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Scholarly digital editions: an (un)known land

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Irene Mamprin

Scholarly digital editions: an (un)known land

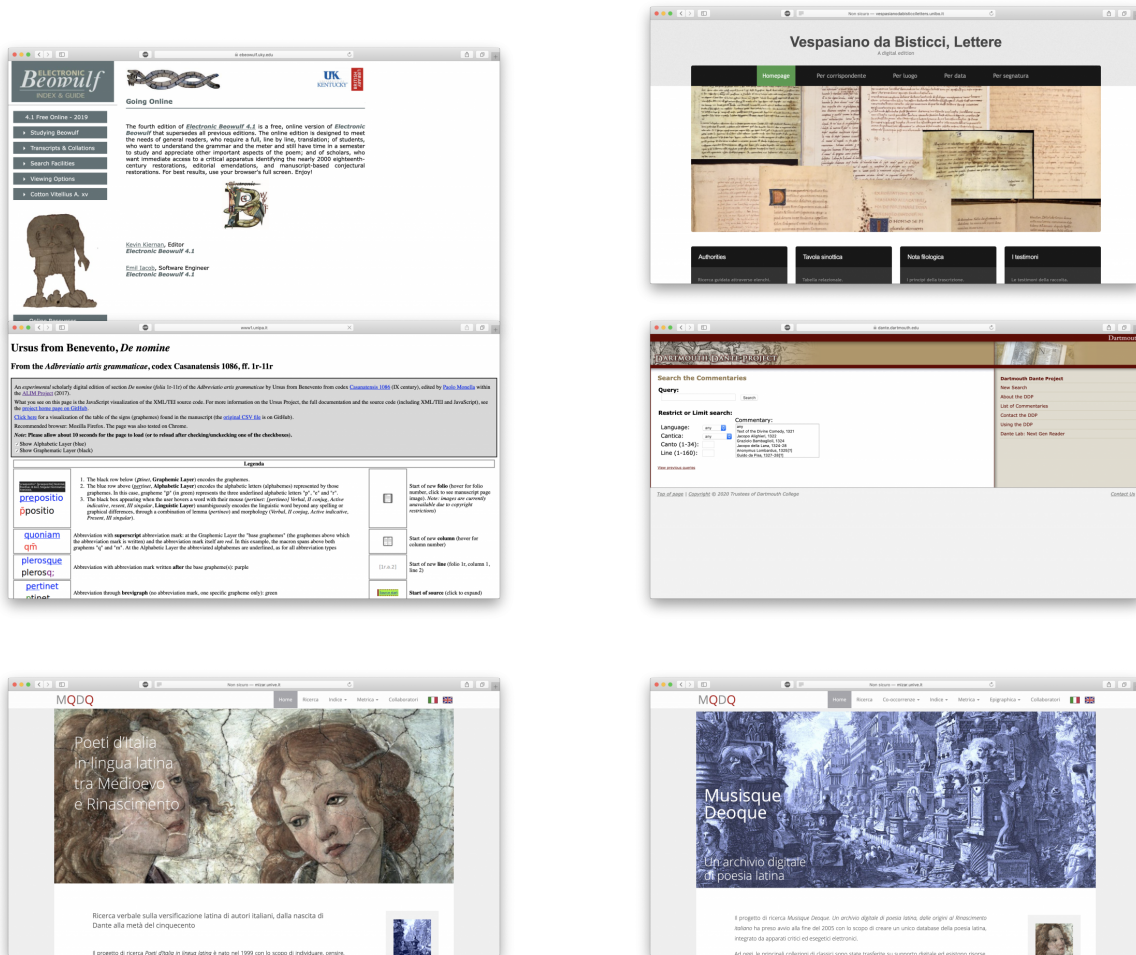
Abstract. The new book by Tiziana Mancinelli and Elena Pierazzo is an introduction to the ecdotic practices developed in the digital environment. The concept of "scholarly digital edition" is investigated and the reader is provided with a series of tools to understand its limits and potential, also in relation to future developments and the adoption of shared standards.

