Digital Editing *As* Feminist Experimental Literary Adaptation

by Elan Paulson

In the past few decades, feminist critics have made significant contributions to and rich cross-pollinations with the field of textual studies. Scholars such as Brenda R. Silver, Julia Flanders, and Ann Thompson have incorporated feminist theory into their critiques of the hierarchical and excluding logic underpinning mainstream textual theory and editing practices. Other textual scholars, however, are cynical about these recent interventions. For instance, in an article that questions the legitimacy of feminist textual studies, Laurie Maguire, attempts to describe how feminist "combative politics" (71), first asserted in the 1970s, become "a statement of the obvious in the 1980s, a truth universally acknowledged in the 1990s, and a cliché in the twenty-first century" (71). This belief that feminism aims to be "cliché," or normative, textual scholarship, however, *recovers* the very centre/margin dualist rhetoric that many contemporary feminists challenge. Feminist bibliographers and editors who support a politics of difference promote decentred, relational, and multiple approaches to textual studies, continuously interrogating all forms of unexamined "cliché" in the field. This paper explores how a theoretical framework of feminist experimental writing and adaptation criticism might be useful in re-visioning[1] the process of feminist digital editing as a form of creative literary adaptation. In addition to producing more "feminist" editions that are yet conventional in their linear page design, feminist editors might also consider how *experimental editing* may subvert dominant editing conventions. In re-*seeing* digital editing as a practice of creative adaptation, feminist editors perform a re-*making* of the

texts that they transform. Just as experimental writing enacts literary criticism while transgressing its traditional forms, so too might the editor's use of new media help to produce dynamic digital adaptations of print literature that imaginatively perform and reinforce the editor's own particular feminist approach and editing methods.

While feminist approaches to textual studies are obviously multiple and diverse, in the introduction to *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, editors Robyn C. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl explain that, "Feminist critics generally agree [...] that feminist literary criticism plays a worthwhile part in the struggle to end oppression in the world outside of texts" (x). To disrupt the patriarchal privileging of notions such as essence and sameness that construe women as objects, feminists often read marginalized, non-normative and transgressive writing practices by women as creating moments of literary/textual difference. Working within this transgressive mode, feminists often also make strategic alliances in order to challenge existing power structures that compartmentalize and value unequally diverse knowledges and experiences. For example, feminist textual and literary scholars often agree that cross-field criticism and trans-genre writing practices promote experimental and thus subversive ways to create, examine, and edit texts. Editors Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue explain that feminist experimental writers aim to "foster dialogue, explore interfaces and thresholds," and "augment new reading practices" with their textual play (6-7). The editors characterize experimental writing as *feminist* because they argue that it transgresses fixed, hierarchical, and discrete ways of thinking about texts and gendered subjects in texts. They also explain that feminist experimental writers use textual innovations to "investigate racial-sexual differences in material society that dominant

constructs cover up, creating women's texts that proffer ways of seeing the unseen, looking at the unlooked at" (5). Like feminist writers and literary critics, feminist editors may use experimental editing strategies to expose how cultural and textual structures re-inscribe and cover up the "logic" of discrimination and exclusion circulating in the economy of mainstream textual studies.

Just as critics argue that feminist experimental writing exposes cultural mechanisms that perpetuate social inequalities, recent adaptation critics interrogate traditional models of adaptation studies that have marginalized the genre of adaptation. In her book-length critical study, novel to film adaptation critic Sarah Cardwell problematizes issues of *origin* and *fidelity* that constitute the long-dominant comparative approach to adaptation. The comparative method views adaptations, or "target" texts, as extending directly from a source, or "origin," text and it also privileges the author's "true" intentions over the adaptor's mere "re-interpretation" of the source text (10). In this comparative view, adaptations are understood as little more than corrupted or diluted versions of the source text; it reifies hierarchical categories of authorship and originality, discretely separating (and devaluing) the copy from its source text, the adaptor from the source text author, and interpretive criticism from original creative fiction.

In contrast, the more pluralist approach to adaptation that Cardwell theorizes is cued by Roland Barthes' notion of intertextuality, that the text is composed of multiple quotations drawn from many cultural sources (160). If the source text itself is not one but many (inter)texts, then from a non-comparative view the adapted text undermines the source author's intentionality as the basis for interpretation (McFarlane 21). The strength

of this non-comparative approach lies in what McFarlane calls its "decentredness" as well as its ability to place adaptations in what Cardwell observes as "a far wider cultural context than that of an origin-version relationship" (25). Cardwell advocates this pluralist approach because it re-sees adaptation "as the gradual development of a 'meta-text'" (25), rather than as a hierarchical privileging of a source text over other texts related to it.

