

## PREFACE

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of books in the possession of Cowper at his death includes two copies of a 1798 edition<sup>1</sup>. So we may conclude that Cowper's friends and perhaps Cowper himself had no objection to the newer style, and we are therefore not compelled to give the text an American air with 'favor,' 'honor,' 'labor,' &c., nor to print 'sdyr' (= *scire*), 'saeze,' 'cloathes,' and other spellings which creak the reader, when nine-tenths of the text is spell according to modern usage<sup>2</sup>. In punctuation the second group, especially in *Table Talk*, &c., tends to be more 'logical,' less 'rhetorical' (a word which nowadays covers some vagueness about a difficult subject); and Cowper's heroic couplets are even improved by a frequent use of stops. His blank verse is less heavily stopped, as is natural; and the second group, if somewhat inclined to insert unnecessary commas, marks out the boundaries of the comma and the semi colon far more clearly, to the benefit of sense and rhythm<sup>3</sup>.

The royal 8vo edition of 1801 has been chosen rather than any other in the second group for several reasons. A comparison of it with the rest showed clearly that special pains had been taken in printing it, and points of detail, such as the elision of 'e' in preterite forms<sup>4</sup>, carefully attended to. It has a far more handsome appearance than any previous edition. Its freedom from misprints is shown by my notes, where I have attempted to report all verbal errors that occur; absolutely, there is no doubt a fair number, but comparatively, there are few; the 1786 edition especially bristles with misprints, and the 1782 volume too has many, in spite of the list of errata which gives a false air of accuracy to the edition. The earlier editions of the second group correct most of the misprints of the first group, but introduce many of their own; these are not worth specifying, any more than those of the first group. A single instance will show the carelessness with which Cowper's proofs were read: the gross mis-

<sup>1</sup> See Mr. Wright's *Life*, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> But where an antiquated spelling persists throughout all editions up to and beyond 1801, I have felt bound to retain it; this accounts for 'scite,' 'gulph,' and a few others.

<sup>3</sup> Cowper's own views on the punctuation of blank verse are expressed in a letter to Unwin of Oct. 2, 1784 (*Letters*, ii. p. 245).

<sup>4</sup> Cowper theoretically held strong views on this point, which he did not carry out in print; see his letter to Lady Hesketh, April 3, 1786 (*Letters*, iii. 16), where he mentions Madan's criticism on his retention of the silent 'e' in words like 'placed,' and defends himself on the ground that elision might lead foreigners into mispronunciation. But the first two editions of the poems retain or elide the 'e' inconsistently with any supposed requirements of prosody, pronunciation, or typographic beauty.