

Are the ‘gatekeepers’ becoming censors? On editorial processes and the interests of the scholarly community.

Questions about the proper role of learned journals and of publishers are brought to the fore in a recent exchange over suggested edits to a book review. [William St Clair](#) shares his experience and the review in question and wonders whether some learned journals are becoming afraid to facilitate discussion of academic issues.



In 2015, I was invited by the *Modern Languages Review* (MLR) to review a volume of letters by William Godwin, the Enlightenment thinker of the eighteenth/nineteenth century. As author of *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, often regarded as a standard work in the field, I found nothing unusual in the request.

My piece was sent in to the editors and cleared in the usual way, with a couple of editorial tweaks, some months ago. However, when the piece was about to go to press, they suddenly asked for two final paragraphs of the review to be removed. These paragraphs, see below, comment, among other things, on the dire effects on public access of the inward-looking publishing model adopted – despite the fact that the costs have mostly been met by the general public as taxpayers. They also point out how the project is at odds with everything that Godwin himself stood for. When I offered to discuss possible changes, the request to review was peremptorily cancelled.

Here is an extract from my email exchanges with the MLR editorial staff concerning my review:

Extract from an email dated 5 April 2016 from a member of the MLR editorial staff (personal info removed to preserve anonymity).

‘Unfortunately, the central editorial team has objected to the conclusion of the review. In particular, they are concerned that the question about open access is one in which the MHRA [Modern Humanities Research Association – the scholarly society that the journal is associated with] is implicated as much as OUP [Oxford University Press – the journal’s publisher] – and while there is certainly a point to be made, it is felt that an MLR review is not the appropriate vehicle. Furthermore, there is concern that OUP (who of course will be sent a copy of the review) may object, perhaps even with legal repercussions. This does seem ironically symptomatic of the ‘unGodwinian’ practices you were addressing. However, I hope you can appreciate that the MHRA is not in a position to stick its neck out on this issue in this particular arena. To avoid further delay and keep your review in the current issue (which we certainly wish to), we are suggesting an edited version of the review (attached now) in which the conclusion has been substantially shortened.’

Extract from my reply dated 7 April.

‘As for the more general point, your suggestion that some of the main points of the review should be left out, I cannot see how anyone could regard the remarks in the version that you wish me to self-censor – as anything other than true – and indeed well known – and directly relevant to the nature of the book and the concerns of readers of the journal, as well as being especially pertinent because unGodwinian.’

It is hard for me to regard this episode, and the phrase ‘the MHRA is not in a position to stick its neck out’ as other than an attempt to close down discussion. And it comes from an organisation that claims ‘to encourage and promote advanced study and research in the field of the modern humanities’ and ‘to maintain the unity of humanistic scholarship.’ As it happens much of my career has been devoted to studying how books and periodicals historically performed, or in many epochs did not perform, their economic role of carrying ideas across distance and time. For more on this, ‘The Political Economy of Reading’ is an online Creative Commons summary of my large work *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (CUP 2004), and is [available here](#).

This is the first time I have encountered such a blatant request to self-censor. University of Leicester researchers experienced similar issues with Taylor and Francis for criticising the wide profit margins taken by some commercial publishers (which was reported by the [Times Higher Education](#)). Are cases like these on the rise? Have others had similar experiences? Without access there can be no impact.

MY UNPUBLISHED REVIEW

The Letters of William Godwin, Volume II: 1798-1805. Ed. PAMELA CLEMIT
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014 xlvii+423 pp. £100.00.

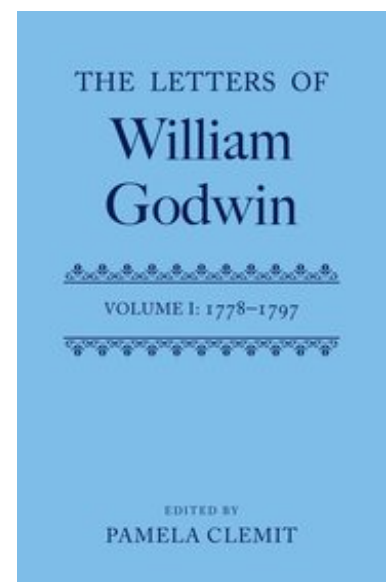
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William Godwin resists the usual conventions of literary history. His greatest contribution, many have judged, was as an Enlightenment thinker, carrying into the anglophone world the ideas of the *philosophes* of eighteenth century France and then developing them in new directions. Beginning at the time of the French Revolution, whose progress he had reported on in anonymous articles in the *New Annual Register*, Godwin produced a succession of ambitious works, beginning with *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793) that fearlessly questioned the foundations, and the usefulness to society, of traditional western institutions, including government, religion, property, and marriage.

