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Textual Cultures: Texts, Contexts, Interpretation, Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 44-55 (Article)

Published by Society for Textual Scholarship

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/tex.2008.3.1.44>



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# Uncoupled

## OR, How I Lost My Author(s)

*David Greetham*

### ABSTRACT

The essay traces the personal history of trying to “find” an author, in the sense of a number of attempts to identify a “father figure” with whom an editorial and critical career might be linked. Describing such devices as the mapping out of a comprehensive series of abstract models for charting the relationships between a translated and a translating text (in the case of John Trevisa) and the construction of an authorial idiolect where no autograph survives (in the case of Thomas Hoccleve), the personal narrative now regards these attempts to reach back into the authorial psyche as hubristic, even improper. In the place of such a single authorial identity, the essay concludes by showing how authoriality rather than authorship took over in the development of a scholarly career, resulting in, for example, the founding of the interdisciplinary Society for Textual Scholarship.

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For Speed Hill<sup>1</sup>

I TRIED TO FIND, AND BE LOYAL TO, AN AUTHOR: I REALLY DID. BUT SOMEHOW the “psychic connections” that my fellow-panelists identified, never quite took with me. As a very neophyte editor, I was co-opted (suborned?) into the Clarendon Press edition of John Trevisa’s Middle English translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (*On the Properties of Things*), or DPR, a “monumental” tome, published in 1975.<sup>2</sup> But Trevisa, while a diligent scholar and even possibly a renegade Wycliffite (or even

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1. Since Speed Hill (1935–2007) organised these two panels on the psychic relations between editor and author (and also contributed a paper), but was sadly unable to attend the sessions, I dedicate my own paper to him.
  2. SEYMOUR 1975–1989. My textual contribution, *Liber Quintus Decimus. De Prouinciis*, occurs in vol. 2, pp. 726–824, and I also worked on the notes for vol. 3.

possibly, according to David C. Fowler,<sup>3</sup> the author of *Piers Plowman*), remained somehow determinedly faceless, basically a faithful translator (and a successful one) of “other men’s flowers”.

But I did try, and, to be honest, quite enjoyed the ultimately failed attempt, in part because it gave me the opportunity to delve into some of the more arcane areas of textual research (based on this biographical fact of Trevisa’s having devoted himself to translation), and thereby to produce what I now regard as a series of too-neat, too pat, and perhaps also too pretentious “models” for translation, which Fredson Bowers was generous enough to publish in *Studies in Bibliography* (see GREETHAM 1984). I don’t think there’s any point now (and besides which, I would probably find it too embarrassing a display of my youthful idealism) to try to actually *explicate* what these fanciful models *mean*, ranging as they do from what I called the “Perfect Linear” (in which all witnesses in the translating language are uniform in using the same, or very similar, term[s] to represent what appears to be an “accurate” translation) to the more complex “Parallel Variance Class” (in which we seem to get two or more plausible but inconsistent translations of the original text). I now believe that the very titles of these different translation models sound pretentious, in their attempts to map out *every* possible relationship between translating and translated text: I think they show my youthful earnestness, my attempts to situate Trevisa and his text as an ideal form to which I could declare allegiance, and thus embrace as a father figure.<sup>4</sup> The models were quite wonderful in their enthusiasm, and were all dedicated to the project of gaining a more direct access to my author, ob-

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3. While I had obviously “repressed” this recognition in the oral delivery of this paper, the recent death of David Fowler has brought home to me more forcefully his role as the missing “father figure” looming in this and other papers in this collection. It was Fowler who read my first meagre publication in a medievalist newsletter mysteriously called *Ralph*, and on the strength of that and subsequent correspondence, invited me out to the University of Washington and other west coast institutions to lecture on Trevisa and textual studies. He became one of the first advisers to the Society for Textual Scholarship, a contributor to *TEXT* and to our conferences, and a continued kindly presence in my early textual life. While this paper is formally dedicated to Speed Hill, it also commemorates a generation of such scholars (like Fredson Bowers and Paul Oskar Kristeller) who showed me the textual light before I even acknowledged that was the path I was to take, and continued to be wise, courteous, and benevolent mentors till the end of their lives.

