

A future digital edition model for *The Duke of Parma*

[Um futuro modelo de edição digital para
The Duke of Parma]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, Textual criticism, Genetic criticism, Digital archives, Editorial theory.

Abstract

This article offers a preliminary reflection on the possibility of editing Fernando Pessoa's *The Duke of Parma*, based on an early version of the *Duke of Parma Digital Archive*. Rather than proposing a definitive editorial model, it explores methodological approaches for reconstructing a highly fragmentary and unfinished work. The study examines the tensions between document and work, genetic and critical editing, and philological rigour and reader accessibility. Through codicological description, binary encoding of material features, and clustering analysis, the article investigates possible material groupings and writing phases within the surviving corpus. It further considers thematic and narrative criteria for reconstructing the projected dramatic work. Ultimately, the article argues that editorial practice should move beyond the mere preservation of documents and aim to facilitate a meaningful encounter between Pessoa's unfinished work and its readers.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Crítica textual, Crítica genética, Arquivos digitais, Teoria editorial.

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma reflexão preliminar sobre a possibilidade de editar *O Duque de Parma*, de Fernando Pessoa, a partir de uma versão inicial do *Duke of Parma Digital Archive*. Em vez de apresentar um modelo editorial definitivo, procura explorar metodologias para a reconstrução de uma obra fragmentária e inacabada. O estudo analisa as tensões entre documento e obra, edição genética e edição crítica, bem como entre rigor filológico e acessibilidade para o leitor. Através da descrição codicológica, da codificação binária das características materiais e da análise de agrupamentos, investigam-se possíveis fases de escrita e afinidades materiais do corpus. O artigo considera ainda critérios temáticos e narrativos para a reconstrução da obra dramática projetada. Defende-se, por fim, que a edição deve favorecer o encontro entre a obra pessoana e os seus leitores.

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The present article offers a preliminary reflection on the possibility of a future edition of *The Duke of Parma*. Rather than proposing a fully developed editorial model, it seeks to explore a range of possible approaches to such an undertaking. In this sense, the study constitutes an exercise situated at the intersection of theory and practice, grounded both in the current state of knowledge concerning this particular work by Pessoa and in the distinctive features of its surviving materials. It is based on an initial and still partial version of the Fernando Pessoa's *Duke of Parma Digital Archive* as it existed in the first half of February 2026.

The *DoP Digital Archive* has since been completed, which means that some of the specific results presented here may already appear outdated. The methodological reflections underpinning them, however, remain valid. The aim of this article is therefore not to offer definitive solutions, but rather to reflect on a set of tools and procedures through which such solutions might eventually be reached. At the time of writing, the study necessarily relied on limited material and on a still provisional conceptual framework. Consequently, its value lies less in the conclusiveness of its results than in the attempt to formulate a process that may prove effective once all the essential components are fully available and properly established.

Why edit the *Duke of Parma*?

The preparation of an edition of an unpublished work necessarily raises a preliminary question of justification: namely, whether such an undertaking is genuinely warranted. In the case of *The Duke of Parma*, this question is far from trivial. One may legitimately ask whether the work responds to a real scholarly need or whether it risks being perceived as yet another excavation of Pessoa's famous trunk, driven less by the intrinsic relevance of the text than by the desire to prolong an already extensive editorial and hermeneutic enterprise.¹

Even if the necessity of an edition is provisionally accepted, a second and equally significant problem immediately emerges. Given the highly unstable, fragmentary, and poorly defined condition of the surviving materials, one must ask whether it is possible to produce an edition capable of mediating between rigorous

¹ Cf. RONCAGLIA (1992: 576-577), "La cura di un'edizione è sempre un problema etico prima che tecnico. Tanto più grave la responsabilità morale del curatore, di fronte a un'opera cui l'autore non ha dato l'ultima mano né apposto il «visto si stampi». È lecito pubblicare un testo «non finito», alla cui diffusione l'autore non ha dato il proprio benessere? [...] la questione più delicata è un'altra: non di legittimità, bensì d'opportunità: circa la scelta del momento e la definizione delle procedure e tecniche d'edizione" [Editing is always an ethical problem before it is a technical one. The editor's moral responsibility becomes even greater when confronted with a work that the author neither brought to a final form nor authorised for publication. Is it legitimate to publish an 'unfinished' text that the author never consented to disseminate? (...) the most delicate issue, however, lies elsewhere: not in the legitimacy of publication, but in its advisability, and in the choice of the appropriate moment, procedures, and editorial techniques].

