

Atheists and Evangelical Zeal

The Dilemma of Plagiarism and Originality

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PLAGIARISM IS WRONG. I know this because I am told as much. I cannot read a course syllabus without encountering a university-mandated section on the evils of plagiarism. But I ask, somewhat in the guise of a devil's advocate, what if plagiarism isn't as bad as we think? What if plagiarism is not paramount among scholarly sins? I know these questions may sound almost blasphemous to the academically minded. But they are the focus of this discussion.

Many cling to negative notions about plagiarism and textual ownership with almost religious conviction. Their bible is Originality. They are its disciples. Some even speak of plagiarism with the fervent delivery of a televangelist. Take, for example, Dr. Morris Freedman, currently a professor at the University of Maryland. He wrote an essay entitled "The Persistence of Plagiarism, the Riddle of Originality" for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1994. In his essay he states:

The plagiarist pollutes the universe of achievement. He wants us to give his stolen object our stamp, our respect as his property. At best he makes an alloy of what should be pristine. At worst he soils, despoils, the idea of original creation. He is worse than the censor, who, in killing a book, Milton said, kills reason itself. The plagiarist kills a man's soul, denying him recognition of his self, his offspring. He mocks originality, destroys distinctiveness, blasphemes against creation.

While I respect his passion, I find it difficult to be converted to his degree of intensity on the subject from this preaching alone. The *Areopagitica* (Milton's famous pamphlet wherein Dr. Freedman found his quote) was meant as a testament to free speech and against censorship imposed by Parliament. I will

draw on this little piece of information again. On researching Dr. Freedman's background, I discovered that, as one might guess from the quote, one of his academic focuses is John Milton and seventeenth-century literature. This is intriguing on a couple of levels.

First, it could explain his almost religious conviction on the subject of textual originality. Milton's life and works were heavily influenced by his own religious beliefs. It would be reasonable to assume that one of his scholars would embody the same degree of passion on any number of subjects, including non-religious ones. Secondly, I wish to briefly examine an instance from Milton's history that may cast Dr. Freedman's argument in a slightly different light.

As Alexander Lindey points out in his book *Plagiarism and Originality*, in a study of *Paradise Lost* "Voltaire found that Milton had reproduced more than two hundred verses from [Masenius's] *Sarcotis*" (1952, 77). Now, this does not necessarily reflect negatively on Milton's work. He was writing at a time when textual originality was not as strict a discipline as it is today. Many of our greatest writers borrowed from other sources. But with even this single instance in mind, one must inevitably wonder how a man such as Dr. Freedman (and by this I mean someone so academically praised and accomplished) can be so devoted to a literary "borrower" and still be so passionate against plagiarism. We must then also question Dr. Freedman's use of Milton's own words to further his crusade against plagiarism, when it seems Milton himself was guilty of this sin, at least in the case of Dr. Freedman's apparent definition of the subject. It even seems likely that Milton himself would not have been opposed to the idea of borrowing, and may have even been advocating its practice as a form of free speech (in terms of the historical timeframe, of course) in his *Aeropagitica*.

But for the moment, let us put plagiarism in a more academic light. Rebecca Moore Howard talks about the notion of authorship and textual ownership in her essay "Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty." In one section, she talks about the lack of the idea of plagiarism in the premodern era. She quotes Giles Constable: "The term plagiarism should indeed probably be dropped in reference to the Middle Ages, since it expresses a concept of literary individualism and property that is distinctly modern" (Howard 1995, 789). So we have only relatively recently become so preoccupied with the notion of originality in text.

So where was the notion of textual ownership, as it is defined today, during and before the Middle Ages? As Constable states, it didn't really exist. But that is not to say the past did not have its own views on the subject. "Sixteenth-century English writers before the accession of Elizabeth practiced the classical theory of imitation quite as consistently as their contemporaries on the continent, but discussed it infrequently" (White, 1965, 38). The way that Harold Ogden White describes it sounds eerily similar to some aspects of religion during the

Renaissance. Instances of prostitution and other immoral actions were accepted almost silently by the church. St. Thomas Aquinas once said: “Prostitution in the towns is like the cesspool in the palace; take away the cesspool and the palace will become an unclean and evil-smelling place.” Queen Mary I herself was opposed to the infamous Bridewell prison, allegedly fearing that the great number of prostitutes held there would leak information about England’s religious leaders’ sexual adventures.

Somewhat in the same vein, we have issues of textual ownership. Borrowing was accepted and even praised in some cases, even though it was not precisely an act of originality. An excellent example of this is the play *Troilus and Cressida* by William Shakespeare. Before Shakespeare it was *Troilus and Criseyde*, written by Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer copied the story from Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*. Boccaccio took the tale from Benoit de Sainte-Maure’s *Roman de Troie*. Time and again this tale has been adopted by a disciple of literature and molded to fit his or her desires.

