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The First Quarto of *Hamlet* in Film: The Revenge Tragedies of Tony Richardson and Franco Zeffirelli

In 1969, Tony Richardson released a filmed version of his acclaimed theatrical production of *Hamlet*. Twenty-one years, and many staged productions of *Hamlet* later, Franco Zeffirelli filmed yet another, and very different, *Hamlet*. Whereas Richardson's is darkly minimal, Zeffirelli's colourful and star-studded production is lavish in set and setting. Nicol Williamson's intense portrayal of Hamlet is a far cry from that of Mel Gibson's Hollywood-esque revenger. But together, these films, and other daring productions like them, demonstrated the actability of the first quarto of *Hamlet* as a performance text thereby helping to change its status among textual scholars as well, prompting them to reevaluate the 1603 quarto.

The first printed text of *Hamlet*, long known by textual scholars as one of the so-called “bad” quartos, has recently begun to be reevaluated as a text that, instead, reflects a collaborative theatrical promptbook of an early revenge tragedy by William Shakespeare. Although some remain cautious, scholars such as Andrew Gurr, Kathleen Irace, Steven Urkowitz, and Laurie Maguire, have demonstrated that many of the first quarto texts of Shakespeare’s plays, rather than being ‘corrupt,’ pirated texts, may reflect those plays as they were staged during Shakespeare’s time.¹ Because Q1 *Hamlet* is a play that appears to have been closely linked to the playing company, the Lord Chamberlain’s/King’s Men, and it is also an early printed text, it is an ideal object of study, not only for Shakespearean theatrical and film scholars, but for textual scholars as well.

In 1909 and 1910, when the New Bibliographers, beginning with W.W. Greg and A.W. Pollard initially posited their ideas of memorial reconstruction and pirated texts, textual scholars quickly accepted these theories as textual orthodoxy.² Shakespeare textual studies were primarily based upon them until the latter part of the 1980s. These hypotheses were largely responsible for the status of Q1 throughout most of the twentieth century. In the meantime, theatrical practitioners began experimenting with these early texts. They made exciting discoveries, but because of the seemingly impenetrable division between the academy and the theatre, textual scholars largely ignored these findings. There is a history behind this separation, but suffice it to say that finally, and partly because of productions such as Tony Richardson’s 1969 *Hamlet* and Franco Zeffirelli’s 1990 *Hamlet*, a new understanding began between theatrical practitioners and scholars.

Before examining the films and their contributions to new textual theories about the first quarto, it is important to understand how and why the first quarto of *Hamlet* was rejected by

scholars as a Shakespearean text in the first place.

Sometime during the first twenty or so years of the seventeenth century, most of the early manuscripts and printed texts of *Hamlet* disappeared. There were apparently no reminders of how the original revenge tragedy had been played. For two hundred years, all performances of *Hamlet* were based on the second, longer quarto (printed in 1604-05) or the shorter and more playable Folio version printed in 1623. Audiences and actors alike became rather accustomed to these later *Hamlets*, although it cannot be denied that these productions were freely revised. In 1823, a quarto text of a play called *Hamlet* was discovered among the papers and books of the Duke of Devonshire by Sir Henry Bunbury. This quarto was purchased by Huntington in the Kemble-Devonshire sale in 1914 and is in the Huntington Library today. The second of the two extant 1603 texts is rumoured to have been brought to Nottinghamshire by a student of Trinity College, Dublin. This text was purchased by Halliwell and sold to the British Museum in 1858, where it remains.³ Initial impressions were that the 1603 text preserved an early original by Shakespeare. However, during the intervening decades, and based on the significant differences between this play and the long-accepted lengthier version, most editors, agreeing with Greg and Pollard, decided that the 1603 text was indeed ‘corrupt.’ They assessed this play as non-Shakespearean, though his name appears on the title-page.⁴ These editorial judgments were probably made without the benefit of consultation with a theatrical historian or practitioner.

It appears likely that late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century productions of *Hamlet* were based largely on the playing company’s original playhouse manuscript or manuscripts. As the play continued in repertoire, and Shakespeare completed the longer revision (whether Q1 is an abridgement of Q2 as some scholars argue, or Q2 is a revision of Q1 will continue to be debated), the players probably began to incorporate borrowings from the more literary Q2.

