Digital Editions: Some Thoughts on the Relationship Between Editor and Reader

S. Douglas Olson

Abstract This article deals with the sustainability of and access to digital text editions of ancient and medieval texts as well as with the relationship between editor, reader, and text. Currently, digital publication appears to be an extremely fragile—and probably a very expensive—medium for the preservation of scholarly knowledge. In addition, by disposing of the editor's role as gatekeeper, the ideology of "reader-as-editor" contains the potential to damage one of the foundations of academic work, and with it the concept of a common, authoritative text.

Zusammenfassung Der Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit den Themen „Nachhaltigkeit" und „Zugriffsmöglichkeiten" digitaler Editionen antiker und mittelalterlicher Texte und der Beziehung zwischen Editor, Leser und Text. Elektronische Publikationen scheinen ein überaus anfälliges Medium zu sein, um Forschungswissen zu erhalten, ganz zu schweigen von den Kosten. Darüber hinaus führt das ideologische Konzept, das den Leser als Herausgeber begreift, dazu, die Grundlagen des akademischen Schaffens zu zerstören, indem es den Editor in seiner Funktion als Torwächter und dadurch die Idee eines allgemeinen, autoritativen Textes abschafft.

Keywords presentation of texts, apparatus criticus, expertise, durability

In what follows, I pose a number of skeptical questions regarding digital editions of classical and medieval texts. I do so because there seems little doubt that this new technology will be adopted in one way or another in our field, and because the choices we make in regard to it over the next few decades may shape the future of classical and medieval studies decisively. It is accordingly in our own best interest to consider the matter as carefully as we can now and attempt to move in the most effective direction possible. My questions involve the relationship between readers and editors, on the one hand, and between texts in any form and cultural institutions such as libraries, on the other.

Practically put, first of all, one guiding principle of digital edition projects generally appears to be that new technologies will free readers from reliance on either an editor's report of manuscript readings or his or her decisions as to which of

Publiziert in: Chronopoulos, Stylianos, Maier, Felix K. und Novokhatko, Anna (Hrsg.): Digitale Altertumswissenschaften: Thesen und Debatten zu Methoden und Anwendungen, Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2020 (Digital Classics Books, Band 4). DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.563.

those readings to prioritize in a final version of the text. Electronic versions of the manuscripts themselves are accordingly to be furnished, along with transcriptions (the latter offered, I assume, in the explicit awareness that transcription is itself a potentially fraught act of interpretation), the expectation being that the reader is free—even expected—to engage in the work of constructing the text on an equal footing with the nominal editor himself. To the extent that this model is taken seriously, reading thus becomes in the first instance an editorial act; as one reads, one must decide what to read. Closely associated with this display of editorial transparency is often a commitment to the multi-form character of the text, regardless of whether the variety is taken to be lodged in the work of the original author (who may have produced a number of more or less closely related versions of the same material); in the efforts of a series of redactors, adapters and epitomators; or in the activities of individual copyists, each of whom can be understood as producing a novel version of the text valid for his or her own historical and cultural time and place. These are essentially democratic gestures, intended to alter the top-down model of the omniscient, all-powerful editor and to allow readers to think for themselves. The same impulse can be seen in a more restricted form in the standard traditional scholarly apparatus criticus, which when properly constructed presents a set of readings comprehensive and clear enough that interested readers can always learn what the witnesses have and make different choices among the readings presented, should they wish to do so. Digital editions nonetheless raise the stakes in this area considerably, implying in the type and range of material they present an editorially far more active audience.

This approach to the text raises two interrelated problems. The first is that it is notoriously difficult to find readers willing to engage even with a limited traditional critical apparatus. Much of the editor's power is lodged in this fact, in that what an editor prints is generally taken to be what the original author wrote, or at least close enough to it that no further consideration is required. We as editors know that this is an inadequate view of the situation, and one obvious response to the dilemma is to assign the fault to our readers, who ought to be required to do a better job at the task we have set them. But this is an ineffective approach (because unlikely to be productive), and it might be better to acknowledge that the average consumer of a classical or medieval text is quite uninterested in engaging in textual criticism and instead merely wants stable material to use for another purpose. The argument extends a fortiori to manuscripts, which are even more difficult for non-specialists to read and evaluate, which is to say that making them available and thus implying that they should be used raises the demands on our audience at precisely the point where we know from unhappy experience that it is least likely to follow our lead. It is difficult to argue in principle against the idea of making as much original information as possible available for the occasional reader interested

in engaging in active construction of the text. But the question is not so much what we as a field might choose to do in an ideal world as where we should commit our generally limited resources.

