

Highlighting Variants in Literary Editions Techniques and Goals

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1. Introduction

The book of Genesis tells us that God wrote the Book of Nature in six days, reviewed and approved it, rested from his work and handed it down to future generations of mankind. He produced an absolutely original work, he made no corrections or improvements, and we have no reason to expect a second edition. Any search for variants — or to be more precise: for “genetic variants” and “authorized version variants” — would thus be futile.

Like his divine role model the author of literary texts produces works which we may come to admire as the creations of an alter deus; unlike his divine role model, however, he is fallible and therefore creates variants. I will for the purpose of this paper classify them as source-text variants (a term which I will explain shortly), genetic variants (changes prior to the first publication), version variants (changes in different printings of the same work) and transmission variants (changes mostly occurring after the author’s death).

The way in which we present these variants depends on our understanding of a literary text. If we emphasize an author’s quasi divine nature, we will look down on all variants and consider them mere signs of fallibility. We may need them as clues in our attempt to rediscover the original version of a work that has undergone historical changes, but we will not assign them any intrinsic value. If we edit them, we will not present them in neon lights but rather assemble them in the editorial apparatus, the equivalent of a burial ground. If, on the other hand, we emphasize and esteem the historical nature of literary production and transmission, we should value the variants and present them accordingly — perhaps not in neon lights but at least in some visible and transparent fashion. I personally believe that we should do both. We should continue