Emendation and the Editorial Reconfiguration of Shakespeare

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Abstract

This chapter anatomizes two opposed trends in the modern textual (re)configuration of Shakespeare, represented by the respective belief that what we need is more extensive or less extensive editorial intervention. It focuses on one form of editorial intervention in which these opposed trends can be seen to crystallize: emendation.

Reference

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The editing of Shakespeare has been characterized by two opposed trends in recent times, represented by the respective belief that what we need is more extensive or less extensive editorial intervention. Advocates for more editing ('interventionist editors') have called for and practised more thorough modernization of spelling and punctuation, added more and more detailed stage directions, and emended more readily and more daringly than most previous editors. Those who have called for less editing ('uneditors') hold, on the contrary, that the editorial tradition has increasingly distanced us from the Shakespearean text we should be reading today, and recommend that long-practised editorial interventions be removed. Asked how we need to reconfigure Shakespeare today, one group of scholars thus answers that we need to dress him up, the other that we need to strip him down.

My chapter focuses on a form of editorial intervention in which these opposed trends can be shown to crystallize: emendation. It shows that textual scholarship since the 1980s has followed two very different orientations in its thinking about emendation: we need more, better, more ingenious emendation to solve the cruces, thus leading us to a fuller understanding of the text; or we need to un-emend readings which the editorial tradition has unjustifiably imposed upon us in order to recover the text's true meaning. In the last part of this chapter, I ask what is ultimately at stake in the diametrical opposition between the two proposals to reconfigure Shakespeare. I argue that they reveal fundamentally different attitudes towards textual mediation, authority, and the value of tradition, which go back at least as far as the century in which Shakespeare was born.

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Editorial emendation has attracted relatively little attention in recent times. It is true that editors carefully think about textual cruces and routinely practice emendation, and there is no shortage of proposed solutions published in Notes & Queries and elsewhere. Nonetheless, there has been little systematic work interested less in individual emendations than in emendation more generally. While circumstances of transmission and their impact on editing or the editorial mediation of stage action have been hotly debated in recent times, the editorial practice of emendation has not. This seems remarkable until we remember that in the eighteenth century emendation was essentially what Shakespeare editing was about. Although John Heminge and Henry Condell had implied that emendation was unnecessary given that the 'maimed, and deformed' quarto texts had been 'cur'd' by the Folio (sig. A3r), eighteenth-century editors found that this was far from being the case. Early in the eighteenth century, Lewis Theobald and Alexander Pope were confident about their ability to improve the Shakespearean text and liberally emended. Disagreements between them resulted in the first book-length study of Shakespeare's texts, which is, significantly, about emendation: Theobald's Shakespeare Restor'd: or, A Specimen of the Many Errors as weil Committed, or Unamended, by Mr. Pope in his Late Edition of this Poet (1726). Theobald's basic argument - to which Pope famously responded by satirizing Theobald in The Dunciad - is that Pope was an incompetent editor who did not emend when he should and did when 'there was no Occasion to depart from the Poet's Text' (quoted in Murphy 2007: 96).

Later in the century, Samuel Johnson came to practise emendation much more cautiously, writing that 'my first labour is, always to turn the old text on every side, and try if there be any interstice, through which light can find its way ... In this modest industry I have not been unsuccessful. I have rescued many lines from the violations of temerity, and secured many scenes from the inroads of correction' (Murphy 2007: 98–9). Similar tendencies towards more or less emendation can also be observed later in history and beyond Shakespeare studies. For instance, the nineteenth-century German philologist Karl Lachmann 'encouraged editors to try to make sense of their copy-text rather than depart from it', a method to which A. E. Housman objected, preferring to come up with 'inspired emendations' (Egan 2010: 11, 7). Although it might be tempting to tell a diachronic story about the practice of emendation, from the adventurous follies of eighteenth-century editors to the sobriety and restraint of modern editors, the opposing tendencies for more and less emendation can in fact be observed at various points in the editorial history. They reflect not only shifting thinking about the ontology of the
(Shakespearean) text and the object of the editorial quest, but also the temperament of editors, who have usefully been divided into those who are 'conjecture-happy' and those who are 'conjecture-shy' (Taylor 1997: 59).

