



School of Law

GRAY LADY BOWDLER: THE CONTINUING SAGA OF THE CRIMSON SPOT

**Ross E. Davies,
George Mason University School of Law**

***Green Bag Almanac and Reader 2012,
Forthcoming***

**George Mason University Law and Economics
Research Paper Series**

11-08

This paper can be downloaded without charge from the Social Science
Research Network at http://ssrn.com/abstract_id=1758989

GRAY LADY BOWDLER

THE CONTINUING SAGA OF THE CRIMSON SPOT

Ross E. Davies[†]

This is a short, true story about the *Green Bag* versus the *New York Times*, two periodicals doing their best according to their respective lights to serve their respective readerships. The story is told for the most part through recent email correspondence between, on one side, a variety of *Times* editors and, on the other side, one *Green Bag* editor. Reasonable minds might differ about the relative merits of the positions taken and the practices followed by the two periodicals and their spokespeople, but no reasonable person could deny the entertainment value of some of their exchanges.

Those exchanges are reproduced in chronological order, starting on the next page. But first, a small dose of background . . .

In January 2009, an overlong, overwrought, and exceedingly dull article about a famous bowdlerism — the changing of Lady Macbeth’s cry of “out, damned spot!” to “out, crimson spot!” in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* — appeared in the *Green Bag Almanac and Reader*. The article showed that contrary to conventional wisdom, the “out, crimson spot” mutilation of *Macbeth* was not perpetrated by Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825). (Bowdler, the creator of the hugely successful *The Family Shakespeare*, a 10-volume collection of cleaned-up versions of Shakespeare’s works, gave his name to the editorial practice of removing or replacing objectionable words in others’ literary works.) In his day, Bowdler had indeed done a lot of prudish tinkering with Shakespeare, but he had left the “damned spot” just as it was. Someone else was responsible for adding “out, crimson spot” to the long list of puritan alterations of Shakespeare. The *Green Bag* article nominated the brothers Thomas (of *Bulfinch’s Mythology* fame) and Stephen Bulfinch, who did in fact replace “out, damned spot!” with “out, crimson spot” in their own 1865 bowdlerization of Shakespeare’s works, titled *Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes, and for the Family Circle*. The *Green Bag* article also suggested that the *New York Times* had played a part in the creation and propagation of the myth of Bowdler’s responsibility for “out, crimson spot!” because two of its respected writers, Thomas Lask (implicitly) and William Safire (explicitly) had attributed it to him.¹

Very nearly no one noticed the *Green Bag*’s obscure little article, perhaps because the subject was so profoundly unimportant, and perhaps because it was written by a nonentity and published by a small-time press.

Then, in January 2011, the *Times* published an article (written by yet another of the newspaper’s respected writers, Michiko Kakutani) critiquing a new bowdlerized edition of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*.² In the

[†] Professor of law, George Mason University; editor-in-chief, the *Green Bag*. Thanks to Robert A. James for connecting the dots.

¹ Ross E. Davies, *How Not to Bowdlerize*, 2009 *Green Bag Alm.* 234.

² Michiko Kakutani, *Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 7, 2011, at C1 & 5.

GREEN BAG ALMANAC & READER 2012

course of her critique, Kakutani complained about the decline of literary integrity among both editors and readers:

Authors' original texts should be sacrosanct intellectual property, whether a book is a classic or not. Tampering with a writer's words underscores both editors' extraordinary hubris and a cavalier attitude embraced by more and more people in this day of mash-ups, sampling and digital books — the attitude that all texts are fungible, that readers are entitled to alter as they please, that the very idea of authorship is old-fashioned.

Then, lo and behold, Kakutani rolled out the old, erroneous attribution of "out, crimson spot!" to Bowdler:

Although it's hard to imagine a theater company today using one of Bowdler's Shakespeare adaptations — say, changing "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" in "Macbeth" to "out, crimson spot!" — the language police are staging a comeback.

This was too much, even for the mild-mannered *Green Bag*. It might have been one thing for the *Times* to mildly and innocently perpetuate its incorrect past reporting on Bowdler.³ But it was entirely another for a *Times* writer to slam others' alleged "hubris and cavalier attitude" toward original texts while engaging in that very behavior herself. If Kakutani had bothered to read Bowdler's book before purporting to quote from it, she would have known better.

