

On the Meaning of "True Copy"

Robert Detobel

On the title-page of the Shakespeare First Folio the editors inform us that the plays were printed "according to the True Originall Copies." This statement might be understood as the editors' claim to authenticity, that is, to their publishing the version the author himself had or would have authorized for publication. The statement is reiterated in the head-title: "Truely set forth, according to their first Originall." Original, then, is not meant as the first text but as the text the author himself finally considered to be definitive.

However, the folio editors are challenged by the editor(s) of the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*, published in 1604, whose title-page has a very similar claim: "Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie."

In both cases, the published text of *Hamlet* is said to be based on the true copy, and one could fairly expect both texts to be more or less concordant. In fact, they are substantially different. Nearly 300 lines of the Second Quarto *Hamlet* are not in the Folio *Hamlet*, whereas the latter contains 85 lines which are not in the former. Beyond that, the Second Quarto adds the predicate "perfect," a claim absent from the Folio. Finally, the word "original" does not appear on the quarto title-page. As punctilious as it has often been, orthodox scholarship has avoided the question of sorting out all these differences. Was the game not worth the candle?

Probably not for two of the most reputable, Edmund K. Chambers¹ and Walter W. Greg.² Both recognize the problem, or at least acknowledge it; but after a brief reference to the publisher's epistle in the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio of 1647, they rapidly turn to another subject.

What does the epistle of Humphrey Moseley, editor and publisher of the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio of 1647, tell us? The Moseley text reads as follows:

When these *Comedies* and *Tragedies* were presented on the Stage, the *Actours* omitted some *Scenes* and *Passages* (with the *Authours's* consent) as occasion led them; and when private friends desir'd a Copy, they then (and justly too) transcribed what they *Acted*. But now you have both All that was *Acted*, and all that was not; even the perfect full Originalls without the least mutilation; So that were the *Authours* living (and sure they can never dye) they themselves would challenge neither more nor lesse then what is here published.

Robert Detobel is a journalist and translator based in Frankfurt, Germany.

As in the Second Quarto *Hamlet*, we find the word “perfect.” This is defined as going beyond the copies circulating among private friends (as were Shakespeare’s sonnets) and beyond the text of the stage (that is, with some deletions, “mutilated”). In other words, the perfect text is the text as the author wrote it and would like to have it printed, although he might have given his consent to its being staged in an adapted or abridged form.

This definition is corroborated by the title-page of John Webster’s *The Tragedy of the Duchess of Malfi*, published in 1623—as far as I know, the only other instance of a play where the word “perfect” appears: “The perfect and exact Copy, with diverse things Printed, that the length of the Play would not beare in the Presentment.” Here we have the statement directly from the author who, to conclude from the commendatory verses of other playwrights (always absent from Shakespeare quartos) and from the epistle to Lord Berkeley signed by John Webster himself, was his own editor and was still alive (which may deceptively strike us as a superfluous remark). John Webster does not pretend that his play was published according to the “true copy” or the “true Original.”

What, then, does Moseley tell us about the meaning of “true copy?”

Though the term “true copy” is not explicitly used, he states: “So that were the Authours living (and sure they can never dye) they themselves would challenge neither more nor lesse then what is here published.” Or, as it is termed in the Shakespeare First Folio: “truely set forth.” I cannot see what else this could mean other than being faithful to the intention of the author. Hence, not by the author. This explanation is in accord with another remark of the Shakespeare Folio editors: “It had bene a thing, we confesse, worthie to have bene wished, that the Author himselfe had liv’d to have set forth, and overseen his owne writings; But since it hath bin ordain’d otherwise, and he by death departed from that right...” Since the author was dead and unable to set forth himself, to see to the publication of his work, the editors had to see it “truely set forth,” in other words, according to what they took to be the author’s true intention. Hence, “true copy” does not refer to the author’s own decision but to the editors’ caring for the work of a dead author.

There are yet other contemporary examples of the expression “true copy” which are relevant to this argument.

In *Some Aspects and Problems of London Publishing 1550 to 1650*, Walter W. Greg mentions another case presenting the same characteristics as the editorial situation of the Beaumont & Fletcher and Shakespeare Folios:

William Lambarde wrote his *Archaion*, an account of “the High Courts of Justice in England,” in 1591, ten years before his death, but he did not publish it. For more than forty years, manuscripts must have circulated in private among antiquarian lawyers, till in 1635 one happened to fall into

the hands of a stationer named Daniel Frere, who entered it on 27 March forthwith. The text, however, proved to be inaccurate, and the author's grandson Thomas Lambarde entrusted an authoritative manuscript to Henry Seyle. Seyle and Frere got together and a fresh entrance, explicitly cancelling the old one, was made in their joint names on 1 July of what is described as "the true original copy from the author's executor"... Then, Frere having asserted his rights in the copy, withdrew, leaving the accredited stationer, Seyle, to publish the emended edition alone.³

Here the "true original copy" is explicitly related to the author's intention by stating that it was the one he entrusted to the executor of his will.

