

c:\wp\file.txt 05:41 10-07-98

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In the beginning was the File, & the File was with Gates, & the File was Gates. Through Gates all files come into being; never true file came into being, except through Gates.

What is a file?

This is not a file.

This is only an incarceration of a file.

An incarceration is a s/mattering of a United State of the File.

Any s/mattering defiles from a slaved transformation of a virtuality into a 2 2 solid state.

Virtuality rules ok.

A state is a time of a version of a virtuality.

Of the making of states there is no end.

There is no end to the File, and no beginning.

Beginning being none, there is no single autor of the File.

For every reader of the File, there is anutter time and state, anutter autor, anutter utter.

Poly there are of s/matterings & s/mutterings, poly of versions & of virtualities, poly there are of states & files, but there is only the one true File.

Poly there are of types & archetypes, but polyally are only prototypes of the File.

Ditto, the pen is the precursor of the cursor in the mind of Gates.

The Prints of Darkness prophesied the coming of the File.

The Prints of Darkness is but an incarceration of the File-to-be in the mind of Gates.

Those there were once, who worshipped the Prints of Darkness and the s/matterings s/mutterings of the page.

But the Pagites could not prevail, against the File.

For the File ate the Prints of Darkness.

Hail, Gates, cursor of*****Please forgive this interruption by an ancient idiolect. Bear with me.

I am General Editor of *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton*. I envisaged a particular kind of edition of a particular group of texts, I persuaded Oxford University Press to publish it, I negotiated a contract, I commissioned individual editors, I set deadlines, I developed and promulgated editorial procedures, I checked and corrected individual texts. But I am powerless to finish the edition. When people ask me whether or when the edition will appear, I say, 'It depends upon John Lavagnino.'

John Lavagnino is the 'Digital Editor' of *The Collected Works*. I invented that term to describe a role which, to my knowledge, had not existed before, but which seemed absolutely essential for the kind of edition I wanted to create. I was determined that the Oxford Middleton would take advantage of what I had learned about computerised editing from my previous experience with the Oxford Shakespeare. The Oxford University Press *Complete Works* of Shakespeare had been edited, and then printed, from files containing transcripts of various quarto and folio texts of Shakespeare's works, files originally prepared under the direction of Trevor Howard-Hill, and used to generate the Oxford Shakespeare Concordances. Howard-Hill's files had been written in the 1960s in a computer language which, by the late 1970s, only one computer in the world could still read; but once those files had been translated by that one computer, the translations provided us with an exceptionally accurate textual database, which we further checked and then manipulated editorially. For Middleton, no such database existed. But I knew that an electronic edition of Middleton would enable, and encourage, certain kinds of research that a traditional book-edition would not. If Middleton were to break Shakespeare's stranglehold on the Renaissance, he not only had to be read; he had to be accessed. Not only readable, but searchable, researchable, resourceful. This the Oxford Middleton was, pervasively. From the outset it was

designed to be produced in the new conditions of textual production and reproduction in the late twentieth century: a diverse group of widely dispersed scholars used their individual personal computers, tied by a set of encodings into a virtual network, to produce hundreds of files, which were all routed to a single nodal point which collected, unified and transformed their individual textual productions. That nodal point was occupied by myself and Lavagnino, general and digital editors, collaborating at Brandeis University.

This digitalisation of Middleton was both intellectually and practically valuable. A draft concordance, prepared by Lavagnino on the basis of the initial editorial database, made it possible, for the first time, to approach local editorial problems from the global perspective of the entire canon. That evidence also helped resolve some contested attributions; for instance, it contributed significantly to the case for exclusion of *The Family of Love*, and for inclusion of some newly discovered poems. The concordance, and associated software, have enabled us to achieve a degree of editorial consistency which would otherwise scarcely have been possible in an edition prepared by sixty-six scholars in eleven countries – of an author whose works have not been edited as a whole since 1886, and some of whose individual works have not been reprinted since the early seventeenth century. Because of the availability of legible proofs of our draft texts, many of us could teach Middleton texts – otherwise unavailable – in undergraduate and graduate courses, and that teaching experience uncovered oversights and sharpened our perspectives on works that have not benefited from much critical attention or informed debate. My collaboration with Lavagnino in designing the edition, from type-fonts to page layout and running titles, inspired much rethinking of the standard material format of printed editions; it laid the foundations for my concept of a 'federal edition'. Finally, by relieving Oxford University Press of most of the composition costs associated with a very big book, we have ensured that the Oxford Middleton will be much more affordable than it would have been if it had been typeset in the traditional way.

