



School of Law

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

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left on the cheekes will make the owner looke big like a bowdled hen.

Bowdlerize (bau'dlərəiz), *v.* [f. the name of *Dr. T. Bowdler*, who in 1818 published an edition of Shakspeare, 'in which those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family': see *-IZE*.] *trans.* To expurgate (a book or writing), by omitting or modifying words or passages considered indelicate or offensive; to castrate.

1836 GEN. P. THOMPSON *Let. in Exerc.* (1842) IV. 124 Among the names. .are many, like Hermes, Nereus. .which modern ultra-christians would have thought formidably heathenish; while Epaphroditus and Narcissus they would probably have *Bowdlerized*. 1869 *Westm. Rev.* Jan., It is gratifying to add that Mr. Dallas has resisted the temptation to Bowdlerize. 1881 SAINTSBURY *Dryden* 9 Evil counsellors who wished him to bowdlerise glorious John. 1883 *Ch. Times* 703/4 It [Henry IV] is Bowdlerized, to be sure, but that is no evil for school purposes.

Hence **Bowdlerism**, **Bowdlerization**, **Bowdlerized** *ppl. a.*, **Bowdlerizer**, **Bowdlerizing**, *vbl. sb.* and *ppl. a.*

1869 *Pall Mall G.* 4 Aug. 12 We doubt whether Juvenal. . can be read with advantage at the age when Bowdlerism, as a moral precaution, would be desirable. 1878 *Athenæum* 6 Apr., False squeamishness or inclination to Bowdlerism. 1882 *Westm. Rev.* Apr. 583 The bowdlerization. .is done in an exceedingly awkward and clumsy fashion. 1879 F. HARRISON *Choice Bks.* (1886) 63 A Bowdlerised version of it would be hardly intelligible as a tale. 1886 HUXLEY in *19th Cent.* Apr. 489 We may fairly inquire whether editorial Bowdlerising has not prevailed over historic truth.

† **Bow-draught.** *Obs.* [f. *Bow sb.*¹ + *DRAUGHT* from the phrase *to draw a bow*.] A

Oxford English Dictionary 1031 (1888).

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

In his useful and entertaining book *How Not to Write*, William Safire tells us where the verb “to bowdlerize” comes from:

Dr. Thomas Bowdler, eager to make Shakespeare “fit for the perusal of our virtuous females,” cut out what he considered the naughty and profane words. In his sanitized version, Lady Macbeth’s “Out, damn’d spot!” was changed to “Out, crimson spot!”, which earned the censor a place in the dictionaries in the verb *to bowdlerize*.¹

Safire is referring to *The Family Shakspeare*,² a 10-volume collection of cleaned-up versions of Shakespeare’s works brought out in London in 1818 by Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825), whose work was an extension of the earlier efforts of his sister and fellow-expurgator Henrietta (1750-1830).³ But alas, Safire is not quoting from *The Family Shakspeare*, although apparently he thinks he is. Instead, in the course of describing how Bowdler doctored Shakespeare, Safire has doctored Bowdler.

BOWDLER AND THE BULFINCHES

Let us begin by acknowledging the accuracy of the general thrust of Safire’s story. Thomas Bowdler, hell-bent on making Shakespeare safe for consumption by all humanity, did in fact thoroughly butcher the Bard in *The Family Shakspeare*. (There is, after all, much naughtiness and profanity in Shakespeare.) And Bowdler’s name and -ism have long been epithets to be wielded by the cosmopolitan and the libertarian against the puritan and the censor.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Thomas Perronet Thompson coined the term “bowdlerism” in a June 8, 1836 letter to his constituents. Thompson, who represented Kingston upon Hull in the House of

¹ HOW NOT TO WRITE: THE ESSENTIAL MISRULES OF GRAMMAR 100 (1990; 2005 prtg.).

² Yes, that is the way Bowdler spelled the name. See THOMAS BOWDLER, 1 THE FAMILY SHAKSPEARE title page (1818).