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While there have been advocates for more or less thorough editing across the centuries, calls against editing in its traditional form have taken on new proportions in recent decades. What Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass in 1993 diagnosed as a 'mounting resentment toward the editorial tradition' can now be identified as a distinct movement in the history of Shakespearean textual studies (de Grazia and Stallybrass 1993: 255). What is central to this movement is the contention that the traditional editorial reproduction is harmful, that it oppresses and obscures, and that it therefore needs to be radically reformed. Several factors can partly account for its recent rise. One of them is the ground-breaking Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works of 1986 and its massive Textual Companion, both spear-headed by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. The most important editorial achievement in Shakespeare studies since the Cambridge Shakespeare Works of the 1860s, it fully embraces editorial intervention, takes numerous controversial decisions and has stirred debates in which many feel that less would have been more. Another factor is that the traditional object of editorial pursuit has been coming under attack: while the aim of the New Bibliography was to 'strip the veil of print', in Fredson Bowers's famous phrase (1955: 87), and thereby to recover the authorial text behind the printed text, de Grazia and Stallybrass hold that the early texts need to be 'looked at, not seen through', asking us to focus on the 'materiality of the text' (1993: 256–7). Related to this is the fact that, thanks to the electronic revolution, eschewing modern editorial mediations in favour of electronic facsimiles of the early printed texts has become easier than ever before.

The resentment against the editorial tradition has resulted in arguments that traditional emendations must be unemended. These arguments are advanced on different grounds, which can be summed up as ideological, epistemological and material. According to the ideological case, what is perilous about traditional emendation is, to put it in a nutshell, its politics. The editor, according to Leah Marcus, colludes with the conservative, indeed, oppressive forces within the fiction of the plays. Traditional emendation in The Tempest, for instance, reflects 'a set of strict cultural delimitations by which the witch [Sycorax] has been kept under control'; unemending traditional emendation, by contrast, 'is to open the play once more to an unsettling, polysemous menace that Prospero and modern editors have worked very hard to contain' (Marcus 1996: 17). The same logic applies, mutatis mutandis, to other plays: traditional editors of The Taming of the Shrew can be shown to mime the activity of The Shrew's indefatigable and autocratic tamer, Petruchio, and editors of Hamlet reflect the Prince's cultural elitism, constructing the play 'along the lines of Hamlet's own taste', preferring 'the highly literate over the low and suspiciously oral ... Alas, poor Yorick!' (129, 176).

Whereas the ideological approach to unemending traditional emendations takes issue with earlier editors' politics, the epistemological approach questions the certainty with which editors claim to have identified textual error and thus justified the need to emend. When can we be sure that a passage is corrupt? On what grounds can an editor diagnose textual error with sufficient certainty to justify emendation? As one scholar has put it, 'On what basis should we assume that "corruption is everywhere", since the only possible measure of such corruption, the authorial manuscript, is not there to be consulted?' (Holderness 2003: 83). All too often, Michael Warren maintains, the reason why editors endorse and perpetuate emendations is the weight of tradition, which, however, constitutes no valid reason to endorse an emendation where its necessity cannot be established with a sufficient degree of certainty: 'much of the Shakespeare text' is 'difficult yet intelligible and interpretable', so 'another difficulty should not immediately be discerned and dismissed as an error' (2004: 139). Moreover, 'experience of performance often reveals that what presents problems in reading may present few upon the stage' (139). Stephen Orgel has advanced a similar argument, but in his view emendation of textual obscurity should be resisted not because obscurity may turn out to be intelligible but because obscurity may be the point: 'Of course, we assume that we are, by elucidating, recovering meaning, not imposing it; but is this assumption really defensible? How do we know that the obscurity of the text was not in fact precisely what it expressed to the Renaissance audience?' (1991: 434, 436). What makes editorial emendation problematic, it has been argued, is that too many emendations are based on assumptions rather than certainty: 'Error is a risky concept; the idea of others' error is a temptation' (Warren 2004: 137–8). Therefore, 'What if, denying the editorial impulse to detect and manage error, one were to assume that the text is correct?' (130).
Related to the epistemological approach is the *materialist* approach to unediting. Its basic tenet is that all features of an early printed text (such as a Shakespeare playbook) carry meaning, which modern editing threatens to efface. In the essay in which de Grazia and Stallybrass diagnose a 'mounting resentment toward the editorial tradition', they describe 'the focus of [their] essay' as follows:

old typefaces and spellings, irregular line and scene divisions, title pages and other paratextual matter, and textual cruces. They constitute what we term the 'materiality of the text'. Discarded or transformed beyond recognition in standard editions, they remain obstinately on the pages of the early texts, insisting upon being looked at, not seen through. (de Grazia and Stallybrass 1993: 256–7)

Far from stripping the veil of print to recover a 'privileged “original”' behind it, this 'return to the early texts ... bars access' for the modern reader: 'The features that modernization and emendation smooth away remain stubbornly in place to block the illusion of transparency' (256).

As far as editorial practice is concerned, the materialist approach to unediting can take two forms: the one is to edit in such fashion as to preserve certain features of the early texts (such as textual cruces which editors traditionally emend); the other is to refuse to edit at all. The latter approach is associated with Randall McLeod, who has argued that 'In the present state of Shakespearean criticism ... we must sidestep the editors' (1981: 96), and 'proposes that we use only facsimiles, and thereby force ourselves and our students to confront the material reality of Renaissance literature, the Renaissance text in its genuine cultural context' (Orgel 2002: 18). Some have agreed, arguing that 'the facsimile makes these historical features available to criticism in ways that the standard modern edition occludes' (Holderness 2003: 46).

Others have continued to edit for a mass market despite their sympathy for the materialist approach to unediting. Editor of *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* in the Oxford Shakespeare series, Orgel writes: 'my basic feeling as an editor is that texts aren't ideas, they are artifacts, and I want to preserve as much as I can of their archeology'. He explains that one of the ways in which this belief has affected his editorial practice is his 'stubborn refusal to emend if I can get any sense at all out of the folio' (2002: 16), which means he has refused to endorse a number of traditional editorial emendations. Marcus has similarly advocated an editorial practice that preserves original textual features which modern editions usually efface. Arguing that in modern editions, 'inconsistencies [in the early modern text] have been normalized out of existence in the editions we use', and that modern editors thus impose 'artificial clarity', she calls for 'editions that stimulate readers to experience elements of undecidability in their reading of Shakespeare' (2007: 135, 136, 142).

Recent arguments in favour of more thorough editing and, more specifically, emendation start from the observation that 'there is no avoiding edited Shakespeare, the question is only what kind of editing' (Gibbons 1999: 1). Shakespeare's texts had an existence before they reached print: his plays existed in manuscript as well as in staged performances, but none of his manuscripts survives (with the likely exception of a small portion of *Sir Thomas More*), nor do we have any reliable records of his plays in performance. In other words, the earliest extant form of Shakespeare's plays, namely that of printed playbooks, has already undergone editorial mediation: 'All texts of Shakespeare are editions; all have been edited; 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' (Taylor 1997: 1). Given the unattainability of unmediated, unedited Shakespeare, 'we can only choose which mediator(s) to accept' (3). To the charge that modern editorial intervention modifies and falsifies the document on which it is based, the response is that any editorial intervention does so, including that which led to the earliest extant printed playbooks: 'We can only read Shakespeare's discourse through the filter of earlier readers, who have “translated” - handed over, transmitted, transmuted - his texts to us' (Taylor 1997: 1).

As Taylor puts it, 'To translate is, notoriously, to betray; to communicate is to corrupt. Shakespeare's texts have thus inevitably been betrayed by the very process of their transmission' (1). The refusal to edit today would thus not lead to the avoidance of textual betrayal but to the unquestioned acceptance of one instance of it, namely that of the earliest editors. In short, the uneditors' impulse is to refrain from emendation on the grounds that such intervention misrepresents textual features; those who embrace emendation hold instead that textual misrepresentation has always already been an inevitable part of editorial mediation.

