"The very names of the Persons": Editing and the Invention of Dramatic Character

Random Cloud

In his Preface to the 1723 edition of "The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare" Alexander Pope seems to have intended praise:

every single character in Shakspear is as much an Individual, as those in Life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike; . . . had all the Speeches been printed without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have apply'd them with certainty to every speaker.

The editor's confidence that one could supply a whole corpus' worth of missing speech tags (!) must reflect his conception of the distinct individuality (hence the distinct unity) of each of this playwright's dramatic characters. He is onto something, of course, for lifelike characterizations (in the major roles, if not in "every single character") is one of Shakspeare's most conspicuous achievements.

But Pope is also quite offtrack. However unified the interpretation of a Shakspearean role can be made to seem in performance or in modern editions, the very names of the Persons in the earliest Shakespeare texts very frequently vary. (That you don't know what the hell I am talking about shows how pokedex your Shakespeare is.) In order to contradict the editor it is not even necessary that we deny his critical premise, of Shakesper's appeal to Life itself; one merely has to read the evidence of the earliest quartos and folios. So, if you like: when it comes to the very names of the Persons, every single character in Shakspear is as individual as those in Life itself.

Pope's fantasy about speech tags is scarcely innocent. In openly praising Shakespeare's artistic coherence, he secretly congratulates his own reductive editing; for Pope played fast and loose with the evidence of Shakspear's text, suppressing the artistic variation of names that contradicts the editorial notion of unity.

With how much certainty would Pope's imagined restorer cope with this crux in the 1599 quarto of Romeo and Juliet, if its speech tags were actually removed—here, where essentially the same four lines are assigned not only to a young man passionately in love for the first time, but also to an old and mortified friar? That Shakespeare assigned this speech to such very different roles suggests that its duplicated words have little to express of the personal experiences of either of them. Isn't it better to say that precisely because they are repeated, these four lines have an impersonal expression; that the speech primarily tells time (a function discharged elsewhere in this play by an impersonal Chorus); that it creates an atmosphere verbally, as the modern stage does with lighting; or that it serves to close or open a scene in a play: that it is dramatically or scenically functional, and not unmediated mimetic or redolent of the personal character of Life itself?

Or consider this passage in the 1623 folio All's Well.

Con. You have discharg'd this honestlie, keepe it to your selfe, manie likelihoods inform'd mee of this before, which hung so totring in the ballance, that I could neither beleue nor misdoubt: praze you to leave mee, till this in your bosome, and I thank you for your honest care: I will speake with you further anon.

Exit Steward.

Enter Helen.
Old Cow. Even so it was with me when I was young,
If ever we are natures, these are ours, this thorn
Dost to our race of youth rightlie belong
Our blood to us, this to our blood is borne,
It is the show, and test of nature's truth,
Where love with passion is impetuous in youth,
By our remembrances of dares forgone,
Such were our faults, or then we thought them none.
Her deye is sickle out, I observe her now.

Although there are two speech tags here, there is only one speech and only one speaker, to whom, as we read along, Shakespeare gives a new name in the very midst of his speech. Now, once an actress intones the words of Shakespeare's dialogue, they become her own, as it were, in the service of the role she performs. The residual variant speech tags, however, remain behind in Shakespeare's "voice"; for surely they are all his vocatives. To whom else can we ascribe his naming? Certainly to no one in the fiction.

Surely they are all Shakespeare's vocatives.

What caused Shakespeare to rename the role during the speech, I don't know either. But playing with names, as Samuel Johnson so sympathetically observed, was Shakespeare's "fertile Cleopatra." In fact, during the course of the play the author used five different speech tags for this one role:

Mother, Countess, Old Countess, Lady, and Old Lady.

One of the simplest explanations for the repeated and augmented speech tag is that it marks a seam in the layering of composition. The second part of the speech could easily have been scripted first, or, if it came second, it may have been written at some remove from the first part. The ideal unity we read into such a text runs up against a fragmentation or a multiplicity that we actually read. It is a problem of interpretation whether such supposed traces of construction are to be swept under the rug in production, as if they were mere noise, or whether they are to be attended to as message—as discontinuities in tone, or in action, or in what interests me most here, in individual characterization.

Understandably, an actress of this role is liable to be focused (in a way, Pope would understand intuitively) on her own character; she may most readily come to conceive an individual identity (especially before rehearsals) from the inside out, as it were—from reading all the dialogue assigned to her, as if she is centered in what she says. So, let's imagine for contrast how a director might view the overall flow of action during this speech, and from that outward perspective counsel the actress. The director may feel that the Stewart's exit and Helen's entrance mark a pause or turning of the action which will orient the audience to new themes and new relationships, in the course of which the audience's perception of this role will be reassessed. (As she is about to initiate talk about the new themes of youth and age, it should be easy for actress and director to talk each other's language, though they come from different directions.)