³ NOEL PERRIN, DR. BOWDLER’S LEGACY: A HISTORY OF EXPURGATED BOOKS IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA ch. 3 (1969) (hereafter PERRIN); see also M. Clare Loughlin-Chow, *Bowdler, Henrietta Maria (1750-1830)*, and *Bowdler, Thomas (1754-1825)*, in OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY (2004), www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3028 and www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3032. A second edition of Perrin’s book appeared in 1971, and a third in 1992. All citations are to the 1969 edition because it is the one most likely to be at the root of the confusion discussed in this article and the relevant passages are unchanged in the later editions.

Commons at the time, was deriding a Parliamentary act of discrimination on the basis of religion:

I should like to know on what particular portion of either the letter or the spirit of anything left by the founders of Christianity, the Anglican sect undertakes to found a right of cutting men off from civil advantages, as the engine of increasing the number of baptisms. . . . There may be reason for believing, that when the early Christians baptized a full-grown heathen, they sometimes gave him a new name, as a token probably of the newness of life to which he was called. But even this, it is plain, they did not always do. For among the names preserved in the writings of the apostles, are many, like Hermes, Nereus, Olympas, Silvanus, and perhaps Phebe our sister, which modern ultra-christians would have thought formidably heathenish; while Epaphroditus and Narcissus they would probably have *Bowdlerized*.⁴

Since then, Bowdler's name has been tied — quite appropriately — to those who would, as the *American Heritage Dictionary* puts it, “remove material that is considered offensive or objectionable from (a book, for example).”⁵ Safire has occasionally used Bowdler as Thompson did, in moderately epithetical ways in his famous *New York Times* “On Language” column and in other writings.⁶ Lawyers, too, do their part to carry on the tradition begun by Thompson of associating Bowdler with self-righteous, moralizing censorship.⁷

The sharp point of Safire's story in *How Not to Write*, however, is wrong. Recall that as an example of the extremity of Bowdler's prudish editing, Safire cites his transformation of Lady Macbeth's famous profanity “Out, damn'd spot!” into the less colorful “Out, crimson spot!” At first blush this seems like a great illustration of bowdlerism at its worst: the

⁴ *Letters of a Representative to his Constituents, during the session of 1836, reprinted in T. PERRONET THOMPSON, 4 EXERCISES, POLITICAL AND OTHERS 61, 123-124 (2d ed. 1843) (emphasis in the original), cited in 2 OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 454 (2d ed. 1989); OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 1031 (1888); see also THE RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 248 (2d ed. 1987).*

⁵ THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE 218 (4th ed. 2006).

⁶ See, e.g., note 1 above and accompanying text; *Patriotic Gore*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 16, 1984, at A25; *Clone Clone Clone Clone*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 6, 1997, at SM18; *Sexy Lexies*, N.Y. TIMES, June 29, 2003, at SM18.

⁷ See, e.g., *U.S. v. American Library Ass'n, Inc.*, 539 U.S. 194, 237-38 (2003) (Souter, J., dissenting); *U.S. v. 12 200-Foot Reels of Super 8mm Film*, 413 U.S. 123, 133 (1973) (Douglas, J., dissenting); Brief for Petitioners at 33, *Denver Area Educational Telecommunications Consortium, Inc. v. F.C.C.*, 518 U.S. 727 (1996); Richard A. Posner, *A Political Court*, 119 HARV. L. REV. 31, 101 (2005).

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

perfect and original language, composed by an accomplished and respected author, has been disfigured and reduced by a sanctimonious editor who thinks himself a superior character if not a superior writer. But look at page 238. That is a picture of page 234 of volume 4 of Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare* — the page containing the passage that Safire claims to be quoting. But the “crimson” passage isn't there. Instead, Lady Macbeth quite conventionally (for her and for Shakespeare) says, “Out, damned spot!” In other words, Bowdler did not change “damn'd” (or “damned”) to “crimson.” Well, who did?

