

Loose Ends and Inconsistencies in the First Quarto of Shakespeare's Hamlet? (Hamlet Studies 18 (1996): 94-104)

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In their reprint of 1825, Payne and Foss treated Q1 as the "only known copy of this tragedy as originally written by Shakespeare, which he afterwards altered and enlarged" [H. H. Furness, ed., *Hamlet*, New Variorum (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1905), II, 14]. In the nineteenth century, Charles Knight was a prominent exponent of the revision theory and John Payne Collier that of the opposite view [See Furness, II, 5-36]. G. R. Hibbard and most other modern editors belong to Collier's camp. According to Hibbard, one of the problems with the First Quarto of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is that it has many "loose ends and inconsistencies in the conduct of action and in the nomenclature of some of the characters" [G. R. Hibbard, ed., *Hamlet*, Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 72. Page numbers of further references to this work will be inserted in the text]. While conceding that most of the Shakespeare scripts contain some unresolved contradictions and some incoherent passages, Hibbard and other editors contend that Q1 has unfortunately a large number of them.

For Hibbard and other critics, Q1 is a corrupt text because it is a memorial reconstruction of Q2 which presumably had been performed in the theatre several years before the publication of Q1 in 1603. They try to explain the origin of the "loose ends and inconsistencies" by suggesting arbitrarily that a pirate reconstructed Q1 from memory after having acted in Q2. What Hibbard and other scholars have never provided is any reliable evidence for their dating of Q2 or for the theory of memorial reconstruction. This theory has prejudiced readers against the authenticity of Q1 and treated actors and publishers unjustly. Consequently, as Frank G. Hubbard has stressed, "Students of *Hamlet* literature have for so long seen the First Quarto through the Second, that it is not to be expected their obliquity of vision can easily be corrected" [Frank G. Hubbard, ed., "The First Quarto Edition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," *University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature*, No. 8 (1920), p. 7]. By examining closely each of the seven cases of "loose ends and inconsistencies" that Hibbard has identified as problematic, this study seeks to rebut his general conclusions about the quality of the text of Q1.

If Hibbard's examples do not stand up to scrutiny, one must allow the possibility that *Hamlet* has survived in three equally genuine scripts in Q1, Q2, and F1. It also means that editors should not suspect that some Elizabethan publishers did not have any concern for the integrity and intelligibility of the dramatic scripts they sold to their readers. When Caxton defended his choice of the Chaucer manuscript, "Whyche booke I have dyligently oversen and duly examynd to th'ende that it be made accordyng unto his owen makyng," he established a standard for the new publishing trade, and there is no proof that Tudor publishers had ignored or violated it.

Hibbard's first example of inattentiveness to plot is that the author of Q1 did not give the manner of Hamlet's escape on his way to England: "Q1 fails to explain how Hamlet escapes from the custody of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and from the ship that is carrying him to England—he is merely 'set ashore' (H2v) at some unspecified place; and while it promises a fuller account of how it all happened, it never keeps that promise" (72). Hibbard seems to believe that the playwright should describe the method of Hamlet's escape and the itinerary of his return to Denmark, but he does not say how this knowledge would enhance the audience's grasp of the action and of Hamlet's behaviour. The patrons would have no need for this information beyond that he "is safe arriv'de in Denmarke" (H2v), as Horatio tells the Queen in a scene that does not appear in Q2. Hibbard insists that Shakespeare should have delivered to the reader what he had promised. Since Shakespeare would not have made an error like this, it means he did not write Q1. Horatio confides in Gertrude about Hamlet's safe return, and thus he moves the action forward neatly. Being "set ashore" is as satisfactory a device as any other. Horatio assures Gertrude that "... at his next conversation with your grace, / He will relate the circumstances at full" (H2v). Hamlet would have related these circumstances, but he never got a chance.

