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HAMLET

the characters

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Claudius: the newly elected King of Denmark and brother of Old King Hamlet, who has recently died. During the course of the play it becomes clear that he murdered his brother.

Gertrude: the Queen of Denmark. She is the widow of the dead King and has recently married Claudius. She is Hamlet’s mother.

Hamlet: the Prince of Denmark. Only son of the dead King. Gertrude is his mother and Claudius is his uncle.

The Ghost of Hamlet’s father (Old Hamlet) appears on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. He claims he was poisoned by Claudius as he slept in his garden.
Polonius: a trusted advisor to the King of Denmark. He is the father of Laertes and Ophelia.

Laertes: the only son of Polonius, and Ophelia’s brother.

Ophelia: the daughter of Polonius and in love with Hamlet. Laertes is her brother.

Courtiers: in this production Osric, Reynaldo, Lords and two Gentlewomen
THE OTHER CHARACTERS

Horatio: Hamlet’s “fellow student” from Wittenberg University in Germany. In this production he is imagined as an older man, perhaps Hamlet’s tutor.

Soldiers: Franciscus, Barnardo and Marcellus are on night duty on the battlements of Elsinore castle when the Ghost appears.

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern: in this production imagined as schoolfriends of Hamlet from the time before he went to University.

The Players: a troupe of actors who are known to Hamlet and who perform *The Murder of Gonzago*.

The Sexton has been a gravedigger since Hamlet’s birth, 20 years ago. In this production imagined as a woman who has inherited the job from her father.

Fortinbras: the ambitious nephew of the King of Norway. He has had a plan to invade Denmark to regain land lost by this father but his uncle forbids him to do so and he invades Poland instead. He is returning from that campaign when he arrives at Elsinore at the end of the play.
HAMLET

synopsis
Elsinore in Denmark. The King has recently died. His brother, Claudius, has very quickly married the widowed Queen, Gertrude, and acceded to the throne in place of his nephew, Prince Hamlet.

Hamlet is deeply unhappy with his mother’s new marriage (which in Shakespeare’s time was considered incestuous) but he is enraged when he is told by the Ghost of his dead father that he was poisoned in his garden, not by a snake, but by Claudius. Hamlet vows revenge, but tells no-one of the Ghost’s revelation.

Meanwhile, the new King’s chief minister, Polonius, discovers that Hamlet has been making overtures of love to his daughter, Ophelia. He orders her to end the relationship, on the grounds that the young Prince can have no serious intentions towards her and intends to ‘ruin’ her. However, when Hamlet appears profoundly distressed by this, Polonius concludes that he has gone mad from unrequited love.

Claudius and Gertrude ask two old schoolfriends of Hamlet’s – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – to spend time with Hamlet in Elsinore, to report on his mood and find means to entertain him. They invite a company of Actors to the Court, and Hamlet asks them to perform a scene which mirrors the murder of his father, so that he can gauge Claudius’ reaction and be sure that the Ghost was telling the truth, and was not a devil in disguise.

Claudius storms out of the performance, and Hamlet believes that the Ghost’s accusation is proved. He has the chance to kill Claudius the same night whilst he is at prayer, but decides to delay it, as he wishes to send a guilty Claudius to Hell, not a repentant one to Heaven. He confronts his mother, accusing her of complicity in his father’s murder, and impulsively kills the eavesdropping Polonius,
assuming the figure hiding behind a curtain to be Claudius.

Claudius sends Hamlet away to England, in the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who carry an order to the English king to put Hamlet to death. Hamlet discovers the warrant, puts Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s names on it in place of his own, and returns to Elsinore, where he finds that Ophelia has gone mad and been drowned in a river.

Ophelia’s brother, Laertes, blames Hamlet for the death of both his father and his sister, and is persuaded by Claudius to kill Hamlet in a rigged fencing match. Hamlet accepts the challenge. Claudius prepares a poisoned wine, as a back-up.

They fight at first with ‘bated’ (blunt-tipped) swords, but whilst Hamlet is distracted by his mother, Laertes swaps his bated sword for an unbated one, tipped with poison, and wounds Hamlet. Hamlet manages to swap swords and kill Laertes. Gertude drinks Claudius’ wine and is poisoned. Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword and makes him drink the wine. Claudius dies, and then Hamlet.