4. The models were intended to chart every possible relationship between the translated and translating text, from unambiguous to complex, including various types that would cover not only variance in the witnesses of the translating text and unanimity in the source, but also variance in both source and translation.

scured not by a “veil of print” but by the veil of scribal confusion and mis-transmission. Our/my author lay beyond this confusion, immanent as the lodestar for my arcane models. I think I have to recognise that the project was ultimately not as effective at “unveiling” the author as I had hoped and was thus also not enough to endow Trevisa with those paternal qualities I was presumably looking for.

But, what was worse, from the mid-seventies or so, and especially after the first two volumes came out in 1975, I began to have second thoughts about the then-dominant editorial principles which we had unconsciously assumed were appropriate to the editing of Trevisa, and began to write a series of essays not setting up an idealised author and an idealised text, but distancing myself both from these essentially Formalist/New Critical principles and at the same time questioning the unexamined hegemony of any editorial/authorial/philosophical protocols that could be employed on any text. This distancing (and embarrassment) has continued down to the present, for in an article recently published in the Italian textual journal *Ecdotica*, I return again to the scene of the crime and use the personal and cultural distancing as a means of showing just what was *then*, and what might be *now*: that the earlier search for an immanent author (mis)represented by the extant, but inevitably corrupt, witnesses, has given way to a recognition that the variance shown in these witnesses is valuable evidence for the socialization of the text (GREETHAM 2006). In this case, my *Ecdotica* piece, while formally a response to Paul Eggert’s generous and comprehensive review-essay (2005) of my *Theories of the Text* for the same journal, became not just a survey of the changing terrain of textual practice, but a demonstration of how practice could be affected by theory. And, just as Freud bravely used his own dreams and his own “Freudian slips” (*avant la lettre*) in his account of the general phenomena, I was still smarting enough from my earlier unthinking acceptance of the then-dominant ideology to use my own “slips” as examples of what the shift in textual perspective might show.<sup>5</sup> This section of the *Ecdotica* essay demonstrates how a witness that we regarded as “insincere” and “inauthentic” in the 1970s (and thus not fixable with any security on any conventional patrilinear stemma, and therefore not “authentic” or “sincere” enough to be cited as evidence of an authorial reading) would under the different textual dispensation of a quarter century later now become by far the most challenging and significant, precisely because it showed a copyist/reader actively intervening in the construction of an early “socialised” text. If I were to edit Trevisa now, far from being re-

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5. FREUD 1965; see also TIMPANARO 1976 and GREETHAM 1989, “Literary and Textual Theory”.

jected as too idiosyncratic and unrepresentative of authorial usage, this “contaminated” witness would be much more interesting in its own right than those more decorous, more “sincere” witnesses that we relied on three decades ago. It all depends where you’re standing.

Thus, by the time I came to my second potential father figure, Thomas Hoccleve, I was ready for a more than usually *interrogative* view of text and author, and this despite the fact that various features in Hoccleve’s life (which, unlike Trevisa, were very well documented not only in contemporary records but in the introspective and self-revelatory nature of his own poetry) corresponded to some parts of my own personal narrative (bouts with depression, anxieties about professional status and productivity, and even the ability to write).

For example, in the so-called highly autobiographical *Series* poems (FURNIVALL and GOLLANCZ [1892] 1970), Hoccleve introduces an interlocutor (“Friend”), who functions much like, say, Dr. Arbuthnot in Pope’s *Epistle* to the said gentleman: to provoke, to question, to advise:

Of studie was engendred thy seeknesse,  
And þat was hard / woldest [thow] now agayn  
Entre into þat laborious bisynesse,  
Syn it thy mynde and eek thy wit had slayn?  
Thy conceit is nat worth payndemayn:  
Let be / let be / bisye thee so no more  
Lest thee repente and reewe it ouersore.  
(Dialogue, vv. 379–85)

