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Editors, texts, and performance: the value of textual criticism in the age of relativity

Abstract

The article is an attempt in part to refute what are seen as gross distortions of the work of
Shakespeare's editors in a recently-published article by Johannes Birringer. Initially the work of such
editors is analysed, with particular emphasis being placed on their acknowledgement of the tentative
nature of their conclusions, in refutation of Birringer's claim that they are obsessed with 'authority'
and definitive texts. It is then pointed out that Birringer bases his argument on a false perception of
the relationship between text and performance in the Elizabethan theatre, and the value of sound
editorial work is then indicated, based on a more accurate assessment of this relationship.

The argument is then extended into a more general discussion of the attitudes underlying Birringer's
article, which are questioned in a number of ways on the basis of the contradiction between theory
and practice.

1. The issue

Johannes Birringer's article "Texts, plays and instabilities" in the first edition of *South
African Theatre Journal* (1987:4-16) contains, among other things, such a distorted view of
the activities of the editors of Shakespeare's plays that I feel compelled to make some sort
of defence of their work, while at the same time extending the discussion from a simple
argument/ counter-argument encounter to an attempt to gain a more balanced perspective
on some of the broader issues Birringer's article raises.

In his argument Birringer, following the recent trend in the discussion of what could
broadly and loosely be called cultural experience to see relativism everywhere and
permanence nowhere, seeks to do away with many of the approaches to drama that have
been employed up to now, all of which, he feels, tend to seek for some kind of hierarchy,
stability and permanence. I should state immediately that this position is neither here nor
there, really: modes of interpretation come and go; each has its contribution to make; and
each has its weaknesses. In the course of establishing his case, however, Birringer
introduces a thoroughgoing dismissal of the work of the editors of Shakespeare's plays,
which I shall repeat in full, since it will provide the basis for the first part of this article.
Birringer (1987:10-11) states that

> Shakespeare scholars continue to be religiously obsessed with determinisms, Good and Evil quartos,
> "definite" or "original" texts, "authority", "aesthetic integrity", and so forth, although they should in fact
> know that - so far as performance goes - the written Text remains our best evidence *after* the event,
> very much like the quartos and folios of the Elizabethan stage that are in most cases merely records
> and transcripts of a certain performance in a certain playhouse. Shakespeare's modern editors, in
> their search for the lost Urtext and their construction of an "authoritative" version of it, have
> successfully repressed the unthinkable thought that there never was a stable text in the first place but

only scenarios-inprogress (sic), trial versions, subject to cutting, rewording, expansion, revision ... and, not surprisingly, to collaborative processes in the theatre as well as to diverse proprietary interests of acting companies and owners.

Now, whereas it seems to have become an established fact of many of the procedures which have been created to discuss cultural experience that in order to say something considered to be 'new' and 'different' exponents of the 'new' feel obliged to go in for "blanket condemnations of existing positions ... as ... a strategy, the purpose of which is to carve out a place within the discipline for the group's interests and methods" (Visser, 1983:60), such procedures seem to me to be extremely unfortunate. They become so because they almost invariably involve the universally condemned activity of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, in this case in particular dismissing and denegrating some genuinely valuable work done by some very capable people for the sake of introducing as yet untried ideas into the spectrum of knowledge - or, more accurately, into the spectrum of theories about knowledge.

2. The procedures and practice of textual criticism

In order to retain what seems to me to be a very healthy baby, what this article will attempt to do is to examine the principles the editors of Shakespeare's plays have developed over the years, in order to see if there is any value in their work. To get to the root of the matter, one needs to ask questions about what exactly Shakespeare's editors are attempting to do when they prepare a modern edition of one of his plays, on what principles they are attempting to operate when they do so, and what their attitude to their work is. Is it as blinkered - and self-deluding - as Birringer suggests it is? All these matters have been discussed with great clarity in key works which provide the basis for understanding what a textual critic working with the plays of Shakespeare (or, for that matter, with any other text) is trying to achieve. W.W. Greg, probably the greatest of Shakespeare's editors, sets out seven rules in his *The editorial problem in Shakespeare* which can serve as valuable guidelines to anyone who wishes to find out more about the subject. These can profitably be read in full (Greg, 1954:x-lv), but only Rule 1 is quoted here, for it states the basic aim of the textual critic preparing a critical edition of a Renaissance dramatic text:

