

The End of Editing Shakespeare

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Surveying editions of Shakespeare in 1853, the anonymous reviewer in the *Athenaeum* concluded: "As the demand increases for the plays of Shakespeare, so new editors will arise—all with notions and new readings of their own,—till it will end perhaps by every intelligent man turning editor for himself." Indeed, the first twenty-five or so years of the reign of Queen Victoria saw the publication of new (and revised) complete editions by Charles Knight, John Payne Collier, Samuel Weller Singer, Alexander Dyce, Howard Staunton, Richard Grant White, W. G. Clark and W. A. Wright, Thomas Keightley, and James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps, among the more than eighty recorded in the British Library catalogue. One hundred and fifty years later the feverish activity does not seem to have abated very considerably. The past sixty years have seen the appearance of editions by Ridley, Kittredge, Neilson and Hill, Alexander, Harrison, Sisson, Munro, Craig, Harbage, Evans, Bevington, three by the Oxford team, as well as Arden 2 and Arden 3, Cambridge 3 and Cambridge 4, Yale 2, Pelican, Penguin, Signet, Bantam, Folger, etc. etc. (not to mention various clones and packagings), to name just a few among the seventeen columns devoted to editions of Shakespeare in *Books in Print*. While the sheer number does not quite mean every intelligent man or woman is turning out a Shakespeare, it may well indicate that the way is being cleared for Everyman and Everywoman turning editor. Or to put it another way: the plethora of editions stimulates me-tooism; the plethora of editions, born of free enterprise, spurs competition. The motto is: anything you can do I can do better. And, most important, the plethora of editions, like the excesses of ancient Rome, has modified the end—i.e. the extent or goal—and at the same time has spelled the end—i.e. the conclusion—of editions as

we have known them. A paradox, to be sure, like the fact that since I have so little space at my disposal I may be permitted to do the prohibited: to make sweeping generalizations. And in still another paradox: to attempt to show that such sweeping generalizations, customarily held to be untrue or viewed with utmost suspicion, are in this case undeniably true.

First, let us look at editions. The most striking fact about editions of Shakespeare over the past sixty years—and longer too—is that when all is said and done they are, in their core substance, interchangeable. Granted there are attempts at novelty: Kittredge (1936) retained (with impunity) numerous old spellings—e.g. “murther” and “mushrump”—for which his student, G. Blakemore Evans (Riverside 1974) has been taken to task; Oxford (1986), in its understandable attempt to scrape away the barnacles which have over centuries fixed themselves on the text, has even invented some in reinventing Shakespeare. Nor do I mean to overlook some inspired conjectures regarding single words or expressions. But the overriding fact of the matter is that as far as the editing of the text is concerned, the situation resembles that of an elephant pushing a peanut. Let me illustrate.

In my New Variorum edition of *Antony and Cleopatra* I fully collated fifty-two editions and partially collated another fifty-one against the First Folio. Although this historical collation was completed before I was able to consider such important editions as the Oxford and Bevington (among others after 1974), it does nevertheless reveal important facts about the stability of the text of Shakespeare. If we concentrate on substantive verbal changes—in, say, the first act—we find that there are only thirty proposed (most of them from the crafty hand of John Payne Collier) in the nineteenth century and only four in the first seventy-five years of this century. I must emphasize that these are alternative readings, assembled according to their mere appearance without regard to the quality of the editor or edition. Not a one of them has found general acceptance. A brief glance at the textual notes of the latest edition of *Antony* (Arden 3, 1995) reveals that all the substantive verbal changes not found in the First Folio originate no later than in Dr. Johnson’s edition of 1765, the largest number already in the Second Folio of 1632, which in the main tidied up obvious misprints and slips in grammar.

Of course, it will be argued that *Antony*, aside from some confusion regarding lineation and the like, is acknowledged to be a good text and/or that my sample is too small or selective—that is, that I have been practicing a sleight of statistics. But if there are only four proposed verbal changes in 613 lines—and each line contains an average of, say, eight words—then the resulting percentage of change is 0.0008156. The conclusion is that either there is a paucity of evidence or imagination or courage on the part of the editors, or more likely that there is little or nothing left to manipulate. Even if larger numbers were conceded—say, twenty new substantive verbal changes per work in editions of the twentieth century, yielding a generous (if not fanciful) projection of eight hundred for the entire corpus—the percentage of change based on eight hundred divided by a total of some 885,000 word-tokens or graphic entities would be 0.0009039. Reluctantly, but inescapably, the conclusion must be that as far as substantive verbal changes are concerned the text of Shakespeare is for all intents and purposes fixed. Even admitting new works to the canon—itsself a sign of impatience with the restrictions of a closed system?—would not appreciably increase the potential for manipulation.

