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### **Concerning the Interpretations of William Shakespeare's "Hamlet"**

*Abstract:* In Shakespearology there are no generally accepted interpretations of "Hamlet" either conceptually or textologically. Many interpretations of this tragedy make a demoralizing reading, for they ignore the obvious solutions to the "Hamlet enigma": accepting the early dating of the first drafts of Shakespeare's play, treating the so-called "Bad Quarto" of 1603 as an early variant of Shakespeare's celebrated text and explaining the intricacies and the possible inconsistencies of the plot within the context of the religious conflicts of the Elizabethan England.

*Key-words:* William Shakespeare, "Hamlet", "Bad Quarto", Catholicism, Protestantism

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### **К проблеме интерпретации трагедии «Гамлет» Уильяма Шекспира**

*Аннотация:* В шекспироведении не существует общепринятых интерпретаций «Гамлета» ни в текстологическом, ни в концептуальном плане. Однако эту типовую ситуацию можно преодолеть, если принять во внимание доказательства создания первых вариантов «Гамлета» в ранний период творчества Шекспира, признать принадлежность перу Шекспира так называемого «Плохого Кварто» 1603 года и рассмотреть «загадки» содержания пьесы в контексте религиозных конфликтов елизаветинской Англии.

*Ключевые слова:* Уильям Шекспир, «Гамлет», «Плохое Кварто», католичество, протестантство

We have all heard about "the Hamlet enigma". So enigmatic is the main character that interpretations here are of necessity multiple and endless. Every generation will see in the play and in its main character something unique, every soul will find in him and in it something relevant to that soul's particular experience. Every actor will play Hamlet the man – and, in fact, does play him – differently (cf. John Gielgud vs Vladimir Vysotsky). And so on.

In terms of interpretation – if we insist at least on limiting its scope – this does not sound very promising, and for all those who are not ready to place the play in a modernist paradigm such a universal approach seems apparently to be not without exaggeration and not without its inherent flaws.

For all the alleged universality and the subsequent ambiguity of the play there must have been something in it hermeneutically that Shakespeare's contemporaries would agree upon and be attracted by. Theatre was a popular kind of art, akin to modern mass media, it was expected to reflect the immediate events taking place in the then England. Shakespeare's spectators cannot be expected to have possessed the sophistication of a Harold Bloom and to appreciate highly abstract ideas critics of this kind are ready to offer.

Is it possible to imagine an average Elizabethan playgoer appreciating a text with the following set of features:

1) "Hamlet's laughter can unnerve us because it issues from a total lack of faith, both in language and in himself" [1: 410];

2) "Hamlet is no mystic, no stoic, and hardly a Christian at all" [1: 429] – (here it must be said in passing that Hamlet's "Too too solid flesh" monologue provides the truly Christian view of suicide);

3) Hamlet is human consciousness incarnate (incarnated)?

When pushed sufficiently hard we can imagine anything, but closer examination of the audiences should make us more discerning about such kind of interpretations. There must have been something immediately relevant to the spectators in the play, something connected with their daily experiences and their daily problems. If Hamlet chooses to procrastinate for four and a half hours (the duration of the play when performed in its full form), its audience must have had similar experiences.

But this trivial idea is largely ignored by critics, and when not engaged in producing abstract schemes in the Harold Bloom fashion they suggest interpretations close to what their generation (or rather its highly literarily alert representatives) is prepared to find in a text of verbal art: Hamlet as a Romantic hero, Hamlet as the Freudian case, Hamlet as the Christian humanist, "Hamlet" the play and Hamlet the character as an artistic failure. There is yet another equally untenable proposition: **possibly** Hamlet's mother had committed adultery with his brother-in-law when her first husband, the future Ghost, was still alive, which means that Claudius may be Hamlet's biological father; Hamlet suspects that much and is reluctant to kill his **possible** father. The more threadbare the connection with the actual text, the more exciting the paradox of the interpretation. With Romantics there is also a fundamental flaw: **their** characters are opposed to society for reasons unspecified and this was accepted by, let us say, Goethe's contemporaries; Shakespeare's audience would require **reasons**, and **reasons to be apparent**, connected with the daily experience of this audience. Hence a necessity for a historical reading of the play unambiguous at least to this extent.

