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Jean-Christophe Mayer

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Reading Practices

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Literacy, the playbook market and the reading of plays

“From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are number'd,” wrote John Heminges and Henry Condell—Shakespeare’s fellow actors—in their preface “To the great Variety of Readers”, which appeared in the first folio of Shakespeare’s works (sig. A3^r). In a society that was still steeped in oral culture and in which the command of the written word was not a prerequisite for many professions, these statements could appear to be wishful thinking. Moreover, according to some historians’ estimations, two thirds of the male population and nine tenths of female population were still unable to sign their names at the time of the English Civil War.

However, not being able to sign one’s name did not necessarily mean that one could not read as reading and writing were taught separately at the time. The literacy figures thus need to be qualified slightly. Many were taught to read printed texts, but because they had to leave school at an early age, or because teaching standards were poor, they could not read manuscript texts, nor could they write. There were also strong regional and social differences. In London only 22% of the men were unable to sign their names at the outset of the seventeenth century. The aristocracy and the clergy were of course generally more privileged. Yet 70% of London tradesmen could read and write compared to 50% in the north of England. 34% of Essex husbandmen and 33% of rural weavers were equally skilled. Furthermore, there were great gender inequalities, for in the same period 90% of women could not sign their names. Readers tended to be male and urban (many lived in London). They were mainly members of the middle class, the aristocracy and the clergy, even if some men whose profession did not require them to be literate could read. The skills of the latter varied enormously and their reading was probably more for pragmatic purposes than for their own entertainment.

There was nothing that resembled the mass market for books to which we have been accustomed since the nineteenth century. None the less, the early modern book market was far from negligible and the market for playbooks showed some signs of vigour. Indeed, before the publication of the 1623 folio of Shakespeare’s works, fifty-eight quarto and octavo

editions of his plays had appeared in print. If a typical print-run of a book might have been 800 copies, this would give us a figure of nearly 50,000 books in circulation—which was far from modest, as the population of London *circa* 1600 was around 200,000 people.

Religious books dominated the print market and the average market share of playbooks during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods remained just below 4%. Yet reprint rates indicate that printed drama fared well on the book market. From 1579 to 1625 the reprint rate of playbooks was about twice that of printed sermons, or of treatises. On Peter Blayney's list of the eleven best selling plays for the period 1576-1625, one finds three Shakespeare plays: *I Henry IV* (7 editions), *Richard III* (5 editions), *Richard II* (5 editions). These three titles, which were all published by Andrew Wise in 1597-1598, come respectively fourth, fifth and sixth on Blayney's list (Blayney, 388).

Buyers were not necessarily wealthy, even if the editions remained beyond the means of many. Single play editions would cost about six pence unbound (binding would make them even more onerous). Shakespeare's first folio was expensive in comparison—it cost about fifteen shillings unbound when it first came out. Binding raised its price by at least a pound. To get a more accurate sense of what these sums represented for their prospective buyers, one should remember that a broadsheet ballad could be purchased for a penny (half a penny for a half sheet), whereas the prices in public playhouses varied from one penny to six pence, the closed amphitheatres being more expensive (from six pence to two shillings). During the same period, an industrious artisan made about six shillings a week, while an agricultural labourer earned only half as much. Food was notoriously expensive and could cost up to six pence a day—the equivalent of an agricultural labourer's daily earnings. In sum, the price of printed drama (particularly of single editions) was not totally out of reach, although the cost of even a single edition represented quite an investment for those on more modest incomes.

Reading practices

Gradually, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and despite these financial odds, there came to be more readers of Shakespeare's plays than spectators. While the stage and the publishing world continued to influence each other, the "order of books" began to shape an increasingly large number of people's perception of Shakespeare's works. It is important not to conceive reading as being a passive reception of a meaning already there in the text. The order of books—that is the writing strategies of authors combined with the configuring of the text by publishers and editors—is always in some way challenged by the

readers' own "tactics", by the creative, inventive ways they find to *use* books (Chartier 23). Shakespeare's texts should not be seen as being detached from the materiality that turned them into books—this materiality is the space which readers manipulate and transform. Readers always establish a dialectical relationship between the material and symbolic world of the book and their own world. Shakespeare's early modern readers—those who not only bought, borrowed and circulated, but also marked and appropriated the text of his first editions—were arguably as essential to the growing status of Shakespeare's works as those who acted, directed or went to see his plays (and indeed sometimes they were the same people). Moreover, it is worthwhile bearing in mind that some of our most familiar reading practices were born out of the interaction between those thousands of early modern readers and the printed text of such widely read authors as Shakespeare.

