**Shakespeare Ancient and Modern: The 1750s Reception**

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*[ABSTRACT ]* *Eighteenth-century writers on Shakespeare were very attached to the view, originating among Shakespeare’s own contemporaries, that his work had a kind of universality, communicating “for all time”. Yet they were also often preoccupied with how difficult many readers found it to even understand him. This essay examines statements of both kinds from the early and mid-century, to argue that in the 1750s, distinctively, commentators concluded both that Shakespeare was “modern” – in the sense that he wrote in an everyday idiom, unbound by classical conventions – and that he was “ancient”, in the sense that Elizabethan culture and its language itself had become historically alien and obscure. Comparing representations of Shakespeare by Samuel Richardson, Samuel Johnson, Edward Young, Charlotte Lennox, David Hume, and other writers of the 1750s, with their forebears in the earlier parts of the century, this essay makes the case for the originality of this position, and considers the implications of the paradoxical fact that Shakespeare seemed to become “ancient” and “modern” simultaneously at this time.*

In October 1748, the poet and dramatist Aaron Hill wrote to Samuel Richardson for advice on a title page for *Gideon or, The Patriot*, an epic Hill had been tinkering with since the 20s but never finished, and a neoclassical tragedy adapted from Voltaire called *Merope*, which he was struggling to convince David Garrick to produce. Hill had been a fixture of the literary scene far longer than Richardson, and the novelist is tactful in his assessment of the semi-retired Hill’s difficulties in finding a foothold in the market of the late 40s. ‘Your writings require thought to read, and to take in their whole force; and the world has no thought to bestow’, Richardson consoles him, ‘I do not think, that were Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to be now published as a new work, it would be well received. Shakespeare, with all his beauties, would, as a modern writer, be hissed off the stage’. A couple of months away from publishing the final instalment of his own audaciously experimental and self-consciously ‘new’ *Clarissa*, Richardson flatters his friend that ‘the fault lies in the indolent… world’. But he is also adamant that neither trusting to one’s eventual vindication by posterity, nor being self-satisfied at having stayed true to older, better standards, is an adequate response to the demands of the modern literary scene. ‘You would not, I am sure, wish to write to a future age only’, Richardson adds, ‘besides, I am of the opinion that it is necessary for a genius to accommodate itself to the mode and taste of the world it is cast into, since works published in this age must take root in it, to flourish in the next’. ‘Garrick’, he concludes, ‘thinks you above the present low taste… and wish(es) you could descend to it’.[[1]](#footnote-2)

As the idea of a vernacular canon developed in the eighteenth century, Shakespeare and Milton were increasingly the names around which it was organised. In this respect, it is not surprising that Richardson can treat their seventeenth century as a time when high-minded difficulty was no bar to commercial success (meaning that the period might have been kinder to Hill), while also suggesting that there may be something shallow and tokenistic and about the indolent modern public’s engagement with them. Wary of such nostalgia, however, Richardson proposes to Hill a different, explicitly present-oriented, conception of authorship. Instead of trying to apply the standards of an earlier time regardless of context, Richardson argues that genius must be pragmatic about ‘the mode and taste of the world it is cast into’, adding with a characteristically Christianising twist on the conventions of literary fame that ‘works published in this age must take root in it, to flourish in the next’. As I argue below, such questioning of what it means to be a modern author remains a constituent part of Richardson and other writers’ interests during the 1750s, but with one difference: increasingly in the decade, Shakespeare is positioned not merely on the side of nostalgia for lost standards, but as *the* modern author of the kind Richardson describes.

But that is only half of the story The 1750s’ project of making Shakespeare modern also took place in a context in which, paradoxically, he was also becoming increasingly ‘ancient’: in the specific sense of being historically distant, linguistically alien, a voice from another time. On the stage, Shakespeare’s plays were continuing to be broken up, reorganised and modernised for contemporary audiences; in editing, a turn that treated Shakespeare not merely as a difficult or haphazard writer with a disputed textual history, but as a relic speaking from the other side of a decisive transformation in the English language was becoming the new orthodoxy; in history, the political and cultural strangeness of the turn of the seventeenth century dominated attempts to write about it; and in literary historiography, a growing interest in Shakespeare’s relationship to his sources and to his contemporaries was producing an increasingly historicised understanding of his achievement. By 1765, Samuel Johnson could presume to announce the start of a new era for Shakespeare, claiming that with the publication of Johnson’s own Shakespeare edition, ‘he may *now* begin to assume the dignity of an ancient’ (VII: 61 [my emphasis]).[[2]](#footnote-3) But in all these ways, Shakespeare was also becoming ‘ancient’ in another, more ambivalent sense, of being historically estranged, obscure, and other.[[3]](#footnote-4)

My argument, then, is that Shakespeare became ancient at the very moment he became modern: and that this moment was the 1750s. Whatever importance or analogous dialectical quirks can found at other stages in the history of Shakespeare’s reception, this is a particular significance of that decade. In what follows, I begin by showing how discussions of literary modernity in the 1750s put Shakespeare’s modernity centre stage, in contrast to the relatively muted place it had taken in earlier versions of the dispute between the ancients and the moderns. Following this, I examine the way that, as much as the period seemed to want to claim Shakespeare as the archetypal ‘modern’, readers were also becoming increasingly nervously aware of how difficult it was getting to understand him and his time.

That the contested and ambiguous terms ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ could take such a habitual place in the critical idiom of the European eighteenth century was owing to the minor culture war that ushered the century in. In a series of debates over the relative merits of ancient and modern culture in the late seventeenth century, the partisans of the ancients had made the case for the transhistorical verities of the classics, while the partisans of the moderns saw the status of classical literature as historically contingent, and potentially even superseded by recent developments in learning. Shakespeare’s difference from classical writers had been part of how he was spoken of ever since the early seventeenth century, and yet in the writings the *querelle* inspired between the 1690s and 1730s, he is virtually unmentioned.[[4]](#footnote-5) Shakespeare does not join the moderns, Tasso, Milton, Bacon and Harvey, whose souls are reanimated inside their books to battle against those of the ancients in the library of Jonathan Swift’s *Battle of the Books* (1704): indeed, despite the frequency with which Swift was later identified with the younger poet and editor of Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Swift never seems to have taken much interest in Shakespeare at all.[[5]](#footnote-6) Shakespeare’s absence from the *querelle* might be explained by the fact that it tended to be the partisans of the ancients who cited their preferred authors’ achievement in poetry and creative writing, while the moderns tended to focus on achievement in the natural sciences[[6]](#footnote-7); or otherwise by the fact that drama was not habitually taken to be of the same standing as poetry at the turn of the eighteenth century. But it also seems as reasonable to take it as evidence that Shakespeare’s later positioning at the heart of the idea of serious creative writing simply can’t be assumed at the start of the eighteenth century.

