Rewriting Shakespeare: Shakespeare’s early modern readers at work

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

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1 In the winter of 1663, John Ward, vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon, wrote the following entry in his diary "Remember to peruse Shakespears plays and bee versd in them that I may not bee ignorant in that matter." This entry is typical of a man constantly seeking self-improvement in many different fields of knowledge, one who made numerous notes about books to read and things to see. But Ward – like many of Shakespeare’s readers – was also someone who had a parallel interest in live theatre. In September 1662 he recorded in his diary having seen Ben Jonson’s *Alchemist* at the King’s Theatre in London.

2 It would be easy to multiply examples of how the stage history of texts is closely interwoven with the history of reading. In this way, the work of Julie Stone Peters in *Theatre of the Book* is exemplary in breaking down some of the barriers between the world of print and that of theatrical production.

3 Nevertheless, the vast amount of very useful work that has been done in performance studies and in the stage history of Shakespeare’s plays, has tended to obliterate the story of how early modern readers first became acquainted with Shakespeare’s text. It is a story that has been silenced because of the understandable aura of the stage. Yet one does not necessarily need to argue that Shakespeare wrote as a “literary dramatist,” or that he might have had print publication in mind for some of his plays, to realize that we may learn a great deal from the way Shakespeare’s printed text was annotated and transcribed by its early readers.
The reason why Shakespeare's text is still performed at all today is intimately tied to the book. With only one small part of a manuscript – that of the play *Thomas More* – potentially in the hand of Shakespeare, editors, but also actors and directors have only had the printed text of Shakespeare to go by. While Shakespeare may have written solely for the stage, his text was nonetheless configured and thus transformed since the sixteenth century by the print cycle which it underwent and which enabled it to survive. This was a cycle in which readers, publishers, as well as other interpreters of Shakespeare’s text played an important role.

Examining the work and practices of readers may help us understand how texts are born out of other texts and other readings. Indeed, in this article I will be looking at the important work of *renovation* of the printed text accomplished by early modern readers of Shakespeare's editions through their acts of writing. If there was such a thing as anthropology of reading, this form of criticism would look at how human beings interact with texts as material objects – objects which are equally caught up in time, doomed to decay, but which have a seemingly infinite potential for renewal. To use the words of perhaps one of the most perceptive of early modern readers – John Milton – “books are not absolutely dead things, but so contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are.” If material studies – which seem set to take over where New Historicism left off – wish to renew the critical field surely their primary focus must be the study of these interactions between humans and the physical but also symbolic objects they create.

One answer to the question of why Shakespeare has become so important to us today lies in the largely untold story of how, since the sixteenth century, thousands of living, breathing readers have used Shakespeare’s text to talk about themselves and to make sense of their lives. While the advent of Shakespeare as a major literary figure may have had to do with nationalistic or institutional agendas, it was also greatly helped on by the work of individuals.

The often non-linear, circuitous narrative of how in fashioning Shakespeare these individuals fashioned themselves needs to be recounted. Whether they inscribed the inside of books or whether they made manuscript books (commonplace books, miscellanies, diaries) out of printed editions, their task, to some extent, was never to reach completeness. But it was never synonymous with failure for all that. Individually and as a whole, the open-endedness of their venture meant that, however partial their efforts, their way of relating to texts continued to be informed by a genuine interest in past writings and by a strong desire to invent a future for them. In writing themselves thanks to Shakespeare, they rewrote Shakespeare and allowed others to write themselves through Shakespeare’s texts.

There are many ways of telling this story, but for reasons of space and consistency I wish to concentrate on two areas primarily. I want to look first at how the fashioning and monumentalization of Shakespeare by readers often coincided with their desire for self-exploration. This is where the history of reading and the study of life-writing intersect. Secondly, I wish to give some idea of how readers invented a future for the book through the traces they left inside printed books and in manuscript. This part will be concerned with both professional and amateur readers and will explore the dialectics of the critical apparatus, that is to say, how readerly and editorial practices exerted a mutual influence, how book production influenced book consumption and the reverse.
Let me begin then with self-exploration and the monumentalization of Shakespeare. Traditionally looked upon as desecrating for the work, graffiti in books often celebrate the work and the author of the inscriptions at the same time. It is frequent to find parts of the preliminary epistles in honour of Shakespeare copied out by readers in the opening pages of the folios. What can be regarded as penmanship exercises or pen trials can also be seen, as the case might be, as attempts at self-expression sparked by Shakespeare's work, or as confident assertions by extremely literate individuals of their mastery of the written medium in a rare book.

