Editing Hamlet - interview with Ann Thompson

Jerome Monahan spoke to Ann Thompson, editor of the new two volume edition - and the first woman to be trusted with the task.

Ann Thompson, Professor of English at King's College London, is the first woman to have edited *Hamlet*. Together with co-editor Neil Taylor she further broke with tradition producing not a single 'conflated' version of the play for Arden but a two-volume edition offering all three of the early *Hamlet* texts to have survived. Even more controversially, she and Taylor decided to treat all these versions with equal respect. In doing so they avoided the tendency of previous editors to dismiss the First Quarto of 1603 as 'bad' and others who have regarded the First Folio of 1623 as Shakespeare's 'improved' or 'revised' version of the 1604/5 Quarto. She talked to *emagazine* about taking on probably the most daunting editing job in Shakespearean studies, the controversies that surrounded the project and the benefits of ending up with three Hamlets at the end of ten years of editing.

JM: Can you spell out the background to this project?

Writer

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AT: About half of Shakespeare's plays exist in more than one version. Since the early 18th century the editorial tradition has been to conflate them - picking and choosing the best bits in the hope of creating a definitive Othello, for example. That approach persisted until 1986, when the editors of the Oxford Complete Works of Shakespeare decided to publish the two early versions of King Lear. They said afterwards they should have done the same with Hamlet, but they didn't and nobody else did either so we decided to do it without surrendering to the Revision Theory.

JM: The Revision Theory?

AT: The idea that the Folio version of a play is actually Shakespeare's revision and therefore superior to all other versions. It's flawed for several reasons. We know that authors can rework things and make them worse - for example, Wordsworth's Prelude. Also, there can be all sorts of reasons why some passages appear in one text and not in others. For example, the 1604/5 Second Quarto may not have included the line 'Denmark's a prison' because of fears of offending King James' wife, Anne of Denmark. We just wanted to present the texts in their own right which often meant restoring readings that most other editors had suppressed because they preferred one version of the play over another.

Also, my co-editor Neil Taylor and I felt that if we were going to spend several years on the project then we didn't just want to tidy up something that has already been done well - the Harold Jenkins edition of Hamlet for Arden in 1982 was a very good conflated edition.

JM: Your decision to treat the 1603 version of the play with such respect is probably one of the most controversial things you did. I remember at school being taught to be rather contemptuous of it.

AT: We are not arguing that it is as good a text as the other two - although at least one reviewer has said that is what we do - its poetry is not as good and it is half the length, but it is a very interesting text. It is the earliest Hamlet text we have. And if this is the version created by someone sitting in the theatre taking it down in shorthand or someone who acted in it and wrote it down afterwards - well this is interesting too. It was first unearthed in 1823 and only two copies have survived, but then again only a dozen copies of the Second Quarto have been found.

JM: Its existence suggests a pretty cut-throat world of unscrupulous audience members, cheating actors and opportunistic publishers. Are they much shorter - these bad quartos?

AT: Yes - I think that the fact that the 'good quarto' - the Second Quarto - of Hamlet came out only a year after the first one and quite explicitly says on the title page that it is 'newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was' indicates that Shakespeare's company knew there was this 'bad' version in circulation and thought that they might as well cash in on sales and put out a longer and better one. But I don't see why you would need to suppress the first one. You want as many of these early texts as you can get.

JM: There are some fascinating variations, for example the

Gertrude of the First Quarto is very different from the later versions.

> *AT: Yes - one of the big questions left hanging by the longer Hamlet texts is what exactly is Gertrude guilty of? In the First Quarto she tells Hamlet most firmly: 'I never knew of this most horrid murder.' There is also an additional scene that is unique to the First Quarto between Gertrude and Horatio - who do not have a whole scene together in the other versions- in which she very clearly demonstrates that she is on Hamlet's side and is deceiving her husband quite consciously and knows what he has been plotting against Hamlet.*

JM: You would expect inaccuracies and bits of clumsy poetry in a version someone was trying to recollect from memory, but something as hugely different as Gertrude's knowledge or an entirely new scene suggests that such things existed in early performances in some shape or form?

