

Limits of Scholarly Editing

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ABSTRACT

The goals of scholarly editing are limited by what can be accomplished in reality. What can be hoped for or aimed at may be the inspiration, but not the goal, of scholarly editing. Well-argued disagreements among scholars demonstrate that variation in interests, methods, and values for documents, texts, works, history and art, both place perfection out of bounds and valuable triumphs within reach. Textual evidence requires editorial presentation, which requires intellectual added value. Just as there are many ways to get it wrong, there are many ways to get it right.

THIS NOTE CONTINUES THE IDEAS EXPRESSED IN “WHAT IS SCHOLARLY Editing”,¹ where I reviewed the characteristics of scholarly editions that distinguish them from all other types of editions. I suggested there were only two rules of scholarly editing: The first requires the discovery, analysis, and presentation in some form of the documentary history of a verbal work from inception to latest edition; the second requires the reasoned production of a text based on an analysis of the work’s textual history along with an explanation of editorial principles. These two rules can be adequately applied regardless of the goal, interests, or favored methodology of the editor. Having fulfilled the demands of the two rules, an edition of any kind could be considered scholarly. Several kinds are described in that essay.

The present note focuses on the limitations of scholarly editing, distinguishing between what can be accomplished from what can only be hoped for or aimed at as the goal of scholarly editing — or that can be offered as hyperbolic advertising. Textual scholars welcome the vetting of editions before publication, and we value reviews subsequently that offer corrections or that point to gaps in the work. The desire to conduct bibliographical and textual scholarship so that “it need not be done again” is strong in textual scholarship. And yet perfection in textual scholarship seems never to be achieved — raising the question of what constitutes achievable goals.

1. SHILLINGSBURG 2022, 33–45.

Much discussion in the literature of textual studies and in textual conferences has, in the past, focused on what might be the right way or the best way to edit. From the late 1950s to the late 1970s, many discussions focused on definitive editions, perhaps because it was helpful in getting grant support, or because of absolutist notions about facts, or because of excessive comfort with hyperbole. The term definitive, nevertheless, bothered even those who used it. Fredson Bowers, delineating differences between definitive editions and practical editions, defended practical editions as valuable in spite of inevitable shortfalls reflecting lack of funding.² Of course, practical editions would have to do in the absence of ‘real’ scholarly editions. Bowers explained that definitive scholarly editions were possible only with adequate funding and adequate application of critical intelligence. He knew a *text* could not be definitive; but the *edition as a whole* — the exhaustive apparatus in conjunction with a reading text — could perhaps be called definitive, in the sense that the edition represented an achievement no one was likely to try to do better. Publishers might use the phrase “definitive *text*”, but scholars said ‘definitive *edition*’. Definitive editions were critical editions — with texts established through textual analysis, not by reprinting existing ones.

‘Definitive Edition’ was a hedge, attempting to keep the sense of perfection without uttering a blatant falsehood. It is a bit difficult at this point to distinguish between what scholarly editors of the last century actually thought they/we were achieving and what the agents of new methods have accused them of thinking. Yet, it seems that many scholars believed there actually was no better way. History has shown that at least there are different ways that are just as good and just as imperfect. The difference lies not in the failure to apply the two basic rules, which hold for all scholarly editions, but in the goals and interests that the new editions are meant to serve.

An academic, not commercial, discipline, scholarly editing does not seek monetary profit. Scholars have both the opportunity and responsibility to take the time to do things right. Perhaps that is why the arguments about what method was the right one seemed so important. Yet one must not encourage anyone to think editions result from the application of a fixed universally agreed formula that can be achieved correctly, for that would make editing a mere mechanical process — a view often encountered in academic departments where textual critics and scholarly editors have had to explain repeatedly to promotion and tenure committees the critical

2. See BOWERS 1962a, 1–17; and 1962b.

nature of their work. There has been no final agreement about which way was the right way to edit. Scholarly editors exercise critical faculties and create new knowledge.

No one uses the term ‘definitive’ anymore. ‘Definitive Critical Edition’ contradicts itself: *definitive* implies an achievement that cannot be improved or one that represents the only right way to edit, whereas, *critical* implies the exercise of individual judgment. No edition is without errors, every edition could with equal justice have been edited in a different way, no edition meets all the criteria that have been held up as standards for scholarly editions, and no edition does all things for all readers. The fact that some editors believe in a single, real, correct way to edit and who think proper care can produce results worthy to be printed on acid-free paper guaranteed to last three hundred years, does not make it so.

Nevertheless, the urge to create scholarly editions that need never be done again remains with us, both expanding the scope of work, particularly in digital archives, and restricting the scope of analysis. The first step in the latter effort was made by the Center for Editions of American Authors, which banned explanatory notes for scholarly editions because they represented temporary critical views, whereas scholarly editions were supposed to be factual, unaffected by critical fads or biases. A second step, imposed first by European Historical Critical editing, and subsequently in America by editors appealing to sociological and social investigations of textual histories, has been to proscribe eclectic and speculative emendation on the grounds that emendation distorts history and introduces individual tastes. Even though both groups deny that editions can be definitive, the proscription of emendation seems driven by the desire to avoid anything that might make the edition local or temporal. Somehow, rigid adherence to the facts of the historical record, without critical analysis or adjustment is seen as editing that can be done without spin and in such a way that it would never have to be done again. Although that looks like striving for definitiveness without using the word, it really represents an altered (optional) definition of the word editing — a substitution of different goals for scholarly editing.