Fortinbras of Norway arrives amid the carnage and assumes power in Denmark.
notes from the director
“... that incestuous, that adulterate beast...”
“to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets”

The accusation of incest, laid against Claudius by the Ghost and by Hamlet, is not the fantasy of angry minds. According to the doctrine of ‘carnal contagion’, the marriage between Claudius and Gertrude was incestuous according to canon law. By his brother’s marriage to Gertrude, Claudius had become ‘kin’ to her in the fleshly as well as the legal sense.

“None of you shall approach to any that is near kin to him, to uncover their nakedness... Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother’s wife: it is thy brother’s nakedness... And if a man shall take his brother’s wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother’s nakedness: they shall be childless.” Leviticus 18

This doctrine, which had some legal force in England until only a century ago, had played an important part in the English Reformation. Henry VIII had obtained a special dispensation from Pope Julius II to marry his brother Arthur’s widow, Catherine of Aragon – largely on the assertion that Arthur and Catherine’s marriage had never been consummated and that when she married Henry she was still a virgin.

But Henry changed tack when he wished to divorce Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn. His ministers...
claimed that the marriage to Catherine had, after all, been incestuous, and therefore illegitimate and cursed — not with the complete infertility predicted in Leviticus, but with the crucial failure to produce a male heir. Its annulment was therefore imperative to the continuance of the Tudor line.

But this time the Pope, now Clement VII, would not bend. Henry declared himself the head of the Church in England, broke from the Papacy and married Anne. However, the issue of incest and legitimacy did not end there. Henry’s marriage to Anne was widely regarded as adulterous, and their child — the future Elizabeth I — therefore a bastard. This charge was compounded by Henry himself when in 1536 Catherine of Aragon died and Anne (who had suffered a series of miscarriages) miscarried a son. With Catherine dead he was free to allow his marriage to her to be seen as a true one, so rendering the marriage to Anne illegitimate and freeing him to marry yet again. He accused Anne of adultery (with her own brother) and treason and obtained an Act of Parliament declaring the 3 year-old Elizabeth a bastard, a charge that would haunt her throughout her life. Anne, of course, was beheaded.

The last of the British laws prohibiting men from marrying their brother’s wives was repealed by parliament in 1907.

Whether or not Claudius and Gertrude have also been guilty of adultery — as the Ghost implies — is by no means as clear. Does their relationship predate the murder, as Belleforest’s retelling asserted, or was it Claudius’ ambition that led him to fratricide, and his subsequent marriage more a matter of political convenience than sexual desire? In the related matter of Gertrude’s guilt, Shakespeare seems to leave us to make up our own minds — or perhaps to the actress playing the role — as to whether she was complicit in the murder, though in the 1st Quarto version she insists that she was not:

“But as I have a soul, I swear by heaven
I never knew of this most horrid murder.”
A Ghost from Purgatory

“I am thy father’s spirit,  
Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night  
And for the day confin’d to fast in fires  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purg’d away.”

From the time of the Reformation, the notion of Purgatory was rejected by Protestant thinkers and Churchmen, along with the importance of death-bed contrition and absolution. One’s card was marked, as it were, for Heaven or Hell, according to one’s record in life (and particularly in faith), and no amount of prayer by living relatives, or tortured penance in the staging-post of Purgatory, could change that. In fact, the Protestant authorities made prayers for the dead illegal. And they believed ghosts to be either delusions, or the devil in disguise.

So, although the Denmark of Shakespeare’s time was fiercely Protestant, Shakespeare seems to have conceived Old Hamlet’s Denmark either as a Catholic state, or more like the England of 1600, where despite the political and religious orthodoxy, the Catholic imagination survived, including a residual belief in Purgatory and the reality of ghostly visitations.

But this is not the only curious element in this matter of Old Hamlet’s appearance on the Elsinore battlements. For those who did believe in them, ghosts were supposed to appear to the living to seek the prayerful intervention of their loved ones to speed their passage from purgatory to paradise. Very often they did this silently, presenting a forlorn sight, evoking pity (“Alas, poor Ghost”, says Hamlet). To return to demand revenge – a demand likely to confirm one’s damnation – is very extraordinary, and it is therefore no wonder that at one point in the action Hamlet wonders if ‘the spirit I have seen’ may not ‘be the Devil’.
Suicide

“... or that the Everlasting had not fix’d
His canon ’gainst self-slaughter”

“... who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of desip’d love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?”

