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On Editing Old French Texts

MARY B. SPEER

As I understand it, a major focus of our discussion this afternoon is to be the problem of writing a manual on editing for an audience that is—to say the least—not in agreement on a single best method of editing texts. By way of approaching the problem of “orthodoxy” in Old French textual criticism, let me describe how Alfred Foulet and I came to write our manual as we did, the readers we had in mind, and the reactions our work evoked. The manual, *On Editing Old French Texts*, was published in 1979 by the Regents Press of Kansas.

Our decision to write a manual grew out of our own dissatisfaction with the poor quality of many of the editions we reviewed or used in research and our realization that the only existing code for preparing Old French editions was both inadequate and outdated. This code, to which most editors referred for more than fifty years, was the list of practical rules for editing old French and old Provençal texts which Mario Roques presented to the Société des Anciens Textes Français in 1925 and published in 1926. Roques’ rules revised the editing instructions compiled for the same society by Paul Meyer in 1908, and Roques adopted the very same headings that Meyer had laid out. Like Meyer, Roques avoided such controversial matters as stemma construction and editorial philosophy; instead he offered *practical* rules governing mainly the external presentation of an already established text: use of diacritics, resolution of scribal abbreviations, numbering of lines and paragraphs in the text, and the content of the accompanying introduction and apparatus. Roques’ rules fill five and one-half journal pages; and, since they did not, of course, cover in that brief space all the possible variations on the problems addressed (such as the use of the diaeresis), numerous editors have since supplemented and modified those rules according to the needs of their texts.

Both Meyer and Roques preferred to divorce rules governing the presentation of edited texts from the thornier theoretical issues of choosing which text to present and deciding how to establish it, no doubt because such rules, if accepted by editors of differing ideological persuasions, would assure a certain superficial uniformity among printed editions prepared by diverse methods. What, then, was the ideological potato that was too hot to handle in the SATF

rules of 1926? This was the contention between two factions often labelled “Lachmannians” and “Bédierists,” or “interventionists” and “conservatives,” a split still much in evidence.

Because of the prestige of German philological science in the nineteenth century and Gaston Paris’ espousal of the Lachmannian method in France, that method dominated the Old French editing scene from about 1866 to 1913. According to the procedures of the common error method known to you all, editors strove to reconstitute both the content and the language of the author’s original composition. The prior existence of one genuine Original (or Archetype) was seldom doubted; the Lachmannian editor confidently expected to reverse the passage of time and reconstruct that original from its unfaithful descendants by methodical deduction. Even in the nineteenth century, though, the critical text thus obtained was not usually considered a historical certainty, but rather a working hypothesis, or even, as we see it today, a subjective approximation of the author’s composition.

In 1913, in the Preface to his second edition of the *Lai de l’Ombre*, Joseph Bédier attacked the supposedly objective and scientific Lachmannian procedures for constructing a stemma and advocated that, instead of creating a new hypothetical text, editors should limit themselves to publishing the best surviving manuscript of a work, intervening only to perform the *toilette du texte* and correct those errors which the scribe himself would have rectified if his supervisor had pointed them out. If this manuscript fell short of being the “authentic” text once set down by its author, it was at least a genuine medieval document and could be used with confidence as an *instrument de travail*.

Within fifteen or twenty years, the best-manuscript edition recommended by Bédier had supplanted the Lachmannian critical text as the standard approach to editing Old French works in France, notably in the influential *Classiques Français du Moyen Age* and *Société des Anciens Textes Français* series directed by Bédier disciples, and it won converts among scholars in many other countries, as well (Italy being a prominent exception). However, as Yakov Malkiel remarked recently, the doctrinaire Bédierists have not succeeded in wiping out the Lachmannian “heresy” they have opposed so vehemently, for important edi-

tions attempting to recover the author's text or to present not just one manuscript but all the major redactions of a significantly variable text have regularly appeared since 1930, most often outside of France proper. And spirited clashes between true Bédierist believers and neo-Lachmannians continue to enliven professional meetings, though the number of well-informed partisans on each side is relatively small in proportion to the total number of specialists in Old French and Old Provençal.

Given, first, the intensity of the conflict between Bédierists and neo-Lachmannians and, second, the disturbingly widespread ignorance of the dimensions, history, and implications of that conflict, Alfred and I chose to remain descriptive and educational when dealing in our manual with most ideologically sensitive questions, and we decided to be prescriptive chiefly in practical concerns. We envisioned in our audience two categories of readers. One would be concerned with the task of editing: novice editors with no idea how to proceed, experienced editors needing a comprehensive reference manual, and reviewers of editions. For these readers we tried to supply clear explanations of procedures and firm practical guidelines, illustrated by precise examples that reveal the complexity of the problems addressed. The second category of readers would include anyone who uses editions of Old French texts (or even translations based on editions). We wanted to alert those readers to the interpretive, critical nature of editing so that they would become aware that the printed book they read and quote from does not, in all likelihood, contain the author's actual composition, but the result of hundreds of editorial decisions. We wanted these non-editing readers of texts to know what decisions the editor has made, how they define and shape the text, and how to use the apparatus that should allow readers to control the editor's work. In short, we hoped to build an informed readership that could appreciate editing as an ongoing critical dialogue with an often recalcitrant text. To accomplish this, we tried to create a context for the more prescriptive sections of the manual by opening with a historical overview of Old French editing methods from the late eighteenth century to the present. This history ends with a description of a wide variety of strategies used in editions published since 1950. In the interest of flexibility and fair-mindedness, we tried to show that the editing method adopted ought to depend on the textual tradition of the work and take into account such factors as the genre of the work, the number and quality of extant manuscripts, and the filiations of those manuscripts. For the *Song of Roland*, for instance, an editor may reasonably favor best-manuscript editions of each redaction, while for the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, we are firmly convinced that an attempt to reconstitute the author's poems must be given priority over the faulty transcription in any surviving copy. Because we tend to see scribes as unfaithful copyists—for a number of reasons—and because we have a fair amount of confidence in the validity of emendation procedures, we are