By the time Hamlet returned to Elsinore, Ofelia had drowned and her funeral was in progress. "The faire Ofelia dead!" (I1v), the prince learned from Claudius and Gertrude and others. The readers are relieved that Hamlet did not die in England, and they are awaiting the next stage in the unfolding of events. Hamlet's mother would have found out how her son eluded death and landed in Denmark, if the funeral, the duel and the consequent deaths had not altered the course of their lives. The complex and intricate structure of Q1 is determined by the contingencies of time and by plots and counter-plots within that framework. The mother-son relationship is more intimate and sympathetic in Q1 than it is in Q2. Gertrude and Hamlet are dead soon, victims of Claudius's scheming. Horatio alone survives to tell the Hamlet story. Shakespeare used Hamlet's promise of explanation to add pathos and sentiment to the drama.

About this scene, Hibbard also speculates why it appears in Q1 and not in Q2: "Q1 contains an entire scene between Gertrude and Horatio for which there is no parallel in either of the good texts. Taking place after the scene in which Ophelia's madness is shown, it has Horatio relate to the Queen the contents of a letter he has received from Hamlet" (73). Obviously, Gertrude has to be told about Hamlet's safe return to Denmark, about Claudius's plot to have Hamlet killed, and about the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. After listening to Horatio, Gertrude becomes fully aware of Claudius's villainy and is resolved to handle him with tact:

Then I perceiue there's treason in his lookes
That seem'd to sugar o're his villanie:
But I will soothe and please him for a time,
For murderous mindes are alwayes jealous. (H2v)

The scene helps the reader in following various developments in the plot. In Q2, Shakespeare uses a different device. The sailors bring to Horatio a letter from Hamlet in which the prince tells him about his escape. They also arrange Horatio's secret meeting with Hamlet "on the east side of the Cittie/Tomorrow morning" (H2v). The Ambassadors bring the news of the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in the very last scene. The expanded plot required a different strategy than the one in Q1, and the two work effectively in separate ways in the two scripts.

Next, Hibbard objects to the unannounced appearance of Horatio when Hamlet has finished talking to the Players. "At a point corresponding to 3.2.48 in this edition," says Hibbard, "it has Horatio, without the benefit of a stage direction to signal his coming, appear out of nowhere to say 'Heere my Lord' (F2v) to a Hamlet who has not called him" (p. 72). It is clear from the context that Horatio appeared at the right moment when Hamlet needed him. According to Hibbard, a stage direction should have indicated that Hamlet wanted to see Horatio, and he is unwilling to see the appropriateness of Horatio's entry for any reason. One hardly notices the omission in the course of reading and does not consider it a major hurdle or a hindrance in grasping the development of action. The Players have been asked by Hamlet, "Well, goe make you ready," (F2v) and they leave.

The new scene in Q1 begins with Horatio's "Heere my Lord." This is the first meeting between Hamlet and Horatio since their encounter with the Ghost. The missing stage direction does not obscure the sense. Hamlet would have been startled to see his friend if he had not expected him there, and so would the prompter or book-keeper in the theatre. Characters do not enter the stage without any reason. It would be absurd to claim that Horatio enters "out of nowhere," because that would imply that the dramatist could not control the entrances and exits by his characters. Hamlet does not act surprised at Horatio's appearance because he says: "Horatio, thou art euen as iust a man, As e're my conuersation cop'd withall." (F2v) In Q2, the players leave, Polonius, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz come in and leave, and Hamlet calls: "Whata howe, Horatio" (G4r).