There is no specific injunction against suicide in the Bible – and suicides such as Razis, the ‘father of the Jews’ (see 2 Maccabees), attract no censure – but in the 5th Century St Augustine laid down that the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”, applied equally to self-murder, this eventually becoming the doctrinal position of the Christian Church to which Hamlet refers in his first soliloquy. The philosophers of the ancient world had been divided on suicide; Plato regarded it as immoral.
(with some exceptions), but many others, including the Stoics, were able to excuse, or even applaud it as a noble choice in certain circumstances – particularly when the choice could be regarded as being made rationally, rather than in a distraught state. Of course, Shakespeare’s audience would have been well-acquainted with the suicides of famous Romans, including Brutus, Cassius and Mark Antony, and the Egyptian Cleopatra.

“The wise man lives as long as he ought, not so long as he can; and the most obliging present Nature has made us, and which takes from us all colour of complaint of our condition, is to have delivered into our own custody the keys of life; she has only ordered one door into life, but a hundred thousand ways out” – Tacitus, The Annals

“I am more an antique Roman than a Dane: Here’s yet some [poisoned] liquor left.”
– Horatio, at the end of the play.

The Church’s position did not shut down the suicide debate in Europe. In the 16th century Michel de Montaigne explored the issue even-handedly in his essay, ‘A Custom of the Isle of Cea’, and in the early 17th century John Donne, himself to become a minister of the church, wrote a book, Biathanatos, in which he at least entertained arguments in justification of self-murder. Shakespeare would not have known of Donne’s work (written a few years after the composition of Hamlet); but we know that he was an eager reader of Montaigne’s essays and drew on them frequently.
Kingship in 
Shakespeare’s 
Denmark

“... popped in between the election and my hopes ...”

The Danish Monarchy, which can be traced back to Gorm the Old (buried 958) and his son Harald I Bluetooth, was theoretically – as Shakespeare correctly records in the play – an elective one, though in practice it was in a very restricted sense. It was generally limited to the royal house, and although the succession of a brother of the deceased, or even a second son, would have been acceptable, the crown was commonly passed from father to eldest son. But in return for being chosen, the king had to sign a coronation charter, which regulated the balance of power between himself and his people.

This system existed until 1660/61, when Frederik III introduced a hereditary, absolutist monarchy for Denmark and Norway, based on the principle of male primogeniture.

The democratic Constitution of 5 June 1849 changed the monarchy’s status from absolute to constitutional. Then the Act of Succession of 27 March 1953 introduced the possibility of female succession, which enabled the current Queen, Margrethe II, to succeed to the throne.
Christian IV, 1588-1648 The Protestant King of Denmark at the time Shakespeare wrote his play, and James I’s future father-in-law.

Frederick III 1648-1670
The King who abolished the elective element in the Danish monarchy and introduced a hereditary and absolutist system.
Stage History

The first of Shakespeare’s four great tragedies, *Hamlet* seems to have been an immediate success. The writer and critic, Gabriel Harvey, remarked: “The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, but his *Lucrece*, and his *Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, have it in them to please the wiser sort.” After its première in 1601 or 1602, in which Richard Burbage (then in his early 30s) played the title role, it continued to be performed regularly in the London playhouses, at Court and at Oxford and Cambridge, until the theatres were closed in 1642 on the outbreak of the Civil War.

When the theatres reopened after the Restoration it was not long before the play was revived. Of a performance in Lincoln’s Inn Fields in 1661 John Downes wrote: “Hamlet being Perform’d by Mr Betterton, Sir William Davenant (having seen Mr Taylor of the Black-Fryars Company Act it, who being Instructed by the Author Mr Shakspeare) taught Mr Betterton in every Particle of it; which by his exact Performance of it, gained him Esteem and Reputation, superlative to all other Plays.”

The eighteenth century, while recognising the play’s poetic beauties, regarded it as a rather barbaric melodrama in need of purification. David Garrick omitted the graveyard and fencing scenes and spared Gertrude. “I had sworn,” he declared in 1776, “I would not leave the stage till I had rescued that noble play from all the rubbish of the fifth act.”

Nineteenth century productions were comparably modified and cut, and played before lavish sets. Henry Irving’s interpretation of the Prince was particularly successful, running for 200 consecutive performances in 1874/5 at the Lyceum Theatre.

