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Shakespeare's Early Readers' Reception, Appropriation and Transformation of Printed Paratexts (1600-1800)

In this presentation, I'll be looking at Shakespeare from a history of reading point of view.

I do not deny other perspectives, but simply want to underline what important cultural work was accomplished in the paratexts¹ of his early printed editions.

From the early Folios onwards, paratexts have been crucial elements in the coming into being of print Shakespeare. To some extent, they not only bring Shakespeare into existence as a literary author but also shape his readership and are shaped by readers.

Not all paratext was skipped by consumers eager to get to the plays. Some, in fact, may never have completely read the plays and only concentrated on the preliminaries.

No doubt responding to printed constructions of the author presented to them, some readers made author-focused interventions, introducing, for instance, epitaphs and a variety of biographical and monumentalizing material (what Gérard Genette calls "epitexts")².

External texts could exert such an influence that owners of early editions of Shakespeare were sometimes tempted to align them with the paratexts of more modern publications. In certain cases, paratexts were almost entirely transformed.

Indeed, prefaces were rewritten, reconfigured, physically moved around, replaced by original manuscript introductions. Otherwise, personal and occasionally controversial elements could be introduced.

[**SLIDE**] *Author-focused Interventions: Epitaphs and other Monumentalization processes*

Shakespearean paratexts, and particularly those of the first four seventeenth-century folios, with their epistles and elegies, spoke to a culture, which, as Scott Newstok notes, was marked by "epitaphic saturation",³ one that was obsessed with death and memorialization.

In this way, some readers no doubt sensitive to the monumentalizing effects of the paratexts, with their insistence on the author as a figure authenticating the works, turned their editions into quasi shrines showcasing their admiration for a writer, whose engraving—as has been argued—precisely resembles a "death mask".⁴

On the recto of a second flyleaf in a Second Folio now belonging to the Library of Congress, one “J Leake” produced epistles to Shakespeare partly inspired by David Garrick's 1769 commemorative ode for the Shakespeare Jubilee: [SLIDE]

Shakespeare the God of my Idolatry the
 valuable sustenance of the
 soul
 J Leake
 Immortal Bard I behold the with
 religious Veneration!
 J L
 1787

The same person responded directly to the epistle “On Worthy Master Shakespeare and his Poems” by I.M.S. (sig. *3r-v). The words “Of death and Lethe” are underlined in pencil where the poem reads “*Rowle backe the heauens, blow ope the iron gates / Of death and Lethe*” and opposite these lines is inscribed the following statement in the margin: [SLIDE]

He shall live in spight of
 Death, & Lethe J L
 1779.⁵

The inscription is indicative of how readers could be creators and movers of texts. These last lines are indeed author-focused, but they belong also to the genre of the epitaph, rather than just to the epistle, or the ode.

Crucially, while the folios were concerned with establishing a literary place for a deceased writer (here lies Shakespeare, in other words), readers paradoxically reinforced these intended effects by altering the paratexts, recomposing the printed “here lies” and by importing into the “here” of the book, the “there” of other circulating epitaphs about Shakespeare.

This celebration of Shakespeare through epitaphs went hand in hand with the desire to know more about the dramatist.

The folios’ paratexts had whetted readers’ appetites, but it was not until Rowe’s 1709 edition [SLIDE] that a published version of Shakespeare’s plays produced a biography of the author—the much reprinted *Some Account of the Life, &c. of Mr. William Shakespeare*.

What readers did not find in their early books (collected or single play editions), they went to seek in “epitexts” of various natures: seventeenth-century accounts of English poets and, later, the well garnished prefaces of major eighteenth-century Shakespearean editors.

Therefore, through the work of readers who circulated these texts, I argue that the author was literally and symbolically re-inscribed into early printed editions.

[SLIDE] *Importing Critical Epitexts: Aligning Early Editions with the Paratexts of more Modern Publications*

With increasingly more Shakespearean editions and more critical material (or “epitexts”) at their disposal, early readers could construct personalized paratexts.

Again, it is intriguing to see what they chose, which can reveal what these readers thought was lacking in early playbooks.

So, readers engineered a dialogue between old and more recent publications and newly created their books, to some extent, by altering or extending their paratexts.

One type of supplementary paratext that was relatively common was the glossary, or series of explanatory notes inserted in printed early editions.

For instance, in a Third Folio held by Meisei University Library (MR 733) seven leaves at the front of the book [SLIDE] consist of a manuscript glossary written only on the recto of these pages. The glossary resumes at the end of the same work on the recto of three leaves. These leaves were probably bound into the volume and were meant to complement the notes inside.

