Review essay: Teaching Latin textual criticism to a new generation[1]

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Ralph Hanna, *Editing Medieval Texts: An Introduction, Using Exemplary Materials Derived from Richard Rolle, 'Super Canticum' 4,* Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

R.J. Tarrant, *Texts, Editors, and Readers: Methods and Problems in Latin Textual Criticism,* Roman Literature and Its Contexts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511805165.

My grandfather (a retired Jersey farmer) recently asked me a surprisingly pointed question. "Aren't you playing God with our books?"

This neatly sums up the typical attitude towards the scholarly editing community. In its most extreme form, 'King-James-only' advocates promote an English translation of the Bible as it was revised in the seventeenth century (in the particular form into which it fossilized in the nineteenth century), claiming that modern editors and translators are misrepresenting the past. It is easy to dismiss such positions as uninformed, but without access to manuscripts or an easy method to compare sources, most of the world has to

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[1] This review is shaped by my experiences learning palaeography and textual criticism as an undergraduate with Marie-Pierre Bussières (University of Ottawa); and as a postgraduate student with Alexander Andrée, Lawrin Armstrong, and John Magee (University of Toronto). I am also grateful to Teresa Webber (University of Cambridge) and Maura Lafferty (University of Tennessee Knoxville) for their thoughts on teaching these subjects.

take it on faith that editors are representing their source materials accurately. At the other end of the spectrum are university administrators and even scholars who assume that editing an ancient text is equivalent to assembling a collection of academic essays, and hence see little value in the work of anyone that spends their time deciphering manuscripts and teaching people how to do the same. The reality is that textual criticism is the foundation of nearly everything that we think we know about the past. Yet knowledge of it has always been restricted to elevated circles through high and overly combative rhetoric, and it is growing dimmer in the face of the devaluation of critical editions. Not only that there is a limited number of people who have the capability produce an edition, but also that there is little appreciation for the intellectual labour or creativity involved in the process. If we are to remedy the problem that academic recognition systems give little weight to editions and translations of primary sources, the classroom is one place to start.

Teaching and performing textual criticism has become both more important and feasible with the availability of digitized manuscripts. These are publicly confirming that editors are overwhelmingly honest and scrupulous people, but they are also revealing the vast number of details that they have overlooked, sometimes significantly changing our approach to a text. Practically every text now needs to be re-edited, and not only the hundreds of medieval Latin works that remain completely unpublished, and hence completely inaccessible to modern readers. We are at a moment at which the humanities can take one of two paths: we can allow textual criticism to sink into further obscurity and turn the study of texts into an echo chamber, constantly repeating the errors of

editions from the twentieth century and earlier without understanding how they were created. Alternatively, we can seize the opportunity of universally available manuscript facsimiles by broadening the number of people that can read and interpret them. Two new books are steering us towards the latter path: Ralph Hanna's *Editing Medieval Texts,* a *uade mecum* for turning a set of manuscripts into a readable edition; and R.J. Tarrant's *Texts, Editors, and Readers,* an accessible introduction to the history of editing and interpreting the field's publications.

Books for teaching textual criticism

Textual transmission is unevenly taught as part of degrees in classics, medieval studies, history, and modern literature. Some advanced degrees with a strong teaching component offer specialized postgraduate courses in textual criticism, palaeography (sometimes with specialized modules covering specific periods and areas), codicology, and diplomatics. Other universities offer a single undergraduate or postgraduate course combining these subjects, ranging in length from an informal survey over several weeks to a full year. Many do not offer tuition in any of these subjects, expecting students to pick it up on their own. This means that introductions to the field need to serve as both independent study guides and classroom textbooks. Students (and indeed advanced scholars) seeking to understand or create a critical edition for the first time often do so without the help of an instructor.

In the face of a paucity of tuition, interested learners need both practical and theoretical guidance from the ground up. There is not a single book that covers both of these aspects,

which has led to a small constellation of books that one needs to master to understand the basics of the field. On the practical side, M.L. West[2] has yet to be surpassed as a clear guide to creating a traditional critical edition. It is entirely geared towards classical texts, but remains suitable for creators of critical editions – though it is too technical to be a general introduction, especially for students who do not intend to edit texts themselves. The collection of case studies by R.B.C. Huygens[3] usefully complements this book with a series of case studies on medieval texts. Would-be editors could theoretically read these books and produce something reasonable, but few people could likely do this without some form of guidance, and they would not know how to benefit from the many digital tools for working with text. One wishes for a book that covers literary texts in a similar way to the treatment of diplomatics by Olivier Guyotjeannin, Jacques Pycke, and Benoît-Michel Tock,[4] providing a single-volume text that could be used to provide the basic tools for competently producing an edition.

