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Fragmenting Authorship in the Eighteenth-Century Shakespeare Editionⁱ

When, in the early years of the twentieth century, the New Bibliographers started to formulate their arguments about the Shakespearean text, one of their key concerns was to restore the reputation of the 1623 First Folio. This project rested on two evidentiary foundations. Firstly, A. W. Pollard's division of the early quartos into "good" and "bad" categories seemed to affirm the good faith of the Folio editors. Heminge and Condell had claimed that, prior to the Folio, Shakespeare's plays were "maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors." Since the eighteenth century, most commentators had interpreted this statement as applying to *all* pre-1623 Shakespearean quartos. Once editors had realized that certain Folio texts themselves derived from quarto copy, they had concluded that Heminge and Condell were both lazy and unreliable. However, Pollard's demonstration suggested that the Folio editors had meant to stigmatize only a small subset of texts – the "bad quartos" (Greg, *Editorial Problem* 7–14). As Peter Alexander put it, this promised to "restore the good name and authority of Heminge and Condell" by showing that "their statements square[d] with the facts" (36).

The second strand of New Bibliographical revisionism was the suggestion that some of the Folio texts, and many of the "good" quartos, had been set from Shakespearean "foul papers."ⁱⁱ Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors believed that the Folio editors had relied on corrupt scribal documents for their texts. In opposition to this, the New Bibliographers saw evidence that Shakespeare's own manuscripts underlay many of the early editions. Whereas earlier accounts of Shakespeare's textual history had been sunk in a "quagmire of ... despondency," these findings suggested new directions for research (Greg, *Shakespeare* 92). The result, Pollard suggested, would be to replace the pervasive attitude of pessimism in Shakespearean textual studies with one of "optimism" ("Foundations" 383–84).

As Pollard's and Greg's choices of title make clear, the New Bibliography aimed to set Shakespeare's text on new foundations. Greg was fully aware of the revolutionary import of the movement, and, in a strain of slightly self-mocking hyperbole, he portrayed himself and his allies as a cadre of radical conservatives poised to sweep away the errors

of the intervening years and restore Shakespeare to his original form. “An attitude of textual pessimism ... had long been traditional when Pollard blew the trumpet of revolt,” he wrote. “Perhaps never has so conservative a spirit led so revolutionary a crusade” (*Editorial Problem* 18). Fundamental to the “attitude of textual pessimism” that Greg wanted to replace were a set of textual assumptions that derived ultimately from the eighteenth century. One passage in particular seemed to exemplify the problem, and the New Bibliographers returned to it repeatedly. In his 1756 “Proposals” for a new edition of Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson had crafted an almost apocalyptic account of the depredations that Shakespeare’s works had undergone. Once Shakespeare had sold his plays to the theatre companies, Johnson wrote,

They were immediately copied for the actors, and multiplied by transcript after transcript, vitiated by the blunders of the penman, or changed by the affectation of the player; perhaps enlarged to introduce a jest, or mutilated to shorten the representation; and printed at last without the concurrence of the authour, without the consent of the proprietor, from compilations made by chance or by stealth out of the separate parts made for the theatre No other authour ever gave up his works to fortune and time with so little care: no books could be left in hands so likely to injure them, as plays frequently acted, yet continued in manuscript ... no other editions were made from fragments so minutely broken, and so fortuitously reunited. (Sherbo, *Johnson on Shakespeare* 7: 52)

Underlying the printed editions of Shakespeare, Johnson believed, was a chaotic mass of theatre manuscripts and actors’ parts. The anarchic nature of textual transmission in the London playhouses meant that no one part of this could be seen as unequivocally Shakespeare’s (Scholes 164). Actors might interpolate new lines into their parts, while stage managers could arrange for songs, speeches, or whole scenes to be added to older plays on the occasion of their revival. The canon of Shakespeare’s plays, for Johnson as well as other eighteenth-century critics, was a mingled one, where – potentially – more than one authorial body resided.

Johnson's suggestion that Shakespeare's texts were protean, multitudinous, and fragmentary was the antithesis of the New Bibliographers' attitude of textual optimism. No matter how whimsical Greg was in referring to the movement as a "revolt," he and his associates nevertheless were proposing a radical break with pre-existing modes of Shakespearean textual criticism. In order to effect it, they needed to discredit Johnson's view of the text, and the accounts of other eighteenth-century editors – Alexander Pope, Lewis Theobald, George Steevens – who shared it. Greg himself responded to Johnson's conjectures by simply dismissing them as "nightmare fantasies," which it "would be absurd now to take seriously" (*Editorial Problem* 156). Pollard's account of the passage was similarly dismissive. Responding to Johnson's claim that the plays had been printed from "fragments ... minutely broken" – in other words, actors' parts – Pollard asked "whether for once in his life the great Doctor did not descend ... to writing sheer nonsense" ("Improvers" 282). For the New Bibliographers, who imagined the manuscript sources of Shakespeare's text as a series of ideal-typical precursors to the printed book – foul papers, prompt books, full-text private transcripts – Johnson's account of a radically fragmented Shakespeare seemed barely comprehensible.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the past thirty years, the New Bibliographical consensus in Shakespearean textual studies has itself largely dissolved. However, as Tiffany Stern has pointed out, one of its key assumptions – the essential unity of dramatic texts – has "hardly been queried" ("Re-patching" 170). Accordingly, in this article I want to revisit the eighteenth century's preoccupation with a textually fragmented Shakespeare. Notwithstanding the New Bibliographers' hostility, Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editors often brought a strongly theatrical sensibility to their work. Drawing upon their knowledge of contemporary stage practices, they were keenly aware of the modular nature of early modern theatrical texts. They knew that any play undergoing performance would have been broken down into a number of discrete manuscript components – actors' parts, songs, detachable prologues and epilogues. Using their own theatrical experiences, they were also willing to speculate about the material traces of performance underlying Shakespeare's published texts.

This attention to theatrical performance is not surprising. Many of Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editors had substantial connections with the London playhouses.