Eventually, the early playtext was sold to a stationer and printed and is now recognised as Q1. After the Restoration, however, there were apparently no printed copies of Q1 and no early theatrical manuscripts still extant; all performances and performance texts of *Hamlet* relied of necessity on the First Folio and the second quarto, even though, unbeknownst to anyone, the early play remained hidden within the lines of the later texts.

Actors in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries published their own performance editions that reflected their own interpretations, creating editions that were indiscriminately altered by the actors and the directors involved. These acting editions made it difficult, if not impossible, for editors to find a direct textual descendent of an original Shakespearean manuscript, if that were ever possible, or indeed necessary. As a result, acting interpretations, whether or not scholars recognised it, made their way into editorial decisions.

The first documented Hamlet was the player, Richard Burbage. Pre-commonwealth references to Burbage's Hamlet portray a performance that sounds much closer to Q1 than either Q2 or F.

Paul S. Conklin finds that early seventeenth-century allusions to the play, viewed collectively, point to a stage Hamlet who was "a straightforward avenger . . . primitive...direct...elemental." In short, such faint markings in the dust that can still be discerned point to a Hamlet quite at odds with our modern conceptions.⁵

This description is *not* at odds with the Hamlet of Q1.

After Burbage, the great Hamlets through the seventeenth, eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, including Joseph Taylor, David Garrick, John Henderson, Edmund Kean, William Charles Macready, and Edwin Booth, moved further and further away from the early play. After at least 200 years without it, the 1603 *Hamlet* text was rediscovered. Still, there was only a slight and short-lived movement towards Q1 as a viable performance text.

The nineteenth-century director, William Poel, staged the 1603 play, but because of his poor planning and direction, and audience expectations based on Q2/F, his production was not well received. Poel's Q1 productions failed for a number of reasons, but one of the most ironic involved the audiences' inability to recognise the play as representative of an *Elizabethan* revenge-tragedy. The spare staging and unfamiliar language (poorly delivered by amateur actors) unsettled the Victorian audience. This was ironic because it was Poel's ambition to restore to Shakespearean productions "the *conditions of playing* for which they were designed."⁶ Perhaps Poel was simply too far ahead of his time. In any case, the first quarto simply could not be adapted successfully under those conditions and the production was considered a failure. But it did make enough of an impact to open the way for successive directors to consider using the earlier text.

Early in the twentieth century, Harley Granville-Barker used many of Poel's methods in attempting to restore some of the Elizabethan staging techniques in his *Hamlet*. It was Granville-Barker's techniques that so intrigued the actor, Sir John Gielgud. Gielgud "rekindled his interest [in playing Hamlet] by reading Granville-Barker's *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Hamlet* (1932). Any improvements he might make would be due to Barker's influence."⁷

By this time, the New Bibliographers' theories concerning the nature of many of the early Shakespearean quartos had been ensconced in the academic dialogue. In spite of this, directors and actors did not dismiss Q1 from consideration and continued to experiment with innovative ways of interpreting Shakespeare's plays. Gielgud, in attempting to return to what he considered elemental in Elizabethan theater, drew away from the maudlin theatrical standards (costumes and setting) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He brought his youth and energy to bear on his interpretation of the essence of Hamlet's character. Even though his performances were

based on Q2/F, his interpretation primed audiences and critics for the soon-to-come reintroduction of Q1 into *Hamlet* productions.

John Gielgud was the primary influence, in turn, on Laurence Olivier's interpretation. Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet* (still based on Q2/F, although Q1 was consulted and parts of it were incorporated into the film) was, thanks to Gielgud, more recognizably Elizabethan. Productions such as those starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole followed the new (old) bare stage and minimal costumes technique, and O'Toole, directed in 1963 by Olivier, used lines from the closet scene in Q1; specifically, Gertrude's answer to Hamlet:

But as I have a soul, I swear by heaven
I never knew of this most horrible murder.⁸

But it was Michael Benthall in 1957 who broke barriers when he introduced a restructuring (based on Q1) of the usual scene sequence in his production of *Hamlet* at the Old Vic. His lead was followed by Tony Richardson, whose *Hamlet*, first presented at the Round House in London and filmed in 1969, incorporated speech as well as some key scene orders from Q1.⁹ Richardson's discriminating changes did not upset audience expectations. Itrace points out that "playgoers unfamiliar with the Q2/F order of episodes do not notice awkwardness in the plot design."¹⁰

This production was a victory for the Q1 text because it caused some of the most skeptical critics to admit the theatrical possibilities and strengths of the Q1 text. Unlike Poel's earlier attempts, the result of the Richardson/Williamson production was undeniably effective; critics and audiences alike responded positively to this new direct and purposeful, and far more Elizabethan *Hamlet*, skilfully played by Nicol Williamson.

