

Research Article

Forum

Adapted and unadapted texts: do any of us ever read just what our author wrote?

Jerome Moran

Independent Scholar, UK

Abstract

We do not possess, nor are we ever likely to possess, any autograph of a Greek or Latin literary text from antiquity. We do not always apprise our students of this fact. This article seeks to explain why we possess only copies of the texts, often adapted for one reason or another and at many stages removed from the autographs. It also explains why certain kinds of originals cannot by their nature be copied or adapted, and are lost to us as soon as they are created. Non-literary texts too, written on durable materials other than papyri and parchment, do not, for various reasons, always constitute autographs, or autographs that we and our students can have ready access to.

Key words: autograph, adapted and unadapted text, original/copy, literary/non-literary text

‘**Adapt:** to make suitable (for a new or different use or situation) by means of changes or modifications ... to adapt one thing to another implies a suiting or fitting by alteration or modification’ (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*) [See the full entry to appreciate what a nuanced term ‘adapt’ is.]

Quot editores tot Propertii (J.S. Phillimore)

‘... [E]ditors do create the authors they edit, in that the text of author X in editor Y’s edition is made up of the sum total of editor Y’s textual decisions.’ (Tarrant, 2016, p. 105.)¹

[Note that by the above definition not all alterations, even deliberate ones, may be viewed as adaptations (see further below). Every adaptation is an alteration of some kind, but not vice versa. It can be difficult to know whether an alteration should be viewed as an adaptation, especially if one is uncertain about the reason for the alteration. Often one cannot tell whether a manuscript reading is an alteration at all, i.e. something different from what the author wrote – which is precisely where textual criticism comes in, of course. This caveat does not, however, undermine the belief that no extant literary text from antiquity is a faithful copy of the autograph, which is what an editor of a critical edition seeks

to restore, and what we would like to think we are presented with.]

Some preliminaries about terminology

By a ‘text’ I mean a verbal composition of any kind, whole or partial, literary or non-literary, adapted or unadapted, authorial (or indited) or copied. It is not necessarily written or committed in some other way to a physical material. For example, the texts that were the original compositions of the Homeric poems may not have been written texts in the first instance, and they may have been indited. But we still refer to them as ‘texts’.

We know what ‘copy of a text’ means. Is it unambiguously clear what ‘a copied text’ means? Does it mean a text that is a copy of another text, or does it mean the text of which a copy has been made? In fact the terms ‘copied text’, ‘altered text’, ‘adapted text’ and ‘unadapted text’ are all ambiguous, the first three as between the earlier and later text, the last one as explained below.

To avoid any confusion, by ‘adapted text’ we mean a version of another text. The other text has been deliberately altered in some way in order to fit it in its altered form (the adapted text) to some different context, readership or purpose. The adapted text is the later text; the altered text is the earlier one. The alterations have been made *to* the earlier text (it does not make sense to say that they have been made *to* the later text) but they appear *in* the later text. The earlier text may continue to exist alongside the later text or may at some point be replaced by the later text.

Copies and Originals

The main reason we learn Greek and Latin is to enable us to read what are described as ‘unadapted texts’ (‘unadapted’, note, not

Author of correspondence: Jerome Moran, E-mail: jeromemoran@hotmail.com

Cite this article: Moran J (2023). Adapted and unadapted texts: do any of us ever read just what our author wrote?. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 24, 169–173. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631023000284>

simply 'unaltered') in Greek and Latin, especially literary texts. But do we ever achieve our goal? When our students read what is represented to them as an 'unadapted' classical text, which is, after all, the fruit (though Tantalus like, as it happens) of their labours, they probably think that they are reading a text that consists solely of the author's own words, as he wrote them or indited them (as an ingenuous student myself, at school at any rate, I never doubted it).² We do not disabuse them; on the contrary, we indulge their sense of achievement at being able to read at last what they take to be the *ipsissima verba* of the author, rather than the 'adapted' texts that they have been presented with up to this point. We ourselves assume, perhaps too readily, that the author's own words are what we are presented with when we read a modern text. We are not aware of what can happen to it after it has left the author's hand. People in the ancient world and beyond – owners of texts, and readers, if not scholars and competent and conscientious scribes – were less concerned about the integrity of a text than we are (they were also less concerned about originality of composition). Owners of texts (and for a long time texts were in the hands of private owners) had little compunction in altering their copy of a text themselves for whatever reason, to 'correct', add to or subtract from, or 'improve' in some other way, or just to personalise it and to feel that it was theirs in ways other than merely as owners of it. (Don't we do this sort of thing ourselves with our own books? I know that I do.) Some scholars call this 'collaboration' and regard it as an authentic part of the work as it has been received by us. Other, more traditional, scholars call it 'interpolation', i.e. non-authorial material, and regard it as unwarranted intrusion upon the work.