In 1881 William Poel directed a very rare production of the 1st Quarto in London’s St George’s Hall.
Four celebrated Hamlets (clockwise from top L):

Richard Burbage c 1600
[Dulwich Picture Gallery reproduced in Peter Ackroyd’s Shakespeare: The Biography];

Thomas Betterton as Hamlet [artist unknown];

Mr Garrick in Hamlet Act 1 Sc 4,
[Folger Shakespeare Library];

Henry Irving as Hamlet in a 1893 illustration from The Idler [Project Gutenberg]
Among the friends of Fengo, there was one that above all the rest doubted of Hamblet’s practices in counterfeiting the madman, who for that cause said that it was impossible that so crafty a gallant as Hamblet, that counterfeited the fool, should be discovered with so common and unskilful practices, which might easily be perceived, and that to find out his politic presence it were necessary to invent some subtle and crafty means, more attractive, whereby the gallant might not have the leisure to use his accustomed dissimulation; which to effect he said he knew a fit way, and a most convenient mean to effect the kings desire, and thereby to entrap Hamblet in his subtleties, and cause him of his own accord to fall into the net prepared for him, and thereby evidently show his secret meaning. His device was thus, that King Fengo should make as though he were to go some long voyage concerning affairs of great importance, and that in the meantime Hamblet should be shut up alone in a chamber with his mother, wherein some other should secretly be hidden behind the hangings, unknown either to him or his mother, there to stand and hear their speeches, and the complots by them to be taken concerning the accomplishment of the dissembling fool’s presence; assuring the King that if there were any point of wisdom and perfect sense in the gallant’s spirit, that without all doubt he would easily discover it to his mother, as being devoid of all fear that she would utter or make known his secret intent, being the woman that had borne him in her body, and nourished him so carefully; and withal offered himself to be the man that should stand to harken and bear witness of Hamblet’s speeches with his mother, that he might not be esteemed a counsellor in such a case wherein he refused to be the executioner for the behoof and service of his prince. This invention pleased the King exceeding well, esteeming it as the only and sovereign remedy to heal the prince of his lunacy; and to that end making a long voyage, issued out of his palace, and rode to hunt in the forest.
Meantime the counsellor entered secretly into the Queen’s chamber, and there hid himself behind the arras, not long before the Queen and Hamblet came thither, who being crafty and politic, as soon as he was within the chamber, doubting some treason, and fearing if he should speak severely and wisely to his mother touching his secret practices he should be understood, and by that means intercepted, used his ordinary manner of dissimulation, and began to crow like a cock beating with his arms (in such manner as cocks use to strike with their wings) upon the hangings of the chamber: whereby, feeling something stirring under them, he cried, A rat, a rat! and presently drawing his sword thrust it into the hangings, which done, pulled the counsellor (half dead) out by the heels, made an end of killing him, and being slain, cut his body in pieces, which he caused to be boiled, and then cast it into an open vault or privy, that so it might serve for food to the hogs.

Belleforest’s full story, and Saxo’s History of the Danes on which it is based, are both available on the company website: stf-theatre.org.uk
HAMLET

costume designs
HAMLET

staging the duel
The stage direction “They Fight” occurs in a number of Shakespearean and other Renaissance plays, but it does not appear in Hamlet. Rather we find the stage direction “They Play”. This is for a very specific reason.

The fight at the end of the play is often referred to as a duel, but this is not correct. A duel, or ‘duello’, is an engagement to settle an argument, or respond to an insult. It is an extension of the medieval notion of a trial by combat, as in Richard II, when Bolingbroke challenges Mowbray, and:

Stands here for God, his sovereign and himself,  
On pain to be found false and recreant,  
To prove the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Mowbray,  
A traitor to his God, his king and him

They fight to satisfy honour - or justice.

The fight between Hamlet and Laertes is not a duel, but rather a prize-fight. It is a sporting contest played with blunted weapons to win points; a demonstration of skill at arms. As far as Hamlet is concerned this is a bout of swordplay and he is not in danger:

I will win for him if I can, if not, I will gain nothing but my shame and the odd hits.

