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Review of Bernard Cerquiglini, In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology.

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Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 112 pp. ISBN 0801861268.

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Can a book about medieval French texts become out-of-date in the space of a decade? Bernard Cerquiglini's text was originally published in 1989 as *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie*; Betsy Wing's translation appears just ten years later. Cerquiglini's main thesis about the centrality of variants and variance to the nature of the medieval text is still of critical importance. Yet, unfortunately, its conclusions about the necessity of finding different ways to edit medieval texts have been superseded by the development of electronic resources. *In Praise of the Variant* presents a theory that is currently at the center of medieval textual criticism, but its application to contemporary understanding of the edited medieval text is limited by the advances of the last twelve years.

Cerquiglini's book, a collection of essays, focuses on two main points: first, that variance is an essential feature of the medieval text, and, second, that modern scholars have mistreated the medieval text by editing the variance out of it. Cerquiglini distinguishes two types of variance, the "longitudinal" variance within a text, made by repetition, and the "lateral variants," or different manuscript copies of a text, which, inevitably, differ from each other. Both kinds of variance have alarmed modern (that is, post-medieval) readers, who think repetition is boring and consider manuscript variants evidence of error; modern editing practices which attempt to "fix" these problems undermine the "joyful excess" which characterizes medieval texts. These two points are made explicit in chapter three of *In Praise of the Variant*, but the essays are tied together loosely by these concerns, and in chapter five, Cerquiglini suggests possibilities for ways modern editors can deal with the inherent variance of medieval texts.

Because these chapters are connected loosely, it is possible to discuss each one in isolation. The first, "Textual Modernity," discusses how the development of printing makes possible "the realization of an old dream, . . . the faithful copy" (2). Cerquiglini links the stabilization of the text to our modern understanding of authorship as ownership. He emphasizes the importance of the title page and copyright laws (focusing on France alone) in this development, and he ends the chapter by suggesting that the nineteenth-century understanding of texts and authors (texts as fixed entities, authors as owners of those fixed works) colored the then-emerging field of philology and has pulled our reading of medieval texts away from an appreciation of variance. This chapter's points are not surprising; Elizabeth Eisenstein (*The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*) and Henri-Jean Martin (*Histoire et Pouvoirs de l'Écrit*, among others) make similar connections between printing innovations or laws and authorship, although authorship is not the main focus of their works. But Cerquiglini's focus on the nineteenth century as the moment where modern authorship emerges is illuminating, calling into question any simplistic notions that the printing press changed the world overnight; it should be required reading for those who insist that in the space of a few years the computer and Internet will kill the book. In addition, Cerquiglini's brief overview of centuries of print is very clear and accessible to the non-expert.

Chapter three, "The Joyful Excess," which presents the book's central thesis, begins with a wonderful discussion of how medieval writing *is* variance, how what modern readers see as "heavy-handed repetition" is the expression of an "aesthetic of return, where pleasure lay in variance" (36-7). We must put aside our "modern scorn for needless repetition" and ask each text, "Tell me how you repeat yourself and make use of your repetition" (36). Here, Cerquiglini most clearly explains the problem with reading medieval texts--modern readers bring post-medieval assumptions to them--and expresses how we must approach these works.

In addition, "The Joyful Excess" presents the editor's dilemma: how does one deal with the multiple copies, full of variants, of a particular text? As Cerquiglini puts it, "It is hard enough to get used to the idea that there might be more than one *Chanson de Roland*, all of them authentic. But does one have to put up with, for example, several true *Percevals* by Chrétien de Troyes--the most famous romance of the European Middle Ages?" (38). Yes, in fact, we do, Cerquiglini implies, and the field has agreed with him. The study of variant texts is trickling down to the classroom; my undergraduates read both the "good" and the "bad" quartos of *Hamlet*, a text with an iconic status similar to *Perceval*'s, and regard the bad quarto with a mixture of horror and glee as their conceptions of the Shakespeare monolith fall apart.

However, chapter three ends on a disappointing note, because although Cerquiglini has given us this exciting way of reading medieval texts, he does not show us how variance actually produces meaning. The chapter is designed to move toward a final example that will illustrate his theory, but the example does not connect variance to significance. Cerquiglini simply takes two versions of a short passage from *Perceval* and points out details of the syntax: "Manuscript T expresses consecutive relation with the conjunction *que* . . . where A uses a simple paratax. . . . In T the construction of comparison is explicit, making use of the substitute verb *faire* (to do) . . . whereas in A the expression is less heavy-handed" (43). At no point does he connect these differences to any meaning of the text. While the study of syntax is a legitimate end in itself, Cerquiglini leads us to expect a discussion, not limited to grammar, of the significance of the variance. In spite of this problem, however, the chapter remains a clear presentation of ideas that are currently key to our understanding of medieval texts.

