Gabriel Egan

Myths and Enabling Fictions of 'Origin' in the Editing of Shakespeare

The debate in NTQ about editing Shakespeare has engaged with the practices embodied in recent scholarly projects from the Oxford *Complete Works* (1986) to the continuing 'Shakespearean Originals' series. The issues raised have been philosophical, concerning the nature of authorial subjectivity, and practical, concerning the interventions made by editors in manifestly corrupt or incomplete texts. Here, Gabriel Egan surveys the progress of the debate and responds in detail to Andrew Spong's defence in NTQ 45 of the principles embodied in the 'Shakespearean Originals' series. Rejecting Spong's claim that editorial interference cannot be justified and that early printed texts must be 'cordoned off', Egan argues the necessity of explained interference based on 'enabling fictions' of authorial intention. Since all textual transmission is necessarily mediation, he argues that scrupulous explication of interference is called for, and that this is lacking in the 'Shakespearean Originals' produced to date. Gabriel Egan is completing a PhD on Shakespearean original staging at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-on-Avon.

THE CONTINUING debate in *New Theatre Quarterly* about the editing of Shakespeare has reached a stage where a summary of the views previously expressed may be desirable before engaging with the latest contribution by Andrew Spong.[1] Brian Parker began the debate[2] with a criticism of the editorial procedures used by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor in *William Shakespeare: the Complete Works* (Oxford, 1986). Parker noted that modern technology, in particular cheap photolithography, photocopying machines, and computers, has brought to lone bibliographical scholars an embarrassment of textual riches unknown to their predecessors. The quantity of data available, and the means for processing it, produce a phenomenon familiar to sub-atomic physicists in which the particular means of examining the data have a strong influence on the results. In other words, you get what you look for.

The Oxford edition took as its object of interest the theatrical text as performed in Shakespeare's lifetime, and when editing the extant documents it was this that the editors sought to reconstruct for their readers. Editing towards this ideal led the Oxford editors to certain absurdities, since an early pre-theatrical draft text would not be given the same weight as a later post-theatrical text: hence *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to take one of Parker's examples, is dated 1595, but the Folio text, rather than the 1600 Quarto is used as the basis for their version. In a conclusion, the logic of which baffles this reader, Parker called for the return to the practice of conflating early printed texts in an effort to retain the stereoscopic effect whereby multiple early texts with minor differences give the reader a sense of the changes that occur between first authorial draft, final produced version, and, where applicable, later revision.

In a response to Parker's article, the general editor of the Oxford edition, Stanley Wells, began with a collection of small but significant factual errors in Parker's piece.[3] Concerning the substance of Parker's argument, Wells pointed out that editing makes theatricalization necessary since one's copy frequently has things that cannot be staged. The important thing, Wells argued, is how consistently one theatricalizes.

Wells noted that Parker's argument for conflation was in direct contradiction to the 'bricolage' model used by Parker to describe the effect of multiple unstable texts, since,

far from promoting an awareness of what has been excluded, the conflated edition prints a composite of a range of texts. Extending this point, Wells argued that once authorial revision is accepted there can really be no responsible conflation since one has no authority for deciding between two different readings if the dramatist first wrote and saw into production the first, and then later decided to remove it and substitute the second.

At this point in the debate a new strand was added by a contribution from Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey in which they compared the editorial principles enshrined in their 'Shakespearean Originals' series with those of the editors of the Oxford edition.[4] Holderness and Loughrey claimed that, for all Wells's rejection of the principle, the Oxford edition had used conflation of a particular kind. Although the Oxford editors sought to represent each play as it was first performed, and hence chose for their copy text in each case the earliest theatrical text extant, they also wished to represent the dramatist's habits of expression in preference to those of anyone else.