Keywords. digital philology, digital scholarly editions, electronic representation, Elena Pierazzo, literary texts, scholarly editions, Tiziana Mancinelli

Che cos'è un'edizione scientifica digitale is the new book by Tiziana Mancinelli, a specialist in the modeling and production of digital editions, and Elena Pierazzo, Professor at the University of Tours and expert in theory and methodology of digital philology. The book - published in January 2020 - aims to offer an overview of new ecdotic methodologies and practices within the digital environment to an audience who is not necessarily expert in digital publishing or computer science for the humanities: essentially, to anyone who wants to become aware of this paradigm shift. The authors, therefore, aim to provide an adequate reading key to this vast and varied phenomenon of digital editions through a summary presentation of the new techniques: in fact, the work does not claim to teach how to develop these techniques - nor to present a taxonomy of digital editions - but to make them understand how they really work and why they can be useful for the humanities.

- 2 Mancinelli and Pierazzo map a still unexplored area, immediately asking the question of what a scientific edition, and in particular a digital scientific edition, is: the authors inform the reader of the difference between "digitized philology" - based on a more traditional work system - and a "digital philology", that is the real innovation born in a computer environment. The paradigm shift the authors point out developed gradually, in stages, until the scientific community understood the importance of digital technology in providing standardized methods and principles that overcome any national and cultural barrier. Subsequently, a series of examples of critical digital editions is proposed, such as the *Electronic Beowulf* (<https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/>) and the various projects around Dante's *Comedy* (<https://dante.dartmouth.edu/>) for the Italian panorama. All the

exemplified editions have a not negligible technical aspect: the standardization with TEI coding and XML language. Here follows a brief chronological account of the history of digital editions from the 1940s to the present day, in Italy and abroad: the authors identify four historical phases characterized by methodological and epistemological changes. The final chapters are all dedicated to the definition and description of the methodology, codification, processes and tools needed not only to build and design a scholarly digital edition, but also to read it correctly and evaluate it. Finally, a small glossary is provided to familiarize with the new computer vocabulary.



Some examples of digital scholarly editions and digital archives

Evolution and challenges

- 3 Since the very first lines Mancinelli and Pierazzo grasp the problem in the definition of the new editions: in a history studded with gaps and incompleteness due to technological obsolescence and the absence of a plan for the maintenance of digital resources, the authors make the reader understand that digital represents a new way of production and fruition of the text, just as printing was for Renaissance philologists. The emphasis placed on the four historical phases of digital editions (one more than Tito Orlando's thesis) clarifies in an exhaustive way the positive and negative aspects of the potential of digital philology. The book does not neglect any problem: on the contrary, it immediately highlights the obstacles that young scholars may encounter when publi-

shing a digital edition. In fact, they warn that the non-existence of a platform that allows access to digital editions and copyright problems affect the weakest groups in research and this may stifle the affirmation of new digital projects. In this sense, the book intends to send a message about the future of digital humanities: it is our duty to limit the economic obstacles linked to research tools, so that young researchers can advance a sector rich in scientific potential.

- 4 Although the book is not intended to be a specialist handbook, it fully describes an evolutionary process that has affected the entire second half of the twentieth century: so the study investigates in detail the changes and milestones in the history of digital editions providing an almost complete overview of this phenomenon. Moreover, the authors through their proposal for the evaluation of a digital edition show how much the work of a digital humanist (indeed, of the whole team for the realization of a digital project) is worthy of attention and scientific examination and for this reason they want to provide a univocal methodology of reading and criticism, defining step by step all the phases of work.
- ◆ **Video.** Introduction to Digital Scholarly Editions (with Marjorie Burghart and Elena Pierazzo). An introductory video on digital scientific editions that illustrates some of their potentialities, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gMoRqiAoRo>.

