



An Uncertain Text: Reliving Shakespeare's Creative Milieu in the Modern World

Eric M. Johnson

Abstract – *The production of online texts, especially within wikis, is far more similar to the creative processes of the Elizabethan stage than printed texts. Because Shakespeare continued to re-work his plays in conjunction with his actors and audiences, and these texts have been continually restaged to this day, they have never truly reached an immutable, teleological form. Thus, the collaborative tension between the multiple authors of a wiki article is more analogous to Shakespeare's multi-layered, ever-shifting environment than the comparatively linear production processes of printed texts. This paper uses the text of King Lear and the "King Lear" Wikipedia article to demonstrate the similarities between Shakespeare's dramatic world and online tools.*

Juliet. What must be shall be.

Friar Laurence. That's a certain text.

-- *Romeo and Juliet, Act IV, scene 1*

Playwriting in the Elizabethan theater was a dynamic, collaborative process between the authors, actors, and audiences of the period. Playwrights composed their texts for acting companies who tested the material in live performance and made revisions according to theatergoers' reactions. Since no copyright law protected any text, authors could borrow from other works – or steal ideas outright – and no one could legitimately object (Shakespeare, Ed. Orgel, xxvi-xxvii). Indeed,

audiences had little expectation of “originality” in the modern sense: they did not necessarily want to see new stories, they wanted to see old stories re-told with wit and vitality.

If companies performed for an audience outside their normal venue – in a noble’s private home, or in a different town – the plays and their presentations reflected the circumstances. They might omit portions of dialogue and even entire scenes. In a more intimate setting, where the actors’ voices did not have to compete with large, noisy crowds, they would surely have adduced more subtleties from their lines. They would not have considered these reworkings violations of the author’s intellectual property because plays were owned by the companies that commissioned them.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries accepted that a playwright’s “original” work was not the result of private, solitary labor, but a public act. The stories were in general circulation, and once they were re-presented on the stage in their new forms, the public could react to them. This forum for critique was not limited to the educated classes but extended downward to illiterate workers who sought nothing more than entertainment.

As Marjorie Garber says about the plays of the era, “plays were written collaboratively, under pressure of time and the stage, somewhat like film and television scripts today” (Garber 22). Investors in public theaters wished to see their money multiplied, as all investors do. Actors held shares in their companies and were compensated according to their performances’ popularity (Ibid 25). That does not mean that the interests of both groups were purely financial, as their numbers included, of course, Shakespeare himself, but such fiscal interests did help shape the direction and substance of the theatrical enterprises. They could not survive if they generated and staged plays that could not find a wide audience.

The English state exerted its own influence on the creative process through the Office of the Revels, which licensed plays for public consumption. Its head, the Master of the Revels, was a member of the royal household, and his opinions reflected that station. This legal scheme had a circumscribing effect on the plays’ subjects – if a work appeared to express anti-monarchical sentiments, or if it seemed to criticize the reigning monarch, it would not be approved.

In sum, the playwrights certainly expended tremendous intellectual labor on their plays, and were the animating force in fashioning attractive and coherent themes, plots, and characters. However, the credit must be shared with the other contributors – on stage and off – whose influence helped shape those works during the authors’ lives. This creative process frequently continued after their death, particularly with Shakespeare’s works, which have been continuously staged (with a brief pause for the English Civil Wars) to this day. Scholars added their voices to the mix when English literature became a proper subject of study in nineteenth-century universities. A myriad of film, radio, and television versions of the plays emerged as those media became more widespread – not least because Shakespeare’s works were beyond the protection of copyright law. As long as the plays are staged, they will never have a final version.

To see the similarities between early-modern play composition and a wiki¹ article’s development, I will compare the historical progression of *King Lear* in print, and the article called “King Lear” on Wikipedia. Since the First Quarto (Q1)² of *Lear* was printed four hundred years ago

¹ In its purest form, a wiki is a collection of online texts that can be edited by its readers, who can also see previous revisions of the texts. Wikis generally encourage, if not require, their reader-editors to register themselves. The best-known wiki by far is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org).

² A quarto is a printed copy of a single play. Its name comes from its manufacturing technique, in which a single page is folded twice at right angles to make four leaves.

