

8-31-2013

Textual Messages: Scholarly Editions and Their Role in Literary Criticism

Alison Lumsden
University of Aberdeen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lumsden, Alison (2013) "Textual Messages: Scholarly Editions and Their Role in Literary Criticism," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, 15–21.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol39/iss1/4>

This Symposium is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Textual Messages: Scholarly Editions and Their Role in Literary Criticism

Cover Page Footnote

This essay is part of the SSL Symposium, 2013: Divergent Authenticities: Editing Scottish Literary Texts.

The SSL Symposium, 2013: Opening Position Paper

TEXTUAL MESSAGES: SCHOLARLY EDITIONS AND THEIR ROLE IN LITERARY CRITICISM

Alison Lumsden

There is no question but that in recent years textual or scholarly editing has been of central significance in the world of Scottish literary studies. Editions such as the Duke-Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle, the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels and the Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg have made works available that have been hitherto inaccessible. Moreover, they have set new global standards in textual editing practice and have revitalised the standing of the authors whose work they have explored. In the wake of their success new projects have appeared: scholarly editions of Burns and Stevenson, and of Scott's poetry, are all now in preparation.

However, beyond the somewhat rarefied circle of scholarly editors, the full significance of textual editing and what it adds to the general economy of critical debate is seldom explored or understood. Indeed, at times it seems as though editing and criticism are parallel, even separate, activities rather than interlinked practices, as if the role of the editor is simply to provide the critic with the tools with which to undertake more interesting critical activity. This paper, therefore, will seek to offer some remarks that might open a discussion not only about the issues that vex all modern editors, but also about the broader critical implications that are in fact intrinsic to the function of scholarly editing itself and that inform the debates at the heart of this at-times-misunderstood activity.

All good scholarly editions share the same underpinning aims: to clarify and at times expand upon the body of work by an author; to provide reliable texts; and to offer the supporting materials that help readers to understand the status of the texts they are reading and the

contextual frameworks in which they can be located. The editors of the Hogg edition, for example, emphasise the need to make available works that have never been published in “their original, unbowdlerised condition,”¹ while the “General Introduction” to the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels states that it “aims to provide the first reliable text of Scott’s fiction ... the lost Scott, the Scott that was misunderstood as the printers struggled to set and print novels at high speed in often difficult circumstances.”²

It is this common purpose, however, which may lead to some of the misunderstandings that surround scholarly editing; its clear aims simply seem to require well defined methodologies and “rules” that can be followed with rigorous consistency. Yet, while such consistency is essential, none of these aims can be easily met, and behind each of them lies a whole host of complex decisions which, in turn, may modify our understanding of what constitutes a literary text. It is, I would suggest, the nature of these decisions, and the processes which they in turn generate, that provide the space where scholarly editing and criticism truly intersect. While it is impossible to describe these processes in any detail here, the following remarks are designed to give a flavour of the decisions that underpin any good edition and the challenges that face its editors.

This may be exemplified by considering the first of these goals; the desire to stabilise or expand on an author’s body of work. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg. Part of its aim is to ensure that work by Hogg that has been long out of print is once more readily available to the public, and at a projected thirty-four volumes it outstrips the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels. Yet the body of work it encompasses is not unproblematic; Hogg, as his editors acknowledge, was a relentless re-cycler and the “body” of his work now contains several items which appear in multiple volumes; for example, several tales appear in both *The Shepherd’s Calendar* and *Winter Evening Tales*. Clearly this raises significant issues for editors, publishers and, not least,

¹ See, for example, “The Aims of the Edition,” in James Hogg, *The Forest Minstrel*, ed. Peter Garside and Richard D. Jackson, The Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg 19 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2006), p. vi.

² David Hewitt, “General Introduction,” in Walter Scott, *Peveiril of the Peak*, ed. Alison Lumsden, EEWN 14 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007), p.xvi.

the book buying public; while tracing the publishing archaeology and history of these texts may be an admirable activity the extent to which it can be justified in economic terms is of course open to debate.

