

*Assumptions Fruitfully Disturbed: The One-Volume Oxford Shakespeares*

William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*. Gen. Eds.: Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986. Pp. xlvii + 1431. £ 25.00.

William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works. Original-Spelling Edition*. Gen. Eds.: Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986 (1987). Pp. lxxiii + 1456. £ 75.00.

Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, with John Jowett and William Montgomery, *William Shakespeare. A Textual Companion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987 (1988). Pp. x + 671. £ 60.00.

The Oxford Shakespeare offers a modern-spelling and an original-spelling text of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare in two parallel volumes. A third volume, *William Shakespeare. A Textual Companion*, supports, explains, justifies and defends the editorial labour. The edition constitutes a radical new departure in Shakespearian textual editing for the twentieth century.

As is generally recognized, the Cambridge Shakespeare of 1863—66 systematized and renewed Shakespeare editing for the nineteenth century. With the Globe text which it spawned, the (Old) Cambridge Shakespeare became the original basis of textual reference for the inflation of Shakespeare editions in the twentieth century. Yet this has been the century of the bibliographic revolution in Shakespearian textual scholarship. To a lesser or greater degree, its insights and results have percolated into the stream of Shakespeare editions. Competing to be recognized as standard editions for everyday as well as scholarly-critical use, these have importantly turned their attention to explanatory annotation. Yet they have also fluctuatingly, but on the whole progressively, deviated in their texts from the Old Cambridge point of departure. For all the tendency of textual rethinking so evidenced, however, the reasons have been many and complex, for the fact that no comprehensive attempt at re-establishing Shakespeare's text in the light of twentieth century textual scholarship was until now undertaken — or, if undertaken, did not succeed so as to issue in the publication of an edition.

The edition to appear at the peak of New Bibliography's wave in England would have been R. B. McKerrow's Oxford Shakespeare, as it was commissioned and begun before the Second World War. Its *Prolegomena* published in 1939 have in themselves become a standard reference work in Shakespearian textual criticism. Yet they are not the prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare of 1986. In fact-searching detail, the intervening half-century has seen refinements and sophistications in the bibliographical approach to textual study far beyond its application in even McKerrow's exacting hands. In matters of principle, the choice and treatment of copytext in procedures of eclectic editing that have today assumed a pervasive methodological role in Anglo-

American editorial theory and practice came to be proposed by W. W. Greg — as his “Rationale of Copy-Text” — precisely in contradistinction to McKerrow’s *Prolegomena*. Shakespearian textual study and editorial methodology have thus conceptually moved ahead in terms even of the bibliographical school which McKerrow significantly contributed to defining. Noticeably, moreover, editorial thinking of late has begun to shift ground, moving away from an all but exclusive dominance of bibliographical methodology, and admitting, or re-admitting, a wider range of historical and critical dimensions — partly traditional, partly innovative — into textual criticism.

Hence, it is at a time when the discipline of textual scholarship is under review and the art of editing has reached a cross-roads that the Oxford Shakespeare is making its appearance. Anything but oblivious of the changing currents — much more, in fact, participating in the shaping of fresh editorial trends — the Oxford Shakespeare does not provide the edition of Shakespeare’s *Works* that the decades of intense debate of Shakespearian textual problems have led one to expect. This should be stated and appreciated from the outset. The edition departs from some main guide-lines set out in that debate in original and well-considered, if sometimes potentially controversial, ways. To measure it as an edition, therefore, one must carefully take in its self-stated principles and pragmatics and balance what results from them against the necessarily different results obtained by embracing different editorial methods and aims.

Where, and in what ways, the Oxford Shakespeare differs in conception and procedures from earlier editions, as well as from long-nurtured expectations of a new critical text edition, may be summarily stated. Greatest momentum inheres in its principle of establishing, wherever possible, the text of a given play closest to performance (or, to overstate the principle: of giving a company text in preference to a pure author text). A performance text, where identifiable, is a version text. To think editorially in terms of versions follows from assuming a revising author. In the Oxford Shakespeare, this assumption leads to a demonstration of the fact in the edition’s single most spectacular feature, its two edited versions of *King Lear*. Each, and together, they evidence tangibly a consistent attitude of marking out the editorial mediation — or editorial participation in the edited text — for attention. Such participation inescapably shapes the edition through the editors’ emendatorial activity, embraced distinctly (and joyously: in German one would call the editors “emendationsfreudig”) against every conventional present-day trend in the editing of Renaissance texts. Pervasively, too, the editorial mediation is present in the modernized text volume. Being the first complete edition in the history of Shakespearian editing to provide an original-spelling text in full, the Oxford Shakespeare yet does not eschew a modernized presentation of the *Works*. With its two text volumes in parallel, it not only thoroughly defuses the all but ideological old-/modern-spelling controversy of the past decades. It also foregrounds the modernizing process and its results as a genuine act of textual criticism and editing.