(Higgins 4), it has gone through numerous and divergent editions, and this article will not attempt to catalog all of them. Rather, it will highlight several developments in the “accepted” version of *Lear*, and then show how, by virtue of its very nature, the wiki article is more suited to following the contours of these developments.

Let us briefly compare that raucous, ongoing process of playwriting (really, a series of overlapping processes) with print production and its linear progression of tasks ordered toward a fixed, teleological outcome. Typically, a printed text originates from an author, which is then read by one or more editors, who turn the text back to the author for revisions. That cycle is repeated as many times as necessary, and when both parties are satisfied that the text is in its final version, it travels to the production workers, who begin the grunt work of laying out the pages, making small edits, and shepherding the layouts through the physical generation of the printed material.

The first major printed re-interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Lear* was by far the most infamous. Nahum Tate, a Restoration-era poet and writer, changed the entire nature of the play. In the introduction to his version, he says:

...’Twas my good Fortune to light on one Expedient to rectifie what was wanting in the Regularity and Probability of the Tale, which was to run through the whole *A Love betwixt Edgar and Cordelia*, that never chang’d word with each other in the Original...The Distress of the Story is evidently heightned by it; and it particularly gave Occasion of a New Scene or Two, of more Success (perhaps) than Merit. This Method necessarily threw men on making the Tale conclude in a Success to the innocent distrest Persons: Otherwise I must have incumbred the Stage with dead Bodies, which Conduct makes many Tragedies conclude with unseasonable Jests (Bloom 11).

Tate called Shakespeare’s original a “Heap of Jewels, unstrung and unpolisht” (Ibid), and the “Success” he mentions is that Lear and Cordelia do not die, and Edgar and Cordelia are married, thus changing the harshest of tragedies into a standard-issue comedy. Incredibly, this perverted (is there any other word?) text persisted as the accepted version until 1838 (Garber 660). In Tate’s defense, he did not intend to commit vandalism: he was taking a pre-existing text and re-shaping it to fit his own conceptions and the perceived desires of his audience; precisely what Shakespeare and his contemporaries did. These impositions are incomprehensible to modern sensibilities, but in the 1680s, Shakespeare was not yet *The Shakespeare*, the baseline against which other English writers are compared. Furthermore, Tate’s reinterpretation is not wholly different from many “radical” modern productions, deliciously parodied in a recent article in *The Onion*, “Unconventional Director Sets Shakespeare Play In Time, Place Shakespeare Intended” (Onion).

Q1 and the subsequent quartos were riddled with errors, and the First Folio (F),³ printed in 1623, had more than a few as well. The editorial quality did improve in later editions, but they were not pristine. Q1 has about 300 lines that are not found in F, and F has about 100 lines that are not found in Q1 (Foakes 21). Some of the differences are significant, such as the Fool’s enigmatic last line, “And I’ll go to bed at noon,” which only appears in F (Garber 674). A scene depicting Lear convening a trial with imagined defendants is in Q1 but not F (Ibid, 678). All this prompted

³ Like the quarto, the folio’s name comes from its manufacture, except a single page is folded once to make two leaves, which are usually larger than a quarto. The First Folio, printed after the author’s death, collected most of Shakespeare’s plays into a single volume.

eighteenth-century editors to fault the printers for negligence (Urkowitz 4). These editors – many were greatly talented men, but none were professional scholars – did their best to make corrections and reconcile the differences between the texts (Taylor, *Reinventing* 185). They were by no means unsophisticated, and used what they thought were the best tools available to them: the source criticism that had been applied to biblical and classical texts to “purify” them from later accretions and errors (Murphy 69).

Professional scholars began to address Shakespeare’s corpus in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *Globe Shakespeare* of 1864, a critical edition edited by Cambridge professors William George Clark and William Aldis Wright, went back to the quartos and First Folio to produce their volume, instead of using another editor’s texts. They have been faulted subsequently for taking earlier versions of the plays as Shakespearean drafts, but that point is debatable (Hosley 78).

In reading nineteenth-century editors’ comments about the texts, one is struck by the confidence with which they present their views. In his 1879 edition, Henry Hudson wrote that the Folio contains “several passages which were most certainly not written by Shakespeare” (3). Horace Furness proclaimed that, “the Folio...is much better than [the text of] the Quarto....Where the Folio is clearly defective the Quartos have been called in aid” (v-vi). He is supremely confident in determining what are and are not “Shakespeare’s” words, much more so than present-day editors.