In some heavily inscribed early editions, readers seem to compete in their claims of ownership of the book and for their right to inscribe their names against Shakespeare's. This is very much the case of Folger Fo. 2 no. 32, in which a series of eighteenth-century readers have left traces. The names “William Shakespear” “Iames Wightwick” appear together and upside down in a bottom margin of *Cymbeline* (p. 414, ddd1v). In Folger Fo. 2 no. 49, page 38 of *Coriolanus* bears the inscription “Anne Clarke her hand and book the lord of heaven upon her” (dd1v). Other hands have been there too: “Patrick Coogan his hand” on a page of *King Lear* (p. 321; tt3r). Some even attempt to take over the physical but also symbolic space of the book with their self-affirmations. George St George covers the entire inside margin of a page of *Hamlet* with “George St george his book and god convert him I am your humble Servant to command” (p. 281; qq1r). On the closing page of *Anthony and Cleopatra* (p. 388, aaa6v), he writes “Georg[e] St georg[e] is a rouge [i.e. rogue] / and owns this booke. / Per me Scripta Georgius St. george / november the 25 – Anno domini – 1711.” Situating the self in time, this inscription is also a somewhat transgressive affirmation of status, which acquires more prestige because it is made in a rare book. The same page bears the inscription “george St george is a rouge [rogue]” in mirror writing, another outward sign of writerly prowess.

In the case of the Shakespeare folios, the books’ physical size combined with their prestige as cultural objects and as expensive commercial items can lead to extravagant expressions of the self. For instance, in Folger Fo.3 no.8, the blank page after *Twelfth Night* and facing the opening page of *The Winter's Tale* is entirely covered with the inscription “John Barnes His Book 1762” drawn in ink and with decorative dots (p. 275, Z6r) (figure 1).
Such inscriptions can be seen, I argue, as traces of the way culture operates as a cycle. Indeed, the Shakespeare folios in particular create their own sense of prestige through their format and the way their paratextual material has been configured. To write into such a book is for many early modern individuals a source of prestige and is in some regards empowering. But such writing – often self-consciously ostentatious – inevitably adds further prestige to the book and is a conscious or subconscious message to other potential readers. In a number of folios, individuals celebrate Shakespeare and simultaneously make a show of their own intellectual confidence gained by their ownership of the book. On the third flyleaf of Fo.1 no.45, “The incomparable Shakespear” and the dramatist’s last name are elegantly calligraphed across the page in an eighteenth-century hand (figure 2). Just under these inscriptions, the words “Knowledge & wisdom” appear. A reader again celebrates what she or he regards as the intellectually empowering value of Shakespeare’s works in Folger Fo. 3 No. 8. On a page of Romeo and Juliet (p. 664, Kkk5v) the word “Knowing” has been calligraphed and the almost Cartesian and partly existential phrase “Knowing so I am” appears on a page of Macbeth (p. 712, Ooo4v).
Many of the inscriptions are akin to drawings or illustrations and may, to some extent, be also regarded as artistic moments of self-expression. The study of illustrated and extra-illustrated editions of Shakespeare is a field unto itself that has recently received some noteworthy attention. Therefore, I will only be concerned with the less systematic and more personal instances of these attempts at illustration. As we have seen, there is a small step between writing and drawing in books. I do not wish to collapse these two activities but only to signal how they both contribute to the monumentalization of the book as much as they betray also a desire for self-expression through the book or Shakespeare's work. It is the case of the series of remarkable ink drawings in Folger Fo. 1 no. 48 which might be the work of one of its former owners, the late eighteenth-century painter John Cranch (1751-1821).

These are artistic responses to Shakespeare's works by a reader who was a professional painter. Drawings done by non-professional readers are interesting also, but on other counts – they are often small windows into individuals' imaginative worlds. They are the striking results of an encounter between the self and the book. In some cases, they may be a form of aesthetic response to a passage, as in Folger Fo.3 no. 20 where a face in profile has been drawn in pencil in a scene where the former Richard II meditates on his place in life from his prison cell: “I have been studying, how to compare / This Prison where I live: unto the World:” (ff4v).

