Essays in Criticism 53(1)

WATCHMEN

Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City': The Historian and his Reputation 1776-1815. By DAVID WOMERSLEY. Oxford University Press, 2002; £65.

In a letter to his patron Holroyd (Lord Sheffield) Gibbon observed that the first volume of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* would, as he put it, 'decline into the World' on 17 February 1776. The next two volumes appeared in 1781, and the final three not until seven years later. In February 1776 Gibbon was, as David Womersley observes at the beginning of his fascinating and pioneering new book, a man 'without reputation'. He had published his essay on literature and his critique of Warburton on the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, and he had sat in Parliament, but he was by no means a famous man. But in 1788, when the final volumes of his great history were delivered to the public, he was very famous indeed, and so he remained until his death in 1794.

Gibbon was an assiduous and astute custodian of his own reputation as it grew. With meticulous and imaginative scholarship (*res olim dissociabiles*) Womersley has succeeded in tracking Gibbon's calculated moves to adjust and enhance the impression he made on his contemporaries, not only in the course of publishing the history but also throughout the six attempts that he made to write his own autobiography. Womersley ends his work with a conclusive demonstration of the arbitrary alterations that Sheffield imposed upon the autobiography as he prepared his composite edition of the manuscripts after Gibbon's death. The title of the book incorporates a quotation from Gibbon's *Vindication* of his fifteenth and sixteenth chapters (on Christianity), but the book itself covers a far larger field. It begins with Gibbon's minute but revealing revisions in the second edition of the first volume of the history, and it concludes with the second edition of the *Memoirs*, which Sheffield brought out in 1814 and 1815.

At the end of his preface, in paragraphs that have an apotropaic character, Womersley describes his study as

'methodologically promiscuous'. He appears to be shielding himself from what he calls the 'unintelligent rigidity' of literary theorists by defending a close contextual analysis of Gibbon's writings, with particular attention to the intellectual and physical environment as it changed during and after Gibbon's lifetime. One can only applaud this doctrine, which Womersley summarises in a Gibbonian manner as a special kind of Arian trinitarianism: 'The father is bibliography, the spirit is context, but close reading is only the son. It is a later, dependent, and subordinate activity which can be practised with safety only within the boundaries marked out for it by its senior colleagues'. Womersley's method demands much of his readers, but it is brilliantly justified by the results. The detective work that supports his arguments is exhilarating and leaves us with a much clearer understanding of both Gibbon and Sheffield.

In a detailed study of the alterations that Gibbon introduced into the first volume of the *Decline and Fall* in the second and third editions, Womersley concentrates on the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters since these were to provoke so much fierce controversy. It is clear that Gibbon had expected from the start that there would be clerical resistance to what he had written, but the revisions for the second edition, which followed the first by only three and a half months, reveal that he was already concerned to diminish the force of passages that might show an unacceptable advocacy of deist thought. When he was making his revisions in April and May 1776 he was evidently trying to anticipate the gathering opposition. Womersley has turned up a most important unpublished note in the Sheffield papers at the Beinecke in Yale stating explicitly that Gibbon was even willing to consider excising the two chapters if they were seriously to disrupt the impact of his work. According to Sheffield, he 'asked whether I thought it advisable to withdraw the offensive passages from the second Edition then at the Press'. Although Sheffield advised him against such action, the French edition in three volumes appeared in 1777 without the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, which the translator regretfully noted he had to omit. Even so a French text of those chapters turned up that year in a separate fourth volume with a fictitious London imprint.

Womersley demonstrates that, as criticism from the pious began to mount, Gibbon realised that the public outcry could actually serve to enlarge his reputation. Accordingly in making revisions for the third edition of the first volume, published in May 1777, he adopted a conspicuously different strategy from the softened language of the second edition. His tone became more confident, and his views were bolstered by a barrage of scholarly references in support of his assertions. This procedure prefigured the strong reply that he was to make to Henry Davis in the *Vindication* of 1779. Womersley's analysis of Gibbon's creation of an appropriate polemical style in which to respond to his critics tellingly invokes the grand precedent of Bentley's celebrated exposure of the Phalaris letters, but the irony in Gibbon's arrogation of Bentley's style was, of course, that Bentley himself would have deeply disapproved of Gibbon's deist tendencies. Bentley's work simply gave Gibbon, as it later gave A. E. Housman, a model of devastating criticism. Gibbon's proud defence of his Christian chapters, once he had discovered their potential for launching his fame, depended for its efficacy on his maintaining the scholarly high ground. Hence the potentially damaging charges of plagiarism in Davis's book, with its parallel columns documenting alleged borrowings, roused Gibbon to issue his long riposte. Davis, unlike many others, aimed directly at Gibbon's scholarship, and that was the high ground he needed to hold.

