

REVIEWS

Marsh, Bill. *Plagiarism: Alchemy and Remedy in Higher Education*. Albany: SUNY P, 2007.

Reviewed by Rebecca Moore Howard, Syracuse University

Since the 2004 publication of “Turnitin.com and the Scriptural Enterprise of Plagiarism Detection,” I have been assigning Bill Marsh’s work when I teach classes in authorship. Most recently, secondary teachers enrolled in my graduate course on plagiarism read it and were incensed—not at Marsh, but at their own previously uncritical use of the plagiarism-detecting service Turnitin.com. I appreciate Marsh’s careful, persuasive writing, so I was already favorably disposed when I picked up *Plagiarism: Alchemy and Remedy in Higher Education*.

While Marsh focuses on contemporary attitudes toward plagiarism, his analyses are grounded in thoroughly researched history of plagiarism in Western culture. He works with previously published analyses (by scholars such as Robert Connors, Susan Miller, Donna Strickland, Ivan Illich, and Bill Readings) and already published collections of primary documents (especially John Brereton’s). To these he adds analyses of primary documents such as the Copyright Act of 1909 and contemporaneous commentary on it (60-61). Marsh does an excellent job of establishing historical context for beliefs about plagiarism. He accomplishes this by chronologically calibrating a wide range of documents in composition and rhetoric, intellectual property litigation, and cultural commentary. He is willing to engage plagiarism in its complexity, rather than striving for a false and inevitably failed simplification of it.

Early in the book, he announces, “Plagiarism can be understood, finally, as a perennial threat to modern values of educational progress and merit” (7). Marsh weaves that claim through the manuscript, showing how an understanding of cultural

representations of plagiarism opens up an understanding of ideologies of education.

He begins with familiar material: the sagas of Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin. Far from offering a shallow analysis of media coverage, however, Marsh works through a range of archival media, especially a transcript from *NewsHour* that reveals the ways in which cultural commentators worry about a double standard for student plagiarists and plagiarizing Authors and sidesteps a deep examination of that very possibility (22-27). A subordinate but fascinating theme in Marsh's analysis of the *NewsHour* transcript is the attribution of laziness to the plagiarist and hard labor to the Author.

Marsh's attention is fixed not on the issues of authorial effort (an issue that Françoise Meltzer admirably explicates in *Hot Property*) but on the ways in which our culture represents an acceptable text derived from sources as one that has accomplished a "textual transformation." Chapter Two of *Plagiarism: Alchemy and Remedy in Higher Education* asserts that intellectual property rights are founded on this representation (32-33). Later chapters follow the representation back to medieval and Renaissance letters—in particular, the enduring belief in alchemy. As recently as Thomas Mallon's 1989 *Stolen Words*, the acceptable use of preexisting material is described as alchemy (67). In the medieval tradition, alchemy was associated with the Divine will (70). It is also "grounded in experiential knowledge and 'withheld' from the unworthy." These three tenets—Divine will, experiential knowledge, and the worth of the subject—inform subsequent thinking on the topic (72). Marsh gives greatest attention to the ways in which transmutation informs the literary theory of Montaigne. His review of Montaigne's work concludes that plagiarism is not only an act of "fraudulent writing" but is also "an 'act of reading' that ends in the ostensibly wrongful or inadequate appropriation of materials read" (88)—a kind of false alchemy.

This analysis extends to contemporary pedagogical artifacts: not only plagiarism-detecting services (to which Marsh devotes an extensive chapter) but also research handbooks (especially the

2002 edition of Robert Perrin's *Handbook for College Research*) and scholarship of pedagogy published by Margaret Price, Bruce Ballenger, and me. Marsh's method is that of critique; he does not model what would for him constitute sound pedagogical methods or materials, except insofar as they are suggested by the vacancies left when he has critiqued what others have offered. For a moment, then, the book disappoints, leaving this reader in postpedagogical despair.

His conclusion, however, suggests a possible—and intriguing—explanation for his reluctance to recommend pedagogy. Marsh offers this concluding question: “Does Internet plagiarism in the age of post-media composition represent one of many laudable literacies students with a new ‘communication ability’ bring to the classroom, or is it, as it always has been, a fraudulent or failed venture in the realm of compositional technique, multimodal or otherwise?” (154). My own analysis of current news sources suggests that the standard answer to Marsh's question is “B”: plagiarism is a “fraudulent or failed venture.” My own research in authorship and especially in plagiarism, however, suggests that it is high time we investigated “A”: that what is called internet plagiarism may be a literacy produced by new communication techniques. That Marsh raises this possibility as his concluding question, especially given his complaints throughout the book about the static, stale representations of the fraudulent student plagiarist, would indicate that he considers “A” a genuine possibility. An investigation of that possibility could not be conducted in a single concluding chapter to this book; it is necessarily an entirely separate, substantial (and risky) project. Yet raising the possibility absolves Marsh of the need to make his own pedagogical recommendations, which would necessarily be grounded in received notions of textual transformation. If our most basic notions of literacy and textuality lag hopelessly behind contemporary literacy practices, any pedagogy we might presently describe might be hopelessly useless.

Plagiarism: Alchemy and Remedy in Higher Education works a relay between the analysis of contemporary pedagogical materials and

traditional rhetorical and literary theory. Bill Marsh is not trying to establish a causal chronological narrative but is instead enabling a dialogue among cultural discourses that would ordinarily seem remote from each other, both synchronously and diachronically. Marsh's model should suggest to those interested in plagiarism and authorship that we can best understand these discourses when we conduct our research both critically and imaginatively, so that we can recognize and explore the diverse yet mutually informing cultural discourses of authorship.

Works Cited

- Marsh, Bill. "Turnitin.com and the Scriptural Enterprise of Plagiarism Detection." *Computers and Composition* 21 (2004): 427-438.
- Meltzer, Françoise. *Hot Property: The Stakes and Claims of Literary Originality*. U Chicago P, 1994.