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The Editing of Shakespearean Plays and Postmodernism

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, the focus of the editors was on the recreation of a “pure text”, which was intended by the writer. These editors wanted to protect Shakespeare from textual pollution. As opposed to this practice, the editing of Shakespearean plays in a postmodern age embraces contamination, hybridity, heterogeneity, and self-negation. Some editors are rejecting the notion of consistency in the editing of Shakespearean plays. They do not find it necessary to make the correction of details like place, action, speech prefixes, and stage directions. Inconsistency is more interesting and revealing for them. Poststructuralism has banished the concept of individual intentionality along with the concept of the autonomous subject. When the editors ask what Shakespeare intended when he wrote his plays, the meanings that the editors give could be contradictory. Shakespearean plays were shaped by multiple pressures like court, city authorities, actors and audiences in the playhouse, censorship and printing house practices. Postmodernism is associated with pluralism, relativism, recognition of differences and a rejection of grand narratives. When an editor edits a text, one alternative from available alternatives is chosen. If the editor of a Shakespearean play offers an authoritative and reliable version of his play, then that text would not be postmodern because the meaning of the text would be made stable. A plurality of meanings is expected in a postmodern edition. This edition would allow the readers to play with a wide range of possible words, actions, and stage directions and construct their own play. However, an edition of a

Shakespearean play that leaves everything open could become formless and unusable. Readers would need something tangible to grasp within a particular edition. One should not expect an infinite range of textual and dramatic possibilities in the text. What is expected is a greater range of editions than are presently available. I wish to examine the problem of how and to what degree, a Shakespearean edition in the “postmodern age” can negotiate with the concerns of postmodernism.

Keywords: postmodernism, plurality, hybridity

Postmodernism is associated with pluralism, relativism, recognition of differences and a rejection of grand narratives. The plurality of postmodernism does not go hand in hand with the task of editing as the editor has to choose one alternative out of different alternatives that are available. If the editor constructs a text that claims to be authoritative and reliable, then the text cannot be called postmodern. The question is: In what way can the editing of Shakespearean plays take into account the concerns of postmodernism? If we want Shakespeare to be relevant in a postmodern age, then an edition of his play should allow readers to play with a wide range of possible words, actions and stage directions. They should be able to generate meaning for themselves. The editing of Shakespearean plays should acknowledge elements of undecidability (Marcus 128-29). I wish to explore how the editing of a Shakespeare play can absorb elements of postmodernist thought in my paper. I would specifically focus on how contamination of texts, characters’ names and speech prefixes, asides, stage directions, and explanatory notes are handled differently by the editors due to the impact of postmodernism. I have mainly focused on the editing of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Textual authority was determined through author-centred narratives in the past. Editors no longer trust these narratives. Editors focus more on the broader cultural situation rather than focusing on the intention of the author. More than one printed version is available of about half of Shakespeare’s plays. There

are three early versions of *Hamlet* and two of *King Lear*. The edition that was intended by the writer cannot be put forth clearly. Earlier, the editors would choose one version of the text which they thought was intended by the writer and would reject other versions. Often the players and the printers were blamed for contamination and the other versions were rejected. This view began to change in the 1980s. Gary Taylor, Steven Urkowitz, and Michael Warren contended that Shakespeare himself revised his plays and produced two different versions of *King Lear*. It is now acknowledged that Shakespeare may have revised his plays according to the requirements of the theatre. Different editions may have been produced for different audiences and occasions. The concept of individual intentionality has been rejected along with the concept of the autonomous subject in poststructuralist thought. Editors are now interested in examining the pressures that may have shaped Shakespeare's plays. Court and city authorities, actors and audiences in the theatre, different forms of censorship and printing-house practices may have influenced the changes that Shakespeare had to make (129-30).

TEXTUAL POLLUTION

Editors in the nineteenth and twentieth-century believed that the text that was intended by the writer could be recreated. Their focus was on the purity of the text. Edmond Malone, an eighteenth-century editor, declared that his aim was to protect Shakespeare from textual pollution. Editors have used different ways of finding elements of textual pollution and have attempted to erase them. Postmodernism celebrates contamination, hybridity, heterogeneity, and self-negation. Editorial practice has been influenced by this celebration: "Some editors are beginning to feel less pressure than in the past to emend Shakespearean texts to make them self-consistent in terms of place, action, speech prefixes, stage directions, and other important details" (131). They find inconsistency more

