

The New York Review of Books

The Tremendous, Ferocious Bentley

G.W. Bowersock

NOVEMBER 24, 2011 ISSUE

Richard Bentley: Poetry and Enlightenment

by Kristine Louise Haugen

Harvard University Press, 333 pp., \$39.95

Among the literary giants of eighteenth-century England Richard Bentley is less famous today than Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, or Edward Gibbon, but his reputation was huge at the time. Gibbon referred to him as “the tremendous Bentley.” Even before 1700, when he began, at the age of thirty-eight, a stormy tenure as master of Trinity College in Cambridge, he had already won public recognition in both classical studies and theological debate, and his reputation continued to grow until his death in 1742.

In the *Dunciad* Pope mercilessly mocked Bentley’s achievements as a critic, but Gibbon found in Bentley’s polemical style a model for his own *Vindication* of the notorious fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, on early Christianity. Through his prowess as an editor and critic of texts in Greek and Latin, Bentley not only reached the lofty level of scholars of the previous century, above all Joseph Scaliger, but got there by publishing his most devastating criticism in English rather than Latin, despite his impeccable command of Latin. His critical acumen and ferocious style, in scholarship, sermons, and pamphlets, outlasted his own century and ultimately inspired A.E. Housman in the twentieth to assume Bentley’s formidable mantle when he prepared his magisterial texts of Latin authors.

Bentley, born in 1662, took holy orders in 1690, after seven years as tutor to the son of the Reverend Edward Stillingfleet in London. By then he was already well embarked upon an audacious program of scholarly research on some of the most difficult and obscure texts from classical antiquity—the Greek lexicon of Hesychius, the Latin astronomical poem in five books by Manilius, and the Greek books of Philostratus, including the biography of the wonder-worker Apollonius of Tyana. Once established as a deacon of the Anglican Church, Bentley soon became an eloquent champion of orthodoxy in opposition to a

growing chorus of dissidents and radical thinkers, and this led to his installation as the Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1717.

In her new biography of Bentley, Kristine Louise Haugen is by no means the first to comment on the apparent incongruity of Bentley's careers as a churchman and a scholar. For her, "Bentley the churchman and Bentley the scholar were two discernibly different creatures." She has built her work, as she fully acknowledges, on the magnificent biography of Bentley that James Henry Monk published in 1830, and it is praise enough to say that her thorough and well-documented account supplements his without replacing it.

The greatest strength of Haugen's book is its close attention to the scholarly achievements of Bentley. But she might have paid more attention to the phenomenal projects that Bentley had under way in the 1680s, when he was still in his twenties, and well before his public debut with the *Letter to Mill* of 1691, a groundbreaking work of scholarship published as an appendix to an edition of the work of the sixth-century-AD Byzantine historian John Malalas and addressed to the young scholar John Mill, who prepared the text. The new edition of Philostratus that Bentley was preparing in this period seems to have eluded Haugen altogether, even though his copious annotations survive, together with specimen sheets of a proposed printed text. His annotated copy of the lexicon of the fifth-century-AD Alexandrian scholar Hesychius is, as Haugen knows, in Trinity College, Cambridge. The annotations in his early hand illustrate just how far he had advanced in his work on this difficult Greek dictionary, to which he returned in later years.

As for the first-century-AD Latin poet Marcus Manilius, Bentley's correspondence and his own public remarks in the following decade show that he had been contemplating publication of a new edition. The actual publication had to wait some five decades, but, as G.P. Goold, Manilius' finest editor in recent times, observed in 1963, "Many indications conspire to suggest that the best part of the notes was executed in these early years." It is hard to fathom how Haugen could claim, after surveying the youthful work on Hesychius, that Bentley "did not embark on any edition of Latin poetry until his Horace, begun in 1702."

