

## PRACTICE: DOCUMENTATION STYLES

THIS ARTICLE [AN ALTERED VERSION FOR TEACHING PURPOSES] USES THE DOCUMENTATION STYLE OF THE JOURNAL *SEDERI*.

CHANGE PARENTHETICAL CITATIONS (BOTH IN THE MAIN TEXT AND IN THE FOOTNOES) AND FINAL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO THE CHICAGO STYLE (WITH FOOTNOTES AND FINAL LIST OF WORKS CITED)

### “Dramaturgy of the Acting Version of the First Quarto of *Hamlet*”

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It is relatively known that the First Quarto of *Hamlet* (1603), the first text ever printed in which the tragical history of the Prince of Denmark is related to the playwright William Shakespeare, presents a version notably different from the standard version reflected in the texts of the Second Quarto (1604/5) and the First Folio (1623). Readers can now easily compare the First and the Second Quarto texts at the British Library website (“The Texts”) and see facsimiles of the three early texts at the *Hamlet* Home Page of the Internet Shakespeare Editions (Best, 2010).

Among its most striking differences we could point out the following. It is a much shorter version, 2,220 lines, just over half as long as the Second Quarto (the longest textual version) or any modern critical edition. Variation in dialogue ranges from passages of total similitude, paraphrases, to fragments unique to the First Quarto (about 130 lines), together with a number of transpositions and echoes. Some characters bear different names, for instance, Corambis for Polonius, Montano for Reynaldo<sup>i</sup>, or Rossencraft and Gilderstone for Rosencrantz<sup>ii</sup> and Guildenstern. There are important structural differences, especially at two points where the line of action is markedly altered: 1) the soliloquy “To be, or not to be” and the subsequent nunnery episode occur immediately after Corambis plans to “loose” his daughter to Hamlet<sup>iii</sup>, and 2) after Ofelia has become mad, Horatio informs the queen of Hamlet's return in a scene which is unique to the First Quarto. And finally, characterizations are different, especially the queen who in the closet scene unambiguously denies any complicity with the murder of Hamlet's father and vows to assist his son in his revenge.

Textual critics have provided various explanations for the origin of this different *Hamlet*, narratives that could be grouped into the following two basic ideas:

- a) It reflects a first conception of the play (so that the version we have in the Second Quarto is a revision of this first version)<sup>iv</sup>, either a full play, a sketch, or a partial revision by Shakespeare of the so called *Ur-Hamlet*. This first conception could be either genuine as it stands, or adapted, shortened and degenerated during its transmission.

b) It is posterior to the Second Quarto version, being the result of short-hand report, of memorial reconstruction, or of revision, adaptation and abridgement<sup>v</sup> (a process that, on the one hand, could be Shakespearian, collaborative or entirely non-Shakespearian, official or unauthorized, and on the other hand, could be previous to the performance, synchronic to the reporting, or the job of a hack poet after the reporting).

Other arguments deal with the legitimacy of its publication, whether the First Quarto is an unduly published text or was authorized for printing.

A general consensus of the majority of critics<sup>vi</sup> sentences this first published Shakespearian *Hamlet* as a “bad quarto”, a reported, pirated, garbled and corrupted text, concocted from memory in order to provide a version for some provincial tour, by an actor or group of actors who performed either in the full play or in some stage abridgement.

Whatever the case, it certainly reflects, or is, *a* version of the play, a version for the stage, whose dramatic qualities deserve our appreciation. It is then the purpose of this paper to assess the dramaturgy, the art of dramatic composition, of the acting version that the First Quarto of *Hamlet* represents. First I will sum up some of the most significant contributions dealing with different aspects of dramaturgy such as construction of plot and of structure, and characterization; and secondly I will concentrate on one aspect of dramatic composition: dialogue writing or dialogue adaptation.