Many students do not need to edit their own texts, but only need to know how to read a critical edition; moreover, one cannot contribute to textual criticism, or realize its full importance, without understanding its actors and the theories they developed over time. The best single-volume introduction to this is easily that of L.D. Reynolds and N.G.

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[2] *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique Applicable to Greek and Latin Texts* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973).

[3] *Ars Edendi: A Practical Introduction to Editing Medieval Latin Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

[4] *Diplomatique médiévale*, 3rd ed., L'atelier du médiéviste 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

Wilson.[5] This book deals more with the history of textual transmission than its philological implications: it includes a one-chapter introduction to textual criticism, but fully exploring its modern history and the field's rhetoric is beyond its scope. Students who need a solid grounding in editorial theory and its history have had to read further. E. J. Kenney[6] provides an ample history of editing in the modern period, but it needs to be updated in light of new information. Stemmatics still occupy a large intellectual space, especially when discussing classical texts, and Sebastiano Timpanaro[7] provides an engaging introduction to this subject. The work of Paul Maas[8] remains a classic, and continues to be assigned both as a summary of a particular way of thinking that has characterized the field, and on account of its brevity. This can be usefully pared with Giorgio Pasquali[9] for discussion at a higher level. One of the primary difficulties with his theoretical approach, shared by many of his peers, is a tendency to treat texts as an abstraction, thinking little of the people who shaped texts over centuries. Where thought is given to them, it is often in a critical light. One of the most forceful expressions of this is that of Alphonse Dain, whose book remains a frequent recommendation to students:

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[5] *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[6] *The Classical Text: Aspects of Editing in the Age of the Printed Book*, Sather Classical Lectures 44 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

[7] *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann*, Bibliotechina del saggiatore 18 (Florence: Le Monnier, 1963); English translation, *The Genesis of Lachmann's Method*, trans. Glenn W. Most (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[8] *Textkritik*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1957); English translation: *Textual Criticism*, trans. Barbara Flower (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

[9] *Storia della tradizione e critica del testo*, 2nd ed. (Florence: Le Monnier, 1952).

> A dire vrai, je réserverais plutôt les flammes éternelles aux scribes, orgueilleux ou non, qui ne suivent pas les règles de la copie. Car il y en a. Et j'entends par mauvais copistes, non pas tant les scribes qui écrivent avec négligence que ceux qui reproduisent leur texte sans le respecter, et à plus forte raison, le corrigent. Le plus grand tort, en effet, que l'on puisse faire à un texte est de l'amender en le copiant. Il y eut à toute époque des gens qui se sont crus malins et ne se sont pas fait scrupule de pareilles pratiques.[10]

The difficulty is that textual critics have not viewed medieval scribes as peer scholars, but mere unreliable copying machines. Works such as the *Prolegomena ad Homerum* by F.A. Wolf[11] gives one a sense of the sources of such sentiment, but there has been a paucity of scholarship for thinking about the effect of such high-flown words of textual critics. This collection of books, along with a number of other articles, will give students a solid grounding in just how much editing mattered to scholars of past centuries, and just how much we take for granted arguments that shaped texts as we now read them. Yet there has been no accessible critical examination of what all this rhetoric means, especially of a length that one could assign at the undergraduate level.

The new volumes by Hanna and Tarrant fill these gaps in the resources available for learners. *Editing Medieval Texts* largely fills the need for a practical guide to producing a critical edition of a text from the Middle Ages, more accessible than West because it can

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[10] Alphonse Dain, *Les manuscrits*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Belles lettres, 1975), 18.

[11] *Prolegomena to Homer, 1795*, trans. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and James E.G. Zetzel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

be used with less context, and does not assume that the reader is already a master of both Latin and Greek. *Texts, Editors, and Readers* conveys the importance of editing as a discipline in both the premodern and modern periods, an attention to the words we use, and an understanding of how to read a critical edition that should be required for any scholar of the premodern period. These are accessible volumes that will be usable by anyone trying to make their way through the jungle of textual criticism independently. They also make it possible to condense the reading necessary before one can have some idea of where to go in creating an edition, and in a far more engaging manner than many previous treatments. This has the potential to enable courses in the subject where they could not before have existed.

