



Editorial Criteria for ‘Provisional Editions’ of Renaissance Latin Texts: Some Comments

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*Editorial Criteria for ‘Provisional Editions’
of Renaissance Latin Texts:
Some Comments*

Imagine for a moment that you are visiting a famous Chianti *fattoria* in the Tuscan countryside, say Castello di Ama, Fonterutoli, or Querciabella. Great wineries such as these always make at least two wines, typically a fine *riserva* and a good-quality Chianti classico at a lower price. Both are excellent wines that give pleasure. The connoisseur of course lives for the difference, but it may require some discernment on the part of the average wine drinker to tell the two wines apart.

When you tour the vineyard and the winery, however, even the novice can see that the two wines require very different levels of effort and expense. Riserva wines often come from a special part of the vineyard that is more carefully worked, better pruned and better composted. Its yield is often drastically reduced during *vendage verte* to ensure that the remaining grapes will enjoy vigorous growth. In the winery, the grapes are subjected to a much higher level of scrutiny during sorting, and undergo labor-intensive methods of fermentation; during *élevage* the wine may be stored in more expensive French oak barriques. The Chianti classico, on the other hand, will come from a part of the *vigneto* that is less intensively farmed; in the winery its grapes will undergo less rigorous sorting and the pressed juice will live its short life before bottling in less luxurious oaken surroundings.

Even the most snobbish of wine snobs would never say that the Chianti classico of (say) Fonterutoli was a failed wine, a wine that shouldn't have been made, and heap abuse on the heads of the poor *produttori* for their low standards of winemaking. They would never liken it invidiously to the machine-produced wines of a no-name cooperative. That would seem ungrateful. Yet that is precisely the disobliging tone adopted by many philologists when criticizing certain kinds of text editions – cultural artifacts whose production is not without instructive parallels to fine winemaking. In Latin philology, it seems, only the critical edition will do, the *premier cru* of all the available evidence in manuscript and print, carefully collected and collated with years of effort, subjected to rigorous sorting into ever more complex stemmata, and presented to the reader amid forests of apparatus and commentary. Editions that do not claim the label ‘critical’ are dismissed as irrelevant to serious philology.¹

A great critical edition is a magnificent and useful achievement to be sure. But like a fine wine, it is extremely rare and expensive to produce. A great many people would go thirsty if the world of wine produced only *riservas*, and the same is true for the community of those who use Latin texts. In fact the situation is worse in the world of Latin philology, since to survive commercially, the maker of fine wines has to bring his wares to market in timely fashion, whereas the maker of critical editions can often take decades to finish his

work, and in many cases fails to produce anything at all. (There are enough notorious cases of this phenomenon to make illustration superfluous.) Moreover, as in the case of winemaking, standards for critical editions grow more exacting with each decade. What was considered a critical text in the 1950s is no longer acceptable today. The result is ever fewer projects brought to fruition. The price in terms of a scholar's time and energy is rapidly becoming too high to pay. This is the case even in Italy, which has the finest philological tradition in the world today.

In this situation it is all the more necessary to elaborate standards for text editing that take into account the reality of our times: that most students and scholars will not engage with a Latin text unless it is available in a modern printed or digital form, preferably with a translation on the facing page. The great poets, orators and philosophers of the Renaissance who wrote in Latin will gradually disappear from current scholarship and our students' syllabi if they are available only in manuscripts and early printed books (the part of the print universe most resistant to the attentions of GoogleBooks). Our situation today requires that text editions be produced more rapidly than is consistent with the methods of the modern critical edition. But many skilled editors, particularly in Italy with its tendency to *filologismo*, are understandably bewitched by the cultural prestige of the critical edition and affect a corresponding disdain for anything falling short of that near-mythical ideal.

My position in this essay is that Renaissance Latin philology should not deal in false binary oppositions – the view that an edition is either critical or it is not – but should start from the simple observation that some less-than-fully-critical editions (sometimes called 'provisional editions') are better than others. That such distinctions in quality are possible among 'unscientific' editions in itself shows that they can have value for even the most rigorous philologist. Most working scholars recognize this in practice, even if they are not willing to endorse it in principle. The chief question in evaluating a provisional edition, in my view, should not be "To what extent does it fall short of a truly critical edition?", but "Is the text better or worse than existing texts?" In practice there are many ways to improve vulgate texts that stop short of a full critical edition, and some provisional editions deserve far more recognition from professional philologists than they currently receive. In the following comments, I shall lay out a few editorial principles for making provisional Latin texts. Obviously, given restrictions on space, my remarks cannot be definitive. My aim is to start a conversation about appropriate standards for a type of scholarly publication which many people believe conforms to no standards at all.

