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Intention in the editing of Shakespeare

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"Intention in the editing of Shakespeare" by Gabriel Egan

Concern for the problems of authorial intention came relatively late to editorial theory. It took decades for the anxieties of early-twentieth century literary scholars to be felt by bibliographers and editors. The main reason for this is that twentieth-century editorial theory was driven by the work of W. W. Greg, A. W. Pollard, and R. B. McKerrow given the name New Bibliography in 1919 (Greg, 380). The New Bibliographers were primarily concerned with early-modern plays, for which the problems of intention differ from those arising in prose narratives and poetry: in drama the writing is first to be transformed into speech and action before it is consumed. It is true that for virtually all writing further layers of completion are necessary before it meets its consumer--few novelists and poets construct actual books for their readers, William Blake being a remarkable exception--but the kind and the degree of completion that a playscript must undergo are far beyond the merely presentational alterations that scribes and printers make in mediating their copy to readers. Although New Bibliography was later applied to modern non-dramatic works, most notably by the Center for Editions of American Authors, its principles are inappropriate to these texts, for reasons exquisitely detailed by Tom Davis.

High French theory from Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida is now routinely brought into discussions of authorial intention in editing, and it forms the intellectual core of the theory and practice conveniently identified as the New Textualism, exemplified in the writings of Paul Werstine, Margreta de Grazia, and Randall McLeod, amongst others. What links Paris 1968 and modern textual theory is a shared rejection of idealism in its metaphysical and epistemological forms. Metaphysical idealism asserts that reality is just an effect of ideas and its opposite, which has become virtually the default setting for all literary scholars these days, is materialism, which insists that the basic stuff of the universe is matter and that we know about it through its material form. Epistemological idealism insists that regardless of how the world actually is we can know about it only through our minds, so what we share when we discuss it are reports of the psychical processes in our heads. The opposite of this insistence that our minds mediate reality (and so perception fundamentally conditions our sense of what reality is) is realism, which insists that human knowledge grasps things as they really are in the world. The distinctions between these kinds of idealism are frequently elided in theoretico-historical work, and materialism is widely treated as simply the pragmatic concern for surviving physical artefacts in preference to the ideas that are supposed to have created them, or the lost predecessor artefacts from which they were made. Thus New Textualists attend closely to what is actually in the early quarto and Folio texts of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and disdain as nebulous, unattainable Platonic Ideals the preceding thoughts in the minds of the writers. Even the preceding manuscripts from which the printings were made are described by New Textualists as hypothetical, although what this means is that their contents can only now be hypothetically reconstructed (Egan "Myths"). To minds captured by such a decidedly unMarxist caricature of materialism, the hypothetical status of authorial papers can even come to mean a healthy scepticism that they ever existed outside of the imaginations of New Bibliographers.

A full account of the influence upon recent editorial theory of post-structuralist literary theory (and its wider consequence, post-modernism) requires more space than available here (see Egan [Reading](#)). However, two essential links in the chain are Roland Barthes's declaration of the death of the author in progressive criticism of his time, and Michel Foucault's response that diagnosed the author as merely a construct, a product (or 'function') of a particular way of reading that could be historically situated and was subject to change. This way of thinking promotes a disdain for authorial intention and an elevation of the labour of the other, usually unattended, contributors to the surviving printed artefacts, especially scribes, editors, compositors, and pressmen. According to New Textualists such as McLeod the blending of labours in the artefact is so complete that editors can never isolate the author's contribution, and they should cease trying. In fact these theoretical and seemingly empirical approaches ought to be largely irrelevant to early-modern drama. This is so not only because this way of thinking is mistaken--authors are indeed important and attitudes towards them have been remarkably consistent over centuries--but also because plays are unlike the kinds of writing that Barthes and Foucault were thinking about. Because they are not complete when written down, and because of the textual consequences of certain practices of early-modern theatre writing and play printing, early-modern plays give the false impression that post-modern literary theories illuminate them. Chief among those practices are collaborative writing and successive revision of scripts, the effects of which New Textualism misreads through its post-modern spectacles.