Laertes, however, has a darker purpose.
The prize-fight in *Hamlet* derives from the rites of The Company of Maisters of the Science of Defence which was founded in 1540 during Henry VIII's reign to regulate the teaching of the Arte of Defence or fencing. In The Company, students or Free Scholars, had to face up to 30 opponents with a range of weapons, including rapier, quarterstaff, and broadsword in order to advance to a Provost and eventually a Master. This ‘playing the prize’ was a form of examination, in which the opponents were not trying to injure a student but test his skills. Bouts were held in public squares, or sometimes the stage of a playhouse, and were often a focus for gambling. Sometimes spectators would throw money into the ring, thus providing the ‘prize money’.

As such training was considered an essential part of a young nobleman’s education, families would hire fencing masters. The royal court of Denmark was no exception. In 1601, King Christian IV, engaged the services of Italian fencing master Salvator Fabris. Whilst in Denmark Fabris wrote an extensive treatise *Lo Schermo, Overo Scienza D’Arme*, which detailed techniques for fighting.
with the rapier, rapier and dagger, and rapier and cloak. The illustrations here are taken from the first edition, published in 1606, copies of which can be found online.

The moves choreographed for this production are taken from the principles that Fabris taught whilst in Denmark. It is a very different style from modern sports fencing but very dynamic, and exciting to watch.

In the final act Hamlet says he has ‘been in continual practice’. Had he been the Crown Prince of Denmark at that time his continual practice would have been under tutelage of Salvator Fabris. There are even rumours that Shakespeare asked Fabris to arrange the fights for the premiere of Hamlet, so perhaps - at least stylistically - we can experience a bout of fencing akin to that seen by Shakespeare himself.
HAMLET
the texts
There are three major versions of Hamlet – the ‘1st Quarto’ (Q1), published in 1603, the ‘2nd Quarto’ (Q2) published in 1604/5, and the ‘1st Folio’ (F1), published in 1623. Further quarto editions are based on Q2, and further folios are revisions of F1.

What is generally referred to as the ‘full text’ is the ‘2nd Quarto’. It is enormously long, in performance probably about 4 hours, and longer than Shakespeare’s own company could possibly have performed in the 2.00 – 5.00 slot they were allowed in the Globe Theatre. So the commonly held idea that it is the play as Shakespeare would have liked to see it played is questionable.

The ‘1st Folio’ version, which may be based on the company’s prompt book, cuts it down considerably (the “How all occasions do inform against me!” soliloquy is lost, as well as other admired passages), though most modern productions – including our own – cut out even more.

The ‘1st Quarto’

The text of the ‘1st Quarto’ was lost for centuries, a single printed copy turning up in a library in Suffolk in 1823, followed by another in Dublin over 30 years later. They remain the only two copies known. Its text is a mystery, as it differs greatly from the one you can now buy in a hundred different editions. Was it – as ‘1st Quarto’ suggests – the first version of Shakespeare’s famous play, or just a badly recorded and badly remembered version of the text of Q2 that happened to find its way into print before the authorised text?

When its text was published to a new audience in the 1820s, its peculiar readings, not least its version of the famous ‘To be or not to be’ speech, came as a rude shock –

To be, or not to be, ay, there’s the point,  
To die, to sleep, is that all? Ay, all.  
No, to sleep, to dream, ay, 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 accursèd damned.  
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 wronged,
The taste of hunger, or a tyrant’s 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.
Ay, that. Oh, this conscience makes cowards of us all.-
Lady, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered.

and it led to the text as a whole being generally derided.
To its fiercest critics it belongs with those lambasted in the
preface to the 1st Folio in 1623 as “stol’n and surreptitious
copies, maimed and deformed by frauds and stealths of
injurious impostors”.

Now literary critics and editors have been arguing about
Q1’s status for nearly two centuries. Though there are many
variations within these extremes, the three most vigorously
championed theories are these:

‘Bad Quarto’ theory: this argues that Q1, though the
first to be printed, in composition postdates the text we
know as Q2, and is a garbled version of the play which
Shakespeare’s company had first performed (we think) in
1600 – a poor ‘memorial reconstruction’ of the ‘official’ text,
probably by the actor who had performed Marcellus and
doubled as Lucianus, since these characters’ scenes seem
to be accurately remembered, while the others are not.
This actor, the argument runs, might have worked freelance
for Shakespeare’s company, and then sold his inaccurate
recollection to the eager publisher.

