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# Realising (re)vision, manipulating manoeuvres:  editing the English Middle Ages

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*This article discusses the importance and relevance of textual editing for students and scholars of historical literatures, especially Middle English texts.  By surveying the different types of editions necessary for studying Middle English literature, the author argues that in the "digital age," an understanding of The Edition is necessary, not only for the preservation of cultural texts, but also for the contribution and understanding of interpretations fundamental to literary disciplines.*

As an early undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature, I had a magnificently staggering ignorance of what "editing" meant or what "The Edition" was.  Despite the obvious relationship these terms had to my chosen discipline, I quite happily read (usually) the assigned texts, (usually) misunderstanding "critical edition" to suggest that reading a specific text was essential to obtaining my degree.  It was Chaucer that demanded a more nuanced and informed approach.  It was Chaucer, then, who changed my life, instigating a series of foci that allow me to now claim to be a textual editor of Middle English literary texts, and a university teacher of medieval English literature who regularly emphasises the importance of "The Edition" as a concept to her students.  I have realised these research and teaching interests despite stern warnings from several mentors, when considering a focus for my doctoral degree in Middle English literature, against producing an edition.  And while I think I understand the underlying premise for my mentors' cautions, including anxieties about producing a dissertation that would incorrectly categorise my abilities outside of literary criticism, therefore creating difficulties on the teaching job market, I did, as part of my doctoral dissertation, produce an edition of a Middle English text.[i]  In doing so, I built on an already burgeoning interest in textual scholarship and history of the book, but perhaps more importantly I continued to consider the state of a text and the process by which we read a text.

    It was Chaucer who initially required my work in textual criticism and editing.  When I was first introduced to Chaucerian texts, like many of his readers I was astonished by my encounters with poetic precision, debauchery, challenges to authority, bawdy and pithy humour, and past historical constructs in his works; but even more, when I was introduced to Chaucerian texts I had to learn what an edition really is.  An edition — The Edition — is a necessary and useful manipulation, a balance of manoeuvres, sometimes silent yet sometimes overt, between author and edition over what a text says versus what was intended. And so while this essay is not about Chaucer, his mention is significant here, where I offer some musings on the nature of medieval textual editing, its methodologies, and its importance — especially to students — in the current age, as it was reading Chaucer and his texts that initially brought me to understand why The Edition matters.[ii]  This question of The Edition and its relevance has received an upsurge of attention over the past two decades (at least) in the field of Middle English literary studies, but the attention and anxiety concerning textual editing and

scholarship is certainly not limited to the scope of texts from the English Middle Ages. Indeed, in this age when the form and delivery of texts has been altered so drastically, and consequently our ways of reading similarly altered, the question of the conversation of The Edition is necessary both within academe and beyond. Students, especially, must be invited to consider the state of a text within the parameters of considering its status as an edition; similarly, students must be taught the skills necessary to undergo textual editing — especially in this age, now invariably termed "digital."

The job of an edition is to present the text. This charge, at first blush, sounds undemanding; however, The Edition's job is just the opposite: it is demanding and difficult. I vividly remember the day that I myself, as an undergraduate student, learned just how complicated and challenging The Edition's task actually is. Until this point I had read from many editions, but as the editions were largely those included on my course lists as required readings, I had not regularly paid attention to what seemed to be the "extra" stuff surrounding the texts: the editorial commentaries, editorial methodologies, and introductions seemed peripheral to my needs. In reading for my medieval literary classes, the texts already had challenging, yet sumptuous and scintillating textual apparatus that provided translations and explanations of unknown Old and Middle English phrases, words, and concepts; as such, I had failed to consider reading, what seemed to be, the extra material – the words, chapters, and commentary surrounding the text. Once I finally determined to read this material, I learned that someone – the Editor – was controlling the text to massive degrees, at times determining the text should be something it had never been.