Alexander Pope wrote the first-night prologue to Addison's *Cato* and assisted a number of other dramatists during the 1720s and 1730s (Goldstein). Lewis Theobald was an experienced dramatist and pantomime deviser. George Steevens was an amateur actor and keen theatre-goer (Sherbo, *Achievement* 94). Edward Capell was deputy examiner of plays and collaborated with David Garrick in altering *Antony and Cleopatra* for the Drury Lane theatre in 1758 (Cunningham 99–101). Johnson himself maintained a long-term presence on both sides of the eighteenth-century stage. In addition to *Irene*, he wrote prologues for a number of plays, including Garrick's *Lethe: or Aesop in the Shades* (1740).^{iv} Despite the jocular line that Boswell's *Life* has Johnson uttering in 1749 – “I'll come no more behind your scenes, David; for the silk stockings and white bosoms of your actresses excite my amorous propensities” (1: 201) – Johnson continued to maintain close relations with the theatre world long after this date (Klingel 308–9).

As these examples show, the social and professional networks that Shakespeare's editors moved in frequently overlapped with those of the playhouse. This bears out Vanessa Cunningham's observations about the nature of dramatic editing before what she calls “the divorce of stage and page” (11). In this period, she writes, “strict boundaries had not yet been set between those who served Shakespeare in the study and in the theatre,” a situation enabled by a figure like Garrick, who acted as a social conduit between the two communities (7). This intimacy not only gave editors a privileged viewpoint from which to witness Shakespeare “in action,” it also, I will argue, engendered in them a hyper-awareness of theatrical manuscript practices and their effects on the transmission of plays. Ideas drawn from contemporary playhouse practices thus came to have a considerable impact on the way in which the history of Shakespeare's texts was understood.

For eighteenth-century textual critics, Shakespeare's plays were modular – broken down into predictable textual units. Shakespeare's authorial presence across a play was therefore understood to be intermittent. Dramatic “paratexts” – prologues, epilogues, and songs – were especially likely to be singled out as un-Shakespearean.^v Creative agencies other than the author could enter the document at any of these points of fracture and disrupt Shakespeare's stylistic signal. To an extent, then, the views of Johnson and his contemporaries foreshadow a recent trend in theatre history that emphasizes the

distributed nature of authorial agency on the early modern stage.^{vi} However, this is not to say that Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editors were simply forward-looking pioneers.^{vii} Their portrayal of the Shakespearean stage was often hostile, and they were usually sceptical about the ability of theatre personnel to transmit texts reliably. In the hands of editorial commentators like Alexander Pope, George Steevens, and Joseph Ritson, this scepticism could harden into outright contempt. Moreover, the argument that the playhouse was a hotbed of textual corruption performed a valuable rhetorical function. It provided a vocabulary that commentators could use to execrate those parts of Shakespeare's canon that simply did not appeal to their own critical senses.

As the examples I will discuss make abundantly clear, this contempt for theatre practitioners was an all-too-pervasive feature of eighteenth-century Shakespearean editorial rhetoric. Nevertheless, the hostile tone of what I term the period's "dramatically informed anti-theatricalism" should not lead us to overlook the often-valuable *information* about stage practices that eighteenth-century editors provide. Their views about the modular nature of early modern plays deserve to be taken seriously. In particular, their awareness of the complex and aggregate nature of authorship in plays that spent any time in repertory is salutary. This nose for complexity often compares well with the tendency of more recent critics to regard all features of the printed text, even potentially detachable units like songs, as equally "integral parts of the plays" (Seng xii).

There is, in other words, a good deal of pertinent, dramatically informed textual criticism buried in the eighteenth-century editorial tradition that has been unduly obscured by the New Bibliographical and post-New Bibliographical emphasis on dramatic unity. The English theatre was a conservative institution and there was much continuity in stage practice between the early modern and post-Restoration playhouses (Stern, *Rehearsal*). Eighteenth-century observers therefore had, potentially at least, a privileged insight into the day-to-day workings of the Shakespearean stage unavailable to those writing after Cunningham's "divorce of stage and page." Evidence of this familiarity, and the advantages it could confer, often surfaces in eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare. Johnson, for instance, was familiar with the use of actors' parts and knew that songs were often lost because they were not usually transcribed into them (Stern, "Absence" 87–88). As well as informing criticism, however, knowledge of this

kind could also engender a basic mistrust of theatrically mediated documents. This belief in the inherently corrupting power of playhouse manuscript practices would in turn have a profound effect on eighteenth-century assumptions about the integrity – and authorship – of Shakespeare’s plays.

An Anatomy of Folio Abuse: Pope to Steevens

The founding document for the eighteenth century’s belief in a fragmented Shakespeare was undoubtedly the Preface to Alexander Pope’s 1725 edition (Seary 138). For Pope, the “almost innumerable Errors” in Shakespeare’s text sprang “from one source, the ignorance of the Players” (1: xiv). None of the printed versions of Shakespeare’s plays, he insisted, was reliable due to their common origins in the primal corruption of the playhouse. The confusion in which Shakespeare’s dramatic texts lay is exemplified, Pope writes, by the multiple texts offered by different quarto editions of the same play. These have “whole heaps of trash different from the other,” a circumstance “occasion’d,” Pope suggests, “by their being taken from different copies, belonging to different Play-houses” (1: xvi). Pope’s narrative describes an editor’s nightmare – a Shakespearean text defined not by one authoritative source but by many corrupt copies. Each play, he implies, was essentially owned in common by the London theatre community, the actors and scribes in each playhouse multiplying errors and adding their own non-authorial “trash” to the dialogue.

