

Did Shakespeare Ever Think Twice?

By [STEPHEN GREENBLATT](#)

One of the strange effects of the word processors on which most of us now write is the almost complete disappearance of any signs of labor. It is possible, of course, to use "track changes" for keeping a record of revisions, but much of the actual process of writing simply vanishes without a trace. We all automatically and instantaneously produce what Elizabethan scribes called "fair copies."

If you write as I do—with a succession of false starts and crossing-out and second-guessing that haunts virtually every sentence—it is easy to get discouraged and to imagine that real writers are exempt from the whole tiresome business. Each of your own paragraphs is achieved in something like trench warfare, two inches forward, one inch back. For the blessed few, the words must simply flow.

Shakespeare was reputed to have written with such amazing confidence—in a world of goose-quill pens and lamp-black ink—that even his first drafts were fair copies. "What he thought," the editors of the first folio wrote of him in 1621, "he uttered with that easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers." The praise of Shakespeare's supreme "easiness" clearly nettled his friend and rival playwright Ben Jonson, who was a compulsive reviser. "The Players have often mentioned it as an honor to Shakespeare that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out line." "My answer hath been," Jonson tartly added, "would he had blotted a thousand."

The notion that Shakespeare rarely revised his work makes perfect sense. Here, after all, was a man who wrote, on average, two plays a year, acted in his own plays and those of others, penned sonnets, and helped to run a theater company, to say nothing of his many other business interests. The original manuscripts have all long disappeared, but biographers have endlessly repeated the claim that they were "unblotted." After all, where would Shakespeare have found the time for rewriting?

Apparently, however, he did find the time. A number of Shakespeare's plays survive in both the small quarto editions, inexpensively published during his lifetime, and in the first folio. Comparing versions of the same play, I and other scholars have concluded that many of the differences are probably due to Shakespeare's own obsessive fiddling. Not all of them, to be sure. In the so-called bad quarto, for example, we find "To be or not to be; ay, there's the point," which almost certainly was not an inept first try at Hamlet's words but the result of an actor's lousy memory.

But when Fortinbras's band of "lawless resolute" become "landless resolute," we are encountering a subtle rethinking of motives. And when the quarto's "What's Hecuba to him, or he to her," becomes the folio's "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba," we are dealing, I believe, with the writer choosing to break his perfectly good iambic pentameter line for the sake of something more powerful.

There are literally thousands of these tiny changes. What then of Shakespeare's reputation for "easiness"? He evidently had a stake in hiding all of the hard work that went into his apparent fluency. His was a culture that prized what the famous Italian courtier Baldassare Castiglione called *sprezzatura*, that is, nonchalance. Castiglione understood that the only way to achieve this nonchalance—in writing as in dancing or riding or telling jokes—was through fantastically painstaking revisions that all had to be carefully concealed.

Writing is never easy, but we all like to make it look easy—and the computer greatly helps us maintain that pretense.

—*Mr. Greenblatt teaches in the English department at Harvard and is the author of "Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare."*