

The Two Texts of *King Lear*: a Characterization Issue

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the divergences between the various editions of William Shakespeare’s King Lear, mainly the 1608 Quarto (Q1) and the 1623 Folio (F1) versions. Initially, all the available editions will be examined, but the focus will later shift to studying the scholarly and editorial debates that arise from their existence as (mostly) independent texts. Subsequently, both minor and major discrepancies – ranging from punctuation and spelling to the inclusion or omission of entire scenes – will be analyzed. However, particular attention will be paid to the implications the variations between the different versions have for the play’s characterization: special focus will be given, for instance, to the absence of the mock trial scene and the Fool’s prophecy. The final part of the paper will focus on the divergences in the characterization of the protagonist, Lear, and the Fool, as well as the shifts in moral authority between Albany and Edgar across versions.

Keywords: *King Lear, characterization, editing, editorial debate, textual independence*

Introduction

King Lear is generally considered to be one of the greatest works written by English playwright William Shakespeare.

The plot mainly deals with a king, Lear, who divides his kingdom into three parts and decides to bestow one of them on each of his daughters, provided they profess their love for him first. Cordelia, the youngest, refuses and is banished. This, the resulting guilt, and the conflict with Goneril and Regan, the king’s elder daughters, cause Lear to go mad. The play ends with the death of most of the characters, with Albany and (possibly) Kent being the only relevant exceptions. A second plot, or subplot, interwoven and parallel to the first one, has Edmund, Gloucester’s bastard son, deceive his father and trick him into thinking his legitimate son Edgar wants him dead; Edgar is forced into hiding, takes on several disguises, and ends up helping his father, who has been blinded and does not recognize him. All of the characters introduced in the subplot also pass away at the end of the play, except for Edgar.

Albany and Edgar's survival is attributed to their ability to evolve and challenge their principles and beliefs; nevertheless, their moral stance changes across various versions and will, therefore, constitute one of the key points of this paper.

1. The multiple texts of *King Lear*

There are numerous editions of the play analyzed. The first one, a Quarto edition (which, from here on after, will be referred to as Q1), was printed and published in 1608; the exact date is wrongly reported on the opening page of the Second Quarto (Q2), an edition of the text which was actually issued in 1619. The First Folio edition (F1), as is the case with most of Shakespeare's works, appeared in 1623; the subsequent editions, such as the Third Quarto (Q3) and all the remaining in-Folio versions, were printed after this year: the Second Folio (F2), for instance, was published in 1632, whereas Q3 is dated 1655.

The in-Folio editions of the play, particularly F1 (as the following versions are mainly reprints of it), are generally believed to have been constructed by compiling either Q1 and Q2 or Q2 and a prompt-book; scholars generally agree on the fact that Q2 was, in any case, a primary source for F1 (Foakes 113). F2 is actually deserving of special attention in this regard, as it is the only version of the play in which the character of Kent is explicitly said to die, albeit in unclear circumstances, at the end of the final act; this is not specified in either the earlier or later editions, although there is some consensus that the character's final words can be interpreted as a reference to his death off-stage after the play has ended: in fact, following Lear's demise, Kent, loyal servant of the king, announces that he has "a journey, sir, shortly to go" and that his master was waiting and he could not say no (*KL* 5.3.320-21).

2. The editorial debate

Aside from this detail in F2, only Q1, Q2 and F1 can be examined as different texts independent from one another: they have, that is to say, what is defined as independent textual authority.

The editorial debate concerning these three versions of the play is centered on the question of which one or ones of them should be used as reference when editing *King Lear*. The first problem that arises from this dispute is establishing whether the Quarto versions, and particularly Q1, are good or bad Quartos. Foakes addresses this in his introduction to the Arden edition of the play, stating that in "the 'good' quartos, among which Q1 of *Lear* is now usually included, were printed from the author's 'foul papers'"

(Foakes 125); he nevertheless admits that “[Q1] has many errors and muddles, and frequently prints verse as prose or prose as verse” (Foakes 111).

