

## **Review: Zaccarello, Michelangelo, ed. 2019. *Textual Cultures: Texts, Contexts, Interpretation 12.2***

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### **Abstract**

The volume *Textual Cultures 12:2* contains some of the works presented at the fifth *Incontro di Filologia Digitale* (15-16 June 2018, Verona) with a foreword by Michelangelo Zaccarello. The theme of the event, “Born-digital editions and texts: theories, working approaches and methods”, aimed to provoke discussion on both shortcomings and breakthroughs in scholarly digital editing and to promote new projects. Moreover, the resulting collection of essays is defined by Zaccarello as an incentive to cooperation between Italian and North-American scholars. From the case studies gathered in this publication and the words of some contributors, it appears that an interesting matter of continuous debate among digital humanists and cause for reflection for readers is the dichotomy between the use of already established resources and workflows and the need to invent *ad hoc* tools and systems to answer new research questions. Since this incongruity can cause confusion in students and researchers entering the field and hinder the collaboration between different academic groups, the goal of my review is to address these problems from the perspective of an aspiring digital philologist in the hope of emphasising the conversations we still must have to ensure successful progress in these studies.

Il volume *Textual Cultures 12:2* contiene alcuni dei lavori presentati al quinto *Incontro di Filologia Digitale* (15-16 giugno 2018, Verona) con una prefazione di Michelangelo Zaccarello. Il tema dell’evento, *Edizioni e testi “born digital”: problemi di metodo e prospettive di lavoro*, aveva lo scopo di suscitare la discussione su limiti e progressi nel campo della critica testuale digitale e di promuovere nuovi progetti. Questa collezione dei relativi saggi, inoltre, viene definita da Zaccarello come un incentivo alla cooperazione tra studiosi italiani e nordamericani. Dai casi studio raccolti in questa pubblicazione e dalle parole di alcuni degli autori stessi, un interessante oggetto di continui dibattiti tra umanisti digitali e spunto di riflessione per i lettori sembra essere la dicotomia tra, da un lato, l’uso di risorse e procedimenti già stabiliti e, dall’altro, il bisogno di inventare strumenti e sistemi *ad hoc* per rispondere a nuove domande di ricerca, il che può confondere studenti e ricercatori che si avvicinano a questo campo e ostacolare la collaborazione tra i vari gruppi di accademici. L’obiettivo della mia recensione è, perciò, far fronte a questi

problemi dal punto di vista di un'aspirante filologa digitale, con la speranza di sottolineare le conversazioni che dobbiamo ancora avere per garantire un efficace avanzamento della disciplina.

## Introduction

In the issue of the Society for Textual Scholarship's journal published in autumn 2019, *Textual Cultures* 12.2, the reader can find seven essays, ten reviews and a foreword by Michelangelo Zaccarello. It includes some of the presentations made at the fifth *Incontro di Filologia Digitale* (15-16 June 2018), part of a series of international conferences organised and hosted by the University of Verona.

From the title of the event, "Born-digital editions and texts: theories, working approaches and methods", the reader can immediately notice that best practices in textual criticism is still a hot topic of debate in the Digital Humanities community, as scholars continue to introduce fresh ideas and develop new practical strategies to meet their research needs. As pointed out by Zaccarello, the colloquium represented an opportunity to discuss shared methodological solutions and issues related to born-digital editions ([13]: 2). It was also a chance for speakers to showcase techniques adopted and tools created specifically for their own projects such as, for instance, the software *Alignment* described by Simone Ventura ([11]: 33).

As a matter of fact, five of the seven essays mention the eXtensible Markup Language, XML, in combination with the guidelines of the Text Encoding Initiative, TEI, as the formats of choice for text encoding. This is not surprising, given that they are considered the *de facto* standards for this activity ([7]: 308), albeit problematic ones, as I will discuss presently.

