

Hamlet and After*

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Coming late in a debate that has gone on for some time one risks appearing censorious; yet the issues concerning *Hamlet* broached in *Connotations* over much of 1992 are important and do invite further discussion. It is with a consciousness of the difficulties attending comment on the pronouncements of such eminent scholars as John Russell Brown, Dieter Mehl, and Maurice Charney that I ask boldness to be my friend. I shall need it.

Brown's original essay sets out (somewhat surprisingly without mentioning scholars such as Sister Miriam Joseph,¹ M. M. Mahood,² and Brian Vickers³) from the fact that Hamlet is fond of wordplay and then argues that this fondness also colours Hamlet's last words: "the rest is silence" (5.2.350).⁴ There are several details inviting queries,⁵ but my principle objection is that Brown constantly tends to decontextualise. Not all puns are equal, indeed any play on words must surely be seen as part of a dramatic character in a specific situation. The example of Mercutio's dying pun, which Brown adduces in his second contribution (276) illustrates the point: "Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man" (RJ 3.1.94). The contrast to Hamlet's last words is striking indeed. It also illustrates a second main point: that there exists a vital difference between utterances of dramatic characters intentionally ambiguous or playful and utterances that are not. (Borderline cases will, of course, occur, but do not impair the argument.) A critic is free to consult the *OED* (in fact, I have been blamed for doing it too often) and find any number of possible meanings for words. Brown

*Reference: Anthony Brian Taylor, "Arthur Golding and the Elizabethan Progress of Actaeon's Dogs," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 207-223.

does and comes up with five readings of Hamlet's last sentence. There is no harm in that, though the first "All that remains for me to say must be unspoken" surely hits it in one, or nearly.

The impression, eloquently created by Brown, that Hamlet is constantly holding back, at the last moment as in many others, has, I think, been ably refuted by Charney (186-87), who also quarrels, albeit against his will, with Brown on five readings (187-88). Thirdly, Charney takes up the question, touched on by Brown in his first contribution (28-29), of the four O's found in the Folio version of *Hamlet* after "silence." While Charney mildly considers them as possibly part of Shakespeare's revision, Mehl wholeheartedly asserts they "have as much right to stand in the text of *Hamlet* . . . as any other addition in this version of the play" (183). In other words, he accepts the argumentation of Wells and Taylor which led to the *Hamlet* text in the new Oxford collected edition,⁶ equally enthusiastically adopted and executed (now there's a word with multiple meanings indeed!) by Hibbard in his separate edition of this play.⁷ Mehl cannot believe that Hamlet should have died with a conscious pun on his lips (183), but generally stresses that what matters is not so much multiplicity of meanings as "the ultimate failure of language" (ibid.). The first view chimes in with Charney's and my own feeling, the second strikes me as something of an anachronism. There were at the time plenty of formulaic expressions, dear to rhetoric, that language is insufficient. At bottom, however, the concept is alien to the period, it is implicitly refuted, just like Othello's modest personal disclaimer regarding skills of oratory (*OTH* 1.3.81 ff.) or Antony's, for that matter (*JC* 3.2.216 ff.), by the very language employed.

In his rejoinder, Brown goes mainly for the "'O, o, o, o.' *Dyes*" issue, extending it to an all-out attack on the Taylor-Wells view of the F text (280 ff.). I am very much in sympathy with the line he takes, particularly with the notion that each change in the Folio "should be examined individually" (282); the trouble is that a short discursive essay can hardly do more than begin to embark on that particular debate, which is bound to continue for some time to come. From *paronomasia* (a conference paper on which formed the basis of Brown's first contribution) the argument has—already in the very first contribution itself, as duly observed by Charney (186)—at first insensibly, then quite strongly shifted (resembling

Hamlet with his bewildered companions in 1.5) to quite different ground. And each reply, Charney's as well as Mehl's, perhaps inevitably, brought into play yet other issues meriting comment. There is no reason why it should stop at this, I in my turn will have furnished scope for further comment when I say that the issue of what is commonly called cuts in F—not just the last great soliloquy in 4.4, but also the cuts in 3.4 that are generally deemed quite astute—still call for fresh, systematic consideration. If indeed Jenkins' notion of "Playhouse Interpolations"⁸ (of which the disputed O's form a prime instance) is to be finally ditched, if one is ready seriously to consider adopting the hypothesis that F represents Shakespeare's second thoughts, then not just additions but also excisions, indeed all substantive variations between F and Q2 need to be pondered in every respect. That would be worth doing, but would exceed a brief note. It must be left to a separate study.

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NOTES

¹Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (New York: Columbia UP, 1947).

²M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (1957; rpt. London: Methuen, 1968).

³Brian Vickers, *The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose* (London: Methuen, 1968) esp. 248-71.

⁴Quotations and line count follow Peter Alexander's edition: Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951; rpt. 1960)—not simply because I have it to hand, but because it represents a convenient traditional middle ground.

⁵Hamlet's mother/father remark to Claudius in 4.3.51-53 is surely no "conscious withdrawal" (Brown 22) but a deft parting shot drawing blood; one should not express, as Brown does (24) surprise at Hamlet describing his madness to Laertes in 5.2.223-31, "as if it had been entirely real"; there is no basis in the text to place the final duel in 5.2 "at the midnight hour" (24): these problematic points are just examples, there are still others.

⁶Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, gen. eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1986) 737-77. Taylor furnished the concrete arguments in favour of the hypothesis that *Hamlet* in F was set by compositor E from Shakespeare's manuscript. See "The Folio Copy for *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*," *ShQ* 34 (1983): 44-61.

⁷The Oxford Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987). Cf. my review of Hibbard alone in *N&Q* ns 35 (1988): 365-68, and of his edition together with Harold Jenkins' New Arden Edition (1984) and Philip Edwards' New Cambridge edition (1985) in *Anglia* 108 (1990): 233-42.

⁸Harold Jenkins, "Playhouse Interpolations in the Folio Text of *Hamlet*," *Studies in Bibliography* 13 (1960): 31-47.