

SCHOLARLY EDITIONS AND THE NEW MEDIA

Peter L. Shillingsburg. *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. v, 216. \$29.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Ember Smith, Clemson University

Peter Shillingsburg writes in this book that “[t]he future of electronic editing dawns as clearly bright to us now as the future of printing must have appeared in the first decades following 1452.” His book presents the technological changes taking place now in the scholarly editing field as part of the larger digital revolution the rest of the world is undergoing. “What Gutenberg did to democratize books and other texts,” Shillingsburg writes, “the World Wide Web has done to democratize information.” He sees a wide range of new possibilities for scholarly editing divorced from the limitations of print.

The title *From Gutenberg to Google* is something of a misnomer as the book does not trace the history of print or online publishing. Apart from briefly outlining some of Google’s innovations in the introduction, Shillingsburg doesn’t discuss the company. Shillingsburg says that the book’s title came to him while he was visiting the Gutenberg Museum in Germany. He writes, “As I stood looking at copies of the first book printed from moveable type 500 years ago—its beauty, its endurance—I had a vision in the form of a question: where, in 500 years, would anyone stand to look at a museum display of the first electronic book and would the words ‘endurance’ and ‘beauty’ come to mind?” The book is full of such profound questions. Shillingsburg covers so much ground and speculates on so many different topics, from Plato to an imagined history of yellow margarine, that at times it can be hard to follow (though no less interesting). Although the author touches on so many different subjects, the main concern of the book is scholarly editing, a subject some readers may find too far-removed from their own experience to find engaging. Undaunted readers will, however, find much to ruminate upon within its chapters.

The technological changes of which some scholars seem so wary are already in progress and further development along these lines seems inevitable, according to Shillingsburg, who believes that “the age of print has seen its peak and heyday.” He argues throughout the book that what we need now is a new way forward in our approach to the scholarly edition. At the heart of the book, we have his ideas on “script act theory” and “a conceptual space for electronic representations of literary texts,” along with his review of the problems arising from them. “Script act theory,” as Shillingsburg defines it, is “every sort of act conducted in relation to written and printed texts, including every act of reproduction and every act of reading,” a view that he hopes will be “provocative” for other scholars. Those hoping for practical technical instructions, however, may be disappointed. This book is not addressed to a technical audience, so you won’t find any helpful how-to instructions in it. As for any “practice” regarding scholarly editing, this book is only of general, not specific, interest. It is possible that only someone already familiar with the process of scholarly editing will find this section digestible.

The book’s lengthy discussions on scholarly editing, while perhaps not the sort of nuts-and-bolts primer I was hoping for, are fascinating. Shillingsburg is editing an elec-



tronic version of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and the examples he draws from his work on the edition are edifying, to say the least. He discusses all the nuances involved in creating a scholarly edition, the minutia of which I shall leave to the "thoughtful general readers as well as professional scholars and critics" to whom Shillingsburg says the book is addressed.

If you're looking for a treatise on how to create an electronic scholarly edition, you won't find it in *From Gutenberg to Google*. Those unfamiliar with the editing process also will not find a beginner's manual in this book. Shillingsburg outlines a "wish list" of features requisite for the ideal software for creating a scholarly edition, but he offers no insight on how such a program might be created. For any interested software developers out there, his wish list is an excellent resource. The rest of us may already be aware of the shortcomings of current software although we probably lack the programming skills to rectify the problem.

This book addresses some very complex questions, such as the very nature of a text and the right and wrong reasons for creating a scholarly edition. "Developments in editorial theory," Shillingsburg writes, "have put into question the whole purpose for editions and the concepts of how editions should take shape and function." *From Gutenberg to Google* is as much about editorial theory as it is about anything, and it is in such places where Shillingsburg discusses the subject at length that the real meat of the book is found. Though he concedes that "it is easy to get lost or discouraged in the field of electronic texts," the recent innovations in technology and the new developments in editorial theory make him optimistic about the "electronic textual revolution." The answer to the question "What is a book/text/manuscript?" is never cut and dried, according to Shillingsburg. So, now that the age of print is apparently drawing to a close, these questions will become more and more important as we move from a print-based to a screen-based world.

In chapter eight, "Hagiolatry, cultural engineering, monument building, and other functions of scholarly editing," Shillingsburg asks and answers some questions on the nature and purpose of scholarly editing. After pointing out the time, effort, and attention to detail required to produce a scholarly edition—as well as the fact that "so little reward seems to come from so much investment of time and intelligence"—Shillingsburg asks, "Why do we create scholarly editions, why do we spend our time and our lives in this way?" These are sobering questions coming from an editor of the author's experience. After all, if *he* doesn't know the point of creating a scholarly edition, how should we? Partly, the motives for scholarly editing that he says should be discarded—hagiolatry, cultural engineering, monument building, and cultural preservation—answer his own question. Without such motives, what would be the purpose of a scholarly edition? Shillingsburg says that "We can never forget that the compilation of a scholarly edition is the interpretive best thinking of an editor and is NOT the establishment of a text for all time," adding that "No two editors would produce the same results. It is not science."

Due to the sheer scope of the topics *From Gutenberg to Google* covers, the book isn't easy to categorize. For the uninitiated, this book provides a bird's-eye view of the field of scholarly editing and the changes being brought on by the digital revolution. In many ways, this book is a difficult read because so many of the concepts it contains are new and still developing. As Shillingsburg points out, "As yet we are but 15-20 years into an era whose counterpart introduced a 500-year reign." Often, he will ask a question and answer



it, but the most provocative questions are the ones he doesn't have answers for, such as: "Can you imagine the day when Emily Dickinson's poem 'There is no Frigate like a Book' will have an annotation for the last word that says 'Book = Print book; Dickinson was unaware of electronic books?'" In short, *From Gutenberg to Google* is a book that challenges one to think.