

Franz Fischer

*All texts are equal, but... Textual Plurality and the Critical Text in Digital Scholarly Editions.*  
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# VARIANTS

## 10

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The cover image is the second annotated proof of the Finnish poet Aaro Hellaakoski's "Dolce far Niente". Reproduced with kind permission from the Literary Archives of the Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura [Finnish Literature Society].

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## All texts are equal, but...

### Textual Plurality and the Critical Text in Digital Scholarly Editions

Franz Fischer

Is there a future for the “old philology”? Why are “truly critical” and “truly digital” editions so rare? This article<sup>1</sup> discusses the questions raised at the Leuven round table by showcasing two scholarly editions that claim to be both digital and critical: the edition of William of Auxerre’s *Summa de officiis ecclesiasticis*, an early thirteenth-century Latin treatise on liturgy, and the so-called HyperStack edition of Saint Patrick’s *Confessio*, a fifth-century open letter by Ireland’s patron saint, also written in Latin and the oldest text that has survived from Ireland in any language. In giving a comparative introduction to both of these online editions – to their underlying methodology and theoretical implications – I will make the following arguments: (1) Critical texts matter. The critical reconstruction of an assumed original text version as intended by an author remains of major interest for most textual scholars and historians as well as any person with an interest in historical texts. (2) Critical texts have the same legitimacy as various and different manifestations of a text. Digital editions enable the presentation of textual plurality. (3) There is no reason intrinsic to the digital medium that makes the idea of a critical text obsolete. Rather, a critical text can serve as the standard reference, as an ideal text to start with and as a portal to access the variety of textual manifestations of a particular work.

#### Definitions

The primary purpose of scholarly editions is to make texts from the past available. Through editions textual scholars access, assess, prepare and present primary data for research. A scholarly edition is the critical representation of historical documents and texts (Sahle 2008). But what does “critical” mean? And, even more fundamentally, what is a text?

According to the pluralistic text theory of Patrick Sahle a definition of what text actually is depends on the perspective on a particular text and on the individual perception of this text.<sup>2</sup> Text, or textual identity, can be understood according to six features. Firstly, texts need to be understood in terms of their *idea*, its content or intention: texts are intentional. And: text are what they mean. Applied to editorial practice, this is the realm of interpretation, exegesis, commentaries and the justification for the most noble of all editorial interventions: emendation – a correction of the text as present in the witnesses, based on the editor’s understanding of the author’s intentions. Traditional philology according to the Lachmannian paradigm has always been seeking to transcend the material contingencies and corruptions of textual transmission by aiming at reconstructing an assumed original version or archetype – whatever the definition of this might be.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the present article (alluding to the famous slogan in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*) was not ingeniously coined by myself on the occasion of the Leuven Round Table discussion in 2011 but (as I learned only subsequently) had been used already by Paul Morgan (quote in Sahle forthcoming). I am grateful to Patrick Sahle, Anthony Harvey and Philipp Steinkrüger for their support in developing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Sahle forthcoming; see Fischer 2008. For a similar concept in the field of bibliography see the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records as issued by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA 1998, 12-29).

But text of course is also understood, secondly, as a *work* with a clearly defined narrative structure; thus, for example, the opening paragraph of Saint Patrick's *Confessio* is always *Confessio* 1, be it in the original Latin or in the German translation; it is always the same text. This is not the case when text is dealt with, thirdly, as a specific expression, a *linguistic code*, a certain series of words. A translation is entirely different from the original under the perspective of text as a linguistic code. But the original Latin of the *Confessio*, which was first published in a scholarly edition in 1950-51, reprinted in 1993 and now digitized and made available online, is still the same text, with exactly the same words. However, these texts, fourthly, are all different *versions*, so that, for example, in a seminar situation, though everybody may be consulting "the same text", not everyone will find that (say) "page 12" contains the same thing – and some will not be working with pages at all.

