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THE BOWDLERS AND THEIR FAMILY SHAKESPEARE

We all know what Bowdler, or the tribe of Bowdlers did in producing *The Family Shakespeare*: they deleted the obscenities and blasphemies, and occasional sentiments which struck them as immoral. My purpose is to suggest that Bowdler's Shakespeare in our enlightened days has been sadly misjudged. Swinburne of all people thought so. In an essay called 'Social Verse', from *Studies in Prose and Poetry* (1894) he wrote:

More nauseous and more foolish cant was never chattered than that which would deride the memory or depreciate the merits of Bowdler. No man ever did more service to Shakespeare than the man who made it possible to put him into the hands of intelligent and imaginative children.

And to help shove aside the notion of absurdity we may keep in mind that the debate continues, though our focus after nearly two centuries and a technical revolution has changed. If we agree that children should not be freely exposed to sex-videos, all of us are latter-day Bowdlers. I suppose the real Bowdlers, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, were rather broad-minded in allowing scenes of violence to remain in their *Family Shakespeare*; nothing could more probably create nightmare in the sleep of an attentive child than, for example, the orgiastic chopping-off of limbs which occurs in *Titus Andronicus*.

Many people, if questioned, might get the dates wrong so it is well to establish them for a start. Bowdler's Shakespeare was not a Victorian venture, though it best-sold through the Victorian period. 1807 was the date of the first edition, a high moment in George the Third's reign; but its genesis went back much further, as was explained in a charming footnote to the fourth-edition preface:

My first idea of *The Family Shakespeare* arose from the recollection of my father's custom of reading in this manner to his family. Shakespeare (with whom no person was better acquainted) was a frequent subject of the evening's entertainment. In the perfection of reading few men were equal to my father; and such was his good taste, his delicacy, and his prompt discretion, that his family listened with delight to Lear, Hamlet, and Othello, without knowing that those matchless tragedies contained words and expressions improper to be

pronounced; and without having reason to suspect that any parts of the plays had been omitted by the circumspect and judicious reader.

It afterwards occurred to me, that what my father did so readily and successfully for his family, my inferior abilities might, with the assistance of time and mature consideration, be able to accomplish for the benefit of the public. I say, therefore, that if *The Family Shakespeare* is entitled to any merit, it originates with my father.

So there we have it, as to date: Thomas the father of those pious scribblers and Shakespeare pruners, bringing up his family near Bath towards the end of the eighteenth century, reading Shakespeare of an evening, cutting out the bits he thought unsuitable.

Stage productions through the eighteenth century habitually did just the very same thing; except that on stage they were concerned also with one further form of deletion, obscurity. From Pope to Malone the textual editors deplored Shakespeare's coarseness. Pope, most famously, and Hanmer after him, relegated the wonderful Porter scene in *Macbeth* to a footnote, convinced their Shakespeare could never have been guilty of such vulgarity; from Alexander Pope in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, to Robert Bridges in the first quarter of the twentieth, excuses were found for those rough edges of Shakespeare which didn't fit the mould their minds made, of the artist in flawless taste. After Hanmer (1744) editorial duties were resumed, of attempting to print the text which Shakespeare wrote, even if parts and aspects were deplored. As for those, they decided the actors must have invented them or audiences expected them, and in theatre's market economy an author was forced to oblige. This is how Robert Bridges ended his essay 'On the Influence of the Audience', printed in the final volume of the Shakespeare Head Press edition of Shakespeare, pleasantest of reading editions, in 1907:

Shakespeare should not be put in the hands of the young without the warning that the foolish things in his plays were written to please the foolish, the filthy for the filthy, and the brutal for the brutal; and that, if out of veneration for his genius we are led to admire or even to tolerate such things, we may he thereby not conforming ourselves to him, but only degrading ourselves to the level of his audience, and learning contamination from those wretched beings who can never be forgiven their share in preventing the greatest poet and dramatist of the world from being the best artist.

In the 'Advertisement' to Bell's first publication of the plays, 1774,

intended to provide what was heard in the theatre, its editor Francis Gentleman had written:

Shakespeare's admirers, even the enthusiastic ones, who worship him as *the god of their idolatry*, have never scrupled to admit that his most regular pieces produce some scenes and passages, highly derogatory to his incomparable general merit; he frequently trifles, is now and then obscure, and sometimes, to gratify a vitiated age, indelicate... There is no doubt but all our author's faults may justly be attributed to the loose, quibbling, licentious taste of his time; he, no doubt, upon many occasions, wrote wildly, merely to gratify the public . . . it has been our peculiar endeavour to render what we call the essence of Shakespeare more instructive and intelligible; especially to the ladies and to youth; glaring indecencies being removed, and intricate passages explained . . .

