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SIR WALTER GREG AND THE CHAUCERIAN FORCE FIELD

A Response to Stephen Knight's 'Textual Variants: Textual Variance'

RISING TO ADDRESS A CONFERENCE on textual hermeneutics at Canberra in May 1982, Stephen Knight seems to have experienced a certain embarrassment at being engaged in so distinctly untrendy an occupation as editing. 'I feel I may be here more as an exhibit than as a contributor' he informed his hearers, adding 'I feel there is an invisible glass case between you and me.'¹ Certainly the air at the conference seems to have been heavy with the battle-cries of post-structuralism — 'the end of interpretation', 'the death of the author' and the idea that what we should be after is 'good misreadings' in which 'the notion of a mistake, at least as something to be avoided, disappears' — assertions which, if they were to become universal, would make textual editing as we know it totally superfluous.² However, Knight is by no means a traditional editor and what he had to say about editing was no doubt exactly what such an audience would want to hear. I intend to comment first on his strictures against traditional editing — which are not very well informed — and then on his description of his own methods as a contributor to the variorum Chaucer.

The late Sir Walter Greg seems to have been something of a whipping boy at the conference. Ken Ruthven takes the first swipe in his introduction to the number of *Southern Review* in which the relevant papers appear:

In prior times, ere Theory did begin, texts were thought of as stable or at least stabilisable phenomena: they were manufactured by authors, knocked about by printers and repaired by editors. "Establishing" the text, annotating its obscurities and "introducing" it with observations on its biographical provenance, printing history and literary-historical context were activities which, in the opinion of scholars like Greg, underpinned

all worthwhile discourse. Afterwards, the text could be handed over safely to interpreters, who would correct one another's misunderstandings of it, and to critics, who notoriously preferred some books to others.³

This is fair comment and I don't imagine that Greg would have objected to a word of it. The point does need to be made, though, that a 'text' for Greg was an entity presenting no problems of definition. It consisted of various sequences of black marks on various pages and the possibilities of meaning permitted to these sequences of black marks by the *OED*. By having determined with great precision what were to be the objects of his enquiry, he had no difficulty in working out methods of pursuing it, methods which remain perfectly valid as long as we are still doing what Greg used to do. Ruthven's 'text' is a purely subjective entity whose relationship to the black marks is, to say the least, problematical, and which many present-day critical theorists would define in terms of its infinite resistibility to final definition of any kind. The fact that we use the same word for it as we do for Greg's 'text' is nothing more than a confusing accident of nomenclature.

To Stephen Knight, even more forthrightly, Greg is 'an archetype of old-fashioned positivist, text-and-author-centred editing' (p.44). (Is there any other kind? — Read on and be enlightened!) The 'positivist' method, moreover, requires to be assessed not only as method but as ideology:

It is clear that the single authority of the single authoritative and authorial text is part of the family and property system so dramatically present in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction — a system that values and promulgates the authority of a certain male relative, and endows him with property. The positivist method of editing bears the imprint of and legitimises patriarchal property relations. In the genetic notion there's also a trace of racism . . .⁴

This is hardly an opinion to be argued with. Either one accepts this sort of thing as the summit of intellectual rigour or one does not. But Knight goes further. Referring to Greg's work on the genealogical relationship of texts, he insists that 'the method, for all its calculating calculus, doesn't work'. This is more serious. Ruthven had at least been prepared to concede that, if one had a use for old-fashioned, authoritarian editing, Greg had been pretty good at it. Knight won't even allow him this.⁵

At this point it will be helpful to remind ourselves what Greg actually had to say about general textual theory — an easy enough task as his main contributions are contained in one short book, *The Calculus of Variants*, published in 1927, and a medium-length article of 1950, 'The Rationale of Copy-Text'.⁶ 'The Rationale of Copy-Text' is concerned with problems arising from the editing of printed Elizabethan plays, though it has been found to possess wider reference and has led to quite a large secondary literature. Greg argued that an edition should be based on that early text which best preserved the author's characteristic

spellings and punctuation; but then had to deal with the problems of divided authority that could arise when, for instance, a later edition contained recognisably authorial corrections or revisions. Earlier theorists had tried to establish general rules for guiding editorial choice in such situations. Greg, on the contrary, insisted that every individual instance had to be judged as evidence for the author's final intention according to its own merits. He makes no pretence that his method will lead to 'consistently correct' decisions, claiming only that 'the results, if less uniform, will be on the whole preferable to those achieved through following any mechanical rule'.⁷ In view of Knight's belief that Greg represents a tradition of 'scientistic legitimation' in editing, it seems timely to emphasise that his influence within the 'positivistic' tradition of English editorial practice, parallel to Housman's in the classical area, was to open the widest possible field for the exercise of editorial judgement and that he implied no higher status for the resultant choices than that they were the most probable in the light of the available evidence — a matter that will be discussed in more detail later.

