

# Critical editions

## and why the world needs them

*by Marian Hobson*

If there is an edition of a text already, isn't that enough? Do we need another sitting on that one's shoulders? Well yes, we do, for at least three reasons.

As we know, most of the knowledge which is transferred to us from others comes from what has been written down. And at present, manuscripts and books are the principal vehicles for transmitting this. Firstly, we may think that the words arise from an author or group of authors; we in most cases know who they are; we have their words in front of us. But the web has taught us to beware of taking a 'page' for granted: where has it come from? has it been interfered with? has someone missed something out? We have all come across the Google book with a page folded over and illegible. The same can happen in a print run: a couple of pages may have been inserted, and followed up, that insertion may lead to the establishing of a different context for the text.

Ten years ago I was asked to re-edit a text that was not easily available, certainly not in paperback, in spite of its great beauty and its historical interest. The work was Diderot's *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751). The reason for editing it once more were clear and even simple: it had never 'taken' in the history of reading eighteenth-century texts. People interested in it would have some difficulty in finding outside a university library a copy they could read, still less own. Yet this little *Letter* has persuaded scholars as different as Lessing in the eighteenth century and Chomsky in the twentieth to study it. So in this case, putting something back in circulation with the historical and intellectual context explained to the interested was pretty clearly something that needed doing: there was a gap in the market, and one that was worth the effort to fill.

The French publisher asked me to make the volume larger. Here, a text that could accompany the *Letter on the deaf and dumb* without difficulty was available. Another, earlier letter by Diderot, much more famous, still in print in paperback – the *Letter on the blind* (1749) – seemed the obvious choice. And equally obviously, so it seemed, this one was going to be reasonably easy to edit, provided due acknowledgement was made to previous editors. Work started. Living near a great library (Cambridge University Library) I could check previous editors' references fairly easily, although some of the works Diderot referred to were not widely available. It was here that I began to realise that previous editors had simply missed something which now seems intellectually vital. They tended to remark on how well Diderot knew now obscure eighteenth-century mathematicians. But when one looked at these mathematicians two very salient facts sprang out.

First, at least one is still considered pre-eminent by modern mathematicians: he did much of the background work necessary for Newton in his later mathematical writings. He was thought to be such an extreme deist that his orthodoxy was in serious doubt (yet as a member of Cambridge University he had to be a member of the

Church of England). Second, the kind of deism he espoused bears more than a passing resemblance not just to Newton's view of space, at one point in his life anyway, but also to Diderot's future view, as expressed in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. So, in a way that was totally unexpected, re-editing this text altered the whole perspective in which it can be viewed. The question now becomes: how did Diderot know about Jo Raphson (of the Newton–Raphson method for evaluating roots of difficult functions)? What were the connections between this young journalist/writer and the group around Newton which much earlier in the eighteenth century were known about, but which became obscured and finally lost early in the nineteenth century?

The consequences for our ideas of the 'Radical Enlightenment' seem obvious. And the facts would not have been dredged up again without someone going down a text very carefully, checking previous editions' statements and quotations, and in effect rectifying their perspective. In other words, and to generalize, it is probably only by editing a text that such mistakes come to light – for such now appear many statements made within the last ten years even about Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles*. Perhaps even more important, this kind of discovery actually opens ways to new research on these great Enlightenment figures. How did Diderot know what he knew? Did someone (perhaps Buffon?) tell him? Or were there intellectual circles exchanging ideas and information but being careful in what they wrote? Newton was certainly like this; Raphson may have been a kind of runner for him, a tester of what the market could bear in the shape of radical ideas. All this needs now to be worked out, if that is possible; and doing this involves being inventive not just about substance of research but in method too.

Editing critical editions is not always appreciated at its just worth as an intellectual activity. Done well, it can cause the intellectual tectonic plates to shift slightly. That is how knowledge creation as an activity within the community functions. Critical editions are a fundamental part of the process.

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