



A Study of the Textual Problems in Hamlet

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ABSTRACT

Hamlet is considered to be one of the most complex and intriguing of all tragedies of Shakespeare. Perhaps no other play in the history of theatre might have attracted the critical attention Hamlet received over the ages. One of the most difficult areas has been the internal textual problems in the play. The research that has gone into the text of the play indicates that many versions of the play existed even during the days of the Bard. There are glaring differences between the various Quarto and Folio editions of the play. This research paper makes detailed analysis of these issues which ultimately contributed the enormous complexities of Hamlet.

Keywords : Text, Quarto, Folio, Soliloquy, Foul-papers, intermediate-script

There are many internal and external evidences to suggest that in Hamlet, Shakespeare working on a text that already existed. But it is a well-known fact that the same thing holds true of most of his plays. The Bard never really bothered to write stories on his own. Yet this fact never deprived his plays of their mark of originality and authenticity. Ultimately they all improved vastly upon the crude formats of the originals and carried the unmistakable seal and signature of the Master.

Hamlet is one his plays where the textual difficulties become most imponderable and almost indecipherable. With its bewildering depth and intensity, the play has few parallels in world theatre. It is the mercurial Prince himself who primarily contributes to the intriguing mystique of the text. A more rational and stable Prince might have made the play less difficult and obviously less charming. The multiple and irreconcilable variations of the play's language and structure needs an extensive reading and in-depth analysis.

These apparent textual problems are making a heavy demand on the actor, director and theatre-goer to develop his own understanding of the issues which paradoxically the eponymous character himself is unable to comprehend. Ultimately it must emerge that there are as many versions of Hamlet are available as there are actors, directors and least to say theatre-goers. The play keeps mutating with every different theatrical production.

The first known version of Hamlet dates back to 1603 titled, 'The Tragicall Historie of HAMLET Prince of Denmarke. By William Shake-speare'. The version makes a definitive claim to authenticity with its unambiguous 'as it hath benee diuerse times acted by Shakespeare's company 'in the Cittie of London'. Further, the play has been performed 'in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where'. This version known as the first quarto has now been categorised as 'bad' which runs upto 2,154 lines.

The First Folio edition of 1623 titled *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies of Shakespeare* is having the play with 3,535 lines. The added lines generally point out to the fact that rather by being a very authentic version; the text bore the unmistakable marks of the influence of theatre. The problem seems to be that the editors of this volume had to frequently refer to the bad quarto of 1603. As a result of this certain irresolvable is-

sues with regard to the real Hamlet arise.

The second quarto had always been problematic as the dramatist himself never cared to correct the differences that existed between various manuscripts as he went on writing. The two illustrations cited below will evince this fact:

Q.2 : Giues him threescore thousand crownes in anuall fee

F : Giues him three thousand Crownes in Annuall Fee

(2.2.73)

Q.2 : a speech of some dosen lines, or sixteen lines

F : a speech of some dosen or sixteen lines

(2.2.493)

In a similar way Hamlet's speech in the fuller quarto version is a problematic issue. In the conspiracy hatched by Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to accompany Hamlet on his voyage to England, though the Prince himself remains unaware it, and the audience needs to be taken into confidence. The issue becomes all the more complex for the theatre as Hamlet has to be made aware of this shocking truth and he needs to evolve a strategy to counter it. Though the ghost had urged him to take revenge on Claudius without further delay, Hamlet chooses to relish the prospect of avenging on the opponent by eliminating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern this time, perhaps to derive a strange satisfaction of his ingenious ploy and frustrate the malicious villain. The relevant passage is cited here:

F. HAMLET: I must to England, you know that?

GERTRUDE: Alack,

I had forgot. 'Tis so concluded on.

HAMLET: This man shall set me packing.

Q2: HAMLET: I must to England, you know that?

GERTRUDE: Alack,

I had forgot. 'Tis so concluded on.

HAMLET: There's letter sealed, and my school fellows,

I will trust as I will adders fanged,

They bear the mandate. They must sweep my way

And marshall me to knavery. Let it work,

For 'tis the sport to have the engineer

Hoist with his own petar, an't shall go hard

But I will delve one yard below their mines

And blow them at the moon. Oh 'tis most sweet

When in one line two crafts directly meet.

