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Editorial Practices—An Historian's View

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All those engaged in the editing of literary and historical documents are deeply in debt to Dr. Tanselle for his thorough analysis of the editorial standards that have been set for the dozens of projects now going forward. Somewhat to the embarassment of the profession, he has seized upon individual statements of editorial practice that have internal inconsistencies and that are in conflict with the editor's actual practice. And although his article, now before us for discussion, is aimed primarily at the shortcomings of historical editors, he has not let the literary fraternity escape unscathed, some of whom, he finds, are guilty of the same sins as the historians. Nor is Dr. Tanselle all negative in his assessments. He gives generous praise to historians for annotation that provides the needed context for edited documents. Some of us are thankful that he is not at all disturbed about the length of notes and that he firmly eschews the charge of triviality that has been leveled by some historians. "If a note illuminates, who is to say that it is trivial or time-wasting?" he seems to ask. He finds that the scholars of literature need to do more than they have done to provide the settings for the works they edit.

In the course of his critical examination of editorial practices, Dr. Tanselle sets forth standards that he would have all editors adhere to. Rejecting as far as editing goes any distinction between literary and historical documents or between the productions of literary men and statesmen, he insists that the paramount concern must be the integrity of the document itself. And here he does make a distinction—that between printed and manuscript documents never intended for print or between public and private papers.

Writings intended for publication introduce a complicating element: the printer's or publisher's contribution. In editing a printed document, the scholarly editor is urged to make corrections and emendations that will restore the intention of the author. The result will be a critical text, preferably in clear form. That is to say, the editor, using available manuscript sources and carefully collating all obtainable and significant printed versions, may produce a version not precisely like any extant document, whether in print or not, but one that in the editor's best judgment adheres strictly to the author's intent. Such a text will be clear of the impedimenta of the editorial craft —the brackets, braces, carets, different type faces and sizes —but the reader will be able to reconstruct each of the significant variant texts by consulting a list of all changes made that is given in the back of the book. Thus the reader enjoys an eminently readable text, but he does not remain uninstructed on what the editor has been up to.

Private papers, such as letters and journals, never intended by their authors for publication, Dr. Tanselle wants treated in a different way. First, he rejects any silent changes in the text, particularly any effort at modernization. He takes historians to task, for example, for regularizing punctuation or paragraphing; for silently correcting slips of the pen, such as inadvertent repetition of word or phrase; or even for dropping the dash that in the eighteenth century commonly follows a period. Silently tinkering with the text alters the spirit and mood of the original; it injects an editor's judgment or taste between reader and author. What Dr. Tanselle desires is a literal text that with suitable editorial devices includes every cross-out, interlineation, comma, capital letter, and misspelling. To give notice of deletions in a note would leave the reader "to reconstruct the text of the document, which is after all of primary interest" (p. 50). By keeping the deleted matter in the text, the editor allows the reader to have the same experience as "reading the original" (p. 51). So far as the text goes, the only editorial judgments allowed silently to intrude are those which determine what a carelessly written word actually is despite malformation of a letter or two and whether the author made his changes at first writing or at a later time.

Dr. Tanselle likes clear lines drawn and firm distinctions made. He is partial to no-nonsense terms. If an editor presents private documents "as anything more polished or finished than they were left by the writer, he is *falsifying* their nature." Failure to record every deletion is indefensible. Deletions are "*essential* characteristics of private documents" (pp. 47, 50; all italics supplied). Why then, have historical editors behaved so badly? They have pleaded that they wanted to make their documents more readable. Ironically, those of their colleagues who are partial to writing monographs seem less and less concerned with readability—except when they choose to consult printed and edited documents. Dr. Tanselle has no patience with the readability defense. The only way the reader can recapture the author's spirit and mood is to tackle angle brackets, braces, unexpanded abbreviations, and intrusive commas.

