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Selection and Annotation: Deciding Alone

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I am interested that the Association for Documentary Editing would have a panel on the solo editor, because since reading Don Higginbotham's piece in the March issue of the *ADE Newsletter* the idea of the solo editor as a particular species of the genus of historical editor has intrigued me. As the single, sole, solo editor of the Papers of David Hartley, and as the associate editor of The Papers of Philip Mazzei, I am presently both a solo editor and a team editor. I feel, therefore, sensitive to the difficulties which the solo editor shares with other editors, as well as to those which derive especially from the solitary nature of a project. Perhaps it ought to be said right from the beginning that every editor is, at some time in the course of editing, a solo editor. The game of editing—selecting and annotating—is played alone. The trappings of the project *qua* project become irrelevant at a certain stage, and the documents and the editor exist in their own world. We are all solo editors, but some of us are more solo than others. My examples in this paper will come primarily from the eighteenth-century editing projects and from my own experience. In view of the topic suggested—selectivity and annotation—my remarks, too, are related largely to the province of printed volumes. But I hope that solo editors

of microfilm and microfiche projects, as well as editors of nineteenth and twentieth century projects will find portions of the discussion relevant.

The solo editor's difficulty with selection is inherent in the history and definition of the project. It is her *own* project, carefully chosen and tenderly nourished. The main pitfall for the solo editor, then, is over-involvement with the subject. This is a trait known in all editors, but I think it is even more dangerous for those of us who work alone. Because the solo editor has probably nursed a project from the conception of the idea, through the stages of grant proposal and funding, to the formulation of an editorial apparatus, and, subsequently to the development of a full-scale project, she has a stake in every letter, every document, and every footnote. From the initial spark of wondering why so and so's papers have never been edited, to the thought of applying for a grant to edit the papers and fill in that crucial missing piece of history, the solo editor has a particularly high level of attachment to the subject. And no associate editor or editorial assistant stands along side to question whether a particular letter needs to be part of the edition, to raise a critical, questioning voice.

Letters whose acquisition required not just a form letter of inquiry but additionally a personal visit to an archive and perhaps a lengthy search cannot lightly be put aside because they are not quite applicable or because they duplicate other material. For example, a form letter of

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recommendation written to five government officials might in some cases more properly be calendared than printed in full five times. But if one of these five copies was obtained only after great effort, to see it reduced to the status of a calendared item is hard for the editor to accept.

Choice but peripheral material creates an even greater problem. When David Hartley was a pamphleteer for the Whigs in the 1760s, for example, he had a lengthy correspondence with the marquis of Rockingham and with the duke of Portland. The letters demonstrate Hartley's understanding of national finance, his concept of the balance between revenues and expenditures; and, most significantly, the letters reveal his commitment to a budget which would keep the land tax low. The letters offer fresh material, particularly for American scholars. But I wonder whether they properly belong in *The American Correspondence of David Hartley: Selected Letters and Political Pamphlets*. They predate his interest in American affairs by several years. In only one letter is there any mention of a colonial issue, and that will be included. On my own, I still have a difficult time standing by my own editorial principles and forcing myself to leave them out. I think that an editorial staff could more firmly come to the decision to stay within the definition of the project as a selected edition of American correspondence and could transcend the personal involvement of a single editor.

The editor who is the sole authority over documentary materials functions almost like a god in deciding which letters are to gain or to be denied entrance to the kingdom of heaven. The decision is a solitary one, and a rationale must be worked out before the actual task of selection is begun. Two or three people selecting might hammer out a consensus which could effectively serve as a rule of thumb in the practical act of selecting for inclusion. Alone, it is wiser to start with a theoretical principle and with a carefully conceived and designed edition from the very beginning, lest, in the struggle between editor and documents, the documents get the upper hand. Where there are two people, they can argue with each other; each can hold the other to the principles established. There is at least a forum for debate. But when only the letters themselves stand as the "other", there is no devil's advocate. A letter will always opt for its own inclusion.

