

THE CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF EDITING IN THE LATE RENAISSANCE: THE LABOURS OF HUMANIST SCHOLARS AND THE REBIRTH OF THE CLASSICAL TEXT

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It was not until the late-eighteenth century that the English verb “edit” started to be used in its modern sense. But scholarly editing has a long history going back to the third-century BCE when literary studies began to be undertaken at the Museum in Alexandria (Reynolds and Wilson 5-16). After eighteen centuries of accumulated textual scholarship, the enhanced interest in antiquities, especially in the restoration of classical texts in the Renaissance, in conjunction with the surging tide of humanism, encouraged scholars such as Johann Amerbach (d. 1513) and Desiderius Erasmus (d. 1536) to channel their efforts into establishing the theory of textual criticism. In this essay, I discuss how humanist scholars embraced the concept of textual editing and put it into practice half a century after the invention of the printing press. Sonia Massai has directly addressed their editorial achievements in her *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor* (41-68), but here I localise discussion on humanist scholars’ conceptualisation of editing. This will be brought to light by an investigation into the origin of the modern English term “edit” and the editorial terminology employed by Erasmian scholars.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb “edit” came into use in the modern sense after the role of “editor” had been firmly established.¹ The modern sense of the verb “edit” in the OED is defined as “to prepare an edition of (a literary work or works by an earlier author),” and “to prepare, set in order for publication (literary material which is wholly or in part the work of others).” The word “prepare” refers to the collective procedures which include various practices for perfecting the text for publication. In the introduction to his edition of *Richard III* in the Oxford series, John Jowett describes the “editing” of early-modern English drama as a series of practices which entail “establishing the most authoritative source text” and “making certain kinds of alteration to the text on the basis that this document, from the viewpoint of the modern reader, is obfuscatory, misleading, or wrong” (127). These “alterations include correction of error, modernization of Elizabethan spelling, stabilization of stage directions, and so on” (Jowett 127).² Each of the editorial practices described by Jowett can be generally categorised as and roughly called “editing,” but the term “editing” itself cannot be defined by only one of those subdivided tasks.

According to Anthony Grafton, the subdivided tasks comprehended in the modern term “editing” had already been conceptualised as the editorial principles by Politian in the fifteenth century, the latter being developed by the school of Italian textual critics led by Pier Verroti. Their editorial principles prescribed the establishment of an archetype from which all the extant manuscripts of a work derived, the collation of textual variants, and their recording in an edition (Grafton 162). The ideal process of preparing an edition of the classical text formulated by Italian scholars is equated with the modern sense of the term “editing.” However, a term having the same meaning as that by which we designate modern editorial practices collectively did not exist in the early-modern period or, more broadly, in the Renaissance.

The English word “edit” is derived from the Latin verb *edere*, which means “to give out,” hence “to publish” and “to give birth or produce.”³ The correspondence between the two concepts, “to publish” and “to give birth,” is recognised in *The Correspondence of Erasmus*. An image of new birth is employed when Erasmus describes the preparation or publication of his edition of St Jerome’s *Opera Omnia*. Some examples are given in a letter in which Erasmus makes a petition in 1515 for permission to use Domenico Grimani’s library to accomplish his editorial works. He describes his editorial tasks as exhausting as they almost killed him while Jerome was given “a new life” (*Correspondence of Erasmus* 97).⁴ In Allen’s Latin edition of Erasmus’s letters, the text appears as “Mihi certe tantum hic laboris exhaustum est vt parum abfuerit quin ipse immorerer, dum studeo vt ille *renascatur*” (*Opus Epistolarum* 77).⁵ The Latin verb *renascere*, which means “to be born again,” is the term which Erasmus uses most frequently in order to describe either the preparation of his editorial works for publication or their publication itself. When he describes his editorial labour as the focal point of the narrative of St Jerome’s resurrection, Erasmus regards the rebirth of the works of Jerome as something brought about by the practice of editing. He repeatedly emphasises that he had risked his life to restore the works of Jerome. R.A.B. Mynors and S.F.S. Thomson translate his words into: “I have borne in this such a burden of toil that one could almost say I had killed myself in my efforts to give Jerome a new lease of life” (*Erasmus* 108).⁶ In the original Latin, the last part of the text appears as “sedulo adnitor ut Hieronymus *renascatur*” (*Opus Epistolarum* 89), the literal translation of which can be rendered as “I struggle hard so that Jerome will be reborn.” While Mynors and Thomson’s translation emphasises Erasmus’s consciousness of his editorial initiative to give rebirth to the works of Jerome,⁷ Erasmus himself seems to have considered the restoration of the ancient text as a spontaneous phenomenon produced by his selfless act of editing. These descriptions of Erasmus’s editorial labour as bringing the ancient

