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The Textual Condition of *King Lear* and Its Impact on Undergraduate Study of Shakespeare

by Daniel S. Skoglund

The textual conditions of Shakespeare's works are largely ignored at the undergraduate level. In fact, it was not until I began graduate study in English that I was made aware of the textual studies field altogether.^[1] The exclusion of textual studies from the Shakespeare classroom does students a grave disservice by providing them with an idealistic understanding of Shakespeare and his relation to his texts. D.F. McKenzie's textual theoretical perspective reminds us that:

A book is never simply a remarkable *object*. Like every other technology it is invariably the product of human agency in complex and highly volatile contexts which a responsible scholarship must seek to recover if we are to understand better the creation and communication of meaning as the defining characteristic of human societies (4).

Oftentimes, students are not made aware of the fact that modern editions of Shakespeare's works do not wholly represent what Shakespeare may have actually penned himself, nor do they even resemble the earliest printed versions of these works. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor note that:

All texts of Shakespeare are editions; all have been edited; and all have been mediated by agents other than the author. This complicating limitation applies as much to the earliest extant editions as to the most recent. We can only read Shakespeare's discourse through the filter of earlier readers, who have 'translated' —handed over, transmitted, transmuted—his texts to us (1).

A lesson focused in textual studies is an eye-opening and necessary experience for students of Shakespeare, and it is one that can be easily incorporated into a standard curriculum without designating extensive amounts of time to the issue. In particular, *Lear* is a great text to use in the undergraduate classroom as a way of demonstrating the impact that the textual condition of a work can have, particularly in terms of character development and performance.

King Lear is by no means a non-traditional text, but teaching the play's textual cruxes is an aspect of the work that is often glossed over, extremely interactive, informative, and most of all, teachable. The benefit of using *Lear* for a lesson such as this is that the instructor need not reach out into unfamiliar territory to develop a sound lesson, and given the play's popularity, the lesson is apt to have a more profound impact in the classroom than perhaps some of Shakespeare's other works. However, perhaps the most significant reason for utilizing *Lear* is that its textual condition is one of the most convoluted in the Shakespeare canon. With hundreds of lines added and removed from both the First Quarto (Q1) and First Folio (F1) printings of the work,

along with centuries of editorial attempts to assemble a “true” *Lear*, the play offers much to work with when assessing issues of textual instability.^[2]

Because the Shakespeare classroom often treats the bard as an insular literary figure whose biography and works are definite, students generally find the lesson somewhat shocking. Their presuppositions of Shakespeare and his canon are undermined entirely, and this one simple lesson can change their entire perspective of Shakespeare and how they read him thereafter. After such a lesson, students have often told me that they think more often about the textual states of Shakespeare’s works and consult textual notes more frequently in an attempt to understand how these changes may alter the meaning of these works. In addition, this type of lesson ties in well with themes that are regularly covered in the study of Shakespeare but also provides a different lens through which to examine issues of staging, genre, character analysis, plot development, and so forth.

There are several editions of the play that encourage the instructor to engage in teaching issues of textual instability, but oftentimes instructors neglect the issue. A conflated text of the play (such as *The Riverside Shakespeare*) will not suffice in terms of addressing textual issues and can serve to limit student exposure to these elements. Therefore, choosing a text to use in the classroom is one of the most important aspects of engaging in a lesson like this. There are several suitable editions that instructors can choose from. The instructor has the option of assigning an edition that includes a

parallel text of the play, such as *The Norton Shakespeare*, or an edition, such as the Pelican Edition of *Lear* that includes Q1 in the front and F1 in the back; both editions allow for different teaching strategies and make for different reading experiences. By assigning a parallel text that includes Q1 and F1 versions of the play, the instructor should know that this makes for a reading in which the reader is able to cross-reference and assess the impact of textual differences immediately but also continually interrupts reading. A parallel text also assists the untrained eye in spotting textual variants and is much easier to use than repeatedly referencing textual notes. By choosing a text that includes both the Q1 and F1 texts separately, the reader is able to engage in the experience of each text in full without interruption, but must then not only meticulously cross-reference the two texts but also locate textual variants on their own, something that can be relatively difficult to do for an inexperienced student, and it is for this reason that I choose to assign a parallel text. Instructors should also make use of the online facsimiles provided through the UVIC website. The website not only provides students with a visual of these early printings but also encourages students to engage with these variant texts by providing them with easy access to such rare documents.^[3] In either case, instructors should be aware of how they want students to engage with the text as well as how they intend to teach it and choosing the best text to meet the needs of the instructor and students is not something that should be overlooked.