> *The aim of a critical edition should be to present the text, so far as the available evidence permits, in the form in which we may suppose that it would have stood in a fair copy, made by the author himself, of the work as he finally intended it.* (Greg, 1954:x)

Let us set aside for the moment the issue of whether attempting to establish a text *"as [the author] finally intended it"* is a valid aim (it will be addressed later), and examine the tone of this statement. Notice how built into the apparently prescriptive form of a 'rule' there is a considerable measure of tentativeness: the text is established *"so far as the available evidence permits"*; there is no attempt to claim absolute authority. Similar statements in the same spirit made by Greg and other textual critics support a clear case for acknowledging that Shakespeare's editors do not make the kind of rigid claims about their work that Birringer seems to think they do: Greg (1954:ix), for example, states earlier in the work already referred to that

> All textual criticism ... is in a manner tentative; but the conditions that obtain in Shakespeare's plays ... still appear such as to make our conclusions even more tentative than usual.

This seems sufficiently clear and undogmatic in tone not to require further comment. Greg states elsewhere (1970:27), in his discussion of the establishment of a copy-text (the text upon which a modern edition of a Renaissance dramatic text is generally based):

> Since the adoption of a copy-text is a matter of convenience rather than of principle ... it follows that there is no reason for treating it as sacrosanct ....

He concludes his discussion with the statement: "My desire is rather to provoke discussion than to lay down the law" (Greg, 1970:33). Notice in particular Greg's use of the term *sacrosanct*, which makes an interesting comparison with Birringer's statement that Shakespeare's editors are "religiously obsessed" with the fundamentals of their work. In fact Greg here, using terminology with identical associations, not only denies the need for any such 'religious' obsession, but by implication specifically rejects such an obsession. A.E. Housman (1970:2) uses the same terminology to make the same point: "[textual criticism] is not a sacred mystery".

To extend the point, Fredson Bowers, another formidable name in the area of Renaissance textual criticism, proceeds along similar lines when he sets out one of the principles the modern textual critic should apply: "In editing it is necessary to proceed on consistent assumptions". He then adds, "The application of this saw should not be confused with the derivation and observance of mechanical rules" (Bowers, 1955:6). Housman (1970:2) makes an identical point:

> ...textual criticism is not ... an exact science at all. It deals with a matter not rigid and constant ... but fluid and variable .... It is therefore not susceptible of hard-and-fast rules.

All this, I would suggest, evidences an attitude of Shakespeare's editors to their work admirably elastic, open, undogmatic in the extreme, acknowledging fully the highly tentative nature of their conclusions and equally aware that, contrary to Birringer's claims, there is no such thing as a 'definite' or 'original' text with absolute 'authority', an 'Urtext' of which they can say, 'This is the last word on the text of *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*' or whatever. They are fully aware that they are merely presenting the best text possible, given the evidence available, in full acknowledgement of its imperfection in ideal terms. Textual critics, it can clearly be seen from the above statements, do not see themselves as working in ideal terms.

Now, it undoubtedly happens that trail-blazers and theorists such as the men quoted above have their ideas or principles distorted by followers who come later, who cannot cope with elasticity and need rigid guidelines, hard-and-fast rules rather than broad adaptable principles, but this happens in any discipline, and I see no reason why a basically sound set of principles (backed up by some admirable practice which is evidenced by the many fine editions of Renaissance plays we have available to us today) should be condemned because of its second-rate, more literal-minded adherents.

Even more, their work should not be loosely conflated, as Birringer does, with what he calls "the nostalgic wish for an 'authentic' staging" which he quite rightly rejects as 'irrelevant' (Birringer, 1987:10). The desire for some sort of authentic performance that will "reproduce for a modern audience the effect (it) may be supposed to have had upon (its) original audience" (Birringer, 1987:9, quoting Stanley Wells) is so obvious an absurdity that it scarcely needs comment, other than to state that such a performance is impossible simply because there is minimal evidence upon which such a performance could be based,

whereas - and this is the key point that I would like to make here - there is very specific, concrete evidence on which to base an edition of a Renaissance text in the manner which Greg sets out in the seven rules referred to above. This evidence is generally a printed text (often a quarto or folio) that was set up from some kind of manuscript, and it is with the process of turning that manuscript into a printed text by compositors in an Elizabethan/Jacobean printing-house that the textual critic is most concerned, mainly attempting to ascertain what kind of errors crept in while the text was being set up prior to printing.

