

The first hamlet's quarto descent

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The title page of the second quarto of Hamlet claims that the text beneath it is “ Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much / againe as it was, according to the true and perfect / Coppie.” Taking this at face value, three facts necessary follow: That there is at least one earlier edition (or else this one could not be “ newly imprinted...again”); that the earlier edition was shorter (or else this one could not be “ enlarged”); and that this quarto does not include some lines from the “ perfect Coppie” (since it is “ almost as much”). Indeed, a First Quarto exists dated a year earlier (1603); Q1 is shorter some 1600 lines; and the Folio does restore certain seemingly authorial passages. It appears as if “ I. R.,” the printer, or “ N. L.,” the publisher, is correct on all possible counts. We cannot even condemn I. R. or N. L. for self-interested advertising. They admit that their copy is “ almost,” but not quite, “ perfect.”* Thus we might wish to take seriously one further point that the title page tries to make, namely, that the earlier quarto was neither “ true” nor “ perfect,” and therefore is corrupted not simply in its brevity, but also in the presentation of the text which it actually does contain. This would mean that Q1 did not use the “ true and perfect Coppie” as its copy-text. It does not seem preposterous to rephrase: Our new edition is bigger and truer than that other edition, because we had access to the play as it was mean to be, while the earlier publication did not. N. L. would certainly know if this were the case, since he was one of Q1’s printers. That such a reading is believable suggests it is exactly what we are intended to believe, as the title page is an advertisement after all. Accepting this last implication as true, Q1 must be the product of a theatrical production in one sense or another. Indeed, its title page brags that the text is “ As it hath

beene diverse times acted” as opposed to as “ William Shake-speare” had written it. Nothing is confusing yet.

The thesis of the day, specifically that the actor who played Marcellus and Lucianus reconstructed the text of Q1 from memory, fits in nicely with the two title pages. An actor would of course have access primarily if not solely to the “ acted” playtext or the memory thereof; a shilling or two should provide the rest of the explanation. However, the thesis as it stands cannot satisfy all of the curiosity a careful reader of the First Quarto is bound experience. It is not simply that an actor misremembered Q2's “ truer” text. Rather he worked from what was “ diverse times acted,” and hence directed, and hence probably cut for length and reshaped for entertainment's (i. e. profit's) sake. Thus, there are necessarily other agencies involved whose work looms somewhere in between Shakespeare and the his most infamous memorizer.

This establishes two totally distinct problems with regard to the origin of the quarto. The first is the problem of memory. The text is certainly not exactly what was acted. The mere fact that the lines which are spoken by or in the presence of Marcellus or Lucianus are so much closer to the text of the Second Quarto strongly, almost inarguably, suggests that the rest of the text is even further removed from the play as it was produced, because it proves that the actor had a variable and flawed memory. The second problem is, as alluded to above, that of the productions.

Furthermore, we must assume a thoughtful agency, because Q1 is such an effective, yet fundamentally different play. If Q1 were simply the result of a

faulty memorization of the basic text of Q2 or Folio Hamlet, then there is no conceivable explanation for how Q1, independent of both of these texts, has such forceful dramatic logic, unless we regress and say that it was one of Shakespeare's earlier drafts, or perhaps, his final draft. This distressing thought would have much trouble, though perhaps not insurmountable trouble accounting for the extraordinary similarity of Marcellus' Q1 lines to Marcellus' Q2 lines. Let us say then that there is both a "memorizer" and a "director" (who may, of course, be any one of numerous people chipping away and reshaping the play).

These two primary mitigating factors that separate Q1 from Shakespeare's imagined pen often merge in a reading. Any attempt at deciphering one from the other, especially once the problems of the compositor are introduced into the mix, is undoubtedly conjecture. Some conjectures, however, are better than others. And the working through of this particular problem does shed some interesting light on the play as we have come to know it, as the essentially cut-and-paste masterpiece whose birth postdates Shakespeare's death by about a century.