‘Evolution’ theory: this involves the notion of an even
earlier ‘Hamlet’, the text of which has never been found.
This is the so-called ‘Ur-Hamlet’, some suggest authored
by Thomas Kyd, others that it was Shakespeare’s own
first attempt. We know that a play of that name had been
performed by Shakespeare’s company, the Chamberlain’s
Men (possibly in co-production with Henslowe’s Admiral’s
Men), at Newington Butts in 1594, and there are references
to it as early as 1589. So this theory has it that Shakespeare
evolved his famous play from this earlier one (be it his own,
or Kyd’s, or some other writer’s work) rather than starting
afresh in perhaps 1599 and working directly from the source
in Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiquest*. This would make Q1 just a stage – perhaps the first major stage - in a relatively long evolution. It was hurried into print, perhaps even at the company’s own instigation, but before Shakespeare had completed his transformation. Q2 quickly followed in 1604 in an attempt to erase the memory of that transitional, and unsatisfactory version. F1 followed nearly twenty years later and represents the text, substantially cut for performance, though it also offers some lines unknown to Q2 and many different word and line-readings.

‘Alternative Version’ theory: this argues that Q1 may be a poorly printed but otherwise fairly accurate record of a version of the play that was edited and modified from the form of the first production of Q2 in order, perhaps, to be toured with a reduced company (interestingly, while it refers to attendant lords and others it gives no speeches at all to servants, messengers, sailors or soldiers).

After nearly two centuries in which the fortunes of these three theories have fluctuated wildly, the ‘bad quarto/memorial reconstruction’ theory probably has the upper hand at the present time. The programme note for the 2010 National Theatre production confidently states: “The First Quarto … was a pirate edition, heavily truncated and possibly transcribed (badly) by the actor who played Marcellus at the Globe.” And in his fine book, 1599, James Shapiro goes even further:

“one or more of those involved in the touring production, including the hired actor who played Marcellus (we know it was this actor because in putting the text together he remembered his own lines a lot better than he did anyone else’s) cobbled together from memory a 2,200 line version of the road production and sold it to publishers in London.”

Such certainty is questionable. Q1 certainly is very poorly printed, and it has many lines that sound unworthy of, or simply unlike, the Shakespeare we know, but it is a much better version of the play than it has often been thought. It is certainly completely produceable, and manages some developments in the play (particularly around Laertes’ return from France) in a more economical fashion than the longwinded development of Q2. ‘Piracy’ also leaves some
questions unanswered. Why are Polonius and Reynaldo called ‘Corambis’ and ‘Montano’ - was the pirate's memory really that poor? Why do some of the supposedly garbled passages make sense on their own terms? And why is Gertrude’s behaviour sometimes closer to the Belleforest source than to Q2? Zachary Lesser, a Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania and author of ‘Hamlet After Q1’ has gone so far as to argue that Q1’s ‘To be or not to be’, for all its inelegance, has a rather stronger internal logic than the version so many of us have to heart.

In all these theories speculation is heaped upon speculation. Some proponents of ‘bad quarto’, for example, explain away ‘Corambis’ and ‘Montano’ by noting that the title page refers to a performance in Oxford University, one of whose honoured founders was considered to be Robert Pullen, whose Latin name was ‘Polenius’. In Shakespeare’s time the President of Corpus Christi College was John Rainolds (or Reynolds), well-known for his fierce enmity to the theatre. Thus the changes of name from ‘Polonius’ and ‘Reynaldo’ were conceived specifically for that performance in order to avoid offence. Well, maybe …

Without adding materially to the speculation, it seems clear that there are several elements of difference in the Q1 text that point to some now irrecoverable but distinct validity in its composition, even if it is true that what came to be printed of it is a ‘poor, memorial reconstruction’.

One detail of Q1 that has influenced production for nearly two centuries is the stage direction during the ‘closet’ scene between Hamlet and Gertrude, Enter the Ghost in his night gown, in place of the mere Enter the Ghost of the later editions. This detail has fed into notions, not all of them post-Freudian, that the climactic scene between Hamlet and his mother should be played either in, or very obviously adjacent to, the royal bedchamber. It is interesting to note in this context that Q1 does not use the word ‘closet’ in reference to this scene, though it is used several times in Q2 and the Folios; critics of the theatrical habit of having Hamlet and Gertrude circling a bed, or even tussling on it, have repeatedly insisted that a ‘closet’ is NOT a bedroom …

Another detail concerns Hamlet’s age. From the conversation between Hamlet and the Sexton in Q2’s version of the graveyard scene, we can determine that Hamlet must be
approaching 30 (or older), given that he vividly remembers Yorick carrying him on his back:

Here's a skull now; this skull has lain in the earth three and twenty years.

