How to do things with texts: An introduction

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The photograph reproduced on the cover of this book shows an object that represents a scriptural activity being performed in a way that may come as a surprise to some readers. The object in question is made of celadon, a kind of Chinese pottery produced with a gray-green glaze, and it is very small, only 17.2 cm (less than 7 inches) in height. It is a funerary figurine unearthed from a tomb at Jinpenling, Changsha, Hunan province, in 1958; the date is inscribed on a brick, and the tomb dates to the second year of the Yongning reign, Western Jin Dynasty (ca. 302 CE). It is now preserved in the Hunan Provincial Museum in the city of Changsha.

The object represents two clerks collating and checking the accuracy of manuscripts. Many of us are likely to think of the collation of texts as a solitary activity, undertaken in silence and performed by the eye. We imagine a modern scholar sitting in a library with a printed text and a manuscript in front of him, or a premodern scholar with two manuscripts on his desk; in either case he is looking alternately at the one and then at the other, blocking out all distractions so that he can focus on one of the texts in front of him and can compare it, letter for letter, word for word, with the other one.

Here, by contrast, it is not one person who is involved but two, and they are engaged in an intense joint activity that is at least as much interpersonal as it is intertextual. They kneel or squat facing each other across a small wooden table on which a pen, an ink stone, and books made of bamboo have been placed; the table separates them but at the same time links them as a physical object and as the embodiment of the ancient tradition in which they have their place. The figure on the left holds a book in his right hand and is ready to write something onto it with a pen held in his left hand. The one on the right is holding a pile of books. The figure on the right stares fixedly at the face of the other one, perhaps most precisely at his right ear. He is saying something of great importance to the other man, and he wants to be quite certain that his oral communication reaches its goal unimpeded. The man on the left seems to be staring out into empty space beyond the man on the right, so that no sensory impressions will distract him from that urgent communication. Each one leans toward the other as an expression of the intensity of their collaboration. The two blocks out of which they
are sculpted are correlated with one another and connected by an intimate complementarity in a kind of elegant inter-scriptural tango. And as in any good tango, the partners are asymmetrical: The man on the right has been placed a little bit lower and is leaning slightly more toward his colleague in a gesture of respect, indeed of deference. For their interdependent collaboration is articulated unmistakably as a strict hierarchy. Both men are wearing distinctively ornate headgear; but the hat on the left man’s head has an additional ornament on its back that affirms his higher status. The one on the right has to do only one job: He has to pronounce out loud as precisely and clearly as possible what he reads on his text. But the one on the left has a number of jobs to do: He must listen to his colleague, understand what he says, compare what he hears to what he sees on the page in front of him, and then if necessary write something onto that page. The one on the right is using his brain, his eyes, and his mouth; the one on the left is using those three organs as well, but also his ear and his hand.

These two men are engaged in correcting manuscripts, and they are doing so in a collaborative, oral and aural, way. The man on the left is checking, word for word, what he hears from the man on the right against what he can see in the manuscript he is holding. Pen poised to make a correction at any moment, he is waiting to hear one reading and to see a different one before he strikes to emend where he finds a discrepancy. We might have expected the sculptor to show these two men actually looking at their manuscripts, to which their labors are in fact directed; but instead he has shown both scribes looking down at their respective manuscripts, to which their labors are in fact directed; but instead he has chosen to show the one man looking at the other and the second man looking into space. A moment's reflection is enough to explain his choice. For what else could he have done? He could have shown both scribes looking down at their respective manuscripts; but if he had, he would have shown something that a viewer could not have interpreted otherwise than as two independent scholars, each one reading his own manuscript next to but not in collaboration with the other. Or he could have shown one looking down at a manuscript and the other looking at his colleague; but this would have conveyed a one-way act of dictation, which represented one person speaking and the other simply copying down what he heard.

