
Editing Shakespeare for the Twenty-First Century

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The first prerequisite for the endurance of Shakespeare through history is a good text of the plays. Without editions there would be no Shakespeare. That is why every twenty years or so throughout the last three centuries there has been a major new edition of his complete works. One aspect of editing is the process of keeping the texts up to date – modernising the



spelling, punctuation and typography (though not, of course, the actual words), providing explanatory notes in the light of changing educational practices (a generation ago, most of Shakespeare's classical and Biblical allusions could be assumed to be generally understood, but now they can't).

But because Shakespeare did not personally oversee the publication of his plays, editors also have to make decisions about the relative authority of the early printed editions. In the case of *King Lear*, there are hundreds of differences between the pocket format 'quarto' edition published in Shakespeare's lifetime and the elaborately produced First Folio text of 1623, the original 'Complete Works' prepared for the press after his death by Shakespeare's fellow-actors, the people who knew the plays better than anyone else. Some of the differences are far from trivial, among them Lear's dying words and the question of who rules Britain at the end of the play.

Generations of editors have adopted a 'pick and mix' approach, moving between quarto and folio readings, making choices on either aesthetic or bibliographic grounds, and creating a composite text that Shakespeare never actually wrote. Not until the 1980s did editors

follow the logic of what ought to have been obvious to anyone who works in the theatre: that the quarto and folio texts represent two discrete moments in the life of *King Lear*, that plays change in the course of rehearsal, production and revival, and that the major variants between the early printed versions almost certainly reflect this process.

The scholarly editing of Shakespeare began in the eighteenth century, when the model for such activity was the treatment of the classic literary and historical texts of ancient Greece and Rome. The recovery of those texts had been at the core of the humanist Renaissance. The procedure was to establish which surviving manuscript was the oldest, the aim being to get as close as possible to the lost original, weeding out the errors of transcription which had been introduced by successive scribes in the centuries before the advent of print. As Shakespeare began to be treated like a classic, the same procedure was applied to his texts. The eighteenth century also witnessed his rise to the status of national genius, icon of pure inspiration. This image required the imagining of a single perfect original for each play. Shakespeare



couldn't be allowed second thoughts – that would imply some deficiency in the first ones.

About half of Shakespeare's plays appeared in print in his lifetime in quarto format, cheap little books analogous to the modern paperback. Following the classical principle that the earliest surviving text must be the one closest to the original authorial manuscript, generations of editors preferred the quarto texts to the posthumously-produced folio – save in a small

number of cases where the quarto text was so full of errors and inconsistencies that they had to rely on the folio. For this reason, all edited texts of the complete works published in the past three centuries have been hybrids of quarto and folio, scholarly reconstructions that merge together different moments in the original life of many of the plays. So, for example, *Richard II* is always edited from its 1597 quarto, but with the pivotal dethroning scene imported from the 1623 folio (the scene was ‘dangerous matter’ politically, so its absence from the quarto was almost certainly the result of censorship).

If you look at printers’ handbooks from the age of Shakespeare, you quickly discover that one of the first rules was that whenever possible compositors were recommended to set their type from existing printed books rather than manuscripts. This was the age before mechanical typesetting, where each individual letter had to be picked out by hand from the compositor’s case and placed on a stick (upside down and back to front) before being laid on the press. It was an age of murky rushlight. And of manuscripts written in a secretary hand which had dozens of different, hard-to-decipher forms. Printers’ lives were a lot easier when they were reprinting existing books rather than struggling with handwritten copy. Easily the quickest way to have created the First Folio would have been simply to reprint those eighteen plays that had already appeared in quarto and only work from manuscript on the other eighteen.

But that is not what happened. Whenever quartos were used, playhouse ‘promptbooks’ were also consulted and stage directions copied in from them. And in the case of several major plays where a well-printed quarto was available (notably *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Richard III* and *Troilus and Cressida*), the Folio printers were instructed to work from an alternative, playhouse-derived manuscript. This meant that the whole process of producing the first complete Shakespeare took months, even years, longer than it might have done. But for the men overseeing the project, John Hemings and Henry Condell, friends and fellow-actors who had been remembered in Shakespeare’s will, the additional labour and cost were worth the effort for the

sake of producing an edition that was close to the practice of the theatre. They wanted all the plays in print so that people could, as they wrote in their prefatory address to the reader, ‘read him and again and again’, but they also wanted ‘the great variety of readers’ to work from texts that were close to the theatre-life for which Shakespeare originally intended them.

