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Excerpt

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TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND
THE LITERARY CRITIC

THE relation of bibliographical and textual investigation to literary criticism is a thorny subject, not from the point of view of bibliography but from the point of view of literary criticism. In contrast to the general uniformity among textual critics about ends and means, literary critics—as we might expect—hold diverse opinions about the operation of their discipline. At one extreme are those higher critics whose chief concern is for the ‘total’ or ‘essential’ values of literature, and whose contemplation of an author’s work is correspondingly lofty. At the other extreme are critics whose analysis of a work is so detailed that scarcely a word of the text, no matter how ordinary, can escape a searching interpretive inquiry.

In so far as the application of large philosophical and aesthetic concepts to broad problems may dull a critic’s awareness of the significance of small details, it is easy for a bibliographer to understand that not all critics may be expected to share his concern for the exactness of representation given to the physical form of the work to be handled. On the other hand, what sometimes seems to be a critic’s almost perverse disregard for specific accuracy may offer the bibliographer a nasty shock. Several years ago, in a paper before the English Institute held annually at the invitation of Columbia University, I hoped to stir up some questions and discussion by remarking *inter alia* that I felt

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I could prove on physical evidence not subject to opinion that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare wrote 'sallied flesh', and not 'solid flesh'.¹ I confess I was taken aback when the first commentator rose to give it as his opinion that really there ought to be some law to keep bibliographers—who otherwise seemed normal intelligent persons capable of better things—from wasting their lives poking around in such minutiae. Whether Shakespeare wrote 'sallied' (that is, 'sullied') flesh, or 'solid' flesh, was of no importance at all. He personally had read 'solid' all his life, found it quite satisfactory, and saw no reason for changing. Whether it was technically right or wrong did not affect the argument that the Folio phrase had got itself generally accepted. People were used to it. Moreover, the 'essential values' of *Hamlet* the play were not at all affected by retaining the conventional reading here.

Whether this is quite that passion for truth one looks for in a professing critic, I leave aside. I am not really concerned to satirise the 'total values' school and its frequent insensitivity to the actual values of the material on which it chooses to operate; or to invoke laughter at the inadvertencies of the anti-historical 'new critics'. As always, when one is working with a difference in degree, not in kind, the point at which one feels a need to defend the bridge is shifting and uncertain. How many conventional readings in the text of *Hamlet*—one, two, five, ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred, two hundred?—must be proved unsound before the 'total values' of the play *are* affected and the literary critic should begin to grow uneasy about the evidence on which he is formulating his hypothesis for the whole? Because the traditional Old Cambridge text of Shakespeare's

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Richard III was based on the bad first quarto instead of the revised good Folio print, current editions can advertise that they contain more than a thousand variants from the conventional text. How many values are affected here?

However, the real danger comes when such a critic—who seems to believe that texts are discovered under cabbage plants (or in bulrushes)—when such a critic tackles a subject in which some knowledge of textual processes is required. For example, in what I understand is—in my country at least—an admired essay on *Lycidas*, John Crowe Ransom argued that Milton, for artistic purposes, deliberately roughed up an originally smooth version of the poem. Characteristically, Ransom made no attempt to examine the transmission of the text from manuscript to print in order to see if there were any physical evidence for his theory. If he had, not only would he have found no support, of course, but evidence to the contrary.¹ How far can we trust the ideas and methods of critics who think so little of analysing the nature of the texts with which they work?

Even scholarly investigators on a less rarefied plane encounter trouble when they ignore textual facts. The identification of Shakespeare's symbolic imagery in play after play has become a popular indoor sport at learned meetings; the study was largely begun by Caroline Spurgeon though she may not be held accountable for the excesses of her imitators. Does it make any difference that some of the images she uses as evidence for her thesis are editorial emendations and not necessarily Shakespeare's words—and that she did not attempt to assess the purity of the evidence she was collecting by using an edition that would show her what was editorial and what not?² Does it make any difference

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that the linguist Kökeritz has sometimes used derived instead of primary texts and thus muddied the waters of his evidence;¹ or that when he utilised primary texts for an analysis of Shakespeare's linguistic forms he totally ignored the whole body of bibliographical evidence dealing with facts about variance in different compositors' spelling habits, and, in spite of marked differences in date of printing and in printing-houses, persisted in treating each print of a play, ignoring its origin, as if it were a literally exact transcript of a Shakespearean autograph?² Yet this false line of reasoning is basic to his arguments from statistical evidence that such and such forms are Shakespearean spellings. Does it make any difference that even the great *Oxford English Dictionary* has occasionally failed to reproduce an Elizabethan form of a word when it has been ironed out by emendation or modernisation?³

