Introduction

What Is a Text?

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We are all now for “bibliographical” methods, keenly on the watch for every least indication of disturbance in the accurate transmission of a text, sorting out by many subtle and ingenious methods the first, second, or third stage of the composition, the original draft, the first completed form, the revision of this, that, and the other purpose, and so on. But there is much more in these modern methods of research than used to be understood by “bibliography,” and I am not sure that the recent extensions of the term have been altogether justifiable. The virtues of bibliography as we used to call it were its definiteness, that it gave little scope for differences of opinion, that two persons of reasonable intelligence following the same line of bibliographical argument would inevitably arrive at the same conclusion, and that it therefore offered a very pleasant relief from critical investigations of the more “literary” kind.1

B. McKerrow’s remarks of sixty years ago may well stand as an epigraph for this special issue of Huntington Library Quarterly. We are now, too, all for “bibliographical” methods: advances in computer science and the attendant technologies of collation, ideological critiques of the presuppositions of textual criticism itself, and the sheer volume of newly discovered manuscripts and early printed volumes have all made bibliography a central topic of academic debate. Few might still claim that the province of bibliography lies with the unarticulated intuitions of “persons of reasonable intelligence,” but many would likely agree that what we mean by “textual scholarship” necessitates a knowledge of the historicity of texts and readers and that such scholarship can only benefit from the communication among critics of many and various fields.2

Nonetheless, although “textuality” has become something of a term to conjure with—and disciplines as diverse as film studies, cultural anthropology, and the history of science imagine themselves working with the meaning and the mode of “texts”—the processes of transcribing, collating, describing, and editing books and manuscripts of earlier historical periods remain, for the most part, relatively familiar. Editions from the age of McKerrow may seem, at first glance, pretty much the same as those from the atelier of Jerome McGann. And, to a large degree, debates framed by the Bédierists and Lachmannians of nearly a century ago still find themselves played out in the prefaces and articles of professional editors.  

The question still evades us: What is a text? Or, to ask it more precisely, what are the relationships between the methods of textual study and the privileging of a class of objects called texts? How does an artifact become a text? Does it become one only when subjected to the inquiries of textual analysis? For that matter, can a text lose its status and revert to the merely artifactual?

Such questions guide our inquiries into the elements of textuality itself. Are pictures—illustrations, marginalia, historiated initials—texts, and how can the editor incorporate such information in the making of the modern edition? For example, no modern scholarly edition of The Canterbury Tales (excluding, for the moment, facsimiles) prints the pilgrim portraits with the General Prologue. Yet Frederic Furnivall’s late-nineteenth-century edition of Hoccleve’s Regiment of Princes prints a facsimile of Hoccleve’s portrait of Chaucer precisely where it appears in one of the earliest manuscripts of the poem (British Library, MS. Harley 4866).  

We may ask the question more radically: Can texts themselves function as pictures? Can, in other words, displays of writing function not as strings of words to be conveyed and edited but rather as icons of something else? The very notion of “facsimile” implies a transformation of text back into picture. And, as current photographic technologies improve, the spate of new facsimiles may come to stand as virtual (in both senses of the word) replacements of old texts. The facsimile of the famous Ellesmere manuscript, recently copublished by the Huntington Library and Yushodo Co., Ltd., is no simple reproduction, how-

3. Witness, for example, the exchanges in the essays collected in Stephen G. Nichols, ed., The New Philology, a special issue of Speculum 60 (1990); and see Tim William Machan, Textual Criticism and Middle English Literature (Charlottesville, Va., 1994).

ever; and a number of textual scholars have argued directly that the entire enterprise of facsimile production is editorial from beginning to end.\(^5\) In the “Notes and Documents” section of this issue, Anthony G. Cains describes the rebinding and conservation of the Ellesmere manuscript that was undertaken as a component of the recent facsimile publication. He reveals the ways in which binding affects the production of a facsimile—what one can see of the page, both generally and in detail. More broadly, his analysis suggests the difficult boundary between the textual and the artifactual; not only natural degradation but also the various bindings and repairs have interfered with the pigments and inks, the decoration of the manuscript in particular, which, as other essays in the volume show, is increasingly the subject of textual inquiry.

