

THE COMPOSITION AND REVISION OF  
H. L. MENCKEN'S TREATISE ON THE GODS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . .	ii
TEXT OF THESIS . . . . .	1
Selected Bibliography . . . . .	54
APPENDIX . . . . .	57
VITA . . . . .	62
ABSTRACT	

As a newspaper columnist and magazine editor during the first three decades of this century, H. L. Mencken inspired reactions ranging from incoherent fury to enthusiastic adoration. The Depression, however, marked the beginning of his gradual fall into obscurity, and from the mid-1930's until his death in 1956 he drew little public attention. During the 1960's and 1970's, though, a steady revival of interest resulted in numerous scholarly and semi-scholarly books and articles. William Manchester's biography, H. L. Mencken: Disturber of the Peace, originally published in 1950, was revised and reissued in 1962, a year after Betty Adler's H. L. M.: The Mencken Bibliography first appeared. Carl Bode's Mencken, a detailed and thoroughly documented biography, appeared in 1969. Bode also edited a volume of Mencken's correspondence, The New Mencken Letters (1977), a welcome addition to Guy J. Forgue's 1961 collection of letters.<sup>1</sup>

Studies of Mencken's writing have also appeared regularly during the 1960's and 1970's. In H. L. Mencken: Iconoclast from Baltimore (1971), Douglas C. Stenerson examines the influences which shaped Mencken's beliefs. Mencken's frequently antagonistic attitude toward the South is

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<sup>1</sup>There were various biographical works on Mencken during his lifetime, for example, Ernest Boyd, H. L. Mencken (New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1927); and Isaac Goldberg, The Man Mencken: A Biographical and Critical Survey (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1925). Later works on Mencken generally provide a clearer perspective. William Manchester, Disturber of the Peace: The Life of H. L. Mencken (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950; paperback reprint as H. L. Mencken: Disturber of the Peace, New York: Collier Books, 1962) is a popularized, favorable view, while Carl Bode, Mencken, (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969) is more balanced. Betty Adler, compiler, H. L. M.: The Mencken Bibliography (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1961); Guy J. Forgue, ed., Letters of H. L. Mencken (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1961); and Carl Bode, ed., The New Mencken Letters (New York: Dial Press, 1977) are all essential to the serious Mencken scholar.

the subject of Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South (1974) by Fred C. Hobson, Jr., and the history of the magazine Mencken founded and edited is discussed in M. K. Singleton's H. L. Mencken and The American Mercury Adventure (1962). The numerous other books on Mencken focus on different aspects of his life and career: Mencken the literary critic, Mencken the political analyst, and Mencken the music lover. The most recent major work, Charles A. Fecher's Mencken: A Study of His Thought (1978), contains an acute appraisal of Mencken's place in literary history and effectively analyzes and evaluates his roles as philosopher, political theorist, critic, philologist, and stylist.<sup>2</sup>

But some aspects of Mencken's work are still neglected. His witty and distinctive writing style is often mentioned, but the style and his methods of composition have not been studied in any depth. Most comments on style are general and appreciative, but no one has published a truly careful examination of the composition of any of Mencken's major works or of the development of his style. This absence of sophisticated textual analysis is puzzling, for Mencken saved a wealth of material which could

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<sup>2</sup>These more specialized works on Mencken often shed light on areas outside their narrow topics: Douglas C. Stenerson, H. L. Mencken: Iconoclast from Baltimore (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971); Fred C. Hobson, Jr., Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South (Chapel Hill, N. C.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1974); and M. K. Singleton, H. L. Mencken and The American Mercury Adventure (Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1962). Other titles include Joseph C. Goulden, ed., Mencken's Last Campaign: H. L. Mencken on the 1948 Election (Washington, D. C.: The New Republic Book Co., 1976); and William Nolte, H. L. Mencken: Literary Critic (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1966). The steady stream of books on Mencken has not diminished the quality of the work. Charles A. Fecher, Mencken: A Study of His Thought (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1978) offers fresh perceptive insights. Another important work is Guy J. Fogue, H. L. Mencken: L'Homme, L'Oeuvre, L'Influence (Paris: Minard, 1967). Unfortunately, this book is currently unavailable in English.

be used in such studies. He organized and labelled his proofs, his type-  
 scripts, his holograph manuscripts, his notes for various projects, his  
 personal library, and dozens of his miscellaneous papers. These he donated  
 to Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, which has established an H. L.  
 Mencken Room to house the collection. The New York Public Library holds  
 much of Mencken's surviving correspondence--both business and personal  
 letters to and from him. In addition to these documents, Betty Adler's  
 1961 bibliography and a supplement to this bibliography issued in 1971 are  
 available, as are Adler's A Descriptive List of H. L. Mencken Collections  
in the U. S. (1967) and Man of Letters: A Census of the Correspondence  
of H. L. Mencken (1969).<sup>3</sup> The major tools for textual study of Mencken's  
 work therefore already exist.

Critics and biographers, however, have chosen to concentrate on  
 Mencken's influence, personality, or philosophy rather than on his style.  
 Mencken scholars do tell us that he was an orderly, methodical man who  
 generally sat down and worked a certain number of hours each day. They  
 also acknowledge that Mencken's years as a reporter influenced his style,  
 but they do not examine the style he adopted when he was not pressured by  
 newspaper deadlines. Did Mencken's prose roll onto paper easily, with  
 few revisions, or did he change words and rearrange passages, striving to  
 eliminate stylistic awkwardness?

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<sup>3</sup>Betty Adler, compiler, A Descriptive List of H. L. Mencken Collec-  
tions in the U. S. (Baltimore: Enoch Pratt Free Library, 1967). See  
 also Betty Adler, compiler, Man of Letters: A Census of the Correspon-  
dence of H. L. Mencken (Baltimore: Enoch Pratt Free Library, 1969).

Mencken's compositional methods have also been neglected; early comments on Mencken's method of composition have given rise to the notion that he put his books together hastily and carelessly. William Manchester's biography shows Mencken as a "cut and paste" artist. Carl Bode's more comprehensive biography gives a clearer picture but still perpetuates this myth. For example, according to Bode, Mencken threw Damn! A Book of Calumny (1918) together in a week "with the help of scissors and library paste."<sup>4</sup> Mencken did patch some of his books together from previously written material, but generally these "compiled" works were sold as anthologies. Unfortunately, Mencken used a similar technique for Notes on Democracy (1926), which was meant to be a serious, original book. Manchester's version of the composition of Notes, wherein Mencken sat down and "bludgeoned his way through several pots of paste and a stack of copy paper"<sup>5</sup> is much simplified. Bode describes the writing of Notes more accurately: "[Mencken] started to make notes for it about 1910. When he began the actual composition in 1925, he drew not only on those early jottings but also on his work in the Smart Set, and on the Monday Articles. Before he finished it, in June of 1926, he drew on the Mercury also. He rewrote the old material and added to it a much larger amount of new" (Bode, p. 180). Although Bode charitably calls Notes on

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<sup>4</sup>Manchester, H. L. Mencken (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 243. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup>Bode, Mencken, p. 118. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text.

Democracy "the culmination of fifteen years of writing and more than that of thought" (Bode, p. 180), the book reads like a hastily assembled pot-pourri.

Mencken did not always compose in this manner. One of his best-selling and most durable books, Treatise on the Gods,<sup>6</sup> was written from "scratch" and contained no previously published material. A textual study of Treatise dispels the myth of Mencken as a slapdash cut-and-paster. The surviving versions of the book allow one to trace the growth of Treatise through virtually every stage of its evolution. Treatise on the Gods was, in addition, one of only two books that Mencken chose to revise for a new edition, and so we have two published versions to compare--the first edition of 1930 and the second of 1946. Pre-publication forms of both versions exist. The two extant pre-publication texts of the first edition are typescripts: the "Original Typescript of Treatise on the Gods 1928-29" and the "Fair Copy, Corrected" dated 1929. Several printings of the 1930 edition were issued, including a cheap Blue Ribbon impression in 1933. Some of those intermediate impressions include minor changes made in the plates at Mencken's request. There are also four pre-publication versions of the second edition of Treatise; the circumstances under which these were created are revealed in the 1945-46 letters between Mencken and Alfred A. Knopf, his publisher and personal friend, and Knopf's wife Blanche, a vice-president in the Knopf firm. There are two sets of proofs

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<sup>6</sup>H. L. Mencken, Treatise on the Gods (New York: Knopf, 1930). Subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text as Treatise 1930.



and two "rough" revisions formed from a combination of typescript and tearsheets from the 1930 edition.

This thesis is a study of the different versions of Treatise that survive today. Other studies of Mencken's work will be needed in order to obtain a complete picture of him as a craftsman, but certain tentative conclusions can be stated after studying the different forms of this particular work. HLM cultivated a public image as a literary brawler who tossed out his insults effortlessly, but such was apparently not the case. Instead, he wrote carefully, revising often and thoughtfully. He sometimes painted verbal pictures with a few swift, expert strokes, but more often he polished syntax, changed wording, and reworked mundane phrasing so that it sparkled and stung. Mencken had a taste for research and a desire to be accepted as a serious scholar, despite his loudly voiced contempt for the academic community. Although he offhandedly refused to take anything seriously in public, Mencken dutifully sent his publisher numerous corrections for the plates of Treatise. Even sixteen years after Treatise's publication, when he was beginning to feel the debilitating effects of age and poor health, he was willing to take time to revise and improve the book he felt would outlast him.

Treatise on the Gods was the second volume of a trilogy planned to include Mencken's definitive statements on democracy, religion, and morality. Mencken had high expectations for this series, but, pressed for time, he did a sloppy job on the first installment, Notes on Democracy. Critics and the public reacted adversely, and even Mencken quickly admitted the poor quality of the book. In a 1933 letter to Norman Foerster, who was compiling an anthology called American Poetry and Prose, Mencken

disparages the book: "I am sorry that your selections are from 'Notes on Democracy,' for it is probably the worst of all my books."<sup>7</sup> After this failure Mencken changed his tactics; Treatise on the Gods is completely different from its predecessor. Treatise is Mencken's attempt to redeem himself from charges that he offered the public the same old material in a different guise. It is an entirely original work, written only after Mencken had immersed himself in scholarly histories of religion.

Mencken chose religion as a subject for serious writing despite his usual irreverent, mocking tone toward the institution. As a frankly avowed agnostic, he seemed to feel he could bring a fresh point of view to the subject. His particular beliefs about religion were deeply ingrained, owing to his upbringing in a family in which religion was of little importance. Mencken's father and paternal grandfather were both nonbelievers, and HLM received his only exposure to religion during his childhood when he and his brother Charlie were shuttled off for a time to a Methodist Sunday School. As Mencken recounts the story, he later questioned his father about this lapse into conventionality. Mencken, Sr., "hemmed and hawed a little, but finally let go the truth. What moved him, he confessed, was simply his overmastering impulse to give over the Sunday afternoons of Winter to quiet snoozing."<sup>8</sup> Mencken's own religious philosophy, though derived primarily from independent study and consideration, always mirrored his father's casual cynicism, and Treatise on the Gods is a mixture of thoughtfulness and jocularly.

