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Johnson's Shakespeare, 1765

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JOHNSON'S SHAKESPEARE, 1765

By HENRY N. PAUL

Two different editions of Johnson's Shakespeare, both of which bear the date 1765, have not heretofore been distinguished the one from the other. The set which I recently gave to the Furness Library is the first edition, dated 1765. The set in the library which was used by Dr. Furness in his collations is the second edition, also dated 1765. Note that the name of C. Corbet is in the third line of the imprint of volume 1 of the first edition, and in the top line of the imprint of the second.

To understand why there were two editions in the same year, we must recall the circumstances surrounding the first appearance of Dr. Johnson's Shakespeare. On June 1, 1756, had appeared "Proposals For Printing, by Subscription, the Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare, Corrected and Illustrated by Samuel Johnson," an eight-page pamphlet of which but three surviving copies are recorded, one of which is in the library of our fellow-citizen Mr. A. Edward Newton. In this short paper Dr. Johnson laid down the principles and the plan for the editing of Shakespeare which all of his distinguished successors have followed, and he proposed to carry out this plan. He further promised "that the work shall be published on or before Christmas 1757." But this admirable plan outran the ponderous Doctor's industry and strength. By 1758 only ten of the plays had been printed

and the sheets put in storage. After this for a long time the work dragged heavily and there seemed to be no progress, until five years later the editor was stung by Churchill's satirical couplet:

He for subscribers baits his hook,
And takes their cash,—but where's the book?

His friend Sir Joshua Reynolds pointed out to him that he must complete his task. At last he did so, and in the *St. James's Chronicle* of Thursday, October 10, 1765, appeared the following squib, written by George Colman: "Johnson's Shakespeare! Published! When? This morning—what at last!—*Vix tandem*, egad! He has observed Horace's rule of *nonum in annum*. Keep the piece nine years, as Pope says—I know a friend of mine that subscribed in '56—&c.—&c.—&c." The work appeared on the day mentioned in eight octavo volumes, to be had at two guineas in boards or more if in full leather.

Dr. Johnson had given great attention to the writing of his preface, and a few days before the work appeared, a small number of copies of the preface had been separately issued with a special title page, found only in such copies. One of these rare pamphlets is in the Furness Library.

When the work was begun Dr. Johnson's fame was not so great as it had become by 1765, and accordingly the printing was not a large one, and the interest which it excited was sufficient to exhaust the entire edition very rapidly. In the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 35, October 1765, page 479, there is a review of it which begins with the following sentence:

"Of this work all commendation is precluded by the just celebrity of the author, and the rapid sale of the impression which has already made a second necessary, though it has not been published a month."

Bibliographers must either have missed this, or must have supposed that this re-impression was merely a second printing from the same types; but of course this could not have been, because Tonson would not have kept his type standing from 1758 to 1765. Careful comparison shows that every page of the second edition is from a new setting of the type.

In the first edition the imprints on the title pages of volumes 1 and 2 are different from those on volumes 3 to 8, but in the second edition the imprints are all the same and coincide with the later volumes of the first edition.

In the first edition the famous preface is paged in Roman numerals and the rest of the *prolegomena* paged consecutively to the preface. All of the off-printed copies of the preface as separately issued are of this printing. In the second edition the pages of the preface are without numbering, and printed with greater spacing (I suppose Dr. Johnson asked Tonson to do this) so that the preface occupies more leaves, while the remainder of the *prolegomena* has its own Roman paging. There are differences between these two printings of the preface. Corrections were made in an effort to improve the phraseology of this document, which had been carefully polished, and which must always stand as a fine example of Dr. Johnson's grand style. For example:

	<i>First Edition</i>	<i>Second Edition</i>
Page xii, line 1,	“would be probably such”	“would probably be such”
Page xiii, line 13	“rigorous or critical”	“rigorous and critical”
Page 1, line 23,	“the exuberant excrescence of diction”	“the exuberant excrescence of his diction”

In the Dublin reprint of 1766, and in the subsequent edition published by Tonson in 1768, the preface was reprinted from the uncorrected first edition and not from the corrected second edition; but when George Steevens came to reprint it in 1773 he embodied the corrections, and all subsequent printings of this famous writing—and they are legion—seem to be from the corrected text.

A comparison of the text of the plays shows some small changes in the second edition. Many errors of spelling or punctuation occurring in the first edition are corrected in the second. It is likewise apparent that the compositor of the second edition has made other similar errors. I think the second edition is more carelessly set than the first. So far as I have noted there do not seem to be any textual corrections which must be ascribed to editorial supervision.

Hereafter the Dublin reprint of Johnson's Shakespeare, dated 1766, should take its place as the third edition, and the edition published in London dated 1768, usually called the second, should become the fourth.