While Swift did not take the opportunity to rank Shakespeare among the modern authors, he did have an indirect influence on the construction of Shakespeare’s modernity via his stance on Homer, which as Henry Power has most recently argued, in turn informed that of Pope. One of the most important instances of perceived modern undermining of the transhistorical status of the ancients had been Richard Bentley’s *Dissertation upon the Epistles of Phalaris* (1697), which had demonstrated the historical alterations undertaken by the Ancient Greek language, and by extension, the cultural specificity and contingency of everything written in it. As Power remarks, ‘for Swift, the Homeric poems were the ultimate pattern of linguistic stability and cross-epochal communication’, meaning that he necessarily ‘disliked the view of Homer as becoming progressively less intelligible’ that Bentley had opened the door to, ‘above all because it robbed him of his prime example of a stable language’.[[7]](#footnote-8) Swift, we can say then, did not regard ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ as strictly or solely temporal categories. Literature, in his analysis, can be thought of as consistent with ‘ancient’ principle if it retains its transparent power to communicate in any historical contingency, while it is ‘modern’ if, through an undue attention to the particular and topical, it has condemned itself only to speak only to the moment of its first context.

When Pope came to translate Homer (1715-26), he took over this Swiftian representation of the universality of the Homeric word.[[8]](#footnote-9) Pope was seen by some of his peers as a capitulating ‘modern’ for admitting that a translation was needed in the first place (not to mention his uneasy tidying up of some of Homer’s more unseemly passages).[[9]](#footnote-10) But he was at the same time a full-blooded ‘ancient’ in pleading that he has only made such concessions to allow Homer’s true ancient universality to shine through once more.[[10]](#footnote-11) As Joseph M. Levine points out, Pope’s 1725 Shakespeare edition more or less directly repeats the rationale of his Homer, undertaking ‘to rescue the Elizabethan from the obscurity of the past in something of the same way that he had the ancient Greek, by restoring his meaning accurately and finding ways to make him intelligible to a modern reader’.[[11]](#footnote-12) If anything, in Pope’s assessment, what was true of Homer in the ‘ancient’ reading, is even more true of Shakespeare, since, as Pope stresses in the preface to his edition, Shakespeare’s immediate communication of eternal nature wasn’t even tempered by even the moderate mediating influence of Homer’s study under the scholars of Egypt.[[12]](#footnote-13) In short, despite entangling so much of his reputation in his association with the creation of a Shakespeare who was legible to modern audiences, Pope had no more to gain than Swift did from thinking of him as a ‘modern’. Instead, the programmatic force his edition was committed to silently positioning him as a Homeric ‘ancient’: a speaker of eternal verities, could we but listen.

These terms of discussion are somewhat different by the end of the 1740s. In *An Attempte to Rescue that Anciente English Poet, And Play-Wrighte, Maister Williaume Shakespear from the Many Errours, falsely Charged on him by Certain New-Fangled Wittes* (1749), the critic John Holt adopts the mock-wisdom of Martinus Scriblerus from Pope’s own *Dunciad Variorum* (1729), remarking sardonically that ‘the basis of all verbal criticism’ is that ‘the author could never fail to use the very best word, on every occasion’ and ‘the critic cannot choose but know which it is’. As we will see, whatever their differences in emphasis, the Shakespeare editors of the first half of the eighteenth century worked within an undeclared consensus that obscure, disputed, or aesthetically unseemly passages in Shakespeare should in the first instance be assumed to be interpolations or misprints of some kind, making it part of the editor’s job to guess at what Shakespeare was most likely to have ‘originally’ written, and to amend the printed text accordingly. Turning away from this tradition, Holt argues that ‘no author has suffered more by this treatment, than our deserving admired Shakespeare: who, though a Modern, has been explained into obscurity, and though he wrote in a living tongue, has been rendered unintelligible by his commentating editors’.[[13]](#footnote-14) The poor quality of the printed editions of Shakespeare’s work had been a truism since the first folio. With Holt, however, the charge can now be applied to the very processes of eighteenth-century editing that been developed to undo precisely that early damage. Thus Holt is adopting Pope’s language to disparage an editorial consensus Pope was himself part of.

Holt’s use of the term ‘modern’ for Shakespeare also indicates a new possibility in critical terminology at mid-century. We might say that the distinctiveness of this new position lies in where it locates transparency. For Pope, we have seen that transparency is the trait of being ‘ancient’, in the Swiftian sense of being timelessly communicative, and – whether in the case of Homer or Shakespeare – Pope’s whole editorial policy is geared towards pushing aside such belated blocks to that transparency as have since arisen. For Holt by contrast, Shakespeare was a ‘modern’ writing in ‘a living tongue’ from the outset, and it is only the editorial consensus that professed to be clarifying him in the eighteenth century that has made him so obscure. In other words, both Pope and Holt regard Shakespeare as having once been completely transparent: what has changed is that for Pope this is what made him an ancient, whereas for Holt it makes him a modern.

Richardson’s advice to Aaron Hill, written months before Holt published his *Attempt*, does not obviously share Holt’s innovative view of Shakespeare’s modernity. But that was about to change. Richardson’s earliest published writings suggest an intuition that the education and fashionable culture of the upper sorts of society were not an objective record of ‘what is best’, but were rather made to seem so in a way that entrenched their class interests.[[14]](#footnote-15) This is why Richardson’s conduct writing of the 1730s advises young apprentices – such as those employed in his own print shop – not to attend restagings of Restoration comedies: not only was the morality lewd, but their own tradesman class itself was invariably made the butt of the joke.[[15]](#footnote-16) Since at least the time of the composition of *Clarissa* in the mid-40s, Richardson had expanded this early intuition into a full blown antipathy towards what he came to regard as the disastrous consequences of the dominance of the classics in the education of Britain’s hegemonic class. As he wrote to Lady Bradshaigh, the *Iliad*, ‘noble as it truly is, has done infinite mischief for a series of ages’ having normalised violence at the top of society in such a way that has ‘ravaged the earth, and made it a field of blood’.[[16]](#footnote-17) This re-envisaging of the terms of the old ancients and moderns debate (which, Pope’s own misgivings about the violence of the ancients notwithstanding, Ian Watt calls ‘substantially new’[[17]](#footnote-18)) crystalizes in a scene in Richardson’s third novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), including now – for the first time – a newly modern Shakespeare.