With very little or no critical apparatus at their disposal, early modern readers of Shakespeare had a large measure of freedom, but their reading practices were also influenced by the education they received, which in turn shaped the way in which they related to printed books. As part of the Elizabethan school curriculum pupils were trained to look for headings in the texts they were given to read. These headings could offer material for composition on a variety of subjects. Then the children had to write a brief disquisition, a sort of purple passage, on those given subjects. Theme writing, or commonplacing, was thus a two-fold activity and there is little doubt that these exercises proved very useful, all the more so since it was a method which tended to favour oratory, that is, spoken language and disquisitions and it could also be used in civil life. In fact, commonplacing—that is the collecting and classifying of excerpts used to garnish one's own speech or writings with other people's thoughts and words—was a method that had been widely used during the Middle Ages and that was still proving popular amongst early modern readers and annotators, even if, as we shall see, many Elizabethan educationalists warned that it should not be considered to be an end in itself.

The standard texts for the study of commonplaces were Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Cicero's *Topica* and his *De oratore*, as well as Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. However, the ones most suited to young children were Erasmus's *De copia* [**illustration 1**; caption: Annotated copy of a 1556 edition of Erasmus's *De duplici copia verborum*, British Library (STC: 10471.7)], for adornment and enrichment, and Aphthonius's *Progymnasmata* for themes. Elizabethan educationalists condoned the commonplacing method to varying degrees. Roger Ascham saw the method as a way for the reader to impose another order upon the order of books and hence to appropriate them: "bookes of common places be verie necessarie, to induce a man, into an orderlie generall knowledge, how to referre orderlie all that he readeth" (Ascham 43).

William Kempe, like Ascham for that matter, remarked that the noting and imitation of examples had to be the prelude to making “somewhat alone without an example” to be truly worthwhile (Kempe sig. F2^r).

In his *Ludus Literarius: Or, The Grammar Schoole*, which went through no fewer than seven editions from 1612 to 1627, John Brinsley gave practical advice on how to mark books: “For the marking of them, to doe it with little lines vnder them, or aboute them, or against such partes of the word wherein the difficulty lieth, or by some prickes, or whatsoever letter or marke may best helpe to cal the knowledge of the thing to remembrance” (Brinsley 46). Brinsley further recommended in particular that all schoolbooks be marked with ink, “because inke will indure.” For those who did not want to spoil their books, his advice was to use a pencil, while children could be allowed to mark books with their nails: “But for all other bookes, which you would haue faire againe at your pleasure; note them with a pensil of black lead: for that you may rub out againe when you will, with the crums of new wheate bread. The very little ones, which reade but English, may make some secret markes thus at euery hard word; though but with some little dint with their naile: so that they doe not marre their bookes” (Brinsley 47). Brinsley also commended the use of the commonplacing method, but only as long as it did not stem readers’ creativity: “although they are stil to adde whatsoever they can inuent of their owne braine” (Brinsley 47).

In *The elements of armories* (1610), the Jacobean historian Edmund Bolton suggested that the work of interpretation greatly benefited from note taking and the use of a specific code of annotation. Asterisks, trefoils, manicules (pointing hands or fingers) and headings are signs (half way between the material and the cognitive) recommended in Bolton’s *Elements* (Bolton 123-24). Memory is like a wax writing-table that only remembers what is sealed or written on it: “for the soft-wax table of memory retaines not without sealing, and nothing is worth attention which is not worth remembring” (Bolton 123). Indeed, some tables, or “table-books”, were like portable notebooks and some were erasable and could thus be reused. Tables were intermediate objects, since readers could use them to store material gathered from a printed book before transferring and classifying it into a manuscript commonplace book. Tables constitute what Bolton calls “artificial memory” (Bolton 121), but they are at the same time a metaphor of the human mind—which forgets (erases) in order to make room for new material and new experiences, in the fashion of the erasable writing-tables.