For this reason the Oxford editors based their accidentals (spelling, punctuation, capitalizing, italicizing, lineation, etc.) on those of another text if that could be shown to represent more faithfully the dramatist's practice. The theatrical text might instead be influenced by a scribe's or a prompt-holder's habits in these matters. According to Holderness and Loughrey, the modern-spelling version of the *Complete Works* was most guilty of inventing stage directions and conflating accidentals, but they also mocked the process of 'antiquing' in which modern English inventions were turned into authentically archaic early modern English for the original-spelling edition of the book.

For Holderness and Loughrey, the desire to recreate the manuscript upon which an extant printed text was based is just another manifestation of the privileging of handwritten text over printed text, originating in the neo-platonic notion of the 'veil of print'. Since we have only the print version to start from, the underlying manuscript is just an imaginary ideal which we extrapolate from the print version, and hence any attempt simultaneously to 'improve' the print version by reference to the imaginary original produces logical circularity. The policy of the 'Shakespearean Originals', Holderness and Loughrey announced, would thus be to confine conjectures to the apparatus and to reprint the early printed text 'as is'.

Alan Posener began his response to Holderness and Loughrey's piece in much the same way that Wells had begun his response to Parker's, by pointing to a myriad of small errors and misunderstandings.[5] In particular, Holderness and Loughrey's reliance upon a faulty translation of Platter's eye-witness account of a performance of *Julius Caesar*, and their failure to read 'shovel' in *Hamlet* Q1 as meaning 'shovelful', were scorned by Posener. Whereas Holderness and Loughrey emphasized the collective nature of Elizabethan dramatic production, Posener asserted the special role of the individual dramatist. It was, after all, Shakespeare individually, and not the theatrical collective, that Greene denounced as an 'upstart crow' and Meres praised as an English Plautus.

Holderness and Loughrey's detraction from Shakespeare was compared by Posener to the Baconian or Oxfordian position, but rather than desiring a more elitarian 'Shakespeare' they wanted a more egalitarian one. Holderness and Loughrey considered the reference to hypothetical foul papers as an underlying authority for printed texts to be 'idealism', but Posener argued that these hypothetical documents were what Marx would call 'concrete abstractions', which we can meaningfully employ in emendation.

As an example Posener used what appears to be a slip in Holderness and Loughrey's article where the phrase 'substitution . . . for' is used where the intended meaning seems to be 'substitution . . . by', and showed that silent emendation is not only justifiable but also sometimes necessary to the production of meaning. Thus Posener distinguished between two different kinds of interference: emendation needed to restore sense, which the Oxford editors performed, and conflation

of different versions of a text, which they did not. Posener did not address Holderness and Loughrey's argument that the Oxford editors engaged in conflation by drawing their accidentals from the text closest to the author's hand, whilst preferring the text closest to first performance as their copy text.

It is to the latest contribution, Andrew Spong's 'Bad Habits, "Bad" Quartos, and the Myth of Origin in the Editing of Shakespeare', that I must respond in detail. Spong attempts to address some of Posener's criticisms of Holderness and Loughrey by using Marxist cultural theory to demonstrate that the positions taken up by contributors to the discussion are exactly those we should expect to obtain amongst editors of these two opposing political persuasions. Spong thus begins by placing the Oxford Shakespeare project and the New Cambridge Shakespeare series in the context of the 'new critical strategies' of the 1980s, and positions them as responses to the loss of dominance suffered by 'orthodox critical beliefs'.

By 'orthodox', Spong here means 'conservative' and he sees a complete victory in the 1980s for interpretation 'from class, gender, sexuality, and race-based perspectives'[6] which others, myself included, might wish instead to represent as an incomplete and ongoing struggle. In reaction to this left-wing success, 'the idealism which formerly had been reserved for the consideration of "Shakespeare's thought" has now retreated to "Shakespeare's text",'[7] and hence the conservative editorial practices of the Oxford and Cambridge editions.