Another way of putting this is that as we move into the digital world, we as scholars need to ask ourselves whether editing texts is a properly democratic activity, which is to say both whether everyone wants to do the job themselves—as I suspect that they do not—and whether this would be a helpful and efficient way of proceeding in any case. Anyone who works with texts as texts is aware of how slippery and unstable they are. To edit any text, and particularly a text in an ancient language produced in a long-lost time and culture, is to be required to make countless decisions about what the witnesses say, what those readings mean, how they weigh against one another, and ultimately what to print. Whatever one thinks of this process and how it is carried out, the making of such decisions has traditionally been regarded as the responsibility of the editor, and readers have by and large deferred to editors' judgments. If one believes that editors have some form of professional expertise, a specialist knowledge and training that allows them to make better choices than the average reader in regard to what to print at any particular point, this is a sensible and efficient division of labor. That assessment of the situation deserves careful consideration, for editors are not necessarily all so wise, and when they make bad (or merely eccentric) decisions and are not called to task for their choices, the intellectual cost to the field as a whole can be considerable. My more substantial point, however, is that an ideology that assumes that the reader will routinely be expected to build his or her own text erodes the traditional function of the editor, who is transformed into something like a low-level collector and collator of information intended eventually to be used by others. This is all the more the case because an approach that increases the individual reader's editorial obligations and power also has the potential to produce a deep fracturing in what has traditionally been regarded as the bedrock of our disciplines. Scholars routinely note in an initial footnote in an article of any kind dealing with an ancient source that they have adopted the text of one modern scholar or another, not because they necessarily have a profound knowledge of the editorial background to the text in question but because it is easier to discuss larger matters involving e.g. Sophocles or Paul if we can agree from the outset as to what Sophocles or Paul seems likely to have written. Conversely, an efficient conversation becomes more difficult to arrange if my text of *Oedipus the King* or *First Corinthians* differs again and again from yours. Even if we can agree that this is potentially an intellectually more honest way of working, there is a price to be paid, and we need to consider whether we and our peers are willing to pay it. And the time to consider the matter is now.

To turn this issue in a slightly different direction: Much of the point of the traditional scholarly apparatus has been to spare readers the work the implicit

ideology of the new electronic edition proposes to demand of them. A properly informed and constructed critical apparatus does not require manuscript work (the vast majority of which is drudgery, even if some of us have come to love it), because the editor has completed it and has summarized the results in the critical apparatus. Precisely to the extent that the editor has fulfilled the responsibilities of his or her job, therefore, the provision of manuscript facsimiles, transliterations and the like is unnecessary, for all the reader will discover there is documentation for information summarized—or appropriately ignored—in the apparatus criticus. To the extent that digital editions aspire to capture the most efficient and productive aspects of the traditional printed edition while moving beyond them, it is important to ask precisely how the proposed new system is an improvement on the old and what the reward for the enormous expense and effort it entails is likely to be.

Finally, there is the separate matter of sustainability: As scholars, and in particular as editors, we look to the future, in the hope and expectation that our work will continue to be useful and important for decades and ideally centuries to come. This extended temporal horizon is particularly important for classicists and medievalists, not only because the traditions of our fields extend back hundreds and even thousands of years, giving us a sense of our own place in time, but because we know that our circles of academic conversation are small, as a consequence of which our next true interlocutor may not yet have been born. It is accordingly important that among the most successful features of the physical book is its sheer durability. A book, once printed and placed on a shelf and protected in a minimal fashion from water, fire and pests, can remain legible for centuries, regardless of whether attention is paid to it in the meantime. The modern system of printing scholarly books in quantities of at least a few hundred and distributing them widely in libraries throughout the developed and developing world, moreover, has made it difficult for any individual item to disappear entirely; at least one copy of every book is almost always available somewhere. In sum, the modern printed book has been an extremely effective tool for disseminating and preserving knowledge even in relatively minor, economically and culturally disadvantaged disciplines such as our own.

That digital editions are capable of serving our larger purposes so well and for such extended periods of time is not yet apparent. More directly put, electronic publication appears at this point to be an extremely fragile means of preserving scholarly knowledge and potentially an extremely expensive one (which represents another, more institutionalized form of fragility). The electronic revolution is only about a quarter of a century old. Its technologies remain unstable, and constant technological evolution seems in fact to be a defining feature of the new regime. Nor has the web yet been tested by war, although there seem to be indications that it is extremely vulnerable to attack from both state and non-state actors. That any

hostile power will ever feel much interest in damaging electronic corpora of ancient and medieval Greek and Latin texts is on the face of it unlikely. We are nonetheless likely to sustain considerable collateral damage when the servers are—perhaps inevitably—brought down in the next major international conflict, and our work is similarly unlikely to be a top priority when efforts are made to bring the servers back up again as that war continues or after it is over. It is accordingly worth considering how fully we wish to commit our field to a form of publication that may prove far less durable than its highly successful predecessor.

Added to this concern about the stability of the web as a place for storing knowledge over the long term is a substantial technological and economic problem. Library collections are a form of infrastructure, and as such they require continuous economic investment (e. g. in physical buildings and their maintenance; cataloguing, administrative and custodial staff; repair and replacement of damaged copies of texts and other materials; and heating and cooling costs). Book-collections can nonetheless endure considerable neglect for many years, provided the buildings in which they are located are dry and sound. The same cannot be said of electronic collections, above all else because the programming platforms on which today's digital materials are based will inevitably be replaced within a few years by new ones, to which old materials will have to be converted or be lost. As noted above, we as editors tend to believe that our work is not ephemeral, even if the culture as a whole regards our original material as obscure, and we work instead in the conviction that the significance of what we do lies precisely in the fact that the texts we produce will continue to be available decades or centuries from now. We accordingly need to consider whether we are convinced that the academic and cultural institutions that support us today will be willing and able to make the continuing investment it will take to constantly update not only our own digital work but all the other digital work that will likely be generated in the future. If we cannot see that as a certainty—i.e. as certain enough that we are willing to entrust our own life's work and the work of our academic peers to this new mode of publication—we might wish to place at least some of our scholarly eggs in a different, more time-tested and probably more affordable basket. And if the point of a digital edition is merely or at least inter alia to provide a bridge to a hard-copy version of the text at some point, it is worth asking in which of the two venues the majority of our efforts and funds are best invested, and thus how we can most effectively serve our readers as they really are rather than as how we would like them to be.