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The Early Manuscript Reception of Shakespeare:

The Formation of Shakespearean Literary Taste

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What did early modern readers really think of Shakespeare's works? The short answer is that we shall never know for sure. The long answer, based not on theoretical or pedagogical guidebooks of the time, but on the empirical evidence gleaned from the study of manuscripts (commonplace books and miscellanies mainly) and annotated books, requires us to bear in mind that each reader's receptivity is unique and that aesthetic response in particular is multifaceted and can be occasionally bewildering from our perspective.

Readers' tastes were constructed over time and the notion of taste itself is always unstable and dependent on personal as well as external factors. During the early modern period, these factors could be the availability of print criticism and the development of a sphere for scholarly discussion in particular. There is also a basic question of scale. Compared to eighteenth-century readers, their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century forebears were necessarily more self-reliant. They had far fewer books at their disposal – not only Shakespearean editions, but also works of criticism and literary periodicals focused on the poet and dramatist. From a social point of view, and with a few remarkable exceptions, the business of reading Shakespeare remained logically the domain of an educated and relatively wealthy elite (lay or religious scholars, the upper middle class and the aristocracy). Furthermore, these readers were themselves a minority within the elite at the very outset of the period.

Asking what sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers thought about Shakespeare sounds like an anachronism or a question *mal posée*. Yet this is largely due to how, as scholars, we have frequently omitted to look close enough, in the right places, and with the adequate

methodology. In this essay, I argue that as early as the first part of the seventeenth century, readers were sensitive to well-constructed plots, that they were interested in characters, in the expression of emotions, and that they were able to formulate critical and aesthetic comments on Shakespeare's works.

Well before the classification and appreciation of plays according to neo-classical standards at the Restoration and during part of the Augustan age, and prior to the elevation of good literary taste as one of the foremost public virtues in Georgian Britain, some readers were making crucial critical statements during Shakespeare's lifetime, or in the decades immediately following his death. As suggested, this is all the more important to state as the first generation of Shakespearean readers was mostly self-sufficient. It also makes the study of their tastes both worthwhile and appealing.

Studying Works 'For Action' and Aesthetic Pleasure

The early modern appreciation of Shakespeare is still primarily associated with the tradition of studying works 'for action', that is, for the sake of collecting reusable extracts, which could be especially valuable to readers who were courtiers, scholars, politicians, or lawyers and who needed to master various types of rhetoric.¹ Yet I contend that the cult and practice of rhetoric was not incompatible with an interest in the stylistic and aesthetic qualities of Shakespeare's texts.

One of the earliest and lesser-known literary critical responses to Shakespeare's style can be found in William Scott's treatise, *The Model of Poesy*, which Gavin Alexander, in his

¹ For more on this tradition, see Jardine and Grafton, "'Studied for Action": How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy', pp. 30-78; Sherman, *Used Books*, p. 5; Orgel, *The Reader in the Book*, pp. 16-17.

recent edition of the treatise, has dated to the summer of 1599.² Born c. 1571 and deceased in or around 1617, Scott had read Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and his *Richard II* (1595). He was a law student at the Inner Temple when he wrote this treatise, a manuscript now in the British Library (Add. MS. 81083). Scott's *Model of Poesy* was dedicated to Sir Henry Lee and was no doubt partly an attempt to demonstrate his talents and seek future employment or patronage as well.

The title of the treatise recalls Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (1595), but while Sidney viewed popular theatre generally as too low for his standards, Scott judged that both of Shakespeare's works were 'well-penned' (pp. 45 and 53). Much of the treatise has to do with appropriateness of style and rhetoric, but it is not devoid of literary judgement for all that. Thus, it is not surprising to find *The Rape of Lucrece* commended for its fitting *imitatio*: 'it is as well showed in drawing the true picture of Lucretia, if it be truly drawn, as in imitating the conceit of her virtue and passion' (p. 12). *Lucrece* is mentioned again as a graceful instance of the heroic together with the *Mirror for Magistrates*, *Rosamond*, and *Peter's Denial* (p. 20). Further on in the treatise, in a passage dealing with the superabundance and excess of conceits and of *copia* in general, one passage of Shakespeare's narrative poem does not fare so well. Scott quotes the line 'The endless date of never-ending woe', describing it as 'a very idle, stuffed verse in that very well-penned poem of Lucrece her rape' (p. 53).

