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What is classical philology? Textual criticism

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1. Introduction

So much of the literature of ancient Greece and Rome has been lost. The Athenian playwright Sophocles wrote over a hundred tragedies: today only seven survive, together with a few fragments of the others. Livy's Roman history originally comprised 142 books: we have only 35 to read today. And figures like Sophocles and Livy are the lucky ones. Of most of the authors who wrote in ancient Greek or Latin during antiquity – poets, playwrights, historians, geographers, novelists, philosophers – virtually nothing survives at all.

This apparently stark and uncompromising difference between survival and disappearance is more blurred than we might at first imagine. What do we actually mean when we say that seven plays of Sophocles have 'survived'? What does that 'survival' consist of? In that case, it means that we possess manuscripts that contain the text of those seven plays. But these manuscripts were not written during Sophocles' lifetime in the fifth century BC. The earliest dates to about AD 950, nearly one and a half millennia after Sophocles' death in 405 BC. They were (obviously) not written by Sophocles himself, or by any of his contemporaries. Rather, they were copied by scribes who were making copies of some earlier manuscript, which is now lost. That lost manuscript will itself have been the copy of an earlier manuscript. And so on, back to Sophocles himself and the texts that he wrote in the fifth century BC.

At any point in that chain the copying might have ceased: an author's works might have fallen out of fashion, leading to a lack of interest in recopying them, and their

consequent failure to survive. Sometimes we can assign a rough date to the period when a text stops being copied – so the last fragmentary ancient manuscripts of Sappho, for instance, date to the sixth and seventh centuries AD, and, since there are no mediaeval manuscripts of her poetry, it is likely that copying of her works ceased not long after this time. But even in the case of those works which were copied, the process which preserved them also stored up problems for the future. For manual copying of a text is far from a foolproof way of ensuring its survival. Scribes are subject to human error: they can misread words, miss out words or lines, add text that should not be there (for example, mistakenly incorporating explanatory glosses into the work itself), write so illegibly that future scribes will misinterpret their letters, or just become distracted and make some unaccountable blunder. Copying texts from previous centuries is an even harder task: the scribe is confronted by vocabulary and syntax that will often be unfamiliar, and the subconscious temptation to normalise these strange forms into contemporary language is ever present. Moreover, while even a single iteration of manual copying can lead to errors being introduced, the repeated process of copying down the centuries compounds the problem. One scribe makes an error; then a later scribe makes a further error based on that original mistake; and as a result the original text is now beyond repair.

We referred just now to the potential for subconscious change. Conscious change was also a possibility, at least when scribes were copying a language with which they were familiar. An unusual form might be changed unintentionally, as just noted; but its very strangeness might also provoke a scribe to alter it deliberately, sure that the manuscript was in error and that the scribe was capable of seeing this and making the appropriate change. Sometimes the scribe will have been right – other times, though, the scribe may have 'corrected' a form that already happened to be correct, or may by a deliberate intervention have added new corruption to a text that had already strayed from the author's original.

Moreover, the difference between unconscious, subconscious, and conscious change will not always have been clear; in considering such questions we quickly face big questions of the place of intentionality in human actions which are beyond the capacity of any textual critic to solve.

As a result, the text that survives of any ancient author stands at some remove from the text which that author originally wrote. We cannot assume that just because a word is in a manuscript, or all the manuscripts, of Sophocles, that Sophocles himself must have written it. The word could be a copying mistake made centuries ago by some unfortunate scribe, which subsequent scribes have faithfully copied. There is thus a fundamental uncertainty that affects all our dealings with ancient texts.

2. Early printed editions

The coming of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the German city of Mainz, opened a new chapter in the transmission of classical texts. Up until that time, all copying had to be done by hand – a laborious process which, as we have seen, could introduce many errors into the texts that were copied. From now on, copying could take place through mechanical means, dramatically cutting down on the amount of error introduced by the copying process. The earliest classical printed editions appeared in the second half of the fifteenth century, with Latin authors tending to be published sooner than Greek ones, because there was greater demand for Latin texts. The change of medium was of great significance. Not only could texts now circulate without any new errors introduced by human scribes; they could also circulate in greater numbers. The advance in technology made it possible for texts which, in some cases, had survived in only a single manuscript and so were in danger of being lost altogether, to appear in dozens or

hundreds of copies – copies which, moreover, would be much more readily available than handwritten manuscripts generally were.