And so the correspondence began. (I have removed email headings and signature blocks, except where leaving them in might help with the narrative flow. I have redacted the names of *Times* editors, because it seemed like the polite thing to do.)

From: rdavies@gmu.edu

Subject: Letter about Michiko Kakutani's misattribution of a famous bowdlerism to Thomas Bowdler

Date: January 8, 2011 6:53:26 PM EST

To: letters@nytimes.com

Cc: rdavies@greenbag.org

January 8, 2011

Letters to the Editor
The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10018

To the Editors:

In "Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You" (Jan. 6), Michiko Kakutani attributes to Thomas Bowdler that most famous of bowdlerisms — the changing of "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" in "Macbeth" to "out, crimson spot!" Kakutani is, like several other distinguished critics before

³ We all make mistakes, and life would be miserable if it were spent skewering others and being skewered ourselves over every little transgression.

DAVIES, GRAY LADY BOWDLER

her (including the NYT's Thomas Lask and William Safire), wrong. It was Thomas Bullfinch (of "Mythology" fame) and his brother Stephen who un-damned Lady Macbeth's spot in their "Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes, and for the Family Circle" (1865). Kakutani's error — an innocent one, surely — is a reminder that high horses are dangerous places for even the most knowledgeable and careful of critics who feel that "[t]ampering with a writer's words underscores both editors' extraordinary hubris and a cavalier attitude embraced by more and more people in this day of mash-ups, sampling and digital books"

Very truly yours,
Ross Davies
rdavies@greenbag.org

p.s. For a larger serving of information about the misattribution of "out, crimson spot" to Thomas Bowdler, see Ross E. Davies, "How Not to Bowdlerize," 2009 Green Bag Almanac 234, available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1333764.

Date: January 8, 2011 7:40:59 PM EST

Correction: I misspelled Thomas and Stephen's last name. It is "Bulfinch" with one "l". I need a good editor. Ross

Subject: Unanswered letter to the editor that might qualify as a correction: "Letter about Michiko Kakutani's misattribution of a famous bowdlerism to Thomas Bowdler"

Date: February 1, 2011 5:44:49 PM EST

To: nytnews@nytimes.com, public@nytimes.com

Cc: letters@nytimes.com, rdavies@greenbag.org

To Whom It May Concern

I am writing to you for two reasons:

First, because on January 8 I sent the email below (also attached in pdf) to your Letters editor, and I have not received a response. I am dissatisfied with the non-response, and so I am sending this message to the Public editor (public@nytimes.com).

Second, because I recently read about the experience of Andrew Pincus (see Eugene Volokh, "New York Times Letter to the Editor Policy: You Can't Say That the Times Is Wrong?" at volokh.com). My letter attempts to correct a recent (and recurring) error by the Times. And so I am sending this message to the Corrections editor (nytnews@nytimes.com).

I am also re-sending this message to the Letters editor, on the off chance that my earlier message fell through a crack.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,
Ross E. Davies

GREEN BAG ALMANAC & READER 2012

Date: February 1, 2011 5:51:47 PM EST

THANK YOU for writing The New York Times. We are grateful to readers who take the time to help us report thoroughly and accurately. Your message will reach the appropriate editor or reporter promptly.

What happens now that your message has been received, or if you have more questions?

ACCURACY: If you have pointed out an error, a correction will appear on Page A2 as soon as possible. Corrections for articles in weekly sections usually appear in those sections.

Because dozens of readers often point out the same error, we cannot notify each person that we are publishing a correction. Please accept our thanks now.

If we decide that a correction is not necessary, an editor or a reporter will be in touch to explain our reasons.

NEWS COVERAGE: If you are writing to give us feedback on our coverage, your message will be forwarded to the appropriate department. Because of the volume of e-mail we receive, we cannot respond to every comment. But we pay respectful attention to all messages, even those that are part of organized letter-writing campaigns, for which we are not staffed to reply individually.

EDITORIALS: News and opinion departments operate separately at The Times. If you have written to comment on an editorial or an Op-Ed article and want your comments considered for publication as a Letter to the Editor, please resend your message to letters@nytimes.com More information on submitting letters can be found at nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/help/lettertoeditor.html

Send Op-ed submissions to oped@nytimes.com

More information can be found at nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/help/opedsubmit.html.