The fundamental problem with Birringer's critique of the work of textual critics stems from the fact that he does not correctly understand the relationship between the text with which the textual critic is concerned and the performance. He (Birringer, 1987:11) states that the

> ... quartos and folios of the Elizabethan stage ... are in most cases merely records and transcripts of a certain performance in a certain playhouse.

This is most certainly incorrect: in fact the quartos and folios were almost invariably set up in the printing-house from some form of manuscript which provided *not* a record of a performance but rather the *prior basis* for performance(s) - which is an entirely different thing. Fredson Bowers in his *On editing Shakespeare* identifies 13 possible states of manuscripts of this type (Bowers, 1955:11-12); only two types of printer's copy were records of a performance; and these were either very rare, or a hopelessly garbled version of the play (forming the basis for the 'Bad quartos' which Birringer incorrectly perceives as the focus of obsessive behaviour by Shakespeare's editors)[1].

As a result of this, it is clear that the textual critic is working with a *text* rather than with performance, *and therefore does not seek to interfere in any way with the process of performance.* He or she tacitly acknowledges that what the Elizabethan players did with that text once they started preparing for a performance in the theatre is not their business at all (except in special circumstances, see below), and they would equally not dream of attempting to dictate on questions of performance to a modern director, or to criticise that director for adapting the text the editor produces in any way he/she likes. A textual critic would therefore agree wholeheartedly with Birringer's contention that "so far as performance goes - the written Text remains our best evidence *after* the event" (Birringer, 1987:11), qualifying it merely (but vitally) by saying that a textual critic is not concerned with performance, unless it has visibly affected text (see below), and that - with this qualification - the questions of text and performance are two entirely separate issues, which should in no way be conflated - as Birringer misleadingly does.

Once the order of procedure has been correctly established, one will further discover that the textual critic also takes into account Birringer's (1987:11) description of texts as being nothing more than

> ... scenarios-inprogress, trial versions, subject to cutting, rewording, expansion, revision ... and ... to collaborative processes in the theatre as well as to diverse proprietary interests of acting companies and owners

insofar as evidence for such processes is available within the material upon which a modern text is based. This is clearly acknowledged in an illuminating discussion of the many and

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[1] If one wishes to read more about the distortion caused by so-called 'bad quartos', see A.W. Pollard (1937).

various ways in which a play comes to be created, and their effect on the work of the textual critic, by James Thorpe in his "The aesthetics of textual criticism" (Gottesman and Bennett, 1970:77-79). The editor will deal with such factors in the following way. When there appear to be several versions of a text, often the result of later rewritings (frequently prompted by changes made in rehearsal, or in production) the editor will make a decision to print a particular version, but will give a full and complete record of all other readings of modified passages, together with a full statement of the evidence which he used and the principles upon which he based his judgement to print the text that he/she did print, so that the reader may come to his/her own conclusions as to which the 'best' reading is. This seems to be an altogether acceptable, open, and honest procedure, undeserving of blame. So in fact, far from "successfully repress[ing] the unthinkable thought that there never was a stable text" (Birringer, 1987:11), Shakespeare's editors fully acknowledge that texts were constantly modified, but speculate about such changes only insofar as there is evidence within the raw materials with which they work (printed texts or manuscripts) to support any case they make. For classic examples of such procedures one might look at Nicholas Brooke's edition of Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* in the Revels series, or virtually any critical edition of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, to name but two in which this process is clearly to be seen.