In what ways does the availability of facsimile editions alter the character of textual questions? For the Ellesmere Chaucer, the answer lies in the future. But for, say, \textit{Beowulf}, the evidence has been around for centuries. One need only recall the reading \textit{wundini gold}—a phrase long thought to evidence the linguistic archaism of the poem—to reflect on how editors working from a transcription (in this case the Thorkelin transcripts of the \textit{Beowulf} manuscript) could discern a piece of text not to be found in the actual manuscript and then incorporate that text in published facsimile and critical editions.\(^6\)

What, then, are the elements of textuality? At the local level, where do we draw the line between a “variant” and an “error”? In the vicissitudes of scribal copying, how can we distinguish between a lapse and an intrusion—and, in the case of what appear to be intelligent and meaningful intrusions, how do we distinguish between the variant and wholesale rewriting?\(^7\) The transmission of

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6. The phrase \textit{wundini gold} in \textit{Beowulf} had been understood to be a survival of an early Old English instrumental form, and thus was valued as evidence for an early date (seventh or eighth century) of composition of the poem. Kevin Kiernan demonstrated that this reading appears as an editorial conjecture in the transcript of the poem made by G. J. Thorkelin in the late eighteenth century. It was then reproduced in Julius Zuippiz’s transliteration of the text in his published facsimile (\textit{Beowulf; Reproduced in Facsimile} [London, 1882]) and was maintained by twentieth-century editors (notably C. L. Wrenn), who had not consulted the original manuscript. Kiernan’s examination of that manuscript shows that the reading should, in fact, be \textit{wundmi gold}—scribal nonsense, but one that may be more conservatively edited as \textit{wundum gold}, not an archaic phrase at all and one consistent with the date c. 1000 for the manuscript. See Kiernan, \textit{Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript} (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980), 30–37.

7. This question has been explored for a variety of vernacular literatures in such recent studies as Sylvia Hout, \textit{From Song to Book: The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry} (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987); Seth Lerer, \textit{Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England} (Princeton, N.J., 1993); and John Dagenais, \textit{The Ethics of Reading in a Manuscript Culture: Glossing the “Libro de beun amor”} (Princeton, N.J., 1994).
medieval literary documents has been an obvious site for such reflections. To some, variation is the mark of unreliability, the distinctive manifestations of what Chaucer would lament as the miswriting and mismetering “for defaute of tonge” that he imagines as the scribal afterlife of *Troilus and Criseyde*. To others, variation offers testimony to the creatively fluid nature of the medieval and the early modern text. Barry Windeatt incorporates such miswritings into his edition of *Troilus and Criseyde*. He presents Chaucer’s poem “in the context of the corpus of variants drawn from the extant manuscripts, not only because those variants can be of editorial value, but also because they are held to be of a positive literary value, to embody in themselves a form of commentary, recording the responses of near-contemporary readers of the poetry.” But variation did not end with the advent of print. In a curious troping on Chaucer’s envoy, Stephen Hawes concluded the *Pastime of Pleasure* (first published by Wynkyn de Worde in 1509) with his fears not of scribal but of typographical error:

Go lytell boke I pray god the saue  
From mysse metrynge / by wronge Impressyon.9

And it went on. Phenomena recorded as variants by modern editors may all too often be the mere mistakes of the compositor. Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “Satire to John Poynz” condemns the courtiers, “Of them that list all vice for to retain,” a line mangled in Tottel’s *Miscellany* to “Of them that list all nice for to retain” (a reading, by the way, corrected back to “vice” in the first three reprintings of the volume, yet again transformed to “vile” in later ones).10 And more significantly, many Shakespearean variants have recently been revealed to be not witnesses to competing versions of the plays but similar mistakes at the print shop. Some dif-

ferences between the Quarto and Folio editions of *King Lear*, for example, may well be missettings of a marked up copy-text.11

The instability of medieval and early modern literary texts is thus a problem not only for the editor but also for the author and the reader. Chaucer’s attentions to miswriting in the *Troilus*, together with his well-known lament to Adam Sciveyn, suggest a thematic attention to the vagaries of textual transmission.12 The author’s words are always subject to the garblings of others. As Chaucer put it to his Adam: “And all is through thy negligence and rape.” But often, the mistakes of writing hands are not due to the ministrations of the scribe but to the anxieties of authorship itself.

And now my penne, alas, with which I write,
Quaketh for drede of that I most endite.13

This couplet from the proem to Book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde* stands not just as a mark of Chaucer’s narratorial self-consciousness. In the century after his death, it also came to articulate the position of any author writing in the post-Chaucerian tradition. Lydgate mimes these lines half a dozen times, as do a string of poetasters stretching into the sixteenth century.14 Even Sir Thomas Wyatt complains, “My hand doth shake, my pen scant doth his part,” in a ballade that queries the very possibility of authorial control of the literary text.