The Bowdler editions were more liberal and faithful than this, their focus upon a text which could be read without embarrassment to children; indeed it was a lady, Henrietta Bowdler, who produced the first *Family Shakespeare*, twenty of the plays, experimentally in 1807. Those four tubby little volumes, printed locally in Bath by Cruttwell, were not a success.

The several scribbling Bowdlers were not used to failure. Responsible for a dozen books of pious verse and sermons, none of which would tempt anyone now, each was snapped up by Georgian England and commonly reprinted. A taste for moral instruction existed; many people leaned towards Christian life, whatever deviations and blunders their years displayed; those phrases of religious memory and hope so elegantly cut upon marble in churches, and on stones outside, closed their chapters of struggle and faith.

Hope Bowdler from which the family came is in a beautiful part of Shropshire near Wenlock Edge. Thomas and Elizabeth Bowdler have four writing children and two grandchildren in the Dictionary of National Biography, an unusual distinction. John, Thomas, Jane and Henrietta all produced such books as their world, incredibly to us, desired, John's pamphlet called *Reform or Ruin*, 1797, 'reached an eighth edition within a year of its first publication'; Jane, an invalid, least likely candidate for literary success, died aged forty in 1784.

In her later years she wrote many poems and essays, and a selection was published at Bath for the benefit of the local hospital in 1786 under the title *Poems and Essays by a Lady, lately deceased*. The verse is very poor, and the prose treats, without any striking originality, such subjects as sensibility, politeness, candour,

THE
FAMILY
SHAKESPEARE.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

"The Stage might be made a perpetual Source of the most noble
"and useful Entertainment, were it under proper Regulations."

ADDISON.

PRINTED BY

RICHARD CRUFTWELL, ST. JAMES'S-STREET, BATH;

FOR

J. HATCHARD, BOOKSELLER TO HER MAJESTY,
NO. 190, PICCADILLY, LONDON.

1807.

and the pleasures of religion. Nevertheless, sixteen editions (with the author's name on the title-page) were published at Bath in rapid succession between 1787 and 1830.¹

Henrietta with her brother Thomas wrote two volumes of *Poems and Essays* 'which passed through a large number of editions'. Without help from her brother she produced anonymously *Sermons on the Doctrines and Duties of Christianity* which 'passed through nearly fifty editions'. The bishop of London, Beilby Porreus, assuming them to have been written by a man in holy orders, offered the author a parish in his diocese. She edited *Fragments in Prose and Verse by the late Miss Elizabeth Smith*, 'which was very popular in religious circles'.

So much for the older generation, piously publishing for a large audience; whether their success surprised them as much as it does us, cannot now be known. It must therefore have come as a shock or disappointment to Henrietta that her more ambitious work, *The Family Shakespeare* of 1807, failed to find many readers and had a mixed reception. We should pause to have a look at it, and see what happened.

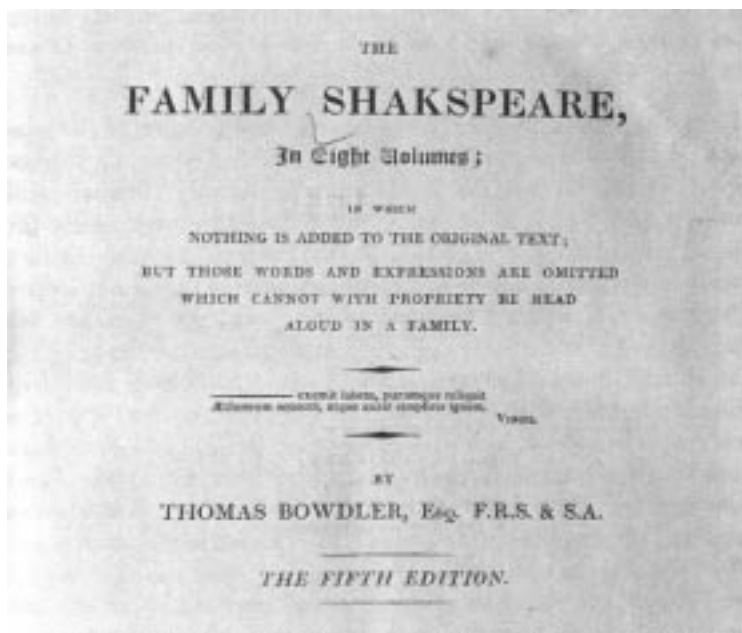
To Noel Perrin of Dartmouth College we owe the discovery of several letters proving that Henrietta was responsible for the 1807 *Family Shakespeare*, four duodecimo volumes offering twenty plays; not the twenty easiest from her point of view for they included *Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*.