Godwin continued to publish right through the so-called ‘romantic period’, drastically revising *Political Justice* twice, and writing new works. He was much influenced by emerging authors of that period, as well as by his own experience, until the eve of the Victorian age. Nor can he be easily classified by the genres he chose to write in. Philosopher is too limiting a description for an author who also turned his hand to plays, history, biography, memoirs, and books for children. For Godwin, the pen and the printing press were not so much the tools of a career author chasing success, as the best means he had of conversing with strangers, and potentially influencing them. Since some readerships, including women, were thought to prefer ideas when they were packaged as fiction, he wrote six three-decker novels.

The second volume of what is planned to be a set of six volumes of Godwin’s letters, edited by Pamela Clemit, of which the last will consist of letters to Godwin, is published in accordance with the long-established conventions of the monumentalising editions of Oxford University Press. All letters written by Godwin found in a diligent search are transcribed, arranged in chronological order, and fully annotated. Many are printed here for the first time, recovered from drafts and copies.

Clemit understands that the inherited conventions within which her edition is being produced, that derive from nineteenth century romantic ideas of author as solitary genius, are inappropriate to a figure such as Godwin whose whole literary corpus, indeed his whole life, was a continuous revision, socially produced, involving many others. She has therefore usefully included many quotations from the other side of the correspondences. We are also given drafts that show the stages of composition, with innumerable deletions, as Godwin conversed with himself before



deciding what words eventually to send.

Especially fascinating in the present volume is the correspondence with a series of women to whom Godwin proposed his own form of marriage. Not for him the language of romance or flattery, or even the implied condescension of too much courtesy. To Godwin the supreme virtue was sincerity, and he was alert to any whiff of what today would be called political correctness.

It is therefore paradoxical that, in scholarship, he now offers a rolling case study in the perils of presentism. Gone is the tut tutting of the Victorians at his disapproval of marriage, but a few years ago, the National Endowment for the Humanities was invited to regard Godwin's importance as one of 'England's first family of writers' as if they were celebrities (Abstract circulated 13 May 2011). In the present volume Clemmit has been tempted into suggesting that we regard Godwin as 'a risk-taking entrepreneur' making 'investments' (page xxxvii). Although some letters that deal with financial matters are included in the volume, the business records are not, nor apparently, except for mentions in Godwin's letters, is it planned to include them in future volumes (page xxxix). A fairer way would be to regard Godwin as the father of a household of five children (to only two of whom was he biologically related), whom he managed to bring up and educate by writing books and by running a children's bookshop that sold his own compositions and those of others who were devoted to the cause of advancing political justice.

There is no mention in the present volume of the fact that the whole [Godwin/Shelley archive](#) is due to be digitised and made available, as open access, over the next few years, although the letters of Godwin will be held back until the present edition is completed. Nor can I find any reference to possible plans for the print-only edition to be made available online, even to the few who belong to institutions that will enjoy access. Instead the publisher's page has menacing words forbidding copying, that include no reference to fair use or fair dealing. It is all very unGodwinian, unfair both to the author who warned against enclosure and privatisation of public commons, and to the excellent work of the editor.

The volume has been subsidised by taxpayers or by institutions that enjoy tax benefits at each stage, from the buying of the manuscripts, the paying for the editorial work, the tax status of OUP, through to the purchase of copies of the book by university libraries. The only parties who do not benefit are members of the taxpaying public who will have to travel to one of a handful of libraries, where, if they are allowed in at all, they are not permitted to copy. For all its merits as a scholarly edition, therefore, the volume is published under an obsolete inward-looking model and sits uncomfortably with the professed aim of the University of Oxford to make available the results of scholarly research.

Note: The email extracts in this piece have been included to provide full context. Where appropriate, personal information has been removed to preserve anonymity. This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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