Hacking *Hamlet* - The Publication of Play Excerpts in Restoration England

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A brief overview of English history tells us that the outbreak of Civil War, in September 1642, saw the issuance of the first law of suppression that closed England's theatres and heralded a seventeen-year drought of English drama. In truth, the twin beliefs that English dramatic performances came to an abrupt halt, and that the stages remained silent for the following seventeen years are inaccurate. The myth of a vibrant artistic culture skidding to a halt in 1642, only to be revived by a returning Charles II in 1660, was established in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Wars and gained weight as the official recollection of the recent past. A 2006 Oxford Dictionary of National Biography feature by Timothy Raylor describes the turbulent years following the Restoration, during which the arts began to revert to pre-war modes. In fact, while theatrical performances were certainly curtailed, pamphlets, newsbooks and public records indicate that performances continued throughout the Interregnum. Hyder E. Rollins (1921) presents numerous accounts of performances being interrupted by soldiers demanding fines from actors and spectators, as well as notices for both public and private performances.

Prior to the ordinances demanding the closure of the playhouses, the theatres had been experiencing difficulties for some years. Outbreaks of the plague had prompted the authorities to mandate the closure of playhouses, as well as other venues which attracted crowds, and the preceding six years had seen those who made their living in the theatres balancing on the edge of poverty (Rollins, 268).

The closure of the playhouses satisfied two major concerns of the government of the day: to curtail the dissemination of material deemed "immoral" by the Puritan revolutionaries; and also to prevent large gatherings of people, and thus suppress the ability of royalists to organize an effective resistance or counter-revolution.

Although the public enactment of plays was forbidden, private performances were left unmolested. The closure of the theatres, then, created an unprecedented demand for plays in print, both in the form of prompt books for private performances, and as texts to be read in solitude. As Raylor puts it, the drama retreated from the stage to the page, or to the closet.

In 1662 Henry Marsh published a collection of "Drolls" under the title, *The Wits, or, Sport upon Sport.* In his front matter he claims it to be the first such collection, and suitable for "*all Persons, either in Court, City, Countrey, or Camp*", and invites the reader to enjoy the collection, as his edition "[saves] *the difficulty of purveying and hacking up and down*" (Elson, p. 43). In his Preface to the collection Marsh makes several claims about the virtues of such a collection: that the selected scenes can be removed "*without injury*" to the plays from which they are taken; that they have been "*exquisitely and aptly represented in the becoming dress of the Stage*" ; that they are suitable for all occasions and can be learned easily without "*the long labour of a Cue*" (Elson, p. 44). This paper will focus on Marsh's claim that the scenes can be removed from their extended plays without detriment, occupying a dramatic niche in their own right. In particular, this paper will examine the treatment of droll number 9 in the collection: *The Grave-Makers,* taken from *Hamlet*, act V, scene i.

Marsh's Preface to his published collection of drolls appears to imitate, or even mock, a preface written by John Heminge and Henry Condell for their First Folio Edition of Shakespeare's Plays, published four decades previously, in 1623. Although Heminge and Condell's book predates the closure of the theatres by almost twenty years, it formed part of a more general movement of drama into print that was

expedited, but not caused, by the prohibition of public performances between 1642 and 1660. Rollins (p. 269) draws attention to an action on the part of The King's Men at the Blackfriars, in which the acting company forbade the members of the Stationers' Company ever to print a list of sixty plays in their repertory. The list was compiled in July 1641, more than a year before the commencement of the Civil War, but following six years of intermittent theatre closures due to plague outbreaks, which left many actors struggling to make any sort of living. A conclusion that might be drawn from Rollins's analysis of the situation is that the actors anticipated further and ongoing disruptions to their employment prospects and issued the list as a sort of insurance against losing out to the publication of plays. At that time The Stationers' Register, maintained by The Stationers' Company, performed the function we now know as copyright, and entering works into the register began to secure both moral and, more importantly, fiscal ownership of the works. Throughout the English Commonwealth years a great deal of drama was collated and published in diverse volumes of collections, individual plays, and collections of play excerpts. Since the closure of the theatres was primarily a measure to restrict large public gatherings, with earnest concern about immoral content taking a secondary position, there was little opposition to drama being consigned to print. Henry Marsh and his business associates embraced the increasing demand for published works that replaced public entertainment, and his Preface makes references to well-received performances of the plays from which the drolls are taken as evidence of their worth as literature.

