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Author(s)	Barr, Rebecca Anne; Tonra, Justin
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*For the sake of argument: crowdsourcing annotation of Macpherson's Ossian*

The argument presented by a scholarly edition can usually be traced to the vision of a single editor or a very small group of editors. But is it possible—or even desirable—for an edition to present multiple, perhaps competing, arguments? This paper emerges from a new project to create a ‘social edition’ of James Macpherson’s *Ossian* poems, and describes some theoretical issues behind crowdsourcing annotation of the text.

**[Stemma slide]**

The purpose of this project is to generate new knowledge about a key eighteenth-century literary work. *Ossian* was a sequence of poems presented by a young Scottish author who claimed they were ‘translations from the Gaelic originals’ and which caused a European publishing sensation. Presented as ‘Fragments of Ancient Poetry Collected in the Highlands of Scotland’ in the first edition, the resultant popularity caused Macpherson to issue a second edition only months later. The second edition of *Fragments* thus opened with an advertisement for consumers who were buying into the vogue for primitive British verse. This emphasised the second edition’s added value by its inclusion of ‘one entire [new] poem’ (No. XII), but it also whetted the public’s appetite by promising that these celtic pieces were only the first phase of a projected literary archaeology. ‘Measures were being taken,’ Macpherson’s advertisement promised, ‘to make... a more full collection of the remaining works...[and to recover] the heroic poem mentioned in the preface’ (3). Such paratextual pronouncements as well as Macpherson’s periodical puffs worked like

eighteenth-century print virals: spreading anticipation of a printed edition which would satisfy the hunger for a 'complete' Celtic epic.

Macpherson certainly profited from the controversy which his works engendered in British, Irish and European reading publics. Since its first publication in 1760, *Ossian's* combination of spurious textual genetics and claims to cultural authenticity has provoked dissent and disagreement. Significantly, Macpherson's response to criticisms of his work was characteristically *editorial*. Just as Samuel Johnson's accusation of inauthenticity stemmed from the fact that 'the editor or author [note the ironic wavering] could never shew the original' of his supposed translations, so Macpherson's publications strove to stabilize their meaning through the medium of print. During the author's lifetime his printed editions *react to* enthusiastic *and* hostile readings of his 'antique' poetry. Following the first slight volume, Macpherson subsequently reconfigured and absorbed these 'fragments' into longer epic works, which were themselves in turn further edited and altered: they were annotated and *de*-annotated, given critical apparatus, such as Hugh Blair's preface to *Fragments* and Macpherson's 'Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity of the Poems of Ossian' (1762). In the 1765 *Works of Ossian* all previous poems were gathered together, with footnotes that emphasized the classical resonances and Gaelic origins of the lyrics. In 1773 Macpherson produced his 'authoritative' edition the *Poems of Ossian*. The changing editions of his poetry thus produce a battery of paratext: appendices, insertions, expansions, and alterations aimed at bolstering credibility and maximizing commercial success simultaneously.

**[Campbell slide]**

From the outset, then, Macpherson deployed edition as argument. *Ossian* is a 'text of the margins' (Stafford viii), a sequence of printed works whose fragmentary and provisional origins provoked dispute, but who sought to support their *oral* claims through *editorial* means. The text's propensity to provoke dissent can be seen in J.F. Campbell's copy of the 1760 *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* held at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. Campbell, an esteemed Gaelic scholar, annotated his editions of Macpherson's works across years, modulating his appreciation of their Gaelic provenance in light of his own research and the publication of further scholarly works on Scots folklore and Gaelic poetry. So in 1869 Campbell compares Macpherson's suppressed 1758 work *The Highlander* with the 1760 *Fragments* and writes 'these fragments are not translations...but the 'work of one mind.' In 1871 he adds more notes, declaring that though some are 'founded upon a genuine ballad' others are not, and pugnaciously asserts 'after getting through about 40,000 lines of Gaelic which is not in Macpherson's style and about 17000 lines which are, I suppose that I have read more than 60,000 lines of Gaelic since this time last year so I have a right to an opinion.'

*Ossian's* editorial pose actively solicits such critical evaluations from its audience, its authorial distance granting an unusual degree of interpretive authority to the reader. It is precisely *Ossian's* foregrounding of textual history (real or fabricated) that makes it an ideal case for interrogating the practices of scholarly editing. As Kristine Louise Haugen (1998) has shown, despite the absence of any ur-manuscript and its oral ancestry, **[Fingal slide]** Macpherson's work repeatedly dwells on questions of textual authority and textual

transmission: using asterisks to signal lacunae, noting interpolations, adding scholarly glosses and etymologies, analogues and sources, and in the second edition of *Fragments*, incorporating variants. Macpherson utilises the power of editorial practice to assert meaning.