Surprisingly, Greg does not cite the case of Lambarde when briefly raising the question of the "true copy" in his work on the Shakespeare Folio, though it is clear we facing the same type of situation as described by Moseley: several manuscripts in circulation, an author dead for more than thirty years, and thus some doubt hovering over what constituted the authentic manuscript.

Are there any relevant cases in which the term "true copy" was used while the author was known to be still be alive? No.

In the same book, Greg writes of two quarrels that arose among stationers, the first between Abel Jeffes and Edward White, the second between Abel Jeffes and Thomas Orwin. In 1592, Thomas Orwin had printed a translation of the German, *The Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, "newly imprinted, and in convenient places imperfect matter amended according to the true copy printed at Frankfort." There was an earlier and, if we believe Orwin's assertion, a more faulty copy printed by Abel Jeffes of which nothing is known today. What version is meant, then, when referred to as the "true copy?"

Despite the obvious references to the true copy being printed in Frankfurt, the reference is certainly not to the German original printed in Frankfurt by Johann Spies in 1587. Though based on a manuscript written between 1572 and 1587, this book was a chapbook bearing, naurally, no author's name. Moreover, it is hard to see on whose authority, other than the translator's, the printer could have relied. The reference can only have been to the English version, which was as much of an adaptation as an actual translation. Of the English translator only the initials P.F. and his status of gentleman are known. He is thought to be Peter Frenche, who studied in Cambridge between 1581 and 1585. This may seem plausible in light of the particular relationship between the university printers of Cambridge and the Frankfurt fair. (To relieve the conflict between the university printers of Cambridge and the London stationers, Lord Burghley had given Cambridge the monopoly of printing all books brought in from the Frankfurt fair.) But the evidence is still too slender to identify the author-translator with certainty. Moreover, the use

The Elizabethan Review

of initials suggests that the printing was done without the consent or, at least, the formal acknowledgement of the translator. There seems no possibility of knowing whether the translator was still alive in 1592. Nevertheless, it may be that the reference to a “true copy” also implies an absentee author leaving to the editor the decision concerning “truefulness.”

The other case is more to the point. Abel Jeffes had printed an early and defective copy of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. In 1592, Edward White published another, better version, stating on the title-page, “Newly corrected and amended of such gross faults as passed in the first impression.” (Thomas Kyd, it should be remembered, died two years later.) This was the typical statement publishers used when the author was still alive.

An analogous expression is used on the title-page of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (published in 1598) and *Romeo and Juliet* (surreptitiously published in 1597 and a second time in 1599). In the first case, the name of the author, W. Shakspeare, was also indicated; in the latter, it was not. In the case of *LLL*, this reads: “Newly corrected and augmented By W. Shakspeare.” In the Second Quarto of *RJ*: “Newly corrected, augmented, and amended.” In both cases, the first publication was from a pirated copy and the title-page suggests the author’s intervention. (This, however, remains doubtful in light of the signal differences with the Folio texts.) A third case is the title-page of the Third Quarto of *Richard III* (published in 1602), which reads: “Newly augmented.”

Corrected, augmented, emended, amended, enlarged, revised, and so on are the usual terms for reprints made during the life of the author. Sometimes, it refers to a previous surreptitious printing, as in the case of Samuel Daniel’s poem *Delia and Rosamond* (1594, “augmented”); sometimes the author has only corrected printing errors in a previous edition, as in the case of Michael Drayton’s epic poems *Piers Gaveston* and *Mathilda* (reprinted in 1596 as “corrected”); and sometimes the newly imprinted text was an outright revision as, again, Drayton’s *Piers Gaveston*, re-published in 1605/06. Some reprints of Thomas Heywood’s plays bear the remark, “revised by Th. Heywood” on the title-page. At a time when authors were used to revising their works, even those which had already appeared in print as the definitive version, it is but logical that the “true copy” could not be produced until after their death.

It should be noted, however, that the same terminology—“emended,” “corrected,” etc.—was used after the death of an author. Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*, for instance, was reprinted in 1663 “with new additions.” So were some plays of Beaumont and Fletcher’s and others. But there was never any claim of these additions and/or revisions being done according to the original or to the “true copy.” In other words, the authority of the author was never vindicated.