If the use of XML-TEI can count as a shared methodological solution, a common problem experienced by the authors of the essays seems to be how to deal with complex textual traditions, which, obviously, is a conundrum that affects digital humanists at large since one can find a vast array of literature on the matter ([1];[3]). The proliferation of digitised primary sources has led to an increase in the number of scholarly digital editions of cultural heritage items ([2]: 1). The greater the amount of material, the higher the probability of customised tools simply not being enough to satisfy the requirements of both editors and end-users ([10]: 227). Consequently, this triggers the production of *ad hoc* resources, which, according to Pierazzo's essay, may be too specialised for early-career researchers to be able to engage in these projects and for the public to understand fully and benefit from them ([6]: 6). In addition, navigating the sea of languages and platforms can be quite intimidating and confusing for someone new to the field, not to mention the fact that some of these resources can get lost in the crowd and remain unknown. Furthermore, if an institution develops original solutions specifically for its research questions, it can be hard for other colleagues to collaborate on or reuse and implement them.

Collaboration and exchange of ideas, however, are of paramount importance to the spread and advance of knowledge. This is why Zaccarello's foreword, for example, heavily underlines the scarcity of contacts between the Italian and Anglo-North-American scholarly editing traditions and encourages cooperation between the two ([13]: 2-3), which is one of the goals of *Textual*

*Cultures 12:2*, pursued with the publication of Italian projects in this US-based journal. These statements do not mean to imply that innovative individual experiments should not be launched because, clearly, there would be no progress without them; quite the contrary, the case studies discussed here explore how different branches of academia may benefit from tools that were initially born in a specific context.

What should an aspiring digital philologist do, then, when confronting these intricacies? Even though readers of *Textual Cultures 12:2* are already experienced digital humanists who can grasp the inner workings of different Digital Humanities projects and technologies, it is important for the community to involve the beginner-level cohorts in the conversation more directly by providing them with exhaustive and tailored guidelines and step-by-step project reports to steer them through the thorny theoretical aspects of digital scholarly editing and to help them learn by example.

Therefore, in the following paragraphs I will analyse the content of *Textual Cultures 12:2* to outline which of the topics and methodologies could be perceived as motivating or disorienting by soon-to-be digital humanists and to try to suggest ways to approach these studies.

### ***Textual Cultures 12:2: research questions and methodologies***

The first essay in *Textual Cultures 12:2* is Elena Pierazzo's "Quale infrastruttura per le edizioni digitali? Dalla tecnologia all'etica" ("Which infrastructure for digital editions? From technology to ethics"), in which the author draws a parallel between *haute couture* and *prêt-à-porter* scholarly digital editions: the former are described as specialised, expensive, original and rarely customisable products because they are the result of specific project needs; the latter are cheaper, use existing frameworks, and can be adapted with little effort to other editors' requirements.

Specialised editions are also said to be the ones that are more likely to receive funding because of their innovative nature, which provides an incentive to their production, and because they are costly, as they are often supported by teams of professional developers. However, a great abundance of different, unique, multifaceted platforms makes it hard, according to Pierazzo, for the community to use and evaluate them and, consequently, for the resources to be considered authoritative, especially since they are also difficult to maintain and necessitate frequent professional and technical care, which can make them appear as unreliable. In addition, Pierazzo claims that a drawback of these efforts towards originality is that more generic ready-made tools are neglected and scholars do not invest in their implementation ([6]: 6).

When an aspiring digital philologist ponders these difficulties, the questions that arise are many and a little unsettling: what is my workflow going to look like? Does this depend on my research question or do the tools and what I can do with them define my project? Do I go for widespread models or do I try to invent something new? Which skills do I need, given that interdisciplinarity is essential to any project that seeks to be useful, interesting and funded? Also, what does the market ask of digital philologists and will my project be valuable to the field? Pierazzo seems to be aware of all these problems and, to help neophytes break free of this stagnation, calls for two

main interventions. First, the development of both *haute couture* and *prêt-à-porter* editions. The former should experiment and the latter consolidate existing models and educate a larger public who, ideally, would take advantage of standardised and scientifically validated editorial platforms with a few accessible customisation options and of repositories hosted by credible infrastructures, such as libraries or publishing companies, as designated publication spaces. Second, the author encourages pedagogical reflection on teaching and learning Digital Humanities to lay ethical and detailed guidelines and thus attract more young scholars by being clearer about the skills needed to be the successful editors of the future.