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<sup>7</sup> The New Mencken Letters, p. 296.

<sup>8</sup> H. L. Mencken, Happy Days: 1880-1892 (New York: Knopf, 1940), p. 177.

Although Mencken was never indoctrinated into any set of religious beliefs, he maintained throughout his career a lively curiosity in the elaborate systems through which men expressed their faith. He wrote on religion often during his career, but in preparation for writing Treatise he began to study the phenomenon seriously. He examined the existing scholarship carefully and even queried experts on the best books to study. In a letter to a Monsignor Dudek, for example, Mencken asks, "what is the best current book of Catholic doctrine? I want to find out precisely what the church teaches on all the salient points of the faith."<sup>9</sup> The fifteen-page bibliographical essay which concludes Treatise reflects Mencken's reading. The bibliography lists seventy-three works, and Mencken's comments on these works demonstrate his familiarity with them.

In discussing his research for Treatise, Mencken begins his remarks by saying: "The literature of religion is so vast that no man can hope to traverse more than its main roads" (Treatise 1930, p. 354). Mencken, however, was a quick and retentive reader, and he managed to explore a number of sideroads, as well as becoming thoroughly familiar with the more widely traveled highways. His reading ranged from the thirteen-volume Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics to more specialized works such as Frazer's The Golden Bough and even to official statements of dogma published by some of the Protestant denominations. In the bibliographic essay, HLM normally evaluates the works he mentions, and these brief comments reveal his knowledge and his attempts to be impartial. He

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<sup>9</sup>The Letters of H. L. Mencken, p. 311.

praises Christian scholars when they deserve it, and he does not hesitate to attack his fellow skeptics, saying frankly, "Of books planned to blow up Christianity there are hundreds, but most of them are trash" (Treatise 1930, p. 359). Mencken was equally harsh on those who whitewashed Christianity: "The literature of Christian exegesis and apologetics is immense, but it consists mainly of pious works of small persuasiveness" (Treatise 1930, p. 362). Mencken's wide-ranging references and his easy knowledgeability in discussing religion throughout Treatise are impressive. The impression of sloppiness and lack of preparation that characterized Notes on Democracy is completely absent from Treatise on the Gods.

After months of reading and preparation, Mencken began Treatise sometime in late 1928 or early 1929. On July 1929 he informed his friend Raymond Pearl that "the book is going slowly, but surely."<sup>10</sup> Mencken persevered, despite the demands on his time and energy from the illness of his future wife and his duties on The American Mercury, and on the evening of Thanksgiving, 1929, he finished his original draft of Treatise on the Gods.<sup>11</sup>

Mencken composed this first version on the typewriter, a habit he acquired during his newspaper days. The text is surprisingly readable, considering that it is a first draft. It contains numerous corrections, some typed and others inscribed in Mencken's handwriting. The original

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<sup>10</sup>The New Mencken Letters, p. 236.

<sup>11</sup>This document is now at Enoch Pratt Free Library where it is catalogued under the title "Original Typescript of Treatise on the Gods." In subsequent references, it will be cited as "original typescript."

typescript is largely uniform in appearance; the same paper and the same typewriter were used throughout. Mencken evidently made carbons as he typed, for in a note he attached to the corrected fair copy (the document which followed the first draft) he says: "A section of this corrected fair copy, running from page 236 to page 255, is missing, so I have substituted carbons of the original typescript." A comparison of the pages in question reveals that the two copies are indeed identical with the exception of handwritten revisions on the ribbon typescript pages included with his first draft. Mencken's care in making two copies indicates that he wanted to insure against loss or accidental destruction of the draft.

Though this first typescript is virtually a rough draft, the number of changes is fairly small. The extent of revision varies: some pages contain many corrections while others are virtually free from revisions. This document shows no evidence that Mencken restructured the book or made any major substantive changes while working on it. Instead, he refined his style and corrected minor flaws. Distinct patterns can be discerned in these revisions, as when Mencken attempts to amplify or strengthen his original material. For example, he changes the phrase "rid worship of this artificiality" to "rid worship of this formalization and artificiality" (p. 6), thus strengthening his case against religion. In describing an Aztec ritual he adds to the statement "his heart was cut out" the words "deftly and swiftly" (p. 160), making an already chilling picture even more gruesome. HLM also substitutes specific and vivid words for fairly common ones, as when he replaces "enemies" with "abhorrrers" (p. 9). Learned phrases are sometimes inserted--for instance, the alteration of

"in person" to "in propria persona" (p. 151). Mencken makes his writing more fluent, detailed, and erudite. The infrequency of major changes and the decisiveness of the writing stem from Mencken's strong confidence in his ability to turn out logical, coherent copy on the first draft.<sup>12</sup>

After revising the original typescript by hand, Mencken turned it over to his secretary, Rosalind Lohrfinck, who typed a fresh copy, which Mencken also revised by hand.<sup>13</sup> The result was the second document housed at Enoch Pratt Free Library and labelled "Fair Copy, Corrected."<sup>14</sup> An examination of the corrected Fair copy reveals that in revising Mencken retyped portions of his secretary's draft. There are two different colors of type in the corrected fair copy: black and bright blue. The blue type appears on thin white paper with revisions written in Mencken's hand. The passages typed in black appear on thicker paper which has aged to a light brown, and these pages contain x-ed out words and typewritten revisions, as well as handwritten revisions. Mencken obviously typed these sections himself, while the pages of blue type are the work of his secretary. Both colors of type appear on the first page of the corrected fair copy, and one can easily see the difference between the top seven

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<sup>12</sup>In discussing these changes, both the reading from the original typescript and that from the 1930 edition will be given. Page references throughout this paragraph are to the 1930 edition.

<sup>13</sup>Fecher, Mencken, p. 321. Fecher discusses the practices Mencken usually followed in writing a book. He says that Mencken normally typed a first draft and then had his secretary type a second copy.

<sup>14</sup>This document is dated 1929. It will be cited subsequently as "corrected fair copy."

lines and the remainder of the page, beginning with the words "the subject."<sup>15</sup> See Figure 1 in Appendix.

While reading the corrected fair copy, Mencken seems to have realized that several paragraphs would need to be completely rewritten. He was always efficient, so instead of retyping these pages completely, he cut out those sections he wanted to retain from his secretary's typescript. He then retyped the sections he wanted to rewrite and pasted corresponding sections together, making handwritten corrections on both. In this way, the orderly Mencken created a neat, easy-to-read typescript with little wasted effort. But Mencken was not doing the kind of cut-and-paste revision that had weakened his previous works. Instead of cannabilizing parts of separate and unconnected works, as he had done in writing Notes on Democracy, Mencken was simply reworking passages that were originally conceived as parts of one work.<sup>16</sup>

A study of Mencken's changes in the original typescript of Treatise reveals some interesting patterns. Although his changes are limited, they are significant, particularly in the preface. In the opening lines of the preface of the original typescript, Mencken refers to Treatise as a "little book," but in the second version he simply calls it a "book,"

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<sup>15</sup>The top portion of this page is in black; and the bottom in blue.

<sup>16</sup>Mencken used the cut-and-paste method on only a few pages of the corrected fair copy. The first thirteen pages, pp. 64, 80, 82, and 259 were revised in this fashion. Page 81 is missing from the document and pp. 236-55 are simply carbons of the original typescript, so it is impossible to tell how Mencken revised these pages. Mencken had also used cut-and-paste revision on a very few pages (pp. 164, 176, 194, and 248) of the original typescript.

indicating increased seriousness toward the work and also hinting that he had originally planned a shorter and less comprehensive work. Mencken also explains his approach and method by adding this sentence to the corrected fair copy: "I have not attempted a formal treatise, and so I have felt no compulsion to follow a rigid pattern of exposition, but have set down my observations freely, expanding them when the immediate matter interested me especially, and reducing them to brief notes when it seemed to me to be unimportant or dull" (p. 1). Mencken also begins the next page of his revised treatise with an explanation of his special attention to Christianity. Throughout this rewritten copy of the preface, Mencken clarifies his position and justifies his treatment of the subject of religion.

Mencken also revises the structure of Treatise. In the original typescript, the book is divided into three major sections: I. The Nature of Religion, II. Its Evolution in the Modern World, and III. What It Is Today. These headings are changed and the book is divided differently in the corrected fair copy, which includes four sections: I. Its Nature and Origin, II. Its Evolution, III. Its Place Today, and IV. Its Future. This second typescript is further divided by Mencken's use of numbered subsections. The structure was superimposed on the book; it did not grow out of a preconceived design, for Mencken added section and subsection numbers by hand, often squeezing them in between lines. Before the book was published, Mencken reworded his four section headings and added still another. The published version of Treatise includes five sections and the "Bibliographical Note" which concludes the book. The final sections are entitled: 1. The Nature and Origin of Religion,



2. Its Evolution, 3. Its Varieties, 4. Its Christian Form, and 5. Its State Today. Mencken's insistence on method and order are evidenced by his concern for the arrangement of Treatise. Even though the material in the book was not actually changed, Mencken was obviously searching for the best way of framing the information he was presenting.

Mencken's concern for an accurate description of the book's contents is also evident in his alteration of the title of Treatise on the Gods. On the title page of the corrected fair copy, the title "Reflections on Religion" has been typed and then cancelled to be replaced by the handwritten "Treatise on the Gods." Reflections on Religion, though perhaps more accurately describing the final product, is a much more informal, less rigorous-sounding title than Treatise on the Gods. The final title establishes a more detached, professional tone for the work.

Many of the differences between the original typescript and the corrected fair copy are similar to the corrections found on the pages of the original typescript. In revising Mencken does add detail and on occasion formalizes his language, although on the whole a certain casual tone pervades the work in all its forms. The occasional use of mock Biblical phrasing adds a satirical note to some of his revisions. For instance, the sentence, "Which is to say, they are thrown into the arms of priests, as human beings have been thrown at all times and everywhere" becomes "In other words, they are thrown into the arms of priests, as the pious have been thrown since the memory of man runneth not to the contrary, at all times and everywhere."<sup>17</sup> This jeering is characteris-

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<sup>17</sup>Original typescript, p. 7. The second version appears in the corrected fair copy, p. 13.

tically Menckonian, as are the author's attacks on the clergy. Mencken changes a clause referring to the clergy from "their support cruelly burdened the state" to "their support half-starved the people."<sup>18</sup> One of the primary aims of HLM's revising was to make his prose more vivid, as illustrated in the following two passages. This construction appears in the original typescript: "for the convolutions of his cortex had been gradually developing, and the more they developed the more he was afflicted by the new curse of thinking."<sup>19</sup> Mencken managed to sharpen his wording in rewriting: "for the cells of his cortex had been gradually proliferating, and the more they proliferated the more he was afflicted by a new curse: the power to think."<sup>20</sup> By comparing the original typescript and the corrected fair copy, it quickly becomes obvious that Mencken wrote Treatise on the Gods as a long essay which he managed to get almost exactly into the form he wanted on the first draft. The corrected fair copy is simply a polishing of that original work.