The tenet of textual criticism and editing is that "even small differences, can be significant, shaping different meanings as we read" (Keleman 6). What does it mean that Chaucer's Canterbury Tales exists in more than fifty-five manuscripts, yet few of them always agree on what the text actually reads (The Canterbury Tales is known to exist in its entirety in some fifty-five manuscripts, while a further twenty-eight have The Tales in fragmentary form)? How does a "modern" editor decide which reading is correct for her edition? What is happening when some editors reject all possible readings of extant Piers Plowman manuscripts (approximately fifty manuscripts in all) and instead decide they know what Langland (the author) would himself had written, though no genuinely authoritative versions of Piers Plowman are known to be extant? And further, what is happening when the editions from which I first read these texts did little to show just how wonderfully variable and seemingly disarranged these texts really were? The editions I initially learned from were clean, punctuated, capitalised appropriately – most importantly, they presented the texts as static and absolute. To be fair, I initially did little to appreciate the information provided by the editions that responsibly included variant tables or explanatory notes.[iii] But I eventually began to absorb that many versions of texts existed beyond that from which I was reading. These revelations meant that there existed a textual tradition of negotiating a text and its preservation that I was completely new to, and fascinated by. And it is this realisation that must be emphasised here and in the literary arts at large: the reality of many texts is that they exist in numerous and varying forms. The clean and static version of a text used by most students or scholars of historical texts such as Middle English literature - The Edition -

is one of many; indeed, it might even be a collaborative version put together from numerous extant versions.

A brief and general explanation of the different types of editions and their methodologies is necessary.  Editions of medieval English texts, and scholarly editions in general, can best be categorised into four groups:  facsimile, diplomatic (conservative), eclectic, and critical.  The facsimile edition is a reproduction of the original.  This reproduction is photographic, and can be presented in hard (print) copy, electronically, or both.  The diplomatic version puts into print or electronic copy the main text of the manuscript. This type of edition is also termed conservative, or transcription, as it presents a transcription of a single manuscript witness, without emendation or correction.  Perceived or obvious errors (scribal or otherwise) are included, and punctuation is limited to what the manuscript itself shows.  An eclectic edition takes its material from multiple extant copies of a text, producing a composite text of variants from other witnesses, and includes emendations based on the editor's knowledge of authorial and scribal habits.  The fourth type of edition, the critical edition, presents the "best text" by comparing various versions, choosing from these versions a copy text, and makes corrections by consulting the variants.

The editor selects his type of edition according to the needs of his audience; however, although one type of edition can be suitable for one audience group or another, the divisions are not always clear, and it can be difficult for an editor to decide how to present the text.  The facsimile edition, essentially a photographic reproduction, is an invaluable tool for scholars and students alike. As a teacher of medieval English literatures outside of the United Kingdom, I depend upon facsimile editions to introduce students to manuscripts; as a scholar and textual editor of medieval literatures, I depend upon facsimile editions for my own research, and I aim to produce facsimile editions for the research of my colleagues.[iv]  While a fair number of libraries and university archives in Canada and America have medieval works in their collections, accessibility is an issue.  To be sure, accessibility also remains an issue in the United Kingdom — just because a manuscript exists in an archive does not guarantee a scholar will be permitted to access it.  The facsimile edition alleviates the issue of accessibility and introduces students to the beauty and complexity of literatures in manuscript form, and provides a glimpse to the skills required for its transmission.  The importance of these two points is worth considering further.  While the beauty and artistry inherent to many literary manuscripts is important to share with students, it is the manuscript form of English literature that is crucial for students to understand, and yet many students are not exposed to the history of literary production and its forms until well into their academic career.  To be sure, students who find their tasks of critique and interpretation challenging, especially at the beginning of their academic experience, benefit from witnessing the history of literary criticism and interpretation in its original form:  the manuscript. The form itself presents interpretation and illustrates itself for interpretation.

