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Hamlet: Origin Displaced

Abstract

This article focuses upon the category of 'origin' from a theoretical viewpoint, which, besides including philological/textual aspects, inevitably opens up the issue of interpretation, not limited to 'capturing' an authorial, foundational meaning. In the wake of Continental philosophical thought and in particular Derrida and Lacan, I argue that origin can never be recovered in conventional terms, but is rather displaced in space and time, in the materiality of subsequent edited texts: much in the same way as, for Freud, telling a dream is already an experience of displacement, in which what remains of the dream are significant traces. A case in point are the multiple versions of *Hamlet*, approached as a palimpsest to illustrate my argument, dealing in particular with important editorial choices in classic editions of the past two decades.

Keywords: *Hamlet*; origin; hermeneutics; displacement; textual history; authorship

This paper is the result of a long-standing dialogue with Alessandro Serpieri, both as textual scholar and first translator in Italy of the early *Hamlet*, a true turning point in his everlasting interest in source and attribution studies.[1] From the moment he translated Q1, "young Shakespeare's young Hamlet" – to quote Terri Bourus (2014)[2] – this text continued haunting him as the voice of an author displaced onto the page: for him, as critic, an experience of loss. To this issue Serpieri returned on a number of occasions – among which I remember in particular a conference we were both part of at Rome's Teatro Argentina, where he argued in favour of the "archaic beauty" of Q1 (Serpieri 2015a). And in an unforgettable radio interview about his last book *Avventure dell'interpretazione* (Serpieri 2015b),[3] a few months before he passed away, he focused – *contra* Plato – on the erratic quality, *per se* dramatic, of literary writing *contra* Plato; adding that, since the life of a text is subject to change in time, it entails a process of loss and regeneration. *Hamlet* was for him the supreme evidence of such mutability.

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[1] See Serpieri et al. 1988-90. The translation of Q1 was first published in 1997 by Marsilio (Serpieri 1997b). The same series also features his own parallel translation of the more authoritative Q2 (Serpieri 1997a). Among his contributions to the question of authorship I am most indebted to his study of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Serpieri 2012).

[2] This recent, engaging study has helped me reflect on this topic; not to mention Giorgio Melchiori's leading studies in Italy on *Hamlet*'s authorship, particularly Melchiori 2012.

[3] Fahrenheit, *Avventure dell'interpretazione*, 10 May 2016, http://www.raiplayradio.it/audio/2016/05/Fahrenheit----Avventure-dellinterpretazione---ore-1600-del-10052016-7b26af5a-3ae4-4f37-9814-b64f95d9ea9e.html (last access 21 March 2018).

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A crucial issue in our conversations on the many secrets of *Hamlet*'s origin was at some point Stanley Wells's and Gary Taylor's choice to edit *King Lear* in dual form in their 1986 Oxford *Complete Works* of Shakespeare, a challenge in the history of Shakespeare's textual editions. It is from a dialectical relationship between Sandro's philological and semiotical response and my own approach, indebted as it is to Continental theory, notably to Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida, that this essay has taken its cue.

It is with fondness that I dedicate it to Alessandro's memory.

In the beginning was the plot (?). And *Hamlet's* plot was of mythical ancestry, for besides historical sources such as Saxo Grammaticus and Froissart, Shakespeare drew on archaic Nordic myths (not without analogues in Greek and Latin drama). Interestingly, however, the core of the plot was the loss of the father, i.e. of one's origin. Behind the textual history of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, before the play actually begins, there is already an absence, which, in Shakespeare's metamorphosis of the myth, is thematically embodied in the figure of the Ghost: who – or which – is similar, but not identical to Hamlet's authentic, dead father. What the Ghost displays is a displacement of the father: any access to the father, along with any objective truth about his end, is in fact barred in this. It is only to a certain extent that the son's play-within-the-play can capture, or, in Hamlet's word, "catch", the agent, and the cause of such loss.