AT: Yes - that unique scene covers material that is spread across three scenes in the longer version. Perhaps Shakespeare or somebody else thought this play's too long and we can cut some of this and get onto the climax more quickly by just doing a bit of filleting. And it is well done - it is not something that someone would have achieved when just taking down illicit shorthand. And if it is an account of an actual performance then its stage directions become very interesting. For example, in the Second Quarto and Folio 'closet scene' the Ghost is said just to 'enter' and so it

was always assumed that he appeared in the same way as he had done earlier on: in armour and carrying a truncheon. But in the First Quarto in the closet scene the direction says 'Enter the ghost in his night gowne'.

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JM: So he dresses appropriately for the setting?

> *AT: Yes - he could be. It is his former wife's closet - not a bedroom but her private room.*

JM: It's wonderfully ludicrous in one way - the idea of the Ghost having a wardrobe of clothes suitable for whichever location he is due to haunt.

AT: Yes, it is curious. Nobody actually did it dressed this way until Henry Irving's production in the late 19th century in which the Ghost came in wearing a dressing gown, and the same has happened in quite a lot of modern productions since. It has helped Freudian readings along enormously. It also fits the strong Anglo-American tendency to see the play as more a kind of domestic, family drama and not a political drama - the way it has been presented in many Eastern European countries.

JM: Is it true a number of critics were quite hostile to this project?

AT: Yes - some people, including Harold Jenkins himself thought his edition shouldn't be replaced. He felt that all the others in the Arden series could be re-edited but not that one. His is a good edition.

JM: It was twenty years old by the time you came to do your edition.

AT: Yes - 1982 - so a lot has happened. There is nothing on Hamlet on the stage in Jenkins' edition for a start. And the critical landscape has been transformed since then. But people were attached to that edition. When news got out about our project it caused a stir - I was even interviewed on Radio 4's Today Programme. Stanley Wells of the Oxford Shakespeare Edition was on the telephone to put the opposite point of view. His concern was that a multiple-edition Hamlet might confuse people. It was amazing. It was he who had pioneered two-versions of King Lear in the Oxford Collected Works and said in print at the time that they should have done the same with Hamlet!

JM: In the essay collection you edited for Arden called *In Arden: Editing Shakespeare* several contributors speak of how an editor's attitudes, their sexual politics, can lead them to impose their views on a play. Do you think there are readings of *Hamlet* that have lost out because male editors have suppressed things in their editing that should have been highlighted?

AT: Yes - one thing that comes up in Hamlet criticism is Hamlet's age and therefore Gertrude's age, because if Hamlet's 30, as both the longer texts insist, then that makes Gertrude 50 and this has worried male editors who feel she could not possibly be attractive to a man like Claudius. It is less of a 'problem' in the First Quarto in which Hamlet is said to be about 20.
Also, male editors can be very awkward when it comes to annotating obscenity and all the sexual puns and jokes. Editors have tied themselves in knots trying to explain Hamlet's remark about 'country matters' without using the word 'cunt'. And a lot of male editors want Shakespeare's heroines to be pure and virginal. Some of the blame also must lie with publishers who sometimes do not want editors to be too clear in their annotation because of the danger of alienating certain markets.

JM: The American market?

AT: Yes - or the schools market.

JM: One of the pleasures of your edition is the way it allows the reader in on the editorial process - was that a deliberate approach?

AT: Yes, one of the things I have tried to impose as a general editor for Arden is that all editors be a bit more up front about what's involved when editing - for example taking a sample passage and having a facsimile illustration of a page or a column of the Folio and just talking about their procedures - how you get from the 17th-century version to the modern version including the changes an editor has to make about punctuation or lineation. This way the process isn't a mystery just shared between editors.

