

## THE POLITICS OF EDITING MEDIEVAL TEXTS: KNIGHT'S QUEST AND LOVE'S COMPLAINT<sup>1</sup>

IT IS A CURIOUS IRONY that the development of medieval textual and literary criticism has actually been hampered by the enthusiasm of scholars to make medieval texts accessible in print. Although there are exceptions, many areas of medieval studies take as their first *desideratum* a good and reliable edition of the work in question. For many such scholars the text, if it is edited properly, is only ever, as Barthes puts it, the 'phenomenal surface of the literary work', and is quite unproblematic in its claims and status as a basis for interpretation, even if individual readings might raise a few critical eyebrows.<sup>2</sup> In the last few decades, considerable advances have been made in editorial theory and practice but, as in any other discipline, it is hard to shake off the methodological heritage bequeathed by the early pioneers in the field. Medieval studies as we know them had their birth in the age of positivistic science, the nineteenth century; and from the founders of the discipline we have not only inherited a textual and editorial methodology (which has been convincingly challenged in recent years) but we are also heirs to a less tangible and more insistent idea of the edited text as the primary requirement, the stable basis, for interpretation. We may have become more tolerant of different ways of arriving at that text, but I would suggest that we are still unsure about the status we wish to accord it as the result of historical accident or editorial intervention. The New Critics' idea of the perfectly formed text as a self-contained and autonomous object is in direct opposition to the manuscript situation of most if not all medieval texts, but it is only within the last decade or so that medievalists have begun to challenge the usefulness of New Critical principles for interpreting medieval texts. As a very telling example of the situation engendered by this uneven development of practice and theory, I wish to consider two recent Australian publications which raise some of the most important issues at stake in textual criticism, and which have broad implications for its relationship with other literary and theoretical discourses. They are Stephen Knight's 'Textual Variants: Textual Variance' in *Southern Review*, first presented as a paper at a conference on textual hermeneutics convened by Ken Ruthven and Livio Dobrez at Canberra in May 1982, and Harold Love's critical response to this paper, 'Sir Walter Greg and the Chaucerian Force Field', published last year in this journal.<sup>3</sup>

Knight's paper is radical in its aims and proposals, and it seems important to outline, very briefly, some salient features of the tradition against which he defines his own position.

Although the history of editing medieval texts can be traced back to the first scribe who began to collate variants among his manuscripts, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that any concerted effort was made to establish medieval studies as an academic discipline, along the lines of classical scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Thus there already existed a ready-made model for the study of philology, palaeography, and textual and linguistic analysis. However, unlike the

classicists, the medievalists had yet to discover a canon of texts, and the main barrier to any comprehensive study of medieval literature was its inaccessibility. The first priority, then, was to make this material available in printed form.

It can be argued that the Early English Text Society, founded in 1864, and the most influential of the bodies which aimed to further the study of Old and Middle English, actually set medieval studies in a direction which has turned out to be a blind alley. The Society conceived its mission as printing most, if not all, of the surviving body of medieval literature, as a *first step* in encouraging the reading of this literature. The process of transforming manuscript into printed text was conceived as simple, if time-consuming; indeed, the history of editing medieval texts in England can be seen as a history of amateurism. Some of the most active bodies in this field in the nineteenth century were not the universities, but the gentlemen's clubs of the day, such as the Athenaeum, the Roxburghe, and the Percy Society. Under the guidance of F.J. Furnivall, many texts were also edited for the Early English Text Society by amateur scholars for the amateur readers of the *O.E.D.*, which remains, ironically, a principal source for elucidating and interpreting those very texts which supplied the citations glossed in the *Dictionary* in the first place.<sup>5</sup> While the Society has never tried to impose any uniformity of procedure on its editors, and its publications bear witness to a great diversity of editorial practice, nevertheless, the priority it gives to editing texts that have not been previously published over revising poorly edited but more popular texts confirms the view that any edition is better than no edition: the only good medieval text is an edited one. The end result, of course, is a too ready acceptance of the authority of the edited text.