She, and her brother Thomas in the following editions, felt no such guilt as should disturb the collective conscience of picture restorers, for the work she had done; anyone who wanted the full text could still consult it: 'For those who object to such alterations', she explained in the 1807 Preface:

there are many editions of Shakespeare, 'with all his imperfections on his head'; but it is hoped that the present publication will be approved by those who wish to make the young reader acquainted with the various beauties of this writer, unmixed with any thing that can raise a blush on the cheek of modesty.

Her focus was upon sexual indecency, with a constant eye also upon blasphemy, but the latter presented a minor ill needing only routine treatment, compared with thorough vigilance against obscenity. Henrietta looked to 'those who value every literary production in

¹ *Dictionary of National Bibliography*, Vol. 43.



proportion to the effect which it may produce in a religious and moral point of view'; her brother wrote at greater length on his careful attention to blasphemy or the wrong use of 'God', a rather narrower context.

Both of them claimed all along that they had not added to the text, or provided verbal changes, only deleted the unacceptable and, Henrietta says, 'occasionally substituted a word which is in common use, instead of one that is obsolete'. Thomas Bowdler in the next edition, 1818, was more emphatic about this, stating on the title page of his ten volumes that 'Nothing is added to the original text; but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family'.

One is tempted to assume that Thomas took over and finished the job, editing all thirty-seven plays for family reading, after the relative failure of his sister's tentative attempt; writing a new and clearer Preface, taking the work to Longman in London rather than getting it printed locally by Cruttwell with Hatchard as London distributors.

Noel Perrin, in his entertaining book *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy*, was surely wrong in saying 'here was Shakespeare mutilated, as no English

author had been mutilated before'. Shakespeare had frequently and constantly been mutilated, changed, re-written, for stage production. Francis Gentleman, an easy example because he went into print on the subject, in 1774 (about the time when old John Bowdler had delighted the family with his readings) was in touch with Garrick and refers to 'the prunings, transpositions, or other alterations, which, in his province as a manager he had often found necessary to make, or adopt, with regard to the text, for the convenience of representation, or accommodation to the powers and capacities of his performers'.

The tradition continues — indeed, that passage helps me to receive with more tolerance the astonishing eccentricities of most productions at Stratford and on film. A current Stratford *Hamlet*, as I write this, has deleted altogether the opening scene, about which T. S. Eliot wrote a charming essay defining and explaining its artistic perfection. Textual change has become habitual in films of the plays, though extraordinary background noise and rapidity of speech in the recent *Romeo and Juliet* film made sure Shakespeare's poetry was incomprehensible anyway. Rapid shouts from the stage, when neither speed of speech nor shouting is appropriate, mutilates or slaughters the text a thousand times more effectively than anything perpetrated by that gentle couple Henrietta and Thomas Bowdler.

Though this is not the place to review Stratford of the nineteen-nineties, an interesting contrast between it and the Bowdlers may be mentioned: simply, its purpose is opposite. Where the Bowdlers reduced or deleted what seemed indelicate, modern Stratford emphasises it; where Garrick concealed, Stratford makes explicit. In Stratford we are back perhaps among the Elizabethans, we are groundlings for whom the poetry is too complex for comprehension anyway. If Shakespeare was and is commonly too wonderful to be understood from the stage, but digestible at slow tempo in one's chair at home, producers show wisdom in surrendering to popular clowning, to stage-effects and rapidity, frenzy, incomprehension.

Eighteenth-century theatre made a different choice, by deleting obscenity along with indecency. Shortened versions which remained had some chance of being understood. It was endearing but not amazing to read John Gielgud's confession in a recent interview, that he spoke passages of *Lear* from the stage with much appreciation of their sound but small understanding of what they meant.