The Shakespeare First Folio is one of the iconic books in the cultural tradition of the West – indeed, given Shakespeare’s unprecedented international reach of the world – but such is the conservatism of scholarly tradition that it has taken three centuries for it to be properly edited as a book in its own right, for the practice of mixing quarto and folio copy texts to be challenged. Astonishingly, given the status of the First Folio, the RSC Shakespeare is the first edition of the *Complete Works* in three centuries to use the Folio as copy-text throughout.

This is not to say that we have edited the Folio as if the Quartos did not exist. Quarto readings are invaluable in the process of identifying and correcting printing errors in the Folio. And, indeed, it is a matter of peculiar good fortune that they exist for several of the tragedies. The overall standard of printing in the First Folio is remarkably high, though there are degrees of variation according to the nature of the printer’s copy for each play and the habits of the various members of the team of compositors who worked on the project. However, after the comedies and histories were completed, a new and less competent printer joined the team. Probably an apprentice, he is known by scholars as Compositor E. He was responsible for typesetting large chunks of *Troilus and Cressida*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*: consultation of the Quartos allows us to undo much of his bad work in these plays.

Like all editors since those of the 1632 Second Folio we have attempted to be more accurate than the First Folio compositors were. Our golden rule has been to follow the Folio whenever it makes sense, but correct it from the Quartos when a Quarto is manifestly correct and the Folio manifestly erroneous. So too with the larger question of emendation: we follow

the Folio whenever it makes sense, but correct it from the editorial tradition when the editorial tradition makes sense of what is manifestly erroneous in the Folio. In cases where differences between Folio and Quarto are, in the editors' judgment, due not to a compositor's error but to a divergence in copy (because of authorial or playhouse revision, or intelligent alteration or annotation or sophistication on the part of the book-keeper or editor or scribe who prepared the Folio text), the Folio is followed, but if the revision is of substance and interest it is flagged in the textual notes. For the sake of completion, substantial Quarto-only passages — which are especially numerous in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* — are edited separately at the end of each play where they occur.

Our text, then, aims to be simultaneously authentic and modern. Spelling and punctuation must be modernized to ensure that Shakespeare remains a living dramatist. Speech-headings need to be rendered consistent and other tidying up is necessary for the sake of the modern reader and actor. We aim to return to the origins of Shakespearean editing in homage to Hemings, Condell and their team, but at the same time we have learned the lesson of late twentieth century scholarship and editorial theory: that there is no single definitive authorial text, because many different agents at different moments influence the creation and dissemination of a play. To stress again: our claim to originality is that we have edited a real book (the First Folio), not an imaginary construct ('the plays as they came from Shakespeare's hand', as in the dominant editorial tradition, or 'the plays as first performed' as in the revisionist school of editing). We grant that this results in the alteration of some things that Shakespeare originally wrote, as in the case of oaths, which were modified ('heaven' for 'God', removal of the blasphemous 'zounds' and 'sblood') following a parliamentary act of 1606. We accept that there are almost certainly passages in the Folio that are the result of playhouse additions after Shakespeare's death or scribal regularization and emendation in the process of preparing copy. But such features are worth retaining for the sake of editorial consistency, of fidelity to the ambition of recovering the plays

at one particular key moment in their evolutionary history, and of recognition that Shakespeare's achievement was at the profoundest level collaborative.

We have also respected the Folio in editing its preliminary matter. And we have demarcated the non-Folio works (poems, sonnets, Quarto-only passages of *Hamlet* and *Lear*, together with the two collaborative plays, *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*) by setting them in double-column format — a deliberate inversion of the original distinction whereby Quartos were single column and Folio double. Unlike some modern editors, we are not fully persuaded that Shakespeare wrote the Countess of Salisbury scenes in the anonymous play *Edward III* — stylometric analysis increases our scepticism — so that play is not included (though we have edited the Countess scenes on the edition's website <www.rscshakespeare.co.uk>).