(The commercial privileging of the modern-spelling volume thereby appears legitimized from within the edition itself.)

If, in emendatorial shaping and modernizing, the marked editorial presence purposefully influences our relationship to the text, that undaunted presence ultimately contributes also to shaping for us a temporally outlined image of the author through his oeuvre. In ways again yet unattempted in Shakespearian editing — though far from uncommon by the conventions that elsewhere govern the scholarly editing of an author's Works — the Oxford Shakespeare sets Shakespeare the author before us by thoroughly reviewing the canon of his writings in all the genres he can be shown to have contributed to, integrating the plays, the brief epics and the poems in the one volume and, for the first time ever, arranging the plays in a chronological sequence.

In meeting the challenge of establishing the authorial canon, the Oxford Shakespeare proves innovative particularly by the attention it gives to Shakespeare's non-dramatic writings. Of defensibly attributable poems, a larger number is incorporated in the Oxford Shakespeare than in any previous edition. Manuscript sources for Shakespeare's poetry have been systematically searched for the first time in the history of Shakespearian editing, and have not only yielded variant versions of several sonnets as well as a number of occasional verse compositions, but also an entire long poem ("A Song") never before considered in relation to, or as part of, the Shakespeare canon. Within the scheme of the edition's chronological arrangement, the poems, for which dates cannot possibly be determined individually, are grouped together and intercalated as a pivotal link between the 'Elizabethan' and the 'Jacobean' Shakespeare. This admittedly arbitrary placing of the poems in the edition detracts in no way from the overall effect, inherent in the idea of a chronological ordering of his works, of silhouetting Shakespeare the playwright, epic and lyric poet through the progressive concatenation of the links in the chain of the oeuvre. If the relatively marginal modifications of the canon help to reconsider Shakespeare's range as a writer, the transformation of (ultimately) the First Folio's atemporality into chronology holds a potential for reappraising the very nature of his creativity in the interplay of dramatic and non-dramatic kinds as well as, particularly, of the dramatic genres he adopted or originated.

The text volumes of the Oxford Shakespeare confront us in an unaccustomed manner. No apparatus of footnote explanation reassures the reader of the edition's scholarly claims. Each text volume is prefixed by an almost identical General Introduction which admirably serves as an introduction to essentials of Shakespeare scholarship and research for the non-specialist. The original-spelling volume adds a prefatory article on "The Spelling and Punctuation of Shakespeare's Time" which lucidly outlines Elizabethan conventions of writing and printing for any reader intent on tackling Shakespeare in the orthographical, typographical and linguistic guise of the original editions. The plays themselves are prefixed by one-page introductory essays, models of succinctness, and each a delight to read.

The editorial guidance within the text volumes is necessary, welcome, to the point and does not in the least encroach upon the edited texts themselves, set forth on large pages in double columns. The "First Folio" reading effect of the text volumes should be fully appreciated. It is both an aesthetic and a didactic effect. Page size and double-column printing perceptibly shape a play in its large structural outlines. The text gathers momentum in the reading from its unbroken sweep over the pages as from a sweep of action on the stage. If there is an incentive to interruption, it is to an interruption at will. The textual annotation and explanatory footnoting which this edition does not provide has to be sought elsewhere (and, in libraries, will be found in other editions until the day that a volume of critical commentary to the Oxford Shakespeare appears).

The initial stimulus to such search which the edition does provide is significant in that it is itself textual. Wherever a play's textual situation suggests or permits it, passages editorially excluded from the version text edited are appended to the play in question. This invites the reader's participation in assessing the problematics of establishing a version, or versions, of a given play. Asked by the editorial arrangement in the Oxford Shakespeare to contextualize alternative or variant passages of appreciable extent, the reader/student may develop a sense that textual variation matters, that at the same time there are degrees of significance, as well as differences in the sources of origin, of textual variation to be distinguished, and that a scholarly edition calls upon him to become involved in its report of the field of variation surrounding the edited text. In opposition to public belief and professional wishful thinking, the Oxford Shakespeare proposes and upholds the central tenet that "no edition of Shakespeare can or should be definitive". This is a notion that it offers its students and readers to learn and to experience.