Editing Medieval Texts

Editing Medieval Texts aims to allow a potential editor of a medieval text to a basic level of competence as quickly as possible, with the minimal amount of theory and context necessary. The book is borne of long experience working and teaching in this field, particularly with Middle English. As the title suggests, it aims to be language-agnostic, giving some examples in English. Similar handbooks often illustrate the same points with complex examples in classical Latin and Greek. This prevents the book from becoming too intimidating to readers who have not studied more than intermediate Latin. The focus is nonetheless on a medieval Latin text, walking the reader through producing an edition of Richard Rolle's commentary on the Song of Songs. The bulk of the text is a 'preliminary' that works through the steps, followed by a model edition and translation.

The cross referencing that this approach allows reduces the examples that can sometimes overburden the text of similar books. The result is much more approachable than possibly any earlier introduction to editing.

The author does not assume that the reader knows anything about the subject, starting with the nature of an edition, why they exist, and the steps to creating one. One quickly realizes that this is not a replacement for M.L. West's classic handbook; it brings textual criticism to audiences that would not find such books readily comprehensible. The examples provided are those that a scholar of English literature would recognize, in contrast to the typical work on Latin textual criticism that ignores everything after the third century. Treatment of theory is limited to defining terms such as 'critical edition', 'best text', and so forth. There is a chapter dedicated to each of the steps he identifies:

1. Collecting the witnesses.
2. Finding a copy-text and transcribing it.
3. Comparing the witnesses, or collation.
4. The examination of the variants.
5. Annotation.

This approach assumes that one is working with a tradition that one can reasonably survey, and at the same time one that exists in more than one manuscript. There is minimal attention, for example, to the techniques of documentary editing that one might wish to adopt in the case of a text that survives in only one manuscript. The strength of this book, however, is in its ruthless simplification without reducing the process to

nonsense. The tone throughout is conversational, inviting reader to look over the author's shoulder as he edits Richard Rolle.

The creation of the edition begins with collecting witnesses: this focuses on showing how to look for additional witnesses even when it might seem that one already has a ready list, as is the case for Richard Rolle. This avoids the practicalities of how to obtain images of a manuscript or see them in person, but as these areas are so variable and library policies are constantly shifting, this is perhaps for the best. The bibliographic resources described are almost entirely those focusing on English manuscripts. Assuming that one is able to find facsimiles, the author provides advice on finding a single, complete manuscripts to use as a base transcription, and the differences between Latin and vernacular texts that play into this decision. The recommendation in transcription is to mark all abbreviations, but oddly punctuation is ignored entirely, even though the selected example has a clear system that can be reproduced easily in print. The tacit assumption is that the reader will be using a computer to transcribe the text, and most students can use further advice on avoiding errors in this context through methods such as double-blind entry (key to the accuracy of a single-manuscript edition) or pitfalls in adopting another digital text. While such points will often date a book quickly – West, for example, recommends that one should make one's edition from a copy of a prior printed edition to avoid introducing errors at the typesetting stage[12] – that does not make them any less likely to arise in students' minds.

[12] West, *Textual Criticism*, 66.

A lack of digital advice is also a problem in the chapter on the final preparatory step of collation. Although variants are spoken of as 'data', readers are instructed to collate manuscripts in tables using sheets of paper. One can make an argument for this from a pedagogical perspective, and any advice on collation software will be out of date within a few years, but given the book's practical rather than ideological drive, it would be useful to note that there are digital solutions to this problem that have the potential to increase accuracy and reduce labour if used responsibly, and indeed explain where the use of paper is still wisest. Editors are always deeply concerned about sources of error in manuscripts: they should take an equal amount of interest in finding sources of inaccuracy in their own methodologies.

The final steps address the process of turning transcriptions into a usable text with notes. The longest chapter in the book considers the process of choosing the variants to include in the edited text and apparatus, including a whirlwind tour of stemmatics and scribal psychology. The author advocates a charitable approach to scribes, particularly to understand which variants can be attributed to lapses of concentration or an ambiguous abbreviation in the exemplar, and emphasizing this as a means of understanding the relationship between witnesses. The last descriptive chapter discusses ideals for notes and other analytical material to include with an edition, closing with a discussion of what should be included in an introduction.