Printed editions did, however, introduce a new type of error all of their own. A printer deciding to publish a particular edition needed to select a manuscript or manuscripts on which to base the printed edition – and very often the edition would be based on a single manuscript, selected not because of the quality of its readings, not because it was thought to offer a text that was particularly close to what the author had originally written, but simply because it lay closest at hand for the printer. And while printers sometimes corrected obvious errors to be found in a manuscript, sometimes they did not – or sometimes they introduced new errors by means of their attempted corrections. This part of the process we have already observed when discussing the practices of medieval scribes. But since (as we have seen) a print edition would have a wide circulation of dozens or hundreds of copies, copies that would be far more accessible than any manuscript, any errors in a printed edition would have far greater impact than would any error in a manuscript. In the medium of print, these texts, perhaps headed by the name of a famous printer or scholar, carried a new authority – an authority that they did not deserve, because they were put together on principles that today would be recognised as unscholarly.

To take the example of Sophocles, crucial editions were published by Adrianus Turnebus in 1552/3 and by the scholar-printer Robertus Stephanus in 1568. Those editions would be the dominant text of Sophocles for over two centuries, with many copies in circulation: for years to come they were standard points of reference for anyone intending to read Sophocles' tragedies in the original. Yet they based their editions on a poor manuscript – a manuscript written by the early fourteenth-century Byzantine scholar Demetrius Triclinius, which incorporated many textual interventions by that scholar. Turnebus and Stephanus simply printed the text in Triclinius's manuscript, without indicating when a

reading was the result of inherited tradition, and when it was the fruit of Triclinius's critical engagement with the text. Readers were thus unable to distinguish between the two, even though it is obviously crucial to know whether a word on the printed page is copied from a manuscript, or results from a scholar's ingenuity; crucial to know, too, what the manuscript text originally was even when an editor judges the reading to be faulty, in case the reader wishes to question the editor's judgment or to prefer an alternative solution.

To us today such a state of affairs seems extraordinary. Yet we should not be eager to criticise. With these early editions we are dealing with the works of pioneers of scholarship, of people who for the first time were grappling with the problem of how best to render classical texts, which before now had existed only in handwritten form, into print. It is therefore not unreasonable that they should have adopted some practices which we would reject today; or that it should have taken time for some useful features – such as line numbers in the margins, or the critical apparatus at the bottom of the page – to find a place in their editions. They were at the beginning of a long process of improvement which still continues today.

3. Modern printed editions

Over time editors became keener to reflect on and to justify their methodology of editing. For example, over time texts began to be furnished with a critical apparatus at the bottom of each page, which gave readers all kinds of information which in previous editions they had been denied. A critical apparatus (often referred to by the Latin phrase 'apparatus criticus') tells readers what manuscripts contain each reading, and which textual changes have been proposed by different scholars. It is a way of indicating to the reader that the text printed by the editor is not certain: that the editor has made choices, that other choices were available,

and that the reader needs to consider whether or not those choices were right and the impact that they have on the significance of the text.

Both parts of the Latin phrase ‘apparatus criticus’ need careful weighing. ‘Apparatus’ describes something that prepared or supplied for something else – a means of support for the main text under which it is printed. This is qualified by ‘criticus’, which derives from the Greek verb κρίνω, ‘I judge’. An editor needs judgment to construct an apparatus because it would be virtually impossible to include every possible detail. Some texts exist in hundreds of manuscripts, and even when these all have the basic same reading there are frequently differences of orthography or accentuation, or involving scribal corrections of various kinds, with the result than any complete account of what readings manuscripts have at any one point could go on for many pages, just for a single word of the original text. Moreover, there are often dozens of conjectures made by different scholars on a given textual point; particularly with popular authors who have received scholarly scrutiny for several centuries, a full account of all interventions would be a considerable labour which, again, would dwarf the presentation of the actual text to which the apparatus is meant to be ancillary. Producing an apparatus criticus of such detail for a text of any significant length would hardly be within the physical capabilities of any individual editor. And even if a team of scholars were to be assembled to produce such an apparatus, or if it became possible for such an apparatus to be assembled by digital means (see below), the question would remain: why? For whom would such an apparatus be of use? It would represent the mere gathering together of material without consideration of the practical value that such labour would impact to users of the edition. Different editions need different levels of detail in the apparatus criticus – an edition for use in schools barely needs any, an edition for scholars needs rather more – but no-one needs to see everything. Editors owe readers their judgment; they should not be passive, unthinking purveyors of information, but thoughtful, creative scholars who select what will

be useful to their readers. For what is the point of scholarship, if not to be useful? – and to be useful is to be selective.