If the manuscripts that the quarto editions stemmed from had been corrupted by the actors, the degree of theatrical contamination in the Folio was, Pope suggests, of a different order entirely. Pope’s account of the textual transmission of Shakespeare’s plays in the early modern theatre describes a system almost diabolically inventive in its capacity to generate error. In the Folio, writes Pope, “the additions of trifling and bombast passages are ... far more numerous” than in the quartos (1: xvi). This he attributes almost solely to actorly interpolation: “For whatever had been added, since those Quarto’s, by the actors, or had stolen from their mouths into the written parts, were from thence conveyed into the printed text” (1: xvi). The actors’ replacement of Shakespeare’s authority with their own has, Pope writes, led to all manner of

unauthorized changes to the text. In some cases, “beautiful passages” extant in the quartos have been cut out of the Folio text, “it seems, without any other reason, than [the actors’] willingness to shorten some scenes” (1: xvii). In others, “mean conceits and ribaldries” of the players’ own invention have been shuffled in amongst Shakespeare’s lines (1: xvi). As proof that the Folio’s amplifications had come about through playhouse, rather than authorial, agency, Pope offers his own eyewitness testimony. While preparing the edition, he writes, he came across one old quarto, “which seems to have belonged to the playhouse,” with “several of those very passages ... added in a written hand, which are since to be found in the folio” (1: xvii).^{viii}

Throughout the Preface, Pope single-mindedly attempts to discredit the Folio text and its compilers. In their Address “To the great Variety of Readers,” Heminge and Condell had described themselves as Shakespeare’s “friends,” and emphasized the “care and pain” they took in having “collected and publish’d” his plays. Pope’s brief account of this Address omits all mention of “care and pain,” but adds the information that Heminge and Condell were merely “two Players,” and that their edition was published “seven years after [Shakespeare’s] decease” (1: xvi). To drive home his point that the Folio editors were unreliable witnesses, Pope emphasizes the social marginality of theatre professionals in the early modern era. In Shakespeare’s time, he writes, actors of Heminge and Condell’s rank were “mere Players, not Gentlemen of the stage: They were led into the Buttery by the Steward, not plac’d at the Lord’s table” (1: xix). The Folio editors claimed to have printed Shakespeare’s plays from the “Original Copies.” Pope responded by trying to prove even these to be corrupt and unreliable. Rather than passing on Shakespeare’s original manuscripts, Heminge and Condell had instead given the printers “those [copies] which had lain ever since the Author’s days in the playhouse, and had from time to time been cut, or added to, arbitrarily” (1: xvii). “It appears,” he writes, “that this edition ... was printed (at least partly) from no better copies than the *Prompter’s Book*, or *Piece-meal Parts* written out for the actors” (1: xvii). In attacking the sources of the Folio text so vehemently, Pope meant to undermine any claim they might have to textual authority. Rather than a unified and reliable whole, the Folio is, he implied, a mass of broken and corrupted parts. The seeming unity of the collection thereby dissolves, in Pope’s hands, into mere illusion. Instead of a monument, the Folio

becomes a travesty – a mock-Shakespeare, whose words are intermingled with the voices of “Plebeians and Clowns,” overseen by mock-editors, who were themselves only players.

Pope’s image of a Shakespeare dismembered by playhouse manuscript conventions would receive more nuance and detail eight years later, in Lewis Theobald’s Preface to his Shakespeare edition. Like Pope, Theobald emphasized the error-ridden nature of the Folio text, the supposed ignorance of the actors who had assembled it, and the generally corrupting influence of the playhouse itself:

When the *Players* took upon them to publish [Shakespeare’s] Works intire, every Theatre was ransack’d to supply the Copy; and *Parts* collected which had gone thro’ as many Changes as Performers, either from Mutilations or Additions made to them.... Scenes were frequently transposed, and shuffled out of their true Place, to humour the Caprice or supposed Convenience of some particular Actor.... For there ever have been, and ever will be in Playhouses, a Set of assuming Directors, who know better than the Poet himself the Connexion and Dependance of his Scenes; where Matter is Defective, or Superfluities to be retrench’d. (1: xxxviii)

Despite Heminge and Condell’s pretensions to have published a collected edition of Shakespeare, Theobald’s rhetoric suggests, the 1623 *Works* were anything but “intire.” Instead, Shakespeare’s plays were broken down into minute parts, which in turn became the property of the actors who portrayed them. Thus individuated, they were “mutilated” by non-authorial, part-based revision, and “retrench’d” by stage managers who presumed to know better than Shakespeare himself how his plays ought to be performed. After observing that a number of Hamlet’s lines extant in the 1604 quarto are missing from the Folio, Theobald attributed this to Heminge and Condell’s reliance upon theatre manuscripts as copy-text. “The first motive of leaving [these lines] out,” he writes, “was to shorten Hamlet’s speech, and ease the Actor; and the reason why they find no place in the first folio, is, that that edition was made from the Playhouse castrated copies” (Nichols 2: 574). The Folio is, in other words, insufficient – “castrated” by the shifting exigencies of theatrical production. In Theobald’s account, as in Pope’s, the playhouse’s

almost endless capacity for manuscript production overwrites and obliterates whatever “authentic Manuscripts” of Shakespeare may once have existed (1: xxxvii). Their original state could be restored only through an editor’s conjectures, not by examining the testimony of the remaining textual witnesses.

This editorial campaign against the First Folio’s authority was to assume perhaps its most vivid form in George Steevens’s 1793 edition of Shakespeare. Steevens’s account leaves the Popean narrative intact, but heightens it to the level of grotesque caricature. Summing up the printing history of the quartos and First Folio, he writes that, “The integrity of dramas thus prepared for the world, is just on a level with the innocence of females nursed in a camp and educated in a bagnio” (1: xii). In order to defend his practice of selectively replacing First Folio readings with those of later editions, Steevens adopted Pope’s *ad hominem* strategy of attacking the Folio editors on social grounds. No one of Heminge and Condell’s rank, Steevens implies, deserved the respect, or even the attention, of their editorial successors:

we have sometimes followed the suggestions of a Warburton, a Johnson, a Farmer, or a Tyrwhitt, in preference to the decisions of a Hemings or a Condell, notwithstanding their choice of readings might have been influenced by associates whose high-sounding names cannot fail to enforce respect, viz. William Ostler, John Shanke, William Sly, and Thomas Poope. (1: xii–xiii)

For Steevens, as for Pope, social status ultimately determined the cultural – and textual – authority of the “players’ edition.” The “lowness” of the social milieu from which the First Folio emerged effectively disqualified it from receiving any special stamp of textual reliability. Instead, Steevens argued for a profoundly eclectic text; one that combined readings taken from the “corrected” 1632 Folio with those emendations he saw fit to adopt from the eighteenth-century editorial tradition (Murphy 94).

