Navigating Bacon's *New Atlantis*: beyond the old texts and the new

Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* is a complex and difficult text, and one which has hitherto been insufficiently served by critical editions. My dissatisfaction with currently available editions led me to wish to provide the reader with more contextual information through which they could read the text itself. The text itself is multi-faceted and multi-layered, and so seemed to me perfect for production in 'electronic' format: this format, I believe, allows for far greater flexibility on the part of the reader, vital with such a complex text. The fact that it also deals, to a degree, with the impact of new technology and the wider dissemination of information simply added to my conviction.

As the project was conceived as a Masters dissertation, however, it was necessarily limited in scope. This led me to concentrate specifically on the issues of context for the work itself and the method of navigation within the online environment: especially apposite considering that the sailors in *New Atlantis* begin their 'adventure' hopelessly lost.

The fact that *New Atlantis* is a work which exists only in printed form, and with the various editions differing very little from one another, also influenced my content: the complex debate surrounding the desirability of the presentation of multiple textual witnesses instead of a single, editorially mediated text simply was not relevant to this work. As a result, my partial edition was produced following standard editorial practice, and it is merely the presentation of the text, and the apparatus which accompanies it, which has altered from what we would expect to find within the confines of a printed edition.

Back in 1998, Peter Baker suggested that 'Until the electronic text offers a reading experience that the book does not, it will remain a speciality item,' [1] and he was, at least in terms of the literary text, correct. As he suspected, hypertext makes possible a different reading experience to that of a book possible, and this different experience has already been utilised in many texts, such as training programmes, manuals and other such technical works. Of course, for many literary critics, the very thought of reading a book on anything other than paper is anathema. Since 1998, however, advances in computer technology regarding size, price and performance have made computers all-pervasive. This has resulted in an upsurge in the general experience and expectation of computer users, not least regarding the ever-present use of websites for increasingly ordinary tasks. Thus not only has the presentation of a text in this medium become far simpler than it was even these few short years ago, but now the

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[1] Peter S. Baker, 'The Reader, the Editor, and the Electronic Critical Edition' in V. P. McCarren and D. Moffat eds, *A Guide to Editing Middle English* (Ann Arbor, 1998), p. 264.

average student may well find it easier to access an academic work presented online work than one in print. It is not merely a question of the ease of accessing a website compared to the tedium of ploughing through shelves and shelves of jumbled books, but also the fact that the information contained within these sites is increasingly easy to keep up-to-date. It soon became apparent to me that while an electronic text can offer a completely different reading experience from that of a book, the awareness of this possible new experience soon begins to affect the choices an editor makes when creating both the edited text itself and the critical introduction which accompanies it.

I began to create the critical apparatus for my edition still in the mindset of the printed edition and the progressive, linear form of narrative that this implies. While the text itself was created in exactly the same manner as if it were to be printed, and the notes and glosses which accompanied the text were merely linked to the text in the manner allowed by the online environment, the critical introduction was an altogether different matter. I could not, I soon discovered, simply write my introduction and 'make it electronic.'

I had originally written my critical introduction in the form of a linear argument, much as one would for a print edition. Even though it consisted of different chapters and sections, they were intended (as they are all such pieces) to be read in order, allowing the progression of the argument to be grasped. To present it in such a manner online would be simple, if a little pointless, while making it rather awkward to read: the online page is more akin to a scroll, which tends to make long pieces of text somewhat unwieldy, especially to an audience used to the rather more modern habit of turning the pages of a book. Thus it seems that the online environment is a different reading environment from the traditional book, and the text needs to be altered – or, at the very least, organised – accordingly. It is ironic that the utilisation of modern, web-based display technologies seem to have brought the reader back to the position of having a number of scrolls available to him, as if attached to a version of the reading machine described by Jardine and Grafton in their work on Gabriel Harvey.[2] It therefore seemed appropriate to split the piece into 'chapters.' This, of course, introduced another difficulty.