That Shakespeare's early printed playbooks already contain editorial misrepresentation can be easily demonstrated by reference to typographic nonsense they sometimes contain. Andrew Murphy has commented on a
useful example: ‘an editor encountering the word “aud” in the text may feel reasonably confident that it should be corrected to “and,” arguing that no word “aud” appears to exist in the English language, that the context requires a conjunction, and that the likely explanation for the error is that the “u” is simply a turned “n” (2007: 103). With a word like ‘aud’, emendation to ‘and’ proceeds by reference to a textual object which included the word ‘aud’ – the manuscript – that is no longer extant. Yet the fact that the material object to which emendation conjecturally refers no longer exists does not make it doubtful, Murphy implies, that ‘aud’ is a simple misprint, occasioned by an instance of ‘foul case’. In a case like this, an uneditor who advocates the use of facsimiles or who refuses to emend ‘aud’ to ‘and’ on the grounds that ‘texts aren’t ideas, they are artifacts’ thus accepts that modern readers encounter editorial misrepresentation.

Many cases are less straightforward than ‘aud’: ‘An editor, in emending, decides that a text is diseased; such decisions may be mistaken’ (Taylor 1997: 60). Even though the presence of textual corruption in early printed Shakespeare playbooks can be taken for granted, the absence of documentary evidence in which to anchor emendations means they involve conjecture. As John Jowett puts it, ‘The editor’s base text … will always be flawed. The emended text, however, will always be insecurely grounded.’ He recognizes that ‘This unresolvable dilemma leads editors often to declare their reluctance to emend’, especially when there are no ‘collateral texts’ (such as another early quarto edition) with which to justify an emendation (2007a: 118). Yet once it has been accepted that textual misrepresentation is always already part of a printed Shakespeare text, such reluctance may in fact be misplaced: ‘the editor can make a virtue of inaction and so avoid exercising choice and judgement’ (122). In other words, even in the absence of independent textual evidence, editors who embrace their task do not shrink from emending.

By evoking the authority of a document (e.g., ‘Shakespeare’s manuscript’) that is no longer extant or intentions (e.g., ‘Shakespeare’s intentions’) that cannot be recovered in order to justify emendation, editors expose themselves to the charge – levelled at them by uneditors – that their editorial pursuit is governed by unwarranted idealism. Yet ‘the more pernicious idealism’, it has been replied, is an editorial policy which aims to produce of a document no more ‘than an ideal version of itself’, resulting in the wilful preservation of errors whose emendation could, and should, be attempted (116).

The editors’ perceived responsibility towards their readers is an important argument for interventionist editors. One of them – having quoted a passage from All’s Well That Ends Well which appears to make little sense as it appears in the Folio – asks: ‘Should we leave the passage as it stands, and let the layman or the actor flounder? Should we expect our readers to come up with something better?’ (Taylor 1986: 36). Another one quotes a passage from Coriolanus in which ‘the conjunction of metrical irregularity and defect of sense gives’ a clear ‘indication of error’, and states: ‘In these circumstances an editor would be relinquishing his or her function if the text were not emended’ (Jowett 2007a: 123). A third scholar, having referred to an editorial problem in King Lear, states that the use of a photofacsimile has been advocated by an uneditor, adding that ‘rather than solving the problem this passes it on to the reader who must decide for herself which peculiarities are error and which art’ (Egan 2010: 204).

De Grazia and Stallybrass lament that the materiality of the text is lost in most modern editions and advocate ‘a return to the early texts’ that ‘bars access’ for the modern reader (de Grazia and Stallybrass 1993: 256). Yet interventionist editors argue that most modern readers do not want to have textual access barred: ‘Editors and readers are interested, and rightly so, in having a text that can provide a suitable initial reading experience of a work, uninterrupted by textual problems or external considerations’ (Shillingburg 1996: 37). Indeed, facilitating access to the complexities of Shakespeare’s text has been argued to legitimize the labour that goes into modern editions: editors ‘spend prodigious stretches of time and effort trying to determine exactly what an author wrote, so that other people, with less time to spend, can read those words, and enjoy or interpret them as they wish’ (Taylor 1997: 6).