interesting and revealing than consistency. They do not emend verbal forms that are considered ungrammatical now. Shakespeare wrote his plays before the codification of English grammar took place in the eighteenth century. Shakespeare routinely used double superlatives and double negatives. Anthony's "most unkindest cut of all" in *Julius Caesar* can be taken as an example. Shakespeare often combined a singular subject with a plural verb and vice versa. Editors correct these grammatical mistakes. The fear of contamination is also reflected in the editors' belief that Shakespeare did not borrow from other writers. Early twentieth century editors referred to borrowed material in Shakespearean plays. In the twentieth century, the existence of unacceptably popular elements was blamed on contaminations that were introduced by pirates, unauthorised agents and actors who would reproduce the plays from memory and sell these plays to the printers. These plays were considered contaminated because these actors could not reproduce the sophisticated artistry of Shakespeare. Such explanations are not considered convincing now. Patchwork, palimpsest, and textual hybridisations are coming to be valued by the editors in a postmodern aesthetic. It is now acknowledged that Shakespeare borrowed heavily from other writers (131-32). I would now discuss how contamination has been embraced and can be embraced in the editing of *Hamlet*.

There are three basic printed texts of *Hamlet* and no manuscript of the play is available. The first text was published in 1603. This is known as the first quarto (Q1). Nicholas Ling and John Trundell were the publishers. It is also called a bad quarto as it is considered a corrupt and abridged version of Shakespeare's play. It has 2,154 lines. The second text was published in 1604. This is known as the second quarto (Q2). It is supposed to be based on Shakespeare's own manuscript, his 'foul papers'. It was a not a fair copy, but a completed draft. Shakespeare submitted it to his company. It is the largest text and has 3,674 lines. James Roberts printed it for Nicholas Ling.

The third basic text of *Hamlet* was published in 1623 in the posthumous *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*. It is known as the First Folio (F). It has 3,535 lines. Philip Edwards observes:

These three texts are not wholly independent of each other. James Robert's compositors while they were setting the second quarto, had in front of them not only a manuscript but a copy of the bad quarto of 1603 and they frequently copied its readings in the first act and possibly elsewhere. The Folio compositors may likewise have made use of a copy of the second quarto, though the extent of this use is extremely uncertain. There is always a problem when our texts disagree, but the agreement of two texts on a particular reading can be the result of mere copying. (10)

Most editors have based their editions on the Second Quarto (Q2) and the First Folio (F1) of *Hamlet*. Q1 of *Hamlet* and other Quartos have been dismissed by these publishers. If one compares ACT III, Scene I of *Hamlet* as it is given in the Cambridge edition of *Hamlet* edited by Philip Edwards and compares it with Q1 of *Hamlet*, one would find that the quarto edition which has been rejected can add different layers to the meaning of the text. In Q1, the scene begins with the King's dialogue. It is as follows:

Right noble friends, that our deere cosin Hamlet
Hath lost the very heart of all his sence,
It is most right, and we most sory for him:
Therefore we doe desire, euen as you tender
Our care to him, and our great loue to you,
That you will labour but to wring from him
The cause and ground of his distemperancie.
Doe this, the king of *Denmarke* shal be thankfull.

In the Cambridge edition, the King's dialogue is:

And can you by no drift of circumstance
Get from his why he puts on this confusion,
Grating so harshly all his days of quiet
With turbulent and dangerous lunacy? (143)

In the Cambridge edition, Claudius is having a conversation with Rosencrantz and Guidenstern when the scene

opens. He has already been informed that Hamlet's madness is put on. The King uses a verb 'wring' in Q1 in place of the verb 'get' in the Cambridge edition. The verb 'wring' also seems appropriate as the King knows that it would be difficult for Rosencrantz and Guidenstern to find out the true cause of Hamlet's lunacy. The word used in Q1 for Hamlet's lunacy is 'distemperancie'. This word again is not inappropriate. 'Distemperancie' refers to the disturbance of health, mind and temper. The word does not explicitly refer to Hamlet's lunacy.

