

20 July 2011

To: The Executive Council and Delegate Assembly
Modern Language Association of America

2011 Annual Report of the Committee on the New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare

1. The NVS Committee's Charge

The MLA's Committee on the New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare has the following charge:

“The Committee on the New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare sets policy and exercises broad control of the New Variorum Shakespeare project, under which New Variorum editions of Shakespeare's works are published by the association.”

2. Routine Business

Following a committee dinner on Thursday, 3 February 2011, the committee held a full-day meeting on Friday, 4 February, at the MLA office. In attendance in person were Michael J. C. Echeruo (chair), Richard A. J. Knowles, Katherine A. Rowe, Valerie Wayne, Paul Werstine, and W. B. Worthen. In attendance by phone were James L. Harner and James R. Siemon. Rosemary G. Feal visited the meeting for the discussion of the NVS in the twenty-first century. Staff members who attended all or part of the meeting were Judith Altreuter, James Hatch, and David G. Nicholls (liaison).

The committee approved the agenda for the meeting and the minutes of the 2010 meeting. It reviewed the committee chair's 2010 annual report to the Executive Council and the Delegate Assembly.

3. NVS Volumes in Preparation

The committee reviewed the list of New Variorum editions of Shakespeare in preparation. Judith Altreuter reported that the index for *Comedy of Errors* is under way and estimated that the tagging and copyediting for *King Lear* would be done by the summer of 2011.

Paul Werstine reported on the status of the NVS volumes now in progress and invited members to recommend possible coeditors for *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Twelfth Night*.

The committee decided to make the following changes to the Assessment of the Status of Projected Volumes: In category A (“likely to be submitted in the next five years”), the projected date of submission for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* should be changed from 2012 to 2013 and that for *The Tempest* from 2013 to 2015.

4. The NVS in the Twenty-First Century

In advance of this year's meeting, the committee assembled an assortment of texts thought to be relevant to a planned meeting with the executive director, Rosemary G. Feal, on the future of the New Variorum edition of Shakespeare. The committee had been informed that the MLA Executive Council, as part of a strategic planning exercise, wanted two questions answered: (1) What should a twenty-first century Variorum edition look like? and (2) Why should the Shakespeare Variorum be a project of the MLA at this time?

In answer to the first question, members described qualities of the content of the edition that they deemed essential: it should be comprehensive, assimilating the vast amount of scholarship on each of Shakespeare's works; it should be centered on the value of Shakespeare's work and the scholarship about it; it should be a work of cultural preservation; it should be flexible, adaptable, and constantly updated. Several members noted the importance of the editor's judgment in assembling an edition, while one questioned the need for the editor's interpretation. Two members noted that the textual notes and commentary notes are the essential elements of the edition; information in the appendixes is duplicated in other editions. Others noted that the appendix on performance history is important, and one member noted that the appendixes are unique in that they present the history of the thinking on their topics. Many members expressed a wish for an edition that is available on the Web without cost to the user. This electronic edition would feature an intuitive interface that is interoperable with other sites and databases; would be sustainable and able to evolve with changing user needs and technologies; and would be accessible to a wide range of users (e.g., scholars, students, fans, actors). Staff members recommended the use of open source software and integration of the editorial and production processes through an electronic platform. Some members recommended continued production of the printed volume, noting a concern for preservation given the evanescence of electronic media; they also said that discursive parts, such as the appendixes, are best accessed in codex form.

The committee then considered reasons why the MLA should be the publisher of the Shakespeare Variorum edition. Most members argued that the MLA is the appropriate—and perhaps the only—organization to publish the edition. They noted that this is a much bigger project than any other Variorum edition, that the tremendous scope of the work needs broad support from an organization as big as the MLA, and that smaller scholarly societies do not have the resources to support such a project. Several members noted the centrality of Shakespeare as a figure for the study of English language and literature: his works are read throughout the world; every kind of criticism has been applied to his works; Shakespeare has been admired and imitated by generations of writers. Another member noted that the Variorum edition helps preserve the work of MLA members, many of whom have written about Shakespeare. Several members argued that the MLA has a moral obligation to continue publishing the edition: the association has inherited a cultural legacy to which it is indebted, and many scholars have devoted years of work that would be lost if the edition were discontinued.

5. Digitization and Serial Publishing

The committee was in no position to conclude its discussion of the digitization of the Variorum. The committee remains interested in the prospect of digitization and in the furtherance of the

development of an appropriate application. It remains the committee's position that if the digitization of previous volumes does go forward, it should start with the most recent volumes since the early volumes, edited by the Furnesses, would not be heavily used and could be made into PDFs rather than be encoded.

The committee had also hoped to be in a position to conclude discussions of the possibility of serially publishing "versions" of different parts of an edition as they became available. In view of the Executive Council's strategic planning exercise, further consideration of the associated issues must be deferred.

6. Editorial Protocol for the New Variorum Editions of Shakespeare

Without a doubt, the major achievement of the committee during the year was the approval of the "New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare Editorial Protocol," which concludes the committee's effort, highlighted in the chair's report of 2009, to find ways, "consistent with its charge, for its members to be involved, beyond policy review and advice on procedures, in the appointment of new editors, the adjudication of disputes with editors, the determination of current appointments, and the challenge of an expeditious publication of the New Variorum consistent with its history of scholarly care and attention."

I thank the Executive Council for the opportunity offered me to be on the New Variorum Shakespeare committee and to serve as its chair.

Respectfully,

Michael J. C. Echeruo
NVS Chair

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