According to this “Friend”, Hoccleve suffered from an excess of “Studie” and “Thought” (like Hamlet’s “thinking too precisely on th’ event”), which made him unable to write—and this is, of course, what he writes about, the inability to write.<sup>6</sup> It’s an ironic game of productive non-production that extends through Burton’s *Anatomy* and beyond. He even had a Lacanian “mirror” stage, where he questions his own powers of perception, especially of the state of his own mental illness,<sup>7</sup> a technique that Philip Roth was later to use in *The Breast* (though I would not therefore assert that Roth is a devoted Hocclevean [see GREETHAM 1989b]):

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6. Hoccleve’s line, that the “thoght is wasting seed”, appears in the “Prologue” to the *Regiment of Princes*; see FURNIVALL 1897, 201–3.

7. For Hoccleve’s “mirror scene”, see his “Complaint” in FURNIVALL and GOLLANCZ [1892] 1970, 162–75.

Many a sawte made I to this myrowre,  
 thinkynge, “yf that I loke in this manere  
 amonge folke / as I now do, none errowr  
 of suspecte loke / may in my face appere,  
 this countenance, I am svre, and this chere,  
 If I forthe vse / is no thinge reprevable  
 To them that have / conseytes resonable

And there-with-all I thowgt[e] thus anon:  
 “men in theyr owne case / bene blynd alday,  
 as I haue hard say / many a day agon,  
 and in that [same] plight / I stonde may;  
 how shall I doo / which is the best[e] way  
 my trowbled spirit for to bringe at rest[e]?  
 yf I wist howe / fyne wolde I do the best[e]”.  
 (*Complaint*, vv. 162–75)

So Thomas Hoccleve was an attractive figure, one to whom I might indeed establish a “psychic connection”, particularly since we both seemed to have “psychic disjunctions”. And so, perhaps as a replication of my technical “modelling” for Trevisa as translator, I tried (I really did) to get further back, and closer to, my new author’s actual idiolect than had previously been thought possible for any Middle English author. Surveying the anomalous condition of the Hoccleve *oeuvre* as it was (or was not) preserved in autograph manuscripts (Hoccleve was, after all, a professional scribe), I introduced what was at the time a radical editorial procedure: importing the well preserved accidentals of Hoccleve’s own autograph manuscripts of *other* works into the substantive text of his most famous work, the *De Regimine Principum* (*Regiment of Princes*) or *DRP*, for which no autograph survived.<sup>8</sup>

Given that Hoccleve was an anally retentive bureaucrat and tried to impose order on the shifting surface features of late medieval verse, the editorial team, whose personnel varied over the years, found that there was even more consistency in usage in other surviving autographs than we might have hoped for, and that this radical editorial procedure actually worked: a similar *modus operandi* was later used for one of the texts in the California Twain, where no autographs remained, but accidentals usage could be estab-

8. I began work on this “importing” of accidentals as a general editor of a new “normalised” edition. This editing was eventually completed by Charles R. Blyth (1999). For a description of this editorial procedure, see GREETHAM 1985 and 1987.

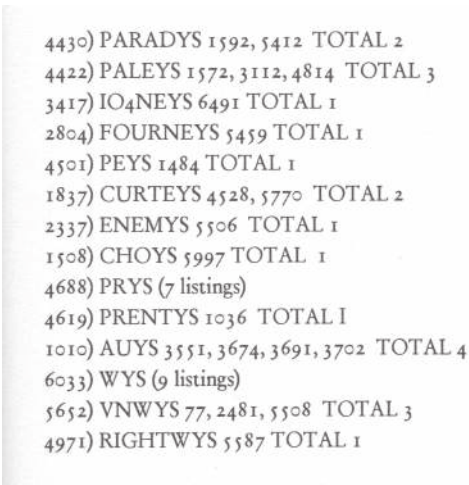
3435) IS (There are 746 listings in the concordance for this entry. They are not given here.)  
 1934) DEEDIS 3861 [i.e., line number in HOCCELEX text] TOTAL 1  
 4149) NEEDIS 3863 TOTAL 1  
 3230) HIS (There are 480 listings in the concordance for this entry. They are not given here.)  
 5316) THIS (There are 416 listings for this entry in the concordance. They are not given here.)  
 1541) CLERKIS 2829 TOTAL 1  
 5788) WERKIS 2831 TOTAL 1  
 2273) ELLIS 5795 TOTAL 1  
 4034) MIS (29 listings in concordance)  
 867) AMIS (12 listings)  
 4169) NIS 464 TOTAL 1  
 1399) CARKEIS 1065 TOTAL 1  
 1806) CROIS (13 listings)  
 5658) VOIS (7 listings)  
 5413) TOURIS 3325 TOTAL 1  
 1922) DECEITIS 6573 TOTAL 1  
 5400) TORMENTIS 5702 TOTAL 1

