



## **Censorship and the New Bowdlerization of Literature**

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There is nothing new about changing the text of well-known books. It is usually associated with the Victorians but the first edition of the Family Shakespeare, edited by members of the family from which we get our word "bowdlerize", was published in 1807. The practice declined during the twentieth century, only to re-appear with a new focus; not sex, or rather what one writer called "the inconvenient circumstance that human beings have bodies and bodily urges", but race, or rather physical and cultural differences between one human being and another and how those differences are described.

Just like last time around, there is now a thriving branch of publishing dealing in the mutilation of books and the sale of distorted versions. Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, the sellers do not claim to be protecting anyone's morals. They have gone back to the century before and claim to be protecting their feelings. Then it was "sensibility", now it's "sensitivity" but it's the same thing and the same results are intended.

First, profits. Selling a new edition of a classic is like selling a new model of a car or a computer. The customer doesn't really need it, so you have to persuade them that the old one is no longer suitable.

Second, to protect the censors. All censors claim to be protecting someone else, never themselves. Parents and teachers do not want children to learn outdated terms for dark skin colour or disabilities because their elders will be embarrassed if they use them or ask what

they mean. It is really very unlikely that children will pick up a previously unknown term of abuse out of a book and use it outside the classroom.

We are in favour of all new editions of books intended for people under 13 and first published before 1970 being published as they were written, but with a disclaimer on the title page to the effect that: "This book was first published in [year]. The way the people in the book think and the words they use to say what they think are what people thought and said then. The writer was living in [year], not now." Expurgation is censorship, censorship is lying and lying to children is wrong.

Third, control. The bowdlerizers do not want uneducated people (children are uneducated by definition) to learn things about the past that they do not want them to know. They also have a mindset which treats everyone who lived in past centuries, including the twentieth, with contempt; as though it were not worth trying to understand them. If people who forget the past are condemned to repeat it, what is to be said of people who want to give the citizens of the future no past to learn?

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