Introduction

The recent history of textual scholarship has been, in large measure, that of rethinking traditional assumptions regarding the authority and stability of literary texts. While perhaps once useful as a way of establishing a firm basis for bibliographic analysis and editorial practice, such notions have come to seem increasingly ill-adapted to the challenges faced by editors and textual scholars over the past few decades.

In 1964 Fredson Bowers could confidently assert, with the admirable goal of establishing a rigorous basis for scholarly editions of literary works, that

> [w]hen an author’s manuscript is preserved, this has paramount authority, of course. [...] An editor must choose the manuscript as his major authority, correcting from the first edition only what are positive errors in the accidentals of the manuscript. (226)

Such a statement is reassuring, both in the way it elevates the manuscript to a privileged status (thus appealing to widely-held notions of writerly authority) and in the basic identity it asserts between one particular document – the manuscript – and the literary work (thus suggesting a high degree of textual stability). So, taking Bowers’ example and following the terms of his argument, by collating the manuscript of Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables* against the first printed edition of that work, one locates ‘approximately three to four thousand small changes’ (Bowers 226). The rejection of these changes by a scholarly editor makes it possible to achieve a more ideal representation of Hawthorne’s work.

Two generations later, however, the conception of the literary work which informed Bowers’ statement of editorial principle has come under siege from all sides. Today, textual scholars are well-acquainted
to considering the ways in which a text’s material realisation influences its interpretation, to describing the transformations that texts undergo as they are ever more rapidly and ever more widely disseminated by means of new technology, and to gauging the consequences of a text’s social reception. The field of textual scholarship today has been shaped by the critical re-evaluation of tenets upheld in the work of W. W. Greg, Fredson Bowers and G. Thomas Tanselle. This re-evaluation began in earnest in the middle of the 1980s with the publication of two landmark studies: Jerome McGann’s *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983), which put forward a view of the text as a ‘material event or set of events’ (21), and D. F. McKenzie’s *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (1986), which insisted upon an expanded definition of bibliography as ‘[a] concern with texts in some physical form and their transmission’, and which expanded textuality to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography. (13)

More recent work has evoked further challenges facing contemporary textual scholars: the difficulties of constructing electronic editions of texts that have initially come down to us in written or print form1, for example, or the need to establish new procedures for analysing and preserving an increasingly significant body of ‘born-digital’ materials2.

In light of these evolutions, literary scholars have been forced to rethink the ways in which they approach their objects of study. To be sure, this process has sometimes been slow to take root, as George Bornstein, for instance, laments in the opening chapter of his landmark study *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*:

[j]n our age of relentless demystification, the text itself often remains the last mystified object, with critics naively assuming that the paperback

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1. For scholarship on this question see, for example, Burrows, Finneran, Shillingsburg 123-72 and Sutherland.

2. For discussions of the issues raised by ‘born-digital’ texts see especially De Groot 90-102 and Thomas. The implications of digital technology for the way in which we conceive of textuality today are developed at length in McGann, *Radiant Textuality*. 

texts that they pull from their local bookstore somehow ‘are’ *King Lear*, or *Pride and Prejudice*, or *The Souls of Black Folk*. But […] any particular version that we study of a text is always already a construction, one of many possible in a world of constructions. (5)

Yet literary criticism has responded to recent developments in textual scholarship, registering an ever-growing sensitivity to the manner in which texts are constructed, materialised and received within given social contexts. In the process, the question of how literary works should be defined has acquired as much urgency as that of how they should be interpreted. The objects of literary study, whose imagined stability made possible the critical ventures of English Leavisites, American New Critics and practitioners of close reading in the French tradition have been set in motion, opening exciting new horizons, but also forcing scholars to rethink their analytical strategies and critical terminology.

The essays collected in this volume consider one consequence of this development by examining the ways in which scholars working on the literature of a variety of periods have been forced to reconsider their definition of the literary work. Insofar as this notion involves an assertion (be it explicit or implicit) of the work’s basic identity with an ideal textual state that can be used to establish clear boundaries within which close reading can take place, its pertinence has been challenged by recent scholarship. Jerome McGann neatly summarises the difficulties involved in defining what we mean by a literary work by evoking G. Thomas Tanselle and Hershel Parker’s debate on the distinction between historical and literary works. ‘Parker, like Aristotle’, McGann writes,

would not want to collapse the distinction between [historical and literary works] because they epitomize the difference between a form of writing that is committed to facticity and information, and a form that is, by contrast, devoted to creation.