In his Advertisement and notes to Shakespeare, Steevens widened his predecessors’ assault on the Folio’s text to encompass its other, paratextual, features. One of these targets was Heminge and Condell’s Address “To the Great Variety of Readers,” which, on the basis of verbal parallels, he attributed instead to Ben Jonson. “Perhaps Old

Ben was author of the *Players' Preface*," Steevens observed casually in a footnote, "and, in the instance before us, has borrowed from himself" (Reed 1: 166n7).^{ix} By suggesting that, in the Folio, as elsewhere in their professional lives, the "player editors" were simply mouthing words written for them by somebody else, Steevens was effectively trying to silence Heminge and Condell. If they had no authentic voice of their own, he seems to be saying, they could convey no authoritative testimony about Shakespeare's works.

In many ways, the rhetorical posture that editors from Pope to Steevens assumed towards the early editions of Shakespeare resembled the process of "breaking and remaking" that Ronald Paulson has observed at work in Augustan satire. A writer like Swift "'blasts' the poetry of the past in order to build his own out of its ruins" (31). Editors like Pope and Steevens insist on the broken nature of Shakespeare's text in order to renew it with their own editorial interventions. As Theobald put it,

the natural Veneration, which we have for [Shakespeare], makes us apt to swallow whatever is given us as *his*, and let off with Encomiums; and hence we quit all Suspicions of Depravity: On the contrary, the Censure of so Divine an Author ... produces an exact Scrutiny and Examination, which ends in finding out and discriminating the true from the spurious. (1: xxxvi)

The false idol of the Folio, the "Veneration" of which concealed many a "Depravity," had to be smashed so that a "true" Shakespeare could be reconstructed from the iconoclasted pieces. In order to do so, however, editors had to demonstrate that the existing fabric was indeed rotten. The kind of editorial "Scrutiny and Examination" of Shakespeare's textual foundations that Theobald prescribes is, therefore, predicated on there being "Suspicions of Depravity."

Anatomizing Shakespeare: The Play as a Collection of Fragments

Since the latter part of the seventeenth century, revising dramatists and critics have used a variety of images to represent the fragmented nature of Shakespeare's plays.

Borrowing a trope from Epicurus, John Dryden described his adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida* as an attempt to recover the play from the “heap of Rubbish, under which” so much of it “lay wholly bury’d” (13: 226).^x Nahum Tate, in the Preface to his adaptation of *King Lear*, notoriously referred to the original play as a “Heap of Jewels, unstrung and unpolisht” (A2^v). In both cases, the adapting playwrights claimed to be *restoring* the Shakespearean original – lifting his plays out of the original disrepair in which they had found them (Lynch 287). Eighteenth-century editors of Shakespeare often used architectural rhetoric to represent this textual and artistic confusion.^{xi} Shakespeare’s body of works became a gothic cathedral – awe-inspiring in its size and scope, but structurally unsound and, perhaps, in need of renovation for its full beauty to be realized (Stock 155). In the final paragraph of the Preface to his edition, Pope likened Shakespeare’s works to

an ancient majestick piece of *Gothick* Architecture, compar’d with a neat Modern building: The latter is more elegant and glaring, but the former is more strong and solemn. It must be allow’d, that in one of these there are materials enough to make many of the other. It has much the greater variety, and much the nobler apartments; tho’ we are often conducted to them by dark, odd, and uncouth passages. Nor does the Whole fail to strike us with greater reverence, tho’ many of the Parts are childish, ill-plac’d, and unequal to its grandeur. (1: xxiii–xxiv)

Theobald’s 1733 Preface to Shakespeare continued where Pope’s left off, introducing its subject with an extended architectural trope. Shakespeare, he wrote, was a “splendid dome” containing “many gaudy apartments,” the whole providing the spectator with “a gay confusion of pleasing Objects, too various to be enjoyed but in a general Admiration” (1: [i]).

As Nick Groom has pointed out, “the use ... of architectural images to describe old language” was a philological commonplace in eighteenth-century English scholarship (282). It was a way of representing literary style in diachronic fashion – bringing new and old into vision at the same time. However, the architectural trope was more than just a way of describing the condition of Shakespeare’s text; it carried with it an implied license to rebuild or restore. As Johnson put it in his Preface to Shakespeare, “The first care of

the builder of a new system, is to demolish the fabricks which are standing” (Johnson and Steevens 1: 42). Rendering Shakespeare’s text as an old or “*Gothick*” “fabrick,” then, suggested instability, outmodedness, and the need for renovation. Pope’s assertion that “Parts” of the Shakespearean corpus were “childish, ill-plac’d, and unequal” (1: xxiv) accorded with his desire to remove those pieces from the main structure. Steevens resisted the Folio and quarto collations in Edmond Malone’s 1790 edition in similar terms. Restoring original readings without first subjecting them to aesthetic judgement, Steevens wrote, threatened to “revive the anomalies, barbarisms and blunders of [the] ancient copies,” stripping away the more decorous improvements of the Second Folio and subsequent editors in a way that was “by no means honourable to our author” (1: xiv–xv; xiii). Malone’s edition, in other words, introduced alien and corrupted elements at those very points where it pretended to restore what Shakespeare had originally composed.

Instead of continuing the “pretence of restoration” promised by Malonean collation, Steevens proposed a more radical programme of editorial reconstruction. “The style of many an ancient building,” he wrote,

has been characteristically restored. The members of architecture left entire, have instructed the renovator how to supply the loss of such as had fallen into decay. The poet, therefore, whose dialogue has often, during a long and uninterrupted series of lines, no other peculiarities than were common to the works of his most celebrated contemporaries ... ought not so often to be suspected of having produced ungrammatical nonsense, and such rough and defective numbers as would disgrace a village school-boy in his first attempts at English poetry. (1: xiii–xiv)

This equation of the editor’s role with that of a supervising architect places connoisseurship and aesthetic judgement at centre-stage. It is Steevens’s appreciation of Shakespeare’s uncorrupted style that will allow him to discern where the text has “fallen into decay.” Likewise, his sense of Shakespearean metre will enable him to restore the lost rhythms of the unpreserved original lines. The metrical “blunders” and lexical

“barbarisms” that Steevens detects are, he implies, the unauthorized excrescences of actors and prompters, and it is the editor’s task to remove them.