Instead, the sculptor has shown us both men engaged primarily with one another and only secondarily with the texts that are their true raison d'être. What is more, he has focused all of our attention on the left scholar's right ear, into which his colleague pours his words and toward which he and we direct our concentrated gaze. At the beginning of their collaboration stand various written exemplars of the same text that differ in various points from one another; at the end stand once again the same written exemplars,
now corrected and standardized with one another. But the collaboration itself is not visual but oral, not written but spoken. A scriptural tradition involving canonical texts – for what other kind would these clerks be paid to control? – is represented here as an act of oral transmission and constant reciprocal checking. Yet it is not only a rational scholastic procedure that we witness. Collation is figured here simultaneously as the transmission of certain values – attention, obedience, precision, collegiality – that are important not only for their embodiment in canonical texts but also for their instantiation in the acts by which those texts are copied and checked (as well as in all other activities). And at the same time it seems to suggest a ritual procedure, one following, with scrupulous seriousness, an ancient code of conduct in which success is a form of piety and in which failure would entail dire theological consequences. Are we reading too much into this tiny sculpture to see the man on the right as expressing not only deference toward his superior but also a certain degree of anxiety – as though the only guarantee for the accuracy and transparency of this act of textual transmission and of all the values and institutions that depended upon its success were their unremitting attention to their ancient, tedious, and indispensable labor? After all, the man on the right is younger, and he is still a reader; perhaps, if he does his job very well and is otherwise ordered in his life, he might someday himself become a corrector – and if he does not, he certainly will not. So what is at stake for the man on the right in his scholarly collation is not only the world, the nation, and the future of mankind – but also his own career.

In fact, the practice of collation was oral, and aural, for many centuries, and not only in Confucian China but also in the West. The scholars who collated manuscripts of the Greek Bible in the Palestinian city of Caesarea in the late third and fourth centuries CE did not attract the interest of sculptors. But they left subscriptions in the manuscripts they collated. These reveal that collation was normally the work of two men: a reader, who read the authoritative text aloud, and a corrector, who checked a second manuscript for variations and corrected it when he found them. As in our Chinese pair, one of the partners – the corrector – was senior to the other. Those who succeeded as readers could eventually become correctors. More than a thousand years later, in 1515 CE, collation was still a collaborative activity in Queen’s College, Cambridge, where a scholar wrote to Erasmus that he had not been able to collate manuscripts of Seneca because he had no one to help him. Evidently our vision of collation rests on very limited experience: It reflects practices that came into being in the modern scholarly library, with its rules imposing silence and separation upon its users,
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and gives a false idea of the way textual work has been carried out in the past, in the Greek and Roman traditions and in others as well.

This volume is designed to expand our vision of the history of textual practices. It offers a series of case studies in the multiple ways in which texts have been selected for entry into official canons and then verified, corrected, glossed, interpreted, illustrated, excerpted, performed, archived, and otherwise put to use. The author of each study is a specialist in the field in question, and each examines the practices of one or more past textual specialists in detail. Taken together, we believe, the studies – as their titles indicate – offer a survey of the main forms of work normally done to, and with, canonical texts. No single tradition comes in for exhaustive treatment, but the studies necessarily overlap in their coverage of scribal and scholarly efforts. Systematic comparisons across the essays draw attention to the kinds of textual work that occur in recognizably similar forms in different cultures and traditions, and to those that appear distinctive or even unique. The book as a whole offers detailed studies in multiple philological traditions that we hope will prove to engage interestingly both with one another and with readers who, like ourselves and the other authors, come to most of the fields treated here from the outside.

We also believe that this book can engage interestingly with recent developments in the history of science – indeed, that these kinds of textual practices are an appropriate object of study for historians not only of humanistic scholarship but also of other forms of scientific activities. Historians of the natural sciences have spent the last generation and more examining, in microscopic and illuminating detail, the practices of scientists in earlier periods. Once they concentrated for the most part on systems and theories, on ideas and discoveries: Now they focus even more on equipment and records of observation, on the organization of laboratories and on the training and application of modes of attention. They scan the closely written pages of notebooks and reconstruct the granular, day-to-day work of collaboration, from Mesopotamian ziggurats to contemporary laboratories. By taking these hitherto rather neglected areas of scientific life as their focus, the historians of science have taught us, in ways that no other approach could, how to observe the humble, indispensable, and often contingent processes by which larger theories and models first crystallize and then generate further research programs. In so doing, they have applied to the history of science the new concentration on varieties of practice and modes of behavior that has characterized sociology, philosophy, and other disciplines in the past decades – and they have also provided much interesting stimulus and materials for those disciplines.
It is rather surprising to note that, by contrast, historians of the humanities have only begun to carry out comparable forms of research. Many Western classical scholars have examined the work of their past counterparts, concentrating for the most part on traditionally prestigious areas of scholarship such as the emendation of texts – an area in which many contemporary practitioners still regard their past counterparts as colleagues, engaged in the very same timeless and common enterprise as they are. More recently, historians of the book in the West, East and South Asia, and the Islamic and Jewish traditions have begun to examine such everyday practices as reading and note taking, and to establish how techniques first developed by scholars were taught in schools and internalized by students. On the whole, however, it is still difficult to gain a sense from existing histories of the humanities in the West of the full range of practices that scholars there have employed in any given period.

