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Shakespeare I

**Quarto or Quart-No?**

The unsure hand behind the Quarto 1 version of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy erases much of what makes Hamlet a fascinating and elusive character. Differences in style not only allow for different performance possibilities, but also describe opposite personalities: the Folio’s Hamlet is self-reflexive, impassioned, and uncertain whereas the Quarto’s Hamlet is steadfast and plain. The Folio’s soliloquy emphasizes a link between Hamlet’s philosophical nature and his indecisiveness; as a result, it turns out the question isn’t “to be or not to be” but “to act or not to act”. This suggests that Hamlet delays action because he thinks too much. Neither question confuses the Quarto’s hero, whose soliloquy is an explanation of a straightforward conscience opposing suicide. By ignoring the gap between Hamlet’s seeming impulsiveness in this soliloquy and his indecision throughout the rest of the play, the Quarto a less compelling character.

The soliloquies have similar content but follow different logics to different meanings, illustrating how Folio and Quarto Hamlets subscribe to opposite philosophies. The first distinction is that Hamlet is decisive enough to answer the question only in the Quarto. Both soliloquies begin by considering the dilemma “to be, or not to be” (1710) before diverging in the next breath. In the Folio, Hamlet declares the dilemma a “Question” and proceeds to unpack the question while giving equal weight to both options: the next two lines consider life; the following two consider death. In the Quarto, Hamlet knows the answer before he even poses the dilemma, which is not a question but a “Point”. The next line “to Die, to sleep” makes clear that the relevant meaning of point is “A subject or matter in dispute or under discussion” (OED 10a), and this subject matter is the choice of suicide. Contrasting with Folio Hamlet’s even-keeled examination, Quarto Hamlet’s mind has been made against suicide as he begins his speech—the rest is exposition.

In both versions, consideration of what happens after death leads Hamlet to decide not to kill himself. But the two envision different afterlives and so when the Quarto’s Hamlet is moved by the idea of a quid pro quo, the Folio’s Hamlet dithers out of fear of an unknown fate. Both soliloquies begin with the image of death as a kind of sleep. Next in the Quarto, the sleeper’s soul or consciousness enters a dream within the sleep. Death then becomes the dream itself and from this dream the subject awakes into an afterlife that is fair and pleasurable and which emerges as a reality. While the description that it “pusles the braine and doth counfond the sense” (832) seems to suggest a negative view, because the next line “which makes vs rather beare those euilles we haue” follows in parallel structure, puzzling the brain and confounding the sense must mean overthrowing the rational or visceral impulses towards suicide. Hamlet concludes that people put up with the difficulties of earthly existence because they hope they will be rewarded with this worthwhile and real future. This conscience turns them into cowards—they would put up with life’s evils because they await a better future. They resist the temptation of suicide not out of moral purpose or fortitude but simply out of fear. While the Folio’s Hamlet is preoccupied with deciding whether suicide or suffering is nobler, the Quarto’s Hamlet sees nothing noble in either.

Quarto Hamlet’s less nuanced world is clearest in his vision of the afterlife. While the Quarto’s afterlife is a reality after death, in the Folio it is just a dream, “perchance” (1719) to occur, in the sleep of death. The Quarto Hamlet’s afterlife at which “the happy smile, and the accursed damn’d” (821) suggests a binary similar to heaven and hell. His certainty in his projection is also marked in his substitution of “passenger” (819) for “traueller” (1734), a word that replaces connotations of wandering with the passivity and inevitability of conveyance.

The Folio’s Hamlet is more skeptical. Where the Quarto’s Hamlet meets life after death with “joyfull hope” (822), the Folio’s Hamlet feels “dread” (1732). He doesn’t know if the happy smile on arriving at the undiscovered country because what he knows is that from that “borne / no traueller returns” (1733-4). Borne means “the limit or terminus of a race, journey, or course; the ultimate point aimed at, or to which anything tends; destination, goal” (OED 3a), making it redundant to note that travelers don’t return from their destinations. This imbues the line with dread by doubling the lack of return. The actor’s vocal performance of this line also underscores that something is rotten in the undiscovered country: the line deviates from iambic pentameter with spondaic (no tra-[uel-ler]), pyrrhic ([tra]-uel-ler), and trochaic (pu-zels) substitutions. This disorder in the soliloquy’s rhythm mirrors Hamlet’s anxiety. He concludes that people put up with life’s hardships because they are afraid of the uncertain ills of afterlife.

This sentence “But that the dread of something after death…then flye to others that we know not of” (1732-6) reveals the most significant difference between the soliloquies and the true focus of the Folio’s: the connection between thought and action. It is not the logic of the brain that is puzzled, but the will to act (1734). While the Quarto’s soliloquy simply resists suicide, the very pursuit of an answer in the Folio gives rise to a new conflict in which conscience makes cowards and thought sickens resolution and dissolves enterprise. This creates a difference in stakes. Both Hamlets conclude that action cannot be taken, but this conclusion has greater resonance in the Folio. The paralyzed action refers to two things: Hamlet won’t kill himself, or avenge his father’s death. And so this soliloquy may clarify our understanding of Hamlet’s inability throughout the play to take decisive and premeditated action.