Following the 'preliminary' is an edition and translation of the fourth section of Richard Rolle's commentary, which includes all available manuscripts. The inclusion of this edition is one of the unique ways in which this handbook rethinks the typical approach to

the format. The facing-page translation makes the interpreted meaning of the text clear to those still acquiring Latin. The usefulness of the edition itself could be amplified with suggested exercises for the reader to work through it, and perhaps a running commentary on key variants. It includes a verbose critical apparatus, written in English, which does not use the sigla assigned to the consensus of the witnesses; it might be worth noting in more detail some of the alternative approaches to writing an apparatus. One could wish that the publisher had made an effort to model the best practices for critical edition design (as one can now achieve with relative ease using typesetting software, such as Classical Text Editor or LaTeX), particularly in making full use of the margins for line numbers and cross references, and giving more attention to line breaks and spacing to make the apparatus more readable. An appendix exemplifies the format of manuscript descriptions for an introduction, which are ideal guides to the sorts of questions one needs to answer to provide sufficient material context for an edited work.

On the whole, this book is perfect introduction to someone who wishes to produce an edition but does not have the benefit of an instructor. It has the potential for use with intermediate learners in a way that no other handbook of editing has achieved, though a high list price (£80/US$120) may prevent it from being as as widely as it should be with undergraduates. Hanna's message is clear and inspiring: medieval manuscripts and texts are not nearly as frightening as they are often made out to be, and anyone who puts their mind to it can learn to distil their idiosyncrasies into an accessible text.

Texts, Editors, and Readers

Texts, Editors, and Readers is not Tarrant's first introduction to the history of Latin textual criticism: he previously wrote a chapter for students of English literature that summarized recension theory and approaches to emendation.[13] This is one of those few books that is both an accessible introduction to a particular field and a satisfying assessment of its present state for the experienced. The author surveys the changing theoretical approaches to textual criticism over its history, understanding its roots as going further back than the modern period, and explores how the criticism of scribes now forms the basis of our own evidence for the transmission of texts. He supplies, in other words, the people omitted in the abstract discussion of texts that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Throughout the book, he pays particular attention to the words that editors have aimed at one another, and how this rhetoric has often resulted in a high-temperature field. This should prompt scholars to take a hard look at ourselves, and consider whether we need to be more charitable towards our peers if we want a field with a future.

This book is emphatically neither a handbook for producing a critical edition, or a thorough survey of the complete history of textual criticism. Rather, it presents itself as both a personal examination of the field's present state and coming challenges; and an introduction to textual criticism for classicists who might not have any desire to investigate the intricacies of collation or manuscripts, but want to better understand the

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[13] R.J. Tarrant, 'Classical Latin Literature', in *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research*, ed. D.C. Greetham (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995), 95–148.

source of their Oxford Classical Texts and Teubners. There has never been a book that thoroughly addressed the needs of this audience, and this one does so with a dry wit, translating quotations from Latin without assuming that the reader has any knowledge of the language.

The introduction sets the stage with the basics of the concepts surrounding editions; a brief history of postclassical textual transmission; and a discussion of the importance of scribal error, contamination of a textual tradition, and the various ways in which editors have tried to remedy these problems. This is followed by two essays exploring modern textual criticism and its reception (or lack thereof) elsewhere in academia. The first investigates the rise and fall of the 'heroic editor', beginning with Karl Lachmann and today either endangered or extinct. In the intervening period, textual criticism rose to an unprecedented level of prestige and authority that was entirely unsustainable. This disintegrated into interminable disagreements about how to edit, with different schools of thought seeking to have any meaningful form of dialogue – hence what is today a arcane, shrinking field that is increasingly misunderstood, without however removing any of the disagreement. The author logically looks from this to the shape of this disagreement, examining textual critics' rhetoric, and considering editions as themselves a form of rhetoric. Editors since the late Middle Ages (perhaps drawing on editors in antiquity itself) have used loaded and moralistic terms to describe their sources and opponents without widely reflecting on this. This persuasion has in part filled a vacuum where there is a lack of evidence to demonstrate the correctness of a particular reading.

The solution, Tarrant suggests, is to cultivate a greater openness to alternatives and ambiguity.

