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The Quest for Shakespeare's Text in Eighteenth-Century England

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Introduction

The way we edit early texts today owes much to the experiments and debates that took place in previous centuries, especially in the eighteenth-century, where the editing of Shakespeare became a national question in England for reasons I shall explain later.

As, I'm sure, you are well aware 2023 is the four-hundred anniversary of the publication of the book that we now know as the First Folio of Shakespeare, which originally bore the name of *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. The volume excluded Shakespeare's poems (his *Sonnets* had been published in 1609) and contained thirty-six plays. Without it, such currently famous works such as *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Winter's Tale* and *Macbeth*, may have never reached us.

To this day, scholarly research on the printing, compiling, classifying of works within the folio, and the way it was first emended, has never ceased. This is why one could say that the editing of Shakespeare has really become a benchmark for other types of textual revision in the Anglophone world and beyond.

Almost every major eighteenth-century multi-volume editor of Shakespeare owned a copy, often together with other early quartos of his and later reeditions of the First Folio, such as the Second Folio of Shakespeare's works (1632), the Third Folio (printed in 1663/1664) – which appeared opportunely at the Restoration – and the Fourth Folio published in 1685. Therefore, this paper will not be solely focused on the First Folio in order to give a larger overview of the conversation around Shakespeare's dramatic output.

This presentation is divided into two parts. First, I shall focus on the ambivalent dominance of major eighteenth-century editors, who were in fact lost in what Samuel Johnson aptly called a "Wide Sea of Words". Then, we shall look at the concurrent and challenging rise of amateur readers of Shakespeare, who sometimes challenged editors in productive ways and deserve a place in the history of textual editing. The conclusion of this paper will show that, even after four hundred years of intense commentary, the subject of revising Shakespeare has not been exhausted and that new light may still be shed on the nature and intricacies of the quest for Shakespeare's text.

The Ambivalent Dominance of Major Eighteenth-Century Editors lost in a “Wide Sea of Words”

Whereas the early modern period was inclined to regard the emendation of texts as a collective enterprise up until the end of the seventeenth century,¹ the eighteenth century tended to consider it primarily as the domain of a handful of editors in charge of deciding the “true” meaning of the text.

Nonetheless, the rise and supremacy of editors in the eighteenth century was somewhat of a contradictory phenomenon. Thomas Hanmer continued to fashion himself as a gentleman reader of an earlier period in the preface to his 1743-44 edition. For him, he argued, editing had been a hobby (“for his private satisfaction”) and he also believed that this activity ought to be practiced chiefly among “other gentlemen”.²

This was because some editors regarded early quarto, octavo, and folio editions of Shakespeare as too confusing for their readers. Consequently, in their view, it had to remain the domain of a small circle of scholarly specialists in charge of making these texts legible for the public. Thus, Lewis Theobald bemoaned what he called “The mangled Condition of *Shakespeare*”, while Samuel Johnson considered that Shakespeare’s language was not “designed for the reader’s desk”.³

Yet, those specialised readers had first to overcome a larger linguistic issue, which had both hermeneutic and nationalist consequences. A fair number of the notes produced by editors and many of the readers’ needs concerned the clarification of Shakespeare’s language and the correction of mistakes. However, the question remained: what principle should be employed to correct Shakespeare? Both Warburton and Johnson were acutely aware of this problem and knew full well that establishing a national language and a national literature on firm ground

¹ Sonia Massai, *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. p. 204.

² William Shakespeare, *The works of Shakespear. In six volumes. Carefully revised and corrected by the former editions, and adorned with sculptures designed and executed by the best hands*, ed. Thomas Hanmer (Oxford: printed at the Theatre, 1744), vol. 1, p. i. ESTC: T138604.

³ William Shakespeare, *The works of Shakespeare: in seven volumes. Collated with the oldest copies, and corrected; with notes, explanatory, and critical*, ed. Lewis Theobald (London: printed for A. Bettesworth et al., 1733), vol. 1, p. xxxiv. ESTC: T138606. William Shakespeare, *The plays of William Shakespeare, in eight volumes, with the corrections and illustrations of various commentators; to which are added notes by Sam. Johnson*, ed. Samuel Johnson (London: printed for J. and R. Tonson, et al., 1765), vol. 1, p. li. ESTC: N12071.

was an arduous task, not least because the unstable language of a prospective national literary author such as Shakespeare could not serve as a linguistic standard. Indeed, Shakespeare's various source texts were riddled with cruxes and textual variations. William Warburton complained that the English idiom was still "destitute of a Test or Standard to apply to, in cases of doubt or difficulty":

For we have neither GRAMMAR nor DICTIONARY, neither Chart nor Compass, to guide us through this wide sea of Words. And indeed how should we? since both are to be composed and finished on the Authority of our best established Writers. But their authority can be of little use till the Text hath been correctly settled, and the Phraseology critically examined.⁴

This "wide sea of Words" was one that Shakespeare's publishers, editors and readers had launched themselves, ever since Shakespeare had appeared in print. Such inevitably circular reasoning made the editorial task even more susceptible to negative judgement. In other words, editors had trouble to navigate their own course and drop anchor at a sensible place.