*William Shakespeare. A Textual Companion* constitutes the core of the Oxford Shakespeare considered as a scholarly enterprise. The publisher's blurb that it is "probably the most comprehensive reference work on Shakespearian textual problems ever assembled in a single volume" seems no overstatement. Its "General Introduction" opens most aptly with self-conscious reflections on editorial mediation and proceeds to survey systematically the state of our knowledge about Shakespeare's texts, the material conditions of their composition, revision, theatrical realisation, transmission and editorial history. Facts and inferences about classes of manuscripts, authorial and scribal writing habits or printing-house conventions of casting-off of copy, compositorial work-sharing and proof-reading are given their due. Beyond thus securing the foundations for an understanding of the Shakespearian textual conditions in bibliographical terms, the "General Introduction" discusses the issues central to the editorial conceptions of the Oxford Shakespeare. Considering the relationship of Shakespeare's company to their shareholder and main playwright, the 'prompt-book as a socialized text', or the links of plays in memorial reconstruction to authorial or company texts, it variously ramifies its pivotal notion of Shakespeare as a revising

author and, in consequence, of the instability of the Shakespearian text which, as an edition, the Oxford Shakespeare sets out to reflect. The history of Shakespearian editing as outlined in the Introduction's final sections then serves as a foil to offset the Oxford Shakespeare in its practice of emendation, the implications of its 'interventionist' editorial approach and, quite fundamentally, its readiness (in contrast to what is held to be true for the Old Cambridge Shakespeare) to "disturb the assumptions of its readership".

From the Introduction's 60-page overview, the *Textual Companion*, for its remaining 600 pages, moves inexorably into specificities of argument and exactitude of documentation. An extensive and closely reasoned essay scrutinizes afresh "The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare's Plays". Combining traditional with novel categories of analysis for both attribution and chronology, it stands out for the lucidity with which it weighs and balances the value and promise of insight to be derived from various investigative approaches singly and in combination. Confirming received opinions about the chronology and canon much more than reversing or modifying them, the chapter may serve both as an admirable survey of, and an instructive introduction to, its subject matter. It is true that it integrates some new methods of investigation and that, thanks to the edition's computerized working background, it draws its facts and conclusions from a much fuller coverage of the textual material than previous studies were ever capable of mustering. Yet at the same time it reaffirms the canonical division which, at the margin, incorporates *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* while excluding *Arden of Feversham* or *Edward III*.

Under the aspects of chronology, the hypothesis of Shakespeare's early beginnings in the late 1580s is, after a careful weighing of the proposition, rejected. Some intriguing new arguments are adduced for the ordering and dating of the plays within the span of Shakespeare's writing years between, as conventionally held, around 1590 and 1611/1613. The years of enforced dramatic inactivity, in particular, are seen as significant dividers. 1603, when the death of Queen Elizabeth and the plague closed the theatres, becomes the 'watershed' year between the Elizabethan and the Jacobean canon. (It is where the text volumes, in their chronological design, find room for Shakespeare's lyric poetry.) Ten years earlier, 1592/93 was the year of the first great plague to close the London theatres and to hit them in their substance to such an extent that, when they reopened, the players re-formed in distinctly smaller troupes. Shakespeare's early canon is taken to relate to this year by the size of cast their scripts envisage. These 'watershed years' may deny the dating of *King John*, on account of its cast size, to 1591, or mark *Troilus and Cressida* as Shakespeare's last Elizabethan play. But much refinement is yet required beyond the wide chronological grid they provide. It is (paradoxically) a reassuring confirmation of the tentativeness of even the most stringent analysis of every available scrap of external or internal indication of chronology to find that, from a fresh collocation in the chronological essay of all the evidence for a sequential ordering of the plays, a reversal is suggested for the edition's

own sequence, in the text volumes, of *Dream — Romeo — Richard II* (for, or around, 1595). This revision within the edition of its own previous stance highlights the critical implications of its propositions about the texts and their order, as inherent in its very format, and underscores the constant need to scrutinize and, if necessary, to question them. If and when, on the other hand, the edition can hope to stand secure in its argument from evidence, as may prove to be the case in the matter of its reversal of the hitherto assumed order of the last plays, where now *The Winter's Tale* precedes *Cymbeline*, the impetus to be derived from the edition's order should induce some appreciable critical rethinking about directions in Shakespeare's final dramatic phase.