This assertion can be most simply refuted by pointing out that Stanley Wells was hired by Oxford University Press to begin the project in 1977, and Philip Brockbank was hired by Cambridge University Press to commence their series in 1978. Thus these projects began before, and hence not in reaction to, the critical developments which Spong assigns to the 1980s, although he might still wish to argue for change during the gestation of the works if he can find the evidence.

Getting down to 'basics', as Spong, following Posener, puts it, the problem of Holderness and Loughrey's use of Platter's account receives an extraordinary treatment. Posener showed that Holderness and Loughrey had used in their article a rather inexpert translation of Platter's German text which rendered 'streüwine Dachhaus' as the meaningless 'strewn roof-house' rather than the correct 'house with a straw-thatched roof'. Spong uses this as an opportunity to discuss the 'myth of origins' which sends scholars on a wild goose chase 'tracing the origin itself back to *its* source',[8] and derives from an idealistic platonic belief in 'the recuperability of the authorial consciousness'.[9]

Spong plays along with this myth in order to expose it, and hence he admits that 'Holderness and Loughrey draw the quote from E. K. Chambers's *The Elizabethan Stage*'.[10] If this is true, then Holderness and Loughrey ought to have cited Chambers's book, and not Campbell and Quinn's *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare* to which they attribute the passage in their article.[11] Spong even toys with the idea of making sense of 'strewn roof-house' by offering 'a reed-strewn Lords' Room at the top of the theatre',[12] for which there is no evidence whatsoever and which a practical consideration of playhouse design rules out.

Having offered this imaginary lords' room, Spong sensibly retracts it and admits that Posener's translation – 'house with a straw (i.e., thatched) roof' – is correct. The error in Holderness and Loughrey's article is particularly important because they repeat it in the 'General Introduction' that prefaces the first three volumes in the 'Shakespearean Originals' series.[13] In subsequent volumes an attempt is made silently to 'improve' Chambers's translation, as we shall see.

Having drawn yet more attention to Holderness and Loughrey's careless use of sources, Spong compounds their error by suggesting that the fault lay not with Chambers but his printers:

> It would appear, however, that Chambers's original text features a typographical error, whereby a hyphen has been incorrectly positioned: what should have read 'strewn-roof house' became 'strewn roof-house', and this error has been often reproduced.[14]

Having silently skipped over Campbell and Quinn, to whom Holderness and Loughrey attribute their quotation, and alighted on Chambers, Spong posits something he calls 'Chambers's original text' which contains an error.

One can only wish Spong were more specific. The first printing of *The Elizabethan Stage* in 1923 had the hyphen in between 'roof' and 'house',[15] and all the subsequent reprintings maintained it. The archives of Oxford University Press indicate that in 1944 Chambers made corrections to the text prior to a reprinting, but he left the hyphen in question where it was. It appears that the author did not consider himself or his printers to have made the error that Spong detects.

Perhaps Spong is referring to a hypothetical error in Chambers's typescript from which the first edition was set. If so, this is no more available to us than Shakespeare's foul papers, and Spong's attempted emendation is rather remarkable since it implies that an error in a printed text can be so gross that one may reasonably infer an underlying text and a process of transmission which accounts for it. This is precisely the point that modern bibliographical scholars would attempt to persuade the 'Shakespearean Originals' editors to accept, although I doubt many would share Spong's conviction that his hypothetically misplaced hyphen is a clear-cut case.

Spong's attempt to efface Holderness and Loughrey's slip is unconvincing, but Posener was not entirely fair in writing that 'we can infer . . . that they are not all that good at German'.[16] What Holderness, Loughrey, and Spong appear to be ignorant of is the relatively well-known inadequacy of Chambers's translation of this passage, which led Ernest Schanzer to do the job properly.[17] It is to Schanzer's translation that careful scholars now resort.