The Calculus of Variants, which is Knight's principal bugbear, is a study of the logic of variant groupings, directly inspired by Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* and the early work of Wittgenstein. Greg's principal target here was the influence of Karl Lachmann's method of 'common errors' according to which an editor identifies certain readings as being scribal mistakes, incapable of correction by subsequent scribes, and uses these alone to determine the relationship of the manuscripts that contain them.⁸ Lachmann's method has a certain validity in the editing of texts in classical languages since scribes often had only a rudimentary understanding of those languages and thus little chance of restoring an authorial reading lost through mistranscription, but is of virtually no use when the scribe is copying a text in his own language which he can be assumed to know quite as well as the author. Greg argued that the primary task of the editor should be to create a purely distributive (non-directional) stemma based on a consideration of all the available evidence. Only when this has been done is the editor entitled to look for evidence for the derivation of one reading from another within the stemma, and in doing so must not forget that the notion of direction applies primarily to readings and only indirectly to the manuscripts. The determination of direction, moreover, lies 'outside the calculus, since it involves judgements concerning the originality of readings, which are incapable of logical proof'.⁹ The same applies, needless to say, to any attempts to resolve the contradictions created by non-genetic agreements, though Greg does give helpful advice about which classes of variants are more likely and which less likely to reveal the primary source in each case.

Knight does not seem to understand this at all. His summary of Greg's theory is as follows:

Greg argues that you can group manuscripts only by shared error: if two are both correct (leaving for the moment what that notion may imply), they need not be related, but could easily have got the right reading by a different path. So you group

those which share errors, and so you find the truest manuscript. *That is pure Greg.* [My italics.] But here is the problem: how do you know what constitutes an error until you have edited the manuscript and found the true blood line? Greg says you only edit when you know the authority. How did he find it? By a circular process, is the only answer. (p.45)

The first sentence of this paragraph is a not very clear statement of a principle to which Greg would have assented, but omits the essential feature distinguishing his method from Lachmann's which is that, in the construction of the non-directional stemma, manuscripts are grouped purely by their possession of *minority* readings, irrespective of whether these may have been the readings of the archetype or scribal alterations. (The term 'error' should be avoided as it is a standing invitation to blur the all-important distinction between the exclusive common ancestor of the surviving sources and the archetype of the entire tradition.) The statement claimed as 'pure Greg' is in fact pure Lachmann, apart from the term 'truest manuscript' which is gibberish. The accusation of circularity would only be true if the editor were to make the mistake just mentioned of attempting to determine authorial readings prior to having established those of the exclusive common ancestor. In fact, the direction of change can be established without any danger of circularity whenever the form of a reading shows that it has been derived by a known mechanism of alteration from another existing reading.¹⁰ Knight's failure to understand these issues casts an entirely new light on his wholesale dismissal of 'positivistic' editing. Critical theorists will immediately recognize in his distortions of Greg a classical example of a Bloomian *tessera* — a 'strong misreading' of an anxiety-causing precursor designed to create imaginative space for the textual ephebe. But scholarship cannot grant such privileges without ceasing to be scholarship, or scholars claim them without ceasing to be scholars.

It is true that it is often impossible to determine the genetic groupings of texts within complex manuscript traditions, due to unmanageably high levels of irregular and contradictory agreements or because the tradition derives from more than one recension. This was the problem encountered on a mammoth scale by George Kane in editing the A Version of *Piers Plowman* and by Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson in editing the B Version.¹¹ The question at issue is whether the situation is equally hopeless with regard to *The Canterbury Tales*. Manly and Rickert believed it was not; however, their meticulously reasoned attempt to establish the genetic relationship of the manuscripts is presented by Knight as little better than a joke.¹² Here his criticisms might have had more weight if they had not been followed by a further crashing misinterpretation of Greg.