In Shakespeare studies, the truly applicable problems of authorial intention were identified even before the seminal essay by W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley that drew literary critics' attention in this direction, when an exchange of letters entitled "The genuine text" was initiated by C. S Lewis in the pages of the [Times Literary Supplement](#) (Lewis 1935a; Bateson 1935; Wilson 1935a; Lewis 1935b; Lawrence 1935a; Wilson 1935b; Ridley 1935; Greg 1935; Lawrence 1935b; Wilson 1935c). Lewis proposed that if Shakespeare's primary artistic intention was to create performances in collaboration with others rather than to write a definitive manuscript, then the editor-detectives seeking to recover from the extant printings the words of the lost definitive authorial text were chasing something that never existed. Any manuscript Shakespeare created would be at best only the "embryo" of his final object, Lewis argued. He perhaps ought to have called it an unfertilized egg since his point was that only after others had worked upon this object and merged their creativity into it would this object begin turning into Shakespeare's intended outcome, the performance.

The exchange of letters initiated by Lewis had no discernible impact on editorial theory and practice, but it shows that the objections to central tenets of New Bibliography--the tenets that Shakespeare worked alone and did not revise--were apparent long before New Textualism took hold in the 1980s. Indeed, in his contribution to the exchange W. J. Lawrence cited similar objections to editorial methodology made in 1917 and 1928. Greg's contribution to the exchange agreed with Lewis that there can be no absolutely genuine text, only shades of the genuine thrown into relief by particular goals of editors on particular projects, and that texts are not fixed but change over time as they are reworked by their authors, by scribes, and (in the case of plays) by theatre practitioners. As commonly happened with criticism of the New Bibliography, Greg announced himself already apprised of the

critique and having never believed otherwise. Greg's previous and subsequent writings show that he did not accept Lewis's position in practice. Despite the airing of powerful objections regarding collaboration and revision, the standard New Bibliographical assumption remained that where there exist substantially differing early editions of a Shakespeare play, typically quarto and Folio versions, the differences arose from corruption in transmission from a single authorial archetype rather than from authorial second thoughts or discoveries in rehearsal. Since different printings would contain different random departures from this archetype, an editor picking and choosing between variants present in the substantive early editions would come closer to what the author wrote than one who was overly faithful to her copy text (Greg "Rationale").

The difficulty that inter-connected authorial revisions raise for the eclectic methodology of importing readings from distinct versions was pointed out by Han Zeller, who also objected that the methodology depended on being able to tell authorized variants from errors in transmission when in fact these might be indistinguishable. Zeller's solution was for editors to respect the integrity of each version and to admit readings from another version only in cases of indisputable error in transmission. However, there was emerging at this time an even more extreme argument to forbid eclecticism altogether and simply to preserve the integrity of versions as they have come down to us from early printings. For Morse Peckham, the editor making a fresh edition is not recovering anything but simply adding to the stock of available editions and any hope to recover the author's intentions, lost in the past, is self-delusion. New Bibliography's attempt to strip the veil of print to find the underlying manuscript, wrote Peckham, "reveals a Neoplatonic nonentity" and current textual criticism "is surprisingly Neoplatonic at that school's worst" (127). Since the Neoplatonists considered themselves Platonists, he might just as well have called New Bibliography an Idealist or Platonist school, which of course it is. Rather than be misled by the pursuit of Ideals, Peckham insisted that we have only the surviving early editions and that self-evidently they represent distinct versions of works. Thus to conflate Q2 and F Hamlet is to "construct a version . . . which came into existence long after Shakespeare's death" (129). This was a far-sighted comment, but Peckham was wrong to suppose that no-one had pursued its consequence by making an edition of Hamlet based on F with the Q2-only passages demoted to small type at the foot of the page. As Ann Thompson showed, George MacDonald's neglected 1885 edition of Hamlet did just that.

While it is true that collaboration and authorial revision present challenges to New Bibliography, it is not the case that discernible authorial intention entirely disappears if these processes are admitted. At the very least, we should note that the early-modern state was not apt to let offending writers off the hook with a post-structuralist recognition that performance disperses authority and that authors are not really the originating centres of their own creations. When plays gave offence, their writers (not the players, usually) went to jail. For all that the script was circulated in fragments as Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern argue, it also had to come together as a singularity to be authorized by the state censor. The forces of authority acted centripetally against these centrifugal tendencies, rendering the dispersed, fragmentary, unstable, and plural text into something fairly singular and for which the writer was held responsible in law.