We should be seriously disturbed by the lack of contact between literary critics and textual critics. Every practising critic, for the humility of his soul, ought to study the transmission of some appropriate text. If he did, he would raise such an outcry that we should no longer be reading most of the great English and American classics in texts that are inexcusably corrupt. We should no longer complacently accept the sleazy editing that even today too often marks the presentation of works of literature to the student and to the general public.⁴

There is every reason to deplore the common ignorance of textual conditions and of editing standards that puts the critic quite at the mercy of the editor. For example, in 1901 A. H. Thorndike thought that a splendid formula to distinguish the collaborated work of Fletcher from that of

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Massinger was the frequent use of the contraction *'em* in Fletcher as against the invariable use of the full form *them* in Massinger.¹ The only trouble was, as he discovered too late, that he had used Gifford's edition of Massinger from which to quarry his evidence; and in this edition Gifford had silently expanded Massinger's *'em* forms to *them*. His edition was untrustworthy, and a man who was at the time an inexperienced scholar—though later a great one—suffered from his misplaced confidence in an improperly edited text.

Fifty years later it is still a current oddity that many a literary critic has investigated the past ownership and mechanical condition of his second-hand automobile, or the pedigree and training of his dog, more thoroughly than he has looked into the qualifications of the text on which his critical theories rest. One may search the history of scholarship in vain to find parallel examples—in relation to the *zeitgeist*—of cultural *naïveté* and professional negligence. Moreover, the danger is not confined to early texts. A critic of *Richard III*, say, who reaches up to his bookshelf and does not care whether he pulls down the Old Cambridge or the New Cambridge volume is no more simple-minded than one who reads Melville or Whitman in texts altered for an English audience, or who—in America—reads most of the Victorians in nineteenth-century American editions,² or even T. S. Eliot or Yeats in corrupt American editions instead of the more authentic and often the revised English texts.

Professor R. C. Bald has remarked on the curious fact that as late as 1948 and 1949 respectively, G. B. Harrison and O. J. Campbell, two active and distinguished Shakespearean

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scholars, put out editions of Shakespeare that were close reproductions of the Old Cambridge, or Globe, text of almost a hundred years before. He adds, 'It is not as if there had been no advances in textual study of Shakespeare during the present century, nor are these two editors ignorant of the work of Pollard, McKerrow, Greg, and Dover Wilson; but is there any other branch of study in which a teacher would be satisfied to present students, as these books do, with the results achieved by scholarship up to, but not beyond, the year 1864?'¹

If the public, or students and their professors, will not demand good texts, publishers will not offer the means for textual scholars to provide them. Indeed, I have heard it said that Harrison chose to use the Globe text only after his publisher had polled a number of teachers and found the familiar Globe was their preference. I am far from asserting that there is a vast backlog of excellent editions of texts waiting to find a publisher. I am aware that editions of early literature are not considered to be best sellers; and especially if they are in old spelling they may find some serious difficulty in getting into print. I am aware that for too long editing has been esteemed the proper province for the amateur, the pedant, or the dullard who could not even write a biography; and that for too long editing has often deserved its lowly reputation. Moreover, I am conscious that even today the newer editorial methods are only dimly understood by various would-be practitioners. At least, the manuscripts that publishers occasionally send me for an opinion indicate a troubled awareness of the word 'bibliography' though little understanding of its method.

Yet even if we could posit for the future none but ideal

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editions, I expect there would still remain a considerable isolation of textual bibliographers from their ultimate consumers, the literary critics. This is a pity. I waste no tears on the wounded egos of the bibliographers; the damage is on the other side. I could wish that general critics knew more, and knowing more would care more, about the purity of the texts they use.