References in Shakespeare to reading and note taking seem to echo Elizabethan educationalists’ partial distrust of the commonplacing method. In *Love’s Labours Lost*, the two pedants Sir Nathaniel (a curate) and Holofernes (a schoolmaster) are ridiculed for their

abuse of Latin phrases and their obscure fragmented language. Sir Nathaniel has a “table-book”, or portable notebook, which he brings out absurdly (5.1.14). Moth remarks that “They have been at a great feast of languages and stolen the scraps” (5.1.32-33) and Costard is also under the impression that “they have lived long on the alms-basket of words” (5.1.34-35). Indeed, the pedants are mocked for recycling fragmented scraps of ready-made material. In the opening scene of the play Biron had already warned against the so-called credit gained from books: “Small have continual plodders ever won, / Save base authority from others’ books” (1.1.87-88). The King of Navarre’s answer to him is ironical but deeply revealing of the fundamental paradox attached to the commonplacing method: “How well he’s read, to reason against reading” (1.1.94).

In the first half of the seventeenth-century Thomas Fuller pointed out that commonplacing remained a controversial, if not contradictory, issue for his contemporaries: “I know”, wrote Fuller humorously, “some have a Common-place against Common-place books and yet perchance will privately make use of what publickly they declaim against” (Beal 139). One of Shakespeare’s most famous characters is himself a case in point of the ambivalent attitude to commonplacing. Hamlet kept a “table book” and yet in the same speech (after hearing his dead father’s injunction to remember him) he decides first that “from the table” of his “memory” he will “wipe away all trivial fond records, / All saws of books [that is, all sententious sayings]” (1.5.98-100), only to jot down a commonplace in his notebook a few moments later: “My tables—meet it is I set it down / That one may smile and smile and be a villain” (1.5.108-109). One senses here a conflict between “natural memory” (the brain) and “artificial memory” (the notebook), a conflict which ought in Elizabethan terms to be a dialectic between two types of memory which should really work together, one compensating for the failings of the other. None the less, these two forms of memory are often set one against the other in Shakespeare. In the case of Hamlet their conflict betrays a fundamental dilemma between the character’s desire to be a self-sufficient autonomous individual and his recourse to a common method of making sense of the world through the formulation of philosophical topics or places.

Shakespeare’s early modern readers at work

This conflict between the self and the world can help us understand the processes through which readers approach books and engage with them practically and symbolically. Indeed, to some extent, the book could be compared to what child psychologist Donald Winnicott called

a “not-me possession”, in other words an object that is both me and not me, that helps me acquire a sense of self by acting as a transitional object between myself and the world. Parents will be familiar with these objects (soft toys, towels, etc) indispensable to children’s well-being and essential to their development of a sense of self and of their relation to the world outside and to others (Compagnon 20). Interestingly, in several first folios of Shakespeare’s works, there are a considerable number of marks of ownership in the opening pages of the volumes. This—one could object—is where such marks usually appear in books and yet one could argue that this is also a transitional space where the reader’s world and the world of the book, with its specific textual space, meet and coalesce to some extent. Furthermore, it is a space (like the rest of the volume) that has been mechanically reproduced, manufactured and sold to a fraction of the community and this may explain why some readers have such an urge to singularize it, to make it theirs.

Shakespeare’s book is physically reconfigured by its readers partly because of this latent conflict between uniqueness and commonness, which the rather lavish introductory apparatus of the folio triggers. Thus, a late seventeenth-century reader by the name of Olivea Cotton has signed her name above the epitaph penned by Leonard Digges and dedicated “To the Memorie of the Deceased Author Maister W. Shakespeare”. Under the table of contents of that same edition, Cotton has written “myne” in the Folger Shakespeare Library’s first folio no. 54. Another reader of the same period, John Lister, has signed his name in large italic hand just above Ben Jonson’s homage to Shakespeare (“To the memory of my beloved, The Author”). On the page that contains Hugh Holland’s epitaph (“Upon the lines and life of the famous scenicke Poet, Master William Shakespeare”), Lister has left his signature no fewer than five times in elegantly calligraphed letters (Folger first folio no. 70). In his own copy of Shakespeare’s first folio, Joseph Batailhey at about the same time signed his name on almost every play in the volume (Folger first folio no. 76). One William Johnstoune, a mid seventeenth-century reader of a copy of Shakespeare’s first folio (now held by Meisei University Library in Tokyo) left a curious personalized manuscript version of Ben Jonson’s commendatory verse: “To the Memory of / My Vncel ye / avthor” (Yamada xvi).

