

Research Programme 2012-2014 General framework

"Editing and Translating Early-Modern Texts: New Directions in the Digital Age"



The question of how texts from the past are transmitted has been the focus of various different currents, trends and schools of thought, which have attempted to theorise the conservation and valorisation of cultural heritage. Within the Seminar, we will examine recent developments which have seen ambitious editorial and translation projects come to play a central role in 17th and 18th century research. We will assess how, why and by what new means the transmission and edition of texts, as well as their translation into other languages, have now become a key aspect of research activity. At a time when traditional scientific roles are being redefined and marginalised, we will pursue three main lines of enquiry: 1) the refocusing of attention on the materiality of texts, 2) the development of digital publishing, 3) the emergence of partners who were until recently considered secondary to the editing and translating process. Our study will combine a wide range of methodological, technological and institutional factors, with a view to highlighting new focal points for textual transmission and the shift in scientific authority.

1- Are texts at the heart of the editorial process?

Firstly, we will consider the impact of large-scale editing, re-editing or translation projects which have recently been completed or are still underway (Shakespeare, Shirley, Winstanley, Defoe, Burton, Donne, Spenser, Browne, Austen, Hutchinson, Milton, Cromwell, etc.) and how they have contributed to the redefining of historical, literary or geographical canons. Several aspects of this question will be analysed:

a) Choices relating to editing or translating texts (choosing a canonical or minor writer; an English, Irish, Scottish or Welsh author; whether to translate or edit complete works or anthologies; fictional or historical and epistolary material; critical editions; facsimile editions; online provision of existing editions, etc.). New developments in the field of physical bibliography will also be examined (i.e. palaeography, choice of source text, editing, transcribing, establishing editorial protocols, critical apparatus, etc.).

b) Textual materiality. Increasing attention is being paid to the materiality of the text as object. Whereas traditional practices aimed to provide a reliable or even a definitive text, with annotations where appropriate, material questions (paper, folding methods, erasures, blanks, spacing, insertions, tears, etc.) are no longer viewed as marginal. This shift in editorial "vision," which sometimes occurs to the detriment of the text — insofar as the aim is no longer merely to observe written letters but rather to reconstitute an object and writing or printing methods — has given rise to a new interest in editorial protocols and printing techniques: nowadays it is important to be able to provide insights into a set of physical characteristics which the previous generation of editors or translators considered marginal.

c) The textual ideal. This new focus on palaeographic, codicological and bibliographic issues has led to a questioning of the very nature of the intended edition: how can one reconcile a desire for thoroughness — taking into account every slight change in the orientation of handwriting or the tiniest trace of wear in a printer's characters — with the need to present a clear and legible text which will be accessible to the reader? Can anyone claim to strike a satisfactory balance? We will see how researchers as well as printers are today trying to resolve these contradictions by devising new modes of presenting the page and the information it is intended to convey, while avoiding the risk of rendering the text entirely peripheral, or at least secondary, to the conditions in which it was produced.

2- From the margin to the centre: a digital "revolution"?

Secondly, the work undertaken by researchers now relies upon equipment that is revolutionising the way a corpus is approached. This includes digital instruments, photographic retouching software capable of revealing hitherto indecipherable writing or erased words, X-ray technology, ultraviolet rays, machines for collating texts, computing programs, databases, etc.

As well as considering these advances, which help to improve the physical quality of editions or translations based on traditional materials, we will also examine the challenges posed by projects for digital publication of literary texts and historical documents from the 17th and 18th centuries. Recently completed and ongoing projects, such as [*Jane Austen's Fiction Manuscripts*](#), [*1641 Depositions*](#), [*The Casebooks Project*](#), [*Jonathan Swift Archive*](#) and many others have challenged our conception of textual editing. Whether the corpus comprises a thousand or a million pages, the digital era forces editors and/or translators to ask themselves a number of new questions, to reassess how they approach their particular object of study, to make choices and to collaborate with engineers and computer scientists, in unprecedented ways. We will therefore consider the effects of these radical technological changes, raising questions about the increasingly widespread use of digital editions and their influence on the development of a new British canon. Will digital technology encourage the translation or re-edition of canonical texts by significant authors? Will it instead favour more miscellaneous and marginal corpuses? Or will it establish a balance between the two? Should we always embark on a full transcription/edition of a given corpus or are digital reproductions sometimes enough to provide scholars with the information they need to interpret the works or documents?

3- The researcher at the heart of a network?

Thirdly, the Seminar will try to establish a unique dialogue between all those concerned by these recent far-reaching changes to the publishing and translation market. One striking development that has taken place over the last few decades is the shift away from the publication or translation of texts (be they manuscript or print) by an isolated individual to the setting up of teams comprising many members. The roles traditionally ascribed to editors and translators are being sidelined, while new expectations emerge and hitherto unknown, sometimes unexpected, collaborative projects are undertaken.

The initial identification of an author and/or a corpus of documents to be edited or translated is still, by and large, carried out by a single researcher, despite the increasing collaboration between editorial project leaders and their partner establishment. This is, however, often the point at which the strictly individual contribution ceases. From the outset, when a project is developed a veritable business initiative begins. This involves collaborative work with libraries and lawyers to obtain reproduction rights, establishing a scientific and editorial committee, identifying research organisations and targeted funding applications (AHRC, Leverhulme, British Academy, Wellcome Foundation, ANR, ERC, etc.), choosing between free access or subscription-based publishers (Cengage, Chadwyck Healey, Proquest, Adam Matthew Digital, etc.) and working on contracts for paper and/or electronic editions. It also requires a scientific team (project leaders, PhD and post-doctoral students, research assistants, etc.) as well as an administrative team and, when electronic publishing is planned, a technical team (private or in-house), via one of the university digital publishing centres. More and more projects now advertise for volunteers supervised by academics (amateur historians, teachers, people with an interest in English Heritage, undergraduate or graduate students, independent scholars...) to join their team, in order to create a truly collaborative community of transcribers, while not compromising on academic standards.

Understanding the emergence of this network of participants and partners — who were hitherto marginal players compared with the single figure of the editor or translator, but are now key contributors and equal partners in editorial undertakings — is one of the main challenges in the research field today.

Due to the sheer number of people involved — academics, PhD students, lawyers, commissioning editors, engineers, computer scientists, librarians and funding managers — there is ample opportunity for discussion (and disagreement). The format of this Seminar, with two speakers per session, may for the first time in France provide a platform for exchanges between academics (leading an editorial or translation project) and one of their partners — doctoral student, editorial assistant, funding manager, editor, archivist, computer technician or lawyer — and thus give clearer insights into the ongoing redefinition of roles and centres of power.

Conclusion

Over this two-year cycle, the Seminar will study how the editorial and translation landscape is being restructured, by raising methodological questions relating to the radical changes currently affecting the activities of 17th and 18th century research specialists. Has the position of the individual, paper-based edition or translation now become marginal in relation

to the vast projects mentioned previously? How are these projects distributed and by whom? How will future research be affected by the increase in targeted thesis projects, where a PhD student is offered funding to contribute to an edition? Do assessment authorities accord the same importance to editing and translation projects, which are often lengthy (5 to 10 years) and costly, as they do to original monographs? What role do French academics have to play in the transmission of British texts in France as well as abroad? What criteria do publishers apply when assessing the importance and prominence of any specific project? All these questions, which have thus far not been the object of any detailed discussion within a single seminar in France, will provide a starting point for a joint, interdisciplinary study, while also allowing for direct exchanges with students enrolled in the Masters degree.