The twenty-five years since George Kane published his A-text of *Piers Plowman*, however, have seen a great resurgence of interest in the theoretical and practical problems of textual criticism. Few editors would now regard the editorial process as simple or straightforward, and in general, they are aware that the decisions they make about the editorial method to be followed may well turn out to be more important than their most controversial individual readings. Addressing the 1976 Toronto Conference on editorial problems, Anne Hudson outlined some of the basic methodological presuppositions at work in editions of medieval texts from the fifteenth to the twentieth century; and concluded:

The old reductive view of the editor, then — the view that the editor “merely” provides a text which the literary critic may interpret, the historian plunder, and the philologist gut for interesting forms — has to go. It has long been clear, even at a simple level, that this type of edition will not suffice.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, even while we recognise that editing is not as simple as its early practitioners assumed, many medievalists have defended their thirty-odd year allegiance to New Critical principles, by implicitly pleading that first things should come first, that the now very complicated business of establishing their

texts has hindered them from following the equally complicated development of European critical theory and its impact on the reading of literary texts, much as Martha pleaded that her work in the kitchen hindered her from learning at the feet of the master with Mary. While it is certainly true that undergraduate students are disadvantaged when working from inadequate or outmoded texts, it seems hard that we should have to wait on the editors to wash up the dishes and produce some clean texts, before developing satisfactory reading and teaching practices, especially when the universal opinion of scholars from Housman to Moorman, the author of an inoffensive little book for post-graduate students on editing Middle English manuscripts, holds that editorial skills are really only developed by practice and experience.<sup>7</sup> How do you train an editor to edit?

\* \* \* \* \*

It is against this background that we must consider Stephen Knight's paper, for he begins by drawing attention to himself as neither hermeneuticist nor deconstructionist, but as editor, thereby defending his work and his presence at the conference, explaining how he is there only by Ken Ruthven's invitation, a little like a Chaucerian monk out of his cloister. The paper can be seen in one way as a statement of editorial intent, as he outlines his programme for editing *The Franklin's Tale* for the Variorum Chaucer. It begins, however, with some remarks on what Knight calls 'traditional editing', concentrating on Sir Walter Greg, and his genealogical method of textual recension, and comparing the more intuitive approach of Kane and Donaldson. He makes the important point, central to his thesis, that both methods, in their vocabulary and practice, conceal differing coercive ideologies of their own, each tied to specific social and historical conditions. For example, he describes Greg's 'voice of nineteenth century positivist patriarchy' and contrasts the voice of Kane and Donaldson as that of 'twentieth century bourgeois liberalism'. The principal fault of these and other editors is their failure to acknowledge their debt to the ideological forces at work in their editorial practice and, of course, this is precisely what Knight claims he can and is about to do. The most controversial part of his paper, though, is his brief statement of his editorial practice for the Variorum edition, the chief importance of which will be that it preserves the rejected variants and considers other editions, as well as other manuscripts. His main claim to difference from other editors, specifically Manly and Rickert, Kane and Donaldson, and Greg, is that he takes

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 the historically antique text: the earlier part of this paper has argued for the fallacious and ideological character of such a quest. Rather, when faced with 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 variants is the one with the fullest socio-literary potency, the one that recreates most fully the dialectical tensions of the period of origin.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, there are many issues here which demand discussion, but let us first consider Harold Love's response to Knight's strictures against earlier editors. One of the most interesting aspects of the debate between Knight and Love is the language in which each presents his position. We have already seen how Knight characterises the different 'voices' of other editors, which express different and conflicting ideological positions. Harold Love in turn takes Knight to task rather severely for misunderstanding Greg, and for misrepresenting his ideas on recension: specifically, for confusing them with those of Karl Lachmann. Much of what Love has to say on these issues is interesting and well supported, particularly the distinction he draws between the use of Lachmann's method for reconstructing classical texts and Greg's alleged adaptation of it for medieval and renaissance texts. Love draws attention, however, to what he calls Knight's 'failure' to understand these issues, and we soon realise, from the manner in which he corrects Knight, that more is at stake here than a simple question of editorial practice. Love *wants* to say that Knight is wrong about Greg, but seems unwilling to spell out his criticism in a way which might seem too authoritarian. He therefore attempts to kill two birds with one stone; first, he tries to show that for all Knight's radicalism and attempts to undermine traditional modes of editing, he can still misread a text: and secondly he tries to undermine what he perceives as the theoretical background to Knight's paper by implying that post-structuralism is really only concerned with finding fancy names for old and familiar errors. He claims:

Critical theorists will immediately recognise 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 ephebe.<sup>9</sup>

This is certainly a powerful note on which to end a paragraph of an essay on textual criticism, although it would be still more powerful if it were accurate: what Love would *appear* to mean is not 'tessera', which for Bloom is a process of 'completion and antithesis' (involving the retention of the terms of the parent-poem, though their meaning might be extended), but rather, 'clinamen', the predominant ratio of 'poetic misprision' or 'swerve'.<sup>10</sup> I am not sure either that, if pressed, Love would be willing to accord Knight the status of strong reader, with all that that implies for the subsequent evaluation of his work. In fact, he cannot maintain this apparent willingness to countenance a Bloomian view of influence for much longer than a paragraph; for the next one chastises Knight for his dismissive account of the attempt by Manly and Rickert to untangle the manuscript relations of *The Canterbury Tales* and concludes, 'Here his criticisms might have had further weight if they had not been followed by a further crashing misinterpretation of Greg'. We have moved very quickly from allowing Knight

the privilege of the strong reader to condemning his ignorance. Here, according to Love, he is just wrong.