This point is adequately demonstrated by looking to two early English texts that students are often introduced to in a historical survey course:  Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.  Both texts also provide interesting levels of analysis, as unusually for early English literatures, they exist in

singular manuscript form.  It is quite often the case that the first poem students are taught in such a course is Beowulf, and in so doing they learn that Anglo-Saxon poetry depends upon alliteration and a rhythmic scheme of two half lines separated by a caesura.  From their textbooks, students who are junior in their studies will read the poem in translation:

So!  The Spear-Danes    in days of old  (Beowulf, Anderson 1)

Students able to read the poem in Old English might find:

Hwæt, wē Gār-Dena     in ġēardagum  (Klaeber's Beowulf 1)

From both examples, it is clear that students are taught that the poem is structured via traditional line numbers, and that each line has a mid-point caesura.  Students are surprised to see from the Beowulf manuscript, Cotton Vitellius MS A.XV, that the manuscript neither presents the poem in line structure, nor presents spaces to indicate the caesura in a line.   Rather, the first line of the manuscript's first folio presents:[v]

hþÆT þE GARDE  (Beowulf, MS Cotton fol 132r)

Immediately, students notice discrepancies between their editions and Beowulf in its original form. No caesura is marked in the manuscript, and the first line (according to modern editions) continues below the first line in the manuscript.  From such revelations, students find themselves with a variety of questions, all aimed at what the process of analysis and interpretation is that allows editors of the critical edition in their textbook to present the poem as they do.

The Middle English poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight offer students similar opportunities to consider how a text is presented, and the differences between manuscript and modern edition.  For example, students learn that the poem is divided into four "fitts;" indeed, their reading schedule is likely assigned according to this structure.  However, when students see the poem in manuscript form, Cotton Nero A.x., they learn that the poem in its original has no such structure. As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo, and Linda Olson recently discussed, most students do not learn that the poem's first editor, Madden, imposed this structure, and that the poem has been read and interpreted by way of this "silent" manipulation ever since (Kerby-Fulton 58).  Perhaps even more surprising and potentially contentious for students, in the context of editorial manipulation and interpretative consequence, is the issue of the "bob and wheel."  Students learn that the verse paragraphs of the poem are each closed by the "bob," a one-stress line, and the "wheel," a rhyming quatrain of three-stressed lines.  The second and last lines of the "wheel's" quatrain rhyme with the "bob."  Fundamentally, however, the manuscript does not present this precise structure, as Kerby-Fulton, Hilmo, and Olson explain:

It was J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon...who pointed out something that most editors do not comment upon: 'In Gawain the short "bob" lines, which metrically follow each group of long lines, are written to the right of the long lines, sometimes opposite the last of these but often two or three lines up.'  Yet all modern editions, including Tolkien and Gordon's own, all a product of New Critical ideas, insist on laying out the bob and wheel in rigid uniformity, immediately after the long lines, with the "bob" given a full line of its own.  No such uniformity occurs in the manuscript, where the bob never has its own line and is various placed.  (Kerby-Fulton 59)

The difference between Gawain's form in a critical edition and in its manuscript, illustrated by the "bob and wheel" and allowed to be revealed by a facsimile edition, allows students to realise that their texts have been scrutinised and interpreted already - even if seemingly merely for purposes of presentation - before their work as literary critics has begun.[vi]  In the student's discovery of what literary criticism is, and of how it generates a dialogue that the discipline itself relies upon, it is crucial that the dialogue generated rest on a valid interpretation. Erick Kelemen notes, "for an interpretation of a work to be valid, the text on which the interpretation is based has to be an accurate representative of that work" (8).  Crucially, exposure to the seemingly simple facsimile edition allows students and scholars alike to realise that the texts from which they learn, study, and research are but representations of a text and its interpretation - not an original version that may or may not have ever existed.

