A Redefinition of Classical Scholarship

Abstract: This paper offers a new way to consider material texts in light of emerging technologies. We highlight the improvements that digital editions of these texts offer in place of printed volumes, using the Homeric scholia as our primary example. We also demonstrate the precision and breadth of scholarship now possible using digital methods, which are not just digital productions of our current print editions but expansive and flexible editions better able to represent a multitext.

The digitization of manuscripts and papyri, which serve as the material basis for Classical texts, has made these documents more accessible than ever. This accessibility means that we, as philologists, need to reassess how we define a text, how we create an edition of a text, and the implications of a digital edition for our research goals and opportunities.

The conventional critical edition, in which one reading is given precedence over all others, fails when the goal is not to recreate a single text. For some Classical texts a conventional critical edition means a loss of crucial evidence. For example, the Homeric scholia stem from several different traditions. Each manuscript that contains scholia is a unique entity and must be treated as such. The Chronicles of Jerome are different in each of its sources in organization and content. There can be no conventional critical edition of Jerome that accurately represents this diversity. Cases like these become more apparent when working with the material basis for these texts, leading us to the conclusion that we should consider each manuscript an individual document and artifact in order to fully comprehend and study the breadth of the textual tradition.

The printed book does not properly represent a multitextual tradition (see Dué & Ebbott 2009). The scholia in current print editions (Erbse 1969–1980 and Dindorf/Maass 1875–1877) are rendered out of context, away from the pages and poetry to which they refer. Using digital technology, the Homer Multitext project (HMT) is now working to create a sustainable, digital edition of the Homeric manuscripts. We aim to create not simply editions that can be viewed on the web, but true digital editions that will not be rendered obsolete by technological advancements.
The HMT creates digital diplomatic editions of Homeric manuscripts that cite high-resolution digital photography of those manuscripts as their sources. Because these digital editions are linked to the high-resolution photography, they are instantly verifiable by the user. These editions promote the understanding of the material artifacts behind a text, and their beauty and utility lie in not restricting the user to one type of visual display. The user has access to a range of resources, which can be viewed selectively. For example, the HMT offers numerous manuscripts, and a user will be able to select which and how many manuscripts to work with. A user can decide to look only at the Homeric text in a set of manuscripts or a user can opt to look at the text with scholia. The digital text can be displayed as the diplomatic edition of the text as it appears on the manuscript, or the user can opt to see editorial readings included, such as the expansion of commonly abbreviated words.

With flexible, digital editions, philologists will be able to embrace a multitextual approach, an approach which was difficult if not impossible using printed editions. Research questions that are impossible to ask of conventional critical editions, even when they are made electronic and searchable, will be possible with the ability to find and compare materials from multiple primary sources.

Classicists will also be able to accomplish significant scholarly work in papyrology, codicology, epigraphy, and other such fields. Computer science and statistics can offer classicists new ways to present, collect, and interpret data. Although the electronic versions of our print editions, such as the TLG, have allowed valuable and useful searching mechanisms, these tools pale in comparison to the types of refined data compilation that are possible by collaborating with technical sciences in the production of flexible, digital editions. Multitextual editions also allow researchers to see all the evidence from these sources. Why settle for a composite version of Homeric scholia that discuss Odysseus and Diomedes, when you can have every version present in these manuscripts at your fingertips in seconds?

Access to the images of manuscripts, inscriptions, and documents allows scholars to produce better, interactive, cited and citable, digital texts. Articles in the fields of palaeography, codicology, epigraphy, and papyrology cite the primary source and sometimes offer a reproduction of the original. These articles could benefit from direct citation of high-resolution photography of their sources, so that they can better demonstrate their arguments to their readers and become more easily comprehensible. Direct citation is now possible using an
image citation tool (ICT) developed by the HMT, an application that allows users to make canonical references to high-resolution photography of texts. The tool allows the user to focus on a particular region of interest with a uniform resource name (URN), which can then be used as the citation for both the text and image (see Smith 2009). The ICT provides a more precise mode of citation than just general reference to the image, and can be used even to improve past work, when such technology was not available. For one example, during the Center for Hellenic Studies 2014 HMT summer seminar, the participants edited T. W. Allen's 1899 article "On the composition of some Greek manuscripts" to include image citations of the Venetus A. This forthcoming version improves the clarity of the article even for those who previously had access to a facsimile or digital images. With the image citation tool applied to Allen’s observations, readers can now see the exact portion of the manuscript page to which Allen refers.

Without a doubt we are standing on the edge of a new movement in Classics. We must redefine our editions and the basis of our research and interpretation. The digitization of our material sources is an opportunity to re-embrace these documents, re-evaluate long unseen texts, and move our field forward in way that has not occurred in centuries.

Works Cited