Scott, as we have pointed out, is mostly focused on poetry and rhetoric, but voices his opinions on what he finds aesthetically appropriate. He is also concerned by reception. One finds him quoting Shakespeare's *Richard II* to illustrate a point about the power of amplification. He cites John of Gaunt's speech in 1.3.227-32,

Shorten my days thou canst with sullen sorrow,

² Scott, *The Model of Poesy*, p. xxviii. All references will be to this modern spelling edition and will be given in the text.

And pluck nights from me, but not lend a morrow;
 Thou canst help time to furrow me with age,
 But stop no wrinkle in his pilgrimage;
 Thy word is current with him for my death,
 But dead, thy kingdom cannot buy my breath. (p. 66)

For Scott, amplification is a means of impression on ‘the mind of the reader’: ‘Sometime our amplification is by heaping our words and, as it were, piling one phrase upon another of the same sense to double and redouble our blows that, by varying and reiterating, may work into the mind of the reader’ (ibid.). For this early modern reader, what is memorable and valuable in Shakespeare (and other authors) is what is composed in a style that is easy to memorize and that *mesmerises*. The rest can or should be discarded and forgotten.

Incidentally, it is obvious that Scott sees Shakespeare’s *Richard II* with the eyes of a reader and not those of a playgoer. In passing, one realises that he turns Shakespeare into a *literary* author—one, for him, who wrote for ‘the mind of the reader’.

A Taste for Good Plots

Nevertheless, even the most literary-minded readers could be concerned by the quality of the plots of Shakespeare’s plays. Such concerns emerged in fact decades before neo-classical critical discourses on dramatic unities and so-called adequate plotting. The annotations contained in a First Folio currently held by the University of Meisei in Japan (MR774) and dating back to 1620–1630 are a case in point. The inscriber – possibly a Scot by the name of William Johnstoune – is pleased by the way the plot is unfolding in two of Shakespeare’s comedies: he records in the margin ‘Conceiued feares and losses happilie remoued Intricassies cleered and Ioyfullie ended’ for *The Merchant of Venice*, or ‘good epilogue’ for

As You Like It (TLN 2760-2796, and Finis).³ Conversely, the plot of Shakespeare's sometimes grotesquely bloody tragedy of *Titus Andronicus* is, after a while, too much to bear and loses its credibility or dramatic truthfulness for the annotator: 'More tragicall deuices and executions nor is credible' is Johnston's response (TLN 1238-1364).

A good story, one that could speak to an audience, as well as to readers, was what performance-oriented readers of Shakespeare commended. Church of England clergyman Abraham Wright (1611–1690) is famed for the notes he took on several plays around 1640–1650 and for his attention to plots.⁴ In a manuscript now preserved by the British Library, he commends *Othello* for meeting both literary and dramatic high standards in the following terms: 'A very good play, both for lines and plot, but especially ye plot'.⁵ Wright himself had done some acting while at Oxford in the 1630s and he was the author of a play, *The Reformation*, which is now lost. He was a man who, in the words of Tiffany Stern, was 'also interested in how plays worked as performance texts for he is analysing them with an eye to the audience'.⁶

A Liking for Characters

³ All transcriptions of MR774 are taken from Yamada, ed., *The First Folio of Shakespeare*, who follows Charlton Hinman's 'Through Line Numbers' system (TLN). References will be given in the text. For the dating of the inscriptions, see Yamada, p. xix.

⁴ For the dating of this manuscript, see Estill, *Dramatic Extracts in Seventeenth-Century English Manuscripts*, pp. 84–85.