Similar theoretical issues are discussed in Roberto Rosselli Del Turco's "Designing an advanced software tool for Digital Scholarly Editions: The inception and development of EVT (Edition Visualization Technology)", the sixth essay of the collection. As can be inferred from the title, the article describes the creation of the software tool EVT, Edition Visualization Technology, and the principles that inspired its genesis. The software was born to visualise the XML-TEI files containing the encoded texts and the facsimile of the Old English manuscript *Codex Vercellensis* (Vercelli, Archivio e Biblioteca Capitolare, MS CXVII) and to publish its scholarly digital edition on the web, the *Digital Vercelli Book*. The author explains that the rationale behind the choice of XML-TEI schemas was that, again, they are acknowledged by the scholarly community as the standard means for semantic annotation of literary texts and allow for the digital edition to have features such as text-image linking and the separation of the diplomatic transcription from the interpretative one, which are indeed useful to both researchers and students who cannot see the manuscript in person and want to focus on the codicological and palaeographical aspects of the item.

As for the visualisation tool, Rosselli Del Turco states that the research team wanted it to be freely available, independent of specific platforms, user-friendly, flexible and reusable ([9]: 93). Incidentally, these are the same characteristics that belong to Pierazzo's *prêt-à-porter* editions, and that both authors address the problem of best practice in scholarly digital editing is testament to a particular and much-appreciated attention to the needs of both editors and end-users and to the fact that these are still burning issues. Moreover, another common theme is the involvement of Digital Humanities students, given that EVT was born at the University of Pisa as a hands-on learning project. Finally, Rosselli Del Turco notices how flexibility turned out to be the key feature of EVT, as other research groups enthusiastically engaged with the developers to learn how to use and make suggestions on how to improve and adapt its architecture. In addition, another principle that inspired the shaping of EVT is interoperability, achieved thanks to the separation between the software and the edition data, which can be encoded without constraints except for the rules of the chosen markup language, and migrated to and interpreted by other software ([9]: 99-100).

The article closes with some reflections on theory and practice in Digital Humanities. Rosselli Del Turco observes that, even though they are often born to offer specific solutions, the tools we create and use should be as versatile as possible to accommodate a variety of requests related to disparate texts and approaches to textual criticism. Even widespread standards such as XML and TEI are problematic ([9]: 104-105), the former because of its rigid hierarchical structure and

redundancy, the latter because, in spite of the rich guidelines, it cannot satisfy every single editorial need. The realms of encoding possibilities can also lead to inconsistent tagging, as different editors can use different labels to explain the same phenomenon. Researchers, therefore, need to make an effort to disentangle data from the limitations imposed by specific software by separating the former from the latter, which ensures the sustainability of the materials over time, and to thoroughly document their choices to show transparently if and how the digital medium affected their editorial practice. The author also remarks that, since technologies should be put at the scholar's service, feedback from users is essential to perfect these instruments and guarantee progress to shared and more stable standards.

The second essay in the journal is Riccardo Viel's "Lessicografia e critica del testo: esperienze di filologia informatica applicata alla lirica romanza" ("Lexicography and textual criticism: computational philology experiments applied to Romance lyric"). The author presents the modular and relational database *TrobVers*, created by Rocco Distilo (University of Calabria), and, using data from Giraut de Borneil's lyric corpus as examples, shows how *TrobVers*' structure can help identify and represent relationships between witnesses and their sources and gather and analyse manuscript variants through tags. *TrobVers* was born to contrast with what Viel sees as a tendency in scholarly digital editing to overshadow the reconstruction of the textual tradition and its diachronic evaluation in favour of a more in-depth presentation of a single witness ([12]: 19). The author, a supporter of the Lachmannian method, seems to agree with Pierazzo and Rosselli Del Turco in underlining that the tools should serve the philologist and their approach to textual criticism: the philologist shapes them in order to improve the quality of the edition according to its purpose. In this case, the focus of the analysis is the lexical micro-unit, which is described from a semantic, onomasiological, philological, grammatical and syntactic point of view. The digital medium enables the organisation and connection of these different levels of knowledge, making it easier for the scholar/user to retrieve information. Moreover, the tags conveying semantic-onomasiological data adhere to Hallig-Wartburg's ontology, which permits comparison of the database to others following the same guidelines ([12]: 23).