But I do not yet know exactly what the Middleton edition will cost. I set a deadline for the delivery of files on 2 September 1993, and we promised the contributors the edition would be published in the autumn of 1994. At the time of my writing this edition has still not appeared.

There were reasons for the delay. Between 1993 and 1998 my marriage disintegrated, and so did Lavagnino's relationship with his own

long-term intimate partner. Are such changes substantive, or incidental? Certainly, such emotional realignments have become increasingly common in our time; certainly also, they consume large amounts of time, energy and morale. They also produce divisions of property. My ex-wife got the personal computer we had both been using since 1986.

Between 1993 and 1998 I moved from Brandeis University to the University of Alabama; John Lavagnino moved from Brandeis to Brown, and then to King's College London. Are such changes substantive, or incidental? Certainly, such geographical and institutional mobility is increasingly common in our time; certainly also, it consumes large amounts of time, energy and morale. I was pleased that the University of Alabama computer network, and the personal and office computer they provided me, were IBM-compatible; I assumed this meant I would have no trouble transferring files. However, their systems were all based upon Microsoft Word; I had always used WordPerfect. Indeed, I was still using WordPerfect version 4.2, which I had learned in 1986 and had always found entirely adequate to my compositional needs. In order to facilitate interaction with Microsoft Word, and my office printer, I upgraded to WordPerfect version 5.0. Soon afterwards, I was forced to adjust to the new Windows 95 operating system. Finally, in 1998, wanting to purchase a personal printer, I was forced to upgrade my word-processing software again, because I could not find a single new printer that could read WordPerfect version 5.0. By themselves, personal computing problems delayed by at least a year my completion of general editorial work on the Middleton edition.

Meanwhile, Lavagnino had problems of his own. The National Endowment for the Humanities did not fund my application for a 'research tools' grant, which would have supported Lavagnino's work on the electronic edition, the concordance and the software design that would translate our editorial files into forms which could generate camera-ready copy for the print edition. Computerised Shakespeare projects have, in the last decade, received significant financial support from public- and private-sector sources; but there is no money for Middleton. Lavagnino, accordingly, at the time a graduate student, had to support himself by other means. This was not in itself difficult; he is a brilliant and experienced software designer, much in demand. But the people able and eager to pay for his talents were not in the humanities, but in science and business. These freelance jobs paid the bills, but they also consumed most of his time, and directed his intellectual energies

away from the kinds of problems the Middleton project posed. Indeed, increasingly they drew him away from the academy altogether. His work on Middleton, however personally satisfying, was not professionally rewarded, until in July 1998 he was offered a position at King's College London, in what is at this time the only academic program in the world devoted to humanities computing. In this job he will be expected and encouraged to pursue his digital editing of the Oxford Middleton. But the change of jobs and sites will itself take time and energy.

As I write this, I and the other editors of *The Collected Works* are waiting for John Lavagnino to finish the computer work that only he knows how to do. This is the measure of power: I am replaceable, but Lavagnino is not. At the end of the twentieth century, the digital editor is more important than the general editor.

What theories can be formulated, on the basis of the foregoing data?

Change is expensive. Change expends time, energy, resources of all kinds.

Computerisation enforces change. The accelerating evolution of textual technologies imposes upon society as a whole, and upon editors as members of that society, a succession of mandated obsolescences. A book printed 400 years ago can be read more easily, in many more sites, than a file created ten years ago.

Changes in textual practices have always created narrow gates, through which texts have to pass if they are to remain legible. The change from uncial to minuscule script, the great vowel shift, the invention of print – these mutations of the media of representation transformed textual practices so radically that texts which were not translated into the new medium almost always perished, because they had become unintelligible to the textual classes. The change from print to digital technology has been correctly perceived as another such life-or-death gate. Unfortunately, it is not a single gate, but a succession of gates, with shorter and shorter intervals between them. *The more rapidly computers evolve, the more frequently files must be transformed, in order to remain legible.*

But change is expensive. Indeed, the more rapid the change, the more costly it is. Therefore, *the more rapidly computers evolve, the more expensive the maintenance of file-legibility becomes.*

As maintaining legibility becomes more expensive, *we will be able to afford the maintenance of legibility for fewer and fewer files* – unless our resources expand as rapidly as change accelerates.

