Plagiarism and Imitation During the English Renaissance

A Study in Critical Distinctions

Harold Ogden White

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TO

MY PARENTS

PREFACE

THE purpose of this book is to define the attitude of English writers between 1500 and 1625 toward the question of literary property rights, of imitation, of what today is called plagiarism. This definition might have been sought through a study of the works of the period, their sources, and their relations to those sources; that is, by an investigation of literary practise. But this method has already been applied to all of the chief writers of the day, and to most of the less important ones, in countless monographs and editions. Scholarship has solidly established the fact that the Elizabethans took plots, ideas, and even stylistic ornaments from others more frequently than they invented them, in the modern sense of the word. The fact stands, inescapable; but to many readers and not a few students, who believe that the modern way of doing things is the only right and respectable way, it is productive only of regretful sighs and reproachful shakings of the head. Some chide the age as a whole for its insensitive literary conscience, its defective literary honor. Others take questionable comfort in the vague and scarcely articulate conviction that Shakspere and his fellows really knew that they should not steal right and left, but were forced by the deplorable morals of their day into betraying their own higher natures.

Literary conscience, literary honor, higher natures — these are imponderables. But expressed literary theory is definitely ponderable and capable of analysis. I have, therefore, focused my attention on what the Elizabethans

said about imitation and allied problems. Formal critical treatises, prefatory epistles and verses, satirical writings, and controversial publications of all sorts have been analyzed, and the entire literature of the period has been combed for even the most incidental references to what modern critics call plagiarism. The conclusions of previous scholarship about the practise of the writers discussed have been used sparingly, and only for comparison or illustration. I have endeavored to establish the fact of English Renaissance *theory* concerning imitation and originality, that it may stand beside the already established fact of English Renaissance *practise*. If that theory and that practise coincide, as I have endeavored to prove that they do, the critic of the Elizabethan conscience and of Elizabethan honor is, of course, at liberty to reply that that theory is merely the conscienceless, honorless code of a conscienceless, honorless crew. But — if that theory and that practise coincide — he will at least have to admit that the imitative composition which he deplores was produced in open conformity with the code of the Renaissance rather than in furtive violation of the code which is current today, and which he somehow feels has been, or should have been, operative ever since the invention of the alphabet.

Because English Renaissance theories were avowedly derived from those of classical literature, I have felt it necessary to devote a section of my first chapter to establishing the attitude toward imitation held by Greek and Roman writers during the eight centuries from Isocrates to Macrobius. I have felt it unnecessary to devote a similar section to the fifteen hundred years of medieval literature for two reasons. In the first place, Englishmen of the sixteenth century regarded their predecessors, Chaucer

almost alone excepted, as "very homely poets," and consciously avoided imitating the men of "that misty time," the Middle Ages. In the second place, in so far as the Elizabethans were unconsciously influenced by medieval theory, such influence was even more favorable to imitation, to reliance on authority and distrust of the individual, than was that of the classical principles — a point too well established to need laboring. Chaucer's quatrain from *The Parliament of Fowls* aptly summarizes the attitude from 400 to 1500:

> For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,
> Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
> And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
> Cometh al this newe science that men lere.

But because classical theory was to a large degree expounded to Englishmen by the Italian and French critics of the Renaissance, I have included sections on the adaptations and modifications of that theory in Italy and France during the sixteenth century, before embarking on the chronological study of the English authors with whom the book is primarily concerned.

The pleasure I take in thanking the many who have helped me in the preparation of this book is limited only by my realization of the disproportion between my obligation and the means at my disposal for expressing my gratitude. The officials and attendants of the Harvard College Library have aided me with untiring efficiency. Only considerations of space preclude my naming the many scholarly friends who have, through the years, been generous with suggestions, criticism, and encouragement; of these I am especially indebted to Dr. Gaetano Rudolph Aiello,

Dr. Alston Hurd Chase, and Mr. Harold Freeze Folland. During the long task of seeing the book through the press, Professor Hyder Edward Rollins has been prodigal of time and helpful suggestions drawn from his wide knowledge of Elizabethan literature and of publishing. And from the very inception of the work I have been privileged to draw priceless aid and inspiration from the vast erudition and genial kindliness of Professor George Lyman Kittredge.

