

Forum

Moby-Dick and Fluid-Text Editing

TO THE EDITOR:

I am in favor of the kind of detailed “fluid-text” editing that John Bryant advocates in “Rewriting *Moby-Dick*: Politics, Textual Identity, and the Revision Narrative” (125.4 [2010]: 1043–60), but only in the case of works like *Moby-Dick*, where the payoff is sufficiently significant. For example, with regard to the richly revised holograph manuscript and published texts of *Frankenstein*, such editing may not be worthwhile if it cannot conclusively determine the composition order of the two major surviving portions of the draft manuscript.

The evidence provided by revisions or corrections can be slippery, as one of Bryant’s own examples demonstrates. To sign on Queequeg as a harpooner aboard the *Pequod*, Captains Bildad and Peleg require that he be a Christian. Ishmael claims that Queequeg is “a member of the first Congregational Church” in the 14 November 1851 American edition (John Bryant and Haskell Springer, eds. [New York: Pearson Educ., 2007; print; Longman Critical Ed.] 94). In the 18 October 1851 British edition, “first” in this phrase appears as “First.” The denomination is referred to twice, as “First Congregational Church,” in the seven paragraphs that follow in the American edition. The British edition reduces all eight paragraphs to one sentence that (apparently) simply asserts Queequeg’s conversion to the First Congregational Church: “‘Why,’ said I, ‘he’s a member of the First Congregational Church’; [and I entered upon a long rigmarole story, touching upon the conversion of Queequeg, and concluded by saying that in] the grand belief we all joined hands” (see the in-text revision narrative, the sixth of thirty-one, in Bryant and Springer 95). The words I have placed between brackets do not appear in the American edition, but those on either side derive from the first and last sentences of the eight-paragraph section of that edition.

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Bryant assumes that the Queequeg of the British edition is indeed a Christian; he misses the likelihood that the substitute sentence's references to "rigmarole" and "grand belief" (in "the conversion of Queequeg"?) contain undercutting irony—that is, the likelihood that Ishmael is lying. This likelihood amounts to possible evidence that Melville himself provided the substitute sentence and intended the "facetious" implications of "rigmarole" that Bryant denies in his in-text revision narrative, preferring to see "rigmarole" as "tedious and complicated." Indeed, "rigmarole" does also mean prolix, rambling, and incoherent. Ishmael's joke is clearer in the eight American-edition paragraphs. It depends on a distinction between the "first congregational church," the universal church of all humankind—what Melville calls "the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world" in his eighth paragraph (Bryant and Springer 95)—and the "First Congregational Church," a particular denomination.

Bryant notes of the editors of the (competing) 1988 Northwestern-Newberry "eclectic" edition:

In Queequeg's conversion, they made one small emendation. Borrowing from the revised British version, they capitalized Ishmael's lowercase *first* in "first Congregational Church," thereby eliminating [what may have been] Melville's typographic joke. By regularizing *first* to match all other capitalized instances of the word in the passage, the Northwestern-Newberry editors ignore Melville's humor and perpetuate a vestige of Britain's imperialist strategy of converting Queequeg. (1054)

I inserted "what may have been" to qualify Bryant's unequivocal assertion, which is based on the lowercasing of a single word. Bryant makes an equally strong assertion in his in-text revision narrative: Ishmael's "point . . . is that all people belong to one spiritual community. . . . Melville's reference to the (lower-case) 'first' Church underscores [instead of "may under-

score"] this argument" (95). I would maintain that the British editor or Melville himself corrected a mistake by the author, by his sister Augusta as she copied his difficult handwriting, or by the American plate setter. (The British edition, like the American one, was printed from plates set in the United States.) Bryant himself makes the essential point in *PMLA* on the page facing his passage on 1054 above: "editing a text that evolves from one version to the next is a special case because considerable interpretation is required simply to identify a change as revision—is *First*, for instance, a revision, correction, or accident? and by whom? and why?—and scholars cannot establish revision texts without substantial critical intervention" (1055). That is why "what may have been" is necessary. The *F* in the British edition may indeed be Melville's correction of the *f* in the American one.

Bryant assumes that a postmodern Melville deliberately broke the conventional understanding that Ishmael is the author of *Moby-Dick* and inconclusively contaminated Ishmael's rendition of his own spoken words with the hint of a typographic joke. But if Melville had intended a typographic joke, he would surely have eliminated all the capitals and written "first congregational church" in the first of the passage's eight paragraphs. It can be persuasively argued that the Northwestern-Newberry editors made the right decision in following what I deem to be the British edition's correction of an error in the American edition. Most probably, these editors were not, with the *F*, perpetuating "a vestige of Britain's imperialist strategy of converting Queequeg" (1054).

We cannot be certain whether Bryant's revision interpretation or my correction-plus-revision interpretation is correct. Uncertainties will persist regardless of how much "fluid-text" editing is applied. It is easy to claim too much. Indeed, even the term *revision narrative* can presume too much where an actual or possible correction is involved. An alternative, neutral term like *change narrative* is required.

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