**Figure 1 and 2 (below):** Example of a reverse concordance for Hoccleve's *De Regimine Principum*. A reverse concordance simply lists all words in a lexical data base, but with the spellings in reverse order, so that, as in the examples of Figure 1 and Figure 2, we can see Hoccleve's use of words with an *-is* ending and a *-ys* (two alternative forms for, say, plurals or genitives) and thus hope to discover any authorial preference of consistency during a period when such spellings were not yet fixed. The computer file from which the reverse concordance was drawn was created by the computer services department at Adelphi University under the supervision of Peter Farley.

lished from collateral works.<sup>9</sup> But what was doubtless (in retrospect) more significant for me at that second stage of an academic career, was that this attempted penetration into the compositional idiosyncrasies of an otherwise absent author gave me the opportunity to indulge in a new series of arcane models, using a computer-generated concordance (we were still on a mainframe in those days) and a reverse concordance. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). With such evidence analysed we were determined to map out our journey into the author's mind. This "mapping" was to follow a very predetermined narrative of editorial choices, as is shown in the "flowchart" in Figure 3. This flowchart began to show some resemblance to the Hampton

9. HIRST 1993. There is now a "revised" paperback edition (2002) of *Roughing It* purporting to be the "first and only text that adheres to the author's wishes in details of wording, spelling, and punctuation, restored from original sources", but this is then noted as "reproduces the text and notes of the Mark Twain Project's 1993 edition".

Figure 2



4430)	PARADYS	1592, 5412	TOTAL 2
4422)	PALEYS	1572, 3112, 4814	TOTAL 3
3417)	IO4NEYS	6491	TOTAL 1
2804)	FOURNEYS	5459	TOTAL 1
4501)	PEYS	1484	TOTAL 1
1837)	CURTEYS	4528, 5770	TOTAL 2
2337)	ENEMYs	5506	TOTAL 1
1508)	CHOYS	5997	TOTAL 1
4688)	PRYS	(7 listings)	
4619)	PRENTYS	1036	TOTAL 1
1010)	AUYS	3551, 3674, 3691, 3702	TOTAL 4
6033)	WYS	(9 listings)	
5652)	VNWYS	77, 2481, 5508	TOTAL 3
4971)	RIGHTWYS	5587	TOTAL 1

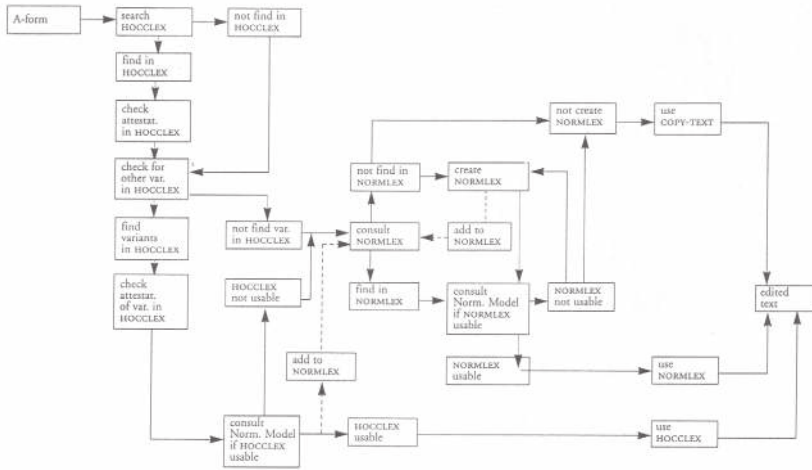
Court Maze, but (as with the translation “models” for Trevisa) was intended to give an editor a theoretical and practical guide to the recovery of authorial usage, inferred or otherwise. And, as with the examples of modelling from Trevisa, I don’t now think there would be any great value in trying to *explicate* these processes, but simply to display them as evidence of textual hubris (and probably pretension as well). But again, stalwart Fredson Bowers happily took this display into the bosom of *Studies in Bibliography*.<sup>10</sup>