Early editions of Shakespeare, like other books which have travelled through time, form an archive of human taste, but also record the presence of human beings who have been in contact with them. Among the traces of human presence and activity that the early editions of Shakespeare bear, I have found (in the three hundred copies that I have looked at) buttons, bookmarks, pins, but also traces of a compositor’s hair fallen on the page at
the stage of printing and later stains left by rusty scissors, keys, spectacles, coins and even round stains left by various receptacles containing different beverages including claret wine and a variety of burns probably caused by sparks coming from a hearth or from someone smoking with the book in their hand.

These are often regarded as peripheral or accidental and yet they remind us of the transformative processes which books undergo as they go through their life and come into contact with their users. As Juliet Fleming has cogently put it, “The book is a thing that differs from itself, at all the moments of its production, and at all the moments of its consumption.” Readers, as Bill Sherman has also reminded us, are “users” of books – they engage with them in a variety of ways and not always for their intellectual content.

This is where “book use” and life-writing sometimes become intertwined. The preliminaries of Fo. 1 no. 78 contain a number of juvenile ink drawings. The proximity of the signature “Elizabeth Okell her Book 1729” to the drawings suggests that she may have been at least one of their authors (figures 3 and 4). These may be adult primitive illustrations, but because of their subject, they are as likely to be the product of a child painting his or her most familiar universe – the house. These drawings are, in some ways, so many windows into a young person’s imagination. Captured on these pages are moments when a young person is trying to come to terms with the world around her, both her domestic surroundings (hence the drawing of the inside of the house) but also the place of her home within a larger universe (hence perhaps the outside view of the home in the second set of drawings).
Books work as transitional objects and in this way they are necessarily intimately tied to individuals’ lives. They are at once a space of transaction between the self and the world, a “not-me-possession,” to borrow a term from psychologist Donald Winnicott, but also objects of transaction and exchange between human beings.

Because Shakespearean early editions are rare books, their provenance is often important to many readers. Books are part of social networks and the social value of the book increases its symbolic and intellectual value. Such relations are often made explicit and public in the private but open space of the book. In Fo. 2 no. 17, a seventeenth-century hand has written on a page of Twelfth Night: “This Book which You Now Look Into was Given Me by Miss Molly Smithe and was the book of an Ancient family the name I bear most Lovingly” (pp. 258-59, Y3v-Y4r) (figure 5). Some owners also like to retrace the illustrious provenance of their book – adding other networks of power and prestige to the folios’ already impressive display of artistic and political influence.

Shakespeare’s early editions were thus at the heart of social, political and family exchanges. Some of their pages were also literally used to communicate with other
individuals. It is not rare to find trial letters, as in Folger Fo.1 no. 28, on the last page of *Merchant of Venice*: “Dear, sister I hope you Gaett whell too Epson and am sorry I Colld nott” (p. 184, Q2v).  

While Shakespeare’s early editions reveal their users’ social and family ties, they can also bring to light their readers’ sense of existence within time and space. In Fo. 2 no. 36, a “Mr Holland” has repeatedly inscribed the date “1671” in his book. On a page of 3 Henry VI, the same date is calligraphed in the top margin (p. 164, r2v), while a page of *King Lear* bears the inscription “Mr Holland is my name I say 1671” (p. 313, ss5r).

Walking in the footsteps of their predecessors, readers pursued these practices well beyond the early modern period. In Folger Fo.4 no.4, two nineteenth-century readers have tried to calculate the time span between the date of publication of the fourth folio (1685) and the time when they signed the book – 1852 for Felix Gouraud and 1884 for Manfred Gouraud (front flyleaf verso).

In certain cases, it is the text itself of Shakespeare’s works which sparks readers’ reactions to death and to the passing of time. At these moments, the book is used almost as a semi-private diary. In a 1640 edition of Shakespeare’s poems, one eighteenth-century reader has inscribed “Wm Burton Alderman ffor Welford Dyed” close to a line in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, “A flower that dies, when first it gins to bud.” In Folger Fo. 1 no. 78, someone has recorded “W. M. died July 12, 1894” next to Bassanio’s speech about Anthonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, which begins “The dearest friend to me, the kindest man” (p. 176, P4v). In the same volume, a reader has inscribed “mar 14 1886” with a bracket near the passage spoken by the Chief Justice in 2 Henry IV, which reads “To welcome the condition of the Time” (p. 97, gg6r). In *Richard III* one finds a note on the date when Britain declared war on Germany: “August 4th 1914 – war –” (p. 179) and on the recto of an end flyleaf of the same edition one can read: “nov 11th 1918 – armistice signed at 5 Am.”