The editing of Hamlet's soliloquy in this scene presents a different problem. The text of Hamlet's speech is radically different from its counterpart in the Cambridge edition. The text of Hamlet's soliloquy as it appears in Q1 is as follows:

To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
 To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
 No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,
 For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,
 And borne before an euerlasting Iudge,
 From whence no passenger euer retur'nd,
 The vndiscovered country, at whose sight
 The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.
 But for this, the ioyfull hope of this,
 Whol'd beare the scornes and flattery of the world,
 Scorned by the right rich, the rich curssed of the poore?
 The widow being oppressed, the orphan wrong'd,
 The taste of hunger, or a tirants raigne,
 And thousand more calamities besides,
 To grunt and sweate vnder this weary life,
 When that he may his full *Quietus* make,
 With a bare bodkin, who would this indure,
 But for a hope of something after death?
 Which pusles the braine, and doth confound the sence,
 Which makes vs rather beare those euilles we haue,
 Than flie to others that we know not of.
 I that, O this conscience makes cowardes of vs all,
 Lady in thy orizons, be all my sinnes remembred.

Editors do not consider Q1 when editing Shakespeare as they find it anomalous. The theory is that these quartos were reproduced by the actors through memory as they wanted to sell these plays to the publisher. It was held that these quartos did not have any connection with the genuine text of Shakespeare's plays. However, Laurie E. Maguire, Paul Wersting, Lukas Erne, and others have significantly changed the way we look at these quartos. The variation in this soliloquy is of a high order. This soliloquy has a different set of words from the Q2 and F1 equivalents. The tone, emphasis and focus are different. The longer versions of the soliloquy in the other two versions are abstract and philosophical. The version given in Q1 is concrete, direct and political. Q1 also includes a unique scene in which Horatio informs the Queen about Claudius's various acts of treachery. The Queen says: "I preceiue there's treason in his looks/ That seem'd to sugar o're his villanie". This dialogue makes her a less ambivalent figure than she is in the other two versions. Q1 appears to be more fast-paced and action-oriented than Q2 and F1. It seems to follow the conventions of the genre of revenge tragedy more closely (Murphy 7-8).

INCONSISTENCIES IN THE HANDLING OF NAMES

Lists of *dramatis personae* are not given in the early printed texts of Shakespeare's plays. Modern editions have the lists. In the early texts, the audience is acquainted with the characters through stage directions and speech prefixes. These are often unstable (Marcus 133). The speech prefixes used in these editions can be restored to "communicate a creative tension between naming, racial and other stereotyping, and action, which runs through many of the plays" (134). There are interesting inconsistencies in the handling of names in these texts. Since the manuscript is not available, it is difficult to attribute these inconsistencies to one source. The source can be an author, a playhouse scribe, an actor, a pirate or compositors in the printing house (135).

The names of the characters in *Hamlet* are unstable. The name of the Queen, Gertrude, comes from the Folio. This was not the name that Shakespeare wrote. Her name appears as Gertrard in the second quarto. It was in the eighteenth century that the spelling of the character, Rosencrantz, was established. The spelling of this character in the second quarto is Rosencraus which is supposed to be a misreading of 'Rosencrans'. The name of Polonius is Corambis in the bad quarto. Montano is the name of his man. What led to this change of name is difficult to establish. Perhaps, the earlier name was offensive. Someone may have found it odd that a Pole has been made the Danish counsellor. The name Corambis was perhaps thought appropriate for the role (Edwards 70-71).

SPEECHES AND ASIDES

The handling of asides has changed due to the impact of postmodernism. In an aside, a character makes a comment or a speech which is not heard by other characters on the stage. If a character's speech is not labeled as an aside, our understanding of a particular character and the relationship of that character with other characters becomes more complicated. A character becomes stable when a speech is designated as an aside. The audience can understand the motivation of the character as an aside is a private utterance as opposed to a speech which is a public utterance. Modern editors have filled the gaps by designating certain speeches in the early editions as asides. They have imposed artificial clarity. They make a clear distinction between a speech and an aside. The result is the simplification of the psychology of the characters. The complexity of dramatic interactions between them is lost. A scene's dramatic action is certainly clarified through a clearly marked aside. Younger and less experienced readers may benefit through this kind of editing. Readers who are more experienced should understand that the marking of a speech as an aside is a result of the faith of the editors in the notion of autonomous subjectivity.

Shakespeare's characters could be better understood if the editors maintain the obscurity and avoid the clarity (Marcus 136-37).

Hamlet's aside in Act I, Scene II in the Cambridge edition is given as a speech in Q2. When Claudius calls Hamlet "my son", Hamlet says "A little more than kin, and less than kind." To call him 'son' is more than their actual kinship permits; and there is less than the natural feelings of such a relationship between them. The relationship between Hamlet and Claudius would become more complicated if this aside is designated as a speech. The verbal disagreement would suggest Hamlet's reluctance to accept the King as his father. Hamlet's defiance of the authority of the King would be evident right from the beginning of the play.

