

Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment

Review Number: 1289

Publish date: Friday, 20 July, 2012

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ISBN: 9780674058712

Date of Publication: 2011

Price: £29.95

Pages: 352pp.

Publisher: Harvard University Press

Publisher url:

Place of Publication: Harvard, CT

Reviewer: Chris Mounsey

Over the last twenty years Richard Bentley's star has, if not exactly risen, then at least been mapped. His denouncing of the Letters of Phalaris as fakes (*Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris*, 1697) in the face of Sir William Temple's judgment of taste that they were authentic to the Sicilian tyrant ('An essay upon the ancient and modern learning', 1690), earned him an unenviable place as the butt of satire in Jonathan Swift's *The Battel of the Books* (1705). But his hermeneutic method of seeking more or less obscure evidence on which to make inferences about non-religious texts, both classical and modern, has been given its rightful place on the trajectory towards the literary scholarship that we recognize today.

It is Bentley's curious double position in the history of letters that Kristine Louise Haugen brings us with some skill. Taking as her starting point the work of Joseph Levine, Marcus Walsh, Jonathan Kramnick and Simon Jarvis, she begins with an account of Cambridge before Bentley, and the classical scholarship that he would have learned there as an undergraduate. In this sense, Haugen's book follows Samuel Johnson's approbation of Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (1754): 'You have shown to all who shall hereafter attempt the study of our ancient authours the way to success, by directing them to the perusal of the books which those authours had read'. Next, Haugen fills in the gaps in the evidence about Bentley's early life with a contextual study of the polemical activities in the house of Edward Stillingfleet, Dean of St. Paul's, inferring that this was where he gained a taste for the Paper Wars that were a staple of and a spur to, publication in the early 18th century – and into which Bentley so injudiciously threw himself.

By chapter three we get to direct evidence and Bentley's first publication, the *Letter to Mill* (1691), which follows the strictures of the classical learning he would have taken on board in Cambridge by eschewing commentary upon whole works in favour of fragments, and choosing the most obscure texts for his scholarship. In the same way, chapter four explores two editions of the *Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris* (1697 and 1699), this time explaining the first as a salvo in a Paper War meant for the common reader, and the second hugely expanded edition (with countless extra evidential passages) as meant for the professional critic.

In these works Bentley's methodology and his character as a scholar developed, to come to maturity in his edition of Horace (1712). Chapter five, which brings us this extraordinary work, is wonderfully argued.

Bentley brings more and more evidence to his argument, so much so that his reasoned conjecture soon asks questions of the very text he is explaining. Haugen argues that Bentley 'clearly imagined an archetype or common ancestor of all existing manuscripts, making arguments about how and why its readings had been changed' (p. 148), and if no existing manuscript could be found with this perfect reading, then the text must be re-written to conform with the conjecture. Bentley thus sets himself up as the authority figure which he denounced at the beginning of his career. Textual scholarship and the careful transcription of existing manuscripts are rejected in favour of following general rules for poetry that are themselves founded upon imagined texts that are in turn made up of conjectures from many different sources. This process of making an edition has put the editor centre stage – he chooses which rules are to be deemed general.

In chapter six, we see Bentley widening his scope in his edition of Terence (1726). Here his method turns to the meter of Latin poetry itself, which is regarded as some sort of ur-text that exists before poetry is even written, and from which further changes can be made to the existing manuscripts without giving any evidence. Haugen writes:

In the case of Terence and Plautus, Bentley claimed, any metrical account based on quantities alone missed the real principle of their verse, which he called its beat (*ictus*). This had been, quite literally, the regular beating of an ancient flute-player's foot throughout a poetic line, and it corresponded (Bentley said) to the metrically important syllables in the line, which the ancient actor emphasized through a "raising" or "heightening" of the voice (*arsis*). Bentley envisaged one syllable with *arsis* for every two metrical feet—a total of three in a trimeter line, four in a tetrameter. The *arsis* sometimes, but by no means always, fell on a syllable that bore word accent according to the standard rules; Terence had made reasonable efforts to keep the *arsis* from falling on the last syllable of a word, where the standard rules absolutely forbade the word accent, but only in the third and fourth feet of the trimeter could *arsis* on the last syllable be completely avoided. (p.171)

This is editorial arrogance of the utmost degree, and the fact that Bentley's proposed edition of the New Testament (chapter seven) was never published (for lack of a similar ruling principle) can but cheer us. But his edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* was unfortunately not likewise held back.