In considering the skills that are required of editors, the facsimile edition also allows students to quickly learn that reading the text in manuscript form is completely unlike reading from their modern critical editions, and the diplomatic edition can act — in addition to a variety of other important uses —as a guide to deciphering the writing system used on a manuscript (facsimile) folio. The (often) highly elaborate and (often) initially bewildering script used by scribes to copy their texts requires a reader skilled in palaeography — the study of writing systems used in medieval texts —to read them.  Such systems, in addition to being elaborate, are idiosyncratic and painstaking — not only in their level of detail, but also in their interpretation. The diplomatic edition, which puts into print as much as possible what is included on the folio of the manuscript, can, in part, alleviate this problem. For example, a diplomatic edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, might represent the poem's first line as:

Siþen þe ſege  þe aſſaut watz ſeſed at troye[vii]

as opposed to the critical edition which could read:

Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesed at Troye

It is illustrated with these two examples of the same line that the diplomatic edition strives to mirror the manuscript itself.  The diplomatic edition, then, is often invaluable to linguists or other scholars who require information of what the manuscript itself shows, but do not have the training to decipher the text, or are unable to view the manuscript itself (this is oftentimes the case, as most extant manuscripts do not have facsimile copies).  And while the diplomatic edition is admittedly unsuitable for teaching many literary aspects of a text to students, it is still useful to a student-based audience in that it allows students to have some insight into the history of book production and its methodology before the advent of the printing press — knowledge surely needed for students to have a full appreciation of the literature they study.   Like any edition, however, the diplomatic edition has its weaknesses; despite the fact that it is an attempt to remain as close to the "original" as possible, conservative editors must admit that certain impressions are still imposed onto the text.  For example, what is an editor to do about scribal abbreviations or word spacing?   Will he expand the abbreviations; will she collapse a space between a prefix and word proper?  If abbreviations are expanded, as they often are, the reader is already one removed from the original, and the reader must therefore assume the editor's expansions to be correct.  If word spacing is emended, will a poem's

possible reading and interpretation be dismissed before ever being read by someone other than its editor?  Examples such as these only point to the ideological nature of textual editing, even in the case of editions that deal with only one manuscript, such as the diplomatic edition.  The diplomatic edition, in representing the smallest possible version of a text, also caters to a very small percentage of scholars (as alluded to above).  As Dumville astutely notes, "the first concern of most readers who are not professional philologists will be to have a text which (inherent difficulties of comprehension aside) is presented in such a way as to offer easy readability — in other words, modern punctuation, preferably heavy, and modern capitalisation" (46).  Eclectic and critical editions are invaluable in that they make the text itself readable and thereby accessible.

An editor creating a critical edition chooses the "best" manuscript version of a text, and makes changes only (usually) where supported by other manuscripts, although word spacing and punctuation is normally regularised.  This editorial process is sensible in that its product introduces students to a core text from which to study literary aspects such as plot, or style and verse patterns, and the users also feel assured that the "best" text reading is presented.  An eclectic edition strives not to determine the "best" witness, but rather to produce the "best" literary reading.  In this way, the eclectic edition is based on a single manuscript but also reads into source variants from other witnesses plus emendations made without any manuscript authority.  This type of edition can be especially useful for literary texts in that editors are free to emend to keep with aspects of verse or metre; however, the issue of emendation exposes the political and ideological nature of textual editing.  Michael Lapidge commented on the issue of emendation in 1990, articulating his "rage and fury" against conservative editors who "shrink from emendation" (67).  The crux of both critical and eclectic editions is that the responsibility of the editor lies, not only as Lapidge argued, "in conserv[ing] the transmitted text when it is sound, but...in emend[ing] it when it is not," (67) but also in outlining clearly who he perceives his audience to be, and his methodology and editorial principles. The critical or eclectic editor can also tailor his accompanying materials to meet the needs of his intended audience:  students may require glossaries for Middle English words and explanatory notes. However, the audience must have substantial faith in the editor's ability and methodology:  how has the "best" text been determined?  Some editors might feel it is logical to simply edit the earliest extant version of a text.  Is this the case if later manuscripts are more similar to each other, and the earliest seems unique in its rendering?  A responsible editor will detail her standards and methods of choosing the "best" text, and also her method of transcription, and the textual apparatus will make variant readings available.  It is crucial that students be introduced to such inclusions in their editions.  As West notes:

