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Sophie Chiari

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CERCLES

Shakespeare & Text

John Jowett

Oxford Shakespeare Topics
Oxford: University Press, (Revised Edition [First, 2007]) 2019
Paperback. ix+249 p. ISBN 978-0198827566. £16.99

Reviewed by Sophie Chiari
Université Clermont Auvergne (Clermont-Ferrand)

The author of *Shakespeare & Text*, John Jowett is currently Professor of Shakespeare Studies and Deputy Director at The Shakespeare Institute (University of Birmingham). This new, revised edition, which obviously builds on Jowett's research for the New Oxford Shakespeare, explores the rich and complex field of Shakespeare textual studies and provides us with a comprehensive and synthetic survey of the topic. It is conveniently divided into eight well-balanced chapters and, in addition, it includes two enlightening appendices (the first presenting a passage from *Hamlet* as printed in Q1, Q2 and F1, and the second informing the reader of the early editions and manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays and poems). A 'Glossary of Key Terms' will duly reassure the lay reader and enable him/her to acquire some basic knowledge regarding conflation, dittography (*i.e.* '[t]he error of writing twice the same letter(s)' [208]), or foul papers for example. Of course, at the very end, Jowett also supplies some carefully selected—hence helpful—bibliographical references in the fields of manuscript studies, of early modern printing, of editorial theory and of digital humanities.

Clearly written and informative from beginning to end, let us say right from the start that *Shakespeare & Text* poses no major obstacle for the general reader even though it sometimes addresses fairly technical issues. The author explains, in a concise introduction, that 'no manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays survive either from the theater or in his hand' [4] with the notable exception of a passage in *Sir Thomas More*, called the 'Hand D' section of the manuscript, which focuses on the xenophobic riots that took place in London. Paradoxically, today, we continue to read the poet and playwright even more than ever before. As a result, detailed attention must be paid to the book industry of his time (which promoted anonymity and collaboration altogether) if we want to fully understand 'the nature of Shakespeare as writer' [5]. Shakespeare, Jowett then reminds us, was the sharer and chief dramatist of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a playing company founded in 1594 and which became the King's Men in 1603. We do not really know what he thought of publication (critics such as Lukas Erne* argue that Shakespeare did produce reading texts for the page, and not just dramatic texts for the stage) but the fact is that he was 'an institutionalized authorial figure in its very earliest manifestations' [14].

Jowett not only insists on Shakespeare as author, but also a co-author whose texts were constantly revised. He was an active collaborating writer early in his career (he definitely had a hand in *Arden of Feversham*, *2 Henry VI*, *3 Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Edward III* for example), but his collaborations dwindled from 1594 to 1612. At the very end of his career however, he renewed with this practice and co-wrote *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* with the young John Fletcher—not to mention the lost work *Cardenio*. All of his plays, whether composed sole-handedly or not, required licensing and, therefore, had to be approved by the Master of the Revels. If and when they were printed, ‘the printer chosen by the publisher would provide an estimate of the number of sheets required for the book’ [54] and would thus ‘cast off the copy’ (*ibid.*)—a process which entailed frequent mistakes, not always duly corrected by the compositor. These corrections, Jowett points out, sometimes caused notorious cruces which still cause major disagreements today among Shakespeare’s critics.

It was the First Folio which significantly challenged previous editing habits and assumptions. The first edition of Shakespeare’s plays (which excluded the poems) was the work of John Heminges and Henry Condell, both members of the King’s Men, and it was all the more important as sixteen of the plays included in it had never appeared in print before 1623. What is more, the Folio introduced additional changes in the playtexts, and Jowett quotes significant examples from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Richard II*. The first edited collection of Shakespeare’s plays therefore offers us a ‘different Shakespeare, allowing us often to compare one form of a play with another’ [89].

Jowett then addresses the ‘Mapping’ of the Shakespearean text in his fifth chapter [99] and reminds us of the influence of the New Bibliographers who dominated the twentieth-century approaches to the playwright, and for whom ‘it was important to analyse the individual text not in isolation but in relation to a general description of the genesis and evolution of the Shakespeare text’ [99]. The period of the New Bibliography also established ‘bad’ and ‘good’ folios, the ‘bad’ ones being those thought to be affected by approximative memorial reconstruction. By the 1990s, the New Bibliography had seriously declined, but the caricatural polarisation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ texts remained—*Hamlet* being a case in point with its Q1, Q2 and F1 versions, the Q1 text being far shorter than the other ones. *Hamlet* is no exception however, since ‘quartos thought to be close to Shakespeare’s hand are arguably more affected by transcription and annotation than used to be assumed’, Jowett argues [111]. This leads him to address the issue of textual emendation, an editorial practice which aims at correcting errors and which has now been widely accepted by editors and readers alike. Conjectural emendations, *i.e.* those ‘initiated by editors without the testimony of an early text’ [127], are probably the most challenging ones. Lewis Theobald’s ‘a babbled of green fields’, in a passage from *Henry V* where the Hostess relates the death of Falstaff, is one of the most widely discussed emendations of the canon for example. The Folio notoriously reads ‘a Table of greene fields’, which does not seem to make much sense. Yet it is hard to know what the playwright meant exactly and we will probably never find his original meaning. Other possible emendations may concern the distinction between prose and verse. Indeed, because ‘the opening words of verse-lines were not usually capitalized’ in play manuscripts [135], Jowett explains, the difference between the two was not an easy one to make for the compositor.

It would be wrong to limit editorial practice to textual emendation, however. Jowett shows that the modernisation of spelling and punctuation, as well as the addition of stage directions, are both part of the editor's work. Spelling variants make the Shakespearean text notoriously unstable: the word 'sonne', for example, could either refer to 'son' or to 'sun'. In the famous opening lines of *Richard III* which allude to 'this son of York', both meanings are present, yet the editor can only retain one. Regarding stage directions, Jowett makes clear that '[t]he idiosyncratic and the particular in the wording of original stage directions are almost always preserved' [149], yet in the case of 'permissive stage directions' (*ibid.*), which happen to be particularly vague, the editor may choose to provide details reflecting his/her understanding of the stage business.

This second edition of Jowett's book would not have been complete without a last chapter exclusively devoted to 'The Digital Text' [157], which takes into account the digital revolution that allows Shakespeare's plays and poems to become even more accessible worldwide. A digital edition is much more than a simple scholarly edition, Jowett insists:

It will be critical, in the sense of reflecting an evaluation of the original documents on which it is based. It will be designed to facilitate the user's access to and understanding of the text. It might be part of a larger project, as when a marked-up digital text is hyperlinked to a recorded live performance. [169]

These new developments undoubtedly give some added value to the plays and poems: because it is now possible to introduce audio or video recordings when need be, Shakespeare's text becomes fully alive and more resonant than ever in our multimedia society. Digital editions, therefore, contribute to renew our interest in Shakespeare: not only do they accommodate a variety of different texts as well as a 'large array of data' [174], but they also reach out to a wide variety of readers who, so far, could hardly deal with the ambiguities so characteristic of early modern texts in general.

Emphasising the multifaceted nature of the Shakespearean text, this book written by a leading expert in the field proves both illuminating and useful, and offers valuable insights into early modern editions as well as modern printed and digital ones. While it will be most helpful to students interested in Shakespeare and in textual studies—especially to post-graduate students specialising in the early modern period—it will also provide the general readers with much-needed clarifications on the authorship of Shakespeare's texts thanks to contextually-based examples.

*Erne, Lukas. *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*. Cambridge: University Press, 2016 (Second Edition [First, 2003]), 2013.