Thus, Shakespeare’s early editions allowed several generations of readers and users of books to experiment with life-writing. Shakespeare’s printed text could be used as a personal record of public or private events, but also to record personal feelings. These could be apparently unrelated, as the romantic annotations made by a late eighteenth-century reader on a page of *King Lear* in Folger Fo.4 no. 12 (p. 92, Hhh4v): “My dear I love you” and “I do sware [sic] I love none but you.” Other annotations were more closely connected to Shakespeare’s text. For instance, on a damaged back flyleaf of a 1640 edition of Shakespeare’s *Poems* one can just about make out parts of a love letter, probably inspired by Shakespeare’s volume of love poetry. The eighteenth-century hand is possibly that of a female reader as the signature “Elizabeth Gyles her Boock” on the same page appears to indicate. “My Deeerest Iuell” seems to be the addressee and the letter mentions the desire to “write and loue more true” (Folger STC 22344 Copy 10).

Many of the individuals whose traces we have examined invented personal connections with Shakespeare’s text through their encounter with the material book. While national, critical, institutional and even political agendas may have gradually influenced them in their choices in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these readers nevertheless continued the never-ending task of renovation of Shakespeare’s text. Moreover, they were influential in shaping the future of Shakespeare in print through their transformations and personalisation of his early editions. As much as these editions had shaped their reading experience, readers often challenged these and the ensuing
editions and forced them to evolve through a variety of writing acts. In this second part, I wish to give some idea of how readerly and editorial practices exerted a mutual influence.

II

26 The experience of reading Shakespeare with an almost total absence of critical apparatus is very unfamiliar to us. Early readers of Shakespeare were thus forced in many cases to create reading aids for their own purposes. The most frequent reading aids found in those books are hand-written lists of *dramatis personae*. None of the early quartos had such lists and only 7 out of the 36 plays in the First Folio were supplied with them. Eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare, however, began supplying them systematically.

27 For readers it was often a case of trying – even in the fairly spacious folios – to find room in the remaining blanks to write down these lists. All the more so as readers began to want other types of texts in their editions. Some indeed, like the eighteenth-century annotator of Folger Fo.1 no. 71, perhaps influenced by the introductions of contemporary Shakespeare editions or perhaps by personal interest, copied various extracts of critical texts in the opening pages of their early editions. On the recto and verso of the second flyleaf of Fo. 1 no. 71 one finds for instance an extract of John Dryden’s *Of dramatick poesie* (1668) which concerns Shakespeare, as well as selected and summarized extracts of Gerard Langbaine’s *An account of the English dramatick poets* (1691), together with an extract of *The Tatler* focusing on the themes of *Othello* and of marital life.

28 Margins were also taken up by notes which readers created for themselves in the style of other books they had seen. In the course of the eighteenth century they copied notes lifted from the modern editions of Shakespeare into their early books. Eighteenth-century editors had created notes in order to satisfy early modern readers’ curiosity for Shakespeare’s text and these notes were in turn appropriated by readers. Yet this was very rarely a simple cut and paste process. On the contrary, readers copying editors’ notes often selected them, compared notes in different editions, rewrote them to meet their needs, thus creating manifold levels of understanding and interpretation.

29 This is the case of Folger Fo. 2 no. 24 where an eighteenth-century reader has added notes which he or she has selected from Thomas Hanmer’s 1750-51 popular duodecimo edition. The annotator does not proceed systematically but according to his/her needs. Finding possibly too few notes on *Macbeth* in Hanmer’s edition, the reader turns to Theobald’s 1750 edition. The notes in the two editions are compared in order to elucidate difficult passages in *Macbeth*. The reader even invents a dual system of footnoting in order to combine notes from the two editions – the Hanmer notes have an asterisk, the others repeat the numbers in Theobald’s edition.

30 When it comes to plays like *King Lear*, whose textual history is particularly complex, our reader is busy adding passages, cutting others and comparing the text of the Second Folio to that of modern editions. As a result, the margins of *King Lear* are cluttered with manuscript additions and he or she has even to resort to interleaving to be able to copy a whole scene taken from Hanmer’s edition thus creating a sort of parallel text (pp. 320-321).