But having done what at first seemed editorially improper (even after having received the imprimatur of Fredson Bowers, and through him, by spiritual osmosis, that of W. W. Greg), there remained the nagging question: why was it possible for us to think of this apparently radical approach at one cultural moment and yet not to have questioned the inherited New Critical dogma that lay behind the editing of Trevisa (and, as Lee Patterson [1985] has pointed out, behind the virtually contemporaneous “modernist” editing of the B Text of *Piers Plowman* by Kane and Donaldson)? What cultural/intellectual/procedural forces (usually unacknowledged, in fact usually invisible), tended to make us more susceptible to one editorial series of *données* than another? Was this a case of Althusser’s famous definition of “ideology” as something internalised and unseen, whereby a cultural moment established its identity? Or was it an example of Terry Eagleton’s insistence that “ideology, like halitosis, is what the other person has”?<sup>11</sup> And if this were so, what would that do to the possibility of attaching ourselves psychically to any author, no matter how se-

10. The “flowchart” was composed for my essay “Challenges of Theory and Practice in the Editing of Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes*” (GREETHAM 1987).

11. See EAGLETON 1991, 2, and ALTHUSSER 1971, 162–64.





**Figure 3:** The “flowchart” for establishing preferred authorial usage in accidentals, beginning with the copytext reading in the base manuscript A, navigating through “HOCCELEX”—the computer-generated patterns of inferred usage in the editorially constructed database of “constructed” authorial preferences. The flowchart appeared previously in my essay “Challenges of Theory and Practice in the Editing of Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes*” (GREETHAM 1987).

ductive and self-defining that attachment might seem to be? Did I really want to establish psychic confraternities with the faceless and/or the neurotic and depressed? Or with their opposites, whoever they might be? On a practical level, how much real progress could there be in moving from the monumental *DPR* (Trevisa), consuming ten years, to the equally monumental *DRP* (Hoccleve), another ten? One consonant? And how strong could my own assertions of editorial self-confidence be in embracing either the faceless translator or the depressive poet, a poet who is most often illustrated by that manuscript of the *Regiment* bearing a portrait of his “master”, Chaucer, admonishing him from the margins? And what had it already said about the canonical (and personal) status of Hoccleve, that the previous edition of the *Regiment*, by Fred Furnivall (1897), had overtly (and to my mind embarrassingly) selected the copy-text for that edition on the manuscript bearing the “best portrait of Chaucer”, (i.e., of *another* poet, not the one you’re editing!), even though the linguistic features of this selected copy-text were distinctly inappropriate, with traces of northern forms that would have been unlikely to come from the mouths or pens of either Hoccleve or Chaucer, both Londoners. Hoccleve was also “Occleve”, like a good Cockney.

What to do? By this time, I had critically distanced myself from the Formalist theory and practice of one edition (Trevisa); and while I was attracted to the psychological self-exposure of another author (Hoccleve), he was in any case gradually beginning to come into his own (as a couple of my “critical” essays argued), and I did not wish to hoist my colours to someone who was nonetheless still a “minor” author. In the same period of my academic life, I had also come to the realization that there were unseen theoretical precepts driving the apparently “neutral” interventions of editors of the Greg-Bowers-Tanselle dispensation, and that these “unseen” precepts could undermine any claim that an editor (or critic) was simply “doing what comes naturally”. Thus I began to understand that this lofty, while at the same time self-denigrating, principle was untenable historically and procedurally: Donaldson’s acerbic and dismissive prescription (1970) for an “editorial death-wish” was ironically both hubristic and unattainable. There was only one alternative: to cast myself off from a specific author, or even group of authors (while at the same time maintaining a deep interest and commitment to “authoriality”), and to begin to explore and make “manifest” what had previously remained hidden. A scholarly-critical life not without authors, but, if anything, with too many of them.

