

New Old Readings in the Texts of *Hamlet*

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This paper seeks to draw attention to several original readings in the early texts of *Hamlet* – specifically those from which the play is commonly known– which traditional or standard critical editing has relegated to oblivion in the small print of textual apparatuses, that section of critical editions which the average reader seldom or never reads.

The standard critical edition of *Hamlet* aims to reconstruct or approximate the text its author wrote. To that end, editors study the textual transmission of the play, by analysing and comparing its early texts, especially those that are not derivatives from any previous witness and therefore are accorded primary authority: namely, the First Quarto printed in 1603, the Second Quarto dated 1604/5 and the First Folio published in 1623 (no witness has survived that has a direct relationship with the author's hand, such as holographs or authorially corrected copies).¹ Having a preconceived history of the 'text' of *Hamlet*, editors establish their critical texts either by choosing between the variants present in the Second Quarto and the First Folio (the First Quarto contains a version of the play markedly distinct from the received *Hamlet* and is not usually considered authoritative), or by basing their critical edition on one of these and correcting its assumed errors with variants from the other authoritative witness (apart from modern conjectural emendations). In both cases, a number of readings are discarded on the grounds that they are errors of transmission, or authorial first thoughts, although in many cases the only criterion for such a discrimination is of aesthetic or stylistic nature; and the new edited text is an eclectic or conflated version that claims to correspond to the author's intentions.²

Yet, for the last 15 years or so, this aim of reconstructing authorial intentions (especially final intentions), has been questioned as the only valid goal or factor in critical editing, and so has the eclectic reconstruction of an ideal, stable and unique authentic text. Alternative editorial approaches focus on the social and collaborative aspects of the production of literary texts, on their cultural and historical dimension, or on their multiplicity, and their unstable, fluid nature.³

¹ For these conclusions on the filiation of the 17th-century textual witnesses of *Hamlet*, see Chambers (1930: I, 408-425) and Greg (1970).

² For fundamental references in Shakespearean editing, see Greg (1942: vii-iv; 1950) and Bowers (1955; 1962).

³ See McGann (1983), Parker (1984), McKenzie (1986), Hay (1987; 1988), Gabler (1987), Shillingsbrug (1989), Oliphant and Bradford (1990); for Shakespearean textual criticism, see Goldberg (1986), and Trousdale (1987; 1990), Bate (1991); and Taylor and Warren (1983), Werstine (1988) and the Oxford edition of Wells and Taylor

In an attempt to apply these new editing principles to a scholarly edition of *Hamlet*, the illusion of the authentic Shakespearian *Hamlet* may be replaced by less abstract objectives: the texts in the early witnesses themselves. These concrete forms of *Hamlet* are not exactly what the author wrote, but given the problematic, if not fallacious, character of the aim of reconstructing the author's text, they may be an alternative point of reference in scholarly editing. They are historical facts and possess a cultural and historical value that may be of interest for readers. The textual differences among them may no longer be discriminated as authentic and corrupted variants, as correct or genuine and incorrect or spurious, since all readings have the right of their historicity. As Jerome McGann (1985: 192) suggests in quoting the historian R. G. Collingwood: "Of historical method in general, (...) it should not begin by asking the question 'Is this right or wrong' but rather, 'What does this mean'?"

Thus a critical editor approaching the texts of *Hamlet* may edit these early witnesses not by eclectically choosing among variants, but rather by trying to find the meaning in every single reading without systematic comparison with its counterpart in the other authoritative witness to assess which one is better or authentic.

One of the results of editing the Second Quarto and the First Folio *Hamlets* in this conservative, or non-eclectic, method, has been the rediscovery of a number of acceptable readings which have always been forgotten, or which have generally received almost no consideration at all, readings which, to put it dramatically, have been sacrificed for the ideal of the true and pure Shakespearian text. However inferior these forgotten readings may be judged, they are the readings that the seventeenth-century texts of *Hamlet* offered to their readers, and therefore might have a meaning for them which deserves to be retained in critical editions, at least for historical reasons.

Moreover, the retention of these forgotten readings may be sustained in editions concerned not with hiding rejected variants in apparatuses, but rather with showing them in full, making them available on the line itself by means of a synoptic presentation, such as those produced by genetic editing (among them the well-known *Critical and Synoptic Edition of Ulysses* edited by Hans Walter Gabeler in 1984).