Lexicography and textual criticism were on the same boat and no one illustrated this dilemma better than Samuel Johnson. Even if his *Dictionary* appeared nine years before his edition of Shakespeare (which was published in 1765), Johnson had been working in parallel on these two projects and was conscious of the problems posed by the interdependence of lexicography and textual criticism. He had in fact used Warburton's edition to collect illustrative quotations for the *Dictionary* and when he was nearing completion of it he wrote to Thomas Warton in 1755 that he had experienced the same predicament as Warburton: "I now begin to see dry land, after having wandered, according to Mr. Warburton's phrase, in this vast Sea of words".⁵

⁴ William Shakespeare, *The works of Shakespear in eight volumes. The genuine text (collated with all the former editions, and then corrected and emended) is here settled: Being restored from the blunders of the first editors, and the interpolations of the two last: With a comment and notes, critical and explanatory. By Mr. Pope and Mr. Warburton*, [edited by William Warburton] (London: Printed for J. and P. Knapton et al., 1747), vol. 1, p. xxv. ESTC: T138851.

⁵ Cited in Jarvis, *Scholars and Gentlemen: Shakespearian textual criticism and representations of scholarly labour, 1725-1765* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 149. This paragraph is indebted to Jarvis's analyses, esp. pp. 127-28.

Meanwhile, editing gradually entered the communal field in the course of the eighteenth century and this once silent practice, which had been the domain of a privileged few, working for themselves, or for the reading pleasure of other advantaged few, was becoming an activity of domestic significance, in which potentially everyone might participate. What the editors had made available could turn against them and the *concordia discors* between editors and their other potential contenders in the public sphere also betrayed “a compound ambivalence about the relation between experts and the public”.⁶ There is no better proof of these tensions than readers’ often ironic notes in their books or manuscript miscellanies on editors themselves or on the subject of editing.

Part II: The Concurrent and Challenging Rise of The Reader

Far from being completely misguided or critically unfounded, the early modern debate around the editing of Shakespeare’s works was profoundly decisive because it wrestled with fundamental questions dealing with the nature and purpose of edited texts – but without the concurrent and challenging rise of the reader steps forward may never have been made.

In truth, what has been largely overlooked is the fact that eighteenth-century readers repeatedly attacked and contested the work of editors in the numerous inscriptions they left in Shakespeare editions. Such discussions were fuelled from the 1750s onwards by the debates that raged in literary journals destined for the same readers.⁷

Moreover, while many eighteenth-century editors had trouble departing from the “received text” of Shakespeare (established by previous editors), a large body of readers who owned early editions of the playwright were closely examining the source texts. Some were intent on adapting Shakespeare’s quartos and folios to the received text (that is, they wanted to edit the text by modernizing it in the light of eighteenth-century editions). Others, however, were either emending early editions according to their own rules and uses, or they were contesting the modern editions, noting differences and challenging modern editors. If the seventeenth-and eighteenth centuries saw the rise of the editor as a supreme authority over Shakespeare’s words, they witnessed in parallel the development of genuine personal interests

⁶ Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 43.

⁷ See Antonia Forster, “Avarice or Interest: The Secrets of Eighteenth-Century Reviewing”, *Yale University Library Gazette* 81 (2007), pp. 167-76; esp. 167.

in the text of Shakespeare on the part of readers who claimed their autonomy through textual editing. Paradoxically, the editors themselves, whose self-proclaimed function was to produce texts which readers were free to appropriate, facilitated the rise of the reader. In *Shakespeare Restored* (1726), Lewis Theobald argued, for instance, that “As SHAKESPEARE stands, or at least ought to stand, in the Nature of a Classic Writer, and indeed, he is corrupt enough to pass for one of the oldest Stamp, every one, who has a Talent and Ability this Way, is at liberty to make his Comments and Emendations upon him”.⁸

While some eighteenth-century readers began buying the new multi-volume editions of Shakespeare with their increasingly large critical apparatus of introductions, notes and illustrations, others either inherited, collected or held on to the older quarto, octavo and folio volumes. The extent to which the owners of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions of Shakespeare engaged with these books by collating, modernizing or even reinventing them is greatly underestimated.