If we take the selection process to its absolute origins, I think that it presupposes an attitude toward the nature of the editorial enterprise. And this is one of my main points: it is the ability to select that produces the editor, the historian. A project proceeds in a logical fashion: collection precedes accession and filing; these precede selection and transcription. Concurrently with the initial stages, the documents are being read and analyzed. What is absolutely essential at this stage is that an attitude toward the edition take shape in the mind of the editor. The editor has the responsibility of being actively engaged

with the material, in choosing what goes into the edition, what is to be calendared, what can perhaps be best included as supporting material in a footnote, and what ought—reluctantly of course—to be excluded and reserved instead for an article. The choice of subject for the edition, the engagement with the documents, and the bringing together of those documents into a cohesive selected edition are the tasks of the solo editor of selected correspondence. If the project has been undertaken as a selection of papers, then it is far more honest and responsible to face that fact, than to pretend to a passive objectivity. To be selective is not to be irresponsible or unscholarly, and the solo editor can only: admit that she makes the decisions alone; offer the reasons for decisions; and produce a good, solid selected edition.

All editors, of course, and not simply the solo editor, are selective. There is less need in 1979 than there was ten years ago to defend the belief that the very act of selection is interpretive. A report in *Annotation* on Robert Rutland's panel at the Hyde Park Conference in April, 1978, noted that there was "general agreement" that the editor interprets—and if there can be general agreement on an issue within the editing profession, we should carefully cherish that statement. Transcription has now become the focus for controversy within the profession, but selectivity is as important. Publishing costs soar, multi-volumed series project completion only decades from now, and so selectivity is offered as the easy solution. But to direct an editor to be selective is meaningless because to issue a pragmatic order without an accompanying philosophical or methodological rationale is hollow. The editor is first a scholar, and must formulate her own criteria based on legitimate scholarly foundations. It is, in other words, good to be selective, even when undeniably interpretive, but the selectivity is to be based on principle, not pragmatism. Selectivity based on the imaginative choice of a topic is what we solo editors can offer the profession.

In the editorial methods sections of most editions, the division on selection often receives the shortest treatment. Transcription and annotation receive the greatest attention. There is little selection, and therefore little need to discuss it. Paralleling those lean paragraphs on principles of selection is a general tendency in professional discussion to pass over selection as an issue. I think we miss an opportunity when we do this, and I believe that the solo editors working on selected printed volumes can seize upon selectivity as a virtue, and become good historical editors precisely by choosing to be highly selective.

Editorial teams of the larger projects have so far faced a different kind of selection problem. The editors of *The Benjamin Franklin Papers*, for example, have made an editorial decision to extract petitions which Franklin signed but did not write, and to note or to summarize documents which bore only peripherally on his activities.

But there is no question of "selecting" actual letters; all letters to or from Franklin have so far been included. This is as it should be, but a different problem confronts the solo editor, the editor of the smaller project. Selection may mean to choose between and among letters. It may be, for instance, that not all letters from Franklin to Hartley ought to be included in full in the Hartley edition. Franklin is clearly Hartley's most important American correspondent, and I would not lightly leave out any of his letters. But letters of Hartley's English correspondents present new sources for historians, and if everything cannot be included, it may be more important to offer the less standard and previously unpublished letters. A one or two volume edition does not necessarily allow for the publication in entirety of all letters found. The editor of this kind of project is forced to adhere to rigorous standards, and has less latitude in what can be included.

The editor will be guided in selection by the audience for the book, by the possible availability of the material in other published sources, and by her overall conception of the work. It is the conception, the imaginative direction of the edition that makes it worth doing. The mere inclusion of all letters which have been found does not guarantee a good documentary edition. If there is no selectivity, if there is no creative, scholarly center to the edition, the documentary edition produced will not make a significant contribution to historical literature. Selectivity can become a strength. Carefully chosen letters related to a central theme and accurately transcribed and annotated will yield a volume that stands on its own as a work of historical writing and, simultaneously, complements other editorial projects of the same period.

The solo editor of the small project is under the burden of being more highly selective, but at the same time she works at a certain advantage. The principles of selection can be highly unified and unifying; a single mind has set the guidelines and does all of the actual selecting in accordance with those guidelines. Additionally, the principles of selection will not have to change over the lifetime of the project. The uniformity and continuity resulting from a single set of standards of selection reinforce the likelihood of producing a directed, well-conceptualized, and coherent work of history.

