

Textual Variant Exercise

Woman's Wit vs. Woman's Will in *King Lear* Act 4, Scene 6

Maria Fahey

When a Shakespeare play exists in the Folio and an early quarto, you can consult the facsimiles to see what variations exist. (Although some modern scholarly editions provide notes about textual variations, many editions do not.) Exploring a variation can open up interpretations of a scene and can empower students to try the work of scholarly editing. What follows is a textual variant exercise for *King Lear*.

Reread Edgar's speech at 4.6.275-307. (Edgar has just killed Oswald and has read Goneril's letter that Oswald was to deliver to Edmund.) Notice Edgar's response to the letter, which the Folger Shakespeare Library edition prints as, "O indistinguished space of woman's *will*" (4.6.300 emphasis mine). The Folger editors chose the [First Folio variant](#); [Quarto 1](#) reads "wit" instead of "will."

After rereading Edgar's speech, review the excerpts from the OED's entries for "[wit](#)" and "[will](#)." Then, consider: How does the choice of printing Quarto 1's "wit" or the First Folio's "will" affect the meaning of Edgar's comment about Goneril? How does it affect what he suggests about women? If you were editing *King Lear*, which word would you choose?

Here is the scene in the [Folger edition](#):

OSWALD, *falling*

Slave, thou hast slain me. Villain, take my purse. 275
If ever thou wilt thrive, bury my body,
And give the letters which thou find'st about me
To Edmund, Earl of Gloucester. Seek him out
Upon the English party. O, untimely death! Death! *He dies.*

EDGAR

I know thee well, a serviceable villain, 280
As duteous to the vices of thy mistress
As badness would desire.

GLOUCESTER What, is he dead?

EDGAR Sit you down, father; rest you.

Let's see these pockets. The letters that he speaks of 285
May be my friends. He's dead; I am only sorry
He had no other deathsman. Let us see. *He opens a letter.*
Leave, gentle wax, and, manners, blame us not.
To know our enemies' minds, we rip their hearts.
Their papers is more lawful. *Reads the letter.* 290

*Let our reciprocal vows be remembered. You have
many opportunities to cut him off. If your will want
not, time and place will be fruitfully offered. There is
nothing done if he return the conqueror. Then am I
the prisoner, and his bed my jail, from the loathed 295
warmth whereof deliver me and supply the place for
your labor.*

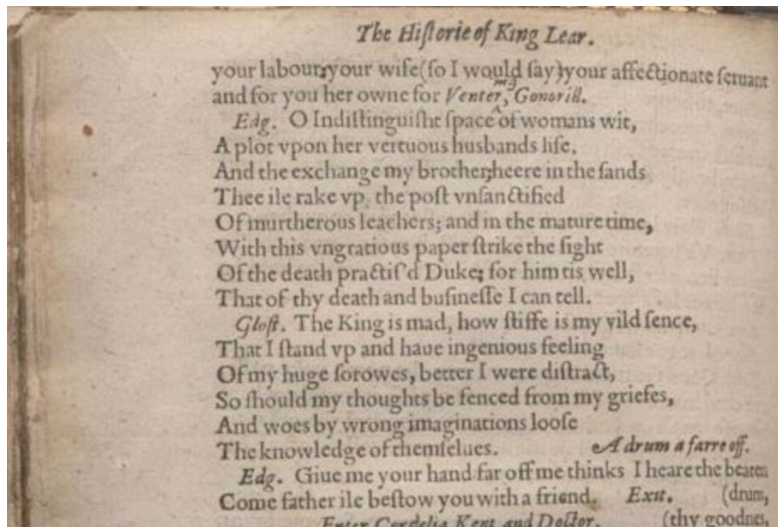


*Your (wife, so I would say) affectionate servant,
(and, for you, her own for venture,) Goneril.*