Richardson wanted his *Hamlet* to be a less obviously reflective but equally compelling

revenger. He put the focus squarely on Hamlet, minimizing or eliminating what he saw as superfluous or distracting. Many of his techniques, however, were not as new as might have been perceived at the time. Studies have demonstrated that, except for Court Masques (lavish entertainments that eventually affected theatrical performances), early Elizabethan theater was spare, with few stage props or changes of scenery. The action moved quickly without intervals or breaks between scenes,¹¹ just as it does in Q1, which “seem[s] to preserve elements of a very early production of *Hamlet*.”¹² As then, and in the tradition begun by Granville-Barker, Richardson, too, kept stage scenery to a minimum, and costumes were simple, with the exception of court dress. This was elaborate, to emphasise the staginess and artifice of the court. The other characters are viewed from Hamlet’s perspective alone, stressing his motives for revenge. **[videoclip 2–Williamson’s interpretation of the apparition of the Ghost to**

Hamlet—note the focus on Hamlet] James M. Welsh points out that:

Richardson chose not to emphasize Hamlet’s denial of life . . . [Hamlet is] the victim of a very corrupt world. . . . Claudius is stripped of the rhetorical elegance. . . . and reduced to the besotted satyr of Hamlet’s imaginings.¹³

Interestingly, the character of Claudius, not named but simply referred to as “the king” in Q1, is never fully developed in either Richardson’s or Zeffirelli’s films. Here he is truly just a ‘Player King.’

Richardson chose the Q1 arrangement of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy and the nunnery sequence. The result in the film (as it was in the staged play) is remarkable. As Irace writes, “The major effect . . . is that the change makes the sequence of events easier to follow, as several scholars have noticed.”¹⁴

The scene sequence, again as noted by Irace, plays as follows:

1. Q1, scene 5: Hamlet reveals his plan to feign madness.
2. Scene 6: Ophelia/Ofelia describes Hamlet's visit in her closet.
3. Scene 7: Polonius/Corambis decides that Hamlet has lost his mind and that this insanity is a direct result of thwarted love. Polonius/ Corambis thinks that he should eavesdrop on the young couple.

With the "To be or not to be" soliloquy and the nunnery sequence in Scene 7, there is no doubt of Polonius/Corambis's motivation nor is his plan overshadowed and forgotten as it is in the Q2/F sequences. In those versions, the old man does not get around to eavesdropping on his daughter and Hamlet until after his encounter with Hamlet reading (the fishmonger scene), after the arrival of Hamlet's supposed friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, after Hamlet's "rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy, and after Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's report to Claudius about their meeting with Hamlet. By then, Corambis/Polonius's plan to eavesdrop is almost forgotten, and the old man must remind the audience of his intentions.¹⁵

Richardson used three other elements from the early text, in addition to the scene sequence. Namely, Francisco calls "Stand ho," close to Q1's "Stand" spoken by the First Sentinel. As Irace notes: "Most productions follow Q2/F, the approaching sentinel (Bernardo) nervously speaking out of turn."**[videoclip 1–the opening of Richardson's film]**

Richardson also incorporates words from Q1 in the transition between the nunnery segment and the fishmonger episode, when his Polonius borrows phrases from Corambis in the Q1 bridge passage: "I will myself go try him. Let me alone to sound the depth of him"(7. 191-4). And Nicol Williamson's Hamlet...uses the Q1 pun "trapically" in its *Murder of Gonzago* sequence.¹⁶

Richardson's production received (and continues to receive) praise from theatrical and academic critics alike. Its use of Q1 and its rejection of elaborate scenery and costumes in favor

of a more Elizabethan style made both the play and the subsequent film, classics in the history of *Hamlet* productions. Most importantly, this film opened up new avenues of thought among academics. Many scholars now began to question the “bad” quarto theories and the status of Q1 began, slowly but inexorably, to change.

