

Scholarly Editing and German Literature: Revision, Revaluation, Edition

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Textual Scholarship and Canon Formation

Annika Rockenberger

What part do (scholarly) editions play when it comes to processes of canonisation and canon formation? Do they count among the causally efficacious factors and if so, to what degree? In publications on this topic, the view is commonly taken that editions can indeed contribute significantly to the canonisation of single works and authors. When adopting a skeptical attitude towards this, however, the question arises how the hypotheses of a relevance of editorial practices to the canon can be verified empirically, and according to which criteria possible efficiencies of editions on the canon can be established. In my article, I principally discuss how the question of the relevance of editions for the canon is to be understood in general and how it could be answered – if applicable.

What do you mean? and How do you know?

JOHN HOSPERS: *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics*. New York-London: Free Press 1969. pp. 1–13. Here: p. 2

“Is scholarly editing a factor in canonisation?” – By intuition, my first reaction to this question is to say: ‘no’. But, a closer look at current publications on canon research and scholarly editing made me consider an alteration of my initial judgement.¹ As one of the first to do so, Rien T. Segers stated that “the publication of texts” explicitly “counts among those activities that serve the canonisation process.”² Furthermore, Joseph Grigely takes the view that “scholarly editing” could be described as “institutionally supported canonization.”³ Then, in their introduction to the valuation of literature, Renate von Heydebrand and

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- 1 This article is a revised and extended version of my paper presented at the UBC graduate conference “Rema(r)king German Literature”, held 15 September 2012 in Vancouver, Canada. All quotations taken from non-English publications are translated by me. – I owe special thanks to Per Röcken (Berlin) with whom I discussed extensively the thoughts and questions raised in this article.
 - 2 Rien T. Segers: *Durchbruch und Kanonisierung. Eine neue Provokation für die Literaturgeschichtsschreibung? Oder: Wie konnte Virginia Woolf so berühmt werden?* In: *SPIEL* 12 (1993). pp. 1–22. Here: p. 4.
 - 3 Joseph Grigely: *Textuality. Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1995. p. 31.

Simone Winko explicitly name one *definitionally* relevant token of the term 'literary canon'. Components of the canon – among other things – are passed on by being “incorporated in series of classics” and “editions of complete works; especially critical editions.”⁴ A little further on, they put forward the hypothesis: “publication on visible and qualified spots, preferably in well-structured editions of complete works, is an act of valuation that initialises and – to a certain extent – prejudices the road to success.”⁵

Many more utterances of this kind are to be found in current discussions of modern German textual scholarship. Stephan Kammer states in an online compendium of scholarly editing that “editorial projects of various types have repeatedly initiated the canonisation of authors and texts respectively, without having recourse to the general cultural engagement of their objects.”⁶ With reference to his monumental empirical survey on the history of the reception of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's literary work, Winfried Woesler states that “when it comes to canonisation processes in literature or hierarchisation within canons, editions are a crucial issue.”⁷

In an overview article on scholarly editing, Rüdiger Nutt-Kofoth allots scholarly editions to the function of “co-controlling the literary canon.”⁸

Allein durch die Klassifizierung eines Autors und seiner Werke mit dem Qualitätssiegel ‘würdig für eine historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe’ wird der bestehende Kanon ‘bedeutender’ Autoren oder ‘bedeutender’ Werke bekräftigt oder auch verändert.

[Solely by classifying an author and his works with the seal of quality of ‘being worthy of a historical-critical edition’, the existing canon of ‘significant’ authors or ‘significant’ works is also being affirmed or modified.]

4 Renate von Heydebrand, Simone Winko: *Einführung in die Wertung von Literatur*. Systematik, Geschichte, Legitimation. Paderborn: Schöningh 1996. p. 222.

5 Ibid. p. 226: “Publikation an sichtbarer und qualifizierter Stelle, möglichst in gut gegliederten Gesamtausgaben, ist eine Wertungshandlung, die den Weg zum Erfolg eröffnet und ein Stück weit präjudiziert.”