The actual history thus ignored, the textual history is treated with equal nonchalance. The assumptions here are 1) that Shakespeare was "a late starter", 2) that all the "bad" earlier texts ever published under his name or published anonymously (but having later "good" and generally recognized Shakespearean versions) could not have been written by him because he was "the late starter", 3) that the "bad" texts were written by other authors (here the exciting game of identification begins) or 4) were the result of a "memorial reconstruction" of a "good" Shakespeare play by the actors once involved in playing some minor parts in these "good plays", 5) that the numerous verbal parallels between the earlier "non-Shakespearean" and the later "Shakespearean" texts are connected with him "borrowing" (meaning "stealing") generously from other less illustrious authors (which, we are invited to believe, was the common practice among the

writers during Shakespeare's lifetime, but which in actual fact it was not), or 6) these parallels were the result of the notorious "memorial reconstruction".

Though nearly indispensable part of the present day academic Shakespearology, **all these assumptions** – incredibly! – remain uncorroborated. Equally incredibly, **all these assumptions** form part of the overwhelming majority of the treatises devoted to "Hamlet".

The bare historical textological facts are: Thomas Nashe explicitly refers to a play with Hamlet as a hero in 1589 [2: 474–476]. In 1594 Philip Henslowe mentions "Hamlet" as a play whose performance brought him (Henslowe) certain revenue [3: 21]. In 1598 Gabriel Harvey speaks about the "tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke" by William Shakespeare [4: 197] (too obvious to be discarded, Harvey's statement is moved by some experts including Edmund Chambers [4: 197] three years ahead, to make it correspond to the theory that "Hamlet" was written by Shakespeare not earlier than 1601). In 1603 – crucially! – the so-called "Bad Quarto" of "Hamlet" is published – a text much shorter than "Hamlet" the way we know it now, retaining the same plot and numerous passages familiar to all readers of Shakespeare, but with the names of some characters changed and some celebrated passages excluded or written in an inferior manner. In 1604/1605 the "Good Quarto" of "Hamlet" (the way we know it now with some inconsiderable alterations introduced from the First Folio of 1623) is published.

All this, presumably, should make one think that Shakespeare had written several versions of "Hamlet", the earliest going back as far as the end of 1580s, and that in the course of his career he kept revising his own work. The 1603 edition offers one of the earlier versions, while next year an extended and revised text saw the light of the day.

Chronologically, textologically, psychologically and artistically there is nothing to contradict this reconstruction, especially as there are similar cases connected with other works by Shakespeare. Thus, as far back as 1591 the two parts of "The Troublesome Reign of John King of England / of King John" had been published, to be later revised linguistically and conceptually and reduced to a much shorter text, the future "King John" the way we know it from the First Folio.

But in both cases Shakespeare is by and large deprived of the authorship. In the opinion of professional scholars, writing anything in or before 1589 when Shakespeare was already 25 is **too early for him**. This is the obvious outcome of bardolatry: the national genius is not allowed any inferior texts and is credited with having begun with masterpieces straightaway. No other Elizabethan playwright is without apprenticeship – with the exception of Shakespeare, in the opinion of so many scholars.

The fact that "King John" in its final version contains many parallels with the 1591 texts is explained through the theory of **borrowings** – in other words stealing from other authors, plagiarism pure and simple. No other Elizabethan playwright is known to have practiced this kind of stealth and to have got away with it – with the exception of Shakespeare, in the opinion of so many scholars.

Following the same line of reasoning, the play "Hamlet", mentioned by Nashe in 1589, is attributed under the name of "Ur-Hamlet" to Thomas Kyd whose "Spanish Tragedy" is conceptually similar to Hamlet. Though Nashe speaks about more than one author imitating Seneca's tragedies, Kyd is credited with having written the so-called "Ur-Hamlet" as well. And then Shakespeare is credited (or discredited) with having **borrowed** from Kyd generously and shamelessly. Unlike "King John", no text of the "Ur-Hamlet" is – supposedly – extant, so Shakespeare here cannot be accused of verbal plagiarism, he was just **adapting** Kyd's plot. Thus, the greatest playwright ever living is rewarded the title of the late beginner and, to put it plainly, of a plagiarist. Which has been an accusation

levelled at him in 1592 by the dying Robert Greene [4: 188–189], only to be disavowed later in the year by the publisher Henry Chettle [4: 189] and never repeated by anyone again during the remaining 24 years of Shakespeare's life.