For instance, Marilyn Hoder-Salmon views her screenplay version of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) simultaneously as a critical adaptation *and* as a creative source text. Hoder-Salmon explains that her dramatic adaptation of Chopin's fiction "[t]akes the genre [of adaptation] a step further by illustrating that a critic […] may […] use the process of adaptation as an interpretation of the original source" (Preface x). The author's adaptation as interpretation, or "creative criticism," approach redefines the genre of adaptation not as subsidiary to the genre of creative fiction, but as a form of feminist criticism of a source text that yet maintains its own "elegant, even poetic" original creative aesthetic (x).

Cardwell's criticism of the hierarchical comparative view of adaptation resembles Brenda Silver's reconsideration of the politics of adaptation as she edits Virginia Woolf's fiction manuscripts. Just as Cardwell proposes and Hoder-Salmon demonstrates, Silver similarly redefines the adaptation as an embodied textual *performance* that carries no less authority or meaning than its source text. Silver believes that, even when they cross media forms, adaptations are not "subsidiary or marginal to the 'original,'" but rather should be conceived as "texts with the same status as any other text in the ongoing, historical construction of a composite, palimpsestic work" (58). Like Cardwell, Silver

views the adapted text as defined by its multiple intertexts. Silver assembles and edits Woolf's writing not as individual and isolated extant versions, but as contextualized by her entire corpus of manuscript texts.

And, in fact, just as adaptation interprets a source text, so too might we re-see editing as a form of adaptation as well. In her formulation of the feminist politics of editing as adapting, Silver references gender performance theory, explaining that "various versions exist as materially as the bodies that are gendered through performative acts, and the way [versions] are enacted, received, and policed can have a material impact on the way we teach and write and live" (61). Silver exposes how the adaptation, and the relationship between versions or adaptations, are performed (and regulated) by medium and form, visual and textual structure, literary content, editorial intervention, and readerly engagement. Just as Hoder-Salmon's screenplay adaptation literally performs its author's interpretation, so to do editors adapt the source text by adding their own apparatus, including emendations, annotations, commentaries, indexes, lists of intertexts, etc. The editor's work is performative in that that his/her textual apparatus enact and police the text's reproduction and interpretation.

Moreover, as feminist experimental writing and pluralist adaptation criticism expose and critique the unseen hierarchical and dualist rhetoric underpinning dominant literary and critical discourses, feminist digital textual scholars have revealed how patriarchal editing concepts conceal but maintain the illusion that the editor "objectively" reveals the author's "true" intentions. In her gendered critique of digital textual editing, Julia Flanders, in her article "The Body Encoded," explains that textual theory draws on a

binary power structure that locates control with the editor who, as she describes, is "a source of intention sufficient to preside over every detail of a work that is to be considered a work of literary art" (131). In print editions, the editor's authority has been justified by the convention of the "best text" concept, or what Flanders calls the "myth of the lost original" (130). The inherently masculine essence of the author's true text cannot be materially realized, as its very—gendered female—physical matter inevitably corrupts the transcendent and universal meaning of the text, intended by the author. The editor's "duty" is thus to restore the text to the author's ideal form, to preserve the text's "chastity," which reinforces the patriarchal fallacy of a need for the editor's gate keeping to manage the text (129).

Later in her article Flanders reformulates *digital* literary reproduction not as a duty of restoration of an original text but as a creative act of adaptation, of intertextuality, for even for a mimetic textual representation on the computer screen, the digital text format requires adding tag sets to the body of the text. This coding process can present the visual presentation of a text, as with HTML tag sets, or it can describe the text semantically using XML tag sets. Flanders argues that "semantic tagging definitely alters the meaning of the text" because the editor decides how the page contents will be interpreted, while the act of tagging physically "add[s] [additional] text to the xml layer of the text in the form of annotations" (136). The particular historical and material conditions of the digital text and the editor's semantic tagging at the transcription level create a performative electronic version of the edited and transformed print source text.

Following Flanders' logic in the context of feminist experimental writing and pluralist adaptation criticism, I believe that because the digital transmission process incorporates other texts and apparatus, such as HTML or XML tag sets, DTDs, and style sheets, each digital textual reproduction may be re-conceived as a creative literary adaptation. Following Cardwell and Silver's revised views of adaptation theory, I propose that each digital version of a print source text has its own value as a uniquely transcribed text, in which the descriptive and/or semantic tagging alters and adapts the source text. Thus, the feminist literary and textual criticism assembled here together promotes a re-vision of the critical edition as an adaptation; like feminist experimental writing, Flanders' feminist digital textual studies criticism reveals how the editorial process and digital technologies that transform codex texts also enact and regulate the digital text's visual presentation as well as the user's level of interaction with it.