What, then, of Knight's proposals for editing *The Franklin's Tale*? The basis of the Variorum editions is their preservation of all variants and their consideration of all other editions, and in his quest to elucidate the 'continuing historicity of the text' Knight is particularly interested in what the early variants can tell us about conditions of manuscript production. They have 'historical force as possible parts of each functioning re-formation of a text, with a place and a time that both determine the text and receive its impact'. Thus, the only priority that the editorially reconstructed and 'historicity-rich' text can have is chronological.

Unfortunately, Knight has space to give us only two examples of historically tense readings, whereas perhaps the hardest thing for us to accept without further details are the conditions which must be in play before he will choose such a reading. He says that 'when faced by equally possible variants' he will print the reading which satisfies his other criteria; but he does not tell us what makes two variants equally possible, or indeed what makes a given variant impossible, although presumably he has in mind metrical, grammatical and syntactical factors. It is also unfortunate that in the two examples he gives his chosen reading just happens to be that preserved in the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts, and moreover, as Love points out, the reading which would be chosen, in any case, by the principle of *lectio difficilior*. Knight apparently can give us no clearer example of how the readings preserved in his text might differ from other texts of *The Franklin's Tale*. In fact, the paper shows a remarkable lack of clarity when it comes to defining what is actually *meant* by 'historical tension': does Knight have in mind a tension between literature and politics, between specific social structures, between now and then, or indeed one or other of the myriad other possibilities that the phrase could signify? He does not tell us. Perhaps, indeed, 'historical tension' is simply one factor that makes a *lectio difficilior* difficult in the first place. But even if we could identify two or more such readings, how are we to measure their impact so as to choose between them? Moreover, Knight's 'ideology' is so overdetermined that we can gain no clear idea of the *kind* of ideological point we should privilege when discriminating between two or more readings which seem equally historically 'tense'.

In considering these two papers and the terms in which the issues are presented, it is easy to see shades of the quarrel between the *antiqui* and the *moderni*. Stephen Knight claims to bring the ideological element of the debate into the open, while Harold Love frames his criticisms of Knight in a somewhat patronising tone that, it would seem, tries not to dismiss the question of ideology, for that would seem naive, but insists that if Knight persists in holding these views, then he should invest his presentation of them with more rigour. According to Annette Lavers, the cardinal sins of the practitioners of *la nouvelle critique*, as seen by their establishment opponents, such as Picard, were their ignorance, their obscurity, their presumption and their mendacity.<sup>11</sup> None of these

charges is made explicit here, of course, but I think we can find in the tone, as well as the substance, of Love's complaint a certain similar resentment of Knight's argument. For example, in dismissing Knight's association of positivistic editing with patriarchal property relations, Love quotes one of Knight's admittedly more strident, elliptic and suggestive passages, in which he finds a trace of racism in the practice of genetic recension, and comments '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.' And then, as if getting down to the serious business, he proceeds to show how Knight has misunderstood Greg. However, Knight's analysis of the ideological forces at work in traditional editorial methods is precisely one of the most interesting, original and challenging aspects of his paper. The recognition that any edited text is an ideologically loaded construct is long overdue, and yet Knight's presentation of the case leaves much that invites argument. In particular, his understanding of 'ideological' as a kind of umbrella term for 'socio-literary potency' and 'dialectical tension' is a confident appeal to a kind of Marxism that seeks to embrace all kinds of social tensions, racial and sexual, as well as economic. Radical feminists, to name just one group, would certainly take issue with the notion that *all* other tensions and inequalities can be resolved through the class struggle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apart from his fears that Knight is insufficiently experienced to edit *The Franklin's Tale*, Love also expresses the view that an edition of the tale along these lines will not be of much use to its readers, in 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 in new interpretations of medieval society: the text becomes a twentieth-century artefact, not a medieval one.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever the sins of earlier editors, they were at least, according to Love, trying to recreate lost medieval artefacts, by determining what was textually possible from the pattern of what was available in the manuscripts. Well, it is certainly true that Knight's edition will be a twentieth-century one, reconstructed from a twentieth-century perspective of the manuscripts. But here there is a problem with the textuality of Knight's own paper. For I am told that at the conference, he was keen to emphasise that, yes, the Variorum *Franklin's Tale* would be a twentieth-century recreation: presumably meaning it encouraged a Knightian reading rather than a Chaucerian one or perhaps, that it had no pretensions to recapture a late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century authority or ambience. In the published version, however, he writes of the 'chronological priority' enjoyed by a text constructed along his principles, so that he does seem to claim far more than an occasional, temporal authority for his text. Indeed, he is simply making the claim implicitly made by all editors: to have reconstructed the 'original' text,

whether or not he sees Chaucer as individually responsible for this text, or the 'loose and accidental force-field that was the essential form of run-of-the-mill medieval manuscripts'.

