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Author(s)	Barr, Rebecca Anne; Tonra, Justin
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Rebecca Anne Barr & Justin Tonra
NUI Galway

Carefully Corrected / Mutilated Mess: Ossian*'s Textual Legacies*

In the current climate of panicked humanistic self-justification, the culture of commemoration has become one of the academy's prime means of legitimizing its labours and of appealing to audiences beyond its walls. Thus Scotland marked the 200th anniversary of Walter Scott's *Waverley* not merely with academic conferences but also through a series of public events including an exhibition at the National Library of Scotland, a storytelling festival, and the distribution of 25,000 free copies of a publication entitled "Great Scott!" - *with the exclamation mark.* Irrespective of actual readership, the memorializing of literature is by no means politically or culturally neutral. Despite enthusiastic advocacy from many quarters, Scott's anniversary was somewhat muted. "Sir" Walter's sympathies jarred with a twenty-first century Scotland contemplating the legacy of over three hundred years of restive union and the prospect of devolution. James Macpherson occupies a yet more uneasy place in the Scottish cultural canon and beyond. After all, 2015 also commemorates the Civil Rights marches from Selma, Alabama - a Southern town named after Macpherson's *Songs of Selma.* As James Mulholland notes, "controversies over legitimacy…are an essential part of the literary reception and cultural meaning" (Mulholland 394) of these poems. Is *Ossian* a culturally nationalist work that contributed to the growth of Scottish identity or the work of an Anglo-British 'cultural quisling' (Moore, 2004: 38)? Debates over *Ossian's* aesthetic and moral 'legitimacy' have tended to recur during periods of Scottish national self-determination and definition. The late 1990s revisionist reassessment of Macpherson's work coincided with the devolution referendum and the establishment of the Scottish parliament at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Similarly, the literary

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commemorations of 1814 and 1815 coincided with the referendum on independence;

Britain's most significant constitutional issue since Irish independence.

More generally, however, the fraught afterlives of *Ossian* allow us to reflect on the allure

and the potential distortion of commemoration. Ossian's legacies, in both the sense of

provenance and outcome, have clearly always been contested. [SLIDE] Yet the privileging of

the 1765 edition of *The Works of Ossian*, whose 250th anniversary this panel invokes, has

become a bibliographic orthodoxy largely accepted without question by the academic

community. The authoritative status of the 1765 edition has been reinforced by

Macpherson's modern editor, Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh UP, 1996), who dismisses the 1773

Poems as "a mess which has been bequeathed to us in edition after edition ever since"

(xxiv). Where Macpherson aims to have "brought the work to a state of correctness, which

will preclude all future improvements" (1:v), Gaskill laments the "authorial vanity which is

really behind so many of these revisions" (xxiv) and selects the 1765 Works as his copy-text.

Though Macpherson described the 1773 edition as "[c]arefully corrected, and greatly

improved" literary criticism treats it as an illegitimate offspring.

In textual terms, then, these two options split the corpus into the inspired, authentically

'Ossianic' *Works* of 1765 and the aesthetically-degraded, editorially-mutilated *Poems* of

1773: representing them as a "poetic original" and an aesthetically and egoistically

corrupted text respectively. Such editorial interpretations pit the imaginary Ossian against

the authorial Macpherson, refusing to countenance the possibility that, in Thomas Curley's

words, "Macpherson *was* Ossian" (Curley 2010: 37). This paper will examine the legacies of

the Ossianic copy-texts, arguing that to favour any particular edition perpetuates a limited

understanding of the many elements--authority, originality, authenticity--which contributed to the creation of Ossian and which continue to contribute to its interest since its initial publication. To circumvent the reification of a singular *Works* or *Poems* text, we will present the crowdsourced annotation tool and genetic critical edition of the new social edition (Siemens, et al.), *Ossian Online*, as a means of unearthing the textual shifts and the multiple legacies of this seminal work.

