

What news? (*Cymbeline* 1.1.161)¹

Now what news? (*2 Henry IV* 2.4.354)

Sirrah, what news? (*Julius Caesar* 5.3.25)

What news abroad? (*King John* 5.6.17)

What's the news? What's the news? (*Coriolanus* 4.6.85)

What news? (*King Lear* 4.2.70)

What news, what news, in this our tottering state? (*Richard III* 3.2.36)

According to the Open Source Shakespeare Concordance², the word, 'news' occurs 317 times in 297 speeches within 38 of the dramatist's works, putting it within the top 300 most frequently occurring words in a canon comprising 28,829 individual word forms (words occurring at a roughly similar rate include, 'lie,' 'things,' 'fortune,' 'fellow,' 'help,' 'hands,' and 'bed'). Distribution patterns suggest the frequency of the word may depend, to a limited extent, on genre: all of the plays in which it appears most often are histories and tragedies (twenty-seven occurrences in *2 Henry IV* and *Richard III*, twenty in *Coriolanus*, seventeen in *3 Henry VI*, sixteen in *King John*, thirteen in *Antony and Cleopatra*, twelve in *Romeo and Juliet* and *1 Henry IV*), but it also appears with notable frequency in a few comedies (twelve occurrences in *The Merchant of Venice*, eleven in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*). Notably, in a little more than a third

¹ All references to Shakespeare's works are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare, 6thth edition*. Ed. David Bevington (Pearson Longman, 2006).

² See <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/>

of all instances where it appears, the word is part of a variation on ‘What news?’ (‘What is the news?’), a question that Shakespearean characters ask approximately 120 times, usually in connection to battles or affairs of state, but also in less elevated, domestic contexts, such as a wedding feast (*The Taming of the Shrew* 5.2.83), or a private conversation in an orchard (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.5.18). In a number of cases, the question cues exposition from a messenger or other sort of reporter who narrates events that Shakespeare could not or did not want to represent onstage— for example, the Boatswain reports the miraculous restoration of Alonso’s ship when Gonzalo asks for news in *The Tempest* (5.1.221-4), and the Second Messenger reports the death of Fulvia when Antony asks for news in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1.2.119-24). Dramatic utility aside, the frequency of “What news?” is also explainable as a straightforward reflection of contemporary speech. As Atherton has noted, the question was a standard salutation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the form of address an early modern would typically adopt when encountering a person who had just arrived from a remote locale (a person such as a travelling player, perhaps, or an itinerant peddler on the model of Autolycus) (39-43). Considering the centrality of the theatre to public life in early modern London, one can reasonably presume that the question was also frequently on the lips and minds of Shakespeare’s audience members as they filed in and out of The Globe. The appeal of news was a powerful aspect of the drama proper, but it was also an important part of being physically present in and around the theatre, one of the very few venues where large groups could congregate voluntarily around a mutual interest.

Of course, the subject of the present study is not simply the word, ‘news’ itself, but the new idea of news that evolved in conjunction with new media products, increased mechanisms for transmitting information, and increased opportunities for participation in public life. Shakespeare’s career in the theatre falls somewhere around the middle phase of this process of evolution, beginning about the same time that John Wolfe published his short-lived series of news quartos on the French Wars in the early 1590s, overlapping with the increased availability and popularity of news that characterized the first decade of the seventeenth century, and ending in 1613, seven years before Nathaniel Butter and his partners would form the nation’s first news syndicate and begin to produce regular installments of news serials on a weekly basis. This chronology is important to keep in mind because it foregrounds the significance that a difference of a decade can potentially bring to bear on what ‘news culture’ might mean in an early modern context. News was in a state of intense flux on a conceptual, technological and social level in the years around the turn of the seventeenth century. The media landscape Shakespeare surveyed when he wrote *The Winter’s Tale* in 1609-10 looked appreciably different when Ben Jonson took up the same subject for *The Staple of News* in 1626 (a contrast comparable, in a very general sense, to the contrast between the television cultures of 1948 and 1964, or the Internet cultures of 1996 and 2012). The primary task at hand in the present analysis, therefore, is not so much a matter of tracking instances in drama where news (or ‘news’) appears, but of asking how news-thinking and the representation of news in drama contributed to an ongoing process of conceptual construction—

how Shakespeare opened up a forum where people could think through the meanings of news on a critical, but also an emotional, basis.