But even if everyone has the same version, they still have, fifthly, different *documents* in their hands. And this distinction is even more obvious when we talk about handwritten copies, manuscripts or even charters. We can describe these documents topographically ("here is text, there is text") and as regards the chronology of its creation ("this has been corrected or added at a later stage, that at an earlier stage"). And this is why we have so-called genetic editions, recording and representing the genesis of a text in time and space. Also, we can analyse and describe the script and the writing materials, the colour or the chemical components of the ink, the parchment, the paper, the script or font size, and other visual features. And this is why we have so-called diplomatic editions that claim to represent, sixthly, the visual features and signs of a particular document – because they are significant. The physical appearance of medieval charters or, most notably, of the Bible as a book (e.g. in a liturgical context, or in court when you swear on it) is highly meaningful. The "text itself" does not matter here at all — the book might even contain blank pages — yet the text is identified by means of its physical appearance and, as such, points to a certain idea or truth. This brings us back to the text understood as idea or intention: platonic, eternal and true, and transcending any particular physical manifestation.

Arranged in a circle these aspects of textuality build the so-called text wheel according to Sahle — visualizing a pluralistic understanding of what text actually is (Figure 2). Any sort of "text" is all this at once, at least potentially, *in posse* if not necessarily *in esse*. Indeed, one should always be able to ask: where is the text, when all documents, all witnesses are corrupted, full of mistakes, incomplete? And where is the text when all documents are lost? And then, of course, if we accept a somehow ideal or intentional existence of texts, then which is the text when an author has changed or revised his or her intentions during the course of time?

On the other hand, there has always been a certain mistrust towards the written word, as manifest for example in Saint Paul's famous statement in his second letter to the Corinthians: *The letter kills, but the spirit gives life.*<sup>3</sup> However, textual scholars and historians rely completely

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 3,6. Another well-known example is Socrates telling the anecdote of the king of Upper Egypt criticizing the invention of script because it creates pseudo-knowledge instead of true knowledge (Plato, Phaidros 274B ff, esp. 275D-E): "Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very much like painting. For the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And it is the same with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to learn about their sayings, they always tell you one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is tossed about, alike among those who understand and those to whom it does not belong, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; and when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect

on textual evidence in a very pragmatic way: there is no textual evidence without its material manifestation. But also, there is no text without an abstract meaning. By the means and techniques of textual criticism (*recensio*, *collatio*, etc.) traditional editors try to bring both perspectives as far as possible into accordance.

Either way, textual perspectives and respective research interests are much more diverse. The text wheel might help to distinguish these specific notions of texts as realized in an edition. And the value of a scholarly edition might be measured and assessed by asking how far all of the textual aspects stated above are covered or, at least, how consistent is an editor's choice in representing just some or even just one of these textual aspects.