Spong did not let Posener's correction rest. In order to prove that the errors which go around come around, he cited Howe's continuation of John Stow's *Annales of England,* in which is described the destruction of 'the play-house or Theater, called the Globe' by fire in 1613. Spong comments that 'Stow (or perhaps Howe) cannot decide whether to refer to the Globe as "the play-howse" or "Theater".' Note the odd transformation of 'play-house' into 'play-howse' for which Spong, the scourge of those who silently emend, might be held culpable.

But what of Spong's reading of Stow's use of the word 'or' as indicating indecision? Logically, of course, the word is simply being used in its very common sense of 'also known as', as for example one might refer to 'the development of the wireless or radio'. Stow's phrase 'play-house or Theatre' indicates that he knows both terms to be applicable, and many other commentators of the period used the terms interchangeably, as synonyms, within a single sentence.

Spong aims to show that 'the signifier "the Globe Theatre" which Posener refers to is particularly vulnerable' because the recycling of the timbers of the 1576 Theatre to make the 1599 Globe caused Stow's uncertainty. Thus the term 'the Globe Theatre' is radically unstable, Spong argues, because 'Theatre' means both 'playhouse' in general and the particular playhouse which was the '1576 Theatre'. Worse still, Posener risked grave ambiguity by asserting that 'streüwine Dachhaus' meant 'a house with a straw (i.e., thatched) roof, as was the Globe Theatre', because the Globe was rebuilt after the fire with a tiled roof. Hence 'it is very difficult for the critic to avoid falling foul of the same difficulties that he believes himself to discern in others'.[18]

Spong seems to feel he has given as good as he got, but his argument is based on obfuscation. The builders of the 'Theatre' gave it that name because they knew it to be the classical word for 'playhouse', and the writer of the *Annales* knew this too. Posener's phrase, 'a house with a straw (i.e., thatched) roof, as was the Globe Theatre', is quite unambiguous as a translation of a text securely dated 1599, since there was only ever one Globe in existence at any one time, and in 1599 it had a straw roof.

Spong hopes to have shown us all 'falling foul of the same difficulties' because of our attachment to a 'myth of origins', and to

avoid this kind of error he advocates a new approach to textual reproduction:

> All that we can do is place a cordon around each version of each text, deliberately keeping the individual Quarto and Folio editions apart rather than attempting to unite them, a principle practically and theoretically instantiated in the 'Shakespearean Originals' series.[19]

If Spong believes this, then his conjectural emendation of Chambers must be rejected as impermissible, since the absence of any underlying texts for the extant print versions of this work must necessitate the placing of a cordon around them. Or perhaps he would 'confine all such editorial speculation to the critical apparatus'[20] of his edition of Chambers, as the editorial policy of the 'Shakespearean Originals' would require. It would be an unreadable edition.

The 'General Introduction' which prefaces each volume of the 'Shakespearean Originals' series has itself undergone silent revision by Holderness and Loughrey. In volumes published since 1995, the wording of Platter's account has been altered so that what was 'strewn roof-house' now reads 'thatched playhouse'.[21] Holderness and Loughrey still attribute their quotation to Campbell and Quinn's *Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare*, which contains no such phrase. Hence the error is enlarged, not reduced, since it now includes misquotation of source. Yet the 'General Introduction' is not separately dated in each volume, and its copyright date is still given as 1992, that of the earlier version.

This 'General Introduction' must qualify as an over-determined collaborative text, its limitations and errors being necessarily symptomatic of the cultural conditions under which it was produced. If they stick to their principles, Holderness and Loughrey cannot correct future impressions without falling into the delusion of 'the recuperability of the authorial consciousness', in this case their own. Once the slip concerning the Platter account was drawn to their intention, intellectual honesty would require that they merely footnote their earlier error.

It is to such absurdities that the fetishizing of particular print manifestations of text inevitably leads. If the editors were to abandon this fetish they might reasonably revise their 'General Introduction' and give the date of the revision. Their decision to silently alter their source, in effect conflating Chambers's text with their own translation of 'streüwine Dachhaus', is intellectually indefensible.