So, what patterns appear when Shakespearean characters ask about, react to, reflect on, and report news? Turning once again to the Shakespeare Concordance, one immediately notices an emphasis on the negative. Characters describe news as “bad” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.2.101), “unwelcome” (*1 Henry IV* 1.1.50), “heavy” (*All’s Well That Ends Well* 3.2.33), “fearful” (*Coriolanus* 4.6.145), “villainous,” (*1 Henry IV* 2.4.330), “cold” (*2 Henry VI* 1.1.235), “baleful” (*3 Henry VI* 2.1.96), “full of grief” (*3 Henry VI* 4.4.13), “unsavoury” (*2 Henry VI* 4.6.80), “ill” (*King John* 4.2.134), “dead” (*King John* 5.7.65), “strange” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 3.5.2), “foul shrewd” (*King John* 5.5.14), and most forcefully of all, “black, fearful, comfortless, and horrible” (*King John* 5.6.22). Conversely, there are only four, comparatively prosaic, descriptors that cast news in a positive light: “good” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.3.19), “welcome” (*1 Henry IV* 1.1.66), “excellent” (*Coriolanus* 1.3.90), and “happy” (*2 Henry IV* 4.4.109).³ On this note, I should add that in cases where good news appears, it is often a deceptive reverse-image of bad news yet to come, a pattern that recurs in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth*, *2 Henry IV*, and *King John*. More importantly, there is also a pattern of association between the predominantly unpleasant quality of news and the unpleasant, ravenous individuals caught up in the process of transmission. For example, Lear speaks of the “poor rogues” who “talk of court news” in prison (*King Lear* 5.3.13-14), and Prince Hal says that the

³ These lists of examples are not comprehensive.

court itself is beleaguered by “smiling pickthanks and base newsmongers” (*I Henry IV* 3.2.25). On a similar note, the disguised Duke in *Measure for Measure* says that there is “a great fever on goodness [...] novelty is only in request” when Escalus asks him for news (3.2.218-19), and Hamlet jokes that “doomsday” must be imminent if, as Rosencrantz claims, the only news from abroad is that “the world’s grown honest” (*Hamlet* 2.2.236-238).

All of these examples reflect an abiding interest in problems concomitant to the onset of new forms of publicity. Shakespeare repeatedly emphasizes the lurid, common character of news culture, allowing for very little distance between news and rampant rumor. A particularly evocative example occurs in *King John* 4.2, where Hubert de Burgh describes the street-level conversation surrounding the (supposed) death of Arthur and an impending invasion by the French Army:

Old men and beldams in the streets
 Do prophesy upon it dangerously.
 Young Arthur's death is common in their mouths,
 And, when they talk of him, they shake their heads
 And whisper one another in the ear;
 And he that speaks doth grip the hearer's wrist,
 Whilst he that hears makes fearful action,
 With wrinkled brows, with nods, with rolling eyes.
 I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,
 The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool,
 With open mouth swallowing a tailor's news;

Who, with his shears and measure in his hand,
 Standing on slippers, which his nimble haste
 Had falsely thrust upon contrary feet,
 Told of a many thousand warlike French
 That were embattlèd and ranked in Kent:
 Another lean unwashed artificer
 Cuts off his tale and talks of Arthur's death.

(4.2.186-203)

There is something subtly grotesque in the abundance of corporeal imagery layered onto this description. The “common” news travels from mouth to mouth like a disease. People whisper in each other’s ears. An animated listener nods his head and rolls his eyes, clownishly excited by the thrilling horror of the revelation. In addition to this unsettling cluster of somatic detail, there is also a prominent focus on the low social status of the individuals participating in the scene of transmission: a tailor and a blacksmith discuss the prospect of a French invasion as they go about their labors, conspicuously armed with the emblematic tools of their respective professions (hammer, anvil, shears, measure). In the midst of their exchange, the tailor is interrupted by a third craftsmen whom De Burgh refers to as “*another* lean, unwashed artificer,” a description that sweepingly characterizes all parties to the conversation as filthy and underfed—and by implication, uneducated, unintelligent, and unfit to discuss matters that should properly remain within the exclusive purview of the aristocracy. As a compliment to the overall tone of disparagement and mistrust, the term “artificer,” or ‘skilled

worker’, also hints at spurious embellishment, just as the description of the tailor’s report as a “tale” suggests an obviously fictional, baseless flight of fancy.

