

SHAKESPEARE AND
THE BOOK

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Monotype Baskerville 11/12.5 pt. *System* QuarkXPress™ [S.E.]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 78139 6 hardback
ISBN 0 521 78651 7 paperback

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Introduction

Shakespeare and the Book is a seemingly straightforward title, exceptional, perhaps, only in its conspicuous avoidance of the usual allusiveness of academic title-making. The words are all simple (the very familiar proper name alone having more than one syllable) and its structure is certainly conventional enough: two nouns joined by a copulative. The title ought to reveal clearly what the book is about, but I am not sure it does. Or, rather, I am sure it does, but I also fear that many readers won't realize it right away. The "and" is the problem.

To start with the second term: by itself, "the book" hardly needs justification as an object of interest. It is a hot topic in the academy today, even in the popular press. It should always have been so, because the book is one of the major achievements of our humanity. For too long, however, its consideration has been shunted off to unpopular bibliography courses or hidden among the offerings of the library school. But suddenly the book has become important to us all, if only because the insistent claims of its imminent demise have focused our attention upon what we will lose with its passing.

While the book's monopoly over the written word was unchallenged, its ubiquitous presence seemed natural and inevitable; but the book itself was largely invisible. Belatedly we have come to see it in its own right – as an artifact, as a commodity, and as a technology. Its new-found visibility registers in the widely circulated e-jokes: the book wittily reimagined in techno-speak. "Bio-Optic Organized Knowledge (trade name: BOOK)" is hailed as a remarkable technological breakthrough: a "revolutionary information platform" requiring neither wires nor batteries; it is portable and compact yet "powerful enough to hold as much information as

a CD-ROM disk”; its “opaque paper technology” allows a “doubling of information density”; each page is “scanned optically.” You get the idea.

Ironically (or is it inevitably?), not only the book’s advantages but also its history have become compelling objects of interest at the precise moment when we are being confidently assured that its demise is near. Printed books, we are told, no less than libraries and bookshops, are dinosaurs that do not yet know they are extinct. William J. Mitchell, Dean at the Architectural School at MIT, for example, sees a world in which books themselves have no cultural value but are mere pacifiers, as he says wryly, for those “addicted to the look and feel of tree flakes encased in dead cow.”¹ Many voices have joined in to sing the book’s eclipse, as print moves forever “beyond Gutenberg”; nonetheless, it is unmistakably a song in counterpoint: an enthusiastic soprano line for the digi-philés, celebrating our epistemological and political release from the tyranny of the codex, and a despairing bass part reserved for the digi-phobes, proclaiming the inevitable loss of authority, coherence, and sensual delight as the written word is reduced to bits and bytes.

In chapter four I will have more to say about the transition from the institutions and technologies of print to their digital substitutes, thinking about what may be lost and gained as words appear to us not conformed as ink on paper but as pixels on computer screens. But for now I will say only that, in spite of the exhilarating potential of the electronic text and the seeming irresistibility of its technologies, the book’s resiliency may have been seriously underestimated. We are perhaps living in the latter days of print, but the now seemingly antiquated technology of the book may very well prove more robust than many have imagined. In any case, if we are to offer compelling alternatives to it, we must understand how it functions in its full material and social complexity. In part these chapters are designed to contribute to that understanding.

They begin with what is, or should be, a self-evident assertion: that the material form and location in which we encounter the written word are active contributors to the meaning of what is read. A poem read as it was written by its author in ink on a sheet of foolscap is not identical with the “same” poem read as printed

in the Complete Works of the poet, or as published in the Norton anthology, or even as it is read online. Not only is it likely that the so-called accidentals of the texts will vary (if not some things more obviously substantive), but also that the modes and matrices of presentation themselves inevitably become part of the poem's structures of meaning, part, that is, of what determines how it is understood and valued. In D. F. McKenzie words, "its presentation in different formats and typefaces, on different papers in different bindings, and its sale at different times, places, and prices, imply distinct conditions and uses and must vary the meanings its readers make of it."² This probably should be obvious, but in literary studies there has long been a tendency to act as if the works we read have a reality independent of the physical texts in which we engage them. In an essay that served as a cornerstone of the New Criticism, René Wellek and Austin Warren off-handedly dismissed as a "theory which probably has not many serious adherents today" the idea that the literary work existed as "the writing on the paper" or "on the printed page."³