4. Digital editions

Technological developments have continually affected the transmission of classical texts. As we have already seen, the invention of the printing press was a major turning point for classical editions; so too in modern times, the importance of the internet for editions is gradually becoming more apparent, offering as it does an entirely new means of communicating a classical text to readers, and the potential to do so in ways that overcome the limitations of the printing press. The project *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, published by Oxford University Press and for which I serve as Classics advisor, is one example of this. The essence of the project is that the digital world offers new opportunities for the display of classical editions that go beyond the possibilities of the printed page. For example, a printed edition is to some extent limited to what can appear on two-page spread when the book is opened; what appears there is final, and cannot change from one use of the book to another. In the case of a digital edition, however, the user of the edition can have quite an impact on what appears on the screen depending on what is useful at any particular point. The format of *Oxford Scholarly Editions Online* puts the text, apparatus, and (if available for a particular edition) translation and commentary all in separate columns, and allows the user to decide which of them should be visible at any particular point. A reader who wants to focus on text and apparatus alone can do that; a reader who would like a translation too can summon up that information too and dispense with it too whenever desired. As the reader scrolls down one column, the other columns move automatically, so the reader can always see the relevant information for a given line. The layout, in other words, take advantage of the opportunities

presented by the digital world to display classical texts in the most effective manner, rather than simply using the internet as a means of distributing images exactly as they appear in printed books.

The main focus of this project at the moment is on putting into digital format the huge back catalogue of classical editions that Oxford University Press has published. But the digital format offers new opportunities for editors undertaking fresh editorial projects. I noted above that different groups of readers often want different amounts of detail in an apparatus criticus. In a book, an editor has to choose one particular style and print that; but in a digital edition, the editor can prepare two or more apparatuses, allowing readers to decide whether they want to have detailed accounts of all the key manuscript readings, or whether they simply want to be notified when the editor is printing a scholar's conjecture rather than a manuscript reading. Editors could prepare more than one translation, one a very literal one, the other a more natural text that was easier to read, and allow readers to choose which they preferred; both are often useful for the reader to discern the editor's sense of a particular passage, and different readers will want to access different types of translation at different times. Editions could contain digital hyperlinks to manuscripts when these manuscripts are available online (as many now are, thanks to the enlightened policies of the libraries that contain them), making it as easy as possible for readers to check at first hand an editor's reports of a manuscript's readings, rather than simply replying on what the editor says. After all, errors are inevitable, however distinguished or careful the editor, and it is best scholarly practice to check a source at first hand rather than simply accepting the reports of another. Inserting such hyperlinks allows the editor to move one step beyond the traditional apparatus criticus, empowering readers to engage with the source material whenever they so desire. In short, editors of classical texts should whenever possible take full advantage of the new

opportunities presented by this exciting new medium, whose possibilities are only beginning to be exploited.

5. Examples

So far we have been considering the issue historically – how have texts come down to us from the ancient world? How have texts been corrupted during this time? What impact did the coming of printed editions have, and how have they changed over the centuries? What about new digital editions? In this final section, we will take a look at some particular problems, all from the Greek tragedian Sophocles, examining what difference textual criticism can have for our understanding of actual passages.

Ισ.	ἀλλὰ κτενεῖς νυμφεῖα τοῦ σαυτοῦ τέκνου;	
Κρ.	ἀρώσιμοι γὰρ χἀτέρων εἰσὶν γύαι.	
Ισ.	οὐχ ὥς γ᾽ ἐκείνῳ τῇδέ τ᾽ ἦν ἡρμοσμένα.	570
Κρ.	κακὰς ἐγὼ γυναῖκας υἱέσι στυγῶ.	
?	ὦ φίλταθ᾽ Αἷμον, ὥς σ᾽ ἀτιμάζει πατήρ.	
Κρ.	ἄγαν γε λυπεῖς καὶ σὺ καὶ τὸ σὸν λέχος.	
Ισ.	ἦ γὰρ στερήσεις τῆσδε τὸν σαυτοῦ γόνον;	
Κρ.	Ἅιδης ὁ παύσων τούσδε τοὺς γάμους ἐμοί.	575

