

## The Rest Is Not Silence: A Reply to John Russell Brown\*

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It is not surprising that John Russell Brown's vigorous, witty, and energetic paper comes out of a symposium on paronomasia at the University of Münster in July 1992. The paper is strongly appropriate for that occasion, yet there are other ways of looking at the last moments of *Hamlet* that may not be so specifically related to paronomasia. Brown rather blurs the linguistic continuum leading from literal puns (homophonic use), to general wordplay, to multiple meanings, which have nothing to do with puns at all. His discussion of at least five meanings of "The rest is silence," which is at the heart of his paper, is a far cry from paronomasia. Yet all the verbal resources of *Hamlet* are marshalled significantly and intelligently. Brown is not only a subtle critic of language but also a skillful commentator on performance. He says that "Hamlet is creating a paronomasia of performance" (20) in his scene with Ophelia in 3.2., and he is everywhere sensitive to performance implications of language.

There is one assumption throughout that I find odd: that Hamlet has a secret that he never reveals and that "Wordplay allows him to escape without revealing his secret" (26). This seems to me a romantic and skewed interpretation, but Brown insists on it with a quantity of repetition that I find surprising. Hamlet has a "reluctance to tell all" (23), he practises "avoidance-tactics," "refusing to talk further" (24), and "the audience is encouraged to expect that the hero will unmask and everything will be clarified" (24), but this does not happen. What "single and simple message" (21) does the hero have that Brown is as

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\*Reference: John Russell Brown, "Multiplicity of Meaning in the Last Moments of *Hamlet*," *Connotations* 2.1 (1992): 16-33.

unsuccessful as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in plucking out? I am baffled by this kind of pursuit, which violates the existential nature of Hamlet's engagement with the audience, which is also an engagement with himself. To say that, even in soliloquy, Hamlet "is not always in control" (21) seems to me to mistake the protagonist's relation to himself as well as to the spectators. For Hamlet to be "in control" of his discourse implies a purposiveness that is foreign to his character. Hamlet speaks in order to find out what he wants to say; he is one of the audiences to his own words, especially in soliloquy. Is Hamlet trying, imperfectly, to express his meanings, or, as Brown says, to use punning language and wordplay to conceal his meanings? This implies that there is another esoteric play behind the public play that will reveal itself only to the initiated. Criticism, therefore, becomes an act of piercing through Hamlet's (and Shakespeare's) concealments and masks.

Brown fixes his discussion on Hamlet's last words, "The rest is silence," to which he attributes at least five separate meanings. These lines "could be a joke, a profound searching of the unknown, a resignation to the fate of a sparrow, the voice of bitter despair, or a matter of fact" (32). I wonder why Brown chooses such relatively unambiguous lines to expend his energy on, except that these lines are connected with his idea of Hamlet's unrevealed mystery: "So he might speak of his failure to tell all, and die making an excuse for his rashness or ineffectuality" (26). But it is fairly conventional for the protagonist at his death to run out of time and to have a lot more to say than he can possibly fit in. This explains why characters such as Hotspur and Antony die in the middle of a sentence. Even the Ghost in *Hamlet* "could a tale unfold"—different from the tale he is actually telling—that would harrow up Hamlet's "soul, freeze thy young blood, / Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres" (1.5.16-17). I cannot understand why Brown should single out "The rest is silence" to clinch his point about Hamlet's holding out on us "with such an 'ambiguous giving out,' in glancing, unreliable wordplay, at this crucial last moment" (27). This is not really wordplay at all in comparison with Hamlet's earlier, dazzling display of paronomasia.

Brown's fifth and final explanation of "The rest is silence" I find disappointing: that Shakespeare is speaking through the voice of his

protagonist, "telling the audience and the actor that he, the dramatist, would not, or could not, go a word further in the presentation of this, his most verbally brilliant and baffling hero" (27). Brown is at his most characteristic and extravagant moment here, insisting on a cutely paradoxical interposition of Shakespeare into his play. Shakespeare is brought on to tell us, confidentially, in place of Hamlet the character, that "he has 'no more to say,' still less any further mystery to disclose" (28). Brown is very self-consciously slipping back into the romantic mysteries of Sir Sidney Lee in the late nineteenth century, as if at certain crucial moments the dramatic character can't be trusted with enunciating points that have an important autobiographical clang.

Hamlet's last words are actually "O, o, o, o," which occur only in the Folio text, and which Harold Jenkins, the Arden editor, dismisses as an actor's interpolation by Richard Burbage, which has no authority in Shakespeare's authentic text. Presumably, Brown also rejects the O-groans because he says that "We have no idea what the four O's were intended to mean and still less notion of what Shakespeare thought about them" (28). But O-groans occur in *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and in many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. They were a fairly conventional emotional gesture in these plays, especially associated with death. We do not know precisely how the O-groans got into the Folio text of *Hamlet*, but one plausible suggestion is that they were part of Shakespeare's extensive revision of the earlier Quarto 2 version.

By the demands of logic, I have been betrayed into mounting a vigorous quarrel with an essay I greatly admire and with an author who has consistently titillated my intellectual curiosity in conversation, in lecture, and in print. Brown is creating his own original *Hamlet* for the occasion, and I think he is carried away with a passion to pluck out the heart of Hamlet's mystery and to bring on Shakespeare himself as the taunting author. This is an admirable enterprise, and I feel a sense of disloyalty in not being able to join it. I am inclined to accept Hamlet for what he is and not to probe his riddling discourse for secrets that he does not choose to reveal. Perhaps I believe in the Freudian unconscious more firmly than Brown does, which applies to dramatic characters as well as their creators. In other words, there is a certain stratum of literary and dramatic discourse that is hidden from both

character and author alike. There is no way of exercising the control and the deliberateness that Brown posits. This is especially true of *Hamlet*, where the protagonist is trying out roles and modes of discourse throughout the play.

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