Hamlet: Q1 + Q2 + F =? (emagplus81)

Philip Smithers examines the differences between the two quarto and the Folio editions of Shakespeare's Hamlet and reflects on their significance.

An Insoluble Literary Equation

When Henry Bunbury of Barton Hall, in 1823, unearthed an old book ‘barbarously cropped and very ill bound’ in his attic, little did he know that the shockwaves of that discovery would be felt to this day. The book that had turned up, or rather returned (like Hamlet’s father) in a very questionable shape was none other than the earliest copy of Shakespeare’s Hamlet: the so-called ‘bad quarto’, now commonly referred to as Q1. Prior to this discovery, and like many other Shakespeare plays, there were two known versions of Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

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This article first appeared in emagplus for emagazine 81, September 2018.

Q1

Shakespeare’s plays were printed in what is known as a Quarto version (so called due to the size of the paper it was printed): cheap copies of the play, similar to today’s paperback novel. Such was the 1604 version of Hamlet, titled: THE Tragicall Historie of HAMLET, Prince of Denmarke. By William Shakespeare. Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie (henceforth known as Q2). ‘Perfect Coppie’ implies that it is the definitive text of the play but that also is up for debate. The other version of the

play comes in the Folio version of 1623: an expensively bound, hardback text containing the vast majority of Shakespeare's writing which was put together by Henry Condell and John Heminges, fellow members of the King's Men acting company. There are hundreds of different variations between Q2 and Folio texts, most to do with slight word changes; however there are some significant larger cuts to the text, a main one being the removal of Hamlet's 'How all occasions do inform against me' Act IV soliloquy from the Folio version (F). Indeed, Act IV consists of a mere nine lines in the Folio with Fortinbras's role also significantly diminished.

This opens up a number of questions about the play: which version reflects the play as it was staged? Did Shakespeare make the changes? Does it show his process of editing the play? Are the changes merely down to a careless printer? Which version should I read? Is one version 'better' than the other? Despite claims to the contrary, the answer to these questions remain maddeningly elusive. The common practice for editors is to conflate the two texts, meaning they combined the two together but the problem with this is that it does not reflect how it was ever staged in Shakespeare's day. If plays were roughly 'two hours' traffic' as stated in the prologue to Romeo and Juliet then this conflated version would have been far too long for an actual performance. Considering that plays started at two o'clock in the afternoon and recognising how early it gets dark in winter, you can see how, claiming the conflated version was performed in Shakespeare's London, stretched credibility – not to mention the audience's endurance.

Michael Davies has suggested that because 19thcentury commentators, such as Coleridge and Hazlitt, were reading

‘armchair’ versions (a conflated text) of Hamletwhich ‘exaggerated Hamlet’s supposed delay significantly, then a question naturally arose for them which had not, it seems, been asked before…why does Hamlet procrastinate so much?’ (Hamlet, Character Studies, 67). This would explain why, for two hundred years, Hamlet’s ‘delay’ was not commented on until the Romantics got involved. Thus, it is possible that this prominent interpretation of the character of Hamlet is a result, not of Shakespeare’s writing, but of the editorial process.

Q1

Into this tornado of wild and whirling words, cast Sir Henry Bunbury’s finding, a discovery that had ‘profound effects of our understanding of William Shakespeare as author’ (Lesser, Hamlet After Q1, 10). Its title, THE Tragicall Historie of HAMLET Prince of DenmarkeBy William Shake-speare. As it hath beene diuerse times acted by his Highnesse servants in the Cittie of London: as also in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where, implies that it is a version of the play designed for a travelling company. Its length could also suggest the same. At nearly half the length of Q2 and F and lacking much of the Hamlet we know from those two versions, it was an astonishing discovery in Shakespeare studies. To take one of many, many examples of how this differs from the other versions and why some consider it a corrupted text – and why it is referred to as the ‘bad quarto’ – let us compare the opening of Hamlet’s soliloquy at the end of 2.2: in the Q2 and F version Hamlet famously berates himself as ‘a rogue and peasant slave’; in the Q1 version he refers to himself as a ‘dunghill idiot slave’. It’s not difficult to see why some consider this a ‘bad’ text but, as I will detail later, it is not all

quite so ‘bad’.

Where did Q1 come from and why is it so different? Again, definitive answers are impossible to give. It has been suggested that, like Hamlet, Shakespeare and his company had to deal with pirates. The theory goes that Q1 was a ‘pirated text…sold to printer without the author’s knowledge or permission’ (Callaghan, Hamlet Language and Writing, 25). Recently, Tiffany Stern (Shakespeare Survey 63, 1-23) has put forward the theory that it is a noted text by members of the audience. (A modern equivalent, I imagine, would be surreptitiously recording a film on your phone in the cinema – which begs the question, what would the actors have thought of someone scribbling furiously on a pad during a performance in broad daylight?) A further proposal is that it is a rough draft of Shakespeare’s manuscript; another is that it is actually a truer reflection of how the play was staged at the time. For these reasons, an observation that has been applied to Hamlet the man, could equally be applied to Hamlet’s textual history: a question mark in the shape of a play.