Economy of reasoning (the famous Ockham's Razor) suggests that both "King John" and "Hamlet" as we know these plays now had the earlier versions written **also** by Shakespeare, which provokes valuable insights as to the specificity of his professional career begun not at the unfathomable age of 29 with the elaborate narrative poem "Venus and Adonis", but at least 5 years previously with much less sophisticated texts.

With "King John" we are lucky to have a very early text by Shakespeare, with "Hamlet" we seem not to be so lucky. But is this really the case?

The "Bad Quarto" of 1603 is 2514 lines long, while the "Good Quarto" of 1604/1605 is 3762 lines long, and only 591 lines written in blank verse in these two texts coincide [5: 128]. Here we are invited to believe not that the Second Quarto is Shakespeare's plagiarism; theft is involved here all right, but it is the new pack of thieves stealing from the original thief – meaning Shakespeare the alleged plagiarist who had "borrowed" from Kyd. Some leading authorities on Shakespeare insist that the First Quarto was produced as a result of a "memorial reconstruction" carried out by some minor actors of Shakespeare's company either because they were on tour in the provinces and needed a play for performance, but did not have the text of the play at their disposal, or because these dishonest actors decided to earn some money by "remembering" the text of "Hamlet" and giving it to the publisher (for more detailed information see [5: 121–135]).

If we try to corroborate the theory we will see, for example, that out of the 53 words Ophelia addresses to her brother in a particular dialogue the "desperate" actors remembered only 7 and added another 61 word of their own [5: 130]. A problematic achievement for the professionals, however minor their parts could have been.

The reasoning offered in connection with the celebrated monologue "To be, or not to be" is no less awkward. The "Bad Quarto" renders it in the following way:

To be, or not to be, I there's the point,  
To Die, to sleep, is that all? Aye all:  
No, to sleep, to dream, aye marry there it goes,  
For in that dream of death, when we awake,  
And borne before an everlasting Judge,  
From whence no passenger ever returned,  
The undiscovered country, at whose sight  
The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.  
But for this, the joyful hope of this,  
Who'd bear the scorns and flattery of the world,  
Scorned by the right rich, the rich cursed of the poor?  
The widow being oppressed, the orphan wrong'd,  
The taste of hunger, or a tyrants reign,  
And thousand more calamities besides,  
To grunt and sweat under this weary life,  
When that he may his full Quietus make,  
With a bare bodkin, who would this endure,  
But for a hope of something after death?  
Which puzzles the brain, and doth confound the sense,  
Which makes us rather bear those evils we have,  
Than fly to others that we know not of.  
Aye that, O this conscience makes cowards of us all,  
Lady in thy orizons, be all my sins remembered.

Here again one presumably has to believe that this is the **natural** result of the meagre efforts of the meagre actors to reproduce the famous text. A strange pack of thieves indeed: actors collectively suffering from amnesia (to use an apt appellation suggested by Eric Sams) reconstructing the part none of them had ever played but all of them had presumably heard many times. Is it **reasonable** of accept this text as a corruption of the standard version? Or is it **more reasonable** – or **truly reasonable** – to consider the standard version the improvement of the text just quoted? An improvement carried out not by the amnesiac non-actors of the part they had not played, but by its author himself? Chronologically this explanation is the only plausible one: the earlier text published in 1603, but written much earlier, is published in a revised form 1604. Juridically it is equally plausible: copyright restrictions in those times were enforced vigorously, both versions of “Hamlet” were published quite openly for the same respectable bookseller Nicholas Ling who would not jeopardize his reputation by meddling with the supposedly piratical edition.