Sometimes (but hardly ever from the ancient world) there is more than one original text, more than one version of the same work.³ And there are today many revised, sometimes extensively revised, versions of what purport to be the same work. Walt Whitman's *Leaves Of Grass* is a prime example. W. H. Auden was forever tinkering with poems that had already been published. Some people write the same book with a different title; others write a different book with the same title. Barbara Cartland is an example of the former; Whitman and Auden are examples of the latter.

In the case of musical works there are only different versions (of interpretation), never an original of which there are copies, even unfaithful copies. Even where an autograph exists and it is clear what the composer wrote, the notes on the page of the autograph score are not the piece of music, which is something that is realised only in performance, something that is heard (unless it is a silent work of John Cage), not read. There is no original work with which to compare the different versions, only the different versions. Critics may hail a particular performance as 'authentic' or even 'definitive'; but these should not be taken to mean that the original of the work has somehow been discovered or recovered. A recording of a performance may be said to be a copy, but it is only a copy of a particular version or realisation of the work, not of the original work. There is no original work: the original/copy model is not appropriate. This is similar to the situation with ancient literary texts in that we do not possess the originals of them. But in the case of texts it is because they are lost to us, not because they never existed in the first place. Homer may be an exception to this, if he was a truly oral poet; and the case of Homer may be more similar to that of musical works, except that Homer may not even have had the equivalent of a score. (See further, note 3.)

Consider also a playwright's playscript and the relationship between the playscript and the play. As Hamlet says, the play's the thing. The relationship between the two is very like that of a musical score and the music – and there is such a genre as a musical play,

e.g. the Conor McPherson play *Girl From The North Country*, based on the music of Bob Dylan. As with a piece of music, the autograph of the playscript may exist (which is more, of course, than just the actors' dialogue). But this is not the play, which, like a piece of music, is something that is realised only in performance. (The word 'drama' is from a Greek verb to do, *dran*, not from any verb to write; similarly, 'act' comes from the Latin verb to do, *agere*.) Some plays involve unscripted, impromptu interaction with the audience or between the characters. There is no original play of which there are copies. There is an original playscript of which there are copies, just as there is an original musical score of which there are copies. There may be recordings of performances of the play, but these are not copies of the original play, which no more exists than does the original of a musical work. Add to this the very different productions of the 'same' play by different directors. If the play is the overall performance, in what sense are they performances of the same play? The playwright's words may be faithfully reproduced (they are not always), as may in a sense be the composer's musical notes; but the overall performance that is the play cannot be reproduced, even in a recording. As with music, the different performances of a play resemble the different 'compositions-in-performance' of an oral epic poem, except that in the case of the latter there is no original script. There is a sense in which this is true of a performance of a play: since the play is the overall performance, every performance constitutes a new composition of the play. As for the autographs of ancient Greek and Roman plays, these underwent the same kind of treatment as literary texts, with the added distortion of the original of actors' interpolations and those of other personnel involved in the production of the plays.

In the case of works of art we usually have, or think we have, the original. But sometimes this is revealed as a copy, or as a forgery. (And there have been literary forgeries of course, e.g. the works of Dictys and Dares from the ancient world and Ossian and Chatterton's Rowley poems from the modern world.) In some cases we believe that the original is lost and that all we have are copies that were made at the same time as the original. But we are not able to compare them with the original. And an original work of art viewed *in situ* is different from a photographic image seen in a book. A copy of an ancient literary text is like a copy of a lost work of art, but a less faithful, i.e. less representative, one.

In Philosophy the 'causal' or 'representative' theory of perception maintains that we do not perceive things directly, but rather 'representations' of things caused by the things themselves. But we are never in a position to compare what we perceive with the thing itself, so we can never know how representative what we perceive is of the thing itself (nor even whether it is a representation at all). Our experience of a classical text is somewhat analogous to this. In the case of Homer, if he was a truly oral poet, we can never know in principle how 'representative' what we have now is of a supposed 'original'. How much of this are our students aware? Do/should we make them (more) aware?

Are there any unadapted Greek and Latin texts?

The simple answer is 'yes', but in the case of literary texts – which are what most of us want to read most of the time – the answer, if the question is a non-trivial one (see below), is 'almost certainly not'.