⁵ British Library MS. Add 22608, cited in Kirsch, 'A Caroline Commentary on the Drama', p. 257. Plots were in truth of paramount importance for theatre people and all performance-oriented readers. See Stern, *Documents of Performance*, pp. 1–35. Some readers also kept manuscript plot lists. See, for proof that this was a lasting practice, Folger Library MS. S.a.9, Plots of plays and romances summarized by John Howe Chedworth, 4th baron, ca. 1775.

⁶ Stern, *Documents of Performance*, p. 8.

Likewise, there is a small step between comments on an actor's part in a play and literary interest in a character. Attachment to and focus on some of Shakespeare's characters is not necessarily synonymous with a later age – the eighteenth century and some of its character-oriented criticism. Thus, Wright remarks disparagingly 'Hamlet is an indifferent part for a madman'.⁷ Far from offering a dry rhetorical interpretation of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Scott was attentive to how characters dealt with their emotions and how this was conveyed to the reader: 'Sometime the person shall be so plunged into the passion of sorrow', wrote Scott, that he will even forget his sorrow and seem to entertain his hardest fortune with dalliance and sport, as in the very well-penned tragedy of *Richard the Second* is expressed in the King and Queen whilst | They play the wantons with their woes (p. 45).

Like other annotators, Scott collapsed two different passages. In the play, Richard is talking to his cousin Aumerle. It is only in the next scene that the queen comes on stage to speak words that echo Richard's: 'What sport shall we devise here in this garden / To drive away the heavy thought of care?' (3.4.1–2). Coalescence and criss-crossing are frequent phenomena among annotators.

As for the annotator of the Meisei Folio (MR774) his marginalia reveal how closely engaged he was with Shakespeare's characters. There are some he obviously dislikes. If we take his notes on *Macbeth*, it is clear for him that Macbeth's wife is directly answerable for the crimes committed by her husband. His notes insist on Lady Macbeth's responsibility: 'but his hellish wife driues him to do it' (mm2, a [TLN 457-518]). Some characters stir strong

⁷ Kirsch, 'A Caroline Commentary on the Drama', p. 258.

emotions in Johnstoune.⁸ In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* he sides with Caesar's assassin, Brutus, rather than with one of the men who denounces the assassination, Anthony: 'Anthonie sends a fawning message to brutus' (*Julius Caesar*, kk6, b [TLN 1323-1388]) and 'Antonies subtle and seditious harangue to stirre the people to mutinie' (*Julius Caesar*, ll1v, a-b [TLN 1649-1780]). Perhaps this is because he felt that Brutus is really the character who is at the heart of *Julius Caesar*, despite the play's title.

He is particularly attracted to one of Shakespeare's strong, even violent, characters, Coriolanus, the roman military leader. Johnstoune's notes on the play prove that he was following and interpreting almost every emotional turn (bitterness, anger, etc.) in the character, who obviously fascinated him, as, for instance, this remark makes evident: 'Coriolanus Inflexible and Incapable of flattering' (*Coriolanus*, bb3v, c-d [TLN 2230-2293]). Often his marginalia show him trying to interpret the feelings and emotions of the characters, for instance in *Timon of Athens*, when he writes 'Timon moued with the honestie of his steward' (hh3v, b [TLN 2094-2157]).

While Johnstoune did make strong judgements on some of Shakespeare's characters, his inscriptions demonstrate that he could be aware of their complexity. The following two examples are illuminating for that matter, with their use of 'perplexitie' and 'perplexed': 'Confused perplexitie of othello Intending to l murder his wife vpon suspition' (*Othello*, vv4, b [TLN 3220-3278]) and 'perplexed separation of louers vpon necessitie' (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, x2, b [TLN 417-480]). Johnstoune projects feelings onto the folio's lines. He breathes life into Shakespeare's characters by lending them qualities. In some cases, nevertheless, he goes the opposite way. Indeed, he appears to separate the characters from the

⁸ In some ways, Johnstoune anticipates Margaret Cavendish's comment on the emotional powers of Shakespeare who 'Peirces the Souls of his Readers with such a True Sense and Feeling thereof, that it Forces Tears through their Eyes' (Letter 123, in *CCXI Sociable Letters*, p. 246).

