

Playing Editor

Inviting Students Behind the Text

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In their research, some scholars relish a more editorial, textually aware approach to Shakespeare: hitting the archives, ruthlessly tracking variants, pitting quarto and folio against each other, deploying bibliographic information to inform textual interpretation. Of course all Shakespearean scholars do this kind of work to some extent; rigorous analysis demands taking the medium of the message into account. But regardless of our methodology, many of us find a deep satisfaction in the smell of old books, the touch of old paper and leather bindings, the pleasure of reading early print on the page.

This sensory pleasure offers a valuable teaching opportunity. The appeal of material authenticity – crumbling paper, impressed letters, inscrutable marginalia – can appeal to our students, too, even if it is only digital and not physical. While we inevitably teach from neat and tidy modern editions of Shakespeare’s texts, this shouldn’t prevent students from also sharing in the exhilaration and delight of interacting with the less homogenized original sources, whether that is with variants at the bottom of the page or consulting facsimile images online or turning the pages of a First Folio. How can we invite students behind the edition, behind the curtain, to play expert and editor? What are some methods for incorporating more of the original sources into our teaching of Shakespeare? How can this be done, practically speaking, in classes where often

students have enough trouble with the language as it is? What are some simple pedagogical activities for teaching textual criticism through Shakespeare, and Shakespeare through textual criticism?

This piece explores some practical solutions to these questions. However, it also focuses on the motivations behind incorporating such textual criticism exercises in teaching: what can students gain by being invited behind the text to play editor? Shakespeare, standing as an authoritative, monolithic cultural figure for many new readers, provides the perfect chance to disrupt easy assumptions about literature with a foray into the dark, tactile, messy, and fascinating world of deciphering original documents and their contexts.

Not that teaching Shakespeare through textual criticism is a new idea – rather, in what follows I hope to reinforce the book-history based learning that already goes on in many classrooms and libraries, but also to promote textual criticism as an accessible mode of learning relevant to *any* reader of Shakespeare from high school and up. Among a myriad of influences and inspirations, perhaps my exploration here owes the most to Erick Kelemen’s excellent book, *Textual Editing and Criticism: An Introduction*. This work, in my view, should be the first stop for instructors seeking to expand their students’ perception of how texts work and where they come from.

Invite the Students behind the Text

Some of the following approaches may be possible using only the edition at hand, depending on the edition; or comparison with other printed editions; or consulting a print or digital facsimile of original folios or quartos. (Obviously if you have a nearby library with any early Shakespeare – or even later seventeenth-, eighteenth-, or nineteenth-century copies – a class visit to see and work with those resources is ideal.) Fortunately excellent online resources can now be easily accessed by both instructor and student for free. Some options are outlined at the bottom of this page.

Yet without using the computer at all, during class time students can work individually, in pairs, or small groups to compare two different editions of a play to find surprising differences, or compare a printout of a page from a quarto or folio to their copy. A brief introduction to early modern letterforms like the tall *s* will suffice to orient them to the unfamiliar look of early print on the page. The simplest types of exercises to teach Shakespeare through textual criticism might involve pointing out to students (or asking them to find) a single specific example of how

the editor of their edition has changed the base text: whether that is “corrected” punctuation, with the addition or deletion of a single comma; modernized spelling that flattens out punning early modern homonyms; or adaptations of formatting, like line breaks. How do seemingly small, innocent changes influence the meaning of the text? Can the original offer alternate interpretations from the edited version? How does a comparative close reading of the unedited passage and the edited passage produce divergent understandings of the text? Working from the original only, have groups produce an “edited” version of a short passage and justify their choices. The groups can compare their varying results. What does editing take from the text, and what is gained? What advantages and disadvantages can they identify in modernizing a text for the comfort of today’s readers? Are there “right” or “wrong” changes, or simply “better” or “worse”? Why?

The same questions can be asked of a further level of editing: where the editor has chosen to print a particular version of the play (Q1, Q2, First Folio, etc.) and perhaps includes variants from the other versions as part of the textual

Online Teaching Resources

The British Library’s *Shakespeare in Quarto* project
<http://special-1.bl.uk/treasures/SigDiscovery/ui/search.aspx>

The Shakespeare Quartos Archive
www.quartos.org

Bodleian Library, First Folio Facsimile Online
<http://firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>

apparatus of the edition, either at the bottom of the page or in an appendix. One of the most well-known examples of this kind of crux is from Othello's final speech where he refers to an "Indian" in the quarto and "Judean" in the first folio. What is at stake with these two different words? How can a micro-reading of this line be applied to a macro-reading of the entire play? (Of course plenty of secondary literature on this crux and other similar ones is available to the instructor and/or students.) Or, compare two or three alternate versions of a longer passage: for instance, Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy in its multiple forms. With students in small groups or pairs of "director" and "actor," can they describe how the different versions might inflect their performance of the speech, or of the entire Hamlet character? If they – and you – are brave, the class can feature a dramatic show-down of the performances of each of the versions, with the audience contributing their analysis of how the actors interpreted each version differently.