Early in the novel’s first volume, the heroine Harriet Byron tries to extricate herself from a dinner party debate about the merits of a university education and knowledge of the classics. In this iteration, the debate is no longer divided straightforwardly between those who defend the ancients and those who defend the moderns (Swift’s *Battle* is mentioned as a text from a different age), but rather as one between three parties: ‘the man of the town’ – who wears his learning lightly and chuckles his way through the debate, ‘the man of the college’ – the real adherent of the ancients, but as obnoxious a pedant as any ‘modern’ scholar scathingly imagined by the Scriblerians – and finally… the woman. This division reflects the fact that, like the petit-bourgeois printer Richardson himself, most women were ‘moderns’ by default, deprived of a classical education, and Harriet remarks sadly of Richardson’s real-life friend, the classical scholar Elizabeth Carter, that her mastery of Latin and Greek makes her ‘so much an owl among the birds, that she wants of all things to be thought to have unlearned them’.[[18]](#footnote-19) As Fiona Ritchie has most recently emphasised, women had recognised a kinship between Shakespeare’s ‘small Latin and less Greek’ and their own at least since Aphra Behn, and the radical idea that women were actually better placed to understand Shakespeare as a result of their shared separation from classical ideas which could only be a distraction, was very soon to be made by Elizabeth Montagu.[[19]](#footnote-20) Sure enough, when Shakespeare does emerge in conversation in *Sir Charles Grandison*, it is as a move away from the uncomfortably interrogative talk dominated by the man of the college, to the more feminine and inclusive topics of ‘*Plays, Fashion, Dress and the Public Entertainments*’. In this discussion, Harriet says, the man of the college ‘made no great figure; … For he would needs force in conversation, with a preference to our Shakespeare, his Sophocles, his Euripides, his Terence; of the merits of whose performances, except by translations, no one present… could judge’.[[20]](#footnote-21)

In Richardson’s analysis of culture in the 1750s then, Shakespeare has swapped sides, and his new positioning as an exemplar of Richardsonian modernity – inclusive, fashionable, feminine – is amplified in the novelist’s collaborations and correspondence of the rest of the decade. The first example is Richardson’s correspondence with a combatant in one of the more celebrated controversies over Shakespeare of the start of the 50s. Thomas Edwards attacked the 1747 Shakespeare edition of William Warburton in *A Supplement* (1748) and *The Canons of Criticism* (1750), and, despite previously having been professionally close to Warburton, Richardson encouraged Edwards’ ongoing criticism of him in a correspondence lasting until Edwards’s death in 1757. In a sonnet addressed to Warburton and sent to Richardson prior to its publication in *The Canons*, Edwards remarks that ‘who would comment well (on Shakespeare’s) god-like page… must have a heart as well as head’.[[21]](#footnote-22) The suggestion of the poem is similar to Holt’s: Shakespeare would be perfectly clear to sufficiently sensitive modern readers, were it not for what Edwards calls the ‘borrowed plumes of index-lore’, the distracting interventions of modern editors such as Warburton.[[22]](#footnote-23) Warburton next editorial project was his *Works* of Pope, published in 1751, which prompts Edwards to reiterate the criticism: Pope, he hopes, ‘as well as a much better man, Shakespeare, will soon get rid of the lumber which at present encumbers them, and emerge to posterity clear of their heavy annotator’. Pope and Shakespeare are also discussed together later in the correspondence, when Richardson imagines an odd counter-factual genealogy of Shakespeare reception: one in which Pope himself had not stooped to the ‘low work’ of editing, and thus had not ‘degraded himself by setting his face, with so much animosity, against Theobald’s’. This alternative line of editors, Richardson speculates, might conclude with Edwards himself, superseding Warburton as an editor who could finally do justice ‘to the injured shade of Shakespeare’.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Such fantasies of what would now be called ‘un-editing’ Shakespeare in Richardson’s correspondence with Edwards reach a programmatic finale in the work of another friend: Edward Young’s essay of 1759, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, addressed to and printed by Richardson, as well as probably partly written by him.[[24]](#footnote-25) Young’s influential essay substantiates Richardson’s earlier defence to Hill of a literary modernity able to ‘accommodate itself to the mode and taste of the world it is cast into’, as well as his belated interest in making Shakespeare – Young’s ‘star of the first magnitude among the moderns’ – into the author who best fulfils it. In doing so, the essay’s effort to make Shakespeare modern also ends up making him curiously interchangeable with one ‘modern’ in particular. Young remarks that ‘a friend of mine… with a genius, as well moral, as *original* (to speak in bold terms), has cast out evil spirits; has made a convert to virtue of a species of composition, once most its foe’. Richardson, Young argues, ‘has relied on himself’, rather than any prior classical model, and in so doing has transformed the novel from a scurrilous stumbling block to virtue into its most valuable and effective technology: ‘as the first Christian emperors expelled daemons, and dedicated their temples to the living God’. In Richardson’s hands, the modern novel supersedes the classical imitations that dominated the early eighteenth century, as Christianity superseded the pagan culture that produced the classics. But were this hyperbolic praise not enough, Young breaks off with a concession to Richardson’s modesty: ‘you, I know, are sparing in your praise of this author; therefore I will speak of one, which is sure of your applause’.[[25]](#footnote-26) This is how the influential passages on Shakespeare’s originality in Young’s text are introduced: in a rhetorical performance that acts as if the same points could equally be made of Richardson, and as if the great dramatist and the modern novelist had become interchangeable names.

Virtually absent from the first wave of hostilities between the ancients and the moderns in the early century, by the end of the 1750s Shakespeare had become for many commentators the indispensable modern author: feminine, spontaneous, English, Christian, original, novelistic, and crucially unindebted to the classical tradition. But how is Holt’s Shakespeare writing in the ‘living tongue’ of modern English, or Harriet Byron’s ‘our Shakespeare’ of the fashionable tea table, to be reconciled with the other Shakespeare emerging in the period? If Shakespeare becomes ‘modern’ in the 1750s, then he also becomes ‘ancient’, in the specific sense of having become historically distant to a hitherto unparalleled extent.

