Introduction

Is Q1 *Hamlet* the First *Hamlet*?

Terri Bourus

Many of the questions that we ask about Shakespeare's *Hamlet* depend on what we mean by 'first'. In a book published in 1589, Thomas Nashe refers to a play about 'Hamlet'.[1] Earlier texts by Saxo Grammaticus and François Belleforest told the tragic story of a medieval Danish prince named 'Amlethus', 'Amleth' or 'Amleto', but Nashe is the first known printed occurrence of the Anglicized name 'Hamlet'. Nashe's 'Hamlet' is therefore, in one sense, the first *printed* 'Hamlet'. But at the same time Nashe's text clearly demonstrates that an English play about 'Hamlet' was already circulating and was familiar to Nashe's readers. Did Shakespeare write the early play that Nashe was mocking? Whoever wrote it, was that play being performed in the late 1580s printed at some later date? Is it the same play that was performed by the newly formed Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1594 at the theatre in Newington Butts?[2] Is it the same play that Thomas Lodge assumed would be familiar to his readers in 1596, a play about 'Hamlet', 'revenge' and a 'ghost' being performed

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at the 'Theator' (the venue normally used by the Chamberlain's Men between 1594 and 1598)?[3] Or were the performances in 1594 and/or 1596 based on a revised version of the 1580s play? If so, who wrote the revision? Does any aspect of the German play *Tragoedia der Bestrafte Brudermord oder Prinz Hamlet aus Dännnemark* (first printed in German in 1781 from a manuscript dated 1710, and first translated into English in 1865) derive from performances by English actors, touring in Germany, of the English play of the 1580s, or from the performances in the mid-1590s?[4]

The answers to all those questions depend on our interpretation of another 'first'. The first known printed edition of *Hamlet* was published in 1603. The title page of the 1603 *Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke* explicitly attributes the play to 'William Shake-speare' and claims that it was performed by the company of actors to which Shakespeare belonged. That edition is often called 'Q1', shorthand for 'first quarto' (referring to the bibliographical format most often used for early editions of plays, a quarto). It was followed by an expanded second edition, also a quarto, also attributed to 'William Shakespeare' ('Q2'). After Shakespeare's death, another distinct version of the play was included in the big, expensive, hardbound 1623 'folio' collection of thirty-six of Shakespeare's *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* ('F', 'F1' or 'the Folio'). Q1 is the rarest of these three important early editions of Shakespeare's most famous play; it survives in only two known copies. It has had less influence on critical and theatre history than the other two early versions. In fact, all three early versions have been eclipsed by a fourth version, created by eighteenth-century editors, which combined material from both Q2 and F. That 'conflated' editorial version is the text that almost all readers and performers think about when they think about *Hamlet*. In the overwhelming majority of editions of Shakespeare from the last three centuries, that omnibus, conflated edition of the tragedy, the *last* version to appear in any surviving printed or manuscript text, is assumed to be the *first Hamlet*. As a result, the three editions printed between 1603 and 1623 are all dismissed on the assumption that, in different ways and to different degrees, each is a defective derivative from Shakespeare's hypothetical first manuscript of the play.

The foundations of modern Shakespeare scholarship were established before editors and critics were even aware of the existence of Q1. In 1823, a defective copy of the first edition was discovered,

and a reprint of that version was published in 1825, introducing it to a wider circle of scholars and fans. Since 1992, Q1's version of the play has been made available in many different formats and publications: free online digital facsimiles and transcripts, inexpensive paperbacks, scholarly editions with textual notes and dense introductions, a paperback anthology of revenge plays, and textbooks designed for college students. Early in 2015, Zachary Lesser wrote a groundbreaking, award-winning history of the effect – on criticism, scholarship and performance – of the rediscovery of Q1 in 1823.[5] Three months earlier, I had published a very different book, not on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reception of Q1 but on the circumstances surrounding its creation.[6] These two books were conceived and written independently of each other; they address different issues in different styles; they have tended to appeal to different readers. But they both challenged the orthodox assumption, which had dominated Shakespeare scholarship for a century, that Q1 could simply be ignored.

What the editions and monographs of the last thirty years have done, collectively, is to begin to canonize Q1 *Hamlet*. No one can claim that there is now a universal consensus about what Q1 is, or what it means, or how it came to be. In fact, the canonicity of works of art is usually accompanied by intense disagreements about how to interpret them. For most of the twentieth century, Shakespearians who agreed about nothing else agreed that they didn't need to worry much about the first edition of Shakespeare's most famous play. Q1 *Hamlet* is now becoming canonical because of an increasing recognition that it is *worth arguing about*. Rather than asking, 'What's the matter with Q1 *Hamlet*?', this book attempts to answer a much more interesting question: 'Why does Q1 *Hamlet* matter?'

