The Life and Work of
Fredson Bowers

by

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I N EVERY FIELD OF ENDEAVOR THERE ARE A FEW FIGURES WHOSE ACCOM-
plishment and influence cause them to be the symbols of their age;
their careers and oeuvres become the touchstones by which the
field is measured and its history told. In the related pursuits of
analytical and descriptive bibliography, textual criticism, and scholarly
editing, Fredson Bowers was such a figure, dominating the four decades
after 1949, when his *Principles of Bibliographical Description* was pub-
lished. By 1973 the period was already being called "the age of Bowers":
in that year Norman Sanders, writing the chapter on textual scholarship
for Stanley Wells's *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographies*, gave this title to
a section of his essay. For most people, it would be achievement enough
to rise to such a position in a field as complex as Shakespearean textual
studies; but Bowers played an equally important role in other areas.
Editors of nineteenth-century American authors, for example, would
also have to call the recent past "the age of Bowers," as would the writers
of descriptive bibliographies of authors and presses. His ubiquity in
the broad field of bibliographical and textual study, his seemingly com-
plete possession of it, distinguished him from his illustrious predeces-
sors and made him the personification of bibliographical scholarship in
his time.

When in 1969 Bowers was awarded the Gold Medal of the Biblio-
graphical Society in London, John Carter's citation referred to the
Principles as "majestic," called Bowers's current projects "formidable,"
said that he had "imposed critical discipline" on the texts of several
authors, described *Studies in Bibliography* as a "great and continuing
achievement," and included among his characteristics "uncompromising
seriousness of purpose" and "professional intensity." Bowers was not
unaccustomed to such encomia, but he had also experienced his share of
attacks: his scholarly positions were not universally popular, and he
expressed them with an aggressiveness that almost seemed calculated to