Among the various eighteenth-century publications which were used to modernize Shakespeare's source texts, those of Rowe, Pope or Hanmer appear to have been popular. The extent to which the early texts were adapted varied, depending on how consistent and conformist readers proved to be.

Modernizing and adapting early Shakespearean editions was a fairly common practice for those who owned such editions. Yet these editorial practices also involved a degree of choice and creativity. In some cases, readers began devising personal textual principles and, as we shall discover, this could lead them to contest the authority of editors. At its worst, the *concordia discors* which ensued might take on the guise of a battle of egos, but at its best it led to a fruitful questioning and redefinition of the very purposes of editing, as the line between readers and professional editors grew thinner. What is customarily referred to now as the “rise of the editor” in the eighteenth century was consequently a complex and contradictory phenomenon.

As the reader's voice came to be heard more and more either in literary magazines and newspapers, or in the margins of Shakespearean editions (in the form of manuscript notes), there was a sense that this work of mediation could go too far – hence a potential tug-of-war between readers and editors. Indeed, as we progress through the eighteenth century there is a growing questioning and even rejection of “the scholastic commentary [...] generally perceived

⁸ Lewis Theobald, *Shakespeare Restored* (1726), cited in Simon Jarvis, *Scholars and Gentlemen*, p. 64.

and portrayed as self-obsessed, self-serving, parasitic, not seeking to explain the text but to replace it”.⁹

The work of editors—especially in its recognized excesses – had in fact become the subject of ridicule not only in literary and journalistic circles, but also on the reader’s level. Some eighteenth-century amateur compilers and anthologists would collect satirical extracts openly attacking editors. Mary Capell copied *ca.* 1740-1751 “A Sonnet upon Mr: Warburton” in her anthology of eighteenth-century verse. In her miscellany, which contains over eighty manuscript poems, she transcribed these lines that directly target Warburton:

Tongue-doughty Pedant; whose ambitious mind
Prompts Thee beyond Thy native pitch to Soar,
[...]
Much hast thou written more than will be read;
Then cease from Shakespear thy unhallow’d rage,
Not by a fond o’erweening pride mis-led,
Hope Fame by injuring the Sacred Dead:
Know, who would comment well his Godlike Page,
Critic; must have a heart as well as head.¹⁰

Another eighteenth-century reader by the name of Sarah Burnes appears to have been even more blatantly critical of Warburton. On a page of a Fourth Folio in which she has also left her autograph (Folger Fo.4 no.12), next to Strumbo’s line in *Lochrine* where the character complains that “this is my luck, that when I most would, I cannot be understood: so that my great learning is an inconvenience unto me”, Sarah Burnes added this short but cutting remark “Mr Warburtons case” (sig. Bbbb1r).

Some early editions of Shakespeare also contain manuscript statements which question editorial methods and the transformation of Shakespeare’s early texts in subsequent volumes. It is particularly striking that readers challenging eighteenth-century editors should do so in their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions of Shakespeare. While some modernized their

⁹ Marcus Walsh, *Shakespeare, Milton and Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing: The Beginnings of Interpretative Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 25.

¹⁰ Mary Capell, *Anthology of eighteenth-century verse*, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, MS Lt. 119, ff. 170r-171r. The author of the satirical sonnet was Thomas Edwards, who had attacked William Warburton’s 1747 edition of Shakespeare for its pedantry and sloppiness. The sonnet is in Edwards’s *The Canons of Criticism and Glossary: Being a Supplement to Mr. Warburton’s Edition of Shakespear. Collected from the Notes in That Celebrated Work and Proper to Be Bound up with It* (London: C. Bathurst, 1750), p. 14. ESTC: T201005.

quartos and folios, others used the dramatist's source text in order to vent their frustration at the received text which eighteenth-century editors had produced and perpetuated, despite their partial efforts to examine early editions of Shakespeare.