Peckham's essay pre-empted much of 1980s New Textualism, including its logical tangles, philosophical weakness, and its impoverished sense of what it means to be an author. By relegating the revising author to the status of just another reader/editor wanting to change the writing, Peckham dispersed the authority for the writing and treated a number of texts--authorial manuscript, copy-edited manuscript, proofs, first edition, or authorially-revised edition--as being of equal interest and value. All an editor can do, according to Peckham, is choose one of these as the object of interest, and he castigated as "hagiolatry" our literary culture's mistaken preference for the first and last texts in the above list; this shows clearly that his thinking follows Barthes's in "The death of the author". The essentially post-structuralist ideas of Zeller and Peckham gained some purchase on editorial theory in the 1970s, but were entirely ignored in mainstream Shakespeare studies until the 1980s. Stephen Orgel's essay "What is a text?" was the first to introduce them to Shakespearians and he explicitly used the hard evidence of collaboration and revision as the means to ground his post-structuralism in theatre-historical and documentary evidence.

From the evidence in Henslowe's Diary and surviving scraps from contracts and lawsuits, G. E. Bentley's The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time had concluded that collaborative writing and revision-for-revival were normal practices in the theatre, and that they remain present but undetected in many surviving plays. Bentley considered Shakespeare essentially untypical, albeit the most successful, of the dramatists of his time, but he did not push home the implications for editorial theory. Orgel did, and allied with Honigmann's persuasive claim for revision in copying fair (discussed below), this gave powerful reasons for decentering the author: writers changed their minds, and the plays belonged to companies not authors, were altered without their consent, and were turned into performances by a team. In short, the idea of a solitary dramatic author making a singular output was mistaken and needed to be replaced with a social and collaborative model of dramatic creativity in which the script is endlessly reshapeable and unfixed. Once we realize that writing plays was like this, Orgel argued, New Bibliography (what he called "Modern scientific bibliography") is revealed as fundamentally mistaken in its assumptions and hence hopelessly anachronistic in its practices.

Orgel's critique of New Bibliography is acute, and like Peckham he spoils it by overstating its supposed post-structuralist insights. While it is true that authors change their minds and that they admit, even welcome, the input of others, there are no grounds but post-structuralist prejudice for the claim that "the author has become a curiously imprecise, intermittent and shifting figure" when Christopher Marlowe's last name is simply misspelled "Marklin" on the title-page of the 1616 quarto of Doctor Faustus (6). Having firmly established that the collaborative nature of dramatic performance reduces the authority of individual dramatists over what gets spoken, Orgel had only the force of sheer assertion for his claim that publication reduced the authority of writers over their works. Although Orgel was right to point out that once a manuscript was sold to a publisher the author's legal rights largely ceased, there is considerable evidence that moral and intellectual rights were thought to remain with the author, who was the source and authority for the contents of a book. Brian Vickers has adduced considerable empirical evidence for this (506-41).

Collaboration and revision can produce textual effects that are interestingly contradictory or paradoxical, but we ought not to misread these effects as validating

prior assumptions derived from literary theory. Thomas Merriam pointed out that modern criticism apes the Romanticism of S. T. Coleridge's delight in "[myriad-minded Shakespear](#)" (Coleridge, 13) when it celebrates the abundant self-contradictions, especially on religious matters, in [All is True](#) and [King John](#). Upon reapportioning the division of these plays amongst their collaborating writers it emerges that each was, within his own sections of each play, quite self-consistent; the contradictions arise between their shares because the writers were not in agreement on certain matters (Merriam [Identity](#); [Co-authorship](#)). By comparison, the new Oxford Complete Middleton undermines the post-structuralist celebration of Shakespearian contradiction and indeterminacy for their own sake by showing how [Measure for Measure](#) and [Macbeth](#) got their oddities when Middleton adapted the now-lost Shakespearian predecessor plays to make the versions we witness in the 1623 Folio. An unthinking assumption that indeterminacy is more interesting and creatively productive than determinacy is one of the pernicious effects of high French literary theory, and those who wish to hear the counter-argument that indeterminacy is dull may enjoy the opening pages of G. K. Chesterton's novel [The Man Who Was Thursday](#), where the matter is debated with brio by two poets (3-4).