The most striking chapter in the volume is the fourth, "Gaston Paris and the Dinosaurs," which gives a brief history of French medieval textual criticism. The chapter focuses primarily on the conflict between Gaston Paris and Joseph Bédier's theories of editing medieval texts, discussing the problems with both methods. Coming out of the tradition of Karl Lachmann, one of the fathers of modern textual criticism, Paris sees scribal transmission as the mechanism through which error reproduces itself; for that reason, he advocates (re)creation of the text, working from the manuscripts to figure out what the "original" text would have been. Using examples from Paris's edition of *Saint Alexis*, Cerquiglini shows us how Paris rewrites the saint's life, reconstructing the text that should have been there, and, in so doing, moving farther and farther away from the texts that are. In his discussion, Cerquiglini makes clear the interconnectiveness of Paris's search for the "original" text and the nineteenth-century linguistic obsession with the reconstruction of the proto-Indo-European language; this "desire for origins," to borrow Allen Frantzen's phrase, motivated the search for both the Urtext and the Ursprache. Today, scholars are critical of Paris's techniques and methodology, and Cerquiglini's discussion clearly illustrates why.

On the other hand, Joseph Bédier's theories have been quietly and almost unquestioningly accepted; Cerquiglini describes "the good-natured, academic comfort in which Bédierism has dozed along" for fifty, now sixty, years (70). Cerquiglini's critique, then, is especially important, and I think the most valuable part of this book for twenty-first-century readers. Bédier believes in editing each manuscript version of a text in isolation from all others, creating an edition for each manuscript. Cerquiglini cogently argues that in using this seemingly anti-Parisian method, Bédier ends up pulling the text away from its inherent variation just as much as Paris does; as he writes, "Bédier's antimethod, as much as any other, reduced medieval works to the stable, closed, authorized texts of modernity" (70). This critique is particularly useful because it shows how Bédierist editions reinforce modern ideas about the text, creating many fixed texts instead of celebrating the variance of the one. Cerquiglini concludes at the end of this chapter that we must find another way to understand and edit medieval texts, and, although he writes before the existence of the Web or CD-ROMs, his words point the way to the modern hypertext edition.

Other chapters in the collection, however, are less useful than these three. The one that concerns me the most, and the one that will lessen the value of the book to readers who work on non-French texts, is the second, "Mr. Procrustes, Philologist." This chapter focuses on the development of the vernacular; in so doing, it makes sweeping generalizations about vernacular texts across languages. Cerquiglini bases this chapter on the assertion that, because French is the first vernacular language to develop a written form in Europe, those early French texts can give us special insight into the development of vernacular texts in Western Europe. In order to make Cerquiglini's point clear, I quote this passage at length:

Numerous reasons have been advanced to explain the development all at once of a written vernacular. Certain very specific circumstances should not be overlooked. . . . Improved economic and cultural conditions and the sorts of experimentation that this promoted deserve, nonetheless some general mention; they explain why French was the first of the vernaculars to embark on the adventure of the written word. For at least two centuries it was in the northern Gallo-Roman lands that everything was happening. Think of the real melting pot surrounding Saint-Denis for forty leagues or so between 1130 and 1270. That was where Western philosophy and architecture were forged. *The first texts in French constitute the laboratory of writing in the medieval vernacular; it is not simplistic, therefore, to choose them for our subject.* (19; emphasis added)

Throughout this chapter Cerquiglini repeatedly places the development of vernacular texts in a particular time and place, France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and this placement serves as his justification for using these texts as the basis of conclusions about the vernacular across Europe. However, the idea that French was the first written vernacular in medieval Europe is simply not true. England and Ireland both had fully-developed, booming industries of vernacular compositions and translations by the end of the ninth century. By the time French literature develops, the written saga tradition in Icelandic is also established. Cerquiglini states that "it is not simplistic" to extrapolate from the twelfth and thirteenth-century French vernacular to medieval vernacular texts in general, but unfortunately it is both simplistic and misleading, and it will cause difficulties for those readers who try to apply his conclusions to non-French texts.