While one reader appears to be aware of the problems of his copy text (that is, the text of the Third Folio (Folger Fo.3 no.22)), the bulk of the annotator's remarks is concerned with the shortcomings of eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare. Writing a footnote about a line in *The Tempest* where Prospero uses the word "trash", the annotator complains "yet what abundance of nonsense has been wrote by the late Editors on this word & Passage" (sig. A1v). Commenting on a line of *As You Like It* in a marginal gloss, the reader vents his/her anger again about a number of contemporary Shakespeare editors: "*that* compleat beetleheaded blockhead Warburton has pretended to understand it as a Description of Beauty & if I mistake not Theobald & his friends are all fools alike" (sig. R4r). On the same page and about a passage spoken by Rosalind ("Over the wretched? what though you have no beauty / As by my faith, I see no more in you"), which the annotator seeks to clarify by a comment, he/she writes: "Now *this* obvious construction of *that* Passage reconciles every Line *that* follows but *the* Fools, *the* Idiots, *the* Commentators, & Publishers hitherto of our Author have not one of 'em understood *the* plain meaning of *the* Passage".

Perhaps the most damning annotation of all is when the reader accuses eighteenth-century editors of failing to acknowledge the instability of their copy text. Such an argument could only come from someone who had studied early editions closely. In a margin of *The Tempest*, one senses much irritation:

Johnson, Capel, Rowe & *the* rest, if any more, of *the* Editors of our Author, what are ye about ye Blockheads, *that* you do not tell your Readers as you go along, of these real Imperfections in the Work & tell them *that* all *that* can be expected from a Publisher is to give to *the* World his genuine Words & Meaning, & not to amuse mankind by [...] saying My Edition is a compleat Edition. When you ought to know that the Work itself is not a compleat Work. (Folger fo.3 no.22, sig. A3r)

Even though from our perspective this reader's concern for a "genuine" meaning may still appear misguided, the annotator of Folger fo.3 no.22 came close to the realisation that there is no perfect original text and that, as a result, it is impossible to go back to a state of so-called

completeness.¹¹ Early editions represent states of a text which, as we know, remains in some respects unfinished and unstable.

Another remarkable example is that of Shakespeare annotator, surgeon and apothecary John Sherwen (bap. 1748, d. 1826), who was also an amateur literary scholar and a frequent contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine*. What is fascinating in the case of Sherwen is that his marginalia and criticism of eighteenth-century editorial methods were rendered possible precisely because of the growing belief in editorial circles that readers should be free to express their views and choices and that editing was more about giving readers options than about imposing them. In his much marked and interleaved copy of Shakespeare's Second Folio (FSL Fo.2 no. 53), Sherwen had in fact made his, Samuel Johnson's hymn to personal reading, to the extent that he had transcribed it onto one of the front flyleaves of his folio (Fourth flyleaf recto).

In the preface to his 1765 edition of Shakespeare, Johnson precisely stated the two principles which would guide many amateur readers like Sherwen – first, the basic and irrevocable readers' privilege to find their own reading pleasure in a text and, second, their freedom to choose or discard whatever was made available to them in the critical apparatus. Therefore, in Johnson's mind, the rise to prominence of the editor was not incompatible with the autonomy of the reader. Indeed, in the same preface, Johnson rejected dictatorial conceptions of the editor. For him, the purpose of editing was to enable readers to develop intellectual judgement:

The reader, I believe, is seldom pleased to find his opinion anticipated; it is natural to delight more in what we think or make, than in what we receive. Judgement, like other faculties, is improved by practice, and its advancement is hindered by submission to dictatorial decisions [...].¹²

Sherwen's remarks are often astute and there are times when his open challenges to the authority of professional editors lead him to important realizations. By comparing the quarto (1600) and Second Folio versions of *Henry IV, Part 1*, he realizes that the Archbishop's advice in Act 1,

¹¹ One reader of a Second Folio currently in the Bodleian Library (Arch. G c.9) also noticed differences between early texts by collating them. Thus, for instance, in *Titus Andronicus*, the annotator remarks "18 lines here wanting which are in the 4to. 1605" (sig. pp3r) and in *Hamlet* the inscriber writes, "in Orig: here with 60 lines being the 2 scene" (sig. rr1r) and "wanting here several lines of conversation, which are inserted in the 4.to 1605" (sig. rr4v).

¹² William Shakespeare, *The plays of William Shakespeare, in eight volumes*, ed. Johnson, vol. 1, p. lx.

scene 4 beginning “Let us on: / And publish the occasion of our Armes” appears only in the Folio version and points out that “They who tell us that Shakesp. never altered or corrected should attend to this excellent Speech added by him after the first Edition” (sig. g2v). In short, from the readers’ point of view, textual notes were indubitably an improvement, but certainly did not lock meaning forever.