History and literature differ, that is to say, along the lines of their intentionalities. This being the case, we find in Parker’s work a passionate engagement with the issue of literary intention. Parker’s insistence that editors of literary works should return to authorial manuscripts wherever possible represents his desire to position the text in as close a relation to its authoritative source as possible. For literary work, in this view, is the creative expression of an individual’s quest for meaning and order. The
scholarly editor’s task is to clarify as much as one can the artistic process of creative activity, for it is that process which is the literary work […].

(‘Socialization’ 40)

If many (including McGann) would still wish to follow Parker in defending Aristotle’s distinction, such defences can no longer credibly rely upon appeals to an ‘authoritative source’. It would be necessary to formulate a definition that preserves the notion of the ‘literary work’ while registering the impact of recent scholarly debates on subjects such as the material production and sociology of texts. In Scholarly Editing in the Computer Age, Peter Shillingsburg attempts such a definition when he describes the literary work as

the message or experience implied by authoritative versions of a literary writing. Usually the variant forms have the same name. Sometimes there will be disagreement over whether a variant form is in fact a variant version or a separate work. (176)

This definition has the advantage of drawing a distinction between our understanding of the literary work and any one given textual state in which it might exist. It registers the modulations in meaning brought by variant forms and holds open the possibility that a literary work can exist in multiple states. But it also, quite deliberately, encourages debate about how to define the contours of any given literary work. When does it become necessary to stop speaking about multiple versions of a single work and to start speaking about the existence of multiple works? What of cases where the definition of ‘authoritative versions of a literary writing’ is problematic due to collaboration between multiple authors or significant editorial intervention? Or cases where the ‘message or experience’ of an authoritative version are modified by translation, adaptation or the addition of significant paratextual elements such as illustrations?

In their different ways, each of the essays in this volume deals with aspects of this debate, making the case for a more flexible understanding of what constitutes a literary work and drawing attention to the impossibility of establishing a clearly delineated space within which such works can be said to exist. Be it through re-edition in varying forms, in varying contexts, with varying paratextual features;
through character-migration between texts, and even between media; or through the presence of multiple authorised versions, all of these essays engage with cases that challenge our assumptions about how literary works should be defined and approached. The title of the volume, ‘Tracing the Contours of Literary Works’, acknowledges the continuing relevance of distinctions between literary and non-literary works while simultaneously drawing attention to the care that the critic must exercise in defining the object of his or her study; it suggests that the outlines we trace around the space ‘belonging’ to any given literary work must always be provisional, fluid, perhaps multiple, since no work can be reduced to a single, authoritative textual state.

The opening essay in the collection examines Mark Z. Danielewski’s novels *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*, two works that make extensive use of what recent textual scholarship has termed ‘bibliographic code’ (the use of typeface, page layout, cover design and other paratextual elements as carries of meaning). Grzegorz Maziarczyk describes the manner in which Danielewski ‘exploits the potential of the book form and turns it into a signifying structure’. Pointing out that the ubiquity of the printed codex leads many critics to ‘treat the material form as a transparent, and therefore negligible, element of a given work of fiction’, Maziarczyk’s study challenges the conception that literary works are exclusively linguistic entities. Likewise, Danielewski’s experimentation with the traditional codex form in *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions* calls into question traditional reading practices. By situating his novels at the confluence of the codex format and cybertext, he forces disoriented readers to simultaneously draw upon reading strategies acquired through contact with printed books and electronic media. Maziarczyk concludes that multilayered and multimodal texts such as Danielewski’s stand as examples of what Espen Aarseth calls ‘ergodic literature’. They engage the reader by material, structural and verbal means to create a work in which ‘nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text’ (Aarseth 1).

Another example of cross-media synergy is to be found in the process of character migration between literary works and across media – a phenomenon associated today with the establishment of characters
as brands or franchises. **Susan Pickford** traces the history of this development in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature and offers two significant case studies – Combe and Rowlandson’s *Dr. Syntax* and Pierce Egan’s *Life in London*. Pickford’s analysis of this question leads her to engage with a legal definition of literary works. She offers a brief history of English copyright law and notes that from a legal perspective, the crucial issue is that of defining the literary work in such a way as to create barriers to protect intellectual property. Pickford observes that there was a growing consensus in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England that works of literature were to be defended by the legal system. But she draws attention, at the same time, to the fact that transgression of legally defined boundaries between literary works can often be a source of creative energy.