As we have seen above, one objection to emendation in the editorial tradition is that its politics are wrong and elitist. Yet the refusal to edit and a policy that ‘bars access’ to the modern reader have similarly been accused of elitism: ‘Although [de Grazia and Stallybrass] identify themselves as inclusive and egalitarian, conferring value upon the honest labour of printshop workers, the consequence of pursuing their project is to restrict Shakespeare to a privileged group, exclusively academic and exclusionary even within the precincts of the academy’ (Pechter 1997: 61–2). Those who advocate a return to the early printed texts tend to be interested in, and experts of, textual and bibliographic scholarship, but they have been criticized for their assumption that students should share that interest or acquire some of that expertise before reading Shakespeare: ‘the view that editions should be abandoned in the
classroom and replaced with photofacsimiles [is] an impractical suggestion for most purposes' (Jowett 2006: 17). In other words, it is legitimate for readers to want to read Shakespeare without foregrounding questions of textual or bibliographic scholarship, and uneditors fail to cater to that large part of the readership by failing to produce what Wells calls 'a workable text' (1991: 34).

While uneditors argue that we have gone too far in the removal of perceived corruption and should now unemend in order to recover the original text, there are interventionist editors at the other end of the spectrum who claim that we have not yet emended enough, that the Shakespearean text can be further improved by means of additional and better emendations. Bowers has claimed that 'just about every emendation has been proposed that is likely to be adopted', and that 'editing has largely resolved itself to the exercise of personal choice among the known alternatives' (1955: 167). Instead of choosing among the known alternatives, he argues, they should try to come up with new and better readings: 'The more editors who play the game, the more competing entries posterity and the public will have to choose from, and the more likely that their eventual choice will do credit to the author' (44).

Taylor advocates 'mimetic editing', that is, the attempt 'to emend in a manner entirely characteristic of his author' (30). Here is one of his examples, from the Chorus to Act Two in Henry V: 'Linger your patience on, and we'll digest / Th' abuse of distance; force a play.' (TLN 493–4). The second line is a foot short, and its end is emended by Taylor to 'force (perforee) a play', the omission of the word being explicable through simple eyeskip. The collocation 'force perforee' occurs four times in other texts by Shakespeare, and in the present line it constitutes, as Taylor has it, 'a markedly Shakespearean emendation' which 'exactly fits the aesthetic requirements of the context, rectifies the metrical deficiency, and explains how the error occurred in the first place' (32). The dominant principle in modern practice has been that an emendation 'should be as colourless as possible', 'a false principle', according to Taylor: 'if you must insert something, it is of course better to insert something neutral than something uncharacteristic; but if you can find something unmistakably characteristic to fill the gap, that is even better' (29, 30, 32).

Wells has similarly argued for more liberal emendation than prevailed for much of the twentieth century. For instance, he advocates emendation of the second 'my' in 'My father dead, my fortune liues for me', to 'his' (The Taming of the Shrew, TLN 757), even though the line in the Folio 'conveys a kind of sense'. Yet given that 'his fortune' makes 'much better sense', Wells adds, 'I do not think we should be inhibited from adopting a superior reading by a fear that we might be improving on Shakespeare rather than on the agents of transmission' (1984: 42). Other instances where an editor may legitimately improve on Shakespeare through emendation, according to Wells, are points at which Shakespeare seems to have committed inconsistencies of plotting which are easily ironed out and where an editor may reasonably feel justified in making the correction (48). Similarly, Wells advocates more liberal emendation when the text is metrically deficient: modern editors have become suspicious of the inclination — prominent in the eighteenth century — to regularize Shakespeare's verse, yet 'the policy of refusing to mend metre', Wells writes, 'can be, and I think has been, taken too far. We should pay our poet the compliment of assuming that he cares for metrical values, and be willing to emend when the surviving text is demonstrably deficient' (50).