Suppose, for the ease of argument, that the director wants the audience to see the young woman's entrance slightly before the Countess does. From our point of view, Helen's entrance onto a silent stage occupied only by the Countess would, without a word's yet being spoken, offer us an emblem of Youth vs. Age; we would perceive the Countess now, not solely from her own perspective (built up from the dialogue she has spoken, or from that she is about to speak), but rather relatively, and this is, from the outside. In this silent moment she would be re-perceived by the audience as an Old countess—not because she is old (though she is), but because with Helen beside her she suddenly looks old.

Now, this moment of silence is nevertheless textual (though you won't find it in modern editions. Its text is that of the new speech tag, which states, in the author's voice, that the speaker of the dialogue to follow is Old. When the silence ends, the first line of her resumed speech discovers, as I said, that age is a theme there too: "it was . . . when I was young." But age and youth are, crucially, not the only themes. The rest of the Old Countess's first line, "Even so . . . with me," can be read as affirming that the two women are alike in their capacity for love, and this theme is not directly about age. The redundancy of the new tag and the dialogue it ushers in is thus selective redundancy; and selective redundancy between such internal textual categories as tag and dialogue externalizes itself as interpretation. (And whose interpretation, do you suppose?)

Later in the play Shakespeare switches to Old Lady as the tag for this role, again during conversation with Helen. (She is "Old," by the way, only when Helen is present.) If, in the speech we have been
analyzing, Shakespeare had switched to the Old Lady tag after Hellen's entrance, might we not have felt that the thematic redundancy of tag and dialogue was now less about age than about Being Female? Do you see why I say that selective redundancy is interpretive? Or imagine this: elsewhere Shakespeare tags Hellen as "La." Suppose Shakespeare called them both "Ladies" here. In addition to the Female theme, might we not detect that of Gentility?

Here are the lines that immediately follow the passage already photocopied.

**Hell.** What is your pleasure Madam?
**Ol. Com.** You know Hellen I am a mother to you.
**Hell.** Mine honestable Miltris.
**Ol. Com.** Nay a mother, why not a mother? when I fed a mother,
Me thought you saw a serpent, what's in mother,
That you start at it. I say I am your mother.

At the start of the play Shakespeare's stage-tag name for the Countess was Mother. Suppose Shakespeare had reverted to this tag at the entrance of Hellen. Would not such a redundancy direct our attention to the Maternal-Filial dynamic of the encounter, which is strongly borne out in these later lines, rather than to the theme of Age vs. Youth?

Of course, an actress can convey her age and be simultaneously womanly and motherly and ladylike. My fancied substitutions from among Shakespeare's other variant speech tags are intended to show merely that each of his options for naming this character could be redundant of something in the dialogue, but not of everything; his specific choices of tag do interpret dialogue through selective emphasis. It is helpful to remember that no one speaks in Shakespeare's plays without being summoned by a name for each speech. Each time he summoned a character, Shakespeare was free to rename her, and he was just the author to exploit that freedom. He is thus, thank God, unpredictable. Pope's nomenclature for Shakespeare's characters is highly predictable; Shakespeare's is not. So I'll put it to you. When you read Shakespeare do you want to read Shakespeare? or do you want to read Pope?

March 5, 1834

Coler: Shakespeare's intellectual action is wholly unlike that of Ben Jonson or Beaumont and Fletcher. The latter see the totality of a sentence or passage, and then project it entire. Shakespeare goes on creating, and evolving B out of A, and C out of B, and so on, just as a serpent moves, which makes a fulcrum of its own body, and seems for ever twisting and nutting its own strength.
Curiously, Pope repeats the tag “Count.” but this is not because he is conserving this rare example of Shakespeare’s multiple naming. Rather, Pope himself had a neo-classy notion of scene divisions. For him an entrance or exit during a speech initiated a new editorial scene, and the first speech of such a new scene required an editorial speech tag— even if there is no interruption of the flow of speech. Thus, Pope would have had a tag here even if Shakespeare hadn’t. Although Pope idealized the unity of character, we can surmise that this now-unpopular editorial practice tended to atomize Shakespearian action, a sin comparable to the editorial structuring of the action into acts, which is still much in vogue, though there is no basis for it in many Shakesper’s early publications. In any case, we certainly may edit the quotation with which this paper opened:

Pope: Had all the speeches been printed with Shakespeare’s very names of the Persons, I believe an Editor may apply his own names with certainty to every speaker.