In 1721, Francis Atterbury – then in the thick of the Jacobite plot he would go to the tower for in the following year – wrote to Pope as follows:

I have found time to read some parts of Shakespeare which I was least acquainted with. I protest to you, in an hundred places I cannot construe him, I don’t understand him. The hardest part of Chaucer is more intelligible to me than some of those scenes, not merely thro the faults of the edition, but the obscurity of the writer: for obscure he is, and a little (not a little) inclined now and then to bombast whatever apology you have contrived on that head for him. There are allusions in him to an hundred things, of which I knew nothing, and can guess nothing. And yet without some competent knowledge of those matters there’s no understanding him. I protest Aeschylus does not want a comment to me, more than he does: so that I begin to despair of doing you any considerable service[[26]](#footnote-27)

The obscurity of the Shakespearean text, of which Atterbury’s experience presents an extreme example, is *the* given of eighteenth-century Shakespeare editing. Whereas the seventeenth century was happy for successive Shakespeare folios to be left to pile up errors with little that would be recognised as formal editorial supervision (a process Randall McLeod evocatively refers to as ‘drifting’[[27]](#footnote-28)), eighteenth-century editors assumed a Shakespearean corpus that was in desperate need of editorial mediation to rescue it from obscurity. To demonstrate what is distinctive about the obscurity attributed to him in the 1750s, I turn here to Samuel Johnson’s writings on Shakespeare, and suggest that while his conviction that Shakespeare was obscure to modern readers was clearly not new, where he located that obscurity to a great degree was.

The general pattern is that the editors of the first half of the century tend to locate Shakespeare’s obscurity in external factors: that is to say, the muddle has been caused by concessions to playhouse in-jokes, careless storing and copying of texts, and worse than careless seventeenth-century publishing practices, prior to which the Shakespearean text must once have shone forth with transparent meaning. Even Theobald, the editor most often criticized in his own time and praised in ours for his nascent historicism and tough-minded prioritizing of textual over aesthetic correctness, sees his work as ‘restoring to the public their greatest poet in his original purity: after having so long lain in a condition that was a disgrace to common sense’.[[28]](#footnote-29) For Johnson, by contrast, while all those external factors certainly don’t help matters, underlying them is a far more structural obscurity caused by the increasing distance of the Elizabethan idiom itself.

Let us take Pope once again as our main comparison. I have suggested that the downplaying of Shakespeare’s status as a ‘modern’ during the first bouts of the ancients and the moderns controversy paved the way for Pope’s approaching him as an ‘ancient’ comparable with Homer when he came to edit him in the 1720s. But as with his translation of Homer, this guiding critical insight required Pope to be able to explain away the fact that readers such as Atterbury were simply unable to understand him. Still worse, it was clear to early eighteenth-century readers that many passages in the received Shakespearean text represented a grave departure from the transhistorical and transparent literary standards that Pope both assumed he could speak for, and had promised Shakespeare could fulfil. Faced with individual phrases that either seemed unduly vulgar or just didn’t make sense, Pope presumed to replace them with substitutions that seemed more plausible: famous examples include the switching of the dignified ‘in private’ for Shakespeare’s grossly plebeian ‘hugger-mugger’ in the burial of Polonius in *Hamlet*, and ‘goary blood’ for the ostensibly nonsensical ‘golden blood’ of the murdered Duncan in *Macbeth*. [[29]](#footnote-30) Throughout, grammar and metre, and even historical anachronisms are silently corrected, while at times entire exchanges of objectionable dialogue are relegated to footnotes. In Simon Jarvis’s analysis, Pope ‘moved back and forth between two different ways of accounting for these supposed blemishes: the idea that Shakespeare was a rough diamond who took no care to polish his own work, and the idea that Shakespeare’s text had been traduced by his first editors, who, as players were not gentlemen and, therefore, were insufficiently educated to be left in charge of the text’.[[30]](#footnote-31) In other words, preserving Shakespeare’s standing as a true ancient and exemplar of Pope’s normative literary values, required that Shakespeare be represented as having suffered as a contemporary author might suffer: rushed into ‘rhyming ere he wakes’ and ‘printing before term ends’, or subject to the textual vandalism of incompetent or unscrupulous publishers.[[31]](#footnote-32)

In this way, Pope had treated Shakespeare in the manner already described: as an ‘ancient’ who could be returned to the transparency and aesthetic correctness proper to that standing, if only his inconvenient obscurities and infelicities could be explained away to external causes. However, by the turn of the 50s, Shakespeare was beginning to be thought of as ‘ancient’ in quite a different way. In the famous claim from the preface to Johnson’s edition, that Shakespeare ‘may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient’, Johnson is perhaps best known for using the word ‘ancient’ in something like Pope’s sense. But well before this, he was also habitually using it in a less rarefied way, to simply mean old or historically distant: as in 1745 when he criticises Thomas Hanmer’s Shakespeare edition for not distinguishing between ‘the ancient reading and the innovations of the editor’ (VII: 45); or when he writes to the Oxford scholar and poet laureate Thomas Warton regarding Warton’s study of Spenser in 1754, ‘you have shown to all who hereafter attempt the study of our ancient authors the way to success’[[32]](#footnote-33); or again, when in his *Proposals* for the Shakespeare edition he remarks that Rowe and Pope ‘were very ignorant of the ancient English literature’ (IV: 56).

A development of Johnson’s construction of Shakespeare’s language as ‘ancient’ in this sense can be roughly traced through his writings. Punctuating his near constant occasional comment on Shakespeare at this time, Johnson published essays on *Macbeth* in 1745 and 1751, made mastery of Shakespearean diction a grounding of his *Dictionary* of 1755, set out the rubric for a new Shakespeare edition in 1756, and, finally, published *The Plays of William Shakespeare* in 1765. Marcus Walsh observes that while the first of these writings ‘offer conjectural emendations… often with a limited regard for the language of Shakespeare’s time and his own idiom’, in the 50s, ‘Johnson’s emphases had shifted towards explanation and contextualisation’.[[33]](#footnote-34) ‘Dictionary Johnson’, the mature Shakespearean, still holds with some of the Popean diminution of Shakespeare’s obscurity as merely the result of his chaotic circumstances of publication. But crucially, he is also resigned to the likelihood that there never was a transparent Shakespearean text prior to those external factors. ‘The reading of the ancient books is probably true’, he concedes, ‘and therefore is not to be disturbed for the sake of elegance, perspicuity, or mere improvement of the sense’ (IV: 106). This much accepted, he also adds an even more radical explanation for Shakespearean obscurity. ‘When a writer outlives his contemporaries, and remains almost the only unforgotten name of a distant time’, says Johnson ‘he is necessarily obscure’ (VII: 53). The difficulty in Shakespeare that the editorial tradition had established itself to overcome, had all along gone deeper than mere textual serendipity or authorial idiosyncrasy: it was to be located in a fundamental transformation in idiom since the seventeenth century from which Johnson’s age could not hope to pull back.