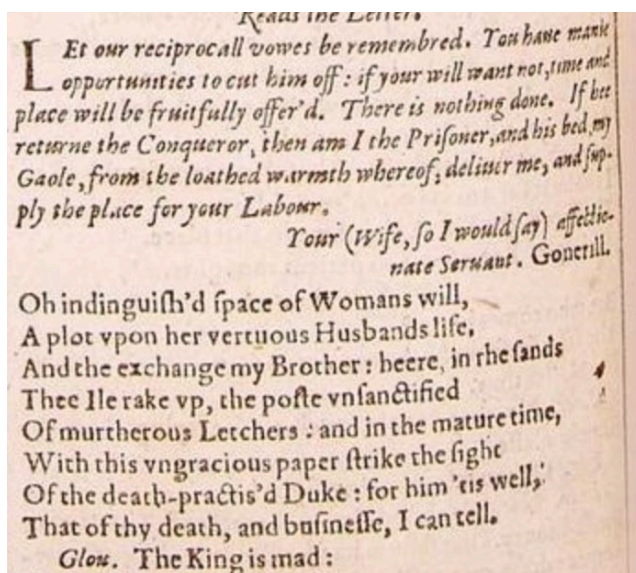
O indistinguished space of woman's will! 300
 A plot upon her virtuous husband's life,
 And the exchange my brother.—Here, in the sands
 Thee I'll rake up, the post unsanctified
 Of murderous lechers; and in the mature time
 With this ungracious paper strike the sight 305
 Of the death-practised duke. For him 'tis well
 That of thy death and business I can tell.

(*King Lear* 4.6.275-307)

Here is Edgar's speech in [Quarto 1](#):



And here is Edgar's speech in the [First Folio](#):



WIT, n. (excerpt from online Oxford English Dictionary 7/10/24)

I. Denoting a faculty (or the person possessing it).

I.1. † The seat of consciousness or thought, the mind: sometimes connoting one of its functions, as memory or attention. *Obsolete*.

I.2.a. The faculty of thinking and reasoning in general; mental capacity, understanding, intellect, reason. *archaic*

I.3.a. Any one of certain particular faculties of perception, classified as *outer (outward)* or *bodily*, and *inner (inward)* or *ghostly*, and commonly reckoned as five of each kind (see **I.3b**): (In early use occasionally loosely extended to include other bodily faculties, as speech and locomotion.) *Obsolete* except as in **I.3b**, **I.3c**.

I.3.b. five wits: usually, the five (bodily) senses; often vaguely, the perceptions or mental faculties generally

II. Denoting a quality (or the possessor of it).

II.i.5.a. Good or great mental capacity; intellectual ability; genius, talent, cleverness; mental quickness or sharpness, acumen. *archaic*.

II.i.5.b. † Practical talent or cleverness; constructive or mechanical ability; ingenuity, skill.

II.i.6.a. Wisdom, good judgement, discretion, prudence

II.i.6.c. † A prudent measure or proceeding; an ingenious plan or device. *Obsolete*.

II.i.7. Quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression; talent for saying brilliant or sparkling things, esp. in an amusing way. *archaic*.

WILL, n.1 (excerpt from online Oxford English Dictionary 7/10/24)

I. Senses relating to wishing or desiring.

I.1.a. Desire, wish, longing; inclination or disposition (*to do something*).

I.1.b. An inclination *to do something*, as contrasted with the power or opportunity. Now only as merged in sense **II.5**.

I.2. † Physical desire or appetite; *esp.* (and usually in later use) sexual desire. *Obsolete*.

I.3.a. That which a person desires, (one's) desire.

I.3.b. † A desire or wish as expressed in a request; hence (contextually) the expression of a wish, a request, petition *Obsolete*.

II. Senses relating to intention.

II.5.a. The action of willing or deciding to do something; the exercising of the mind with conscious intention towards initiating a chosen action; volition.

II.5.b. † Intention, intent, purpose, or determination; an instance of this. *Obsolete*.

II.5.c. A deliberate or fixed desire, intention, or determination *to do something*.

II.6.a. The faculty by which a person exercises his or her capacity for initiating conscious and intentional action; power of choice in regard to action.

II.6.b. Control over one's own will; self-control; the degree of deliberate imposition of this over instinct or impulse; an instance of this.

II.7.a. Intention or determination that what one wishes or ordains shall be done by another or others, or shall take place; (contextually) an expression or embodiment of such intention or determination, an order, command, injunction

II.8. Modified by a possessive: that which a person wishes should be done, a person's pleasure; *esp.* as the object of *do, work, etc.*