

The 4Rs: WRITING, REPAIRING, RE-PRESENTING, RE-CREATING THE TEXT

8–10 April 1994

So far as I am aware the first conference in Australia devoted exclusively to matters of textual editing was held at the HRC in 1984 at precisely the time when the first stirrings of that wave of discontent with post-war Anglo-American editing procedures ('editorial theory') were being heard. Since then there have been three editorial conferences in Australia: *Editing in Australia* at ADFA in 1989, *The Textual Condition* in 1993 at the University of Sydney (an ASPACLS conference) and now *The 4Rs*.

The theoretical problems which editors have been engaging with in recent years as they reflected on their empirical practice have included the ways in which the contemporary discussion of textuality has affected editorial invocations of textual authority dependent on notions of authorship, authenticity and origination. Questions of historical copyright, the social functioning of printed texts, the psychology of creative writing, the history of the book and of print-culture, feminist challenges to editors' assumptions and practices, issues in historical practice, aesthetic philosophy, epistemology, communications theory, rhetoric and discourse have been brought into the discussion. Editing begs taxing, even unanswerable theoretical questions; and yet it must meanwhile continue to be done at the practical level. The resultant tensions richly fuelled editorial debate at *The 4Rs*.

This conference added an important dimension to what has hitherto been predominantly a debate among editors of literary works by including papers from such disparate areas as dance notation, art and historic-house restoration, the editing and modern mastering of historic recordings of music, and the recording of oral literatures. What emerged was an awareness of the fundamentally cognate problems (and similar vocabulary) underlying the attempt in every area to deal with documents – whether two-dimensional or three, whether written or oral – from the past. Self-consciousness of the interventionist nature of the editor's or restorer's work in the successive 'lives' and different texts of a work came out in many papers. Traditional emphasis on attempting to trace the lineaments of the ur-text of an ancient or medieval work or to establish the definitive text of a modern one was by no means unrepresented at the conference. But many speakers would have none of it, pointing instead for instance to the iconographic traditions which not only illuminated but 'performed' the medieval text and which the procedures of modern editing conceptually elide; to the need to highlight the restorer's intervention by painting grey the non-authentic furniture in the historic house; to learn to read George Herbert's poetry visually before we

presume to edit it textually; and to recognise that the fifteenth-century painting cannot be recovered in its original form.

The challenge of this conference was to broaden editorial discussion in a genuinely interdisciplinary way. Perhaps the most pleasing aspect of the conference was how well this worked. The first day of the conference ranged papers on musicology beside papers on editing oral literature and performance drama texts (Shakespeare, Australian plays of the commercial stage, Restoration comedies, and Rochester poems held only in memory) and dance. The second day had a mix of papers on the restoration of visual, three-dimensional 'texts' with papers on editing from manuscript *Cyrano de Bergerac's L'autre monde* and the Canadian William Kirby's *The Golden Dog*, editorial theory and citationality, textual instability, Ford Madox Ford, and dating a newly discovered D. H. Lawrence poem by traditional and computer-stylistic methods. After a paper on editing the letters of G. A. Sala, the third day was devoted to sessions on the recently announced History of the Book in Australia project and to the development of electronic forms of scholarly editing. The chairperson of this session remarked: amidst the disabling anxieties of theory, these electronic editors are getting on and doing. Editorial theory has enunciated the dilemma which the electronic edition may go some way towards solving. One hopes that it may also help make possible the realisation of the clarion call issued by one of the speakers for the scholarly editing of Australian musical scores.

These sessions were very well attended, which may be a sign of the times. The conference as a whole attracted over ninety participants; this was more than anticipated. The mix of twenty-eight papers ought to have been bizarre. Speakers included eight from overseas (all speakers are listed in the last *HRC Bulletin*); they came from Departments of English, French, Modern Greek, Dance and Musicology, the State Gallery of Victoria, the Information Technology Division of CSIRO, the National Film and Sound Archive, the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, the Oxford University Computing Service and the University of Queensland Press. Yet the interlinking of the papers' fundamental concerns was remarkable, demonstrating as they did various aspects of the conference's subtitle: writing, repairing, re-presenting, re-creating the text. The very many positive comments received during and after the conference – comments that went far beyond the normal politenesses – indicated that the conference was unequivocally a success.

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Paul Eggert
Convener
Director
Australian Scholarly Editions Centre
English Department
University College ADFA