play, as the repeated use of indefinite pronouns ('a' and 'one') in a number of extracts of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* indicates.⁹ Johnstoune transforms Shakespeare's characters into generic figures. This shows how – already at the beginning of the seventeenth century – Shakespeare could become 'extractable'. A similar tendency can be perceived in Charles I's copy of Shakespeare's Second Folio now in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. In the table of contents, the King added characters' names against the titles of some of Shakespeare's plays: 'Benedick and Beatrice' against *Much Ado About Nothing*; 'Rosalind' against *As You Like It*; 'Pyramus and Thisbe' against *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; 'Malvolio' against *Twelfth Night*.¹⁰ In fact, a few years later, during the Commonwealth – more than a century before Garrick's planned parade of characters for the Stratford-upon-Avon Shakespeare Jubilee in 1769¹¹ – some Shakespearean characters came to lead independent lives in the drolls (short dramatic pieces) directly inspired by the dramatist's characters: *The Bouncing Knight* (Falstaff), *The Grave-Makers* (Hamlet and the grave-diggers); *The Merry Conceited Humours of Bottom the Weaver* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).¹²

Rating Shakespeare Critically: No Consensus Among Early Readers

Shakespeare's early readers differed in their appreciation of his style, plot and characters. Many were appreciative, but no consensus on the value of his plays or poems emerged among them during the period. Readers' efforts to classify, distinguish, or rank the dramatist's works confirm this too. The endeavours represent early and mostly independent attempts to express preference and taste without the guidance of substantial printed literary criticism on

⁹ See, for instance, TLN 3237-3297, TLN 3298-3363, TLN 3430-3495, TLN 3496-3561, or TLN 3628-3693.

¹⁰ For details, see Birrell, *English Monarchs and their Books*, pp. 44–45.

¹¹ Stern, 'Shakespeare in Drama', pp. 141–57; esp. p. 147.

¹² On drolls, see, in particular, Randall, *Winter Fruit*, pp. 154–55; Wiseman, *Drama and Politics during the English Civil War*, p. 6 *et passim*.

Shakespeare. In this era, annotators wish to record their tastes for their personal use, or for the sake of other readers with whom they possibly shared their books, but not to concur with, emulate, or oppose some critical norm.

Famously, scholar and writer Gabriel Harvey (1552/3-1631) noted in his copy of Thomas Speght's folio edition of Chaucer published in 1598 that 'The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus, & Adonis: but his Lucrece, & his tragedie of Hamlet, prince of Denmarke, have it in them, to please the wiser sort'.¹³ The lines, written c. 1600, are part of notes in which he cites the literary tastes of several famous figures. Harvey's comments seem to be his own (and perhaps a reflection of what he observed) and represent an early attempt at looking at Shakespeare's reception generically and sociologically (the young as opposed to older and no doubt scholarly readers like himself). *Hamlet* was probably one of his personal favourites, as it also appears ('the Tragedie of Hamlet'), together with 'Richard 3' in marginalia listing his preferred fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works.¹⁴

We cannot take Harvey's tastes as completely representative of the period. One reader – possibly an early seventeenth-century clergyman – deemed some plays, including Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *King John*, as well as a few others, totally unfit for note taking. He wrote in his commonplace book: 'The tragedy of King John. & Richard the 3rd: Tamburlaine, vertumnus, ye 4 Prentises haue nought worthy excerpting'.¹⁵

Other types of readers built personal hierarchies of taste for their own use, or for the benefit of future readers. In a First Folio currently held by the Library of Congress, an early hand has left this note on the 'Finis' page of *Othello* (sig. vv6r): 'This is *the* best, if ere [ever]

¹³ Cited in Stern, *Gabriel Harvey, His Life, Marginalia and Library*, p. 127.

¹⁴ These lines are in Harvey's copy of Guicciardini's *Detti, et Fatti* (1571), see Stern, *Gabriel Harvey*, p. 128.