Thirty-nine years after Heminge and Condell wrote their Preface which condemned those "injurious imposters" who had "stolen, copied and maimed" Shakespeare's plays (Eliot, EBook #13182), Marsh published his collection of drolls with a Preface that defended their extraction from longer works in comparable terms. As if in response to Heminge and Condell's assertion that after repeated readings of Shakespeare: "*And if then you doe not like him surely you are in some manifest danger, not to vnderstand him.*" (Eliot, EBook #13182), Marsh retorts: "*He that knows a Play, knows that Humours have no such fixedness and indissoluble connexion to the Design, but that without injury or forcible revulsion they may be removed to an advantage; which is so demonstrable, that I am sure nothing but a morose propriety will offer to deny it.*" (Elson, 43). While Heminge and Condell challenge the "intelligent" reader to concede that they cannot appreciate the works of Shakespeare, Marsh challenges the same reader to concede that they are devoid of any sense of humour. Echoing the Preface to the First Folio, Marsh insists it is not his place to praise the authors, but rather the readers' prerogative to judge the works; and both Prefaces insist that the true worth of a book is known by its sales, and so entreat readers to purchase the book before criticizing it.

In Marsh's Preface to "The Wits, or, Sport upon Sport" he explains in broad terms the reasons for selecting these particular editions for his publication:

"*...he who would make up a Treatment to his Friends by any such diversion, cannot study a more compendious method, without the help of Fidlers and mercenary Mimicks, and the long labor of a Cue: one Scene, which may almost be acted* Extempore*, will be abundantly satisfactory, being chosen fit and suitable to the Company, as none can come amiss.*"

The convenience he describes is easy to see in the Grave-makers scene extracted from *Hamlet* (act V, scene i) : a skull and a spade are all the props required, any amateur could pretend to dig, and since the scene ends before Hamlet encounters the funeral procession, there is little need to dress him as a prince or describe anything of his situation.

The scene opens with the two grave-diggers discussing the propriety of a Christian burial for a "questionable" death. Anyone familiar with *Hamlet* would recognize the scene instantly and recall the circumstances surrounding Ophelia's death. However, anyone unfamiliar with the extended play, which could be an entire generation of tavern-goers following the seventeen-year closure of public playhouses, would hear the opening discussion with no knowledge of Ophelia's unrequited love or recent bereavement. At this point in the original play, Hamlet is unaware of the identity of the deceased for whom the grave is being prepared, he only learns the truth when he spies the funeral approaching and identifies it as "maimed", perhaps at the same time as the audience. In this respect, then, Marsh's claim that "*without injury or forcible revulsion they may be removed to an advantage*" (Elson, p.44) holds true, since Hamlet and the audience are both ignorant of the circumstances of the death for the duration of the conversation with the

grave-digger.

Besides the mechanics of the scene, the topic of their discussion is also able to stand alone outside the plot of the entire play. Carol Chillington Rutter points out in her paper "Ophelia in the Grave", that it is the grave-digger who first makes Ophelia a suicide (p.309). Her paper deals with the significance of the scene in the context of the full-length play, and draws attention to the fact that up until this scene, Ophelia's death is only referred to as a tragic accident, the result of temporary insanity, brought on by extreme grief. To the audience of the full play, this may present a surprise, in the light of Gertrude's description of Ophelia's "*mermaid-like… / As one incapable of her own* distress" (act V, scene vii, lines 175-77) demise. The grave-digger makes the connection because he is privy to the funeral arrangements and recognizes them as "maimed". A reader of Marsh's extracted scene, however, is told in the *Argument* that the grave is being prepared, "*for a Lady that drown'd her selfe*" (Elson, 111). Significantly, the action of the full play is not dependent on this scene, and discussion of her questionable death does not make or break the overall plot. Bridget Gellert's assessment of the iconography of melancholy in this scene (1970) draws attention to the fact that Shakespeare's scenes frequently carried iconographic or symbolic significances that were in addition to, and isolated from, the development of the action (p. 57). Although her paper also addresses the scene's significance in relation to the rest of the play, her references to tableaux that function as condensations of the central themes of the entire work (p. 57) lends unwitting support to Marsh's claim that the scene can be extracted and acted *Extempore*.

According to James Holly Hanford's paper "Suicide in the Plays of Shake-Speare" (1912), the subject of the conversation between Hamlet and the grave-digger was not only familiar to Shakespeare's audience, but also quite topical. He draws attention to the "Christian Horror" surrounding the act of suicide and the deep-rooted beliefs of both the Church and the citizens that to commit self-slaughter was the most dreadful of all sins, since it admits of no repentance (p. 382). Michael MacDonald's paper "Ophelia's Maimed Rites" (1986) similarly calls attention to the historical context of the graveyard scene, and to the legal, religious and moral problems posed by suicide with which Shakespeare's audience would be familiar. He explains the legal choice faced by coroners examining the body of a suicide, who must decide between a verdict of *felo de se* (felony against oneself) or *non compos mentis* (insane, and therefore innocent). In cases of *felo de se* the suicide was denied the rites of Christian burial, his property was forfeited to the crown and his corpse buried profanely (at night in a public highway with a stake driven through it). If the suicide was found *non compos mentis* his property was saved and he was theoretically allowed a Christian burial, although ecclesiastical law established only the barest guidelines for burying suicides, hence many suicides' rites were "maimed" (p. 310).