If we are to proceed a little further with the discussion, then Birringer's assertion that "there never was a stable text" needs to be looked at a little closer, because it is here that probably the crux of my argument as to the value of the work done by textual critics is to be found. It is undoubtedly valid to make such a statement (since texts obviously were adapted in some way all the time, while playwrights, knowing that they were only providing a working script which would be adapted in the theatre, were often very casual about the manuscript they handed to the theatre company), *but this cannot be crudely extended to the assumption that there never was a text at all* and therefore that any attempt to establish a text is highly questionable (as Birringer constantly implies). Birringer, we recall, is working on the inaccurate assumption that the text was a record of a performance, and since there was obviously never a stable performance (although even that statement probably needs to be qualified), then any attempt to make a printed record (as he thinks happened) of a particular performance, and then edit that record and view the resulting text as sacrosanct and authoritative, is obviously questionable. But if we view the procedure correctly - i.e. that some kind of manuscript formed the prior basis for performance, however much it was adapted or modified later - then we find ourselves confronted with an entirely different situation.

3. The value of textual criticism

I would like to clarify this situation by examining it in terms of what goes on in any theatre nowadays when a play is produced, whether it be a production of a Renaissance drama or a modern play. Surely one must acknowledge the initial presence of a text, generally a printed or typed one, that provides the basis of *most* productions, and therefore of each individual performance within a production run. It is true that some plays are workshopped from a basic scenario, or developed in some other way without a pre-written text, but these are in the minority. Directors and producers read texts, either a printed version of a play (usually, it should be pointed out, prepared by some kind of editor, even if it was the author her/himself) or a typed manuscript of a newly-written work. This is called the script, if you like, but the fact remains that it takes the form of a printed text. Actors are given scripts/texts from which to learn their lines. Now, that text may be cut, modified,

and adapted in rehearsal, *but it still provides the basis for a performance*.   And if this is the case, why then reject with contempt the labours of men who establish some kind of reasonably reliable text as the basis for these modifying processes, especially since those editors make no claim, as we have seen, either to the absolute authority of the texts they have established, or to what the director and actors may or may not do at any point in production?

From here it would seem obvious as to why the labours of Shakespeare's editors are worthwhile, but I will make the case nonetheless, to fully confute Birringer's ill-informed dismissal of those labours.

If we accept that the texts of Shakespeare's (or Marlowe's, or Webster's, or Chapman's) plays are not only the 'best evidence *after* the event' of performance, but in fact the *only* source of our knowledge of these plays, without which they would be entirely lost to the modern world (i.e., they would not exist *at all*), then it would seem to follow logically that if we are going to base a performance on one of these texts, the question to ask is on what precise text that performance is going to be based. To answer that question, one needs to look a little deeper at the kind of problems editors deal with when they come to prepare a modern edition of a Renaissance play.

The process of transmission of a Renaissance text from its earliest recorded origins is a complex one - and I give here only the briefest caricature of that process[2].   Occasionally manuscripts are still extant, but generally the play will exist in its earliest state in a quarto edition. From this first quarto, later quarto or folio editions were generally (but not always) set up. As the Shakespeare industry grew, one started to see the appearance of editions of his collected works by editors such as Pope and Johnson. In this process of transmission, huge numbers of 'errors' crept into the texts presented. The compositors of the initial quartos were responsible for many of them - possibly they couldn't read the author's handwriting, or tried to remember too much text at one time, and set up either incorrect text (i.e. they did not repeat precisely the substance of their copy) or gibberish[3]. These errors were often not detected, as Elizabethan printing-house proof-reading was frequently slapdash and haphazard, to put it mildly[4]. Such errors were not only repeated, but often compounded later. When, for example, a poet like Pope decided to edit Shakespeare, he felt at liberty to rewrite many lines, supremely confident that he was 'improving' on the original; Johnson, rather less arrogant, improved on the gibberish passages more according to his own good taste than with any authority (which in this case means without any careful study of the process of transmission in order to discover how and when errors could have crept in and what a more 'correct' reading might be). It worked very much like that party game where one whispers something into one's neighbour's ear and it gets passed on until by the time it has travelled right round the room it is a completely different statement from the original.

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[2] Anyone wishing to read further on the kind of complex issues the editor has to deal with should read one of the texts referred to earlier (Greg, Bowers, etc.).

[3] Again, an examination of the analyses of men like Greg and Bowers will indicate the amazing variety of the Elizabethan compositors' capacity for error.

[4] To the extent of discovering a compositorial error half-way through a printing run, making the correction, but still binding the sheets containing the misprints into the final product, in order to save money, since paper was handmade and therefore expensive.

