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Cover Page Footnote

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EDITING THE LETTERS OF A SCOTTISH AUTHOR

Gillian Hughes

What do an author's letters consist of? Any initial definition is problematic and inevitably involves a degree of editorial selection. Letters embody strategies designed to enhance personal identity and status, and have models such as copy-books and epistolary fiction. One Regency governess, for instance, regretted that her pupils preferred spending their evenings together in card-playing rather than in writing letters to one another.¹ The magazine fiction of James Hogg often took the form of a letter addressed to himself or to the periodical's editor, while the "long monthly budgets" Stevenson sent Colvin from the South Seas were perhaps less his part of a two-way exchange than the basis for a posthumous publication.² Are addresses to editors of newspapers conveying facts or opinions, personal letters or literary works? Does a short literary work or a presentation autograph become a letter because it has been directed to a publisher or autograph-hunter and posted?

Editorial purpose directs selection. An eighteenth-century editor would routinely omit the expressions of respect that preceded the end-signature to a letter, and a nineteenth-century editor would still exclude as uninteresting or irrelevant those portions of a letter not germane to his or

¹ *Miss Weeton: Journal of a Governess 1807-1811*, ed. by Edward Hall (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), p. 254.

² See, for instance, "A Singular Letter from Southern Africa" and "Strange Letter of a Lunatic," in James Hogg, *Contributions to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine Volume 2: 1829-1835*, ed. by Thomas C. Richardson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 65-76, 77-86; also Stevenson to Baxter, 8 January 1893, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 vols (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1994-95), VIII: 6-7.

her primary (often literary or religious) purpose, such as orders to tradesmen and details of the transmission of the letter, the omission of such passages being indicated by a series of ellipses. Where an edition of letters by a group of co-religionists or business partners is in question correspondents may be treated as of equal status. An edition of an author's letters, on the other hand, mostly provides in full only one side of a two-way correspondence, and in cases where a letter comprises not easily separable passages written by that author and another a hierarchy of importance will often be signalled by the use of differences in type or by giving the co-writer's contribution in summary form.

Self-censorship may influence editorial selection, as notions of privacy and propriety alter rather than vanish. It may no longer be customary to return a person's letters on the death of the recipient, but it is still unacceptable to open and read a letter addressed to another person. And though an editor may now be less inclined to eliminate references to formerly sensitive topics such as sex, religion, and personal hygiene, the family and friends of an author may feel differently. As Hogg's daughter, Mrs Garden, put it, "Love letters are only meant for two pairs of eyes."³ The greater the time-lapse between the writing of an author's letters and their publication the freer an editor is likely to be from control by family over access and publication and from anxiety over the potential consequences of causing offence to living persons.

With few exceptions an author neither collects nor coherently shapes his letters for publication, so that the editor largely determines the collection's extent. The scale of an editor's enquiries and publication of the results has in the past tended to relate to the assumed literary importance of the author concerned. Grierson's landmark edition of Sir Walter Scott's letters was impelled by the commemoration of the centenary of the death of that colossus of Scottish literature in 1932.⁴ Alan Lang Strout's publication of his pioneering archival work on James Hogg's letters, on the other hand, was limited by his opinion that at some future date "when the Scholarly vies with the Comic Section in interest, a definitive *Missives of the Ettrick Shepherd* may be found worth

³ M. G. Garden, *Memorials of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd* (Paisley and London: Alexander Gardner, n.d.), p. 117.

⁴ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. by H. J. C. Grierson and Others, 12 vols (London: Constable & Co., 1932-37).

publishing.”⁵ Extent may also cause its own problems. Scott and Carlyle are instances of prolific letter-writers, for each of whom there are thousands of extant letters. To date forty volumes of letters by Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle have been published between 1970 and 2012 in the ongoing Edinburgh-Duke Edition, while Jane Millgate has estimated that the twelve volumes of Grierson’s *Letters of Sir Walter Scott* contain only about half of Scott’s surviving letters.⁶ Heroic costs in research time and money enable publication of the Carlyle letters as printed volumes backed by an online edition, while Millgate’s research is available as an electronic catalogue of Scott’s correspondence rather than a new edition of his letters. James Hogg’s surviving letters, in marked contrast, could be published in three printed volumes.⁷