Greg, in explaining why collation should be restricted to substantive variants, excluding accidentals, had pointed out that a scribe will generally follow his copy 'in major matters' but that 'in the minor points of spelling and grammatical form he will be largely led by his own fancy'.¹³ Knight interprets this quite erroneously as meaning that in the analysis of conflated traditions 'the minor

variants are random; the big errors bear the weight' which he then opposes, on the principle of dismissing both doctors because they happen to disagree, to a view attributed to Manly and Rickert 'that the only important signs of relations between manuscripts are a series of minor errors shared' (p.48). In fact, Greg's explicit view on the subject is exactly that of Manly and Rickert:

It may be added that, where conflation is suspected, the value of variants as an indication of ancestry is in inverse proportion to their intrinsic importance. To the herd of dull commonplace readings we must look for the genetic source of the text, to the more interesting and striking for the source of the contamination.¹⁴

Greg, in other words, holds (1) that the accidentals of a text and some minor features of grammar and idiom will vary with scribal whim, (2) that striking readings will tend to travel to other manuscripts, and (3) that clear but relatively unobtrusive *substantive* variants can be relied on to show the primary genetic affiliation of any given source in a conflated tradition. This principle will certainly not solve every problem of every tradition, but, guided by it, as I have attempted to show elsewhere, an editor has a useful tool for determining the affiliations of manuscripts, provided that the text of a given source has not passed through more than one process of conflation.¹⁵ Simply to declare, as Knight does, that 'positivistic' methods are incapable of dealing with the complexities of medieval copying, and that Chaucerian variants must therefore be declared 'free floating' (whatever than can possibly mean) is to adopt an attitude to the real work of editing similar to that adopted by Falstaff with regard to the real work of fighting at the battle of Shrewsbury.

It should also be noted that while Knight accuses Manly and Rickert of giving 'a quite phenomenal and wholly improbable picture of horsing around in medieval scriptoria' (p.47), he offers no alternative theory of the methods that might have been used by stationers to produce multiple copies of popular works like *The Canterbury Tales*. The basic issue is that, if more than one scribe at a time was to work on the same text, and the possibility of dictation is ruled out (though it is known to have been used on at least some occasions during the late medieval period), it will have been necessary either to acquire a second exemplar or to employ some scheme of progressive copying, perhaps with the fascicule as the unit. Both methods are historically attested and would lead to exactly the kinds of irregular agreement described by Manly and Rickert.¹⁶ Simply to reject their account of scribal work patterns is not enough: the challenge is to replace it with a better one.

* * * *

How then, having disposed to his satisfaction of the methods of text-and-author-centred editing, does Knight, as a contributing editor to the *Variorum Chaucer*, plan to deal with the texts which fall to his care? The answer is by a radical reversal of traditional priorities. In Greg's system, editorial intention is

subsumed under authorial intention. The intention of the editor is to create the text the author intended. Where the author's intention with regard to a particular feature of the text is in doubt, the editor makes an informed guess as to what it might have been. It is only when faced with a conflict between decisions made by the author on separate occasions that the editor is free to give priority to that which suits the intention of his own edition. Knight, while allowing room for authorial intention (quite how much is not made clear by his article), holds that whenever there is doubt as to what this may have been the editor is free to choose between the available alternatives in accordance with his own intention. In Knight's case this means that his edition will have 'a consciously historical and socio-literary interpretation as its ultimate guide' and that the reading which accords with his interpretation will be accepted as the 'correct' reading.

The origins of this policy lie in Knight's concern for what he calls the 'textuality' of *The Canterbury Tales*. Any editor who has collated variants through the entire course of an extended tradition must have been impressed by the fact that alongside the obvious signs of error and decay there will be other signs reflecting an almost organic power of self-renewal by which the text in transmission through history generates new readings and undergoes subtle shifts in meaning. To Knight, this range of variance is an intrinsic part of the text *qua* text and a valid source of readings to be incorporated into an edition irrespective of whether they are likely to be scribal restorations of authorial readings. He lays particular stress on the variability which he has observed between the order of the tales in the manuscripts and the number and designation of the headlinks, expressing a conviction that this cannot be the result either of scribal corruption or of Chaucer's changes of mind.¹⁷ The variability of the manuscripts he sees as essentially 'Gothic', responding 'to much that is collective and non-individual in the social and economic formations of the period' (p.48). Similarly, the 'essential form of run-of-the-mill mediaeval manuscripts' was a 'loose and accidental force-field' rather than the 'single shapely object' represented by the modern book (p.51).