That languages change was not a new realisation.[[34]](#footnote-35) Just to take two recent examples, Pope had treated as an inevitability in *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) that ‘our sons their fathers’ *failing language* see/ and such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be’; while whatever his insistence that Homer could be excused its ravages, Swift acknowledged the same pattern in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), in the immortal Struldbruggs who ‘lie under the disadvantage of living like foreigners in their own country’, because after two hundred years their culture’s language has changed too much for them to be understood.[[35]](#footnote-36) What *is* new with Johnson, is – first – an editor’s application of the pattern of the transformation of languages to the problems of Shakespeare’s English; and second, his countenancing the possibility that its time of becoming ‘such as Chaucer is’ had already arrived. Even Swift’s superficially similar argument in his *Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue* (1712), that successive corruptions in the Interregnum and Restoration had damaged the earlier purity of Elizabethan English, is qualified by the accompanying claim that the ‘standard for language’ established by the King James Bible and Book of Common Prayer had with partial success continued to keep that idiom alive.[[36]](#footnote-37)

The early formation of Johnson’s analysis can be detected in *The Rambler* #168 (1751), where he discusses Lady Macbeth’s ‘Come thick night’ speech. Johnson pays the speech the high compliment that it ‘exert(s) all the force of poetry, that force which calls new powers into being’ (VII: 127), and yet notes that its effect comes close to being destroyed by its – to his ear – wholly inappropriate diction. ‘Dunnest’, ‘knife’, ‘peep’, and ‘blanket’ are all words that Johnson takes to be transparently ridiculous to eighteenth-century readers. But whereas in such situations Pope and to varying extents Johnson’s other editorial predecessors would have responded by proposing emendations, for Johnson the deadlock between the undeniable ‘force’ of Shakespeare’s poetry, and the equally undeniable absurdity of its diction at points like this, is to be explained by other means. Johnson concedes that while ‘we are all offended by low terms… no word is naturally or intrinsically meaner than another’ (V: 126-7). On the contrary, ‘words which convey ideas of dignity in one age, are banished from elegant writing or conversation in another, because they are in time debased by vulgar mouths, and can be no longer heard without the involuntary recollection of unpleasing images’.[[37]](#footnote-38)

Johnson is no straightforward linguistic relativist and there is no question for him that ‘low terms’ are rightly offensive. The point is that it is no use expecting that the past should have anticipated the standards of the present: right and inevitable as they may presently be. This policy of prescription in the present and easygoingness in the past contributes to the rather double treatment of the Elizabethan idiom in the *Dictionary* and the writings that follow it. Explaining the rationale for the illustrative quotations provided for the words in the *Dictionary*, Johnson says that he has ‘endeavoured to collect examples and authorities from the writers before the Restoration, whose works I regard as *the wells of English undefiled*, as the pure source of genuine diction’ (XVIII: 95).[[38]](#footnote-39) ‘Every language has a time of rudeness antecedent to perfection, as well as false refinement and declension’ and ‘I have fixed Sidney’s work for the boundary beyond which I make few excursions’ (XVIII: 96). The ‘rudeness’ of English prior to the high watermark of Elizabethan English is one thing, but accompanying implication that the English of Johnson’s own time has become one of ‘false refinement and declension’, ‘from which’, he adds, ‘it ought to be our endeavour to recall it’, seems tricky to reconcile with Johnson’s pronouncements elsewhere. The *Dictionary*’s nostalgic history of the language contrasts, for instance, with that implied in the series of biographies of poets Johnson wrote in the final part of his career. In these writings, it is axiomatic that, whatever the many limitations of its writers, it was the Restoration that established a congenial literary English: that Denham ‘improved our taste, and advanced our language’ (XXI: 98), that Roscommon was ‘the only correct writer in verse before Addison’ (XXI: 248), and that Dryden, ‘found’ English poetry ‘brick and left it marble’ (XXI: 494).[[39]](#footnote-40) Nor is this just a late volte-face, since the incorrectness of Elizabethan literary language is already part of Johnson’s assessment in his *Proposals* for a Shakespeare edition, published only a year after the preface to the *Dictionary* had referred to it as the language’s ‘pure source’:

our poetical language was yet unformed, when the meaning of phrases was yet in fluctuation, when words were adopted at pleasure from the neighbouring languages, and while the Saxon was still visibly mingled in our diction. The reader is therefore embarrassed at once with dead and with foreign languages, with obsoleteness and innovation (XVIII: 53).

As with the analysis of ‘come thick night’, this is probably as ambivalent as an author of Johnson’s certainties ever allows himself to be. The post-Restoration clarity about standards in literary language is in one way superior to the embarrassing cacophony of competing traditions underlying the ‘poetical language’ of the Elizabethans; but taken from another view, this modern English also risks collapsing into what the *Dictionary* had called ‘false refinement and declension’ by comparison. Deciding between these views was not – as far as I can tell – sufficiently important to Johnson for him to ever have particularly clarified it.[[40]](#footnote-41) But what the two interpretations have in common is the conviction that the language of Shakespeare is – whether fortuitously or disastrously – a language of the past.