An edition may be designed for the non-specialist reader which combines critical editing (certainly emending obvious misprints and readings that exhaust any possibility of making sense), modernization of spelling and punctuation, and synoptic presentation of the significant variants between the Second Quarto and the First Folio.⁴ By offering a simultaneous, synoptic and "corrected" view of two of the early texts from which *Hamlet* is known today, readers are given direct appreciation of the inherent textual diversity of *Hamlet*, of which a number of readings, however inferior, are an integral and unavoidable part.

The following pages, therefore, present a reassessment of these readings, discuss their possible meanings, and defend them as alternatives to the standard eclectic *Hamlet*, in a scholarly edition (perhaps a critical-synoptic edition) that aims to provide an interpretation of the texts of *Hamlet* as pieces of history in their own terms, and not as evidence from which an ideal authentic text can be reconstructed.

(1986) and its *Textual Companion* (1987) for the re-realization that works such as *Lear* and *Hamlet* exist in different versions.

⁴ There is a precedent for such a synoptic presentation in "The Enfolded Hamlet" edited by Bernice W. Kliman (1996), which is, however, a diplomatic text rather than a modern critical edition "with as little editorial intervention as possible", in which "Q2 is the copy-text, but wherever material variant occurs in the folio, it appears in the line. Curly brackets distinguish Q2-only elements and pointed brackets F1-only elements" (1996: 2). I here express my gratefulness to Bernice W. Kliman for her comments not only on this essay but also on my forthcoming critical-synoptic edition of *Hamlet* inspired by her "Enfolded" *Hamlet*. I also wish to thank the editors of the forthcoming Arden *Hamlet*, Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, for their generous advice on particular passages that troubled me.

To begin with the Second Quarto, a reference must be made to two unusual defenders of Q2 readings: Thomas Pyles's article "Rejected Q2 Readings in the New Shakespeare *Hamlet*" (1937), and to John F Andrews' edition of *Hamlet* (1993). Pyles's article defends 141 readings in the Second Quarto that John Dover Wilson unnecessarily emends in his Q2-based edition (1934b). Andrews's edition, although still an author-oriented and confessedly eclectic edition, is atypically conservative in its adherence to readings of the Second Quarto on which it is based. Andrews is the first modern editor⁵ to adopt a large number of Second Quarto readings, such as "Neither a borrower nor a lender boy₂" (I. iii. 75, emphasis is mine)⁶ –which he modernizes to as "Neither a Borrower nor a Lender, boy," with the addition of a comma before "boy" to make it a vocative–, instead of the accepted reading from the First Folio "Neither a borrower, nor a lender be;" (TLN 540).⁷

However, although he emends the Second Quarto "very sparingly", correcting a reading only when it is "untenable or seems manifestly less suited to the dramatic context" (1993: lii), he does reject readings which possess an acceptable meaning –we cannot forget that critical editing is ultimately and inevitably a subjective task. For instance, in the Second Quarto line III. iii. 79, Hamlet reproaches himself: "Why, this is base and silly, not reuendge," (11r 25). But Andrews adopts the First Folio variant "hire and salary" (TLN 2355). The reader will have noticed that the pair of nouns in F1 "hire and salary" is more in stylistic consonance with the noun "revenge", and an editor in pursuit of what Shakespeare wrote may use stylistic reasons of this kind (supported by paleographical or bibliographical explanations) to assume that Q2 "base and silly" is a compositor's error and that F1 "hire and salary" is the authentic reading to be adopted in his or her critical edition.⁸

Yet "base and silly" is not devoid of meaning. It not only yields a perfectly acceptable sense when seen in its own terms –Wilson concedes that "it makes a sort of sense" (1934: 325)–, but it was also retained in the four subsequent quarto editions of *Hamlet* until 1676, and has been adopted by one critical edition, that of Parrot and Craig (the only critical edition, among those consulted, that has adopted it).⁹ If "base and silly" is meaningful, it may be retained in a critical edition of the Second Quarto that is not concerned with recovering the ideal authentic text by removing spurious readings, but rather with finding a meaning in whatever reading happens to exist in a historical text and making it available for the modern reader of such a critical edition. And it would make the most sense if "base

⁵ The critical editions of *Hamlet* consulted and compared are too numerous to be cited in the bibliography. Information has also been taken from Furness's *New Variorum* edition (1877) and Spevack (1980). Jennens (1773) and Evans (1974) are editors who have adopted some Q2 readings for the first time.