The goal of editing without critical bias or error betrays a serious misunderstanding of the nature and limits of editing. Prohibiting emendation on the grounds that it corrupts the historical record or the grounds that the resulting text represents an editor’s perhaps faulty critical thinking or taste, ignores both the fact the by tomorrow, the new text will be part of the historical record, too, and that all previous editions represent

authorial lapses and / or the local and temporal critical thinking of previous compositors, printers, or editors.

The task of creating a record of textual history for a work is more properly the purview of historical bibliography. Tracing the history of textual change and reprinting a historical text has never required textual criticism and was not previously considered to be editing. Textual criticism goes beyond the record; it analyzes and interprets the record. Rarely, not every time, that analysis will support reprinting a historical text that requires no further emendation. The object of scholarly editing is to supply the historical record and offer a critical analysis of the authority and significance of textual change through time. Then provide an edited text with its supporting argument.

Preparing scholarly editions that fulfill the demands of critical analysis of the historical record seems accurate and honest. Editions that revive and prolong the life of the literary work. Editions that, in spite of everything, are as good as one can get. Editions that offer scholars and other readers the fruits of study and serious labor to provide specific kinds of reading experiences. Editions that do not cut corners, mislead, misinform, or tolerate factual error. Editions that do not claim to achieve more than can be achieved. Editions that are good enough to achieve a worthy objective. Editions that do not claim to achieve that which cannot be done.

This proposition does not favor practical editions, whose shortfalls derive from economic stringencies, insouciance, ignorance, or narrow-minded pride. Nor does it turn a blind eye to inadequate or sloppy work. Instead, it appraises honestly the limitations of serious, critical, intensive, full-scale scholarly editorial work. If we compare Textual Criticism to Interpretive or Literary Criticism, we note that nobody describes critical interpretation as definitive or terminal, never needing to be done again. Instead we call it seminal, transformative, mundane, superficial, insightful, thought provoking, profound, or unconvincing. That Literary Criticism is not definitive has never prevented it from being valued by promotion committees. The quality of the work, perspicacity in thought, and clarity of expression give critical pursuits value. Good literary criticism helps us to see better. Textual criticism is criticism. Editions not only present textual histories; they interpret the evidence, which helps us see better, too.

Textual criticism as presented in scholarly editions creates new knowledge, offering new vistas on verbal works. Its value depends on the quality of the research, the brilliance of evidence analysis, the clarity of arguments, and the accuracy of textual presentation. Its value does not

depend on slavish adherence to a rule of editing dictated by those who know nothing about the evidence in hand for a particular work.

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Perfect, Comprehensive, Definitive, Established for All Time, Universally Admired editions are impossible. Scholarly editions are better than that. They are real. An edition, based on all the evidence, analyzed and presented with the editor's added intellectual value, should be good enough to leave one satisfied, well-informed, and happy. An edition that dumps the facts in front of readers, leaving them to be their own textual critic and editor, are better, perhaps, than an edition that leaves them unsatisfied, unhappy, or worse: ill-informed. Claims to be without critical bias, like those claiming to be definitive, are self-deluded.

And yet, what can we do with an editor's human desire to have accomplished something of lasting value that might not have to be done again, at least not in the same way for the same purpose that defined their editorial effort? I suggest pondering the etymology of the word 'definitive'. One suggestion is that it is related to the word 'definition'. It sets borders on a way of understanding something. It is definitive if it offers a clear view of the object that is being defined. Such a view suggests that there might be multiple definitions, multiple definitive efforts, multiple definitive editions — none of which can claim to be the only correct one. Another suggestion is that the core of 'definitive' is 'finished' or 'final'. It declares that the task undertaken has reached a conclusion beyond which, without new evidence, its argument cannot advance. Such a view could be thought of as universal finality (as apparently it once was). But it need not. Given the evidence at hand, given the assumptions about verbal works, given the focus of interest of a particular editor, the work could be conducted in such a way that no one would be likely to undertake the fruitless task of replicating and enhancing that particular view of things. Nothing, however, would prevent anyone from undertaking and bringing to definitive conclusion a different set of assumptions or goals. Again, multiple definitive editions of the same work would be possible, each equally definitive and still imperfect — perfection is a pipe dream, not a standard.

In order to put this view of scholarly editing to a test, I undertook a survey of textual scholars, asking them to nominate a scholarly edition that they admired and to say briefly what they admired about them. The result

of this effort can be seen at ADMIRED SCHOLARLY EDITIONS³ where you may nominate your most admired scholarly edition as well.

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Works Cited

- BOWERS, Fredson. 1962a. "Established Texts and Definitive Editions". *Philological Quarterly*, 41: 1–17.
- . 1962b. "Practical Texts and Definitive Editions". In *Two Lectures on Editing: Shakespeare and Hawthorne*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- SHILLINGSBURG, Peter. 2022. "What is Scholarly Editing?" *Textual Cultures*, 15.2: 33–45.

3. For those reading in a print-only format, the site address is as follows: <https://admired-scholarly-editions.blogspot.com/>.