The different meanings of the soliloquies also change our impression of Hamlet himself. The scope of his concerns are widened in the Folio, making his a more fully-rounded and intriguing personality. For example, the miseries of existence listed in the Folio are of a higher order. Through the use of metonymy (the insolence of Office) and personification (Love, Law) and Hamlet’s aestheticization of these experiences into the image of a load of sorrows (*fardle*, OED 2b), one bears while grunting and sweating. As a result, the Folio’s examples lose their quality as index of specific experiences and instead function as metaphor for all traumas. As it is made less specific and separated from its human context, misery is enlarged but it loses out on an opportunity for pathos. In contrast, Quarto Hamlet is a storyteller—he specifies a widow and an orphan as the objects of oppression and wrongs and this imbues his soliloquy with emotive imagery. The Folio’s more metaphysical focus is again underscored when the “scornes and flattery of the world” (823) in the Quarto become the less earthly “Whips and Scornes of time” (1724).

The differences in style and diction expand Folio Hamlet’s personality possibilities. For example, it is possible to perform a Folio Hamlet with a sense of humor and irony. When he speaks of the miseries “that Flesh is heyre too” (1717), *heir* means “one to whom something is morally due” (OED 2), but the word also contains more positive but paradoxical connotations of succession and inheritance. Folio Hamlet could also be portrayed as quixotic. His flighty, figurative language suggests his view of the world might not only be more nuanced and less dualistic, but perhaps of a slightly different world altogether. While Ophelia is a “Lady” (836) in the Quarto, in the Folio Hamlet addresses her as a “nimph” (1743), which means a beautiful young woman, but chiefly refers to a mythological, semi-divine spirit. Unlike his counterpart, he also describes a world in which intangible concepts are personified; for example, Fortune and Time become foes wielding slings, arrows, whips, and scorn.

While Fortune is usually anthropomorphized as a goddess Fortuna or Lady Fortune and Time as the elderly Father Time, Hamlet customizes these depictions in the Folio. Fortune is “outrageous”, or “excessively injurious” (OED 1) and martial, and Time is abusive and insulting. The inventiveness and complexity of the images that appear in the Folio soliloquy denote those same qualities in the mind that would create them. Hamlet’s ever more indecisive nature in the Folio is reflected in the intricate rhetorical structure. The Quarto follows a straightforward logic: don’t decide to not be. The argument is more masterful and convoluted in the Folio. There, subtle transitions keep revising the meaning of what has just been said; for example, “take Armes against a Sea of troubles” in 1713 appears to continue the combative imagery of 1712, but the next line “and by opposing end them” reveals that Hamlet has switched to “not being”. Another transition occurs in 1719: dying is first equated with sleeping no more (1715), but “to dye to sleep” neatly returns us to life with “to sleep, perchance to Dream.” On a larger scale, the soliloquy rounds itself into a great circle—the examination of to be or not revises itself into a puzzled will that cannot decide to act or not.

Another good example of Hamlet’s inventiveness occurs in 1716, where he says that to sleep is to end “heart-ake”. This is the first recorded usage of *heartache* to describe “pain or anguish of mind, esp. that arising from disappointed hope or affection” (OED 2) instead of a physical pain. It’s a poetic and self-aware mind that would invent a word to connect the ache of the mind to the heart, the seat of emotion.

Figurative images like “heart-ake” also infuse the Folio version with a stronger emotional undercurrent. Right before Hamlet envisions the end to all heartaches, he takes arms against a sea of troubles. The power of this image lies in the shades of meaning in the word sea, which can “describe a copious or overwhelming quantity or mass” (OED 2), or is “with reference to metaphorical drowning” (OED 3). This idea of taking arms against the sea encapsulates the immensity of the challenge and through the inevitable futility of the endeavor, hints towards poignancy. Similarly, the choice to describe having died as having “shuffel’d off this mortall coile” fills Hamlet’s view towards death with a sense of gloomy yearning. Also absent in the Quarto is one of the soliloquy’s most compelling images: conscience as an illness that sickens the thinker and replaces the ruddy glow of Resolution with the pale cast of Thought. As with “heartache,” the Folio’s Hamlet ascribes biological manifestations to functions of the mind as a way to breach the barrier between text/speech and feeling.

This kind of awareness and concern with language makes the Folio’s Hamlet a more nuanced and warm-bodied character. His language also differentiates the meaning of his soliloquy from what appears in the Quarto by emphasizing that final conflict between thought and action. This makes the plot more complex as it suggests Hamlet’s tragic flaw in the play—his indecision. All of these are nuances that better lend the Folio’s Hamlet to dramatic performance and makes him a more compelling character.

Word Count: 1868

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet.* From handout provided in class (1603 Quarto 1, 1623 Folio 1). Print.