1. Knowing what is known: collecting evidence

The most time-consuming part of preparing a critical edition, as is well known, is the collecting of witnesses. Even with the electronic tools now available, it can take many months of intensive labor to examine the tens of thousands of catalogues and other

repertories where information is given about the holdings of manuscript depositories worldwide.² There will always be catalogues that are hard to find, even in the best-stocked libraries, and of course there are tens of thousands of Western literary manuscripts still uncatalogued, where the editor's only recourse may be to visit the library in question. Even when the scholar locates a catalogue reference to her text, the reference may be ambiguous and require further investigation or *in situ* inspection. Many texts are hidden under unfamiliar titles or in miscellaneous manuscripts that have only summarily been described. Even after all the catalogues have been checked, it may take many more months and numerous expensive research trips to see all the witnesses and resolve all the remaining loose ends.

The editor of a provisional edition cannot undertake work on this scale. But she can at least build on what is known already by digesting all the relevant secondary literature and studying all previous editions, not overlooking reviews of those editions, which often contain vital discussions of textual problems. That should be a minimum requirement. In addition I would recommend checking Kristeller's *Iter Italicum*, easily consulted on line, which, experience suggests, refers to or describes about a third of humanistic manuscripts of the Renaissance.³ If time permits, it would also be worthwhile checking the published catalogues of the major collections (the Vatican Library, the three largest collections in Florence, the Ambrosiana in Milan, the Marciana in Venice and the Nazionale in Naples as well as the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the British Library, possibly also the Staatsbibliothek in Munich and the Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek in Austria). Together with the *Iter* these catalogues, at a guess, cover at least 75% of surviving Renaissance literary manuscripts. The work required is much less time-consuming by comparison with that required for a full critical edition. At the end of the process, the editor will have a dossier of leads to possibly important manuscripts, which can be followed up at her discretion, based on the information available.

Obviously, this method relies to some extent on the laws of probability. There is always the chance that some over-zealous *dottorando* with too much time on his hands will ambush the poor editor in a slashing review, pointing out that vital manuscript in Cluj, Romania, which he found on his last trip there but which the editor in her invincible ignorance missed. That sort of risk is unavoidable. But there is also the real possibility of locating some vital witness previously unexploited by scholars, and making material improvements to a vulgate text. Wise critics will be grateful for the improvements, and not complain that every possible improvement has not been made.

2. *Selection of witnesses and collation*

An intelligent assessment of probabilities is also vital in the selection and collation of witnesses, the second-most time consuming task for those making critical editions. The editor of a provisional edition will have to make a choice of which witnesses to collate,

which to ignore, and which to spot-check. Assuming that the goal is to reconstruct as far as possible the author's text, she will look for texts demonstrably close to the author and his circle: autographs or manuscripts with authorial corrections and notes; dedication copies; presentation copies; copies owned by persons close to the author; copies made by scribes who are known to have worked with particular authors⁴; copies made within a decade or two of the date of composition. The first print edition should always be collated, since its errors will often reappear in later editions and in scholarly discussions of the text. *Recentiores non deteriores*, but in practice the editor of a provisional edition will have to ignore *recentiores* unless there is explicit evidence that the witness has some special connection with the author's archetype. It will be useful for the editor to acquire some knowledge of the provenance of major *fondi*, since provenance often provides clues as to which modern collections are likeliest to contain the manuscripts of an author and his circle. The choice of which witnesses to collate and in what detail will depend on the time available, but a minimal standard would be to collate all manuscripts with demonstrable authorial interventions, all dedication copies, and all copies where the scribe claims to have copied his text from the archetype (which is not to say that all such claims should necessarily be trusted). In cases where only a handful of manuscripts survive, they should all be collated. In cases where there are multiple redactions, the editor will, in accordance with the usual practice, print the latest redaction in the author's lifetime, relegating the most significant variations of earlier redactions to the notes.

3. Orthography and Punctuation

This is a controversial issue. Renaissance philologists have aimed since the time of Lorenzo Mehus in the eighteenth century to inculcate an appreciation for the distinctive orthographies of the period. It is not too much to say that for some editors, the very identity of Renaissance Latin philology as a discipline is bound up with questions of orthography. There is obviously much to be said for this attitude. In a critical edition, it is a worthy goal to establish the precise spelling of an author. Authors like Poliziano had very strong views on orthography (most famously preferring *Vergilius* to *Virgilius*), and it would be disrespectful and unhistorical to ignore their preferences. Some authors and scribes also had distinctive, carefully considered forms of punctuation, though critical editors have often paid less attention to this aspect of their writing than they might.⁵