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Well, I am not a clear-lines, firm-distinctions sort of fellow myself. I prefer to leave rather more latitude to editorial judgment than Dr. Tanselle would. Take the matter of deletions. I am convinced that a sensible and sensitive editor can determine whether in the given context a deletion is significant or not. The determination, of course, will be more obvious in some cases than others. If there were many deletions (I cannot give a quantitative definition of "many"), I might want to include them all because they might, given the context, suggest an indecisive or agitated state of mind. But three or four inconsequential ones in a document, along with incomprehensible punctuation and superfluous dashes, could well annoy a modern reader. They would not be "too difficult," as Dr. Tanselle insists, but reader annoyance itself could block the reader from sensing a writer's mood. I believe that there is a difference between essential and non-essential, although I cannot draw a precise line. In the interest of precision, Dr. Tanselle would say that it is essential to record every deletion.

It seems to me that insisting that silent changes of any sort will destroy the mood conveyed by a document puts the burden of proof on those who insist. If, as many editors have said, a dash after a period can safely be eliminated as meaningless, it is incumbent upon those who agree with Dr. Tanselle to demonstrate what exact mood or spirit is sacrificed by the silent deletion of such dashes. By way of aside, it would not surprise me if someone were able to show that the dash after a period was copied from newspaper printers, who used it to justify lines. I believe that no one, among historians at least, has publicly observed that newspaper printers were much closer to modern practice in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation than educated statesmen of the eighteenth century. It may be that printers set a kind of standard that the educated gradually copied.

The important point is that newspaper readers until late in the eighteenth century felt no compulsion *to follow* a standard; the notion of an authority for orthography and punctuation did not emerge until then. Dr. Johnson's dictionary, which did not appear until 1755, took a long time to become an arbiter, especially in America. Without agreed-upon norms, abnormalities by our standards today were not such then and probably did not reflect mood or spirit. Not until Noah Webster's spellers began to appear, the first in 1782, did children begin to be trained to spell and pronounce according to a single standard as a way of promoting nationalism and even equality. Ironing out differences in orthography and pronunciation, it was thought, would help to level distinctions. But the effort was largely a nineteenth-century phenomenon (Robert L. Church and Michael W. Sedlak, *Education in the United States,* N.Y., 1976, pp. 16-20).

John Adams and other gentlemen of his generation never looked upon correct spelling and capitalization as worthy of notice. Occasionally I receive a letter from a family member who makes a lazy stab at spelling a difficult word and puts "sp?" in parentheses after it—the mark of a guilty conscience. Our generation thinks that spelling is important, or knows that it ought to think so, at least. Living in Philadelphia in the early days of the Continental Congress, Adams fumbled repeatedly with the spelling of "Pennsylvania." Had he cared about it, he could have obtained the form accepted locally from the *Pennsylvania Gazette,* which he read regularly. I have read many a letter to and from Adamses that apologized for a poor performance. A large sheet was used to write only a few lines; the letter was written in haste; it was prolix; it was scribbled and had words crossed out and interlined. Never did anyone apologize for his punctuation, spelling, abbreviations, capital letters, or the use of the ampersand. There simply was no established and recognized authority on these matters, nor did statesmen feel the need for one. Everyone was on his own. My wincing the first few times I encountered John Adams' spelling of "college" with a "d" only revealed an unhistorical attitude. So did my perception of quaintness in the unexpanded abbreviations, superscript letters, and ampersands of the *Susquehannah Company Papers,* on which I served my apprenticeship as an historical editor. Proofreading volumes of such literally rendered text soon made it seem ordinary enough. No special flavor lingered. Probably we have all been surprised when a young undergraduate remarks upon the funny "s's" of the eighteenth century that look like "f's." Scholars immersed in manuscripts and books of the period have long since forgotten to notice such a peculiarity.