The *Letter to Mill* is so stupendous in its impact because it drew upon all the learning that Bentley had accumulated in the preceding decade, particularly an ongoing study of the fragments of Greek poetry, some of which were preserved in the *Chronography* of Malalas, which was the ostensible subject of the *Letter to Mill*. A few years later Bentley produced, in two versions (one short and one very long), his celebrated demonstration that the admired letters of a Sicilian ruler called Phalaris in the sixth century BC were neither authentic nor ancient. This *Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris*, in its second, longer form of 1699, remains as dazzling now as it was when it was written, even if Bentley, who always warmed to polemic, could not restrain himself from overkill. Gibbon wryly

observed, “The Epistles of Phalaris have been pronounced spurious after a much fuller hearing than they deserved.”

Haugen continues the record of Bentley’s achievements across a broad spectrum, including his legendary edition of the poems of Horace that appeared in 1712 and a meticulous analysis of the impact of the archaic Greek letter digamma (*F*) on the hexameter verse of Homer. Bentley is sometimes wrongly credited with discovering the digamma, which had vanished from most Greek dialects some time before Homer’s epics were written down in the seventh century BC, but his insight into its effect on Homeric poetry was undoubtedly original. Bentley found that the digamma, when restored to certain portions of Homer’s text, would allow proper metrical scansion in lines that had not previously scanned correctly. He also launched a project to produce a new edition of the New Testament. He finally published, in 1739, a few years before he died, the edition of Manilius’ poem, the *Astronomica*, that he had come close to publishing over forty years before.

As an editor of an ancient author, Bentley was conscious of the need to consult the surviving manuscripts on which the text had to be based as well as previous printed editions with conjectures on passages that were “corrupt”—i.e., had been incorrectly altered. But he is best known today for his unshakable conviction that a truly gifted scholar, such as himself, could detect corruptions in a text even when the manuscripts were in agreement, and could intuit the correct reading both from the context and, perhaps more importantly, from an innate talent for divination. His doctrine is best known from his edition of Horace where he appeals to *ratio et res ipsa* (“reason and the thing in itself”) as the foundation of editing. This, he wrote, “count[s] for more than a hundred manuscripts, especially when the old Vatican manuscript agrees with me.” Haugen is certainly right when she says, “We are allowed to suspect that within the limits of the rhetoric, Bentley’s reason counts for more than manuscripts primarily because it is *Bentley’s reason*.”

In his *Horace* Bentley introduced corrections into the text of a poet whose work was very well known to students and cultivated readers of the age. Haugen thinks that familiarity with Horace was “a mark of social distinction,” and perhaps it was, but this does not warrant calling the poet “the archetypal master of the artfully expressed commonplace.” W.H. Auden is on record as saying that of all the ancient Roman poets Horace was the only one he really liked, and Auden knew a thing or two about lyric poetry.

What Bentley did for the poems of Horace was brilliant if not always persuasive, and one notorious example will suffice to illustrate this. In the third poem of the first book of *Odes*, the poet praises the courage of the world’s first seafarer, who confronted powerful winds, turbulent seas, and terrifying sea monsters with equanimity—*siccis oculis* (“dry-eyed”). Bentley argued at length that no human being would ever conceivably weep in the face of danger and therefore that the dry eyes of the primal seafarer were absurd. The text had to

be emended to *rectis oculis* (“with eyes looking straight ahead”), for which Bentley provided ample parallels.

Arguments against Bentley’s emendation have been almost as bizarre as his own in support of it. In today’s standard commentary on the *Odes*, we read, with reference to this passage, “Ancient southerners showed their emotions much more freely than modern Englishmen (Elizabethans were different). In particular they were readier to scream during a storm.”¹ But the shade of Bentley would ask even now, “Yes, but were they readier to weep?”

Haugen builds her story into a tragic finale with Bentley’s catastrophic 1732 edition of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which the methods and critical judgment that had served him so well in treating classical texts ultimately proved disastrous in editing a masterpiece in his own language. Proceeding from the assumption that the blind Milton was traduced by an ignorant and intrusive editor who corrupted the text that the poet had dictated, Bentley imposed grotesque alterations upon Milton’s epic, as reviewers immediately noticed. He made one of his most infamous corrections by eliminating the words “darkness visible” (I.63), which “serv’d only to discover sights of woe,” because he found it impossible for darkness to discover sights of woe rather than cover and hide them. So Milton’s immortal darkness visible was replaced by Bentley’s absurd reading, “a transpicuous gloom.”