text back to life confirm that the act of editing was equated with the restoration of the classics.

The restoration of the classics, however, was not to be completed over the desk of the editor. Erasmus finds the rebirth of Jerome's works in both the printing and the publication of the text. He writes, "a great printing shop is now in full activity; St Jerome is printing (or rather, being reborn) in most elegant type" (*Erasmus* 97).⁸ The Latin word translated as "printing" is *excuditur* which means "to be moulded." Therefore, what Erasmus compared to the rebirth of Jerome is the process in which the text was given a new shape of type. In the same letter, he also writes that by preparing the works of St Jerome he aims to "see the whole of St Jerome virtually reborn" (*Erasmus* 96). Again, "reborn" is translated from *renasceretur*, an inflection of *renascere*,⁹ but here the "rebirth" of Jerome's works is presented as the purpose of editing. Thus, Erasmus's editing of the classical text always presupposes both its printing and its publication. When he states, "I had long been working . . . towards this one purpose, that we might see the whole of St Jerome virtually reborn" (*Erasmus* 96), he envisages the complete works of Jerome being published. Erasmus's purpose of editing, which he described in the above-mentioned letter, is the publication of his editorial works. Consequently, Erasmus finds the rebirth of St Jerome in the publication of his edition. In another letter, he describes the publication of his own work as its "birth." When his compilation of adages with his commentary saw the third edition in 1515, Erasmus wrote, "My *Adagia* . . . is now coming to birth for the third time" (*Erasmus* 47). Here the word *nascitur*, which means simply "to be born," is used to refer to publication of the work (*Opus Epistolarum* 36). Thus, the term *renascere* was used metaphorically to refer to the phenomenon of publication as if the ancient works had been reborn and brought into the world. In addition, it connoted the restoration of the original text, which was believed to be made possible by editing.

The Latin verb which Erasmus and his contemporaries usually use to refer to the act of publication is *edere*. With reference to the publication of his third edition of *Adagia*, Erasmus writes, "I have published, besides many other things, a corrected edition of my *Chiliades*" (*Erasmus* 98), which appears in Latin as "Edidimus praeter alia permulta Chiliadum opus a nobis emendatum" (*Opus Epistolarum* 78).¹⁰ "Edidimus" is first-person plural in the perfect tense of *edere*, and literally means "we have published." In most cases *edere* is used to refer to the plain fact of publication, that is, the act of sending a literary work into the world. But, in one case, interestingly, Erasmus uses this term to imply that publication must ensue from editing and printing. Describing the publication of his edition of the New Testament, he writes, "The New Testament has been rushed

into print rather than published” (*Erasmus* 273), which is translated from the Latin text, “Novum Testamentum *praecipitatum* est verius quam *aeditum*” (*Opus Epistolarum* 226). This indicates that the New Testament was thrown into press without having received proper care. In this context, “aeditum,” a passive perfect participle of *edere* connotes an “editorial” process precedent to printing. Thus, it can be said that the act of *edere* entails “editing” followed by publication. This assertion can be supported by Bruce Metzger’s translation of the phrase concerned into “precipitated rather than edited” in his *The Text of the New Testament* (99).