To illustrate the results of our method, here are two simple examples, one of Quarto/Folio variation and the other of our presumption against emendation unless it is absolutely necessary. Each involves a kiss. Othello tells the assembled senators of Desdemona's reaction to his narrative of his exotic military adventures. Quarto has 'She gaue me for my paines a world of sighes'. Folio has 'She gaue me for my paines a world of kisses'. Nearly all editions follow Quarto, even when Folio is their base-text. The assumption seems to be that Desdemona would not be so forward as to kiss Othello when he is still a comparative stranger. But 'kisses' for 'sighes' is an unlikely scribal or printer's error. It is more probable that each reading is true to the play at the particular moment in its life represented by the respective texts. We edit Folio, so we retain Folio's 'kisses'. We note in our commentary that in the usage of the period kisses could mean 'gentle touches', but it is also the case that Venetian customs of courtesy in the play are by any standard forward — Cassio greets Iago's wife Emilia with a kiss on arrival in Cyprus and Iago's manipulation of Othello plays intensely on the Moor's lack of ease with Venetian body language. A Desdemona who kisses Othello in the imagined pre-action of the play is a stronger, more active and interesting character than one

who merely sighs in admiration for his charisma.

At the climax of *Much Ado about Nothing*, all modern editions give Benedick the line 'Peace, I will stop your mouth', at which point in all modern productions he kisses Beatrice. But the Folio reads '*Leon*. Peace I will stop your mouth'. It is hard to imagine that the printer misread the speech heading '*Bene*' as '*Leon*' and, besides, by this point in the play Benedick is addressing Beatrice with the intimate 'thou' and 'thy', not the more formal 'you' and 'your'. There is therefore every reason to suppose that Shakespeare intended the line to be spoken by Leonato — who perhaps *forces* Benedick and Beatrice into a kiss. By restoring the Folio line to its original speaker we create the possibility for a staging that is at once more challenging and, in all probability, more authentic.

Editing the Folio has involved us in hundreds of decisions of this sort. We hope that our edition may come to be regarded as modern equivalent to the eighteenth-century example of Dr Samuel Johnson. As Johnson drew on the revolutionary textual innovations of his predecessors such as Lewis Theobald, but had a presumption in favour of the authority of the Folio and of *explaining rather than emending* Shakespeare's text, so we draw on late twentieth-century scholarly innovations but inaugurate the twenty-first century editorial tradition by falling back on Johnsonian common sense and gratitude to John Hemings and Henry Condell for their extraordinary work in making Shakespeare available 'to the great variety of readers' in a text that keeps his plays anchored in the place from which they came and where they continue to be most alive: the theatre.

Establishing the text is only the beginning of the editor's task. It is also our duty to explain Shakespeare's language. For a global audience in the twenty-first century, educated far away from the nuances of sixteenth-century English and in many cases coming to Shakespeare from the position of a non-native speaker, the explanation of language in context is perhaps the most important aspect of an edition. And the creation of such explanation is a task for which twenty-first century editors have resources and freedoms not available to our predecessors.

Possessed of a vocabulary of at least 20,000 words, Shakespeare was the man who gave us terms such as 'hunchbacked', 'tranquil', 'schoolboy', 'coldhearted' and 'shooting star'. It was Shakespeare who gave the owl his cry of 'tu-whit, tu-who' (although 'whit' and 'woo' are in fact individual mating calls made by separate owls). He invented now-familiar phrases like 'skimmed milk', and 'dead as a doornail', maxims like 'the course of true love never did run smooth'. He relished the very sounds of words - the belched belligerence of 'garboil', the scrambled incoherence of 'skimble-skamble' and the hissed fastidiousness of 'preznie'. In his plays, he refers to 'words' more than 800 times, to 'speaking' over a thousand, and his characters don't just 'speak' — they 'howl', 'carp', 'buzz', 'lisp', 'rant', 'mutter' and 'drawl'. Like the theatre for which he wrote, Shakespeare's plays are shifting seas of words and sound, from the 'sweet airs' and narcotic 'voices' that haunt a magical island, to the lively 'brabble' of drinkers at a London tavern and the sound and fury of the 'dogs of war'. He even incorporated the notoriously noisy playhouse audience into his soundscape: in *The Tempest* they double up as the sea, surging round the three sides of the stage as it becomes the deck of a storm-tossed boat. Shakespeare calls them 'roarers', a word that neatly encapsulates two senses of 'noisy waves/riotous revellers'.