It may be helpful at this point to bring together some of the main forms and causes of the adaptation of texts, mainly texts in manuscripts and printed editions, by scribes, editors, owners and readers. These are in addition, of course, (though not altogether

unrelated) to alterations in the form of the myriad of routine scribal errors:

- (i) alterations intended to bring the wording of texts into line with grammarians' prescriptions, in order to ensure 'correctness' and uniformity of linguistic usage;
- (ii) in the case of dramatic texts, alterations in the form of actors' interpolations or alterations made by other people involved in the production of plays;
- (iii) alterations made by owners or readers of texts in order to conform with their personal preferences or requirements;
- (iv) wholesale alterations made by scribes and editors in accordance with their notion of the literary style of the author, often with the effect of eliminating authentic authorial idiosyncrasies of style in the interests of a bland stylistic uniformity;
- (v) alterations in the form of the suppression or alteration of content in order to conform with some ideology, usually religious, moral or political in origin;
- (vi) global alteration of the format of texts for the sake of convenience or expediency: roll to codex, papyrus to parchment, maiusculum to minuscule script, resulting not just in the alteration of texts but in the wholesale loss of texts that did not get copied in the new format.

These can all be viewed as adaptations and not simply as alterations. Collectively they conspire to make it almost certain that we do not read unadapted texts, literary texts at any rate. If we add to them the countless other alterations we can be pretty certain that we never read original literary texts.

Adaptation entails human contrivance, conscious and deliberate intervention in the text. A copy of a text that contains inadvertent alterations only (all texts from the ancient world do) is not an adapted text. A deliberately altered text is not necessarily an adapted text (note the ambiguities in this sentence). And a text may happen to resemble another text but differ in certain particulars without being an adaptation of it. Different versions of a myth may have differences that are not to be accounted for by supposing that one has been adapted from another, unless some form of intertextuality is at work and the intertext can be seen as an adaptation, which I suppose it often is.

The simple, made-up reading passages that we find in the early stages of the language course books we use are examples of unadapted texts in the first sense of the term as given above. On the other hand, reading passages in the later stages of such books may be adapted texts, since they are clearly altered versions of other texts that have been altered to fit a different context, readership or purpose from the other texts.

Some course books also contain what are described as 'unadapted' texts, in the second sense of that term. These are more problematical. In the case of these it depends on what kind of text they are.

In the case of literary texts, especially extant copies of them in manuscripts that postdate antiquity (usually the earliest copies we have, for Latin at any rate), what is the relationship between the so-called 'unadapted' text in our course book, the text that it is claimed has not been altered (the identity of this is not usually acknowledged), the text in the manuscript (or rather texts in the manuscripts), the text in early printed editions, and the original composition (the autograph), however composed, i.e. written or indited in some fashion? Little wonder if we do not disclose to our students how they come to be reading their 'unadapted' texts.

The unadapted text in the course book or anthology is usually a copy of the text of a modern printed edition, often a critical edition of the putative original composition (insofar as this can ever be (re)constructed).⁴ The unadapted text may not be an alteration of the text of the modern edition. But what of the modern edition? This is where complications arise in the form of circumstances that cause us to doubt whether there can ever be such a thing as an unadapted text. A scribe may in rare circumstances produce a faithful copy of a copy that unknown to him has been so adapted. This may happen at any stage of the textual transmission, depending on the cause of the adaptation.

Since we do not possess a single autograph of an ancient Greek or Latin literary text – we have plenty of autographs of various kinds of non-literary texts – we can never be sure of the exact nature of the original text. This means that in principle we cannot be confident that we are ever reading an unadapted text. From what we know of the vicissitudes of textual transmission the presumption of the unlikelihood that we are reading such a text is overwhelming.

The survival and integrity of literary texts before the age of printing depended on timely and accurate copying in sufficient numbers. Countless texts failed to survive and there is good reason to think that no text survived unaltered – and no physical autograph survived. The causes of the loss of texts are various. Papyrus is not very durable in normal conditions and parchment, though more durable, was more expensive than papyrus. Losses occurred therefore as a result of natural causes and for economic reasons once parchment started to replace papyrus. The change from roll to codex accounts for the loss of texts that failed to get copied in the new format. The same applies to the change from maiusculum to minuscule script. (See Tarrant: 6) We assume that the texts would already have undergone greater or lesser alteration, by accident or design, in any case, before any of these changes took place and in the process of change from one form to another.

I said at the beginning that by a 'text' I mean 'a verbal composition ... of any kind, literary or non-literary ...'. There is an important difference between a literary text and certain kinds of non-literary texts such as an inscription (public or private), a shopping list on a papyrus, a graffito, an ostrakon, a *defixio*, a wooden tablet etc. This is that in the case of the latter we are always presented with an autograph – the text at first hand as it was produced – but in the case of the former never, but instead a version many times removed from the original composition. In the case of the latter we can be sure that what we are presented with is always an unadapted text.