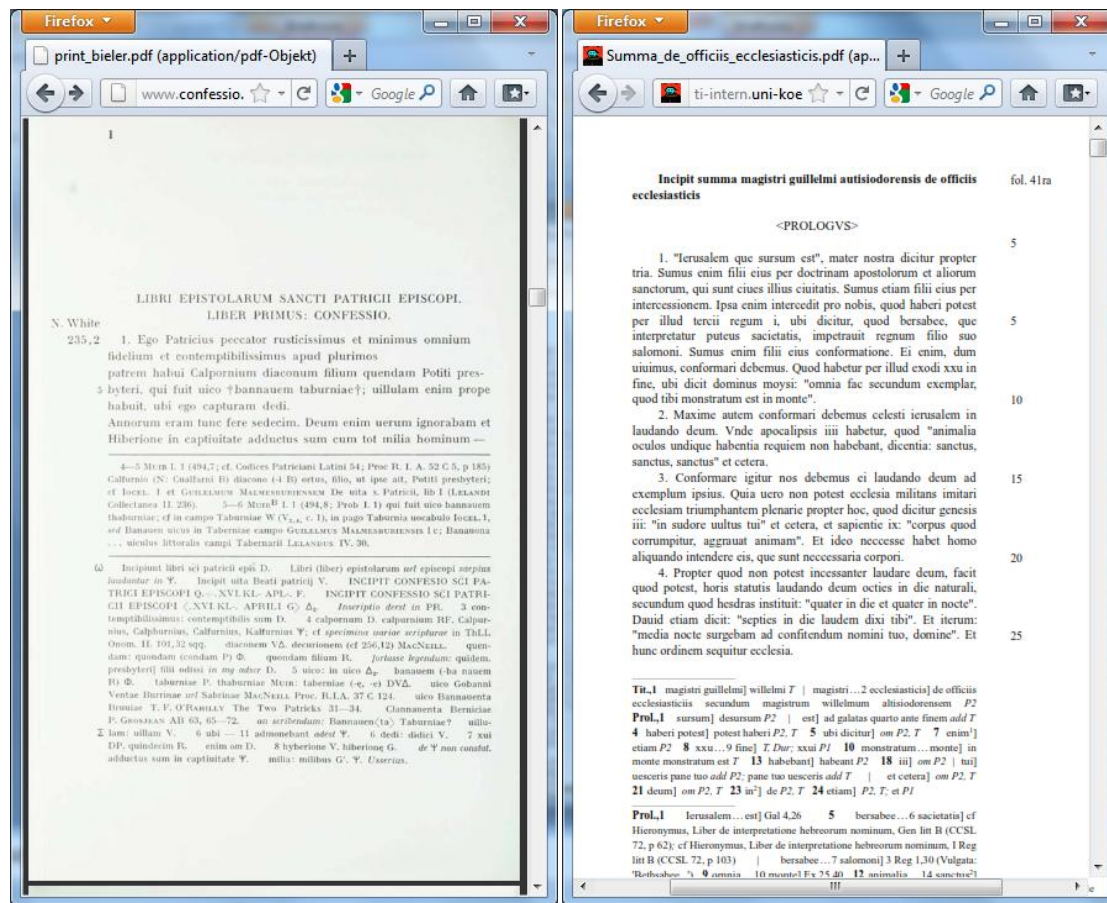


Figure 1: PDF versions of a critical text online – *Confessio* (Bieler 1950-51) on the left, *Summa* (2007) on the right

## Two digital critical editions, two methodologies

Both editions shown in Figure 1 are digital *and* critical, but methodologically, as regards their realization, they have been created under completely different approaches (from opposite directions, as it were). On the one hand (Figure 1, left), the work of Saint Patrick's *Confessio* had

or help itself" (transl. Fowler, with changes by Ph. Steinkrüger). The editor in that sense is the godfather of the text. In his exegetic capacity the critical editor proclaims to know and execute the author's intention when emending and commenting the written word accordingly.

already been published in an excellent print edition by the Austrian scholar Ludwig Bieler in 1950-51. On the other hand (right), the *Summa* by William of Auxerre had never been printed or published before. Here the point of departure was the text as witnessed by fifteen manuscript copies dispersed in fourteen libraries and archives across Europe.

Both of these editions are critical editions according to the Lachmannian paradigm (Maas 1927, West 1973; see Andrews in this volume); that is, both editions establish a text that is based on a meticulous comparison of the physical evidence as furnished by the manuscripts. They claim to present “the text”, or “the best text”, the text as intended by the author, a reconstruction of an assumed archetype, emended, structured and annotated. Variant readings of the manuscript testimonies are recorded in the *apparatus criticus*. Inter-textual references are recorded in the *apparatus fontium*, in the *apparatus biblicus* and (as a special feature of the edition of the *Summa*) in an *apparatus* indicating the use of text passages by authors of later times. All *apparatus* entries are referenced by means of *lemmata* and line numbers. Each text is introduced with a description of the textual material and the methodology applied for re-creating “the actual text”.

And these texts are, as they stand, also digital texts (which is already a considerable achievement in itself): they are accessible online, as PDF; they can easily be copied and shared; they are searchable and printable; and any passage can be copied and pasted to any other electronic document. Yet “digital” is supposed also to entail “more” — more than just creating an electronic duplicate of the printed page of the printed page (Robinson 2002, Gabler 2010). Both editions offer many more features and functionalities than just “copy and paste” etc. And both editions cover a much wider range of textual manifestations of the respective works.

Ideally, a scholarly edition that is “truly digital” should be an edition that aims at covering all or, at least, as many of the textual aspects as possible of a particular work in the best possible way, by exploiting the full potential of the digital medium while maintaining the highest possible academic standards.