Similar problems face the editors of Scott's poetry. While the poetry contained in the novels of the Author of Waverley has long been accepted as part of his poetical canon, the editors must provide a sound justification for reprinting material which has so recently been edited as part of the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels. More problematically, the editors must define the parameters of this enterprise; while the EEWN has done a majestic job in tracking down the sources for many of the mottoes in Scott's fiction, a significant number remain unattributed; given his vast knowledge of the literature which foreshadows him, one would be naïve to assume that all unattributed poetry is by the author. In the fields of traditional material and song, the body of an author's work is even harder to define. The body of work by Burns, for example, is not a fixed canon, and at times material attributed to him has been of dubious provenance; where the line is drawn on such material can perhaps seem to depend on no more than an artificial construct of the author and a critical interpretation of what is likely to fall into the category of work by him. Even the task of establishing the parameters of a scholarly edition is, then, far from simple.

Once the body of work has been established, perhaps the most vexed question of textual editing emerges: what version of a work should be chosen as base text and on what basis should modifications to it be made in order to provide a "reliable" or "original" version of the text? This is of course the question that has been at the heart of textual editing theory since Greg and Bowers in the early nineteen-fifties, and the multiple approaches that have been taken towards it testify that there is not necessarily one answer, or even a correct approach.

For example, while Jerome McGann's groundbreaking work on the socialization of the text has problematized the role of manuscript material for generating emendations, it is notable that, of over two thousand emendations in the Edinburgh edition of *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, the vast majority have been made to correct earlier mis-readings of the manuscript. While manuscripts can no longer be seen as a kind of "hotline" to authorial intention, the significance of them to the Edinburgh Edition demonstrates that they still provide a crucial point where things can go awry during the original publication of a text, and they remain vital to the editing process. Moreover, they tell us a great deal about creative practice, an area of critical activity that may well experience

something of a rebirth as the influences of cognitive theory and creative writing on literary studies expand our understanding of the discipline. While, then, scholarly editors may share the common aim of providing a reliable text, defining what, exactly, such reliability means will prompt divergent views.

Providing supporting and contextualising materials for the finished text may seem the most straightforward of all the tasks that the scholarly editor faces but this too is, of course, the subject of debate. A host of practical questions must be resolved: where should variations be recorded; how far should they interfere with a reader's experience of the text; how extensively should a text be glossed or annotated; and how should such support be indicated? The edition of Scott's poetry now in preparation faces a further dilemma: how to deal with the question of annotating Scott's own extensive, but often misleading, annotations to his poems. These questions may, on the face of it, seem like minor matters but they are crucial to the ethos of any edition. A close look at the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels and the Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of *The Collected Works of James Hogg* will show that, while these sister editions have much in common, their approaches to these matters are not always the same. While EEWN has sought to offer as much objectivity in its processes of annotation as possible (maintaining a distinction between "facts" and "interpretation" and avoiding critical introductions that are located in a given critical moment) the Hogg edition has assumed a more interpretative role. While both approaches are valid, it is certainly clear that these para-textual decisions will have a significant impact on the reader's relationship to the edition and may in many ways be the most overt interface between readership and scholarly text.

For many, of course, the answer to these complexities seems to lie in the possibilities opened up by electronic resources and electronic editions. The wealth of digitised material available and the possibilities generated by it marks the greatest change in scholarly editing practice in recent years and provides rich avenues for exploration. However, rather than resolving some of the debates that are at the heart of scholarly editing, electronic sources and editions only throw these issues into relief. What we may define now as the "body" of an author's work has the seeming potential to expand indefinitely, and a recent focus on the memorabilia generated by literature and the "afterlives" of texts offers the tantalising opportunity of including those adaptations, appropriations and artefacts that spin out from the core of any body of literature within the ever more

dynamic terms defined by an author's identity. Peter Garside's database of Walter Scott illustrations and Murray Pittock's AHRC Beyond Text Project on Robert Burns offer two excellent examples.³ However, these clearly sit alongside the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels and the Burns Edition now in progress and both retain a clear distinction between scholarly editing and what might be called scholarly archiving. Digital editions and digital archives should not be confused, and editors must take care (as these projects have) to recognize the relationships and differences between these two kinds of scholarly resource.

The vexed question of which base text to choose and how to emend it may also seem to disappear with the possibilities provided by digital editions, since all editions can, in theory, be replicated for the reader. While, however, there is no doubt that the increasing availability of digitized versions of texts is of immense value in the work of collating different editions of an author's work (and the procedures used by the New Edinburgh Edition of the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson are commendable in this respect), again such digital "archiving" must not be confused with scholarly editing; the reader still, I would argue, wants the editor to make decisions for him or her and provide a reliable and readable text. Too much information may be as bad as none at all. This of course extends to annotation and supporting material. One can, after all, envisage electronic texts that are not annotated or glossed but simply hyperlinked to existing dictionaries and the wealth of information already on the internet. But such an imaginary edition would be confusing to say the least and only highlights the critical selection that underpins good annotation. There is no doubt of the value of electronic resources for the preparation and outcome of scholarly editions, therefore, but this does not necessarily make the role of the textual editor an easier one.