Having confirmed Q1’s validity as an independent text worthy of consideration, the issue of the superiority of F1 to Q1 or Q2 and vice versa presents itself; Foakes, in this regard, states that “in [some] instances, it is possible to find Q superior to F, F superior to Q, or both as offering equal but different versions; value judgements are always open to challenge” (Foakes 132). Still, scholars have debated this problem at length and attempted to find an answer. This issue is, furthermore, linked to the fact that F1, Q1, and Q2 can be read separately or conjointly: if one were to declare one version better than the others, surely, they could be inclined not to consider them when editing the text. Michael Warren confidently argues that Q (1 and 2) and F1 “must be treated as separate versions of *King Lear*” (Warren, M. 105). There have been, in an opposite fashion, attempts at asserting that Q and F derive from the exact text, an edition of the play which is now lost; Wells discredits this position, claiming instead that “the Quarto and Folio texts of *King Lear* are distinct” and that “there is no valid evidence that they derive from a lost archetype” (Wells 20). Perhaps the most original take on this matter is the one advanced by Weis, who argues that:

We are [...] not presented with two different plays but with the same work in two different stages of composition, the latter (Folio) containing the play as conceived by Shakespeare sometime after 1608 and before his retirement from the stage in 1613. [...] This does not mean that the case for revision has been proved beyond a reasonable doubt, nor that the Oxford editors are entirely justified in asserting categorically that ‘the 1608 Quarto represents the play as Shakespeare originally wrote it, and the 1623 Folio as he substantially revised it,’ and that the revision was ‘made probably two or three years after the first version had been written and performed.’ (Weis 266)

In this view, the discrepancies between the various versions of the play seem to be attributed to the author’s creative process and to the natural development of the story in his mind, rather than to any other cause. However, a lot of scholars such as Foakes do not agree with this opinion.

3. Minor divergencies

Among the numerous discrepancies across the different editions of the play, the vast majority are minor in quality and do not cause a significant difference between the texts.

Of these divergences, most are typographical, metrical, or accidental: they involve changes in punctuation, the addition of extrametrical words in F1, minor and globally irrelevant corrections, and the substitution of words with

equivalent ones. Errors due to eye skip or simple accidents are also typical in the process of copying and printing a new version of any text, a circumstance which, in the case of *King Lear*, was exacerbated by the fact that the original manuscript from which Q1 was issued was “often difficult to read” (Blayney 26-30, 184-7); moreover, it is commonly believed that Q1 was set by two probably inexperienced compositors, who were working “for a printer who had never before printed a play text” (Foakes 111).

Others appear more relevant: for instance, the previously mentioned printing of prose as verse and verse as prose in Q1 has caused some rather significant editing issues. The two different titles, the Quarto and Folio editions, also catch the eye: both the Quarto versions were printed with the title “*The History of King Lear*”. At the same time, the Folio reported the title “*The Tragedy of King Lear*” (Foakes 113), thus creating a contrast in the possible initial perceptions of the play's genre.

A final category of minor divergences concerns the spelling of names and headings: Albany, for instance, is sometimes spelled Albanie in F, whereas Gonerill (or Goneril) is consistently spelled Gonerill (with an ‘o’ instead of the usual ‘e’) in Q1 and Q2. The most wavering spelling of all is that of the name of the duke of Gloucester, variably spelled Gloster. (Headings Glo. and Glos.) in Q, and Gloster, Gouster or Gloucester (headings Glo. or Glou.) in F.

4. Major discrepancies

Some of the discrepancies between the various versions are instead more considerable: they can actively change or shape the interpretation of certain characters or certain aspects of the plot.

The first of these ‘major’ divergences concern the omission or addition of entire scenes, or, as stated by Weis: “The differences between *King Lear* Quarto (1608) and Folio (1623) are considerable, with Quarto containing some three hundred lines not in Folio, which in turn has a hundred lines absent from the earlier version” (Weis 264). The possible causes for these alterations are, of course, great in number and impossible to prove with total and undisputable certainty. According to Weis, nevertheless,

Not only are the discrepancies on a different scale from the “good” Quarto/Folio differences found in the sources of plays like *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Othello* (all of them “two-text” works), but they appear to be systematically governed by aesthetic considerations and, in some instances, political censorship. (Weis 264)

The case for an intervention on the Quarto edition of the text ruled by political censorship seems to be particularly relevant or at least plausible in the instance of the war with France, which is treated in vastly differing manners in the

Quarto and Folio versions. While, in fact, both Q1 and Q2 extensively mention the war between England and France (a universalization of the fraternal conflict between Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia), a rather significant part of the lines concerning this struggle was omitted in F. More particularly, it is to be noted that the third scene of Act 4 is absent in F1 and the following in-Folio editions. These deletions, probably the work of a censor rather than Shakespeare himself, make it so that F “offers an intentional revision of Q, a revision calculated [...] as one of several that remove or obscure references to a French invasion” (Foakes 393, citing Taylor 31-32, and Urkowitz 6779).