Ismene:	But will you kill your own son's bride?	
Creon:	Others too have fields that can be ploughed.	
Ismene:	But these other marriages would not be as suitable as this is for him and for her.	570

Creon:	I hate the idea of evil wives for my sons!	
?:	O dearest Haemon, how your father dishonours you!	
Creon:	You are paining me too much, you and your marriage!	
Ismene:	Will you really deprive your son of this woman?	
Creon:	It is Hades who will put a stop to this marriage.	575

Antigone 568–75

In this passage the Theban king Creon is set on executing Antigone, who has defied his order that the dead traitor Polynices, Antigone's own brother, should be executed. Ismene, Antigone's sister, pleads for her life, reminding Creon that Antigone is betrothed to Creon's son Haemon. Line 572, a passionate exclamation referring to the wrong that Creon is doing to Haemon, is attributed to Ismene in the manuscripts, but the earliest printed edition, the Aldine of 1503, gave the line instead to Antigone, and that decision has been followed by subsequent editors, including the famous Sir Richard Jebb whose late-nineteenth-century edition is still in use today. Giving the line to Antigone would make this the sole line in which she references Haemon (with whom she never shares the stage) – it is not hard to see why this option was so attractive to editors, in that it opened up a romantic perspective on Antigone's character which otherwise was wholly absent from the play. Moreover, the names of speakers in our manuscripts have no textual authority; manuscripts in Sophocles' day did not include speaker names, so the names that we do have were added centuries later by ancient scholars with no more knowledge of Sophocles' intentions than we have.

Yet formal considerations in fact make it extremely unlike that Antigone speaks the line – in a passage of this kind (called 'stichomythia') we expect the verses to alternative evenly between the two speakers, not for a third party to interrupt suddenly in this way. Moreover, when we consider the point fully, we can see how effective it is for Ismene and not Antigone to utter the line. Antigone never refers to Haemon because her focus is totally

on her brother; her single-minded attention to the question of his burial ensures that she never speaks about her fiancé. Giving her even a single line about him ruins that effect.

The textual problem is especially interesting because deciding it requires us to sift the evidence provided by manuscripts, by formal features of tragedy, and by the expectations of characterisation; coming to a decision requires us to consider the problem from several different angles. The whole question illustrates how considering an apparently straightforward textual problem – who speaks a particular line – involves consideration of the play as a work of literature.

ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ

	ἄνδρες πολῖται, ξυντομωτάτως μὲν ἂν	
	τύχοιμι λέξας Οἰδίπουν ὀλωλότα·	1580
	ἃ δ᾽ ἦν τὰ πραχθέντ᾽ οὔθ᾽ ὁ μῦθος ἐν βραχεῖ	
	φράσαι πάρεστιν οὔτε τἄργ᾽ ὅσ᾽ ἦν ἐκεῖ.	
Χο.	ὄλωλε γὰρ δύστηνος; Αγ. ὡς λελοιπότα	
	κεῖνον τὸν ἀεὶ βίοτον ἐξεπίστασο.	
Χο.	πῶς; ἆρα θείᾳ κἀπόνῳ τάλας τύχῃ;	1585
Αγ.	τοῦτ᾽ ἐστὶν ἤδη κἀποθαυμάσαι πρέπον.	

Messenger:	Men of the city, I would most swiftly meet my goal by declaring that Oedipus is dead! But as for what took place, my story cannot be spoken in a small span, nor the actions that happened there.
Chorus:	So the wretched man is dead?
Messenger:	Know that he has left the life that he always lived.
Chorus:	How? Wretched man, was it by a divine, painless fate?

Messenger: This now is fit for wonder.

Oedipus at Colonus 1579–86

The above passage comes from towards the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, after Oedipus has departed the stage, having been called by the gods to his death. The Messenger who has just entered gives the key information about Oedipus – that he has died. But the Greek in lines 1583–4 is rather odd, with the expression translated as 'the life that he always lived' being particularly difficult; the phrase, literally 'the always life', might more normally mean 'eternal life'. Perhaps, then, λελοιπότα, 'has left, departed from', is an error for λελογχότα, 'has obtained as his portion'? This small change would have an immense impact on the final part of the play: it would mean that the Messenger declares that Oedipus has not just died, but has been rewarded with an eternal existence, as a hero with power to help his friends and harm his enemies from beyond the grave. If we keep λελοιπότα, by contrast, the Messenger simply repeats his opening statement, that Oedipus has died, with no reference to any existence or power after death. The change of a couple of letters could significantly impact the interpretation of the passage, and the play; scholars continue to disagree as to whether its is desirable. Deciding the question is beyond the scope of this chapter; but merely raising it illustrates how textual problems are frequently bound up with broader interpretive questions and cannot be separated from them.