Given this situation, the question that must implicitly be asked is, if a director and a group of actors are going to present a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays, as they frequently do, and if they are going to base that performance - however loosely - on a text (which as far as I can see they invariably do), then *on which text are they going to base that performance?* And it would seem logical to me that that group of performers are most likely going to want to base their performance on the 'best' text available, i.e. the text, in Greg's words "as the author finally intended it", whether they consciously make such a decision, and know the full ramifications of it, or not. And if you balk, as some people do, at the notion that one should try and produce a text 'as the author finally intended it' then, put simply, if you are going to take the trouble to learn some lines, are you going to learn lines which are (given all the qualifications which Greg and company so honestly make) closer to some kind of 'original' text that Shakespeare produced, or are you going to learn some lines which are the result of a compositor in an Elizabethan printing-house setting up gibberish because he was too lazy to read his copy properly? The answer seems obvious, and therein lies the value to the actor of Shakespeare's editors.

Having said this, I would be the first to acknowledge that at times the claims by some - and I stress *some* - editors of Renaissance texts have been extravagent as regards their pretensions to 'authority', assuming from the evidence of the quarto before them far too much knowledge of the physical processes of printing in the Elizabethan printing-house upon which such claims for authority are based. This is an unfortunate part of any discipline, and all that need be said is that if such a discipline is in a healthy state, then it will have corrective mechanisms built into it to prevent such distortions from becoming generally-accepted practice. And so it is with Renaissance textual studies. An excellent example, among others, is D.F. McKenzie's "Printers of the mind: some notes on bibliographic theories and printing-house practice" (1969:1-75) which, as the title suggests, provides a detailed comparison between the exaggerated claims of over-enthusiastic theorists, and a carefully-assessed analysis of what can legitimately be claimed as knowledge of what went on in the Elizabethan printing-house, in order to reject illegitimate claims for authoritative readings. Such corrective work seems entirely admirable within a discipline that acknowledges the tentative nature of much of its labours, and this seems in itself to suggest that the products of Renaissance dramatic editors are a worthwhile contribution to theatre in the broadest sense of the term.

Ironically, if one can briefly practise a little deconstruction on Birringer's argument, one can see that he (Birringer, 1987:9) acknowledges the value of such labours himself, although, of course, tacitly. Why else, for example, when he quotes from *Antony and Cleopatra* on p. 9 of his article, does he select the Arden edition of Shakespeare to quote from? Now it may well have been closest to hand, but then again, would it not be legitimate to ask why that particular edition was closest to hand? One could go back in infinite progression here (because that was the one in the bookshop at the time Birringer went in to buy a copy of the play, but then why did the bookshop stock that particular edition, and not some other, etc., etc.?), but one must ultimately get to a point where one is forced to admit that the Arden edition was chosen because it has the reputation of having some kind of authority, that it is the 'best' text available, meaning the most 'accurate' the one, however imperfect, closest to Shakespeare himself. In another example, to support a point he makes about the theatrical process in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Birringer states that his point is "supported by the Folio stage direction" (Birringer, 1987:10). What are we to make of this? On one level, he is obviously asserting that an aspect of the much-despised text (a 'Good Folio,' perhaps? - see Birringer, 1987:11) is sufficiently legitimate to support

his argument, which in itself seems illuminating of the implicit authority he sees in such textual evidence. On another level, however, he is displaying a remarkable ignorance of the general status of stage-directions in Renaissance printed dramatic texts. They can generally be described as unreliable, their unreliability taking a variety of forms: for example, a character will be brought onto the stage and then never removed (in the stage directions) simply because of the casualness of the author in the writing of his work, as described above. Should a text be set up from a manuscript annotated or transcribed in the theatre to be used as a prompt-copy, then stage directions are possibly more reliable, but not necessarily so: compositors, setting up the quarto text from such a prompt-copy, might simply ignore stage directions because they took up too much space, or place them in the wrong place for the sake of convenience, or reduce them to fit the space available, and so on. Basing any kind of interpretation of a text on a stage direction needs to be done, therefore, with a little more circumspection than Birringer displays. A more informed knowledge of the procedures of textual criticism might have saved him from making the kind of assured statement he makes here, and to moderate his claims more in the spirit of the kind of tentative conclusions textual critics come to when they talk about anything related to a Shakespearean text.