Their "today" is not our today, of course, but still it is usual, at least in the classroom-teaching of literature, to ignore the material contexts in which it is presented to its readers, to assume (or merely tactically to pretend) that it exists exclusively as the patterning of its language apart from its particular appearance "on the paper" or its location on a particular "printed page" (or on a computer screen, or even as it is spoken). If physical texts even rate a mention, they are usually considered to be at best conveyors of the work and at worst corruptors of it. Nonetheless, the specific forms and contexts in which we encounter literature, its modes and mechanisms of transmission, are intrinsic aspects of what it is, not considerations wholly external to it; and, no less than its semantic and syntactic organization, these exert influence over our judgments and interpretations. Yet even editorial theory, which of all areas of literary studies might be thought the most sensitive to the inescapability of the material text, easily posits as its object of desire a work that never was, an ideal text of an author's intentions that no materialization does (or can) bear witness to.

I am deeply suspicious of this commitment, however much the logic of its defenders may appeal. No actual text can, of course,

perfectly articulate the intentions of the author, and its defects are at least theoretically liable to correction; but the concomitant argument that the author's unrealized intentions are therefore the work itself – and their materialization merely some approximation of the intended work, at best instructions for imagining the intangible original – seems to me to be true only tautologically.⁴ It is true, that is, only if the work is defined as the fully articulate intentions of the author whether or not these are embodied in any particular text. Such a definition of the “work” is not logically impossible, and indeed it is not without value; but it does serve to isolate the work of art from most of the actual conditions of its making, granting its author an almost impossible sovereignty over it. The work is denied any effective principle of realization, seemingly imagined as something self-sufficient, and, in the process, the contexts in which it was written and in which it is read are, perhaps unwittingly, universalized.

I would argue, on the contrary, that literature exists, in any useful sense, only and always in its materializations, and that these are the conditions of its meaning rather than merely the containers of it. Though the imagination may desire something less coarse than the various physical texts that no doubt inadequately preserve and present its workings (like Wordsworth's “mind” seeking “Some element to stamp her image on / In nature somewhat nearer to her own”⁵), it must content itself with a medium that is incommensurate with its refinement. Only as texts are realized materially are they accessible. Only then can they delight and mean. The work of the imagination is unable to constitute itself; it is always dependent upon imperfect physical supports for it to be presented to its readers, supports that themselves mediate what is there to be engaged.

Some might say that this focus on the physical forms in which literature circulates and on the conditions that govern both its production and consumption is a sociological rather than a properly literary concern, deflecting attention away from the internal design of the text to the circumstantial details of its manufacture. But of course “the text” is exactly what is at issue. It is, I hope, not too stubbornly literal to insist that the literary text must be read as a physical object and therefore cannot be, except theoretically, seg-

regated from the circumstantial details that bring it to our attention. We can read only what is physically before our eyes to be read, and we should, therefore, factor into our calculus of meaning what Roger Chartier calls “the effects that material forms produce.”⁶

Attention to how the material forms in which the text circulates affect meaning does not in any way deny the importance of its symbolic patterning, somehow refusing its “literariness” in favor of its social existence; rather, precisely what such attention seeks is a more comprehensive conception than is otherwise possible of its literariness, of the palpable designs it has upon its readers. Such attention should expand, not in any way limit, our understanding of the text. It recognizes that the specific forms of a text’s embodiment – things as vulgarly material as typeface, format, layout, design, even paper (think of William Prynne’s outrage that editions of Shakespeare were printed on “farre better paper than most Octavo or Quarto Bibles”⁷) – are not external to the meaning of the text, inert vehicles designed only for its conveyance, but rather are part of the text’s structures of signification.

Focus on the documentary particularities of a text frees our reading from the fantasy of literary autonomy. It demystifies the act of writing, clarifying the actual conditions of creativity, locating the text within a network of intentions, within which the author’s, however dominant, are still only some among many – and intentions, it should be noted, that are incapable of producing the book itself. The specific forms of textual embodiment speak the complex history of its making, and speak as well the remarkable productivity of the medium, a useful reminder of how much the book, no less than any of the electronic media that threaten to replace it, is a technology that not merely passively conveys its content but one that actively shapes its very intelligibility.