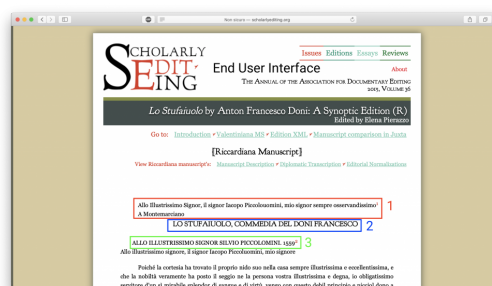
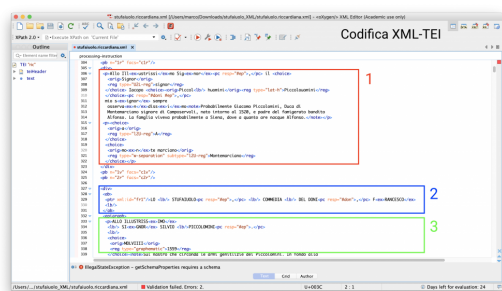
The paradigm shift

The existence of national schools with sometimes diametrically opposed methods and principles has been the norm for at least the whole of the last century; one of the great changes generated by digital is undoubtedly that of overcoming national (not to say nationalistic) optics which can only harm the cause of knowledge.

Elena Pierazzo, Tiziana Mancinelli, *Che cos'è un'edizione scientifica digitale*, Roma, Carocci, 2020, p. 17.

- 5 With these words the authors underline how the paradigm shift in digital humanities, namely the introduction of the TEI guidelines (<https://tei-c.org/>) and the use of the XML language, represent an epoch-making turning point in philological research. As early as 1993 Peter Shillingsburg highlighted the democratic nature of the web, insisting on the possibility that it could offer equal tools and guidelines for all scholars. If we look at all the national schools – as the authors suggest – in the last century, we notice a heterogeneity of principles, methods and thoughts that for a long time prevented the dialogue between humanists, while now the web becomes the spokesman of a breaking down of boundaries and a universal unification of the scientific community. Shillingsburg, by publishing the *General Principles for Electronic Scholarly Editions* (<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/MLA/principles.html>) in Toronto during the MLA congress (*Modern Language Association*, 1993, <https://www.mla.org/>), initiated the codification of criteria for the evaluation of digital editions, hoping in this way for a widespread diffusion of philological innovations through the web. But if Shillingsburg dwelt more on the technological supports, Mancinelli and Pierazzo intend – like the 2006 *MLA Guidelines* – to highlight the quality of the ecdotic criteria and subsequently the analysis of the tech-

nical aspects. Once the standard has been defined, however, it is not certain that an edition will last forever and digitization is not a simple process: the choice of one medium and one technology instead of another has consequences at all levels of research. Let's think, for example, about the automatic transcription of a text and how difficult – if not impossible – it is to obtain 100% accuracy: should we rely on crowdsourcing and the free work of volunteers recruited on the web or should we prefer outsourcing to external companies that are not always competent? The web teaches us that every choice we make is never neutral and can have repercussions on the ethics and quality of our work. Still, computers are often considered a way to reduce working time: William McCarthy, on the other hand, makes it clear that new technologies are a new way of conceiving work and creating a new and revolutionary world view. And while it's good that digital editions are open source, the lack of financial income could compromise the very existence of digital humanities.



An example of scholarly digital edition: *Lo Stufaiuolo* by Anton Francesco Doni (<http://scholarlyediting.org/2015/editions/intro.stufaiuolo.html>) edited by Elena Pierazzo

To learn more

- ❖ Mancinelli, Tiziana; Pierazzo, Elena (2020). *Che cos'è un'edizione scientifica digitale*. Roma: Carocci editore.
- ❖ McCarthy, William (1996). «Finding Implicit Patterns in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' with 'Tact'» [online]. *Digital Studies/Le Champ Numérique*, 2. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.227> (2020-02-28).
- ❖ Orlandi, Tito (1990). *Informatica Umanistica*. Roma: Carocci.
- ❖ Shillingsburg, Peter L. (1993). *General Principles for Electronic Scholarly Editions* [online]. URL: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/MLA/principles.html> (2020-02-28).