⁶ References are keyed to Evans (1972). For the First Folio, the TLN (Through Line Numbering) set up by Hinam (1968) is used.

⁷ Similarly, Andrews retains Q2 readings such as "Till then sit still my soule, *fonde* deedes will rise" (I. ii. 256), when the First Folio adjective "foule" had been always adopted in critical editions; or "horrows" I. i. 44, "return" I. i. 91, "fear events" I. i. 121, "coold mother" I. ii. 77, "chapes of grief" I. ii. 82, "devote" I. ii. 83, "seal-slaughter" I. ii. 132, "wary" I. ii. 133, "beguide" I. iii. 131, "possess" I. v. 68, "swiftly" I. v. 95, "or took" II. i. 56, "her resort" II. ii. 143, "sanctity" II. ii. 210, "extent good" II. ii. 224, "Fortune's lap" II. ii. 229, "ever poor" II. ii. 272, "black verse" II. ii. 325, "lowliness" III. i. 45, "sickled o'er" III. i. 84, "list" III. i. 144, "what noble" III. i. 157, "scape detected" III. ii. 89, "invected" III. ii. 258, "stare" III. ii. 309, "fret me not" III. ii. 371, "breaks out" III. ii. 389, "rain" III. iii. 22, "pardon" III. iii. 50, "heave, a kissing hill" III. iv. 59, "compound" IV. ii. 6, "me thought" IV. vii. 88, "pace" IV. vii. 138, "went" V. i. 85.

⁸ Andrews defends his decision to deviate from his copy-text by arguing that "Here the Folio reading is much more plausible than the Second Quarto's *base and silly*; it provides a suitable contrast to *Revenge* (opposing a noun with a noun phrase), and it coheres with the financial metaphors that dominate Hamlet's remarks as well as those of his adversary" (1993: 192).

⁹ Parrot and Craig explain the Q2 variant: "The killing of Claudius at prayer seems to Hamlet *base*, i.e. a low act, not of course, the deed to be revenged; (...) The word *silly* seems repugnant to the modern ear in this context, but Shakespeare uses it repeatedly (*Taming of the Shrew*, 5. 2. 124; *Richard II*, 5. 5. 25; and *Lear*, 2. 2. 109) in the sense of feeble, foolish, senseless act" (1938: 168).

and silly” appeared together with “hire and salary” in a critical-synoptic edition, in which notes would explain the alternatives.

On editing the Second Quarto (and the First Folio) under such a historically-oriented conservatism, instead of the author-oriented eclecticism, in preparation for a critical-synoptic edition, I find a number of readings to be not only tenable but also worthy of consideration.

In III. iii. 57-60 the Second Quarto reads:

In the corrupted currents of this world,
Offences gilded hand may showe by iustice,
And oft tis seene the wicked prize it selfe
Buyes out the lawe, but tis not so aboue, 60
(11v^o 2-5) (TLN 2334)

These lines, spoken in his soliloquy by a near-repentant Claudius, express the general idea that justice may not punish crime (“offence”) in this corrupted world, but it will in heaven. Perhaps the reader has had some difficulties with “showe by iustice” on the second line.¹⁰ Here, “show” can be taken as an intransitive verb meaning “To be seen” (*OED* v VI), and “by” as an adverb in the sense of “Near, close at hand” (*OED adv* B1a). Thus the Q2 phrase may indicate that justice may stand at the side of crime, in equal position without being able to condemn it: “offence’s gilded hand may show [may be seen] by [beside] justice”.

This reading has never been adopted in any modern edition (only in the subsequent quartos up to 1676),¹¹ because the comparison to the First Folio variant tips the scales in favour of the latter: the First Folio reads “shoue by Iustice” (TLN 2334) instead of “showe by iustice”. The idea of justice being “pushed aside” by “offence’s gilded hand” is a more forceful expression, and the graphic similarity between “shoue” and “showe” or the probability of a literal misprint have lead editors to systematically adopt F1 here. It may not be what Shakespeare wrote, but “show by justice” was present in 17th-century printed texts and had a meaning then that we should not ignore.