Another angle would be to consider the material context of a particular original version (ideally available in full online): how the physical condition, clues to its production, any inscription, marginalia, other evidence of reading, provenance, can reveal a history of a text otherwise lost in the standardized edition. This is also a valuable opportunity to teach some book history: how the printing press works, how paper was prepared, how books were put together, how they were sold and circulated. What physical clues suggest how this copy might have been produced, used or read? Did its mode of production influence how the text appears or

functions? Can we deduce what the text meant for its various readers over time? How might that inform our interpretation of the play? What is the text's untold story?

Why Invite Students Behind the Text?

At a minimum, playing editor helps students understand what is at stake in the complex ideas of authorship and the complex material history behind the plays. Yet if at first it seems like these kinds of editorial activities might open up more questions than provide answers, or perhaps produce some awkward, unresolved silences in class: that is the point. Teaching textual criticism is about busting open the text, about unraveling words under pressure, about positioning problems as gold nuggets to be mined rather than glossed over. Most importantly, teaching textual criticism is about *profoundly transforming students into critical readers and critical thinkers*. This transformation can be broken down into four aspects.

Healthy skepticism: i.e. undermining trust in editions, editors—and authority. What we so easily forget is that at some point we learned that healthy skepticism that transformed us from a student into a scholar – we learned to stop trusting the editor and his authority, to stop trusting the sterile edition, to question why and dive into the variants, and ultimately, get back to the original documents. Achieving this in our classrooms involves some work on our part: we have to identify viable ways into the textual cruxes, we have to design debates that motivate and do not overwhelm. But the pay-off can be transformative. No longer content to leave it to

someone else, the student who plays editor turns passive contentment to active questioning; passive reading to active reading; passive silence in class into active arguing and debate. We treat them like a grown-up scholar so they can become one.

- Who is the editor-God behind the curtain?
- What kind of power does this editor-God hold?
- What kind of decisions has the editor made for us, and how can we understand them enough to agree or disagree?
- What other textual riddles and puzzles lay dusty and unsolved?

In many ways these kinds of questions undermine trust in editors, and by extension undermine trust in academic authority – a thrilling step forward in independent, critical thinking for students (and for grown-up scholars, as we must remember this healthy skepticism every day in order to produce innovative thoughts).

Thus emerges a delicious paradox: when we invite the reader, the student, to occupy the editor’s position – a position of authority, like ours as instructor – we must vacate it first, or at least make room for the student. To empower the student we cede some power. As the teaching authority figure we too act as an editor of their learning experience and the classroom environment: presenting the reality we want, when and how we want it. But by demonstrating how sometimes these decisions can be arbitrary, and sometimes carefully deliberated, we engage the student in their own education.

Healthy optimism: i.e. building a feeling of critical community. These kinds of editorial activities enable students to feel that freedom and responsibility that comes with taking control of the text itself, directing the interplay between quartos and folio, witnessing the *mouvance* of the text before their very eyes. It’s a rush to be asked to make decisions like that. When we invite students behind the text to see and perform textual criticism, it is a vote of confidence in their readiness and ability to use their judgment to stake a position. In fact, however, readiness is irrelevant; practice before we are ready makes us ready. Breaking down trust in the published edition builds trust in ourselves as readers and thinkers. Healthy skepticism in others breeds healthy optimism in ourselves, an especially sacred kind of confidence for new learners of difficult material. When the student occupies that power position of making editorial decisions, then can they grow an understanding of the editor not as mysterious/tyrannical ‘Other’ but as fellow critic. By participating in the same common endeavor – reading and understanding an original textual source – we feel as if we are all in a special club. That is to say, in breaking down the complexities of editing into discrete, workable moments accessible to all, instructors have the opportunity to open radically this “special club” (of editors, but also of the entire academic pursuit, really). Textual criticism has the potential to build a feeling of critical community that engages students with respect and optimism. The trick, I think, is that all students are ready and able – that is, all students able to read Shakespeare have something to gain

from playing editor of Shakespeare, regardless of their ability.

Defamiliarizing the text and unsettling reading practices. Now, in my courses, the goal of classroom editorial exercises is not to produce some field-changing insight into the editing of *Hamlet* (though that would, obviously, be wonderful). Rather, I hope that playing editor gives the students opportunities for *seeing* differently than they have before. I mean both seeing the words on the page and seeing meaning in the text.