The corrected fair copy does not seem to have been used by the compositors as printer's copy for Treatise. Possibly Mencken's secretary made a "clean" copy for this purpose. Neither this document nor the galley proofs of the 1930 edition of Treatise on the Gods have survived however. Thus the next existing version of Treatise is the edition published in 1930. As might be expected, a comparison of selected passages of the corrected fair copy and the published version reveals that some

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<sup>18</sup>The first version of this quote appears on p. 77 of the original typescript. The second rendition is on p. 86 of the corrected fair copy.

<sup>19</sup>Original typescript, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup>Corrected fair copy, p. 14.

changes were made before the book's publication, but they are relatively few and minor. Some of the variants seem to have come from a copy editor. For example, Mencken's usual practice of placing quotation marks after periods or other marks of punctuation has been revised throughout. The majority of revisions, however, are stylistic. Minor additions, deletions, and word changes have been made, but even these are sparse in the first part of the book. A copy editor would probably have been reluctant to make such changes for an author as well-established as Mencken, at least not without his permission, so we can probably assume that Mencken himself made these revisions on the printer's copy or in proof. In the final section he becomes more concerned with his style, and he chooses his words carefully. As he did in his earlier revisions, he sometimes softens a harsh judgment or substitutes a sharper and more vivid phrase. A table of variations from two brief passages in the fifth section of Treatise demonstrates the kinds of changes Mencken made between the corrected fair copy and the published text.

<u>1930 page-line references</u>	<u>Corrected Fair Copy</u>	<u>1930 Edition</u>
327.10	any belief	a belief
327.13	how Jefferson has been forgotten!	how completely Jefferson has been forgotten!
327.20	any show	any better show
327.20	distinguished names	eminent names
327.22	every 100,000 Unitarians	every 100,000 Unitarians, <u>i. e.</u> , heretics,
327.24	listed, whereas	listed therein, whereas

<u>1930 page-line references</u>	<u>Corrected Fair Copy</u>	<u>1930 Edition</u>
327.25	18 Methodists	18 professing Methodists
341.21	all religions	every religion
341.22	influence one another	influences it and is influenced by it.
341.22	they come	it comes
341.24	striking borrowings	more striking borrowings
341.26	some of them	most of which

Treatise on the Gods was finally published in March of 1930. Despite Mencken's pains with the book, the critics did not view it with quite the same satisfaction that its author did. Treatise was reviewed in major newspapers and magazines throughout the country. Professional journalists and critics did pinpoint some of the book's flaws, but some reviews included attacks on Mencken himself. Treatise is so clearly an expression of its author's personality that those who disliked HLM seemed unable to treat his book impartially. Such criticism was most frequently based on Mencken's opinionated attitude. Reviewers felt that his agnosticism prejudiced him against religion and made his history biased and unreliable. Reinhold Niebuhr in The Atlantic Bookshelf wrote that Treatise "tells us little more than how one fanatic feels about other fanatics of a different stripe."<sup>21</sup> Mencken's attempt to present his scholarly side was frequently

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<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, Untitled review of Treatise on the Gods, The Atlantic Bookshelf, June 1930, p. 20.

derided by those who had reservations about Treatise, and some reviewers pointed out that Mencken's appeal was limited primarily to an audience which already accepted his ideology. Fanny Butcher characterizes Mencken's audience as "those who accept his major premise--in this case, that religion is not a manifestation of divinity but man's own invention to explain the unknown."<sup>22</sup> Mencken was also attacked for other inadequacies, ranging from typographical errors to what reviewers felt were limitations in his research.

Mencken himself felt that the reception accorded most of his works was unpleasant, but he was even more defensive than usual about Treatise. In a 29 October 1934 letter to Harry Leon Wilson, Mencken said in reference to Treatise on the Gods and Treatise on Right and Wrong: "Both of the books got immensely unfavorable notices and not a few eminent authorities denounced them with tremendous violence."<sup>23</sup> In the preface to the original typescript of Treatise, he mentions that "the book got hostile notices almost everywhere."<sup>24</sup> When he discusses the reviews in his letters, Mencken inevitably speaks of them being negative. William Manchester claims that these reviews "rocked Mencken. . . . The young men who

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<sup>22</sup>Fanny Butcher, "Mencken Pen Takes Up Job Voltaire Tried," Review of Treatise on the Gods, Chicago Daily Tribune, 29 March 1930, p. 16, cols. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup>Letters of H. L. Mencken, p. 379.

<sup>24</sup>Original typescript, n. p. When donating this document to Enoch Pratt, Mencken included a single typewritten sheet, dated 1937, on the history of Treatise.

reviewed Treatise unfavorably were contemptuous of the book Mencken had conceived as his masterpiece" (Manchester, p. 289).

Treatise did elicit negative commentary, but Mencken also received praise for the work. Henry Hazlitt in The Nation spoke favorably of the book, though he also hinted that Mencken's loss of popularity had already begun: "This treatise will do much to restore the recently wavering reputation of its author. It easily stands among the best of his books, and seems to me likely, indeed, to survive longer than any of the others . . . . It is a work of genuine scholarship, admirably organized, and for the most part surprisingly sober in tone."<sup>25</sup> Burton Rascoe, an admirer and acquaintance of Mencken, characterized Treatise as the author's "best book to date,"<sup>26</sup> as did Hazelton Spencer in The New Republic.<sup>27</sup> Naturally, some of the favorable reviews were from fans or personal friends. James Branch Cabell, one of Mencken's correspondents and friends whose writings had been publicly praised by HLM, went so far as to say that "Mencken is one of the very few indisputably great men now living. He is a force which endures and which will endure for a long while. He is that force which has reshaped all the present world of American letters."<sup>28</sup> Mencken's

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Hazlitt, "The Gods Damned," review of Treatise on the Gods, The Nation, 130 (1930), 328-29.

<sup>26</sup> Burton Rascoe, "Mencken's Theology," review of Treatise on the Gods, Plain Talk, 6(1930), 626-31.

<sup>27</sup> Hazelton Spencer, "Mencken on Religion," review of Treatise on the Gods, The New Republic, 62 (1930), 355.

<sup>28</sup> James Branch Cabell, "Dreams on Cosmogony," review of Treatise on the Gods, New York Herald Tribune, 13 April 1930, Section XI, p. 1, col 1.

style is frequently praised, even by reviewers who are largely negative. Edmund Chaffee, for instance, who complains in his brief review that Mencken is "out of his depth," is still willing to concede "the vividness of the writing."<sup>29</sup>

Viewed together, the reviews of Treatise on the Gods seem fair, balancing unjustified criticism with extravagant praise. While the reviews from major periodicals and newspapers tend to be negative, they hardly seem harsh enough to have justified Mencken's tag of "immensely unfavorable." However, reactions from the clergy and from the Jewish community might have been responsible for Mencken's subsequent feeling that the book was treated severely.

Mencken certainly expected outrage from the religious community over Treatise. He was used to being denounced by fundamentalist Christians and seemed to enjoy replying to these attacks. A Baltimore Post column dated 20 March 1930 predicted (giving odds of 100 to 1) that Treatise would be attacked in at least 50 percent of the churches in Baltimore.<sup>30</sup> Mencken certainly was deluged with criticism from churchmen. Even in serious reviews, most objections to Treatise were on ideological rather than literary grounds. A thoughtful review in the New York Times Book Review emphasized Mencken's lack of humanity: "Indeed, as we blink our eyes over this glittering medley of jests and gibes at whatever gods

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<sup>29</sup> Edmund B. Chaffee, "Religion's Voice As Heard In Recent Books," review of Treatise on the Gods, Outlook and Independent, 155 (1930), 191.

<sup>30</sup> Louis Azrael, "Day by Day," Baltimore Post, 20 March 1930.

there be, we seem to be conscious that, varied as is Mr. Mencken's vocabulary, some words are among the unemployed. Peace and joy and long-suffering are, doubtless, pardonable omissions. . . . But is there to be not even a passing allusion to so familiar a monosyllable as love."<sup>31</sup> Most attacks were on even more specifically religious grounds. The Reverend John E. Graham devoted much of his The Way of the Skeptic<sup>32</sup> to a denunciation of Mencken, and Ronald Knox's Broadcast Minds<sup>33</sup> contains a lengthy chapter entitled "Menckeniana," written primarily in response to Treatise. Knox viewed Mencken's attitude as irresponsibly irreverent; in fact, he said that Mencken "would tell us himself that the whole thing [Treatise] was only a leg-pull" (Knox, p. 133). Knox not only says that Mencken is profane, but also feels that Treatise is both anti-Catholic and anti-clerical. Knox's attack on Mencken is generally more reasonable than Graham's. Graham criticizes Mencken's methods and even parodies his style. Graham writes, for example, "it does not require a genius to caricature religion with effect, or to caricature any other good thing for that matter. The veriest boob in Christendom, or Jewry, or Paynimry, can easily make a laughing stock of the finest masterpiece by distorting or disfiguring it" (Graham, p. 23).

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<sup>31</sup>P. W. Wilson, "Mencken Turns His Back on Whatever Gods There Be," review of Treatise on the Gods, The New York Times Book Review, 23 March 1930, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup>John E. Graham, The Way of the Skeptic (New York: The Dial Press, 1931). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text.

<sup>33</sup>Ronald Knox, Broadcast Minds (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text.