Q1 obviously matters to our understanding of *Hamlet*, but what we make of it also shapes our understanding of the trajectory of Shakespeare's career and of early modern theatre history more generally. Even before Q1 was rediscovered, Edmond Malone had decided that Nashe and Lodge were referring to a lost play by Thomas Kyd.[7] According to this hypothesis, the 'first Hamlet' therefore had nothing to do with Shakespeare, except insofar as the lost play by Kyd might have influenced the surviving play that Shakespeare wrote more than a decade later. Kyd was first; Shakespeare was second. Recent scholarship has demonstrated how many plays performed before 1642 have perished, and the *Hamlet* play of the 1580s might

be one of them.[8] We cannot rule out that possibility. But we also should not rule out, a priori, the possibility that Q1 is Shakespeare's first surviving version of his most famous play.

The thirteen chapters in this book all demonstrate, from different angles and in different voices, what happens when critics, performers, scholars and editors decide *not* to ignore the first edition of *Hamlet*. The table of contents arranges these chapters in order to juxtapose different approaches to similar problems. The first three chapters (Taylor, Marino, Wagoner) all draw on personal experiences of Q1 in performance; the next two (Bruster, Bourus) focus on the production of the 1603 quarto from the perspective of book history; the next three (McCarthy, Frampton, Nance) situate Q1 in early networks of reading and reaction; and the three that follow (Johnson, Continisio, Kelly and Plehn) all consider patterns of verbal variation between Q1, Q2 and F. The next chapter (Loughnane) also focuses on an analysis of verbal variants, but transforms the question of what happens in Q1 to the question of what does not happen in *Hamlet*. Finally, the afterword (Holderness and Loughrey) returns us to 1992, when the *Shakespearian Originals* edition of Q1 provoked an angry backlash that exposed the theoretical assumptions and emotional investments behind twentieth-century editorial orthodoxy.

But the contents could have been arranged in other ways, and I suspect that the chapters will be read, in print and online, by different readers in different combinations. Anyone fascinated by Shakespeare's dramaturgy might go first to Marino's illustrated description of the production he directed, but they will also be interested in Loughnane's analytical history of the whole genre of dumb shows, in Wagoner's exploration of interruptions in the structuring of dialogue, in the new kind of hybrid performance text that Kelly and Plehn propose and in the examination by Holderness and Loughrey of early modern collective creativity and the complex relationship between texts and theatres. Both Taylor and Marino analyse Scene 14 at length; like Holderness and Loughrey, Nance engages deeply with postmodernist theory; Taylor, Wagoner and Bourus all consider Q1 as a particularly gendered problem. Readers who like charts, tables and numbers may skip from Taylor to Bruster to Kelly and Plehn. Interested in Shakespeare's relationships with classical writers? You can find in Q1 links to Seneca (Taylor) and Virgil (Nance). Interested in Shakespeare's relationships with his contemporaries? You'll discover that Q1 connects *Hamlet* to Nashe,

Harvey and Jonson (McCarthy), to Kyd and Lodge (Taylor), to Florio (Frampton) and to Drayton (Bourus) – but not to Marlowe (Nance). Those chapters combine with Kelly and Plehn's statistical analysis of variants to challenge traditional assumptions about Shakespeare's artistic development from the early 1580s to the accession of James I. Some chapters (Bruster, Bourus, Kelly and Plehn) specifically address technical issues of textual transmission; but more fundamentally, all the chapters show that the traditional invocation of 'bad quartos' is an impediment to thought: it is an obfuscation, rather than an instrument of analysis. *Hamlet* as a play and a character is famous for the way that it makes the act of thinking dramatic. And Q1 *Hamlet*, if we actually read or perform it rather than gesturing at it dismissively, *makes us think*.

Attention must be paid to such a first.[9]

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Notes

1. Thomas Nashe, 'To the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities', in Robertus Greene, *Menaphon* (1589), sig. **3r–3v.
2. Dulwich MS VII, fol. 9; transcribed in *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21–22.
3. Thomas Lodge, *Wits Miserie* (1596), sig. h4v.
4. See *Fratricide Punished (Der bestrafe Brudermord)*, trans. H. Howard Furness, rev. Geoffrey Bullough, in Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. vii (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 128–58.
5. Zachary Lesser, *Hamlet after Q1: An Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

6. Terri Bourus, *Young Shakespeare's Young Hamlet: Print, Piracy, and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
7. Edmond Malone, *The Life of William Shakspeare*, ed. James Boswell (1821), 295–96, 369–73. For a critique of Malone's foundational assumptions, see Bourus, *Young Hamlet*, 137–66.
8. See the Lost Plays Database, and in particular its 2012 entry for *Hamlet*: https://lostplays.folger.edu/Hamlet (retrieved 19 January 2022).
9. Attention should also be paid to Aaron Rodriquez, a doctoral candidate in English at Florida State University, who compiled the Index for this book.