It remains a mystery to this day how Bentley could have gone so wrong. George Goold’s simple solution was that Bentley did not know the language and meter of English nearly so well as Latin, but that is clearly inadequate, as the foregoing examples illustrate. Haugen tries to address this conundrum by assessing the Milton and Manilius editions in parallel: “I read Bentley’s Manilius and his *Paradise Lost* against one another...because the two editions worked as multiple, and related, acts of positioning for Bentley as a scholar.” But that is no help. The *Paradise Lost* was an utter failure. By contrast, the Manilius edition is a work of genius, as any Latinist from the eighteenth century down to the present would agree, and its influence among the greatest practitioners of textual criticism in modern times has been enormous. In writing of Bentley, Housman asserted without hesitation, “His Manilius is a greater work than either the Horace or the Phalaris,” and in comparing Bentley with Scaliger, his predecessor in editing Manilius, he wrote, “Scaliger at the side of Bentley is no more than a marvellous boy.” He singled out Bentley’s “lucidity, his sanity, his just and simple and straightforward fashion of thought.” The editor of *Paradise Lost* is unrecognizable here.

To understand what happened we have to remember that the Manilius edition was ready for the printer before 1700. As late as 1724 Bentley’s nephew Thomas wrote him from Rome that he was looking forward to the publication of his uncle’s Manilius before his New Testament would appear. Meanwhile, another nephew, Richard, son of Bentley’s

brother Joseph, was reading the proofs of the Milton edition in 1731 and wisely urged a halt to the publication. It is tempting to think that the reception of his *Paradise Lost* made Bentley realize how perceptive the young Richard had been.

In any case, Bentley turned to the same nephew finally to bring out his *Manilius* and to write a preface for it. This meant that a work prepared decades before Bentley's *Milton* appeared seven years after it. After leaving his *Manilius* unpublished for more than fifty years—possibly with some tinkering in the interval—Bentley may simply have wanted to get it out, once he had found in Henry Woodfall a publisher who would produce a beautiful volume and typeface. After all, Bentley had, by his own admission, aborted the publication of his *Manilius* in the late 1680s because he had disapproved of the typography of his publisher at that time. Hence Bentley's entire career as a churchman, as master of his college, and as professor fell between his work on *Manilius* and the publication of it.

Despite his dedication to theology and his contentious involvement in ecclesiastical and college affairs, Bentley the churchman remains in the shadows in Haugen's biography. Yet the deeply held convictions that drove him into religious controversy are comparable to his explosive reactions to sloppy or irrational scholarship. Already in 1692 he had delivered a series of sermons in London, alternately at St. Mary-le-Bow and St. Martin-in-the-Fields, under the endowment of Robert Boyle, who died in 1691. The first, on "The Folly of Atheism," proclaims, after a homage to the trustees of Boyle's estate, that the endowed sermons are "for proving the Christian Religion against notorious Infidels, viz. *Atheists, Deists, Pagans, Jews and Mahometans* not descending to any Controversies that are among Christians themselves."

The Boyle sermons show Bentley fully in control of the aggressive polemical style that would characterize the *Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris* later in the same decade. Beginning with Psalm 14 ("The Fool hath said in his heart, There is no God"), he acknowledges, with scholarly fastidiousness, that this text reappears in Psalm 53 but refuses to discuss the duplication as improper,

when we are to argue and expostulate with such persons, as allow no Divine Authority to our Text; and profess no greater, or, it may be they will say, less Veneration for these Sacred Hymns, than for the profane Songs of *Anacreon* or *Horace*.

Bentley soon warms to his theme when he identifies the fools in his text as "indocil intractable Fools, whose stolidity can baffle all Arguments, and be proof against Demonstration itself...."

