For the Stage and the Page

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Abstract

Argues that Shakespeare wrote his plays not only for the theatrical stage but also for the printed page.

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For the Stage and the Page

Shakespeare was a man of the theatre, a playwright, not a literary dramatist. He didn't write his plays to be read. Or did he? Lukas Erne questions the truth of a mouldy old tale.

It is one of the more enduring myths in thinking about Shakespeare that he was indifferent to his literary reputation, to the publication of his plays, and to their afterlife. In the early 16th century, Alexander Pope wrote that Shakespeare 'grew immortal in his own despight', and many variations upon this theme have followed since. Like all myths, the present one has served an important purpose, allowing us to see Shakespeare, the natural genius, 'wasting his native woodnotes wild', in opposition to the bookish Ben Jonson. What Jonson thought of as the 'loathed stage' was the one and only reason why Shakespeare wrote his plays. Or so the story goes.

Before we can fully understand how doubtful the traditional consensus is, we need to ask what has sustained it for so long. In fact, four interrelated assumptions have usually supported each other. Firstly, printed playbooks, mostly in quarto format, roughly the equivalent of the modern paperback, allegedly represented mere ephemera, to be read and discarded, an opinion the renowned scholar Fredson Bowers was particularly influential in establishing. Secondly, Shakespeare had no interest in the publication of his plays. On the contrary, the companies actively opposed such publication, fearing that fewer people would want to see a play if they could buy the playbook instead. Thirdly, the Shakespeare playbooks that have come down to us supposedly give us the texts as they would have been performed, even in the case of very long plays such as Richard III or Antony and Cleopatra. And fourthly, when we have plays that survive in both long and short versions — like Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, and Hamlet — the long texts are thought to represent the 'normal' stage version, whereas the short ones, which scholars sometimes refer to as 'bad quartos', represent anomalies of some kind. In fact, they are understood as being versions for performance in tour in the provinces, or garbled memorial reconstructions.

It is easy to see how these four traditional assumptions have supported each other: if playbooks were mere trivia, then why would Shakespeare have cared about their publication? Since Shakespeare wrote exclusively for the stage, not for the page, even the longest plays we have were designed for the stage in more or less their entirety. Why else would Shakespeare have written playtexts of such length? And since even the very long texts were designed for the London stage, shorter versions of the same plays need to be explained away as something different and inferior. As a result of these mutually reinforcing assumptions, the view of Shakespeare as indifferent to his literary reputation and his works' survival could remain safely in place.

A closer look, however, will reveal that none of the four pillars that have supported this traditional construction of Shakespeare rests on solid foundations. Playbooks were not only collected and catalogued (by Sir John Harrington and William Drummond of Hawthornden, to name others) but even excerpted and anthologized. As for Shakespeare's alleged indifference or even opposition to the publication of his plays, it is not easy to square with all those plays (in fact more than half of the total number) that were published while Shakespeare was alive and well. Once we stop treating them as exceptions to the rule, we realize that Shakespeare and his fellow actors in the Lord Chamberlain's Men appear to have had a consistent strategy of publishing all those of Shakespeare's plays which they could have published. What's more, the moments of publication conform to a fairly clear pattern, occurring about two years after they were first performed, perhaps providing publicity for a stage revival.

Once we are prepared to take seriously a Shakespeare encouraging publication and catering to a readership, we will less easily dispose of the conundrum posed by what we know about the length of performances on the one hand (the two hours' traffic of the stage) and the length of many of Shakespeare's playtexts on the other. Ben Jonson, who explicitly prided himself on writing for readers rather than just spectators, is the only other playwright who ceased a significant number of similarly lengthy plays. The suspicion that many of Shakespeare's plays may have been significantly abridged before they first reached the stage is supported by what we can gather from extant manuscript playbooks of which many, and all the long ones, show abridgement. Also, in the 1647 Folio edition of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, the publisher Humphrey Moseley informs readers that when the plays of Shakespeare's successors were performed, 'the Actors omitted some Scenes and Passages (with the Author's consent) as occasion led them'. Many of Shakespeare's plays being considerably longer than even the longest 'Beaumont and Fletcher' play, isn't it reasonable to assume that Hamlet and similarly long plays also underwent substantial abridgement? If we answer this question affirmatively, we may be prepared to see the long and short versions of such plays as Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, and Hamlet in a new light, not so much as 'good' and 'bad' as literary and theatrical texts, the long versions giving us plays Shakespeare designed for the closet and the short ones reflecting the plays as they would have been performed.

It may then be time for us to rid ourselves of the image of a Shakespeare writing only for performance. Shakespeare could not help knowing that by 1600, less than halfway through his career, he was read and reread, published and republished, excerpted and anthologized, like no other playwright before or beside him. In 1598, Francis Meres raises Shakespeare to the top of the English literary canon alongside a few recognized literary worthies, Spenser, Sidney, Daniel, Warner, and Drayton. Two anthologies of 1600 show excerpts from his plays, attributed to 'W. Shakespeare', alongside the literary masterpieces of the day. These are the years when Shakespeare may have been writing a number of his sonnets which, as J. B. Leishman convincingly showed, deal with the theme of poetry as immortalisation more recurrently, indeed obsessively, than any other poet's.

What this means for modern readers and teachers of Shakespeare is that they should beware of some of the more extravagant claims of the now fashionable performance criticism according to which the stage is the source of all valid discovery. Shakespeare wrote his plays for playwrights and readers, and armchair lovers of Shakespeare need not feel ashamed of their practices, nor think of them as ahistorical. As for directors, actors, and spectators at the Globe and elsewhere, they can legitimately delight in the radically slimmed-down, fast-paced two-hour Shakespeare production and shun the next five-hour Hamlet. The groundings may well be grateful.

Lukas Erne teaches English Literature at the University of Geneva. His Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist, published by Cambridge University Press, is available from Shakespeare's Globe Shop price £9.95.
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