¹⁵ Bodleian MS. Eng. Misc. D. 28, cited in Coatalen, 'Shakespeare and other "Tragicall Discourses"', p. 137.

good play were writ | so maist thou profitt much by readinge it'.¹⁶ The address to an (imaginary?) reader emphasises the didactic or moral virtues of the play in a fashion that is close to Harvey's humanist type of reading. Yet reading for profit rather than leisure was not what everyone was after, even in an age that outwardly valued poetry over theatre and tragedy over comedy.¹⁷ What is striking is a growing tendency on readers' part to rate and compare Shakespeare's works. The trend would develop later with the help of editors and *literati*, as Shakespeare's corpus became increasingly remote and thus less easy to penetrate and appreciate. In a First Folio that once belonged to the Cary family in the first half of the seventeenth century, three comedies are rated: 'Pretty well' (sig. B4r) for *The Tempest*; 'very good, light' (sig. E6v) for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, but 'starke naught' (sig. D1v) for *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.¹⁸ Clearly, those who were looking for light reading in Shakespeare's comedies could be disappointed. But so could those who focused on the more serious and allegedly more edifying tragedies. Abraham Wright compared two of them—*Othello* and *Hamlet*—concluding, largely against the judgement of centuries to come, that *Hamlet* was 'But an indifferent play, the lines but meane: and in nothing like Othello'. Wright did enjoy the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* ('a good scene'), but found it 'betterd' in Thomas Randolph's *The Jealous Lovers* (1632).¹⁹ New work was overshadowing Shakespeare's in the decades after his death. Around the time when Wright was taking his notes, William Cartwright talked of Shakespeare's 'Old fashion'd wit'.²⁰

¹⁶ PR2751 .A1 1623 Batchelder Coll: fol.

¹⁷ Kastan, "'A rarity most beloved": Shakespeare and the Idea of Tragedy', p. 4.

¹⁸ Glasgow University Library, shelfmark: Sp Coll BD8-b.1. For a possible dating of the annotations to the 1630s, see Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio*, pp. 128–29.

¹⁹ Cited in Kirsch, 'A Caroline Commentary on the Drama', pp. 257–58.

²⁰ Cartwright, 'Upon the report of the printing of the Dramaticall Poems of Master *John Fletcher*, collected before, and now set forth in one Volume', sig. d2v.

Significantly, Wright had highlighted an entire scene, not so much because he was intending to commonplace it in the traditional sense, but to mark a moment of particular interest or beauty. As we have shown, the critical dissecting of the dramatist's works began before the Restoration and the Augustan age, as soon as readers wished to get 'the best' out of Shakespeare's already famed, but largely miscellaneous collections of works. Therefore, it is no wonder to find scenes in the playwright's popular play of *1 Henry IV* marked out as best: with a capital 'B' (sig. d6r) for a scene in Act 1, scene 1 with Hal, Falstaff and Poins and with 'Best' (sig. f3r) for the short scene 2 in Act 4 with Falstaff, Bardolph, Hal and Westmorland in a Second Folio (Folger Fo.2 No.38). Contrarily, Act 2, scene 1, which begins with a possibly dispensable dialogue between two Carriers, is one that is rated as 'Worst' (sig. e2r) in the same volume.

In a period when criticism was not, as it is now, associated with *literary* criticism and when the term 'literature' did not refer to works of imagination only,²¹ the quest for expressions of literary taste, or for traces of aesthetic and critical comments might appear vain on the face of it. Yet, as we hope to have shown, readers did air their views about Shakespeare and some did so extensively. No further and better proof can be furnished than by what is no doubt the most thoroughly annotated First Folio in the world by a reader in the first few decades of the seventeenth century, Meisei University's MR774, which we have already mentioned.