Part of Gaskill's rationale for using the 1765 *Works* as copy-text for a single-volume edition is quite convincing: it incorporates more than four hundred textual revisions from its predecessors, was influential in continental Europe and formed the basis for successful translations. However, Macpherson's rejection of the 1765 *Works* in his corrections for the 1773 *Poems*--which includes more radically transformative textual revisions than in the 1765 edition--similarly argues for certain shortcomings in *Works*. The first complete edition of the corpus is certainly vital for understanding the sociology of *Ossian*: its rapid success and influence in the period and the widespread dissemination of that text in reprints and translations. Arguably, however, the extent of revision in the *Poems* makes it--or, more precisely, its comparison with earlier texts--more urgently relevant for comprehending the complex questions of authorship and authenticity inspired by the *Ossian* phenomenon.

Ultimately, many of the problems with Gaskill's edition are related to the single-volume format and the bibliographic constraints that it imposes upon the editor. There is simply not enough space to reproduce all of the variants between the major editions published under Macpherson's authority (to say nothing of other major editions, such as Malcolm Laing's of 1805). The purpose of the Gaskill edition is quite explicit: to resolve the "quite formidable"

(xxii) situation of locating a copy of the poems by publishing "the entire corpus of

Macpherson's Ossianic writing" in a single *volume.* Though the editor firmly proclaims his

disapproval for the 1773 *Poems*, his precise point about the need for readily available texts

argues for its inclusion in a more capacious and accommodating editorial environment.

In textual terms, what recommends the 1765 *Works* to Gaskill is the fact that it is not the

"mutilated" mess that Macpherson created in the 1773 *Poems*. The major problem here, as

Gaskill sees it, is Macpherson's omission and abbreviation of contextual notes and parallel

passages from Homer, Virgil, Milton, and other sources. The editor's critical point is that in

so doing, "Macpherson was not so much helping to emphasize Ossian's authenticity as

underlining his own originality" (xxiv). Gaskill aims to resolve the situation by reproducing

notes from the *Works*, but without their Greek and Latin originals (a compromise again

dictated by available page space). The treatment of the "extensive stylistic revision" (xxiii)

between *Works* and *Poems* is less transparently handled, however. Gaskill enumerates the

categories of change that comprise this stylistic shift: paratactic intensification by "ruthless

pruning of conjunctions" (xxiii), abandonment of dashes, replacing commas with full stops,

and full stops with exclamation marks. Changes to the running order of the poems, in the

use of tenses, and deployment of quotation marks are also listed in a textual note at the

beginning of the volume. These modifications *are* regularly in evidence in the *Poems*, but

the chief problem of Gaskill's edition is its inconsistent recording of the formal,

punctuational, and verbal revisions that comprise the stylistic shift: "Variants are offered for

the poetic text, but the extensive nature of the later revisions meant that these had of

necessity to be selective. In the main only significant differences are noted, these consisting

for the most part of variations in imagery" (xxv). Scholarly editing is a necessarily subjective process, but it is difficult to defend such an arbitrary methodology.

For example, collating the 1765 and 1773 texts of "The Songs of Selma" give a representative impression of the extent of variation--recorded and unrecorded. In this relatively short poem (ten pages in quarto; thirteen in octavo), Gaskill's endnotes identify thirty-nine changes. However, a further forty-nine unrecorded verbal changes are present, varying in extent from single-letter changes [SLIDE]: "gray-haired"/"grey-haired" (1765, 292/1773, 205-6) or "echoing"/"ecchoing" (1765, 299/1773, 212); to lengthy rephrasings: "like the gales of the spring, that, flying over the hill, by turns bend the feebly-whistling grass"/"like gales of spring, as they fly along the hill, and bend by turns the feebly-whistling grass" (1765, 292/1773, 206).

Synonymous variation is another casualty of the constraints upon the critical apparatus. Where a variant is synonymous with its predecessor, Gaskell is guided in the decision to record by a consideration of "whether...the difference would show in a (German) translation" (xxv). In practise, however, this is not consistently applied. The change from "my ghost shall stand in the wind" (1765, 295) to "my ghost shall stand in the blast" (1773, 209) is recorded in the critical apparatus. But a similar revision in the previous paragraph is not recorded: "No feeble voice is on the wind" (1765, 295) to "No feeble voice is on the gale" (1773, 208). This inconsistency is unsatisfactory, as are the opaque decisions about what constitutes *significance* in the sphere of textual variance. The effect of excluding close synonyms from textual consideration is to reduce *Ossian* to a poetry of information, lessening its poetic function and promoting the referential. This tallies with the view of

Macpherson as an Ossianic cipher, rendering the legacy of oral culture on the poetic page, on the one hand, but also capable of its mutilation.