The 'myth of origin' is indeed a powerful one. It is typified for Spong by the recent statement of the MLA Committee on the Future of the Print Record that 'the future of humanistic study depends on the preservation of original material', since 'new forms cannot fully substitute for the actual physical objects in which those earlier texts were embodied at particular past times'.[22] Spong responds that 'it is frankly difficult to believe that this will always be the case, if indeed it still is', since information technology is rapidly providing new means of reproduction.[23]

Spong has failed to notice that information technology is only one aspect of scientific development, and future scholars are likely to have tools of which we cannot dream for testing the surviving printed versions. As fast as technology produces new means of reproduction it provides fresh reasons why the originals must be preserved. Scholars like Malone felt free to write on the documents they were studying because the only technology available to reproduce them was manual transcription, which would filter out their additions. Had Malone known that his marks would become familiar to scholars the world over, by means of photofacsimile, he undoubtedly would not have made them.

To affirm his mastery of information technology Spong offers three Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) which point to pages on the World Wide Web which have Shakespeare-related content. Within three weeks of publication of his article two of the three URLs were invalid, even when one conjecturally emends 'indxe.html' to 'index.html'. At least one of the URLs, 'http://ves101.uni-muenster', is manifestly incomplete since it lacks a top-level domain which would be either a country code (probably 'de', meaning

'Germany') or an international domain name (for example 'edu', meaning 'education') that takes the place of a country code. Spong may claim that his URLs have been corrupted by the printer, and I would be prepared to accept this explanation, but again the principle of over-determination would stand in the way of correction. One can only assume that Spong, as it was once joked of Derrida, is obliged on principle to make no marks on his proofs.

There is a further problem with his use of printed text to disseminate these URLs. Having commented that it is ironic that the MLA committee's statement about original materials 'was disseminated via electronic mail',[24] Spong displays an equally ironic lack of understanding of the Internet, and especially the World Wide Web. The print medium is not a good place to pass on URLs since it is in the nature of the Web that pages come and go, sites are reorganized and moved, and generally nothing stays the same for very long. A scholarly article, which in the case of *New Theatre Quarterly* might not appear until a year after it is written, is possibly the least appropriate place to disseminate URLs.

In an attack on the squeamishness about 'fiscal matters' shown by Chambers, Spong quotes his comment that the Shakespeare quartos were published by persons 'among whom shifting business relations seem to have existed, and some of whose proceedings, from a literary and probably also from a commercial point of view, were discreditable'.[25] Spong rejects such disdain for sharp practice and asserts that 'a play's use value was equivalent to its exchange value alone, for over and above everything else it was a commodity'.[26]

The danger of this apparently Marxist position is that it comes very close to a right-wing *laissez-faire* notion of use value. Plays are unlike other commodities such as coal and steel in that they embody human self-contemplation. Because they construct dramatic worlds which to some degree mirror and yet simultaneously stand apart from the world we perceive as our own, plays have a use value that exceeds their exchange value. Such forms of cultural production are the means by which the cultural-ideological superstructure exerts influence upon the economic structure from which it arises. Without this principle of reciprocity, Marxist cultural theory degenerates into a model of mere 'reflection' and 'determination'.

Spong sees the new critical strategies of the 1980s as having 'risen to occupy a position of dominance',[27] but I suggest that at best these strategies are still, to use another of Raymond Williams's terms, 'pre-emergent'. If anything the concern to account for extant texts and edit them with concern both for contemporary dramatic practice and the active intellectual labour of the dramatists shown by the Oxford edition is part of, rather than a reaction to, the shift towards materialism in the 1970s and 1980s.

