Women Edit Women

Feminist Scholarly Editing in the Digital World

This talk will discuss issues of literary textual scholarship, particularly the editing of early women's texts, in the age of big data. It will present an overview of the current trends in digital textual criticism in order to reflect upon the theoretical and methodological ramifications of digital technology as applied to literary texts. It will focus on the archival and editorial aspects of literary digital humanities (especially those engaged with early modern texts by/about women) and engage in current conversations about diplomatic and scholarly editions to see whether the idea of a 'feminist' digital edition is viable or, indeed, desirable.

It is perhaps widely known that modern 'scientific' textual scholarship in English began with the editing of Shakespeare. This is not surprising because Shakespeare's texts were produced in a period in which the printed book was gradually becoming a profitable commodity and significantly variant editions of a single play survive. But 'serious' or 'scholarly' modern editing (as opposed to, say, the heavy-handed changes that Nahum Tate introduced to Shakespeare's plots, such as adding a happy ending to *King Lear*) was invested in the idea of the author's 'final intention' and 'textual purity.' The New Bibliographic editor was forever in search of the perfect reflection of the author's desire untainted by mechanical mediations: he (gender intended) was the idealistic seeker of the 'work' in the 'text.' Women very rarely intervened in this sacred dialogue between the author (who was most often Shakespeare) and his editor. This changed when women started actively participating in academia and began editing men. The next logical step was the 'archaeology' of women writers by female academics initiated by Betty Travitsky in the 1980s which yielded a crop of texts with women (and sometimes men) now editing women. Early women's texts have currently become, if not strictly mainstream, at least reasonably de-exoticized in the Anglo-American academy. Nevertheless, debate continues about the nature of a 'feminist' edition.

Computers, of course, ushered in a paradigm shift in bibliographical studies. The scope for new and exciting experimentation with text and image that digital technology affords the humanities scholar has already led to numerous richly-funded academic projects that operate at the interface of art and technology. New standards have been generated, new methodologies of literary criticism have been deployed using computer tools, and the field of digital humanities seems to be thriving. But can (and should) the digital platform be used by feminist scholarly editors to do more, and more ideological, things with their texts? Is it incumbent upon feminists worth their salt to appropriate digital tools (created, mostly, by male programmers) to begin to identify and thwart digital misogyny? Is the amorphousness of the Internet and its apparently endless possibilities the pixelated embodiment of a pseudo-consciousness that can be gendered feminine? And importantly, what does it mean to be a female editor in the digital world? This talk will address issues such as these while highlighting significant landmarks in the history of bibliographic and textual studies.

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