Hibbard complains next about the confusion of names in the Dumb Show and the play-within-the-play: "In the Dumb Show that precedes the play-within-the-play, the first two figures to enter are 'the King and the Queene' (F3r). But, when 'The Murder of Gonzago' begins, these same two figures come on again as 'the Duke and Duchesse' and are designated Duke and Duchess in their speech prefixes. Furthermore, although Hamlet, when he asks the Players for the play, calls it 'the murder of Gonzago' (E4v), he now tells Claudius: 'this play is/The image of a murder done in Guyana, Albertus/Was the Duke's name, his wife Baptiasta (F4r); and then, to add to the confusion, he goes on to say that the character now entering 'is one/Lucianus nephew to the King'" (72). In Q1, the playwright is presenting four distinct elements—the Dumb Show, the play of the Duke and the Duchess, a murder in Guyana, and Hamlet's interpretation—which reinforce the theme of fraternal murders. The readers have no reason to expect that the two couples in the Dumb Show and the play-within-the-play should be the same. Lucianus poisons the King and the Queen in the Dumb Show, and this is followed by the enactment of the scene of the murder of the Duke. The Duke and the Duchess have been married for forty years, and the husband hopes that, after his death, his wife will find a "more noble mate/More wise, more youthfull" (F3v). Hamlet interrupts their speeches, and, as soon as the Duchess exits, he asks Gerturde, "Madam, how do you like this play?"

In his interpretation of the story of Albertus in Hamlet's exchange with Claudius, Hibbard is ignoring a parallel. Hamlet has not changed the name of the play-within-the-play. According to Hamlet, "this play," that is, the murder of Gonzago, "is/The image of a murder done in Guyana." Shakespeare is juxtaposing four stories—those of the King, Gonzago, Albertus, and the elder Hamlet. The two murders in the play-within-the-play recall the first and foreshadow the fourth. When Hamlet whispers to Claudius the theme of the play-within-the-play, he shrewdly reinforces it by generalizing about the occurrence of fraternal assassinations. Hibbard does not consider the words, "the image of," in their proper context, and he misses the emphasis in Hamlet's speech. Hamlet is playing a game with Claudius. Brothers have killed their siblings in the past, and they are still doing it. The text of Q1 is not self-contradictory; it is consistent in itself. One might also note that the King and the Duke are not exclusive terms. In a general sense, a Duke can be said to have the authority of a king in his dukedom. Lucianus can be called a nephew of the King in the Dumb Show or that of the Duke in the next scene. Hamlet is hinting at a connection between himself and Lucianus, the murderer, even as he jokes about free souls. He was explaining to the King the title of the play: "Mouse-trap." Hamlet's uncle is a "galld iade" and the prince is the nephew like Lucianus. He taunts Claudius:

Father, it is a knauish peece a worke: but what
A that, it toucheth not vs, you and I that haue free
Soules, let the galld iade wince, this is one
Lucianus nephew to the King. (F4r)

Hibbard does not pay attention to the different descriptions of the Dumb Show. The Dumb Show in Q1 is bare in detail: "Enter in a Dumbe Shew, the King and the Queene, he sits downe in an Arbor, she leaves him." (F3r) In Q2, the picture is more elaborate: "Enter a King and a Queene, the Queene embracing him, and he her, he takes her vp, and declines his head vpon her necke, he lyes him downe vppon a bancke of flowers, she seeing him asleepe, leaues him." (H1v)

While commenting on the nomenclature, Hibbard ignores the verbal variations between Q1 and Q2 as if the two scenes are identical except for the confusion about names. The speeches of the Duke in Q1 and the King in Q2 are not the same. In Q1, the Duke speaks:

Full fortie yeares are past, their date is gone,
Since happy time joyn'd both our hearts as one. (F3r&v)

In Q2, the King addresses his spouse in this way:

Full thirtie times hath Phebus cart gone round
Neptunes salt wash, and Tellus orb'd the ground,
And thirtie dosen Moones with borrowed sheene
About the world haue times twelue thirties been
Since loue our harts, and Hymen did our hands
Vnite comutuall in most sacred bands. (H1v)

The language of Q2 makes a very different impact on the reader or the patron than that of Q1.