Pedagogically speaking, the ideal way to structure a reading of *King Lear* with a textual focus is to begin by explaining the textual condition of the play to students before they read it; this allows the students to experience the work with a focus on “texts” as opposed to looking for things with which they may be more familiar, such as dramatic elements, scansion, tragic flaws, genre traits, etc. However, content and text should not be entirely divorced, and students should still be encouraged to look for these devices because they often provide the substance of the textual differences, but the instructor should emphasize the importance of engaging in a close reading of the texts themselves. It is important for the instructor to provide a historical background to situate the work in terms of a discussion hinging on textual studies. It is essential that the instructor point out to students that these plays were written and performed and that no documents, such as foul papers, survive from these textual acts. In addition, nothing (aside from a debated dramatic excerpt from a play entitled *Sir Thomas More*) survives in Shakespeare’s hand. Making sure students are aware of these things stresses the importance of approaching the text from this angle. Instead, we are dealing with a quarto text that is printed several years after the first performance of the play and a folio text that was printed several years after Shakespeare’s death, which gives us reason to place an extreme amount of scrutiny on these texts. The instructor should also educate students on the intricacies of early modern printing by pointing out that several people had a hand in producing the earliest forms of Shakespeare’s plays, and it

is likely that printers made mistakes during printing as well as editorial choices that were unauthorized by Shakespeare. To demonstrate this, I will often show students a picture of the printing process so that they can visualize just how many hands might have been involved in the printing of a text.

Since students are generally unfamiliar with reading a play through this lens, the instructor must demonstrate how to go about making meaningful discoveries between the two texts. What do we mean by “meaningful?” Students often begin the discussion by pointing out something relatively insipid, such as the fact that the prompt BASTARD prefaces Edmund’s lines in Q1 while he is labeled as EDMUND in F1. When I inquire of the student what they make of this, they may note that by listing Edmund as “BASTARD,” his identity is entirely consumed by his being a bastard, but by giving him a name, he better represents an individual, which might be cause for the reader to view his character as more self-assertive and pronounced. While this is a rather solid point, it is important to prompt the class to think about what these editorial changes mean in the larger context of how we read Shakespeare. Students are often surprised to find out that Edmund is also labeled “BASTARD” in Q2, a version that “reprints Q1 with no apparent access to independent manuscript authority,” which suggests that the changing of Edmund’s prompt title from “BASTARD” to “EDMUND” first occurs in the 1623 printing of F1 (Wells and Taylor 509).^[4] I ask students to assess the editorial choice, and they will usually point out that Shakespeare died before the printing of F1

and ask how we know which title Shakespeare intended to use for Edmund. At this, the instructor should be sure to note that we cannot be sure, nor can we be sure that this has any connection to performance as these were the printed texts of the play. No matter what the first example that the class offers is, the instructor must be sure to address that point and steer the lesson toward a discussion of textual instability to develop a solid foundation for the rest of the lesson. This will generally create a snowball effect in which students will continue to point out that with the vast amount of textual contrast, how can we be sure which lines are Shakespeare's and which lines are editorial decisions, and how might these changes affect our understanding of the work?

For *Lear*, I tend to focus on 5.3 as it has not only the greatest amount of textual variance but perhaps the most meaningful as well. While there are several sections that one could cover, (the Fool's prophecy, the mock trial, the map scene, as well as many others)^[5] I have 2 specific sections that I prefer to focus on because they lend themselves well to issues of character development and performance. The first of these examples is the assignment of the last 4 lines of the play to different characters:

(Q1)

ALBANY: The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest borne most; we that are young,
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (V.iii.358-361)

(F1)

EDGAR: The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest borne most; we that are young,
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (V.iii.358-361)^[6]

Notice that these lines are assigned to Albany in Q1. Given that they are the final lines of the play, it would make sense for Albany to receive them, as the last speech is generally assigned to the character with the highest social rank (Black 883). However, these lines are assigned to Edgar in F1, which breaks the aforementioned convention. This is one of the more tangible examples for students. The instructor should then ask students to assess how this difference is relevant. Students are generally quick to note that the assignment of these particular lines considerably changes not only the end of the play but the development of the two characters as well. Students will point out that if Edgar receives the lines (F1), they serve to represent his action of ascending to political power, which suggests that his character has matured considerably by the end of the play and can perhaps be viewed in a more respectable light. In this assignment, Edgar's character adheres to tragic conventions such individual discovery, soul searching, fate and fortune, public matters, and emotional involvement. However, if Edgar does not receive the lines (Q1), the development of his character simply plateaus. With Kent's refusal to "rule in this realm" and no clear signal from Edgar to accept the position, the ending of the play and fate of the realm are left unsettled, and the reader is left to wonder what to make of Edgar's experience because his discovery is extremely

limited, his fate is left unanswered, and public matters are left unresolved. Through these textual differences, these editions present two entirely different endings not only for Edgar's character, but for the state as well.