Steevens’s architectural vision anatomizes the Shakespearean text into its individual components. Like the antiquarian who picks over the “artificial ruin” of Thomas Rowley in Vicesimus Knox’s account of the Chatterton forgeries, Steevens reduces Shakespeare to “single stones,” subjecting each one to authenticating scrutiny (Groom 282). His belief that the early editions had been set from piece-meal actors’ parts enabled him to develop a theory of widespread contamination by theatre personnel:

To a reader unacquainted with the licenses of a theatre, the charge of more material interpolation than that of mere syllables, will appear to want support; and yet whole lines and passages in the following plays incur a very just suspicion of having originated from this practice ... for the propensity of modern performers to alter words, and occasionally introduce ideas incongruous with their author’s plan, will not always escape detection. (1: xvii)

Actors’ ad lib could, Steevens argued, make their way into the prompt-book and, over time, displace the original text. To illustrate this, he gives the example of an (unnamed) actress in John Home’s *Douglas* who, having changed one of her lines, caused “the prompter’s book” to be “thus corrupted,” resulting in the altered line appearing in a later revival (1: xviii). At no point, however, does he explain exactly *how* the ad lib might have entered the Drury-Lane prompt-book.^{xiii} Steevens intimates darkly that, “Many other instances of the same presumption might have been subjoined, had they not been withheld through tenderness to performers now upon the stage” (1: xviii). That corresponding interpolations had entered Shakespeare’s plays could now, he wrote, “only be suspected,” and the passages themselves thus “remain unexpelled” (1: xviii).

Steevens’s account of the supposed prompt-book alterations in *Douglas* and their significance for Shakespeare is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it shows how mutable he believed early modern theatrical manuscripts to have been. Secondly, his argument indicates how willing many eighteenth-century textual critics were to use contemporary examples to illustrate Elizabethan stage practice. It draws upon a tradition of writing

about the theatre that emphasized the excesses of actors, such as Tate Wilkinson's critique of comedians who habitually entertained "themselves with low indecent jokes and a volley of oaths not in their parts" (2: 252). In his Preface, Steevens's gaze shifts from the Globe theatre to Drury-Lane and back again, as though the two playhouses existed in an unbroken continuum. In his hands, the question of seventeenth-century manuscript transmission becomes an opportunity for attacking *contemporary* stage performances. As we shall see, this dramatically informed anti-theatricalism pervaded Steevens's editorial rhetoric, especially when he was arguing against Shakespeare's authorship of particular passages.

Paratexts and Shakespearean Authorship

To eighteenth-century editors of Shakespeare, prologues, epilogues, songs, and comic dialogue occupied especially ambiguous places in the Shakespearean corpus. They were published within or alongside plays, but contemporary stage practice taught that these kinds of texts were more ephemeral, and less likely to be Shakespeare's, than the material surrounding them. Accordingly, they were often singled out as playhouse additions, and editors stressed the flimsiness with which they were attached to the Shakespearean mainpiece. In the pre-Commonwealth theatre world, prologues and epilogues were often written by someone other than the author of the play they accompanied, often the company dramatist (Bentley 135–37; Stern, "Small-beer" 183). Similar conventions held on the Restoration and eighteenth-century stages, although they tended to be expressed in the languages of friendship and sociability rather than those of commerce or contract law. The writing of a prologue for another author's play resembled a kind of sociable exchange. Dryden wrote a prologue for Nahum Tate's *Loyal General* (1679); Tate reciprocated by contributing commendatory poems to *Absalom and Achitophel* and *The Medall* (Griffin 8). Pope, meanwhile, composed a prologue to *The Fond Husband* as a favour to Thomas D'Urfey, apparently at Joseph Addison's request (Goldstein 12). Prologues and epilogues in this period were often figured as the outward signs of friendship – they placed a dramatist, as Dustin Griffin puts it, "among his peers" (8).

Augustan critics projected this social vision of the stage back onto Shakespeare and his contemporaries, imagining prologues and epilogues as tokens of favour exchanged between playwrights. Johnson, for instance, identified the prologue and epilogue of *Henry VIII* as the work of Ben Jonson, and speculated that he had written them out of “friendship or officiousness” on the occasion of the play’s revival (Sherbo 8: 658). Familiarity with the contemporary stage also seems to have given eighteenth-century editors a keen sense of the ephemerality of prologues and epilogues. In eighteenth-century stage practice, as in the early modern theatre, prologues and epilogues were usually reserved for new plays, or for revivals (Stern, *Rehearsal* 190; 282–83). In this vein, Johnson could dismiss the epilogue to *2 Henry IV* as a “merely occasional” piece, written for “some theatrical transaction” that the passage of time had rendered obscure (Johnson and Steevens 5: [613]n). For Johnson and his contemporaries, prologues and epilogues were not integral parts of the Shakespeare canon. Instead, they were seen as records of the social world in which dramatists moved, or as remnants of performance contexts – those unknown “transactions” that occurred between theatre companies, their audiences, and their patrons.

Particular set pieces contained within plays were also suspected of being actorly insertions. Pope relegated the entire Masque of Jupiter in Act 5 of *Cymbeline* to a footnote, identifying it as an interpolation “foisted in ... for mere show” some time after Shakespeare had completed the play (6: 219n). A number of subsequent editors agreed with his judgement. Steevens, in particular, was unsparing in his hostility towards the theatre manager whom he imagined arranging for “this contemptible nonsense” to be added to the finished drama:

The subsequent narratives of Posthumus ... seem to have excited some manager of a theatre to disgrace the play by the present metrical interpolation. Shakspeare, who has conducted his fifth act with such matchless skill, could never have designed the vision to be twice described by Posthumus, had this contemptible nonsense been previously delivered on the stage. (Johnson and Steevens 9: 315n)

Edmond Malone's recovery, while preparing his 1790 Shakespeare edition, of surviving pre-Commonwealth theatrical documents appeared to give new support to the earlier editors' presumption that Shakespeare's plays had been revised and added to by others. Malone himself wrote in agreement with Pope's and Steevens's opinions about *Cymbeline*, adding evidence from the records of Sir Henry Herbert that the "addition of a new scene, and sometimes an entire act, to an old play, appears ... to have been common" (1, pt. 1: 406). After citing five examples from the Caroline period of payments made to playwrights for "additions" and "new scenes," Malone speculated that, were the papers of Edmund Tilney and George Buc ever found, they would show "the *Vision*, *Masque*, and *Prophecy*, in the fifth act of *Cymbeline* ... to have been interpolated by the players after [Shakespeare's] death" (1, pt. 1: 406; 407n).