Of course such laws as these lent themselves to a certain level of abuse and MacDonald details extensive statistics concerning the infrequency of the *non compos mentis* verdict. He claims, through those statistics, that the insanity verdict was reserved almost exclusively for "raving lunatics", and coroners' juries actually used the symptoms of less severe mental illness, such as depression, as evidence of intentional self-harm and declared *felo de se* (p. 310). MacDonald also draws attention to an apparent leniency in the application of this law when applied to noble men and women. Without repeating his statistics here, a noble suicide was five times more likely to be found *non compos mentis* than a commoner, and he produces correspondence between the court and the coroner that pressured the latter to declare a favourable verdict in the case of the suicide of the Earl of Berkshire in 1622 (p. 312). Additionally, MacDonald comments on the rarity of men and women "of quality" being tried as suicides: they are significantly under-represented in relation to the proportion of the population which they comprised, suggesting that many were declared "accidental", thus avoiding any inquest into sanity and suicide. According to him, the grave-digger's comment of "*If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out a' Christian burial*" hits the nail squarely on the head. Any final attempt at explaining away Ophelia's death as self-defense is raised and immediately massacred by the two clowns. Between them they reach the conclusion that since the coroner has found her eligible for a Christian burial, she must have drowned not by going into the water, but rather by the water coming to her, making her the victim rather than the aggressor. MacDonald draws specific attention to the problems presented to coroners by victims

of drowning incidents (p.312). Without a reliable witness it was impossible to tell if a drowning victim fell, jumped, or was pushed into the water. Coroner's juries, therefore, had to rely on accounts of the victim's state of mind prior to their demise and, as mentioned previously, signs of depression and melancholy were often taken as evidence of the intention to commit *felo de* se. According to The Riverside Shakespeare (2nd Ed., 1997) this exchange between the grave-makers alludes to a very famous suicide case in which a judge drowned himself in 1554. In 1553 Sir James Hales's steadfast refusal to acquiesce to calls for the relaxation of the statutes of Henry VIII and Edward VI against nonconformists, and in particular Roman Catholics, earned him the wrath of the royal court and imprisonment. An attempt to commit suicide by opening his veins while in prison was unsuccessful, but following his release, he succeeded in drowning himself by lying face downwards in a shallow stream. The coroner held his death to be a felonious suicide, and his property was forfeit accordingly. Following his death, his widow attempted to sue for the return of his property using an unprecedented line of reasoning: she argued that the forfeiture could only occur for an event happening during her husband's lifetime and, since the act of suicide can not be concluded until after the victim dies, it could not be completed during his lifetime. With this logic, she claimed her husband's felony was not committed during his life, and therefore his property was not forfeit. The Hales *v.* Petit suit called into question the possibility of dividing a single moment in time into two distinct parts for legal purposes: effectively separating the intention from the execution of a given act. Lady Hales was unsuccessful in her suit, the judge reasoning that Sir James Hales killed himself while he was alive, and therefore the act of killing himself was executed during his lifetime (Barker, Oxford DNB). Shakespeare's grave-digger attempts to recount this defense in relation to the case of the woman about to be buried, but becomes confused and mangles the account:

Grav. It must be so offendendo, it cannot be else; for here lies the point, if I drown my self willingly it argues an act, and an act hath three branches, it is to act, to do, to perform, or all; she drown'd her selfe wittingly. (act V, scene i, lines 9-13)

Since this particular case was long cited in the courts, it is reasonable to assume that both Shakespeare's theatre-goers and Marsh's tavern-goers would have been familiar with the general gist, if not the finer details of the argument. Finally, just in case any theatre-goer was in danger of taking this proposal seriously, Shakespeare has his number 1 grave-digger butcher his Latin and declare the death *so offendendo* rather than the *se defendendo* he clearly intended.

If the scene is to be removed from the longer plot of the full play, the interest of the audience, or reader, must be held by the quality of the dialogue. While the rest of *Hamlet* does not turn on the grave-digging scene, a great deal of social comment is present in the dialogue between Hamlet and the grave-digger. Without the context of the rest of the play, the reader is presented with a series of juxtapositions of high and low professions, as explained by Bridget Gellert (p. 61). The young prince engages the old grave-digger; he talks of lords and lawyers, as the grave-digger talks of tanners and gallows-makers; they trade riddles as the grave-digger picks pedantic holes in Hamlet's questions. As a short drama in its own right, Marsh's treatment of the graveyard scene lives up to the claims he made in his Preface: the edition does no "*injury*" to the original play, only a "*morose propriety*" could be offended by the cut or the content, and the undertaking of a reading or performance requires nothing lacking in any literate amateur.

Appendix I

Henry Marsh's Preface to "The Wits, or, Sport Upon Sport", 1642.