What the term “true copy” tells us is that the editor faced an ambivalent situation like that in Moseley’s epistle: having several manuscripts in circulation

without knowing in all certainty which version the living author would have considered the most definitive. Not a situation without a shadow of a doubt, but, in effect, a situation loaded with doubts. This situation could only arise when, as the creator of the work and thereby the sole authority to decide what is the true version, the author had died without having stated so beforehand. It would be as oddly superfluous for an author to speak of his own manuscripts as the “true original copies” as for God to speak of his “true original creation,” but it is quite reasonable for those interpreting God’s or the author’s true intentions to say so. In the case of Lambarde’s *Archainomia*, it was fairly clear that the greatest authority was vested in the version he had entrusted to the executor of his will. On the other hand, Shakespeare of Stratford bequeathed no such authoritative manuscripts to the executors of his will. This point is underscored by the 1641 reprint of George Chapman’s most successful play, *Bussy D’Ambois*, seven years after his death. On the title-page, the publisher informs us that it was “being much corrected and amended by the Author before his death,” a sentence so essentially different from, “So that were the Authours living... they themselves would challenge neither more nor lesse what is here published,” that it needs no comment.

Is there any publication other than the Shakespeare Folio, the Beaumont and Fletcher Folio, and the Second Quarto of *Hamlet* for which the claim is made of being the “true copy”? Only the Second Quarto of *A King and no King*, “Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher,” which appeared in 1625. The First Quarto had been published in 1619 by the same stationer. Regarding the completeness of the two quartos, the order of publication is the inverse of that of the *Hamlet* quartos. In the latter case, the First Quarto is a corrupt and considerably abridged text and the Second Quarto the more complete text. In the case of *A King and no King*, the First Quarto is considered the fuller and more authentic text; the Second Quarto adds a few lines, but omits more and is less complete on balance. Nevertheless, it is on the title page of the Second Quarto of 1625 that the statement, “according to the true copy” is to be found, not on the first and slightly fuller version.

Even if the term “true copy” does not and cannot express the author’s own judgement, but reflects only the editor’s subjective intent, however faithful to the author’s true purpose, it is hard to see how any useful information could be gained from a qualification indifferently applied to two opposite cases. On the one hand, to the fuller and better quarto (*Hamlet*), on the other, to the less complete quarto (*A King and no King*). Moreover, the difference between the two quartos of the latter play are mainly variations of spelling and minor amendments, i.e., they are corrections, not revisions. If this is the case, why not speak of “corrections and emendations” rather than of “true copy?” This had been done with the Second Quarto of Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Philaster*,

The Elizabethan Review

published in 1622 (the First Quarto having been published in 1620). Also in the Second Quarto of *The Maids Tragedy*, published in 1619, being “newly perused, augmented and enlarged.” And in the Third Quarto of the same play, published in 1630, being “revised and refined.”

The answer seems obvious. The Second Quarto of *A King and no King* was published in 1625, the year that John Fletcher, the surviving author, had died of the plague (in August). We can assume that the Second Quarto was published in the months following and that the main purpose of publication was to pay homage to the deceased. Hence, the term “true copy” is less an indication of an improvement on the former quarto of 1619 (none of the title-pages of their other plays newly published after 1625 bears such a phrase, but the ordinary “revised” or “corrected”) than that the author had met with his death, the publication itself being a commemorative act of the kind we are so accustomed to in our own time.

In general, then, the only definitive information to be gained from the publisher’s use of the term, “true copy,” was to imply that the author was dead and, when this term was used on the title-page of a quarto, that he had but recently died.

That the Second Quarto of *Hamlet* was published in 1604 “according to the true and perfect Coppie” therefore implies that Shakespeare, the author of this play, was by then dead. As some copies bear the date 1605 and others 1604, the printing was probably carried out late in 1604.

That the printing of this quarto was meant primarily as a last homage is even more apparent than in the case of Fletcher. There is the quarto’s prominent use of the royal coat of arms, which was displayed on the title-page. It was not unusual for a servant close to the king, especially a member of the high nobility, to exhibit the royal coat of arms on special occasions, such as funerals. Thus, its use points to some particular relationship to the king by a nobleman who was “A companion for a King,” to quote John Davies of Hereford.

Yet, when William Shakespeare died in 1616, his company, the King’s Men, did not react, although their three leading members knew he had died. There was no “commemorative activity” on the troupe’s part. There would be in 1625, when their surviving leading dramatist, John Fletcher, died, and had been in 1604, when their leading dramatist, the author of *Hamlet*, had died.

It should be noted that, like John Fletcher in August 1625, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, had died of the plague, in June 1604.

Notes

1. Edmund K. Chambers, *Shakespeare. Vol. I* (Oxford, 1930) 96-97, 412.
2. Walter W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio* (Oxford, 1955) 153.
3. —, *Some Aspects and Problems of London Publishing 1550 to 1650* (Oxford, 1956) 76-77.