H. O. W.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
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PLAGIARISM AND IMITATION DURING THE ENGLISH RENAISSANCE

CHAPTER I

Classical and Continental Renaissance Theories of Imitation

DOUBTLESS Horace was correct in saying that a poem on the Trojan war should not begin as far back as Leda's egg. But a study of the theory of imitation in the English Renaissance must, comparatively, begin even farther back. For since sixteenth-century England avowedly derived its critical doctrines from the classics either directly or through the interpretations of Continental Renaissance writers, a brief summary of the Greek and Roman principles of imitation and of the adaptations of those principles by sixteenth-century Italy and France is essential to an understanding of the English point of view.

"It is a universal rule of life that we should wish to copy what we approve in others," writes Quintilian.[1] It is likewise a universal rule of classical literature. To the author of *On the Sublime*, "zealous imitation" of the great writers of the past is a "road . . . which leads to sublimity"; it is "the aim, . . . and we must hold to it with all our might."[2] To be eloquent is to possess Attic eloquence, Cicero declares, and to imitate Demosthenes is to achieve an elo-

1. *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 2, § 2, trans. H. E. Butler, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian* (Loeb Classical Library, 1920–1922).

2. *On the Sublime*, xiii, 2, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe, *Aristotle: The Poetics*, *"Longinus": On the Sublime*, etc. (Loeb Classical Library, 1927).

quence at once Attic and perfect.[1] Quintilian devotes a chapter of his *Institutes* to imitation because, he says, "it comprises a great part of art." [2] A century later, Lucian attributes the decline of letters in his day chiefly to the attempted substitution of short-cuts to literary success for the painstaking imitation of the ancients.[3] But classical writers were sent to their predecessors for more than inspiration: they were to get subjects and material as well. Isocrates, for example, strongly insists that "one must not shun the subjects upon which others have spoken before," [4] Pliny the Younger advises a correspondent to "write something on the same topic" as that discussed by his model,[5] and Horace even suggests turning the *Iliad* into a drama.[6]

That the practise of such a widely held theory should receive commendation is to be expected: there is scarcely a tribute to an author in classical times which does not praise his imitation of some other author. Horace's approval of Lucilius for "hanging wholly" on Greek Old Comedy; [7] the paean to Plato, "who has irrigated his style with ten thousand runnels from the great Homeric spring," in *On the Sublime*; [8] and the pleasure of Pliny the Younger at being told that one of his orations resembled a speech of Demosthenes [9] — these are but incidental manifestations,

1. *Of the Best Kind of Orators*, 13.
2. *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 2, § 1.
3. *The Rhetorician's Vade Mecum*, *passim*, trans. H. W. and F. G. Fowler, *The Works of Lucian* (1905).
4. *Panegyricus*, 8, trans. George Norlin, *Isocrates* (Loeb Classical Library, 1928–1929).
5. *Letters*, vii, 9, trans. William Melmoth, revised by W. M. L. Hutchinson (Loeb Classical Library, 1915).
6. *The Art of Poetry*, l. 129, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, *Horace: Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica* (Loeb Classical Library, 1926).
7. *Satires*, i, 4, l. 6.
8. *On the Sublime*, xiii, 3.
9. *Letters*, vii, 30. See also i, 16, ii, 3, iv, 3, ix, 22.

taken at random, of the general attitude. Of the numerous systematic studies, two are famous: Quintilian devotes a long section of his *Institutes* to the laudation of Roman imitations of Greek literature;[1] and Macrobius devotes most of two books of his *Saturnalia* to the citation by parallel passages of hundreds of cases of Virgil's indebtedness to Homer and others. Nowhere is there a hint of disapproval of Virgil's borrowings. On the contrary, his method of using what he read is held up as a universal example: "the fruit of reading is to emulate what one finds good in others, and by suitable adaptation to convert what one most admires in others to one's own use" — which, Macrobius continues, is just what the best Greek and Roman poets had always done.[2]

Open avowal of imitation is likewise a cardinal point in classical literary theory. Five of Plautus's prologues announce that the play to follow is a Latin rendering of a Greek original; four of these name the author. Terence makes a similar avowal in five of his prologues, naming the Greek author in three. He declares that "he has combined many Greek plays" into a "few Latin ones" and that he "will do it again,"[3] resting on the authority of Naevius, Plautus, and Ennius, "whose freedom he is . . . earnest to imitate."[4] Cicero, Lucretius, Horace, Propertius, Phaedrus — these are but a few of the many classical writers who make it a matter of pride to acknowledge their models and sources.[5] The correct attitude of the literary debtor

1. *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 1, §§ 85–131.