31 Philological and editorial interests have thus a transformative effect on the text. But Shakespeare’s history plays also attracted the attention of readers who had historical interests, some of whom seemed determined to transform Shakespeare’s text to make it
comply with historical facts as they had read about them in the chronicles. Some of their
emendations appear outrageous to us, but they are nevertheless the traces of readers’
struggle for a method in their quest for textual accuracy. Thus, a reader of Folger Fo.2 no.
21 transforms a passage of Richard III in which the Duke of Clarence’s murderers seek to
dispose of his body (Act I, scene 4 in the folio). “Well, Ile goe hide the body in some hole”
is turned into “Well, Ile goe lay the body in his Bed,” with this explanatory note: “Sr. Rich
ard Baker in his chronicle says – He was laid in his bed to make the People believe that he
died of Discontent” (p. 182, sig. f. 5v).

While sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers of Shakespeare had more freedom in
the sense that they were not guided by a critical and editorial apparatus, they also
perhaps had less stimulus than eighteenth-century readers who not only had more
annotated editions at their disposal but could also be inspired by a large body of printed
anthologies of literary extracts of Shakespeare and of other writings.

The eighteenth-century man of letters Walter Harte (1709-1774) assembled a large
commonplace book of theatrical extracts, many of which were taken from Shakespeare’s
works (Folger MS M.a.47). The title of Harte’s commonplace book – Miscellanea Tragica.
Theatrical Index of Sentiments. & Descriptions – contains most certainly a reference to Pope’s
“Index of the Characters, Sentiments, Speeches and Descriptions in Shakespear,” which
Harte probably found in volume 8 of Pope’s 1728 duodecimo edition of Shakespeare. Close examination of Harte’s commonplace book reveals that while he copied a number of
Pope’s marked out passages and that he borrowed many of his own commonplace
headings from Pope’s printed index, he did not entirely let himself be guided by this
edition. Likewise, Folger MS W.a.271, a collection of manuscript verse containing
“Extracts from the Beauties of Shakespeare” gleaned from the 1780 edition of a popular
printed commonplace book of the same name displays a very personal selection of
Shakespearean commonplaces (pages 38 to 63).

Even John Benson’s 1640 commonplacled edition of Shakespeare’s Poems was transformed
by at least some of its readers. In one copy held by the Folger Library (STC 22344 Copy
2), a seventeenth-century annotator has crossed out some of the titles used by Benson
replacing them by others inspired by his or her interpretation of the text. For instance,
“False beleefe,” the title chosen by Benson for Shakespeare’s sonnet 138 (“When my Love
sweares that she is made of truth”) is replaced by an arguably more relevant title:
“Mutuall flatterie” (sig. B1v) (figure 6).
Likewise, printed commonplace books of literary extracts were sometimes suited to the needs and desires of their readers. While printed anthologies undeniably homogenized tastes, they could also have the opposite effect. A good example of this is the Folger’s copy of Joshua Poole’s *Parnassus* (published in 1677), a printed commonplace book of poetical extracts under subject headings, that is interleaved with some 195 folios (Folger MS M.a.16). The annotator’s Shakespeare additions consist of extracts from *Julius Caesar*. Interestingly, while Poole’s book was conceived as an aid to poetry writing, the extractor seems more concerned to turn his or her selected extracts of *Julius Caesar* towards less elevated, but equally important concerns, those of everyday life. Thus, a number of extracts are commonplace in a way that reveals that even a play like *Julius Caesar* could be made to illustrate more mundane concerns such as “Sickness. or Sick. v. Fever. Physic” (f. 57v) or “To keep from sleeping” (f. 62v). Steering away radically sometimes from Poole’s poetic agenda, the annotator also created entries on “2 Shite” (f. 57r) and “2 Vomit” (f. 126r) (figure 7).
These instances could be related to what one might call urges of anti-editorial rebellion, which some readers could have. A reader of Fo.3 no.22 commenting on a passage of *As You Like It* in a marginal gloss complained about a number of contemporary Shakespeare editors: "that compleat beetleheaded blockhead Warburton has pretended to understand it as a Description of Beauty & if I mistake not Theobald & his friends are all fools alike" (p. 199; sig. R4r).