Western practices, moreover – as historians of science now argue aggressively – are neither the only nor necessarily the most ambitious and productive ones. Where texts are concerned, epics in Sanskrit reached a scale unknown in Greek, and mastery of philosophical classics in Chinese served as a formal qualifier for entry into government itself. There is every reason to assume that the practices devised by non-Western cultures are, in their own terms, powerful and rigorous – and that by comparing them to Western ones, we will be able to see both sides from a new vantage point. This volume marks a first effort to carry out both tasks at once: to give readers a sense of all the varied pursuits that went into the management of texts in all premodern sciences and to draw comparisons between the practices of very different scholarly communities.

The authors of the studies collected in this book are certainly not the first to draw attention to the practices employed in forming and shaping a canon. Consider just one exemplary text, from Renaissance Italy. The De politia literaria is a long, learned, and somewhat crabbed piece of Latin, composed in the middle of the fifteenth century by the Milanese scholar Angelo Decembrio. Imitating ancient Roman scholars, above all the grammarian and antiquary Aulus Gellius, Decembrio claims to record literary discussions at the court of Ferrara, a city famous for its classical tastes, where Pisanello and other artists created elegant medals on the model of ancient coins and the learned teacher Guarino of Verona created a famous school for the study of the Latin and Greek classics. His pupils included, among others, Leonello d’Este, the brilliant bastard marquis who ruled the city for ten years.

The canon that interested Decembrio was literary, and he designed his book both to define what such a canon should be and to show how it should
be used. Textual knowledge, for Decembrio, could do harm if it fell into the wrong hands, since canonical texts could be misused in many ways, sometimes tragically but also sometimes comically. Decembrio enjoyed nothing more than describing ignorant braggarts, such as the pedant who tells people at court that if they can cite a line of Virgil, he can produce the next one, only to have the poet Tito Vespasiano Strozzi force him to quote a suicidal line from Virgil's *Eclogues*, “Stultus ego” (What a fool I am). Yet he also takes a deep interest in the details of scholarship. He has his characters discuss technical questions such as the authenticity of the ancient Latin rhetorical treatise *Ad Herennium*, then normally and wrongly ascribed to Cicero, and the value of the history of Alexander the Great by the historian Quintus Curtius. These pursuits mattered to Decembrio because he saw them as essential to creating a valid list of the authors who deserve to be kept and studied—a work of great value, in his view, that can be carried out only by those who have both learning and taste. He dramatizes the importance of canonical status in a skit about a dreadful poet named Ugolino Pisani, who comes to the court to present Leonello's library with a dialogue of his own. Pisani's characters are pots and pans that speak bad Latin, and their creator suffers a deserved humiliation when Leonello and Strozzi ridicule him and drive him away. Decembrio also makes his scholars and courtiers discuss substantive questions that became urgent at this time in Italian cities, when a taste for classical Latin and Greek literature was often accompanied by one for the newer classics in Italian by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio: Did works in the vernacular deserve a place in a learned library? Decembrio's answer is positive, yet even with this answer, debate persists. Was Petrarch correct, for example, to imagine Caesar weeping when he looked on the body of his onetime friend and later enemy Pompey? Leonello d'Este replies that he was: His own father, Niccolò, though a great man, had shown considerable emotion when he caught his wife, Parisina, having an affair with his son Ugo, and had to have both of them executed.