QUESTIONS OF STAGING

Editors in the nineteenth and twentieth-century clarified the action through stage directions. As opposed to this practice, early Shakespearean editions do not give these directions clearly. The entrances and exits of the characters are often left unmarked. The questions to be asked are: "What is an editor's function in creating and emending stage directions? Is it to offer readers a clear, unproblematic sense of the pattern of action on stage so that they can visualise the play as they are reading it? Or is it to offer readers an array of possible scenarios for the action on stage with the goal of being suggestive rather than definitive?" (Marcus 137). The readers may want to tackle problematic questions of staging on their own. Earlier, basic patterns of the scene were clearly given. Now, the editors do not give lengthy details of the location and environment of a particular scene. These editorial specifications are given briefly. This sparseness reflects the sparseness of the Shakespearean stage. This also suits postmodern taste. Editors prefer fluidity to specificity when they conceptualise dramatic action. Different editions may give

contradictory or confusing stage directions of the same dramatic action (137). Marcus observes: "Rather than offer a specificity that forecloses interpretative possibilities that two out of three early texts leave open, an editor working with a postmodern textual framework in mind would be likely to leave the matter undecided, weighing the differences among the early texts in a note" (138-39). The entrances of characters are sometimes omitted in the early editions of Shakespearean plays. They differ from one edition to another edition. Rather than choosing one alternative out of many alternatives, editors in a postmodern age can think of leaving the choice open to different interpretative possibilities. At the same time, it should be noted that these possibilities cannot be endless. Publishers would find it difficult to print the text if the editors exceed the word limit. Having endless openness in a printed text is not feasible. What is required is a little suggestiveness. Readers should be encouraged to generate meanings for themselves. Editors want the readers to play the games that the text provides (140-41).

If ACT III, Scene I of *Hamlet* given in the Cambridge edition of *Hamlet* edited by Philip Edwards is compared with Q1 of *Hamlet*, one would find that a stage direction provided in Q1 is different from the Cambridge edition. The stage direction is: "Enter King and Queene, Rossencraft, and Gilderstone". Q1 omits Polonius, Ophelia and the Lords. The presence or absence of Lords changes the effect of the scene: "With the Lords (albeit silently) present the scene provides a more social and less private vision of the world of the play: they make it less a "domestic" drama" (Murphy 3).

PLAUSIBLE MEANINGS

In a postmodern edition of a Shakespearean play, exploratory notes should be given. Explanatory notes give final, definitive meanings. Exploratory notes are open to multiple interpretations. In such an edition, the editor would give

plausible meanings of a word or a term rather than giving only one meaning. New enquiries into Shakespearean meaning are often closed off when only one meaning is given. Editors should not place unquestioning trust in traditional scholarly resources. Editors often emend unfamiliar usages in Shakespeare. Anachronism can be used creatively to explore these usages (Marcus 141-42).

When Renaissance spellings are emended, a richer sense of meaning can be lost. The following lines from Hamlet's soliloquy can be taken as an example: "And enterprises of great pitch and moment,/ With this regard their currents turne awry,/And loose the name of action" (qtd. in Murphy 5). The verb "loose" is emended as "lose" in modern editions. If the Renaissance spelling is retained, the verb "loose" would have the sense of "lose" and it would also carry the meaning of to let "loose," to release. Hamlet says that death is the undiscovered country from which no "trauiler" returns. The word, "trauiler", is corrected as "traveller". If the Renaissance spelling is used, the word would also have the sense of "travail," or labour, which is also appropriate (6).

CONCLUSION

When the editor selects one meaning, this meaning is selected at the expense of eliminating other meanings and textual ambiguities. Andrew Murphy raises a number of fundamental issues about the editing of a Shakespearean play:

what aspects of the text fall entirely within the editor's control? Does the editor have a wholly free hand in modernising spelling and, if so, what might be lost in eliminating any ambiguities of meaning that inhere in the spelling of the original texts? Is the editor completely at liberty in matters of punctuation and, again, what might follow from this? To what extent should the editor intervene in the presentation of the text in order to make it easier for the reader to find his or her way through it? Should, for example, act and scene divisions be consistently marked as a way

of ordering the text on the page? To what extent might such segmenting of the text run against the grain of its being a theatrical document? In the theater, after all, there are no act or scene breaks. Should an editor add or amplify stage directions in order to make the logistics of the action more intelligible to the reader? If this is within the editor's power, then how much information is enough, or too much, or too little? (9)

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