Perhaps a good play to read in the Bowdler theme is *Othello*. 'Measure

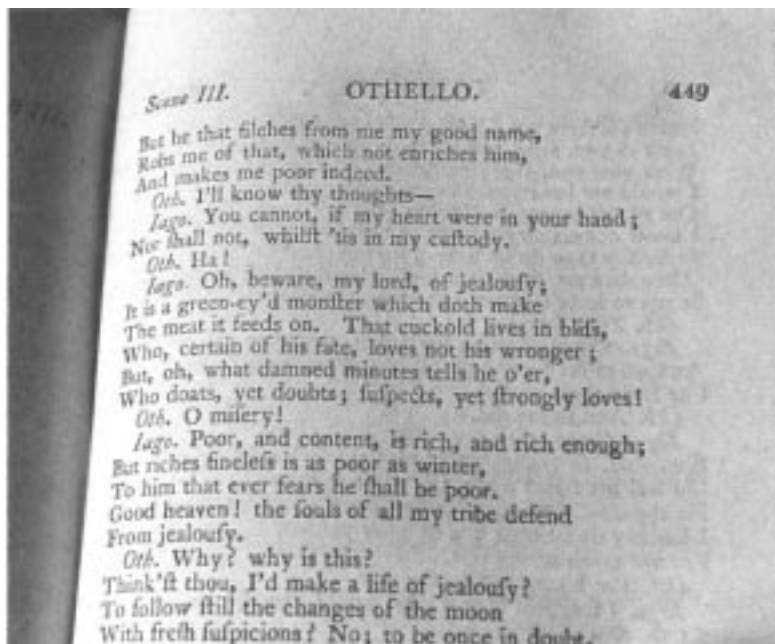


for Measure and Othello', wrote Eric Partridge,² 'are Shakespeare's most sexual, most bawdy plays' and he regard Othello as 'slightly the bawdier of the two'. I had recently a copy of the 1681 quarto with manuscript deletions, adaptations, and stage notes for successive theatre performance through the eighteenth century.

Partridge quotes for particular example the opening of Act III, foolish but typical, where the Musicians enter with Cassio. *They play, and enter the Clown*, is the printed stage direction.

Clown:	Why Masters, ha your instruments been at <i>Naples</i> , that they speak i' th' nose thus?
Boy:	How Sir, how?
Clown:	Are these I pray, call'd wind Instruments?
Boy:	I marry they are Sir.
Clown:	O, thereby hangs a tail.
Boy:	Whereby hangs a tail Sir?
Clown:	Marry Sir, by many a wind Instrument that I know.

² *Shakespear's Bawdy*, p. 54.



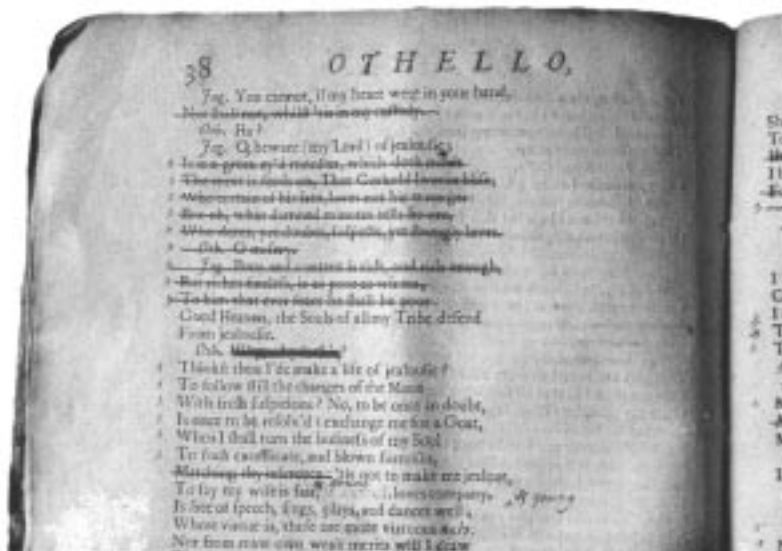
We get it, or we don't. At the head of the Act is added in an early hand, in my prompt copy, 'This Act should begin at the 3rd Scene of it, the 2 first Scenes being unnecessary and very mean'. Omitted also of course, from Bowdler's text.

Here is an obscure passage, famous enough, Iago lecturing Othello in mid-passion:

'Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy:
 It is a green-ey'd monster which doth make
 The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss,
 Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
 But, oh, what damned minutes tells he o'er,
 Who doats, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves!'