In its turn, the play-within-the-play displays thematic evidence of the metamorphosis of an original text: the piece is given a new title (*The Murder of Gonzalo* becomes *The Mousetrap*), and it is altered in length and authorship by the insertion of "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (2.2.520), morphing into a revised, collaborative text.

Variation is constitutive of myth, and so is instability. This is brilliantly argued by Giorgio de Santillana in his celebrated *Hamlet's Mill* (1969), in which he takes *Hamlet* as a case in point of the instability of myth, highlighting the constant displacement of meaning in different versions of the plot – a dynamic that has obvious cultural and historical reasons, but which also depends on the theoretical assumption that processing is a mode inscribed in the very essence of language, that is, in the constitutive relationship between language and vision. It is the very process highlighted by Sigmund Freud in his Introduction to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when he argues that the act of telling someone a dream is already one of displacement, in which the original experience is forever lost. What remains in the telling of the dream are merely traces: these are the only referents for the work of interpretation. To be sure, the dream itself is not a primary text either, being a representation of an unconscious, obscure, original desire; a thesis radically adopted and taken a step further by Lacan, who speaks of *the thing* which resists symbolization (one of the reasons why the elaboration of self-knowledge in psychoanalysis is an interminable process).

I have given these references in support of my argument on *Hamlet* as an icon of the question of origin, in fact *the* question of modernity, both in the sphere of textual criticism and in the theoretical field of aesthetics, where hermeneutics is a crucial issue. The question of meaning intertwines with the question of origin – one must ask whether any access to it may be found, or rather whether such a gateway is forever and constitutively inaccessible. In this light, it is worth noting that dis-

placement is a key feature in the map of the editions of Shakespeare's own time, particularly the three seventeenth-century ones which are the stock-in-trade of Shakespearean attribution studies and which ideally come after a hypothetical, lost *Ur-Hamlet*: Q1 (printed in 1603, but whose date of composition is still debatable, at least according to Terri Bourus), Q2 (1604), and the Folio version (1623).

All three texts are currently considered worthy of critical attention by the most distinguished current editions, Oxford (1986, and 2005), Arden Shakespeare (2006), and Norton (1997 and 2012): Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor starring in the Oxford edition, with Taylor prime responsible for *Hamlet*; Stephen Greenblatt in the 1997 Norton edition, based on the Oxford, later replaced by Robert Miola, in the next Norton Critical Edition issued in 2012; Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor in the Arden Shakespeare (2006). But to revert to the early ones, it is worth recalling that among the three, the difference is principally in length as well as in chronology: Q2 is about 3,000 words longer than Q1, which is more suitable for performance; while the Folio version is 73% longer than Q1, but 4% shorter than Q2. This is elementary, commonplace learning, but it is a necessary ingredient in my argument. I find support for including such details in the Judaic tradition's regard for the trivial, i.e. what is evident, as an essential feature of knowledge, as it triggers the process of questioning.[4] In any case length is not only the mark of a technical difference. It is also a difference in quiddity.

Q2 is traditionally accorded a superior status to Q1 – according to Giorgio Melchiori, this is rather a drama meant for the closet compared to Q1, which is less literary and no doubt meant specifically for the stage. A case in point is the absence of the Prince's most famous soliloquy, "to be or not to be" (3.1.55ff). However, the Folio version is considered just as authoritative as Q2, so much so that it was used as the copy text by the 1986 editors of the Oxford *Complete Works* of Shakespeare (with no afterthought in the 2005 revision) as well as in Greenblatt's 1997 Norton edition; and Kenneth Branagh chose the Folio text for his 1996 film. In the Critical Norton, however, Robert Miola adopted Q2.

I take the Norton Edition of Shakespeare's complete works itself as a hybrid text from an editorial point of view: it features the same introductions and notes from the previous one (indebted to the Oxford *Complete Works*), but also a change in the editing of the text (perhaps texts?), in which several scholars are involved.

