

David Richman

**Hamlet's Night of Comic Horror:
Implications for Performance Derived from the "Bad Quarto"**

The first recorded indications that Hamlet may appear an unhappy man can be found in the play's first published version, the quarto brought out in 1603. Early in this version the usurping king addresses his black-clad nephew:

And now princely Sonne {Hamlet},
What means these sade and melancholy moodes?¹

Other views of Hamlet suggested themselves during those first years of the play's popularity. In *Eastward Ho!*, the urbane 1605 comedy recently and gloriously revived by the Royal Shakespeare Company, a footman called Hamlet darts across the stage. Another character bawls after him, in a line that must have struck that 1605 audience as a theatrical in-joke: "'Sfoote Hamlet; are you madde? Whether run you now?"² Critics and theatre historians like Robert Weimann and Margreta de Grazia observe that in the early decades of the play's history, Hamlet's signature action appears to have been not paralyzing thought but frenzied motion, which would have linked him more with the knockabout clown of folk tradition than with the introspective consciousness acclaimed in the modern period.³

¹ All references to the first quarto of *Hamlet* refer to the machine-readable version produced by the Oxford Text Archive. This text has neither act, scene, nor line divisions. The original spelling and punctuation, useful in production, are preserved. Being blind, I make extensive use of these machine-readable texts, which are readily available to me.

² George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston, *Eastward Ho!*, in *Critical Responses to "Hamlet," 1600-1900*, ed. David Farley-Hills (New York: AMS Press, 1995), 1:3.

³ Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 125; and Margreta de Grazia, "Hamlet before Its Time," *Modern Language Quarterly* 62 (2001): 358.

Of course the introspective Hamlet, thinking too precisely on the event, the archetypal representative of modern subjectivity, the man who could not make up his mind, has come to dominate the popular imagination. Oscar Wilde wittily and incisively summed up the situation more than a century ago, and his words still stand.

Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy.⁴

This brooding haunted Hamlet doesn't necessarily make for an inaccurate image. The popular imagination need not be taken in exclusively by falsehood. But as Ben Jonson and his *Eastward Ho!* collaborators suggested all those years ago, there are alternatives: other things to be said about and done with this elusive prince.

Some of those alternatives are suggested in the *Hamlet* first published.⁵ Briefly to recap the tangled publication history of this play: a quarto Q1 came out in 1603; a fuller and better quarto Q2 came out a little over a year later in 1604; and yet a third version came out in the First Folio F, the omnibus edition of Shakespeare's plays brought out posthumously in 1623. Q2 and F have become the basis of all subsequent editions of the play. The problematic Q1 which has come to be known as "the bad quarto" has generated and continues to generate a good deal of controversy. I don't propose to lose myself in the fights about this text's provenance. Is it an early draft--the mysterious "Ur-Hamlet" that has tantalized so many critics and historians? Is it a work of piracy--the product of the faulty memories of unscrupulous actors? Is it a chief example of those "stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed

⁴ Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: W. H. Allen, 1970), p. 308.

⁵ The best compendium is Thomas Clayton, ed., *The Hamlet first published (Q1, 1603): origins, form, intertextualities* (London: Associated University Presses, 1992).

by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious impostors" denounced by F's editors?⁶ Whatever the motives and abilities of those who brought this text out in 1603, they were closer to the play at its creation than we can possibly be. This "bad quarto" at the very least may be taken, and I propose to take it, as a source of suggestions about how Hamlet might have been presented and might still be presented on the stage to an audience.

My aim with this exercise is twofold: to suggest ways in which selected bits of Q1 might be staged; and also to use Q1 as a means of casting fresh light on a play that we have perhaps come to know too well. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* has grown so central to our culture, so iconic, that we grow numbed to the play's power, to its thousand natural shocks. Q1 *Hamlet*, this crude problematic text, gives its audience and readers a Brechtian jolt. The play we thought we knew is *verfremdet*, made strange; and that strangeness can reinvigorate the hold the play continues to exert upon all of us.

Like his better-known counterpart, the Hamlet of this 1603 script is a complex fellow, not easily captured in a few phrases. Nonetheless I will make bold to offer a few phrases that give a fair if incomplete description. This Hamlet is a trickster, a clown, a master of disguise (both exterior and interior), an agent of subversion, someone who never hesitates to rough up his enemies and his friends. If he is the crude elder brother of the subjective modern hero, he is also Arlecchino's kinsman.

Let me begin with the bad quarto's most infamous example.

To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
To Die, to sleep, is that all? I all:

⁶ See "To the Great Variety of Readers," reproduced in the Oxford Text Archive machine-readable version of the Shakespeare First Folio.

Not, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes.

This version of "to be or not to be" has been variously denounced, and the script's unfortunate reputation to some extent rests on this speech.

