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A Study of Shakespeare's Versification

The Reverend Matthew Albert Bayfield (1852-1922) published this study at the end of his life after a long career as classical scholar, editor of Greek tragedies and headmaster of several public schools. He gives an account of the structure and characteristic features of Shakespeare's dramatic verse and argues that it has been fundamentally misunderstood by other scholars. In particular, he analyses the use of contractions or abbreviations found in the Folio and Quartos and continued in the editions of his own time. He weighs up which of the contractions familiar from many editions were actually Shakespeare's, and what that reveals about how Shakespeare might have intended his prose and verse to be spoken. Bayfield's many appendices evaluating the metre of specific lines and his detailed linguistic analysis remain thought-provoking for modern editors and scholars of Shakespeare.

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*With an Inquiry into the Trustworthiness of
the Early Texts an Examination of the 1616
Folio of Ben Jonson's Works and Appendices
Including a Revised Test of 'Antony and Cleo-
patra'*

MATTHEW ALBERT BAYFIELD



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WITH AN INQUIRY INTO THE TRUSTWORTHINESS
OF THE
EARLY TEXTS
AN EXAMINATION OF THE 1616 FOLIO OF
BEN JONSON'S WORKS
AND APPENDICES
INCLUDING A REVISED TEXT OF *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*

BY

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TO
ALFRED WILLIAM POLLARD
A SMALL INSTALMENT OF AN UNPAYABLE DEBT.

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PREFACE

THE enterprise on which this book embarks is frankly a bold one, for it aims at two objects, distinct yet inseparable, which are nothing less than revolutionary, and this in so familiar and well-worked a field as the text of Shakespeare's plays. Its purpose is, first to give an intelligible and consistent account of the structure and characteristic features of his dramatic verse, the essential principles of which appear to have been wholly misconceived hitherto, and secondly to show that there are many thousands of lines of it that are given in modern texts not as their author intended them to be delivered, but clipped and trimmed to a featureless uniformity that he would have abhorred.

The plays as we have them present many problems, and among them one which forces itself upon our attention at every turn and therefore cannot be ignored. No solution of it has yet been found or, so far as I am aware, even sought, and it is for these reasons that it is here taken in hand. Its outlines may be briefly stated.

With the exception of certain of the Quartos—exceptions of prime significance, as will be seen—the texts, both early and modern, are strewn in varying proportions with abbreviated forms such as *to't*, *do't*, *in't*, *by't*, *i'intreat*, *i'have*, *not o'th'best*, *th'gods*, *th'first*, *th'platform*, *th'hot duke* (*th'ot duke!*), *i'th'throat*, *in's hand*, and *s wife*, *to's* (*to us*), *cram's* (*us*), *th'art* (*thou art*), *y'are* (*you*

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are), *you shall ha't (have it)*, *the town is tane (taken)*.
 The Folio even makes Cleopatra say,

Rather on Nylus' muddle
 Lay me starke-*nak'd*, and let the water-flies
 Blow me into abhorring.

Besides these and others not mentioned, we often have such elegancies as "Tell me your counsels, I will not disclose *'em*" (Portia to Brutus), "We'll see *um* starve first" (Lear to Cordelia), "I am certain *on't*" (Antony), "Ay, 'twas he that told me *on* her first" (Othello, on the Folio's testimony), "*A (he)* sought my life," "*A* was a goodly king." Several of the combinations of consonants are unpronounceable as printed, while in others of the contractions the aspirate must be dropped; and this in plays written by the master poet and playwright for no other purpose than to be acted on the stage. Sometimes it is a Quarto that imports these forms, sometimes the Folio, at one moment Tweedledum, at the next Tweedledee; for they freely contradict one another, and themselves. At times they make up their quarrel and agree to abbreviate together. The Folio, alas! our sole authority for twenty of the plays, is throughout more given to the practice than the Quartos. The contracted forms, if read as printed, frequently destroy the metre and even more frequently produce a false emphasis, making it appear that Shakespeare was either indifferent to such details or incapable of doing better. That he was largely indifferent is, I believe, a common opinion. The ordinary abbreviations still employed in verse, as *I'll*, *he'll*, *he's*, *'tis* etc., often occur where they should not, with the same injurious

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effect. Speaking generally, the apparent object of this free use of the apostrophe is to reduce the line as far as possible to the plain norm without triplet or quadrisyllabic feet or double upbeat, whereas Shakespeare was from the first and throughout his literary career continually departing more and more from this primitive Gorboducian model.

Modern editors habitually alter *th'* to *the*, *th'art* to *thou'rt*, and (naturally not daring to leave it) *y'are* to *you're*, retaining the rest; but this is an arbitrary and partial method of procedure which does not solve the problem or even touch it, and is not justified by any sound principles of criticism. At the same time the retention of all the abbreviations except *th'* indicates an imperfect recognition of what was Shakespeare's ideal of dramatic verse—the ideal at which he was aiming almost from the first, and to which in the end he absolutely attained in the incomparable versification of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Yet attention has actually been drawn to “the *irregular* verse of the later plays.” The result is that the most perfect of all dramatic verse has been systematically travestied; its native freedom is hampered as by fetters. As left by their author, the measures moved with the lightness and ease and rhythmic grace of a beautiful and elaborate dance, and they made music to the ear. Read as we must read them, they stump about as it were in clogs; their grace is gone and the music is “beastly dumb'd.” Consequently the enjoyment of a play at home is marred by an irritation which grows in proportion to the beauty of the verse that is distorted, and in the theatre the actors

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are compelled to vex our ears and their own with halting measures that have no balance, and to deliver much of the finest of all drama in a jargon that is unworthy both of the author and themselves. This cobbled patchwork is given to us for Shakespeare's verse as he was satisfied to leave it, and while it is proclaimed with simple truth that he is the world's greatest poet, it has been found necessary to beg us to make allowances—yes, to *make allowances* for the numerous imperfections of his versification!