This vivid portrait of oral transmission readily recalls the Induction to *2 Henry IV*, memorably delivered by Rumor, a stock allegorical figure popularly associated with the indiscriminate circulation of information that may or may not be true.⁴ Adorned in a costume “painted full of tongues” (Induction 1), Rumor begins the play with a vision of news culture that transposes the domestic network of ears and mouths in *King John* to a global context:⁵

Open your ears, for which of you will stop

The vent of hearing when loud Rumor speaks?

I, from the orient to the drooping west,

⁴ The figure of Rumor derives from the classical idea of *fama*, a word that combines all forms of public discourse, good and bad, true and untrue, alike. *Fama* is personified in a number of classical sources, most notably in Virgil’s *Aeneid* 4.173-78 and in Book 12 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Shakespeare was also undoubtedly familiar with Chaucer’s poem, *The House of Fame*, which makes use of the same idea.

⁵ The image of multiple tongues as a metonymy for rumor may have had an added salience at the end of the sixteenth century. In 1596, the year before *2 Henry IV* likely appeared at the Globe, Edmund Spenser published *The Second Part of The Faerie Queen*, which memorably features a hundred-tongued dog named “The Blatant Beast,” an allegory for slander and gossip that bears striking similarities to Shakespeare’s Rumor (see Book VI, canto xii).

Making the wind my post-horse, still unfold
 The acts commencèd on this ball of earth.
 Upon my tongues continual slanders ride,
 The which in every language I pronounce,
 Stuffing the ears of men with false reports.
 I speak of peace while covert enmity,
 Under the smile of safety, wounds the world.
 And who but Rumor, who but only I,
 Make fearful musters and prepared defense,
 Whiles the big year, swol'n with some other grief,
 Is thought with child by the stern tyrant War,
 And no such matter? Rumor is a pipe
 Blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures,
 And of so easy and so plain a stop
 That the blunt monster with uncounted heads,
 The still-discordant wav'ring multitude,
 Can play upon it. But what need I thus
 My well-known body to anatomize
 Among my household?

(Induction 1-22)

Although the immediate focus is on orality, there are a number of details to suggest that the scene of transmission described by Shakespeare in this extraordinary passage is in fact a depiction of the more sophisticated and diverse

news culture that developed around the turn of the century.⁶ In contrast to traditional mechanisms for circulating information, Rumor's network extends across the entire world ("ball of earth") and has the capacity to swiftly transmit "continual" reports, unbounded by barriers of language or geography. From this point of view, the reference to "the Orient" in line three takes on particular significance: one of the most prominent focuses of international news in the late sixteenth century was the Ottoman Empire, which defeated a combined Hapsburg-Transylvanian alliance in 1596, the year before *2 Henry IV* appeared at the Globe (another, much more overt allusion to the Ottomans occurs at 5.2.48, when the Prince anachronistically refers to the succession of the notorious sultan Mehmed III Adli: "This is the English, not the Turkish court; | Not Amurath an Amurath succeeds, | But Harry Harry!"). More notably, Rumor's network also entails a non-exclusive, open-ended constituency, or "wavering multitude," an assembly that sounds very much like the idea of a public posited at the foundation of the new idea of news. Following a scathing excoriation that ends with a description of his network as a "blunt monster with uncounted heads," Rumor turns to the audience assembled at the Globe and says, in effect, 'you realize of course that the monster I'm talking about is *you*': "But what need I thus | My well-known body to anatomize | Among my household?" This sudden about-face opens up a more complex, more ambivalent, perspective on the public dissemination of news.

⁶ Note that Jonson makes a similar connection between news culture and the classical idea of fama in *The Staple of News* 3.2.115-22. See Chapter IV, Section v.