But the script suggests a staging and acting that makes dramatic sense of the speech. Readers of this quarto will note that the speech occurs at an earlier point in the play than does its familiar counterpart. Thus Hamlet has earlier confirmation than in the better-known versions of the corruption and villainy with which he is "benetted round."⁷ Hamlet has just appeared to Ofelia in his disguise as a distracted lover. She has reported the appearance to her father Corambis, and the old man is setting up his daughter to draw the prince out while he and the king spy unseen on the result. Hamlet enters while the king, Corambis and the decoy Ofelia are planning the set-up from which his mother is stealing away. This entrance allows Hamlet, the observed of all observers, neatly to turn the tables and become himself the chief observer. He watches his mother steal away, watches Ofelia baiting the trap, watches the king and Corambis as they glide behind the arras. He puts on a show for their benefit and, as is the way of all artists, tells the absolute truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.

I would have Hamlet pop up from the audience, appearing to read. As the king and his counsellor shoo the queen offstage and instruct Ofelia, Hamlet might steal a leaf from Falstaff's book and shush the audience. He would coolly watch the conclusion of the set-up and then, when the characters are in place, he might step up to the stage and begin his "act." On "To be, or not to be, I there's the point" he might speak directly to Ofelia, all the while in feigned madness, pretending not to see or take note of her. On "To Die, to sleep, is that all?" he might make a few swipes with

⁷ All quotations from Q2 *Hamlet* are drawn from the machine-readable version produced by the Oxford Text Archive. This version has neither act, scene nor line numbers.

his rapier at the curtain behind which the King and Corambis are hiding--forcing them to scuttle away from him. On "I all" he might make a good thrust at the old courtier who would do his notorious imitation of a crab in getting away. Finally, he might wave his weapon in mock farewell at his observed observers cowering behind their curtain as he says: "Not, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes." As an alternative to the musing meditation that characterizes the usual playing of this speech's well-known counterpart, Hamlet's speech in Q1 might be played instead as the calculated charade of a subversive trickster.

In staging the better-known *Hamlet* I might import elements of my proposed Q1 staging by making the prince aware from the moment of his entrance that he is being observed, that Ophelia has been set to draw him out. The "sea of troubles" against which he considers taking arms might be the opponents without as much as the enemy within. As in my staging of the Q1 speech, I might try having him make a few passes at the arras on "by opposing, end them." The speech might, in short, become as much a contemplation of murder as of suicide.

The swift, edgy playing I am advocating for Q1 is suggested by the dramatic writing in the succession of encounters that fill the crowded night between Hamlet's springing of his notorious mousetrap and his setting off under guard for England. The action of these scenes is very close to that in Q2 and F, though their language is cruder and more obscenely, if less subtly, salacious. A manic tone must dominate Hamlet's performance in this most busy part of the play in all three versions. This tone is clearly evident in the by-play with Rosencraft and Guildenstone immediately after the king's sudden and revealing exit from the prince's doctored play. In Q1, as in Q2 and F, the two courtiers reenter once again to probe Hamlet's mystery and to tell him that his mother wants to speak with him. The prince diverts himself and the audience with his pointed demonstration of their lack of musical skill. In my proposed production, the sequence might go something like this:

On the line "I pray will you play vpon this pipe?" Hamlet might wield the little instrument as if it were a weapon and rush at Rosencraft, who might dodge him on "Alas my lord I cannot." In a symmetrically identical move, Hamlet might rush on Guildenstern, who might similarly dodge. The sequence has all the trappings of a comic chase until Hamlet suddenly changes the tone. If the scene is well played the audience, like Hamlet's victims, might be thrown off their guard by the prince's scary unpredictability. With the suggestive line "Why looke, it is a thing of nothing" Hamlet might seize Guildenstern's hands and force the latter's fingers into unwilling intercourse with the recorder's holes, while shoving the pipe into the flunky's open mouth. The line makes for a complex, multilayered sexual pun--"thing" being slang for penis while "nothing--no-thing" is slang for vagina. Shakespeare uses a similar figure in Sonnet 20.

And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a dotinge,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.⁸

It will not be hard, and it should be great fun, for the performer to make the sense clear to an audience less familiar with Renaissance sexual slang than with the sexual slang of our own day.

The salacious line is moved in Q2 and F to a cryptic description of the usurping king who assumes, in Hamlet's imagination, the physical characteristics of both sexes.

Ham. The body is with the King, but the King is not with the
body. The King is a thing.
Gyl. A thing my Lord.
Ham. Of nothing, bring me to him.

⁸ This quotation is taken from the Oxford Text Archive machine-readable version of the 1609 quarto of Shakespeare's sonnets.

This exchange in any of the play's versions suggests that there is a place for Dario Fo as well as for Schopenhauer in the contemplation of Shakespeare's prince.