The problem with actual, or “empirical” readers is that they are often unruly. We have only to examine the terms used by literary theorists to describe readers to sense the former’s embarrassment: readers have been called “ideal”, “implied”, “implicit” by critics who have been forced to admit that they do not always conform to these categories. Shakespeare’s commonplacing readers do not always follow the prescribed methods of commonplacing in their jottings. They are conventional and unorthodox, some are rather laid back readers while

others are incredibly thorough in their notes, they are an irritation to those who would want to ground a general theory of reading on an analysis of their practices and they are also puzzling—examining readers’ traces is an exercise in learning to live with the partial inscrutability of human reactions and interpretations.

Furthermore, the Shakespeare these readers reconfigure is not always one with whom we would feel comfortable. In British Library MS. Lansdowne 1185—an early eighteenth century manuscript commonplace book—the headings or *tituli* chosen betray their anonymous writer’s social prejudices: “Of ye Rabble” (f. 6v) “of their Incertaintie” (f. 6v) for *Coriolanus* [illustration 2; caption: Notes on Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* in an early eighteenth century manuscript commonplace book, British Library MS. Lansdowne 1185, f. 6v] ; “The weak construction of the Rabble common accidents by ye Rabble” (f. 11v), “The conjectures and discourse of ye Rabble upon prodigies” (f. 12v) in *King John*. A late seventeenth-century reader of Shakespeare’s fourth folio (1685) even notes in his commonplace book that “the plot [of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*] is good, but y^e characters & persons of y^e play so mean, y^r witt & language & conversation so plain, that `tis scarce worth reading” (Blakemore Evans 274).

Examining the excerpts extracted by commonplacing readers can also be frustrating for critics who would want to associate these extracts with a general interpretation of the play. Be that as it may, it is these seemingly quirky extracts that are very telling of the processes by which readers relate to the text. Thus, extracting and reframing are semi-conscious processes that imply, to some extent, a chance meeting with the text. This appears to be particularly the case when readers select one word or a very short extract from a long scene, the remaining excerpt being like a distillation, or the quintessence of a meeting with the text. In his mid seventeenth-century manuscript commonplace book (Folger V.a.87), William How extracts a single word of Portia’s line in *The Merchant of Venice* in which she promises “I will doe any thing, Nerrissa, ere I will be married to a sponge” (1.3.95-96). William How extracts a word that obviously struck him and that he immediately reconfigures—“Thou spunge” [sic], he notes (f. 7). In *Henry V*, he savours one of Pistol’s invectives “thou prickeard cur of Iseland” (2.1.35), which is totally decontextualized. Later in the same scene, he has lifted the name of “Doll Tear-sheete” (61)—a character who appears only in 2 *Henry IV*, but whose peculiar name may have suddenly jogged his memory (f. 7r).

Thematic criss-crossings and displacements are difficult to ascertain and yet they are at the very heart of the activity of commonplacing, which dislocates, reallocates and replaces, and

moves language around in ways which can sometimes be deeply creative, provocative and also quite simply baffling. On some rare occasions, commonplace readers reflect on the technique they are using in the act itself. This is the case of an early seventeenth-century compiler who, having just copied in his notebook Juliet's speech to Romeo in Act 2, scene 1 of the play ("`Tis almost morning, I would have thee gone— / And yet no father than a wanton's bird / That lets it hop a little from his hand..." [221-26]), makes a personal note to himself that this same speech has also been fruitfully decontextualized and reconfigured by someone else—the clergyman Nicholas Richardson: "This Mr Richard/^{son} Coll. Magd: inserted hence into his Sermon, preached it twice at St Maries 1620. 1621. applying it ~~the~~ to gods loue to his Saints either hurt with sinne, or aduersity neuer forsaking them" (Coatalen 146).

Some readers reconfigure the printed text of the plays in ways that re-inject life into Shakespeare's language—these are practices that we could call *creative transformations*. In his notes on *The Merchant of Venice* (Folger V.a.87), William How transforms one of Gobbo's lines ("He hath a great infection, sir, as one would say, to serve" [2.2.119-20]) into "He has an infection to serue you" (f. 7), thus lending more impact and ultimately more life to the line. Such transformations are also ways in which literature can be potentially recycled into more common everyday vernacular language. Even when Shakespeare is seemingly at his best in his use of a "natural style", William How sometimes manages to produce a snappier, more dynamic version. Thus, Nim's lines in *Henry V* ("I dare not fight, but I will wink and hold out mine iron. It is a simple one, but what though? It will toast cheese [2.1.5-7]) are rephrased and reduced to a single and more dynamic expression: "Heres a sword will serue to tost cheese on" (f. 7) [**illustration 3**; caption: William How's notes on several Shakespeare plays, Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V.a.87, f. 7r]. Similarly, in his notes on *Much Ado About Nothing* Edward Pudsey turns Claudio's indirect comment on Benedick ("And never could maintain his part, but in the force of his will" [1.1.221-22]) into a *direct* address to someone: "Yo^w cannot maintayne y^r argum^t but in y^e force of yo^r will" (p. 35), a phrase which again carries more pith and can be re-injected into real-life situations.