Such authorial prejudice attests to the critical suspicion with which Macpherson as poetic originator has been viewed, both by his contemporaries and by later scholars. Like Samuel Richardson, Macpherson's opaque relation to the production of the Ossianic texts renders his perceived authority tenuous. If Richardson's editorial stance did not diminish his sense of property in *Clarissa*, for instance, his creative ownership is clear in the numerous revisions, emendations and multiple editions of the works. Macpherson, like Richardson, leverages the evocation of an "Air of Genuineness" (Carroll, 85) to shape readers' response to his work, even if his role as "scholar-makar" (Crawford) involves more irascible defensiveness and ostentatious dissimulation than the novelist's coy fictional pose. Yet assuming the role of mediator undermines Macpherson's editorial authority, allowing readers and editors alike to reject later emendations. If *Ossian*'s claim to represent authentic translations of an elusive oral culture rests upon a functional erasure of the Macpherson as author, that erasure is nonetheless effected by profound authorial labour which deserves scrutiny, rather than inconsistent complicity with the fiction of the ancient bard. The aesthetic rationale evidenced for prioritizing the 1765 *Works* over the authorized 1773 edition seems to aim at dispossessing Macpherson of *Ossian*'s artistic achievements, deauthorizing his amendments and obscuring the "complicated mechanics of his authorial procedures" (Curley, 8) in an analogous fashion to previous neglect of Richardson's editorial alterations. If revisionist recuperation demands the death of the author, reifying the 1765 *Works* obligingly removes him from the scene. Instead, the 1765 *Works* produces a sense of historical objectivity through a web of scholarly apparatus. At its outset it advertises the

"lately published" second edition of Hugh Blair's 1763 *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian*, before proceeding to an oleaginous dedication to the Earl of Bute - (justified by the "similarity between the Statesman and the Poet") - and then to Macpherson's own exposition of the poems' antiquity. Yet a letter from the critic Hugh Blair reveals the interdependence of critical apparatus and poetic work. Working through the page proofs of the *Critical Dissertation*, Blair asks Macpherson's publisher Thomas Becket to pay his "Complimts to Mr. Macpherson" [SLIDE]:

> I have made such alterations in the Passages he has excepted to, as I imagine will satisfy him. As this has occasioned a pretty long alteration in the last Paragraph, pray attend that this be correctly printed: & desire Mr. Macpherson to take the trouble to revise the last sheet for that end. (Chapman, 82)

Blair's feting of *Ossian* as "revisionist history" (Ruthven, 9) is itself ghost-authored. Even scholarly paratext is subject to authorial supervision: ultimately "subjoined" to the toned and tweaked "restored" work of 1773.

The *Ossian* corpus is as much a product of editorial apparatus and retrospective refashioning as original genius. In this fashion Macpherson bears comparison with writers such as Samuel Richardson, whose printerly oversight provides numerous instances of literary recalibration and authorial intervention. Just as Richardson's desire to control reception results in a surprisingly fluid and responsive corpus, so Macpherson's investment in the conception of a Highland epic necessitates structural and textual revisions which reveal the contradictory pressures of authorship, originality, and reception. Revisiting *Ossian*

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in this context affords new perspectives. If the 1773 *Poems* abandons the historical

introduction and elides Blair's supplementarity, Macpherson's preface to the authoritative

edition displays a profound ambivalence towards the nexus of authorship and editing.