Starting at the focal point of English literature (as high school students learn it) reveals exactly how complicated the textual situation is:

The first problem of interpreting this monologue in the context of Q1, and therefore of interpreting it in the context of the Hamlet corpus, is its utter incomprehensibility towards the beginning. The phrase "When we awake" never properly finishes itself. We cannot awake "the vndiscovered country," the land of the dead, as if that country were a person to be awakened. Nor

does the phrase “ the accursed damn’d” have any “ objective correlative,” to stretch T. S. Elliot’s phrase. If the “ happy smile” at the “ sight” of the “ ludge,” the accursed certainly cannot “ damn’d.” Grammar simply does not allow for it. Maxwell Foster, in his book *The Play Behind the Play*, accordingly blames the compositor. Since a few words and a little rearrangement would make sense out of the passage, he argues, the passage the compositor was staring at and made a mockery of must have been:

Indeed, now we know what Hamlet is aiming at. Foster is set on arguing that Q1 is an early Shakespearean draft; the passage must have made sense at one point. Of course, the argument is circular. Shakespeare penned the passage, therefore the passage must make a logical contribution to the dramatic thrust of the play, therefore the play is “ good,” therefore Shakespeare penned this passage. However, it is difficult to believe that anyone who was paying any attention would allow for such a passage as it appears. The fact that the lines as we have come to know them (“ For in that sleep of death...”) are themselves complicated serves as no excuse, because Q1 often simplifies with extraordinary clarity. For instance, “ The Courtiers, souldiers, schollers, eye, tongue, sword, / Th’expectation, and Rose of the faire state” that ends up “ quite quite downe” in Q2 (1808-1810) is reduced to being “ All dasht and splinterd thence” in Q1 (922). Furthermore, the ease with which Foster reordered the passage suggests that the memorizer, who by default assumes the role of editor, might readily have done the very same thing. Thus it does make some sense that the passage did once make some sense. The fault very well may rest with the compositor. Foster’s amendments, though perhaps misguided in their purpose, do serve the

purpose of putting what are otherwise meaningless phrases into a familiar schema. What the confusion reveals in the end is how difficult it is to determine who, if anyone, has made a mistake. But at least now the work of putting the monologue into the grander schema can go on.

"But for the ioyfull hope" of the our eternal ("euerlasting") salvation do we avoid making our "Quietus." Hamlet insinuates that if he were to kill himself he would be "accursed" and, as a result, "damn'd." He decides to live on because he might in the end attain the rank of "happy." In Q2, however, it is the sheer "dread of something after death," as opposed to a "ioyfull hope," that is Hamlet's supposed reason for not taking his own life. The second quarto is more depressing in that sense, as there is no explicit reference here to the possibility of heaven, but instead only to Hamlet's "dread" of a punishment.

Another key distinction between the two monologues, besides what seems to be Q2's markedly superior poetry, is the concluding lines that are not found in Q1:

In Q2, then, Hamlet links his inability to commit suicide to a more far-reaching cowardice. The word "enterprises" subsumes both suicide and homicide, self-slaughter and slaughter. By ending Hamlet's interior conversation on "O this conscience makes cowardes of vs all," Q1 barely leaves open the possibility of this connection. If we see it, it is most likely because we are projecting our knowledge of Hamlet onto the passage. An independent reading reveals that Hamlet is merely extending his understanding of himself to others. Not only am I, Prince of Denmark,

incapable of killing myself because of my “conscience,” but so is everyone else. In the Second Quarto, Hamlet implies that we are all incapable of action, period. The Folio adds the words “of us all” to cement the point. This reading renders Hamlet’s projection absurd. After the play-within-the-play, Hamlet will have categorical proof of the fact that not all of us are cowards: Claudius managed to muster up enough courage to dispatch Hamlet Sr. to the very same undiscovered country of which he is so afraid.

Each version fits the play in which it is found. Hamlet’s ridiculous assumption, that the “name of action” is universally lost, serves him as a rationalization in Q2 for his delay, whereas in Q1 no such rationalization is necessary. Hamlet kills the King as soon as he finds it feasible, provided the King will reap his just punishment. Even in a detail like this one, Q1 is consistent in a way that a botched reconstruction of some other play would not necessarily be. In that case, we would expect a loose end here. It appears, then, as if someone has knowingly cut a few lines.

