

BOOK REVIEW

Texts, Editors, and Readers: Methods and Problems in Latin Textual Criticism. By RICHARD TARRANT. Roman Literature and its Contexts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 192. Paperback, \$28.99. ISBN 978-0-521-15899-2.

As Tarrant explains in the preface, this is not a manual of textual criticism or a history of scholarship (xi). Rather, it is a thoughtful reflection on the field of textual criticism and its past, present, and future by a distinguished practitioner. As with the other books in this series, it is written for non-specialists, in the tone and register of an engaging professor speaking to advanced undergraduates and graduate students. But specialists, too, will find it informative and enjoyable.

The book begins, appropriately, with an introduction to textual criticism and what editors do. Throughout, Tarrant provides examples of the issues and problems of textual criticism and the different ways scholars have approached them through the ages.

The first chapter, “Textual criticism in a post-heroic age,” addresses the elephants in the room: heroes of textual criticism such as Scaliger, Heinsius, Gronovius, Bentley, Lachmann, et al. How can one hope to measure up to them? Over the years, some (e.g. Housman, D. R. Shackleton Bailey) have joined their ranks, but it is easy to see why others would be too intimidated to try. Tarrant gives these heroes their due respect, but he also points out their faults, which shoulder some of the blame for the discipline’s decline. But he concludes by encouraging us to look to the future, which offers opportunities to “reframe the goals and procedures of textual scholarship” (29).

The next chapter, “The rhetoric of textual criticism/textual criticism as rhetoric,” confronts another problem of the discipline—its inclination toward “strongly coloured rhetoric” (30). Tarrant discusses the way textual criticism has traditionally talked about itself: textual critics are on the side of right, as healers, sleuths, and judges in a world full of corruption, sin, and disease. It is no wonder that textual critics have often reserved their harshest words for their peers who fall

short of perfection. Tarrant attributes the heated rhetoric of the past to an overblown sense of certainty, which more recent developments in critical theory have called into question.

Accordingly, he suggests a humbler purpose for textual criticism: “to report accurately the essential manuscript evidence and faithfully to reflect the present state of the understanding of the text, in order to serve as an instrument of research and as the basis for further discussion” (41). After examining the rhetoric of textual criticism, Tarrant discusses a point often overlooked by users of critical editions, namely that critical editions are arguments and not catalogs of facts. The rhetorical posture of certainty adopted by editors of the heroic age is responsible for this misperception, but not all of those editors are guilty. Tarrant examines the notes of Heinsius and Bentley and suggests that Heinsius’ style, which highlights uncertainty instead of smothering it, offers a more appropriate model for “post-heroic textual criticism” (47).

In the next three chapters Tarrant presents a veritable seminar on some of the most difficult concepts: recension (chapter 3), conjecture (chapter 4), and interpolation, collaboration, and intertextuality (chapter 5). These chapters showcase Tarrant’s skill as a teacher. As promised at the beginning of the book, he give us not a how-to manual, but rather a survey of textual criticism’s main issues and problems, with lucid examples of an editor’s tasks.

In chapter 6 (“Textual criticism and literary criticism: the case of Propertius”) Tarrant succeeds in erasing the line that so often separates textual and literary criticism. After surveying the recent history of textual criticism of Propertius, he deploys the principles he has discussed in earlier chapters to show what can happen when textual criticism and literary criticism interact. Instead of rehashing the arguments of other scholars, he joins the discussion and advances it with several new and interesting arguments.

Chapter 7, “Presenting the text: the critical edition and its discontents,” discusses the strengths and weaknesses of printed critical editions in conveying information about a text. Tarrant takes a balanced view of the publishing conventions for critical editions, writing about how the critical apparatus can be “an elegant piece of craftsmanship” (130), but also exposing its great potential for hampering instead of helping readers. By the end of the chapter, it becomes clear that many of the problems of critical editions arise from the limits of the printed page.

Accordingly, Tarrant closes with thoughts about the future of textual criticism. It seems fair to say that he is optimistic. After all, he writes, “a good edition will have a useful lifespan of one or two generations, with fifty years an especially

long life" (146), which means that there are abundant opportunities for aspiring textual critics. Tarrant takes a balanced view of the prospects of digital critical editions, seeing their potential for improving access and accessibility, but also observing that, despite all of the new tools and techniques, the work of an editor remains essentially the same, and as important as ever.

The appendix on reading a critical apparatus should be required reading for any student of ancient literature. Readers who want to know more about textual criticism will profit from browsing the ample bibliography.

Tarrant's book is the last volume in the series *Roman Literature and its Contexts*. The series' editors Denis Feeney and Stephen Hinds should be congratulated not only for the thought and care they put into cultivating this series, but also for bringing it to such an impressive conclusion.

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