One of the challenges in working on the new edition of Shakespeare's works has been how to return this sense of linguistic exuberance to the text. In a highly literate age such as ours, we need to remind ourselves that in 1600 language was not primarily *writing*, but speech and sound. Spelling was not standardised and monolingual dictionaries did not exist. Languages themselves were known as 'tongues'. When Shakespeare wrote 'mettle' it is not always clear whether he meant 'spirit, temperament' or 'metal'. Frequently, of course, both meanings are present. When Macbeth tells his wife that, should she have children, her 'undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males' he plays on the idea that, as a 'metal', she should be used to make 'mails' (i.e. chainmail).

armour). Meaning existed, as Shakespeare's sonnet 81 has it, 'where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men'. (His sense that words were alive is neatly demonstrated here by the fact that the reader must pause to breathe after the comma in the middle of the line). His plays are packed with puns: sole/soul, eye/I, horse/whores/hoars/hares. Some of these need a note on contemporary pronunciation. Falstaff's 'Give you a reason? If reasons were as plenty as blackberries, I would give no man a reason' is tricky if we do not know that 'reason' was pronounced 'raisin'. Others are more straightforward: the soldier Pistol's blustering threat to 'firk' ('beat') a captured Frenchman has the unfortunate result of being heard as an altogether more explicit proposal. The French princess Katherine who is to marry Pistol's king similarly misunderstands 'foot' as 'foutre'.

The mangling and malapropisms of foreigners, of bumbling police constables and affected courtiers demonstrates the endless slipperiness of Elizabethan English, a language in which the meanings of words were not fixed and Shakespeare did not reside silently in the pages of a book. In the Foreword to the new edition, Michael Boyd calls the Shakespearean text a 'blueprint for performance to a live audience', its words rippling with a host of possible linguistic and theatrical senses that it is important for the on-page notes to provide access to. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, features a play in which a character represents a wall with a hole in it, through which two lovers whisper and try to kiss. 'My cherry lips,' moans the lovelorn Thisbe, 'have often kissed thy stones, / Thy stones with lime and hair knit up in thee.' Traditionally, the actor playing the wall arrives on stage wearing a brickwork-patterned board or sheet, extending his fingers in an 'O' to represent the chink the lovers peer through. But the language reveals that there is a different – and funnier – joke here altogether. The word 'stones' can also mean 'testicles', 'lime' was pronounced 'limb' (a word for a penis) and 'hair'... probably needs no explanation. Rather than standing with arm outstretched, the actor playing the wall is standing with his legs apart, making for a much

ruder joke when Thisbe attempts to kiss her lover only to 'kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all'. Our discoveries of wicked new theatricality in the language have already filtered into RSC productions like Gregory Doran's *Dream* in which, according to the *Guardian* reviewer, 'the real success [was] pulling off an exceptionally funny play within a play'.

Annotating the Shakespearean text should be a means of opening up these double-hinged doors of language. In the RSC edition we have tried to generate a sense, not only of the sounds of words, but of the 'non-standard' meanings that often accompanied the primary senses of words. Shakespeare's sexual language and slang fell victim to the great editorial tradition of the eighteenth century, an age of dictionary-making possessed by a desire to fix language and regularise spelling. In his famous *Dictionary*, as in his edition of Shakespeare's works, Dr Johnson sought to 'secure our language from being overrun with cant... crowded with low terms', to 'facilitate', 'settle' and 'civilise' English. A number of Shakespeare's colloquial references simply evaded editors. Many of them, however, were deliberately purged and pruned, dropped from the explanatory notes, inaccurately defined, or only partially glossed. Mercutio's song about syphilis in *Romeo and Juliet* was dismissed by one editor as 'a not very intelligible fragment of some ballad' for example. Shakespeare's energetic engagement with the vagaries and vulgarities of everyday speech was incompatible with his emerging status as a national icon. When editing 'divine Shakespeare', one eighteenth-century scholar declared, one was responsible for 'restoring to the Publick their greatest Poet in his original Purity'. The legacy of this can be seen in many twentieth century editions, in which slang words or dialect forms often go without a gloss. Until very recently there has been a continued reverence for the bard that often leads to all sorts of words being dismissed, unhelpfully, as 'bawdy quibbles', 'obscure' or 'of uncertain meaning'. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* (which is extensively influenced by Johnson's work on Shakespeare) does not cater for all meanings that were active in the sixteenth century.

