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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 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, Kathl

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, Ricnh17(t)-1(to)28(d)-1(tli)-o(nh17(tbi)-1.6(c)-14.7gi)-1.6

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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

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.

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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 app th ot936.9(t t)42(es)-

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.

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