Chapter eight brings us the history of this most 'heartstopping' of editions. With the clear ruling principle of English blank verse to back himself up, Bentley needed only a cheating scribe or type setter to spoil Milton's lines in order to 'argue for his own dominance in a field of contestants' (p. 212). He could now make whatever changes his taste thought more correct. Correctly in terms of biography, *Paradise Lost* is read against Bentley's edition of Manilius's *Astronomica*, which Haugen argues is treated in the same way as Milton: another victim of a 'bad hand' (*mala manus*), though the edition was begun many years earlier. This is an interesting move as it gives a sense of Bentley's career, in which the man gains in certainty as he progresses until finally he can do the work he has always wanted to. Completing his career with the Manilius edition fulfils the potential we saw in the first two chapters: it is an obscure text about astrology, a subject which was not well understood. It is thus the perfect text in which to find 'errors', and being in hexameters with a ruling principle, to put these errors 'right'.

But here is where I begin to depart from agreement with Haugen's project as a whole. She claims in her introduction that 'This book emphasizes the continuous, almost vertiginous changes in scholarly approach that marked each one of Bentley's successive publications' (p. 7). Instead, it seems to me that we have a clear development in scholarly methodology in making an edition. We begin with the first important step of bringing evidence to bear upon conjectures in the *Dissertation on Phalaris*, we then move to the imagined perfect text that lay behind the conjectures of the Horace, to the preposterous conjecture of a poetic ruling principle that allowed for any unevicenced conjectures Bentley chose to make in the Terence, culminating in the dreaming up of a *mala manus* to spoil the early versions of Milton and Manilius so that Bentley could put them right again.

However, Haugen insists that 'Bentley's critical methods [both] impressed by their deep commitment to

reason and to law ... [and] held that reasoned judgment and observation could (and should) take the scholar far beyond the actual evidence before him' (p. 5). This would seem to conflate the stages of his scholarly development. In the beginning of his career, we must be filled with admiration of the method that he used to stand up against Sir William Temple – empirical evidence is brought to bear against baseless opinion. Swift's attack on him in *The Battel of the Books* is half-hearted and comes just before one of the book's hiatuses. When he is attacked by Pope in the *Dunciad*, after the Milton edition, Bentley's methodology has become as self-deluding and self-supporting as Temple's, and so is ripe for the lash.

That said, we must cautiously agree with Haugen's challenging statement that 'To inquire about Bentley's career, then, is to initiate a nearly violent dialectic between his alienness and his family resemblance to us' (p. 7), if we read 'us' to mean 'modern literary scholars'. We must be careful not to follow too closely in Bentley's direction, we must maintain our faith in evidence and we must avoid believing too strongly in our own version of the 'truth'.

The question is where the balance in biography ought to lie, between giving us the facts about a person, and giving an interpretation. Richard Bentley is, and remains, a difficult subject since he was one of the greatest classical scholars of his age, and advanced the study of poetry in English. But he was also for great reason painted as the buffoon in many a contemporary satire. Such doubleness is not unusual in an 18th-century figure: Christopher Smart could, in the same lifetime, publish two translations of Horace (one in prose and one in verse) and perform political satire on stage dressed as Mrs Mary Midnight, he could write nationally significant poems on the attributes of the Supreme Being, and also trivial lyrics for the pleasure gardens. One wonders whether Bentley took himself as lightly as Smart did in his more ridiculous moments.

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