Shakespeare has a sharp sense of the vulgarity and mendacity characterizing public discourse, but he also recognizes that his own profession bears an inextricable connection to it. The theatre is Rumor's "household," a uniquely public forum where a messy, often unsavory, exchange of information and ideas could flourish.

Rumor's Induction sets up a scene that rehearses another important pattern in Shakespeare's representation of news: the dramatization of an individual in crisis subjected to a flurry of contradictory reports. The individual in this particular case is the Earl of Northumberland, who begins the play in a state of extreme anxiety as he waits for information about his son, Henry Percy (or Hotspur), leader of the rebel army that faced off against the King's forces in the final scene of *1 Henry IV*. His first messenger, Lord Bardolph, brings purportedly "certain news" (1.1.12) of a rebel victory, a report that becomes immersed in doubt following the entry of another messenger, Travers, who says that he has just heard from a man on a bloody horse that the "rebellion had bad luck, | And that young Harry Percy's spur was cold" (1.1.41-42). As Northumberland struggles to sort out the truth of the situation, a third messenger, Morton, arrives with eyewitness testimony of the rebels' defeat and Hotspur's death, a report the Earl reluctantly accepts. Shifting, almost automatically, from news-recipient to news-broadcaster, he orders the immediate dispatch of "posts and letters" to circulate word of a renewed rebellion, thereby providing new grist for Rumor's myriad-headed monster to feed on (1.1.214). As noted above, the scene reprises a dramatic situation that repeatedly becomes manifest in Shakespeare's plays when

serious thinking about the news occurs: an anxious, bewildered enquirer struggles to find meaning in a hazy profusion of information. For another example, consider the beginning of *Othello* 1.3, wherein the Duke of Venice, inundated by a series of wildly divergent reports, declares in frustration that “There is no composition in these news | That gives them credit” (1.3.1-2). The same pattern also appears, with particular frequency, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play that, as Janet Adelman has noted, continually bombards the audience “with messengers of one kind or another, not so much to convey information as to convey the sense that all information is unreliable, that it is message or rumor, not fact” (35).⁷ As noted in the foregoing analysis of Rumor’s speech, Adelman finds that the pattern points back toward the speaking situation of the theatre itself, reminding the audience of their complicity in the jumble of discursive activity represented onstage: “our opaque protagonists [are] surrounded by critics and commentators,” she writes, “the structure of these scenes emphasizes the process of discussion” (34). Taking the argument a step further, she very helpfully points out that the dramaturgical purpose of such moments is not to condemn or confound the audience, but to prompt a more active thinking-through of the issues offered for consideration:

We listen to a series of reports and judgments which are neither true nor false, or are both together, until even the concepts of truth and falsity lose their meanings. Shakespeare is not dallying with us only to confuse us. He is instead deliberately playing with these dramatic techniques in order to

⁷ On the messengers in *Antony and Cleopatra* see also Barfoot, “News of the Roman Empire: hearsay, soothsay, myth and history in *Antony and Cleopatra*.”

draw us into the act of judging. In effect, we are forced to judge and shown the folly of judging at the same time: our double responses are an essential part of the play. (39)

This argument returns focus to my primary object of study: the relationship between the early modern theatre and what I have called ‘news thinking’, or the conceptual construction work that laid the foundation for a new, more sophisticated, idea of news. The disorienting effect of news as it appears in Shakespeare’s plays does not merely extend or reflect the disorientation of news consumers in early modernity—it transfers the experience to a wholly different register, a forum where they could think through their feelings about the news from a more critical, comfortably detached, angle of view.

II.ii. The introduction of Autolycus in 4.3: broadsheets and Mercury

Autolycus does not appear in *The Winter’s Tale* until the third scene of the fourth act, shortly after the action has shifted from Sicilia to Bohemia. In sharp contrast to the grave subject matter dominating the first half of the play (royal tirades, a trial, etc.), he enters singing a lighthearted song in celebration of the wayfaring life and associated pleasures such as birdsong, “ale,” and “tumbling in the hay” with casual lovers (4.3.1-22). When his song comes to an end, he delivers a candid self-introduction in the style of Vice figures from Tudor morality plays, thereby establishing a confederacy with the audience and exposing