With the Bentleian *Vindication* behind him Gibbon could concentrate on the preparation of the two volumes that were destined to appear in 1781. These included his celebrated treatment of Constantine (an extraordinary anticipation of Burckhardt's *Konstantin* in the next century) and his no less celebrated treatment of Julian and Athanasius. Drawing fruitfully on a study of Gibbon's Athanasius by Timothy Barnes, Womersley tries to understand why Gibbon's Julian was less positive than one might have expected and his Athanasius so much more positive. Gibbon even asserted, reasonably if surprisingly, that Athanasius would have made a better emperor than any of 'the degenerate sons of Constantine'. Obviously his critics would find themselves confounded by this assessment. Here, however, contextual analysis does not uncover the whole

story, and it would have been helpful if Womersley had added to his 'methodological promiscuity' a modest dose of old-fashioned Teutonic *Quellenforschung*. Gibbon's Julian, admirable in many things but nonetheless a fanatical despot, is nothing more nor less than a faithful reflection of the Julian of Ammianus Marcellinus, whose depiction he had studied at a tender age in Lausanne in the biography by La Bléterie. His juvenile notes on the work survive in the Lausanne Commonplace Book of 1755 and show exactly the same interpretation as the pertinent chapters of the history. In fact, Gibbon's notorious remark about Julian's 'populous' beard, with insects living in it, is translated literally from La Bléterie's 'barbe peuplée'.

Womersley's discussion of the Gibbonian contrast between Athanasius and Julian comments on Julian's 'affectation', as expressed repeatedly in Gibbon's text. Yet *affecter* is a favourite word of La Bléterie in describing the emperor. As for Athanasius, La Bléterie had already made the comparison in the archbishop's favour. He called him 'ce grand homme', and returned to Julian's treatment of him in his *Life of Jovian*, where he translated the hate-filled letter of Julian to Ecdicius, the prefect of Egypt – a letter quoted at length by Gibbon and followed by words that unmistakably echo La Bléterie's own commentary. Here is Gibbon:

> The death of Athanasius was not *expressly* commanded; but the praefect of Egypt understood, that it was safer for him to exceed, than to neglect, the orders of an irritated master. The archbishop prudently retired to the monasteries of the Desert.

And here is La Bléterie:

> Non content de bannir Athanase, l'empereur donna des ordres peut-être secrets de lui ôter la vie; ou du moins Ecdicius, pour faire sa cour à Julien qu'il voïoit mécontent de sa négligence, prit de soi même la résolution de délivrer pour jamais le paganisme d'un si redoutable ennemi. Quoiq'il en soit Athanase remontoit le Nil pour se retirer dans la Thébaïde.

In substance, language, and sequence, Gibbon comes very close to La Bléterie, whose interpretation he found both congenial and useful for his purposes, but it is an interpretation that he had lived with and absorbed for decades.

The last three volumes of the *Decline and Fall*, published in 1788, occupy Womersley less than the earlier ones, although he has an illuminating chapter on Gibbon's Muhammed. He skilfully explores the eighteenth century use of the founder of Islam as a code for non-Trinitarian heresies, and argues that Gibbon's account must be read with that in mind. Johnson's famous insinuation that Gibbon might once have been a Muhammedan is plausibly interpreted as an allusion to his theological eccentricities rather than to his youthful interest in Arabic studies, although his personal interest in that area of scholarship undoubtedly encouraged and enriched his presentation of it. With the volumes of 1788 Womersley and his reader have already reached the point at which Gibbon undeniably enjoyed a huge reputation, and he had began to contemplate the writing of an autobiography to secure it for posterity.

Gibbon embarked on the first of the six unfinished drafts of his *Memoirs* precisely in 1788, but this was not his first attempt to describe his life. In 1783 he composed in French and in the third person a brief autobiographical sketch, mentioned by Sheffield in the *Miscellaneous Works* and preserved in the British Museum. It is odd that with his scrupulous and impeccable attention to the *Memoirs* Womersley has nothing to say at all about the French autobiography. The piece is clearly dated by a reference at the end to the recent publication of the 1783 octavo edition of the history, and Gibbon states that he is at work on a continuation down to the capture of Constantinople by the Turks. This document mentions both Oxford and Lausanne, but without any allusion to the religious conversion that led to Gibbon's translation to Switzerland. His fondness for the French language and for Parisian society is eloquently expressed, no doubt honestly but with an eye to Francophone readers. He does, however, mention with satisfaction the strong criticism of the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters and asserts that he was reduced 'à la tache facile mais

humiliante de confondre le calomniateur'. Replying to Davis was by no means an easy task. Even in so slight an autobiographical essay as this Gibbon has made his observations with an eye to his reputation. He was clearly not ready yet to address his adolescent embrace of Catholicism, but he could proclaim unhesitatingly that the society of Paris was 'la plus douce et la plus éclairée de la terre'.