But the reader’s rage also extended to those involved in the printing of the Third Folio. Indeed, the title of the edition is altered by the annotator to “A most detestable & most wretched Edition of Mr. William Shakespear’s Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies” (figure 8). Heminge’s and Condell’s promise that the works of Shakespeare are “offer’d to your view cured and perfect” is challenged by the reader who remarks “I wish this was true but the Number of Commentators & the various Editions since this Edition prove that this Edition is far from perfect or being cured as it is here called” (sig. a1v).
Yet editorial rage could lead to important editorial realisations also. By comparing their early editions to those of eighteenth-century editors, readers made some discoveries. The annotator of Fo.3 no.22 came almost to the realisation that there is no perfect original text and that, as a result of this, it is impossible to go back to that state of so-called completeness. Early editions represent states of a text that, as we know, remains in some regards unfinished and unstable. In a margin of *The Tempest* he notes significantly:

> Johnson, Capel, Rowe & the rest, if any more, of the Editors of our Author, what are ye about ye Blockheads, that you do not tell your Readers as you go along, of these real Imperfections in the Work & tell them that all that can be expected from a Publisher is to give to the World his genuine Words & Meaning, & not to amuse mankind by tell saying My Edition is a compleat Edition. When you ought to know that the Work itself is not a compleat Work. (p. 5, A3r)

Early editions of Shakespeare are places also where it was easier especially for modern readers to escape from the interpretative frameworks offered by the growing body of criticism which from the seventeenth century onwards sought to help them make sense of texts with little or no critical apparatus. While it could be argued that these interpretative frameworks helped readers develop their tastes and critical awareness, readers had always constructed representations of Shakespeare’s text in their early editions. In fact, this continues to happen now when contemporary readers do not read introductions or critical notes in modern editions of Shakespeare, but still engage with the texts. There are various ways of appropriating Shakespeare’s text and while some might strike more of a balance between honouring the specificities and history of the text and personal response, all responses whether naïve or sophisticated keep literature alive by building a future of interest for it.

While late twentieth-century criticism has typically tried to steer clear of emotion, privileging instead the disincarnated frameworks of interpretation of structuralism
poststructuralism, early modern readers remind us that emotional response to a work of art is an important mode of interpretation for many individuals – however naïve or inappropriate these responses might sometimes appear to us. Emotions are clearly a source of pleasure and a driving force for many readers. In Folger Fo. 1 no. 73, one reader has been touched by a scene in which Constance in *King John* is speaking to Pandulph and the Dolphin about her lost son Arthur and also by the scene when the same Arthur is confronted to his executioners. Both passages bear the inscription “very moving” in the margin (p. 12, sig. a6v and sig. b1r).

An eighteenth-century reader by the name of Mary Elmer has recorded her personal response to what she imagined were the emotions of the main characters in *Anthony and Cleopatra* in the margins of Folger Fo. 2 no. 57. “See what joy tis to heare of his wifes death,” she writes when Anthony speaks to Enobarbus of Fulvia’s death (p. 362, yy5v). On the next page, when Cleopatra declares “But let it be, I am quickly ill, and well, / So Anthony loves” (p. 363, yy6r), she writes: “Mary Elmer thi s loue is a strang[e] thing” (p. 363, yy6r).

At times emotional response is tinged with humour and a hint of criticism. In Folger Fo. 1 no. 73, after Braggart’s concluding lines in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (“The Words of Mercurie / Are harsh after the songs of Apollo”), someone has added “So is his that reads thee” (sig. M6v). Often the appreciative comments made on the plays are laconic and seem poised between emotional and aesthetic response.

Other comments bring out more specifically the qualities found by readers in the writing. Shakespeare’s sense of dramatic timing in *Measure for Measure* is remarked by one reader of Folger Fo. 3 no. 22: “how finely this brings on the Discovery of Claudio’s being yet living!” (p. 83, G6r). The same reader is equally impressed by an instance of chronography in *Hamlet* (“But look, the Morn in ruffet Mantle clad, / Walk s o’re the Dew of yon high Eastern hill) and notes “A Fine Picture here’s painting [sic]” (p. 731, Qqq3).