A few lines below on the same page of the Second Quarto, we find Hamlet saying: “Now might I doe it, but now is a praying, / And now Ile doo’t, and so a goes to heauen, / And so am I reuendge, that would be scand” (11r^o 119-121) (III. iii. 73-75). The construction “am I reuendge,” may have struck the reader who perhaps has mentally corrected “revenge” to a past participle “revenged”. However “revenge” can be taken as a noun, as if Hamlet assumes a personification of “Revenge”. In *Titus Andronicus* V. ii. 3 and 30 there are almost identical constructions: “I am Revenge”. The Second Quarto phrase, as it stands, was not corrected in the Third Quarto, published in 1611, although it was emended to the past participle in the Fourth Quarto. This is also the First Folio reading (“reueng’d” TLN 2352), and the one adopted in all the consulted editions. There is a paleographical argument to defend the past participle: in Elizabethan Secretarial hand, final “-d” could easily be misinterpreted as final “-e”, so that an original handwritten form **“reuengd”* could have originated “reuendge”.¹² The probability of error in Q2 “reuendge” is high. But had the First Folio read

¹⁰Pyles defends “show” because it “avoids repetition of the same idea in the following lines. Such repetition was a Shakespearean trick, but the Q2 reading has something, though not much, to be said for it nevertheless” (1937: 134).

¹¹For derivative texts of the Second Quarto and the First Folio, the collations in Wright and Clark (1892) and Furness (1877) have been consulted.

¹²In an analogous case, the Second Quarto has “Against the which a moitie competent / Was gaged by our King, which had returne / To the inheritance of *Fortinbrasse*” (B2v^o 3-5) (I. i. 91). Here, the construction “which had returne” is awkward, and the emendation to “returned”, the Folio reading (TLN 108) is easily defensible in eclectic editing, especially when paleographical arguments are adduced. However, awkward as it is, the noun

“revenge”, as a noun, modern editors would have paid more attention to the possibilities of this reading, and a large number of them would have adopted it.

Another interesting example of old forgotten readings in the Second Quarto is a combination of a stage direction (or rather its absence) and a verbal variant. In the last scene, during the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, all modern editions follow the First Folio in indicating that “*In scuffling they change Rapiers.*” (TLN 3777) (V. ii. 302). This exchange of weapons,¹³ after Hamlet has been fatally wounded by Laertes’s envenomed sword, will allow Hamlet to wound Laertes and cause the tragic end of the latter. Later in the text Laertes says “I am iustly kill’d with mine own Treacherie” (TLN 3785) and “The Treacherous Instrument is in thy hand.” (TLN 3797) (V. ii. 316). Yet here the Second Quarto says “The treacherous instrument is in *my* hand” (O1r^o 11) (emphasis is mine).

This may sound incongruous, but it should be noticed that the Second Quarto does not have any stage direction indicating that Hamlet and Laertes exchange rapiers. It may be that the stage direction was either accidentally omitted or never written down, and that the Q2 compositor or proof-reader, on perceiving that there was no indication for Laertes to lose his sword, mis-corrected “thy hand” to “my hand”. But Q2 as it stands, and as reprinted in the Third and Fourth Quartos, simply leaves unspecified the method by which both Hamlet and Laertes are actually wounded: note that, as in the First Folio, Horatio also exclaims that “They bleed on both sides” (V. ii. 304) (TLN 3781) and that the Q2 Laertes also says “I am iustly kild with mine own treachery” (O1r^o 1). Could it be that Laertes hurts himself in the “incensed” duel? This would make Laertes’s complaint that he has been caught “as a woodcock to [his] own springe” (V. i. 306) more pathetic. Even if one assumes that there was an exchange of rapiers not indicated in Q2, couldn’t it be that Laertes has snatched the envenomed sword back from Hamlet’s hand either in the final stage of the duel, or when he says “It [treachery] is heere *Hamlet*, thou art slaine”?

In I. iii. 47-51, Ophelia tells her brother Laertes not to do:

(...) as some vngracious pastors doe, [30]
Show me the steep and thorny way to heauen
Whiles a puft, and reckles libertine
Himselfe the primrose path of dalience treads.
And reakes not his owne reed.
(C3v^o 30-34)

Line 49, “Whiles a puffed and reckless libertine” is metrically defective, which leads editors to suspect an error of omission; but the whole passage is grammatically and semantically adequate. The syntax is ambiguous:¹⁴ “libertine” may be taken as the subject of “treads”; if we modernize to “Whiles, a puffed and reckless libertine,” we have then an apposition; and “a” could also be interpreted as the weak form of the personal pronoun “he” (*“Whiles he, puffed and reckless libertine, himself (...) treads”). This weak form also appears in an analogous stressed position in II. i. 98 (TLN 988) “As a would draw it”, in a speech by Ophelia. The Folio variant is clearer: “Whilst like a puffed and reckless Libertine” (TLN 512). With the presence of “like”, the Folio Ophelia compares Laertes with “a

“return” makes sense. It is present in the three subsequent quarto editions, and Andrews (1993) was the first modern editor to adopt it. Yet he did not retain “revenge” in III. iii. 75.