The 'Shakespearean Originals' series removes the dramatist's ideals from the process and locates a spurious authority in the early printed texts themselves. This is a decidedly un-Marxist rejection of the recoverable active labour of the working dramatist, and amounts to a fetishizing of print. Stanley Wells stood firm against the intention of Oxford University Press to describe their edition as 'definitive' because he holds the conviction that all texts are actively mediated and historically situated, and hence such a label would be misleading. The 'Shakespearean Originals' series is in danger of representing itself as an unmediated reproduction, but its conflation, or ignorance, of press variants belies this self-flattery.

Spong's quotation of irrelevant passages from Marxist texts does not help either the advancement of the particular critical strategies which he supports, or the case for minimal editing of early printed texts. He begins with a quotation from Marx's 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', which he summarizes as 'indignation and denunciation are characteristic of this class of writing [i.e., criticism]'.[28] If the 'Shakespearean Originals' series is criticized for its fetishizing of early printed texts, this is only to be expected since Marx predicted it.

This does not take us very far, but Spong's citations of authority are not really intended to. As with his quotation of the *Annales* and the spurious claim of instability in the referent 'the Globe Theatre', Spong's quotations of Marxist texts throw up a smokescreen to give the impression that Posener's lucid and straightforward objections to Holderness and Loughrey's work were naive.

In the current period of rapid change in means of textual reproduction, there is a pressing need to update Marxist cultural theory, and, were he alive, a scholar such as Raymond Williams would no doubt be engaged upon it. Instead Spong offers a scatter-gun approach of quoting widely from irrelevant sacred scripture (especially the ever-prescient Lenin) as a defence against all charges. Under the guise of deconstructing a 'myth of origin' which, in this context at least, is non-existent, Spong attempts to refute all of Posener's accusations, from a simple, excusable, error of scholarly judgement (using Chambers rather than Schanzer), right through to the wholly unjustifiable shirking of difficult editorial work on early printed texts. The educational and scholarly value of the 'Shakespearean Originals' series of diplomatic reprints of early quartos is diminished by the self-misrepresentation of the project.

Notes

1. Andrew Spong, 'Bad Habits, "Bad" Quartos, and the Myth of Origin in the Editing of Shakespeare', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XII, No. 45 (1996), p. 65-70.
2. Brian Parker, 'Bower of Bliss: Deconflation in the Shakespeare Canon', *New Theatre Quarterly*, VI, No. 24 (1990), p. 357-61.
3. Stanley Wells, 'Theatricalizing Shakespeare's Text', *New Theatre Quarterly*, VII, No. 26 (1991), p. 184-6.
4. Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, 'Text and Stage: Shakespeare, Bibliography, and Performance Studies', *New Theatre Quarterly*, IX, No. 34 (1993), p. 179-91.
5. Alan Posener, '"Materialism", Dialectics, and Editing Shakespeare', *New Theatre Quarterly*, X, No. 39 (1994), p. 263-6.
6. Spong, p. 65.
7. Spong, p. 66.
8. Spong, p. 67.
9. Spong, p. 66.
10. Spong, p. 67.
11. Holderness and Loughrey, 'Text and Stage: Shakespeare, Bibliography, and Performance Studies', p. 190, note 6.
12. Spong, p. 67.
13. *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, ed. Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 6; *The Taming of a Shrew*, ed. Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 6; *Henry the fift*, ed. Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 6.
14. Spong, p. 67.
15. E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, four volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), II, p. 365.
16. Posener, p. 264.
17. Ernest Schanzer, 'Thomas Platter's Observations on the Elizabethan Stage', *Notes and Queries*, New Series, III (1956), p. 465-7.
18. Spong, p. 67-8.
19. Spong, p. 67.
20. Spong, p. 68.
21. For example *Anthonie, and Cleopatra*, ed. John Turner (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice-Hall, 1995), p. 6.
22. MLA Committee on the Future of the Print Record, quoted in Spong, p. 68.
23. Spong, p. 68.
24. Spong, p. 70, note 20.
25. Chambers, quoted in Spong, p. 69.
26. Spong, p. 69.
27. Spong, p. 65, 66.
28. Spong, p. 65.