

## Hamlet's Last Moments: A Note on John Russell Brown\*

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Though I am in almost complete agreement with John Russell Brown's close reading of Hamlet's dying words and with his contention that "Shakespeare chose, very positively, to provide a multiplicity of meanings at this crucial point" (30), I wonder whether his analysis, helpful as it is for an understanding of the text in the study, is equally valid in the theatre. If we were speaking of one of Shakespeare's sonnets I should find it much easier to believe in the co-existence of four or five distinct meanings, even if they "tend to cancel each other out" (27). In performance, however, we might find ourselves rather in the position of Jane Austen's "inferior young man" Mr. Rushworth, who "hardly knew what to do with so much meaning."<sup>1</sup> It is true that each actor will have to choose between a range of possible interpretations, as John Russell Brown says—and no-one knows it better!—, but it is also worth paying closer attention to the textual problem involved.

Thinking about Hamlet's last moments on the stage, I should like to make a plea for the Folio's reading, "The rest is silence. O, o, o, o."<sup>2</sup> The four letters following "silence" are easily one of the most neglected utterances in the canon, surprising enough in a play in which hardly a single punctuation mark has been left unscrutinized and uncommented on.<sup>3</sup> Most editions either ignore them completely or dismiss them as some actor's invention. An honourable early exception is the edition of Nicolaus Delius where he explains the Folio reading as "Hamlets Todesgestöhn."<sup>4</sup> The only modern edition I know to take this reading seriously is The Oxford Shakespeare. *The Complete Works*,<sup>5</sup> possibly for

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

the first time in three centuries, faithfully reproduces the Folio at this point, whereas G. R. Hibbard in his single-volume edition translates the four letters into a stage direction: "*He gives a long sigh and dies.*"<sup>6</sup> This seems to me rather too specific, but at least the editor recognises that the editors of the First Folio knew what they were doing.

John Russell Brown assumes, as many editors have done, that we owe the Folio's "addition" to James Burbage, and one must agree with him 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). Still, they are the earliest commentary on Hamlet's silence we have and they may well be part of Shakespeare's own revision of the play. Whatever their precise meaning, they confirm the impression that at this point in the play it is not so much "multiplicity of meanings" that is the issue, as the ultimate failure of language. Hamlet knows that as far as he is concerned the time for words has passed, that there is nothing but silence left to him. It is, of course, impossible to rule out that, for the more sophisticated, other meanings of "rest" may be present here and that they will also affect our sense of "silence"; but surely, in performance the primary meaning for the audience is that the moment has come when speech is cut off by death and anything that still needs to be said about Hamlet will have to be said by others. There are Shakespearean characters who die with a pun on their lips,<sup>7</sup> but I find it difficult to accept the suggestion that this is an instance of it. More relevant than the possible range of meanings and associations in Hamlet's last sentence seems to me the Folio's blunt statement that the wonderfully rich rhetoric of the Prince has faded into inarticulate sound before it is finally reduced to silence. The four O's have therefore as much right to stand in the text of *Hamlet* (unless the Folio is completely discarded) as any other addition in this version of the play.

"There is no more to say"<sup>8</sup> seems to be the final impression at the end of many Shakespearean tragedies, and in this general sense I agree with Brown that the closing lines of several plays have something of an authorial ring. Iago refuses to disclose the secret of his motives and Albany (or Edgar, according to which *Lear* we choose) knows likewise about the futility of words in the face of an experience beyond the

comprehension of bystanders and beyond the glib rhetoric of concluding couplets, of a Fortinbras, Lodovico, Albany or Malcolm.

Brown is absolutely right in stressing that our reaction to Hamlet's death and consequently our interpretation of his last words is largely dependent on the way he has been presented to us throughout the play and that the actor has an almost infinite number of options.<sup>9</sup> I would merely suggest that, as the Folio-text seems to indicate, the earliest Hamlet (and possibly his author) meant to emphasize above all the crude fact of the hero's death rather than offering an authoritative dying speech. Whether by Shakespeare, by Burbage or some other man of the theatre, Hamlet's last utterance, between speech and ultimate silence, must at least be taken into account as a "perceptive gloss on the part"<sup>10</sup> by one of his contemporaries, if not by his maker.

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<sup>1</sup>*Mansfield Park* II.1., ed. with an introd. by Tony Tanner (1966; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986) 202.

<sup>2</sup>This is followed by the stage direction "*dies.*" The Quarto of 1604-5 has only Hamlet's last words, "The rest is silence," with no stage direction. The "bad" Quarto of 1603, which sometimes seems to preserve revealing memories of a performance, has a completely different, rather improbable dying speech, ending in "Farewell *Horatio*, heuen receiue my soule" and the direction "*Ham. dies.*"

<sup>3</sup>The most eloquent and persuasive defence I have seen is by Terence Hawkes: "If this is interpolation, give us excess of it." Cf. his "That Shakespetherian Rag," *Essays and Studies* 30 (1977): 22-38, rpt. in *That Shakespetherian Rag* (London: Methuen, 1986) 73-119.

<sup>4</sup>*Shakespeare's Werke*, ed. Nicolaus Delius, 3rd rev. ed., vol. 2 (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs) 425. Jenkins, representing what seems to be the *communis opinio*, refers to "Hamlet's dying groans" as "theatrical accretions to Shakespeare's dialogue," Arden Edition (London: Methuen, 1982) 62. John Dover Wilson's note on Hamlet's silence is characteristically plain: "F1 ludicrously adds 'O, o, o, o.'" (Cambridge Edition, 2nd ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964] 258).

<sup>5</sup>Eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>(Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987). In support of his emendation, Hibbard quotes E. A. J. Honigmann's important article "Re-enter the Stage Direction: Shakespeare and Some Contemporaries," *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976): 117-25, esp. 123, and he states

that the Folio reading "has been the object of unjustified derision" (352). Honigmann's interesting article makes no direct reference to the *Hamlet* passage.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, Mercutio's "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man" (3.1.98-99; ed. Brian Gibbons, Arden Edition [London: Methuen, 1980]).

<sup>8</sup>*Troilus and Cressida* 5.10.22 (ed. Kenneth Palmer, Arden Edition [London: Methuen, 1982]).

<sup>9</sup>This is also emphasized in Marvin Rosenberg's stimulating study *The Masks of Hamlet* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1992), who suggests a range of possible meanings even beyond John Russell Brown: "Os can be most eloquent. (Try them)" (924). It would be foolish to deny, though, that, for the actor at least, "the Os may indicate, apart from dying, something of the final mystery of Hamlet's last perception" (923).

<sup>10</sup>See Hawkes 22.