But if at this time attention to “the book” can hardly be surprising, indeed is almost obligatory as its protracted dominance over the written word is now perceived to be under threat, the application of my interest in the printed book to the primary term of my concern here – Shakespeare – arguably is. At least in his role as playwright, Shakespeare had no obvious interest in the printed book. Performance was the only form of publication he sought for his plays. He made no effort to have them published and none to

stop the publication of the often poorly printed versions that did reach the bookstalls. In chapters one and two I will explore the motivations and activities of the people who, for their own reasons having almost nothing to do with Shakespeare's literary merits, first brought his plays into print. A lot of names, many unfamiliar to all but textual scholars, will appear on those pages, names of people who were responsible for the fact that we have Shakespeare to read at all, and whose motives and actions have fashioned what is there for us to read. Shakespeare himself seemingly did not care.

My interest in Shakespeare and the book, then, risks appearing as at best a quirky antiquarianism and at worse as a perverse self-indulgence (since by "the book" I mean precisely that – the physical text itself, as both artifact and commodity – rather than using it metaphorically to point to the plays, as many have, as complex verbal structures). Indeed, M. C. Bradbrook has stated explicitly that to treat the drama "as book-art is to do it great violence."⁸ Clearly, Shakespeare's own commitment to print was reserved for his narrative poetry.⁹ His *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* were published in carefully printed editions by his fellow townsman, Richard Field, and to each volume Shakespeare contributed a signed dedication. The published plays, however, show no sign of Shakespeare's involvement. He wrote them for the theater and not for a reading public; they were scripts to be acted not plays to be read. "It is in performance that the plays lived and had their being," writes Stanley Wells. "Performance is the end to which they were created."¹⁰ On such seemingly solid ground, many teachers and scholars have rested their confidence that the proper focus of academic attention should, therefore, be performance-based, either considering the printed play as what Michael Goldman calls "a design for performance" or considering performance itself as the object of study (in the theater or, more often, for obvious reasons, on video or film).¹¹

There is much to be said for such a focus, and much – too much, I often think in my most curmudgeonly moments following long hours in the theater watching dutiful, or, often worse, all-too imaginative productions of Shakespeare – has been said for it. Shakespeare does, of course, "live" in the theater; there he becomes our contemporary, responsive to our needs and interests. But, as I

have argued elsewhere, that seems to be exactly what makes the commitment to stage-centered approaches to Shakespeare suspect. Shakespeare in performance yields too easily to our desires. The fact of Shakespeare's domination of the theatrical repertory in Britain from the mid-eighteenth century to the present alone speaks the pliancy of his plays in the hands of theater professionals. In the theater Shakespeare escapes his historicity, becoming for every age a contemporary playwright, and arguably its most important one. Like the promiscuous Hero of Claudio's tortured imagination, he is not merely our Shakespeare, he is everybody's Shakespeare.¹²

Print is a more conservative medium. I mean that literally, not morally or politically; it *conserves* in a way performance can not. Whatever else print does, it provides a durable image of the text, one that avoids the necessary evanescence of performance; indeed its ability to conserve is, in large part, what has made continued performance possible. The text lasts on the page in a way it cannot in the theater, its endurance at once the sign and the foundation of its greater resistance to appropriation. The printed text remains before our eyes, demanding to be respected. This is not to say that the printed play is more authentic than the performed play, nor is it to say that it is somehow immune to tendentious interpretation. Editions and readings of them, as I will explore in chapter three, are no less affected by contemporary interests and understandings than are productions. It is merely to point to the obvious: that the printed text fixes in time and space the words that performance releases as the very condition of its being.

But there is, perhaps, something less obvious to say about the relationship of text and performance.¹³ Although they have often been imagined as two halves of a single reality, as the inner and outer aspects of the play, the printed text and the performed play are not related as origin and effect (in whatever order one might conceive it). Indeed, in any precise sense, they do not constitute the same entity. Performance no more animates the text than does the text record the performance. They are dissimilar and discontinuous modes of production. Their incommensurability is uncannily registered on the title page of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623), where the play is said to be published "*As it was Presented*

privately, at the Blackfriars; and publicly at the Globe, By the Kings Maiesties Seruants,” and yet also said to be “The perfect and exact Coppy, with diuerse *things Printed, that the length of the Play* would not beare in the Presentment.” The title page makes two different and incompatible claims about the text it prints: it is impossibly offered both “as it was Presented” and as it was *not* presented, that is, with more than the play “would . . . beare in the Presentment.”