The equivalent conversation in Q1 suggests that Hamlet need not have been more than 18 or 20 – if Yorick had died while still in post as Court Jester:

Look you, here's a skull hath been here this dozen year.

Our own feeling is that 18 or 20 is a far more credible age for Hamlet than 28 or 30, but why the disparity exists is just one more layer of the Q1 mystery. It may be relevant that Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's first Hamlet, was 33 in 1600. By then he had been a leading actor for a decade; could he also have played Hamlet in the lost play as much as a decade earlier?

Speculation is irresistible!

If you would like to read the full text of Q1, you can download it from the Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory website – stf-theatre.org.uk
HAMLET

performance

all photographs © Mark Douet
cast in order of appearance

Francisco/Reynaldo/Osric ..................................................Marc Geoffreyy
Barnardo/Player (Lucianus)/Fortinbras .........................Laurence Varda
Horatio ...........................................................................Alan Coveney
Marcellus/a Priest ..........................................................John Sandeman
The Ghost of Old Hamlet/1st Player .......................Christopher Bianchi
King Claudius ................................................................Paul Currier
Queen Gertrude ........................................................................Alan Mahon
Hamlet ..............................................................................................Alan Mahon
Polonius .................................................................Ian Barritt
Laertes/Player (Prologue) ..................................................Callum McIntyre
Ophelia ........................................................................Isabella Marshall
Rosencrantz .................................................................Joel Macey
Guildenstern ........................................................................Craig Fuller
Player (Duchess)/Gentlewoman .................................Eleanor Yates
Sexton/Gentlewoman ................................................Nicky Goldie

Lords, Ladies, Players, Soldiers, played by members of the company
The action of the play takes place at Elsinore in Denmark

production

Director .................................................................Andrew Hilton
Associate Director ...............................................Dominic Power
Assistant Director ................................................Peter Chicken
Set & Costume Designer ...........................................Max Johns
Assistant Designer ................................................Mae-Li Evans
Costume Supervisor ................................................Jane Tooze
Lighting Designer ................................................Mathew Graham
Composer & Sound Designer .................................Elizabeth Purnell
Fight Director ............................................................John Sandeman
Production Manager ........................................Nic Prior
Construction Manager ........................................Chris Samuels
Company & Stage Manager ...................................Jennifer Hunter
Deputy Stage Manager .................................................Cassie Harrison
Assistant Stage Manager ........................................Charlie Smalley
ASM Attachment ....................................................Alexander Mincks
Wardrobe Mistress ................................................Jessica Hardy
Graphic Designer ..................................................Alan Coveney
Production Photographer ........................................Mark Douet
Rehearsal Photographer ...........................................Craig Fuller
21 April
International Shakespeare Festival Craiova
esfn.eu/festivals

3 - 7 May
Theatre Royal, Winchester
21-23 Jewry Street, Winchester, Hants, SO23 8SB
01962 840440
theatreroyalwinchester.co.uk

10 - 14 May
The Dukes, Lancaster
Moor Lane, Lancaster, LA1 1QE
01524 598500
dukes-lancaster.org.uk

17 - 21 May
Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough
Westborough, Scarborough, N Yorks, YO11 1JW
01723 370541
sjt.uk.com

24 - 28 May
Derby Theatre
15 Theatre Walk, Derby, DE1 2NF
01332 59 39 39
derbytheatre.co.uk

7 - 11 June
The Lowry, Salford
Pier 8, Salford Quays, M50 3AZ
0843 208 6010
thelowry.com

14 - 18 June
Exeter Northcott Theatre
Stocker Road, Exeter, EX4 4QB
01392 72 63 63
exeternorthcott.co.uk

24 - 25 June
Shakespeare Festival in the Neuss Globe
Stresemannallee, 41460 Neuss
www.shakespeare-festival.de
+49 2131 536 99 99 9

Contact: Morag Massey, Producer
0117 963 3054 • morag@stf-theatre.org.uk

Shakespeare at the Tobacco Factory Tobacco Factory Bristol BS3 1TF
Company No 5134829 / Charity No 1104427