The culprits are two Bostonians, Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867) and his brother Stephen Greenleaf Bulfinch (1809-1870). Thomas was a famous bowdlerizer, as the *New York Times* reported in his obituary:

He was the author of several books of decided usefulness, which he prepared with great painstaking and taste. Among these are some that may be regarded as manuals, such as *The Age of Fable*, *The Age of Chivalry*, [and] *Legends of Charlemagne*, in which, expurgated of all that would be offensive, he presented in a succinct and lucid manner a large amount of information needed by readers, and especially by young readers, in regards to the beliefs, superstitions and traditions of the past.⁸

After his death Thomas's three “manuals” were often published in one-volume editions as *Bulfinch's Mythology*. They are still in print in that form today.⁹ His brother Stephen was also a prominent figure in his own time, known as a respectable Unitarian minister and the author of numerous religious tracts.¹⁰

In 1865, the brothers Bulfinch collaborated on their own bowdlerized *Shakespeare* — an edition “Adapted for Reading Classes, and for the Family Circle.” As they explained in the introduction,

There is in the writings of this great author a degree of coarseness, consistent with the manners of his age, but disapproved by the higher refinement of the present day. This fact, as well as the number and unequal merit of his works, renders a selection allowable, and we think desirable. In the present volume an attempt is made

⁸ *Death of Mr. Thomas Bulfinch*, N.Y. TIMES, May 31, 1867, at 2; see also, e.g., *Author's Preface*, in THOMAS BULFINCH, 1 THE AGE OF FABLE OR BEAUTIES OF MYTHOLOGY vii (Rev. of Revs. ed. 1914) (“Such stories and parts of stories as are offensive to pure taste and good morals are not given.”).

⁹ See, e.g., BULFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY (Barnes & Noble Classics 2006).

¹⁰ 1 APPLETON'S CYCLOPÆDIA OF AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY 444 (James Grant Wilson & John Fiske eds., 1888); *Death of Prominent Citizens*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 14, 1870, at 1.

234

MACBETH.

[ACT V.]

Gent. Since his majesty went into the field, I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon it, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep.

Doct. A great perturbation in nature! to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching. — In this slumbry agitation, besides her walking, and other actual performances, what, at any time, have you heard her say?

Gent. That, sir, which I will not report after her.

Doct. You may, to me; and 'tis most meet you should.

Gent. Neither to you, nor any one; having no witness to confirm my speech.

Enter Lady MACBETH, with a Taper.

Lo you, here she comes! This is her very guise; and, upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her; stand close.

Doct. How came she by that light?

Gent. Why, it stood by her: she has light by her continually; 'tis her command.

Doct. You see, her eyes are open.

Gent. Ay, but their sense is shut.

Doct. What is it she does now? Look, how she rubs her hands.

Gent. It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands; I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady M. Yet here's a spot.

Doct. Hark, she speaks: I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady M. Out, damned spot! out, I say! — One; Two; Why, then 'tis time to do't: — Hell is

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

to present such a selection, in a compact and elegant form. . . . Such scenes and passages have been omitted as were objectionable on the score of morals or taste, or could be spared without serious loss.¹¹

And on page 382 of the Bulfinches' *Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes: "Lady M. Out, crimson spot!"* (See page 240.)

How certain can we be that the Bulfinches are the original authors of the "crimson"-for-"damn'd" bowdlerization that Safire attributes to Bowdler? Pretty — but not absolutely — certain.