philological demands and broader forms of readability and accessibility. The distance separating a critical edition—complete with textual apparatuses and annotations—from the expectations of a non-specialist readership often appears considerable, if not insurmountable. Whether an edition of this kind can reach, even marginally, beyond the restricted circle of highly specialised readers therefore remains an open question.²

With regard to the first of these issues — namely, the advisability of editing *The Duke of Parma* — a preliminary assessment may already be attempted. On the basis of the evidence currently available, the work displays a number of evident limitations alongside several undeniable merits. Its weaknesses derive primarily from the use of a markedly conventional setting, the presence of characters that are at times stereotypical or insufficiently developed, and a high degree of fragmentariness that makes any coherent reconstruction particularly difficult. These limitations, however, are counterbalanced by a series of features that clearly warrant scholarly attention. Thematically, the work engages with concerns that are unmistakably Pessoa: the fragile boundary between lucidity and madness; the tension between the impulse toward knowledge and the death drive; reflections on the fragmentation and instability of the self; and the motif of masquerade as a means not of concealing truth, but of revealing it. Moreover, certain figures—most notably Alberto and the Duke himself—display sufficient psychological and conceptual depth to justify closer examination, with the Duke emerging as one of Pessoa's more compelling alter egos.

Several scenes, although preserved only in highly schematic form, nonetheless attain a remarkable degree of dramatic intensity, as demonstrated by the final scene depicting the Duke's death (11⁴D-85 and 86). Like many of Pessoa's works, *The Duke of Parma* also contains a considerable number of aphoristic formulations — at times contextually unstable, yet striking in their conceptual acuity — which attest to the text's literary vitality despite its fragmentary condition.

What to edit and how: text, document, and work

Any editorial undertaking must begin with a clear distinction between what is currently available and what one ultimately seeks to reconstruct. In the present case, the available material consists, first, of a corpus of documents whose physical and material characteristics provide evidence for the reconstruction of a genetic process, or at the very least allow for the formulation of hypotheses concerning such a process. Secondly, it comprises a set of transcriptions of those documents, which in turn

² The issue has been addressed countless times, and it is not possible here to provide a summary of the debate. However, for an overview of the complex circulation of Pessoa's works, cf. CELANI (2020: 39-46).

offer indications for reconstructing the work itself or, again, for formulating hypotheses regarding its possible configuration. These two levels — the material and the textual — must necessarily converge if one wishes to attain a comprehensive understanding both of the project Pessoa envisaged and of the stage it had reached at the time of his death.

Given that both levels belong to the most problematic domains of Pessoaan philology, there is a strong temptation to restrict the editor's task to what is unambiguously present: the document. Such an approach would involve providing a supposedly "objective" representation of the surviving papers; emphasising the fragmentary and unfinished nature of Pessoa's oeuvre; underscoring the persistent work-in-progress character of his writing; and insisting upon the impossibility — or even the illegitimacy — of imposing closure upon what the author, or circumstance, left open.

Yet, however rigorous and defensible such a position may be, it cannot constitute an endpoint from an editorial perspective. An edition cannot pursue a purely genetic aim limited to the description of writing processes or the observation of textual evolution. Its objective must instead be to propose the most plausible hypothesis of the work Pessoa intended: in other words, to move beyond the mere documentation of textual states towards an articulation of the work as a meaningful entity.

In this sense, the editor cannot remain solely at the level of the document, but must ultimately strive to reach the level of the work. This distinction was articulated particularly persuasively in the critical debate gathered in *Ecdotica*, n.º 10 (2013), a volume to which I am indebted to Paola Italia for drawing my attention. Among the contributions collected there, Hans Walter Gabler's essay offers an especially lucid formulation of the distinction between the editing of the text — understood as the treatment of its material and documentary features — and the editing of the work, conceived as an immaterial and ideal object, while strongly emphasising the centrality of the latter process (GABLER, 2013: 47-49). This perspective is further reinforced by Peter Eggert's reflections, which underscore the role of the reader as a constitutive element of the work itself, an aspect that editions focused exclusively on documents tend to underplay (EGGERT, 2013: 57-62).

In Pessoa's case, one is confronted with works that remained, to varying degrees, merely potential and that, in many instances, never encountered their readers. From this perspective, the editor's primary task cannot be confined to preserving or displaying textual evidence; rather, it must consist in enabling an encounter between the work and its readership.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that an edition centred on the text in its material and documentary dimension necessarily precedes — and prepares the ground for — an edition of the work. It is therefore from this preliminary level that the present inquiry must begin.