However, the very next line in Q1 seems to be an excellent example of a faulty memory. The difference between “Lady in thy orizons, be all my sinnes remembred” and “Nymph in thy orizons / Be all my sinnes remembred” is not insignificant in terms of what it can tell us about Q1. “Nymph” is a loaded word. It expresses in a breath Hamlet’s ambivalence towards Ophelia, who here is a sexualized deity, a woman who is simultaneously the two dichotomous Marys of the New Testament. Perhaps more interestingly, a nymph denotes a stream or a river as well. This allows us a much deeper reading of “orizons”; no longer are they simply prayers.

An "orizon" is a "horizon" too. Hamlet therefore betrays an explicit desire to cast his sins into the farthest reaches of a river. This clearly foreshadows Ophelia's death. And since Ophelia drowns in both Q1 and Q2 as a result of taking Hamlet's sins upon her, there is no logical explanation as to why one would conscientiously substitute "Lady" for "Nymph." If ever one word in a literary work were objectively superior to another, then "Nymph" is better than "Lady." Of course, one could never prove that to someone's ear "Lady" did not ring truer. On the preponderance of the evidence, however, "Lady" is the result of a bad memory. Another clear example that illustrates the same point is Hamlet's condemnation of his mother's lust in Q1: "as if increase / Of appetite had growne by what it looked on" (214-215). Appetite feeds in Q2 (328-329), which is much more evocative. The early draft thesis could not account for these differences particularly well, because "fed" expresses what is actually taking place in both plays. A writer would probably be familiar enough with his own work to properly describe the situation: Hamlet sees Gertrude as already having succumbed to Claudius' temptations. "Looking" on Claudius is not "feeding" her anymore, because she is already sleeping betwixt "incestuous sheetes" (Q1, 217).

The placement of the "To be or not to be" monologue and the ensuing nunnery scene with Ophelia/Ofelia reveals the same consistency in structure and the same problems of memorization. In Q1, the scene would be the first scene of the second act, if scene and act numbers were ascribed to a play that did that not bear them originally. It occurs immediately after Corambis and the King have plotted it, which might reflect the associative chain of a memorizer. However, it also establishes a slew of consecutive spying scenes.

Corambis himself next attempts to get at the cause of Hamlet's lunacy. Then Rossencraft and Gilderstone try to play him like a pipe. Finally, Hamlet orchestrates the play-within-the-play such that he might "catch the conscience of the King" (1163). The cumulative effect is the sense the reader (who is a self-imagined playgoer) has of a powerful buildup, which climaxes appropriately in the murderous cat and mouse game (or "rat" and mouse game) that the King and Hamlet play against each other, wherein delay is-with one theological exception-the result of circumstance. In Q2, the nunnery scene occurs in between the scenes with the players, separating by a few scenes Polonius' and the King's plotting from their actual spying.

And yet, despite the craftsmanship of Q1's structure, the rhythm of its nunnery scene lacks much of the force of Q2's. One small example that speaks to that difference is Hamlet's explicit damning of Ophelia to the nunnery. Hamlet each time says, "To a Nunnery goe" (893, 904, 908, 919), whereas in Q2, he phrases the same idea in various ways, which better reflects either his actual or pretended insanity.

Then what story might we construct as to how Q1 is both remarkably consistent and at points notably inferior, once we assume that it is not a Shakespearean draft? Steven Urkowitz has rightly pointed out that "If the differences between Q1 and Q2 indeed result from ? pirates,'" then "these pirates should merit further study, for their theatrical acuity is impressive." But we cannot neglect the problem of "Nymph" versus "Lady." Only one possible solution remains once these narrow confines have been set for it. The First Quarto must be a memorially reconstructed version of an

intelligently cut and reshaped play. Otherwise, we must attribute an undo motivation to a character actor, who would have little reason to spend his time carefully reordering Shakespeare's scenes himself.