Writing a year before the landmark *Donaldson V Becket* case, Macpherson's attempts to

produce an authorized edition render the 1765 *Works* strangely deauthorized by

comparison. Yet rather than evidencing "authorial vanity", the 1773 preface seems to

convey the instability of the personae underpinning the "Celtic Original". Though his

"genius" is unchanged, the older and wiser "Author" (i) (presumably Macpherson) claims to

have perfected his poetic language. Yet, this capitalized Author swiftly gives way to an

embattled "Translator" vilified by English critics for being "born on the wrong side of the

Tweed" (vii) who then dwindles further into a mere "writer" whose reliance on the vagaries

of public taste forces him to diffidently submit two versions of his work to the public to

adjudicate whether prose or rhyme succeeds better (the rhymed version is surprisingly

good, and compares favourably to the miscellaneous poems published by Macpherson

during the 1760s and 70s). If both Thomas Curley and Howard Gaskill read obnoxious self-

aggrandizement in the 1773 edition, there is certainly room for alternative interpretations.

Trailing the line that his earlier self was perhaps "young in the art of deception" (iv),

Macpherson suggests an almost self-annihilating capacity for self-division and textual

impersonation. Attending to the 1773 edition allows us to explore these contradictions

more fully.

But because the various postures about originality, authenticity, and authority emerge from

the variant relationship of the 1765 and 1773 texts, a comparative approach--and a means

of presentation which facilitates this--is desirable. Precedent for such situations can be

found in editions of the Romantics, and in the textual theory of Donald Reiman and his contemporary editors.

Reiman cites a personal preference for "checking the readings in the first editions or facsimiles of the manuscripts wherever the precise form and substance of the textual details might make a difference to my interpretation of the work" (167). While placing an excessive emphasis on textual *originality*, this desire is motivated by what Reiman perceives as the shortcomings (including "untrustworthiness" and fragmentation) of the eclectic critical edition. With technology enabling the resolution of the difficulties presented by conflated text--by presenting multiple texts in their entirety--the editor is in a position to provide full textual precision (and scholarly guidance) for all readers. When the question of deciding upon textual *significance* is as fraught as in Gaskill's edition, Reiman's approach presents an appealing possibility.

Additionally, Reiman argued thirty years ago that facsimile technology provided a promising alternative to "overpriced, pedantic critical editions" (169). 'Pedantic' should not be seen as pejorative here, but his identification of expense as a barrier to the wide availability of accurate critical texts is appropriate. He suggests that "it may be possible to make available to the public enough different *primary* textual documents and states of major texts...so that readers, teachers, and critics can compare for themselves two or more widely circulated basic versions of major texts" (169). The procedure which he calls "versioning" (169) finds its natural home in digital form and on the web.

Authors of the Romantic period, in particular, have attracted a versioned approach in the presentation of their works. This is no coincidence: the elevated status of authorship and the figure of the author in this era has provoked an editorial desire to consider multiple authorised versions of literary works. The cue for this editorial approach is also enacted in a number of the iconic works of the period. *The Prelude* (1799/1805/1850), *Frankenstein* (1818/1831), and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798/1834) all present significantly revised texts which "bind youth to age" (Reiman 171) in the biographies of their authors. Publication of full versions of these discrete texts has been recognised as a necessity--as a means for students and scholars to examine authors' developing creative processes and shifting textual priorities--and a logical correlate of the romantic ideology. Garland's *Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics* series of the 1980s and 90s applied this theory to the manuscripts of Keats, Byron, and Shelley, but versioning was not unique to this period. As Reiman acknowledges, long works like *The Prelude* had been versioned as early as 1926 (Clarendon Press), and parallel texts of shorter works appeared in the Victorian period. Nor is the phenomenon unique to the scholarly edition: paperback student editions of *Frankenstein* (Oxford Worlds Classics) have explicitly declared their basis in the 1818 or 1831 text. A demand and an audience exists for this treatment of works from the Romantic period, and practical and financial hindrances to the realisation of versioned works have largely been removed by the web. With Macpherson's *Ossian*, the case for versioning is all the more urgent because of the debates about accuracy, authenticity, and authorial agency which accompanied its publication. A versioned *Ossian* is the first stage of our project, *Ossian Online*. Subsequent developments will see the addition of a collaborative annotation tool, and the creation of a genetic critical edition which traces and visualises the development of *Ossian* across texts from 1760 to 1773. The project will, we hope,

reinvigorate debate on these and related topics as students and scholars engage afresh with its productive variety. Reiman, to his credit, is a persistent advocate of the practical and pedagogical value of this kind of engagement: "everyone who uses a text should learn to analyze its history and authority" (180).

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