In preparing the RSC edition, we have been able to take advantage of new electronic resources that are revolutionising the way we understand Shakespeare's language. When it comes to getting a clearer idea of spoken or informal English, being able to search digitised databases of ballads, proverbs or letters is invaluable. Vast collections of poetry, prose and drama are now available online and can be searched quickly and accurately. This gives us a sense of how words were operating in a huge variety of contexts; it has enabled us to see that, whilst Shakespeare certainly invented a considerable number of words, many of the terms the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies as Shakespearean coinages had been used by others before him. Similarly, words that the *OED* gives a later date to are shown to have been alive and well in the sixteenth century. Searching the growing number of online texts, and employing the recent specialist dictionaries they have helped to create, tells us that Troilus' instruction to 'wear a castle on thy head' refers to a type of helmet, and that the French Dauphin's boast that he has besieged or 'banked' enemy towns is a card-playing metaphor referring to securing one's winnings. Tom Snout the tinker in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is thought to have been named after the spout of a kettle, but sixteenth century kettles did not have long nozzles; instead, texts from the period show that 'snout' could refer to the lip of a lidded drinking vessel. Perhaps this is a character who, in addition to possessing a large (or red) nose ('snout'), is fond not only of mending but drinking from pewter tankards. A search of contemporary drinking songs throws up a number of inebriated 'Tom Tinkers'.

Many of the new resonances to emerge in the preparation of the new edition relate to technical language - legal or medical terminology for example. Lady Macbeth's 'a little water clears us of this deed' refers both to cleansing the hands of blood and to being legally exonerated from a criminal act. When Romeo makes 'a dateless bargain to engrossing death', death is seen as both all-consuming and as an exacting lawyer who has 'engrossed' (copied out in legal hand) the contract on Romeo's life. In *Hamlet*, images of disease and medicine

feature prominently. During the play-within-a-play he has staged to catch out his murderous uncle, Hamlet mutters, 'Wormwood, wormwood'. The herb is bitter-tasting and is usually glossed as a comment on how hard it is for Claudius to witness his violent actions being re-enacted before him. But Elizabethan herbals and medical texts also tell us that 'wormwood... killeth the worms in the belly'. The play thus becomes the means of provoking forth the gnawing worm of Claudius' conscience. Interestingly, one of the means of taking the cure was in a preparation dropped into the ears, the orifice through which Claudius poisons his brother. Hamlet may additionally be thinking of Claudius as a doomed rat (as he does later in the play); household advice books tell us that wormwood was used to draw out rodents from amongst the rushes on the floor. *Hamlet* contains a particularly large number of herbal references; it may or may not be relevant that the herbs a distraught and unstable Ophelia hands out are all abortifacients. Such connotations may be more pertinent to Biondello's glib tale, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, of 'a wench married in an afternoon as she went to the garden for parsley to stuff a rabbit [strumpet]'.

Electronic resources do not only unveil new meanings or interesting contextual information; they also give a striking sense of the fluidity of sixteenth-century English. Although monolingual dictionaries did not exist, there were plenty of bi- and tri-lingual guides to Latin, French, Italian and Spanish, all of which are now available in digitised form. We can gain a sense of the meanings of English words by looking at how they function to define a foreign word. 'Foul', for example, is listed in various dictionaries as synonymous with 'unclean, loathsome, full of dregs', 'nasty, base, ill-favoured [ugly]', 'niggardly, pitiful, shameful, infamous'. It appears as a descriptor of excrement, illegible handwriting, bad weather, poor morals, infected ulcers. The vast majority of Shakespeare's words contain a spectrum of related yet distinct meanings, which editors ignore at their cost. When Macbeth imagines life as 'a walking shadow, a poor player' the words 'walking shadow' vibrate with the simultaneous senses

of 'haunting ghost', 'strutting actor', 'living portrait', 'fleeting ephemera'. It has been a priority of the RSC edition to try to restore some of this delicious multiplicity to the text; our notes endeavour to flag up not only actively different meanings generated by a word or phrase, but to demonstrate the way related senses shade into one another. Excitingly, we are continuing to discover new meanings for

his words every day. Language was a precious treasury to Shakespeare; he calls it an 'exchequer' in which a 'mint of phrases' constantly coined forth 'fire-new words'. More of a shape-shifter than the actors themselves, the 'gentle spirit of moving words' that inhabits the plays has the power to 'move' us profoundly, even as its essence shifts restlessly onwards.