One more plausible possibility presents itself. The above does not begin to explain how it is that Polonious is transformed into Corambis. This is no slip of the mind, especially since Corambis is no arbitrary name for Polonious: Corambus was probably the same character's name in an earlier, nonextant play called Hamlet, now labeled Ur-Hamlet, supposedly by the London playwright Thomas Kyd, which appeared some fifteen years before the Hamlet in question. That fact has been deduced primarily from an extant German play of 1710 that treats the same material, *Der Bestrafte Brudermord*. If Shakespeare had only released a single manuscript of Hamlet, then the regression to an earlier name must be a creative decision on the part of a "director," an actor, or an "editor." The question of why any of these hypothetical persons would want to alter the play in such a way is at best problematic and at worst unanswerable, leading us to the tentative conclusion that Shakespeare did in fact pen an early draft and that Q1 is a reconstruction of that draft. Furthermore, an early draft is expected to stay nearer to its sources. Revision is exactly what the word implies-seeing anew. This explanation would explain Q1's undeniable power, just as Maxwell Foster argues it does. It also allows for the "accuracy" of Marcellus' and Lucianus' scenes. To escape this conclusion, we might hope that Shakespeare's early draft differed only insofar as Polonious was Corambis, which would mean that the textual situation might still be what I postulated in the preceding paragraph.

Deciding whether to read Q1 as an earlier or later (adapted) version of Q2 has interesting ramifications for our reading of Hamlet today. If Q1 represents a draft, even one that is mauled, then, as Urkowitz puts it, placing it alongside Q2 is “rather like [perusing] a museum or gallery showing the variant states of the great Rembrandt etchings... Each can stand alone, but when viewed side by side they show how the work grew and altered, and we can better appreciate the particular virtues of each trial.” Our new perspective would grant us the power of asserting with certainty that Shakespeare in every conceivable way intended the nunnery scene to interrupt Hamlet’s dealings with the players. Ophelia is a player of sorts too. She repeats, as if she had rehearsed them, the words of her father and brother almost verbatim. Laertes tells her that “as this temple waxes / The inward service of the minde and soule / Growes wide withall,” (Q2, 475-477) and Polonius demands, “Be something scanted of your maiden presence” (587). She lectures Hamlet on these very ideas, employing an eerily similar vocabulary: “take these [remembrances, i. e. letters] again, for to the noble mind / Rich gifts wax poore when giuers prooue vnkind” (Q2, 1754-1755). (“Presence” and “presents” are identical to the ear.) She, like the players, also performs for the King. Of course, these connections hold independent of any knowledge of Q1, but the early draft hypothesis forces us to put even more pressure on the nunnery scene’s counter-intuitive placement.

If Q1 is an amalgamation of various ideas and lines, the congruity of which has nothing whatsoever to do with the Bard, then it teaches us at the very least how some of his contemporaries who were themselves involved in the theatre interpreted or dramatized the original text. Even the slightest

mistake in memorization elucidates their conception of the play. For instance, only in Q1 does Hamlet say that if the King, as a result of the play, “doe not bleach, and change at that, / It is a damned ghost that we haue seene” (1267-8). To “bleach” means to go pale, to go white as a ghost. Hamlet once again unconsciously conflates his father and the King, although the very sign of the King’s guilt is proof of his father’s ghost’s honesty. To “bleach” also suggests a purification of sorts, which hints at the idea that the public acknowledgement of a sin is a sort of cleansing. Thus who ever is responsible for “bleach” might himself be unconsciously making allusions to these contradictory notions. We might then seek to find similar ideas in the Hamlet we read today, because the memorizer may have made these connections from other scenes in the play.

The strategic early placing of the “To be or not to be, I there’s the point” monologue gives it less weight than it has in Q2, as if it were the beginning of Hamlet’s train of thought as opposed to the turning point we often think it is when we read a modern edition. Indeed, “the point” is more absolute than “the question.” Hamlet does not fight with himself to solve a problem, but merely expresses what that problem is. To argue that this is oversimplification is to oversimplify: it is a revision. It is an Elizabethan argument, positing that a truly revengeful Hamlet would definitely shy away from suicide for hope of salvation, while the confused avenger Hamlet would probably shy away from suicide for fear of punishment. That in itself sheds light on the pop psychology of the day, and thus how we ought to read Hamlet’s psychology in the context of its time.