

Proposal: Material Cultures 2010

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Editing letters in *Electronic Enlightenment*: the example of Voltaire

Voltaire produced the largest corpus of letters of any eighteenth-century writer. Edited by Theodore Besterman, the second edition of Voltaire's correspondence, in over 50 volumes, dates from the 1970s. This edition has now been digitised as part of the *Electronic Enlightenment* project: this dataset was released commercially in 2008. Many new letters have come to light since the 1970s, and it has now become possible to 'revise' the Besterman edition, by incorporating new letters in the database. This paper will explore some of the challenges involved in editing (and re-editing) eighteenth-century letters for electronic publication.

Firstly, there are questions about the protocol of editing. Are there ways in which we can improve on the Besterman edition? For example, by including more information about the letter as physical object: details such as address, seal, postmarks, paper, colour of ink, etc., help us better understand the object as an act of communication.

Secondly, how does (and how should) electronic publication change our editorial practice? For example: styles and categories of annotation need to be standardised; decisions regarding the modernisation of spelling, or the treatment of proper names, might affect possibilities for searching; the ease of including images opens up new possibilities; and so forth.

Thirdly, and most importantly, how does the electronic medium change our study and understanding of this correspondence, as a literary and social object? What new questions can we now ask of this material? How does our understanding of the corpus as a whole change, when we view it electronically? Web publication has the potential to transform our understanding of the "web" of correspondences that constitute Enlightenment debate and exchange.

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