In 1989, Franco Zeffirelli used elements of Q1 in his *Hamlet* (released in 1990) as well, although he did not follow it exactly. Still, according to Kathleen Campbell:

Because the Zeffirelli *Hamlet* parallels the Q1 structure in a number of significant ways, it gives us a glimpse of what the Q1 script might be like in performance. The characters are less complex and ambiguous than Q2/F1, but they are still interesting, and the plot moves more swiftly....Like Q1, the film contains no references to the means of election...Zeffirelli goes even further than Q1 and cuts [Fortinbras] altogether.¹⁷

This cut, Campbell continues, “downplays issues of succession or kingship” allowing a more focused development of Hamlet’s dilemma. The relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude demonstrates an explicit alliance in this script, as in Q1 (ambiguous in Q2/F1). Zeffirelli uses the scene order of Q1, “giving us a glimpse of the basic structure of Q1 in action,...direct,... emotional,...full of action....In short, good theater.”¹⁸

Zeffirelli chose to film his *Hamlet* in a natural, as opposed to a staged, setting. It does not take any imagination to see that Elsinore is clearly a fortified castle, or to see the great outdoor vistas. In fact, the setting has been compared in many ways to an American Western.¹⁹ This directorial decision removes the play from the restraints of a theatrical production. It is lavish, to be sure, but not elaborate, ostentatious, or distracting in the nineteenth-century stage tradition. The costumes are natural to the time and place of the story, and yet the language is Shakespeare’s and the inclusion of Q1 into the script lends Gibson’s character the aspect of an early avenger.

Zeffirelli has been criticised because he seems to have cut-and-pasted Shakespeare's lines somewhat indiscriminately; for example, "get thee to a nunnery" appears rather unexpectedly in the Mousetrap scene. **[videoclip 3—a confused Ophelia responds to Hamlet's bizarre behaviour]** These kinds of transpositions make Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* feel anxious, hurried, and full of a nervous energy that some critics feel do not belong in the play/film.²⁰ However, as an elemental revenge tragedy, this film works well, and a Hamlet filled with just such nervous energy (as Gibson's is) lends credence to the character as an "elemental revenger," yet another reason why the lines and scene order from Q1 are appropriate.

Although Tony Richardson made cuts and changes in the language and the order of scenes in his film, the rearrangement is so skilful that the alterations are all but imperceptible and add significantly to the overall effect of the film. On the other hand, the Zeffirelli cuts are sometimes so abrupt that they might seem to detract from the story and thus run the risk of detracting from Hamlet's dilemma, a risk that could trouble critics. Audiences, however, judged the Zeffirelli/Gibson *Hamlet* a success, and from what we now know about Shakespeare, it is safe to infer that it was audience response that mattered most, not critical acclaim.

Theatre in early modern England relied primarily on the ability of the players to convince audiences. For example, most plays took place in the afternoon in the summer. *Hamlet* opens on castle battlements, at midnight, in winter. There were virtually no special effects to rely on. Mood, place, and time had to be conveyed through the language and the action of the play. The players had to be convincing without benefit of sophisticated lighting or sound effects. If a play was popular, it naturally remained in repertoire for as long as tickets could be sold, and that popularity (and success of a playing company) was almost solely dependent upon the talent of the playwright and the ability of the players to deliver. From its earliest performances, *Hamlet*

appears to have been an audience favorite. Tony Richardson and Franco Zeffirelli certainly understood this when they produced their *Hamlets*. They made careful and conscious decisions to use parts of the text of Q1 in constructing the frame of their films. Like other theatrical practitioners, they each recognised the validity of this collaborative theatrical text, and they each created, as A. H. Thorndike calls it:

A tragedy whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge, leading to the deaths of the murderers and often the death of the avenger himself.²¹

It has been stated that the Q1 sequence weakens the plot because it eliminates Hamlet's shifts in mood, and his gradual acceptance of the mission he is set to "make . . . right." But that approach ultimately serves to strengthen the argument that Q1 reflects an early Elizabethan revenge tragedy, replete with quick action, blood lust, and a convincing hero. Q1 *Hamlet* has all of this.