### ***The HyperStack edition***

Saint Patrick’s *Confessio* Hypertext Stack is a virtual stack of closely interlinked text layers representing all relevant versions of the text, as well as translations into several modern languages, manuscript facsimiles and descriptions, existing print editions and transcriptions, and a series of special features such as electronic text versions of Patrick’s earliest biographies, a bibliography, a novel, audio files, scholarly articles, source files and background information (Saint Patrick’s Confessio 2011). Methodologically, most fundamental for the realization of a digital edition providing such a broad variety of textual layers is not “the text itself”, whatever this might be, but an abstract and persistent structure of books, of chapters (or, here, of words and paragraphs) in order to align and interlink all different versions and documents – without privileging or subordinating the specific characteristics of any particular text version.

This structure, along with a reliable critical text version considered to be canonical by the academic community, has been taken from Bieler’s scholarly print edition, published in 1950-51, which itself is based on the foundational edition by Newport J. D. White (1904). (The latter is also provided in the Stack in the form of PDF scans from a “clean” copy and, most interestingly,

from a unique copy with handwritten annotations by Ludwig Bieler, dating from the time when he was preparing his own “definitive” edition in the 1940s.)

The text of the critical edition was electronically available in the Royal Irish Academy’s *Archive of Celtic-Latin Literature* (ACLL). But this text version was, as it were, flat, or two-dimensional; that is, the text is devoid of its academic framework (apparatuses etc.) in order to fit it into a database that aims to incorporate the whole corpus of Latin texts from Celtic sources into a searchable but single-layered expanse of text. This expanse may be thought of as very wide, but very thin. In contrast, and as a kind of case study, the HyperStack intended to cover just one single – if the most iconic – text from the entire corpus, but in full depth. A tower has been built at one point on the flat plain of text; a third dimension has been added. In order to achieve this, the existing electronic text version has been complemented and enriched with all the relevant textual information that lies beyond, beside or beneath it — both metaphorically, as regards the textual tradition, and literally, as regards the features and functionalities of the printed edition, since these indicate the contextual characteristics of the reconstructed text (the “text itself”) according to the conventions of philology in the Lachmannian tradition of textual criticism.

To achieve this, the three-part apparatus, extensive commentary, and some addenda and corrigenda published in 1966, were scanned and converted automatically via optical character recognition (OCR) into electronic form along with the critical text itself. The result – particularly messy in the apparatus and commentary because of the use of different languages (Latin, English), mixed fonts (Greek, Latin and Hebrew) and formats (superscripts, subscripts, italics etc.) – was proofread, and the basic structure of the text marked up with reference to paragraphs, line numbers, and page breaks. Each word was given a unique ID in order to be able to give clear, machine-readable references, and to provide links to any word or range of words, especially with a view to cross-referencing entries in the apparatus with the relevant passages in the text. Sigla and other references to manuscripts, to biblical, source and parallel texts, to abbreviations etc. — in fact all forms of textual information, implicit and explicit — were encoded in TEI.

For the online presentation of the critical text this information was converted and realized by (1) coordinating all parallel text versions (manuscript facsimiles, earlier editions, and translations); (2) causing relevant passages in the text to be highlighted when corresponding apparatus notes were moused over; (3) embedding hyperlinks to referenced manuscript witnesses, passages and editions; (4) resolving sigla and abbreviations by mouse-over; (5) integrating addenda notes and corrections; (6) linking bibliographical references to the bibliography; (7) linking keys and symbols to an auxiliary list with relevant information, etc.

All in all, this has not only made the information given in the critical print edition (often in an idiosyncratic manner) more accessible, understandable and usable in its digital guise, but has also added valuable information or given additional value to it — not just by so-called “retro-digitization”, but by (in effect) creating a new edition in its own right, aiming at superseding all previous editions.

The critical text thus covers various aspects of Saint Patrick’s writings; primarily, however, it establishes a single authoritative linguistic code, based on the manuscript witnesses, and establishes an abstract work structure that can be referenced. Furthermore, the digital critical text gives access and directs one to a variety of further textual layers within the Stack. These resources can also be assigned to specific notions of texts as defined above and as tentatively

portrayed by Figure 2: translations, for example, primarily reflect the text as a work by conveying its meaning into a new linguistic code; the introduction as well as the commentary provide information on all textual aspects that are necessary to understand “the text itself” and the context of the work; scholarly articles place the text in an even wider context (as do external references). Facsimiles and descriptions give all relevant information about the manuscripts, both as witnesses for the text in terms of content and visually as material objects of history. For instance, the famous Book of Armagh contains the oldest copy of the *Confessio* known to exist, but in a version that deliberately omits significant passages in order to promote St Patrick as a most successful missionary and glorious founder of monasteries in Ireland without failure — and to validate Armagh’s claims to ecclesiastical primacy in Ireland in the Middle Ages.