In the stage-centered approach to editing, the writer's intention is rightly presumed to include the projection onto others of the obligation to complete the work. Recognizing this may require editors to treat inconsistencies in the writing as less significant than they might otherwise seem, since they might reflect merely the writer's assumption that there will be subsequent processing of the manuscript that will smooth out its discrepancies. Thus writing for the stage could well be a craft that calls for relatively little consistency from the author at the moment of composition, and we should avoid misreading the resulting scripts as though they embody, [avant la lettre](#), post-modern ideas about inconsistency and the inherent instability of subjecthood. A celebrated case is the inconsistency of speech-prefixes for Capulet's wife in Q2 [Romeo and Juliet](#), who as McKerrow pointed out is identified as "[Wife](#)", "[La\[dy\]](#)", "[Old La\[dy\]](#)", and "[Mother](#)" in different scenes, according to the social and familial relationships active in those scenes (462n1). An editor trained in New Bibliography would likely regularize these to "CAPULET'S WIFE" on the assumption that this would have been done by someone in the theatre when making the promptbook, in which (New Bibliographers assumed) such variations would be smoothed away. An editor not trained in New Bibliography would likely also regularize, if only so that modern readers are not confused by needless variation.

There is, however, an emerging view that editors should not regularize in such cases, as represented by John Drakakis amongst others. Regarding the variable speech prefixes in [The Merchant of Venice](#), he observed:

Given the modern tendency to normalize speech prefixes, resting, as it appears to, upon some stable conception of dramatic "character", the editor is faced with a choice: either "[Shylock](#)" or "[Jew](#)." No edition yet has been prepared to follow the instability of Q1 (1600) [and](#) F1 (1623) in representing [both](#). (229-30)

Lina Perkins Wilder too lamented the editorial regularizing of speech prefixes, specifically those for Bottom in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#). This Protean character who would break all constraints and be at once a lover and a tyrant is, according to Wilder, simultaneously the company clown inhabiting various roles and Bottom the

artisan--urbanite, not rustic, and hence not straightforwardly clownish in the rural sense--whose performance is so good that he virtually becomes what he says he is. According to Perkins, for an editor to reduce the multiplicity of "[Clowne](#)", "[Pyramus](#)", and "[Bottom](#)" (as the early printings identify him) to just "BOTTOM" is to efface the expression at a paratextual level of the very changeability that this play is so insistently concerned with.

The weakness of Drakakis's and Wilder's arguments ought to be readily apparent. The capacity of a human being to be many things at once is all the more of a wonder when we are aware of the singular person performing the shape-shifting. Readers need to know that it is not Pyramus himself who enters to talk with Thisbe through a wall, but Bottom-as-Pyramus entering to Flute-as-Thisbe. This is not merely a matter of keeping the action clear in the minds of the readers--although that is of paramount importance in editing--but also of respecting, and indicating to the reader, the conventions of the artform itself. To best appreciate a character's performance in an inset play one needs to preserve the singularity of the character doing the performance, else the impersonation collapses into being and we might as well do away with the character names altogether and use the actors' names if we know them. Drakakis's rejection of "some stable conception of dramatic 'character'" is in fact a rejection of a premise of the drama itself, for in these plays dramatic characters are stable. Not once is a character in an early-modern play supposed to be performed by more than one actor, and this stability is reified in the single actor's part for each character. This presents an amusing irony. Stern's work on the actor's part attempted to take our attention away from the singular script, as reproduced by editors of early-modern drama, and refocus it upon the collection of documents, the parts (also called sides), from which actors learnt their lines.

The script was a singularity seldom or never seen by the actor, who knew only his own piece of the dramatic jigsaw puzzle in the form of a part containing just the speeches for one character, each preceded by what is called its cue, being the two or three final words of the previous speaker. Although not avowedly theoretical, Stern's approach is post-modern in its anti-authoriality and its dispersal of textual authority. For Stern, the complete and singular script is not the whole story, since certain dramatic effects--as when cues are deliberately given too early in order to make characters talk over one another--are invisible until the text is disassembled into its constituent parts. Moreover, much of the credit that we would otherwise give the author must, in this model, be devolved to the collective of early-modern actors, each of whom must make sense of his fragmented dialogue and participate in teamwork to put the thing back together. The irony is that this approach diminishes the singularity and isolation of the dramatic author by precisely the degree to which it enhances the singularity and isolation of the dramatic character. In the script-centered model a character is a personality inferred from its engagement in dialogues with others, but in the part-centered model it is instantiated in a singular document containing one speaker's words held apart from its interlocutors' words, which is studied (conned) largely in private. Post-modern anti-humanism aims to diminish the authority of the human author and of the invented human characters at the same time, but it can diminish one only at the cost of bolstering the other. As if conforming to a principle of conservation, it seems that human agency can be dispersed to or condensed in different places but not done away with altogether.