Mencken expected such comments, but he seems not to have anticipated an equally vehement reaction to Treatise which came from America's Jewish community. Most of the critics who accused him of anti-Semitism were offended by lines from this single paragraph:

But in one respect, at least, Christianity is vastly superior to every other religion in being today, and, indeed, to all that we have any record of in the past: it is full of a lush and lovely poetry. The Bible is unquestionably the most beautiful book in the world. Allow everything you please for the barbaric history in the Old Testament and the decadent Little Bethel theology in the New, and there remains a series of poems so overwhelmingly voluptuous and disarming that no other literature, old or new, can offer a match for it. Nearly all of it comes from the Jews, and their making of it constitutes one of the most astounding phenomena in human history. For there is little in their character, as the modern world knows them, to suggest a talent for noble thinking. Even Renan, who was very friendly to them, once sneered at the esprit sémitique as sans étendue, sans diversité, and sans philosophie. One might go still further. The Jews could be put down very plausibly as the most unpleasant race ever heard of. As commonly encountered, they lack many of the qualities that mark the civilized man: courage, dignity, incorruptibility, ease, confidence. They have vanity without pride, voluptuousness without taste, and learning without wisdom. Their fortitude, such as it is, is wasted upon puerile objects, and their charity is mainly only a form of display. Yet these same Jews, from time immemorial, have been the chief dreamers of the human race, and beyond all comparison its greatest poets. It was Jews who wrote the magnificent poems called the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, and the Books of Job and Ruth; it was Jews who set platitudes to deathless music in Proverbs; it was Jews who gave us the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, the incomparable ballad of the Christ Child, and the twelfth chapter of Romans. I incline to believe that the scene recounted in John VIII, 3-11, is the most poignant drama ever written in the world, as the Song of Solomon is unquestionably the most moving love song, and the Twenty-third Psalm the greatest of hymns. All these transcendent riches Christianity inherits from a little tribe of sedentary Bedouins, so obscure and unimportant that secular history scarcely knows them. No heritage of modern man is richer and none has made a more brilliant mark upon human thought, not even the legacy of the Greeks" (Treatise 1930, pp. 345-46).

Mencken begins his next paragraph: "All this, of course, may prove either one of two things; that the Jews, in their heyday, were actually superior to all the great peoples who disdained them, or that poetry is only a minor art. My private inclination is to embrace the latter hypothesis, but I do not pause to argue the point" (Treatise 1930, pp. 346-47). He then moves on to other topics.

This passage is harsh, but there is little else in Treatise on the Gods that could be interpreted as anti-Semitic. Mencken does make one other negative judgment: "Judaism, as a practical cult, is made ridiculous by an archaic and ridiculous ritualism and by a code of ethics that goes back to savagery" (Treatise 1930, p. 343). Throughout the rest of the book, Mencken discusses the Jewish religion in the same tone that he uses for others. Its customs and history are characterized no differently than any of the other religions. Basically, then, only three or four sentences from Treatise caused Jews to condemn Mencken as anti-Semitic.

It is surprising to find, therefore, that many Jewish writers treated the entire book as if it were a direct attack on Jews, rather than a history of religion. S. M. Melamed was one of the book's harshest critics, claiming that Mencken wrote "a book of 364 pages to prove that the Jews could be put down very plausibly as the most unpleasant race ever heard of. . . . Adolph Hitler, for instance, has developed his antisemitic ideas in a little leaflet of eight pages and he says as much as Mr. Mencken in 364."<sup>34</sup> An anonymous note in Every Friday, a Jewish newspaper based in

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<sup>34</sup>S. M. Melamed, "H. L. Mencken's Encyclopaedia of Platitudes," The Reflex, May 1930, p. 3.

Cincinnati, expresses basic agreement with Melamed and adds that "Mencken is only a babbitt among men with real creative minds."<sup>35</sup> Other reactions were almost equally harsh. Rabbi Bernard Heller, speaking before the Central Conference of American Rabbis, claimed that someone with Mencken's "definite prejudices" was unequipped to write an enlightening history of religion.<sup>36</sup> One Dr. Margoshes denounced Treatise in an open letter to Mencken which appeared in the New York Day on 23 March 1930 and which was reprinted in several other newspapers.<sup>37</sup> Jacob de Haas' article on the Jewish reaction downplayed HLM's importance and scolded other Jews for paying attention to the "perfect fault-finder."<sup>38</sup> Mencken's publisher, Alfred Knopf, himself of Jewish origin, provides a matter-of-fact perspective on the issue of Jewish objections to Treatise when he writes Mencken that "from what I hear around town I begin to think that a large proportion of Treatise sales are to the very Jews who are objecting so violently to that paragraph."<sup>39</sup>

Despite adverse reactions, Treatise on the Gods was a commercial success, going through ten printings in just under three years. The first

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<sup>35</sup>"H. L. Mencken and the Jews," Every Friday, 18 April 1930, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>"Rabbi Assails Mencken Book," Providence Evening Bulletin, 27 June 1930, p. 10, col. 1.

<sup>37</sup>S. Margoshes, "An Open Letter to H. L. Mencken," New York Day, 23 March 1930.

<sup>38</sup>Jacob de Haas, "Anti-Semitism in America," The Jewish Chronicle Supplement, May 1930, p. iv.

<sup>39</sup>Alfred A. Knopf to Mencken, 16 April 1930, Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. All unpublished letters subsequently cited are located at the New York Public Library.

four printings were made in March 1930, and no changes were made in the plates until after the fourth printing. But Mencken began receiving lists of corrections for Treatise soon after it was published. A series of letters between Mencken and his publishers reveals that he was concerned about these errors and sent in several lists of them during the first few months after Treatise was published. Some of these lists survive, but others do not. A machine collation on the Lindstrand Comparator reveals that the following changes were made between the first printing in March 1930 and the tenth in February 1933.

<u>Page line references</u>	<u>first printing (March 1930)</u>	<u>tenth printing (February 1933)</u>
6.22	adherents in such magnificoes as Ekkehard of St. Gall	eager adherents in such magnificoes as Master Eckhard
77.19	every Moslem, when he prays continues to face the East whence the sun rises	every Moslem, facing Mecca when he prays, recalls the days when his ancestors faced the East and the risen sun
77.26	by the peasants of most of the countries of Europe go back to the time when their barbaric ancestors	by the peasants of Europe on Midsummer Eve go back to the time when their barbaric forbears
84.17	anthropologists	authorities
84.18	the Belgian, Robert Briffault	the anthropologist, Briffault
123.3	Southern Methodist	Northern Methodist
126.17	St. Peter Clestine	St. Peter Celestine
135.2	Luther's "Ein feste Burg,"	Luther's "Ein' feste Burg,"
139.7	Home	Homo
145.23	ten Hail Marys	three Hail Marys

<u>Page line</u> <u>references</u>	<u>first printing (March 1930)</u>	<u>tenth printing (February 1933)</u>
153.5	Adolf Harnack, in his "Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte," tells us	Dr. Adolf Harnack, in his "Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte," says that
168.23	god	goddess
171.10	Summer	Sumer
172.16	Danaë	Danaë
178.6	crucified him anyhow	released him very reluctantly
189.4	a plain echo of the Apollo cult which then raged	a probably echo, though there are philological considerations to the contrary, of the Apollo cult which
193.25	500	800
197.28	apocalypse	apocalypt
198.19	neurose	neurosis
217.16	that	than
218.27	sailient	salient
225.18	Nicaëa, which met in 365	Nicaëa, which met in 325
225.20	on Easter Day, 367, two years after it began its sessions, Athanasius sent out an <u>epistola festalis</u> from Alexandria,	on Easter Day, 367, Athanasius brought the matter forward at last by sending out an <u>epistola festalis</u> from Alexandria,
233.6	Dunkars	Dunkards
234.19, 20, 26	Manessah	Manasseh
262.20	thought of making	thought of as making
266.21	Herod (whose fear that Jesus might be John returned from the dead seems to have been somehow allayed)	Herod Agrippa (not to be confused with the Herod who feared that John might return from the dead)

<u>Page line references</u>	<u>first printing (March 1930)</u>	<u>tenth printing (February 1933)</u>
273.19	who originated the motto, <u>Credo quia incredibilis est</u> : I believe because it is incredible.	who is credited with the motto, <u>Credo quia incredibile</u> : I believe it because it is incredible.
284.11	Henry V	Henry IV
287.19	<u>ecclesium</u>	<u>ecclesiam</u>
290.18	He was the Paul of early Protestantism, and the most influential [sic] of all the Protestant theologians.	Calvin was the Paul of early Protestantism, and the greatest of all the Protestant theologians.
323.6	But	Both
363.25	Incas	Incans
Index, v.16	Henry IV, 110 Henry V, 284	Henry IV, 110, 284
Index, vii.2	Manes, 97 Manessah, 234	Manasseh, 234 Manes, 97

Many of these changes were made to correct obvious misspellings, such as the correction of "sailient" to "salient" on p. 218. Other changes substituted correct facts for incorrect ones, as when Mencken is discussing the catholic liturgy on p. 145 and says that ten Hail Marys are necessary when the ritual actually calls for three. Most of these changes are obviously minor matters; Mencken never allowed himself the indulgence of making changes that were not necessary for the sake of accuracy. In sending in changes for Treatise, he showed consideration for his publisher by rewriting as little as possible, and thus avoiding expensive plate changes. His determination to correct even minor errors, though, is a clear indication of his sensitivity toward criticism of the book and his pride in it.

In addition to the textual evidence, several brief and businesslike letters from Mencken to the Knopf firm survive in which Mencken asks that plate corrections be made. As early as March 27, shortly after the book's publication, Mencken wrote a note to Blanche Knopf: "The book, by the way, has some errors in it. I'll clear them up against the next printing if, when and as."<sup>40</sup> Only four days later Mencken wrote again: "Here is a list of corrections for the new printing of 'Treatise on the Gods'."<sup>41</sup> A Knopf employee later informed Mencken that they had received his 5 May corrections and that these would appear in the next "edition."<sup>42</sup> In July Mencken was told that corrections received 6 July would be made immediately and that "the sixth edition is now on press."<sup>43</sup> On 14 July Mencken supplied the firm with "three more, all sent in by a high-toned Catholic ecclesiastic!"<sup>44</sup> In supplying these revisions, Mencken was striving to perfect Treatise, methodically sending in corrections as they were brought to his attention.

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<sup>40</sup>Mencken to Blanche Knopf, 27 March 1930.

<sup>41</sup>Mencken to Blanche Knopf, 31 March 1930.

<sup>42</sup>G. G. (employee of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.) to Mencken, 6 May 1930.

<sup>43</sup>G. M. S. (employee of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.) to Mencken, 8 July 1930.

<sup>44</sup>Mencken to Mr. Stimson (employee of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.), 14 July 1930. This list of corrections has survived, and they appear at 126.17, 145.23, and 139.7 of Treatise 1930. The final surviving list of corrections that Mencken sent in was dated 20 October 1930 and includes corrections at the following points: 172.16, 234.19 and 20, Index, vii.3, col. 1, 225.18, 178.6, 193.25, 266.22, 290.18, and 189.4. All of these corrections are listed in the table of variations between the first and tenth printings.