If I split the piece into chapters, I was then left with the problem of how to make the user read them in the 'correct' order. The answer was simple: remove the need to read them in order. As Robinson has suggested, 'Electronic editions may be much less of an authoritarian editor handing down the definitive text, and much more of a partnership between editor and reader'[3] and he has here identified one of the major

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[2] Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, 'Studied For Action: How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy', *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 30-78.
[3] Peter M. W. Robinson, 'The Computer and the Making of Editions' in V. P. McCarren and D. Moffat eds, *A Guide to Editing Middle English* (Ann Arbor, 1998), pp. 249-61 at 261.

possibilities presented by the electronic format: each user's experience of the edition may well be unique. By making each section a discrete argument, discussing a certain piece of information, concept or point of view, the user would become more able to create their own narrative journey through the text. The critical introduction became a collection of short critical pieces on the text, each distinct and separate from the others. The user could now be presented with a list of critical destinations, and could choose the one which most interested them. Thus the critical introduction would lend itself to the manner in which most academic works are, in fact, read: entirely as the need for information presents itself. This, of course, meant that I could no longer structure my introduction in the progressive manner to which I had become attached. I had to ensure each piece fitted less into an over-arching argument as within an over-riding concept: here the context of *New Atlantis*. One of the things which had annoyed me as I viewed academic websites was the manner in which many of them merely presented entire texts or essays as they would appear within a printed work, rather than taking advantage of the flexibility offered by the electronic format. By splitting the introduction into discrete arguments, I had overcome this problem.

It was at this point, when I had begun to design the physical attributes of the new edition, that I realised how important navigation would be to its overall effectiveness. One failure I have noticed in many websites, whether academic or otherwise, is how easy it is to get lost within them, and how there comes a time when the prevailing organisation of the site simply carries you along, just like Bacon's sailors, who noted that 'the Winde came about, and setled in the West for many dayes, so as we could make little or no way, and were sometimes in purpose to turne back. But then againe ther arose Strong and Great Windes from the South, with a Point East; which carried vs vp, (for all that we could doe) towards the North: By which time our Victualls failed vs, though we had made good spare of them.' [4] The fact that hypertext allows practically every word to be connected to every other word or document means that without a strong sense of structure, the edition could easily become unusable. If the user is constantly taken to other places while reading the text, they will not be able to concentrate on the text itself, and will get lost in a sea of footnotes, glosses or pictures. Thus I decided my 'home' page would serve as a template for the entire site, so that wherever the user travelled within the site, this information would always be available. This is also the manner in which commercial websites are organised, and a solution to the problems of navigation not always realised in the academic sector. [5]

Thus I split the page into sections, where one would function as a display of options available (which would remain constant) and the other would be the area in which the document chosen would be displayed. I soon expanded this to having two 'menu'

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[4] *New Atlantis* a3[r.]

[5] See http:<http://www.webstandards.org> and <http://www.useit.com> for information regarding web standards.

sections, one to allow access to critical pieces, the other to editorial 'apparatus' such as footnotes and glossaries. As I had begun to write my critical pieces as discrete pieces, it would have been ideal to have each document available at all times, but with a site containing almost fifty documents, this was impractical. I therefore had to impose some manner of hierarchy on the work. I chose to group pieces under section headings. For example, the section '*New Atlantis* as an Early Modern Artefact' contained four sub-sections, each of which dealt with one individual aspect of the work as an artefact: print history; genre; language; the letter to the reader.

It was here that I realised that the number of possible narratives the user could create was huge, as the 'home' page displayed eleven choices of destination, with each destination having several of its own destinations, and so forth. When the quantity of links within these documents are taken into consideration, it begins to become apparent that each user will navigate their own journey through the edition, and that all of the sections contained within the edition had to accommodate this. Thus, the multilinear narrative was born.