Noel Perrin was, until his recent death, a professor of English at Dartmouth and a leading authority on bowdlerism. He appears to have been the first modern scholar to note the Bulfinches' extreme expurgation of Lady Macbeth. In his book *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy: A History of Expurgated Books in England and America*, Perrin reports,

Compared to the weeding done by Thomas Bulfinch of Boston, [a contemporary's bowdlerizing] may actually be a trifle lax. Bulfinch, son of the great architect and himself the well-known author of Bulfinch's *Mythology*, published *Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes and the Family Circle* in 1865. In it he carried delicacy so far as to deny Lady Macbeth what is the most famous and least-mutilated blasphemy in Shakespeare. In his version she looks at her hand and says, "Out, crimson spot." I have found no other case of this.¹²

We have had no more success than Perrin finding another instance of "crimson"-for-"damn'd" bowdlerization.¹³ We are confident that Thomas Bowdler himself never did it. The last edition of Bowdler's bowdlerization of Shakespeare — published in 1825 — is the same as the first when it comes to that damn'd spot. Other than the failure to mention Stephen Bulfinch's co-bowdlerizership, Perrin's story seems correct.

¹¹ THOMAS BULFINCH & REV. S.G. BULFINCH, *SHAKESPEARE ADAPTED FOR READING CLASSES, AND FOR THE FAMILY CIRCLE* xi (1865).

¹² PERRIN at 108-09.

¹³ William Cusack Smith, a prominent and controversial Irish judge, did use "Out, crimson spot" in a poem published in 1836, but he used "Out, damned spot!" on the same page and attributed both versions to Lady Macbeth, making his fiddling with her words an exercise in poetic rather than expurgatorial license. *To Sleep, in THE GOBLINS OF NEAPOLIS* 108, 109 & n.† (1836) (Paul P. Peeradeal (pseud.), ed.); Brigitte Anton, *Smith, Sir William Cusack, second baronet (1766–1836)*, in *OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY* (2004), www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25936.

Gent. Ay, but their sense is shut.

Doct. What is it she does now? Look, how she rubs her hands.

Gent. It is an accustomed action with her to seem thus washing her hands: I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady M. Yet here's a spot.

Doct. Hark! she speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady M. Out, crimson spot! out, I say!— One; two: why, then 'tis time to do 't. — Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?— Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

Doct. Do you mark that?

Lady M. The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?— What, will these hands ne'er be clean?— No more o' that, my lord; no more o' that; you mar all with this starting.

Doct. Go to, go to; you have known what you should not.

Gent. She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that. Heaven knows what she has known.

Lady M. Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O! O! O!

Doct. What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged.

Gent. I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

Doct. Well, well, well, —

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

HOW THE BULFINCHES BECAME BOWDLER

As language guru Bryan Garner has observed, “heavy borrowing” was not unusual among lexicographers in bygone days, but it is “suspect today.”¹⁴ Suspect but, perhaps, not absent. How else can we explain the fact that William Safire is not alone in his particular mistreatment of Bowdler? For example, Morton Freeman’s *A New Dictionary of Eponyms* — published by the Oxford University Press in 1997, seven years after the first printing of Safire’s *How Not to Write* — includes the following in its definition of “bowdler, bowdlerize”:

In 1818 Bowdler published a diluted ten-volume edition of Shakespeare’s works “in which nothing is added to the original text; but those words are omitted that cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family.” He had toned down suggestive dialogue and snipped off scenes that he thought were too explicit, insisting that only references that might “raise a blush on the cheek of modesty” had been excised.

Bowdler believed that the language of the seventeenth century was not necessarily acceptable in the nineteenth. For example, . . . Lady Macbeth’s poignant “Out, damn’d spot!” became “Out, crimson spot!”¹⁵

Among Safire’s other successors-in-error have been lexicographer Nigel Rees,¹⁶ and test-prep author Suzee Vlk.¹⁷ Surely they did not all independently, mistakenly put quotation marks around the same line that is not in Bowdler’s *Family Shakespeare*, and attribute the quote to that work.

But that still leaves us with the question of how Safire made the mistake in the first place.

It turns out that Safire had predecessors-in-error as well as successors. The *Green Bag* has no expertise in the field of lexicographical sleuthing,

¹⁴ See Bryan A. Garner, *Preface to the First Pocket Edition of Black’s Law Dictionary*, in *GARNER ON LANGUAGE AND WRITING* 351, 352 (2008).