Quicker than it takes to tell it the farcical tone in Q1 turns to rage. Hamlet, flinging the inept Guildenstone from him, holding down the monster inside him, might speak quietly, but it should be the quietness of a volcano about to erupt.

Why how vnworthy a thing would you make of me? You would seeme to know my stops, you would play vpon mee, You would search the very inward part of my hart, and diue into the secret of my soule.

Though this sequence is rougher-edged than its counterparts in Q2 and F, it teaches us that the performer of Hamlet in those better and fuller texts must be able to turn on a dime from farce to tragedy. The actor must exhibit the skill that Kenneth Tynan attributed to the best continental performers.

It needs a continental actor to switch from fun to ferocity in a split second. Englishmen take at least half a minute to change gear.⁹

In Q1 this scene incorporates material that in Q2 and F forms two separate encounters between the prince and the duo of interchangeable courtiers. Thus in Q1 there is yet another change of tone as Hamlet, after his moment of serious rage, once again turns satirist with "besides, to be demanded by a sponge." As he amplifies the topic he might squeeze his interlocutors and even try to mouth them, giving an unsavoury literal demonstration of his metaphor.

For he doth keep you as an Ape doth nuttes, in the corner of his jaw,
first mouthes you, then swallowes you: so when hee hath need Of you,
t'is but squeesing of you, And sponge, you shall be dry againe, you shall.

The speech's farcical possibilities can be enhanced if Hamlet keeps the two guessing

⁹ Kenneth Tynan, *Tynan on Theatre* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 11.

as to which of them he will attack next. The term *lazzi* might accurately characterize this scene's most effective playing.

For this Hamlet satirical farce becomes an expression of fury. In the little "cloud" scene with Corambis, the trickster prince might propel the lumbering old man about the stage, forcing him to view the imaginary cloud from different perspectives. At scene's end he must tamp down his frenzy before visiting his mother. On his final speech, again with a rapid change of tone, he might appeal to the audience as much as to the deity for help. This Hamlet, again like his better-known counterpart, is forever coopting the audience, making us complicit in his schemes. If he kneels while uttering his scene-ending prayer he will anticipate the posture in which he will, in less than a minute of stage time, catch the king.

As in Q2 and F, Hamlet en route to his mother literally runs into his praying uncle and stops himself in the act of dispatching his father's killer. I would have the king kneeling very far upstage, facing away from the main part of the audience. I would have Hamlet enter through the audience, mirroring his entrance for the "To be or not to be" speech. He approaches the king silently, then catches himself in the act of backstabbing, darts downstage, thrusting his weapon back into its sheath, then continues to talk to the audience. The speech's short lines suggest a rapid delivery.

And shall I kill him now,
When he is purging of his soule?

He might pace the lip of the stage, talking quietly to the audience, slowing from presto to andante. It is worth noting that the audience might prefer not to have to watch even this edgy anarchic Hamlet stab a kneeling, apparently praying man in the back.¹⁰ At the same time, the performer must communicate a fury that pursues the

¹⁰ See Michael Goldman, *Acting and action in Shakespearean tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 25.

enemy beyond the grave. In all three versions this scene depicts the prince's controlled rage. Running counter to the popular image, he makes a hard decision quickly.

Hamlet's next encounter on this nightmare journey is with his mother. Though the queen does not tell her husband the whole truth about her encounter with her son, her description in Q1 of his behavior may be taken as a reasonable note on how Hamlet's entrance and first few minutes might be staged.

When as he came, I first bespake him faire,
But then he throwes and tosses me about,
As one forgetting that I was his mother:
At last I call'd for help: and as I cried {Corambis} Call'd, which
Hamlet no sooner heard, but whips me Out his rapier, and cries, a Rat, a
Rat, and in his rage The good olde man he killes.

The set-up for the scene is identical to that in the scene with Ofelia; a woman is prompted to draw Hamlet out with a spy behind the arras. The moment of Hamlet's entrance is not precisely marked in Q1, as it is in Q2 and F. I would have him note and communicate to the audience his awareness that someone is behind the arras. He knows he is once again being watched, but he is ignorant of the watcher's identity. "Mother, mother, O are you here?" He might emphasize "here" with a so-that's-how-it-is-again look to the audience. The scene, going swiftly, must partake of both farce and danger. On "How now mother! come here, sit downe, for you shall heare me speake" he tries to seize her, she dodges, he rushes at her, this time does seize her and flings her into the chair. One or two evasions on the Queen's part will suggest the beginning of yet another farcical chase, like the chase in the previous encounter with Rosencraft and Guildenstern. With the rapidity of farce and the shock of melodrama the queen cries, Corambis yells, Hamlet stabs through the arras that Corambis had called a shroud, then drags the body by the heels into view and discovers the identity of his victim. With this discovery the prince might slow his

delivery, touching a deeper and more somber note.

I a Rat, dead for a Duckat.
Rash intruding foole, farewell,
I tooke thee for thy better.