But here again the difficulty arises which bardolatrors need to circumvent: they are not ready to accept that Shakespeare could have written inferior texts and prefer to suggest theories concerning (to quote Eric Sams yet again) “non-memorial non-reconstructions by non-actors” of a celebrated play. And this is preferred to admitting that the so-called “Bad Quarto” gives us a unique opportunity to trace Shakespeare’s professional development to its first beginnings. We see him as a patient reviser of his own texts striving for perfection, and we may single out the features of his texts to remain there all along, to be changed and worked upon in the course of his career or to be altogether discarded later.

Thus far it has been textual history that we have been trying to come to terms with. As for the interpretation of the ‘mysterious’ content of the play, it also seems to be perfectly clear whatever its possible ‘universal’ implications may be. Procrastination and prevarication and endless doubts and fits of almost psychotic activity on the part of the main character are the corner-stone of the play. Ernest Jones in his psychoanalytical interpretation of “Hamlet” had famously diagnosed the main character’s condition as “hysterical paralysis” or “a specific aboulia” (quoted from [6: 428]), while John Dover Wilson had equally famously, though with no professional preciseness, described Hamlet as a half-mad person, retaining enough good sense to be critical of his own inadequacy, but not always able to control his own increasingly erratic behaviour [7: 210–220]. These ideas might seem all well and good, but the crucial question remains unanswered: would Elizabethan audiences appreciate watching it all and enjoy the hours of representing the mental disorder of aboulia not clear either to its incumbent or its creator going back to their respective childhoods, or the unspecified mental condition against which the character is consciously fighting?

What was typical of Elizabethan audiences was not the collective interest in cases of aboulia originating from difficult childhood relations with their respective mothers, but a very natural splitting of conscience originating from the necessity to make an impossible choice between recognizing the spiritual and **temporal** authority of the Catholic church and recognizing the temporal and **spiritual** authority of Queen Elizabeth in particular and of her government in general. Catholics on a daily basis were to answer the “Bloody Question” asked by the Protestant persecutors: whose side would you take if the Pope or some other foreign Catholic power were to invade England? Like many contemporaries of Shakespeare, Hamlet is ready to accept the spiritual authority of his father and the rightness of the Ghost’s demands to do away with Claudius, but at the

same time Hamlet is not ready to disclaim the temporal authority of the ruling king though discarding him spiritually and to start a rebellion or to murder the sovereign. This was the impossible choice Shakespeare's contemporaries had to make long before the supposed date of the "late creation", the Essex rebellion in this later case being the only factual foundation for Shakespeare if the misdating is accepted.

If we turn to the events of 1580s as the sources of historical parallels to Shakespeare's "Hamlet" (which would have been ancient history for the spectators in the beginning of the seventeenth century and hence highly unlikely to have been alluded to in a popular play) we will come across people with tragic fates to some extent similar to that of Hamlet, people either revered by the nation or, conversely, scorned by many of its representatives. To begin with, these are people participating in the Somerville and the Babington plots, properly provoked by the secular authorities and inspired by those eager to vicariously revenge the injustice, crime and sacrilege committed by the authorities in question. These are also 1) St Edmund Campion and St Robert Southwell with their perspectives of a brilliant career within the Establishment turning Catholic and Jesuit and fighting by peaceful means against the Established Church; 2) numerous aristocrats like Sir Philip Sidney or Ferdinando Lord Strange once approached by the Jesuit Fathers, remaining at least outwardly faithful to the regime nevertheless, but finding no place for themselves in the contemporary political context and finally dying their differently tragic deaths; 3) the Earl of Southampton, a devout Catholic and a friend of the Earl of Essex, participating in the rebellion against Elizabeth and her administration and heavily fined and imprisoned for this, barely avoiding execution; 4) numerous more or less common people like St Margaret Clitherow and St Anne Line, coming of respectable Protestant families, converting to Catholicism and eventually dying for their faith. Like Hamlet, they needed time to make a decision; like Hamlet, they would have preferred a quieter life or no life at all; like Hamlet, many of them would finally take arms against the sea of troubles and by opposing ended them.

It is in the light of these historical facts and historical parallels that the essential meaning of "Hamlet" becomes evident, and the abomination of misinterpretation is overcome both textologically and conceptually.

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