In some small part present-day editorial concern with what seem to be relatively minor matters of accurate decision may alienate the critic, such as the one who became impatient at anybody wasting very much time finding out whether Shakespeare wrote *sallied* or *solid*. In this particular case I fancy the choice is important on grounds of meaning, for the word *sullied* supports my contention that Hamlet feels his natural, or inherited, honour has been soiled by the taint of his mother's dishonourable blood. But the weight that may be put on this word is perhaps unusual. For instance, not much is changed whether Hamlet's father's bones were *interred* as in Q₂, or *inurned* as in the Folio. Yet I hold it to be an occupation eminently worth while, warranting any number of hours, to determine whether Shakespeare wrote one, or the other, or both. The decision, if clear-cut, might be crucial in the accumulation of evidence whether on the whole the Folio variants from the quarto *Hamlet* are corruptions, corrections, or revisions. If this is a problem no editor has fairly faced, neither should a literary critic be indifferent to the question. Depending upon what can be proved, some hundreds of readings will be affected if an editor decides that Shakespeare revised the text after its second quarto form; for in that case the Folio variants should be chosen in all but the most obvious cases of

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sophistication. Or he might decide that in only a few cases, where the second quarto compositors have corrupted the text, should the Folio readings take precedence over the generally authoritative second quarto.

True, certain 'values' will not be materially affected one way or the other. Hamlet will not be revealed as a woman, or as the villain; he will still be melancholy and at odds with the life about him. Denmark will still be a prison. Yet what modern author would view with equanimity an edition of one of his plays that substituted several hundred words scattered here and there from the corruptions of typists, compositors, and proof-readers? Not to mention editors. The critic who is so airy about the relation of textual accuracy to 'essential values' would be more touched if an essay of his own were involved in the general corruption.

Nevertheless, I should not wish to rest the case on such a special problem as *Hamlet*. I do not myself think it pedantry to make a fetish of accuracy in scholarship, or in criticism. Only a practising textual critic and bibliographer knows the remorseless corrupting influence that eats away at a text during the course of its transmission. The most important concern of the textual bibliographer is to guard the purity of the important basic documents of our literature and culture. This is a matter of principle on which there can be no compromise. One can no more permit 'just a little corruption' to pass unheeded in the transmission of our literary heritage than 'just a little sin' was possible in Eden.

As a principle, if we respect our authors we should have a passionate concern to see that their words are recovered and currently transmitted in as close a form to their intentions as we can contrive. It should matter to us, as it

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should matter to all critics, that if one wants to read F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* with several of the author's final revisions, one must go to the fourth or later impressions made from plates altered on his instructions, though one must then guard against a proof-reader's error inserted when the plates were unauthoritatively further corrected for the seventh impression.¹

It should matter to us that in modern reprints of *Tristram Shandy*, to quote an investigator: 'Errors in punctuation amount on many pages to 15 to 20 to the page. . . . Modern reprints have frequently set in lower case words which Sterne required to be set in small capitals. Alterations in spelling have not been confined to modernizations; . . . errors destroying Sterne's sense and meaning have been perpetuated, like *area* for *aera*, *clause* for *cause*, *port* for *post*, *timber* for *tinder*, *catching* for *catechising*, and *caravans* for *caverns*.' Many of these errors apparently originated in some popular nineteenth-century reprint, and have been repeated ever since.²

I agree with Professor Bald that just critical appraisal is not possible until a text has been established. It should matter to us whether the thirteenth of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* ends triumphantly,

so I say to thee,
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,
 This beauteous forme *assures* a pitious minde

as in Grierson's alteration on manuscript authority, or flatly, as in the printed texts,

This beauteous forme *assumes* a pitious minde.

It should matter to us that the very bases for establishing the texts of such important Shakespeare plays as

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2 *Henry IV*, and *Hamlet*, are still undecided.¹ Until we have the physical facts upon which the establishment of these texts may proceed, no one can quote from such plays with any assurance that he is repeating what Shakespeare intended to write. In the present day it may surprise the complacent to learn that the text of Mr T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, in respect to his final intentions, is very much in doubt.

I do not say with the classical scholar John Burnet, 'By common consent the constitution of an author's text is the highest aim that a scholar can set before himself'. But I do assert that the establishing of the texts of our literary and historical monuments, and the preservation of their purity through successive processes of transmission, is a task for a scholar of depth, not an employment for the spare hours of a dilettante or the drudgery of a pedant. On the one hand, some textual investigation and recovery calls for creative and imaginative efforts within the discipline of hard fact that compare very favourably indeed, in my opinion, with the broad intellectual powers that often characterised the nineteenth-century literary critic in England, powers that one would like to see still displayed today, on both sides of the Atlantic. On the other hand, bibliography is the only sure foundation on which to rear the necessary wide acquaintance with the whole complex of the past, the intimate knowledge of its thought, the feeling for its idiom, and above all the knowledge of its language for which no amount of enthusiastic dilettante sensibility can adequately compensate, despite the invaluable aid of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

If we may concede that even the most widely ranging criticism must occasionally descend to exact readings and