JM: More democratic?

AT: I hope so, having on the one hand felt the political importance of becoming a Shakespeare editor and particularly of Hamlet, I decided I am not going to go about this in an authoritarian way. I'm not going to say that I am the great expert on this play and this is the definitive edition, it's now been done. That is another thing that has upset some people. We are saying 'we don't know which is the right text - we think there are three texts here and we are not going to suppress one over the others'.

JM: I can see why that is so threatening. You are revealing the kinds of processes that have gone on before with other conflated editions, and the arbitrariness of people's decisions on previous editions.

AT: A bit - but also there is that rather patronizing attitude that came up in that radio interview, that it would confuse people, that people should not be offered more than one possible reading because, poor souls, they can't cope with it. The opposite is true. My experience is that students find it actually very refreshing discovering there are hundreds of variations even between the two good texts (the Second Quarto and the Folio) which they can argue about. For example, they can take on the editors of both the Oxford and Cambridge editions of the mid-1980s, both of whom are convinced that the Folio is Shakespeare's revision of the play and who therefore argue that the 'so-called' cuts are Shakespeare's - among them Hamlet's last soliloquy. It's just not there in the Folio - the one that begins: 'How all occasions do inform against me/And spur my dull revenge...' when he has seen Fortinbras' army. Those editors say it is a better play without it. It's a much loved soliloquy and whole theories about Hamlet have been built upon it - but no, say these editors, Shakespeare was right to cut it, it's not appropriate to this point in the play. And students can have a discussion about whether it is a better play with or without this soliloquy.

I hope our approach opens the play up for students. It is not monolithic - 'the greatest play by the greatest playwright and all you can do is bow down and worship it'. Now you can get into debates about whether it is a better play with that soliloquy? Would it have been a better play if we knew what Gertrude was guilty of? That kind of thing - it helps students feel less intimidated by it.

JM: You also include a 'doubling chart in your appendices - can you say a bit about that?

AT: Yes - a doubling chart is a diagram showing the parts that could effectively be played by a single actor. Shakespeare's standard company was at most 14 - ten men and four boys for the women's parts - so that is an immediate constraint on what he can do. All three texts of Hamlet can be played by 8 men and 3 boys. The 'law of re-entry' applies: a character cannot go off at the end of one scene and come on immediately afterwards, so that means some other character must come on, so that means you get sub-plots, for example. I also think one of the reasons that the Ghost in the First Quarto might come in wearing a nightgown is because if that actor was doubling the part of the Ghost with that of the King (Claudius) - which is possible and does happen - then a nightgown is something that can be taken on and off very quickly while an actor is wearing other clothes.

JM: And of course a doubling that involves both victim and murderer acted by the same person is highly suggestive. Is it complicated doing a doubling chart?

AT: Well you usually start with the scene that has the most characters in it. In Hamlet it is the play scene in which we have the most speaking characters on stage at the same time. It is a tragedy so there are going to be characters that die before the end so the actor who plays Ophelia can double as Osric - that sort of thing. It is an inexact science. You have to set yourself various rules - such as every line is spoken which for a start didn't happen, and then you have a rule for how long it might take someone to change from one costume to another.

JM: Did the doubling chart suggest other surprises?

AT: Yes, when we did the doubling charts two things were most significant - one - it abolished the idea of the First Quarto as a short text for a smaller company. You still needed to have exactly the same number of people or possibly even one more. And if you think about it, it is obvious because a shorter play gives actors less time to change into different costumes to play different parts. But it had been received wisdom that this was just a cut-down text for a cut-down company touring in the provinces.