In provisional editions, however, where time is a key consideration, preserving an author's punctuation and spelling has concrete disadvantages. To establish an author's usage it will often be necessary to make an extensive study of his surviving manuscripts, as well as manuscripts written by scribes trained by the author. Even so, the practices thus gleaned are likely to be inconsistent or show development over time. Difficulties tend to multiply. There is a further disadvantage in that a collation which attempts to capture peculiarities of spelling and punctuation can take two or three times as long to make. In the case of a long text with many witnesses this can add up to many more months of

collation. Collating punctuation must always be done *in situ*, whereas an editor interested only in more substantive variants can usually do most of her work at home from digital copies. Finally, search-and-replace functions on word processors, an indispensable tool during the final stages of preparing a manuscript for the press, are far more difficult to employ when an editor has preserved quirky and inconsistent spelling.

In the case of volumes in the I Tatti Renaissance Library, our preferred practice when preparing new editions has been to use the orthography of modern classical scholars, taking as our standard the spelling used in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*.⁶ This speeds up considerably the process of collating, data entry and copy editing. In cases where other scholars have already established the orthographic practices of a Renaissance author, we have permitted our editors to follow that practice. We have not permitted the option of so-called ‘period spelling’, since in fact no standard spelling exists for our period; Renaissance spelling varies from author to author, from decade to decade, and from scribe to scribe; indeed, a professional scribe will often spell a word differently, even within the same line, solely to produce a better *mis-en-page*. An exception to the practice of orthographic standardization, naturally, has to be made for verse, where an author’s precise spelling is often necessary to interpret his prosody.

The case of punctuation is more difficult, especially when an author like Petrarch, Salutati, or Poliziano has clearly taken pains to follow a consistent usage. In these cases it is well to remember that it is impossible to represent fully Renaissance punctuation in modern typefaces, and even if it were possible, it would confuse all but specialist readers. Our practice in cases where an authorial witness survives is the following: at the final stages of editing, after modernizing the punctuation throughout, the text is checked against any copies containing authorial interventions to make sure that the modern editor’s punctuation does not falsify the author’s intent.⁷

A final, vital point is that an editor should always state clearly and honestly what has been done and what has not been done. This should (in principle) lead to fairer, more intelligent criticism and make it easier for later scholarship to improve upon her work. The goal should always be to improve on what we have, while keeping squarely in mind the principle of diminishing returns. As the late Albinia de la Mare used often to repeat, the best should not be allowed to become the enemy of the good. This is especially the case when the publication date of the best is scheduled for the Greek Kalends.

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¹ See the penetrating remarks in FRANCESCO BAUSI, “Edizioni critiche e edizioni provvisorie: il Petrarca del Centenario,” in idem, *Petrarca antimoderno: Studi sulle invettive e sulle polemiche petrarchesche*, (Strumenti di Letteratura Italiana, 26), Florence 2008, pp. 247-262; with the response to Bausi’s original paper by ENRICO FENZI, “Lo stato presente delle edizioni di Petrarca,” *Bollettino di italianistica*, III, 2006, pp. 5-44.

² The standard bibliography of manuscript catalogues is P. O. KRISTELLER, *Latin Manuscript Books before 1600*, 4th revised and enlarged edition by SIGRID KRÄMER, Munich 1993, with the *Ergänzungsband 2006*, ed. SIGRID KRÄMER, Hannover 2007.

³ P. O. KRISTELLER, *Iter Italicum*, 7 vols., London/Leiden 1963-97; on line through the website of the Renaissance Society of America.

⁴ A useful tool for such research is ALBINIA DE LA MARE, “New Research on Humanistic Scribes in Florence,” in *Miniatura fiorentina del Rinascimento, 1440-1525: Un primo censimento*, ed. ANNAROSA GARZELLI, I (Inventari e cataloghi toscani, 18), Florence 1985, pp. 393-600.

⁵ A number of examples may be found in MALCOLM B. PARKES, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*, Aldershot 1992, chapters 5 and 6.

⁶ Ed. P. G. W. GLARE, Oxford 1982.

⁷ An example of how close attention to an author’s punctuation may materially affect the meaning of a passage can be found in my edition of Petrarca’s *De sui ipsius et multorum aliorum ignorantia*, included in *Petrarca: Invectives*, ed. and tr. DAVID MARSH, (I Tatti Renaissance Library, 11), Cambridge, Mass., 2003, p. 310 (see also p. 485 n. 147), where previous editors printed “nec Aristotiles certe, nec Plato est” but where Petrarch’s own punctuation in the two autographs is clearly “nec Aristotiles, certe nec Plato est.”