¹³The change of weapons is also indicated in the First Quarto (“*They catch one anothers Rapiers, and both are wounded*”) and in *Der bestrafte Brudermord*, a German version of *Hamlet*, possibly derived from a *Hamlet* taken by an English company to Germany in the early seventeenth century, whose textual witness dates back to 1710. See the English version in Furness (187: II, 115-42).

¹⁴It should also be observed that Ophelia commits a grammatical shift: the original subject of the verb “treads”, 3rd person singular, was in the second person singular (“good my brother”). These shifts are not uncommon in Shakespeare, as Abbot (1966: 415) explains and can be seen in III. ii. 191 (TLN 2059).

libertine”, and the metre is fine in line 49. Again, all modern editions adopt the First Folio here, although the Second Quarto is viable.

Later in the play, the player-king in *The Moustrap* begins his speech with:

King. Full thirtie times hath *Phebus* cart gone round [25]
Neptunes salt wash, and *Tellus* orb'd the ground,
 And thirtie dosen Moones with borrowed sheene
 About the world have time twelue thirties beene
 (H1v^o 25-29)

Readers may have difficulty with “*Tellus* orb'd the ground,” and editors have preferred F1’s variant “*Tellus* Orbed ground” (TLN 2025), which has a more poised style, with “Orbed ground” (in the sense of “the round earth”) balancing “salt wash” (meaning “the sea”), the two elements around which “the sun” (Phoebus’ cart) has gone. Yet Q2’s construction, although weird, is not impossible, with “orbed” as a transitive verb (“To form or gather into an orb” *OED* v 2; “To enclose in, or as in, an orb or circle; to surround, encircle, encompass with a rim or tire» *OED* v 1, earliest reference dated 1645) with its object in “the ground”.

In IV. vii. 14 we encounter a special case, since the Second Quarto reading does not correspond to any recognized word in English: “She is so concliue to my life and soule,” (L3r^o 24), says the king referring to his wife. The First Folio variant (“She’s so coniunctiue to my life, and soule;” TLN 3022) supplies a reading that makes good sense and meter. However “concliue” was retained in the subsequent quartos until 1676, when it was replaced by “precious”. That apparently nonsensical readings are retained in edition after edition is clearly observable (implying that either compositors, proof-readers or ‘editors’, did not always try to make sense of what they were transmitting or that the word did make sense). The fact that “concliue” was present not only in the historical text of the Second Quarto but also in the historical texts of the Third, Fourth and Fifth Quartos, may encourage us to attempt to find out a meaning for that reading. “concliue” brings together ideas of proximity and privacy from “conclave” (“A private room, inner chamber, closet” *OED* n †1, “Any private or close assembly” *OED* n 4) transformed into an adjective by the suffix “-ive” (“with the sense ‘having a tendency to, having the nature, character, or quality of’ *OED* -ive suffix). Perhaps it is a Shakespearian coinage that editors and critics have not paid sufficient attention to due to the handy recourse of F1 “conjunctive”. Moreover the disyllabic “concliue” fits the metrical pattern, since Q2 reads “She is” instead of the contraction “She’s”.

Now I pass on to readings in the First Folio which eclectic editing have traditionally precluded from critical texts. No “conservative” critical edition, such as Andrews’s (1993) with respect to the Second Quarto, has been made of the First Folio, although particular readings in this primary text of *Hamlet* have occasionally been retained or defended in editions such as Rowe (1709), Caldecott (1819), Knight (1841), Corson (1874), and Wells and Taylor (1986). Thus the number of original First Folio readings to be vindicated is higher. A selection of the most conspicuous ones will be explained in detail in the following paragraphs.

In I. ii. 242, after Hamlet has been informed of the ghost’s appearances during the guard’s watch on the platform, he says: “Ile watch to Night: perchance ‘twill wake a-gaine. (TLN 442)”. All consulted editors, even the Second, Third and Fourth Folios, follow the Q2 reading “twill walke againe”. The action “to walk” is commonly used in relation with ghosts. “Wake” is less common, but not without meaning in this context: “to be still up and about (at night)”, “to keep watch while others sleep” (I. 1 and 2.).