Reading and note taking are typically self-conscious and self-reflexive activities. In Folger Fo. 3 no. 22, one eighteenth-century reader left a comment suggesting the infinite pleasure which the repeated reading of a scene of *Timon of Athens* could bring: “Here Timon & Steward enter in conversation together. This is a very fine Scene, well worth reading over & over” (p. 673, Lll3r [Act I, sc. 1]). Some annotators also wish to indicate explicitly that the play has stood the test of reading. This is the case in Folger Fo. 3 no. 8 where on the last page of *The Merchant of Venice* one can read “An Excellent Play. An entertaining Play” and next to these comments “Probatum est,” that is, “it has been tried or proved,” an expression often appended to recipes or prescriptions in early modern times (p. 184, Q2v). Another manuscript note “legi per legi” indicates that the play has been proved worthy through reading and a further note (“Ego Croxal”) suggests that these comments were the work of poet and Church of England clergyman Samuel Croxall (1688/9 – 1752). “Probatus” occurs again in the margins of *As You Like It* (p. 207, S2r), but Croxall was not the only reader in the volume to have tried and tested the plays and to have left an evaluation of them. On the same concluding page of *As You Like It*, other readers have expressed their views: “a very admirable Play,” “An incomparable Comedy.”

Because they have travelled through time and have been passed on from hand to hand early editions of Shakespeare become places of intellectual and critical transaction and some pages operate as forums for readers to express and, to some extent, share their views. In the same volume, the concluding pages of *The Winter’s Tale* and *Hamlet* offer particularly apt examples of this process. *The Winter’s Tale* is considered alternatively by
its readers on its last page as “A wonderfull Pretty Play,” “A comical merry Play” and “A good play” (p. 303), while *Hamlet* is seen also on its concluding page as “An Admirable play,” “A delicat play,” “a fine Tragedy,” “An excellent tragedy,” “A Courageous Play,” “A dismal Tragedy” and “A Lamentable Play” (figure 9). Possibly again by Samuel Croxall, a quotation from Horace’s *Art of Poetry* (“–Decies repetita placebit”) indicates that though ten times repeated, *Hamlet* and no doubt the reading of *Hamlet* will continue to please.

Figure 9

This last example is a good instance of the important work of renovation accomplished since the sixteenth century by these often forgotten practitioners of Shakespeare’s text – Shakespeare’s early modern readers. While literature “continually reasserts its liberty by rewriting itself,” this rewriting can only happen if the textual cycle is kept alive.²⁶ A lot depends on how much individuals are and have been ready to invest in and engage with the text of Shakespeare. In the words of Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker “The text is the reason for the cycle of the book: its transmission depends on its ability to set off new cycles.”²⁷ In this sense, annotating, cutting and digesting a text can be as crucial as going to see it performed. Moreover, these activities are often accomplished before and during the rehearsal process of plays. Only when such types of engagement happen can there be a chance for Shakespeare’s text to be truly life transforming for individuals. However, in some paradoxical way, when the processes we have tried to highlight in this article become invisible again Shakespeare and the text of other classical writers achieve possibly their highest goal. This is when through the repeated work of generations new ideas are born, new experiences are generated and when these in turn are invested in new acts of writing.²⁸
NOTES

1. Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.a.292, f. 140r.
7. Jason Scott-Warren has called for such an anthropology to be developed: “Such an anthropology would aspire to reconstruct the place of the book in the changing textures of personal, social, and material life, showing how books found their place in the fashioning of individual identities, in the negotiation of relationships, and in encounters with the world of things” (“Reading Graffiti in the Early Modern Book,” Huntington Library Quarterly, 73 (3) 2010, p. 363-81, here p. 380).
10. Extra-illustration is the practice of adding images to books. Often cut out from other books, the illustrations were pasted or interleaved. The practice became quite popular among readers during the course of the eighteenth century.
12. Some pages bear also traces of paint. Someone (possibly John Cranch) has drawn a face at the opening of Act 2, scene 2 of Richard II, p. 30; sig. c3v. Opposite the opening page of Julius Caesar, there is a character dressed in a toga with another ghostlike figure next to him (sig. hh6v). On the opening page of Macbeth, one can also see a head drawn in ink in the middle of the printed text (p. 131; sig. ll8r).
15. The drawings appear on three pages of the preliminaries: near the Hugh Holland epistle, near the Leonard Digges epitaph and the page bearing “The Names of the Principall Actors in all these Playes.” In Folger Fo.2 no.49, a small house is also drawn in pencil on the opening page of Merchant of Venice (p. 163, O4r).
16. On Donald Winnicott’s “not-me possessions” and their relation to the reading process, see Antoine Compagnon, La Seconde main ou Le travail de la citation, Paris, Seuil, 1979, p. 20.
17. On a page of Julius Caesar one John Kent has seemingly written a trial address for a letter “To Sr Jaimes ked … Near Safforn Walddy [i.e. Saffron Walden?]” (Folger Fo.4 no. 12; p. 37, Ddd1r).
18. Folger STC 22344 Copy 10, sig. C1r.

