



Abridgment

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At Issue

Both abridgment and bowdlerization are usually carried out by editors, often after the death of an author; they are distinct processes which are often confused. Abridgment, in itself, is not a form of censorship. Many authors consent to the publication of shortened versions of their work in formats such as *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*. Theoretically, these abridged novels are merely shorter versions of longer works, with some descriptive and digressive passages not central to the narrative line having been weeded out, but with the larger meaning or messages of the work having been preserved.

The distinction between abridgment and bowdlerization blurs, however, with the example of texts prepared for use in schools and for juvenile audiences. The plays of [William Shakespeare](#), probably the most abridged and bowdlerized works in existence, are often shortened for use in high schools. More often than not, it is the passages regarded as vulgar and lascivious that are omitted, those passages having been judged extraneous to the meaning of the play by the editor. Such abridgment can lead to the distortion of a work's meaning by excessive or selective cutting.

The term bowdlerization comes from the practices of the nineteenth century British editor [Thomas Bowdler](#), who prepared sanitized versions of the Bible and of Shakespeare's plays for the genteel British family audience. His practices went far beyond simple abridgment, however; Bowdler actually attempted to "improve" on Shakespeare, for example, by rewriting passages and altering plots, such as his revision of the tragedy *King Lear*, for which he provided a happy ending.

One of the least known, though equally notorious, examples of bowdlerization in the United States concerns the publication in 1916 of what was purported to be one of [Mark Twain](#)'s last works, a book given the title *The Mysterious Stranger*. The book was in fact a fraud concocted by Mark Twain's biographer and literary executor, Alfred Bigelow Paine, and the publisher Frederick A. Duneka. Two authentic Mark Twain manuscripts were patched together and heavily rewritten by Paine and Duneka to produce the appearance of a single complete work entitled *The Mysterious Stranger*. Paine and Duneka subsequently marketed the bowdlerized text as a Christmas book for children. For almost fifty years the reading public spuriously believed that *The Mysterious Stranger* was an authentic, complete work of Mark Twain's final years; it was not until 1963 that Twain scholar John S. Tuckey discovered the fraud.

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