I do remain scant wotting what I write,
Pardon me, then, rudely though I indite.15

If the instabilities of texts give voice to the anxieties of authors and their readers, they have become the nodes of celebration for more modern, theoretically minded critics. Late-twentieth-century attentions to the reader’s affective responses to

11. See Joseph A. Dane, “‘Which is the Justice, which is the theefe’: Variants of Transposition in the Text(s) of *King Lear*,” *Notes and Queries* 42 (1995): 322–27. For some of the broader implications of mechanical variation in Shakespearean texts, see Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Texts of King Lear and Their Origins*, vol. 1, *Nicholas Oakes and the First Folio* (Cambridge, 1982); and, more generally, the discussion in Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 285–90.


a work, together with poststructuralist predilections for the *jeu* of signs and signifying, may lead editors as well as critical interpreters to celebrate the variation that inheres in textual transmission. The ideal of the editor as an intentionalist and of the critical edition as recovering the meaning of a work as posed by its originary author may well be past. As David Greetham puts it, “it seems that all we have are competing texts and competing readers.”16 What we are “all for,” to return to McKerrow, is just about everything—be it cultural studies, history, materialism, politics, the problematics of representation. It might be hard now to distinguish between editing as a professional practice and “critical investigations of the more ‘literary’ kind.”

The interfaces of the history of authorship, the practices of scribes and printers, and the institutions and the ideologies of the academy lead us to ask not only “What is a text?” but also “What is a textual critic?” The discipline of bibliography may have originally seemed a handmaiden to the literary: editions were produced to make texts available to readers, critics, and appreciators. Recently, however, textual work has taken on an increasing independence. To some degree, Jerome McGann’s plea for a new “critical editing” offers a manifesto of the bibliographer’s autonomy.

Both linguistic and bibliographical texts are symbolic and signifying mechanisms. Each generates meaning, and while the bibliographical text typically functions in a subordinate relation to the linguistic text, “meaning” in literary works results from the interactive agency of these two semiotic mechanisms operating together.17

From this position, it may seem a short step to Greetham’s “Textual Forensics,” in which textual scholarship is not merely on a par with literary criticism but also in some way profoundly apart from it, yet a powerful influence over it.

Textual scholarship is an antidiscipline because it does not occupy a permanent or consistent epistemological position and because it has no definable *Fach*, or subject matter. And textual scholarship is a postmodernist antidiscipline because it consists of coopted and deformed quotations from other fields.18

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16. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, 342. Remarks in this paragraph are indebted to Greetham’s general discussion of the relations between new developments in textual criticism and literary theory (pp. 341–46).
For Randall McLeod, who has called our attention to, in Greetham’s words, “a technical and epistemological disjunction between the local evidence derivable from analytical bibliography and the generalized evidence resulting from reading,” the very act of writing and publishing textual scholarship becomes a tour de force of typographical invention. One need only scan the concatenation of visual codes in McLeod’s work—facsimiles of First Folio type, photographs of signatures, skewings of lineation and justification, orthographic representations of verbal garblings, right down to the presentation of the critic’s name as, variously, “Random Clod” and “Random Clovd”—to see the building blocks of textual scholarship reassembled into something of an abstract expressionism of the word. McLeod’s text becomes an object of textual study itself. One can imagine the nightmare of proofreading such a document; more to the point, one might note that the critic’s own work enacts his dicta of textual scholarship: that we must avoid reading texts in order to see them.

This volume of essays seeks to engage these directions in textual scholarship from a variety of critical positions, and it does so stimulated by the occasion of the New Chaucer Society’s biannual meeting, held in Los Angeles in 1996. That such an occasion should provoke a volume that may seem to query the very idea of authorial autonomy may be something of a paradox. Ralph Hanna III and A. S. G. Edwards, in the first essay in the volume, treat the annotations and ephemera surrounding the text of The Canterbury Tales in the Ellesmere manuscript—including Rotheley’s poem on the De Vere family, written on the opening flyleaves of the manuscript—not merely as curiosities of history but also as testimony to the historicity of Chaucer. They explore the provenance of Ellesmere to discern how Chaucer’s work was read and understood by late-medieval audiences and also to recognize that such an understanding was a profoundly social and political act. Their new edition of Rotheley’s poem, presented as an appendix to the essay, illustrates the ways in which the methods of traditional textual scholarship may be pressed into the service of decentering the canonical text.

For Julia Boffey also, the recovery of a new text is central to recalibrating Chaucerian authority—here, not as the author of a single canonical work but as the name attached to a canon of shorter poems. The poet as proverbialist is important to much fifteenth- and sixteenth-century reception of Chaucer, and

19. Ibid., 37.
21. See the picture of McLeod reading upside down and the discussion in Greetham, “Textual Forensics,” 39.
Boffey explores the ways in which a little stanza of proverbial verse by Walton came to be misattributed to Chaucer. Bringing to bear the contexts of late-medieval patronage on manuscript production, Boffey’s essay helps us understand the ways in which Chaucer’s poems were brought together to define late-medieval literary writing itself. In the context of Boffey’s ongoing project of revising the *Index of Middle English Verse*, the essay also provokes insight into the critical presuppositions underlying the construction of such reference works. The original *Index* organized autonomous poems by first lines; it created hierarchical relationships between “texts” and “fragments.” Many Middle English lyrics are cut out or cobbled together from longer narrative poems. Bits and pieces of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, Lydgate’s *Temple of Glass*, Stephen Hawes’s *Pastime of Pleasure*, and other works were often excised, reassembled, and recast into short lyrics of desire or verse letters of complaint. Where do we draw the line between quotation and a new text? When does an extract become a new poem? How do the organizational principles of a project such as the *Index of Middle English Verse* shape the answers to these questions, and in the process, how does such a scholarly resource redefine the canon—and the very materials to which it provides the index?