It can also be argued that these changes significantly affect the development of Albany's character too. The argument can be made that Albany is a far more prominent figure in the Q edition. Not only does he receive the last lines, but he also has an extended exchange with Gonorill earlier in the play (4.2) in which he severely chastises her, whereas in F1 he simply concedes to her verbal abuse. Some students have argued that these alterations change the development of Albany's character noting that his extended speech in 4.2 and assignment of the last lines are evidence for an argument in which Albany's character is developed as much stronger in Q1 and far weaker in F1. In addition, by having Albany receive the last lines, his character holds the highest rank at the conclusion of the play, which further contributes to the argument of Albany being presented as a more powerful figure in the Q1 version. Not only are our perceptions of certain characters changed, but it can also be maintained that the two versions present entirely different endings not only for the two characters, but also for the work itself.

The second example that I use is the differences between Lear's final lines in the play. This example lends itself well to issues of performance and also contributes to the discussion of Lear's supposed madness. Notice the differences between Q1 and F1 texts. Significant changes have been underlined:

(Q1)

LEAR: And my poor fool is hanged. No, no life.
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou, no breath at all? O, thou wilt come no more.
Never, never, never. Pray you:
Undo this button? Thank you sir. O, o, o, o.

EDGAR: He faints. My Lord? My Lord?

LEAR: Break heart, I prithee break.

EDGAR: Look up, my lord.

KENT: Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass. He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer. (V.iii.335-349)

(F1)

LEAR: And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life.
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou, no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more.
Never, never, never, never, never.
Pray you, undo this button? Thank you sir.
Do you see this? Look on her? Look her lips.
Look there, look there—
(*He dies.*)

EDGAR: He faints. My Lord? My Lord?

KENT: Break heart, I prithee break.

EDGAR: Look up, my lord.

KENT: Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass. He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer. (V.iii.337-349)

There are significant differences between Lear's final lines in both Q1 and F1. It is important to point out to students that not only are these deaths completely different as far as the text is concerned, but these variants also yield very different performances. Perhaps the most notable difference between the two is Lear's actual "last lines." Notice that in the Q, he ends with a sort of death groan "O, o, o, o," but one line later calls for his own heart to break "**LEAR:** Break heart, I prithee break." The Q edition is far more serpentine if read literally; what one may assume to be Lear's death in line 339 is, in actuality, not so, whereas in F1, a stage direction is provided to mark the exact point of Lear's death (Black 883). Students generally find the Q1 ending far less satisfying stating that it appears as though Lear should die after line 339 and not after line 341. When compared to the F1 version of the text, students note that it appears more reasonable for Kent to receive the lines "Break heart, I prithee break" if the reader assumes that Kent is asking for Lear's heart to break as an act of mercy for Lear, as opposed to Lear apparently coming back from the dead in Q1.

In addition, Lear's death in the folio is far more ocular in nature, with the addition of lines 342 and 343, in that Lear calls for those around him, as well as the audience, to continually *look* on Cordelia, as opposed to the Q1 version which draws the viewer's eye to Lear instead. This addition lends itself particularly well to issues of visual performance, and the instructor should be sure to ask students to assess how this change impacts this aspect of the play. For example, where does this reading focus the

audience's attention and how might it affect the mannerisms and gestures of the actor playing Lear? These lines also bring into question whether or not Cordelia actually lives, or if Lear is simply at his wits end. Students tend to note that these two versions can also have an impact on how one may view Lear's character in the end. With Lear's death in the Q, he appears to have recovered from his madness, at least partially, and is able to reflect on the brutality of the world around him before taking his last breath. Lear's death in F1 is far different in that, just before he dies, he second-guesses Cordelia's death, which forces the audience to, for a brief moment, second-guess it with him.