After the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, Ophelia wishes to give some remembrances of Hamlet back to him, and when he says he never gave her anything, she replies:

Ophe. My honor'd Lord, I know right well you did,
And with them words of so sweet breath compos'd,
As made the things more rich, then perfume left:
Take these againe, (...) (III. i. 96-99) (TLN 1752-1755)

Again, all consulted editors discard "then perfume left" in favour of the Second Quarto variant "their perfume lost" (G2v^o 21). Only Daniel notes that "it is a very good reading" (Furness 1877: 216), and the Second and Third Folios retain it. Both Q2 and F1 ultimately mean the same: the former by means of an absolute construction that seems to connect better with "Take these again"; the latter with a narrative verb in the past ("Then perfume left.") that leaves an abrupt connection. Perhaps this abruptness is related to Ophelia's determination in F1 "I know right well you did" (TLN 1752) in contrast to Q2's "you know right well you did".

In the following scene, Hamlet tells Horatio of his plans to have a scene similar to his father's death performed, and asks him to observe the king (III. ii. 80 / TLN 1931) and to "Give him needfull note" (III. ii. 84 / TLN 1935). This reading, present in the Second and Third folios, has not been adopted by any editor. They follow Q2's "heedfull" (G4v^o 29), which may prove to be more adequate in the context of "Obserue". But F1's "needful", in the sense of "urging, important" (Schmidt) may reveal Hamlet's urgency to spy on his uncle and discover the truth about his guilt.

When in II. ii Hamlet starts to explain to his school-fellows why they were sent to spy on him, he confesses:

(...) I haue of late, but wherefore 295
I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custome of ex-
ercise; and indeed, it goes so heauenly with my dispositi-
on; that this goodly frame the Earth, seemes to me a ster-
rill Promontory; (II. ii. 295-299) (TLN 1342-1346)

The reading "heauenly" has not been adopted by any critical editor. All prefer the Second Quarto variant "heauily", since the context of Hamlet's mirthless disposition requires, more logically, a negative adverb. However, That Hamlet may be ironical at this particular moment by saying "heauenly", a reading present in the subsequent folios, is not impossible.

In Hamlet's monologue behind the kneeling king, F1 reads at III. iii.76-8: "A Villaine killes my Father, and for that / I his foule Sonne, do this same Villaine send / To heauen. (...)" (TLN 2353-2355). Taking the First Folio as it stands, I think the reader will not find any difficulty. Problems only arise when the Folio text is compared to its collateral witness which reads "soule sonne". The Q2 variant emphasizes the idea that Hamlet is "the sole person on whom the duty of taking revenge rests" (Hibbard 1987: 275). This is very apt. And when author-oriented editors take into account the probability of erroneous confusion between the long "s" and the letter "f", they adopt the 'better' reading in the Second Quarto as the one presumably written by Shakespeare. But the Folio variant "foule", present in the subsequent folios, is not without literary aptness: it highlights Hamlet's self-contempt, which is recurrent in the play.

Another First Folio reading which is present in the subsequent folios, but discarded in all modern editions is found when Laertes, plotting with the king against Hamlet, suggests anointing his sword with an ointment:

So mortall, I but dipt a knife in it,
Where it drawes blood, no Cataplasme so rare,

Collected from all Simples that haue Vertue
 Vnder the Moone, can saue the thing from death, 145
 That is but scratcht withall:
 (IV. vii. 142-146) (TLN 3133-3137)

The first line seems to present some syntactical problems, since the emphasizing adverb “so” lacks the conjunction “that”. This is provided by the Second Quarto, which also shows other variants: “So mortall, that but dippe a knife in it” (M1r^o 8). All modern editions follow Q2 here. Yet the First Folio reading can be interpreted as “So mortal, ay, but dipped a knife in it”. Thus it presents an exclamation, “ay”, indicating some enthusiasm or excitement on the part of Laertes when he emphasizes the idea of “so mortal”, which qualifies his own stratagem to kill Hamlet. Following this exclamation is an absolute construction around the participle “dipped” in the sense of “once a knife is dipped in it”.

