

The Genesis of Academic Editing

Applying the Process to Critical Editions,
Journals, and Volumes

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ABSTRACT

This essay functions as a response, reflection, and extension of the three preceding articles. The editorial theories elaborated therein, whether “positivist” or “rationalist” (Farrell), authoritative (Koster) or hypertextual (Guthrie) all relate to the practice of academic editing. Each editorial decision, whether in a critical edition, an edited collection, a monograph, or an academic peer-reviewed journal, relies to some extent on putting those theories into practice.

FOR MOST MEDIEVALISTS, OUR WORK BEGINS WITH TEXTUAL ANALYSIS that requires critical editions; in some cases, that work originates with the manuscript sources themselves, which we either develop into a critical edition or a reader’s edition—analyzing specific parts of a manuscript to make it more accessible to a wider audience. Most publishing endeavors require submitting articles to journals or to edited collections as we work toward publishing a monograph. The complexities of producing editions of medieval manuscripts and translating those skills into wider editorial opportunities like edited collections on interdisciplinary medieval topics, and academic journals in the discipline, require the application of the principles of editing theory in practice.

Each contributor to this issue has, in some way, addressed the difficulties and joys of producing a critical edition. In some cases, the critical edition is very straightforward—there are fewer extant manuscripts or there are fewer variations in language and content. Other texts are more of a challenge, either because of widely varying content, shifts in language, or a large number of surviving manuscripts that must be compared and analyzed in relation to each other. There are, of course, different theoretical approaches to editing. Thomas J. Farrell elucidates the discontent with George Kane’s approach—the eclectic method of “deep” or “open” editing,

but he suggests that such readings are useful as, “editorial theory today responds to diverse impulses” (31). Farrell further points out that

with the exception of the *Pearl-Poet*, whose works, extant only in a single manuscript, cannot be edited eclectically, all of the recognized textual geniuses writing in Middle English have been the recipients of an eclectic edition in that time frame, and each of those editions cites the author’s genius as a substantial rationale for the chosen editorial method: the quality of the author’s *usus poetandi* simultaneously requires and justifies an eclectic methodology to recover the *ipsissima verba* of the author-genius (32).

However, Farrell urges a measure of caution in eclectically editing texts. As Farrell says, “Eclectic editors have shown us the marvels that can be accomplished once we possess its power. . . . But let us . . . at least learn the dangers of such irresistible power; let us seek to keep at arm’s length the genie whose granting of wishes has always led to some results we claim not to have wanted” (43).

Jo Koster concurs that there are numerous “challenges and perplexities involved in editing medieval texts in the twenty-first century” (20). Mainly, who has the mastery, which text is definitive, which is “right”. Koster cites what she calls Thorlac Turville-Petre’s rueful dictum in *Probable Truth* that the “definitive critical edition is only definitive until the next one comes along” (20). This issue crops up often in textual analysis: some publishers insist that authors only cite “definitive” editions in their publications—which often means inaccessible or even out of date—rather than more accessible, even less expensive editions like those produced by TEAMS. Though these more accessible editions are often the only critical texts available, or they reflect more modern editorial practice and/or contextual material and apparatus they are sometimes dismissed as less authoritative.

But in the twenty-first century, new modes of editing texts, dealing with issues of scribal errors, alternative texts, emendation (conjectural or otherwise) and textual inadequacies offer a realm of possibilities for reconstructing medieval narratives as textual editions, which is, in many ways, a form of eclecticism. Steve Guthrie details the process and benefits of electronic editions of well-known, previously-edited texts. He points out that, in fact, for *Troilus and Criseyde* at least, “the deeper questions have been not so much answered as exhausted, a happy accident that leaves an editor free to focus on more pressing needs” (2). But, at the same time, “any edition is an interpretation of the poem for the present, focused through the lenses of

the present” (4). As all three contributions point out, editions respond to the changing and often dispirit needs of the audience—which is, in and of itself, not a static or hegemonic entity. But as cultural analysts and interpreters, textual editions are essential. Theoretical discussions and hypothesis would not be possible without workable and working textual editions.

However, many hiring and tenure committees privilege monographs over edited collections and critical editions, particularly if there are no medievalists on those committees. Critical and reader’s edition are the backbone of what medievalists do. Not every medievalist has access to original manuscripts or microfilm, and while there are more and more digital editions every day, like Guthrie’s, there are scores of manuscripts that are simply inaccessible to a wider public. Critical editions are also essential for teaching—at all levels—and they provide the essential starting point for most textual analysis. The work of editing manuscripts, of producing critical apparatus, and of using interdisciplinary research and materials, provides a solid foundation for other academic roles such as editing a journal, editing collected volumes, or even producing a monograph, as editing theory is applied in practice.

The principles of textual editing, of producing a critical edition of a manuscript are extremely useful in bringing together an edited collection. Not every scholar is in the position to produce a critical edition, but many can (and will) edit a book. Editing a volume can be a complex endeavor and in many ways is more difficult than producing a monograph because it requires marshaling other people—directing them, cajoling them, editing them, and developing an understanding of multiple layers of a specific theme. As the editor of a volume, it is necessary to have a broad knowledge of the whole theme to identify gaps in the contributions or in the work of the contributors, and to make editorial choices. It is not necessary to know absolutely everything about every facet of the theme, but editors need to provide the contextualizing introduction, make the material accessible to a broader audience, and know when the contributors may have missed something. They need to understand the deeper meaning and, essentially follow the eclectic model.