It might seem natural for Bowdler to excise those six lines, but I have transcribed them from Henrietta Bowdler's text, 1807. In the prompt copy, they are all scored through.

The example is perhaps of some interest because I believe they were



deleted from the stage version by reason of obscurity rather than indelicacy. In family reading, Bath circa 1770, as general moral exordium it could pass for a warning against jealousy. Cuckold, if pressed, was explainable, 'A wife must always be true to her husband'. Different indeed from Jago's shout to Roderigo in the opening scene of the first Act, 'I am one Sir, that come to tell you, your Daughter, and the Moore, are now making the Beast with two backs'. Deleted by Bowdler, scored through to illegibility in the prompt copy.

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In these few instances we find changes, deletions, excisions for reasons of obscurity, or delicacy, or critical taste. Bowdler has become a term of absurdity, because it has been assumed that successive editions of *The Family Shakespeare* had only one target: indelicacy, indecency, obscenity. Our stance in the nineteen-nineties supposes of course that in this matter we have achieved commonsense equilibrium, a position of confident balance.

On stage, Stratford returns to a mixture of Bell's period and Shakespeare's, chopping where it chooses and opting for obscenity. We can

Gary Taylor has a few sentences about this:

In the Renaissance children had sometimes attended the theatre, and child actors had played female roles, but none of Shakespeare's texts had been written for children. Nevertheless, by the nineteenth century a familiarity with Shakespeare was expected of every educated person; the sooner aspirant middle-class children could acquire such knowledge, the better. Shakespeare was thus forcibly transformed into a children's author.³

I don't much like 'aspirant middle-class children' as applied to the Bowdlers of Bath – their father wanted to share with them plays and the poetry he loved, probably nothing more than that, they were not 'aspirants' for place in schools or society in that vein; but, in a blurb phrase of modern publishers, clearly *The Family Shakespeare* 'filled a long-felt need'.

The need rose to prominence because it was reckoned that children should be introduced to Shakespeare's poetry – and to his fun, and stories, but with the emphasis upon poetry, or language, and also that very Johnsonian concept 'instruction'. Johnson's notes, especially his comments on earlier notes, provide wit and helpful good sense; his judgements at the end of each play, often vacuous or obtuse as we now read them, had generally an eye upon instruction, the moral lesson. 'The marriage of Olivia, and the succeeding perplexity' he wrote in summary of *Twelfth Night*, 'though well enough contrived to divert on the stage, wants credibility, and failed to produce the proper instruction required in the drama, as it exhibits no just picture of life'. Of *Romeo and Juliet* he wrote, 'His comick scenes are happily wrought, but his pathetick strains are always polluted with some unexpected depravations'. I believe Johnson would have praised *The Family Shakespeare*, which concerned itself not only with indelicate expressions or depravations, but also occasionally with sentiments which struck the Bowdlers as dangerous for children. Doll Tearsheet has no place in their *Henry IV*, but more surprisingly in 'Much Ado' Benedick's reply to Beatrice, who asks how he will avenge Claudio's false accusation against Hero, 'Kill him in the Church', is deleted as too shocking a concept; and sadly, anyone would now agree, Biron's long wonderful speech in *Love's Labour's Lost*, beginning

'Have at you then, affection's men-at-arms ,

³ *Reinventing Shakespeare*, 207

in praise of women's eyes as against academic withdrawal, with such miracle-lines as

'Love's feeling is more soft and sensible
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails'

has no place in Bowdler, a ridiculous deprivation. Yet, here is Johnson's reflection upon this most witty and elegant work of art: 'In this play, which all the editors have concurred to censure, and some have rejected as unworthy of our poet, it must be confessed that there are many passages mean, childish, and vulgar; and some which ought not to have been exhibited, as we are told they were, to a maiden Queen'. Johnson's edition appeared in 1765. Half a century later taste was ready for the Bowdlers. They were guilty of nothing so new or astonishing.

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No variorum editor has concerned himself with *The Family Shakespeare*, but comparisons between this 1681 prompt copy, and Bowdler, and the full text provide absorbing examples.

Iago explained his reasons for plotting against Cassio, apart from a resentment in being passed-over for promotion, somewhat implausibly at the end of Act II scene I; alleging he believed Emilia, his own wife, had been adulterous with both Cassio and Othello, for which the notion of a wife-swap inspired jealous revenge.