The commentary situation is, surprisingly or not, much the same. The historical collation of the commentary notes in my *New Variorum Antony* reveals that, as far as the glossing of vocabulary (the dominant feature) is concerned, commentary has increased as the distance from Shakespeare has increased. Just as obvious, and natural, is the fact that word glosses have reached a point where there is a consensus as to which words require glossing. Certainly, a comparison of the glossaries which conclude one-volume editions of Shakespeare illustrates this fact. And editions of individual plays, having more space and perhaps a slightly different aim or audience, tend mainly to expand and localize the glosses already found in the one-volume editions or in an Ur-glossary like *Onions/Eagleson* or its big brother, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In short, the vocabulary of Shakespeare has been culled, glossed, and recorded. As with the text, commentary on it is for all intents and purposes fixed. Perhaps more fixed than a comparison of various editions would indicate, for at least forty percent of the words glossed or defined in the *Onions/Eagleson Glossary* are to be found in a primer for non-English

speakers, like the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*—certainly even more in any standard collegiate-type dictionary, not to mention bigger brothers.

The advent of hypertext has not altered the basic situation of text and commentary. Hypertext is a form of hypertrophy: an abnormal increase in size, an excrescence which is essentially additive and cumulative in nature. Having at one's disposal all the information that exists—old and new spelling editions, facsimiles, translations, commentaries, illustrations, stages, speakers, actors, directors, professors, and who- or whatever—can lead to a traffic jam, with standstill. However navigable the highway, however fluid the apparent movement, the click of the mouse is more likely to signal lane-changing, with its illusion of rapid forward movement. Ageless and universal, the whole is a kind of digitized megavariorum. Many of us who come to realize that we use only one or two percent of the expensive software we have bought will be reminded of Socrates, who, strolling through the market-place, was struck by all the things he didn't want or need.

Even if we do not agree that hypertext may be more hype than text, there can be little doubt that, in whatever form or dimension, it can be of assistance to an editor—even if in the actual practice of editing, this often means the same picking and choosing, but from a grandiose environment, with an eye to avoiding what the competition has already picked and chosen. With hypertext, however, Everyman/Everywoman—or shall we say, Hyperperson—is invited to become editor: Hyperperson, rear'd arm poised with mouse, in his livery floppy disks and manuals.

This is not as new as imagined. To a certain extent editors of Shakespeare have been practicing hypertexticity from the very beginning: how else can one describe the attention to the chain of foul to fair copies, quarto to quartos, folio to folios, edition to editions? The aggressive proliferation of editions has been marked by a massive proliferation of information—relevant or not—and, increasingly, of ornamentation. As if sensing or perhaps agreeing (but not admitting) that text and vocabulary were settled, editing has taken to providing textual notes which give alternatives not adopted or even considered as such; has begun restoring the once-banished architectural ornamentation of act-

scene divisions; has begun reinventing the once-castigated expanded stage directions and even the much-maligned aside; has begun revitalizing stage practice, complete with the *de rigueur* photographs (often campy) of actors and scenes, and embellished with illustrations, in living color, by commissioned artists and designers. It has, moreover, erected and stocked a supermarket of appendices: glossaries (selected, to be sure), lists of the *dramatis personae* (commonly with the reader-friendly designation "characters" or, better, "persons of the play"), lists of first lines to the poems, annals, genealogical tables, records, documents, maps, bibliographies, and more more more. Editing has become rampantly encyclopedic, with commentary expanding to include not merely the traditional diversions of sources and parallels but interpretations and possible interpretations, with notes being complemented by longer notes, longer notes by appendices. Editing Shakespeare has become in certain areas infoentertaining, in the manner of hypertext. And in like manner, in attempting to make everything available to everybody, it has come up with products which are essentially uniform and interchangeable—and only moderately or partially useful once the novelty of decoration has worn off, like so many computer games.

Most strikingly, editing shares with hypertext the threat of diffusing the clear outlines of Shakespeare—of, in the long run, contributing perhaps relatively much towards the history of scholarship but commensurately little to our grasp of Shakespeare. It is not simply a matter of losing the forest for the trees (on the one hand) or of overspecialization (on the other), or the obeisance to what the *Zeitgeist* or the publisher demands: bows to gender, ethnicity, economics, cultural poli-poetics, and the rest. A most recent CD-ROM makes available folios, quartos, and numerous major editions and adaptations of Shakespeare: none, however, in original typography, all inputted (twice, of course, for "correctness"), all in the same standard modern type and with the obligatory search-possibilities, which cannot, however, distinguish stage directions from spoken text. Just announced is the Arden Shakespeare CD-ROM, which is to contain the second Arden edition of 1946-82 (although already being superseded by the third, the consultant editor of the CD-ROM having himself pointed out the need for the third), "facsimile images" of the appropriate Folio and quarto editions of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Abbott's *Shakespearian Grammar* (1869, rev. 1871), Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1955, rev. 1968), to which still other "elements" are "added." It is unlikely that these elements—each with its own set of lemmata and wordforms, differing lineation conventions, and distinctive scholarly perspective—can be connected. That would require an engineering feat beyond the capacity of even all the king's hackers and all the king's netizens. The uninitiated users will doubtless be left to fend for themselves.

