

## Shakespeare and the Past, by Gabriel Egan

In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Daniel Dennett wrote that ". . . we today--every one of us--can easily understand many ideas that were simply unthinkable by the geniuses in our grandparents' generation!" (Dennett 1995, 377). Examples from science abound. The descriptions of atomic structure taught to schoolchildren today are the cutting-edge scientific theories that Ernest Rutherford and Niels Bohr advanced less than 100 years ago, during which time they have passed from pure research to elementary education. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel imagined such a laying-down of layers of knowledge as a sedimentary process essential to collective intellectual development. The process, however, is markedly absent in cultural studies generally and Shakespeare studies in particular, which seem instead frequently to return to first principles, as though following T. S. Eliot's injunction in his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (Eliot 1951, 126-40) that, since "About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right", it is better that ". . . we should from time to time change our way of being wrong" (Eliot 1951, 126).

Yet something like Hegel's sedimentary model is implied in the poststructuralist conviction that we and our texts are utterly shaped by the knowledge/power system saturating everything and that, as Michel Foucault argued, we must do 'archaeological' work to recover the past culture which made the past minds which made the past works. The exhortation to 'always historicize' derives from the premise that the past is so utterly unlike the present, is so alien to our habits of mind, that we must resist the temptation to treat its artefacts as our own and must rather give them back the otherness that we strip away even in the act of thinking about them with our modern minds. Terence Hawkes described the task as "reinserting plays into the context of the circulating discourses from which 'English' has prised them", but Robin Headlam Wells is indeed entitled to wonder--as he does in his splendid essay "Locating texts in history" that quotes Hawkes saying this (Wells 1994, 324)--how the historical recovery work of traditional scholarship constitutes a prising plays out of their culture rather than, as we might expect, a reinsertion of them into that context.

The problem, I think, is in our whole approach to English literature, and especially Shakespeare. Before they can approach the detailed historical material, children reading English literature must have it somehow made relevant to them; one cannot start from the position that these artefacts are utterly alien since this makes them unteachable. But as children progress in their education, they learn more about the differences between the past and the present and they come to see the works as alien pieces that they, having acquired the skills to decode them, can possess intellectually despite their alienness. Paradoxically, the more one learns to understand the past the more one is inclined to see that past as different: we create the past's alienness in exactly the degree that we feel able to bridge it. The logical outcome of this principle is the recent complaint by M. J. Kidnie in *Shakespeare Quarterly* (2000) that modern editions of Shakespeare tidy and augment stage directions far beyond what is necessary, and her exhortation that readers should instead be confronted by the indeterminacy of the Shakespearian early printed texts. The point of doing this would be precisely to make them hard to read. To such absurdity Shakespeare studies has come because of its unresolved ambivalence towards the past.

Concerning the death of Lear, Kidnie distinguishes between the written text (that happens to have survived) and the "oral text", the words by which Shakespeare "conveyed to the actors his intentions concerning the moment of Lear's death"; this oral text "has been irrecoverably lost" according to Kidnie (Kidnie 2000, 459). Well, not necessarily so. The New Bibliography that dominated Shakespearian editorial theory and practice for most of the twentieth-century valued authorial intention, embodied in an authorial fair copy of a play, over the the socialized version of the play embodied in a playhouse manuscript incorporating revisions made during rehearsal and in collaboration with the performers, and over the performances of the socialized text. A playing company's intention to perform can be attested by, amongst other things, their collective legal battles, but like individual authorial intention there is little detail that can be added to the banal assertion that they intended to perform as a writer intends to write. But the outcome of these intentions, such as a performance, is in principle as recoverable as is a script for that performance. Were it not true that a performed action can be reconstructed with tolerable certainty using the witnesses to it, the criminal justice system would have no rational basis. (The glib assertion that this system has no rational basis is seldom made by those who, being victims of crime, have relied on its imperfect operations for redress.)

There is always the possibility of appeal, because new witnesses turn up. In the early 1980s Herbert Berry found an eyewitness account by Nathaniel Tomkyns of Heywood and Brome's *The Late Lancashire Witches* at the Globe in August 1634. The account occurs at the end of a letter Tomkyns sent to his acquaintance Sir Robert Phelips, and having written about important business affairs Tomkyns turned to "some meriment" which he thought Phelips might want to hear about. Tomkyns described how the play portrayed

. . . their nightly meetings in several places, their banqueting with all sorts of meat and drink conveyed unto them by their familiars upon the pulling of a cord, the walking of pails of milk by themselves and (as they say of children) alone, the transforming of men and women into the shapes of several creatures and especially of horses by putting an enchanted bridle into their mouths, their posting to and from places far distant in an incredible short time, the cutting off a witch (= gentlewoman's) hand in the form of a cat by a soldier turned miller, known to her husband by a ring thereon (the only tragical part of the story), the representing of wrong and putative fathers in the shape of mean persons to gentlemen by way of derision, the tying of a knot at a marriage (after the French manner) to cease masculine ability, and the conveying away of the good cheer and bringing in a mock feast of bones and stones instead thereof and the filling of pies with living birds and young cats etcetera (Brome & Heywood 2002, 179)

That eyewitness account is remarkably good evidence for what happened at the Globe performances of August 1634, and it was also a great help to me in editing the play as I emended and amplified the directions that come down to us from the first (and only authoritative) printing. I used Tomkyns' description of what he saw to avoid writing directions that would lead to reader to imagine (or a practitioner following my text to put on) things that did not happen in the first performances. I had an advantage that previous editors of the play lacked, and in that there is small, but real, incremental progress.