6 Stephan Kammer: [Art.] Kanon. In: *Kompendium der Editionswissenschaft*. Ed. by Anne Bohnenkamp-Renken, Hans Walter Gabler (2001). <http://www.edkomp.uni-muenchen.de/CD1/C/Kanon-C-SK.html>. Downloaded 21 August 2012, “[...] dass Editionsprojekte unterschiedlichen Typs wiederholt die K[anon]isierung von Autoren resp. Texten initiiert haben, ohne auf eine generelle kulturelle Verbindlichkeit ihres Gegenstands zurückgreifen zu können”.

7 Winfried Woesler: Der Editor und ‘sein’ Autor. In: *editio* 7 (2003). pp. 50–66. Here: p. 50.

8 Rüdiger Nutt-Kofoth: Philologie, Editionswissenschaft und Literaturwissenschaft. In: *Die Herkulesarbeiten der Philologie*. Ed. by Sophie Bertho and Bodo Plachta. Berlin: Weidler 2008. pp. 25–44. Here: p. 43.

Thus, it seems obvious: scholarly editions are in fact an efficacious factor in canonisation and the question mark in the question raised above is to be erased. However, how is it then to be explained that the said, at first glance convincing, estimation is not congruent with the following hint given by Nutt-Kofoth in the very same article:⁹

Die Mechanismen des Kanonbezugs, nach denen Editionen veranstaltet werden, oder Wirkungen der Editionen auf den Kanon sind für die deutsche Literatur bisher nicht systematisch untersucht wie auch die Einflüsse solcher editorischer Entscheidungen auf die Wahrnehmung von Literaturgeschichte bisher relativ unbekannt sind.

[The mechanisms of reference to the canon according to which scholarly editions have been designed or the effects scholarly editions have on the canon of German literature have not yet been surveyed systematically, the influences editorial decisions have on the perception of literary history are similarly relatively unknown.]

Besides a certain initial plausibility of the hypotheses in favour of the relevance of scholarly editions for the genesis and/or persistence of the literary canon, no sufficient empirical evidence has been provided to either verify or falsify the hypotheses.¹⁰

Neither will I not provide an empirically-substantial reconstruction of the relationship between canon and scholarly edition either. Rather, I will confine myself instead to some more basic reflections.

Specifically, what I am going to do is this: I will attempt to situate the above raised question heuristically in the scope of two, exemplarily exaggerated *approaches to the explanation of canonisation processes*.¹¹ Proceeding from there, I hope to reach a point at which I am able to *reformulate* the question so that it becomes clearer and more accessible for an empirical survey. The point

9 Ibid. p. 43.

10 But consult the individual studies in *Textual Scholarship and the Canon*. Ed. by Hans Walter Gabler et al. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2008 and *Text och tradition*. Om textedering och kanonbildning. Ed. by Lars Burman, Barbro Ståhle Sjönell. Stockholm: Svenska Vitterhetssamfundet 2002 as well as the critical review of this collection by Mats Dahlström in: *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 19,1 (2004). pp. 134–137.

11 Here, I draw on distinctions introduced by Dagfinn Føllesdal, Lars Walløe, and Jon Elster in their book *Rationale Argumentation*. Ein Grundkurs in Argumentation und Wissenschaftstheorie. Berlin-New York: De Gruyter 1988, pp. 144–188; cf. for a general survey on the issue Peter Achinstein: *The Nature of Explanation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985.

is not to give a definite answer to the raised question, but rather to better *understand* the question itself: Are scholarly editions – more precisely: the actions executed in the course of editorial projects of a specific type and their results – to be counted among the *causal factors* that generate, constitute or preserve a literary canon?

To illustrate an explanatory approach widely used in canon research, I will lay out a brief – and rather simplified – counterfactual imagination. An exemplary society of the following variety shall be imagined for argument's sake: A relatively small group of 'educated' actors and a much larger group of 'uneducated' actors are opposed to each other, where the minority has the power to determine what passes for generally binding 'education'. In particular, deriving from their control of educational institutions, the minority group has the possibility to dictate from which traditional material all members of the society derive knowledge, and through which corresponding verbal and non-verbal actions they ought to express their positive valuation.