There has always been the dream of making Shakespeare available to the masses, a following incidentally which Shakespeare never had. The dream has increased over the centuries as social democracy has increased. And in its own way editing has been at it too, not merely by decorating Shakespeare with appendages but by "translating" Shakespeare, as Bottom was "translated," into another being. It has practiced the dubious semantics of offering a choice of modern dictionary definitions to a reader who is then expected to choose the "right" meaning for a word whose meaning was unknown to the reader in the first place. It has practiced the dubious semantics of giving other instances of a particular word in non-Shakespearean works, as if they were then automatically synonymous. It has practiced—demeaning to editor and reader, if not to Shakespeare—glossing the obvious: *fanged*, Onions/Eagleson informs us, means "having fangs"; *fatherly*, "as a father." Most insidious of all perhaps, it has made a patchwork of Shakespeare's language. Here is a small representative sample from a scene (3.10) in *Antony*. Antony has fled the battle, following Cleopatra.

CANIDIUS [the speech prefix ornamented in caps, *comme il faut*]

Oh, he has given example for our flight

Most grossly by his own!

ENOBARBUS Ay, are you thereabouts?

Why then, good night indeed.

CANIDIUS

Toward Peloponnesus are they fled.

SCARUS

'Tis easy to't, and there I will attend

What further comes.

CANIDIUS To Caesar will I render

My legions and my horse.

If we integrate the notes in two recent editions into these lines we come up with: "Oh, he has given example for our flight / Most *flagrantly* by his own! / Ay, is that what you're thinking? (are you of that mind, thinking of desertion?) Why then, that really is the end. (it's all over.) / Toward Peloponnesus are they fled. / It's easy to get there, and there I will wait and see / What further comes. / To Caesar will I give up, hand over, (surrender) / My foot soldiers and my cavalry." No matter that grossly, attend, render, legion, and horse are given in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*; no matter that we are directed for a definition of a word like attend to "OED v. 13c"; no matter that the absence of information about Peloponnesus seems to imply that the reader is better at geography than English.

This levelling is the natural concomitant of undifferentiated abundance. In this, editing has anticipated hypertext. And hypertext is the creation which will subsume its predecessor. On the surface at least this need not be alarming: civilization itself builds upon civilization, is additive and cumulative: paths become streets, which become avenues, which become highways, which become superhighways. But that is not the story I wish to tell.

If the end has been reached—i.e. the text of Shakespeare is fixed, and the frame for treating it called editing prescribed—then Hyperperson and faithful mouse can do it all too. Hypertext may be challenging for a small few, but it is intimidating for the large many. Like capitalism, the society of practicers of hypertexticity will be composed, on the one hand, of a miniscule minority devoted to the pleasure of luxurious hypertechnical pursuits resembling previous investigations (by an exclusive coterie) of composers, typographical eccentricities, and assorted gadgetries, and, on the other hand, a megamajority of increasing illiteracy attempting to navigate through a bewilderingly billowing flood of information. Or, to change the metaphor: as the windows multiply and access becomes dazzlingly breakneck, Hyperperson, more adept at managing small games—i.e. window shopping at the corner store—will be confronted by a looming skyscraper with countless windows (each, of course, with "intel inside") which will reveal the ultimate secret of hypertext: the wider the perspective, the more diffuse the image; the deeper the penetration, the darker the picture. It is state-of-the-art

updating of the reaction more than a hundred years ago of one critic, himself the editor of a sixteen-volume folio edition of Shakespeare, to the second volume of Furness's variorum *Hamlet*: "There is much no doubt that is exceedingly clever, but, taken as a whole, an almost impenetrable mass of conflicting opinions, wild conjectures and leaden contemplations, a huge collection of antagonistic materials which, if not repulsive, is certainly appalling." In such an environment Hyperperson is, can only be, Hypoperson, with trusty mouse, searching those holes for bits of cheese, and then sending and in return receiving them world wide.

As Hamlet would say: Ay, madam, it is common denominator.

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