In the very last scene of the play, Hamlet tells Horatio the details of his voyage and finishes by saying “and what to this was sement, / Thou know’st already” (TLN 3557) (V. i. 56-7). The reading “sement” does not give a very clear sense. The Second Quarto has “sequent” which offers a perfectly understandable sense: “what follows” is the content of Hamlet’s letter Horatio in IV. vi. Yet, “sement” is also present in the subsequent folios published in the 17th century, a fact that may encourage the textual critic to attempt an explanation before rejecting “sement” as impossible. If we look it up in the *OED*, “sement” appears as an obsolete form of “cement”, which has the figurative sense of “substance to make it cohere”, “a principle of union” (*OED* cement *n* 2 *c*) as quoted from *Antony and Cleopatra* III. ii. 29: “(...) the peece of Vertue which is set / Betwixt vs as the Cyment of our loue”. The meaning of “what to this was cement / Thou knows’t already” is not very clear, for the referent is lacking. Yet in a synoptic edition showing significant variants between the Second Quarto and the First Folio, the possibility of having Q2’s “sequent” contrasted with F1’s “cement” deserves more than one thought.

This last reading presents a problem halfway between emendation and modernization of spelling. Within the sphere of modernization, a folio reading which is usually modernized but that might be considered afresh for its possibilities is Polonius’s “cheff” at: “And they in France of the best rank and station, / Are of a most select and generous cheff in that”. (TLN 539) (I. iii. 73-74). “Cheff” is usually modernized to “chief” and taken as a noun in the sense of “excellence” (*OED* chief *n* †10). Parrot and Craig (1938) paraphrase the two lines as “Frenchmen of the best rank are of a special eminence or distinction in the matter of rich, but not gaudy dress”. Yet the spelling “cheff” may be an Anglicized rendering of the French “chef” equivalent to “chief”; and it may be retained either as such or in the form of “chef” in the light of Edwards’ comment: “It is tempting to think that Polonius had his own idea of what French *chef* meant” (1985: 98). On the other hand, Malone suggested that “*Chef*, in heraldry, is the upper third part of the shield”, and paraphrased the sentence as “They in France approve themselves to be of a most select and generous *escutcheon* by their dress” (Furness 1877: 68).¹⁵

When the king interrogates Hamlet about Polonius’s body, Hamlet answers with the famous “worms’ convocation” puzzle:

¹⁵ Another peculiar reading that may be preserved is “miss” in Polonius’s exclamation “By’th’Misse” (TLN 2249 / III. ii. 378), which is more archaic than Q2’s “mass” and refers to the Latin etymology “missa”, although Corson’s suggestion of an “abbreviation of ‘Missal’” is also arguable.

(...) Your worm
is your only Emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else
to fat us, and we fat our selfe for Magots. Your fat King,
and your leane Begger is but variable seruice to dishes,
but to one Table that's the end.
(TLN 2896-2890) (IV. iii. 21-25)

The reader accustomed to the standard text, which here follows the Second Quarto, may have found something wrong with the last sentence. But I think that it can be argued that the First Folio reading, even though it was not preserved in the subsequent folios, makes some sort of sense and is therefore worthy of being contrasted to the received Second Quarto reading: "(...) your fat King and your leane begger is but varia- / ble seruice, two dishes but to one table, that's the end." (K2r^o 31-2). In Q2, "two dishes" clearly refers back to "your fat king and your lean beggar" and constitutes a gloss of "variable service", that is, the variety of food served at the meal. In contrast, F1 shows a syntactical unit down to "variable service to dishes", meaning variety of food served in dishes. The *OED* records "to" as a 16th-century variant spelling of "two", but it must be observed that F1 does not show any punctuation between "seruice" and "to", and does print a comma after "dishes,". Then in Q2, the solitary "that's the end" has the character of a final grave reflection, implying "the end of all"; whereas in F1 it is connected to "but to one table". The phrase "but to one table that's the end" may mean that although the fat king and the lean beggar are "variable service", they all come to the same table, which is the end, death the leveller.