Since 1823 when the First Quarto was rediscovered (Furness, 1877, vol.2, p.13), few scholars have unfavourably criticized its theatricality, although few studies have been devoted to analyzing the dramatic qualities of this version. It was praised by the eminent critic Granville-Barker (1930, p. 188-98), and even William Poel, the first modern producer that staged the First Quarto in 1881 (Hubbard, 1920, p. 32) believed that it was the text that represented most truly Shakespeare's dramatic conception of the play, that possessed more dramatic coherence and was more stageworthy than the Second Quarto, even though this was a greater work of literature (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 242-1)<sup>vii</sup>.

Indeed the First Quarto *Hamlet* (Q1) is a dynamic piece of theatre, agile, with a “strong, effective dramatic action” (Hubbard, 1920, p. 32) and brief in comparison with the accepted *Hamlet* represented by the Second Quarto and the First Folio texts. It exhibits a compact, tight structure centred around a turning or climatic point in the famous “play within the play” at almost two thirds of performing time, so that later events briskly roll on to the catastrophe in a vigorous revenge tragedy.

As Giorgio Melchiori (1992) shows, this dramatic agility and expediency —as compared with the structure of the standard *Hamlet*— is achieved by the way episodes follow one another. Schücking stated that the arrangement of scenes in Q1 was “incomparably more logical than in the second quarto” (1935, p. 181). If we look at the sequence of Hamlet's monologues in the Second Quarto, Hamlet goes from

- 1.— a state of despair in his soliloquy “O that this too too sallied flesh would melt” (I.ii), to
- 2.— a moment of acceptance of vengeance (I.v), then to

- 3.– a recrimination, “What a rogue and peasant slave am I”, and reinforcement of decision, “I’ll catch the conscience of the king” (II.ii), then
- 4.– back to desperation (III.i) “To be, or not to be”, and
- 5.– recrimination “How all occasions do inform against me” and final resolution (IV.iv) “From now on my thought be bloody or be nothing worth”.

This is a fluctuating, brusque movement that suits a complex puzzling character as is the prince of Denmark we all know. However in the First Quarto, episode 4 (“To be, or not to be”) is transposed before episode 3 (“I’ll catch the conscience of the king”): it is logical that after the shock of the ghost's demand, Hamlet considers the possibility of suicide (even, I would add, when almost four hundred lines before, he said “I do not set my life at a pin's fee”, I.iv.65 / TLN 654), then rejects it, and plans action (moment 3) “What a dunghill idiot slave am I?”. Following this line, moment 5 would be redundant for we had just left Hamlet in another moment of decision, and so it is eliminated.

The succession of events in Q1 then is more lineal, direct, and it has the benefit of condensing the story time from two days and two sequences into one single day and one sequence, thus providing the play with a speedy and agile running. As Melchiori (1992, p. 203-4) observed, the First Quarto, in referring to the performance of the murder of Gonzago, does not say “weele heare a play to morrowe” (II.ii.529 / TLN 1576) and “Weele hate to morrowe night” (II.ii.534 / TLN 1580), so that the performance takes place at night on the very same day. In fact from the beginning of the seventh scene, where plans are set up to find the cause of Hamlet's transformation until he is sent to England, less than 24 hours have gone by. In this condensed space of time all the tests by which Hamlet's madness is observed, follow one another without delay, within the same dramatic sequence: the interview with Ofelia (the nunnery episode), with Corambis (the fishmonger episode) and the interview with Rossincraft and Gilderstone. The test of Ofelia is not postponed to the following day as it is in the standard version.

[...]

The benefit of all this condensation is a more agile, logical and abridged version that solves the inconvenience of the excessive length of the standard *Hamlet*<sup>viii</sup>.

Burkhart (1975) studied the processes of abridgement in the “bad quartos” especially in terms of economy of casting, speech-shortening and paraphrasing that involve compression of meaning and purging of rhetoric and discursive or ornamental passages.