But that paradoxical double claim – the “Bifold authority” that Robert Weimann has taken from *Troilus and Cressida* 5.2.151 to name the text’s competing structures of authorization (a phrase that appears in the folio as “By foule authority,” the variant speaking the inevitable inadequacy of those structures) – exposes something of the perplexing riddle of the relation of print and performance.¹⁴ Neither one is the effect of the other; neither reproduces, or draws upon (except rhetorically) the other’s claim to authenticity. The printed play is neither a pre-theatrical text nor a post-theatrical one; it is a *non*-theatrical text, even when it claims to offer a version of the play “as it was played.”

As it was played, it existed in the theater, in the ephemeral sounds and gestures of dramatic action. The printed text can never be the play “as it was played.” It is always, necessarily if tautologically, the play as printed; and as printed it ties its readers to the words on the page. Its conventions do not arrest performance, while anticipating its eventual release on stage, but, rather, they defer or, even better, deny performance altogether. Reading a play is not reading performance (the printed play as textualized drama) or even reading *for* performance (the printed play as potential drama); it is reading in the absence of performance (the printed play as . . . well, the printed play). “If the play is a book,” says Stephen Orgel decisively, “it’s not a play.”¹⁵

The performed play, conversely, can never be merely a realization of the play as printed. It is neither a pre-textual version of the play nor a post-textual one. Dr. Johnson famously claimed that “a dramatic exhibition is a book recited,”¹⁶ but this is merely evidence of Johnson’s characteristic textual, rather than theatrical, orientation. Even when “a dramatic exhibition” takes as its playing text a particular print manifestation, it does not merely vitalize that text. It does not apply the warming fire of production to dramatic possibilities

somehow frozen on the page. Performance *makes* something that did not previously exist, rather than *enacts* something that has a prior reality; and what it makes, as Terry Eagleton says, “cannot be mechanically extrapolated from an inspection of the text itself.”¹⁷

Text and performance are, then, not partial and congruent aspects of some unity that we think of as the play, but are two discrete modes of production. Performance operates according to a theatrical logic of its own rather than one derived from the text; the printed play operates according to a textual logic that is not derived from performance. In considering a performance of *Hamlet* and an edition of *Hamlet*, one is not, I think, considering two iterations of a single work. Though they are admittedly related (certainly more closely than are, say, a performance of *Hamlet* and an edition of *Othello*), they are still materially and theoretically distinct. *Hamlet* is not a pre-existent entity that the text and performance each *contain*, but the name that each calls what it brings into being. Neither is more or less authentic than the other, for there is no external reality, apart from the texts and the performances themselves, that can provide a standard against which that authenticity might be measured.

We cannot think, then, of the printed text as something secondary, or as something as yet unrealized, ceding authority to the performed play as the fulfillment of the text’s mere potential, any more than we can assume the priority of the text, granting it, as Dr. Johnson would have us do, preeminence over performance. But we must concede that the text has its own compelling logic and history. Not only theoretically but also historically, the text of Shakespeare’s plays can claim, not precedence over performance, but parity with it. Although Shakespeare did indeed write his plays to be performed, they quickly escaped his control, surfacing as books to be read and allowing Shakespeare to “live” no less vitally in print than he does in the theater. If the 1623 folio is a memorial tribute, “an office to the dead,” as John Heminge and Henry Condell say in their dedicatory epistle (sig. A2^v), it is one in which the departed is brought back to life by the very act of publication. “Thou art aliue still,” says Jonson in his commendatory poem in the folio, “while thy Booke doth liue.” In print, Shakespeare is not merely remembered but revived.