If the commonplace method provided many readers with a store of reusable extracts (which could serve civic or even political agendas), it was on the one hand rarely applied consistently and on the other hand commonplace extraction could sometimes resemble a form of literary criticism. Indeed, the boundary is often not clear between commonplace extractions, summaries or reading aids and more personal comments.

The extensive marginalia produced by a mid seventeenth-century reader of Shakespeare's first folio (now at Meisei University) are of the sort just described. Often dismissed as merely repetitive of Shakespeare's text, the extracts in fact reveal some of the tastes of this early modern reader. At times, the marginalia show him coming to terms with the aesthetic world of some of the plays. For him, the gist of Jaques's famous speech in *As You Like it* (2.7.139-43) is that "The world is the stage of mens changeable fortunes" and that "many parts [are] played by one man" (Yamada 61). The marginalia in *Henry V* suggest that he is working hard to understand what artistic deal Shakespeare is trying to strike with his audience. Just before the Prologue, he writes this perceptive note in shorthand: "The auditours Imagination must supplie the strangenesse of Incredible representations of the stage" (Yamada 125). **[illustration 4**; caption: manuscript notes on the Prologue of *Henry V* by a mid seventeenth-century reader of Shakespeare's first folio, Kodama Memorial Library, Meisei University, Japan, shelfmark, 932.141 Sh12, MR774] Confronted with the Chorus in Act III (which begins with "Thus with imagined wing our swift scene flies / In motion of no less celerity / Than that of thought..."), he appears less sure of himself. Nevertheless, still earnestly groping for meaning, he writes tentatively, "Imagination must conceiue the suddane changes and actions of the stage" (Yamada 128).

Conclusion

It is easy to dismiss the empirical readers' material and intellectual engagement with Shakespeare's text as being an example of a primitive form of literary criticism. However, these practices supply us with extremely valuable traces of living, feeling individuals' meetings with the world of Shakespeare's plays. Early modern readers' practices are incidentally not so far removed from present day academic critical practices. Shakespeare scholars use excerpts that they have compiled through their readings and this often results in a fragmentation of Shakespeare's works or an itemizing of their contents, two tendencies which literary critics attempt to counteract by constructing interpretative scenarios. These activities are not only part of the way in which critics operate, but they are also something inherited from previous generations of readers.

The practices of non-academic readers also remind us that critics can never hope to render total justice to the vast freedom of their often very idiosyncratic engagements with Shakespeare's books. In this sense, literature is fundamentally an unfinished and open space—a *common wealth* in both senses of the word, one whose purpose is no doubt to

challenge individuals by making them reconsider the meaning of commonness, of being together and of reading about themselves through a *practical engagement* with books and literature.

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LIST OF KEYWORDS

Aphthonius

Aristotle

As You Like it

Ascham, Roger

Batailhey, Joseph

Beal, Peter

Benedick

Binding

Biron

Blakemore Evans, G

Blayney, Peter W. M

Bolton, Edmund

Book market

Book use

Brayman Hackel, Heidi

Brinsley, John

British Library

Certeau, Michel de

Chartier, Roger
Cicero
Claudio
Coatalen, Guillaume
Commonplace books
Commonplaces
Commonplacing
Compagnon, Antoine
Condell, Henry
Coriolanus
Costard
Cotton, Olivea
Craik, Katharine
Crane, Mary
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De oratore
Digges, Leonard
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Erasmus
Extracting
First Folio
Folger Shakespeare Library
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Hamlet
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Henry IV, Part 1
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Henry V
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Jaques

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Kempe, William

King John

King of Navarre

Kintgen, Eugene R

Lister, John

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Ludus literarius: or, the grammar schoole

Marginalia

Marking books

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Meisei University Library, Tokyo

Moss, Ann

Moth

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Nathaniel, Sir

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The scholemaster or plaine and perfite way of teachyng children, to vnderstand, write, and speake, the Latin tong
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Winnicott, Donald
Wise, Andrew
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