Personal Aesthetic Commenting

Frequently dismissed as merely repetitive of Shakespeare's text, the notes reveal that this early modern reader did try to come to terms with the aesthetics of some of Shakespeare's plays. For him, the gist of Jaques's famous speech (2.7.139-43) is that 'The world is the stage

²¹ Jarvis, 'Criticism, taste, aesthetics', p. 24.

of mens changeable fortunes' and that 'many parts [are] played by one man' (TLN 1097-1159). In *The Winter's Tale*, in the scene where the statue of Hermione comes to life, the annotator is well aware that Shakespeare is theatrically playing with fire. Indeed, according to him, what the characters are witnessing are 'Things so Incredible as may make the beholders to beleue they are done by witchcraft' (TLN 3254-3319). Nonetheless, it is probably the marginalia in *Henry V* that show him working hard to understand what artistic deal Shakespeare is trying to strike with his audience. Just before the Prologue, he writes this perceptive note in short hand: 'The auditours Imagination must supplie the strangenesse of Incredible representations of the stage' (TLN 19-36 and 61-85). Confronted to the Chorus in Act 3 (which begins with 'Thus with imagined wing our swift scene flies / In motion of less celerity / Than that of thought...'), he appears less sure of himself. Still earnestly groping for meaning, he writes tentatively, 'Imagination must conceiue the suddane changes and actions of the stage' (TLN 1007-1066).

Of the thirty-six plays in the First Folio those he annotated most were Shakespeare's twelve tragedies.²² Thus, one might wonder if the inscriber had any idea of tragedy as a literary genre. It seems that he did. His reading of Hamlet's famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is that it is really a 'question whether we ought to ouercome our selues and our passions by extreame patience or die seeking desperat reuenge' (Oo5, a [TLN 1651-1716]). In the text of Hamlet, the question is whether we ought to live or escape in death. But the inscriber introduces 'revenge' here, which is a misreading of the passage, but actually shows what he, as a reader, was expecting, as Stephen Orgel has pointed out.²³ He held the understandable view that a tragedy was supposed to be about vengeance.

²² For details, see Yamada, ed., *The First Folio of Shakespeare*, p. xxviii.

²³ Orgel, *The Reader in the Book*, p. 55.

His most annotated play was *Timon of Athens*. Although it may not appear to us as one of Shakespeare's darker tragedies, his marginalia reveal that he was sensitive to the pessimistic and tragic vision of mankind projected by it. He repeatedly focuses on the subject in his notes: 'vniuersall corruption of man' (hh2, a [TLN 1636-1699]).²⁴ In the sombre and tormented tragedy of *King Lear*, the annotator reacts to Kent's comments on miracles. Providence certainly does not seem to be at work in the play and the inscriber is quick to pick up on that: 'No thing almost sies miracles bot miserie' (rr1, a [TLN 1234-1295]). Why did the annotator of MR774 concentrate so much on the tragedies? Perhaps because he was personally touched, intrigued and stimulated by them, as the aesthetic comments he makes on the plays ostensibly indicate. Revealingly, a term commonly found in his marginalia is the adjective 'strange'. Shakespeare's tragedies are strange, puzzling, disconcerting worlds, posing unsolvable questions since they are about the great issues of human life. So what the annotator might have got out of his reading of these twelve plays is a deep sense of the infinite complexity of the human condition. Or, to put it in Johnstoune's own words, 'Infinit questions of the circumstance of strange chances' (*Cymbeline*, bbb5v,b [TLN 3694-3759]).

Conclusion: Altering our View of Shakespeare's Early Appreciation in Manuscript

Shakespearean appreciation – at least in its manuscript form (that is, in those traces which have come down to us, despite the continent of documents destroyed by time and the likely extensive amount of annotated works yet to be discovered) — was naturally influenced by one of the only methods of textual interpretation available at the time. Widely taught in schools, and by the handful of academic institutions that existed at the time, the humanist tradition insisted on using texts, especially classical authors, to communicate or serve the

²⁴ See also sigs. hh2v, b [TLN 1832-1897] and hh3, a [TLN 1898-1963].

needs of one's profession. Nonetheless, it would be extremely caricatural to reduce humanism to a pragmatic method of extraction. Other aspects in Renaissance humanism, which encouraged aesthetic pleasure and appreciation, as well as readers' curiosity about works in the vernacular, even those at the lower end of the spectrum of literary genres (plays and poems penned by men like Shakespeare, who were not entirely part of literary and university coterie), gradually changed the picture and allow us today to offer, as we have done, a short chapter on the reasons for reading and annotating Shakespeare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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