**Simon Frost** likewise engages with a well-known case of character migration, using the example of *Robinson Crusoe* to pose basic questions about how we define essential notions of literary criticism, such as ‘book’, ‘work’ and ‘text’. Such notions, Frost claims, are often confounded when confronted with complicated publication, distribution and reception histories such as *Robinson Crusoe*’s. His essay begins by describing the profusion of materials associated more or less intimately with this literary work – *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Part I*, and *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Second and Last Part*, of course, but also a range of bibliographically related documents such as adaptations, pirate copies, abridgements, serialisations and chapbooks. On the basis of the material history of *Robinson Crusoe*, Frost suggests the need for ‘new alignments’ in literary scholarship that would give a larger place to book historic investigation. One consequence of such a critical realignment, he suggests, might be a redefinition of literary works in terms inspired by the institutional theory of visual arts. ‘If the institutional theory of art were to define *[Crusoe as] a literary Artwork*, he writes, ‘it would […] be’ less by notions of a stable, idealised text, immune to the effects of distribution of its lexical material and bibliographic code, and, instead, [as a] literary Artwork defined by the reception of physical documents –
both actual reactions to variant materials and the history of developing notions of reception’.

The two essays that follow, by Cécile Cottenet and Lukas Erne, describe the importance of editorial interventions in establishing the shape of literary works and determining the conditions of their reception. Cottenet takes up this question by way of an analysis of the editorial history of Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*. She notes the way in which the editorial paratext of this work has been conditioned by socio-cultural developments, most particularly the rising interest in African-American literature during the 1960s and the establishment of African-American Studies as a major field of academic inquiry beginning in the 1980s. Cottenet describes the transformations that Chesnutt’s work underwent as its publishers variously presented it as an example of local colour writing, as part of a reappropriation of African-American culture and finally as an American classic, worthy of presentation in a handsome and laboriously constructed scholarly edition. The history of the successive editions of *The Conjure Woman* ultimately points out the mutability of literary works in general and their fluctuant interpretation within a range of historical contexts. In part, the task of publishers consists in continuously rehabilitating the works they consider most valuable – wrapping them in paratexts that echo the concerns of new generations of readers. Such rehabilitation very often forces publishers and readers to reconsider the contours of the work in question – a fact that is vividly illustrated by Richard Brodhead’s inclusion, in his 1993 scholarly edition, of stories that Chesnutt wrote together with the rest of *The Conjure Woman* in 1899, but that were rejected by the editor of the first edition and fell out of the work as a consequence.

The editorial problems described in Erne’s essay on *King Lear* are of a different nature. Here, the difficulty both for editorial practice and readerly interpretation stems from the existence of multiple authorised versions of the text – the Quarto *History of King Lear* of 1608 and the Folio *Tragedy of King Lear* of 1623. Given this state of affairs, editors and readers are forced to ask themselves what the ‘real’ *King Lear* is. Should we speak of multiple versions of a single work, or are
the differences between the two texts consequential enough to make it more appropriate to think of the Quarto History and Folio Tragedy as two distinct works? The editorial decisions that shape the ways in which Shakespeare’s play is presented to contemporary audiences are largely determined by the relationship in which the two texts are seen to stand to one another. Offering a critical survey of recent editions of the play, Erne concludes that, as readers, we do not have access to one King Lear but to a variety of King Lears; there is no one ‘real’ Lear but a multitude of editors’ Lears.

Pierre Degott’s essay also considers the significance of textual variants between different versions of a work. His comparative study surveys the early editions of Tobias Smollett’s Roderick Random. After examining the various authorised versions printed during Smollett’s lifetime and describing the evidence of greater artistic maturity in his later emendations of the text, Degott argues that the hurriedly composed first edition, despite the ‘flaws and shortcomings characteristic of the first flush of youth’, might best reflect the subject matter of Smollett’s narrative. In order to obtain a fuller understanding of the work’s publication history, Degott examines a range of paratextual elements, which are often minimised or omitted in modern editions – title pages, frontispieces, epigraphs and apologues. This material is used to gauge the evolution of Smollett’s artistic ambitions for his work and the shifting expectations of his readership. Finally, while Degott makes aesthetic judgments concerning the ‘gains’ and ‘losses’ between the different editions of Smollett’s novel, and states his approval of Paul-Gabriel Boucé’s decision to use the 1748 first edition as the copy text for his scholarly edition of 1979, he also warns of the impossibility of establishing a ‘definitive’ edition of a work like Roderick Random since any edition necessarily involves a choice of one textual state over others.

