

Idealist and Materialist Interpretations of BL Harley 7368, the *Sir Thomas More* Manuscript

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1. In a sequence of articles beginning the late 1980s Paul Werstine has consistently criticized the work of New Bibliographers in general, and W. W. Greg in particular. In *EMLS* in 1998 [1] Werstine argued that playtext editions such as Peter Holland's recent *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Oxford Shakespeare which rely on Greg's categorization of the play manuscripts (especially the distinction between 'foul papers' and 'promptbook') mistake the essentially uncategorizable nature of the extant materials. Chief exhibit in Werstine's case was the British Library manuscript Harley 7368 containing the script of a play called *Sir Thomas More*, apparently by Shakespeare and others. Werstine finds in this manuscript two versions of a comic scene, one of which he calls the 'original' version as composed by a dramatist, and a second version of the same scene which he calls the 'theatrical' version which is "closer to the stage" [2]. Mapping these two versions onto Greg's foul papers/promptbook dichotomy, Werstine showed that the improved consistency Greg predicted in a theatrical document is not to be found in this case: the 'theatrical' version of the comic scene is even less consistent in speech prefixes than the authorial 'original'.

2. My objections to Werstine's argument have focussed on his characterization of the two versions of the scene as the 'original' and the 'theatrical', and his misrepresentation of what these comprise. Awkwardly, the present ordering of sheets in the manuscript puts a scene on folio 6a which, as Werstine (quoting Greg) in his latest defence quite rightly notes, "appears in quite a wrong part of the MS" [3]. There is irony in Werstine invoking Greg at this point, since Werstine has long reviled Greg's habit of re-ordering materials to suit the needs of his arguments. Still, all are agreed that the scene on 6a is in the wrong place, and the substantive question is whether Werstine is right to refer to two versions of a comic scene comprising:

i) The entrance direction on 5b and the deleted dialogue which follows it on that page. This Werstine calls the 'original' version.

ii) The entrance direction on 5b and the dialogue on 7a which replaced the deleted dialogue on 5b. This Werstine calls the 'theatrical' version.

I complained that Werstine had to invent his quotation of (ii) since no piece of paper contains it; only by removing sheet 6 and marrying the undeleted stage direction on 5b with the dialogue on 7a does (ii) come into existence [4].

3. Werstine defends his doing this (and his not mentioning doing it in the original article) in his note "The Two Material Versions of Scene 4 of *Sir Thomas More*", and we

may diagnose that word "material" as an attempt to shore up a shaky position. If there really are two "material" versions of this scene (as opposed to two conceptual versions), I challenge Werstine to produce a picture of each. Some darkroom trickery would be needed because the same piece of writing, the entrance direction on 5b, would have to appear in each: firstly at the beginning of the dialogue on 5b and then again tacked on to the dialogue on 7a, which is in a different hand. One is entitled to *imagine* such a patchwork script as Werstine's 'theatrical' version (and his argument depends on someone having such a patchwork in mind), but Werstine has for a long time fought against such idealization of documentary evidence. If "material" has come to be something which exists only in the mind of the reader (aided by Greg's hunch about what belongs where) then it is indistinguishable from the idealism Werstine has long decried. Greg's spirit demands a high price for this Faustian pact: in his edition the dialogue on 7a is shunted to the back among the 'Additions', putting some 55 pages of other stuff between the stage direction (on 5b) and the dialogue (on 7a) which Werstine wishes to see as a material continuum. If, however, Werstine is willing to dissociate the entrance direction on 5b from the dialogue of 7a, and call just the dialogue the 'theatrical' version of the scene, the problem disappears. Alas, in the same puff of smoke disappears the discrepancy which started this all, since the dialogue is quite consistent in its speech prefixes, as I have pointed out [5]

4. I objected to Werstine's calling (ii) a 'theatrical' version of the scene and his answer is "My principal reason for doing so is, of course, the presence of Hand C in this version", which Hand C also turns up in two playhouse plots. Thus to Werstine "it seems appropriate to call the second version of *More's* fourth scene, which contains inscriptions by Hand C, the 'theatrical' version" [6]. Two reasons why this is in fact quite inappropriate are obvious. The first is that Hand C is also present on 5b, repeating in altered form the stage direction by Munday, so (i) is also 'theatrical' by Werstine's reasoning. The second reason is that Werstine's discrimination between things authorial and things theatrical cannot be squared with his earlier assertion that ". . . one must confront the possibility that the same individuals (Munday and, just possibly, Heywood) could function on both sides of the boundary that Greg's tradition throws up between playwright and theatre in its distinction between authorial 'foul papers' and theatrical 'prompt-books'" [7]. In using the presence of Hand C as his "principal reason" for calling (ii) the 'theatrical' version of the scene, Werstine leans upon the very distinction between writers and theatre people which he set out to undermine.

Notes

1. Paul Werstine, "Hypertext and Editorial Myth." *Early Modern Literary Studies* 3.3 (May, 1998) <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/03-3/wersshak.html>

2. Paul Werstine, "Hypertext and Editorial Myth" paragraph 9

3. Paul Werstine "The Two Material Versions of Scene 4 of *Sir Thomas More*." *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6.3 (January, 2001) <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/06-3/wersnote.htm> note 3

4. Gabriel Egan, "Revision of scene 4 of *Sir Thomas More* as a test of New Bibliographical principles." *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6.2 (September, 2000). <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/06-2/eganmore.htm> paragraph 4
5. Gabriel Egan, "Revision of scene 4 of *Sir Thomas More* as a test of New Bibliographical principles" paragraph 5
6. Paul Werstine "The Two Material Versions of Scene 4 of *Sir Thomas More*." paragraph 2
7. Paul Werstine, "Hypertext and Editorial Myth" paragraph 8

Works Cited

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