Still, it is far from clear what Love means by a 'twentieth-century artefact', and how he can possibly hope to have anything else. Some attention to the *reader's* construction and construal of the text would have clarified the situation here. Students of the alterity of medieval literature and society would also undermine his argument and maintain that the only eyes we have, or can hope to have, through which to consider medieval texts are twentieth-century ones, and that this, indeed, is one of the greatest aesthetic assets medieval texts enjoy: their 'surprising otherness'.<sup>13</sup> In drawing attention to the way in which his ideological interests colour his edition, Knight is merely highlighting the 'normal' conditions of editing, and opening the way to a greater number of editions, showing that there are as many readings and re-writings of medieval texts as there are editors. This is not, I suspect, his own position; but it seems to me a logical outcome of his own persuasive argument that each edition or text is constructed by and situated in its own chronological and ideological space.

Whether we embrace this kind of textual and editorial pluralism or not, however, it is important to remind ourselves that medieval texts, far from being the innocent victims of superimposed critical theories, or coloured by different editorial practices, are only produced as we read them. Medievalists don't need to be reminded that their texts are unstable, at the most obvious physical or phenomenal level: they do need to bear in mind, though, as they continue to talk blithely about 'establishing texts', that post-structuralist textual theorists are currently engaged in wild, if sometimes woolly, debate about the definition of the text according to its context, its readership, or any intrinsic qualities it may or may not have. Editors of texts from all periods and theorists of textuality could all benefit, in different ways, from a greater exchange of ideas in this area. Medieval studies seem particularly well placed to redefine the 'text' as an historical construct (as Knight argues from the textual history of *The Canterbury Tales*) and to consider the rôle of the fourteenth-, fifteenth- or twentieth-century reader as a producer of meaning on or around the 'site of productivity' that is the Barthesian or Derridean text.

It would be naive to suggest that medievalists should first get together and agree about our terminology before writing about medieval texts: but I *do* think we need to remind ourselves that the act of reading a medieval text, however we define it, is very problematic. With the examples of Knight and Love before us, it is clear that what we must try hardest to resist is the temptation to apply theoretical paradigms uncritically; and what we must still tempt is the resistance to theory.

Stephanie Trigg,  
University of Melbourne.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is a shortened and revised version of a paper given at the AULLA conference in Melbourne in February this year. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Harold Love for his graciousness and forbearance in response to this paper. I am also indebted to Jenna Mead for her incisive comments and suggestions for its revision.

<sup>2</sup> '...the text is, in the work, what secures the guarantee of the written object, bringing together its safe-guarding functions: on the one hand the stability and permanence of inscription, designed to correct the fragility and imprecision of the memory, and on the other hand the legality of the letter, that incontrovertible and indelible trace, supposedly, of the meaning which the author has intentionally placed in his work'; Roland Barthes, 'Theory of the Text', tr. from *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, vol.15, pp.1014-17, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. and introd. Robert Young (Boston, 1981), p.32. After defining 'current opinion' of the text in this way, Barthes then goes on, of course, to elucidate his own 'theory of the text'.

<sup>3</sup> S. Knight, *Southern Review* 16 (1983), 44-54, and H. Love, *BSANZ Bulletin* 8 (1984), 73-81.

<sup>4</sup> For a history of the editing of Middle English texts, see Anne Hudson, 'Middle English', in *Editing Medieval Texts: English, French and Latin: A Collection of Papers given at the Twelfth Annual Conference on Editorial Problems at the University of Toronto*, ed. A.G. Rigg, (London, 1977), pp.34-57, esp. pp.34-37.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of Furnivall's editorial procedure, see K.M. Elisabeth Murray, *Caught in the Web of Words: James A.H. Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary* (New Haven, 1977), p.91.

<sup>6</sup> Hudson, p.50.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Moorman, *Editing the Middle English Manuscript* (Jackson, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Knight, p.49.

<sup>9</sup> Love, p.76.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, 1973), p.14.

<sup>11</sup> Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After* (London, 1982), p.33.

<sup>12</sup> Love, p.80.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, 'The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature', *New Literary History* 10 (1979), p.182.

## Robin Waterfield Ltd



17th and 18th Century  
English Books  
Modern First Editions  
Large General Stock  
Catalogues Issued

36 Park End Street  
Oxford OX1 1HJ  
England



**Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a license from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)**