For his fourth example, Hibbard has chosen the conversation between the two clowns: "Even the First Clown, that most precise and dogmatic of characters, lapses into muddle. He ruins his own riddle by posing the question wrongly: 'tell me one thing,' he asks the Second Clown at 5.1.40-1, 'who buildes strongest, Of [instead of stronger than] a Mason, a Shipwright, or a Carpenter?'" (H4r)." (72) Hibbard fails to recognize that the First Clown can be "most precise" and also "lapse into muddle," for this is a privilege of his clownishness. He does not appreciate the trick the First Clown is playing on his companion. The First Clown is saying:

Goe fetch me a stope of drinke, but before thou
Goest, tell me one thing, who builds strongest,
Of a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter? (H4r)

The Second Clown lists reasons for his choice of a mason or a carpenter and is finally given the correct answer. Hence Hibbard's emendation of "strongest" to "stronger than" is unnecessary, because it applies to houses: Who builds the strongest houses? The First Clown does not mention the grave digger in his list of three, because normally one does not think of him as a builder. The winner is "A graue-maker, for the houses he buildes/Last till Doomes-day." The grave digger is praising himself as one whose building will outlast the work of the other three. Part of the joke here is that the Second Clown does not know that the answer is not included in the list of three.

Instead of evaluating this passage the way it is written in Q1, Hibbard criticizes it for not appearing like the language of Q2. The Clown asks the Other in Q2: "What is he that builds stronger then eyther the Mason, the Shypwright, or the Carpenter." (M2r) The "stronger then" suggests that the answer is not these three but a fourth one; the Clown is asking who builds stronger houses than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter. The Other Clown tries to give an answer, but he accepts defeat and admits he "cannot tell." The context in each script determines the appropriateness of the question and the answer.

The appearance of the Ambassadors in the last scene is Hibbard's next example: "In the closing lines the Ambassadors from England turn up, along with Fortinbras, just as they do in the good texts. There can be only reason for coming: to announce the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In fact, however, they do no such thing. All their spokesman has to offer is a piece of uninformative inconsequential nonsense (I4r)." (72-73) The reader has already learned from Horatio that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. It would be pointless to have the Ambassadors disclose the same piece of news for the second time. Horatio had indicated to the Queen about the manner of their deaths. All that the Ambassadors can do is to express sorrow and grief over the tragedy that has struck the land:

Our ambassie that we haue brought from England,
Where be these Princes that should heare vs speake?
O most most unlooked for time! unhappy country. (I4r)

Since these words are quite suitable for the occasion, they cannot be characterized as "uninformative inconsequential nonsense." The role of the Ambassadors is to lament that the princes who should have received them are dead. Their role is very different in Q2, when they speak:

The sight is dismall
And our affaires from England come too late,
The eares are senceless that should giue vs hering,
To tell him his commandment is fulfilled,
That Rosencrans and Gylldensterne are dead,
Where should we haue our thanks? (G1v)

They contribute to the tragedy here in another way. They lament that they have come too late to tell Hamlet they have executed his command. There is nobody to thank the ambassadors for their journey.

Assuming that Q2 only contains the right order of scenes, Hibbard criticizes the placement of the "To be" speech and the Nunnery Scene in Q1: "The 'To be, or not to be' soliloquy and the 'Nunnery Scene' that follows it occur, not in 3.1, as they do in those texts, but in what corresponds to 2.2, coming immediately after Polonius broaches his plan for an 'accidental' meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia to the King." (73) The notion of "corresponds to" again betrays the editor's belief that the structure of Q1 cannot be studied independent of the order of scenes in Q2. In 1845, Joseph Hunter called the order of Q1 "most appropriate" because it "prepares for all the succeeding action in which the natural and the artificial Hamlet are so wildly combined" (Furness, I, 206).

Reviewing Michael Benthall's use of the Q1 sequence, Kenneth Tynan noted that "The improvement, in dramatic logic as well as sheer actability, is enormous" [Curtains (New York: Atheneum, 1961), p. 185]. Gunnar Sjogren and others have also emphasized the coherence of Q1 on stage from their own experience [see "Producing the First Quarto Hamlet," *Hamlet Studies*, I (1979): 35-44; David E. Jones, "The Theatricality of the First Quarto of Hamlet," *Hamlet Studies*, 10 (1988): 104-110; Bryan Loughrey, "Q1 in recent performance: an interview," in Thomas Clayton, ed. *Q1 Now* (Minnesota: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991)]. Instead of finding some merit in these studies, Hibbard persists in his belief that, since Q1 had been composed after Q2, it could not have given the right sequence of scenes.