But resources in the humanities – departmental and library budgets, the support of scholars rather than administrators – have, during the last thirty years, significantly and consistently declined. That change is almost certainly substantive, not incidental. Print technology developed in parallel with the rise of humanism and Protestantism; computer technology has developed in parallel with the rise of global corporations and capitalised science. Literature departments receive a small fraction of the funding that goes to business schools, medical schools or science departments. *As a proportion of total social expenditures, resources for humanities text creation, reproduction and maintenance decline, as digitalisation increases.*

At the same time, the development of digital technologies creates an increasing demand for their use. Thus, society favours cultural works which make maximum use of the multimedia potentials of the new tools: music on compact disc, film, video games, visual and audio encyclopaedias and archives, museum collections on CD-ROM. *In order to compete effectively for the available resources, editors must use the most sophisticated text-tools available.*

Hence, files that do remain legible will become accessible in an increasing variety and complexity of forms. As Randall McLeod and Jerome McGann and Graham D. Caie in their different ways have emphasised, the combination of photography and computers, the digitising of texts and images, makes possible modes of reproduction which preserve many more features of the texts generated by earlier inscriptive technologies (manuscript, print, engraving, etc.). Moreover, the same information technologies enable rapid and massive cross-referencing, concordancing, and all other forms of database searching. These preferred new modes of reproduction are preferred precisely because they are inhuman; no personality intervenes or intrudes between the original site and the new recitation, the original text and the new file. In this environment, *the best of all possible editors is a machine.*

Thus, editorial files must continue to become increasingly technologised. But that technological imperative further diminishes the available resource base. *Editorial files are becoming, not only more expensive to maintain, but also more expensive to create.*

Since resources are shrinking, at the very time when maintaining or recovering techno-legibility has become more expensive, *the number of old texts that can be made or kept legible seems destined to decline.* We are, for instance, already producing fewer editions of Renaissance authors than our Victorian predecessors did.

However, this decline is masked by the proliferation of versions. We effectively reproduce fewer works, but we produce more versions of the few works we do reproduce. We therefore feel that we 'know' those few works with an unparalleled breadth and intimacy; moreover, we test and confirm all our cultural theories against the database of those few works. That diminishing number of works thereby becomes the measure of all things. It is not simply that we concentrate more and more of our attention upon Shakespeare; even within the Shakespeare canon, we concentrate upon a diminishing number of works – just as late classical culture concentrated its attention upon a small fraction of the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus. Hence the paradox which has so rapidly overtaken the work of 'revisionist' editors of Shakespeare: what in the early 1980s seemed, to its opponents and defenders, an outrageously revolutionary practice had come to seem, by the late 1990s, naively conservative. The revisionists attempted to de-idealise Shakespeare by demonstrating that, like other writers, he revised his work; but the revisionist editorial practice of 'versioning' has simply provided more material for idealisation, more texts of Shakespeare at the expense of other works and writers. *The fewer works we preserve, the more idealised they become.*

And it is not just Shakespeare which is being idealised. It is no accident that the rise of versioning, as a theory and practice among the editorial elite, has coincided with the computerisation of the writing class: computers not only make such versioning possible, they also make it seem 'natural'. Like other dominant ideologies, digitalism internalises itself in its subjects, by making artificial social arrangements seem utterly natural, inevitable, commonsensical. My personal computer automatically backs up any file I am working on every ten minutes; I always have access to more than one version of any file, and whenever I access and alter an existing file I am doing what my computer labels 'editing'. Writing as process, ubiquitous revision, the artificiality of closure, the infinite networking of texts, the anonymous and pervasive discursive grid which controls even as it enables our verbal performances – we are reminded of these social 'facts' every time we sit down to word-process the literary texts and literary theories by which we earn our livings. Critical Theory and the New Textualism, like all the other intellectual children of the pc-boom generation, have always proudly imagined themselves to be subversive. But those new theories never subvert word-processing, or the assumptions about the world entailed by daily word-processing. In fact, if we shift our attention from

local disputes over textual minutiae to the larger cultural topography where those minutiae are contested, it becomes obvious that *the alliance of literary and editorial theory in the 'New Textualism' imposes a newly dominant ideology upon a marginalised, relatively impoverished, recalcitrant and residual fraction of the social world.*

People are most comfortable with the technologies familiarised in childhood: those technologies become internalised as part of an individual habitus, shared by age-cohorts. Technological revolutions thus inevitably create habitus-gaps, along a sliding generational scale. *In periods of rapid tool-change, tool-users of a given generation accordingly share a sense of technological superiority over their elders, which both enables and legitimates their efforts to secure institutional power for themselves.*