NEWSPAPER DELIVERY: Questions about the availability or delivery of The Times may be telephoned to 1-800-698-4637, e-mailed to 1-800@nytimes.com or posted at homedelivery.nytimes.com

NYTIMES.COM: For technical problems, write: help@nytimes.com

RESEARCH: We are not staffed to do research for the public. But our online archives, dating to 1851, can be accessed by going to nytimes.com and using the search function.

REPRINTS OF ARTICLES: write to rights@nytimes.com

TO BUY PICTURES: write to photosales@nytimes.com

BACK COPIES: 800-543-5380.

CUSTOMER SERVICE DIRECTORY: Many questions about The Times are answered at nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/help/infoservdirectory.html

Date: February 1, 2011 6:09:34 PM EST

Dear Professor Davies:

I do not have a record of having received this query. That does not mean it was not sent — just that it may not have made it through the spam filters. But it has now reached the correct department — ny-

DAVIES, GRAY LADY BOWDLER

tnews@nytimes.com. I will talk to the Culture editors about this the first thing on Wednesday morning.

Best regards,
[name redacted]
Senior Editor/Standards

Date: February 1, 2011 6:22:08 PM EST

Dear [name redacted],

Thank you very much for the speedy reply. I can be clumsy with email, which means there is a good chance that it was I who dropped the earlier message into an electronic crack. In any event, the inaccuracy about which I complain is not contributing to global warming or undermining peaceful relations between peoples and nations, so if you don't manage to talk to the Culture editors about it until lunchtime tomorrow — or lunchtime a week from now for that matter — no harm will be done and my feelings will not be hurt, and neither will Mr. Bowdler's.

Best regards,
Ross

On Feb 2, 2011, at 4:58 PM, [name redacted] wrote:

Dear Professor Davies,

My name is [name redacted], and I'm one of the editors in the Culture Dept. of The New York Times. I'm filling in as the desk's corrections editor for a few days. Thank you for your efforts to reach us about the Books of The Times review concern. Please know that we are investigating this matter and that I'll be back in touch as soon as possible with more information. Thanks for your continued patience.

[name redacted]
Culture backfield
The New York Times

Date: February 2, 2011 5:33:26 PM EST

Thanks very much for update. Happily waiting. Ross

Date: February 7, 2011 10:21:28 AM EST

Dear Professor Davies,

Thank you again for your patience while we researched the concern you raised about our recent — and previous — references to Thomas Bowdler and Shakespeare. What has made this effort difficult is that your writings were the only ones I could find on this matter to suggest something other than what we and others have written over the years.

GREEN BAG ALMANAC & READER 2012

Below, I've attached some of the sources that have informed our reporting and writing. It would appear that you are fighting an uphill battle. That said, if you can supply further evidence from external sources that suggest we have made a fact error, we would be happy to consider it.

Again, thanks for your feedback and your readership.

Resources on the subject:

1. <http://www.departments.oxy.edu/library/geninfo/collections/special/bannedbooks/censoredworks.htm>

2. At least two references to Thomas Bowdler's editing of Shakespeare by William Safire in his On Language column — one in June 1998, the other in July 1980.

3. This reference from The American Spectator from July 2009:

Thomas Bowdler was an English physician whose desire to publish an edition of Shakespeare amenable to 19th-century sensibilities led him to sanitize many of the Bard's juiciest passages. The result was predictably risible. One of his most hilarious revisions was to change Lady Macbeth's *cri de coeur*, "Out, damned spot," to "Out, crimson spot!" As absurd as it was, this project did preserve the good doctor's name for posterity in the verb "bowdlerize."

4. This is the entry from Wikipedia. Although many have raised concerns about the quality of the writing and editing for this public reference service, this is the first thing any Web searcher will find when typing Thomas Bowdler's name into a search engine: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Bowdler. Furthermore, the very word "expurgation" refers to Bowdler: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expurgation>.