καὶ δεῦρ᾽, ἐάν μοι τοῦ χρόνου δοκῆτέ τι

κατασχολάζειν, αὖθις ἐκπέμψω πάλιν

τοῦτον τὸν αὐτὸν ἄνδρα, ναυκλήρου τρόποις

μορφὴν δολώσας, ὡς ἂν ἀγνοία προσῇ·

οὗ δῆτα, τέκνον, ποικίλως αὐδωμένου 130

δέχου τὰ συμφέροντα τῶν ἀεὶ λόγων.

> And I will send this same man back here again, if you seem at all to be delaying beyond the due time, disguising his appearance in the manner of a ship's captain, so that ignorance may be of help. From him, my boy, as he intricately speaks his tale, take what is profitable from his words.
>
> *Philoctetes* 126–31

This final example comes from Sophocles' *Philoctetes* of 409: Odysseus is giving instructions to Neoptolemus regarding his mission to bring Philoctetes from the island of Lemnos to the Greek army at Troy. The text above is as given by the mediaeval manuscripts; but a fragment of an ancient manuscript, written on papyrus and published as recently in 2017, gives the start of line 130 as οὗ δή, τέκνον, σύ ('From him, my boy, you . . .'). While the difference from the mediaeval text is not great, this text nevertheless seems preferable in that σύ 'you' highlights the imperative and the relationship between the two men: Odysseus is telling Neoptolemus what to do and uses the pronoun to highlight this to him. Moreover, the papyrus is centuries older than the mediaeval manuscripts, so has been exposed to far less of the copying process which leads to errors being introduced. Yet no modern editor, before the publication of the papyrus, had suggested changing the text: editors were happy in unanimous reading of the mediaeval manuscripts. The discovery of this extra evidence will doubtless change the presentation of this particular text in future editions; but it also highlights how insecure the foundations of all our texts are. How many other passages are there in our manuscripts which have never come under suspicion, but which the discovery of an ancient manuscript might reveal to be erroneous?

Conclusion

This chapter has emphasised the uncertainty that afflicts all our efforts to engage with ancient literature – the fact that our sources for Greek and Latin texts are generally late and thus unreliable in all kinds of ways, requiring careful scrutiny from the scholar. That might seem a negative point, and to some extent it is: we would prefer to have the original autograph copies of classical texts, allowing us to see the author's exact words unmediated and unaffected by error. On the other hand, from another perspective such an apparently positive outcome might end up leaving us somehow unsatisfied. Greek and Latin literature attracts us not just because it is enjoyable, but also because it is hard, because it requires intellectual engagement on many levels before it begins to reveal its secrets. Part of the pleasure in studying classical texts lies in that difficulty, and part of that difficulty lies in the necessity of applying our intellects to the fundamental problem of determining, from the sources available to us, what an ancient author actually wrote. So a complete and fully accurate text, however apparently desirable, would deny us that particularly intense form of intellectual engagement with a textual tradition. We may wonder whether we really would like a subject in which there was no room for the intellect, no room for creativity, no room for doubt, in this area. To the remark, made in a seminar on textual criticism, that classical authors' original texts would all be fully accessible in Heaven, the great philologist Eduard Fraenkel is said to have replied: 'That would not be Heaven for a scholar.'

Further Reading

A key work on textual criticism is Timpanaro 2005 (an English translation of a work originally published in 1963); see also Timpanaro 1976 (an English translation of a work originally published in 1974). Barrett 2007 is a collection of essays by a master of textual criticism whose methods repay careful study. West 1973 is a masterly account of how to edit a classical text; Tarrant 2016 reflects on the nature and purpose of editing within the discipline of Classics. De Melo and Scullion forthcoming will be central for all kinds of issues discussed in this chapter. The Sophoclean passages discussed at the end of the chapter are all discussed in more detail, and with bibliographical references, in Finglass 2019. My source for the Fraenkel comment is oral tradition.

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