And yet it seems to me that in the last two decades of debate about *Hamlet's* authorship, a number of scholars have not entirely given up the challenge of reconstructing evidence of an authentic, single creative work out of the early seventeenth-century editions. Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, for instance – whether or not it is true that they were simply tired, as they confessed – did not care to adopt the same method as the one used with *King Lear*, which they presented in the two versions I have mentioned – inevitably causing a shock to a number of scholars, but also producing a refreshing change in the tradition of Shakespeare's textu-

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[4] In particular I refer to the work on the intrusion of what is apparently insignificant in the thought process of by Rabbi Jospeh B. Soloveitchik, who taught at the Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University in New York City until his death in 1993.

al scholarship. The Arden Shakespeare editors made an alternative, radical choice, which consisted in publishing the three *Hamlets* separately. In spite of their penchant for unconventionality, at least in the case of *Hamlet* Taylor and Wells do not seem to have altogether abandoned the mirage (inaugurated by Heminges and Condell) of grasping Shakespeare's plays "as he conceived them" (Folio 1623: A3) – and personally I believe that this may be one unconscious motive for their having based the 1986 Oxford *Complete Works* edition on the Folio version. For her part, Ann Thompson has no such nostalgia for an original, allowing herself a certain dose of sarcasm at the expense of scholars who cannot resist a conflated version, and who thus opt – like Greenblatt in the Norton *King Lear* – for a compromise. In her Introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet* in the Q2 version (1604), she writes:

> As we have seen, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor decided to print two texts of *King Lear* in the Oxford Shakespeare *Complete Works*. Stephen Greenblatt, the general editor of the 1997 Norton Shakespeare, which took over the Oxford texts, nevertheless decided not only to print the two texts of *King Lear* but to add a third, 'a conflated version' . . . so that readers can encounter the tragedy in the form it assumed in most editions from the eighteenth century until very recently (Norton, 2315). Mercifully, you may feel, the general editors of the Arden Shakespeare have decided not to break all records by including a conflated text of *Hamlet* and making this the first four-text edition. (Thompson 2006: 94)

She also states outright that the only features that the three seventeenth-century *Hamlets* share are "the name and designation of the chief character, and the fact that they are plays" (76). Of course, each is connected with one or both of the others, whether through the printer, the publisher, the acting company or the author (thereby implicating Shakespeare's own revision). But – Thompson argues – the question remains as to what extent each of the three *Hamlet*s may be a revision of the preceding one. Is there a text printed with the author's consent behind any of the three editions?

The answer is that there is no such thing as a text authorized by William Shakespeare. Much of the evidence, such as it is, is either contradictory or ambiguous. Few scholars now see in Q1 an early draft of a play by another playwright, perhaps Thomas Kyd. To cut the matter short, there is no consensus as to the texts' transmission; indeed, in Stephen Greenblatt's words, *Hamlet* is a monument built on shifting sands.

There is, however, general agreement that *Hamlet* is a multiple text, in fact a palimpsest. Quite apart from the metaphysical implications of the search for an origin, which by definition is one and the same, the philological issue of the loss – or the displacement – of an original text challenges a hermeneutic, ontological approach to the play with regard to its intended meaning, and consequently to the sense of an ending.

Meaning is a category based on the assumption that there is a *telos* that connects the various parts of a text – the text of a life as well as the printed one – and brings it to a close in accordance with its beginning, where beginning is metaphysically understood in terms of a driving force, yet itself unmoving, as claimed by the

Aristotelian and Christian classical tradition.

By contrast, a multiple text like that of *Hamlet* eschews the possibility of discovering an unquestionable pattern of meaning in it. Origin is not an ontological foundation, a meaning that is *given*; it is always situated elsewhere. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in fact, is inscribed in a horizontal series of texts, within which one refers reciprocally to another – not in teleological order, but in a systematic interplay of traces and differences. One obvious example is the uncertainty of the ghost's ontological status, a simulacrum of the dead father, which being similar but not identical to the dead king– just 'like' him (1.1.45ff) – foregrounds the issue that difference is a signifying condition which disseminates origin within a cluster of traces.