The flexibility of the form also allowed a manner of user choice in how to view certain parts of the editorial apparatus. For example, some like their notes as footnotes, some as endnotes. By creating a document which contains all of the footnotes for each piece, and creating links which make the note appear in a 'pop-up box' when the symbol is clicked, the user can choose which style suits them best.[6] In a similar manner, if I were to cite from a letter, for example, I would be able to include the full text of the letter in an appendix, and allow the user to be taken to this full text if they so wish, directly from the citation within the body text. I separated glosses and notes, again so that the reader can differentiate between a gloss (where the word appears as a link, underlined and in blue as is standard website practice) and a textual note (where the link appears as a number in brackets, somewhat like traditional superscript numbers, but again underlined and in blue). I arranged the groups of textual notes in the same way that I had the sections themselves, for ease of navigation, so if the user wishes to view a page of footnotes, he or she simply clicks on the footnote link in the main menu, and then chooses from one of the sub-menus which then appear in the text window. The flexibility of form also allows easy access to biographical and chronological information.

The finished result, I believe, is an edition (albeit partial) of *New Atlantis* which is provided with comprehensive contextual information which is easily accessible. It is not merely the edition itself which can be accessed easily, but also the information which accompanies it. It is a style of edition considerably easier to use than the

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[6] This also conforms to the guidelines set out by the Web Accessibility and Content Initiative and by Section 508: these state that text-only alternatives should be provided to JavaScript or image-reliant featires of a web site. This is to enable assistive technologies for users with disablities.

traditional book, because of the flexibility of form: it is not fatuous to point out that a considerable amount of time is wasted in a print edition flicking backwards and forwards trying to find notes, comments and meanings for words. The online edition allows enhanced cross-referencing between text, commentary, glosses, contextual documents and references. Further to this, the medium itself allows the possibility for an ease of intertextual referencing to be achieved that was undreamed of just a few years ago. While the editorial process itself must still be carried out in a traditional, scholarly manner, the ultimate mode of information presentation should allow the scholar to spend more time thinking and less time trying to find information.

There are, of course, numerous things I would have done differently were I to do it again. It would have been useful to have made it possible to do, at the very least, simple word searches sitewide. Indeed, I would have liked to have provided an index, with each entry linked to the 'page' in question, and a concordance to the text itself: a process made relatively simple had I encoded the text to allow more complex searches, possibly through use of SGML. I would certainly have considered allowing the site to be accessed in PDF form, so that those who may wish could download hard copies of the pieces included – though this action would, necessarily, remove much of the point of the edition, there will always be some readers who cannot function without hard copy. It would have been helpful if I could have included links to other sites when they were appropriate, though this introduces yet more problems, as it necessitates the continual monitoring of all of the sites in question to ensure their continued relevance. The process of creating this partial edition has given me a greater understanding of the manner in which the format of a project influences its content, and how different formats have their own advantages and disadvantages. It has also suggested to me the manner in which the audience influences a work, before, during and after composition. There are certain things which I researched for this project which I would certainly like to investigate more fully. One example of this is a consideration of how the interpretation of *New Atlantis* itself has been influenced by its format, and how these interpretations have changed over the past three hundred and eighty years. Another example is the intertextual relationships apparent within *New Atlantis*, the manner in which it relates not only to works of the utopian genre, but also of what might usefully be termed the 'discovery' genre, such as works by Ralegh and Hakluyt. On a more general basis, this work has highlighted to me the importance of the establishment of some manner of standard when it comes to internet-based publishing, in order that the student or scholar may more easily ascertain which web-based projects are 'authoritative' and which are not: were such a system in place, it would have been far easier to point the user to other places of interest, and also to assure the reader that the content of this particular site is, in itself, worthwhile.

I feel that, in general, the decisions I made in the execution of this dissertation were correct, as they made the best use of the information I had available to me at the time. While there are standards for web sites *per se*, they have yet to be adequately applied to the particular problem of scholarly editing. It is the consideration of how these existing standards and protocols serve the particular problems of historical documents and scholarly editions which needs to be carried out, and this I feel I have begun to carry out within this edition. Furthermore, if this work serves to interest one person in Bacon's works, or answer one question about *New Atlantis* – or even lead someone to ask a new one – or goes towards solving one of the many problems currently being argued about regarding online publication, then I may consider it to have been a success.