These recent seismic shifts in the status of the adapted text and the authority of the adaptor have blurred the boundaries that distinguish the author, editor, adaptor, and user as the primary source of literary meaning-making. To once more draw upon experimental writing criticism, Loss Pequeño Glazier explains in *Digital Poetics* that Western culture's (post)modern condition has encouraged a greater "awareness of the conditions of texts" (1), while digital technology allows for more user interaction with texts, realizing the reader's position as a Barthesian "writerly reader." Glazier believes that early twentieth century experimental poetry and contemporary digital texts share some overlapping tendencies, particularly "the same focus on method, visual dynamics, and materiality" (1). Thus, just as experimental writing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continues to encourage readers to "become contingent producers of our own

texts" (Hinton and Hogue 5-6), feminist editors explicitly acknowledge their role in co-producing women's writing in the form of critical editions. Moreover, editors have capitalized on the ever-increasing dynamism of digital technology to create multiple entry points into, and user-directed navigational processes across, digitized literary texts. Because twentieth century modernist and postmodernist poetics share a concern with investigating the literary and graphic dynamics and effects of linking, metonymy, fragmentation, and non-linear reading processes, experimental poetry is in what Glazier explains as "the perfect position to inform digital practices" (92-93), which in my view includes digital *editing* practices as well.

This use of poetics to inform digital practices is timely because, as editors Peter Stoicheff and Andrew Taylor explain in their essay anthology *The Future of the Page*, the traditional printed page, since before the Enlightenment, has reinforced linear and hierarchical epistemic structures that have determined the way that readers tend to prioritize information, and, subsequently, how information has been presented on digital web pages. "If websites still tend to reproduce the features of medieval page design," as Stoicheff and Taylor explain, "they do so because these features have become fully integrated with our habits of thought and with the structures of academic publishing. This means," the authors say further, "that there are many good reasons for doing things the same old way and that it will be exceedingly difficult to do things differently" (9). Although the authors do not discuss this "tyranny" of the hierarchical and linear page in explicitly gendered terms, the feminist criticism that I have gathered clearly shows that "doing things the same old way" recovers rather than contests the patriarchal structures that inform conventional (digital) page design. As Glazier recommends the

transformative capacity of visual and concrete poetry for digital poetics, Stoicheff and Taylor describe new media as offering productive and multi-modal alternatives to hierarchical and linear page design. "The digital page," the authors write, "now encourages a nonlinear progression through a text, which in turn has begun to reshape how literary texts, written for the digital platform, are conceived and structured" (13). By restructuring codex source texts using dynamic digital features—such as three-dimensional graphics and other highly interactive designs—digital editors may expose concealed epistemological structures that guide readers' interpretive habits.

These defamiliarizing digital features can be read, furthermore, as productive editing tools for the feminist digital editor, who may consciously deploy them in order to encourage the user to re-think through not only the production of texts but also the politics that underscore digital (re)production. The moment at which the editor employs dynamic digital editing tools to reveal the editor's subjective interpretive and adaptive practices also allows feminist digital editions of literature to be re-seen as feminist experimental literary adaptations. If a digital transcription of a text necessarily includes the editor's own tagged additions, then instead of *concealing* her decisions in a hierarchical, two-dimensional page design that replicates established interpretive patterns, feminist editors might instead explore ways of explicitly re-making their editions with experimental editing practices. By practicing experimental editing, feminist editors expose established editing processes that support yet conceal the (often privileged) subject position of the editor as "gatekeeper" of the text, and would also promote creative cross-discipline experimentation that draws from feminist theory, digital poetics and editing practices. Moreover, if digital archives of women's writing offered creative

adaptations alongside the mimetically reproduced source texts, the different renderings of the source text would further reinforce a feminist politics of difference by offering multiple yet related critical and creative adaptations of a text.

Feminist Shakespearean editor Ann Thompson explains that as editors, "we cannot stand outside the ideological baggage we carry, though we can at least attempt to be aware of the preconceptions and prejudices that may affect our interpretation" (89). The current lack of creative digital literary adaptations of women's writing at this time reveals through their absence how editors yet seem to favour protecting the mimetic or "universal" design of the digital edition or archive.[2] In re-seeing digital reproduction as also capable of enacting feminist criticism, new ways of engendering such theory become possible. This does mean merely supplanting mimetic versions with dynamic ones, which would only invert the rhetorical hierarchy, but perhaps editors may instead aim to create, as Flanders writes, "textual resources which fulfill the purposes which we most care about" (135). And what many feminist scholars care about is extending legitimacy to marginalized texts, authors, and approaches to literary (re)production. Feminist textual scholars may productively articulate feminist and other minority agendas not only by acknowledging their subject positions at the outset of their digital editions, but also by *performing* their own feminist approach to editing/adapting literary texts.

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[1] My use of the word *re-visioning,* and the *visual* metaphors that resonate throughout the essay, are resonant of Adrienne Rich's emphasis in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" on her own experimental textual play, the revisionary/adaptive mode in which she discusses Ibsen's play, "When We Dead Awaken," and her interrogation and re-vision of issues of canonicity, a dominant discourse that deeply influences both literary and textual theories and practices. "[U]ntil we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched," Rich writes, "we cannot know ourselves" (604).

[2] See Works Cited and Consulted for a few representative examples of mimetic or quasi-facsimile digital reproductions of women's writing, such as the *Emory Women's Writing Project* and the *Victorian Women Writers Project.*