

'Cur'd and perfect':  
the problem of Shakespeare's text

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WHEN the President paid me the compliment of the invitation to deliver the Academy lecture for 1971, he indicated that he would particularly welcome a 'scholarly exposition' of some major problem associated with the study of Shakespeare. One cannot live up to that; but Sir Keith's wish in such a matter is my law, and the exposition that follows will be as scholarly as I in my ineptitude can make it. It should not, however, be abstruse; and indeed the theme of the talk might best be announced in an important statement by Professor E. A. J. Honigmann:

A study of Shakespeare's text need not intimidate the general reader—on the contrary, the subject positively invites the common sense of readers uncorrupted with prejudices. . . . Now more than ever this general responsibility for the text of Shakespeare should be publicly asserted, since editors are taking liberties with the text that deserve the most careful scrutiny.<sup>1</sup>

Editors are taking these liberties, of course, because they do not believe that the text of Shakespeare as originally published was ever perfect, in the First Folio or anywhere else.

The quotation in the title of this lecture is from the prefatory address 'To the great Variety of Readers', written by or for John Heminge and Henry Condell, and printed in the First Folio in 1623. The relevant section is:

It had bene a thing, we confesse, worthie to haue bene wished, that the Author himselfe had liu'd to haue set forth, and ouerseen his owne writings; But since it hath bin ordain'd otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envie his Friends, the office of their care, and paine, to haue collected & publish'd them; and so to haue publish'd them, as where (before) you were abus'd with diuerse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious impostors, that expos'd them: euen those, are now offer'd to your view cur'd, and perfect of their limbes; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceiued thē. Who, as he was a happie imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he vttered with that easinesse, that wee haue scarce receiued from him a blot in his papers.

Heminge and Condell, it is now generally agreed, were claiming not that all texts of Shakespeare printed before 1623 were 'stolne, and surreptitious', but that some of them were, and that even those were now published in a 'cur'd, and perfect' form. In fact, if one may leave aside, as they did, the problem of *Pericles*, it may be said that Shakespeare texts fall roughly into three main classes:

(i) the seventeen or eighteen plays first printed in the First Folio;<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text*, London 1965, p.v.

<sup>2</sup> The figure depends on one's opinion whether the previously printed *The Taming of A Shrew* is or is not a bad text of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

(ii) —though Heminge and Condell do not expressly say so—those previously printed in a good text and now published again in the Folio (but here, of course, there are many possibilities, including the possibility that a particular Folio play was printed not from the first published text of the play in quarto but from a later quarto, and the possibility that a Folio text is based on a *corrected* quarto);

(iii) the plays previously printed only in corrupt texts. These are the 'diuerse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious impostors, that expos'd them'—and even these, the Folio editors claim, are now 'cur'd, and perfect of their limbes'. (The best example of this class of play is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.)

Modern bibliography has shown that none of these claims can be taken literally—not even the claim that the texts in class (iii) are 'cur'd, and perfect' in the Folio. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for instance, had been previously published only in the hopelessly corrupt Quarto of 1602, a version that was probably put together by two or more actors relying on their inadequate memory of what had been spoken on the stage. Yet a text as corrupt as this can supply a line missing from the Folio, from which it had presumably been dropped by a simple compositorial error. The Host of the Garter, reconciling (as he thinks) Parson Evans and Doctor Caius, whom he has helped to estrange, says to them, according to the Folio: 'Giue me thy hand (Celestiall) so: Boyes of Art, I haue deceiu'd you both'. It is the bad Quarto that preserves the other phrase that alone makes sense of what remains, and enables us to reconstruct the Host's lines as 'Giue me thy hand (Terrestrial) so; giue me thy hand (Celestiall) so: Boyes of Art, I haue deceiu'd you both'—the first of the parallel phrases being addressed to the 'terrestrial' layman, Doctor Caius, the second to the 'celestial' clergyman, Evans. Again, it is the bad Quarto which for all its imperfections tells us that the name Ford assumed when, in disguise, he bribed Falstaff to attempt Mistress Ford's virtue was not 'Broome', as the Folio has it, but 'Brooke'—much more appropriate for a Ford, and alone making sense of Falstaff's comment when he hears that his client has sent him a draught of sack: 'Such Brooks are welcome to me, that o'erflows such liquor'. (For reasons that can only be conjectured now, 'Brooke' must have been altered to 'Broome' between the time of the first performance of the play late in the 1590s and the publishing of the Folio in 1623.) The Folio text even of *The Merry Wives*, then, is not cur'd or perfect, though it is probably closer to perfection than most modern editors allow.