What Can Q1 Tell Us?

Despite Q1’s rather dubious reputation it has some telling information not found in the other texts. And, since it was ‘produced only three years after the tragedy was produced…(and) it may be a more exact copy than any printed’ (Lesser, 28), it would be remiss of us to ignore aspects of the text which may reflect how it was staged in Shakespeare’s era. Take, for example, Q1’s stage directions in the scene where Ophelia, after going mad, enters: ‘Enter Ofelia playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing’. Margreta De Grazia (Hamlet without Hamlet, 116) notes that ‘[O]n stage and in narrative, unbound and

dishevelled hair gave sign of deep distress caused by loss, sometimes of a loved one (especially the homonymic heir,) sometimes of virginity or chastity'. Was this how Shakespeare's Ophelia was presented on stage? An example from another of Shakespeare's plays, King John, could enlighten us further: upon the death of her child Arthur, Constance, in a moving lament says that she 'will not keep this form upon her head,/When there is such disorder in my wit' (3.3. 101-2) and proceeds to unbind her hair. This could suggest that Q1's stage directions do reflect theatrical practice at the time and is thus a more accurate portrayal of what Shakespeare intended. Might it also add weight to the interpretation that, like Constance, Ophelia is 'antic', not because she's lost her lover, but because she has lost a relative; in this case her father?

Unknowns Answered?

Gertrude has long been a source of differing opinions from various critics: is she entirely innocent of the murder of her husband or is she complicit in his poisoning? Did she commit an adulterous affair with Claudius when Old Hamlet was alive? Is she guilty of betrayal after Hamlet confronts her in her closet, when she informs Claudius that Hamlet has killed Polonius 'in his brainish apprehension' or merely covering for him by not divulging that Hamlet said he is 'not in madness/But mad in craft'? Q1 might offer some answers to such questions, if indeed there can and should be answers. A notable difference between Q1 and the other two versions is that Gertrude is a far less ambiguous character. When confronted by Hamlet she admits outright that was unaware of Claudius's murder of her dead husband: 'I swear by heaven I never knew of this most horrid murder' (11.86). In fact she even proceeds with

Hamlet to hatch a plot to kill her new husband, avowing that she will 'conseal and consent and do my best – /What stratagem soe'er thou shalt devise' (11.99-100) after Hamlet has asked her to 'assist me in revenge' (11.95). Whose decision it was to make Gertrude more noncommittal in Q2 and F is unknown but one cannot but feel such decisions are better for the dramatic nature of the play; ambiguity being a dramatic mainstay in creating engaging characters with verisimilitude.

Enter the Ghost in His Nightgown

When the ghost of Hamlet's father arrives for the third time in Act III Scene IV he has shed his magisterial armour and instead donned a nightgown. At least in Q1 he has. Lesser has stated that this functions as a strong hint for the audience to imagine the scene occurring in the Queen's bedroom; much like a character bringing a candle on the stage would suggest that it was night-time. This detail very much reinforces De Grazia's argument that the main thrust of Hamletis that Hamlet has been denied his patrilineal inheritance. The ghost initially arriving in armour is a failure of inheritance; the armour that the ghost (unusually) wears should, by rights, have been passed onto the son in the funeral ceremony. The ghost wearing the suit of armour is thus a symbol of the failure of 'the transfer of the father's identity' (De Grazia, 143). The ghost arriving in a nightgown functions in the same way. The presence of a bed that the nightgown implies 'signals a faulty inheritance' as beds at that time were very costly and 'symbols of patrilineal inheritance' (Lesser, 153): the rules of inheritance decreed that the bed of the father became the bed of the eldest son. His mother is still sleeping in his father's bed which he

should have inherited; the stage direction of the ghost in a nightgown points to the play as an ‘early modern crisis in which son has not properly assumed the father’s identity’ (Lesser, 154).

Decisions to Be Made

Ultimately, if you are watching any play performed on stage you are watching an edited version. Dramatic texts are cut and emended depending on the director; as a result no two versions of a play are ever exactly alike. That there is no single definitive text of Hamlet is perhaps not so unusual. I think Dominic Dromgoole, author of Hamlet Globe to Globe,provides a neat summation of the relationship between the three texts: ‘probably a beautiful muddle of author’s intentions, actor’s enhancements, actor’s destruction, and the text floating uneasily between them all’ (79). But before you make decisions on the text you study and what version to perform, surely it is better to be aware of all the options available.