It is important to evolve and expand the scope of a lesson such as this. Instructors may want to encourage students to explore issues of textual instability even further in a writing assignment. Instructors and students should not limit themselves only to the issues found in *King Lear*, and this article should serve only as a template for teaching Shakespeare from a textual perspective. There are several textual cruxes throughout Shakespeare's canon that students and teachers can address. For example, *Hamlet* comes to us in three different textual states and presents several textual problems of its own. To expand the discussion further, one could examine the early forms of a play such as the Anonymous *The Taming of a Shrew* and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. In doing this, the discussion is expanded to include early forms of Shakespeare's plays by comparing the textual variants found between two entirely

different texts that are perhaps even written by different authors but might be considered to be different versions of the same work.^[7] Students should also be encouraged to recognize that the issues of textual impermanence are not limited to, say, the two texts of *Lear*. Just as there are two early printed texts of the play with substantially different language, each performance of the play is further contributing to the multiplicity of *Lear* texts as an amorphous and ever-changing work. Editors of Shakespeare continue to make editorial decisions about which text to draw from just as directors of *Lear* make editorial decisions about which version of the play to use in performance.

Teaching the textual condition of any Shakespeare work is no easy task, but it is an aspect of Shakespearian studies that is relatively easy to overlook. The instructor need not provide students with a textual history of each work they teach, but it is important that they do not ignore these issues altogether. By exposing students to these issues, even if it is limited, the instructor is helping students to develop a greater understanding of Shakespeare in relation to his plays, as well as helping them to better understand their own close readings of the work in varying textual contexts. With a lesson such as the one presented here, the instructor is able to introduce students to the field of textual studies, the importance of textual studies in Shakespeare, and how these textual variants can have an impact on matters such as character development and performance, as well as others. However, the impact of textual studies in Shakespeare

does not stop there, and it is up to the instructor and students to use strategies such as these to continue to uncover the textual wrinkles found in these works and leave no stone unturned.

Endnotes

[1] The pedagogical approach to this lesson was inspired and guided by Dr. Andrew Higl (Winona State University). I have since had the opportunity to teach and refine the lesson multiple times in both Dr. Higl's Early British Literature survey course (English 301) and Dr. Jane Carducci's (Winona State University) upper-level Shakespeare survey course (English 417).

[2] To better understand the overarching scholarly discussion related to the two-text problem of *Lear*, one should consult Taylor and Warren's work on the subject, who originally brought the debate to the attention of scholars. See Gary Taylor and Michael Warren. *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*. New York & London: Oxford UP, (1983). Print.

[3] There are many texts for instructors to choose from that encourage the reading of *Lear* from a textual standpoint. I have included citations for the ones I have mentioned here. See: Evans, Blakemore, et al., eds. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, (1997). Print.; Greenblatt, Stephen, et al, eds. *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on The Oxford Edition*. New York: Norton, (1997). Print.; Internet Shakespeare Editions, University of Victoria, (2012). <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/>> Web.; Orgel, Stephen ed. *King Lear: The 1608 Quarto and 1623 Folio Texts*. New York: Penguin, (2000). Print.

[4] The second quarto printing is dated 1608 but was actually printed in 1619 and uses Q1 as its copy-text. See: William Shakespeare. *His True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and His Three Daughters*. London: Nathaniel Butter, (1619). Print.; Wells, Stanley, and Gary Taylor. *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*. New York: Norton, 1997. Print.

[5] This list is by no means comprehensive, and instructors are encouraged to expand this list. I have used informal titles to give readers a general idea about the content and location of these sections. The aforementioned variants can be found in their respective scenes: "The Map Scene" (1.1), "The Fool's Prophecy" (3.2), "The Mock Trial" (3.6).

[6] Line numbers taken from UVIC online text editions. See: "King Lear (Folio 1, 1623)." Internet Shakespeare Editions, University of Victoria, (2012). <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Annex/Texts/Lr/F1/scene/5.3>>; "King Lear (Quarto 1, 1608)." Internet Shakespeare Editions, University of Victoria, (2012). <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Annex/Texts/Lr/Q1/scene/5.3>>

[7] For *The Taming of the Shrew* see: Gaines, Barry, and Margaret Maurer, ed. *The Three Shrew Plays*. Indianapolis: Hackett, (2010). Print. A wonderful text to use for an introduction to the textual cruxes of the Shrew plays and copies of the plays themselves. For *Hamlet* see: Kilman, Bernice, and Paul Bertram. *The Three-text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio*. New York: AMS, (2004). Print.

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