Mynors and Thomson, the translators of Erasmus’s correspondence, unify the translation of *edere* into “publish” and never use the modern term “edit,” whereas Barbara Halporn, who translates the correspondence of Johann Amerbach, unconventionally employs “edit” to translate *edere*. Amerbach was a humanist printer who had started the project of publication of the works of St Jerome before Erasmus arrived in Basel. In a letter of 1492, Johan Heynlin, who taught Amerbach at Paris, encourages him (meaning Amerbach) by saying that book makers should stand in higher esteem than the highly praised manufacturers of weapons. Heynlin refers to those who produce books salutary to the Christian faith as “qui libros Christianae religioni utiles atque necessarios edunt, componunt, scribunt uel imprimunt” (*Amerbachkorrespondenz* 31). The four verbs employed by Heynlin, “edunt, componunt, scribunt uel imprimunt” refer to a series of book production processes. Traditionally, *edere* should be translated as “publish.” However, Barbara Halporn (2000) translates the phrase starting from “qui” as “those who edit, compose, copy, or print the books necessary and useful to the Christian faith” (311). Why does she use the modern English term “edit” even though the Latin counterpart of the modern sense of “edit” did not exist in a strict sense in the Renaissance?¹¹ The answer to this question will emerge from an investigation into how the meanings of the four verbs “edunt,” “componunt,” “scribunt,” and “imprimunt” refer to book production practices. For this purpose, a clear understanding of Heynlin’s letter’s main purport will help to elucidate what he means by each word. From the beginning to the end of this letter, Heynlin discusses the nature and mission of the printer, and praises the thorough editorial care given to the books printed by Amerbach. Referring to the circumstances behind the publication of the works of St Ambrose, he writes:

By your industry you have succeeded in bringing together exemplars of almost all of his books gathered from far distant places. Because your characteristic integrity allows you to let nothing leave your hands that is not scrupulously emended, organized, polished, and worked out, you now ask me to see to it that those exemplars, which individually are written without break and without any divisions placed between, are

divided into chapters and prefaced with summaries for each book and chapter. In this way their ideas and purpose may be explained and thus they may become less difficult and more intelligible to the reader. (Halporn 313)¹²

Evidently Heynlin's subject dwells on the work of the consortium of book producers, composed of editors and printers who prepare the ancient works for publication. Without this context, one might take the sense of "component" as the act of authorship, that is, "to compose" one's own literary work. Here, however, the word "component" denominates a practice in the editorial process. In terms of the editorial process of the ancient text, *componere* means the acts of collecting scattered fragments of exemplars and of bringing them together into a whole in right order. In the quoted passage of Heynlin's letter, Amerbach is said to have collected the fragments of exemplars of St Ambrose's works and joined them systematically to compose a complete edition. The tasks of inserting a space between words, dividing the mass of writing into chapters, and of adding prefaced summaries also shape the practice of *componere*. It can be said that *componere* refers to the act of joining the fragments of the ancient writings and conferring a structure upon them.

After "component," Heynlin moves on to the next stage of book production. Both "scribunt" and "imprimunt" refer to a form of publication. *Scribere*, following editorial operations, is the duplicating process by the hands of scribes. *Imprimere* means "to print." However, early printers called themselves "scribes," since they conceptualised themselves as the successors of *scriptor* or *scriba*, whose profession was to duplicate the text to produce books (Hirsch 19). The juxtaposition of the two words "scribunt" and "imprimunt" in Heynlin's letter highlights the coexistence of scribal publication and print publication, and his respect for the predecessor of the printer. Here, the problem of the translation of the word *edere* invites further consideration. Since Heynlin refers to the two forms of publication by "scribunt" and "imprimunt," he must have implied more meaning by the word "edunt" than the simple act of publication. Furthermore, if Heynlin intentionally listed the four verbs in the order of their appearance, he might also have understood by *edere* an editorial concept or another editorial procedure which cannot be described by the word "componere." As stated above, the act of *edere* entails the practice of editing, followed by publication. It also presupposes the restoration of ancient works which was thought to be realised by editorial labour. Halporn employs the English word "edit" to translate "edunt," probably with the purpose of expressing the idea concerning restoration of classical texts, which the modern sense of the word "publish" does not convey. Thus, it seems safe to conclude from the above that *edere* can refer to the idea of restoring classical texts, or in another word, *renascere*.