Document

The first stage of the analysis consists in a codicological description of the documents, aimed at identifying material isotopies that may contribute to the reconstruction of distinct writing campaigns and, where possible, to the formulation of an internal chronology. Rather than working directly from the facsimiles, the analysis was conducted on the basis of the descriptive records published in the *DoP Digital Archive*. From these records, an initial dataset was compiled, incorporating information relating to the sixty-eight documents described by the first half of February 2026, representing more than one third of the documentary corpus currently included in the archive.

The dataset was organised into two principal descriptive domains: one devoted to the material characteristics of the supports (the sheets), and the other to the writing instruments (pens, pencils, typewritten text, and ink or graphite colours). With the sole exception of sheet dimensions, all features were encoded in the form of a binary matrix, a format selected for its suitability for subsequent analytical processing and comparative analysis (Fig. 1).

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	AA
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2	11-4-0-1	270	200	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
3	11-4-0-4	101	167	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
4	11-4-0-7	270	202	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	11-4-0-8	135	202	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	11-4-0-11	167	110	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	11-4-0-13	170	220	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
8	11-4-0-14	169	110	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
9	11-4-0-15	169	110	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10	11-4-0-16	169	110	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
11	11-4-0-17	207	133	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	11-4-0-18	207	133	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
13	11-4-0-19	216	170	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
14	11-4-0-20	220	170	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
15	11-4-0-21	222	170	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
16	11-4-0-22	166	111	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
17	11-4-0-25	267	202	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
18	11-4-0-31	133	200	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
19	11-4-0-32	70	112	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
20	11-4-0-33	80	168	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
21	11-4-0-34	222	163	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
22	11-4-0-35	222	162	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
23	11-4-0-36	222	167	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
24	11-4-0-37	220	167	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
25	11-4-0-40	269	202	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
26	11-5-0-1	275	215	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
27	11-5-0-2	270	210	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
28	11-5-0-3	279	210	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
29	11-5-0-4	282	213	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
30	11-5-0-5	159	216	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
31	11-5-0-14	192	137	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
32	11-5-0-15	192	137	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
33	11-5-0-16	192	137	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
34	11-5-0-17	192	137	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
35	11-5-0-18	110	170	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Fig. 1. Binary matrix representing the material characteristics of the documentary corpus; documents are indicated in yellow, sheet characteristics in green, and writing instrument characteristics in blue.

In accordance with the provisional descriptive terminology adopted in the individual document records, a series of material variables was identified and encoded as either present (1) or absent (0). For the supports, these variables included: rectangular grid, ruled, laid, wove, off-white, dun, blue, typewriter paper, cut, perforated, Mohican watermark, British watermark, and observations. For the writing instruments, the variables comprised: black ink pen 1, black ink pen 2, black ink pen

(fine nib), blue ink pen, blue ink pen (faded), blue ink pen (very faded), green ink pen, graphite pencil, blue pencil, black typewriting ink, and red typewriting ink.

This phase of the analysis made it possible to identify a first critical issue in the material descriptions produced up to that point, namely the absence of uniform descriptive parameters and of a shared descriptive model. The most problematic aspects concern measurements, which are recorded with considerable variation, and certain features of the paper supports—such as watermark type or colour—which are not documented consistently. Nevertheless, the available data proved sufficient to outline a provisional descriptive framework adequate for exploratory and experimental purposes.

Whereas the paper supports display a high degree of heterogeneity and resist classification into a limited number of clearly defined groups, the situation differs markedly with regard to the writing instruments. Within the sample examined, most documents attest to a single writing campaign; fifteen show evidence of two distinct campaigns, and only one of three. The predominant writing medium is black ink, and the revisional pattern most frequently observed consists of pencil corrections applied to a base text written in black ink.

Once the dataset had been constructed, the second stage of the analysis consisted in subjecting it to a clustering procedure. It should be stressed from the outset that this phase serves a primarily exploratory and heuristic function, rather than producing results of immediate practical applicability. The parameters involved in automated clustering are numerous, ranging from the choice of algorithm to the determination of the optimal number of clusters, and each of these factors inevitably affects both the outcome and its reliability³. Although the initial results appear internally coherent, a more extensive validation process would be required in order to assess their robustness.

Within these limits, the clustering procedure identified nine clusters, grouping documents according to shared material features (Fig. 2). Two of these—clusters 2 and 3—are particularly densely populated, encompassing more than seventy per cent of the dataset. They appear to define a central block of documentation characterised by a high degree of material homogeneity, which may tentatively be associated with a dominant phase of textual production.