¹⁵ MORTON S. FREEMAN, *A NEW DICTIONARY OF EPONYMS* 28-29 (1997) (Freeman’s description of Bowdler and his edition of Shakespeare contains several other inaccuracies, most of which are not strictly relevant here).

¹⁶ NIGEL REES, *CASSELL’S DICTIONARY OF WORD AND PHRASE ORIGINS* 35 (2002) (describing the work of “Thomas Bowdler[,] who published *The Family Shakespeare* (1818)”: “‘Out damn’d spot’ became ‘Out crimson spot’, and so on.”).

¹⁷ SUZEE VLK, *THE GRE TEST FOR DUMMIES* 69 (5th ed. 2002) (“Dr. Thomas Bowdler, an English physician, published in 1818 a ten-volume edition of Shakespeare’s plays called *The Family Shakespeare*. He left out all the dirty parts. For example, instead of ‘Out, damn’d spot!’ the line reads, ‘Out, crimson spot!’”).

but that did not stop us from doing a little amateurish work. Here is the story as best we have been able to piece it together. It all began with the *New York Times*.

In 1969, in his book *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy*, Noel Perrin correctly reported that Thomas Bulfinch — not Thomas Bowdler — substituted “Out, crimson spot!” for “Out, damn’d spot!” in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

The *New York Times* reviewed *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy* in the autumn of that year. The review’s description of Bowdler’s work included this passage — “one editor, who should be everyone’s favorite, changed Lady Macbeth’s famous line to ‘Out, crimson spot’” — without mentioning one or more Bulfinches or making it clear that Bowdler was not the “one editor.”¹⁸ A few days later, a *Time* magazine reviewer, noting that Perrin “takes as his point of departure Dr. Thomas Bowdler,” asked, “What could prompt an educated man to change Lady Macbeth’s most famous line to ‘Out, crimson spot?’” — without mentioning one or more Bulfinches or making it clear that Bowdler was not the “educated man.”¹⁹ And a few weeks after that, a *Christian Science Monitor* review sporting the title ‘*Out, crimson spot*’ included this line — “that state of overrefinement which leads editors to rewrite Lady Macbeth’s most famous speech as, ‘Out, crimson spot’” — also without mentioning one or more Bulfinches.²⁰

Over the next 20 years, a variety of authors — holding themselves out as experts on a range of topics including sex,²¹ language,²² and the Scho-

¹⁸ Thomas Lask, *Notes on Castrati*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 27, 1969, at 31.

¹⁹ “*Knows Where!*”, TIME, Oct. 3, 1969.

²⁰ Melvin Maddocks, ‘*Out, crimson spot*’, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Nov. 20, 1969, at 16.

²¹ JAMES LESLIE MCCARY, HUMAN SEXUALITY: PHYSIOLOGICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS 380 (2d ed. 1973) (“That prototype of the self-appointed guardian of public morals, Dr. Thomas Bowdler, was heard to say, ‘Shakespeare, Madam, is obscene, and thank God, we are sufficiently advanced to have found it out!’ Lady Macbeth’s famous cry, ‘Out, damned spot’ spot was therefore rendered, ‘Out, crimson spot.’”). There was no mention of Bowdler in the first edition of *Human Sexuality* (JAMES LESLIE MCCARY, HUMAN SEXUALITY: PHYSIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR (1967)), suggesting McCary learned of the “crimson”-for-“damn’d” bowdlerization between 1967 and 1973.