This is why, rather than a reading of the three *Hamlets* in ordinary chronological sequence, to my mind the palimpsest is a more fruitful model: instead of one text being obliterated or supplanted by the later one, each can be superimposed on the other, allowing traces and shadows of the earlier text to surface in the language. And thus calling for an interrogation of *Hamlet*'s meaning *within* its constitutional instability.

The issue of origin in *Hamlet* may thus sound like a parody of the Homeric question, but is in tune with the current cultural climate, in which the crisis of classical philology has been a turning point. Roberto Antonelli discusses the question in his important opening essay of volume 8 of the journal *Memoria di Shakespeare* quoted above.[5] Antonelli's essay focuses on the crisis of philology as a defining feature of the twentieth century; a predicament created by the severing of an etymological link between the categories of *author* and *authority*, categories which for centuries had been regarded as indivisible, both terms possessing the aura of *classics*. Shakespeare's unstable authorship is evidence of his modernity; it challenges the sacred conception of the author and its correlative, *the* text, according to the author's last wishes and his signature. Shakespeare's signature either does not appear in the printed versions of his time, or it is in no way proof of authenticity in an early modern landscape in which the printing process is not considered automatically trustworthy (one cannot forget Swift's later challenge to the manipulative agency of the press). From the very dawn of modernity, the instability of Shakespeare's canon has prefigured Walter Benjamin's thesis of the radical crisis of the Author – expressed in his memorable 1939 study on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.[6] Benjamin penetratingly understood the loss of the Author's sacred status in terms of an abdication of the original and the one in favour of the copy and the multiple, a novelty brought about by the increasing power of technology and the consequent hegemony of the press. As a result, the paradigm of authority began to totter, producing a shift from the domain of the author as giver of meaning to the empire of the reader – who, however, is in turn doomed to an ever imperfect interpretation. At the same

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[5] Volume 8 refers to the last printed issue of the journal founded by Agostino Lombardo, which has now gone online and is published in open access with the new name *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies*, http://ojs.uniroma1.it/index.php/MemShakespeare/index (last access 21 March 2018).

[6] It took thirty years for this enlightening study to be acknowledged by British culture, in Hannah Arendt's translation into English, included in the volume *Illuminations* (Benjamin 1968).

time the fantasy of a single text that would be closest to the original of the author, a vision which for a long time had seduced textual critics, was decidedly over; at least in Continental philology and philosophy.

In this context, the text in time, its origin displaced, was engaged in resisting a violent act of hermeneutic appropriation. And it is not surprising that the predicament of the fatherless *Hamlet*, its radical questioning of the category of origin, became so crucial in late twentieth-century theories of deconstruction, notably for Derrida, Lévinas, and Lacan.

In *Avventure dell'interpretazione*, Alessandro Serpieri argues that a text is like an oracle: not only a thing to be interrogated, but itself interrogating. He concentrates on Shakespeare's epistemological scepticism about an ontological textual stability and truth: a veritable disowning of knowledge which in time (and in the wake of Stanley Cavell) would become a crucial aspect of Serpieri's own hermeneutics as literary critic. From his commitment to the search of an origin, witnessed by his work as critic and translator of *Il primo Amleto*, he had moved towards the conviction that all that counts is an interminable, ever open, forever imperfect approach. Rather than the search for a beginning or the reaching of an end – that is to say, meaning – what counts for the late Alessandro Serpieri is the intellectual and existential *journey between*: the persona's journey towards self-knowledge; and the readers', critics', and spectators' towards their own understanding of the play. In the words of Stéphane Mallarmé: "Hamlet walks about, and the book he reads is himself".[7]

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[7] Qtd in Taylor et al. (eds) 2016: 1995. The text of this edition, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmar*k, edited by John Jowett, is based on the Q2 of 1604-05, acknowledged as the most authoritative early text. Q1 and the Folio text are printed and edited separately in the *Alternative Versions* volume. On the complexity of the textual problem see in particular Wells and Dobson 2009, ch. 25.

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