### **[Three phase slide]**

Our project aims to present a new online edition of *Ossian*, prepared according to strict principles of scholarly editing. Despite the publishing history of the *Ossian* poems and their impact upon eighteenth century European culture the only twentieth-century scholarly edition of the text was Howard Gaskill's Edinburgh University Press print edition of the *Poems of Ossian* in 1996. Our open-access project will re-present Macpherson's work to new audiences of scholars and will visualise the textual variation of the eighteenth-century volumes in a critical edition. Following Gaskill's print edition, this online edition aims to utilise the medium and the tools that were largely unavailable to scholarly editors. Despite Gaskill's pioneering work in making *Ossian* available to readers in an accessible paperback format, his edition is problematic. In many ways, Gaskill's edition is an argument for *Ossian's literary value*. An eclectic text, it selects material from across the various editions, from a perspective of the 'best' literary quality: using aesthetic criteria informed by literary criticism and textual primitivism, Gaskill attempts to extricate the work from authorial intention. Thus, he rejects the 1773 *Poems of Ossian*, in which Macpherson makes significant textual, stylistic and structural changes, as a 'mutilated' text which represents 'the worst possible choice' for a scholarly edition. Gaskill accuses the 1773 edition as

‘minimal Ossian and maximal Macpherson’ (xxv), and so seeks to restore the (inspired, autonomous literary) text to its primitive integrity. Gaskill’s print edition is an important act of literary rehabilitation and revision, but it is hamstrung by print constraints which force him into a ‘reluctant compromise’ (ibid.) in which translations, glosses and editorial footnotes are relegated to the end of the edition or removed altogether and in which variants and accidentals are silently excised.

Nonetheless, Gaskill’s edition provides the impetus for our reassessment of Ossian, since

scholarly editions... do not supersede all previous editions and printings. Rather, they propel the life of the work further into the future, in an altered form, by intervening in it critically and appealing to criteria or information previously overlooked...scholarly editors, like all editors, are agents in the ongoing life of the work, not its embalmers. Editions are *one* form of argument about the work.<sup>1</sup>

The affordances of the digital ‘allow for the creation of better-than-print editions’, in which the role of the editor has changed and what can be offered to the reader has radically expanded.<sup>2</sup> While Gaskill had to be selective and evaluative, we can create an archive of editions that allows readers to visualise change across editions, to interpret and judge those changes independently. Most importantly, our project will create an online knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Eggert, ‘Brought to Book: Bibliography, Book History and the Study of Literature’, *The Library*, vol. 13, No. 1, March 2012, 3-32: 32, my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Amy E. Earhart, ‘the Digital Edition and the Digital Humanities’, *Textual Cultures*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2012, 18-28: 22.

community who will be actively involved in the collaborative creation of scholarly annotations. *Ossian's* model of devolved authority makes it a good candidate for allowing a collaborative annotative policy, as does its disciplinary breadth. Its mixture of Gaelic sources, classical principles, and its impact on European literature necessitate a range of expert annotators, rather than a single figure. Users will collaborate, debate, and annotate this edition, synthesising for the first time a broad range of disciplinary perspectives to provide an evolving community of research and a truly 'social edition.'

Paul Eggert has argued that if the "edition-as-argument is to be persuasive, it *can't* be crowdsourced, because crowds can't agree on [the?] edition's argument." Instead, he insists, the edition becomes an argument about data for the reader, "which may impair the material being presented." Eggert's objection to the role of crowdsourcing in scholarly editing stems from his reticence about detailed textual work being completed by committee. Just as this challenges us to think carefully about the boundaries of duty and responsibility of the scholarly editor, using crowdsourcing for one particular part of the editorial process—*annotation*—helps us to examine how developments in technology and in editorial theory may have shifted and refined the tasks of the scholarly editor.

In thinking about the argumentative nature and function of annotation, and the role that a crowd might play in its creation, some general principles about annotation are worth considering. Broadly speaking, annotation serves to aid and improve readers' understanding of historical documents, and its form might be divided into three general categories: notes on document provenance; textual notes; and contextual or informational notes. As is the

case with many editorial decisions, the nature and extent of the annotation in an edition will be directed by the audience for that edition, and by their particular needs. The complexity and familiarity of the documents will also play an important role in this determination. The balance between these categories of annotation can vary quite significantly between editions: the student edition for the commercial publisher will likely feature more contextual and informational annotation while the scholarly edition for an academic audience may veer towards more objective declarations about provenance and textual issues. So, when we speak about the possibility of crowdsourcing the annotation of Ossian, what exactly are we proposing?

Are we willing to permit an open-season on annotating Ossian? Or, are there certain aspects of the edition that we cannot countenance the crowd performing? Here, I am thinking about annotations from the first two categories (provenance, textual) which articulate the findings of the professional scholarly editor (and which represent those tasks which Eggert cannot give to the crowd). For example, those based on collation of textual variants or on the findings of descriptive bibliographical work. These categories fall within the ambit of the textual scholar, while contextual or informational annotation is more often the preserve of the literary critic or literary historian. The boundaries between these roles are, of course, highly permeable, and the scholarly editor must change hats frequently in the course of his or her professional work.

