

## 16. The Treatment of Johnson's Shakespeare by Modern Editors: The Case of *Henry V*

*Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils.*<sup>1</sup>

— Samuel Johnson

### I

Although Samuel Johnson embodied most of his editorial efforts in the notes to his 1765 edition of Shakespeare, the majority of critical writing on Johnson's edition centers on the *Preface*. Arthur Sherbo states that there has long 'persisted the misconception that Dr. Johnson's Preface is Dr. Johnson's edition of Shakespeare, or that his Preface and the General Observations are the edition.' He adds that the *Preface* 'has monopolized critical attention' although it was 'written last and printed less than two weeks before the edition was published.'<sup>2</sup> For example, Graham Parker's recent book *Johnson's Shakespeare* begins as follows: 'The most fitting preface to this discussion of Johnson's Shakespeare is Johnson's own; the extracts from the *Preface to Shakespeare*... present the reader with Johnson's leading propositions.'<sup>3</sup> Typically, references to Johnson's notes are employed only when they are useful for illustrating a concept from the *Preface*. The result of this is what Arthur Sherbo terms a 'phenomenon of present-day critics studying Johnson as a critic of Shakespeare without a single reference to a note in the edition.'<sup>4</sup>

The unavailability of a complete text of Johnson's whole edition accounts for some of the neglect of Johnson's notes; as Shirley White Johnston points out, when most critics turn to Johnson's notes, 'they naturally reach for Arthur Sherbo's *Johnson on Shakespeare* volumes in the Yale edition.'<sup>5</sup> In addition to only printing brief textual lines, the Yale edition omits three types of notes from Johnson's edition. In the introduction, editor Arthur Sherbo states that comments are omitted if they are 'factual glosses of words or phrases [which] are obvious to any modern reader who has access to an annotated edition,' 'emendations or