Kidnie's argument about editing rests of the "key distinction" between "dramatic text and performance" as "very different types of event", because ". . . whereas the script is regularly transformed into or enters performance, performance can in no way be seen as contained within the script" (Kidnie 2000, 464). This one-way thinking is, I suggest, quite mistaken on two fronts. Firstly, performance is *as much* contained within a script as the script is in the performance, either because one takes the strict ontological line that script and performance are utterly unlike and so are incommensurable, or because one takes the more reasonable line that there's *something like* the script in the performance and hence *something like* the performance latent in the script.

But more importantly, and secondly, Kidnie takes the view that adding stage directions to a script that lacks them is an act of 'fixing' meaning, for ". . . any alteration an editor may choose to make to the staging of the script will inevitably embed critical interpretation in the dramatic text" (Kidnie 2000, 467). Indeed, but there is no way to convey a text from the past to a modern reader *without* embedding critical interpretations at all levels of the artefact. Even the most faithful modern facsimile editions are printed on acid-free paper made from wood-pulp instead of the rag-based paper of Shakespeare's time, and that is an act of discrimination that places the meaning above the physical form even though we know that form and meaning are inextricable.

Furthermore, as any poststructuralist knows, words are not determinate and to add a written stage direction is not to limit meaning. Tomkyns's eyewitness account reports that one of the Lancashire witches' tricks was "the walking of pails of milk by themselves", but I believe that a Disneyesque trick was beyond the capacities of the King's men. So, I confined myself to turning my copy text's direction "The pail goes" into "The pail goes [towards Moll]" because she goes on to say "Here, I have it" (2.6.46-52). Kidnie would have none of this, for editors should ". . . resist modifying or supplementing extant stage directions altogether, asking readers to interact with the dramatic text as necessarily unfixed and unstable" (Kidnie 2000, 470). This would not cause great difficulty in *The Witches of Lancashire*, but would make an edition of Shakespeare's first version of *King Lear* awfully perplexing since, as is well known, the quarto of 1608 begins the Dover Cliff scene with the memorable direction "Enter Gloucester and Edmund" (Shakespeare 1608, 12r).

Reading that direction, I can't help imagining a performance that would enact this moment and speculating what Gloucester would do to his father up on that cliff. The play would presumably come to an early, unexpected end, rather like the much mythologized Edinburgh fringe performance of a Samuel Beckett play that ended rather abruptly, ten minutes in, with the entry of a character who cheerfully introduced himself with "Hello, I'm Godot".

Readerly bewilderment would be the result of respecting the *King Lear* first quarto's direction "Enter Gloucester with Edmund", and yet amazingly this would, according to Kidnie, be empowering:

Modernized editions of early modern drama somehow need to create for readers not a sense of comfortable familiarity but a sense of alienation, an awareness of the dramatic text's otherness, partly in relation to the different techniques of reading required by drama and fiction but also with regard to misleading modern assumptions about the conventions of theatrical performance. (Kidnie 2000, 472-73)

Kidnie believes that plays are inherently difficult, that it is a "false assumption that stage directions . . . can substitute for the specialist expertise required of readers" (Kidnie 2000, 466). I find this suggestion elitist and even slightly offensive, and indicative of much of what is wrong with professional Shakespeare studies.

I am pleased to be beside two Shakespeare scholars whose work I have found to be *un*-bewildering, *de*-alienating. To support her claim that "most published scripts" of modern plays now include detailed ancillary material on staging--that is, that they are unlike early modern plays--Kidnie refers to the printed text of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* that begins with a "preliminary 'Note on layout' explaining the print conventions by which she signals different types of overlapping dialogue" (Kidnie 2000, 466). We too easily assume that overlapping dialogue needs to be signalled in a special way, and even that it is a modern naturalistic feature that we should not expect to find in Shakespeare. Or, at least, if it happened in performance it must have been something that Shakespeare imparted by that 'oral text' of instructions to the actors that Kidnie insists is now lost. In fact, as Tiffany Stern has shown, it *did* happen in performance and we can recover how Shakespeare made his actors do it--without having to tell them anything orally--by looking carefully at the texts we have and thinking about the form in which they existed in the theatre, as rolls of actors' parts. If you have not read Tiffany's discoveries about this (Stern et al. 2001), I commend them to you as the sort of work by which the Shakespeare studies can be more like science and incrementally build on the past rather than standing still and forever finding new ways to be wrong.

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