5. Similarly, Britannica online offers similar information: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/76108/Thomas-Bowdler>

[name redacted]

Culture backfield | The New York Times

Date: February 7, 2011 11:09:48 AM EST

Dear [name redacted]

I must confess that I am confused by your statement that I am alone on this. Permit me to suggest two approaches:

1. First, you really ought to look at the book that Ms. Kakutani purports to be quoting from. Like good journalists, she and now you should consult primary sources, not rely exclusively [on] secondary sources. (In fact, I must confess that I am surprised that you have not done so already. It was my surprise that Mr. Safire had uncharacteristically failed to do so that inspired me to write my obscure little essay in the first place.) In this case, the primary source is Bowdler's book — his edition of Shakespeare — because that is the book that the Times purports to be quoting. The book exists. Look at it. It does not include the "Out, crimson spot" line. I am sure you do not need my help to find the book, but if I am wrong about that, please do say so and I will lend a hand. And of course if upon reading the book you discover that I have misread Bowdler, I would be grateful to learn about that as well.

DAVIES, GRAY LADY BOWDLER

2. If you are going to look at secondary sources, you should at least include on your list the book relied upon by your own writer — Ms. Kakutani. In her article, Ms. Kakutani writes:

According to Noel Perrin's 1969 book, "Dr. Bowdler's Legacy: A History of Expurgated Books in England and America," Victorians explained their distaste for the colorful, earthy works of 18th-century writers like Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding by invoking the principle of "moral progress" and their own ethical superiority: "People in the 18th century, and earlier, didn't take offense at coarse passages, because they were coarse themselves."

What Ms. Kakutani apparently failed to do was read another passage in that same book:

Compared to the weeding done by Thomas Bulfinch of Boston, [a contemporary's bowdlerizing] may actually be a trifle lax. Bulfinch, son of the great architect and himself the well-known author of *Bulfinch's Mythology*, published *Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes and the Family Circle* in 1865. In it he carried delicacy so far as to deny *Lady Macbeth* what is the most famous and least mutilated blasphemy in *Shakespeare*. In his version she looks at her hand and says, "Out, crimson spot." I have found no other case of this.

If the Perrin book was authoritative enough for editors at the *Times* to permit its inclusion in Ms. Kakutani's article, then surely it is authoritative enough for you to look at it yourself on this matter.

Please let me know if you need more help on this.

Sincerely,
Ross Davies

Date: February 7, 2011 11:13:00 AM EST

Thanks for your reply. We'll confirm what you've sent and publish a correction on Page 2.

[name redacted]

Date: February 7, 2011 11:22:16 AM EST

Thanks [name redacted]. The attached link, which is to a pdf of volume 4 of the 1825 edition of *Bowdler's Shakespeare* (Bowdler lived from 1754 to 1825), might help. Look at page 234: http://dl.dropbox.com/u/18150912/The_Family_Shakespeare%20-%20v.4%20-%204th%20ed%201825.pdf

Ross

Date: February 7, 2011 11:23:00 AM EST

thx.

GREEN BAG ALMANAC & READER 2012

Date: February 7, 2011 11:24:03 AM EST

Having been such a pain in the neck, it's the least I can do!

Date: February 7, 2011 11:14:26 AM EST [this message is placed out of chronological order because it is one of a flurry of messages that were exchanged within a few minutes of each other, and in the flow of those messages this is where it actually belongs, even if the timestamp might suggest otherwise]

For the record, I believe I described your situation as an uphill battle — not a solitary quest.

[name redacted]

Sent: Monday, February 07, 2011 11:30 AM

Yes, exactly. And I recognize — and appreciate — the difference between battling uphill and banging my head on a stone wall.

Date: February 7, 2011 11:31:07 AM EST

I'll send you a draft of our correction once I've reviewed the material. Thanks again for your patience.

[name redacted]

Date: February 7, 2011 6:02:12 PM EST

Hi Ross,

I enlisted the help of our research department. We have confirmed what you've said all along: it wasn't Bowdler. We can't say with 100 percent certainty, however, that Bulfinch was first. The best I can offer is that we can attribute the research to scholars. As you know, some editing and published works have been lost to history.

All that said, what do you think of language along these lines?