To restore classical texts meant to bring them back to their original form. Erasmus was convinced that his editorial procedures could restore the works of Jerome to their original condition. However, despite his confidence, the manuscripts he collated and corrected were later scribal copies and therefore left no vestige of the texts produced by Jerome himself. Erasmus's method of reconstructing the original was "either to conjecture from corruptions of different kinds what the author wrote, or guess the original reading on the basis of such fragments and vestiges of the shapes of the script as may survive" (*Erasmus* 261). Erasmus surmises that incapable scribes omitted from their transcripts the passages that they could not read or understand and interpolated text, which has made it impossible to separate the authorial text from the scribal contamination (*Erasmus* 260). The errors appearing in the scribal manuscripts were to be corrected only by experts with a wide range of functional vocabulary in Greek. With their proficiency in ancient languages, the editors of Jerome's *Opera omnia* tried to reconstruct the originally intended meaning of the text from the "vestiges of the shapes of the script" which must have been at some remove from the first recorded text (*Erasmus* 261). The actual editorial practices on the works of Jerome involved the challenging task of extracting authorial intention embedded in the scribal errors.

According to Henri-Jean Martin, in most cases Jerome did not write his works but dictated to scribes (111). It seems reasonable to argue that the authorial text existed primarily when it was spoken by the author and recorded by a scribe, whilst bearing in mind that the author's spoken words were not always recorded correctly by his scribe. As mentioned above, the exemplars which had come to Erasmus's hand did not retain Jerome's original text, but rather survived as "not so much corrupted as virtually destroyed and defaced" because of the abuse of the text by illiterate scribes (*Erasmus* 260). Further, Erasmus states that he considered amending the works of Jerome, due to "this insufferable ill-treatment of so eminent a doctor of the church" (*Erasmus* 260). One persuasive argument might be that Erasmus's editorial labours were motivated by the absence of the exemplars retaining the author's "original" text. Even so, there seems to be a discrepancy between Erasmus's awareness that Jerome's original words had never been written in his own hand and his professed efforts to restore the original; for it was impossible to bring back the original text which had been lost to documentation. What came to his hand was the most corrupt text, at the opposite pole to the idealised original. Despite this fact, as Erasmus himself acknowledges, it was the corrupt text which provoked him to think about the author's original, which must have been free from scribal errors. Behind "the vestiges of the shapes of the script as may survive" he assumes the perfect text composed in Jerome's mind (*Erasmus* 261). In order to realise

his ideal, Erasmus had to start reconstructing the works of Jerome by removing the errors of the exemplars.