As an acting version the First Quarto exhibits most of the features of other acting versions. Kathleen Irace (1994) has compared the Shakespearian “bad quartos”, or what she pointedly calls “short” quartos, with modern stage and film versions, and she has concluded that they share mechanisms of adaptation and abridgment in plot structure, characterization and stage action. As she constantly shows, Kemble, Irving, Olivier, Zeffirelli have carried out analogous omissions, transpositions, changes in speech prefixes, loans from other plays, etc. so as to “shorten the plays in

order to speed up performances, simplifying staging, or eliminate characters for casting or other practical reasons” (1994, p. 25).

Looking at characterizations, we find patterns that also prove to be as consistent and as effectively wrought as in other “good” texts. The distrust the queen bears to her second husband is not only constructed by her overt confessions to Horatio in that peculiar scene, but also by the way she is shown as submissive during the first part of the play by means of cutting out, in a seemingly coherent pattern, most of her interventions in the standard *Hamlet*.

The king is a more villainous character, less skillful in handling language rhetorically, a more medieval king rather than a Machiavellian Renaissance prince. Notice the omission in Q1 of five lines (III.i.50-4) that displayed a remorseful conscience in the king, or the fact that it is the king that devises the three stratagems to kill Hamlet: the unbated sword, the poisoned cup, and the poisoned point of the sword (which in the standard *Hamlet* was proposed by Laertes instead).

Other aspects of the dramaturgy of Q1 are expounded in contributions of scholars such as Burkhart (1975), Jones (1988), Urkowitz (1988), Irace (1994), or the ones collected in a seminar lead by Thomas Clayton (1992).

However, one negative quality should be pointed out after so many praises: if language is also part of the dramaturgy of a play, Q1 is indeed verbally deficient, clumsy, sometimes disturbing.

Allowing for this important detrimental aspect of Q1, I would like to add arguments in favour of the theatricality of Q1 *Hamlet* by revealing the dramatic pertinancy of particular moments in the text which may also be explained as the result of a creative intention rather than of an accident, an intention that especially aims to abridge the dialogue.

[...]

To put the whole matter in a nutshell: it is probable that the first published *Hamlet* is a “bad” quarto, but looking at its dramaturgy, and misquoting Polonius' comment on the prince (II.ii. 204 / TN 1243-4), “Though this be *badness*, yet there is method in't”, *dramatic* method in the First Quarto.

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<sup>i</sup> Corambus is the name in the German play *Der bestrafte Brudermord oder Prinz Hamlet*. Reynaldo is the name in the Second Quarto, in the First Folio it is Reynoldo.

<sup>ii</sup> Rosencrantz is a standardization of Q2 Rosencraus and F1 Rosincrance (sometimes Rosincrane).

<sup>iii</sup> This peculiar arrangement of scenes is also present in *Der bestrafte Brudermord*, and has been adopted by theatre productions such as Laurence Olivier's at the Old Vic in 1963 (with Peter O'Toole as Hamlet), Ron Daniel's with the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1989, or by the film version directed by Tony Richardson.

<sup>iv</sup> Among the most important contributions to this view, we should name Furnivall, 1879; Hubbard, 1920; [...].

<sup>v</sup> Beside names cited in next note, see Tanger (1880-2) for short-hand report theory; Burkhart (1975) for adaptation and abridgement theory, and [...] Melchiori (1992) who maintain[s] that the First Quarto is a memorial reconstruction of an official stage version, resulting from authorial revision and abridgement of the full play reflected in the Second Quarto and the First Folio texts.

<sup>vi</sup> See narratives by Chambers, 1930, p. 408-25; [...] Jenkins, 1982, p. 18-36; Taylor & Wells, 1987, p. 396-8; Irace, 1992.

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<sup>vii</sup> Other favourable commentaries by Jones, 1988; Urkowitz, 1988 y 1992; Irace, 1992, p. 90-1 y 1994; Melchiori, 1992, p. 201-8.

<sup>viii</sup> The 1676 quarto of *Hamlet* qualified the play as “being too long to be conveniently acted” (A3r), and a similar view is held by Chambers, 1930, p. 229; Melchiori, 1992, p. 195-201.