³ The dataset was analysed through hierarchical clustering based on binary variables describing material and graphic features. Similarity between items was measured using Jaccard distance, which emphasizes shared characteristics. Clusters were generated through average linkage and visualized in a dendrogram with optimized branch ordering. The number of clusters was selected by maximizing the silhouette coefficient ($k = 2-10$). Cluster interpretation relied on the relative frequency of features, allowing the identification of recurring material configurations. The analysis was assisted by Microsoft Copilot (GPT-5), which was used for data processing, clustering implementation, and visualization.

This step introduces a second possible level of ordering. The first, currently adopted in the version published in the *DoP Digital Archive*, corresponds to the archival order of the documents. The second—proposed here as a possible criterion for a future edition—consists in grouping documents into materially homogeneous clusters, which may provide preliminary indications concerning distinct phases of writing and elaboration.

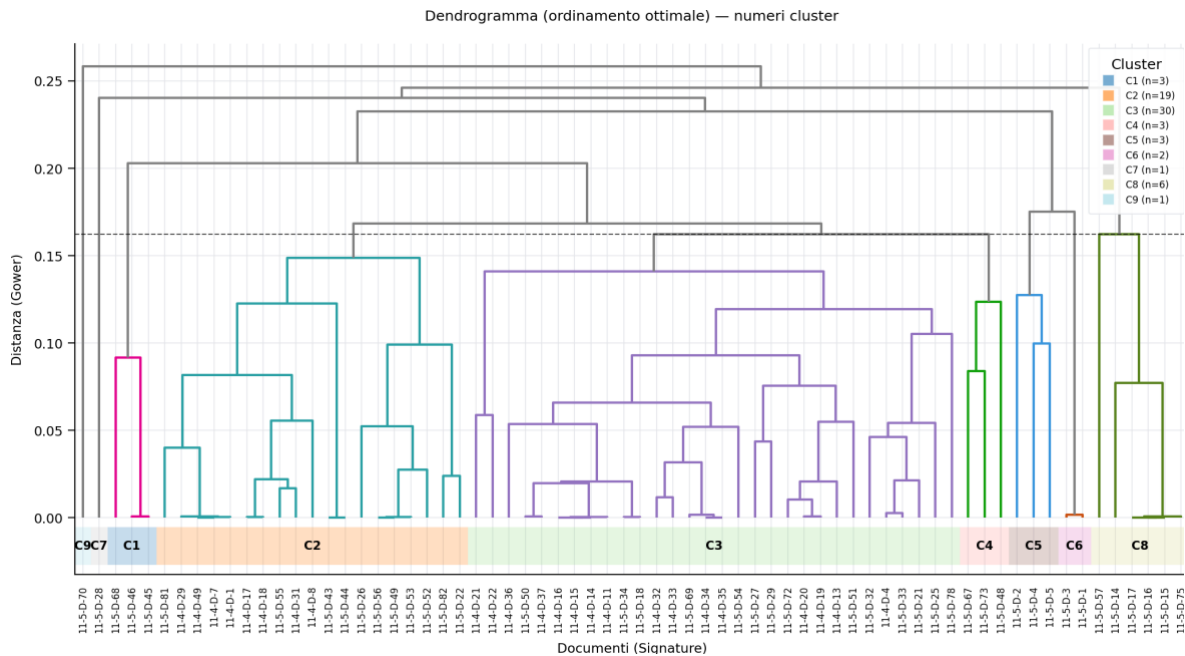


Fig. 2. Hierarchical clustering dendrogram based on binary features (Jaccard distance, average linkage, optimal leaf ordering). Clusters (C1–C9) were identified via silhouette analysis.

The figure was generated with the support of Microsoft Copilot (GPT-5).

A material grouping of this kind may indeed suggest chronological proximity, although such an inference can by no means be regarded as automatic. The interpretative leap involved requires a substantial expansion of the documentary sample, together with its integration into the material description of documents belonging to other works. This point is particularly relevant in the case of a work characterised by an exceptionally broad diachrony if, following Zenith's assessment, its composition includes fragments written discontinuously over the period between 1909 and 1935 (ZENITH, 2022: 303).

The *Duke of Parma* thus belongs to that group of works that accompanied Pessoa throughout a significant portion of his life and that therefore share, to varying degrees, both material and textual characteristics. Through the comparative analysis of paper supports and writing instruments, combined with the study of the evolution of the author's handwriting, it becomes possible to identify parameters that may contribute to the material dating of the documents.