This man shall set me packing.

George MacDonald has noted that it might have part of Shakespeare's original scheme to frustrate the plans of his school mates on board the ship but later modified it by including the part played by Providence. (Hamlet. Ed. George MacDonald. P.258). The first folio clearly shows a version revealing Hamlet's changed relationship with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern which sends them to their sudden deaths. In the second quarto an impatient Hamlet is found to be saying, 'They are not near my conscience'. (Warwick Shakespeare. P.256)

It is significant that the fourth soliloquy which is self-derogatory and reproaching does not figure in the Folio edition. Hamlet is realising the damning and self-destructive impact of his inertia:

Now whether it be

Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple

Of thinking too precisely on th'event-

A thought which quartered hath but one part wisdom

And ever three parts coward – I do not know

Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,

Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means

To do't.

(4.4.39-46)

Ernst Honigmann has made the observation that while writing a play, Shakespeare might not essentially have begun with Act I, but might have wrote speeches and scenes that eventually found their way into plays. (Ernst Honigmann. The Stability of Shakespeare's Texts. 1965.ch.4 p-306). It is obvious that by the time, he has reached this act Hamlet had grown into an enormous enigma and the soliloquy was no longer sufficient to convey the unfathomable depths.

So the Folio has to be silent about Hamlet's voyage to England. The same silence has to add so much to the revealing dialogue with Horatio in a later scene, where he yields to the

providential guidance. When Roberts went in all earnestness to edit Quarto Hamlet, he relied upon Shakespeare's 'foul-papers' and these papers carried many passages which the dramatist had intended to include in the theatrical version of the play. Consequently the second quarto brings to us some of those passages which had never been part of the play which the Elizabethan theatre-goers watched.

In his 1955 book *On Editing Shakespeare*, Fredson Bowers argue that Shakespeare himself might have been compelled to give a reading of the play to get its acceptability before the actual staging. In all probability, the play might have undergone some editing and revising. The part being ascribed to the scribes to write the speeches for actors and this possibility of these hands relying on the scrap books to complete the speeches cannot be ruled out.

To understand the textual problems of Hamlet better, Bower employs a meaningful phrase 'intermediate transcript' indicating the differences between second quarto and folio editions and refers to the special quality of the transcript that lies behind the Folio text, in that it is a more reliable synthesis of Shakespeare's manuscript as well as the production script. Now it seems that the last three acts have undergone extensive revisions.

It now becomes clear that scribe instead of basing the text entirely on the promptbook has begun to include the pragmatics of staging the play, which necessitated variations from that of the Folio. Scribe seems to assume the role of the director and production manager as he begins to incorporate elements that seems to contribute to the play evolving into a fully developed structure. In his book *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, Bullough writes that 'generations of actors played havoc with the original text and doubtless changed incidents as well discern that the original text, while not dependent on the first quarto of Hamlet, shared many of its features.' (Bullough, VII, 128-58)

One of the greatest challenges theatre had always experienced has been the personality of Hamlet. The history of the development of the playing of the text becomes also a study in reducing the fathomless complexities of the character. The issues related to the placing of the 'To be or not to be soliloquy' is one such instance. It is conjectured that playwright was tempted to place this at other junctures than where it is found today. A different positioning of this most crucial soliloquy might have altered the meaning and text of the play beyond recognition.

Rebecca West succinctly put the case about the soliloquy when she commented that critics often misinterpret Hamlet because they cannot face its bleakness. Critics from Dr. Johnson onwards have tried to rescue Hamlet from the pervading air of gloom and despair. It is evident that earlier producers always tried to place the soliloquy much earlier in the play which might have drastically altered its very leit-motif.

It may be concluded that Hamlet as most mystifying and enigmatic of all plays of Shakespeare carries behind it a long history of editing and revising. Sometimes these were the necessitated by the theatrical conventions and conveniences of the times of its presentation. So it turns out that only after the exhaustive analysis of the various factors that influenced and contributed to these textual changes that took place over the ages, we will be able to have a reliable account of the reality of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark.

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