Another Third Folio (British Library c.39.i.20.) [SLIDE] follows a similar pattern and differs only in that the paratext is situated mostly within the volume itself (which does not fundamentally contradict extended definitions of paratext).⁶

Indeed, between sigs. B3v and B4r of *The Tempest*, one finds two flyleaves bound in with the play that contain a series of notes clarifying a number of lexical difficulties on Act 1, scenes 1 and 2 and on Act 2, scene 1. Moreover, at the end of *Hamlet*, between sigs. Sss5v and Sss6r two leaves with a list of words and references have been interpolated. Fourteen numbered folio pages of emendations and explanations follow them.

These notes are dated and headed [CLICK]: “Corrections and Explanat [sic] of | M^r Shakespear’s Tragedy | Of Hamlet. Novr 5. 1743”. This time the reader-annotator appears to have used Theobald’s 1733 edition, at least for some annotations, as on f. 1v [CLICK]: “Mr Theobald seems to have guest right, that instead [...]”.

Other noteworthy features in this volume are that a manuscript table of contents has been added on sig. Eeee4r just before the set of plays now considered apocryphal (apart from *Pericles*).

After the last of these works (*Locrine*) two unpaginated folio sheets are inserted with handwritten notes. These are in a different hand from the previous notes and include biographical information, as well as some critical comments on Shakespeare's works, such as [CLICK] "Mr Shakespear likewise wrote the following poems; which, tho' inferior to his Dramatic performances, yet have they numerous beauties" [f. 1r].

Manuscript paratexts are very often generically permeable (a mixture of navigational tools, biographical or analytical critical/explanatory notes).

[SLIDE] *Reconfiguring Paratexts: Inventing Personal Prefaces and Contesting Printed Paratexts*

In this last section, I'll be dealing with some of the more adventurous readers. Those for whom the original printed paratexts seemed unpractical and persons who—no doubt inspired by the prefaces they read—drafted their own introductions.

Other bold readers introduced humorous or even transgressive elements in the volumes' preliminaries, while some added controversial epitexts that could be considered to change the value and meaning of the book itself.

In Folger Fo. 2 No.38 [SLIDE], on the verso of "The Names of the Principall Actors" (sig. *r) and facing Jonson's "To the memory of my beloved" (sig. *2r), one finds an ink manuscript "A Discourse by way of <preface to William Shakespeare>".

Its characteristics suggest that it is a written draft (a work in progress) because of its roughness. The hand appears to date back to the second half of the seventeenth-century, or to the early years of the next.⁷

At all events, it could not have been composed before 1667 because of its reference to *Paradise Lost* (first published that year). Despite long searches, the author remains untraceable and there is reason to believe that this may be an original preface that never reached press.⁸

The "Discourse" [SLIDE] offers a positive, but remarkably [kən'trɑ:stɪd] contrasted, appraisal of Shakespeare's legacy.

In contrast to the surrounding printed paratexts, there is for the reader-annotator a sense that Shakespeare is in some respects inferior to modern authors [CLICK1]: "<If> Shakespear were a modern writer and one of this age <n>ow in England 'tis undoubted his praise would nott rise halfe *the* height that now itt stands in".

Nonetheless, this is counterbalanced by the fact that, according to the inscriber, [CLICK2] "'tis from him and by him that we gett and regulate all plotts contriuances & actions".

While the commentary remains overall laudatory, the annotator does find “kind of absurdities” in Shakespeare and faults even in the “highest and best of his characters”.

Yet these can be excused, the writer claims, if we recognise / our debt to former writers / and adopt implicitly a progressive view of literature [CLICK3]: “Butt in him we must allow feasible in regard of the grosness of the times wherein he liu’d” (sig. *v).

As we have seen, the paratext of the First Folio (and of the ensuing folio volumes) is frequently scrutinized.

Nevertheless, there is one feature that goes almost always unmentioned—its epistles and poems are the work of men, speaking about the achievements of another man, as well as it includes the names of male actors in his company.

As more and more women gained access to Shakespeare’s editions, there is clear evidence that some of these readers wished to make a stand.

This is very much the case in the opening pages of Folger Fo. 1 no. 23, including the volume itself. The female inscriptions inside the book could be construed as ways of appropriating it and as statements made by women readers that, to some extent, enter into dialogue with the folio’s printed paratext, altering the manner in which this copy is received and read.

Indeed, the book contains various striking examples of female proprietorship. [SLIDE] Mary Child, a mid-seventeenth-century annotator, inscribed her name on different pages.

Elizabeth Brocket (*fl.* 1695-1712), whose husband’s bookplate is patent at the beginning of the same folio, also made the same strong ownership claims.

While her husband (William Brocket (1717-1791)) had no doubt purchased the folio, she appears to have been the only one to truly engage with it.

