

Samuel Johnson's Construction of Shakespeare in *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* (1745)

Twenty years before the publication of his edition of Shakespeare's works, Samuel Johnson published the pamphlet *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* (1745). Therein, he articulates his understanding of the relationship between Shakespeare and his cultural milieu. Johnson, one of a cascade of literary editors of Shakespeare (including Pope, Theobald, Warburton, and Malone) during the eighteenth century, articulates his editorial intervention in contrast to his contemporaries through a specific attention to the linguistic contours of Shakespeare's language. Johnson's focus on Shakespeare's language, etymology, and style when editing develops further in the years between *Miscellaneous Observations* and his eight-volume edition of the plays (during which time he publishes *A Dictionary of the English Language*).

In this paper, I examine Johnson's evolving characterization of Shakespeare's language through a close reading of his notes on *Macbeth* in *Miscellaneous Observations* and his later edition of the play. I argue that Johnson's attention to language, etymology, and style was a contributing factor in a larger editorial project during the period which constructs Shakespeare's authorship as an overdetermined category of interpretation. "Shakespeare" comes to represent not just the poet-playwright, but also becomes a synecdoche for how eighteenth-century editors understood (and formed) a coherent conception of early modernity, intellectual and literary taste, and the English character.

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