> Students have sometimes said to me that they recognize the necessity of textual criticism, but they are content to leave it to the editor of the text they are reading and to trust in his  superior knowledge.  Unfortunately editors are not always people who can be trusted, and critical apparatuses are provided so that readers are not dependent upon them.  Though the reader lacks the editor's long acquaintance with the text and its problems, he may nevertheless surpass him in his feeling for the language or in ordinary common sense,   and  he  should  be  prepared

to consider the facts presented in the apparatus and exercise        his own judgment on them. He must do so in places where the text is important to him for some further purpose. (8-9) [viii]

Here West makes clear that by exposing the methodologies and form of textual criticism and editing to students of literary arts, the text can better be understood to be a product of many conditions and interpretations well before the edition itself has been read.  In my experience, this revelation acts as an incitement to students, goading them towards questioning the perceived authority of the text from which they learn.  For instance, students often become excited during lessons of editorial theory, when, after explaining the construction and methodology of editing, they learn that an editor might deem all versions of a text illegible or nonsensical, and emend a reading to something not supported anywhere, in any extant manuscript witness.  In moments of realisations such as this, students often become quite charged in an attempt to understand how the editor has decided, not only on his or her emendation, but also on the unreliability or unsuitability of existing readings.  This moment, as a teacher, is exciting to witness.  Students comprehend for themselves, rather than being told, that the text is a product of manipulation, and that the text's authority can exist not just with the author but also beyond, with the audience. Students learn firsthand what a text is, and what textual criticism does, as articulated by West:  "...a work of literature must be understood as a product of historical conditions, and textual criticism teaches us that the specific manifestations of the work - the documents we hold in our hands - have affected our understanding of the work without our necessarily being aware of it" (8-9).

Of course in this digital age, the "documents we hold in our hands" are more often actually viewed on a screen.  The digital age and its associated technologies offer not only greater accessibility to texts and their versions (manuscript or otherwise) than ever before, but it also allows for a transmission of knowledge of edition types and their associated principles.  When I teach a Middle English text I can often (depending upon the work) now show it in facsimile, diplomatic, eclectic, and critical versions, all at once.  There are a plethora of manuscripts that have been digitised, and are thus accessible to anyone able to access a computer and internet browser.  For instance, through The Canterbury Tales Project or Piers Plowman Electronic Archive, I can show students high-resolution photos of the manuscript witnesses of the texts we are studying in class.[ix]  When reading Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, I show students the online work of a project I research for, The Cotton Nero A.x. Project (mentioned several times above).[x] This project is working towards providing high-resolution photos of all the manuscript folios (pages), transcribing the entire manuscript (studying the manuscript paleographically and for its writing systems in order to record what the manuscript reads), and producing editions of each of the individual poems in which the digital photographs and the new transcriptions serve as a basis for a hypertextually-linked new critical text with glossary, full textual and explanatory notes, and other supports for readers (McGillivray, The Cotton Nero A.x Project). Students can see what I mean when I state that a modern edited reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight we use in class is questionable, and I can show and explain uncertain manuscript readings – uncertain either due to the scribe's idiosyncratic and difficult script, or because the manuscript itself has suffered some water damage and is thus often difficult to discern. Further, the

digital age allows students and scholars to read and ponder the vast marginalia found in Middle English manuscripts. For example, in the annotations of some Canterbury Tales manuscripts – effectively Middle Age doodles and reader commentaries – students can witness reader reception and interpretation directly via the textual artefact itself. One Middle English reader rails against Chaucer's Wife of Bath's manipulation of biblical text to argue for women's dominance over men's in marriage with a well-placed, "[never] let a bad wife say what she likes"; while another scribe complains of the taxing work of being a scribe while suffering of thirst.[xi] For my students, Middle Age texts are now viewed and studied as fluid, having been seen in their manuscript context. With tools such as online digital manuscript projects, and hypertextually-linked editions, students also witness twenty-first century researchers (including their own teacher, in my case) working through their own research queries and problems. The scholars, it is illuminated, are always students of the discipline; the scholars pose questions and try to find answers, often in the making of The Edition.