Such questions also motivate Ardis Butterfield’s contribution to this volume. Her close examination of the manuscripts of *Troilus and Criseyde* not only reveals the modes of late-medieval reading in terms of the *ordinatio* of layout, rubrication, heading, gloss, and commentary; it also helps us to appreciate the ways in which the *Troilus* embedded a variety of genres in its narrative. Lyrics, songs, and epistles are, to some degree, the building blocks of Chaucer’s amorous and philosophical story, and Butterfield shows in great detail how the scribes of the poem indicated these various generic distinctions in their manuscripts. Such distinctions, too, may draw on the habits of French manuscript organization, and this essay points toward further research in the historical recovery of medieval notions of the text. *Troilus and Criseyde* may not be best considered as a single text but rather, as the scribes perhaps indicate, an arrangement and a synthesis of different forms of discourse, each signaled visually by distinctive codes of textual representation.

Textual representation is at the heart of David Boyd’s account of Chaucer’s Cook’s Tale in Bodleian Library, MS. 686. Like the preceding contributions, Boyd’s essay locates textuality in the material and social conditions of making and reception. He reads this version of the fragmentary, difficult, and both poetically and politically challenging Cook’s Tale in terms of the social positions of its likely audience. Situating a single tale in a single manuscript, he nonetheless enlarges the
issue to query the very nature of an authorized, or authorial, text. Any historicist approach to literature, and by implication any historicist conception of textual criticism, must recognize, he argues, that “an authorial text . . . exists socially and historically as the author’s (s’) Work . . . to a particular group of readers and owners of particular versions.” This revisionist claim leads to a particularly postmodern conception of both the medieval text and the profession of medieval studies. “We cannot separate,” Boyd concludes, “the processes of medieval book production, construction, and transmission from our study of medieval texts or from issues of ideology, politics, and power, all of which are naturalized in the specific manuscript matrices within which and through which they operate.”

For David Greetham, the possibilities of postmodern medieval or textual studies lie not so much in exposing the politics of literature or the literary profession as in exploring the controlling metaphors that have shaped modern editorial practice. The images of filiation, lineal descent, and genealogy; the notion of the text as a member of a family or a branch of a tree; the social paradigms of linearity and patriarchy that govern training in literary scholarship generally—all find themselves laid bare for the cultural figurations that they are. Through analogies to Indo-European philology, comparative biology, and physical paleoanthropology, Greetham shows how all forms of historical inquiry define the objects of their study in familial, linear, or generative terms. What Greetham offers, in the end, is not a rejection of these models as such but a personal recalibration. He posits a model of embedding rather than descent,” a notion of the text as finding its place not on the tree of textual life but in the rhizome of textual diversity. And he suggests, in closing, that “the hypertextual model of free-floating links,” for all its seeming postmodernity, “is a better simulacrum of medieval textuality than the fixed critical text of the codex ever was; or at least of some types of medieval textuality, the scriptible rather than the lisible.”

Read individually, each of these essays exemplifies a tone, a technique, and a tradition of textual criticism in medieval literary study. Read in sequence, however, they trace an arc that leads us from the historical document to our own historical positions as scholars and readers. Along that arc we may be able to locate, if not a definitive answer to this introduction’s titular question, then at least some points of reference for posing definitions. For what each of these contributors suggests—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—is that a text is whatever is reproducible as an object of concern. The Rotheley poem to the De Veres, a proverbial stanza of Chaucerian attribution, annotated manuscripts of Troilus and Criseyde, manipulated forms of the Cook’s Tale, even the documents of professional editorial practice: all are “texts” worthy of study. Or, perhaps to
put it differently, what we witness here are the ways in which bibliographical study transforms physical artifacts into objects of study, and furthermore, the ways in which the practices of editing, in turn, transform these objects of study into “texts.” As scholars, we are all aware of these processes (this is what intellectual history is). Yet what this collection may enhance is our appreciation of the many and competing forces that disturb, mediate, or occlude such an awareness. As textual scholars, we all stand at the nexus of object and artifact: of physical thing and constitutive subject of institutional study. It may seem, in the end, merely reductive to define a text as whatever textual scholars study. But by exploring the vicissitudes of textual study itself—its methods, histories, controlling metaphors, and ideologies—we might well, in the end, see more clearly what McKerrow called the “virtues of bibliography.”

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