A critic's notebook on Jan. 7 about a new effort to sanitize the language of "Huckleberry Finn" misattributed another example of such work — the editing of "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" to "out, crimson spot!" Some scholars cite Thomas Bulfinch as the source of that change in an adaptation published in 1865; it was not Thomas Bowdler, the English doctor whose name produced the verb bowdlerize.

DAVIES, GRAY LADY BOWDLER

Date: February 7, 2011 7:46:13 PM EST

Hi [name redacted]

Glad to hear it. With respect, this is a little bit confusing. Permit me to suggest the following, which is clearer about the key point — that Bowdler didn't do what Ms. Kakutani says he did (I must confess to wonderment that you do not correct the identical errors by previous and prominent Times writers):

A critic's notebook on Jan. 7 about an effort to sanitize some language in "Huckleberry Finn" incorrectly attributed another example of such work — the editing of "out, damned spot!" in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" to "out, crimson spot!" — to Thomas Bowdler, the English doctor whose name produced the verb bowdlerize. Bowdler is not the source, but it is not clear who is — some scholars say Americans Thomas and Stephen Bulfinch, authors of an 1865 adaptation.

Sincerely,

Ross

Date: February 7, 2011 8:07:34 PM EST

Thanks again. We have some strange rules for formatting our corrections. But I like your better use of the adaptation and authors.

With regard to the 1969 article, that was ambiguously worded. The same explicit error wasn't made. I'll reread it and Safire again in the morning. Thanks.

[name redacted]

Sent from my iPhone — please excuse typos.

Date: February 7, 2011 8:17:43 PM EST

Thanks [name redacted].

Date: February 8, 2011 9:59:44 AM EST

Once again, thanks for your tremendous patience and guidance on this.

Here's where I've settled on the language, based on our format for corrections. This is subject to change by another editor or two down the line

...

A critic's notebook on Jan. 7 about a new effort to sanitize the language of "Huckleberry Finn" misattributed another example of such work — the editing of "Out, damned spot!" in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" to "out, crimson spot!" Some scholars cite an 1865 adaptation by Thomas Bulfinch and the Rev. S.G. Bulfinch as a source of that change; it was not Thomas Bowdler, the English doctor whose name produced the verb bowdlerize.

Date: February 8, 2011 10:53:02 AM EST

Dear [name redacted]

Thanks for the follow-up. Perhaps we should start with basics: Will a reader of your current version know to whom “out, crimson spot” was incorrectly attributed? Will they know what Ms. Kakutani wrote that was just plain wrong? Why obscure those basic facts? I see two explanations for the obscurantism:

1. There might be something in your “strange rules” that bars you from making an accurate statement. But isn’t that a reason to change the rules? (And I would love to see the rules. Indeed, why not post the rules on the Times website. Secret rules that obscure the truth seem like the kinds of things the Times would fight, not foster.)

2. It might be that the phrasing you use is likely to leave the reader with the impression that speculative scholars are responsible for confusion based on the Bulfinch possibility, while careful, responsible journalists at the Times are standing firm in defense of the fact that Bowdler is not to blame. That impression is, obviously, very far from the truth. It strikes me as very unlikely that anyone reading your statement would realize that Ms. Kakutani (and, at least, William Safire) falsely blamed Bowdler for “out, crimson spot.” And so your statement strikes me as dishonest (although surely not intentionally so).

Why not say something straightforward: “The Times has repeatedly (in columns written by William Safire years ago and Michiko Kakutani days ago) blamed Thomas Bowdler for something he did not do.” And then go from there to provide more information, if you see fit.

Sincerely,

Ross

That is the end of the correspondence. On February 9, the *Times* posted the following at the bottom of Kakutani’s article:

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 9, 2011

A critic’s notebook on Jan. 7 about a new effort to sanitize the language of “Huckleberry Finn” misattributed another example of such efforts — the editing of “Out, damned spot!” in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” to “out, crimson spot!” Some scholars cite an 1865 adaptation by Thomas Bulfinch and the Rev. S. G. Bulfinch as a source of that change; it was not Thomas Bowdler, the English doctor whose name produced the verb “bowdlerize.”

And the revision was:

Although it’s hard to imagine a theater company today using one of Shakespeare [sic] adaptations — say, changing “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” in “Macbeth” to “out, crimson spot!” — the language police are staging a comeback.