If we look at the Anglo-Saxon tradition, for example, we get a very different picture of the development of the vernacular. English-language texts appear in the early seventh century in the form of legal documents, not literary works. The emergence of the vernacular in Anglo-Saxon England, then, is not the literary moment that Cerquiglini describes in his discussion of French: "The mother tongue, for the first time, confronted all the risks and possibilities of everything that literature specifically is" (20). In the development of written English, by contrast, the mother tongue confronted legalism, not literature; it was a political language as well as a poetic one. The reasons, of course, are historical; their significance is reflected in a text such as the much-anthologized Preface to the Old English translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, in which the author, Alfred the Great himself, places English as the next great political language, proposing that all essential Latin texts be translated into English just as all essential Greek texts were translated into Latin. *The Virginia Quarterly Review* has also commented upon Cerquiglini's "gallocentrism," but the problem is not simply a limited focus; Cerquiglini's conclusions about "writing in the medieval vernacular" cannot and should not be uncritically extended beyond writing in French.

The final chapter of the volume, "Turn the Page," is also less valuable than the first, third, and fourth, this time not because of inaccuracies, but simply because of the passage of time. Cerquiglini's points about the nature of the computer, for example, have become very dated. He writes, for example, "Computer inscription is variance" (81), a statement that is so true that it has become a truism; we are no longer shocked by the ease with which a document may change shape, spacing, font, and color. His suggestion that we produce electronic editions of medieval texts must have been revolutionary in 1989, but since then many editors have taken advantage of the ways that the medieval text, with its variance, can find better expression in electronic form. Online projects such as Melissa Bernstein's *Electronic Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* and Princeton University's *The Charrette Project* are revolutionizing the study of medieval texts, allowing a reader to explore multiple versions of the same text in new ways. In a slightly different way, the *Electronic Beowulf Project* on CD-ROM, which focuses on a work that exists in only one, damaged manuscript, allows us to compare the manuscript copy to the many post-medieval variants--transcripts, editions, glossaries--as well as to read the text in its manuscript context. In short, the future Cerquiglini calls for in chapter five is here today, and this chapter now serves as a historical document of the way people used to speculate about the electronic future.

Indeed, the realities of modern electronic editions have brought up new issues that Cerquiglini's book cannot address. First, there are questions of access, which are mostly questions about money. You cannot use the *Electronic Beowulf Project* unless your machine is has a Pentium 133 MHz processor or faster (or a Mac G3), and I know from experience that the suggested 32 MB RAM minimum just isn't sufficient. You cannot display images of the manuscript in a presentation unless you have a fast computer with projection capabilities and a staff of multimedia specialists who can ensure that the machine they deliver to you will have the right browser with the right plug-ins. The CD-ROM itself is inexpensive and offers an opportunity to see the *Beowulf* manuscript that only very few could ever have before, but the experience is only possible with the right equipment and the right support; as William Kilbride notes in a recent review in *Internet Archaeology*, "*Electronic Beowulf* presages a paradox of inaccessible availability."

Second, there are questions of information overload. Cerquiglini asked whether we "had to put up with several *Percevals*"; today, we must ask if we are capable of putting up with all eighty-nine possible *Canterbury Tales*? If all information is available, every manuscript variant visible, how can we take it all in? James O'Donnell writes in *Avatars of the World: From Papyrus to Cyberspace*, "We have grown up assuming that information is a scarce resource and devised our economics accordingly; but in an information waterfall, the virtual library that tells us everything and sweeps us off our feet with a cataract of data will not be highly prized" (43). The virtual edition is a virtual library in miniature; a virtual edition of a text like *The Canterbury Tales* would be a nightmare, a Noah's flood of information. We need editors to make decisions for us, to tell us what is important and what is not. Without the limitations of the print book, we can become deluged with information.

And third, there are questions of maintenance. Web editions in particular become old quickly. Consider, for example, the wonderful *Aberdeen Bestiary* web site, created in 1995. This web dinosaur is beautiful and contains useful codicological information, but it is ungainly, organized so that the transcriptions cannot be read alongside the images. The site would be much easier to use with frames, an innovation that was not available way back in 1995. One of the most important web resources for medievalists, the *Labyrinth*, is not being updated regularly right now and is becoming less and less useful, the links broken, and the information missing. A web edition is never completed; it requires upkeep that a print copy, happy to sit on a shelf, never asks for. The obsolescence that electronic texts constantly flirt with is an issue that editors of medieval texts need to be thinking about now.

In spite of its limitations, *In Praise of the Variant* nonetheless gives us a valuable introduction to the importance of variance in our understanding of the medieval text. It is, perhaps, a testament to the changes medieval studies has gone through in the past ten years that so much of the book seems so very basic now; these ideas about the nature of the manuscript text have become central to the way we look at medieval works. Medievalists often believe that we are particularly well-suited to life in the post-print world, that an understanding of the variance of the medieval text has prepared us for a world in which, once again, all texts are variants, changing with just a flick of the mouse. Cerquiglini's book, which made that connection twelve years ago, can still be a useful first step into the pre-or post-modern world.