20. These were The Tempest, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, 2 Henry IV, Measure for Measure, The Winter’s Tale, Timon of Athens, Othello. Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition of Shakespeare was the first to supply dranatis personae for all of the plays.

21. For manuscript footnoting in Macbeth, see Folger Fo.2 no. 24, p. 152, nn3v; p. 153, nn4r; p. 160, oo2v; p. 162, oo3v.


25. The inscription “I am Croxall St John’s” on the last page of Twelfth Night (p. 275, Z6r) appears to confirm the identity of the annotator. According to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Samuel Croxall was educated at Eton and went on to complete his studies at St John’s College, Cambridge.


ABSTRACTS

While Shakespeare may have written solely for the stage, his text has been configured and transformed since the sixteenth century by the print cycle, which enabled it to survive. This was a cycle in which readers, publishers, as well as other interpreters of Shakespeare’s text played an important role. In this article, I look at the important work of renovation of the printed text accomplished by early modern readers of Shakespeare’s editions. Whether they worked inside books or whether they made manuscript books (commonplace books, miscellanies, diaries) out of printed editions, their task, to some extent, was never to reach completeness. But it was never synonymous with failure for all that. Individually and as a whole, the open-endedness of their venture meant that, however partial their efforts, their way of relating to texts continued to be informed by a genuine interest in past writings and by a strong desire to invent a future for
them. In writing themselves thanks to Shakespeare, they rewrote Shakespeare and allowed others to write themselves through Shakespeare’s texts. In addressing these issues, I am using manuscript and printed material from the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC.

Même si Shakespeare a sans doute écrit principalement pour la scène, son texte fut conditionné et transformé par une succession d’éditions imprimées qui lui permirent de se perpétuer. Or, ces éditions doivent leur existence aux générations d’éditeurs, de lecteurs et d’autres interprètes du texte shakespearien. Cet article s’intéresse en effet aux pratiques des premiers lecteurs de Shakespeare, qui furent source de renouveau pour le texte imprimé. Qu’ils travaillent entre les couvertures des livres, ou qu’ils transforment les œuvres imprimées en manuscrits (livres de lieux communs, de mélanges, carnets), leurs actions étaient destinées à ne jamais s’accomplir totalement. Mais celles-ci ne furent pas pour autant synonymes d’échec. Tant sur le plan individuel que collectif, et malgré le caractère à jamais inachevé de leur projet, leur manière d’aborder les textes ne cessa pas de témoigner d’un authentique intérêt pour les écrits du passé et d’une volonté forte de leur forger un avenir. En annotant et en réécrivant le texte shakespearien, ils se réinventèrent et réinventèrent Shakespeare, tout permettant à d’autres de se réinventer à leur tour. Pour illustrer son propos, cet article s’appuie sur un certain nombre d’éditions imprimées et de manuscrits se trouvant à la Folger Shakespeare Library de Washington, D.C.

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Jean-Christophe Mayer is a Research Professor employed by the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). He is also a member of the Institute for Research on the Renaissance, the Neo-classical Age and the Enlightenment (IRCL) at Université Paul Valéry, Montpellier. He is the author of Shakespeare’s Hybrid Faith—History, Religion and the Stage (Palgrave, 2006). He has edited Breaking the Silence on the Succession: A Sourcebook of Manuscripts and Rare Texts (Montpellier UP, 2003) and has published an edition and translation of Henry Porter’s Two Angry Women of Abington (Pléiade, Gallimard, 2010). He has also edited several collections of essays, including most recently Representing France and the French in Early Modern English Drama (U of Delaware Press, 2008) and has just completed a monograph entitled Shakespeare et la postmodernité: Essais sur l’Auteur, le Religieux, l’Histoire et le Lecteur (Peter Lang, 2012). He is co-general editor of the journal Cahiers Élisabéthains and was Barbara Mowat - Andrew W. Mellon long-term fellow at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. (2010–11). He is currently researching a project entitled “Reading Shakespeare’s Early Modern Readers”. He is particularly interested in studying the marginalia left by readers in early editions of Shakespeare and in examining manuscript commonplace books, miscellanies and note books. He hopes to be able to produce a cultural history of reading Shakespeare from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.