

A Hard Act to Follow

BY BARBARA MOWAT

How do you edit the most famous author in the world? For the past 20 years, Barbara Mowat and co-editor Paul Werstine have made that their love's labor, editing more than 40 editions of the plays and poems for the Folger Shakespeare Library editions. The books are the most popular Shakespeare texts on the market, outselling all the competition in the United States and used by teachers and students all over the world. As she retires from her post as Director of Research, Dr. Mowat reflects on the challenges and rewards of what may seem to some to be an audacious and somewhat puzzling endeavor: editing Shakespeare.

During my years spent editing the works of Shakespeare, one question has been asked of me repeatedly: "What do you mean, you *edit* Shakespeare? What do you do, correct his grammar?"

Because the editing process is so complex, explaining what I do requires that I fill in huge gaps. Take, for example, the matter of the forms in which Shakespeare's works were left at his death in 1616. Eighteen plays remained in manuscript and did not get printed until seven years after Shakespeare's death; others had been printed individually, often in

versions that differ considerably from their 1623 printing. Thus, when asked about what it means to edit Shakespeare, the most obvious initial answer is that, with many of the plays, my coeditor

and I must first decide which version of the play to edit and whether or not to combine it in some fashion with another version.

Another example of a crucial detail is that the manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays and poems have disappeared, having vanished before 1709, when the first named Shakespeare editor, Nicholas Rowe, began his work. In the dedicatory epistle to his edition, Rowe wrote plaintively:

I must not pretend to have restor'd this Work to the Exactness of the Author's Original Manuscripts. These are lost, or, at least, are gone beyond any Inquiry I could make; so that there was nothing left, but to compare the several Editions, and give the true Reading as well as I could from thence.

In the three hundred years since Rowe published these words, subsequent editors have recognized, as did Rowe, that

we have nothing from Shakespeare but printed versions that often disagree with each other and that are filled with typographical and other kinds of errors. Most editors have continued to aim for the same goal: to "give the true Reading" as best as they could.

When I am forced to give a brief answer to questions about editing, I tend to focus not on the text but on a more accessible area—the editorial naming of Shakespeare's characters and the constructing of each play's dramatis personae list. People seem fascinated by the decisions facing editors over, for example, whether Hamlet's mother should be called "Gertrud" (as in 1604) or "Gertrude" (as in 1623), and whether it is "Puck" (according to Rowe) or "Robin Goodfellow" (as in the early printing); they also are intrigued by the history of dramatis personae lists, most of which were constructed by editors in the eighteenth century according to social and gender hierarchies—the highest ranking males at the top and the lowest ranking females at the bottom.

The more I work with early Shakespeare texts, the more aware I become of the double pull on the editor of Shakespeare today—the pull toward accuracy and consistency in editing and the often conflicting pull exerted by what I call "readers' rights." Beginning with Rowe, a "Shakespeare" was created that is

sometimes different from what one finds in the early printed texts; this "Shakespeare" is known and loved and is alive onstage and in people's imaginations. So what is an editor to do? Does one replace "Gertrude" with "Gertrud"? My co-editor and I decided that this character lives today as Gertrude, and that to give her back her original name in our text would do too much violence to readers' (and audiences') rights. Almost every play presents the editor today with comparable decisions, each one of which must be decided individually and with as much wisdom as one can muster.

We have abandoned, I think, the hope felt by many throughout the intervening centuries that some day editors will establish a definitive Shakespeare text. We have also faced the fact that what has for so long been assumed to be the natural way to edit and present Shakespeare was actually the construction of a particular eighteenth-century dramatist named Nicholas Rowe. Abandoning the "definitive text," moving the presentation from the eighteenth into the twenty-first centuries: these are, in some ways, unsettling for someone editing the complete works of Shakespeare, but they are also exciting and liberating.

Barbara A. Mowat retires as the Folger's Director of Research, chair of the Folger Institute, and Executive Editor of *Shakespeare Quarterly* in June. She will continue to co-edit (with Paul Werstine) the Folger Shakespeare Library editions through their final play, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, to be published in 2010. Her major fields of research are Shakespeare's dramatic romances, early modern printed dramatic texts, and Shakespeare's reading practices.