In a note included in the 1793 *Shakspeare*, Joseph Ritson made a similar case for posthumous revision in Act 5 of *Cymbeline*, but, unlike Malone, based his argument entirely on a connoisseur's view of the text. Not only did Ritson believe that the scene's stylistic qualities marked it out as an un-Shakespearean addition, but he explicitly endorsed Pope's suggestion that the scene be removed from the play entirely. "One would think," Ritson wrote, "that ... the managers had employed some playwright of the *old school* to regale [the audience] with a touch of 'King Cambyses' vein.' The margin would be too honourable a place for so impertinent an interpolation" (Steevens 13: 202–3n). Steevens's inclusion of so many of Ritson's notes in the 1793 edition may have been partly motivated by a desire to antagonize Malone, whom Ritson had repeatedly and vituperatively attacked (Martin 171–72). Nevertheless, Ritson's comments, and Steevens's approval of them, show how prevalent an essentially Popean view of style and authorship continued to be in scholarly circles, even at the very end of the eighteenth century. Malone may have been trying to ground authorship studies in documentary evidence, but this "revolution" by no means immediately erased all signs of the older mode of style-based higher criticism. Ritson and Steevens interpreted Shakespeare's plays according to a post-Bettertonian understanding of dramatic authorship, where theatre managers were expected to intervene in and "fix" plays as their companies performed them (Milhous and Hume 44–45). Episodes like the masque in *Cymbeline*

could thus be dismissed as the unauthorized interventions of agents other than Shakespeare.

What these episodes reveal is the double-edged nature of the practical knowledge that Augustan editors derived from contact with the contemporary theatre. On one hand, their theatrical experience taught them to be aware of the modular and part-based nature of the Elizabethan play-text. On the other, their sense of editorial commitment to Shakespeare made them dismiss these non-authorial interventions as egregious contaminants. Their allegiance to the purely literary, in other words, led them to disregard the autonomy and intelligence of the stage personnel who translated Shakespeare's plays into performance and kept them current in the repertory. This highlights one of the drawbacks involved in what Marcus Walsh has identified as the increasing commitment to a purely "authorial orientation ... in eighteenth-century scholarly editing" (Walsh 10). Too strong a regard for authorial purity could bring with it an obsession with its opposite, contamination, and a corresponding tendency to edit according to the dictates of authorial reputation rather than compelling textual need.

Shakespeare's songs were another part of the eighteenth-century canon where the ties between author and text were deemed fragile. Theobald had recognized that some of the songs in Shakespeare's plays were published elsewhere. In *Hamlet*, for instance, the verses sung by the Gravedigger were, he wrote, "not of Shakespeare's composition, but owe their original to the old Earl of Surrey's poems" (Nichols 2: 577). Direct borrowing of this nature was, he thought, either parodic, or, alternatively, a gesture of tribute on Shakespeare's part. The presence of other songs in Shakespeare, however, posed larger editorial questions. As Theobald had been the first to point out, the song that begins 4.1 *Measure for Measure*, "Take, oh take those lips away," appears in a longer version in the Beaumont and Fletcher play *The Bloody Brother*. This raised obvious issues of priority and authorship. Malone thought that the lines were Shakespeare's, and indeed that "All the songs ... introduced in [Shakespeare's] plays" were of Shakespeare's "own composition" (10: 340n). In his 1821 edition of the *Plays and Poems*, however, the younger James Boswell politely set aside Malone's views. Fletcher, he wrote, was both better known and more successful as a lyricist than Shakespeare, and therefore more likely to have written the original version of the song (Malone and Boswell 20: 419–20n).

Boswell's explanation for how this putatively Fletcherian song had found its way into Shakespeare's play suggests something of how fragmentary and modular Shakespeare's texts were in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century editorial imagination:

as we often find, in our old dramas, the stage direction [Here a song], I have great doubts whether this delicate little poem may not, from its popularity at the time, have been introduced by the printer to fill the gap, and gratify his readers. (20: 420n)

In the pre-1642 theatre, songs appear to have been written out on scrolls and physically carried onto stage by the actors who would sing them (Stern, "Letters" 232). They were not transcribed into actors' parts, and, occupying their own pieces of paper, were essentially detachable from the rest of the play (Stern, "Re-patching" 158). When dramatic manuscripts eventually came to the printing house, it seems likely that sometimes these scrolls had indeed become separated from the rest of the play, either through accident or perhaps because other stationers owned the copyrights of the songs in question (St Clair 150–54). On occasions like this, songs would leave only traces of their former existence in the headings and stage directions of the printed play (Stern, "Letters" 232–33). If Boswell's suggestion that printers would make the effort to fill "gaps" in this way has seemed unlikely to subsequent scholars, he at least appears to have been sensitive to the detachable nature of dramatic songs.^{xiii} This circumstance no doubt contributed to his willingness to see their authorship as neither essentially nor straightforwardly Shakespearean.

Inevitably, perhaps, it would be Steevens who would most forcefully express the eighteenth century's skepticism about the canonical status of songs in Shakespeare. In a note composed for his 1793 edition, he objected strenuously to the authenticity of Feste's closing song in *Twelfth Night*. In part, his rejection of this ending appears to stem from critical puzzlement – a reaction to what Nora Johnson calls the "manifest sense of incongruity" that Feste engenders in the closing scene (157). In particular, Steevens seems confused as to why the play ends with a song apparently unconnected with the

action, and that refuses to tie up the many loose ends that the plot has left dangling.