Critics of the silent supplying of minimal punctuation where it is required need to do more than assert that a mood has been destroyed. At the Adams Papers we have encountered whole pages without periods or capital letters to mark divisions of sentences. Only slow and careful reading enabled us to figure out where a sentence should begin and end. We then provided a few periods without any sense of guilt, notifying the reader in a general way that we had done so. In some instances the placement of a period can alter meaning, for it may shift a modifying phrase or clause from one sentence to another. Clearly in these instances, the editor must tell the reader exactly where he has supplied terminal punctuation. Our rule of thumb has been that if one is reading along and has to back up to ascertain meaning, the editor should supply help with due notice to the reader. A different sort of example is a series of names in which missing commas make it difficult to keep first names linked with last ones. In this case we insert minimal punctuation without notice. What mood is conveyed by such missing commas? Haste? Boredom? Or no mood at all, but perhaps a poor nib on the quill? Who is to say? Several commas in a row with brackets around them may only distract the reader from the mood that the whole page or document was meant to evoke.

I would not convey the impression that we at the Adams Papers are cavalier in our approach to the integrity of the text. We concede that retention of spelling and punctuation may say something about an Adams and those who were frequent correspondents of his. There are misspellings and misspellings, for example. Some may suggest a level of education or slipshod habits. Although there was no standard for punctuation, some correspondents show a pretty consistent standard of their own, and it seems simpler to copy their practice than constantly to "correct" it. But what retention of spelling and pointing says does not warrant slavish copying if that will get in the way of the meaning of the words and the spirit of the document. Thus the Adams Papers retain misspellings, peculiarities of punctuation, and the like. We do not supply periods if commas, semi-colons, or colons do duty in grouping words meaningfully. We ignore all that is taught in freshman composition about the horrors of the comma splice and separation of subject and verb with a comma (a favorite practice of John Adams); but where sentence meaning is at stake, we prefer an exercise of editorial judgment to exact copying with intrusive brackets and other devices.

For us, meaning inheres mostly in the sense of the words, with archaic and obsolete ones getting footnote explanations. If there is meaning in odd colons and superfluous dashes, we believe that it is not retrievable. An assertion that part of the meaning lies in these is an assertion and nothing more when there is little apparent relation between pauses, stress, and rhythm and the marks used or not used. A student of punctuation may find meaning in pointing practice, but that is another story altogether. Although we try to serve a variety of needs among our readers, we cannot serve them all and keep in sight our main objective, the illumination of history. Even genealogists must accept whatever part of a loaf we offer and not beg for answers to their every question.

Mention of meaning raises another consideration. I have called Dr. Tanselle an admirer of distinctions, but I should have mentioned an exception. He asserts that historical and literary documents are intrinsically the same, that no difference in approach to the text of a statesman's letter and a poet's is warranted, even though the one is a man of affairs and the other an artist. Granted that good poets may write dull letters and indifferent politicians, lively ones, still a statesman's letters are read for what they may reveal about his views, his motives, the opinions of others, the course of events—in short, what they reveal about history and the subject's role in it. If his style of writing says something about his character, so much the better. A distinguished poet's letters may be read for biographical information and any manner of other things, too; but we look especially for clues to his aesthetics, his approach to life, the experiences that may underlie and shape the meaning of his poems. If in his letters his word-choice is undistinguished and his sentences clumsy (hard to believe of a poet), we feel a sense of loss from disappointed expectations. No one feels the need to study the poems of mediocre poets or to run through their letters, unless they made better friends than they did poems. But the letters of even the dullest politicians who had a part, however humble, in important events can be perused with profit for the light they may throw upon a moment or a decade. In a roundabout way I am saying that the aesthetic interest is central in the study of literary documents of all kinds. For historical documents, that interest is a bonus; their contribution to the understanding of history is of overriding concern. To insist upon literal rendition in all private papers is to throw things out of balance.