In fact, the terms which humanist scholars most frequently employed to refer to one of the procedures of preparing an edition describe the correction process of textual errors: they are either derivatives or etymologies of the verbs *emendare*, *castigare*, *repurgare*, and *corrigere*. As indicated by the apparent meaning of *emendare*, all four words presuppose the existence of errors when used in reference to the editorial process. The word *emendare* consists of *ex*, meaning “out of,” and *mendum*, meaning “an error,” hence *emendare* refers to the act of getting rid of errors. *Castigare*, meaning “to correct,” is derived from the adjective *castus* which connotes “morally pure,” “unpolluted” and “spotless.” *Repurgare* is formed by two parts: *re* signifies in trope “a restoration of a thing to its original condition,” and *purgare* means “to clean” and “to purify.” Therefore, *repurgare* stands for “cleaning,” and hence removing something “for the sake of cleaning.” *Corrigere*, meaning “to correct,” is composed of *conr*, which derives from “cum,” signifying “to bring together,” and of *regere*, which denotes “to keep from going wrong” (*Lewis and Short’s Latin-English Lexicon*). In a letter written in about September 1514, Maarten van Dorp, professional editor, theologian and humanist scholar at the University of Louvain, admires Erasmus’s emendation of Jerome’s letters.¹³ He writes, “I hear you have purged (*repurgasse*) St Jerome’s letters of the errors (*mendis*) in which they abounded hitherto, killed off (*ingulasse*) the spurious pieces (*adulteria*) with your critical dagger (*obelis*), and thrown light (*elucidasse*) upon the dark places (*obscura*)” (*Erasmus* 21; *Opus Epistolarum* 14). *Iugulare* means “to cut the throat” and hence “to kill.” Here, Dorp describes Erasmus’s editorial labours through the metaphor of eliminating evils to represent the process of correcting textual errors. Erasmus’s description of his editorial tasks also starts and ends with his efforts to amend the text so that it will make sense to the reader, and to annotate those complex passages “which [bring] even the erudite reader to a stop” (*Erasmus* 108). The documented concept and practices of scholarly editing in the Renaissance bring to light the fact that editorial correction was regarded as restoring the text’s original meaning, while scribal errors were considered as depriving the text of its sense.

Although a term equivalent with the modern English term “edit” did not exist in a strict sense in early-modern Europe, the concept and practice of editing had been fully established among humanist scholars in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries. “Edere,” the origin of the English term “edit,” carried the connotations of “publication” and “rebirth,” and “componere” entailed collation of textual variants across exemplars and a subsequent editorial process of uniting the fragments of the

ancient writings into a readable text. The encounter with variant texts of the classical works encouraged the textual scholars to conceive the notion of a single archetype. The editor's pursuit of authorial intention was motivated by the absence of the exemplars preserving the author's original text. The author's original text was considered the only possible perfect form of textual transmission and therefore the editor's point of reference. Restoration of authorial intention could be realised by correction of scribal errors, even though that textual correction rested on arbitrary standards, as represented by Erasmus's conjecture from the corrupt text. The editorial labours of humanist scholars in pursuit of authorial intention gave rebirth to classical works both in the reconstruction of the meaning of the texts and in their ensuing publication.

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Notes

¹ The date of the earliest citation of the noun "editor" in the sense of "one who prepares the literary work of another person, or number of persons for publication, by selecting, revising, and arranging the material" in the OED is 1712. The OED shows that by 1793 the verb "edit" came to mean "to prepare an edition of (a literary work or works by an earlier author)" or "to prepare, set in order for publication (literary material which is wholly or in part the work of others)."

² I quote Jowett's particularly apt description of the collective procedures of editing given in his Oxford edition of *Richard III*. For his exhaustive discussion of editing of Shakespeare, see Jowett, *Shakespeare and Text*, 93-157.

³ Italics are used to indicate the Latin terms, which are being addressed.

⁴ Further references to this edition will be made by its short-title form, *Erasmus*.

⁵ My emphasis.

⁶ The original Latin text appears as “Tantum hic laboris exantlatum est, vt parum abfuerit quin meipsum enecarim, dum sedulo adnitor vt Hieronymus renascatur” (*Opus Epistolarum* 89).

⁷ For discussion of Erasmus’s proprietary editorship and production of “true meaning,” see Massai, 45-9.

⁸ “Feruet ingens officina, *excuditur* elegantissimis formulis diuus Hieronymus, imo *renascitur*” (*Opus Epistolarum*, 77).

⁹ *Opus Epistolarum*, II. 76.

¹⁰ The title of the second edition is *Adagiorum chiliades*.

¹¹ Some English – Latin dictionaries give *corrigere* as a translation of “edit.”

¹² For the original Latin text, see *Amerbachkorrespondenz*, 32.

¹³ On Maarten van Dorp as “castigator” and his association with Erasmus’s circle, see Jardine, *Erasmus*, 99-127.