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### The Electronic *Comedia*

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## FORUM

### The Electronic *Comedia*

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The rapid transmission of data in machine readable formats has for many years now been a staple of the business world. Now, in a number of fields, the same technology is being applied to scholarly subjects, including French and English literatures. The availability of primary texts ready to be read by one's own computer is almost as great a revolution in textual dissemination as the invention of the printing press. Other disciplines, in which scholars can exchange texts either on diskette or by uploading and downloading to a network, are far ahead of Spanish literature, but there is both a nucleus of expertise within the profession and an extraordinary (and growing) demand for new computerized editions of Spanish texts. The prospect of making *comedia* texts available in computer-readable format is at once exciting and daunting. Existing data collections and retrieval formats point out both the opportunities and the problems that may arise in undertaking such an enterprise. In addition, in undertaking the massive project of making *comedia* texts available in machine-readable formats, one must confront questions relating to which *comedia* text among many, copyrights, and administrative issues. Under the auspices of the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater, Inc., and funded by the Program for Cultural Cooperation between Spain's Ministry of Culture and United States Universities, a colloquium was held June 11 and 12, 1993, on the campus of Princeton University to discuss the future of machine-readable *comedia* texts. The participants were Margaret Rich Greer, Associate Professor of Spanish at Princeton; Sharon Voros, Professor of Spanish at the United States Naval Academy; Matthew D. Stroud, Professor of Spanish at Trinity University; Toby

Paff, Humanities Specialist for Computer and Information Technology at Princeton; and Susan Hockey, Director of the Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities at Rutgers and Princeton.

In one sense, we *comediantes* are fortunate to have a number of models available for study, from Vern Williamsen's collection of *comedia* texts available on floppy diskette in WordPerfect format through the AHCT, to the Dante and Shakespeare collections available on-line to subscribers of Internet, to the CD-ROM based ADMYTE project to transcribe and digitize all of the medieval texts and manuscripts of the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid. (A description of the ADMYTE project is available in *Hispania* 75 [1992]: 1010-25.) All delivery formats have some advantages and disadvantages, but the most important consideration is not actually the method in which the data are distributed but the manner in which the texts are stored and treated. Especially since technology changes so rapidly, it is important from the very outset to establish standards that will be useful to future *comediantes* with access to machines and software not yet even invented. In other words, the goal of the project should not be a CD-ROM collection, since CD-ROM may not be with us forever and does not allow data changes once the disk has been produced. Rather, the texts encoded and the processes for studying them should be such that they can be released now in current technology and also later in "revised editions" taking advantage of both technological and scholarly advances.

Early in the meetings, three starting points became quite clear. First, any project to encode *comedia* texts should use standard ASCII text as the basis for data storage and retrieval. Those familiar with the limitations of e-mail should not think that standard ASCII (the first 128 characters) implies a necessary lack of ability to accent, underscore, and the like. Simple programming code sent with the texts will allow one to view text with appropriate diacritical marks without regard to the manner in which the text is stored. Second, the entire text and analysis software should be designed to be available on Internet. The advantages of Internet include worldwide accessibility to anyone with a modem and an Internet account, regardless of the type of machine or the type of software they are using. The authoritative database would reside somewhere (most likely an important Internet node), making it quite easy to supplement, update, and disseminate, unlike CD's or even floppy diskettes. Finally, the fact that the data and the analytical software are available on Internet in no way precludes their additional availability on CD's, floppies, or even printed versions.

There are currently a number of similar projects available over Internet, all of which use tagged text, that is, the database consists not just of the text but information about the text that allows one to search and compare words, lines, characters, and the like. Dartmouth houses two of these collections, the Dante project by Professor Robert Hollander, and the Shakespeare collection. The Dante database includes not only literary text but also literary criticism, and allows one to search the text for words or names and even to restrict text searches to particular commentaries and critical works. The Shakespeare collection is one edition (including no variants) of the full texts of Shakespeare's plays and poems, and allows one to search for words, titles, synopses, character lists, and settings. Toby Paff is currently working on a project with Karl Uitti of Princeton to offer an authoritative edition of *Le Chevalier de la charrette* including transcriptions of the manuscripts, text variants, and much more sophisticated analysis capabilities. We should consider that any *comedia* project may eventually want to include not just the text of the plays and the textual variants, and perhaps critical studies, but also notes and supplementary information. In the not too distant future, it will be easier and more practical to send graphics and video over Internet, meaning that it will be possible for a student or a scholar sitting at a computer to access not only the text of a *comedia* with its variants, notes, and critical studies but even videotaped performances.

The existing literary databases were unique creations; there is no systematic standard applied to their creation. In other words, while their functions may look similar to the user, their internal architecture is not the same from collection to collection. The Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities (CETH), directed by Susan Hockey, has been working for some time on just such a standard. Based on a standard programming language, SGML, the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) hopes to establish guidelines for the encoding of literary (and other) texts for machine analysis. The end product will not look different from the other text collections. The power of the TEI guidelines lies in its adaptability both to changes in the kinds of information one might wish to retrieve from a literary text (that is, additional or changed text tags), and the future ability to study conceptual data such as style or themes that is currently impossible to do using other programs. CETH hopes to establish the standard of the future, and they have already received major funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since any *comedia* project would start from the beginning, there seems to be no reason not to use the TEI guidelines.

The electronic *comedia* project has the potential to unite *comediantes* the world over in a way never before possible through journals and meetings, but it will only be successful with a broad consensus among *comediantes* about its scope and goals. The next step in planning should be a meeting to take place most likely in the Summer of 1994 on the campus of Princeton University. We will be asking for a planning grant to bring together 20 to 25 experts in electronic texts and *comedia* editions. In order to establish the parameters of the project, this meeting will need to agree upon such important issues as which plays to include (at least at the beginning), what information one wishes to include with the plays (text variants, footnotes, critical studies, translations), the location of the authoritative text, the availability of the database in other forms such as CD and print, the administrative structure of the project, and the incentives for scholars to participate by contributing editions of *comedia* texts. While some of the participants, especially the computer experts, will be invited, most of the participants will identify themselves through their interest in this project.

Anyone who is interested in pursuing this project, or who has comments of any kind, should feel free to contact one or more of the following people:

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