But can we? We can if what we are presented with is the text *in situ* or the object that bears the text if this has been removed from the place of its discovery.⁵ I suppose that a photograph too of the object, may, with qualification, count as an unadapted text, but this may be more problematical. This in fact is how most of us actually experience such a text, i.e. as an image of the text. Also, many texts, especially papyri and inscriptions, we experience only after they have been edited, complete with conjectural emendations – the antithesis of an unadapted text. So even non-literary texts are experienced as adapted texts.

The 'unadapted texts' we read in course books, anthologies etc. are copies of texts found in modern editions. The text of a modern edition (a copy of which is presented to us as an unadapted text) may itself be or derive from an adapted text. In fact it is highly likely that it is an adapted text. So the text that we are presented with as an unadapted text may be unadapted in a trivial sense (an accurate immediate copy) but adapted in a non-trivial sense (altered from an earlier form of the text, and certainly from the original form).

The reason for the latter possibility lies in what happened to literary texts in antiquity and beyond. No text survived unaltered from its original composition, it is safe to say. Many texts were adapted for a variety of reasons and subsequently transmitted as the authentic text. Eventually no copies of the earlier texts were to be found, though sometimes stray copies of them or parts of them turned up in monasteries or libraries or were dug up from the sands of Egypt.

The principal stages by which an original text (the autograph) reaches us as a so-called 'unadapted' text may be shown in a simplified form as follows, in descending order of age and correspondence with the original composition:

course book/anthology
 modern printed (critical) edition
 older printed editions
 medieval manuscripts
 manuscripts from antiquity (where these exist: rarer in Latin than in Greek)
 Immediate copies of the autograph and subsequent copies of them
 autograph (written or indited)

(Note the gap in time between items 6–7 and item 4, depending of course on the date of item 7.)

There are thus six stages at which alteration of the original text may occur. At nearly every stage we can be sure that alteration did occur. By the time the penultimate stage is reached an editor may be faced with a greater or lesser number of textual *crucis*, some of them genuinely intractable, and some of them as numerous as those in Propertius (hence the quotation at the beginning). However expertly and conscientiously a modern editor seeks to restore the autograph, it is certain that he or she will not be successful, and that the results of their endeavours will be a text different from the autograph, to a greater or lesser extent. There are only degrees of unsuccess in such an enterprise. There seems to be a diminishing number of people willing or able to take on such an enterprise (in Anglophone countries at any rate). If so, at least the stock of adapted texts will not be added to. But the aim of editors, idealistic though it may be, must be to produce a perfect copy of the autograph, though even if they were to achieve it they would not know that they had.

As for the reasons and causes of why and how texts came to be adapted, most of the main ones have been given earlier. The one that was possibly responsible for most adaptations was the progressive standardisation of the language of the texts, especially where usage was not uniform, within the same author or between different authors. Such usage included orthography, morphology, syntax and lexis. The persons principally responsible for this form of adaptation of the texts were the ancient grammarians. Their prescriptions and proscriptions (and they did not always agree among themselves or even with themselves on what was prescribed and proscribed), which could produce a deformity of the text, found their way into later manuscripts and modern grammar books – and into modern editions of the texts, the so-called 'unadapted texts' we use today. It has not been possible, it would appear, to reverse such adaptations; it seems that they are here to stay. Everything else about a text seems to be fair game for emendation or excision by editors.

The next time we tell our students that they are about to read the *ipsissima verba* of an author's unadapted text we should pause for thought. Perhaps we should come clean.⁶

Notes

1 This book has been helpful in writing this article, especially the parts that touch upon textual criticism. It can be recommended as a readable, up-to-date, introductory guide for those who would like to know more about the topics and issues dealt with in the book. But the book's sub-title (*Methods and problems in Latin textual criticism*) indicates that it is about *Latin* textual criticism only, which means that although there is much in common with the methods of criticism applied to texts in both languages, issues peculiar to Greek texts are not addressed. It is much more accessible, as well as up-to-date, than the accounts by Maas (1958) and West (1973), the only other available guides in English apart from Reynolds and Wilson (2013). (There is also the much older book by Hall (1913), which is still useful in places, and still available.) The (forthcoming) *Oxford Handbook of Greek and Latin Textual Criticism* will probably be too advanced for most non-specialists.