Shortly after publication, Blanche Knopf wrote to Mencken saying that Treatise was getting a "swell" press with an advance sale of "thirty-eight hundred, the best we have ever had for you."<sup>45</sup> Only ten days later Mrs. Knopf again commented on the book's success: "I wish we had bet on the sale of TREATISE ON THE GODS. You were sure we would not reach five thousand. Well we have sold five thousand sixty-eight copies to date."<sup>46</sup> Sales of Treatise continued to rise, and Mencken's hopes for the book's success were high. On 11 April he wrote to Knopf: "I suggest that the sale be stressed in any advertisements that may be printed hereafter. It seems to me to be a far better selling point than good reviews. Americans always want to do what everyone is doing. If we could spread the impression that the book is a success it might really become one."<sup>47</sup>

On 23 March 1931, one year after the publication of Treatise, Alfred Knopf wrote to Mencken that Treatise on the Gods could probably be sold to Blue Ribbon Books for release in their dollar edition the next spring. Knopf favored this plan because "the book will have been on the market in the original edition for at least two years. . . . We think distribution in this cheaper edition will do you and your books generally a certain amount of good, and the sale of the three dollar edition will have

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<sup>45</sup> Blanche Knopf to Mencken, 17 March 1930.

<sup>46</sup> Blanche Knopf to Mencken, 27 March 1930.

<sup>47</sup> Mencken to Knopf, 11 April 1930.



pretty well spent itself by then."<sup>48</sup> Mencken gave Knopf permission to "make whatever arrangement seems advisable."<sup>49</sup> Mencken's unconcern with money and business matters, in this instance at least, demonstrates his diffidence about financial rewards from his writing. Mencken promoted his book not because of a desire to make money, but instead to reinforce his sense of its importance.

Approximately a year after the publication of Treatise on the Gods, Mencken began composing the third volume of his trilogy--Treatise on Right and Wrong (1934). On 28 May 1931 he wrote to Alfred Knopf: "'Treatise on Right and Wrong' has got to page 10 of the typescript. I begin to believe in our Heavenly Father again."<sup>50</sup> Betty Adler quotes Mencken on the composition of the book: "The writing was begun early in 1931, but there were many interruptions, and it was not until late in 1933, after I had got rid of the editorship of the American Mercury, that I was able to give my steady attention to it."<sup>51</sup> Mencken also came to feel that the cheap Blue Ribbon edition killed the sale of the regular edition of Treatise on the Gods, so he refused to let Knopf release the plates of Treatise on Right and Wrong to the dollar-book publishers.

Treatise on Right and Wrong was less successful than its predecessor. In fact, Mencken's popularity declined generally during the 1930's, partly because a depression-ridden nation had little patience for the jovial

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<sup>48</sup>Knopf to Mencken, 23 March 1931.

<sup>49</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 24 March 1931.

<sup>50</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 28 May 1931.

<sup>51</sup>Adler, H. L. M.: The Mencken Bibliography, p. 15.

antics and outmoded economic and political ideas of the Bad Boy of Baltimore. Mencken's reputation sank gradually throughout this decade, so that by 1940 he was forgotten by a large portion of the population. However, with the publication of the nostalgic Days books--Happy Days in 1940, Newspaper Days in 1941, and Heathen Days in 1943--Mencken came into the public eye again. These books were popular and received good reviews, so that an entirely new group of people was exposed to Mencken for the first time. His older admirers, by the same token, could enjoy a slightly mellowed but still sardonically humorous Mencken.

This renewed surge in Mencken's popularity prompted Knopf in 1945 to suggest that Mencken revise Treatise on the Gods, which had long been out of print. HLM's willingness to undertake this task indicates that he wished to modify his public image by updating the book. His failing health undoubtedly reminded him of his own mortality, and the relatively swift demise of his former public acclaim called to mind the fleeting nature of fame. Thus, he began revising the book to create a monument of sorts - a work that would be remembered.<sup>52</sup> Letters between Knopf and Mencken, along with additional correspondence between HLM, Blanche Knopf, and other members of the Knopf firm, reveal the actual process by which a new edition of Treatise on the Gods was created. The story of the revision is further clarified by four pre-publication forms of the text, two located at Enoch Pratt Free Library and the other two housed at Yale University Library.

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<sup>52</sup>Mencken's eagerness for literary immortality was strong, though he sometimes jested about this desire. The donation of his carefully labelled papers to Enoch Pratt was a manifestation of his wish to leave behind tangible evidence of his life and career.

Treatise's revision was first mentioned in a letter from Alfred Knopf dated 21 August 1945. Knopf informed Mencken that "TREATISE ON THE GODS is out of stock and I think we should plan a reprint. The sale, as you know, is not large, but I would not like to see the book remain out of print. Are there any corrections? Would you want to write a new introduction or anything of the kind?"<sup>53</sup> Knopf obviously did not foresee extensive modifications. Mencken replied that he will look through the book, and on 2 October 1945 he wrote to Knopf that he came to the following conclusions:

1. There should be a new preface, perhaps as long as the present one, to wit, five pages.
2. The first four sections could be made fit by making small changes in no more than 15 plates.
3. The fifth section, pp. 291-353 inclusive, could hardly be revised sufficiently by patching plates. It needs a more radical overhauling, mainly because it is full of the events of 1930. There are plenty of pages that might stand, but saving them would be at the cost of rewriting the adjacent pages to fit, a very difficult process, certain to incommode the plan.
4. The text is in Bondoni and looks very good, but I believe the cover is inappropriate for the book.<sup>54</sup>

Mencken concluded his remarks by saying that he would fall to the work of revising, which should take about a month, if Knopf felt the proposed work was worthwhile.

The revision which resulted from this exchange now exists in two parts, one at Yale University Library and the other at Enoch Pratt. The Yale manuscript, which was donated to the library by Bradford F. Swan, begins with a title page on which Mencken has written: "SECOND EDITION:

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<sup>53</sup>Knopf to Mencken, 21 August 1945.

<sup>54</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 2 October 1945.

CORRECTED AND REWRITTEN," and which he has dated 1946.<sup>55</sup> The typewritten preface of this document is a completely rewritten version with a few holograph corrections. In revising the text of Treatise, however, Mencken did not retype the entire book. Instead he used tearsheets of the 1930 edition. He pasted these on larger blank sheets and inscribed his corrections in hand for all but the final section. The early sheets have few corrections. Most are marked either "pick up" or "pick up with corrections." However, the fifth section was reworked in a slightly different manner.

The revision of the fifth section exists in three different forms. The first to be composed is now housed at Enoch Pratt Free Library.<sup>56</sup> The first page of this document is numbered 292, and it is marked "Copy from here on" in Mencken's script. In composing this section of his revision, HLM used his old cut-and-paste techniques. He tore pages out of the 1930 edition and pasted these onto the master sheets. His handwritten revisions appear in the margins, and when he wished to completely rewrite a passage he typed it himself, revising the passages both by hand and on the typewriter. The version of the fifth section that is kept with the Yale revision is a fresh typescript prepared from the "rough" revision. This typescript has handwritten revisions inscribed by Mencken and seems to have been intended to serve as setting copy for the printers.

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<sup>55</sup> Revision of Treatise on the Gods, Yale University Library, Hartford, Conn. The inscription to Bradford F. Swan is dated 1947.

<sup>56</sup> Revision for the 1946 edition of Treatise on the Gods, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore. This document has been signed by Mencken.

There is an unrevised carbon of the same typescript included with the Enoch Pratt document; one typescript is an exact duplicate of the other, except for the handwritten revisions on the Yale copy.<sup>57</sup>

The revised version of Treatise was mailed to Knopf on or about 5 November 1945.<sup>58</sup> Knopf's firm acknowledged receipt of the manuscript,<sup>59</sup> and on 14 November Knopf told Mencken that work was being done on "a new and chaste binding design."<sup>60</sup> On 20 December Mencken was informed that proofs were going out by express on that date.<sup>61</sup> These proofs are included with another set in a document donated to Yale University Library by Swan. The pages which Mencken indicated would have to be reset are stamped "AUTHOR'S PROOFS Containing Proofreader's Marks PLEASE RETURN" and are also stamped with the date 18 December 1945.<sup>62</sup> Included with these pages are galleys stamped: "DUPLICATE PROOFS Do not contain Proofreader's Marks PLEASE HOLD." These are marked either 12 April or 18 April, or are left undated, and they correspond with the pages that were not originally planned to be reset. Mencken seems to have put together two

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<sup>57</sup>The version at Yale appears to be ribbon copy and the Enoch Pratt copy to be a carbon, but the sheets have aged so that fact is difficult to determine conclusively.

<sup>58</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 5 November 1945.

<sup>59</sup>Antoinette Leger (secretary to Knopf) to Mencken, no date.

<sup>60</sup>Knopf to Mencken, 14 November 1945.

<sup>61</sup>Sidney Jacobs (employee of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.) to Mencken, 20 December 1945.

<sup>62</sup>The pages marked "reset" on the Yale revision, and which were sent to Mencken in December 1945 include: 28, 29, 57, 94, 98, 109, 110, 112, 115, 123, 126, 140, 207, 282, 284, and the entire fifth section.

different sets of galleys in order to give Swan a complete document. A few proofreading marks, apparently by Mencken, appear on those galleys dated 18 December. The duplicate proofs, on the other hand, contain no proofreader's marks.

In the correspondence, both Mencken and Knopf expressed some concern about the designation for the new book. Mencken wrote to Sidney Jacobs, a member of the Knopf firm, stating that "My inclination is to call the book 'a new edition revised and rewritten.' It is really not a second edition, but a third or fourth, for I made some changes in the plates long ago."<sup>63</sup> Knopf himself replied to Mencken's suggestion by saying that he considered the changes previously made in Treatise on the Gods as "decidedly minor." Although Knopf felt that this edition "could correctly be described as a second edition," he said that he would do whatever Mencken thought best.<sup>64</sup> Mencken responded two days later that he thought that the book should be called "Second edition: corrected and rewritten."<sup>65</sup>

But Knopf had made a mistake. On 11 January 1946 he wrote to Mencken, informing the author that the original plates for Treatise had been melted down in 1942. Knopf apologized profusely for putting HLM "to the unnecessary and painful labor" of trying to fit revisions into old plates since the book would now, of course, have to be completely

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<sup>63</sup> Mencken to Sidney Jacobs, 26 December 1945.

<sup>64</sup> Knopf to Mencken, 29 December 1945.

<sup>65</sup> Mencken to Knopf, 31 December 1945.

reset and redesigned.<sup>66</sup> Mencken calmly replied "I am rather glad that the old plates are gone, for I never liked the format. . . . Also, resetting will give me the chance to do a really good index."<sup>67</sup> Mencken also told Knopf in this same letter that the first four sections needed no further revision and could be reset as they stood.