In the debate over whether editors should emend less or more, either side is blaming the New Bibliography for the alleged editorial excess or deficiency in emendation. For uneditors, the New Bibliography's focus on the manuscripts from which the printed texts were set up encouraged wrong-headed emendation by speculative reference to lost documents. Conversely, it has been argued that the New Bibliography, with its preference for mechanical explanations, has 'undermined editorial confidence in the validity of critical judgements' of the kind required for thorough emendation (Taylor 1986: 33). As Jowett has pointed out, 'The relative claims of bibliography (founded on scholarship) and aesthetics (founded on criticism) upon the practice of emendation came into focus in A. E. Housman's attack on what he saw as the mechanical approach to textual emendation brought in by the early New Bibliography' (2007a: 124). Housman's strictures live on long after his death: 'Insofar as modern textual criticism is defensively obsessed with its own seriousness, and increasingly ambitious to raise itself to the dignity of a science, to that very degree it inhibits its own imaginative capacity to solve the problems whose existence first brought it into being' (Taylor 1986: 43). Only once we will have accepted that emendation needs to be 'creative and critical' and not simply
‘bibliographical’ – the argument goes – will we produce editions with sufficient, and sufficiently ingenious, emendations (34).

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My aim in presenting what I see as two opposed orientations in the editorial reconfiguration of Shakespeare, in particular as it relates to emendation, has not been to adjudicate between them but to anatomiize them. What opposes them most essentially, I have argued, is that they ask for more or less editing – and emending – respectively, and I have tried to expose the grounds on which they do so. What then is at stake in the disagreement between uneditors and interventionist editors? One way of answering this question is that the opposed answers they give to the question of how much editing we need are complementary. Those who have been calling for less editing, or unediting, advocate what Peter Shillingsburg calls ‘documentary’, ‘sociological’ and ‘bibliographic’ editing: ‘documentary’ in that the imperative is to preserve a surviving document (or at least its essential features); ‘sociological’ insofar as that document is not the result of singular, authorial, but of multiple, socialized, agency; and ‘bibliographic’ in that the makeup of the physical object matters. Those who call for more extensive editing, on the other hand, practise what Shillingsburg calls ‘authorial’ or ‘aesthetic’ editing insofar as their imperative is to produce a better text by emending corrupt, inferior readings to readings which are perceived to be in keeping with the author’s intentions and style. As Shillingsburg has written:

Adherents of documentary, sociological, and bibliographic orientations frown on the authorial and aesthetic editors for violating historical documents, or failing to accept ‘actual’ social phenomena. Authorial and aesthetic editors do not find the significance or integrity of historical or social texts compelling enough reasons to maintain texts that are corrupt or impure. These editorial positions are all internally coherent and viable, but no single text will satisfy the needs of all five (1996: 26).

According to Shillingsburg, there is room for more and less editing, modernized and regularized texts which fully embrace editorial intervention and facsimiles which minimize it. The resulting editions need not be better or worse; they answer different needs.

Yet there is a different and, I believe, ultimately more compelling way of framing the differences in editorial theory and practice advocated by uneditors and interventionist editors respectively. The two orientations reflect attitudes towards canonical texts and mediatory authority which go to the heart of Catholic and Protestant beliefs during the Reformation. How the Scriptural text is best mediated to, and accessed by, readers is an issue on which people disagreed in the early modern period in terms similar to those of modern uneditors and interventionist editors of the Shakespearean text. The Protestant insistence on direct exposure to the Bible and on the recovery of Scripture in its original purity contrasted with the Catholic insistence on the need for scriptural mediation by the Church. As Elizabeth Eisenstein sums up the issue, ‘Was [Scripture] meant to be made directly available to all men in accordance with the mission to spread glad tidings? Or was it rather to be expounded to the laity only after passing through the hands of priests, as had become customary over the course of centuries?’ (1980: 329). What editors are for canonical literary texts, priests are for canonical Scriptural texts, both being textual mediators. ‘The office proper to a priest’, as Thomas Aquinas put it, ‘is to be a mediator between God and the people’ (1913: 299). Luther rejected the idea of priests as a group with distinct mediatory authority and believed instead in a ‘priest-hood of all believers’ (Mullett 2004: 105), just as Shakespeare’s uneditors argue we are better off by not exposing ourselves to the mediation of the clergy of textual scholarship, the editors. In his disputations with Luther, the Catholic theologian Johann Eck insisted that the true understanding of Scripture was informed by and had to be mediated through the Church (Tavard 1959: 151) – just as interventionist editors believe readers are best served by modern editorial mediation. Protestants contended ‘that some Catholic beliefs and practices were based on corruptions of Scripture’ (Harrison 2007: 244) – just as uneditors claim the Shakespearean text is infected with errors introduced through editorial intervention. Catholics (not unlike Shakespeare’s interventionist editors) held that there was no unmediated access to the text, and that the understanding of the text had grown and improved over the centuries.