2. *Saturnalia*, vi, 1.

3. Prologue to *The Self-Tormentor*, trans. John Sargeaunt, *Terence* (Loeb Classical Library, 1912).

4. Prologue to *The Lady of Andros*.

5. Cicero, *Of Invention*, ii, 2, 3; Lucretius, *Of the Nature of Things*, iii, ll. 1–13, v, ll. 1–6, 55–57; Horace, *Satires*, i, 10, ii, 1; Propertius, *Elegies*, iv, 1, iii, 9; Phaedrus, *Fables*, prologues to books i–iv.

toward his creditor is summed up by Seneca the Elder:[1] "Ovid, . . . as he had done with many other lines of Virgil, borrowed the idea, not desiring to deceive people, but to have it openly recognized as borrowed."[2]

Independent fabrication, consequently, plays a far from leading rôle in classical theory. Isocrates praises "not those who seek to speak on subjects on which no one has spoken before," but those who know how to treat the old subjects as no one else could.[3] Lucian refuses to "rest content . . . with the mere credit of innovation." If his work "is not good as well as original" he will "be ashamed of it," and "its novelty shall not avail to save [it] from annihilation."[4] Because "it is hard to treat in your own way what is common," that is, common among mankind — human nature, for example — Horace considers it daring to write on an untried theme or to fashion a new character. The poet will do better, he says, by "spinning into acts a song of Troy" than by presenting "a theme unknown and unsung." He advises following tradition, but admits that independent fabrication may succeed if the result is self-consistent.[5]

Underlying these two basic principles — imitation is essential, fabrication is dangerous — is a third which goes far to account for them: subject-matter is common prop-

1. *The Suasoriae of Seneca the Elder*, iii, 7, trans. William A. Edward (1928).

2. It is obvious from the quotations given thus far that the "imitation" referred to is that of one writer by another. The *mimesis* of Aristotle is a quite different process, variously interpreted as "imitation" or "representation" of "ideal nature." The *Poetics* as extant contains no treatment of the type of imitation inculcated and employed throughout Greek and Roman literature; Greek and Roman writers generally, on the other hand, ignore the Aristotelian *mimesis*.

3. *Panegyricus*, 10.

4. *A Literary Prometheus*, 3.

5. *The Art of Poetry*, ll. 119–130.

erty, the *publica materies* of Horace.[1] "The deeds of the past are . . . an inheritance common to us all," declares Isocrates.[2] Cicero refers to the works of his predecessors as "the common fund." [3] When one writes on topics already treated, Seneca insists, "he is not pilfering them, as if they belonged to someone else, . . . for they are common property." "The best ideas are common property," he further maintains; therefore, since what is common to all belongs equally to each, he asserts that "any truth is my own property," even that "whatever is well said by anyone is mine." [4]

Now these three principles concern only the unoriginal aspect of classical literature. But the ancients were as eager for originality in their way as writers of today are in theirs. Quintilian's "first point" in regard to imitation is that it "alone is not sufficient"; furthermore, he considers it "a positive disgrace to . . . owe all our achievement to imitation," and is certain that "no development is possible for those who restrict themselves" to such a method.[5] Similarly, Seneca urges a friend to "make . . . not memorize," to "put forth something from [his] own stock." "Truth lies open for all," he continues; "it has not yet been monopolized. And there is plenty of it left for posterity to discover."[6] The *type* of originality desired by classical writers is different, that is all. When Isocrates advises treating an old subject "as no one else could" in-

1. *The Art of Poetry*, l. 131.
2. *Panegyricus*, 9.
3. *Of Invention*, ii, 3.
4. *Letters*, lxxix, 6, xii, 11, xvi, 7, trans. Richard M. Gummere, *Seneca: Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* (Loeb Classical Library, 1917–1925). See also viii, 8, ix, 21, xiv, 18, xxi, 9, xxxiii, 4.
5. *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 2, §§ 4, 7, 8.
6. *Letters*, xxxiii, 7, 8, 11.

stead of seeking "subjects on which no one has spoken before," he half defines classical originality as originality of expression. When he further demands that the writer find in previously used subjects "topics which are nowise the same as those used by others," [1] he gives the other half of the definition: the supplementing of material. Supporting this second half-definition, Cicero wants it understood that he has added "certain observations of his own to the common fund." [2] And Seneca insists that one "should play the part of a careful householder" in one's use of the treasure of earlier literature: "we should increase what we have inherited. . . . Much still remains to do . . . and he who shall be born a thousand ages hence will not be barred from his opportunity of adding something." [3] To the ancients, then, combining old material with new and expressing the combination in an original manner constituted originality. This originality was achieved by a composite process which may for convenience be divided into three steps: selection, reinterpretation, and improvement.