Innovative work by James Daybell, Susan Whyman and others on the material culture of the early modern letter emphasises inclusiveness and typicality.⁸ An editor is now unlikely to omit passages which relate to methods of transmission and will include details of address, postal markings, and endorsements that may provide indications of recipient response, provenance, and even political opinion. Hogg’s ending the direction of a letter to Southey in Keswick with “S. B.” for South Britain (I:83), for example, is much more unusual than the designation of Scotland as North Britain. There is heightened awareness of the importance of the specificities of contemporary postal services and transportation networks. In Hogg’s lifetime, for example, the words “By Langholm & Selkirk” (I:416) referred, not to immediate geographical proximity, but to a particular route in a postal system which originally centred the whole of Scotland upon Edinburgh. His letters also utilise many of the numerous (if often illegal) ways of evading high postal charges, including the use of local carriers, publishers’ parcels, and

⁵ Alan Lang Strout, *The Life and Letters of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd: Volume 1 (1770-1825)*, Texas Technological College Research Publications 15 (Lubbock: Texas Technological Univ. Press, 1946), p. 5.

⁶ See The Carlyle Letters Online at <http://carlyleletters.dukejournals.org/>, and Introduction to the Millgate Union Catalogue of Walter Scott Correspondence at <http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/resources/scott/intro.cfm>.

⁷ *The Collected Letters of James Hogg*, ed. by Gillian Hughes and Others, 3 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2004-08), hereafter cited in parentheses.

⁸ James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

exploitation of the franking privileges possessed by Members of Parliament and certain government officials. Hogg's letters to London publishers increase after the opening up of the London periodical market to writers resident in Scotland by the introduction of efficient steam-boats between Leith and London. In the Victorian age, similarly, writers were more easily able to explore the American market after the formation by treaty of a general postal union in 1874.

Collectively, letters increasingly signal patterns of survival to both editor and reader. These reflect the circumstances of an author's life, the progress of his career, the types of letter most often preserved by recipients, and the kind of recipients who preserved most letters. For the period preceding Hogg's breakthrough success as a poet with *The Queen's Wake* in 1813, for instance, fewer letters were seemingly kept as well as written. From 1803 to 1805 only letters to Sir Walter Scott have apparently survived while a local farmer's endorsement to a letter sent to him by Hogg in 1807 notes "I have only one letter in my possession left out of many I had from him" (I:83). Legal, publishing, and courtship letters have survived where casual notes of appointment have not. There is a surge in the number and kind of Hogg's surviving letters from 1813, and another after his extended visit to London during the early months of 1832: then his celebrity status was such that even his note declining a dinner invitation has survived (III:52). At a time when paper was expensive and postal charges high, well-to-do people living in spacious accommodation tended to write, receive, and preserve more letters.

Letter-editing is increasingly informed by the recognition that letter-writing has its own conventions. Many editorial arguments that apply to literary works intended for publication are not applicable to letters. The Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, for instance, is based on the assumption that Scott expected the spelling and punctuation of his manuscript to be completed and corrected by a group of intermediaries at the printing-house, who would also be alert to inconsistencies and infelicities of style. The editor aims to produce an ideal version of this socialised first-edition text, one that "first readers might have read had the production process been less pressurised and more considered."⁹ In most cases the writer of a letter plainly expected the physical manuscript itself to be what his intended audience would read, and letters frequently

⁹ "General Introduction," cited from *Guy Mannering*, ed. by P. D. Garside, EEWN 2 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1999), p. xv.

include reminders that they are specific physical objects. In his initial letter to Eliza Izett, for instance, Hogg occupies the first side of his paper with personal praise of her, then adds “my pen has run away with me in the prelude and I must now turn the leaf and begin my letter on the other side” (I:89).

An editor is therefore faced with problems of negotiation between the unique object intended for the original reader and the inevitably different nature of a printed volume. Some degree of editorial mediation is unavoidable: even a succession of facsimiles involves the loss of information conveyed by the paper and ink of the originals, imposes sequencing by chronology or recipient, and adds a binding. The creation of a print transcription automatically involves some regularisation of sizing, spacing, and layout, for the convenience of the reader as well as to eliminate arbitrary or indeterminate features of the component originals. Where the writer has run out of space on the paper and finished his letter by writing sideways in margins, at the head of the paper, or at right-angles across earlier passages, the editor will provide a text reading continuously from beginning to end. Hogg’s dating at the head of his letters, for example, seems sometimes to be centred and sometimes on the right according to its length, and his stop after the abbreviation “Edin” may appear to be either immediately under the final superior letter or after it. An attractive reading text may also exclude deletions, particularly since significant ones can be mentioned in editorial matter.

