

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

The editor of Shakespeare's text is for ever navigating perilously between the Scylla of impertinence and the Charybdis of timidity. Both, according to the ancients, were implacable to the voyager. But the voyage must be undertaken afresh, as knowledge increases, until discovery is complete. Steering southward to the cautious starboard, towards the open water, may lead us to the whirlpool where ships move in circles without progress, and the voyage ends in frustration. Yet on the bolder larboard tack we risk the rocks of Scylla, a more positive danger. It is characteristic, however, of the kindlier critical atmosphere of the fellowship of scholars today that they no longer lie in wait, a hidden reef, in malignancy towards each others' voyages of discovery, and are perhaps more patient of overboldness than of pusillanimity. It was not always so.

The textual critics of the eighteenth century dealt hard blows indeed upon each other in a *mêlée* of practised and varied abuse. Certainly the eighteenth-century editors were not lacking in courage, or even in self-confidence, and they hurtled magnificently through difficult waters, each with a fine certainty of his skill and competence. It is proper to observe that when they began their labours these waters were uncharted. And conscious as we are now of their defects, we are more justly inclined to pay tribute to their work than to follow their own fashion of mutual abuse. Never were foundations more solidly laid, and they have endured over two hundred years.

The eighteenth century has many claims to be considered indispensable in the history of thought and art, in nothing more surely than in Shakespearian scholarship and particularly in the study of the text of Shakespeare. The mark of the industry and the taste of eighteenth-century editors

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

lies deeply impressed upon the text of Shakespeare as it appears in later editions down to the present day. Their main work of conventionalizing the general form of a dramatic text, with acts and scenes, stage-directions and lists of characters, has endured and dictated to their successors. They laboured to penetrate the veil cast by compositors over the original texts, or inherent in the imperfect copy which these craftsmen had to translate into type, and brooded over the shape of the poet's verse and prose, seeking to restore his intention. They gave a free rein to conjecture in their solutions of the many difficulties presented by the texts under consideration. If we owe to them many sound emendations which seem to restore original readings, some of them with the brilliance of genius, we can also trace plainly the desire to improve the sense, or the metre, of the text as transmitted to them. They were not negligent of the canons of true textual criticism, but did not always abide by them. 'I am willing', wrote Dr Johnson, 'to comply with any meaning that can be extracted from the present text rather than change it.' But he continues, 'yet will propose, but with great diffidence, a slight alteration'. And if he had his way we should change 'which seasons' to 'with reasons', in *Cymbeline* 1.6.9. It is fair to recall that in their view the text of Shakespeare's plays had been transmitted from stage or study to print by a series of incompetent transcriptions, a theory that presented manifest temptations to an editor zealous for Shakespeare's good name.

To them we owe also the first serious consideration of the rival claims of the earliest printed texts in Quarto or in Folio, and of their validity as copy texts. They were even aware of the characteristics of Elizabethan handwriting, and of the *cursus litterarum* in the Secretary script. Finally, the Malone Society took its name in celebration of the labours of Edmond Malone and of the first scholarly and historical approach to the evidence on record concerning

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

the Elizabethan stage and theatre for which the plays were written.

The eighteenth century is infused into the nineteenth- and twentieth-century editions of Shakespeare as powerfully as the Middle Ages coloured the life and thought of Elizabethan England, with all the strength of tradition, of ingenuity, of skill, and of great names, in the long succession from Rowe down to Malone. Many a reading survives, even in recent editions, unperceived, unquestioned, in silence, as a legacy of the labours of an eighteenth-century editor. It might almost be written down for the direction of the modern editor of Shakespeare that his first duty is to beware of eighteenth-century contamination of the text. The mechanics of the vast task of a complete edition of Shakespeare favour methods of preparing copy which rest upon the proof-correction, as it were, of an existing print. Few editors, even of a single play, proceed by way of a pen with clean sheets of paper, as with the copy for a first printed edition of an unpublished manuscript. Constant vigilance is required, and is not easy to maintain through the long watch.

It is easy enough, and it is obligatory, to remember to question even the most apparently certain emendations of a Theobald, 'a babbled of green fields' for 'a Table of greene fields' (*Henry V* 2.3.17), or 'lackeying the varying tide' for 'lacking the varrying tyde' (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.4.46), which have carried it away from Theobald's time onwards. The first is explicable as a printer's misreading of copy in Secretary hand; the second is not so explicable, and requires some other explanation. For explanation is necessary, in a normal text, though the editor of *Pericles* is hard put to it to conceive what went on in the printing house. The emendation, universally accepted, of 'babbled' for 'table' requires a compositor who could set up a minuscule *b* as a capital *T*. The second, of 'lackeying' for 'lacking', is made more credible by the possible attraction of the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

compositor to this misreading by the word 'lack'd' occurring two lines earlier in the passage. But it is the duty of the editor of Shakespeare to make a fresh attempt upon all such *adyta*, undazzled by the brilliance of previous conjectures, undismayed by all previous failures to improve upon them. He can hardly with honour pass over these emendations unobserved. But nothing is more difficult than to secure that at no point in his text has he failed to ensure consideration of departures from the original texts, of minor significance, introduced in the long series of eighteenth-century editions to which so much is owed.