The process of resetting Treatise was accomplished fairly quickly, for in a letter dated 28 January 1946, Plimpton Press informed Sidney Jacobs that the complete manuscript and author's proofs of Treatise had been sent to Mencken.<sup>68</sup> Mencken acknowledged receipt of those materials two days later.<sup>69</sup> These proofs, undoubtedly the first galleys, do not seem to have survived. HLM read these quickly, for in a 5 February letter he stated that he was sending Jacobs the "copy" of Treatise by express.<sup>70</sup> Mencken was quite busy at this time--he was revising his Dictionary of Quotations and was gearing up to work on the final supplement of The American Language. His preoccupation with these other matters did not prevent him from being concerned with the details of Treatise's publication, however. In his letters Mencken generally gave his publisher authority for any necessary business changes, such as raising the book's

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<sup>66</sup>Knopf to Mencken, 11 January 1946.

<sup>67</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 12 January [1946]. Mencken dated this letter 12 January 1945, but internal evidence demonstrates that he used the wrong year.

<sup>68</sup>Plimpton Press (no signature) to Sidney Jacobs, 28 January 1946.

<sup>69</sup>Mencken to Sidney Jacobs, 30 January 1946.

<sup>70</sup>Mencken to Sidney Jacobs, 5 February 1946.

price from the original \$3.00 to \$3.50. Knopf kept Mencken informed on all phases of the operation, writing him on 21 March that the first printing run would be five thousand copies.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout the myriad details of designing and publishing the book, Mencken maintained respectful interest in Treatise, despite his busy schedule. He received the final galley proofs on 16 April 1946, and on 2 May he informed Knopf "I have passed all the proofs of Treatise on the Gods, and the Index should reach Jacobs on Tuesday, May 7."<sup>72</sup> This professional tone is invariably present in Mencken's discussions of his writing. In a letter to one of Knopf's employees, Mencken remarked that "so serious a book as Treatise on the Gods should show a straight photograph" - a casual statement which nonetheless shows that HLM thought of Treatise as a work of importance.<sup>73</sup> Mencken was also concerned that Treatise receive attention from the public. In July he wrote to Knopf to indicate his willingness to help in promoting the revised edition. Mencken asked what plans for publishing Treatise had been made and then added: "It occurs to me that if I wrote a statement about it myself it might be possible to get that statement printed in various newspapers. I am not sure, but I am willing to take the chance if you think the idea is good."<sup>74</sup> Knopf replied positively a few days later, and in an August

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<sup>71</sup>Knopf to Mencken 21 March 1946.

<sup>72</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 2 May 1946.

<sup>73</sup>Mencken to Mr. Simpson (employee of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.), 24 June 1946.

<sup>74</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 25 July 1946.



letter Mencken not only mentioned the newspaper release again, but also offered to put together a mailing list for circulars of the book, mentioning that he had a "number of very live names."<sup>75</sup> Mencken also sent in a list of addresses to which he wanted review copies sent.

The "Second edition: revised and corrected" of Treatise on the Gods was published in October 1946.<sup>76</sup> Mencken wrote to Mrs. Knopf on 6 November asking about sales and mentioning that a few reviews, which "are mainly, of course, hostile," have been appearing.<sup>77</sup> Other than some official notices from the Knopf firm concerning profits from sales of Treatise, the work is not mentioned again in the extant letters between Mencken and Knopf. Mencken carried on his correspondence personally until his stroke on 23 November 1949. From then until his death, all letters were written by his secretary, Rosalind Lohrfinck.

A study of the letters and the existing pre-publication forms of Treatise clarifies the process by which the book was revised. The actual nature of those revisions is even more intriguing. The careful attention originally given to the composition of the book had made extensive stylistic revisions unnecessary. However, the revisions which Mencken does make are significant. A collation of the 1930 and 1946 versions of Treatise on the Gods uncovers the pattern of changes.

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<sup>75</sup>Mencken to Knopf, 7 August 1946.

<sup>76</sup>H. L. Mencken, Treatise on the Gods (New York: Knopf, 1946). This edition will be subsequently cited parenthetically in the text as Treatise 1946.

<sup>77</sup>Mencken to Blanche Knopf, 6 November 1946.

Many of the differences are anticipated by the prefaces of the two versions. Mencken wrote an almost completely new preface for the 1946 edition, and it varies markedly from its predecessor. The 1930 "Preface" is less serious than the 1946 version. In the 1930 edition Mencken states that his aim is "to describe some of the basic patterns of religious behavior and to show their probable origin in this or that human need--so much and no more" (Treatise 1930, p. v). Mencken adds that he has not attempted "a formal treatise" and describes the relatively relaxed layman's attitude which dominates Treatise. He proposes only to "open a few paths" through the vast jungle of theological literature, making it clear that he has no wish to become involved in complex theological debates. He is self-effacing about his final product; he observes that "what has been so powerful in its effects upon human history deserves sober study, whether it be an aberration or not. The results of my own labours in that direction, meagre though they be, I here set forth" (Treatise 1930, p. viii).

Mencken's casual modesty in the 1930 preface undergoes a change in 1946. He shows more respect for his work, hoping that the revision "will stand until long after I am hustled off to bliss eternal" (Treatise 1946, p. v). HLM's interest in literary immortality and his tendency to take himself more seriously is natural for an older man, conscious of his failing health and declining literary powers. The purpose of the book is now more soberly (though less colorfully) set forth: "My book is mainly factual. Its purpose is simply to get together, in handy and I hope readable form, the material data about the embryology, anatomy and physiology of theology, with an occasional glance at its pathology" (Treatise 1946, p. vi). In the revised preface Mencken displays increased respect and a slight defensiveness toward his work that was not present in the

1930 edition. He unapologetically describes his position in the 1930 edition as that of "amiable skepticism. I am quite devoid of the religious impulse, and have no belief in any of the current theologies" (Treatise 1930, p. vii). In 1930 Mencken felt no compulsion to consider the sensibilities of believers, but by 1946 he makes at least a passing reference to "those who believe" suggesting that they "heave this book into the dustbin, and go on reading the War Cry. The world is very wide, and there is room amidst its dermatitis for all of us" (Treatise 1946, p. vii). Mencken is also more protective of his 1930 assertion that "all religions, at bottom, are pretty much alike" (Treatise 1930, p. vi). In the 1930 preface he states this opinion unabashedly, feeling no need to explain or clarify his meaning, while in 1946 he tells his readers: "I try to rid [religion] of the metaphysical flummery that has so long encased it, and to consider it realistically and dispassionately, as one might consider any other human artifact. The notion that it differs from the rest, and is somehow superior to them, is one that seems to me to be very dubious" (Treatise 1946, p. vi). Mencken is slightly less sure of himself in 1946 than he was in 1930, when he could afford to be consciously modest about his achievement in Treatise. The events of the 1930's when he was consistently considered wrong by most Americans in his political and economic opinions, seem to have eroded his confidence to the point that he no longer presents his personal views to the reader as indisputable facts. Instead, he clearly indicates that certain of his notions now seem dubious to him personally.

As Mencken says in a 2 October 1945 letter to Knopf, and later in another letter to his publisher dated 12 January 1946, the first four

sections of Treatise are only slightly modified, unlike the completely rewritten preface. He originally tried to make revisions which could be incorporated into the plates of the book with a minimum of resetting. This limited the amount of revising that he felt he could reasonably do. But even though Mencken did feel compelled to restrict himself when he thought the Knopf firm would be using the original plates, he saw no reason to make any further changes in Treatise when he was informed that these plates had been destroyed. Thus he was largely satisfied with Treatise, and while the modifications he made are not all significant individually, taken as a whole they illustrate Mencken's careful attention to detail as he went through the last revision of a work begun almost twenty years earlier.

One of the minor changes made throughout is the elimination of the British "-our" spellings from the 1930 edition in words such as "honor," "favor," and "endeavor." Mencken appended a typed note to page 1 of the tearsheet revision of Treatise explaining: "I see no reason why we should retain the English spelling of the original edition. I have corrected the text to the American spelling." This change was undoubtedly owing to Mencken's steadily continuing interest in and championing of the American language.

Other changes were made to update Treatise, including tense shifts and references to events that had occurred since 1930. For example, Mencken modernizes this sentence: "there are remote tribes in [Mexico] who still look for the return of the old gods, and during the late combat with the Catholic church it was seriously proposed by some of the Mexican intellectuals that they be formally revived" (Treatise 1930, pp. 93-94).

HLM revised the last part of the sentence to read: ". . . it was seriously proposed by some of the Mexican intellectuals that they be revived, as the Nazis later proposed to revive Wotan" (Treatise 1946, p. 80). In trying to make his references contemporary, HLM even attacks a relatively new foe, FDR, in a passage on religious hypocrisy: "the lamented New Dealers played with [a scheme] in which the Holy Saints were to be displaced by Roosevelt II, Eleanor Roosevelt and a host of lesser semi-divinities, including, I suppose, the go-getting Roosevelt boys" (Treatise 1946, p. 290).

Some of Mencken's revisions are stylistic or involve minor shifts in phrasing. For example, he alters his intent subtly in the change from "It is no wonder that no educated Roman believed" (Treatise 1930, p. 97) to "It goes without saying that no enlightened Roman believed" (Treatise 1946, p. 83). His awareness of shades of meaning is also apparent in his rewriting of page 104. See Appendix Figure 2. His revision of lines 12-13 on this page from the original "and so saved them from the domination of a state clergy" to "and thereby saved them from the curse of a state clergy" is certainly not a major one, but it does show that Mencken was still vividly aware of each word that he used. Mencken does make changes in the first four parts but on the whole seems to have seen little reason to modify his previous work. Yet he still felt that he had not perfected the final section. The revision of this section is worthy of a more intensive examination because Mencken took greater pains with it.

The final section of Treatise on the Gods was reconsidered more completely. Its topic is the state of religion in the modern world, so it was in this section that Mencken had the largest amount of updating to

do, although by no means all of his revisions were due simply to recent changes. An examination of Mencken's "rough" revision reveals far more about his actual processes of revision than does a simple comparison of the 1930 and 1946 editions, so I will quote from this document, as well as the published version, in discussing Mencken's rewriting of this section.<sup>78</sup>

Mencken did not totally rework the fifth section; most pages remain relatively intact, but individual paragraphs are often modified substantially or even completely rewritten. One of the first things noticeable about this revision is the large number of typographical errors and typewritten corrections as compared to the original typescript of the 1930 edition of Treatise. This could be evidence of Mencken's failing powers of concentration. In revising Mencken does add contemporary references, including one to the hated Roosevelt and others to Hitler and the Nazis. Many of his allusions are now dated. Mencken always seems steeped in the current scene, a clear product of his journalistic training. But in other cases, his writing reflects his added maturity and knowledge. In a passage on the progress of the human race during the eighteenth century (Treatise 1930, p. 293), Mencken changes his focus considerably. In the 1930 edition, he disposes of advances in the period in only six lines of very general references, but in revising this passage he expands it to about eighteen lines, adding references to progress in specific fields.