Knight proposes a historical justification for taking the textuality rather than simply the text as the basis for his edition by reference to a view of the conditions of literary composition in Chaucer's time which in its way is just as remarkable. He regards it as 'highly likely that Chaucer worked in *atelier* fashion' like the visual artists of his time. Contributions may have been made to *The Canterbury Tales* by 'apprentices and capable imitators' or by minor poets who were Chaucer's friends (p.52). Transcribers would presumably have felt themselves entitled to join in a continuing process of creativity by consciously adding or reordering. Whether Knight is right or wrong in these assumptions is for other medievalists to judge after he has presented evidence for his claims and explained away Chaucer's own unambiguous demand for strict fidelity in copying in the lines 'Unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn': I would merely remark that the idea of a text reconstructed so as to be representative of some interpretation of the

ideology of its age rather than in order to be as faithful as possible to the intention of an author is not necessarily dependent on the work being the product of collective composition. It is a matter of editorial philosophy which can be applied to any work of literature whatsoever. Knight himself demonstrates in some detail how the decisions of earlier editors of Chaucer have been influenced by their ideological biases, arguing only that his are open and declared whereas theirs were taken for granted (p.51-3). A similar demonstration could be given for editors of Shakespeare.

Editing, however, is a matter of practice as well as theory. How exactly will Knight's ideas find expression in his handling of the text? Here it will be helpful to return to my earlier remark that what Knight describes as 'positivistic' editing would be more accurately described as 'probabilistic' editing. The editor who follows Greg and Housman in their rejection of the idea that there is any cast-iron rule to provide guidance in cases of doubt is left in the position of having to apply editorial judgement to every individual reading in the work being edited, for even where there is no recorded alternative there will still be possibilities of emendation. Editorial judgement is thus simply an estimate, based on as much knowledge and experience as can be brought to bear, whether any given reading is more probably the one desired than any other reading. In many cases one can choose with a very high probability of being right, in others it will be considerably lower. If a reading appears in all surviving manuscripts, it is close to certain to be that of their common ancestor.¹⁸ However, there will not be the same level of probability that it is the authorial reading, as the common ancestor may not have been the author's manuscript and may even have been a very corrupt text. In many cases, the balance of probability between textual alternatives or between a recorded reading and a possible emendation will be so fine that the editor's decision is close to arbitrary. In such situations, even Greg would concede that 'while there can be no logical reason for giving preference to the copy-text, in practice, if there is no reason for altering its reading, the obvious thing seems to be to let it stand'.¹⁹ Knight's response to such a situation would be as follows:

In creating my own text I take the unusual step of having an explicit grasp of my own underlying principle, which rests on historicity. Not, it is important to clarify, on the notion of a historically antique text: the earlier part of this paper has argued for the fallacious and ideological character of such a quest. Rather, when faced by equally possible variants, I will print the one which has the maximum possible historical tension, the reading which loads the text most strongly with ideology. I think that is quite often Chaucer's own instinct in creating his own text, but that is not the authority I am trying to reconstruct: the text I wish to re-form from the variability of the variants is the one with the fullest socio-literary potency, the one that recreates most fully the dialectical tensions of the period of origin. (p.49)

This is pure Knight!

On the grounds that every editor must have some procedure available for dealing with situations in which no reasoned choice between alternatives is possible, Knight's principle is certainly no less logical than the idea that one should follow the reading of the 'best manuscript' or Greg's recommendation that one should accept the reading of the copy-text. Yet with editors of Greg's or Kane and Donaldson's calibre, working with the explicit aim of restoring the reading intended by the author, the number of situations in which there was no difference, however slight, in the relative probabilities of the two readings being authorial, and hence no reason at all for including one in the text and demoting the other to the apparatus, would normally be fairly restricted. If the worst came to the worst, statistical analysis of the author's habits of expression should give some indication of which was more likely to be used by him in the disputed context. Knight, however, having rejected the idea of there being a single, unassisted 'author' of *The Canterbury Tales*, personally responsible for every detail of expression, would presumably have methodological problems in invoking stylistic tests. He has also rejected the helps to determining the readings of the archetype that might have been offered by the analysis of variant groupings. And while Knight's knowledge of the history of Chaucerian editing appears to be exemplary, I do not get any sense from his article that he is widely read in general editorial theory or aware of what is to be learned from the practice of editors outside his own language, field or period. If these assumptions are true, it could well be that the method of choosing the reading that displays 'the fullest socio-literary potency' would have to be exercised in a very large number of instances simply for want of any other method of discrimination. Certainly, in the second example of the application of the method given in his article, 'serement' (*The Merchant's Tale*, 1534) would have been preferred by any traditional editor as the *lectio difficilior*. Knight prefers the same reading but on the grounds that it possesses 'the highest socio-literary tension' (p.50).