To the READERS
The Stationer sends Greeting:
Whereas I have undertaken to collect a Miscellany of all Humours which our Fam'd Comedies have exquisitely and aptly represented in the becoming dress of the Stage:

Now know ye that I think it fit in compliance with the Design to usher in this *Body of Humours* with a Preface, for no other reason, nor to other purpose, then to humour and imitate the Mode of Writers; letting you see the folly and impertinence of Epistolary Personations (never acted before) which shew their Books are chiefly written for their own sakes, and to adorn our stalls.

Now I must tell you, my Plot with my *Humours* is clearly for sale; for I intend to raise no other reputation to my self then that of Ready Money; and

that I onely be-speak in these preparatory lines: since it were besides the purpose, and an unpardonable presumption, to commend these excellent Fancies, which do command and have Emerited universal applause.

All I am obliged to say, therefore, is in justification of the Collection of them into this entire constistencie, the making of a fluid a solid Body, which even the Experiment it self, among the Ingenious, will fairly defend. But I should think the easie accommodation of them to every Gusto of Delight in this ready variety (saving the difficulty of purveying and hacking up and down) should best invite and entertain you.

He that knows a Play, knows that Humours have no such fixedness and indissoluble connexion to the Design, but that without injury or forcible revulsion they may be removed to an advantage; which is so demonstrable, that I am sure nothing but a morose propriety will offer to deny it.

To be a little serious: I was told by people that know better then my self, they would be in this Model more beneficial in sundry respects, then as they lay dispersed before. There is no sort of Melancholy whose sullen dulness and severe aversion to company, may not at one look be mockt out by one or other of these merry attemperatures and resemblances, which will most efficaciously manifest its Folly as in a Glass. Next, he who would make up a Treatment to his Friends by any such diversion, cannot study a more compendious method, without the help of Fidlers and mercenary Mimicks, and the long labor of a Cue: one Scene, which may almost be acted Extempore, will be abundantly satisfactory, being chosen fit and suitable to the Company, as none can come amiss. 'Twill make Physick work, 'twill cease the pains of more inveterate diseases, 'twill allay the heat and distemper of Wine, and generally it is the Panacea, the universal Cure, mighty Mirths Elixir.

Now you know al the Story, Gentlemen; pray remember the *Rump Drolls*, and for their sakes,

Your old Servant

H. MARSH
From Elson, John James (Ed.), The Wits or, Sport upon Sport, Cornell University Press, 1932 Appendix II

Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books
Charles W. Eliot
EBook #13182
Release date: August 15, 2004

Preface to the First Folio Edition of Shakespeare's Plays
Heming and Condell (1623) [A]

"From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are number'd. We had rather you were weighd. Especially, when the fate of all Bookes depends vpon your capacities: and not of your heads alone, but of your purses. Well! it is now publique, & you wil stand for your priuiledges wee know: to read, and censure. Do so, but buy it first. That doth best commend a Booke, the Stationer saies. Then, how odde soeuer your braines be, or your wisedomes, make your licence the same, and spare not. Iudge your sixe-pen'orth, your shillings worth, your fiue shillings worth at a time, or higher, so you rise to the iust rates, and welcome. But, what euer you do, Buy. Censure will not driue a Trade, or make the Iacke go. And though you be a Magistrate of wit, and sit on the Stage at _Black-Friers_, or the _Cock-pit_, to arraigne Playes dailie, know, these Playes haue had their triall alreadie, and stood out all Appeals, and do now come forth quitted rather by a Decree of Court, then any purchas'd Letters of commendation.

It had bene a thing, we confesse, worthie to haue bene wished, that the Author himselfe had liu'd to haue set forth, and ouerseen his owne writings. But since it hath bin ordain'd otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envie his Friends, the office of their care, and paine to have collected & publish'd them, and so to haue publish'd them, as where (before) you were abus'd with diuerse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious imposters, that expos'd them euen those, are now offer'd to your view cur'd, and perfect of their limbes, and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceiued them. Who, as he was a happie imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together. And what he thought, he vttered with that easiness, that wee haue scarse receiued from him a blot in his papers. But it is not our prouince, who onely gather his works, and giue them to you, to praise him. It is yours that reade him. And there we hope, to your diuers capacities, you will finde enough, both to draw, and hold you for his wit can no more lie hid

then it could be lost, Reade him, therefore and againe and againe. And if then you doe not like him surely you are in some manifest danger, not to vnderstand him. And so we leaue you to other of his Friends, whom if you need can bee your guides: if you neede them not, you can leade your selues, and others. And such Readers we wish him.
JOHN HEMINGE HENRIE CONDELL

From Eliot, Charles W., Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books with Introductions, Notes and Illustrations, Release Date: Aug. 15, 2004, EBook #13182 (via Project Gutenberg)

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