Such postulates are *justified* with reference to the interests of *the society* respectively with the *functions* that the objects thus constituting the canon fulfil *for the society*. The conservation of traditional material as collective material has to serve as a means of self-projection and identity-establishment as well as to distance one group from the others and to function as a means of practical orientation. Some members of this society then feel the obligation to further profile *their* canon – in both meanings of the word, 'their own' and 'theirs as part of a group' – by deliberate acts of selection and interpretation, and thus enforcing the canon against divergent claims. *I shall refer to these people as 'philologists'.*

To extend the area of validity of canon-related knowledge and validation *norms* to the 'uneducated' circles of society, modes of representation that are favourably priced and easy to understand (so-called 'reader's editions') are developed. Meanwhile, methods for refurbishing canonised objects are developed that become more and more complex and are barely comprehensible by the majority of people are developed alongside an increasing institutionalisation of the 'maintenance of tradition'. Still, precisely the sophisticated, flamboyant making of these editions (paratexts, book design, layout and typography) is executed so that the postulated value of the objects presented this way becomes apparent.

This exemplarily exaggerated narrative reconstruction of the genesis of a canon obviously uses an *intentional explanatory approach that includes functional elements*. Here, a canon is the persistent result of the purposeful-intentional action of a group of people conceptualised as a holistic mega-actor or at least as some sort of specialised functionaries of this group of people.

Though, what remains a bit vague is what is actually meant when saying that a society, a cultural community or at least a group of functionaries *in toto take an interest in* and *have the intention to* respectively, pass on specific objects that fulfil a specific function *for them*. In such a schematic phrasing it seems that something like *collective intentionality* is presupposed.¹²

For me, it seems clear: the functions ascribed to the canon or its elements are primarily *social*, but at the same time serve as both *justifying and motivating reasons* for the intentional actions of *single actors*. In this, there is an *explanatory feedback*.¹³ Thus, the indication of *functions* of the canon contributes to the explanation of its genesis and persistence *indirectly* – but only *formally* because the shared acceptance of the necessity *that* a certain function is fulfilled does not yet explain *by what exactly* and *why exactly by those objects* the function in question is fulfilled.

I would like to cursorily point out further disadvantages of this explanatory approach: Firstly, it derives from an inadmissible equation of a *postulated* and a *factually accepted* canon. Even if it were the social function of philologists to perpetuate the maintenance of tradition of those works which are of interest to the society in general, the result would certainly not be that they would necessarily be successful in accomplishing this task.

Secondly, there seems to be the objection that the influence of the operative personnel is *overrated*: obviously, the success is dependent on the acceptance of canon-related postulates as reflected in aligned follow-up communications of all other members of the society. This is presupposed without any convincing empirical proof. Needless to say that my simplistic imagination does not meet the complexity of canonisation processes – even as a first approach. This is especially true when considering pluralistic societies. It is a fact that *the canon* does not exist: firstly, because *multiple* canons always coexist, secondly, because individual canons are permanently *in change* and have blurred margins, even in a synchronic view.

But even if I misappropriated some praiseworthy differentiations here, assumptions like those I have narrated briefly above can be found throughout the current debate on the literary canon and canonisation. Each and every

12 Cf. principally John R. Searle: *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin 1995, Ch. 1; John R. Searle: *Making the Social World. The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, Ch. 3; *Concepts of Sharedness. Essays on Collective Intentionality*. Ed. by Hans Bernhard Schmid, Katinka Schulte-Ostermann, Nikos Psarros. Heusenstamm: Ontos 2008, and David P. Schweikard: *Der Mythos des Singulären: Eine Untersuchung zur Struktur kollektiven Handelns*. Paderborn: Mentis 2011.