The digital age also requires that students of historical literatures obtain a working appreciation of textual editing and criticism. Just as the method of textual preservation trended from parchment to paper, from quill to pen, and from pen to typeset, in our current times we have trended from ink to electronic, and from paper to screen. Paradoxically, our digital age has enabled access and preservation and enhanced teaching, but it also threatens to undermine the principles of editing and criticism themselves. For just as a clean and orderly critical edition without notes or without their use suggests resolution and stasis to the reader, an electronic text similarly allows for erasure or ignorance of conflicting or uncertain readings. Further, as our method of storage has moved from vellum, to paper, to digital, the texts and their editions must be reedited to ensure these documents are available via our current system. Jerome McGann sees this need as an "education emergency," commenting:

> Just when we will be needing young people well-trained in the histories of textual transmission and the theory and practice of scholarly method and editing, our universities are seriously unprepared to educate such persons. Electronic scholarship and editing necessarily draw their primary models from long-standing philological practices in language study, textual scholarship, and bibliography. As we know, these three core disciplines preserve but a ghostly presence in most of our PhD programs. (410)

McGann's point is weighty. If few have the skills necessary for textual editing and criticism, many texts will effectively cease to be in our collective literary archive.

The Chaucerian texts and other Middle English literatures that effectively changed my life and introduced me to critical reading could be silenced if we do not teach The Edition in our classrooms. While the question of The Edition and its methodologies will no doubt continue in politicisation, I have briefly discussed how different edition types should be introduced to literary students, as understanding the foundations of textual editing ensures tools for reading that are essential for attempting any understanding of a text. Understanding a text — its history, its argument(s), its reception, its meaning, its vision (and revision), its rhetorical manoeuvres, and its manipulations, both projected and received, cannot be done (perhaps cannot even be acknowledged) without an informed reader. Now that I realise what "editing" means and what "The Edition" is, while I cannot

claim to be a fully informed reader for all the texts I encounter, in my experience and with indebtedness to Chaucer, it is clear that an informed reader cannot be realised without realisation of The Edition.

## Notes

[i] See Olsen, "An Edition."

[ii] This essay is not intended to act as a guide for textual editing, nor does it aim to provide a history of textual editing.  For such material see:  Greetham, *Textual Scholarship;* Greetham, *Scholary Editing;* and Kelemen *Textual Editing and Criticism.*  For issues related specifically to Middle English textual editing, see Minnis and Brewer, *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism.*  For a useful online guide to editing and an introduction to terms and issues, see Reimer, *Manuscript Studies.*

[iii] For one example of such an edition, see Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer.*  As a junior student overwhelmed by reading the texts in Middle English rather than a modernised version, I largely ignored the explanatory and textual notes.  My experience as a teacher has shown me that most students do the same.

[iv] See McGillivray, *The Cotton Nero A.x. Project*, and McGillivray, *London, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. (art. 3):  A Digital Facsimile.*

[v] Specialised font (Junicode) used throughout is available online via Peter Baker.

[vi] For an in-depth discussion of the interpretative gestures allowed by recognizing the various treatment of the "bob and wheel" in the poem's manuscript, see Kerby-Fulton, Hilmo, and Olson, 59-64.

[vii] This text uses Peter Baker's Junicode font, and is created by following the transcription policy of the *Cotton Nero A.x. Project* in concert with the digital facsimile provided by *The Cotton Nero A.x. Project.*  See McGillivray, *The Cotton Nero A.x. Project,* McGillivray, *London,* and Olsen and McGillivray, *Cotton Nero A.x. Project Transcription.*

[viii] Kelemen also considers this quotation at some length; see Kelemen, *Textual Editing and Criticism.*

[ix] See Robinson, *The Canterbury Tales Project* and Duggan, *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive.*

[x] I first worked on this project as a doctoral student and research associate (2002-2007), and now as a principle collaborator.  See McGillivray, *The Cotton Nero A.x. Project.*

[xi] For more on medieval glosses of Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," see Schibanoff, "The New Reader and Female Textuality in Commentaries on Chaucer."

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