My endeavour in the following pages is to show that, if Shakespeare's verse is to be so presented that a modern reader may read it as the poet meant it to be delivered, the abbreviations in question must be expanded into the corresponding full forms. In modern printing elision of a vowel or consonant implies that the elided letter is not to be pronounced, and it has hitherto been the prevailing, if not the universal, opinion that Elizabethan texts are to be interpreted in the same way. Accordingly, and in default of conclusive evidence to the contrary at the time of writing, the argument proceeds on that assumption and arrives at the conclusion just mentioned. That the conclusion is sound I have never doubted, but from the first I had felt doubts as to the correctness of the belief that elision of a letter in Elizabethan texts always means that it is not to be uttered, and these doubts have been justified in a striking manner since the ms. of the book went to press. If the reader will glance at the examination of the 1616 Folio of Ben Jonson's works on pp. 294 ff., he will see that the conclusion which was apparently unavoidable

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even with the accepted view of the meaning of the abbreviations, is placed beyond doubt by the discovery that in writing and printing of Elizabethan and early Jacobean days abbreviation by no means invariably implied that the suppressed letter was to be silent. It follows, therefore, that to reprint an Elizabethan text *ad litteram* may be to misrepresent completely for modern readers the manner of utterance intended. The evidence afforded by Jonson's Folio and the Quarto of his *Sejanus* is decisive on the point. If, however, anyone is disinclined to believe that the practice of Jonson and his printers was also that of the printers of the Quartos and First Folio of Shakespeare, there still remains the original argument, based upon the evidence furnished by a comparison of these latter texts with themselves and one another, and upon the ascertained characteristics of Shakespeare's versification.

Some readers of this book, reluctant to make the complete *volte-face* apparently necessitated by the facts disclosed, may think that the conclusions arrived at "go too far." Yet, as I have written in Ch. ix, although the results of the inquiry may be surprising or even astonishing, that is only what might have been expected in the circumstances, if we should ever reach the truth. We were confronted by so many otherwise irreconcilable phenomena, that by nothing short of a fundamental readjustment of our estimate or interpretation of the early texts were we likely to solve the problem which they present. I venture to request anyone who hesitates to go the whole way with me, to ask himself where and how the line is to be drawn between abbreviations to

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be rejected as merely ways of printing and those that are to be retained. The point has been considered carefully, but no criterion except the aesthetic or literary one seems to be discoverable, and that appears to demand the rejection of all which are not still used in verse. The presumption is wholly against any doubtful instances, and I would ask the reader with some confidence whether he can discover a single line or measure which the retention of one of these would improve.

The revised text of *Antony and Cleopatra* given at the end of the volume will enable readers to judge of the cumulative effect of the proposed changes.

I have to thank the Editor of *The Times* for permission to reproduce the substance of four articles which appeared in the Literary Supplement of that journal on May 23 and June 6, 13, 20, 1918. Appendix vi embodies the gist of a paper read before the Elizabethan Literary Society on April 9, 1919.

M. A. B.

June 17, 1919.

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ERRATA.

- p. 83, l. 6. For "on nos. 152, 165" read "no. 179."
- p. 84, no. 165. Read | "every man | unto his | charge."
- p. 90, no. 200. Read "When ; thou."
- p. 113, l. 9 from bottom. For "172" read "171."
- p. 137, no. 74. The line should be scanned, with quadrisyllabic,
 Náy, no | tearing, | lady: I per|ceive you | know it.
- p. 169, l. 12. Scan, "Though ; peril to my | modesty."
- p. 188, l. 3. Delete hyphen after *sub*.
- p. 212, no. 33. Delete apostrophe before "Ile."
- p. 218, bottom. For "trochaic" read "monosyllabic."
- p. 321. The true arrangement at *Macb.* 4. 2. 54 is, I think,
 Every | one. ^ | Who must | hang them? Why the | honest | men.
- p. 322, bottom. Delete the line *A. and C.* 4. 15. 18.
- p. 443. Text: 2. 3. 16 ff. should be arranged thus:
Sooth. Caesar's. Therefore, O Antony, stay not by
 His side: thy daemon, that thy spirit which keeps thee,
 Is noble...
- Delete footnote on *v.* 17.
- p. 444. Text: 2. 5. 3 f. should read,
 Let it alone, let us to billiards: come,
 Charmian.
Char. My arm is sore, best play with Mardian.
- p. 458. Text: 3. 1. 34 ff. should be arranged as follows:
 We have jaded out of the field.
Sil. Where is he now?
Ven. He | purposeth ||
 To Athens; whither, with what haste the weight
 We must convey with us will permit, we will
 Appear before him. On, there! pass along.
- p. 509. Text: 5. 2. 63 f. should be arranged as follows, "Pro-
 culeius" beginning a new line (delete the footnote):
 Proculeius, what thou hast done, thy master Caesar
 Knows, and | he hath | sent for thee: | for the | queen,