

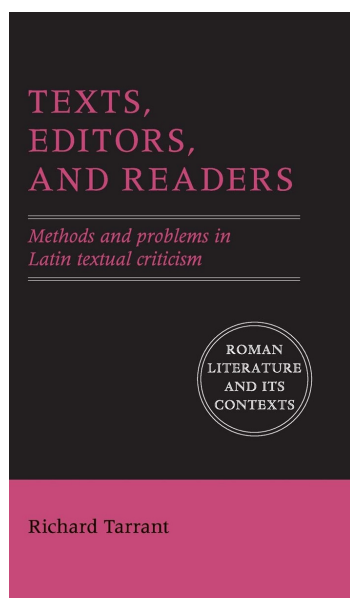
Book Review

Texts, Editors, and Readers. Methods and Problems in Latin Textual Criticism

Tarrant (R.), Pp. xii + 192. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Paper; £22.99. ISBN: 978-0-511-80516-5

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Apology for the interval between the publication of the book and this review. But, barring the forthcoming Oxford Handbook (see below), it will probably be a long time before another book of this kind appears, in English at any rate. Apparently, few Anglophone scholars have the aptitude or inclination to produce one.

‘Our editions of Greek and Latin authors are good enough to live with’ (E.R. Dodds). ‘Maybe, maybe not; it all depends on one’s standard of living.’ (D.R. Shackleton Bailey)

I recommend readers whose interest may have been whetted by this review to read the much fuller and more informed review by Franz Dolveck at *BMCR* 2016.11.46. There is a useful thumbnail account of textual criticism in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (see also the entries ‘texts, transmission of ancient’ and ‘books and writing’). There is also a more scholarly and condensed account by Bruce Gibson in Chapter 4 of the Wiley-Blackwell *A Companion to the Latin language*. We still await what will almost certainly be the even more scholarly account in the Oxford Handbook series, though for most of us this may prove to be too much of a good thing.

Textual criticism (TC) is the scholarly activity that seeks (ideally/idealistically) to restore the autograph of a text, in this case a Latin text from Antiquity. (The subtitle indicates that the book is concerned with the TC of Latin texts only, not both Latin and Greek texts.) As a recognised discipline within Classics, it has been practised for 500 years or more. Actually, it has been practised, both for Greek and Latin, since Antiquity, e.g. the Greek scholars in Alexandria and Pergamum, and Latin scholars such as

Servius and his commentary on Virgil. From being almost synonymous with Classics itself (according to one school of thought), conferring ‘heroic’ status on its best-known practitioners in the 18th and 19th centuries, it has become, in Anglophone circles at least, an endangered species whose extinction would hardly be realised – until it was too late. This book describes its rise and decline. Its fall is not able to be recorded yet, and one can only hope that it never will be since Classics will always be in need of its now unsung services.

The author is best known as an editor of Ovid. In general, editors of classical texts are also textual critics; the converse is not always the case. Only a tiny number of either has written about their craft. Until this book came out it looked like we would not see another one, in English anyway. About the only guides available in English until now have been those of Paul Maas (1953), Martin West (1973) and the estimable *Scribes and Scholars* by Wilson and Reynolds, now in its fourth edition. This book is as timely therefore as it is genuinely instructive. Apparently, there has been a steady decline in interest in TC, on the part of Anglophone classicists at any rate. Perhaps interest will be rekindled by this book and more will be forthcoming. But it is doubtful that we shall ever see again such pioneering figures as Scaliger, Heinsius, Gronovius, Bentley, Lachmann, Housman, to drop just a few names. Much of the work they did does not need to be done again. This is one of the causes of the decline of TC – a victim of its own (qualified) success, you might say.

The book is concerned mainly with the present-day state of textual criticism and editorial practices, so a very up-to-date, indeed proleptic, guide: the concluding chapter is about the present and possibly future role of digital technology in TC.

The central chapters of the book are concerned with the traditional accredited procedures employed in establishing the best possible text. So they are concerned with creating a stemma, collation, recension etc. Tarrant devotes a chapter or a section of a chapter to each of these. The rest of the book is given over to less technical and more digestible stuff.

The book is concerned with more than textual criticism as such and the mechanics of TC. This is what makes it so readable. A colleague – neither a textual critic nor an editor – told me he found it such a page-turner that he read the whole book at one sitting. It is not a ‘how to’ user guide-type manual, in spite of ‘Methods and Problems’ in the subtitle – not that a manual in itself would get you very far as a critic, or an editor.

We learn a lot about the characteristic virtues (and vices, though not always fairly attributed) of well-known critics and editors. The footnotes are full of their egregious triumphs and disasters (as Tarrant and others have seen them), the latter often deliciously exposed by Tarrant, but without any of the mordant malignity of Housman or Bentley, delicious though that may be too in its way, if we are to be honest.

TC is a frustrating and thankless activity ultimately. The goal – to restore the autograph of a text – is unattainable, and even if it were attainable, one could never know that one had achieved one’s goal. This book explains why, but makes you feel that the effort is still worthwhile. It doesn’t quite make TC ‘sexy’, but nor does it make it ‘nerdy’ either, an image it has acquired since losing its hero status, and one that this book may help to dispel.

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