In the *Rambler* essay on *Macbeth*, Johnson moves from discussing the play’s outdated low diction, to making more general comment on ‘the numerous requisites that must concur to complete an author’, which include ‘early entrance into the living world’ and ‘an acquaintance with prevailing customs and fashionable elegance’, since ‘the injury that that grand imagery suffers from unsuitable language, personal merit may fear from rudeness and indelicacy’ (V: 128-9). Shakespeare is not mentioned in these concluding generalisations, but the invitation may be that we take it that the failings of the ‘come thick night’ speech are also the failings listed here: it is a writing too disconnected from ‘prevailing customs and fashionable elegance’, just as Richardson, in his characterisation of modern authorship, accuses Hill of being.[[41]](#footnote-42) These slightly vague terms of argument are considerably sharpened by the time of the ‘Proposals’. There, Johnson remarks that Shakespeare’s obscurity is not – as he allows the conclusion of the *Rambler* essay to imply – the result of Shakespeare’s language being too aloof from and indifferent to the ‘fashionable elegance’ required to address itself to ‘the living world’. On the contrary, he says, ‘if Shakespeare has difficulties above other writers, it is to be imputed to the nature of his work, which required the use of the common colloquial language, and consequently admitted many phrases allusive, elliptical, and proverbial, such as we speak and hear every hour without observing them’ (VII: 53).[[42]](#footnote-43) It was precisely Shakespeare’s rootedness in all aspects of the ‘living world’ of the Elizabethan everyday idiom that left him so vulnerable to being cast into obscurity when that idiom ceased to be the everyday one. In short, Johnson’s intervention into the extent of Shakespeare’s ‘ancientness’ – his rootedness in a now lost idiom – ends up coming full circle: Shakespeare has become so bewilderingly ancient precisely because he was originally so modern.

The earlier eighteenth century sought to find in Shakespeare an exemplar of the transparently normative literary standards the period associated with the term ‘ancient’; its accompanying exegetical tendency was to find ways of explaining away to external factors anything that threatened that appearance of exemplarity. The 1750s, by contrast, found itself in the still more convoluted situation of – first – arguing for a Shakespeare set free from such weighty responsibilities of exemplarity, into a kind of new and spontaneous modernity (so Richardson and Young), while – second – increasingly aware that Popean excuse-making could no longer completely cover over the otherness of Shakespeare, which, linguistically speaking, went bone-deep (so Johnson). In conclusion, I want to suggest that the new Johnsonian sense that Shakespeare was obscure not merely because of external mediating obfuscations, but because English itself had changed, was also supported by an increasing sense of the accordant otherness of Shakespeare’s culture itself.

In 1754, Johnson’s friend, Thomas Birch published his *Memoirs of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, the culmination of his series of scholarly recuperations of period documents, just as another friend, the novelist, Charlotte Lennox, completed her three-volume *Shakespear Illustrated* (1763-4), resituating twenty-two of Shakespeare’s plays in the time of their first production, by publishing the sources on which they were based. (Although if Lennox’s Shakespeare was in this respect ‘ancient’, as an up-to-date reader of vernacular prose fiction, he was also a perfect ‘modern’). In the same year, Thomas Warton’s *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* appeared, an analogous attempt to return Spenser to the cultural practices of the sixteenth century, which argued that ‘reading the works of an author who lived in a remote age’ requires ‘that we should look back upon the customs and manners which prevailed in his age… which are utterly different from those with which we are at present surrounded’.[[43]](#footnote-44) Another variant on this self-consciously historicist approach to literary culture – albeit not necessarily one that Warton would have approved of – appears in the appendix on ‘Learning and Arts’ during the reign of James I in David Hume’s *History of England*: again, published in 1754. Here Hume reiterates the standard neoclassical dismissals of Shakespeare: his lack of learning, of ‘purity or simplicity of diction’, and his ‘ignorance of all theatrical art and conduct’.[[44]](#footnote-45) But unlike many advocates of neoclassical stricture in the period, for Hume this judgement is made not in a vacuum, but as the corollary of a wider assessment of the Jacobean ideology.

Warton’s *Observations* begins with the assertion that ‘when the works of Homer and of Aristotle began to be restored and studied in Italy… every species of literature at last emerged from the depths of Gothic ignorance and barbarity’; even if, that is, ‘Spenser… did not live in an age of planning’, and the sixteenth century did not yet take this classical precedent for rule.[[45]](#footnote-46) By the time Warton extended his researches in the *History of English Poetry* (1774-81), this interpretation had been given a new political aspect, attributing to ‘the study of the Greek and Roman writers… a certain spirit of enterprise in examining every subject’, releasing ‘the intellectual capacity of mankind from the habitual subjection, and that servility of system, which had hitherto prevented it from advancing any new principle, or adopting any new option’.[[46]](#footnote-47) Anticipating as it does the historiography of ‘the Renaissance’ as it would be accepted by the nineteenth century, Warton’s analysis here strikes us as uncontroversial enough. However, as regards the Jacobeans at least, the contours of Hume’s ‘revival of letters’ are rather different. While ‘letters had been revived in the preceding age’, Hume argues, the revival was only disseminated broadly enough to meaningfully affect cultural life by the start of the seventeenth century. At this point ‘a general, but insensible revolution’ took place, in the form of the emergence of a concept of liberty that would subsequently establish the form of contractual government basic to modernity in Hume’s analysis.[[47]](#footnote-48) ‘Insensible’ is the crucial word here, however, because this realignment of the ideological ground was taking place unremarked under the very auspices of James I’s completely contrary principle of monarchical divine right. ‘Happily’, Hume remarks, ‘this prince possessed neither sufficient capacity to perceive the alteration, nor sufficient art and vigour to check it in its early advances’. James’s belief in divine right was such that he never troubled to enforce it; and while it ‘might have proved dangerous, if not fatal, to liberty… the firmness of the persuasion, and its seeming evidence, induced him to trust solely to his right, without making the smallest provision of force or politics, in order to support it’.