'Now I love her [Desdemona] too,
Not our of absolute lust, (though peradventure,
I stand accountant for so great a sin.)
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the Moor hath wrong'd me.
And nothing can or shall content my soul,
Till I am even with him wife for wife;
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At last into a jealousy so strong,
That judgement cannot cure. Which thing to do,
I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,
Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb,
(For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too)
Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me,
For making him egregiously an ass,
And practising upon his grace and quiet,
Even to madness. 'Tis here, but yet confused;
Knavery's plain face is never seen till us'd'.

And how did Henrietta cope with such passages of the play? Easily it seems, for that is transcribed from her text, 1807. All she omits is the two lines following ‘Which thing to do,’:

If this poor trash of Venice, whom I trash
For his quick hunting, stand the putting-on.

Blasphemy, swearing, improper sentiments, and indelicate sexual description were her concern; chiefly the last, deleted alike in *The Family Shakespeare*, and the prompt copy, and Francis Gentleman’s stage edition for Bell. I have to declare that Othello in Bowdler’s text makes a very good read; the children who listened were not greatly deprived.

The other candidate for that questionable position as Shakespeare’s bawdiest play, *Measure for Measure*, gave more trouble to the Bowdlers and caused their only apology by way of Preface for including it.

‘If my Readers’, wrote Thomas at the close of that Preface, ‘should think (and I confess myself to be of that opinion) that “Measure for Measure”, as I have now corrected it, is not yet an unobjectionable play, I would request them to peruse it attentively in its original form; and I am fully persuaded that there is no person who will then express surprise at its not being entirely freed from defects which are inseparably connected with the story’.

I myself have enjoyed Lucio in *Measure for Measure* as among the wittiest of Shakespeare’s inventions, and appreciate Johnson’s concession that ‘Of this play, the light or comick part is very pleasing .. .’ Mrs Inchbald, offering her many little volumes of plays ‘as performed at the theatres royal, Drury Lane and Covent Garden’, at about the period of Henrietta Bowdler’s first Shakespeare publication, could only exclaim, ‘That Dr. Johnson, in his criticism on this play, should write in praise of the comick characters, seems surprising!’

What was their worry? Speaking of wicked Angelo, to the Duke disguised as Friar, Lucio has a sentiment the Bowdlers could well reject—beautifully phrased: ‘A little more lenity to lechery would do no harm in him; something too crabbed that way, friar’. Mrs Inchbald, claiming authority ‘from the prompt book’ used at Drury Lane or Covent Garden, kept the sense but wrecked the phrase, printing ‘A little more lenity to wenching would do no harm in him’, a silly emendation if ever there was; and Thomas Bowdler, with more chivalry than taste followed her. ‘It is gratifying to me’, he adds in a note, ‘to perceive that

Mrs. Inchbald . . . has expressed her sentiments respecting Angelo and the comic characters, in terms nearly corresponding with my own'.

It is of some interest to sort out the succession of early Bowdler editions, wrongly listed in Jaggard's Shakespeare Bibliography. Part of the confusion, but not all, arose from the habit of calling Thomas Bowdler's 1818 edition the first, because he completed the task by including every play. Confusion extends to several changing Prefaces, and the editions to which they belong. I am most grateful to Nikki Rathbone at the Shakespeare Library in Birmingham, and to Geoffrey Groom, for their courtesy in arranging for me to examine the first six Bowdler editions.

After 1818 came the 1820 edition, called there the second, the 1823 edition called the third, and 1825 called the fourth. That is simple enough, and Thomas's *Preface* in 1818 became known as *Preface to the First Edition*; in 1820 it was repeated with minimal change; 1823 however, called *Third Edition* on its title page, had a completely new *Preface* which is always known as *Preface to the Fourth Edition*. In 1825, the so-called *Fourth Edition* repeated that preface with one sentence added.

Meanwhile Henrietta's 1807 preface, truly that of the first edition, was henceforth ignored though she had made there most of the points which Thomas repeated at greater length:

'It will, I believe', she had written, 'be universally acknowledged, that few authors are so instructive as Shakespeare; but his warmest admirers must confess, that his Plays contain much that is vulgar, and much that is indelicate.'