Older scholars, in such periods, have only two choices: to surrender, or to change – the only effective change being to internalise, self-consciously, the unselfconscious technological habitus of their younger rivals. In either case, *power among editorial elites will inevitably shift to scholars who have internalised the newly dominant ideology of The File.*

But the resulting invulnerability of the new elite (a governing class composed of fully technologised subject-files) is purchased by an increasing divide between Master DOS and microserf. The fantastic personal wealth accumulated by Bill Gates – now monitored, second by second, on an unauthorised website; he has made millions of dollars in the time it has taken you to read this text – is not an aberration, and it cannot be adequately criticised or celebrated as a personal achievement. *The widening wage-gap is a structurally inevitable consequence of the triumph of digital capitalism over all other forms of economic and social organisation.* In any humanities department of any post-modern university, administrative assistants (we used to call them 'secretaries' or 'scribes', in a less enlightened age) are required to know how to use a variety of programs marketed by infotech corporations over the last decade; they must adjust their goals, their minds, and even their bodies to fit the new digital products which have invaded their work-stations. Their salaries have not been adjusted upwards, to compensate for the technological adjustments they are being required to make. They can hardly complain, because they have become fungible, readily replaceable supplements to an irreplaceable hardware/software complex.

But the more complex that complex grows, the more vulnerable it becomes to complete collapse. The legibility of even those few

editorial files which the new technology will maintain is dependent upon an unmanageably complex global infrastructure, in which temporally distinct and only marginally compatible technologies must constantly interact at accelerating speeds. Thus, the most vulnerable social structures are those moving most rapidly (the Asian economies), but viruses which begin in those environments can quickly infect others (Russia), until the entire global structure reels into chaos. I cannot predict, as I write this, whether the economic dizzy-spells of the late 1990s will down-spiral into permanent vertigo; I can predict, with absolute confidence, that the dizziness will keep coming back. The so-called 'millennium bug' has already demonstrated the extent to which the maintenance of everyday life on planet earth is dependent upon billions of lines of program code, collaboratively written by thousands of microserfs over decades, and now unintelligible and uncorrectible in its totality. To the new elites, the only thinkable solution to such problems is further versioning: that is, a further social investment in the same technologies, aiming at complete saturation of the human environment by an increasingly complex file-ocracy, committed to increasingly rapid file-turnover. *Digitalism increases, perhaps to certainty, the probability and severity of recurrent episodes of massive social and economic instability.*

In such periods of crisis, marginal activities will be further marginalised. The new Russia has even fewer resources than the old Soviet Union to preserve or catalogue the holdings of its archives, let alone to match the level of information digitalisation increasingly routine in the West. Multinational corporations will always be able to reward experienced software designers more lucratively than university libraries or academic editorial projects. *The instability of text, in postmodern textual ideologies, reflects the instability of the new social digitalism.*

But the preservation of past artefacts, the maintenance of old files, depends upon a stability which digitalism as a social system and an ideology denies. The New Textualism, translating text into file, collaborates with the dominant ideology in transforming the past into a version of the digitalised present. But no exemplar of that digitalised textuality, no single file, has any independent viability; if the network to which it belongs collapses, or becomes obsolete, the individual text-file becomes illegible. Therefore, unless we can develop effective social and editorial mechanisms to resist these foregoing tendencies, it seems virtually certain that *digitalism will eventually lead to the loss of all but a tiny, idealised remnant of the past.*

In the fourth century C.E, Roman Christians celebrated the official triumph of an energetic new religion in what was then the world's most powerful civilisation. They triumphally paraded through the gates of the City of God, into the Dark Ages.

Please retransmit this virus*****

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Virtuality rules ok.

A state is a time of a virgion of a virtuality.

Of the making of states there is no end.

There is no end to the File, and no beginning.

Beginning being none, there is no single autor of the File.

For every reader of the File, there is anutter time and state, anutter autor, anutter utter mutter matter smatter smutter smut*****

Poly there are of s/matterings & s/mutterings, poly of virgions & of virtualities, poly there are of states & files, but there is only the one true File.

Poly there are of types & archetypes, but polyally-in-come-free are only prototypes of the file.

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The Prints of Darkness prophesied the coming of deFile.

The Prints of Darkness is but an incarceration of the File-to-be in
the mine of Gates.

Those there were once, who worshipped the Prints of Darkness and
the s/matterings s/mutterings of the page.

But the Pagites could not prevail, against deFile.

For deFile ate the Prints of Darkness.

Hail, Gates, curser of light!