4. The world of literary theory

The point has been made, and little more need be said about it. I would now like to turn briefly to a discussion of the thesis underlying Birringer's argument throughout his essay, for, as with his attitude to Shakespeare's editors, it seems to be based on a fundamental fallacy, not quite as concrete as getting the relationship between text and performance wrong, but still clear enough.

Essentially it becomes apparent from his article that Birringer is seeking after a post-structuralist ideal in which the real world, or any aspect of it (including presumably theatre) is seen "less as oppressively determinate than as yet more shimmering webs of undecidability stretching to the horizon" (Eagleton, 1983:146); where there are "no determining or unifying principles, no certain knowledge, no 'reallys'" (Washington, 1989:105), where "Nothing is to be taken for granted" (Birringer, 1987:12); where the "dynamic process" of theatre is "always unpredictable, uncertain, and unrepeatable" (Birringer, 1987:7); where "we never know where we stand" (Birringer, 1987:13). With the burgeoning interest in literary theory of the last decade, such attitudes should be familiar enough by now not to require lengthy explanation, although perhaps the obligatory reference to the work of Jacques Derrida should be made here. One should acknowledge the contribution to literary studies of such theorising, perhaps its most valuable being to point out the ideological basis of all criticism and so provide tools with which to question the kind of self-righteous moralising that dogged literary criticism in the early part of the twentieth century. But, like many theories, it has at times been taken too far, and for all its claims to question authority, has become a new authority in itself, a disguise for what Washington calls "the dictatorship of the critic" (1989:102), as dogmatic and overbearing as those systems of belief that it sought to displace[5]. Equally, on the more practical level, it

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[5] While acknowledging the value of post-structuralist criticism, I am, as is evident from this article, extremely sceptical of the excesses which it has led to. Such works as Peter Washington's referred to in this article, or the more recent review article by Claude Rawson (1991:11-15), do a far better job of questioning this type of criticism than I could ever do.

has quite rightly been criticised for tending to live exclusively in the 'never-never land of theory' (Washington, 1989:173), producing as a consequence little actual engagement with literary texts, little that is practical at all, becoming at its worst "the last uncolonized enclave in which the intellectual can play, savouring the sumptuousness of the signifier in heady disregard of whatever might be going on in the Elysée palace or the Renault factory" (Eagleton, 1983:141); or, in the case we are examining, 'of whatever might be going on' in the theatre where plays are actually performed.

5. The world of reality

For theatre is, of course, pre-eminently a practical type of cultural activity. If one were to concentrate on performance (without making such an emphasis the basis of a new authoritarianism), then what actually happens in the production of a play? If one focuses on essentials, what seems to happen is a continuous process of *limiting* possibilities rather than keeping an infinite number of such possibilities in play throughout any performance. One may well *start* with a great number of possibilities (but not even then, surely, an infinite number) when one looks at that rough working document called a text, or script, before one starts cutting and editing, plotting and casting and rehearsing - but in the process of turning possibilities into actualities, one commences a process of limiting those possibilities immediately, and does so increasingly as the production develops towards its consummation in performance. Considerable work has been done on the contradictions between critical theory and literary practice, to test the validity of the claims of modern theorists (as a reaction, one suspects, to those who take their theorising too far), and the results have been highly illuminating. There follows a quotation from Gabriel Josopovici's *The world and the book* (1971) which illuminates the point precisely, and places it within the broad modern attempt to do away with limitations entirely:

> This distinction [between possibility and actuality] has ... been at the heart of modern developments not just in the arts but in a whole range of disciplines .... Saussure's famous distinction between *langue* and *parole* is nothing other than the application of this distinction to language. ... Roland Barthes's radical critique of literature ... is based on the discovery that writers do not usually recognize the ways in which their *paroles* (their choices out of the pool of possibilities which is the *langue*, are conditioned by their social context and by the forms they have decided to employ. ... In his later work, Barthes seems to take it for granted that all literature moves inevitably towards a mode of total possibility - a *langue* without *parole* .... For (he) fail[s] to take into account the tension that exists in each writer *between the awareness of possibility and the necessity of choice* .... (Josipovici, 1971:299-300; my emphasis in the last line)

Washington (1989:91) makes precisely the same point about the act of interpretation, which seems at first to have far greater scope for open-endedness:

> ... in reality - even in academic reality - interpretations are limited at any one time to a few alternatives. We may agree in principle that a text can mean an infinite number of things: its actual meanings are limited, though not prescribed in detail, by the context.