The second of the three classes of play presents a more difficult problem still, and particularly plays like *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, where we have a good Folio text and also a reasonably good earlier quarto, but where it is not easy to say what relationship one bears to the other and where the Folio is not directly based on the good quarto or not on that alone. With such texts one needs all the bibliographical knowledge that one can muster. The modern editor knows that he cannot, each time his two texts differ, make a separate choice of the reading that, on aesthetic grounds, he prefers. He will attempt

rather to establish the nature of the printer's copy that lay behind each of the texts, to decide whether, for example, the compositor worked from the author's 'foul papers', or an author's transcript of these, or a scribe's, or a prompt copy that may or may not have been any one of these, or—worse—a previous quarto corrected by reference to any one of these, or a previous quarto occasionally printed from a bad quarto. He will also reconstruct the printing process as best he can, trying to discover, for instance, whether the text was set up by one compositor or more (and in the process he will use evidence of spelling preferences, evidence of which I confess myself highly and increasingly sceptical); and if he can show that the book was set by formes, not pages, and the copy 'cast off' (i.e. that the compositor calculated in advance how much copy was necessary to fill certain pages, and ran the risk of miscalculating), he will not be surprised to find prose set as verse to fill up space, or verse set as prose to save it (or even lines omitted to save it). Then, if he is a good editor, he will refrain from making emendations that are inconsistent with his general theory: to take a single theoretical example, if he has 'proved' that the text was set by a compositor reading foul papers, he will not suddenly base an emendation on a theory that a word or phrase was misheard.

Particularly since Dr R. B. McKerrow published his *Prolegomena*,<sup>3</sup> and indeed before that too, a great deal of systematic consideration has been given to such bibliographical and editorial method; and Sir Walter Greg once even claimed, in one of his few unguarded moments, that 'Bibliographers have in fact brought criticism down from the fascinating but too often barren heights of aesthetic and philosophic speculation to the concrete familiarities of the theatre, the scrivener's shop, and the printing house'—and Professor Fredson Bowers has similarly asserted that 'the bibliographical method . . . has provided a superior demonstration since it uses not an appeal to probability of opinion but instead the physical and inexorable evidence of the printing house'.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately it is not so. The 'evidence' and 'familiarities' of the printing house are not always 'concrete' or 'inexorable'; they are not even always 'physical' (and McKerrow was wiser than some of his successors when he refused to call such processes 'scientific'<sup>5</sup>). It could be wished that modern bibliographers had paid more attention to a story told by the editor of the new Temple edition of Shakespeare, M. R. Ridley. Ridley sent his 'copy' to the printer for his edition of *Hamlet* (the 'copy' being in fact a corrected earlier printed edition) and was amazed to find in his first proofs not 'the whips and scorns of time' but 'the chips and scorns of time'. He naturally asked himself how the error had occurred, but could find no 'physical' or scientific explanation. The compositor could not have mistaken a printed 'w' for a 'c'; 'w' and 'c', one is told, are not adjacent letters on the monotype keyboard; there was no similar

<sup>3</sup> *Prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare. A Study in Editorial Method*, Oxford 1939.