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<sup>78</sup>Quotations will be from the revision of the fifth section located at Enoch Pratt Free Library and will be cited as Enoch Pratt Revision. Page numbers refer to that document.

(the arts and the sciences), as well as improvements in the average man's mode of living. In a subsequent passage on the same topic, Mencken blithely undertakes to summarize the history of the rise of the lower and middle classes in a few lines. But in rewriting this passage he admits thoughtfully: "The revolution that followed was too complex to be summarized hurriedly [sic]: its causes and events are debated in whole libraries of books, most of them worthless."<sup>79</sup> Throughout this section, Mencken expands some paragraphs and condenses others. He still works toward clear, simple expression, even if the changes are minor. The sentence "The sharpness of the current attack, after a period of relative quiescence, is due to two things" (Treatise, 1930, p. 300) is modified to "This attack has been sharper and more violent in the age we live than ever before and for two reasons."<sup>80</sup> A typical example of Mencken's revisions may be seen by comparing these two passages:

The case of the Methodist bishops in the United States comes to mind at once. One of them is a confessed gambler, others use tobacco (which is forbidden to the minor clergy on penalty of unfrocking and damnation), and practically all of them, in the matter of Prohibition enforcement, condone human sacrifice (Treatise 1930, p. 316).

The case of the Methodist bishops was ran [sic] the United States during the thirteen years of Prohibition comes to mind at once. One of them was a confessed gambler, others were accused plausibly of even worse violations of the moral law they undertook to enforce on their customers, and practically all of them, in the matter of Law Enforcement, winked at murder. Some, indeed, actually gloated over it, as their predecessors in ancient days gloated over human sacrifice.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Enoch Pratt Revision, p. 294.

<sup>80</sup> Enoch Pratt Revision, p. 299.

<sup>81</sup> Enoch Pratt Revision, p. 308.

The garbled first line from Mencken's revision shows his occasional carelessness. But more important, this passage demonstrates his ability to contemporize Treatise while retaining the flavor and impact of the original book.

One set of revisions, however, is different. Mencken seems to have done some rethinking about his comments on Jews. A fascimile of pp. 326-27 of the revision reveals that he chose to retype the most offensive lines. See Appendix, Figures 3 and 4. A full comparison of the offensive remarks as they appeared in the 1930 and 1946 editions is also illuminating:

1930 edition, p. 345-46

But in one respect, at least, Christianity is vastly superior to every other religion in being today, and, indeed, to all that we have any record of in the past:

For there is little in their character, as the modern world knows them, to suggest a talent for noble thinking.

The Jews could be put down very plausibly as the most unpleasant race ever heard of. As commonly encountered, they lack many of the qualities that make the civilized man: courage, dignity, incorruptibility, ease, confidence. They have vanity without pride, voluptuousness without taste, and learning without wisdom. Their fortitude, such as it is, is wasted upon puerile objects, and their charity is mainly only a form of display. Yet these same Jews . . .

1946 edition, p. 286-87

But in one respect, at least, Christianity is vastly superior to every other religion in being today, and, indeed, to all save one of the past:

Save for a small minority of superior individuals, nearly unanimously agnostic, there is not much in their character, as the modern world knows them, to suggest a genius for exalted thinking.

As commonly encountered, they strike other peoples as predominantly unpleasant, and everywhere on earth they seem to be disliked. This dislike, despite their own belief to the contrary, has nothing to do with their religion: it is founded, rather, on their bad manners, their curious lack of tact. They have an extraordinary capability for offending and alarming the Goyim, and not infrequently, from the earliest days down to our own time, it has engendered brutal



1930 edition, p. 345-46

1946 edition, p. 286-87

wars upon them. Yet these same rude, unpopular and often unintelligent folk . . .

Mencken's changes in this passage are subtle, yet he is no longer insulting the Jews with the same careless vigour that was apparent in the 1930 edition. By changing a few words and phrases, Mencken has softened his previous harshness. He has also attempted to avoid giving reviewers an easily quotable phrase with which they can accuse him of anti-Semitism. There is nothing in this paragraph that can be quoted with quite the same effect as was the line: "The Jews could be put down very plausibly as the most unpleasant race ever heard of." In 1930 Mencken's critics seized upon this line, repeating and alluding to it continually. Now Mencken had learned not to provide easy ammunition for his detractors.

In the 1930 edition Mencken called Christianity vastly superior to every religion now and in the past, but in the 1946 version he mentions that there is at least one religion which was superior--implying that this one is Judaism. In 1946 Mencken excludes a "small minority of superior individuals" from his assertion that Jews lack a "genius for exalted thinking." This remark is still uncomplimentary, but Mencken has cleverly included an exemption--the "small minority of superior individuals," so that Jews who want to consider themselves members of this segment can do so and feel that they are not being criticized. Even the change from "noble" thinking to "exalted" thinking is important, for the ability to think nobly would be generally considered more basic than the ability to think exaltedly. In the final two parallel passages, Mencken has shifted the emphasis from his own personal conclusions about Jews to the stereo-

types of the world at large, thus making his remarks closer to a factual analysis of an indisputable Gentile bias against Jews. The changes in this passage are minor but significant. Mencken knew well the power of words, and he never revised thoughtlessly.

Each change in the 1946 edition of Treatise had a specific reason, but his reasons for revising this particular passage are more complex than any other changes he made. H. L. Mencken prided himself on his steadfastness and often bragged about his reluctance to change his mind. Thus, it would have been completely out of character for him to have eliminated the offensive passage or to have revised it so completely that it lost its original meaning. The most Mencken was willing to do was soften his judgment, but for a man of his personality, even this was a surprising concession. It is only when we examine the changes in Mencken's life and in the world about him that we can understand his willingness to do what he so rarely did--change his mind.

In reviewing Treatise in 1930 Jacob de Haas commented prophetically that "the shade of Mencken, I foresee, will rapidly diminish, for only Jews buy anti-Semitic outbursts."<sup>82</sup> To some extent Mencken must have associated his decline in the 1930s with his reputation as an anti-Semite, a position that grew increasingly unpopular as Hitler's program of exterminating the Jews became known in the Western world.

The issue of whether or not Mencken was anti-Semitic bears on his decision to tone down his opinions. Certainly many of his friends and

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<sup>82</sup>de Haas, "Anti-Semitism in America," p. iv.

business associates were of Jewish origin. In addition to Knopf, his Jewish intimates included his collaborator and long-time friend George Jean Nathan, his two close friends Philip Goodman and Benjamin de Casseres, and his principal assistant on The American Mercury, Charles Angoff.

Angoff eventually turned against his former employer and denounced him in print after their official relationship had ended, but even Angoff admits that Mencken "would have been horrified if he had been called an anti-Semite."<sup>83</sup> Mencken did think highly of Jews in some respects. For example, in a letter to Roscoe Peacock he says: "Some of the most intelligent people in America are Jewish, and not only some of the most intelligent, but also some of the most charming. My own feeling indeed is, that taking one with another, Jews average much higher than Americans. However, I agree with you that the unpleasant ones are unpleasant almost beyond endurance."<sup>84</sup> In another letter HLM justified outspokenness against Jews in these words. "I believe there is another difficulty in the anti-Semitic question. After all, a man who believes sincerely that the Jews are a menace to the United States ought to be allowed to say so. The fact that he is wrong has got nothing whatsoever to do with it. The right to free speech involves inevitably the right to talk nonsense."<sup>85</sup>

Despite this remark, Mencken did at one point back down because of pressure from the Jews. In a 24 April 1934 letter to James Rosenberg,

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Agnoff, H. L. Mencken: A Portrait from Memory (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1956), p. 166.

<sup>84</sup> The Letters of H. L. Mencken, pp. 328-29.

<sup>85</sup> The Letters of H. L. Mencken, p. 454.

Mencken discusses two articles he wrote concerning a visit he made to Palestine. He informs Rosenberg that "the local Jewish weekly has already denounced me for the two within, and so I am not inclined to go on with the subject."<sup>86</sup> Mencken also became more concerned about his own alleged anti-Semitism when he broke with Philip Goodman during the 1930's largely because of Mencken's refusal to take Hitler and his anti-Jewish policies seriously. HLM considered Hitler a clown and a fool, and even a 1938 visit to Germany left him unconvinced that the Jews were in any real danger. It must have been a rude shock to the dogmatic Mencken when, shortly after his 1941 letter advocating any man's right to criticize Jews, reports of Nazi atrocities began appearing in America. By the time Mencken began his revision of Treatise the evidence was undeniable--Hitler was not a joke, but a murderous tyrant, and many of the German people, whom Mencken had privately and publicly admired throughout his career, had participated in the murders of millions of innocent men, women, and children.

Thus, Mencken, despite an inclination to denounce the Jews as he denounced so many other groups, toned down the offensive passage in Treatise. Although he very likely believed his remarks when he wrote them, the Days books had helped to create an image of him as the grand old man of American journalism. In revising, Mencken was trying to respond to two different emotions--the wish to avoid shattering his new-found popularity and his usual insistence on saying whatever he liked, no matter who was angered. By weakening yet not completely eliminating his insults to Jews, Mencken seems to have struck the only compromise possible for him.

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<sup>86</sup>The New Mencken Letters, p. 310.

Yet the very fact that Mencken backed down--however subtly--confirms contradictions in his nature that other commentators on his career have mentioned. Mencken was generally a kind, polite, genial man in private, yet his public image was that of a loud-mouthed vulgarian. He was at once a raucous practical joker, but also a concerned friend, who would drop everything to rush to a sickbed to offer advice culled from his years as a confirmed hypochondriac. Incongruities stand out in Mencken's nature in regard to Treatise as well. The materials relating to Treatise help to dispell some of the misconceptions that have been formed over the years. By studying Mencken's revisions, it becomes clear that he was not a bombastic battler tossing out insults effortlessly, but that he was instead a careful stylist. His rhetorical choices tell the careful observer much about the image he tried to present in Treatise and how he skillfully created his persona. The chronology of the composition and revision of Treatise and the mechanics of Mencken's working methods helps to clarify further the disparity between the public's perception of him and the traits he displayed in his career as a writer.

In revising Treatise Mencken often debated complex rhetorical choices and arrived at decisions that strengthened his intended effect. He wanted to construct a book which was learned, yet not pedantic, so he carefully corrected his facts to eliminate even the most insignificant errors. At the same time, he flaunted academics by never allowing Treatise to become dry or dull, as he felt scholarly works too often were. He would carefully cross out mundane phrases and rewrite them to add just a spark of interest or excitement. Taken one at a time, these changes are minor, but on the whole they add significantly to his ability to captivate his

reading audience. Another ploy Mencken used to maintain his reader's interest was to adhere to his rationalist viewpoint--to evaluate religion as clearly and impartially as he would any other social phenomenon. For this purpose he was sometimes willing to tone down a phrase. Mencken was well aware that the public often paid closest attention to his most outrageous assertions, so he did not modify Treatise radically, but he did keep a conscientious eye on his usual bombast. His 1930 version of the offensive remarks on Jews was a rare example of his faltering in logical, clear rhetoric, and in 1946 he revised to make his work more acceptable historically. His alteration of the passage illustrates his ability to manipulate language to create a desired effect.