The absolute fidelity to punctuation, deletions, and interlineations that Dr. Tanselle supports can best be defended for legal documents: legislative resolutions, statutes, declarations, constitutions, treaties, and the like. Since lawyer-like minds sweat over them with thought for their future use in the courts or in the court of world opinion, editorial judgment of what is significant and what is not about alterations in the language needs to give place to the judgments that courts and world opinion will ultimately make. Letters dashed off to friends or thoughts confided to a diary are hardly in the same class. I would not have such distinctions laid down in rules, however, for no set of editorial practices spelled out in an introduction can provide for every contingency. An attempt to do so would mean spending more time laboring over distinctions than can be justified. Proclaiming a thoroughly consistent and inflexible rule that every text shall be preserved as it is in the original insofar as type permits has a seductive simplicity, but I rather like the complexities of a freer reign for editorial judgment.

I have been talking all along about the eighteenth century, which I know best. In the next century, regularization of spelling and punctuation had come to be regarded as important in and outside the schools. If an author chose to ignore that trend, with or without feeling guilty, then the editor will be making a different sort of judgment in preparing his text. Misspellings and whimsical punctuation will have some meaning. Even in the eighteenth century, whimsy had its place. One thinks of the evocative dashes in *Tristram Shandy,* which I once had the temerity to puzzle over in a master's essay on Laurence Sterne's prose style. But the Adamses and their friends seem to have ignored the delightful possibilities of punctuation.

Here perhaps we have the inherent difficulty in trying to set up standards equally applicable to editors of literary and historical documents. For students of literature and bibliographers the text is the thing, even though Dr. Tanselle urges literary editors to put more effort into "explanatory annotation." A good part of the historical editor's work is finding and arranging the documents of his edition. His most important task is placing each in its historical context by explaining references, supplying background, showing development of ideas, and making comparisons. In performing these tasks he functions as an historian. The literary editor is a textual critic primarily; less often is he a literary critic in the broad sense. His work does not require in-depth analysis of non-textual matters, for the document has its own integrity; it can be taken on its own terms. Few historical documents, besides those in the categories just mentioned, are so important that textual purity in Dr. Tanselle's sense is of prime concern.

Dr. Tanselle does not say anything about readers except that they ought not to be dismayed by the difficulties of a literally rendered text. It will still be readable. What is required, however, is a definition of readability. If all one means by the term is that editorial insertions in a printed text of private papers will not prevent a reader from grasping the sense of a passage, one must concede that such devices do not render a sentence or a paragraph incomprehensible. But there is more to readability than that. A multiplicity of devices can be distracting. Within a paragraph a whole succession of angle brackets around deletions can leave a reader to puzzle out just how the final version is to go and cause him to lose the mood of the whole piece, particularly if he finds the editorial apparatus annoying. Those who follow the rules of the Center for Scholarly Editions seem to recognize this danger in that clear text is preferred for printed works or public documents, but Dr. Tanselle insists that private papers should carry all the editorial apparatus right in the text. Aside from the intrusiveness of apparatus, the expense of typesetting a text full of brackets and other devices would greatly increase production costs that are already burdensome.

Although the letters of novelists may remain essentially private, the letters of statemen are the stuff of history; and historians deeply believe, however much their performance may belie the ideal, that all citizens need to understand history. Historians want edited documents of all kinds, not just public ones, to be accessible to scholar and non-scholar alike. They are encouraged when they learn that private papers are being increasingly used in the classroom and when physicians and businessmen confess that they are reading diaries and letters of historical figures. Readability, then, if a wide audience is to be secured, is not a frivolous but a legitimate goal. To obtain it, an editor need not automatically follow precise rules laid down with iron consistency. In fact, I welcome the variety of editorial practices being followed on the assumption that each qualified editor best understands the requirements for accessibility for the materials that he is dealing with. Chided for his modernization of the documents on ratification of the United States Constitution and the first federal elections, Merrill Jensen perhaps knew best. No central figure dominates the documents which he edited; important ideas from a great variety of sources are the thing, not individual spelling and punctuation. Once again, Dr. Tanselle imports from the editing of literary documents the principle of the sanctity of the text with its every wart preserved, a principle not necessary for many, perhaps most, of the documents that an historical editor works with.