The next reference to the ‘revival of letters’ in Hume’s *History* arrives in the appendix on ‘Learning and Arts’, where he represents it as taking a similarly provisional and uncertain position. Shakespeare is not alone in receiving short shrift from Hume, as most of the Jacobean authors (excepting Bacon and William Camden) fall short in his assessment. This is because – once again – whatever force of genius the revival of letters is supposed to have unleashed, it appears as yet awkwardly in the Jacobean moment. ‘Raw and unformed’, it has come too early, even as, adopting the ‘unnatural garb’ of the ‘decay among the Greeks and the Romans’, it already seems derelict.[[48]](#footnote-49) If Johnson considered himself to be writing about a newly ‘ancient’ Shakespeare, from whom he is always inevitably cut off because he does not speak the same form of the language, then Hume’s Shakespeare is analogously a cultural ancient: writing to a moment in political theory where modern liberty was present but ‘insensible’, and to a moment in the arts when the accoutrements of civilisation are in place, but no one as yet knows what to do with them.[[49]](#footnote-50)

1. Letter dated 27th October 1748, in Samuel Richardson, *Correspondence with Aaron Hill and the Hill Family*, ed. Christine Gerrard (Cambridge, 2013), 264-5; for Hill’s standing in the 40s and for *Merope*’s eventual success, see Christine Gerrard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses’ Projector, 1685-1750* (Oxford, 2003), 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Johnson’s works are quoted from *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson,* ed. Robert DeMaria Jr. and others, 23 vols. to date (New Haven, CT, 1958- ), and are given parenthetically by volume and page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. An extra wrinkle in this situation is added by the fact that, of course, Shakespeare and his contemporaries were themselves highly conscious of the ‘historically estranged, obscure, and other’ older forms of representation available to them, and often put this awareness to productive use in their writing. See, for example, Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (Oxford, 2013) and Lucy Munro, *Archaic Style in English Literature, 1590-1674* (Cambridge, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Noted in Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in Augustan England* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), 28, 131; I dissent slightly here from Margreta de Grazia’s suggestion that ‘throughout the eighteenth century and beyond, whenever the age old rivalry between ancient and modern authors cropped up, Shakespeare was chosen to represent the moderns’ [in *Hamlet Without Hamlet* (Cambridge, 2007), 10]; any instances of Shakespeare being cited with approval as a ‘modern’ prior to the 1750s are, as far as I can see, exceptional rather than representative. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The most conspicuous references come in the form of jokes: one in which he pretends to think the Wife of Bath is a Shakespearean character in a letter dated 20th November, 1729 [*The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), iii, 360]; and the terrible puns in ‘A History of Poetry’ (1726) in *Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock Treatises: Polite Conversation, Directions to Servants and Other Works*, ed. (Cambridge, 2013), 223-7, 223: ‘In Queen Elizabeth’s reign I think there was but one *DI-SPENCER* of good verses… yet a little before her death, we attempted to deal in tragedy, and began to *SHAKE-SPEARS*’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See Paul de Man, ‘Literary History and Literary Modernity’ in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Abingdon, 1983), 142-65, 155-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Henry Power, *Epic into Novel: Henry Fielding, Scriblerian Satire, and the Consumption of Classical Literature* (Oxford, 2015), 52, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. For Pope’s beginning the translation in intellectual sympathy with the previous wave of the *querelle*, see Levine, *The Battle of the Books*, p. 192-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. For Pope’s *Homer* as ‘un-Scriblerian in its open commodification of classical culture’, see Power, *Epic into Novel*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. ‘In Homer, and in him only, it [the fire of poetry] burns everywhere clearly, and everywhere irresistibly’ [Alexander Pope, *Translations of Homer, The Iliad Books I-IX*, ed. Maynard Mack (New Haven, CT, 1967), 5]; querying the extent to which Pope really invested in Homer as a transparent writer of universals, an anonymous reviewer of the present essay points out the following footnote from Pope’s *Iliad*:

    I sometimes think I am in respect to Homer much like Sancho Panca with regard to Don Quixote. I believe upon the whole that no mortal ever came near him for wisdom, learning, and all good qualities. But sometimes there are certain starts which I cannot tell what to make of, and am forced to own that my master is a little out of the way, if not quite beside himself [Alexander Pope, *Translations of Homer, The Iliad Books X-XXIV*, ed. Maynard Mack (New Haven, CT, 1967), 283-4]

