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# THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

## A Plague of (Alleged) Plagiarists

*A Survey of Recent Articles*

The list of writers and scholars put in the dock of public opinion for alleged plagiarism has grown rapidly in recent years. Historian Stephen B. Oates, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., *Roots* author Alex Haley, writer Joe McGinniss, novelist and translator D. M. Thomas, and novelist David Leavitt are just some of the accused. Yet even as the plagiarism caseload has increased, the precise nature of the crime itself has become less clear.

"Most of us in the academic world were brought up to believe that originality was the supreme virtue," Morris Freedman, an emeritus professor of English at the University of Maryland, recalls in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Summer 1994). "We looked on plagiarism as the primal sin, as little short of a fall from grace. Proof of [it] used to end professorial careers and warrant the immediate failure of students in courses and, on occasion, their expulsion from an institution." But increasingly today, he says, "we equivocate about plagiarism on campuses and in the world at large."

Such equivocation became especially evident in the wake of the 1990 revelation that the late Martin Luther King, Jr., in writing his doctoral dissertation at Boston University during the early 1950s, had relied extensively, and largely without acknowledgment, on an earlier dissertation by someone else. "Nothing can be gained by attempting to minimize or understate either the amount of King's plagiarism or the seriousness of the academic wrongdoing that it represented," King biographer David J. Garrow cautioned in the *Journal of American History* (June 1991). Yet just such attempts have been made.

Keith D. Miller, an English professor at Arizona State University, argues in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 20, 1993) that King then and throughout his career was drawing upon an oral tradition in which sources habitually went

unacknowledged. (King's famous "Let freedom ring!" conclusion to his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech was lifted from an address given by Archibald Carey, a black pastor, to the 1952 Republican national convention.) In Miller's view, the definition of plagiarism, even in an academic context, needs to be rethought. "While we must teach students to avoid plagiarism, we also need to appreciate the difficulties that some may have in negotiating the boundaries between oral and print traditions," he declares.

While such arguments may seem like (or even be) transparent exercises in politically correct rationalization, defining what constitutes plagiarism is often not a simple matter. Marcel C. LaFollette, of George Washington University's Center for International Science & Technology Policy, points out in the *Journal of Information Ethics* (Fall 1994)—the second of two special issues devoted to the subject—that "use" does not necessarily equal, or imply, plagiarism. She writes: "Within soci-

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT	129
FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE	132
ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS	134
SOCIETY	136
PRESS & MEDIA	140
RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY	142
SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT	144
ARTS & LETTERS	147
OTHERNATIONS	150

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eties and professional communities that condemn 'plagiarism' or 'theft of ideas,' most single out the *deceptive* aspect of the act, not the use of another's insights or ideas per se. In intellectual and academic life, utilization of ideas and insights (whether expressed through word choice, research approach, or interpretation) is central to progress."

In the world of literature and art, things are somewhat different. Some self-described postmodernist artists are challenging the very idea of originality. Sherrie Levine has "earned herself a place in the pantheon of American artists," David Galef of the University of Mississippi writes in the same *Journal of Information Ethics*, by copying the works of well-known artists and peddling them with ironic titles that reveal their provenance. Her lofty intentions are supposed to remove any taint from her works; they are acts of "appropriation" that make a political statement. Galef, however, likens them to political kidnappings.

Even in cases of outright theft, there is no guarantee that the thief will be arrested and punished, or even seriously condemned. Writing in the *American Scholar* (Autumn 1994), Neal Bowers, a poet and professor of English at Iowa State University, tells how his poetry also has appeared in publications under a plagiarist's pseudonym. "My plagiarist has stolen from other poets as well, among them Mark Strand, Sharon Olds, Marcia Hurlow, and probably from still others as yet unidentified; but, for reasons unknown to me, he has specialized in the theft and publication of my work, specifically of two of my poems that he took from *Poetry* magazine. To date, I know of 18 different literary journals that have published or accepted his plagiarized versions of my two poems." Lawyers whom Bowers consulted seemed to think the thievery did not matter since poetry is so unremunerative, while his friends and associates generally sympathized less with him than with the still-active thief. ("One said the plagiarist had actually improved my poem by altering the line breaks at the end, as if plagiarism were just another form of editing or 'workshopping,'" Bower says.)

Where theft and attempted deception are not

obvious, difficult questions remain: what may properly be used without attribution? If use is to be acknowledged, *how* should it be acknowledged?

Take the case—as the *Journal of Information Ethics* (Spring 1994) does in detail—of Stephen B. Oates, a historian at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and author of *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1977). In 1990, he was accused by literary critic Robert Bray of Illinois Wesleyan University of having plagiarized Benjamin P. Thomas's *Abraham Lincoln, A Biography* (1952). "I have determined," Bray writes in the *Journal*, "that Oates, for whatever reason, has freely used Thomas's information, his language, and even his narrative structure at many points . . . without crediting Thomas's work."

Nonsense, responds Oates in the same issue: "Bray has not proven a single instance of plagiarism because there is no instance of it in my book. Plagiarism means, and has meant, the verbatim lifting of whole sentences, paragraphs, and pages from another author's work and presenting them as one's own creation." Oates contends that Bray edited passages from the two books "to create the *appearance* of plagiarism," and misdefined plagiarism.

There exists, Oates points out, "a common body of knowledge about Lincoln, particularly his well-known early years, that has accumulated for more than a century and is in the public domain." Both his book and Thomas's draw on that body of knowledge, and hence there are similarities between the two works. There are also similarities, Oates points out, between Thomas's work (which was not footnoted) and earlier Lincoln biographies and studies. "Contrary to what Bray claims, I did attribute my debt to Benjamin Thomas. In my references to Lincoln's early years, I acknowledge him *seven times* for facts or quotations," he says.

Twenty-three prominent Lincoln and Civil War scholars came to Oates's defense, saying the charges against him were "totally unfounded." In 1992, the American Historical Association found that he had not committed plagiarism but detected "an insufficiency of acknowledgment of one particular source"—an exoneration almost as ambiguous as the contemporary understanding of plagiarism itself.