Introduction

Why Q1 *Hamlet* Matters

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Abstract

This introduction situates the special double issue ‘Canonizing Q1 *Hamlet*’ in the context of the early publication history of Shakespeare’s tragedy and the recent critical and editorial interest in the first edition. The first edition of *Hamlet* – often called ‘Q1’, shorthand for ‘first quarto’ – was published in 1603, in what we might regard as the early modern equivalent of a cheap paperback. Q1 *Hamlet* is becoming increasingly canonical not because there is universal agreement about what it is or what it means, but because more and more Shakespearians agree that it is *worth arguing about*. If we read or perform it, rather than simply dismissing it (as was done for most of the twentieth century), Q1 makes us think: about performance, book history, Shakespeare’s relationships with his contemporaries, and the shape of his whole career.

Keywords: bad quartos, canonicity, *Hamlet* first quarto, performance, Q1 *Hamlet*, Shakespeare

Why should *Critical Survey* devote a special double issue to a single, generally disregarded, early edition of one Shakespeare play? Because that edition makes more difference to our understanding of Shakespeare’s career than any other early text.

The first edition of *Hamlet* – often called ‘Q1’, shorthand for ‘first quarto’ – was published in 1603, in what we might regard as the early modern equivalent of a cheap paperback. It was followed by an expanded second edition (‘Q2’), and then eventually by a text of the play included in the big, expensive, hardbound, posthumous 1623 ‘folio’ collection of thirty-six of Shakespeare’s *Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* (‘F’ or ‘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, the other two early versions have themselves 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*.

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, 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 Q1.¹ 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.² 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 special issue attempts to answer a much more interesting question: 'Why does Q1 *Hamlet* matter?'

The thirteen new articles in this issue 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 articles in order to juxtapose different approaches to similar problems. The first three articles (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; the three that follow (Johnson, Continisio, Kelly and Plehn) all consider patterns of verbal variation between Q1, Q2 and F. The next article (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 *Shakespearean 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 the articles 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 analyze 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), to Drayton (Bourus) – but not to Marlowe (Nance). Those articles 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 articles (Bruster, Bourus, Kelly and Plehn) specifically address technical issues of textual transmission; but more fundamentally, all the articles 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 quarto.

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Notes

1. Zachary Lesser, *Hamlet After Q1: An Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
2. Terri Bourus, *Young Shakespeare's Young Hamlet: Print, Piracy, and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).