²² LORETO TODD & IAN HANCOCK, INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH USAGE 94 (1986) (“... Bowdler removed anything that he felt might cause embarrassment. He cut out large sections and modified others, causing Lady Macbeth, for example, to proclaim ‘Out, crimson spot’ instead of ‘Out, damned spot.’”); ROSIE BOYCOTT, BATTY, BLOOMERS & BOYCOTT: A LITTLE ETYMOLOGY OF EPONYMOUS WORDS 24 (1983) (“In The Family Shakespeare, ... the famous line ‘Out damn’d spot!’ becomes ‘Out crimson spot!’”); Quentin Letts, *NS Profile: Rosie Boycott*, NEW STATESMAN, June 24, 2002, www.newstatesman.com/200206240013 (visited January 9, 2009).

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

lastic Aptitude Test²³ — took the *Times'* (and *Time's*, and *Monitor's*) elisions and ran with them, indicting Thomas Bowdler for Thomas (and Stephen) Bulfinch's "crimson"-for-"damn'd" bowdlerization of Lady Macbeth. This is not to say that what Perrin had written in 1969 was lost on everyone. In his 1978 book *Whatever Happened to Shakespeare?*, for example, Kenneth McClellan recommends Perrin's book, and — proving that he actually read it — provides an accurate synopsis of Perrin's Bulfinch discovery: "Thomas Bulfinch, of *Mythology* fame, had Lady Macbeth say, 'Out, crimson spot!'"²⁴

Which brings us down to 1990, and William Safire.

Some stories are so obviously true they do not need to be checked — or at least they can seem that way, says Harvard's Cass Sunstein:

Rumor transmission often involves the rational processing of information, in a way that leads people, quite sensibly in light of their existing knowledge, to believe and to spread falsehoods. . . . [R]umors often arise and gain traction because of their relationship with the prior convictions of those who accept them.²⁵

Our best guess, or the first part of it, is that by the time Safire sat down to write *How Not to Write*, almost everyone in the circles in which he traveled had read the *New York Times* review of Perrin's book — or talked to someone who had read it, or read a book written by someone who had read it, or read a book written by someone who had talked to someone who had read it, or talked to someone who had read a book written by someone who had read it, or something of the sort.

The second part of our best guess is that almost none of those people had actually read the Perrin book, even fewer had ever seen Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare*, and yet fewer even knew of the existence of the Bulfinches' *Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes*.

The third part of our best guess is that, as Sunstein might say, everyone already had good reason to know what bowdlerism was, and they knew that it was and remains a bad thing, and as a result, they knew that Bowdler was the one who put "Out, crimson spot!" in Lady Macbeth's mouth.

²³ JOAN DAVENPORT CARRIS, WILLIAM R. MCQUADE & MICHAEL R. CRYSTAL, SAT SUCCESS: PETERSON'S STUDY GUIDE TO ENGLISH AND MATH SKILLS FOR COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS 94 (1987) ("He rewrote Lady Macbeth's famous cry, 'Out, damned spot!' to read 'Out, crimson spot!'").

²⁴ KENNETH MCCLELLAN, *WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SHAKESPEARE?* 84, 85 (1978).

²⁵ Cass R. Sunstein, "She Said What?" "He Did That?" *Believing False Rumors*, Harvard Pub. L. Working Paper 08-56 (prelim. draft 11/21/08), ssrn.com/abstract=1304268 (citations omitted).

And there was no need to waste time digging hard at the roots of facts that everyone knew to be true.

Perrin would have winced at this strange and unfortunate offshoot of his disclosure of the Bulfinches' bowdlerization of *Lady Macbeth*. Perrin writes with gentle, perhaps excessive charity that when Bowdler butchered Shakespeare's works he sought to "revise them into innocence"²⁶ — treating Bowdler's enterprise as good-hearted, though misguided. But when reporting allegations that an editor added extra spice to the already racy poems of John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, Perrin is less forgiving: "the forty genuine poems were doctored to make them dirtier than Rochester had already . . . [in] one of the rare cases of anti-bowdlerism."²⁷ It is one thing, Perrin might have summed-up, to fiddle with an author's work in an effort (however arrogant or misguided) to make that author look good; it is quite another to fiddle with an author's work in an effort (wilful, reckless, or negligent) to make that author look bad.