The extremely useful concluding pages of the "Canon and Chronology" essay discuss in detail, and title by title, both "Works Included in This Edition" and "Works Excluded from This Edition". This is a bridging section to the bulk of the volume with its Textual Introductions and Notes to every play and poem edited in the text volumes. Separating the reasoning for attribution and chronology from the individual introductions means that the *Textual Companion* must be consulted in several locations for its complete information about a given play or poem. Yet the chosen arrangement carries distinct advantages. In the discursive headnotes to the Textual Notes for each play or poem, the editors are free to address strictly and exclusively the problems of the text or texts, of the editorial history and textual scholarship, and of their own editorial options and solutions. These headnotes vary appreciably in length and range according to the complexity of the textual situation and previous textual criticism encountered. They serve thoroughly and comprehensively to situate the Oxford Shakespeare in the traditions, trends and controversies of Shakespearian textual criticism and editing both where it fulfills and where it departs from them in argumentative and editorial innovation.

The Textual Notes do not provide exhaustive collations but focus on registering emendations, or refusals to emend, in relation to the 'control text(s)' (themselves catalogued in a "Summary of Control-Texts" compiled as a separate section of the *Textual Companion*). The emendations are drawn from the entire history of Shakespeare's text in editions, but no attempt has been made to collate that history. The main Textual Notes section is furthermore confined to substantives, with the record of emendation of incidentals given under a separate apparatus heading. To offset the danger of subjective exclusivity inherent in a dominantly emendation-oriented textual apparatus, the range of the editorial options provided by the original texts is indicated, where appropriate, by listings of rejected variants in the non-control text (i. e., either Folio or Quarto, depending on whether Quarto or Folio served as the control text for the substantives). Most importantly, the considered selectivity and division of the editorial record provides for a quite exceptional generosity of verbalisation in the listing of the substantive emendations. The Oxford Shakespeare is unique among scholarly editions for the fulness of its reasoning of readings adopted or rejected.

While the register of the editorial alterations to the lineation of all control texts forms a separate section at the end of the *Textual Companion* which thereby very effectively sets the problem of lineation apart in an overall perspective, the textual record for each individual play concludes with a listing of the original stage directions in the respective control text. These surveys of original stage directions are to be seen in relation to the editorial problem of treating the plays' 'para-texts', i. e., those textual elements which do not constitute text to be spoken in performance. As a pervasive problem in the editing of dramatic texts, the treatment of the 'para-text' is first voiced in the *Textual Companion's* General Introduction. The Oxford Shakespeare recognizes and acknowledges that it is in the area of the non-spoken text of printed drama that editors most specifically fulfill their editorial function by "becoming . . . authors themselves". The listings of original stage directions consequently help to identify editorial authorship in the edition's format of presentation.

A survey review like the present can only hope to convey an initial understanding of the methods and aims, as well as the underlying rationale, of the Oxford Shakespeare. It does not begin to meet the requirement of assessing the editorial solutions for individual plays, or specific recurrent textual situations in the Shakespeare canon. To comment meaningfully and critically on the validity of the edited versions of *Measure for Measure*, or indeed *Hamlet*, or on the editorial virtuosity displayed in handling the textual complexities of *Richard III*, or on the originality of approach in drawing on a non-dramatic and non-Shakespearian source — George Wilkins's *The Painful Adventures of Pericles, Prince of Tyre* — to reconstruct a text for *Pericles*, or on solving the emendatorial problems following from the decision to edit a quarto-based as well as a folio-based text of *King Lear*, would in each case — and they are but a selection of editorial case studies worthy of individual consideration — require separate in-depth investigations, and review space to set them forth.

However, the reception and critical assimilation of the fundamental editorial reassessment of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* which the Oxford Shakespeare represents is only at a beginning. The edition, as the editors wish to see it themselves, provides a present synthesis, "a summing up before moving on". In grasping its potential, textual scholarship and the future of Shakespeare editing will find in it manifold points of departure. They will define themselves in allegiance, though no doubt at times also in opposition, to its achievement.

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