The editor with a conscience dare not submit his own judgement silently even to the highest and most unchallenged authority or to established orthodoxy. There is room for debate, for instance, even in the interpretation of a signature of Shakespeare, the famous and important signature appended to his deposition in the Court of Requests. This signature has been transcribed as *Willm Shaks*^p by Sir Edmund Chambers, and as *Willm Shaks*^p by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson, though he does suggest that less probably the *p* is 'a general sign of abbreviation'.¹ Sir Edward, however, uses this crossed *p* for *per* as an item in Shakespeare's alphabet to strengthen the case for identity of his handwriting with that of the *More* manuscript. There can, I think, be little real doubt that either transcription of this signature is questionable. It is extremely doubtful that the *s* in Chambers' version is in fact present. Maunde Thompson's version is a crossed *p* following upon *Shak*, the *s* omitted. The fact is, that the form of the sign interpreted as a crossed *p* is of frequent occurrence as a formal concluding sign of abbreviation in signatures, or to fill up blank spaces in legal documents. There is a good instance among published records in a well-known collection of facsimiles, Sir Henry James' *Facsimiles of National*

¹ *Shakespeare's Hand in Sir Thomas More*, p. 59.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

Manuscripts, 1865–9, no. LXXXVI. Here we have the signature of Marmaduke Darell on 8 February 1586 abbreviated to *Ma^r Darell*, the form of the mark of abbreviation after the *r* being indistinguishable from that used by Shakespeare in his Court of Requests signature. The signature should therefore be transcribed *Willm Shak^k*, and this reputed form of the crossed *p* deleted from any discussion of the known forms of Shakespeare's writing.

The assurance of certainty is a rare blessing upon the editor's labours. It may come in the vindication of a copy-text at a point where emendation has been universal, or general. So it is in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2.7.32, where the Folio reading 'wilde Ocean' is improved to 'wide ocean' from Collier downwards, though the eighteenth century wisely left it alone. It emerges from fuller knowledge that 'wild' was a current term for the open sea, unenclosed, unfettered by land, but not necessarily in rage. The 'wild and wandering flood' of *Troilus and Cressida* 1.1.105, 'the wide world and wild watery seas' of *The Comedy of Errors* 2.1.21, link themselves with this passage, and with the familiar talk of seafaring men as reported in Chancery depositions, to assure us that this is indeed what Shakespeare wrote, and not only what the compositor read and set up. A better knowledge and understanding of Tudor English and Tudor thought saves us from many a hasty conclusion of corruption in the text. Absorption in our modern world may be a menace to the textual editor as it has been so noticeably in much recent aesthetic commentary. We have the distorted perspective which reads fascism into *Coriolanus* or Freudian complexes into *Hamlet*, or applies a sentimental moral licentiousness to debase the faith by which Isabella lives and is ruled, in *Measure for Measure*. A fair textual parallel to such a critical approach would be for a modernizing editor to emend *The Tempest* 1.2.342–3, with misbegotten ingenuity,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

7

sense attributable to it here. If the difficulty is strongly felt, there is confirmation in the sequel to the phrase, 'Such as moue men'. The plural verb seems to require a plural subject, a noun in place of the adjective *prone*. The editor must in reason explore possibilities, undeterred by the current and universal acceptance of the original reading. And graphic evidence for the new reading *grace* now offered may find support in a later line in the play which seems to hark back to the thought and the very phrase of this passage, in 2.2.36, 'Heauen giue thee mouing graces'.

An even more difficult decision faces him in *Love's Labour's Lost* 5.2.67, with 'pertaunt like'. For here the phrase finds a newly suggested interpretation from Dr Simpson as a form of *pur tant*, meaning a winning hand at the game of Post and Pair. It is tempting to let it rest there. Yet if there is grave dissatisfaction with this suggestion, an alternative must be sought. The whole trend of the speech is against it, and in this context the phrase may seem sadly out of place, a trivial intruder, if this is its meaning. If Rosaline is to 'o'ersway his state' and be 'his fate', something more than the chancy and fleeting power of a winning card is required. We recall the many references to a ruling planet which reflect the prevalent thought, and a prevalent image, of the day, frequent especially in Shakespeare's earlier plays. And 'Ruled like a wandering planet over me' (2 *Henry VI* 4.4.16), 'some planet strike me down' (*Titus Andronicus* 2.4.14) and 'Be as a planetary plague' (*Timon of Athens* 4.3.108) cover in time most of Shakespeare's writing career. The moment *pertaunt* is written *ptaunt*, with a crossed *p* for *per*, the misreading becomes comprehensible, and easy to make. And *planet-like* (first suggested by Moore Smith) fits like a glove the thought and imagery of Rosaline's speech.