How powerfully the book has become Shakespeare's milieu may be judged by a quick look at two visual images. The first is a stained-glass window, a photograph of which serves as the cover of this book. The image is, in many ways, unsurprising. It is yet one more sign of Shakespeare's inescapability, one more institutional recognition of his centrality in our culture. And yet it is in many ways a strange representation. It is, of course, unmistakably Shakespeare; the features are familiar, the dress characteristic. The setting, however, is odd, or at least odd for Shakespeare; it is an indoor scene, with a marble pillar to Shakespeare's right and an open window through which one can see a tree. It is not, as one might have expected, obviously either a theatre or a study; it is neither a site of playing nor of writing. And Shakespeare's posture is odder still. Shakespeare faces forward, his legs crossed above his ankles. His right elbow rests on a stack of books, which themselves are sitting on a waist-high marble plinth. The index finger of Shakespeare's left hand points towards a manuscript scroll extending from beneath the stacked volumes. The books are the surprise, conspicuously interposed between Shakespeare and the handwritten scroll. We often see pictures of Shakespeare writing; his quill pen is as much part of his iconography as the keys are of St. Peter's. But Shakespeare is rarely associated visually with printed books. Manuscript was his medium, not print. He wrote his scripts long-hand, and scribes produced additional handwritten copies of the plays as well as the scrolls containing individual actors' parts (though the blocks of writing on the scroll in the window seem to mark it as something other than a play script). Shakespeare was a theater professional, not a literary man.

This is what are told again and again. It is, however, only a half truth. The other half is that Shakespeare was, almost from the first, a best-selling dramatist. By the time of his death, over forty editions of his plays had reached print, and three – *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and *1 Henry IV* – had been published in five or more editions. If these numbers seem modest before the twenty-four editions of William Baldwin's *Treatise of Moral Philosophy* published by 1640 or the forty plus editions of Lewis Bayley's *The Practice of Piety*, they still mark Shakespeare as a remarkably successful author. If it was not a role he sought for himself, or even from which he benefited

much, it was one he could not escape. His plays found their way into print because of (and indeed their texts were in various ways configured by) the activities of the English book trade. The window speaks to that often-overlooked other half – that Shakespeare’s legitimate medium is not merely the theater but also, if not primarily, the book.

And well the handsome stained-glass window might choose that particular half of the story to tell, as it graces a wall in the guildhall of the Stationers’ Company. It seems only fair that the Stationers have thus honored Shakespeare: not only because he is arguably the greatest of English literary figures, but also because he is arguably the industry’s greatest cash cow. Certainly no other English author has made publishers so much money and received so little in return. Shakespeare has become one of the world’s most popular writers and managed never to collect a penny in royalties. In a sense, this book can be understood as an examination of what determines the eccentric imagery of the Stationers’ window: the interests and activities that took Shakespeare’s plays out of the theater and brought them into the study, preserving and presenting them to be read.

There is a second picture that might help explain what this book is about and help justify the conjunction of the two nouns of its title: a full-length portrait of Sir John Suckling by Anthony Van Dyck, painted about 1638 and hanging now in The Frick Museum in New York City (see Fig. 1). It is a wonderful painting, lusciously rendered. In 1661, John Aubrey described it as “a piece of great value,” a portrait of Suckling “all at length, leaning against a rock, with a play-book, contemplating.”¹⁸ Suckling stands, gazing to his right, in an outcropping of large boulders. He is dressed in a blue silk tunic, with a red cloak around his shoulders; and he rests a large book on a rock. His left hand is at the book’s upper-left corner, holding down about half its pages; his right holds up the bottom of a single leaf, revealing the double-columned page beneath that sits atop the remainder of the thick folio volume. The running title of the right-hand page exposed by the lifted leaf is marked “HAMLET,” and a label protrudes from the volume’s fore-edge with a word written in Roman majuscules: “SHAKSPERE.” The name functions in a complicated way here. It may well be the first



1. Sir Anthony Van Dyck, "Sir John Suckling." 1632/1641, oil on canvas, 216.5 × 130.2 cm. Copyright The Frick Collection, New York and used with permission.

secular book that is explicitly identified in a painting, but in any case it clearly reveals Shakespeare's capacity to lend cultural prestige only some twenty-odd years after his death.¹⁹ But it reveals no less clearly that the prestige he offers is already less a function of memorable plays enjoyed in the theater by millions (even by 1638) than of their existence in print. "SHAKSPERE" in Van Dyck's portrait names not a man but a book, and it is the complex cultural process that made this metonymy possible, as well as some of its implications and effects, that *Shakespeare and the Book* explores.