    This could be taken for Pope conceding that, in places at least, not even Homer can bear the rhetorical importance the partisans of the Ancients had given to him; but at the same time, Pope’s choice of Sancho is an interesting identification, given that the comedy of Cervantes’s character lies in his struggle to keep believing the delusions of Quixote are ultimately true, whatever the mounting evidence to the contrary. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Levine, *The Battle of the Books*, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *The Works of William Shakespear*, ed. Alexander Pope, 6 vols. (London, 1725), i, *ii*: ‘*Homer* himself drew not his art so immediately from the fountains of nature, it proceeded through *Egyptian* strainers and channels, and came to him not without some tincture of the learning, or some craft of the models, of those before him’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. John Holt, *An Attempte to Rescue that Anciente English Poet, And Play-Wrighte, Maister Williaume Shakespear from the Many Errours, falsely Charged on him by Certain New-Fangled Wittes* (London, 1749), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. The outstanding interpretation of Richardson’s works as documents in class struggle, conscious or otherwise, remains Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Oxford, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See J.A. Smith, *Samuel Richardson and the Theory of Tragedy: Clarissa’s Caesuras* (Manchester, 2016), 10-11; and Kate Rumbold, *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Cultures of Quotation from Samuel Richardson to Jane Austen* (Cambridge, 2016), 44-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Samuel Richardson, *Selected Letters*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford, 1964), 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London, 1957), 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Samuel Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Jocelyn Harris, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1986), i, 49; on Carter and Richardson, see E. Derek Taylor, *Reason and Religion in Clarissa: Samuel Richardson and “The Famous Mr Norris of Bemerton”* (Surrey, 2009), chpt. 2; and Melanie Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century: Elizabeth Rowe, Catharine Cockburn, and Elizabeth Carter* (Hampshire, 2013), chpt. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Fiona Ritchie, *Women and Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2014), 55-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison*, i, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Letter dated 30th January, 1750, in Samuel Richardson, *Correspondence with George Cheyne and Thomas Edwards*, ed. David E. Shuttleton and John A. Dussinger (Cambridge, 2013), 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. In the same year that Edwards published his critique, a similar argument was made against Warburton in John Upton’s revised *Critical Observations Upon Shakespeare* (1748); for Upton and Edwards, see Marcus Walsh, *Shakespeare, Milton, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing* (Cambridge, 1997), 155-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Letters dated 17th March, 1752, and 29th March, 1756 in Richardson, *Correspondence with George Cheyne and Thomas Edwards*, 251. 396; another of the pair’s habitual topics is the literary progress of Richardson’s female friends, in discussion of which both employ the ‘owl among the birds’ remark from *Sir Charles Grandison*; see 335, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. For ‘un-editing’, see Leah Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton* (London: Routledge, 1996); for Richardson’s hand in the *Conjectures*, see Alan D. McKillop, ‘Richardson, Young, and the “Conjectures”’ in *Modern Philology* 22:4 (1925), 391-404. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition: In a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (London, 1759), 30, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Letter dated August 2nd, 1721 in *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, 5 vols. ed. George Sherburn (Oxford, 1956), ii, 78-9 (78). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Randall McLeod, ‘What’s the Bastard’s Name?’ in *Shakespeare’s Speech-Headings: Speaking the Speech in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Newark, DE, 1997), 131-209 (141). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. *The Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Lewis Theobald, 7 vols. (London, 1733), i, xxxix; for Theobald’s historicism, see Peter Seary, *Lewis Theobald and the Editing of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1990), 172; I remain convinced that Theobald ultimately conforms to the pre-Johnson consensus of protecting the original comprehensibleness and congeniality of the Shakespearean text by attributing what is objectionable in it to external factors: when Shakespeare ‘stands in need of our indulgence’, he says, ‘I would willingly impute it to a vice of *his times*’, while the occasions when he does ‘descend… beneath himself, may have proceeded from a deference paid to the then *reigning Barbarism*’ (*The Works of Shakespeare*, i, xvi). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. *The Works of William Shakespear*, vi, 437; v, 545. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Simon Jarvis, ‘Alexander Pope’ in *Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Malone: Great Shakespeareans, Volume 1*, ed. by Claude Rawson (London, 2010), 66-114. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. For these among Pope’s many representations of the travails of modern authorship, see ‘An Epistle From Mr. Pope to Dr. Arbuthnot’ in *Imitations of Horace*, ed. by John Butt (London, 1953), 91-127, 99; for an alternative argument that sees Pope quietly identifying with Ben Jonson as a writer more adept than Shakespeare at avoiding the pratfalls of modern authorship, see Joseph Candido, ‘Prefatory Matter(s) in the Shakespeare Editions of Nicholas Rowe and Alexander Pope’ in *Studies in Philology* 97:2 (2000), 210-28, 219-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Letter dated 16th July, 1754 in *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford, 1952), i, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Walsh, *Shakespeare, Milton, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing*, 168-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. For examples from the early modern period to the early eighteenth century, see Jack Lynch, *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson* (Cambridge, 2003), 135-40; and Jonathan Hope, ‘“Not Know my Voice?” Shakespeare Corrected; English Perfected – Theories of Language from the Middle Ages to Modernity’ in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, ed. Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (Cambridge, 2013), 78-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Alexander Pope, ‘An Essay on Criticism’ in *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (London, 1961), 195-326. 293; Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. David Womersley (Cambridge, 2012), 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Jonathan Swift, ‘A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue’ in *Parodies, Hoaxes, Mock Treatises*, 121-156. 138, 146-7; in the late *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson criticizes Swift’s belief that preserving ‘certainty and stability’ in language was – ‘contrary to all experience’ – attainable (XXII: 984). One of *RES*’s anonymous reviewers points out that as early as the 1670s, Dryden had justified his modernisations of Shakespeare for the Restoration stage on the grounds that in ‘the present age… the tongue in general is so much refin’d since Shakespeare’s time’, and ‘that many of his words, and more of his phrases, are scarce intelligible’ [John Dryden, *All for Love, Oedipus, Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Maximilian E. Novak (Berkley, CA, 1984), 225]. This comes in the slightly different context of a discussion of how the English language is (unlike Greek) fundamentally unstable in the first place: ‘the English language is not capable of such a certainty… we are wanting in the very foundation of it, a perfect grammar’. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. As Nicholas Hudson stresses in *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003), 35, such references to the ‘vulgar’ in Johnson needn’t be taken as straightforward elitism; Johnson tended to regard the language of ‘common people’ as ‘highly conservative and traditional’, while ‘the idle upper ranks were one important source of the cant and improper innovations he sought to correct’. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. The phrase in italics is Spenser’s for Chaucer. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Further: ‘There was therefore before the time of Dryden no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts’ (XXI: 445). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. In this I differ slightly from Lynch, seeing less consistency between Johnson’s various representations of the history of English than he does; see *The Age of Elizabeth in the Age of Johnson*, chpt. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. It is not an especially clear sequitur, and the fact that Johnson also misattributes ‘come thick night’ to Macbeth, rather than his wife, may imply that the essay was written in even more than the haste the *Rambler*s are famous for. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. In the spirit of accepting a certain inconsistency in Johnson, it is worth noting that in the ‘Preface’ he uses a similar characterisation of Shakespeare’s language to make the opposite point: Shakespearean comedy, he says, ‘has suffered little diminution from the changes made by a century and a half, in manners or in words’ precisely because he uses the historically durable ‘conversation above grossness and below refinement’ of everyday speech (VII: 70-1). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Thomas Warton, *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (London, 1754), 217; for Hume’s literary neoclassicism, see his advice to the dramatist and politician John Home, that if he hoped to ‘redeem our stage from barbarism’ then he must ‘for God’s sake read Shakespeare, but get Racine and Sophocles by heart’; letter dated December 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2011), i, 215-6 (215). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. David Hume, *The History of England*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, Ind., 1983), v, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Warton, *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser*, 1; the second remark added in Thomas Warton, *Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser*, 2 vols. (London, 1762), i, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, ed. David Fairer, 4 vols. (London, 1998), ii, 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. On the Jacobean parliament: ‘A spirit of liberty had now taken possession of the house: the leading members, men of an independent genius and large views, began to regulate their opinions, more by the future consequences which they foresaw, than by the former precedents which were set before them; and they less aspired at maintaining the ancient constitution, than at establishing a new one, and a freer, and a better’ [Hume, *The History of England*, v, 48]; on Hume’s idiosyncrasy in this assessment, see Nicholas Phillipson, *David Hume: The Philosopher as Historian* (New Haven, CT., 2011), 75; also Eugene F. Miller, ‘Hume on Liberty in the Successive English Constitutions’ in *Liberty in Hume’s History of England*, ed. Nick Capaldi (Dordrecht, 1990), 53-104; for a more doubting assessment of the extent of Hume’s belief in there having been a significant transformation in the rationale for sovereignty in the seventeenth century, see J.C.D Clark *English Society, 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985), 51-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Hume, *The History of England*, v, 18-9, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. For other comment on Hume’s association of Shakespeare with the absence of liberty and contractual government in the early seventeenth century, see Stanley Stewart, ‘David Hume’s “Shakespeare”’ in *Cithara* 45:1 (2005), 13-27, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)