2 If the words were indited by the author, as was the case with some classical texts, we may not have them to begin with if the amanuensis had taken them down incorrectly. (A version of this is what happened in medieval monastic *scriptoria*, the source text being dictated to the scribes.) Or the author himself may have made errors when dictating to the amanuensis, errors not picked up by the latter. If they were written by the author, we might not have the author's intended words if he had made the kinds of errors that scribes made, especially if he was making a fair copy of a draft. Again, an autograph may have contained errors that were corrected in a copy or copies. We would probably accept the corrections, not realising they were corrections to what was in the autograph. If another manuscript contained the errors we would think they were scribal errors not authorial ones and therefore eliminate parts of the autograph, confident that we were preserving them. It is interesting to speculate on how many texts were vitiated *ab ovo*. At a rough estimate I would say all of them. Show me a modern text of some length, even if it has been proof-read, that contains nothing but what is in the autograph.

3 How should we categorise Homer? Countless copies of his works survive. But what of the originals? Are the copies ultimately copies of autographs of single versions? Not if his poems were composed purely orally. If they were then there were no autographs at all. But there is still a sense in which he composed many different versions of the same works, if oral theory is correct. And the many differences in the transcriptions of these works that have survived are due to the fact that they preserve these different versions in some form. There is no archetype, let alone autograph. But it would be a mistake to ask, as we might ask of modern works, which of these are the versions that the poet wished to be regarded as the final, true, definitive versions. This would be to fail to understand the difference between oral and written composition. In some ways Homer's poems are like musical works (but without the scores – these came later, but they were not scores of the original performances): they exist only as performances, as realisations of their creator's (unwritten) compositions.

4 In spite of the quotation from Tarrant at the beginning, a modern critical edition such as an OCT or a Teubner text is just another link in the chain of transmission of a text. It is after all basically a copy of the 'best' (according to the editor) manuscript(s), together with copies of readings found in other manuscripts and printed editions, and conjectures of the editor (or of others). There may be a lot of skill (and a lot of drudgery) involved in selecting the best manuscripts and readings, but the only parts of the finished edition that are not copies are the conjectures of the editor, usually few in number and relatively few of which gain general approval, or, if they do, only temporarily. Ironically, if the conjectures were to be correct they would be copies too, in this case of the autograph.

5 But parts of such a text, especially a public inscription, may be missing, or existing parts defaced or have been subjected to *damnatio memoriae*. In such cases what we are presented with, even *in situ*, is not 'the text at first hand as it was produced'. It may well be second hand and post-production. (I am talking here of course just of the text itself, not of the object on which the text has been written, incised or applied: papyrus, stone, wood, pottery, metal etc., none of which will be in the same condition as when the text was produced, and whose altered condition may itself be the cause of alterations to the text.)

6 Given the many hazards of transmission until the age of printing (few were lost to us after about 1550) it is perhaps surprising that we have as many complete (or almost complete) and coherent (on the whole) texts as we do, however adapted or otherwise altered they may still be. This is thanks largely to the

efforts over the last few hundred years of textual critics and editors of critical editions, of course. It may be objected to by purists and perfectionists, but perhaps we should be glad at what we have rather than lament what we have not (autographs or incontestably authentic copies); and since perfection is unattainable and would not be recognised in any case even if it were attainable, perhaps we should agree with what E.R. Dodds is alleged to have said: 'Our editions of Greek and Latin authors are good enough to live with' (quoted by Tarrant: 145). After all, we manage to live with many texts in English after the age of printing, the exact originals or authors' preferred readings of which are uncertain (see what Tarrant says of the manuscripts and editions of John Donne (Tarrant: 127)). One wonders how different from what we have now the most acclaimed future critical editions of most popular texts will be (with the possible exception of Propertius). The present state of many less popular texts is a different matter, but one which is unlikely to concern any but the small number of people who are aware of the present state of such texts. Finally, it would be remarkable (given the exigencies of editors and printers) if you had just finished reading an unadapted version of the autograph of this article (the version

submitted to the editor, or by the editor to the printer). And imagine what it might look like in another 1,000 years or more.

References

- de Melo W and Scullion S** (eds) (forthcoming [2023]) *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Latin Textual Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hall FW** (1913) *A Companion to Classical Texts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maas P** (1958) *Textual Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reynolds LD and Wilson NG** (2013) *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 4th Edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tarrant RJ** (2016) *Texts, Editors, and Readers: Methods and Problems in Latin Textual Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- West ML** (1973) *Textual Criticism and Editorial Technique Applicable to Greek and Latin Texts*. Stuttgart and Leipzig: de Gruyter.