Similar expressions of Francophilia occur elsewhere in Gibbon's manuscripts, but the events of 1789 were to change all that and to make the representation of his life a far more complex task than he imagined it to be in 1783. The death of Deyverdun, Gibbon's friend of more than thirty years, on 4 July 1789 was followed by the storming of the Bastille on the 14th. Gibbon's world was shattered almost overnight. The loss of his friend had been anticipated, but the revolution in France forced Gibbon to reassess not only his espousal of French culture but his own political orientation. In the years down to his own death in 1794 the revolution drove him to an increasingly conservative outlook, in which he came to defend traditional institutions and manners in a way that would have been unthinkable earlier. In drafts C, D, and E he even reproached himself for his contemptuous treatment of Bishop Warburton long ago in his 1770 essay on Book VI of the *Aeneid*.

Through a systematic analysis of successive drafts of the *Memoirs* Womersley is able to track Gibbon's reassessment of two momentous episodes in his life, the death of his father and the experience he had at Magdalen College, Oxford. The first version of his father's death is cool, almost unfeeling: 'Few, perhaps, are the children, who, after the expiration of some months or years, would sincerely rejoyce in the resurrection of their parents' (draft C). But finally in the third version we find: 'My grief was sincere for the loss of an affectionate parent, an agreeable companion, and a worthy man' (draft E). Similarly Gibbon's withering account of Oxford dons and his own conversion to papism is metamorphosed, in draft F, into a long and generally respectful account of a place full of eccentrics but nonetheless full of ancient wisdom and tradition, where (of all things) the writings of Conyers Middleton impelled the young Gibbon to convert. Here Gibbon openly admits to an influence

that had long been surmised, but he attaches it not to the notorious chapters in the history but to his own short-lived conversion.

In a compelling analysis, based on detailed review of the manuscript narratives, Womersley considers Gibbon's disenchantment with the French Revolution in the light of his sympathy with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which appeared in November 1790. Gibbon came to regret the old era that was now gravely threatened and to fear that in some way the world might hold him responsible for inciting the revolutionaries through opinions he had expressed in his history. He now felt the need to assert the primacy of family, old institutions, and traditional government. The Oxford University Press deserves high praise for allowing Womersley to print relevant parallel passages from the drafts of the *Memoirs* in columns, so that the reader can easily confirm the legitimacy of his conclusions. The penultimate draft (E), in annalistic form and dated to March 1791, constitutes a direct reaction to Burke, as we can see from a note that Sheffield purposefully elevated to the main text in his edition: 'I beg leave to subscribe my assent to Mr. Burke's creed on the Revolution of France. I admire his eloquence, I approve his politics, I adore his Chivalry, and I can almost excuse his reverence for church establishments'. Significantly these words nearly duplicate what Gibbon had written to Sheffield in a letter dated 5 February 1791.

To the rapidly changing political scene in France and Burke's *Reflections* it might be reasonable to add the publication of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* in 1791 as another incentive for Gibbon's efforts to alter his own autobiography. The fullness of the final draft (F) on Gibbon's early years looks like an attempt to achieve Boswellian amplitude. Gibbon's desire in January 1793 to propose, through Sheffield as intermediary, a new biographical project consisting of lives of major British political, military, and ecclesiastical personalities would be hard to explain without the impact of Boswell's biography and renewed attention to Johnson's own biographies. The letter to Sheffield incorporating this curious proposal notes that work on the *Memoirs* 'must be postponed till a mature season' and

that Gibbon will probably not live to see them in print. Womersley is the first to observe that the character of the drafts changes according to Gibbon's expectation of posthumous or non-posthumous publication. Draft E, with its tribute to Burke, belongs to the latter category, but draft F, which was to be deferred for the biographies, clearly belongs to the former. Womersley's work on the drafts of the *Memoirs* makes even more obvious the terrible inadequacies of the Bonnard edition and the inanity of trying to create a composite text. The situation has recently become more complicated through the emergence of a new fragment of the *Memoirs* that seems independent of any of the six drafts known hitherto. It was unknown to Womersley. In an exhibition of Gibboniana at the Chapin Library of Williams College in Massachusetts there was a small sheet in Gibbon's late handwriting, lent by George Edwards from his personal collection. It is reproduced as the frontispiece to the catalogue of the exhibition (Grolier Club, 2000), and the brief text runs as follows, with cancel lines through the letters given here in square brackets:

> the emperors of Germany, and Kings of Spain have threatened the liberty of the old, and invaded the treasures of the new, World. The successors of Charles the fifth [h] may disdain their humble kinsmen of England: but the small volumes of Tom Jones, that exquisite picture of human life, will survive the palace of the Escurial [of the ho] and the Imperial eagle of the house of Austria.