13 Cf. Føllesdal, Walløe, Elster: *Rationale Argumentation* (Ann. 11). pp. 157 ff. and p. 175.

contribution to the debate from the discipline of *textual scholarship* refers primarily to such an intentional-functionalistic explanatory approach. A favoured point of reference for this approach is the theoretical postulates of Aleida and Jan Assmann. The following thoughts that are captioned *Wächter der Tradition* (Guardians of Tradition) were first published in 1987 in their book, *Kanon und Zensur* (Canon and Censorship):¹⁴

Erst wenn wir uns freimachen vom Gedanken an selbsttätige Stabilisatoren der Überlieferung wird das Moment der ‘unwahrscheinlichen’ Zeitresistenz als Ergebnis einer bewußten und mühevollen Anstrengung sichtbar. Permanenz stellt sich nicht von selbst her, aber es gibt gesellschaftliche Institutionen, die mit ihrer Herstellung befaßt sind. Sie stützen und regulieren, verfestigen und stellen still, was naturgemäß äußerst variabel ist. Solche Institutionen wirken als ‘Wächter der Überlieferung’, zu ihnen gehören: – die Institution der Zensur – die Institution der Textpflege – die Institution der Sinnpflege.

[First when we disenthral ourselves from the idea of self-acting stabilisers of tradition does the aspect of the ‘improbable’ resistance to time as the result of a conscious and laborious effort become visible. Permanence does not produce itself but there are social institutions that are concerned with its production. They stabilise and regularise, strengthen and set still that which by nature is highly variable. Such institutions act as ‘guardians of tradition’, among them are: – the institution of censorship – the institution of text maintenance – the institution of meaning maintenance.]

Since it is not a matter of the mere *publication* of yet inaccessible works (which quite trivially has to be considered to be the *necessary* condition of *any* communicative follow-up action), but rather of the monocausal *explanation* of the formation of a canon by the “conscious and laborious effort” of social institutions, the significance of the so called “guardians of tradition” is – in my opinion – also overrated here. The differentiation between “text and meaning maintenance” might be compatible with a rough typology of potentially canon-relevant *ranges of action* of editorial practices; but whether those actually make an essential contribution to the formation of a canon or not, *is not so much proven, but rather presupposed*. Obviously, there is a *circularity* in this construction. The influence of one group of actors is being ‘proven’ with

14 Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann: *Kanon und Zensur*. In: *Kanon und Zensur. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II*. Ed. by Aleida and Jan Assmann. München: Fink 1987. pp. 7–27. Here: p. 11.

reference to the process of canonisation which *by definition* is then traced back to the action of this exact group of actors.

With an alternative explanatory approach, Simone Winko tries to avoid the strong intuition that something so purposive as a literary canon had (and has) to be the result of purposeful-intentional action. Instead, she suggests canons are best construed as a result of an *invisible hand* process.¹⁵ She answers questions such as “How is a literary canon formed?”, and “Which mechanisms play which part in the complex process that leads to a literary canon?” as follows:¹⁶

Mir scheint es sinnvoll, einen Kanon als Phänomen der invisible hand zu modellieren: Niemand hat ihn absichtlich so und nicht anders zusammengesetzt, dennoch haben viele ‘intentional’ an ihm mitgewirkt. Invisible hand-Erklärungen werden für soziale und kulturelle Phänomene herangezogen, denen sich kein einzelner Verursacher zuschreiben lässt, die vielmehr in einem Prozess entstanden sind, an dem zahlreiche Menschen mitgewirkt haben, ohne dies als Handlungsziel vor Augen gehabt zu haben. – Entsprechend kann man sich einen Kanon als Zwei-Ebenen-Phänomen vorstellen, das kontingent, aber nicht willkürlich entstanden ist. Es resultiert aus zahlreichen einzelnen Handlungen (auf der Mikroebene), die jede für sich einen anderen Zweck haben als den, einen Kanon zu bilden, und die unter Ausnutzung allgemeiner Prämissen einen Prozess in Gang gesetzt haben, der ihn (auf der Makroebene) dennoch entstehen lässt.