Building a canon, for Decembrio, is a literary project, and it requires the formulation of critical assumptions and standards. But it is also a material and technical one. Decembrio offers detailed instructions on how to construct that ideal library: One should buy the handsome, large-format folios in which the classics ought to be read from dealers like the Florentine Vespasiano da Bisticci, whose three-volume editions of the Roman historian Livy, as he notes, were especially popular. And one must create a sunny, warm, clean, and attractive library to house them. Decembrio's book offers a vivid peek into the discussions that must often have taken place in Italy in the middle years of the fifteenth century, as
patrons, scholars, and architects in Rome, Florence, and other cities built new libraries, lit by solemn, tall windows like those of churches, but stocked with secular and largely pagan books. But it also offers us one view of a complex process that has taken place in many different languages, traditions, and civilizations: the ways in which scribal methods, scholarly techniques, and rules for proper discussion and interpretation intersect as a canon – in this case, the secular, humanistic literary canon of the Italian Renaissance – takes shape.

The term “canon,” nowadays, evokes literary criticism and education. Over and over again, especially since the 1980s, debates have been waged with ferocity worthy of a better cause about the list of books that every educated person, or every secondary school student, should read. At one level, teachers, librarians, and publishers have struggled over the canon of fiction appropriate for different age groups; at another level, professors and critics have argued about the canon of American drama or whether, in Germany, Brecht can take the place once held by Goethe; at still another, theologians and critics have fought about whether particular translations adequately represent Jewish or Christian scriptures or liturgies. So it is clear that canons still matter, at least to some people, but it is no less evident that nowadays they do so only in a relatively limited number of areas.

In the premodern world, however, canons played a radically different role, and one directly connected to the centers of political, social, and religious authority. As E. R. Curtius pointed out in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Western Christian scholars interested in ancient literature and history built on the judgments of the ancients to create a school canon, a set of texts that every learned person had to master. But they also defined canons in every other field. In a world of limited horizons, in which everyone assumed that books held the answers to all vital questions about life and that knowledge trickled downward from the wisest men and not upward from the common practitioners, each discipline that enjoyed any social and political authority needed authoritative textbooks and reference works. Theologians, lawyers, and medical men all needed highly regarded texts to teach them the basic concepts and to refer to in cases of disagreement. Each profession constructed a canon, mastery of which was both the price of admission to practice and the basis of participation in debate. And the model continued to prove extremely influential in later centuries, as most – but not all – European nations transferred it to their new vernacular cultures and tried to create new literary canons. Eventually the processes of colonization and imperialism spread the model far beyond the borders of Europe itself.
As so often, the European experience was not unique or even distinctive. Throughout world history, as the studies in this volume show, cultures around the world have chosen authoritative texts, which have served in turn as the basis for educational and literary systems, ritual practices, and advancement in government. Yet in many cases the processes by which these choices have been made, and even the identity of those who made them, remain obscure. The fact that canons exist at all suggests a high level of consensus about both the value of texts and the nature of their content. Yet every canon is a work in progress, and the techniques used in the work, which form the central subject of these studies, have been central to the creation of cultural models and authorities.

Canons begin with choice and authorization: the more or less formal decision, by some authority, that a given group of works deserve to be set apart as authoritative. In some cases, a constituted authority – a ruler or a set of officials – makes the choice, as in the case of the Ottoman legal texts studied in this volume by Guy Burak; in other cases, however, it may be scribes or printers who do so. Using a range of sources, many of them unpublished, Burak carefully traces the ways in which Ottoman political and legal authorities established a canon of authoritative commentaries and, more important still, a set of procedures for examining new texts that were candidates for admission to canonical status. His account offers some surprises. It seems obvious that printing, which was available to the rulers who consolidated the Ottoman Empire, would have been the easiest and most effective way to produce uniform legal texts. In fact, however, the jurists, confident of their ability to maintain a uniform set of authorities, showed no need for or interest in print. Instead they devised ways for assuring that a manuscript met the criteria for completeness and correctness.