These rhetorical devices and materials relating to the composition of Treatise also tell us much about Mencken the man. His organizational abilities and his methodical research helped him to summarize a vast body of complex material into readable form. Mencken's self-assurance also stands out in the content of the book. Yet between 1930 and 1946, he became somewhat less sure of himself. His revision of his comments on Jews demonstrates some weariness of battling against the public--he was no longer quite so eager to say the worst and take his lumps. Letters to his publisher reveal still another side: his concern with the book and its presentation to the public. Even though Mencken never seemed to take himself or anything else seriously, his remarks about the book and his care in revising it indicate a wish to have his works treated with respect and appreciation.

The third area clarified by examining the pre-publication forms of Treatise is the chronology of the creation of the 1930 and 1946 editions.

The letters between Mencken and his publisher in 1930-31 provide some information about this edition's composition, publication, and reception by the public, and the 1945-46 letters provide an almost complete picture of the second edition. This information allows us to look over the author's shoulder as he conceives the plan for writing Treatise and then carries it through step by step. The time and attention he lavished on Treatise indicate that Mencken's books were vitally important to him, despite the fact that he is most often discussed today as an influence on the literature and society of his day. Yet to Mencken his books were considerably more important than his position as a literary mentor or a social force. The time and effort he put into Treatise on the Gods should help to destroy the myth that his books were merely byproducts of his active life, carelessly dashed off.

Treatise on the Gods was in many respects the culmination of Mencken's career, although he remained active as a writer for approximately twenty years after the publication of the 1930 edition. The book was written at the height of his literary powers and of his public popularity. At this time Mencken was confident of his skill as a writer, and he chose his words carefully, because of his wish to create a memorable work. In revising the original draft of Treatise, Mencken shows himself to be a perfectionist, capable of turning out readable prose on the first try, but always searching for a better way of expressing his thoughts. While Mencken brought relatively little new material to the work in 1946, his revision of the fifth section shows a continuing rhetorical skill and a slightly more temperate nature. Treatise on the Gods is a history of religion from a rationalist's viewpoint, and it is fascinating still as

a commentary on that subject. The text of Treatise on the Gods now stands as Mencken wished it, a monument to his abilities as a writer.



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APPENDIX

REPRODUCTIONS OF MENCKEN'S DRAFTS

## - PREFACE

My aim in this book is to describe some of the basic patterns of religious behavior and to show their probable origin in this or that human need--  
 no much, and no more. I have not attempted a formal treatise, and so I  
 have felt no compulsion to follow a rigid pattern of ~~reason~~<sup>exposition</sup>, but have  
 set down my observations ~~in~~<sup>in a</sup> ~~free~~<sup>free</sup> manner, amplifying them when the  
 immediate ~~subject~~<sup>matter</sup> interested me especially, and reducing them to brief notes  
 when it seemed to me to be unimportant or dull.

The subject, as everyone knows, has accumulated a literature that may be fairly described as gigantic, for it has long attracted the interest of curious men, and great numbers of them have been moved to ~~set down~~<sup>set forth</sup> their notions about it. The very extent of this literature (which is largely controversial and acrimonious, ~~makes a profitable use of it hopeless to the casual layman.~~<sup>and time (thru)</sup>) Attempting a modest exploration of it, he quickly finds himself lost in a vast and impenetrable jungle, bristling with thorns. All I profess to do here is to open a few paths through that jungle -- some of them, I hope, worthy to be called ~~new~~ roads. I have not neglected instructive detail along the way, but principally I have kept to fundamentals.

*think of*

TREATISE ON THE GODS

with the prevailing theology; there were, indeed, quite as many Robert A. Millikans, A. S. Eddingtons, Henry Fairfield Osborns, and Oliver Lodges in Athens as there ~~are~~ in Anglo-Saxondom today. Philo of Alexandria, in the last century of the old era, attempted the heroic feat of reconciling the classical Greek philosophy with Judaism. A bit later Paul of Tarsus was to succeed far better with Greek pseudo-philosophy and Christianity.

*have been*

*in our own time*

As I have said, the inordinate appetite of the Greeks for imported and mutually antagonistic religions had at least one beneficent effect: it kept the official faith on the defensive, and ~~so~~ saved them from the ~~domination~~ of a state clergy. That immunity, though they did not know it, they shared with the far-away Chinese, and in a later age it was to be enjoyed by the Moslems and by sundry lesser peoples. It was not, however, to become general in the world. Both in ancient and in modern times the priests have always reached out for power, secular as well as spiritual, and the history of civilization is largely a history of the long effort to shake them off. Even when, as was the case in most of the great empires of antiquity, they are theoretically subordinate to the head of the state and can function only in his name, they almost invariably manage to invest their operations with so much importance that he is more or less in their hands. That

*96*

*theory*  
*course*  
*and*  
*after vain*

Figure 2. Tearsheet revision for the 1946 edition located at Yale University Library.

326

to answer these questions any way you choose, and to find revelation to support you. Christian theologians have been trying to dispose of them for nineteen centuries, but they still afflict every ~~and some~~ believer,

with any capacity, however slight, for anything reasonable describable as reflection.

9.

But in one respect, at least, Christianity is vastly superior to every other religion in being today, and, indeed, to all that we have any record of in the past: it is full of a lush and lovely poetry. The Bible is unquestionably the most beautiful book in the world. Allow everything you please for the barbaric history in the Old Testament and the ~~debased~~ Little Bethel theology in the New, and there remains a series of poems so overwhelmingly voluptuous and disarming that no other literature, old or new, can offer a match for it. Nearly all of it comes from the Jews, and their making of it constitutes one of the most astounding

phenomena in human history. Save for a small minority, <sup>of superior individuals,</sup> nearly unanimously agnostic, <sup>of superior individuals,</sup> there is not much in their character, as the modern world knows them, to suggest a <sup>genre</sup> ~~genus~~ for exalted thinking.

Even Renan, who was very friendly to them, once sneered at the *esprit sémitique* as *sans étendue, sans diversité, and sans philosophie.*

As commonly encountered, they strike ~~as~~ other peoples as <sup>seen to be</sup> ~~unpleasant~~ unpleasant, and everywhere on earth they ~~are~~ disliked.

Figure 3. Tearsheet revision of Section 5 located at Enoch Pratt Free Library.

dislike, despite their own belief to the contrary, and holding ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> with their religion: it is found, rather, on their bad manners, their ~~lack of tact.~~ <sup>Save for the minority just mentioned there is</sup> ~~no~~ <sup>no</sup> ~~idea~~ <sup>idea</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~more~~ <sup>more</sup> ~~obvious~~ <sup>obvious</sup> ~~qualities~~ <sup>qualities</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~tolerance,~~ <sup>tolerance,</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~good~~ <sup>good</sup> ~~taste.~~ <sup>taste.</sup> They have an extraordinary capacity for offending and alarming the Govin, and not infrequently, from the earliest days down to our own time, it has engendered brutal wars upon them. Yet these same rude, ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~unpopular~~ <sup>unpopular</sup> ~~folk,~~ <sup>folk,</sup> from time almost immemorial,

~~memorial,~~ <sup>Western world,</sup> have been the chief dreamers of the ~~and~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~beyond~~ <sup>beyond</sup> all comparison its greatest poets.

It was Jews who wrote the magnificent poems called the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, and the Books of Job and Ruth; it was Jews who set platitudes to deathless music in Proverbs; and it was Jews who gave us the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, the incomparable ballad of the Christ Child, and the twelfth chapter of Romans. I incline to believe that the scene recounted in John VIII, 3-11, is the most poignant drama ever written in the world, as the Song of Solomon is unquestionably the most moving love song, and the Twenty-third Psalm the greatest of hymns. All these transcendent riches Christianity inherits from a little tribe of sedentary Bedouins, so obscure and unimportant that secular history scarcely knows them. No heritage of modern man is richer and none has made a more brilliant mark upon human thought, not even the legacy of the Greeks.

All this, of course, may prove either one of two things: that the Jews, in their heyday, were actually superior to all the great peoples who disdained them, or that poetry is only a ~~poor~~ <sup>poor</sup> art. My private inclination is to embrace the latter hypothesis, but I do not

pause to argue the point. The main thing is that Christianity, alone among the modern world religions, has an opulent aesthetic content, and is thus itself a work of art. Its external habiliments, of course, are not unique. There are ~~Muslim~~ <sup>Muslim</sup> ~~temples~~ <sup>temples</sup> that, in their way, are quite as glorious as ~~Christian~~ <sup>Christian</sup> ~~cathedrals~~ <sup>cathedrals</sup>, and in Shinto there is a dramatic liturgy that ~~surpasses~~ <sup>surpasses</sup> the Roman Mass. But no other religion is so beautiful in its very substance — none other can show anything to match the great strophes of flaming poetry which enter into every Christian gesture of ceremonial and give an august inner dignity to Christian sacred music. Nor does any other, not even Judaism, rest

*Buddhist temple*

*inherits the catholic cathedrals, is at least as impressive as*

Figure 4. Tearsheet revision of Section 5 (p. 327) located at Enoch Pratt Free Library.



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THE COMPOSITION AND REVISION OF  
H. L. MENCKEN'S TREATISE ON THE GODS

by

Mary Miller Vass

(ABSTRACT)

During his lifetime, H. L. Mencken was sometimes dismissed as a lightweight journalist. However, in the years since his death in 1956, he and his work have received increasing critical attention. The numerous works on Mencken issued in the 1960's and 1970's have added immeasurably to our knowledge. However, serious, in-depth studies of Mencken's compositional methods have not been made, a surprising fact in light of the wealth of materials available.

This study addresses the need for such scholarship by examining Mencken's composition and revision of one of his finest books, Treatise on the Gods. The extant materials relating to this work include pre-publication forms of both the 1930 and 1946 editions and a series of unpublished letters. These documents provide the data for a study of the evolution of Treatise on the Gods. A study of the comments Mencken made about the book, as well as the stylistic changes he made in its many forms, illuminates his working methods and his personality. The result indicates that Mencken was not a careless "cut and paste" composer, but rather was a methodical craftsman, who worked diligently to polish his prose. He was also a careful researcher, who wanted to record facts accurately. Such efforts in Treatise on the Gods resulted in a durable work of scholarship and served to assure him a lasting place in literary history.