When he turns to "A Confutation of Atheism from the Origin and Frame of the World," Bentley shows himself a friend and disciple of Isaac Newton, "to whose most admirable

sagacity and industry we shall frequently be obliged in this and the following Discourse.” An elaborate account of gravity leads to a presentation of planets and celestial mechanics that takes theology in a direction that Newton himself, as we can see from his correspondence with Bentley, would have approved. The relationship of the sun to the planets “I do not think explicable,” wrote Newton, “by mere natural causes, but am forced to ascribe it to the counsel and contrivance of a voluntary Agent.” Newton seemed less certain about the cause of gravity (“what I do not pretend to know”), but he was clearly comfortable with being pressed into service by the young Bentley in his theological guise.

The use of Newtonian physics in arguing for the existence of God on the basis of the “origin and frame of the world” may seem superficially to reflect only the ecclesiastical side of Bentley rather than the classical and philological. But here the great poem of Manilius serves as a precious link between the two. This work of dense mathematical and astrological learning, in five books of Latin hexameter verse, was, for the difficulty of its text and the even greater difficulty of its substance, an Everest that only the greatest Latinists of modern times have dared to climb. Even Bentley’s judicious biographer James Henry Monk could write, “No great accession of reputation could be obtained by an edition of Manilius; since he is a poet never likely to be generally read.” But Monk, in his book published in 1830, was wrong about reputation, even if he was right about a general readership. Joseph Scaliger had edited and vastly improved the text of Manilius by deploying his critical instinct (Bentley’s *ratio*) together with a deep knowledge of astronomy (the principal subject of this author), and his work had vastly enhanced his reputation.

Bentley thought he could outdo Scaliger in reading Manilius. We should remember how greatly he revered his predecessor, even if he sometimes took pleasure in disagreeing with him. Bentley’s will bequeathed to Trinity College five pictures in his possession. Apart from images of himself and his wife, there were portraits of Isaac Newton and Joseph Scaliger. The fifth was of Ezechiel Spanheim, a Swiss-born Prussian diplomat and numismatic scholar, who had enthusiastically recognized Bentley’s genius in the 1690s. Bentley’s little pantheon shows how important the example of Scaliger was to him. If Newton inspired his theology, Scaliger inspired his classical studies. The arrangement and movement of the heavenly bodies was common to both. Bentley’s work was the direct inspiration for Housman’s edition of Manilius’ *Astronomica* in the early twentieth century. This led in turn to a new, though more modest, edition of Manilius by Goold in the Loeb Classical Library, with excellent notes and diagrams, as well as a revival of Manilian studies that continues to the present day.²

Curiously the two greatest editors of this poet, Bentley and Housman, were both men who appear to have split personalities. Bentley the theologian and Bentley the classical editor obviously came together in certain projects such as the aborted text of the New

Testament, but, as Haugen remarked, they seem fundamentally two different creatures. With Housman the separation of roles was even more pronounced. The author of the meltingly sentimental lyrics of *A Shropshire Lad* is very hard to reconcile with the astringent and sometimes savage critic who edited Manilius and other Latin poets. This paradox underlies Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love*, which makes good theater out of it but cannot really explain it. It is difficult to imagine a play about Bentley's divided persona, perhaps because neither side of him seems particularly warm or human, and yet his grandchildren apparently found him loving and approachable.

Bentley's polemic, from which both Gibbon and Housman learned so much, could at times become infinitely more strident than anything either of them wrote. When the clergyman Conyers Middleton published an anonymous attack on Bentley's proposal for an edition of the New Testament, his volcanic reply, issued anonymously in 1721, went far beyond acceptable norms, even for the eighteenth century, and Monk had to admit that Bentley was "now no longer the same person as formerly." Bentley refers to the pamphlet that attacked him as "the greatest malice and impudence, that any scribbler out of the dark committed to paper" and branded its author as a cabbage-head, insect, worm, maggot, vermin, and gnawing rat. "Thus did Bentley," sighs Monk, "...excite by his reply an universal prejudice against himself, which neither his close and argumentative reasoning, nor the occasional scintillations of genius, worthy of his better days, could counteract."