“Though we are well convinced,” he writes,

that Shakspeare has written slight ballads for the sake of discriminating characters more strongly, or for other necessary purposes ... it is scarce credible, that after he has cleared his stage, he should exhibit his Clown afresh, and with so poor a recommendation as this song, which is utterly unconnected with the subject of the preceding comedy. (4: 173n)

At this point, Steevens’s note veers into contemporary performance criticism. Feste’s song is, he implies, on the same level as the anonymous actress’s ad lib in *Douglas* – an ephemeral piece of stage business that the prompt-book has inadvertently immortalized. “I do not hesitate to call the nonsensical ditty before us,” he continues,

some buffoon actor’s composition, which was accidentally tacked to the Prompter’s copy of *Twelfth-Night*, having been casually subjoined to it for the diversion, or at the call, of the lowest order of spectators. In the year 1766, I saw the late Mr. Weston summoned out and obliged to sing *Johnny Pringle and his Pig*, after the performance of Voltaire’s *Mahomet*, at the Theatre Royal in Drury-Lane. (4: 173n)

This outrageous collision between Voltaire and Johnny Pringle’s pig may seem a little too good to be true, especially considering Steevens’s well-known “love of hoax and deception”.^{xiv} Nevertheless, *Mahomet* was revived at Drury Lane in 1765–6, and had at least six performances during the 1766 season.^{xv} (*The London Stage* does not record Thomas Weston as being among the actors, but surviving cast-lists are, of course, neither exhaustive nor complete.) Whether or not we accept Steevens’s words at face value, his account does seem to convey a genuine sense of unease about the mingling of high and low cultures on the eighteenth-century stage. That an audience might want “Johnny Pringle and his Pig,” and that an actor would feel compelled to provide it for them, suggests something of the power that “the lowest order of spectators” had over events on

stage, at least in Steevens's mind. The transition from drama to "ditty" that Steevens chronicles also reveals another area of anxiety in the eighteenth-century critical imagination – the relationship of mainpieces to the songs, dances, and entertainments with which they shared the bill.^{xvi} Both Steevens's anecdote about Thomas Weston and his speculations about the closing song in *Twelfth Night* depict the ends of plays as vulnerable points for dramatic authority. Here, at these thresholds or liminal spaces, agency returns to the audience and "diversion" resumes, physically encroaching on the performing space, and, in the case of *Twelfth Night*, the text itself.

As in his earlier account of prompt-book alteration in *Douglas*, the mode of theatre history that Steevens practised here was a resolutely *presentist* one. Supposed corruptions and interpolations in Shakespeare's text are explained via eighteenth-century stage anecdotes, which in turn reflect badly upon the current state of the playhouse. The theatrical past thus becomes a kind of cudgel with which to beat the present stage for its "licenses" and lapses in taste. A similar temporal shift occurs in Thomas Davies's *Dramatic Miscellanies*, where a note on Hamlet's instruction to the players that clowns are "to speak no more than is set down for them" expands into a discourse on eighteenth-century comic actors and their tendency to "correspond... with the gods" rather than read from their parts (2: 86). For Steevens, however, this presentism also enabled him to see the texts *as* plays. *Twelfth Night* appeared to him as a prompt-book with an additional song "tacked" to it. Unlike practitioners of pure connoisseurship, Steevens was able to defend his authorship theories with speculations about the physical properties of the manuscript copy underlying the printed text.

Paradoxically, perhaps, and despite his presentist focus, Steevens's anecdote about Thomas Weston also allows us to see the broad *continuities* in theatrical practice and audience expectation that united the early modern and eighteenth-century stages. Steevens's recollection of Drury Lane in 1766 recalls Thomas Platter's 1599 account of witnessing the cast of *Julius Caesar* capping their performance with a massed jig.^{xvii} It also resonates with Thomas Dekker's declaration, in the *Strange Horse Race*, of having

often seene, after the finishing of some worthy Tragedy, or catastrophe in the open Theaters, that the Sceane after the Epilogue hath been more blacke (about a

nasty bawdy Jigge) than the most horrid Sceane in the Play was. (qtd. in Gurr, *Shakespearean*, 175)

These resemblances across time suggest that the contention between drama and “entertainment” was an enduring one, with authors and partisans of the literary on one side and a large portion, at least, of the audience on the other. It also suggests that many eighteenth-century spectators relished what Andrew Gurr terms the possibility of an “instant mood-switch” between tragedy and comedy as much as their early modern predecessors did (*Playgoing*, 128).

Perhaps Steevens’s most ambitious attempt to fragment authorship in the 1793 edition came in his notes to *Troilus and Cressida*. Steevens had written nothing about the play’s authorship in either the 1773 or 1778 editions. However, Malone’s discovery in the Henslowe papers that Dekker and Chettle had composed a play called *Troyelles & Cresseda* in 1599 evidently led Steevens to reconsider the matter.^{xviii} Combining the evidence that *Troilus and Cressida* had been a late insertion into the First Folio with the Henslowe records, Steevens now expressed scepticism about the play’s integrity and provenance. Both the prologue, and portions of the main action, were, he suggested, un-Shakespearean. “I cannot,” he wrote,

regard this Prologue (which indeed is wanting in the quarto editions) as the work of *Shakspeare*; and perhaps the drama before us was not entirely of his construction. It appears to have been unknown to his associates, Hemings and Condell, till after the first folio was almost printed off. On this subject, indeed, (as I learn from Mr. Malone’s *Emendations and Additions* ...) there seems to have been a play anterior to the present one. (11: 214n)

Evidently, Steevens believed that the manuscript from which *Troilus and Cressida* was printed had come from another playhouse, and Heminge and Condell had not known of Shakespeare’s involvement in its writing until 1623. Although his words are slightly ambiguous, they imply that *Troilus and Cressida* might have been Shakespeare’s revised version of Dekker and Chettle’s play. This is confirmed in a note to Act 5: “Perhaps this

play was hastily altered by Shakspeare from an elder piece ... Some of the scenes therefore he might have fertilized, and left others as barren as he found them” (15: 474–75n). Ritson agreed that the prologue was un-Shakespearean, but suggested instead that it had been added during a *later* revision. “Some *Kyd* or *Marlowe* of the time” had composed the prologue in the course of “*altering* and *amending*” the play (11: 214n). Despite the contradiction between their arguments, Steevens and Ritson agreed on three points. The prologue was neither Shakespearean nor an essential part of the play, and the authorship problems they detected had come about through revision.