Lear criticism grew more contentious in the twentieth century. The maddening discrepancies between Q1 and F spawned a multitude of interpretations that depended on speculative facts, such as whether Q1 could have been a memorial text written by shorthand as it was being performed (Duthie 82). Scholars proposed a new theory: that the Quarto of 1608 and the Folio of 1623 were “alternative texts created by a revising author,” not transcriptions or copies. The 1983 book *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare’s Two Versions of King Lear* contained a dozen articles promulgating this view. Some current editions of *Lear* now print the Quarto and Folio as separate texts, though that approach is not universal, and it remains to be seen how this issue will resolve itself in the future.

Rather than being physically present to its readers like a book, wiki articles reside on a Web server as texts destined for distribution through the Internet. A wiki’s owner can control access, but in the “classic” wiki model, anyone on the Internet can edit the articles at any time. (This is the model that Wikipedia has adopted, to the point of allowing editors to contribute anonymously.) Wiki articles are published without the physical limitations of mechanical reproduction, and they normally do not have a final version, so they can perpetually remain in the editorial cycle.

Fittingly, it was an anonymous user who created the original version of the “King Lear” Wikipedia article on August 16, 2002. Its six paragraphs are unremarkable; there are no sections, illustrations, or links to outside sources. It concludes with a vague reference to Tate’s revisions: “During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the play’s essential tragic ending was much criticized, and alternative versions were written and performed, in which the leading characters survived and Edgar and Cordelia were married.”

A year later, the article expanded, but not by much – there was one more paragraph, and a user started a section called “Movie Adaptations,” with five items listed. Four external links were at the bottom.

In March 2004, the article had become useful, if not exactly comprehensive. The major characters are listed in their own section, along with descriptions of each. “Sources” had its own section as well, describing the sources Shakespeare may have used to write *Lear*. At the end of that spring, the article began to resemble an encyclopedia article, and included separate sections for the

plot, sources, “Noteworthy innovations,” adaptations, notes, and links. The article had also gained a public-domain image of a painting by William Dyce called “King Lear and the Fool in the Storm.”

By July 2005, users had performed over 164 edits on the “Lear” article, and changed the “Noteworthy innovations” section into “Points of debate,” which describes several difficulties with the plot. One subsection fully describes Tate’s revisions, and it quotes Samuel Johnson’s strikingly uncharacteristic concurrence with these amendments. Another small image of an eighteenth-century painting appears further down the page.

As of this writing (January 30, 2008), the article is a reasonably good introduction to the play: it gives a broad overview of the play’s substance and history, without delving into unnecessary detail. It has nine images that help to explain the play’s action and the nature of the printed texts, with an extensive series of external links leading to other Lear-related online materials. It is not, however, listed as an official “good article” by Wikipedia’s standards. On the “Discussion” page attached to the article, a Wikipedia editor explains why: “Several sections lack citations, and there is no discussion of the language and structure of the play. The final sections of the article, about film versions, are still lists and need to be turned to prose” (Wikipedia, “Discussion”).

Dozens of people have edited the “King Lear” article in the last five years, logging almost 1,000 edits (see Appendix for details). Over 800 other Wikipedia articles link to “King Lear,” as well as over 50 sites on the Internet. Scholars and amateurs alike can contribute what they know, edit the text for style and readability, and upload public-domain images to make the presentation more attractive and accessible. A few editors are highly committed, and watch the article for “bad” changes. Looking through the edit history, one can see more than a few instances of “reversion,” when editors roll back undesirable changes to the article. In the most recent example of reversion, an editor inserted an opinionated statement into the introductory paragraph; within one minute that change was reverted. A watchful Wikipedia editor corrected the article almost as soon as the change was made – in contrast to Tate’s literary interventions, which endured for decades. In all probability, Wikipedia editors will continue to expand and improve the article, as the number of edits increased from 16 in 2003 to 434 in 2007, and has increased every year.