CONCLUSION:

As a result of the combined efforts of eighteenth-century editors and readers, one could argue that the once singular activity of perfecting and annotating Shakespeare’s text had become a way of expressing one’s “Taste”.¹³ Editors gradually sought to entertain close links with their readers through an ever-expanding body of prefaces and annotations. While early Shakespearean readers had comparatively little editorial material at their disposal and were mostly driven by curiosity and their need to perfect the text to access meaning, later readers were, in contrast, encouraged to join the conversation around the playwright’s text.

In his 1709 edition, Nicholas Rowe claimed that he did not want to be prescriptive: “I won’t prescribe to the Tastes of other People”.¹⁴ Samuel Johnson’s wish in his own 1765 edition had been to go beyond scholastic acrimony and rather than trying to supersede all previous editions, he had been keen to stress that the variorum character of his own publication reflected his views: of editing as a “co-operative process of improvement”.¹⁵ The purpose of his variorum publication was a way of reducing futile and unproductive textual controversies between editors, but it opened a new Pandora’s box of intervention by readers: “If the reader is not satisfied with the editor’s determination”, advised Johnson, “he may have the means of chusing

¹³ Paul Nelsen, “Chedworth and the Territoriality of the Reader”, *Reading Readings: Essays on Shakespeare Editing in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Joanna Gondris (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), pp. 140-63, esp. pp. 146, 156.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *The works of Mr. William Shakespear; in six volumes. Adorn’d with cuts. Revis’d and corrected, with an account of the life and writings of the author*, ed. Nicholas Rowe (London: printed for Jacob Tonson, 1709), vol. 1, p. xvi. ESTC: T138294.

¹⁵ Jarvis, *Scholars and Gentlemen*, p. 16. Johnson had famously stated in the preface to his 1765 edition that “the compleat explanation of an authour not systematick and consequential, but desultory and vagrant, abounding in casual allusions and light hints, is not to be expected from any single scholiast” (Shakespeare, *The plays of William Shakespeare, in eight volumes*, ed. Johnson vol. 1, p. lix).

better for himself".¹⁶ Johnson's choice was also amplified by a number of other editors, such as George Steevens.¹⁷

As Shakespeare joined the canon of England's national literature, the activity of reclaiming his idiom as the language of the nation through emendation, modernization or, conversely, the conservative preservation of archaisms (and occasional errors) constituted a new frontier of reading. Amateur editing acquired a fresh value, not only because readers got a sense that they too were taking part in the establishment of a national literary canon, but also because they began to discover their unique powers.¹⁸ One might speak of a "displacement of authority", in so far as "subjective readings" gained considerable ground and the new emphasis was "on the individual reader and the validation of individual response rather than the earlier emphasis on consensus" between an elite group of scholarly gentlemen.¹⁹ Amateur readers invited themselves into the editors' debates over lexicographical questions and this could produce at times some intellectual satisfaction, especially as it fostered the confrontation of alternative perspectives and nurtured the hermeneutic impulse, which is always latent in the activity of reading. Their views could sometimes be misguided and even go against editors' efforts to establish sound principles in the editing of texts, but the often close attention they paid to early texts (or copy texts), as opposed to the received texts produced by the editors, were potentially the origin of significant realizations. More importantly, readers were now in a position to arbitrate and this, in turn, influenced the way Shakespeare appeared in subsequent print editions.

¹⁶ Samuel Johnson, "Proposals for an edition of Shakespeare" (1756), cited in Margreta De Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 68.

¹⁷ In 1766, Steevens published an advertisement "To the Public" requesting assistance for a variorum revision of Johnson's edition arguing precisely that "No edition with notes critical and explanatory, can be furnished by the application of one man, but what will be found defective in as many particulars [. . .] there is scarce a reader of Shakespeare but is in possession of some knowledge which another will continue to want; and is able to illustrate from his profession, or track of reading, what may have escaped the researches of the most industrious commentator". See George Steevens, "To the Public", cited in Marcus Walsh, "George Steevens and the 1778 Variorum: A Hermeneutics and a Social Economy of Annotation", in *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Peter Sabor and Paul Edward Yachnin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 71-83; p. 72.

¹⁸ As Michael Dobson wrote, "Shakespeare the Author, just as much as his *œuvre*, becomes the centre of a struggle for the right to speak for the core of the national culture" (*The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992], p. 134).

¹⁹ Jean Marsden, *The Re-Imagined Text: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), p. 5.

In the increasingly competitive market of eighteenth-century publishing, their word—no longer limited to the margins of the printed page—held more and more sway when it came to attributing value to such cultural wares as edited and annotated Shakespearean texts.²⁰

²⁰ On these issues, Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 112.