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Oh, Tempora! Oh, Mores! Oh, Didier!

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The very first issue of the *No Name Magazine*, published in Baltimore by Eugene L. Didier, prominently featured “Oh, Tempora! Oh, Mores! An Unpublished Poem by Edgar A. Poe” (1, no. 1, October 1889, 1–2). Unacknowledged in the article is the fact that the poem had indeed already been published, more than two decades earlier, by Henry Rives Pollard in the Richmond *Southern Opinion* (1, no. 39, March 7, 1868, 2), from a transcript almost certainly provided by John Reuben Thompson. (The introductory note is signed “J.R.Y.,” presumably a minor typographical error for “J.R.T.”) Pollard, who had been connected with both the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Richmond Examiner*, cofounded the *Southern Opinion*, with his brother, in 1867. Publication ceased abruptly in 1868, following Pollard’s death on August 29, 1868. According to the *Memoir of the Assassination of Henry Rives Pollard* (Lynchburg, Va.: Schaffer & Bryant, 1869, 3–4)—prepared by his brother, Edward—Pollard was killed by a single shot on November 24, 1868, as he rode in a carriage down Main Street, on his way to his office. His assassin was James Grant, the brother of a woman who was “exposed and caricatured” in the pages of the weekly on November 21, 1868. Today, very few copies of *Southern Opinion* are known to exist.

In collecting “Oh, Tempora! Oh, Mores!” in volume 1 of *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969, 8), T. O. Mabbott lists the two printings, noting that “both of the early printed texts contain obvious errors” and stating that “Didier’s text omitted two words, but is obviously closer to Poe’s than Pollard’s.” In using Didier’s printing as his copy-text, Mabbott followed James H. Whitty, who included the poem in the appendix of “Additional Poems with Poetry Attributed to Poe” in his edition of *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (James H. Whitty, ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911, 161–65), but Mabbott confuses the history of the item a bit by saying only that “Eugene L. Didier obtained a transcript of the satire (apparently without knowing it had ever been published),” with the implication that the source of the “transcript” was somehow independent of Thompson. As detailed in the most comprehensive examination of the poem, by Jay B. Hubbell, Thompson is the source for both Pollard and Didier (“‘O, Tempora! O, Mores!’: A Juvenile Poem by Edgar Allan Poe,” *Elizabethan Studies, and Other Essays in Honor of George F. Reynolds*, October 1945, 314–21). Curiously, Hubbell also implies that there are multiple sources for the text of the poem, stating that “the differences between this text and that of the *No Name Magazine* reprinted by Whitty are not numerous, but they suggest that as early as 1826 Poe was already

revising his work with some care,” although he disagrees with Mabbott by relying on the *Southern Opinion* text as “the better of the two.” Hubbell is also mistaken in stating that “Didier claimed to have received a manuscript of the poem” (318, 314). Didier provided no explanation in printing the poem in the *No Name Magazine*, but Whitty records the information that “the Editor of the Magazine, Mr. Eugene L. Didier, wrote me that the poem was sent him by John R. Thompson of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and that the introduction was written by Thompson” (*Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 171). Whitty subsequently communicated information to Mary Phillips, who wrote that “One copy [of the manuscript for ‘Oh, Tempora! Oh, Mores!’] J. R. Thompson loaned to Mr. E. L. Didier, Baltimore, for which she [Rosalie] was to be paid \$10, and in a recently seen letter of Mr. Thompson he asked that the contract be kept, Rosalie paid” (Phillips, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man*, 2 vols., Chicago, Winston, 1926, 2:1595). It is not clear that this letter from Thompson was directed to Didier, or even when it was written. (A letter from Didier to Whitty, now in the Koester Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, is dated May 11, 1909, and mentions the poem by name, but provides no other details.)

Thompson died on April 30, 1873, after a long battle with tuberculosis. If, as Didier apparently told Whitty, Thompson gave him the material, this exchange would necessarily have been prior to May 1873. Assuming that this story is true, the obvious question is why Didier would choose not to publish the poem prior to 1889. Didier supplied a memoir for two editions of Poe’s poetry, both issued by W. J. Widdleton, the first in 1877, with a revised edition in 1879. “Oh, Tempora! Oh, Mores” is not printed among the poems, and is not mentioned in either version of the memoirs. Didier was quick to publish “Alone” (“From childhood’s hour I have not been . . .”) as a newly discovered Poe poem in 1875 (*Scribner’s Monthly* 10, no. 8, September 1875, 608), and to include it in the 1877 collection of Poe’s poetry. It is reasonable to mention that the rather ephemeral “Oh, Tempora! Oh, Mores!” while an interesting example of Poe’s satirical verses, is hardly as significant a poem as is “Alone,” which has come to be seen as an early masterpiece. Still, is it plausible to think that Didier had in his possession the full text of a poem by Poe that he at least thought was unpublished, and remained utterly silent for more than a decade? It seems to me far more probable that Didier did not obtain any material directly from Thompson, and that his source was instead the printing from the *Southern Opinion*. Hoping for a big story to help launch his new magazine (indeed, the poem was promoted as part of an ultimately unsuccessful contest), it made sense to bill the poem as “unpublished.” He was perhaps also confident that the decades-old printing of the poem in the obscure and short-lived *Southern Opinion* would be utterly unknown to most if not all of his readers. A brief notice of the new magazine

by the *Sunday School Times* (Philadelphia; 31, no. 52, December 28, 1889, 828) shows that interest in the new poem may have been very mixed: "The distinction of the first number of the magazine is 'O Tempora, O Mores,' a hitherto unprinted juvenile satire by Poe, the genuineness and the worthlessness of which appear to be equally unquestionable."

Sorting out the scattered and conflicting details necessarily involves some speculation. Didier was not a scrupulous scholar, and his addition of a title and date to the facsimile of the manuscript for "Alone" without explanation show that he was not above playing very loosely with his material. When Whitty inquired about the poem, Didier could hardly admit the earlier printing, and might have invented the claim that Thompson had given him the text directly to cover his own tracks. Admitting the possibility that Didier was indeed unaware of the *Southern Opinion* printing, he may have come into the possession of a handwritten copy by Thompson of Poe's poem, but it would also have necessarily included Thompson's introduction and could hardly have been sent to Didier by Thompson himself. An avid collector of Poeana, Didier may have come across the material sent to Pollard, including the letter from Thompson asking that payment be sent to Rosalie. Such material would presumably have come down from Pollard's estate rather than Thompson's. Richard Henry Stoddard was the executor of Thompson's literary estate, and in none of his various Poe articles does he mention the poem. If Didier did obtain the material sent to Pollard, he should, perhaps, have presumed that it was published, even if rather obscurely, and would still be guilty of inflating his connection to Thompson.

More important than what the story may reveal about Didier's questionable ethics, the point should be made that the authenticity of the poem is not verified by two independent lines of descent, and the differences in text do not reflect multiple manuscripts with changes by Poe, but merely a single text with evidence of meddling by two editors.