[SLIDE] Elizabeth Brocket signed her name on three different dates (1695, 1702, 1712) on the page opposite her husband’s bookplate (sixth front flyleaf recto), thus constantly reinstating her claim to and interest in the book. The phrase “Elizabeth Brockett Her Book” is likewise traced in large characters many times on the same leaf.

Even more revealing of Brocket’s determination to appropriate the Folio as a female reader is a twenty-four-line lyric—Lady Mary Chudleigh’s “To the ladies”, which was published [SLIDE] in *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703).⁹ The transcription [SLIDE] appears before the folio’s paratext and occupies almost the whole of the verso of the fourth front flyleaf. The opposite page is blank, apart from Elizabeth Brocket’s very large calligraphed signature.

The manuscript lines begin with [CLICK1] ‘Wife and Servant are the same, / And only differ in the Name’. They go on to emphasize the difficulty for a woman to express herself: [CLICK2]

“Like Mutes alone she Signs must make / And never any Freedom take. / But still be govern’d by a Nod”.

The poem ends on lines that lend a noticeably militant and doubtless polemic tone to the volume’s preliminaries. **[CLICK3]**:

Shun, O shun, that wretched State,
And all the fawning Flatterer’s Hate.
Value you selves [sic] and Men dispise,
You must be proud if you’d be wise.

It is obvious that “owning” a First Folio by annotating it in this fashion could be for an early woman /, such as Elizabeth Brocket, a statement of intellectual independence and freedom in a prestigious book bought by a man.

While such preliminary annotations might not have been enough to alter the potential reception of the whole volume, they were certainly meant to create an impression and to divert the folio from the more conventional journey charted by its printed paratext.

[SLIDE] *Conclusion*

In that most fragile of places the periphery of early books is notoriously what suffers most in terms of conservation essential testimony remains.

What early annotated editions of Shakespeare show is that paratexts were indeed crucial zones of “transaction” between the book and the reader.¹⁰

When readers interacted with Shakespearean paratexts, they initiated a dialogue. The marks they left on these pages are traces of their evolving needs and questions—on the fringe of the Shakespearean text, mostly.

These exchanges between readers and printed paratexts left numerous remnants, no doubt because what paratexts they found triggered reactions.

The printed preliminaries were deemed lacking or confusing, and ever in need to be completed, or challenged in some regard.

More generally, this type of exchange is an illustration of a very characteristic early modern and modern phenomenon—the intersection of print and manuscript.

The book was a hybrid form in constant transition and bore the evidence of the multiplicity of agents involved in its production and reception.¹¹

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- ¹ The term « paratext » was coined by Gérard Genette in his book entitled, *Seuil* [*Threshold* in English], collection “Poétique” (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987). For reasons of accessibility, we will refer henceforward to its English translation: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Levin, foreword Richard Macksey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ² Genette’s editor, Richard Macksey, usefully clarifies these terms as “those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*)” (Richard Macksey, “Pausing on the threshold”, in Genette, *Paratexts*, pp. ix-xxii; p. xviii).
- ³ Scott Newstok, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: the Poetics of Epitaphs beyond the Tomb* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 8.
- ⁴ “Shakespeare’s portrait has the sombre gravitas of a tomb effigy, its proportions skewed in a manner, which makes the head appear to float spectrally above the collar like a death-mask” (Chris Laoutaris, “The Prefatory Material”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s First Folio*, ed. Emma Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 49-67, at p. 51).
- ⁵ Library of Congress Second Folio Copy 1.
- ⁶ Genette himself was aware that paratexts were not limited to liminal spaces. Nonetheless, as he put it, and in order to set some limits to his project, “However indeterminable its boundaries, the paratext retains at its center a distinctive and undisputed territory where its ‘properties’ are clearly manifest [...]. Outside of that, we will be wary of rashly proclaiming that ‘all is paratext’ ” (Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 407).
- ⁷ I would like to thank Stanley Wells and Martin Wiggins for help on dating this preface and for sharing their conclusions with me.
- ⁸ There is no trace of it in the usual databases (EEBO, ECCO, LION and Google Books), or in C.M. Ingleby’s *Shakespeare’s Century of Praise*, rev. second ed. (London: Alexander Moring, 1879) and Brian Vicker’s *Critical Heritage* series.
- ⁹ Mary Chudleigh, *Poems on several occasions. Together with the song of the three children paraphras’d* (London: Printed by W.B. for Bernard Lintott, 1703), p. 40. ESTC: T097275.
- ¹⁰ Indeed, the most directly useful part of Genette’s definition is perhaps his idea that paratexts constitute “a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*” (Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 3), the latter term being close to what we now call “negotiation”. See, in this field, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations, The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and also Peter Sallibrass, “Afterword”, in *Renaissance Paratexts*, ed. Smith and Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 204-19; at p. 219.
- ¹¹ See David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 34; 50 et passim.