The third essay is Simone Ventura's "Digital Editing and Linguistic Analysis: The First Redaction of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*", in which the author presents a scholarly digital edition of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century prose text produced within the framework of *The Values of French* project. The development of an *ad hoc* tool, *Alignment*, allowed the author to compare the text's two main redactions by mapping of the manuscripts' content and thus to identify linguistic trends in and relations between the witnesses. *Alignment*, alongside the source XML-TEI file group of the edition which "semantically captures the way the text physically manifests itself on the charta and how it is interpreted by the editor" ([11]: 39), is described as the backbone of the linguistic study: the manuscripts can be compared at a structural and macro-textual level, for example using paragraphs, and the tool displays the chosen narrative units with some textual features such as rubrics and *lacunae* ([11]: 36-38).

Even though Ventura hopes that the project will become a methodological paradigm ([11]: 35), it is not clear whether the software *Alignment* and the suite of other instruments such as the Text Viewer will be available for download, customisation and reuse in other editing projects. Other

scholars dealing with rich and complex textual traditions and interested in linguistic variation could benefit from such a resource if its architecture was reusable. Nevertheless, Ventura's detailed explanation of the approach to the philological and linguistic analysis and the digital editing of the material provides the reader with an insight into a possible workflow model.

The fourth essay is Paola Italia's "Il romanzo digitale: Da Manzoni a Pirandello (e oltre)" ("The digital novel: from Manzoni to Pirandello (and beyond)") and deals with the overflow of non-certified versions of Italian novels on the web. The author encourages reflection on these fake texts that did not undergo scholarly quality checks and the development, by authoritative sources, of reliable digital editions in controlled online environments, such as, for example, the portal *Biblioteca Italiana*. Italia also mentions three projects aiming to produce scholarly digital editions equipped with metadata of the works of Manzoni, Pirandello and Tozzi and to build knowledge sites that can represent the polyphonic nature of the novel ([4]: 67). Once again, the importance of providing trustworthy metadata and rich multimedia infrastructures for educational purposes is at the heart of the discussion.

The fifth essay is Simone Reborà's "A Digital Edition between Stylometry and OCR: The *Klagenfurter Ausgabe* of Robert Musil" and explains the use of computational stylometry and optical character recognition to expand the collection and improve the transcriptions of Musil's fragmentary work.

The stance of the author is in line with the volume's other contributors because Reborà touches upon the issues of outdated supports, interoperability, hypertextuality and accessibility. In particular, I think this work represents an example of successful combination of scholarly inventiveness and attention to available resources. Reborà, in fact, took advantage of popular software such as OCRopus/OCRopy and Transkribus, but implemented their functionalities by experimenting with scripts to improve their performance and adapt them to the project's needs, while making the code freely available on GitHub. The article also offers a poignant reminder that no intelligence, human or artificial, is infallible, and that collaboration between the two can remedy their respective shortcomings and be the basis of growth in knowledge ([8]: 86).

The last essay is Diego Perotti's "Torquato Tasso's *Rime d'amore*: Text, Variants, Bibliography". It presents a captivating analysis of the complex editorial history of the text. However, the digital dimension is overlooked in this chapter. The author builds upon Zaccarello's statement on the need to support the dialogue between traditions, in this case the Anglo-American and Italian, because mixed approaches naturally offer a wider pool of solutions to ecdotic problems ([5]: 127).

Finally, the last section of *Textual Cultures* 12:2 presents ten reviews of both digital and non-digital editions of literary works, which are not here described.

## Conclusions

*Textual Cultures* 12:2 includes contributions containing both theoretical considerations and practical case studies. The authors highlight how it is natural for a still growing discipline such as Digital Humanities to be surrounded by intense debate and show the vast assortment of methodologies and objects of research in the field.

Since all the authors introduce their projects with reflections on previous and current research related to their topics and with presentations of the workflows, even a less experienced reader can pick up on relevant threads, common problems and basic principles of best practice in scholarly digital editing. Aspiring digital humanists can therefore be inspired to explore further both conventional and new techniques, to identify research gaps and to give thought to how to tailor a research question.

Nevertheless, it is still desirable that neophytes be freed from the confusion on criteria and approaches. Senior scholars could help by publishing more detailed project reports, with particular attention to behind-the-scenes deliberations and step-by-step guidelines. Moreover, close and active collaboration inside the international community can indeed aid the resolution of possible ideological conflicts and thus contribute to progress in these studies, especially given the variety of academic backgrounds and traditions among both advanced and early-career researchers/students.

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