The position of the "To be" speech and the Nunnery scene in Q1 needs to be examined in the context of the development of its action and not in comparison with their arrangement in Q2. Also, the "To be" speeches in the two scripts vary so much in sense and sentiment that they cannot be treated as one and the same passage. The two quartos reflect Hamlet's state of mind in different ways, and Hibbard does not acknowledge the problem. In Q1, Claudius and Corambis "stand close in the study," Hamlet enters "poring uppon a booke," and Ofelia comes in reading "on this booke" her father has given her. Corambis is stage-managing the scene to prove that Hamlet "is madde," just as Hamlet stage-managed a play later on to catch the king's conscience. Without noticing Ofelia's presence, Hamlet broods over suicide:

To be, or not to be, I here's the point,
To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
No, to sleepe, to dreame, I may there it goes,
For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,
And borne before an euerlasting Iudge,
From whence no passenger euer returnd,
The vndiscovered country, at whose sight
The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd. (D4v)

The promise of salvation prevents the prince from killing himself. In the course of this brooding, he has seen Ofelia, "Lady in thy orizons, be all my sinnes remembered." Too absorbed in following her father's instructions and oblivious to Hamlet's state of mind, she wants to return his love tokens, and he questions her: "Are you faire?" (E1r) After tormenting Ofelia and telling her "To a Nunnery goe" (E2r), Hamlet verbally tangles with

Corambis and, then, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Soon after that, he meets the Players, and this is followed by the Dumb Show and the Play-within-the-Play.

In Q2, an enlarged script, Claudius and Polonius are spying on Hamlet the same way they did in Q1, and they have instructed Ophelia to "reade on this booke" (G2r). The two of them withdraw when they "heare him comming." Hamlet is debating with himself:

To be, or not to be, that is the question,
Whether tis nobler in the minde to suffer
The slings and arrowes of outragious fortune,
Or to take Armes against a sea of troubles. (G2r)

This speech differs totally from the Q1 version. The "dread of something after death/The vndiscouer'd country" makes Hamlet a sceptic or an agnostic; he does not think now of standing before "an euerlasting Iudge." When he becomes aware of the presence of the "faire Ophelia," he wants "all my sinnes remebred" in her "orizons." She addresses him, "How does your honour for this many a day?" (G2v) Ophelia wants to return his gifts, he admonishes her, "[T]o a Nunry goe, and quickly to, farewell" (G3r). After Hamlet's exit, she expresses sorrow over the condition of his mind. Claudius enters with Polonius and announces that Hamlet is not insane.

Hibbard gives the impression that the difficulty with the two scenes has to do only with their placing, not with verbal variations. He misses the uniqueness of each text and the appropriateness of the dialogue and events in each. In Q1, for example, Ophelia comments thus on Hamlet's condition:

Great God of heaven, what a quicke change is this?
The Courtier, Scholler, Souldier, all in him,
All dasht and splintered thence, O woe is me,
To a seene what I have seene, see what I see. (E2r)

Ophelia's reaction to the prince has undergone a transformation in Q2: O what a noble mind is heere orethrowne! (G3r) Only three words are common to the two speeches—courtier, soldier and scholar. For students of drama, these verbal variations are extremely significant, but Hibbard considers them to be a matter of no importance.

Hibbard's objections to the text of Q1 are not tenable. They are based on an unproven and patronizing assumption that Tudor publishers would print scripts without authority and without any concern for their coherence and intelligibility. Since the text of Q1 does not have any loose ends or inconsistencies, we should reconsider the proposition that the publishers of Shakespeare's quartos spent money on circulating texts which were not "comprehensible" to their buyers. Hardin Craig was certainly right in arguing that there "is no evidence, even in the form of necessity or convenience, to justify the establishment of a class of reported plays" [A New Look at Shakespeare's Quartos, Stanford Studies in Language and Literature, XXII (Stanford, California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1961), p. 10].