

## The Need for Editions of Shakespeare: A Response to Marvin Spevack\*

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Editing Shakespeare has not come to an end, as Marvin Spevack claims in "The End of Editing Shakespeare," nor is it likely to do so. It may be true that for many plays the text is pretty well settled, but debate rages about the texts of plays that exist in different versions, Quarto and Folio, plays like *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Henry V*. So, for instance, the Cambridge edition of *King Lear* (1992) is based on the Folio text, the Arden edition (1997) offers a composite text, incorporating passages found only in Quarto or Folio, and the Oxford edition, now in preparation, will, I understand, be based on the Quarto. In the case of plays that are known only from the First Folio, it may be true that for many of them the text is "for all intents and purposes fixed" (Spevack 80), but this is not a serious reason for calling an end to editing. We can only understand Shakespeare in relation to our own time; his works are constantly being reinterpreted in relation to the concerns of our society, so that new insights demand new editions with new critical introductions. Many of the old Arden or New Cambridge editions now for this reason seem obsolete.

Spevack asserts that "The commentary situation is, surprisingly or not, much the same . . . commentary on it [i.e., Shakespeare's vocabulary] is for all intents and purposes fixed" (80). This astonishing remark shows a gross misunderstanding of the nature of a commentary. In the first place, glosses explaining words form only a modest part of the commentary in the major editions of individual plays. In the second place, critical theorising in recent years has persuasively shown that

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\*Reference: Marvin Spevack, "The End of Editing Shakespeare," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 78-85.

meaning in Shakespeare is contingent and unfixed. Our understanding of Shakespeare's vocabulary is constantly being enriched by a greater awareness of the play of meanings, allusiveness, and cross-connections exploited by the dramatist. As new reference tools become available, in relation, for example, to biblical echoes, to sexual innuendos, and to proverbial links, so hitherto unperceived implications may be noticed. What is simply and inadequately glossed in one-volume editions of Shakespeare may demand a much fuller note in the commentary of a single-play edition.

Thirdly, new aspects of the plays come into focus with each new generation of readers and editors. Many of the old second series of Arden editions, for instance, paid little or no attention to stage directions or staging either in their introductions or in their commentaries. Their main emphasis was lexical, in the wake of the completion of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1933. Consciousness of the plays as staged has recently been raised by the availability of films or videos; everyone can now watch Shakespeare at home. Not surprisingly we have seen the rise of what is known as "performance criticism," and editors now routinely attend to details of staging, and the way these can affect our interpretation of plays. Feminist criticism has opened up new perspectives on Shakespeare's treatment of female characters. New historicist critics have generated new ideas about Shakespeare's relation to events of his time. I could go on; suffice it to say that editors continually need to come to terms with new modes of critical inquiry, so that there will always be a demand for new editions.

Furthermore, editors inevitably vary considerably in what they see as important or as necessary to explicate in relation to their perception of the nature and theatrical significance of a play by Shakespeare. It is not true that commentary is "to all intents and purposes fixed"; rather the commentary in a good critical edition reveals the editor's vision of the play in the light of current ideas and preoccupations. Let me offer one example to illustrate the point. Here are the initial commentary notes in six recent editions of *King Lear*:

1. The opening dialogue introduces the underplot and gives us a glimpse of Kent before his intervention at l. 119. (Kenneth Muir, "Arden 2," 1952)

2. K[ittredge] gives 'Edmund stands back'. Coleridge (1.56) says that Glo. speaks in Edmund's presence about his birth with 'a most degrading and licentious levity'. Some are doubtful whether the subject w[oul]d be thought too delicate for discussion in Sh[akespeare]'s day. But cf. 'blushed . . . brazed' (ll. 9-10). (John Dover Wilson and George Ian Duthie, *The New Shakespeare*, 1960)

3. The scene which follows generates all the subsequent action. A short prelude introducing the names and natures of Gloucester and Edmund leads into a headlong ritual of abdication and "auction" of the country. Loyalty and sense are exiled from Britain in the persons of Cordelia and Kent, but taken up by the King of France. Hypocrisy and opportunism are left in charge of self-ignorant greatness. (G. K. Hunter, Penguin, 1972)

4. Lear's canopied chair of state is already placed upstage, between the two entrance doors. In the quiet conversational exchange which introduces both the plot and subplot, Edmund stands upstage, perhaps gazing at the throne and its surroundings to which he has recently returned (line 27), until he is called into the conversation in line 20. (E. A. Horsman, Bobbs-Merrill, 1973)

5. SD GLOUCESTER F spells the name in this way in some SDs and *Gloster* in others. In SHs, *Glouc.* is most frequently used, though Compositor E tends to prefer *Glo.* or *Glost.* In dialogue, 'Glouster' is Compositor B's preferred spelling, 'Gloster' Compositor E's. Q consistently uses 'Gloster', which reflects the proper pronunciation. (Jay Halio, Cambridge edition, 1992)

6. Presumably a throne or chair of state was placed on the stage to signal a ceremonial scene, and to prepare for the entry of the King; there may have been banners or emblems to mark the court as English; see 4.4.0.1 and n. Although the play takes place nominally in the mythical reign of a king who ruled in antiquity, the characters may well have worn contemporary costumes; see 2 and n. Probably Kent carried a rolled-up map; see 36 and n. (R. A. Foakes, "Arden 3," 1997)

It is evident that these notes are all very different from one another. The first is briefly concerned with plot. The second focuses on Edmund and the propriety of the dialogue concerning his illegitimate birth. The third sums up the scene in terms of a moral and allegorising comment on the nature of the characters. The fourth is mainly concerned to propose a confident idea of staging, the location of a chair of state, and the placing of Edmund. The fifth focuses on the spelling and pronunciation of the name of Gloucester, perhaps partly in order to warn American students to avoid their natural inclination to read it as "Glou-

ces-ter." The last note comments on some aspects of staging, on costumes, and on the property that will be required later in the scene. The note in the Penguin edition, number 3, may stem to some extent from the emphasis on moral criticism in the 1960s. The different ways of dealing with staging in numbers 4 and 6 no doubt reflect the increasing attention given to performance in recent times. In relation to number 5 the editor's concentration on the way composers spelled names and the differences between versions of the play is connected with the intense debate about the relation of Quarto to Folio *King Lear* that erupted in the 1980s.

My concern here is not to make a judgment or state a preference, but merely to point out how radically different these notes are from one another, in accordance not merely with the kind of help an editor thought his readers needed, or with the critical fashions of the day, but also with advances in our understanding of the texts and of the staging of the plays. Spevack thinks such editions contribute "little to our grasp of Shakespeare." In my experience, good editions provide the best possible help for understanding the plays. And if they seem at times to be "glossing the obvious" (Spevack 83), it is because what is obvious to the scholar may not be to the student or reader who has grown up on a diet of television rather than literature, and who may have a limited sense of the nuances of meaning so skilfully exploited by Shakespeare. I don't think we know the implications of hypertext yet, or how to use it, and discussion of it is therefore best left for the future.

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