[To me it seems reasonable to model a canon as a phenomenon of the *invisible hand*: no one willfully put it together in this way and not in another, but still many people intentionally contributed to it. Invisible hand explanations are used for social and cultural phenomena to which

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- 15 Cf. for some general contributions on the issue Friedrich August von Hayek: *Die Ergebnisse menschlichen Handelns, aber nicht menschlichen Entwurfs*. In: idem.: *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*. London: Blackwell 1967. pp. 96–105, Robert Nozick: *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Oxford: Routledge 1974. pp. 18–20, Edna Ullmann-Margalit: *Invisible-Hand Explanations*. In: *Synthese* 39.2 (1978). pp. 263–291, Robert Nozick: *Invisible-Hand Explanations*. In: *The American Economic Review* 84 (1994). pp. 314–318 and Rudi Keller: *Sprachwandel*. Von der unsichtbaren Hand in der Sprache. 2nd ed. Tübingen: Francke 1994. pp. 91–105 and 121–127.
- 16 Simone Winko: *Literatur-Kanon als invisible hand-Phänomen*. In: *Literarische Kanonbildung*. Ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold, Hermann Korte. München: Text + Kritik 2002. pp. 9–24. Here: p. 11; see also Simone Winko: *Textbewertung*. In: *Handbuch Literaturwissenschaft*. Vol. 2: *Methoden und Theorien*. Ed. by Thomas Anz. Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler 2007. pp. 233–266. Here: p. 259.

an individual causal agent cannot be ascribed, but which grew out of a process to which many human beings contributed without having this as the aim of their action. – Analogously, a canon can be conceived as a two-level-phenomenon that arose contingently but non-arbitrarily. It is the result of numerous single actions (on the micro level) which each separately have a different purpose than that of forming a canon and which by utilisation of general premises set a process in motion that nevertheless gives rise to its formation (on the macro level).]

Thus, a literary canon is the temporary *causal* consequence of a variety of uncoordinated individual valuation-actions that are oriented on shared premises and that at least partially achieve similar intentions. In doing so, the vast majority of actors do not aim at the formation of a canon, and often do not notice any effects of their action. In another example, Winko explicitly points out that “there are instances in society that serve the ‘maintenance’ of canons, ergo that canons did not arise from contingent actions alone but had also been strengthened and promoted with targeted measure.”¹⁷ – However, it is attested to the mentioned functionaries of the literary system that their actions are scarcely of any significance: admittedly, there are “differences in the weight of individual judgements to be reckoned” but “under this qualitative aspect the power of individual actors is not to be overestimated”; what matters instead is the “broader tendency”, the “multitude” of aligned valuation actions.¹⁸

According to this explanatory approach, the place of editorial practices is the *micro level* of intentional actions. Thus, scholarly editing can be characterised as a complex of correlated individual actions,¹⁹ which are primarily assigned to *distribution* [*Vermittlung*] and *processing* [*Verarbeitung*] – and perhaps also *production* (in the case of fragmentary transmission) – as modes of action.

Depending on different types of editions in different domains each for limited user groups and for a limited period of time, the published results of this cooperative practice delineate the *basis of different follow-up communications that are relevant to canon formation*.

Single editorial actions, which have explicitly or implicitly evaluative components can be differentiated further into *types of actions*: there are, among

17 Winko: *Textbewertung* (Ann. 16). p. 259.

18 Ibid. p. 262.

19 See for a more detailed survey on this subject Annika Rockenberger, Per Röcken: *Interessengeleitete Datenverarbeitung. Zur Empirie der Editionsphilologie*. In: *Empirie in der Literaturwissenschaft*. Ed. by Philip Ajouri, Katja Mellmann, Christoph Rauen. Münster: Mentis 2013. pp. 93–129.

others, the selection of the object of textual scholarship, its constitution and representation, as well as the transmission of information that is supposed to serve as a bridging of barriers for follow-up processing actions.

It is crucial to notice that editorial action here is not without presupposition because the objects in question which are criticised and selected already have a specific history of reception and canonisation.²⁰ Furthermore, editorial action is often associated with other institutionalised processes of securing tradition.