An obscure reading in the First Folio that may deserve to be rescued occurs in the queen's narrative of Ophelia's death: Ophelia fell into the brook, her clothes spread wide bearing her up for some time while she was chanting old tunes, until her heavy garments: "Pul'd the poore wretch from her melodious buy, / To muddy death". (TLN 3174-3175) (IV. vii. 182-183). The First Folio reading "buy", is judged by critics as a plain misprint of "lay", the Second Quarto reading, involving a double confusion of "b" for "l" and "u" for "a" in Elizabethan handwriting (Wilson 1934: 346). But looked at in its own terms, without reference to "lay", the form "buy" is not without sense. *OED* recognizes "buy" as a variant of "buoy", an interpretation adopted here and first conjectured by Gould (quoted in Furness). "Buy" is also a variant of "by" (the reading in the subsequent folios), which, as a noun, means "A place of habitation" (*OED n*¹). Other meanings may be deduced by taking "buy" as a noun derived from a verb—a grammatical shift common in Shakespeare, as we can see in "Dies in his own too much" (IV. vii. 118), in which the adverb has become a noun. "Buy" has the sense of "to expiate, atone for;" (*OED v* †3a), and as a variant of "by" it could also bear the sense of "To remain, stay," (*OED* †bye, by v. Obs. 3 intr.). Thus the original spelling "her melodious buy" may indicate "her melodious expiation" or "her melodious endurance chanting on the waters". The Q2 variant "lay" connects better with the musical context, especially with "lauds", but in F1, the presence of "melodious" helps to maintain the musical imagery.

Finally, a case of apparently nonsensical reading in the First Folio, neither retained in the subsequent folios, occurs in a speech in which Laertes says he will distinguish between friends and enemies of his father: "To his good Friends, thus wide Ile ope my Armes: / And like the kinde Life-rend'ring Politician, / Repast them with my blood". (TLN 2895-2896) (IV. v. 146-148). The Second Quarto and all the 17th-century texts read "life-rendering pelican", alluding to a legendary fable in which the pelican feeds its young with blood drawn from its own breast. In this context, the Folio reading "Politician" is less apt, and judged by editors as an erroneous substitution. Wilson (1934: 50) assigns it to the First Folio's compositor or proof-reader. Parrot and Craig (1938: 197) state that "it is difficult to account for F. *Politician*. It can hardly be a misprint for Q. *Pelican*, yet the scribe is unlikely to have made so ridiculous a change unless he was ignorant of the well known myth of the Pelican. Possibly the change was made by the prompter". Whoever made this change, we are interested in finding out what a given reading means or might have meant, and not in judging it as

authentic or spurious. Thus, taking the First Folio as it stands, without reference to Q2 “Pelican”, it simply refers to a “life-rendering politician” who would even give his blood for his friends or his country. Could it not be Julius Caesar, already mentioned in the play (in III. ii. 103, and, only in the Second Quarto, at I. i. 114), and whose statue was, in Calphurnia’s dream, “like a fountain with a hundred spouts” from which blood ran for the Romans to “bathe their hands in it” (*Julius Caesar* II. ii. 77-9)? (I leave the interpretation of Calphurnia’s dream to the reader).¹⁶

To conclude this expository essay that has endeavoured to vindicate forgotten original readings of *Hamlet* in its Second Quarto and First Folio texts, I wish to restate that inferior or infelicitous as these readings may be seen –and strained their interpretations–, they are undeniably part of the text of *Hamlet*, of its textual history, and preserve possibilities of alternative meanings which should not be ignored. In my opinion, these possibilities need a different response on the part of textual criticism than the author-centered critical edition, especially when the way in which textual criticism understands the concepts of the author’s intentions and of the nature of literary texts is being questioned. Critical editions that do not pursue the ideal and only authentic reading, but accept and attempt to explain readings which are inseparable from the history of the text, and show its diversity and variability in synoptic presentations, may constitute a valid response. And in these editions, the “new” old readings of *Hamlet* discussed in this essay –perhaps with the exception of those that the editor may judge as too strained or obscure– do have a place.

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¹⁶Other First Folio readings to which I would like to draw the reader’s attention (but space does not allow me to explain) are: “Froward” TLN 470 / I. iii. 8, “hath (...) gifts” 730 / I. v. 43, “lock of wit” 1237 / II. ii. 199, “To take” 1499 / II. ii. 457, “favourites flies” 2072 / III. ii. 204, “breath” 2449 / III. iv. 65, “nearer the offence” 2668 / IV. iii. 8, “terrible woer / Fall ten times treble” 3439-40 / V. i. 246-7 (edited by Rowe as “wooer”), “ungorged” 3703 / V. ii. 250, “shoutwithin” 3836 / V. ii. 349 (which from Steevens has been edited as “shot”), “His quarry” 3857 / V. ii. 364, “are to claim” 3886 / V. ii. 390.

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