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

How not to bowdlerize? You could look it up, before you write it down. But a perfect commitment to that rule would require not only superhuman discipline (because "it's hard . . . suspecting everyone, everything, it wears you down"²⁸), but also access to research resources that are probably beyond the reach even of the *New York Times* or the Oxford University Press. Moreover, recent studies of brain function suggest that our brains drive us to adopt as truth what those about us claim as truth, even in the absence of evidence of truth.²⁹ A perpetual, independent return to first facts as well as first principles is a labor for gods, not humans.

Like it or not, we all have to choose some people and authorities to trust in this world, if we are ever going to get anything done. Making those choices is not easy, and finding fault in those we do choose is dis-

²⁶ PERRIN at 63.

²⁷ *Id.* at 45. This characterization might reflect the limited scope of Perrin's study. Doctoring the words of others to make them naughtier than they really are — anti-bowdlerism, as Perrin calls it — is part of the literature of politics. See, e.g., Cindy Richards, *Fighting A Lie That Just Won't Die*, CHI. TRIB., May 30, 1999, at C1; Al Kamen, *In The Loop: Another White House Tale*, WASH. POST, Sept. 25, 1998, at A23; see generally snopes.com/politics/politics.asp. All the better that the term "bowdlerism" was coined by a politician. See note 4 above and accompanying text.

²⁸ Fox Mulder, in *Little Green Men*, THE X-FILES (air date Sept. 16, 1994); see also, e.g., THOMAS S. KUHN, *THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS* ch. 6 (3d ed. 1996).

²⁹ See, e.g., Vasily Klucharev et al., *Reinforcement Learning Signal Predicts Social Conformity*, 61 NEURON 140, 140, 147-48 (2009).

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

comfiting. But perfectionism — while it might be a charming aspiration and a too-clever job-interview answer (“What do you see as your greatest weakness, young man?” “Oh, I’ve been told I invest too much effort in trying to do everything perfectly.” Jeez!) — is as fruitless as looking everything up. We get on well in life by going with what is excellent, not by holding out for what is perfect. The former is in short enough supply and hard enough to find. The latter, when it does turn up, tends to be in a form that falls under the jurisdiction of the Federal Trade Commission.³⁰

Knowing Safire from long readership, we still trust him, in no small part because he is that rare public intellectual who seems to care enough about accuracy to value, even relish, corrections not only of others’ work, but also of his own.³¹ How many writers subsidize corrections and criticisms of their own work by publishing the critics — in their own words — in the company of the writer’s own work?³² How many would or plausibly could publish a book titled “I Stand Corrected”?³³ He isn’t perfect, but he is excellent, and reassuringly accountable. And wrong about Bowdler.

EPILOGUE

Rumor-mongering is a slippery slope. Once we free ourselves from the obligation to check our facts, we are free to write imaginatively. Consider, for example, Morton Freeman, the author of *A New Dictionary of Eponyms*. Having borrowed (in all likelihood) from someone else the story pinning the “crimson”-for-“damn’d” bowdlerization on Bowdler, and having failed (without a doubt) to note that he has not looked at Bowdler’s work himself, Freeman then proceeds to carry on extravagantly for nearly a full page about the scope of Bowdler’s bowdlerization of Shakespeare, concluding his indictment as follows: “Bowdler’s eraser skipped none of Shakespeare’s works. He expurgated all of them.”³⁴

Thomas Bowdler would have been surprised to learn that he had been so thorough. Take *Measure for Measure*, for example. According to Bowdler, the “indecent” parts were so deeply embedded in the play that its reduction-and-redemption was a task that exceeded even his capacity for expurgation. And he provided a lengthy and public explanation — right there in the pages of *The Family Shakespeare* — of his decision not to cut into *Measure for Measure*:

³⁰ See, e.g., *FTC v. QT, Inc.*, 512 F.3d 858 (7th Cir. 2008) & 2009 GREEN BAG ALM. 169.