For a moment I would like to return to the reproduction of printed documents or, rather, public ones, as Dr. Tanselle calls them. He is quite right in stressing that historical editors should examine whatever printed versions are extant, just as one would compare drafts and letterbook copies with finished products and recipients' copies. But, again, I would leave the editor to distinguish between significant and inconsequential differences and to note only the former—unless the editor decided that the sheer number of differences was significant in itself. I am, however, troubled by the production of a public work that has no real counterpart in any document because the editor has divined through manuscripts and other means the intention of the author. Although I have made a case of sorts for allowing latitude to the editor's judgment, I would not go so far as to sanction what almost looks like collaboration, a point raised by several CSE critics. Preferably, the editor should choose from among the possibilities the version of an historical document which is closest to finished form, that is, closest to the author's desire at a given time, and then where the author's intention has not been carried out, suggest at those various points with appropriate documentation what that intention was. In this way at least a text is presented that has a real existence, that has author approval or author and publisher approval, if you will, at some stage. For an editor to create a text suitable for a perfect world in which the author's intention reigned is to create one that never was, one that has no *historical* validity, whatever its *critical* soundness. Historical editors must deal first with what was; a flawed document may have considerable historical significance. What should have been can appear in the notes. A clear text can too easily be lifted out and passed off as the definitive version, despite its designation by the CSE, or some comparable body for historians, as "An," not "The," "Approved Text."

In emphasizing the absolute need to compare all available versions of a piece of writing whether intended by its author for print or not, Dr. Tanselle resorts to a footnote (No. 36) to condemn the historian's use of photocopies as authentic sources for comparison. He reminds us all that such copies can be misleading, but he goes too far in his insistence that comparison only with originals will do, thus setting a standard for perfection that historical editors cannot live up to. Unlike most editorial enterprises, the Adams Papers has access to the originals, as distinct from photocopies and film, of the several hundred thousand documents carefully preserved through six generations (now on 608 reels of microfilm deposited in 90 libraries, here and abroad). But the "accessions" acquired in photo-facsimile form from 233 widely scattered archives and collections, many of them in foreign countries, are of equal importance to the editorial function. These were gathered over many years, and a few still come in. The expense in time and money that would be required to return to depositories to check typed transcripts against originals would be prohibitive and unjustifiable. The size of travel budgets and the resulting delays in publication would give the NHPRC apoplexy. The editor does need to be on his guard in using photocopies, and when his suspicions are aroused to seek out the originals. Our office has occasional requests from scholars using the Adams Papers microfilms that require us to look up the originals to settle a point. But examination of every original is unthinkable; depositories trying to save wear and tear on manuscripts by making film or Xeroxes available would not even permit such zeal to override their rules.

Obviously I have made no effort to enter a defense for every editorial project or set of editorial practices found wanting by Dr. Tanselle. Some are not defensible, and none of them is without blemish. His contribution has been to make us think harder about what we are doing and about what our colleagues are doing, examining more carefully the models whose guidance we have accepted. Yet, although we are met together as members of a single organization engaged in what sounds like the same scholarly activity, I contend that the materials we labor over and the aims we pursue justify different practices. Neither historian nor literary scholar need be contemptuous of the other; rather, we can and ought to learn from each other, giving regard to both the approach to a documentary text and the circumstances that provide its setting. Beyond this, and perhaps as a matter of temperament, I am uneasy with inflexible rules and favor more readily than Dr. Tanselle the exercise of editorial discretion within the limits of a text as given. Readers are entitled to know the principles which an editor sets for himself, but editors can design those rules with reference to the materials they work with, choosing modernization or partial regularization as befits their purposes. An historical editor's real sin is saying carefully and explicitly what he is going to do and then not sticking to it. And here Dr. Tanselle has indeed struck home.