But if we think a little more about making such categorical distinctions within scholarly editing, and attributing portions of the job to specific disciplinary or ideological inclinations,

can we come to a clearer definition of the *essence* of scholarly editing, and how the increasing use of technology within the field or the prospect of a *social* edition **[Siemens slide]** might have challenged or changed that essence? What, today, are the tasks of the scholarly editor, and how have they changed (if at all)? What tasks are sacrosanct, and which might we consider sacrificing or outsourcing if the opportunity to do so arose?

Thomas Tanselle provides a means of thinking further about this question: the first portion of his *Introduction to Scholarly Editing* syllabus offers readings on ‘the Basic Steps in Preparing an Edition.’ The larger categories within this section present tasks whose importance and centrality to scholarly editing are uncontroversial: assembling materials and collating texts; establishing relationships among texts; preparing the text; and designing and proofreading an edition. But the finer-grained subcategories reveal biases within the workflow of Tanselle, an editor for print working in the Greg-Bowers tradition of scholarly editing. A section on ‘The Problem of Copy-Text’ and related groupings dedicated to treatment of accidentals and substantives address topics that, while important and illustrative, are no longer *essential* issues that the scholar editor *must* address. This is not to declare these issues irrelevant—I recently reviewed an excellent edition of *The Shadow-Line* from the Cambridge Works of Joseph Conrad whose apparatus devotes lengthy and detailed attention to copy-text, accidentals, and substantives—it is simply to state that they are now relevant to a specific type of edition (usually for print) and may not inform the principles of a digital editor, or a proponent of the social-text theory and practice associated with McGann, McKenzie, Reiman, and others.

An edition of Ossian which presents *all* texts overseen by Macpherson between 1760 and 1773, and links (by means of the genetic edition encoding module of the TEI) the sites of variation and revision within that period of transmission does not need to make a decision or mount an argument about its treatment of accidentals and substantives. And this is because it presents diplomatic texts of the seven Ossian editions from this period. It does not establish a single eclectic text of the kind that Gaskell's edition presents. But does this represent a conscious rejection of an editorial task and a less argumentative edition? When Walter Greg writes, "Every editor aiming at a critical edition will, of course, correct scribal or typographical errors" (31)<sup>3</sup>, he argues for a particular practical application of a complex set of principles and beliefs about the transmission and editing of documentary texts. In its explicit interventionism, traces of its argumentative force are everywhere visible in an edition which follows this ideology. But the principles underlying the social-text edition, which implicitly advocates equal status for *all* textual witnesses and *all* variants, do not leave such conspicuous traces. Similarly, when Don McKenzie writes that, "in some cases significantly informative readings may be recovered from typographic signs as well as verbal ones, that these are relevant to editorial decisions about the manner in which one might reproduce a text, and that a reading of such bibliographical signs may seriously shape our judgement of an author's work" (18)<sup>4</sup>, he argues for the importance of a text's materiality to the editor, but does not suggest a course for its practical treatment within an edition. Identifying an accidental is easy; how does one editorially isolate something as inherent, yet nebulous, as a text's materiality? The point behind all of this is that the social-text edition's refusal to make evaluative choices between variants (which may *seem* like an abrogation of

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Rationale of Copy-Text.'

<sup>4</sup> *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*.

a central argumentative task of the scholarly edition) *is* its argument: a broad theoretical principle, rather than a narrow practical one.

The critical edition phase of *Ossian Online* will follow the theoretical principles of the social-text edition. It will identify and encode textual variation in the Ossian texts in the period from 1760 to 1773—the same practical method of the Greg-Bowers tradition—but it will stop short of prioritising any variant over another, leaving this evaluative step for the user to take, or to reject. Similarly, *Ossian Online* will crowdsource the contextual annotation of its texts, in recognition of Ossian’s transdisciplinary appeal, and on the understanding that its very broad scope and interest could not be described with satisfaction by the annotations of its two editors. If the social-text edition represents the shifting of authority on *adjudicating* textual matters from the sole editor to the judgement of its users, then the social edition sees a similar devolution of contextual interpretation. What is interesting about these shifts towards the social—to enabling and accommodating multiple interpretive perspectives and possibilities—is the manner in which they provoke questions and encourage reflections about the fundamental duties and responsibilities of the scholarly editor. The case for the defence of scholarly editing in professional situations where it is afforded inferior status to a peer-reviewed article or a monograph is regularly based on assertions that the tasks of the scholarly editor are inherently critical and argumentative. It behoves us in these circumstances to be able to state very clearly *how* our editions argue.

Queen Mary, University of London,  
17 July 2014.