Kelemen, in his introduction to *Textual Editing and Criticism*, articulates this point eloquently:

Textual criticism sharpens a reader's awareness of errors and reorients a reader's attitude toward them so that they are no longer noise or blanks in the message (that can be corrected or, alternatively, ignored) but meaningful evidence about the history of the text and therefore perhaps about the meanings of the text. [...] The result is a defamiliarized text, out of which the reader can construct more complex meanings. (21)

I think of this effect as an “ah-ha” moment, like scales falling from their eyes, where suddenly the reader realizes that reading for variants, errors, changes, the tiniest differences, is like suddenly seeing the world in technicolor after years of reading in black and white. Some students never read the same way again. Details pop like 3-D, spelling and punctuation fizzles with meaning, the very shapes of letters jump off

the page. Perhaps they had never noticed the similarities between the lower-case *u* and *n* letter-forms until they consider that classic crux in *Othello* mentioned above: “Iudean” and “Indian”. With that single word, suddenly the layout of the typesetter's drawer gets tangled up with questions of race, religion, and post-colonial tension. In one moment, the reader's vision can be recalibrated to combine in one field of view a tighter focus on physical details *and* a broader scope of interpretive understanding.

Combining a relish for puzzles, clues, data, detective work with the love of reading. What view I would specifically like to counter here is that editing or editorial exercises are only for those of us with an eye for detail, a love of puzzles, and a perverse relish for lists of sigla and variants. Rather, that the act of playing editor can foster this eye for detail and nurture a love for puzzles. In Kelemen's words, “Textual criticism does not require a special sensitivity to the text as a precursor so much as it teaches that special sensitivity in its practice” (25). Playing editor – making judgment calls on both micro and macro textual cruxes – hones a reader's attention to detail and accuracy, even as it stretches their interpretive and argumentative abilities. Editorial activities challenge the student and leave them a better reader of all texts, indeed, of all data.

Many students who are accustomed to more data-driven analysis from other disciplines may find the detail-oriented approach of textual criticism to be an exciting new way in to literary study. In other words, it can be fun, especially

for those students who find other more seemingly subjective aspects of literature difficult. And for those students already compelled by a love of reading (or, rather, consuming novels at lightning speed), textual criticism's slowed-down approach can be a good balance. In total, playing the editor cultivates habits of digging and discipline, while nurturing a curiosity for authenticity. It also, hopefully, keeps students enchanted by books: our most fundamental duty as literature teachers.

“You are now out of your text”

In Act 5, Scene 1 of *Twelfth Night*, Viola tries in vain to read Olivia, to see through the veil over her face and parse her features, when Olivia doubts that right has been previously authorized. As one modern edition punctuates it, “Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face? You are now out of your text. But we will draw the curtain and show you the picture” (Figure 1).

We know how and when to step out of our

text at hand, our tidy Arden or Norton or whatever edition, and look to what secrets the apparatus or original documents preserve for us to parse – we do that on our own authority, needing no commission from our lord. But in the classroom, we are lord, editor, and director, sometimes even a royal ‘we’ like Olivia, and we too can draw the Curtain and show our students the picture. Perhaps that involves simply exposing them to the ‘picture’ of what the real thing looks like: a snapshot of the First Folio, leaving it to them to mull what more meaning lies in the original punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Or perhaps that involves, for instance, a multi-class debate of the merits of the different versions of *Hamlet* and arguing which to choose for a theoretical production scenario. Regardless, playing editor fosters the daring that Viola displays here, the daring that transforms the complacent student simply content with the editor’s decisions into a scholar confident enough to step out of her text, into the apparatus, into the quarto, into the folio, into the

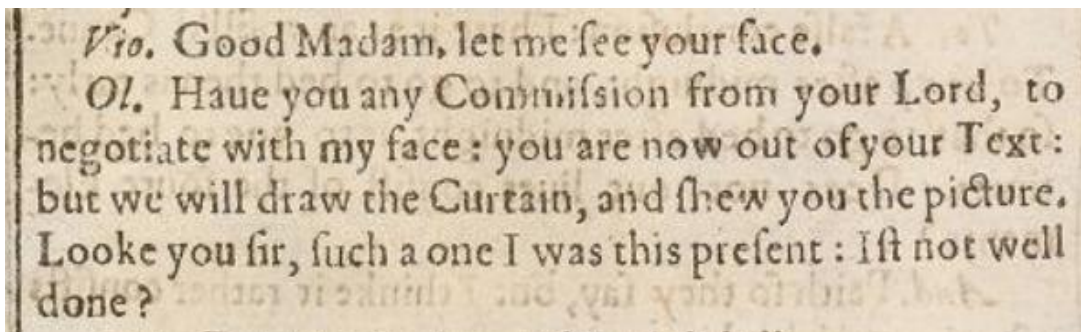


Figure 1 *Twelfth Night, or, What You Will* 1.5. First Folio (1623), p. 259.

critical community of scholars questioning and creating the text.

Though “we will draw the curtain and show you the picture,” it is the viewer or reader’s challenge to read the features and parse the picture of the text: the defamiliarized shapes of

letters, the aesthetic beauty of a seventeenth-century typeset page, the scribbled marginalia of early readers. Fortunately we get to be there to see the looks on their faces when they first experience what it feels like to play editor with the great Bard himself.

Works Cited

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Image credit

Figure 1. *Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* (1623). The Bodleian First Folio, URL: <http://firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>