All quite true and unexceptionable; Johnson, Mrs Montagu, the Bowdlers, looked to be instructed, and improved. It was in the air they breathed. *Elegant Extracts: or, useful and entertaining Pieces of Poetry, Selected for the Improvement of Young Persons* had made its handsome first appearance in 1796.

Thomas in his 1818 preface declared that 'Shakespeare, inimitable Shakespeare, will remain the subject of admiration as long as taste and literature shall exist, and his writings will be handed down to posterity in their native beauty, although the present attempt to add to his fame should prove entirely abortive'. In that essay he took pains to justify his text as generally in the tradition of recent scholarship, following the Steevens variorum of 1803. 'Othello's speech, for example, in the second scene of the fifth act, will be found as it is in Mr. Steevens, and in the old

editions of Shakespeare, not as it is usually spoken on the stage' he added in 1820, as an interpolation to the same Preface.

His new preface of 1823 had been written under the stimulus of vigorous reactions in journals, for and against *The Family Shakespeare*; but before viewing them we can notice a final message, I believe, from Henrietta in a new footnote to the fifth-edition (1827) reprint of Thomas's so-called Preface to the First Edition; for there we first find that charming paragraph, quoted earlier, beginning 'My first idea of *The Family Shakespeare* arose from the recollection of my father's custom of reading in this manner to his family'. That cannot be Thomas's note, because he had died in 1825. Henrietta, who lived until 1830, seems in old age to here-asserting her position as the one responsible for the start of this whole enterprise, which had by then risen to the realms of popular recognition. Assuming she had a hand in those later reprints, she states a position by choosing to call the 1823 essay 'Preface to the Fourth Edition', thus planting her own from 1807 as the first; and so it remained in every future printing.

In that fourth-edition preface, Thomas Bowdler made effective defence against critics who attacked the whole concept without bothering to examine it. He put the argument and opposed it courteously in two sentences:

The great objection which has been urged against *The Family Shakespeare*, and it has been urged with vehemence by those who have not examined the work, is the apprehension, that, with erasure of the indecent passages, the spirit and fire of the poet would often be much injured, and sometimes be entirely destroyed. This objection arises principally from those persons who have confined their study of Shakespeare to the closet, and have not learned in the theatre, with how much safety it is possible to make the necessary alterations.

For the opposition we can quote from the opening paragraph of a review in the *British Critic* of April 1822; the writer was supposed to be considering Caldecott's *Specimen of a New Edition of Shakespeare*, which Murray had published in the previous year:

Emendations, curtailments and corrections (*all for his own good*), have been multiplied to infinity, by the zeal and care of those who have been suffered to take him in hand. They have purged and castrated him, and tattooed and beplastered him, and cauterised and phlebotomised him with all the studied refinement that the utmost skill of critical barbarity could suggest. Here ran Johnson's

dagger through, 'see what a rent envious Pope has made,' and 'here the well-beloved Bowdler stabbed': while, after every blow, they pause for a time, and with tiresome diligence unfolding the cause why they did love him while they struck him, have thus proceeded.

Jeffrey in *The Edinburgh Review*, October 1821 had lent his powerful support to the Bowdler enterprise and so established its long-lasting success; had indeed, at the end of his second paragraph, over-stated it to a startling extent:

Now it is quite undeniable, that there are many passages in Shakespeare, which a father could not read aloud to his children – a brother to his sister – or a gentleman to a lady: – and every one almost must have felt or witnessed the extreme awkwardness, and even distress, that arises from suddenly stumbling upon such expressions, when it is almost too late to avoid them, and when the readiest wit cannot suggest any paraphrase, which shall not betray, by its harshness, the embarrassment from which it has arisen. Those who recollect such scenes, must all rejoice, we should think, that Mr. Bowdler has provided a security against their recurrence; and, as what cannot be pronounced in decent company cannot well afford much pleasure in the closer, we think it is better, every way, that what cannot be spoken, and ought not to have been written, should now cease to be printed.

So what do we make of it all – from Pope to Malone, Bowdler to Bridges? I suggest that before photography and film took over, words and phrases *were* the films and videos, needing their PG, 15, or 18 certificates; that within the habit of reading, a comprehension was attempted and expected. Parents needed defence from the embarrassment of explaining to their kids about Othello and Desdemona who made, as Iago put it, 'the beast with two backs'.

And let us not suppose we have arrived at everlasting or temporary commonsense or stability in these matters. Passions are restrained, most days of most lives, impulses disciplined. We are all Bowdlers, in no position to mock.