Pope was only the second “editor” of Shakespeare, as we have come to use that term. The first was Rowe, whose edition appeared in 1709, almost two decades before Pope’s, who closely followed Rowe’s legal in-rehaming characters. Prior to them, and the age of Shakespeare Editing which they initiated, stretched a century and more, back to the quarto editions of Shakespeare’s individual works, which began appearing before his death, and to the collected editions in folio, which came out after. During that century, these quartos and folios were frequently reprinted, one printing often serving uncritically as copy for the next, the compositors modernizing graphic features and punctuation, for example, as they went. Compositors would attempt to correct what seemed to be obvious mistakes, but, human nature being what it is, would also create new errors. And so this pre-Editorial era of transmission evidences a gradual corruption and naive sophistication of Shakespeare’s texts. Perhaps the simplest way to characterize this period is to say that Shakespeare’s text was drifting.

Such a process can be tolerated at first by wary and ingenious readers, but it must inevitably have a break-point, when the textual errors become so grossly compounded that average readers can no longer understand the text, or when the text deviates so considerably from whatever early versions may have survived, that collation of them produces a list of variants longer than the original work. But such cumulative drift of the reprinted texts in the 17th century can scarcely account in itself for the birth of Editing. True, the fourth folio at the end of this period has its sorry moments textually, but Renaissance readers did not expect the kind of accuracy in printed books that we do. 17th-century readers must have been astute at detecting error and double-guessing authorial intent behind the frequent, palpable errors. In any event, Shakespeare at this time was merely a good read. Luckily, he had died before he had become the Bard, whose every word was sacred. (He had to wait for Editing to be so canonized.) I suggest, therefore, that the impetus for Editing lay outside the internal problems posed by the drifting texts, just as I suggest that the impetus for continued Editing in the 20th century lies outside the internal problems of the text. The urge to edit stemmed from the profound transformation of English culture in the 18th century, which was typified by its fascination with Taste, Propriety, and Criticism as preceptors to art. The age had its positive sides, no doubt, but its stiffness can be measured by the passionate reaction to it (to look ahead) in Romanticism, just as much as in the freedom and wildness (to look back) of the Elizabethan texts that it sought to discipline, tidy, and regulate.

A corollary of the editorial reform of speech tags is the creation of editorial dramatis-personae lists. No Shakespeare text published before his death has such a list, and only a handful exist in the folio tradition after his death. Why editors should inflict dramatis-personae lists on plays, and not novellae-personae lists on novels or sonnetae-personae lists on sonnet sequences, is not clear to me. For the most part, editors act, they do not explain. It is not that such lists are not helpful to a reader who wants such intro-textual Aids, but that they take the conservative form they do in edition after edition, when there are a thousand different ways to help a reader, is strange. The crucial thing to observe is that the dramatis-personae list has insinuated itself between the title page and the opening of Act 1, Scene 1. These editorial lists have now become as sacrosanct as the very body of Shakespeare’s playtext.

It was decades ago that the battle was joined to check the critical tendency to count Lady MacBeth’s children—to project the Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines, to use Mary Cowden Clarke’s telling phrase. But can such a battle really be won as long as dramatis-personae lists continue to infiltrate Shakespeare’s text? These lists imply that characters are solid entities,

The Countess

that pre-exist their functions in the play, rather than illusions

now Mother now Old Countess now Lady...
built up out of the similitudinous dynamic of all the ingredients of
dramatic art, of which character is only a part.

Edition after edition suggests that editors do not read Shakespeare’s
text afresh to compile such lists. No, they read and crib them from
other editors, in a tradition that stems from Pope’s appropriation of
Rowe. Both their editions were published by the astute Tonson, who
claimed his copyright, I understand, not in Shakespeare's, but in his
editors' words. (Do you smell a fault?) But ever since Tonson's rights
ran out, it seems always to be the same originally arbitrary, now-
traditional list—the same peckering order, men above women, gentle
above common—and only so much info, and of such and such a slant.

Lear is King, but not a Father, or a Fool. Albany is Husband to Goneril;
but she is Lear's Daughter, not Albany's Wife—or Edmund's Lover,
or her Sisters' Rival, or a Suicide. Duke Frederick is the Usurper of
Duke Senior's dominions; the latter lives in banishment. Macbeth,
however, is merely a General in the King's army. It doesn't say where
he lives; nor does it say he is a King-Killer. Bertram is Count of
Rossillion, not an Egotistical Snob; yet Parolles is his Parasitical Fol-
lower. Julius Caesar is, comfortingly, plain Julius Caesar. But Marc
Antony is one of the Triumvirs—a position he achieved after Caesar's
death, even though at this early point in the unfolding of the action of
the play—I mean this early point in the unfolding of the dramatis-
personae list—Caesar is evidently not dead yet. At least not very dead.

Obviously the dramatis-personae lists' perspectives on Shakespeare's
characters are as crock-eyed as those in a cubist painting. Of such stuff
is Editorial Unity made.