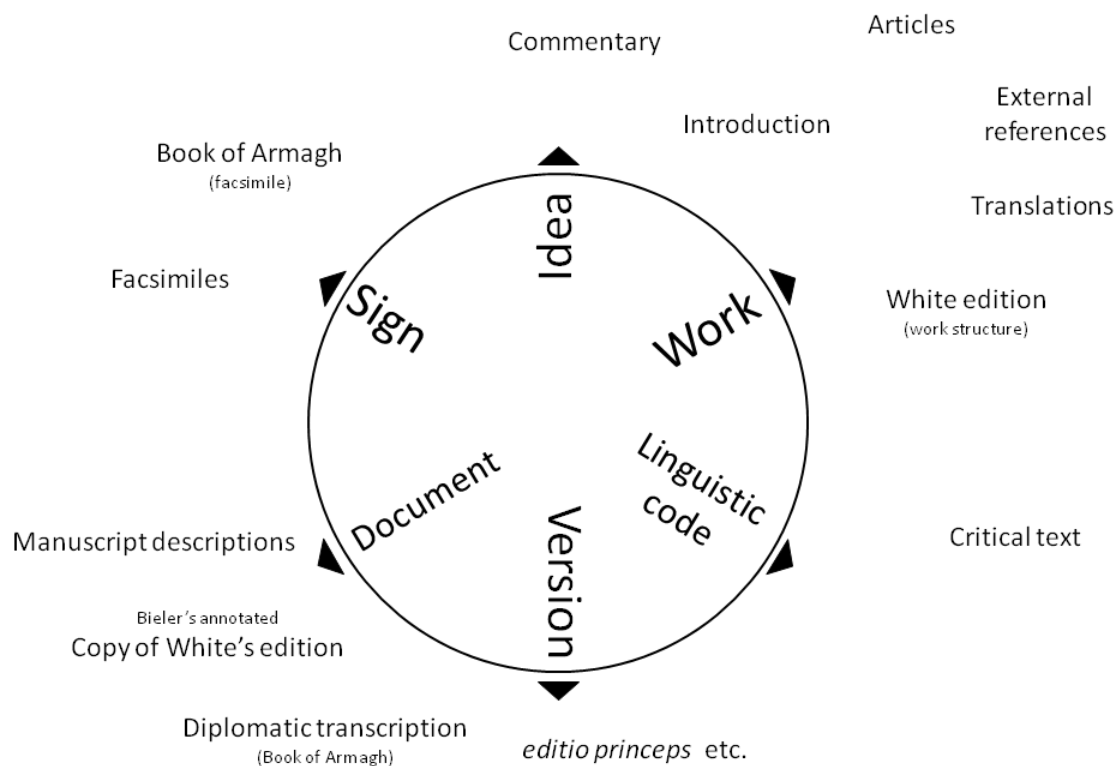


Fig. 2: Text Wheel according to Sahle – applied to the HyperStack resources

### ***The Summa edition***

In the case of William’s *Summa* the print version of a critical text stood at the very end of the editorial process (*Summa* 2007; see Fischer 2010). There was no previous edition to rely on, only manuscripts. So where does one begin creating a digital scholarly edition? How does one create a pluralistic edition that includes a critical text? Methodologically it does not seem to be elegant to begin with digital tools such as the Classical Text Editor (CTE) that are designed to create print editions, for these editions then need to be marked up and enriched to transform them into

truly digital editions (i.e., editions that offer as much textual information as possible and that have the largest feasible number of user features and functionalities).

On the other hand, there is no out-of-the-box software available for creating truly critical and truly digital editions at the same time. The ability of collation tools to support editorial decisions is improving all the time (CollateX, Juxta; see Andrews in this volume); virtual research environments and laboratories are being built to facilitate editorial work (TextGrid, MOM, DARE); the TEI standard for textual criticism is constantly being refined. Yet the entire editorial process of producing a scholarly edition that reaches both traditional (print) and modern (digital) standards remains a complex task only very few projects aim to fulfil.