Such a process is necessarily slow and incremental. Although it does not, in itself, produce an edition, it constitutes a fundamental preparatory stage for any editorial undertaking. It is an approach oriented not towards immediate or readily marketable results, but towards the establishment of conditions indispensable for all subsequent editorial work.

This line of investigation may ultimately lead to a third possible form of ordering, namely a chronological arrangement, arguably the most advanced and objective among materially based orders. At this point, however, the potential of an analysis grounded exclusively in documents reaches its limit. The next step necessarily entails a shift towards the reconstruction of the work itself.

Work

The Duke of Parma displays a relatively well-defined thematic identity and a degree of internal coherence that becomes apparent even through an unsystematic reading, such as one conducted by following the archival order of the documents preserved in the *Espólio*. At the level of the projected work, certain narrative constants can be identified. The action opens with an episode that provokes bewilderment at the court of the Duchy of Parma: an instance of inappropriate behaviour on the part of the Duke that alarms his advisers. This initial unease is subsequently reinforced by further attitudes and statements, leading those closest to him to perceive a persistent oscillation between moments of extreme lucidity and apparent madness. Within the courtly environment, factions soon begin to emerge. Some figures start to conspire, imagining that the Duke's presumed madness may be exploited in order to depose him; others, such as the Duchess, defend him with unwavering determination. The notables of the duchy deliberate on the Duke's fitness to rule, yet fail to reach a decisive conclusion. The situation escalates when the Duke murders his wife, after which he flees and eventually returns to the castle of his childhood, where he dies in the arms of his old nurse.

Not all fragments and dialogues can be situated unambiguously within this narrative framework. Nevertheless, it is evident that, characteristically for Pessoa, what is ultimately at stake is less the plot itself than the textual texture of the work: the Duke of Parma's dialogues and monologues, the construction of complex and paradoxical discursive logics, and forms of reasoning that are at once estranging and internally coherent in their contradictions. Some fragments contain explicit indications of the act to which they belong, although such cases are relatively rare. In other instances, contextual and thematic cues make it possible to hypothesise a plausible position within the overall structure, while a number of fragments remain fundamentally ambiguous, capable of fitting into multiple moments of the projected dramatic action.

A careful analysis at this level is the only approach capable of leading towards a reconstruction of the work as such. It is also a considerably more nuanced and interpretatively demanding level, one that entails a greater degree of editorial responsibility. Yet it is precisely this responsibility that must be assumed if the aim is to restore vitality to the work: to enable a mode of reception that is meaningful not only from a strictly philological perspective, but also from the standpoint of the reader, and that is not confined to a narrow circle of specialists.

It is on this plane that the final two forms of ordering proposed here may be situated. The first is a thematic ordering. As in other Pessoaan works — most notably the *Livro do desassossego* — it is possible to trace thematic pathways within *The Duke of Parma*. If the primary interest lies less in narrative continuity than in individual statements, logical trajectories, paradoxes, and systematic challenges to conventional modes of feeling and thinking, then such a thematic organisation already constitutes a coherent and accessible form of ordering.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that *The Duke of Parma* differs fundamentally from a diegetically diffuse work such as the *Livro do desassossego*. As a theatrical project, it presupposes a relatively defined narrative articulation. The final and most ambitious form of ordering, therefore, consists in a reconstruction of the plot, which offers the highest degree of usability and opens the possibility of an editorial configuration capable, at least in part, of bringing the work closer to its originally intended horizon of realisation: theatrical performance.

Such a reconstruction — necessarily bold and perhaps not entirely secure in all its details — would nonetheless enable a particularly effective and impactful form of reception, namely staging. In this sense, a relative relaxation in fidelity to the objectivity of the material data may ultimately result in a heightened fidelity to the conception of the work as Pessoa may have envisaged it.

Only through such an approach does it become possible to apprehend documents of this kind in their full significance and proper context; for instance, an aged and trimmed sheet measuring 222 × 162 millimetres, written in black ink with subsequent pencil corrections, bearing the following lines (11⁴D-35^r):

How the stars shine, how they are far, my lord!
 And we have thus, thus, thus – somehow this sense
 As if it was not, and the stars as we
 Were some stupendous and external dream.
 How little real is all this reality!
 How little real that I should be here.

For philologists and academic readers, the material dimension of a text is of immense importance and carries considerable scientific and semantic weight; the general reader, however, seeks something different in literature. It is therefore necessary to ensure that the needs of philology — fundamental for any rigorous reconstruction

of the text—are ultimately placed at the service of the reader, rather than becoming an end in themselves. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to preserve the archive, but to make possible the future existence of the work.

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