If as editors we have been cautioned to be selective, we have also been warned in a steady chain of reviews, beginning with Leonard Levy's 1972 review of *The Papers of James Madison*, in the *Journal of American History*, of the dangers of over-annotation. The solo editor again bears a particularly heavy responsibility. The decision not only of how much to annotate but of what to annotate must be made alone. Whatever problems editors face are magnified for the solo editor. Ironically, the two diseases which affect the editor at this state of the project are too much or too little ego. When confronted with a collection of documents which one must clarify and place in context

for the modern reader, it is tempting, first to annotate thoroughly those portions one knows well, and, second, carefully to research and then annotate thoroughly those portions one is slightly shaky about. I think that the solo editor needs to make a conscious effort not to let this happen. The annotation is important, and not at all the less so if the figure happens to be of the "second-rank."

The rank of the historical figure is no small point. While we need not judge all figures of American history and literature and assign a precise "weight" to each, the fact is that we solo editors probably work not on the great statesmen of an age, but on figures who played a regional or supplementary role in politics, or whose involvement was in a particular social question, or who were located in the activities of a precise and limited time frame. The precise connection between the person and his well-known contemporaries is information that the responsible editor must impart.

The amount of annotation will be determined by the editor's expertise, general knowledge, historical interests, and the documents themselves. Too often, weighed down by refinements of editorial method, we forget that editing is writing history. It may be writing history with special rules, but a good history ought still to be the result. The historical imagination guides the editor as closely as it guides the craftsman of narrative or quantitative history. The annotation for the Hartley-Franklin correspondence, for example, will provide information on the exchanges of British and American prisoners which I have found in Hartley's correspondence with the Admiralty, with the Commissioners for Sick and Hurt Seamen, and with Thomas Wren; it will comment on Hartley's use of Franklin's letters in his speeches and motions in the House of Commons. It will also explore the division between Hartley and Franklin over the French alliance and it will show their antithetical perceptions of French history and culture. The annotation will not, on the other hand, detail Franklin's activities in London as a colonial agent; nor will it attempt to explicate the entire narrative of the peace negotiations in 1782 and 1783. The annotation that the editor of the selected printed edition offers does not merely support material for other projects of the period. Rather, it stands on its own, subject to the same standards of integrity and justifiability as any other. The solo editor annotates for the scholarly needs of her own topic.

The general nature of solo editorial projects imposes an implicit restriction on the annotation: time. Normally our projects are short. We produce one or two volumes and we lack the luxury of several years of research. Nevertheless, time must not be the factor governing the extensiveness or intensiveness of annotation. The rush to get out the volumes is not a valid criterion on which to base a principle of annotation.¹ Even if the editor chooses the course of moderate annotation, she must be capable and learned enough to provide good contextual annotation. Because he

or she works alone, the solo editor is even more vulnerable to criticism for over or under annotation. The editorial "we" does not act as a shield; always the editorial "I" bears ultimate, final, sole authority.

This paper is an argument for the place of the solo editor within the profession and for the production of selected printed volume editions. The search for alternative forms of publication to the standard multi-volumed comprehensive letterpress editions has yielded various possibilities: comprehensive microfilm or microfiche editions; comprehensive microforms coupled with selected letterpress editions; combination text-fiche editions. These are all possible alternatives to the time-cost dilemma facing documentary projects. I would suggest that the solo editor and that project is another alternative, and an alternative which is both creative and flexible.

Topics which are narrower in scope either because they deal chronologically with a shorter period of time or because they deal with a more minor figure, or because they can be topically confined, are excellent ones for the solo editor. Solo endeavors contribute to pluralism in the

profession, and since their duration is closer to five than to thirty-five years, they display a flexibility and receptivity to new information and to methodological changes within the profession. They will make documents available to a general readership and will reach a wider audience than a microform publication will. They will put into published form which meets the high contemporary standards of professional editing, significant documents in American history; these may be documents which are not yet published by the large projects or which might escape their nets. Let me give two examples: the Hartley edition will make available Hartley-Franklin and Hartley-Laurens letters before those two long-term projects reach the pertinent volumes. And, even though it is a team project, the Mazzei film and volumes will perform a similar function as it puts the Jefferson-Mazzei letters in print. This is an important service which we perform, and we can produce good history at the same time. Building on the foundation of creative selectivity and employing judicious historical annotation, the solo editors and their endeavors have an important place in the mainstream of editing and of contemporary historical writing.