Other scenes or passages are entirely omitted in one of the versions: specifically, the Fool’s prophecy appears for the first time in F1. It is absent in the earlier editions, and the mock-trial scene is absent in F1 and the subsequent texts.

As concerns the latter of the two instances, its deletion from F has been defended by some scholars in favor of a faster pace (Warren, R. 45-57). Nevertheless, Clare notes that “The mock trial has always been kept [in productions]” (Clare 46-47): Foakes expands on this aspect, adding that the reason for this is that “everyone agrees that it works well on stage” (Foakes 132) and that its indisputable dramatic value is since it is a “nightmarish reworking of the opening [scene]” and serves as a link between 1.1 and 5.3 (Foakes 132, citing Holland 179-80).

According to Weis, the former passage of the two cited above, the one which includes the Fool’s prophecy, is an addition whose very existence contradicts the idea that F has a faster dramatic pace than Q (Weis 265): the prophecy does, in fact, add nothing to the plot, thereby making the omission of the mock-trial scene incoherent. The added lines were, nevertheless, either “retained (from a source independent of Quarto) or freshly introduced by a revising Shakespeare” (Weis 265), but “it is entirely possible [...] that the Fool’s prophecy [...] was, on reflection, signaled as optional in the copy text for Quarto along with several other passages.” (Weis 266).

5. The issue of characterization

The final aspect affected by the changes in the various editions of the text is characterization, involving Lear, the Fool, Albany, Edgar, and (albeit marginally) Edmund.

The protagonist of the play, Lear, appears as (if even possible) slightly more nuanced in F. Only in the Folio versions does Lear, in fact, offer an excuse or a justification for dividing up the kingdom in the first place: his remark, “That future strife / May be prevented” (*KL* 1.1.434), constitutes a first and incredibly significant instance of tragic irony in the text. Furthermore, his character development is gradually hinted at and shown to the audience by

the fact that, during the storm, he invites the Fool to go into the hovel first: “In you go, boy. [...] / Nay, get in thee” (KL, 3.4.26-7).

The Fool is almost certainly the character most affected by this process: in fact, F changes or modifies 54 of the 225 lines the Fool has in Q, particularly having the Fool answer “Lear’s shadow” to Lear’s question “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (KL, 1.4.221-22). These changes do not, however, radically modify his characterization, which does not particularly falter across the different versions of the text.

The core of this essay is to explore how discrepancies between the various editions can influence the characterization and perception of Albany and Edgar.

Most of the lines referencing Albany’s moral standing are omitted in F: the result of these deletions, which do not alter the actual plot at all, is that Albany has a stronger ethical position in Q. He does, however, gain some authority in the Folio version by controlling the final duel between Edmund and Edgar (Warren, M. 95-105); this task was instead assigned to Edmund in F, and it could be argued that the change made deprives Edmund of a significant advantage on his brother in this instance.

The lines of which Albany is stripped in F are, in these versions, assigned to Edgar, who is thus able to reinforce his moral standing further. In F, he has, therefore, more opportunities to express his ideals and ethical views, while still acting in a way that demonstrates his ability to morally compromise (for instance, when he kills Oswald or reads the private correspondence between Regan and Edmund). This grey line that the character of Edgar (and jointly, albeit more marginally, Albany) is precisely the reason that causes him to be one of the very few characters to survive the tragic evolution of the plot, by adapting to the circumstances without dwelling into purely evil tendencies as Goneril, Regan and Edmund might be said to do in the course of the play.

Finally, special attention must be paid to the very final lines of the play: these, spoken by Albany in Q, are instead attributed to Edgar in F:

ALBANY/EDGAR

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most, we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

In the footnote to these lines, Foakes argues that “the royal plural [...] is appropriate to Albany, but the change in F completes the enhancement of Edgar’s role” (Foakes 392, n. n° 322). Therefore, in this particularly significant instance as well, the changes made in F and the subsequent discrepancies with Q seem to support Edgar’s role as a character capable of evolving and possessing a more realistic, less simplistic or ‘greyer’ moral

standing. However, this is achieved by depriving Albany of the same opportunity and instead weakening his ethical position.

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