Uneditors and interventionist editors also disagree on the value of tradition (as did Protestants and Catholics): according to one view, the original texts give us the best access to Shakespeare’s plays and poems, whereas the editorial tradition exposes us to the dangers of accretions which obscure and falsify the original texts instead of clarifying them. Editorial tradition, for uneditors, is thus a source of corruption, which we are called to bypass by returning to the early material text. According to the other view, what allows us to arrive at the fullest understanding of Shakespeare’s plays and poems is the early quartos, octavos and folios (the original texts), combined with and enriched by that which generations of editors have done to clarify them (the editorial tradition). Here is an
account by an interventionist editor of how the editorial tradition has enriched our understanding of the Shakespearean text:

Rowe... did successfully eliminate most of the problems of mislineation in the Folio, and he did restore sense to many passages by means of obvious emendations... Pope... further corrected the lineation of the seventeenth-century texts: Rowe and Pope between them are responsible for most of the relinement accepted by all modern editors... Warburton had contributed many conjectures to Theobald's edition, and Theobald had adopted the best of them... Dr Johnson's edition... contains many judicious notes, which draw upon the linguistic knowledge Johnson accumulated in compiling his Dictionary, and upon his own considerable common sense... In the nineteenth century... editions made minor contributions to the text, by conjectural emendations accepted and recorded by subsequent editors, or by explications of obscure passages accepted silently by subsequent editors. (Taylor 1997: 54-5)

The parallels to Catholic and Protestant views of the transmission of divine revelation should be clear: whereas Catholic theologians recognized two distinct modes of transmission, Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, Protestants argued for one mode of transmission: sola scriptura (Sykes 1963: 175).

I have argued that the contrasting attitudes to the transmission of the Shakespearean text in our own time can be understood in terms familiar from early modern theological disagreements, so much so that it is useful to think of the opposed editorial trends as 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' editing. 'Catholic' editing believes that editorial tradition leads us to a fuller understanding of the text, whereas 'Protestant' editing holds that we need to revert to the text in its original purity, without the accretions of century-old tradition. In 'Catholic' editing, editors form a scholarly clergy, and the editor is a textual priest, a figure of authority to whose care the mediation of the text to the community of faithful readers is entrusted. In 'Protestant' editing, by contrast, the textual clergy has all too often led the community of readers into error. The wisdom they preach must therefore be questioned, their accretions removed, the editorial tradition reformed.

Significantly, early modern Protestant theology and modern 'Protestant' editing are accompanied and aided by the media revolutions of their respective time: 'The advent of printing', as Eisenstein has pointed out, 'was an important precondition for the Protestant Reformation taken as a whole; for without it one could not implement a "priesthood of all believers"' (1980: 310). Similarly, unediting as advocated by McLeod and others has become possible on a large scale thanks to the wide availability of digital facsimiles. For better or for worse, the digital revolution 'is helping to increase the authority of the early quarto and folio texts' (Marcus 1996: 130). Some will welcome that this 'enables the literary form to be transmitted intact, whilst liberating its possibilities of interpretation', thus permitting the formulation of independent interpretation (Holderness and Banks 1995: 336). Others will consider that editorial interventions help interpretation and that readers will be better served by fully edited texts. The question of how to reconfigure the Shakespearean text – of whether we chiefly need to emend the earliest printed texts or the modern editions – is not about to go away. The answer we give to it, individually and collectively, not only impacts on the Shakespeare texts we choose to read but also reflects our attitude towards textual mediation, authority and the value of tradition.