<sup>4</sup> Greg, *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare*, 2nd edn, Oxford 1951, p. 3; Bowers, *On Editing Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Dramatists*, University of Pennsylvania 1955, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> *Prolegomena*, pp. vii-viii.

word to provoke the error of dittography. Indeed, the only possible explanation would seem to be psychological: Ridley's compositor had apparently allowed his mind to wander to a poker game or to food.<sup>6</sup>

If now the argument is, as it were, turned round, what appears is this. If *Hamlet* had come down to us in only one text, and if that text had read 'the chips and scorns of time', what credence would have been given to the emendation 'whips'? An editor making the emendation could not have provided one 'scientific' scrap of evidence to justify his conjecture, and without such bibliographical support it would have won scant respect from most of us. From which some may wish to argue that any editorial guess is justified; it would be wiser to argue rather that our text of Shakespeare never will be demonstrably perfect. In particular there can be no one universally acceptable text of all Shakespeare's plays if Professor Honigmann is right in his contention that plays like *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Troilus and Cressida* exist in two equally Shakespearian texts, one embodying the verbal alterations that Shakespeare made, consciously or unconsciously, when he transcribed from the other. And this theory has not, to my knowledge, yet been satisfactorily rebutted, a mere question why Shakespeare should have bothered to transcribe a play being surely inadequate.

For the remainder of this discussion, however, it may be better to turn aside from such profundities to the plays that were not published until the Folio, the texts of my class (i). One is then faced by the first and what should be the easiest of all editorial questions: when is an editor entitled to think that he can 'cure' such a text?

Presumably he would not nowadays wish to 'correct' for moral reasons, although at least one such notorious emendation stood for many years in editions of *As You Like It*. In Act I, scene iii, after Rosalind and Celia have first met Orlando, following his victory in the wrestling, the Folio has the following:

*Cel.* Why Cosen, why *Rosaline*: *Cupid* haue mercie, Not a word?

*Ros.* Not one to throw at a dog. . . .

*Cel.* But is all this for your Father?

*Ros.* No, some of it is for my childes Father.

That is to say, Rosalind's concern is for the man (Orlando) whom she would wish to be the father of any child she may have. That sentiment, however, did not appeal to Shakespeare's first major editor, the eighteenth-century scholar Rowe, who emended 'childes Father' to 'father's child', and thus made Rosalind reply that she was worried not about her father but about herself. The emendation, fortunately, is not found in standard modern editions, although it was duly approved by Coleridge and survived in, for example, the Verity edition, for too long used for public examinations in New South Wales. Once the emendation was made, critical conclusions could be based on it, and Hudson, for one, could then assert that when Rosalind says some (to him) outrageous things later in the play, her 'occasional freedoms of speech are manifestly intended as part of her disguise, and spring from the feeling that it is far less

<sup>6</sup> *William Shakespeare. A Commentary*, London 1936, pp. 153-4.

indelicate to go a little out of her character, in order to prevent any suspicion of her sex, than it would be to hazard such a suspicion by keeping strictly within her character'. Indeed, one emends Shakespeare at one's peril.

We should be honest about this and admit that it is not impossible that Rowe was right—but no editor is entitled to print 'father's child'. As Ridley has well said (p. 140): 'Any one who cares about Shakespeare would rather have interposed between himself and Shakespeare a compositor however stupid than the cleverest editor who ever emended a corrupt passage'. Editors, one feels, admit the principle in theory but too often abandon it in practice.

An example from another Folio play, *Measure for Measure*, may help make the point. In I.iv, the Duke, in the Folio text, begins his explanation of his temporary abdication:

We haue strict Statutes, and most biting Laws,  
(The needfull bits and curbes to headstrong weedes,)  
Which for this foureteene yeares, we haue let slip . . . .

'Headstrong weedes', however, will not be found in most modern editions of the play. R. C. Bald's 1956 Pelican edition and Dover Wilson's New Cambridge have 'headstrong wills'; others, following Theobald, 'headstrong steeds'; and J. W. Lever's New Arden 'headstrong jades'—the last 'justified' on the ground that 'jades' (spelt 'iades') 'could have been misread in Shakespeare's handwriting' as 'weedes', a statement that to the best of my judgement is simply not 'true'. (A similar and equally unconvincing palaeographic explanation probably lies behind the other emendations.) But why, one asks—whether the argument from handwriting is justified or not—must one emend at all? The New Arden editor has no hesitation: because "'weedes" (F), though a common figure, creates a pointlessly mixed metaphor'. Shakespeare not allowed to write a mixed metaphor, 'pointless' or not? The dramatist who could not only 'take Armes against a Sea of troubles, / And by opposing end them' but could also in one play write, for example,

. . . ere to black *Heccats* summons  
The shard-borne Beetle, with his drowsie hums,  
Hath rung Nights yawning Peale . . .

and

Pitty, like a naked New-borne-Babe,  
Striding the blast, or Heauens Cherubin, hors'd  
Vpon the sightlesse Curriers of the Ayre,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in euery eye,  
That teares shall drowne the winde ?

