

Learned Love

Proceedings of the Emblem Project Utrecht Conference on
Dutch Love Emblems and the Internet (November 2006)

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DANS Symposium Publications 1
The Hague, 2007

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The Emblem Project Utrecht as a knowledge site

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During the last decades, the role of digital resources in the humanities has been debated extensively. Different aspects of this role have been discussed. The specific features of digital editions have been debated in studies by for instance Peter Robinson, Martha Nell Smith and Edward Vanhoutte.¹ In 2002, Stephen Greenblatt and John Unsworth initiated a discussion on the importance of 'digital scholarship', pleading for the electronic publication of secondary resources such as articles and monographs. Paul Eggert discussed important criteria for the infrastructure of digital scholarship in 2005. And recently, Peter Schillingsburg reviewed the effects of the re-presentation of print texts as electronic texts in *From Gutenberg to Google*.

In this article, I am presenting the experiences gained during the making of the Emblem Project Utrecht site within the wider context of this debate about the role of digital resources for the humanities. In an attempt to outline a program for a 'knowledge site', the type of digital resource the EPU site aims to be, I am seeking for connections between the various debates. The leading question is: what have we learned while working on the EPU site, and what do these experiences tell us about the possibilities to enhance the role of digital resources in the humanities?

From digital editions to a knowledge site

When the work on the EPU first started in 2003, the project's focus was the production of digital editions of the selected emblem books. Clearly, there were a number of editorial problems to be solved and decisions to be made. These editorial issues were our first concern, but not our only challenges. The aim was to publish scholarly digital editions which would also help to provide answers to questions such as: 'In what way are the profane and religious emblems in the corpus intertwined?', 'What changes did occur in the use of motives and imagery in Dutch love emblems during the seventeenth century?' and 'What was the relationship between the Protestant and Catholic parts of the corpus?'. We were, in short, trying to build digital editions that would also facilitate literary studies. In order to create such editions, the digital output of the EPU needed to be digital, readable books as well as platforms for activities such as searching, comparing and listing. Given the limited amount of time and money, we had to prioritize between editorial demands and the development of features and tools needed for literary research.

While progressing in both directions, we developed the ideal of creating a site that might be characterized as a 'work-site' – a term introduced by Paul Eggert in 2005. Within Eggert's 'work-site', the word 'work' not only refers to the origi-

¹ Vanhoutte's contribution to this volume is another contribution to this particular debate and also for instance Vanhoutte 1999.

nal work of the author (the primary work), but also to the work done by editors, researchers, reviewers and readers (the secondary work, so to speak). The consequences of building a work-site like this lie beyond the actual construction of the site. The way we conduct research is changed by it, in the sense that editions once published are no longer the fixed results of years of work, but the ever changing contribution of groups of scholars to work in progress. As Eggert states: 'The work-site is text-construction site for the editor and expert reader; and it is the site of study of the work (of its finished textual versions and their annotation) for the first-time reader, as well as any position in between. Because the building of such textual and interpretative work-sites will be piece by piece, collaborative and ongoing, we are starting to look at a future for humanities, work-oriented research that is, if not scientific exactly, then more *wissenschaftlich*, in the German sense, than what literary critics, historians, and others are used to.' (Eggert 2005).

In line with the idea of a 'work-site', we have experimented within the EPU context with the option of conducting quantitative literary studies. In for instance 'Ingrediënten voor een succesformule? Experimenten met een digitale editie van Cats' *Sinne- en minnebeelden*' (Boot and Stronks 2002) we attempted to explain the success of Cats's love emblems by demonstrating – through a systematically performed and rhetorical analysis, the detailed findings of which were made accessible to the reader/user – how Cats changes his approach of the reader every time he addresses a different part of his audience. The 'secondary work' on a work-site thus not only consists of traditional editorial tasks such as transcribing, collating and annotating, but also includes activities such as analyzing and comparing – tasks traditionally located within the field of literary studies. Although not all of these features are yet fully incorporated in the EPU site, the project aims to present digital editions supported by tools for literary analysis. Digital developments seem to offer a unique chance to integrate textual and literary studies, to their mutual benefit.² Providing digital editions have searchable indexes and concordances that facilitate searching through, and non-linear reading of the digitised text, editions can be research instruments as well as electronic representations of printed texts, sources, links, bibliographies etc. The indexes and concordances should be flanked by tools to annotate the digitised text – as Eggert already suggested – as well as tools that help to make literary (quantitative) analyses.³ Visitors as well as project members should thus be facilitated to search the texts and incorporate the results and conclusions based on these results in the digital editions, allowing everyone to illustrate arguments with the specific location of certain elements in the texts. To be useful to the emblem, as well as to other bimedial genres, this system needs to cover not only textual, but also pictorial and musical elements.

Since the introduction of the concept of a work-site, new ideals have arisen.

2 Of course, there is also textual analysis involved in the making of an (digital) edition. As Siemens 2005 states: 'textual analysis lies at the hearth of the electronic scholarly edition.'

3 As Smith 2004 states: through electronic publication texts become largely available, while literary research can be more quantitative based and results can be more easily checked.

