

Horace Walpole and Wikipedia

One of the features of this project will be short biographies of authors. These turn out to be mostly fun to write—I'm getting to learn a lot—but they are challenging as well. It is hard to write anything in a comparatively small space, to give information that is genuinely helpful, to avoid bias, to convey information that helps readers make sense of the works rather than distracts from them. In ideal world I could avoid writing these myself, and simply direct people to a great resource like the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/index.html>], which has brief, reliable, often entertaining entries, written by reputable scholars who have specialized in the work of the person they are writing about. But this is not an ideal world; most of the Oxford DNB is locked behind a paywall, and unless you belong to an institution that subscribes to it, there is no way of reading its entries. I then thought of directing people to Wikipedia. But the experience of writing a brief biography of Horace Walpole, best known now as the author of *The Castle of Otranto*, a key text in the history of fiction in English, has convinced me that this is not a good idea.

Wikipedia's entry on Horace Walpole gets most of the facts right in the sense that there is nothing that it says that is not true. It gets the dates and major events of Walpole's life correct, to the extent that we know them. It's what Wikipedia omits or at best skirts around that is the problem. The Wikipedia entry on Horace Walpole is almost comically demure when trying to talk about Walpole's sexuality.

The literary scholar George Haggerty has usefully suggested that we might best think of Walpole as having been, in our parlance, "queer"; he never married, and although he had intense friendships with women, most of his intimate relationships were with other men. It's not at all clear if he ever had sex with a man (or a woman, for that matter); nowhere

in all of the thousands of letters of Walpole's that have survived does he say explicitly one way or another. But Walpole lived in such a way that his sexuality was front and center, and he never presented himself as a heterosexual man, either as that was defined in his own time or in ours. Yet to identify him as a gay man in the modern sense is probably not right. Eighteenth-century sexuality is not the same as modern sexuality, and it flattens things out to conflate the two. "Queer," which implies deviance, and which was used even in the eighteenth century itself to denote that, keeps us from settling too quickly on hard-and-fast categories, and insists on thinking about sexuality with imagination and subtlety.

Wikipedia, at least as it exists now, cannot handle this kind of subtlety. The entry on Walpole refers to Haggerty's article (which is also behind a paywall) in a footnote, but in the main text, it has a single paragraph on Walpole's sexuality. That paragraph cites a number of Walpole's biographers and what they have to say about Walpole's sexuality. There's a quote from R. W. Ketton-Cremer's 1941 biography about how much Walpole loved his mother, and then another one from the same source (though worded to make it seem like it's a different source) that Walpole was "a natural celibate." A sentence that describes his friendships with women who have been described "by a number of sources as lesbian" that cites a website on eighteenth-century homosexuality (the Wikipedia link is broken, but the site, which is very useful, still exists). The most explicit sentence refers to Timothy Mowl's 2010 biography that, the entry says, "explore[s] his possible homosexuality" including some affairs. (In reality, the thesis of Mowl's book is that Walpole was gay.) And then a concluding statement that "previous biographers such as Lewis, Fothergill and Robert Wyndham-Ketton-Cremer, however, have interpreted Walpole as asexual." And that's it; a handful of quotes and positions cited from a handful of sources published over the last seventy years, with a particular emphasis on Ketton-Cremer's book from the 1940s, an era when attitudes about sexuality

were, to say the least, quite different from attitudes today. And the entire paragraph seems designed to close off the question as quickly as possible, opening up a couple of discrete questions about Walpole's sexuality but then closing with three different sources concluding that he was "asexual." The whole shape of the paragraph is designed to minimize Walpole's sexuality, to contain it and move on as quickly as possible.

This will not do. Walpole deserves better, and readers coming to him need to have the complexity of Walpole's sexuality and its possible implications on his work opened up rather than closed down.

An obvious thing I might do would be to rewrite the Wikipedia entry. Which I might do eventually. But that would take a kind of wholesale rewriting of Wikipedia that might readily be undone by someone else; once something is down in Wikipedia, it is very difficult to alter it fundamentally, rather than to refine at the margins.

The whole experience is yet further proof to me that the free resources on the internet, while often amazing, are not adequate to the task of representing the past as fully and richly as it deserves. That is part of the motivation of this project in general—to provide better, more fully curated resources for students and general readers.