In this different trajectory, I was immensely helped (and inspired) by the work of others: I have already expressed my debt (in, for example, the writing of *Textual Transgressions*) to the “personalist criticism” of my colleague Nancy K. Miller.<sup>12</sup> W. Speed Hill provided a constant and reliable sounding-board (and voice of quiet reasonability) for some of my off-the-wall conjectures. And the ever-accommodating Fredson Bowers took one of my earlier forays into “editing without an author” into the pages of *Studies in Bibliography*, claiming, with a typical Bowersian irony, that a) he didn’t understand a word of it and b) that the following detailed revisions, showing a full awareness of the supposedly incomprehensible, would improve the piece: and, of course, he was right.<sup>13</sup> And through it all was the looming presence of Jerome J. McGann and the “social” theory of textuality, providing further evidence that the time was ripe for the sort of “uncoupling” I was embarking upon, even though Jerry had deftly managed to combine his social theory with a new commitment to D. G. Rossetti after an equally enthusiastic commitment to Byron, the editing of which he now disavowed. But Jerry is Jerry, and can juggle more balls than the rest of us.<sup>14</sup>

So the subterranean streams were in part navigated in my *Theories of the*

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12. See REIMAN 1993 and MILLER 1991.

13. I refer to “Literary and Textual Theory: Redrawing the Matrix” (GREETHAM 1989a).

14. See, for example, MCGANN 1985, 1987, 1991a.

*Text* (1999), the sheer variety of editorial postures and histories in both *Scholarly Editing: A Guide to Research* (1995), and in the founding of this Society and in the publication of its journal, which seems to have illustrated this richness better with each successive volume; and the more seditious side of my political agenda by such collections as *Margins of the Text* (1997). Do I envy my fellow-textuists who have found and remained loyal to their authors? Yes, I do recognise that having (almost) found but then lost my author(s) I have shown less stamina and determination and consistency than Speed Hill as Hooker, Don Reiman as Shelley, and Jack Stillinger as Keats (even with his occasional forays into Coleridge). It may be that some would regard my “uncoupling” as a form of dilettantism, an inability to hold fast to one individual, one *oeuvre*, one authorial presence. I have no persuasive argument to this charge, beyond the fact that at two earlier stages of my career I did at least try to approach and to reconstruct this idealised author, but then backed off. As Speed has reminded me, even in my partly autobiographical *Textual Transgressions* (1998) my own biological father is distinctly absent (after all, he was dead by the time I was four months old), and one might then have imagined that my awareness of this familial gap would have made the search for a literary father figure the more psychologically pressing. After many years of therapy, I have yet to establish whether the real-life loss in some way foredoomed the search for a replacement, but since I have also embraced the marginal status of the alien (and thus feel more drawn to a figure like Auerbach or Kristeller than to comfortable Trevisa and loony Hoccleve), this marginalisation has had its positive aspects: by looking in from the outside, I believe that this helped me to imagine a society in which *everyone* was to some extent an alien, *everyone* was made to feel a little less secure about his or her textual principles: in other words, STS and our twenty-eight years of meetings and publications. I’m not convinced that this would have happened if I had not been uncoupled, if I had remained an acolyte of Trevisa or Hoccleve (or of Middle English, for that matter). So, *non, je ne regrette rien*.

Given this retreat from the singularity of both text and author, the conscious “uncoupling” of my title, is it any wonder that my next book should be a celebration of yet another unholy: its tentative title is *The Pleasures of Contamination*, with an homage to Barthes, Cerquiglini, and to the textual *jouissance* I have always found in the wonderfully “contaminated” atmosphere of these STS gatherings.<sup>15</sup>

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15. *The Pleasures of Contamination* is scheduled to be the first companion monograph to be published by Indiana University Press in the series associated with *Textual Cultures: ‘Textual Cultures: Theory and Praxis’* (GREETHAM 2009).

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