Gibbon, having absorbed from Bentley the elements of a polemical style, as the Oxford scholar David Womersley has shown,³ applied this style initially in an attack on the immensely influential Bishop William Warburton in 1770 by means of a critique of a passage in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. In this tract Gibbon explicitly noted that Warburton had challenged Bentley on several points in his demolition of the letters purportedly by the Sicilian tyrant Phalaris; but, wrote Gibbon, "Bentley is no more, and we may sleep in peace." The knives that Gibbon honed against Warburton were of course turned to much greater advantage later in his *Vindication* of his contested chapters on Christianity, and yet with the passage of time the elderly Gibbon repented that he had been so brutal to Warburton: "I cannot forgive myself the contemptuous treatment of a man who, with all his faults, was entitled to my esteem." It looks as if he felt he had aped Bentley's style a little too well.

Housman never wrote such outrageous polemic as Bentley at his most spleenetic, but he often came close, as did his brilliant admirer, the late D.R. Shackleton Bailey, who actually heard Housman lecture in 1936 a few days before Housman's death. The praise that Shackleton Bailey lavished on Goold's Loeb edition of Manilius was a kind of secular blessing from a high priest of textual criticism.⁴ The scholarly line from Bentley to Housman, and thence to Shackleton Bailey and Goold, is unmistakable and unbroken. Yet criticism based on *ratio et res ipsa* remains in constant danger of going badly astray, as

Bentley's *Paradise Lost* had shown long ago. It is still an open question why Bentley's legacy has proved so fruitful among classicists, whereas his theological writings, which rivaled or even eclipsed his classical works in his own day, have largely become footnotes in studies of the Enlightenment.

A much more serious question remains. How could anyone who read Horace and Manilius as brilliantly as Bentley utterly lack such brilliance when he read Milton? To the end of his long life Bentley never lost his intellectual energy, his erudition, or his arrogance, but, as Monk perceptively discerned in reporting the polemic of 1721, his judgment was failing even then, and he was no longer the man he once had been. Monk believed that he never again did anything equal or similar to his *Phalaris*, of which the longer version appeared in his thirty-eighth year. Yet the Manilius edition was reportedly ready well before that, or at least very far advanced. Hence the reason it is infinitely superior in quality to his work on Milton must simply be that it came from a much earlier time, when Bentley was working at the peak of his powers. His genius flagged in later years, although his energy did not, and one may be forgiven for wondering whether Bentley's obsessive involvement with administrative and ecclesiastical disputes had something to do with this. The publication of the Milton in 1732 and the Manilius in 1739 implies an evolution that is exactly the opposite of the truth.

"The tremendous Bentley," in Gibbon's phrase, continues to haunt classical studies even if his role in eighteenth-century religious debate now seems greatly diminished. Arguably Manilius, with whose abstruse and difficult poem he lived for most of his life, provides the key to understanding this astonishing man. Shackleton Bailey wrote, in reviewing Goold's Loeb edition, "It is sad that so few classicists know Housman's commentary or have any idea what they are missing.... To read it closely, intelligently, and completely is more than a unique intellectual experience." He suggests that there is an aesthetic pleasure that comes from the sheer technical work on such a difficult text. Work of this kind has "the beauty which a piece of mathematics can possess." I suspect that this is why Scaliger, Bentley, Housman, and a handful of other major classical scholars have dedicated themselves so passionately to an obscure Latin poem in five books about, of all things, astronomy and astrology. It was this elusive beauty that united, across a chasm of two hundred years, the Regius Professor of Divinity with the poet of *A Shropshire Lad*.

1 R.G.M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book 1* (Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 51–52. ↵

2 Manilius, *Astronomica*, with an English translation by G.P. Goold (Harvard University Press, 1977). See Katharina Volk, *Manilius and His Intellectual Background* (Oxford University Press, 2009). ↵

3 David Womersley, *Gibbon and the "Watchmen of the Holy City": The Historian and His Reputation, 1776–1815* (Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 2002), Chapter 2. ↵

© 1963-2018 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.