Familiarity with the vagaries of Elizabethan spelling, again, shows the way to emendations that at first blush seem to be fantastic. It is difficult to fix a limit to the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

eccentricities of even well educated Elizabethans in their written communication of words and thought. One might expect to find some measure of standardization in the day-by-day labours of professional clerks in Chancery or in Star Chamber. But spelling was as changeable as shot silk, and as mysterious to the innocent modern eye. The same clerk, within the space of one page, can vary from *coronation* to *crownacion*, and four varieties of spelling for one word may be found in close proximity in continuous writing by one scribe. We are so familiar with the spelling *rogue* in modern English that we are likely to forget the commoner Elizabethan spellings of *roge* or *roage*, one of which settles happily a problem reading in *The Merchant of Venice* 2.1.35, to the satisfaction of one editor at least, aware of the ease and frequency of confusion between an *o* and an *a*. It is a far cry from the Quarto reading, 'So is Alcides beaten by his *rage*', to the readings generally accepted by editors, 'So is Alcides beaten by his *wag*' (or 'by his *page*'). But between *rage* and *roge* there is no gulf, in spelling or writing. We may observe the same confusion in *Timon of Athens* 4.3.271, where *ragge* is manifestly *rogue*, clearly linked with *rogue hereditary* three lines later. Earlier in the same scene the Folio spelling *drugges* reflects a common contemporary spelling of *drudges*, a necessary and certain emendation.

In general, there is much to be said for approaching a difficulty in the text of Shakespeare, or any Elizabethan writer known to have used a Secretary hand, by way of a preliminary transcript of the passage in question into a current Secretary script, given the requisite fluency in such writing, of the type most frequent at the approximate date of the text in question. Such a transcript approximates to the copy from which the compositor would be working, and can often throw light upon his perplexities or upon his careless ease in interpretation. It may also lead us to a visual image of those marginal corrections or additions

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

which are more frequent than is generally realized in the original copy. The moral may be pointed by a happy accident which led to what is hoped to be a solution to a crux in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the course of training in bibliography, palaeography and archives, a student was reading aloud from an Elizabethan document thrown upon the screen by an epidiascope. He fell into error at one place, reading *to see* for *used*. A small bell rang in my memory, and proceedings were suspended for the consultation of a text of Shakespeare. The Quarto text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.208 reads 'Now is the Moon vsed'. It became at least plausible that the compositor of the Quarto had made the reverse error, reading *used* for *to see*, in the easy confusion of an initial Secretary *v* with *to*, followed by the even easier confusion of *d* with *e*. Neither *v* nor *o* is normally post-linked, so that the division into two words offers no difficulty.

It is evident, of course, that there is need for watchful care in the application of this technique to the emendation of Shakespeare's, or any Elizabethan, text, lest it become one more instrument for the improving of Shakespeare, and a Circe to the textual critic. The editor may find an infinity of valuable hints concerning the possibility of such emendations in the numerous lists of *Errata* in Elizabethan books. These are records of actual errors, many due to graphic causes, committed by compositors in their reading of copy and its transmission in type. Confidence in a proposal for such an emendation is often greatly increased by the observation of a parallel instance occurring in a contemporary list of errata. The book thus consulted must, of course, rest upon copy written in a Secretary hand, and this is as a rule readily distinguishable. It is quite certain that we should not be bound by the limitations imposed by the consideration of the particular characteristics of Hand D in the play of *Sir Thomas More*, as the sole model of Secretary hand. Handwriting changes over a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-41612-3 - New Readings in Shakespeare: Volume One: Introduction
the Comedies the Poems

C. J. Sisson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

period of years. And transcripts have to be taken into account.

In the instance cited from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5, Sc. 1, it is plain that something has to be done with the reading given by the Quarto, which is apparently corrupt, and is almost universally agreed to be corrupt.¹ It appears fairly certain that it was incomprehensible to those who prepared and printed the First Folio, the copy for which was undoubtedly the Quarto text. The Folio reading here is 'Now is the morall downe', which later editors have gratefully adopted in the form 'Now is the mural down'. It is difficult, however, to attach any authority to this reading as a possible revision of the text by Shakespeare or in any way due to him. It bears all the marks of those editorial interventions which are certainly a feature of the Folio text and are at times the fruits of desperation. The value of textual criticism or of editorial labours is not necessarily in proportion to their ancience. The Folio reading here must therefore take its place merely as the first known attempt to emend this passage, with manifest rejection of the Quarto reading as a clue to Shakespeare's manuscript. It is an improvised, editorial reading which stands only on its own feet, which are feet of clay. It may justly be set aside, as having no independent authority. And we must seek to improve upon whoever prepared the copy for the Folio text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This is not improving Shakespeare, the capital crime of textual criticism.

No student of the text of Shakespeare can, however, escape the responsibility of individual and personal judgement upon the distinction between weakness in style and corrupt transmission of writing. With all due emphasis upon the preliminary criterion of all emendation, that corruption is manifest, the test of necessity must ultimately be the considered judgement of the individual critic. If his equip-

¹ Professor Alexander, however, retains the Quarto reading.