The other thing that came out of doing the doubling charts was that strictly speaking the only actor who cannot double is Horatio which makes you start thinking about this character. He's very mysterious. In the first scene he seems to be a local with all the knowledge about what is going on. Then in the second

scene it's revealed he is Hamlet's friend visiting from Wittenberg - though if he is Hamlet's friend it is odd that they have not met until this point. Editors have to make a lot of decisions about Horatio - whether he is on stage or not because for long periods he is silent. One could speculate that he has to remain the same (and not double up) because of his role in Hamlet's attitude to things. Hamlet has a very extravagant admiration for Horatio, so maybe Horatio is not allowed to be anybody else - he has to go on being Horatio. It can be a puzzling part for actors, for example there's a story in our Introduction from Scott Handy who played Horatio in Peter Brook's production and he had a difficult time doing it until he actually injured himself and had to spend some time on crutches. He said this gave him an insight into Horatio as the kind of person who would like to be more helpful and positive, but can't. And it is one of the interesting things about the whole 'afterlife' business of the play. There are lots of sequels to Hamlet that people have written in which Horatio surprisingly often turns out to have been the villain - in league with Claudius all along or spying for Fortinbras.

JM: Did the opening of the Globe assist you in your editing?

AT: Yes - the Globe has underlined how all sorts of things happen in soliloquies, for example - sometimes a character is thinking aloud and sometimes he is actually speaking to the audience - saying 'goodness did you see that?' The Globe has also raised a question about the insistence in all three early Hamlet texts that the Ghost in Act I Scene 4 should be under the stage. Hamlet calls him 'old mole'. But when they tried to do this at the Globe it didn't work.

JM: Couldn't be heard?

AT: Yes - the audience couldn't hear the actor and the actor couldn't hear his cues - he couldn't intervene where he was supposed to.

JM: Well how did they do it?

AT: We don't know - we might say that they got the design of the modern Globe wrong and somehow or other the acoustics were different - or perhaps they never worked.

JM: One thing we haven't talked about much is the commentary - the notes that editors place at the foot of each page.

AT: I enjoy preparing them enormously. You can really gain a general education from good footnotes - for example my knowledge of the game of bowls which I have never played derives from good footnotes in editions of Shakespeare's plays.

JM: What was your approach to them, did it differ from your predecessors?

AT: It was focused on opening things up as much as possible. In some of the second series Ardens published from the 1950s to the early 1980s, you find un-translated Greek and Latin in the footnotes. Also there was a sense in those editions that everyone must be very familiar with Western culture and history so references to mythology or the Bible in the text went unexplained.

JM: And on a lot of occasions you seem to be unpicking what other editors have done.

AT: Yes, we were always trying to guess what the reader needs help with, or an actor, trying to help without insisting on a single interpretation.

JM: Here's one about Polonius' verbosity in Act 2 Scene 2 line 90 or so: 'My liege and madam, to expostulate/ What

majesty should be, what duty is...' all that speech - and you say in the commentary: 'Polonius' verbosity is often played for laughs but it could also reflect genuine embarrassment about both Hamlet's madness and it's supposed cause - love for his daughter - Ophelia. So, there you are looking both ways.

> *AT: Yes - there are options here. And there are options how you read Polonius at end of the scene (Act 3 Scene 1) where Hamlet has been so unpleasant to Ophelia and Polonius and the King have been spying. Polonius tells Ophelia: 'You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said - We heard it all.' It is often seen as a very cruel thing to say - just dismissing her, but it could conceivably be a kind thing - 'you don't have to put yourself through it again.' I have had some positive responses from students and colleagues who felt the commentary tries to open things up rather than close them down.*

JM: In the end do you think that teachers would do well drawing their students' attention to the different versions of *Hamlet*?

AT: In the programme notes to a recent production at the Old Vic there's an essay called 'the director's cut' which talked about which edition Trevor Nunn had used and why and what changes he'd made. I thought that title was interesting because it references filmmaking and with the arrival of DVDs we are getting used to there being more than one version of something, different endings, omitted scenes - so I think modern young people are more likely to be interested in this and not think it is very strange that there is more than one version of the play.