

## Preliminary Observations

A critical text of any medieval work which survives in multiple manuscript copies is, as Gianfranco Contini was in the habit of saying, *un'ipotesi di lavoro*, a working hypothesis. Assuming that we have no autograph copy and that, as is almost invariably the case, surviving copies are already several (and often many) generations removed from the original, the text reflects or embodies the best hypothesis the editor is able to construct to explain the inter-relationships among the individual extant copies, and the relationship of all of them to the author's original. This hypothesis, formulated after scrupulous analysis of all the available evidence, should ideally account for the facts as economically as possible (respecting the principle of parsimony), and leave as little as possible unaccounted for. On the basis of this hypothesis the editor then proceeds to a reconstruction of the words of the original which is as close to the form in which the author wrote them as the evidence allows. The discovery of additional evidence in the form of new manuscripts may well provoke a need to re-examine and refine the hypothesis, or, in extreme cases, abandon it and attempt to formulate a new one. The crucial point reflected in the notion of a working hypothesis is that no critical edition of such a text will ever be definitive, any more than a scientific theory can be: the possibility that new evidence may come to light will always exist, and will always have the potential to alter our perceptions of the existing material. Only an unwise or presumptuous editor would claim that an edition was definitive. At best, it will be definitive for its time.

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