The point of departure for the creation of the *Summa* edition was the transcription of a manuscript. This is common practice. But which manuscript to choose? Under the pluralistic approach a transcription is not just a temporary state in the (re)construction of a critical and definitive version. Rather a transcription represents an original document in its own right. Furthermore, it assures editorial transparency and serves as a basis for multiple text presentations. It thus should be executed in as detailed and faithful a manner as possible.

The worst that a critical editor can encounter is an intelligent scribe: understanding what he is copying, an intelligent scribe will have subtly transformed and modified the original and introduced his reading to the text. But as a matter of fact, the intelligent scribe tends to attract our attention more than the unintelligent one. And the copy itself is the result — : a manifestation of an intellectual exchange, a transfer of thoughts. The very fact that an intellectual, high-profile individual has considered it worthwhile to create a copy of a particular work adds value to the work itself. In the case of William of Auxerre's *Summa de officiis ecclesiasticis*, from fifteen extant witnesses a manuscript from the Bibliothèque nationale de France was chosen that at a first and superficial glance looked very much the same as the handwriting of Albert the Great: Albertus Magnus — what a find! Albert, the great philosopher, had deemed this text worthy of spending hours and hours copying 35 folios, 70 pages, 140 columns. Albert the Great, during his time at the university in Paris... Unfortunately, a closer view could not verify this hypothesis. Some scribal and graphic characteristics turned out to be too different.

Nonetheless the writing of this Parisian manuscript, a very small and highly abbreviated *Semitextualis libraria*, was executed by the hand of a distinguished thirteenth-century scholar. That much, at least, is suggested by internal evidence too: the work structure is consistently marked up in line by rubrics and paragraph marks as well as in the margins (e.g. by *questio-solutio* titles), the order of words and the record of biblical quotations is often slightly changed, etc. Given these considerations the manuscript witness was deemed worthy of a detailed transcription. The decision on what scribal characteristics to encode while transcribing was based on the principle of covering as many details as possible subject to a reasonable investment of time. The following codicological and palaeographical features were recorded: column and line breaks, margins, rubrics, initials, original spelling, abbreviations, punctuation, allographical distinctions between u and v, etc. The distinction, however, between the Tironian *et*-abbreviation with and without strike-through was dropped because it seemed too tedious to record this all the way through — a practical decision, but one that has rendered the data inconsistent and therefore useless as regards a systematic analysis of this feature.

Still, the transcription, or rather diplomatic edition, bears a rich set of digital palaeographical data to be exploited, for instance, by quantitative research. Significant characteristics of the scribe, the scriptorium or region of provenance could be compared to similar data from other documents to be recorded by future scholars.

Yet scholars interested in either the person and the thinking of William of Auxerre, the highly distinguished philosopher and theologian who was actively involved in the foundation of the University of Paris, or in understanding medieval liturgy and how it was perceived and understood by their contemporaries want a text that is somehow critical, corrected, structured, normalized. They are not interested in contingent features of a medieval manuscript copy. And many among the most distinguished scholars will hesitate to acknowledge the superiority of digital philology over traditional editing for as long as the former does not deliver what they expect.

Considering again the amount of time and resources available a full collation of all fifteen extant manuscript witnesses would have been too laborious: the text was too long and time too short. For this reason only two further manuscripts were chosen. Test collations of all manuscripts at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the text led to a first approximate stemma, and proved that both of these manuscripts had “good readings” and that each of them represented one of a total of two manuscript families. Of these witnesses each and every reading constituting a variant from the Parisian MS was recorded — consistently and without exception, apart from variant spellings — in order to avoid as far as possible any arbitrariness in the recording of variants and in the collection of data.

To mark the difference between, on the one hand, readings that are commonly regarded as insignificant and not worth mentioning and, on the other hand, those that are commonly regarded as being of interest for the reader, an attribute value was added in the markup of each of the variant readings. Such readings were variously flagged as (1) “not important”, that is, not worth being displayed in a default view of an *apparatus criticus*; as (2) “important”, that is, worth being displayed in a default view of an *apparatus criticus*; and, most importantly, as (3) “better readings”, that is, as readings that will replace those recorded in the Parisian principal manuscript witness in the critical version of the text.

