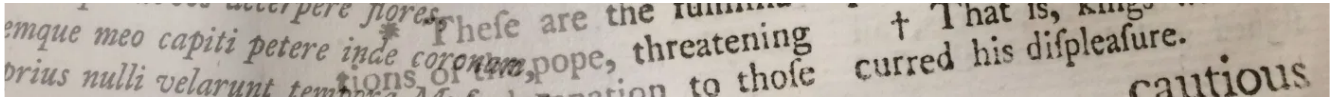


Eighteenth-Century Paratext Research Network

Footnotes in the Long Eighteenth Century: Recommended Secondary Reading



by Alex Watson (Meiji University)

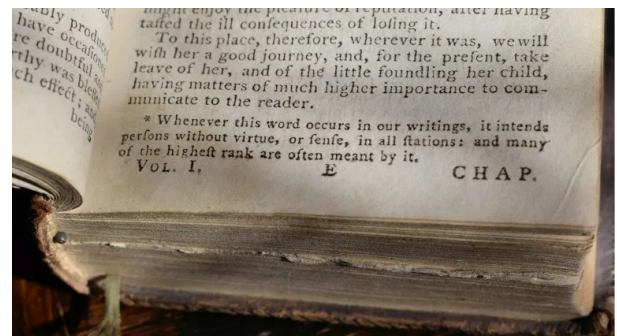
Our contemporary world of digital communication and hypertext has inspired recent scholars to re-examine how the conventions of the printed book enable the transmission of meaning. Within this context, the humble footnote has achieved a new prominence. Although footnotes can be found in works published earlier, annotation not only became ubiquitous in the long eighteenth century, it appeared to embody the period's spirit of combative empiricism (Thomas De Quincey described them as 'a practice purely modern').^[1] This brief article identifies and summarizes five key writings on the topic.

Shari Benstock, 'At the Margins of Discourse: Footnotes in the Fictional Text', *PMLA*, 98: 2 (March 1983), 204-25.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/462046>

Although Grafton (see below) is often taken to be the starting-point for recent investigations, Benstock's earlier analysis contains important, if disputable, insights. Benstock draws on narratology and deconstruction to provide an intricate account of the use of footnotes in two eighteenth-century literary blockbusters: Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Arguably, Benstock's insistence that 'footnotes in fiction cannot serve the ends they serve in the scholarly tradition' (p. 220) pays insufficient regard to the porosity of genres at the time. Nonetheless, this article is pioneering in drawing attention to the importance and complexity of the footnote. The introductory section, in particular, presents one of the best-formulated descriptions of how footnotes operate.

Nigel Leask, 'Wandering through Eblis: Absorption and Containment in Romantic Exoticism' in Tim Fulford and Peter Kitson (eds.) *Romanticism and Colonialism: Writing and Empire, 1789–1836* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 165–88.
<https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/literature/english-literature-1700-1830/romanticism-and-colonialism-writing-and-empire-17801830?format=PB>

Leask examines the "Lake Poet" Robert Southey's extensive footnotes for his eccentric Oriental epic *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801). Leask argues that Southey's notes constitute a "totalizing project": an attempt to accumulate knowledge and thereby gain power over the Orient. Leask compares Southey's combination of heroic verse narrative and scrupulous annotation to the mixture of sumptuous illustrations of vast landscapes and meticulous and detailed information in Prussian explorer and geographer Alexander von Humboldt's encyclopedic volumes on the Americas. According to Leask, in both cases, "the absorptive pull of the exotic visual image or allusion...is constantly checked and qualified by a globalizing, descriptive discourse which draws the viewer/reader away from the dangerous proximity to the image, in order to inscribe him/her in a position of epistemological power; nothing other than the commanding vision of imperial objectivity" (p. 168). It is possible that Leask overstates the degree of ideological coherence in Southey's jumbled and contradictory annotations. Yet this article has a broader significance in Leask's fusion of textual analysis and postcolonial theory, and his demonstration of how analyzing the textual margins can help us better understand the mind-set of colonial power.



A discursive footnote in Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749); edition depicted published by Cooke, 1792.



An illustration of the Andean volcano Chimborazo in Alexander von Humboldt's *Tableau Physique* (1807). Nigel Leask compares Robert Southey's combination of verse and notes to von Humboldt's juxtaposition of landscape and data.

Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote; A Curious History* (1997) (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1999)

<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674307605>

Grafton's hilarious and ingenious tome is the best-known book on the form. Grafton constructs a lively, witty narrative of how historians came to use footnotes to cite and analyze their sources, reserving a central role for the eighteenth century. This story—admirably wide-ranging in its historical and linguistic scope—is enlivened by Grafton's memorable gift for vivid and ludicrous similes. 'Like the high whine of the dentist's drill' Grafton exclaims, 'the low rumble of the footnote on the historian's page reassures: the tedium it inflicts, like the pain inflicted by the drill, is not random but directed, part of the cost that the benefits of modern science and technology exact' (p. 5). Nevertheless, although Grafton accords central roles to writers such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, his account overlooks the sheer variety of uses to which annotation was put at the time: from explanations in grammar books; to antiquarian compendia. As a result, his account risks repeating a somewhat dated vision of the period, as an age preoccupied with producing vicious literary put-downs, overlooking broader cultural, political and social currents. Moreover, Grafton's contention that twentieth-century historians use annotation robotically for citation ignores, for instance, the florid footnotes of Fernand Braudel (1902–85) or A. J. P. Taylor's (1906–1990) obstinate and opinionated missives ('It [is] wearisome to add "except the Italians" to every generalization' Taylor proclaims, 'Henceforth it may be assumed.').[2]

Jacqueline Labbe, "'Transplanted into a More Congenial Soil": Footnoting the Self in the Poetry of Charlotte Smith', in Joe Bray, Miriam Handley, Anne C. Henry (eds.) *Ma(r)king the Text: The Presentation of Meaning on the Literary Page* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 71–86. <https://www.routledge.com/Marking-the-Text-The-Presentation-of-Meaning-on-the-Literary-Page-1st/Bray-Handley-Henry/p/book/9780429432309>

Labbe explores the annotations the poet and novelist Charlotte Smith created for her ruminative and evocative *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784). In these notes, Smith highlights her allusions to Shakespeare, Petrarch, Pope and displays her interest in natural history and botany. Labbe argues that, for Smith, 'the marginal nature of footnotes provided an opportunity to explore spaces not thought proper for a woman to visit' (pp. 72–73). Just as Leask's article was the first to consider footnotes in relation to empire, Labbe pioneers by investigating how gender might inform annotative style. Moreover, while earlier analyses envisage the margins as a space for exerting narrative control and engaging in bookish raillery, Labbe innovates by suggesting that annotation might offer a surreptitious space of writerly liberation: 'the notes bolster the poems with a new version of female selfhood, a subterranean challenge to culture' (p. 73).

Michael Edson (ed.) *Annotation in Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (Bethlehem: LeHigh University Press, 2017).

<https://lupress.cas.lehigh.edu/content/annotation-eighteenth-century-poetry>

This collection of essays from various contributors examines notes in poems appearing in the British Isles between 1700 and 1830. The volume is the ideal first port of call for students and scholars seeking a list of primary texts and a diverse range of perspectives. Edson's 'Introduction', in particular, provides an extremely valuable overview both of the various uses to which footnotes were put and eighteenth-century writers' own expressed views about them. As Edson suggests, the volume seeks to complicate 'the stereotyped narrative in which eighteenth-century authors, and poets especially, waged a heroic but futile struggle against printed notes' (p. xiii). Instead, Edson emphasizes annotation as a site of collaboration and a means by which writers sought to appeal to readers. Edson also provides a series of intriguing quotations about annotation (for instance, Pope's suggestive howler that notes supply 'a Crutch to the weak Poet to help him limp a little further than he could on his own Feet' (quoted p. xviii). The works discussed in the essays

range from the mock-apparatus in John Gay's *The Shepherd's Week* (1713); to the gloss providing nautical terminology in William Falcolner's (1732–69) *The Shipwreck* (1762); to Thomas Percy's (1729–1811) antiquarian notes for *The Hermit of Warkworth* (1771); and to editions of Collins, Homer, Milton, Shakespeare and literary anthologies.

Alex Watson is Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan. His monograph *Romantic Marginality: Nation and Empire on the Borders of the Page* (London: Routledge, 2012) is the first book-length study of Romantic-era annotation. Examining the writing of Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson, Robert Southey, Robert Burns, Walter Scott and Lord Byron and others, Watson argues that the margins of Romantic-period texts constitute complex sites of political marginalization.

[1] Thomas De Quincey, "Style: Part One" in *The Collected Works of Thomas De Quincey: Volume X: Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. D. Mason (Edinburgh: Black, 1990) p. 166.

[2] A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. xxiii.



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