certainly not Bédierists, then; but neither would we like to be characterized as knee-jerk neo-Lachmannians. Our methodological tastes seem to us fairly eclectic, even if they lean towards favoring the author over the scribe in many of the texts we have examined closely. While we made no effort to conceal this preference for retrieving authorial compositions, where possible, we tried to present the conservative position fairly, and we cited many examples from best-manuscript editions. Our preference probably emerges indirectly from our treating the best-manuscript edition as only one of many possible approaches. We made every effort to acquaint readers with a number of non-Bédierist innovative editing strategies, and we tried to point out the shortcomings of best-manuscript editions since numerous Old French texts are today most commonly read in the best-manuscript editions that are readily available.

Reactions of reviewers to the theoretical content of *On Editing Old French Texts* have been rather varied. A centrist group seems pleased with our "broad-mindedness." One such reviewer commented: "Foulet and Speer give examples of editions ranging across the spectrum of possible stances, and support adapting the method to the circumstances of the text in question." That's certainly what we meant to do. Another reviewer saw our lack of categorical imperatives or dogmatic recommendations as a possible drawback because our refusal to take an unequivocal position might be confusing to a novice editor confronted with an array of choices. Two other reviewers, however, discerned an excess of dogmatism in our discussions. One, a self-confessed Bédierist who mistrusts the Lachmann method because of its "intrinsic faults," called our book an "essentially Lachmannian handbook" that "mostly concerns texts composed and transmitted in writing." Despite his criticism of what he perceived as a pernicious theoretical bias, this reviewer approved of the practical sections of the book. Yet another reviewer of a kindred spirit, who described his own editorial attitude as one of "extreme conservatism," spoke of our "stronger leanings toward the assumptions of the interventionist editorial school" and even detected, he said, "a certain disdain for the conservative attitude." He nevertheless found our manual preferable to Charles Moorman's complete "rejection of editorial conservatism" in his *Editing the Middle English Manuscript*. On the whole, even the Bédierists seem to have felt that our book would be generally useful and would not unduly prejudice unformed minds.

What effect is the Foulet/Speer manual having on the editing of medieval French texts? I'm honestly not sure yet, and I think it is probably too soon to tell. It is stirring up discussion about editorial methods, both in a few graduate seminars and in some professional meetings; it is also encouraging readers who never did so before to look critically at the variants and rejected readings in the back of the book and to evaluate editorial decisions; and it is beginning to be cited as a reference in some recently published editions.

In a broader sense, *On Editing Old French Texts* seems to be profiting from and contributing to a renewed awareness of the paradoxical importance of change as both the very life of a medieval French work, through oral and written transmissions, and yet the agent of the work's fragmentation and deterioration, through the necessarily and sometimes intentionally unfaithful transmissions known to us. Innovations in the literary theories associated with formalism, structuralism, semiotics, and reception esthetics, together with innovations in editorial praxis, are serving to reshape the ancient quarrel between Bédierists and neo-Lachmannians, and the evolving notion of what role change plays in the ontology of a medieval composition is affecting the types of editions published. Editions offering multiple redactions of a single text provide evidence to support a generative notion of a text and to shift the focus away from the author, where such a primary transmitter can be posited, to the scribe as retransmitter. Such editions seem to strengthen the hand of Bédierists, for they supply a collection of best-manuscript editions. If one's perspective is oriented toward the quest for authentic readings, one may feel that some multiple best-manuscript editions obscure the original poet's contribution and in extreme cases lead critics

to glorify a lazy or error-prone scribe as a perfectly respectable reader/interpreter of a text he may in fact have botched up without intending to change it. The role of oral composition and transmission for epics and lyric poems is still being debated; and as these issues are resolved, editing philosophies may again be modified. But for now, the new emphasis on codicology, textual variations, and change has helped promote a *re-prise de conscience* of the crucial importance of the role of editors as the modern transmitters and first interpreters of the texts they publish.

We are hopeful that these changes in the critical-theoretical ambiance will sustain the renewed interest in and respect for the difficulties and accomplishments of editorial work. And we hope particularly that the better informed readers who seem to be emerging will foster an increase in the number of really excellent editions, of whatever theoretical stripe.¹

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a paper in a session on "Manuals of Editing" at the Society for Textual Scholarship conference in New York on 21 April 1983.