

Practical Editions of Literary Texts

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The Problem

A schizophrenia in literary scholarship dividing scholars between their research and their pedagogical commitments has been long identified as an occupational, apparently, incurable disease. Interestingly, indications that this disease disables careers and weakens teaching programs are countered by celebrations of the healthy sharing of original research with “disciples” in the classroom. Grants for student-conducted research as a teaching strategy support the latter view, while jazzing up courses and dumbing down scholarship for the classroom stand witness to the former.

One manifestation of this division, damaging to both research and pedagogy, is found in frequent separation of textual criticism from literary criticism: the former usually associated with Dr. Dryasdust, Mr. Pedant, and Dr. Syntax; the latter associated variously with important social insights, politically charged criticism, empyrean heights of fancy, elegant articulation of the mysteries of art, or communion with the muses of art and theory. Neither of these constructions withstands close scrutiny, though cases of impacted narrowness among textual critics and of ideological biases or frivolous flights of fancy among literary critics can be found to support them. One palpable detrimental result of the rift between textual and literary criticism manifests itself in editions of literary texts—the basic tools of both research and pedagogy. Scholarly editions in magisterial tomes that few people use stand in monumental contrast to textually naive and misleading texts used everywhere in classrooms where ignorance and misinformation about textuality pass unnoticed and, worse, where the critical insights and interpretive nuance enabled by textual criticism remain hidden—in fact, are not believed to exist.

This problem has been noted and discussed before. Fredson Bowers put the case very clearly in two early 1960s essays designed to provide