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Richard Tarrant,
*Texts, Editors, and Readers: Methods and Problems in Latin Textual Criticism.*


Gone are the days when textual criticism stood indisputably at the height of classical scholarship. The field, nonetheless, remains crucial, though fewer students of classics learn it, and fewer scholars publish in it. *Texts, Editors, and Readers* will surely spark new interest and appreciation. It provides an engaging introduction to and reflection on the field, its history, and its practice.

Tarrant begins (“Introduction”) by identifying innate challenges posed by classical textual transmission. For example, final, autograph copies of texts do not survive and, in some cases, never even existed (e.g., Vergil), or probably didn’t (e.g., Lucretius). Moreover, transmission has been complicated not only by scribal error but also by two important historical transitions: the move from papyrus to codex, and that from codex to printed text.

The challenges are thus great, but modern textual critics have welcomed them, as Tarrant’s initial two chapters show. Chapter 1 (“Textual criticism in a post-heroic age”) explores the work of past ‘heroic’ editors such as Lachmann, Scaliger, Heinsius, Bentley, and Housman, whose skepticism about the received textual tradition influenced them to make brilliant, if not always convincing, conjectures. Such figures are rare now, in our “post-heroic” age, when a more conservative approach has gained ground. Still, no consensus exists about best practices, and Tarrant argues that the time is ripe to reevaluate the field and its traditional assumptions. In chapter 2 (“The rhetoric of textual criticism/textual criticism as rhetoric”), T. takes up the use of rhetoric in textual scholarship and what it says about the critic’s task. We often find the critic, when confronting manuscript errors, described as, e.g., “healer (error as disease), sleuth (error as crime), judge or arbitrator between competing claimants,” and we read critics writing about their work and the deficiencies of others in extravagant terms (31-2). Such overheated debates, however, cloud an important fact—that it is impossible to recover an authentic original classical text. The rhetoric of textual criticism should reflect this situation better (41).

The next three chapters focus on the process of establishing a text, though these are not ‘how-to’ chapters. Rather they highlight the concerns and challenges
involved at each stage. Chapter 3 ("Establishing the text: recension") treats the tabulation of errors among manuscripts and stemmatic analysis. It presents concepts used by editors to prefer one reading over another, the circumstances when later manuscripts are valuable for establishing the text, and the difficulties involved when dealing with a closed or open manuscript tradition. Tarrant considers in chapter 4 ("Establishing the text: conjecture") how to handle readings from manuscripts that don’t make sense—and thus the issue of conjecture. Conjectural emendation is necessary, but the appropriate amount is a matter of debate. He advocates for a middle course: “Responsible critical practice falls somewhere between accepting the paradosis in all cases where it can be construed and making conjectures simply because an alternative can be imagined, but more specific guidelines are difficult to formulate” (78). In chapter 5 ("Establishing the text: interpolation, collaboration, and intertextuality"), Tarrant elaborates on earlier work he has done in re-imagining interpolation as a collaborative process between the reader and the text. The interpolator acts to make sense of the transmitted text—and not simply to try to pass off forged lines/passage as authentic. Thus an interpolation might, for example, clarify syntactic deficiencies or obscurities in a text (emendation and annotation), or fill in a perceived syntactic or thematic gap in the text (interpolation) or even “an apparent gap in [a] poetic career” (102-3), e.g., as Fraenkel viewed the pseudo-Vergilian Culex (interpolation and intertextuality).

Thus, the critic must play an active, interpretive role to edit any text. An extreme example, as Tarrant discusses in chapter 6 ("Textual criticism and literary criticism: the case of Propertius"), is the text of Propertius, the most vexed in the classical Latin tradition. Is Propertian style essentially clear or is it artistically obscure? Can “the corruption allegedly present in the transmitted text...be accounted for by the usual processes of transmission,” or is “the intervention of a reviser” needed (108-9)? Each answer will affect not only the frequency of editorial conjectures but also the freedom with which an editor might posit interpolations and transpose lines (and even passages). Tarrant argues against those editors (e.g. Butrica and Giardina) who seek to lessen obscurity in Propertius’ text on the assumption that obscurity does not define his style, while he also argues that Propertius’ style is even more deliberately elliptical than Goold and Heyworth recognize (108, 111).

Chapter 7 ("Presenting the text: the critical edition and its discontents") examines the information presented in an apparatus criticus, focusing on the proper “degree of selectivity” and “criteria of selection” (129). “Maximalist” critics provide a fuller representation of manuscript readings and editorial conjectures (and potential classical evidence in support), regardless of their specific relevance for the estab-
lishment of the given text, while “minimalists” favor a more economical apparatus with only those manuscript readings that reasonably influence the establishment of a text. Tarrant clearly falls in the latter (minimalist) camp, but he provides candid assessments of both approaches, and argues in general that “the traditional format of the critical apparatus conveys a false appearance of objectivity and certitude” (141).

In the final chapter (“The future: problems and prospects”), T. explores the positive and negative effects of digital technology. While the ease with which problematic and unscholarly classical texts can be digitally promulgated is troublesome, new technology enables scholars to present texts in ways that, e.g., can display the multiplicity of manuscript readings and thus offer new vistas of investigation both of the given classical text and of the historical-critical context in which it was copied, emended, and studied.

An Appendix (“Reading a critical apparatus”) rounds out the book by providing a general explanation of the apparatus criticus with an extremely helpful list of Latin abbreviations often used.

Tarrant’s book is thus not a handbook of textual criticism. Rather it is an engaging introduction to and reflection on the field, some of its prominent figures and debates, and what its digital future might look like. Particularly rewarding are its insightful examination of the rhetoric of textual scholarship, its presentation (with copious examples throughout) of the basic principles of textual criticism, and its expansive, reader-centered understanding of interpolation. But perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the book is the voice of the author, a preeminent textual critic, who writes with thoughtfulness and humanity about the challenges and uncertainties inherent in a discipline in which the ultimate goal—restoring a text to its original state—is necessarily elusive.

Texts, Editors, and Readers offers newcomers a compelling introduction to how texts are edited and how to make sense of an apparatus criticus. But scholars also stand to gain from Tarrant’s insightful reconsideration of the field and its practice. We should all be grateful to Professor Tarrant for this sophisticated volume.

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