

What did early modern readers really think
of Shakespeare's works?

The Early Manuscript Reception of the 'Bard'

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In this presentation, I shall be concentrating on perhaps the lesser known part of the story of Shakespeare's rise to fame—the story of his very first readers in the late sixteenth century up until the end of the seventeenth century. The story of Shakespeare's readers in the eighteenth century is far more well-known (even if it is complex), and I shall not be addressing it today.

So, what did early modern readers really think of Shakespeare's works?

Well, the short answer is that we shall never know for sure of course.

The long answer, in my view, cannot be based 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. They will form the basic corpus of my presentation today.

Yet we need to bear in mind that each reader's receptivity is unique and that aesthetic response in particular is multifaceted. Reading readers, so to speak, always represents a challenge.

Readers' preferences were shaped 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 scholarly criticism and the development of a sphere for literary 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.

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 can sound like an anachronism or a question *mal posée*. However, if we bear in mind the caveats and parameters previously mentioned, it is possible to offer some answers.

In this presentation, I argue that as early as Shakespeare's lifetime and 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. Such interests emerged 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.

Studying Works 'For Action' and Aesthetic Pleasure

The early modern appreciation of Shakespeare is 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 want to point out 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 critical responses to Shakespeare's style can be found in William Scott's *The Model of Poesy*, which Gavin Alexander, in his 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). 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 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,
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* (he expressly uses the word) and not those of a playgoer. In passing, one realises that he turns Shakespeare into a *literary* author.

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, as will appear through the study of a thoroughly annotated First Folio and of comments in a manuscript by Abraham Wright.

Indeed, inscriptions contained in a First Folio currently held by the University of Meisei in Japan (MR774) and dating back to 1623–1630 are a case in point. The annotator was possibly a Scot by the name of William Johnstoune, although a recent article points to possible previous (still unknown) owners and annotators.¹ (for ease of reference, I shall use this name ‘Johnstoune’ in what follows). 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 loyfullie ended’ for *The Merchant of Venice* (TLN 2693-2738, and Finis), 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 Johnstoune’s response (TLN 1238-1364).

A good story, one that could speak to an audience, as well as to readers, was what some 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

¹ See Akihiro Yamada, “William Johnstoune, Signatory in Shakespeare’s First Folio, and its Owners”, *Notes and Queries*, Volume 65, Issue 4 (2018), pp. 551–556, esp. 556.

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

There is a small step between comments on an actor's part in a play and literary interest in a character. Attachment and attention to some of Shakespeare's characters is not necessarily synonymous with a later age – the eighteenth century and some of its character-oriented criticism. Abraham Wright's writings, William Scott's treatise, Johnstoune's folio annotations, as well as Charles I's marked up copy of Shakespeare's Second Folio all display a liking for characters.

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. Coalescence and criss-crossing are frequent phenomena among annotators.

As for the annotator of the Meisei Folio, 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]). Characters stir strong emotions in him.⁸

While the inscriber did make clear-cut judgements on some of them, his inscriptions demonstrate that he could be aware of characters' complexities. The following two examples are illuminating for that matter, with their use of 'perplexitie' and 'perplexed': 'Confused perplexitie of othello Intending to l murther his wife vpon suspicion' (*Othello*, vv4, b [TLN 3220-3278]) and 'perplexed separation of louers vpon necessitie' (*Antony 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. Yet, in some cases, he goes the opposite way. Indeed, he appears to separate the characters from the 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’ and how, in some cases, his characters would be almost more important than the plays themselves and began having lives of their own.

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*), to name but a few.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 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. The examples chosen in this section will range from Gabriel Harvey's notes, early marginalia in a First Folio that once belonged to the Cary family, to Abraham Wright's writings (once again).

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. Other types of readers built personal hierarchies of taste for their own

use, or for the benefit of future readers. 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*.¹⁵ Clearly, those who were looking for light reading in the 'Comedies' section of the First Folio could be disappointed. But so could those who focused on the more serious and allegedly more edifying tragedies.¹⁶

Going back to one of the more articulate commentators of the period, Abraham Wright, who compared two of Shakespeare's tragedies—*Othello* and *Hamlet*—one notices that he concluded largely against the judgement of centuries to come. For him, *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).¹⁷ 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' (despite having written commendatory verses about him in Shakespeare's Second Folio (1632) more than a decade before).¹⁸

As I have tried to show, 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. 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,¹⁹ readers still aired 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 exhaustively annotated First Folio in the world by a reader in the first few decades of the seventeenth century, Meisei University's MR774, which I've already mentioned and with which the last part of this talk will be concerned.

Personal Aesthetic Comments

Frequently dismissed as merely repetitive of Shakespeare's text, William Johnstone's notes reveal that he did try to come to terms with the aesthetics of some of Shakespeare's plays. 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). Nevertheless, 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).

Moreover, it seems that the inscriber had some idea of tragedy as a literary genre.²⁰ His reading of Hamlet's famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy is that it is really a 'question whether we ought to overcome our selves 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 annotator introduces 'revenge' here, which is a misreading of the passage, but actually shows what he, as a reader, was expecting.²¹ He held the understandable view that a tragedy was supposed to be about vengeance.

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 conveyed by it. He repeatedly focuses on the subject in his notes: 'vniuersall corruption of man' (hh2, a [TLN 1636-1699]).²² 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, 'Infinitt questions of the circumstance of strange chances' (*Cymbeline*, bbb5v, b [TLN 3694-3759]).

Conclusion

Now, I'd like to say a few words to conclude this talk and sum up my argument: 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 then, the humanist tradition insisted on using texts, especially classical authors, to communicate or serve the needs of one's profession. Yet, in my view, it would be extremely caricatural to reduce humanism to a pragmatic method of extraction.²³ Other aspects in Renaissance humanism encouraged aesthetic pleasure and appreciation, as well as readers' curiosity about vernacular literature.

As we've seen, this was a period when a limited number of Shakespearean readers enjoyed an almost unlimited degree of freedom. Not only did they read Shakespeare for 'use' (in partial keeping with the humanist method), but also for their own aesthetic pleasure, enjoying plots that met personal expectations, focusing on characters sometimes to the detriment of plays themselves, and inventing scales of appreciation. Some even offered sophisticated comments on the plays. Shakespeare's early readers were less self-conscious than their Restoration or eighteenth-century counterparts. They never had to embrace, disapprove of, or try to distinguish themselves from the printed critical debates that became abundantly available as soon as Shakespeare's place was firmly established within the public cultural sphere. This is probably what makes early readers' forms of engagement with Shakespeare so unique and captivating.

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.

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

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.

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

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).

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*.

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 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.

¹⁶ Although far less often performed than comedies or history plays, tragedies tended to be more highly considered. See Kastan, ‘“A rarity most beloved”: Shakespeare and the Idea of Tragedy’, esp. p. 5.

¹⁷ Cited in Kirsch, ‘A Caroline Commentary on the Drama’, pp. 257–58.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Jarvis, ‘Criticism, taste, aesthetics’, p. 24.

²⁰ For details, see Yamada, ed., *The First Folio of Shakespeare*, p. xxviii.

²¹ Orgel, *The Reader in the Book*, p. 55.

²² See also sigs. hh2v, b [TLN 1832-1897] and hh3, a [TLN 1898-1963].

²³ See Blair, *Too Much to Know*, p. 27.