Of the prince's subsequent encounter with his mother, about which so very much has been said and written, I will offer only a few notes. Readers may possibly forget but theatre-goers will be constantly aware that the entire scene unfolds in the presence of a corpse, warm, bleeding and new-killed. This awareness is made vivid if Hamlet drags the body, as I would have him do, from behind the shrouding arras.

Hamlet uses two pictures to force his mother to recognize the contrast between the two men she has married. I would have him, as he does in many productions, be carrying or wearing his father's picture; indeed, I would want to find places prior to this scene at which he contemplates or appeals to his father's image. By contrast, the queen herself would be carrying or wearing the picture of her present usurping husband. At the proper moment he would have to throw and toss her about once again, in order to get at it.

Q1 differs from Q2 and F in that Hamlet does not produce both pictures in a single line: "Looke heere vpon this Picture, and on this." Instead, he does reverence to his father's picture:

Whose heart went hand in hand euen with that vow,
He made to you in marriage, and he is dead.
Murdred, damnably murdred, this was your husband.

Then, with a dizzying change of target and tone, he manhandles his mother, roots out his uncle's picture, and as the language in Q1 suggests, vents his satiric rage. He might in these lines become once again the clown prince, sending up with anarchic exaggeration his uncle's style of speech, gait and gestures.

Looke you now, here is your husband,
With a face like {Uxlcān.}
A looke fit for a murder and a rape,
A dull dead hanging looke, and a hell-bred eie,
To affright children and amaze the world:
And this same haue you left to change with this.

A production of the more familiar version of the scene might be enriched by the possibilities suggested in this exploration of Q1. Hamlet, in the closet scene, might know from the first that he is being observed and might once again put on a show for the spy. He might farcically manhandle his mother, throwing and tossing her about, as a substitute for or complement to the more familiar Freudian sexual wrestling that characterizes many playings of this scene. When he talks about the "mildewed eare" the prince might exhibit the ferocity of the subversive clown. To "delue one yard belowe their mines, / And blowe them at the Moone" is something that Harlequin might do, as well as Hamlet.

Q1 partakes frankly of melodrama and farce, and it reminds us that these lower forms remain central ingredients in Shakespeare's tragedies. There is a touch of farce in the ghost's surprise visit to his former wife's chamber. The apparition does strike pity and awe into the prince. But I would wager that readers are pulled up short by the stage direction: "Enter the ghost in his night gowne." The appearance of a figure who combines otherworldly horror with domestic comfort will elicit from the audience a complex and mixed reaction of which laughter may be a part. The ghost, unseen by the Queen, may perform a few subversive tricks of his own--stealing behind his seated and unknowing wife, draping his arms about her shoulders and gazing at his astonished son over her head.

Cruder, simpler, more melodramatic than its counterparts, Q1 resolves a number of the ambiguities that cause the prince such agony and the play's myriad critics such intellection. In one of Q1's quiet serious moments, mother and son form

an unequivocal alliance.

Queene But as I haue a soule, I sweare by heauen,
I neuer knew of this most horride murder...

Ham. ...And mother, but assist mee in reuenge,
And in his death your infamy shall die.

Queene Hamlet, I vow by that maiesty
That knowes our thoughts, and lookes into our hearts, I will
conceale, consent, and doe my best,
What stratagem soe're thou shalt devise.

These lines, which have no counterpart in the better known texts, offer interesting implications for the manner and staging of the Queen's death.

Hamlet's final encounter in this crowded night is with his uncle. In Q1, which does not include a scene in which the interchangeable courtiers nearly catch him in the act of stowing Polonius' body, we have less than thirty seconds of stage time between the prince's exit from the scene with his mother and his reentrance to face his uncle. The queen, his new ally, is on stage for this scene, as she is not in the better known texts.

Two of Q1's peculiar crudities make for a fitting end to this account of my imagined staging. Hamlet takes the occasion to compare the seat of his uncle's sexual appetites with the traditional place of the damned. A good comic actor will have no trouble finding the appropriate geste:

King But sonne {Hamlet}, where is this body?

Ham. In heau'n if you chance to miss him there,
Father, you had best looke in the other partes below for him.

Finally, after his resonant and suggestive "Farewell mother" aimed directly at the king, Hamlet might take advantage of the queen's presence on stage to perform a mock wedding ceremony, ritually joining the hands of the happy couple as he makes his exit.

My mother I say: you married my mother,
My mother is your wife, man and wife is one flesh,

And so (my mother) farewell: for England hoe.

Some of these suggested stagings have perhaps been over-the-top--but that is what rehearsal periods and conferences are for. If my suggestions were to prove unworkable, there would be time and opportunity in rehearsal to temper them. I simply hope to leave you with the suggestion that any acting of the melancholy Dane might benefit by studying his bad subversive elder brother.