The reason given for the emendation is surely inadequate. Moreover, as Professor G. K. Hunter has shown,<sup>7</sup> curbs-weeds is a frequent Shakespeare image-link, being found, for example, in *Hamlet* (III.iv.151-5), *2 Henry IV* (IV.iv.54-62) and *Othello* (I.iii.322-34)—and even if he had not shown this, a

<sup>7</sup> 'Six Notes on *Measure for Measure*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XV, 3 (Summer 1964), p. 167.

critic might well have defended the Folio text on the ground that the Duke is not uttering platitudes but is expounding a particular political philosophy, that strict laws are necessary to restrain those undesirables whom Shakespeare in another mood might have called the caterpillars of the Commonwealth.

Perhaps, with Hunter's demonstration in mind, future editors will preserve the Folio's 'weedes'. But will the principle be granted—the principle, surely, that much greater modesty is needed when one faces the decision whether to emend at all?

My quarrel with modern bibliography is that, for all its protestations about being scientific, it has in a sense brought the wheel full circle. In a sense we are back with Capell, who thought himself entitled to select from various readings 'whatever improves the author, or contributes to his advancement in perfectness, the point in view throughout all this performance' and added 'that they do improve him was with the editor an argument in their favour; and a presumption of genuineness for what is thus selected'. To all such procedures Pope had already given what should have been the death-blow when he said, in the first note to Book 2 of the *Dunciad*: 'Two things there are, upon which the very Basis of all verbal Criticism is founded and supported: The first, that the Author could never fail to use the very best word, on every occasion: The second, that the Critick cannot chuse but know, which it is. This being granted, whenever any doth not fully content us, we take upon us to conclude, first that the author could never have us'd it, And secondly, that he must have used That very one which we conjecture in its stead.' (Pope's own practice as a Shakespearean editor, of course, deserves the rebuke at least as much as any other's.)

Yet while editors no longer 'select' readings from different texts exactly as Capell felt free to do, is the modern editor really any more scientific if he (or, in the example I am thinking of, she), believing he has proved that a play was set by a particular compositor who averages two errors a page, proceeds happily to emend an average of two words on every page? Is there really much 'science' in the practice of an editor who, having established to his own satisfaction that the 'copy' for a text is suspect, 'will incline to be much bolder in his emendation of *passable but not entirely characteristic readings*'?<sup>8</sup> The italics are mine but the words are those of our greatest bibliographer, Fredson Bowers—whose practice as an editor occasionally worries me as much as does his theory. For an example, I should like to return to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and quote Nym's line 'The good humor is to steale at a minutes rest'. At least, that is what the Folio makes him say, and the Quarto for once confirms it, with identical wording. In Professor Bowers's own (Pelican) edition of the comedy, however, Nym's line is 'The good humor is to steal at a minim's rest'. And why? Because the phrase 'minim's rest' appears in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Professor Bowers thinks it a better phrase; and then, *because* he prefers it anyway, he propounds a bibliographical theory to 'justify' his choice and suggests that 'minutes' must have been an error in the prompt book, from which (or a manuscript based on

<sup>8</sup> *On Editing Shakespeare*, Charlottesville 1966, pp. 110-11.

it) the actor-reporter learnt his part, and which the Folio (perhaps) copied. It is a theory by which one could 'justify' almost any emendation one wished to make in *The Merry Wives* and it is, if I may say so, a desperate one. Sadly one quotes back at a great scholar his own words 'Bibliography is a good servant but a bad master'.<sup>9</sup>