The critique here is of precisely the attitude that Birringer's article reflects: one of striving after infinite possibilities in an ideal world where one never makes choices, of creating art unlimited by tiresome realities. But what does happen in reality? Let us return to the theatre, where reality is of the essence. One makes one's first, most basic choice when one decides what play to produce (*Julius Caesar* rather than *Sizwe Banzi is dead* etc.). And then slowly, remorselessly, one makes choice after choice, wittling down one's options as one decides on such issues as in which theatre to stage it (and how many directors even have

that choice?), what to cut and what not to cut, who to cast in what role, set design, costume design, etc., all under the pressure of cost, and availability of actors (drama schools, for example, have a preponderance of women that have to be accommodated in plays that seem to be written almost entirely for men), and so forth. One makes choices and imposes limitations every step of the way. However, this does not seem to be something that should be deplored, but is rather something that is actually *essential* if a production is to work. In fact, one might make it a basic principle of theatre criticism that a bad production is one that has at bottom made bad choices.

Other problems within Birringer's article stem from the same base: his tendency to theorise without seeing the contradictions between theory and practice - often his own practice (this is, of course, how most theorists can be attacked; Washington (1989) spends an entire book doing it, thoroughly enjoying himself the whole way). For example, he rejects hierarchies, yet talks of the performance as being 'primary' which seems to be a word implying supremacy of some sort, and supremacy implies hierarchy. Equally, he rejects the authority of literary or textual critics, yet writes himself with a tone of authority and a tendency to generalise that is so typical of the type of critic he rejects, and so irritating in their discourse: "... we have all been at performances where this was not true" (Birringer, 1987:12) (have we? How does he know?); "we never know where we stand" (Birringer, 1987:13); (Birringer himself seems to know precisely where *he* stands). He ignores completely the practical problem which one experiences when talking 'about' or writing 'about' an immediate experience like a dramatic performance, the problem created by the fact that "... words are mere labels, generalizers, and thus unable to convey anything except the tired life of habit, the progression of instants devoid of any meaning" (Josopovici, 1971:37). And he in the final analysis really only changes from rejecting critics of texts to lauding critics of the texts of performances, which hardly seem to move closer to his stated ideal of placing performance as primary, since, one would suspect, critics of performance would simply appropriate performance in the way that critics of texts have appropriated texts, as the domain for their speculations and 'authoritative' pronouncements (see Washington, 1989:102, quoted above). Despite this, one has a certain measure of sympathy with what he is trying to do, which seems to be an attempt to get away from the oracle-like pronouncements of critics, literary or dramatic, and to let the performance flow as an experience. But, as has been suggested, his effort really seems to revert to the old academic game of making pronouncements, but with a slightly different focus, this time on performance rather than on text. Has anything really changed?

Possibly a way to escape from such an impasse is to return to the Renaissance dramatic texts which formed the original topic of our discussion, however imperfect they may be in their modern editions. Renaissance theatre was pre-criticism, pre-intellectual, and pre-academic, and was therefore in a wonderfully advantageous position to get on with the practical processes of presenting theatre, and experimenting with all the myriad of possibilities which Birringer quite rightly implies are present in theatre. Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights were all practical men of the theatre, writing plays which had to work on the stage, their most important test, one might suppose, being the size of the box-office receipts at any performance, and their most important 'critics' being their audience (as well as, one should acknowledge, the remarks of the first academic critic, Ben Jonson). Because of this, modern theatre can probably still learn a great deal from the Renaissance theatre about the process of performance and the process of creating working documents called scripts, the primary source of such learning being the texts which were produced specifically for performance, and which were often adapted as a consequence of experience within

performance. And surely the best source of our knowledge of the experience Renaissance playwrights gained over twenty or thirty years of writing for one of the world's most demanding theatres is the texts. And if one is going to try and learn anything in this way, then surely one would prefer to learn from a text which is closer to the author's original intention - which is where the textual critic has her/his extremely worthwhile contribution to make.

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