The incompleteness of the dramatic script witnesses not an early-modern love for the inchoate and contradictory, but a straightforwardly material process of creativity in which writing is a midpoint not an endpoint. For that reason, the New Bibliographical concern to determine the provenance of the manuscript underlying a given printing was the right approach, even though in practice the evidence was frequently mis- or over-read and the taxonomies applied were simplistic. In relation to authorial intention, it remains pertinent to discover whether an early printing is based on a manuscript created prior to or after rehearsal and/or revival. An editorial theory that values the performed text over the first-composed text would seek evidence from printings based on post-rehearsal manuscripts. If the manuscript was created early in the composition process, its degree of incompleteness might extend so far as to include anomalies that the writer would remove even before passing it to others. E. A. J. Honigmann argued that Shakespeare routinely made his own fair copy to be passed to his fellow actors, and hence his rough manuscripts prior to that fair copy might have contained false starts and loose ends that he allowed to stand rather than interrupt his flow of composition in fixing them; he would defer the correction until he was copying out fairly later. A printing made from one of these early, rough draft manuscripts will present the editor using it as copy text with a set of tricky decisions regarding just how far to go in completing and correcting what the dramatist, at this stage in the composition, had left incomplete and incorrect.

Stanley Wells argued that Q1 Much Ado About Nothing presents just such a case, and that although an editor can leave intact some of the openness in matters that Shakespeare had not settled, it were a mistake not to fix things that Shakespeare himself would doubtless have fixed when he had the chance. Where a character appears in the opening direction for a scene but says nothing and is referred to by no-one, it is reasonable to assume that this character would have been excised before performance. Thus "Innogen", wife to Leonato, who appears in the opening directions for the first two scenes in Q1 ought to be excised from a modern edition of the play. There are attractive critical arguments for retaining her as a mute and ineffectual character, since her silent presence could symbolize the disempowerment of women in this culture, against which injustice Beatrice's linguistic prowess constitutes a protest and rebellion. Yet an understanding of early-modern theatre economics make such a symbolic role impossible: we have ample evidence from doubling charts that scripts were streamlined for efficiency of doubling. In particular, this play needs four boys to act as Beatrice, Hero, Margaret and Ursula who appear together in 2.1 (Shakespeare, Much Ado 320) and to employ a fifth boy as a mute would be an extravagance that the company would scarcely permit. Since such an apprentice would have to be paid for--the money going to his master--the economics of performance, witnessed in countless plays, would have demanded that he be given lines to speak (to earn his keep) or else his part would be cut entirely.

The critical desire for a silent Innogen must bend to economic reality, and editors must show what they think happened, not what they wish had happened. To do otherwise is to commit the fault that modern criticism so often finds in editions from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which the editor allowed critical preference to overrule the evidence. Only critical prejudice regarding the propriety of young women explains the decisions of Lewis Theobald, William Warburton, Samuel Johnson, Edward Capell, George Steevens, Edmond Malone, J. Payne Collier, and the Cambridge editors of the 1863-6 edition to give Miranda's speech beginning

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"Abhorred slave | Which any print of goodness wilt not take . . ." ([The Tempest](#) 1.2.353-64) to her father, on the grounds that it were indecorous for her to respond to Caliban's lust or to use such strong language. The evidence of the Folio text was here subordinated to an editorial preference that now seems prudish. Editors cannot avoid applying their unconscious assumptions about plausibility and what the author intended (else these would be conscious rather than unconscious assumptions), but they can and ought to weigh evidence from the deduced economic necessities of early-modern theatrical and printing practices, even when these remove such critically interesting anomalies as speech prefix variation and symbolically rich 'ghost' characters.

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