The transformation of raw textual data into a standardized presentation of the critical text, whether in print or in digital form, is not supported by any software tool or editor, nor is the TEI encoding standard in itself sufficient to achieve the critical text. In addition to that, serious problems arise that are both theoretical and practical. On the theoretical side, beside the criticism of critical texts as being highly speculative and ahistorical (a criticism worthy of being called traditional in its own right), the question of normalization, spelling (especially of “better readings”) and suppression of the most characteristic variants and features of the principal manuscript testimony can hardly be answered in a way that is satisfactory for all user scenarios. On the practical side, creating a lemmatized apparatus for a text that has not yet been created proved to be a challenging task since, for each type and sub-type of editorial intervention, a standardized process had to be defined and implemented to transform the source data into a form readable according to the conventions of textual criticism.

Despite these difficulties, a critical text was created and presented, in both a print and a digital version, that displays the “best readings”, is clearly structured, is slightly normalized, and has a



modern punctuation. The three-part apparatus is referenced by lemmata and diacritics. The user of the digital edition navigates via a dropdown menu, via the table of contents, or by browsing chapter by chapter. Each chapter is closely interlinked with the respective passage in the diplomatic transcription of the principal manuscript witness from Paris and with the transcription (or rather reading text) of a variant version as present in an expansively and artistically illuminated thirteenth-century miscellany from Cambrai. All edited texts as well as extensive manuscript descriptions are interlinked with digital facsimiles of the respective documents located within an integrated virtual archive. Thus any record and observation can be viewed and verified. Various indexes generated from the source document give yet another means of access to the text. Philological introduction, manuscript descriptions and edited texts are also available as PDF downloads and will be published in print as soon as a revision of the entire edition is completed.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusions

There is nothing in print that cannot be realized in digital form as well. In contrast, there is quite a lot one can do digitally that cannot be realized in print. Most strikingly, the digital medium supports an egalitarian presentation of text versions including facsimiles and transcriptions. There is, therefore, no theoretical justification for creating critical editions exclusively in print — though there might be practical reasons such as scholarly tradition and prestige or reliable publication workflows to name just a few.

A further advantage of the digital form over print is that editions can be updated: editorial mistakes, typos and misinterpretations can easily be corrected; information can be added at some later stage, etc. This general improvability of digital scholarly editions gives justification for the publication of preliminary or beta-versions in order to make the valuable resources created accessible to the community as soon as possible. But in fact this might turn into a disadvantage because, in practice, a resulting decline in the quality and accuracy of scholarly editions has become noticeable — it is quiet telling that both of the editions presented here are to some extent still “unfinished”. The *Summa* edition has been “preliminary” since its first publication in May 2007.

Each medium has its favourite or natural or most compliant perspective on texts. Print of course very much favours “the one text”, the final version of a reconstructed archetype (whether or not such a thing ever actually existed); facsimiles are too expensive; transcriptions are seldom encountered in print, to say nothing of multiple transcriptions of the same text.

The digital medium very much favours flat texts and images that can be easily replaced and updated. In practice, digital editions tend to privilege texts that have a minimum of editorial intervention, plain texts and (meticulously) transcribed or digitally converted text versions — albeit at times extensively marked up and annotated. But there is no reason intrinsic to the digital medium that would make the idea of a “truly critical text” obsolete. On the contrary, the plurality of equally legitimate texts makes even more obvious the need for a critical text and for the guidance it furnishes by offering a suggested reading based on expert analysis of the textual material and on editorial decisiveness (Robinson 2000). Moreover, as regards editorial decisions

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<sup>4</sup> For a graphic tentatively illustrating the extent to which various textual aspects are covered by the *Summa* edition see Fischer 2010, 159-161 (corresponding to §§ 27-38 in the online version).

the digital medium is particularly suited to providing the transparency that is so fundamental for scholarly research and so imperfectly realized by the apparatus in scholarly print editions.

Critical texts do matter — for the reader's sake and especially in the context of multi-textual editions — and one is tempted to say: all texts are equal, but critical texts are more equal than others.

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