The editorial impulse towards uniformity can, however, create misinterpretation. Idiosyncratic spelling can be informative of both cultural background and pronunciation: Hogg’s persistent spelling of “Wednesday” as “Wedensday,” for instance, shows that the day retained a trace of its Norse origins in the Scottish Borders. Hogg’s daughter, anxious to maximise her father’s social and cultural achievements, corrected his “sweet biksets” to “sweet biscuits” (Garden, p. 209), where Hogg, passing on a request to his wife from their infant daughter, was simply mimicking her speech. Spelling choices can also reveal a preference for Scots forms by Scottish writers, and errors can reveal an author’s level of familiarity with classical and modern languages, or technical terms, or simply indicate distraction, haste, or ill health. The reader will need some reassurance that unusual spellings are those of the author rather than reflecting carelessness in editorial transcription, but in practice soon becomes habituated to the author’s characteristic spellings while others can be signalled by the use of “*sic*.” Because of the dangers of misinterpretation by the editor and as reminders that a letter is a

specific physical object there is also a case for not filling lacunae caused by tears in the paper, blots, or wax seals, but simply informing the reader of their presence: the resulting disadvantage of this is a slight awkwardness in quotation.

Even where the original letter has not survived and the editor must use a contemporary or modern transcription or print text as a source, the aim should still be to reproduce that source as accurately as possible within the new context. The editor may guess, for example, that the strange expression “fugi’ farance” in a typed transcript may have read “fugie for ance” in Hogg’s original letter (I:10-11), but it is also possible that his writing (if not precisely his meaning) has been accurately copied. Editorial conjecture can be offered through annotation. Victorian printed sources in particular may override as well as complete the lighter punctuation of a manuscript letter, but while the effect is unmistakably heavier than the characteristic punctuation of the author it will nevertheless be virtually impossible to decide which individual marks derive from the original letter. Some presentational inconsistency between letters from different types of source is inevitable, and if each letter is accompanied by a statement of its source the reader learns to make the necessary mental adjustment.

Establishing the text of a letter and providing annotation are not such distinct activities as they at first appear to be. Strout, failing to understand Hogg’s question to Captain Napier of “Who are we to get to Ettrick?,” rendered it as “How are we to get to Ettrick?” (Strout, p. 145). Had he noted that the pulpit in Ettrick was vacant after the death of the minister he would have understood that Hogg’s question was an enquiry of the chief heritor of the parish as to the next incumbent. Annotation follows from correct editorial reading, and will then vary depending on the prospective readership. While a Scottish reader might only need to be informed of the death of the previous minister and Captain Napier’s land-holding, another reader would also have to be told that in the Church of Scotland the chief heritors (landowners) of a parish often had the right of making ministerial appointments. In writing a personal letter an author has no need to provide even the level of background information he would normally include in a work designed for general circulation, such as a novel. The editor of a collection of letters will need to supply this, suitably tailored to the nationality, education and cultural experience of the probable readership of the edition, and also information drawn from the other half of the correspondence, so that the reader understands what the author is responding to and what response he may evoke in turn. The editor of

letters will therefore frequently need to supply more annotation than the editor of a literary work.

An edition of an author's collected letters seldom has the completeness or the coherence of a literary work, and the editor's responsibilities include facilitating future expansion of the record by identifying gaps. Besides the inclusion of surviving portions and summaries of letters, missing or untraced letters should be noted the existence of which can be deduced from references in other letters by the author or his correspondents. The reader will be less likely to read all of the text and to read it consecutively than if he had opened a novel, since each letter may be read as a discrete unit as well as part of a sequence arranged by the editor. Each letter will therefore require a title, a number and/or a statement of date and recipient which, unlike the author's own direction and dating, will be regularised and corrected—"Mr Boyde" will become George Boyd and 'Novr 31st' either 30 November or 1 December. An index will allow the reader of a chronologically-sequenced collection of letters who prefers a sequence by correspondent or theme to implement one. Ideally each letter will have its own annotation, and the most effective placement is probably after the letter itself. A large number of footnotes would interrupt a letter occupying two or more pages, while a large number of end-notes necessitates irritatingly frequent page-turning. Use of smaller type or a different font will help the reader who wishes to omit the intervening notes to do so, and if notes are keyed to words from the text the letter itself will not be peppered with superior numerals. The chief danger of giving each letter its own following annotation is that of excessive duplication, but this can be reduced by cross-referencing and by grouping information about frequent correspondents into appendix notes.

In conclusion, it could be argued that, as fresh letters continue to emerge, the work of the letters editor is never done, particularly since electronic publication allows for continuing revision. A volume printed at a specific date allowed the editor at least the possibility of closure.

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