This famous passage is known from an isolated sheet among the manuscripts of the *Memoirs*. It has been conventionally associated with the discussion of genealogy near the beginning of draft A, since the two manuscripts show close affinities in their account of the descendants of Confucius. The text of the sheet that is already known is:

> the Emperors of Germany and Kings of Spain, have threatened the liberty of the old and invaded the treasures of the new World. The successors of Charles the fifth may disdain their humble brethren of England, but the Romance of

> Tom Jones, that exquisite picture of human manners, will outlive the palace of the Escurial and the Imperial Eagle of the house of Austria.

Apart from differences in punctuation and capitalisation, the Edwards fragment shows three significant variants from the received text. It has 'kinsmen' instead of 'brethren', 'small volumes' instead of 'Romance', and 'life' instead of 'manners'. The second cancellation proves that Gibbon was copying a pre-existing text, and he was presumably making changes as he went along. The most striking of the variants is the reference to *Tom Jones* in terms of small volumes. This can only allude to the original duodecimo edition of the work in 1749. Gibbon's admiration of Fielding's novel is well known, but when he refers to it elsewhere he calls it a romance. The new scrap, therefore, would appear to postdate the known independent sheet, whenever that was written (perhaps in 1789). The more plain and vigorous language of 'kinsmen' and 'life' in place of 'brethren' and 'manners' would also suggest a later redaction. How the scrap escaped the Sheffield papers in the British Museum is as hard to guess as why Gibbon was impelled to think of the size of the original volumes of Fielding's novel. His own library contained the octavo edition. But this new fragment suggests that Gibbon's drafts of the *Memoirs* were more messy than the majestic parade of six drafts to which we have become accustomed.

The final part of Womersley's book is devoted to a searching examination of Sheffield's ruthless alteration of the drafts of the *Memoirs* as he had received them. It is clear that the objective was to create an image of Gibbon that would be acceptable in the changed world of 1796, to minimise his Francophilia, to soften his anticlericalism, and even to make Gibbon say things he did not say. Womersley is absolutely correct in saying that Sheffield's editing of the drafts of the *Memoirs* is nothing less than scandalous. The point can be well illustrated by one of Womersley's most startling examples, an alteration that was carelessly omitted altogether in Bonnard's edition. In commenting on the much-discussed passage in the *Decline and Fall* about the darkness of the Passion, which no pagan in the

ancient world appeared to have noticed, Gibbon had written in draft C, 'In an ample dissertation on the miraculous darkness of the passion, I privately drew my conclusions from the silence of an unbelieving age'. Sheffield printed these lines in his edition but replaced the verb 'drew' with 'withdrew', thereby utterly subverting Gibbon's meaning and effectively making him repent of what he had said in his history. The mutilation and manipulation of Gibbon's words extended even to such harmless expressions of Francophilia as 'I tore myself from the embraces of Paris' (draft C). Sheffield printed, 'I reluctantly left Paris'.

Readers of Gibbon are now even more in debt to David Womersley than before. *Gibbon and the 'Watchmen of the Holy City'* is an exemplary work of scholarship.

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton G. W. BOWERSOCK

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SURVIVAL

Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-Century Literature. By ROBERT DOUGLAS-FAIRHURST. Oxford University Press, 2002; £45.

This is an intriguing study – ambitious in its scope and sceptical in its approach – of the topic of 'influence' in nineteenth century culture and literature. As the author declares in the introduction, the applications of the term 'influence' are many: 'the impact of climate, locale, historical events, literary movements and conventions, social and cultural traditions, and individual writers or works'. Moreover, 'its forms include borrowings, forgeries, debts, and literary aftermaths, side-effects, and residues of many other kinds'. This claim gives a fair idea of the wide-ranging discussion which follows, though inevitably some of the elements enumerated are given more detailed treatment than others. There is, for example, no separate section on 'side-effects' and 'residues', and there is very little about forgeries.