Selection is a convenient title for the classical principle that one should imitate only the best features of the best writers. Opinions naturally vary about the number and identity of these models. Cicero, to be sure, recommends the faithful following of a single model,[4] and he has already been cited as declaring that to imitate Demosthenes is to achieve perfect eloquence. The first statement may be ignored, as it is applied to boys in school. As for the second, Quintilian affirms that Cicero imitated Isocra-

1. *Panegyricus*, 10; *Against the Sophists*, 12.
2. *Of Invention*, ii, 3. See also Phaedrus, *Fables*, ii, prologue.
3. *Letters*, lxiv, 7. See also Quintilian, *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 2, §§ 4–9, 28.
4. *Of the Orator*, ii, 90.

tes and Plato as well as Demosthenes;[1] and Cicero himself says, in another connection, that, far from following a single model, he has collected all the authors who have discussed his subject and has chosen the best from each. For, he continues, of all the authors who deserve preservation, there is not one who does not offer something worth imitating.[2] Seneca, less catholic, recommends "a limited number of master-thinkers," [3] and Lucian would exclude all but the ancients.[4] Quintilian studies the question in detail, insisting that "the nicest judgment is required" in deciding "whom to imitate," and "what . . . to imitate in the authors . . . chosen." The answers to both questions will depend, of course, on the "natural gifts" of the imitator and the genre he is working in, but Quintilian follows Cicero in holding that there is scarcely an author who has "stood the test of time who will not be of some use," provided that the imitator limit himself judiciously to each author's "good qualities"; and his "opinion about the moderns is much the same." He specifically rules out the exclusive imitation of a single model.[5] Most catholic of all, Pliny the Younger echoes Quintilian, and quotes Pliny the Elder to the effect that "no book [is] so bad but some profit [may] be gleaned from it." [6]

To reexpress an old idea in the spirit of one's day, to give it the impress of one's individuality, to supplement it with the results of one's experience and observation — all this is reinterpretation. In its lowest form it consists

1. *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 1, § 108.
2. *Of Invention*, ii, 2.
3. *Letters*, ii, 2.
4. *Lexiphanes*, 23.
5. *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 1, §§ 40–41, chap. 2, §§ 14–16, 19–26.
6. *Letters*, i, 16, vi, 21, iii, 5.

merely in presenting a topic in a new dress: recounting "the things of old in a new manner," or setting forth "events of recent date in an old fashion" with Isocrates; [1] giving "brightness to what is tarnished, and light to what is obscure" with Pliny; [2] or choosing a new one of the "innumerable . . . methods of expression still left us" with Quintilian.[3] In its highest form it produces work which, according to Quintilian, "seems to come into being as the very child of nature," without revealing "an artificial manufacture." [4] To show how this highest form of reinterpretation — really transformation — is brought about, classical writers commonly resort to figures, the favorite being that of the bee. As it transforms the nectars of the most varied flowers into honey, so the writer, according to Seneca, should "so blend . . . whatever [he has] gathered from a varied course of reading . . . into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from that whence it came." [5] Digestion is another favorite figure. Undigested — that is, merely memorized or copied — material got from reading can no more be transformed into an original work than undigested food can build up the body. Other figures used are biological reproduction, the kindling of a flame, and the blending of diverse voices in a choir, instruments in an orchestra, or essences in a perfume.[6] As Seneca

1. *Panegyricus*, 8. See also Phaedrus, *Fables*, iv, prologue.
2. *The Natural History of Pliny*, dedication, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley (1855), I, 5.
3. *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 5, § 7.
4. Book v, chap. 14, § 32.
5. *Letters*, lxxxiv, 3, 5. See also Plutarch, *Morals*, 41F; Macrobius, preface to the *Saturnalia*.
6. Seneca, *Letters*, lxxxiv, 6–8; Quintilian, *The Institutes of Oratory*, bk. x, chap. 1, § 19; Macrobius, preface to the *Saturnalia*; Plutarch, *Morals*, 48C.