One of these ideals is of particular interest to us, now that the EPU has officially ended. In 2006, Schillingsburg introduced the concept of the 'knowledge site', partly referring to Eggert's idea of a work-site. Along with Eggert, Schillingsburg believes that digital edition should be flanked by research tools, and should be in constant motion: 'It seems logical now, when undertaking a scholarly edition to plan to produce it as an electronic knowledge site with a variety of tools for accessing its materials and taking advantage of its incorporated scholarship' (Schillingsburg 2006, 97). The knowledge site should have textual foundations, should show contexts and progressions and interpretive interactions and should be open for user enhancements (Schillingsburg 2006, 101-102). Besides and beyond this, in Schillingsburg's view, these sites will form the infrastructure for future developments in research. He states a knowledge site 'requires a community with a life beyond the lives of the originators of scholarly projects to maintain and continue such projects' (Schillingsburg 2006, 95).

Ideally, we now think, the EPU site should become a part of the larger knowledge site on the European emblem. Some movements in this direction have been made of the course of the project – resulting for instance in the OpenEmblem Portal – but what more do we need to create a community that will support and develop a knowledge site on the European emblem in the future? Schillingsburg is confident these communities will be formed, 'just has communities have arisen to support libraries, scholarly journals, and specialized research institutes that outlast their founders' (Schillingsburg 2006, 95).

Problems and challenges

There is ample reason, however, to doubt whether so much optimism is in place. In his article 'Current issues in making digital editions of medieval texts – or, do electronic scholarly editions have a future?', Robinson recently inspected the poor state of affairs in the production of digital editions. If anything, there is a decline in the number of scholarly editions published on an internet site or as CDrom. Publishers are hesitant, scholars unequipped. Robinson suggests that a solution for this problem could be found in the development of tools such as an online publication system (Robinson 2005, par. 30). The EPU experiences have taught us that more fundamental and profound changes are in order. Scholars in the humanities cannot solely depend on the development of tools like an online publication system by others. In the current situation, only programmers or ICT-specialists among the textual scholars are capable enough to develop such tools. To become equal partners, all scholars in the humanities as well as the students within the humanities departments need to educate themselves to obtain a certain level of ICT-expertise. Researchers within the humanities should not only be able to work with digital tools; they should be skilled enough to create the ideas for the development of new tools. Greenblatt and Unsworth stated in 2002 that 'humanists need to em-

brace the new technologies.⁴ I think this change, wanted not only by Greenblatt and Unsworth, can only occur when humanists start working on their computer skills. How can we be partners in a discussion on the future of digital resources in the humanities if we are unaware of technical options, costs, problems and developments?

In this model, scholars working on a knowledge site – editors, bibliographers, librarians, programmers – should know enough of the expertise of the others in their community to be able to solve problems together. A basic understanding of the other's expertise, combined with one's own expertise is needed to create a community, and a sense of urgency and responsibility.

The EPU experiences have also made clear that there is a need – at least in the Netherlands, but the situation elsewhere does not seem to be much different – for more extensive sharing of knowledge on the production and use of digital resources. The EPU site is embedded in (research) programs of the Digital Library of Dutch Literature (DBNL), the Royal Dutch Library (KB), the Data Archiving and Networked Services (DANS) and the Huygens Institute. Techniques and standards used in the EPU match the philosophies and practices of these institutions. Still, despite the connections with these institutions and their particular areas of expertise, an immense local investment was made at the Utrecht University to create the EPU site. Programmers, translators, art historians, literary experts and research assistants worked together, logistically supported by computer software. Clearly, the EPU site could not have been made without the work of programmers combining experience in computer science and literary studies. These programmers are rare. Also, at this point of time, most of them work at institutions such as libraries and centers for scholarly editing. The dissemination of their knowledge from these institutions towards the humanity departments at universities is not an organized process – at least not in the Netherlands. In order to educate all scholars in the humanities, we need to organize summer schools for university students and teachers, taught by programmers that are willing – and allowed to – support the communities within universities that have the ambition to become the center of a knowledge site.

One of the other issues the community of scholars creating and supporting knowledge sites has to discuss is the matter of standardization. A discussion on the criteria for digital resources is necessary to set standards for their quality and durability. Initiatives such as TEI are based on mutual respect among scholars, but they have – as of yet – not resulted in a list of crucial features of digital editions. The TEI guidelines for instance do restrict researchers in their encoding, in the sense that they limit the number of tags that can be used. But almost none of these tags are mandatory. Tags labeling the physical appearance of the original texts is for instance optional. This means that editors can ignore typographical aspects

4 Greenblatt 2002, started a discussion on this issue in an open letter to the MLA, Unsworth 2002 replied to that.

of the original texts. Why do we not have a standardized, mandatory method to encode certain aspects of 'der materiellen Unterlage' (Gabler 2006, par. 6) in the digitisation process? And why is the principle of the sharing of (meta)data still not widely accepted and established? Should digitisation efforts (scanning, transcribing) not be a one-time investment for the scholarly community? It seems that the humanities could profit immensely from some firm decisions taken by scholars who dare to set standards of quality. The EPU is not claiming to be the blueprint for these standards, but we are committed to using this project, as well as our contribution to the OpenEmblem portal, to plead for a change in the way scholars in the humanities conduct their research.⁵

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⁵ More ideas about the changes for the humanities can be found in the Surfshare-programma 2007-2010 (2007).