An editor's first duty, to risk another generalization, is to try to make sense of what his text (or his copy-text) says, not overlooking either such possibilities as that the word he does not immediately understand may be a dialectal one (Dr Hilda Hulme has drawn attention to Shakespeare's not infrequent use of Warwickshire phrases) or even that the text may be deliberately ambiguous or evasive, as in *Timon's* 'Thinke it a Bastard, whom the oracle / Hath doubtfully pronounced, the throat shall cut' (where editors who emend to 'thy throat' remove the very doubtfulness that enabled classical oracles to continue pronouncing). Indeed, if *Timon* is, as many of us still believe, a play that Shakespeare did not finally work over, to reduce it to 'order', the editor who 'emends' it freely, to tidy it up, is doing what Shakespeare did not feel like doing himself—and there is probably no greater presumption than that.

The only justifiable creed for an editor, it seems to me, is one of radical conservatism, and I cannot wholeheartedly agree with Sir Walter Greg, and others who perhaps misunderstand him, on the wisdom of backing one's own judgment.<sup>10</sup> In a sense, no doubt, one always does back one's own judgment; but there is surely much to be said for Dr Johnson's sentiments as expressed in a note on a line in *Cymbeline* (quoted with approval by Honigmann), 'I am willing to comply with any meaning that can be extorted from the present text, rather than change it'. To say which is not to agree either with Johnson's own editorial practice or with Professor Honigmann's own eclecticism. (The conclusion that the latter's investigations point to is rather that there is no such thing as one right text of *Hamlet*.)

The argument is not intended to lead to the decision that editing ought to be abandoned in favour of the production of facsimiles or to imply that emendation is superfluous. It is a plea for greater editorial humility and a greater readiness to admit that the despised compositor with his 'copy' in front of him, and with his knowledge of the language as it was spoken in his own day, is more likely to be correct than, as Johnson so well said, 'we who read it only by imagination'. Emendation ought to be confined to what, in McKerrow's phrase, is 'certainly corrupt' and he, of course, great scholar that he was, realized how many questions the phrase begged—but at least it would rule out 'headstrong jades' or the 'minim's rest'.

Bibliographers and editors have their favourite and oft-told stories about critics who, basing their critical judgments on certain texts in ignorance of the bibliographical facts, have perpetrated 'howlers'. They tell how Caroline

<sup>9</sup> *Textual and Literary Criticism*, Cambridge 1959, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted, for example, by Bowers, *On Editing Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Dramatists*, pp. 6-7.

Spurgeon included in her statistical analyses of Shakespeare's imagery 'images' that were in fact only editorial guesses; they tell of F. O. Matthiessen's verdict that the phrase 'soiled fish of the sea' in *White-Jacket* was 'peculiarly Melville's', when in fact 'soiled' was a misprint for 'coiled'; and Dr Leavis has not been allowed to forget his mishap when to make a point about the influence of Dickens on the early Henry James, he quoted *Roderick Hudson* not from the original text of the 1870s but from the revised version of some thirty years later. To these we must now unfortunately add the critic who, claiming to be the first to respond accurately to what certain Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists actually wrote, often quoted what they 'wrote' from badly edited nineteenth- or early twentieth-century texts, and based critical judgments about the shortness of *Dr Faustus* on the A text, without any apparent awareness of even the existence of the B text, which in the opinion of most modern bibliographers is probably closer to what Marlowe composed.<sup>11</sup>

These are indeed cautionary tales—but there is a relevant proverb about people living in glass houses; and editors are living in glass houses if they persist in emending Shakespeare because they will not allow him a mixed metaphor or will not permit him to use in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* a phrase different from one he used in *Romeo and Juliet* a few years before.

'Bibliography must precede criticism', Professor Bowers has written.<sup>12</sup> One sees what he means, but it is true only in a sense.

<sup>11</sup> The points are made by R. W. Dent in a review in *Modern Philology*, 63 (1965-6), pp. 252-6.

<sup>12</sup> *On Editing Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Dramatists*, p. 51.