Once a text enters the canon, the problems have only begun. Often a work is already centuries old when it achieves the status of an authority. Inevitably, its form and content will present puzzles to its readers, especially to those responsible for interpreting it, to students, or to those who share a common religion. Tools must be forged: Concepts must be developed to help in identifying difficult passages and techniques must be elaborated for trying to solve them, as is shown in Ineke Sluiter’s study of the meaning and use of obscurity. Sluiter discusses the various kinds of contexts in which clarity (most frequently) or obscurity (more rarely) tends to be the preferred model of textual production. “Obscurity” is a scholarly diagnostic tool that leads to the invention and codification of a variety of concrete textual practices and explanatory efforts.
Often, but by no means always, those who do this sort of work are trying, as Glenn Most shows, to domesticate the text in question: to make it seem familiar and to show that it meets the needs and matches the tastes of readers. Often this involves attributing to that text meanings that differ strikingly from those it appears to be communicating on its surface and that must be justified by means of complex theories of allegorical interpretation. How allegoresis developed and expanded in the Greco-Roman tradition and sometimes came into various kinds of relations with the etymological explanations of words there is not only an important topic in itself but also one that suggests the usefulness of detailed comparison with other traditions. In some cases, as Paolo Visigalli’s study of the Rigveda makes clear, exegesis may be designed to continue forever, in an endless process of finding meaning in texts defined as authoritative – in this case, for the purposes of performing rituals requiring the intervention of gods named, directly or indirectly, in the text. In this case, the interpreter focuses on terms that do not yield to standard grammatical analysis and frames rules that will enable them to be explained. Modern performers and interpreters, belonging to a weaker generation than that of those who, in direct contact with the divine, composed the Rigveda, must not accept their weaknesses but must press on, since the effect of the ritual depends crucially on understanding the text. Consensus often, if not always, proves elusive: Christopher Minkowski’s chapter shows that individual interpreters, and even whole communities of them, may find themselves disagreeing radically about the questions that can properly be posed when commenting on a text, not to mention the answers they frame. In this context, the question whether an interpreter has the right to introduce new forms of interpretation into commentary on canonical texts (in the case Minkowski discusses, an interpretive community already existed and practiced forms of interpretation that clearly rested on agreed principles) can lead to debates of extraordinary violence between those who insist on theoretical consistency and those who practice more eclectic forms of interpretation.

Readers need to have canonical texts in accessible forms. An authoritative person must take charge of this process too. Scribes in manuscript cultures, such as that of medieval western Europe, and editors in print cultures, such as that of early modern China, need to make endless decisions about which of several variants to accept in a text or what to do if none of the transmitted readings make any sense. Traditionally, scholars have assumed that their premodern colleagues did not make systematic efforts to improve texts, much less to work out the histories of their texts before they set out to correct them. The chapters by Robert Kaster and Lianbin Dai in this
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volume make clear that these assumptions do not hold. Examining the textual history of the lives of the Roman emperors by Suetonius, Kaster identifies two individuals who subjected the text to massive editorial work — and work of highly different kinds. Both of them took Suetonius's account of a world very distant from their own, pitched in a language that was often difficult and even incomprehensible, as a challenge. One met it slowly, carefully, surrounding the text with a mass of notes and queries demanding further research, as if he were rearing a protective fence. The other, whom Kaster identifies with a well-known medieval scholar and historian, actively intervened in the text, replacing words and phrases and rewriting passages and on some fifty occasions anticipating the emendations made by modern classical scholars. No contemporary description of medieval Western scholars at work encompasses the range of activities Kaster reconstructs, a point that poses sharp questions about the divisions among medieval, Renaissance, and modern forms of philology. Dai, by contrast, recreates a world of Chinese textual practices — one that flourished at the same time as Kaster's scribes, though on the other side of the world — in which scholars formulated elaborate hermeneutical principles before setting out to emend texts. Yet the results could be equally radical: Even texts that had the sanction of imperial authority could be challenged, it seems, if they did not meet the standards for correctness and logic that scholars devised.

One culture's canonical texts, moreover, may derive from a different culture and have been composed in a different language. Translations must be made and equivalent terms found, even when equivalence is diabolically hard to establish. Aaron Tugendhaft reveals some of the complex and even playful ways in which ancient Mesopotamian scribes confronted this problem. What looks to moderns, who approach the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia with specific ideas about how lists and lexica are compiled, like an inquiry into names for gods in various languages may instead reflect a predilection for creating multiple variants of particular phrases, whether oracular or grammatical: that is, a form of learned play rather than of inquiry into belief and practice. Yet the challenge of working across multiple languages may also stimulate philological enterprises of staggering complexity. In thirteenth-century Cairo, as Ronny Vollandt shows, an unidentified scholar connected to the distinguished al-Assāl family set out to assure the correctness of Saadiah Gaon's tenth-century Arabic version of the Torah. Like the Chinese scholars with whom we began, he sought out a discussion partner, a Jew who could inform him orally about the meanings of the text on the basis of Jewish traditions of learning, preserved seamlessly over the centuries. But he also compiled variant readings from other versions of the