Although they are not equal in literary quality – and never will be, because one is a work of art, and the other is an ancillary work that describes it – there are striking similarities between the *King Lear* of the early 1600s and “King Lear” of Wikipedia in 2008. Both operate without authorial copyright protections: the texts can be (and are) copied by others for their own use. (Wikipedia editors agree to renounce any copyright claims on materials they produce when they contribute to the site.) Editing is somewhat idiosyncratic and based on the personal styles of the participants, who adhere to general guidelines, but can interpret those guidelines for themselves and implement their interpretations. No single person or entity exerts final control over the texts’ form. Participation is open and democratic – in the case of Wikipedia, anyone with a Web browser can change or add to the article, or discuss the article; in the case of the play text, anyone with pocket change could watch the play, and audibly react to it.

One might say that the debate in print over the texts of *Lear* has the same give-and-take as Wikipedia and that print has advantages of its own, notably the closely-controlled peer review process of academic publishing, and thus (ostensibly) a higher level of scholarship. But those attributes have little to do with the medium itself and everything to do with the way that the academic world confers status upon scholars. Peer review is not ontologically connected to the printed word. In fact, peer-reviewed online journals have already begun to emerge, and by making their texts (in many cases)

accessible without a subscription, they ensure a greater potential audience than subscription-only journals, giving scholars a better opportunity to showcase their work.

Wikipedia will never be peer reviewed for quality and scholarship, at least not in the traditional academic sense. It has been making serious moves toward better-quality content in the last two years, as well as maintaining editorial stability within mature articles. Its articles do go through a review process, and are scrutinized for style, grammar, content, and other relevant attributes. Wikipedia readers see the most recent content when they visit the “King Lear” article. Novelty does not equal quality, but in the case of collaborative online texts produced by volunteers, the latest usually *is* the greatest, as it reflects a more refined text. To explore the controversy over the Q1 and F variants in print, researchers have to collect journal articles, monographs, and other materials, and piece together the arguments on both sides. *Division of the Kingdoms* remains a touchstone for the debate, but it was published a quarter-century ago, and cannot capture the subsequent conversations that it engendered.

None of this is to suggest that a Wikipedia article is superior to its subject or the scholarly debate surrounding it. Rather, a Wikipedia article allows scholars to observe the editorial processes of the uncertain, never-complete wiki article, and apply those observations to *King Lear* and other editorially problematic texts. The Wikipedia article on *King Lear* unexpectedly invokes and recreates the collective, nonlinear, and often unascertained process of creation from which the play itself emerged, suggesting that the further one gets from the exigencies of printed text production, the closer one comes to imagining the milieu in which Shakespeare fashioned his plays.

Appendix: Data lists

Versions of “King Lear” Cited on Wikipedia

16 August 2002: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=King_Lear&oldid=543249

23 July 2003: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=King_Lear&oldid=1425971

28 March 2004: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=King_Lear&oldid=3026832

6 June 2004: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=King_Lear&oldid=4134360

12 July 2005: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=King_Lear&oldid=18668155

29 January 2008: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=King_Lear&oldid=187731986

Discussion page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:King_Lear

Reversion: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=King_Lear&diff=187730795&oldid=187730779

Edit Totals by Year

Year	Edits
2002	4
2003	16
2004	100
2005	99
2006	309
2007	434
2008	27
TOTAL	989

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Major Literary Characters: King Lear*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1992.
- Duthie, George Ian. *Elizabethan Shorthand and the First Quarto of King Lear*. 1949. New York: Folcroft Press, 1970.
- Foakes, R.A. "The Texts of *King Lear*." *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's King Lear*. Ed. Jay L. Halio. New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1996.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare After All*. New York: Anchor Books, 2004.
- Hosley, Richard, Richard Knowles, and Ruth McGugan, eds. *Shakespeare Variorum Handbook*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1971.
- "King Lear." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 30 Jan. 2008. Wikimedia Foundation. 30 Jan. 2008 <<http://en.wikipedia.org>>.
- Murphy, Andrew. *Shakespeare in Print*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Ed. Horace H. Furness. New York: J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1880.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Ed. Henry N. Hudson. Boston: Ginn, 1879.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Ed. Stephen Orgel. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- Taylor, Gary, and Michael Warren, eds. *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Taylor, Gary. *Reinventing Shakespeare*. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1989.
- "Unconventional Director Sets Shakespeare Play In Time, Place Shakespeare Intended." *www.theonion.com*. 7 June 2007. The Onion. 30 January 2008 <http://www.theonion.com/content/news/unconventional_director_sets>.
- Urkowitz, Steven. *Shakespeare's Revision of King Lear*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.