It looks then as if Knight's ideological mode of editing will not be simply a marginal frill to his projected edition but a powerful and ubiquitous instrument of editorial decision-making. This will not in itself make the text any more or any less eclectic: the assumptions on which it is based have been explained with care, and follow logically from a coherent editorial intention. The reason why such an edition will be of less value to its users than one edited along traditional lines is simply that any attempt to incorporate a twentieth-century interpretation of medieval society (in Knight's case a Marxist one) into the text of an edition of a medieval work is to close off the possibility of using that text to progress forward to new interpretations of medieval society: the text becomes a twentieth-century artefact, not a medieval one. While the work of Greg, like that of Kane and Donaldson and Manly and Rickert, may have been equally influenced by their respective ideologies, at least they had as their declared aim the recreation of lost medieval artefacts from the evidence of their surviving copies and chose to be guided in their search by medieval canons of what is textually possible.

NOTES

- ¹ Stephen Knight, 'Textual variants: Textual Variance', *Southern Review*, 16(1983), 44.
- ² See Iain Wright, "'What matter who's speaking?'" Beckett, the Authorial Subject and Contemporary Critical Theory', *Southern Review*, 16(1983), 5-6. The author argues that this is rather too much of a good thing.
- ³ 'Editorial', *Southern Review* 16(1983), 3-4.
- ⁴ Knight, p.45. Greg in *The Calculus of Variants* (Oxford, 1927), p.2, n.1 questions the patriarchal analogy by emphasising that the genealogy of manuscripts is usually parthenogenic.
- ⁵ Authoritarian editors are also, it would seem (p.46), unable to recognise holes in manuscripts, though why this should be so is not made clear.
- ⁶ Greg, *Calculus* and 'The Rationale of Copy-Text', *SB* 3(1950-51), 19-36.
- ⁷ Greg, 'Rationale', p.32.
- ⁸ A convenient summary of the prevalent form of the method will be found in Vinton A. Dearing, *Principles and Practice of Textual Analysis* (Los Angeles, 1974), p.5-12.
- ⁹ Greg, *Calculus*, p.47.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Greg, *Calculus*, p.20, n.1.
- ¹¹ See *Will's Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-well* (London, 1960), p.1-172, and *Will's Visions of Piers Plowman, Do-well, Do-better and Do-best* (London, 1975), p.1-224.
- ¹² See John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales* (Chicago, 1940), II, 1-77. Knight gives a singularly inadequate representation of their views.
- ¹³ Greg, *Calculus*, p.18.
- ¹⁴ Greg, *Calculus*, p.57.
- ¹⁵ See my 'The Ranking of Variants in the Analysis of Moderately Contaminated Manuscript Traditions', *SB* 37(1984), 39-57.
- ¹⁶ For information on these practices, see Frederick Whitehead and C.E. Pickford's summary of Arrigo Castellani's findings in *Mediaeval Manuscripts and Textual Criticism*, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz (Chapel Hill, 1976), p.112-3 and, more importantly, Anne Hudson's account of the printing of Lollard texts in *Editing Medieval Texts English, French, and Latin Written in England. Papers given at the Twelfth Annual Conference on Editorial Problems, University of Toronto, 5-6 November 1976*, ed. A.G. Rigg (New York, 1977), p.45-7.
- ¹⁷ Knight, p.45-6. Manly and Rickert's view is that 'Chaucer was not responsible for any of the extant arrangements' (II, 475) — i.e. the poem, having been issued in fragments and left incomplete at the time of the poet's death, was edited into a whole by several contemporaries working independently, with the headlinks modified to suit the particular arrangement.
- ¹⁸ An example where this would not be the case would be where a reading of the exclusive common ancestor of a two-branch tradition was altered in both branches, either by conflation or independent error, into the same alternative reading without any record of the original reading surviving.
- ¹⁹ Greg, 'Rationale', p.31.

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