³¹ See generally RICHARD A. POSNER, PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS (2001; 2004 prtng.).

³² See generally, e.g., WILLIAM SAFIRE, YOU COULD LOOK IT UP (1988); WILLIAM SAFIRE, NO UNCERTAIN TERMS (2003).

³³ WILLIAM SAFIRE, I STAND CORRECTED (1984).

³⁴ FREEMAN, A NEW DICTIONARY OF EPONYMS at 29.

PREFACE TO THE FOLLOWING THEATRE COPY OF
MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Thomas Bowdler

2 The Family Shakspeare 1-3 (1818)

This comedy contains scenes which are truly worthy of the first of dramatic poets. Isabella pleading with Angelo in behalf of mercy to her brother, and afterwards insisting that his life must not be purchased by the sacrifice of her chastity, is an object of such interest, as to make the reader desirous of overlooking the many great defects which are to be found in other parts of this play. The story is little suited to a comedy. The wickedness of Angelo is so atrocious, that I recollect only one instance of a similar kind being recorded in history; and that is considered by many persons as of doubtful authority.¹ His crimes indeed, are not completed, but he supposed them to be so; and his guilt is as great as it would have been if the person of Isabella had been violated, and the head of Ragozine had been Claudio's. This monster of iniquity appears before the Duke, defending his cause with unblushing boldness; and after the detection of his crimes, he can scarcely be said to receive any punishment. A hope is even expressed that he will prove a good husband, but for no good reason — namely, because he *has been a little bad*. Angelo betrayed the trust reposed in him by the Duke, he threatened Isabella that if she would not surrender her virtue, he would not merely put her brother to death, but make his death drawn out to lingering sufferance; and finally, when he thought his object accomplished, he ordered Claudio to be murdered in violation of his most solemn engagement. These are the crimes which, in the language of Mariana, are expressed by the words *a little bad*; and, with a perfect knowledge of Angelo's having committed them, she

“Craves no other nor no better man.”

Claudio's life having been preserved by the Provost, it would not, perhaps have been lawful to have put Angelo to death; but the Duke might, with great propriety, have addressed him in the words of Bolingbroke to Exton,

“Go wander through the shade of night,
“And never show thy head by day or light.”

¹ Kirk.

HOW NOT TO BOWDLERIZE

Other parts of the play are not without faults. The best characters act too much on a system of duplicity and falsehood; and the Duke, in the fifth act, trifles curly with the feelings of Isabella, allowing her to suppose her brother to be dead, much longer than the story of the play required. Lucio is inconsistent as well as profligate. He appears, in the first act, as the friend of Claudio, and in the fifth, he assists the cause of Angelo, whom he supposes to have been his murderer. Lastly, the indecent expressions with which many of the scenes abound, are so interwoven with the story, that it is extremely difficult to separate the one from the other.²

Feeling my own inability to render this play sufficiently correct for family-reading, I have thought it advisable to print it (without presuming to alter a single word) from the published copy, as performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden.

The alterations, as I am informed, are the work of that gentleman, to whose theatrical talents and laudable exertions, untied to those of his unrivalled sister, our dramatic writers in general, and Shakespeare in particular, are more indebted than to any person since the death of Mr. Garrick.

If my Readers should think (and I confess myself to be of that opinion) that "Measure for Measure" is not yet an unobjectionable play, I would request them to peruse it attentively in its original form; and I am fully persuaded that there is no person, who will not then bestow praise on the ability with which Mr. Kemble has improved it, rather than express surprise at its not being entirely freed from those defects which are inseparably connected with the story.



² It is gratifying to me to perceive that Mrs. Inchbald, the respectable Editor of "The British Theatre," in her preface to this play, has expressed her sentiments respecting Angelo and the comic characters, in terms exactly corresponding with my own.