It appears to me that Winko's approach is a step in the right direction. Her proposition, however, has some disadvantages: firstly, it seems that the approach is primarily designed to fit the literary system of pluralistic societies in which she *attributes* the influence of individual actors and institutions to be meagre. But, it might be that for certain socio-cultural areas this explanatory approach will go astray or might only satisfyingly explain the *persistence* of a canon but not its *genesis*. Secondly, from Winko's conception of an ideal-typical model of an invisible hand process (that is virtually resistant to empirical proof) follows the tendency *to blank out qualitative differences* between individual actions that are relevant for the canon formation and *to level* their respective causal 'weight' at their contribution to an accumulative effect.

Thirdly, she does not provide any assertions on the relations between single individual actions. Thus, it does not become clear how the connection between editions and other factors of a process of canonisation are to be conceptualised *on an explanatory meso-level*.

To put it another way: While the power of the "guardians of tradition" in creating a canon is overestimated in the intentional-functionalistic explanatory approach, their specifics do not matter at all in the invisible hand model. Figuratively speaking: in this conception, editions are little more than single drops contributing to the creeping corrosion of a stone.

The invisible hand model remains dissatisfying because it is still unclear, if and how the question of the *specific* relevance to canon formation and the effectiveness of editorial practices *is to be answered within this explanatory scope*. Above all, according to what standard the *effectiveness* of editorial practices should be measured against and with what empirical evidence their specific relevance to canon formation could be proven, remains vague.

20 Note, that I do not use 'canonisation' to describe a certain type of action here, but as a process based on actions that can (but does not necessarily) aim at the canonicity of their objects. For some insightful remarks about related terminological problems see Per Röcken's contribution in this volume.

So, is editing (of whatever type) a factor in canonisation? In my view, to answer this question in an empirically substantive way, the following three conditions must be met:

1. The phrasing of the question must be sufficiently *precise* so that the object of inquiry is clear. An understanding concerning the domain of the investigated canon is likewise necessary.
2. A *meso-level*, which enables assertions concerning the relation between individual actions and complexes of actions must be integrated into existing explanatory approaches. In addition, the explanatory approach must be modified in such a way that it would allow consideration of intentional complexes of actions that are gradually involved in a process of canonisation which must be conceptualised *in principle* as an *invisible hand* process.²¹
3. Finally, a measure²² must be given according to which the ‘weight’, the ‘strength’ or the ‘intensity’ of individual actions that are relevant for canon formation must be more precisely defined.

In conclusion, but far from offering a well-justified *answer* to the question raised above, I shall propose a *more precise phrasing*:

1. Which direct or indirect *relations* can be established between *communicative actions* (incl. the results of these actions) performed in the scope of concrete editorial practices of a certain type and the *follow-up communications* of other actors, which are potentially relevant in regard to (a) the canonisation of a specific object in a specific context at a specific moment in time and in regard to (b) the compilation of a set of canonised objects for a canon in a specific context and at a specific moment in time?
2. *Wherein* precisely and on which *level* is there an ‘influence’ (qualitatively and quantitatively) of editorial actions and the results of such actions?

21 This idea is already indicated in Robert Nozick: *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Ann. 15), p. 352, Ann. 8.

22 Considering this, my first intention was that the quantity of the direct and indirect communicative follow-up actions could act as a quantitative measure of the efficiency of a factor of canonisation. What tends to get overlooked is the qualitative aspect of varying engagement and intensity of affirmative follow-up actions (their ‘strength’ or ‘emphasis’), for example due to the socio-cultural position ascribed to the sender of the norm.

Are there – in specific phases of a canonisation process – relations between specific forms of editorial practice and follow-up actions in specific areas of action in the literary system?

3. How 'strong', 'influential', 'efficacious' etc. are these possibly provable efficiencies and effects of editorial practice (a) *according to which standard* and (b) compared with other instances and factors that are also involved in mentioned processes.