Some of the most necessary elements of editing texts are resources—human, textual, bibliographical. As published authors, it is easy to forget that we did not all spring forward fully formed like Athena from Zeus’ head. It is an important part of any publishing, editing, and writing process to learn from what other people say and apply it elsewhere. Almost no one writes perfectly the first time, everyone needs to be edited, and it always helps to have an objective eye look at your work—even if you are the edi-

tor. Develop a style sheet, based on whatever publisher you have in mind; stick to it, send it out to your contributors, and make sure they stick to it so you can establish consistency. Many of them will probably ignore you, but if you have the style sheet, you have something to which you can refer as you edit. Consistency in style is particularly important in editing medieval manuscripts where there may be little consistency among different extant copies, which you have to analyze and present in a unified format.

One of the things that makes consistency easier is a clear line of communication with your co-editor and your contributors. Regardless of whether you and your co-editor disagree on certain points, form a united front for dealing with contributors and publishers. Stay in touch, update them, and make sure everyone is on the same page. A good proofreader is a most valuable asset—not every publisher provides proofreaders or copy-editors. Attention to detail, as with manuscript transcription, is paramount in producing a good volume.

During the editing and submission process, be flexible, be willing to make changes but adhere to the core points of your argument. Format and style are minor, in the scheme of things, so pick your battles with contributors and publishers. As an author, be willing to compromise; as an editor, do not. If contributors fight you on making stylistic or content changes, be courteous, understanding, but firm. If it seems like a losing battle, you can cut a piece, or you can wait for the external reader's report to cut it for you. Contributors should understand that your name is on the cover of the finished volume, so you are as invested as they (if not more) in the quality of the work.

Once you have compiled the volume and submitted it, be prepared to defend your contributors against petty or particularly nasty readers. Some readers do not get it or do not like one particular thing. As the editor, if you think the piece is worth it, fight for it. You should have thoroughly read and vetted everything, or sent pieces out to individual external readers already, so you should be confident in your contributors.

When it comes to finding a publisher, know who the reputable publishers are, and what may help or hurt you in the job or tenure process. Most people reviewing both tenure and/or job applications are not actually experts in your field, and every field has different acceptable publishers. Be prepared to defend your editorial decisions and research the publishers that will take an interest in your specific topic. Some themes are more applicable to some publishers. While university presses are still the cream of the crop, there are several excellent for-profit publishers. But the books these publishers produce are often designed for library sales; they do small print

runs and sell the books for outrageous prices. However, authors can usually get books at a discount, or in bulk, and pass those savings on to students or colleagues. Open access is becoming more and more popular, even with work produced by for-profit publishers. It is a good idea to establish a relationship with a publisher—be amenable to their suggestions, run your ideas past them, but remember that, at the end of the day, your responsibility is to your work and your contributors. Some publishers are less reputable than others and some will take advantage. There are few things worse than producing a vital critical edition or an engaging edited collection that simply sits where no one can read it and no one can afford it.

Publishing in journals, of course, is academic bread and butter. But editing a journal, as many of the previous contributors can attest, is an exercise in dedication. If you take over as editor of a well-established journal, it is fairly easy to adapt to procedures that are currently in place. But if you are starting a new journal or revamping an existing journal, you will need to establish those procedures. Much like editing a volume, the quality of the journal depends on the contributions, the process of peer-review, the network of outside contacts, and the consistency of style and presentation. The rejection rate also adds to a journal's reputation—the higher the rejection rate, the more prestigious the journal. As with editing a volume, meeting deadlines is crucial; even more so with a journal, because subscribers expect to receive their copy in a timely fashion. There are new software platforms for managing journal submissions that strip out identifying markers in files so the review process is truly double-blind, that communicate with external readers, and update contributors. These new systems make it easier for fewer people to juggle the administrative logistics of running a journal.

But editing a journal also depends on adaptability. Editors need to be able to rely on their editorial boards to vet new ideas and consider ways for the journal to develop and expand its appeal. They need to find reliable readers who will be objective in their reviews, rather than simply pushing their own agendas. Editors should have the final say, based on their knowledge of the material and their faith in the readers. If editors encourage fair and objective reviews and challenge those reports that are too personal and too pedantic, then the field overall is more conducive to intellectual inquiry.

Many journals have a very narrow focus, but considering interdisciplinary collaboration among related fields and exploring intersections between them, is a wonderful way of reaching a broader audience. The same is true for edited collections. Several series and collections have taken the initia-

tive in promoting truly interdisciplinary work—not just interdisciplinary approaches by a group of literary scholars or a group of historians who consider different kinds of sources, but collections that bring together the work of historians, art historians, literary critics, archaeologists, and linguists. Along with the monograph, critical manuscript editions, edited collections and vibrant journals are the foundation of our field—the skills for producing one often inform the production of the others. In the current academic climate, where so many institutions are pushing STEM-initiatives to the detriment of the humanities, the ability to adapt, to explore, to expand our approach to medieval studies without diminishing or diluting the core reliance on texts and contexts, make us more viable and more competitive.

The application of editorial theories, either “positivist” or “rationalist”, as Farrell explains; the question of authoritative editions, raised by Koster; or the advantages of producing accessible and affordable electronic editions like Guthrie’s all relate to the practice of academic editing. Each editorial decision, whether in a critical edition, an edited collection, a monograph, or an academic peer-reviewed journal, relies to some extent on putting those theories into practice. As Koster suggests, there is not one correct answer to these issues, but recognizing the practical applications of editing theory beyond the critical edition is a step in uncovering more ways in which editorial theory responds to those diverse modern impulses.