

Jay Savage
Fordham University
jsavage@fordham.edu

Technology and Meaning: Toward a Sociology of Electronic Texts

Given the extreme and multifaceted variation they exhibit it is clear that electronic texts, for all their seeming familiarity, are radically different from previous subjects of textual criticism. The physical arrangement and design of electronic texts can be altered by actions as simple as switching from a desktop computer to an iPhone or Kindle, and just resizing a browser window can change line lengths and cause paragraphs to reflow. Changes of that scale would certainly seem to meet the requirement that such texts are no longer substantially the same setting of type that defines a common edition. They are, for all practical purposes, stateless. This statelessness poses difficulties for creating sociologies of electronic texts, or constructing book histories in the electronic field. If we accept, with McKenzie, McGann, and others, that the arrangement of texts is constructive of meaning, and that the forms in which texts are transmitted and the modifications to those forms over time reveal facets about the changing significance of those texts over time, how can we construct *l'histoire du fichier* to reveal those relationships?

This paper will explore the relationships between electronic texts as texts and the media that carry them, examining the technical and theoretical difficulties of projecting book history onto objects that are not books, and examining some of the embedded features of electronic texts of all kinds that remain available to textual criticism.