Today, thanks in large part to the theatrical willingness of directors such as Tony Richardson and Franco Zeffirelli to experiment with alternate texts and interpretations, "bad" quartos have been and are being reexamined by textual scholars. Most of the early, supposedly "bad" quartos have been or are beginning to be regarded as important texts in the canons of Shakespeare's plays. The Oxford Shakespeare has already included Q *Lear* alongside the Folio version.²² It is only a matter of time before Q1 *Hamlet* takes its rightful place beside the Q2 and F1 *Hamlets* as a legitimate part of the theatrical and textual history of one of Shakespeare's most popular and most frequently performed plays.

Notes

- ¹ Andrew Gurr, ed, *The First Quarto of Henry V* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-4; Gurr, "Maximal and Minimal Texts: Shakespeare versus the Globe," *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (1999): 68-87; Kathleen Irace, ed, *The First Quarto of Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20; Steven Urkowitz, "Back to Basics: Thinking about the *Hamlet* First Quarto," *The Hamlet First Published*, ed. Thomas Clayton (London: Associated University Press, 1992), 257-291; Laurie E. Maguire, *Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The 'Bad' Quartos and Their Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21-71.
- ² W.W. Greg, ed, *The Merry Wives of Windsor 1602* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), xxxix-xli; A.W. Pollard, *Shakespeare Folios and Quartos: A Study in the Bibliography of Shakespeare's Plays, 1594-1685* (London: Methuen, 1909), 9.
- ³ '*Hamlet*' First Quarto, 1603, Shakespeare Quarto Facsimiles No. 7, Intro. By W. W. Greg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1.
- ⁴ See Harold Jenkins, ed, *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), 18-20; G.R. Hibbard, ed, *Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 69, among others.
- ⁵ John Mills, *Hamlet on Stage: The Great Tradition* (Westport; CN: Greenwood Press, 1985), 5.
- ⁶ Marion O'Connor, "Useful in the Year 1999: William Poel and Shakespeare's 'Build of Stage,'" *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (1999): 18, original emphasis.
- ⁷ Mills, 225.
- ⁸ Irace, *Hamlet* 11.83-84.
- ⁹ See Don Radovich, *Tony Richardson: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport; CN: Greenwood Press, 1995), 86.
- ¹⁰ Irace, *Hamlet* 21.
- ¹¹ See Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage: 1572-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24; "The Theater in Shakespeare's Time," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 62, eds. James K. Bracken and Joel Silver (Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman, Inc., 1996), 395.
- ¹² Irace, *Hamlet* 17.
- ¹³ James M. Welsh, "Introduction: Running the Distance," *The Cinema of Tony Richardson: Essays and Interviews*, ed. James M. Welsh and John C. Tibbetts (Albany; NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 15.
- ¹⁴ Irace, "Origins and Agents of Q1 *Hamlet*," *The Hamlet First Published*, ed. Thomas Clayton (London: Associated University Press, 1992), 104.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ¹⁶ Irace, *Hamlet* 22.
- ¹⁷ Kathleen Campbell, "Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*-Q1 in Performance," *Shakespeare on Film Newsletter*, 16 (1991): 7-8.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8. It is worth pointing out Campbell's evaluation of audience response to this film. "Though some of us may rue the loss of much of Shakespeare's language and prefer the more complex characters of Q2/F1, the film reminds us that at the heart of the play is a great story that, in itself, catches the imagination. Audiences with whom I viewed the film liked this *Hamlet*" (*Ibid.*)
- ¹⁹ Kathy M. Howlett, "The Frame's the Thing," *Framing Shakespeare on Film* (Athens; OH: Ohio University Press, 2000), 20-51.
- ²⁰ Welsh, 16.
- ²¹ A.H. Thorndike, "The Relations of *Hamlet* to the Contemporary Revenge Play," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 27 (1902) 118, qtd. in Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Gloucester; MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 62.
- ²² In 1986, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor did not believe that the *Hamlet* textual questions had been as fully examined as those of *Lear* (never held to be one of the "bad" quartos), and did not include more than one version of the play in the Oxford *Complete Works*. But by 1990, they stated that "it now seems obvious that we should have included two versions of *Hamlet*, as we did of *King Lear*." Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, "The Oxford Shakespeare Re-viewed," *Analytical & Enumerative Bibliography* 4 (1990): 16-17.