While certain works acquire a respected and envied canonical status, others experience more ignominious fates. Robert Chester’s Loves Martyr, a work which is characterised by its ‘intricate, enigmatic structure’, is a case in point. Boris Drenkov’s case study focuses on the critical and editorial history of Chester’s work. His opening
contention is that from production to reception, the meaning of a text is transformed as it is appropriated by its readership. Sensitivity to this process, Drenkov argues, became widespread during the Renaissance. It resulted in a tension between authors and their readers as the former struggled to preserve the original message of their creation against readerly attempts to reduce its meaning and redefine the contours of the work according to their immediate practical concerns. Drenkov considers the complexity and ambiguity of Chester’s work in the light of such tension between Renaissance authors and their readers. He concludes that the reading tradition of Loves Martyr has always been ‘one of a continuous struggle with the text’ and regrets that very few critics or editors have accepted to engage in this struggle on Chester’s own terms.

The final two essays in the volume analyse the illustrations that grew from a well-known literary work, existing first as a paratextual supplement but developing a life of their own over the years and consequently resulting in a redirection and expansion of interpretations of the work itself. Nathalie Collé-Bak proposes a case study of John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress, analysing the impact that illustrations have had on the editorial and reception history of Bunyan’s work. She notes that illustrations have played a capital role in the ‘making, selling and reading of books and texts’ and that the popularity of illustrated books has encouraged publishers to keep producing such popular and financially successful editions. The market incentive to produce, and the public’s willingness to consume illustrated editions have thus contributed to a flourishing iconographic tradition for many popular works. Collé-Bak’s survey of the abundant English, British and foreign illustrated editions of The Pilgrim’s Progress demonstrates the ways in which the work’s contours have been redefined over time through its numerous publishers and illustrators – the production of new illustrated editions not only causing the book’s paratext to evolve, but also leading to new critical interpretations of the text itself. More than simply representing elements already present in the text, Collé-Bak concludes, illustrations alter the very nature of the text and ‘modify its mode of consumption’. Much as Erne claims with King Lear, Collé-Bak
concludes that the editorial history of Bunyan’s work means that there is no single Pilgrim’s Progress but a multitude of Pilgrim’s Progresses.

Applying Collé-Bak’s methodology to the iconographic tradition of James Thomson’s The Seasons, Sandro Jung focuses on the material ‘life’ of this poem. He pays particular attention to the evolving visual narrative established by the illustrations that were prepared to accompany one of the seasons, ‘Winter’, over a period of about sixty years. These illustrations, he argues, reflect the changing ideological context of the time, bearing witness to the diminishing importance of the deistic world view that informed Thomson’s poem and encouraging more secular interpretations. Over the years, the poem thus became a more accessible product, destined for consumption by new readers who had emerged with the spread of literacy and the reduction of printing costs. At the beginning of the process described by Jung, the illustrations supported the poetic narrative of The Seasons, whereas towards the end of the process they had begun to acquire a dynamics of their own. Jung attributes this development to the conditions in which new editions of the poem were produced and received – issues such as the expiration of the publisher’s copyright, the evolution of engraving practices and competition between booksellers who sought to promote the book to specific readerships all played crucial roles in expanding the range and autonomy of the illustrations associated with the work. Such marketing phenomena, as in the case of Bunyan, evince the interdependence of literary production and reception and demonstrate the ways in which their interaction redefines the contours of a given work for successive generations.

Taken as a whole, the essays in this volume draw upon recent debates in the fields of textual scholarship and book history to enrich our understanding of a range of literary works. Each contributor, while working from different perspectives, urges us to expand our understanding of what we mean by ‘literary works’ – encouraging us to take into account factors such as the material circumstances of a work’s production and reception, its re-edition in formats that adapt its message to new audiences, its relation to paratextual features ranging from illustrations to the critical apparatus of scholarly editions, and its status
within the social and legal contexts of different historical periods. The term ‘literary work’ is shown to correspond not to any definite textual space, but rather to a process of continual charting and recharting of the varying shapes that specific works assume in different historical and cultural contexts.

*Tracing the Contours of Literary Works* is the inaugural volume of *Book Practices and Textual Itineraries* – a series of peer-reviewed book-length publications devoted to the study of book history and textual scholarship. It grows out of a long-standing reflection conducted by the English Department research team at Nancy-Université, IDEA (Interdisciplinarité Dans les Études Anglophones), which has resulted in the publication of two previous studies, *Left Out: Texts and Ur-Texts* (2009) and *The Lives of the Book* (2010). Published by the Presses Universitaires de Nancy, with an international editorial advisory board, this new series aims to facilitate dialogue on book history and textual scholarship between scholars from France, Europe and the English-speaking world. It is the hope of the editors that this dialogue will be a fruitful one, benefiting from the contributions of scholars with a wide range of interests and resulting in publications that will make a substantial contribution to the fields of book history, editorial theory and textual scholarship.

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**Bibliography**