This steady progression of borrowing one story and slightly revising it to fit the writer’s style was commonplace. But it was almost never an act of disrespect towards the author or the text (except perhaps in claims that the new version was superior to the original). Herein lies the “atheist” view of plagiarism. These authors did not believe in any “god” of pure originality that was to be both worshipped and feared. Borrowing for them was neither wrong nor indicative of an injustice. Imitation was the finest form of flattery, as it were. “Commend me to a pilferer,” Byron has said; “you may laugh at it as a paradox, but I assure you the most original writers are the greatest thieves.” While Byron may have called the borrower a “thief,” he was clearly not using the term disparagingly, and may even have meant it as praise. To Byron, what we see as originality are simply the cleverest instances of hiding what the author has “stolen.” His statement could be a reference to a Shakespeare or a Chaucer, whose works are regarded by many as cornerstones of literature but are often imitations of other works.

So here is our paradox: how can we, as academics and worshippers of the written word, enforce plagiarism as an iron law but simultaneously praise the many “borrowers” as men and women of genius and timeless literary scope? How can we be proponents of originality when the notion itself is so loosely attached to the literary canon? The answer, I believe, lies not in a strict definition of originality, but in a slightly different application of it.

This may be a slightly cynical viewpoint, but for me, it is hard to comprehend the possibility that originality is not dead. At this point, there are roughly six billion minds on this planet that have active thought processes every day. Mathematically, that is roughly 2,190,000,000,000 thought processes per year, even if we give people credit for only a single thought daily. Nor does it take into consideration all of the people who have passed on since the dawn of

conscious thought. Now try to fathom the possibility that when you have a single thought, someone else has not had the same one before. It seems a bit daunting to me when it is looked at statistically.

So if we assume my argument that any single, original thought is logically almost impossible, we can gain a kind of deliverance from the chaos in the notions of imagination. Anne Berthoff (1981) offers this hope: “If we can reclaim imagination as a speculative instrument, there’s a good chance we can think our way through and beyond the misconceptions of language and learning that currently abound” (33). We can work toward Paulo Freire’s notion of a “pedagogy of knowing,” which Berthoff describes as “a method of teaching that recognizes the human need and ability to shape, discriminate, select: the mind’s power to form” (33). “Form” and “shape,” in terms of the imagination, can give new hope to the idea of originality.

I do believe that plagiarism is wrong. But that does not mean it isn’t a problematic topic. There is a difference, in my mind, between copying a pre-existing work out of laziness or wicked intent and imitating an influential work or style out of respect for the original. However, universities do not usually make that distinction when dealing with textual originality. If I decided to rewrite Milton’s *Paradise Lost* with the desire to contemporize it to appeal to my generation, but still borrowed hundreds of lines from the original, I would certainly be in as much trouble academically as if I printed out an essay online because I didn’t feel like writing one myself.

The more we establish plagiarism as an evil and blasphemous weapon against originality, the more we put fear into our students. This approach can be almost puritanical. Candace Spiegelman (1998) conducted a study on peer review and published her findings in an essay titled “Habits of Mind: Historical Configurations of Textual Ownership in Peer Writing Groups.” In her work, she observed that students shied away from using useful comments during peer editing because they felt the piece would no longer be “their own.” They feared a loss of textual ownership, even at the expense of what could be a more concise, coherent piece of writing. I do not believe that this should be the case. It shows a literarily crippling fear in terms of students’ perceived originality and textual ownership.

Another academic gray area that we hear horror stories about, and that I want to briefly consider, is that of improper citations. At what point do we deem that the student has fallen out of the realm of ignorance into that of intent? Undoubtedly, ignorance of proper form is an issue that needs to be addressed with any student where it becomes evident. But, in my mind at least, it shouldn’t warrant the failure of a class or expulsion from a school. The student should not be cast out like a leper when all that is needed is a little help and compassion for his or her situation.

The notion of true textual originality has become reminiscent of a religion. We fear it as much as we praise it. We claim to see its imprint all around us, but we have difficulty presenting concrete examples. And not everyone believes in the same ideals when originality is involved. Schools of thought on the subject can be as different as Christianity is to Buddhism or Hinduism is to Judaism.

Textual ownership and originality present a dilemma. It would be nearly impossible to find common ground between the “atheists” that praise the achievements of the borrower culture and the “evangelicals” that preach the righteousness of originality and the blasphemous evils of plagiarism. Lindey (1952) says it well when he states:

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Three things should be said at the outset. First, there is no such thing as absolute, quintessential originality. Second, plagiarism and originality are not polar opposites, but the obverse and reverse of the same medal. Third, originality—as commonly understood—is not necessarily the hallmark of talent or the badge of genius. (14)

To assume that plagiarism is as simple as the paragraph placed on a syllabus saying “don’t” is folly. To understand that it is a malleable and fluid subject is the doorway to a new understanding. In the end, I would like to believe that academia’s definition of “true” originality is not as important to the academic world as imagination. Searching for that form of originality is intrinsically futile, whereas searching for a unique imagination is an ultimately noble cause. This is not to say that the rules on plagiarism should be rewritten in academia, but that its pedagogy should be re-envisioned. The concrete, black and white rules at colleges and universities do not suit the flexible nature of textual borrowing. I am a devout follower of Berthoff’s claims that academia could use more imagination, in both the student and faculty populations. But the real question is: what do you believe?

Works Cited

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