The next three chapters on "Establishing the text" might look at first glance as if they are opening a technical guide for creating a critical edition, but they are more a detailed study of the theories underlying the problems of rhetoric and evidence introduced in the previous chapters. The author never, for example, provides detailed instructions on what one should include in a critical apparatus. These all cover Hanna's single step of examining variants: here, the process is broken down into "recension" (chap. 3), "conjecture" (ch. 4), and "interpolation, collaboration, and intertextuality" (ch. 5). The chapter recension includes an explanation of stemmata – among the clearest available anywhere – offering examples of various complexity, explanations of Pasquali's closed and open stemmata, and notes on methods of selecting between variants (with the obligatory recitations of various editorial precepts). The author's openness to taking the readings of more recent manuscripts seriously (his recent edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* profitably uses manuscripts up to the twelfth century) is a breath of fresh air. This is followed up in the following chapters with appeals to take scribes seriously as editors – for otherwise, how can one identify their work? He argues that we should speak not of "correct" but "successful" conjectures. In the case of interpolation, he calls for an end to using "inappropriate language of forgery and falsification" (p. 102) and replacing this with a understanding of such passages as useful examples of reception and collaboration. The points covered in these chapters are reinforced with a case study of Propertius (ch. 6).

If critical editions are a form of rhetoric, the centre of that is the apparatus, even if it is ignored or misunderstood by readers and editors alike. “Presenting the text” (ch. 7) makes the case for a critical apparatus that is not merely a collection of variants, but something that can be read as a careful argument for an editor’s reconstruction of a text and alternative ways of approaching it. The maximalist apparatus comes across on the whole as unhelpful, though the author also notes the disadvantages of a minimalist approach. Helpfully, there are apparatus examples from several different editors and series, useful for showing some of the different ways of presenting this information. The author closes with an epilogue on possible futures of editions in a digital context. This leaves more questions than answers, but unsurprisingly the critical apparatus is identified as due for change. It was primarily designed for the convenience of eighteenth-century printers, and there are growing ideas around other methods of visualizing this information. The closing appendix is a standalone explanation of how to read a critical apparatus, with a key to common abbreviations.

Tarrant is not only seeking with this book to inform his fellow classicists of the importance of critical editing, but also to transform the way that editors talk about their work and to one another. Rather than denouncing the moral turpitude of a scribe or editor who selects an incorrect variant, he suggests that it would be of more benefit to everyone if we advertised the fact that a particular passage can be legitimately read in multiple ways. This is an understanding of Latin literature willing to admit that the Middle Ages happened.

New hope for textual criticism

Hanna and Tarrant have given us two new books that, though they do not aim to displace favourites such as *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique* or *Scribes and Scholars*, are making the field a more accessible and hospitable one. Hanna shows that one does not necessarily have to be trained as a classicist to improve on the state of knowledge for a text. Tarrant demonstrates the relevance of the history of textual criticism beyond editors themselves, and shows that one does not have to know how to create a critical edition to read one knowledgeably or understand its value. Such resources are what we need only to inspire new editors, but increase the credibility of textual criticism as a worthwhile and indeed necessary pursuit among academics in related fields.

Both books hint at, but do not pursue, the possibility of a sea change in the way we publish primary sources, creating more accurate and widely available editions. The volumes will likely have a longer lifespan for this. Still, there are a number of practical and theoretical problems that editors of Latin texts have yet to answer: How do we need to change the way we transcribe and collate manuscripts in a digital context to produce more accurate results? Should we think about accepting an accurate transcription of a single good manuscript in a complex manuscript tradition as preferable to the unsourced texts we now use in series such as the Patrologia Latina? How can we exploit the availability of manuscript photographs in critical editions? What ethical and intellectual property conventions do we want to build up to ensure that we can continue to develop one another's work in the same ways as our predecessors did? How can the format of editions change in reaction to academic recognition systems without undermining their

purpose? These are often treated as problems for the future, but in many cases they have already been with us for decades. In 1969, Bonifatius Fischer OSB had already identified the for applying computing to critical editions, and produced a digital concordance of the Vulgate Bible that he co-edited. He also anticipated the foibles of digital humanities projects – "It is strange in general that the use of a computer is taken in the public mind as a proof of scholarly thoroughness".[14] We will be forever fixated in this state of amazement that risks rejecting traditional methods without understanding them if editors do not engage with the questions of how critical editions can grow and become useful to more people.

[14] Bonifatius Fischer, 'The Use of Computers in New Testament Studies, with Special Reference to Textual Criticism', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 21, no. 2 (October 1970): 297–308, at p. 297.