Although Steevens apparently suspected that much of the play was un-Shakespearean, most of his (and Ritson’s) more sceptical notes appeared in the final act. In 5.3 and again at 5.11 of the Folio text, Troilus’ contemptuous dismissal of Pandarus – “Hence broker, lackie, ignomy, and shame” – appears twice. In the 1609 quarto, the lines occur only once, just before Pandarus delivers the play’s epilogue. Modern editors have detected here a Shakespearean revision (Jensen 417). Either Shakespeare first placed Pandarus’ dismissal at 5.3, but, when he decided to have Pandarus speak an epilogue, he transferred it to its new location, or, conversely, when the epilogue was *deleted* from the play, Pandarus’ final appearance was moved back to 5.3.^{xix} Predictably, perhaps, in the 1778 edition Steevens instead invoked playhouse contamination to account for the differences between Q and F. Troilus’ lines, he surmized, were written for delivery at the end of the play, but the chaotic and piece-meal nature of the early modern playhouse manuscript enabled them to be “shuffled” out of order:

There can be no doubt but that the players shuffled the parts backward and forward *ad libitum*; for the poet would hardly have given us an unnecessary repetition of the same words, nor have dismissed Pandarus twice in the same manner.^{xx} (Johnson and Steevens 9: 150n)

By 1793, Steevens had changed his mind. Rather than suggesting that this scene was to have appeared at the end of the play, he now argued that Æneas’ couplet, “Strike a free march to Troy! – with comfort go: / Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe,” just prior to the exit of the Trojan forces, marked the end of the play. Nothing beyond this

point was Shakespeare's, being either "a subsequent and injudicious restoration from the elder drama" that Shakespeare had reworked, "or the nonsense of some wretched buffoon who represented Pandarus" (11: 449–50n).

The ur-*Troilus and Cressida* that Steevens saw buried beneath Shakespeare's play remains as a never-quite-suppressed force. Pieces of it, such as the prologue and epilogue, were apt to resurface, juxtaposing awkwardly with Shakespeare's style and dramaturgy. Allied to this was the problem of playhouse interpolation. As in *Twelfth Night*, Steevens saw performers – particularly those who played clowns – as continual threats to Shakespeare's dramatic intentions. Their eagerness to entertain, combined with the traditional license comic actors had to extemporize, led them to subvert Shakespeare's dramatic structures:

our author would scarce have trusted the conclusion of his piece to a subordinate character whom he had uniformly held up to detestation. It is still less probable that he should have wound up his story with a stupid outrage to decency, and a deliberate insult to his audience. – But in several other parts of this drama I cannot persuade myself that I have been reading Shakspeare. (11: 450n)

What Arthur Sherbo calls Steevens's "moral bent" is well represented in this passage (*Achievement* 94). Pandarus' epilogue, as an "outrage to decency," threatens Shakespeare's reputation as a moral artist and cannot be allowed to stand.

"All recorded texts," as D. F. McKenzie once observed, are "collaborative creations – the product of social acts involving the complex interventions of human agency acting on material forms" (262). Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editors recognized this multivocality. They understood that actors might revise their parts, or that managers might add to or retrench plays in performance. Dramatists, they knew, might revise and "correct" existing works, or write together on new play-scripts. Contemporary stage practice, meanwhile, taught them that prologues and epilogues were ephemeral pieces, and that a play's songs were often composed by someone other than the playwright. However, the canonization of the singular author, Shakespeare, led them to deny or devalue many of these collaborative networks. A kind of dramatically informed

anti-theatricalism existed, whereby those parts of plays that seemed most “theatrical” were deemed inauthentic, or at least inessential. In deploying the rhetoric of textual fragmentation, Shakespeare’s eighteenth-century editors recognized the distributed nature of authorial agency in a theatrical network. However, it also enabled them to achieve something else. The ambiguity of authorial presence in a fragmented or potentially interpolated text provided Shakespeare’s artistic reputation with an escape clause. When faced with the apparently “nonsensical,” readers could always convince themselves that they had not, after all, “been reading Shakespeare.”

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ⁱⁱ For an early and influential statement of this belief, see McKerrow 264–65.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of the ideal-typical nature of Greg’s categories, see Werstine 492–95.

^{iv} On Johnson’s theatrical experiences, see Clayton, Gray, and Klingel.

^v For a definition of paratexts, and a discussion of their functions, see Genette. For the applicability of Genette’s terminology to early modern drama, see Bruster and Weimann 37–38.

^{vi} See, for instance, Stern, *Making Shakespeare*; and Palfrey and Stern.

^{vii} On the historiographical problems inherent in “progressive” versions of editorial history, see Jarvis 7; 190.

^{viii} For a brief discussion of the kind of document Pope might have been referring to here, see Seary 139n26.

^{ix} A more fully documented version of the argument, probably revised and extended by Edmond Malone, appeared in the 1821 Malone-Boswell *Variorum* edition (2: 663–74). See Greg, *Shakespeare* 26, for the argument that the 1821 note is partially Malone’s.

^x On the Epicurean origins of the metaphor, see Novak 57.

^{xi} For an illuminating recent discussion of the convergences between architectural restoration and textual editing, see Eggert.

^{xii} For a discussion of the relationship between prompt-book and annotated actor’s part, see Taylor and Jowett 108.

^{xiii} For a brief critique of Boswell’s theory, see Taylor and Jowett 124.

^{xiv} On Steevens as hoaxer, see Middendorf 128.

^{xv} The performances are listed in Stone 1: 1146–47; 1149; 1153; 1169; and 1200.

^{xvi} On the contentious relationship between drama and “entertainment” in eighteenth-century criticism, see O’Brien 38–40.

^{xvii} I am obliged to Gabriel Egan for this point.

^{xviii} For Malone’s transcriptions of the *Troyelles & Cresseda* records from Henslowe’s papers, see Malone 1, pt. 2: 319.

^{xix} For the first theory, see Greg, *Shakespeare* 346; for the second, see Taylor.

^{xx} The transposition of scenes that Steevens imagines taking place here would have been impossible to achieve with early modern actors’ parts, which were continuous scrolls, not collections of individual speeches. See Stern, “Absence” 87.