Complex though it is, this description of scholarly editing is not designed to act as a deterrent to future generations of textual editors but to represent it as a plethora of decisions and uncertainties rather than as the exact science it is sometimes imagined to be. My reasons for presenting it as such a complex activity are twofold. The first is to emphasise that there is in fact no one correct way to prepare a scholarly

³ See "Illustrating Scott: A Database of Printed Illustrations to the Waverley Novels, 1814-1901," <http://illustrating-scott.lib.ed.ac.uk/>; "Robert Burns: Inventing Tradition and Securing Memory, 1796-1909," <http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/researchcentresandnetworks/robertburnsstudies/majorresearchprojects/burns/>

edition. While there are certainly ways to be wrong, there are many ways to be right; each edition will demand its own methodology and its own parameters. Burns and Scott, for example, are very different authors, and demand different approaches, and Stevenson belongs to a different era of print history where new conditions apply; his editors, therefore, have to deal with issues such as first publication in magazine and journal formats and the conflicting authorities of British and American publication. Moreover, an author does not remain static throughout his career. Scott's poetry, as its editorial team has discovered, is produced in very different circumstances from his fiction (for example, the poems were not published anonymously and as a result the published texts are far more of a social construct than his novels, with Scott modifying his work in response to the comments of friends during the creative process and even after publication); as a consequence editing Scott's poems demands a somewhat different approach from that adopted for the Waverley novels by the EEWN editors. It is, of course, this very divergence that presents the greatest challenge of all for scholarly editions within the modern academic environment. Establishing a robust methodology that is appropriate for the edition in hand is a process that requires initial research, careful consideration and is by definition time consuming. Time, however, is a luxury that the pressures of publishing and the parameters set by funding bodies and research assessment procedures does not allow; nevertheless this preliminary work is essential if any edition is to succeed, and the resulting tension is something with which all modern editors must contend.

My second reason for presenting scholarly editing as such a complex procedure is to remind readers that the finished outcome is, in fact, only the tip of the critical iceberg that has gone to produce it. What seems to be the primary purpose of scholarly editing (the published volume) may in fact be only one outcome of this complex activity. A host of decisions and a whole critical process lies behind each text and this process rests on a large body of research into the working practices of an author, the social, political and publishing circumstances that surround the work, and intellectual decisions about the desired relationship between the supporting material and the reader of the text. Perceived in this way, scholarly editing emerges as a complex critical activity that not only provides platforms for new critical work but is intrinsically grounded in critical decisions. It is, I would suggest, in the space where scholarly textual practice and the critical activity that informs it intersect that the possibility of a step change in our attitude to any body of work might lie.

A full appreciation of the processes at the heart of textual editing may open up the opportunity for new areas of critical debate alongside critical opportunities. For example, as creative writing emerges as one of the main activities in departments of literature, the relationships between creative process and finished product revealed by textual editing allow new synergies to emerge. Scholarly editing also goes hand in hand with a growing interest in the physical production of the book and the social boundaries within which texts are generated. Editorial investigation also intersects with historical sociolinguistics: the textual cruxes with which editors grapple are often in fact evidence of the multiplicity of language from which texts emerge and the fluid nature of them. It is at such points of textual debate that new interpretations of an author might rise to the surface. The detailed textual choices that are at the heart of scholarly editing then, deftly illustrate that it is itself a critical activity that in turn generates new critical possibilities.

To conclude, the rise of textual editing as an activity in Scotland over the past thirty years has given us enviable editions of some of our key authors. It has, however, given us far more: grounded in an understanding of the circumstances and contexts in which texts are produced, the creative processes that lie behind them, and the myriad of textual possibilities from which each text is generated, textual editing may also have given us potentially new ways to think about texts and criticism. It is vital that this activity continues to thrive within Scottish literary studies and that what has been gained is passed on to a new generation. If this is to be the case, however, the complex nature of scholarly editing and its full contribution to critical activity must be understood, not least so that it continues to be funded in a way that allows for the time and rigour it requires.

University of Aberdeen