

Foreword

Pierre Kapitaniak



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Foreword

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- 1 In his famous generic enumeration of dramatic genres, Polonius ends on an intriguing ‘scene individable’ (2.2.365). Harold Jenkins was the first to reject the meaning of this enthralling term as referring to the unity of place, preferring to understand it as part of other ‘unclassifiable’ genres (259). G. R. Hibbard offers a more inspiring reading as ‘plays with no breaks of the performance’ (224). Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* favours the Aristotelian reading with a mention of Jenkins’s option, it may be argued that Polonius’s comment is to be understood in the late sixteenth century context of dramatic practice, when division into acts had not yet become the norm. Thus, rather than the unity of place, the term may denote the structural unity of the play that cannot be divided beyond the scene, whereas ‘poem unlimited’ (2.2.366) evades the very notion of division by not being constrained by dramatic rules. The Folio version of the play is the first and only one to introduce acts, since in all the Quarto versions there is no mention of acts, or even of scenes (including the 1637 quarto reprinted after two editions of Shakespeare’s works in folio).
- 2 It is as if the play resisted such divisions, privileging a more natural flow of unidentified sequences whose logic is orchestrated by the entrances and exits of the actors on stage. That Shakespeare had the scene unit in mind when writing *Hamlet* is echoed by the eponymous prince, for whom a play is excellent when it is ‘well digested in the scenes’ (2.2.399). And is it not ‘one scene’ from *The Murder of Gonzago* revised by Hamlet, which ‘comes near the circumstance’ (3.2.66) of his father’s death, that is the central device of the revenge plot?
- 3 When Hamlet decides to ‘catch the conscience’ of Claudius through a play, it is again to the scene that his musings unconsciously return:
I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions (2.2.541–5)
- 4 Although all critics agree that ‘scene’ should be glossed as ‘dramatic presentation’ (Edwards) or ‘performance’ (Jenkins, Hibbard, Thompson), it is tempting here to think

for a moment that Hamlet already has in mind the efficiency his own revised scene is meant to have on guilty Claudius. For it is the scene itself (and surprisingly not the ‘inexplicable’ dumb-show) that triggers the King’s reaction and interruption of the ongoing play.

- 5 It must have been therefore written in the stars that a journal whose angle is to approach drama through the lens of the scene should devote one of its issues to *Hamlet*. For unlike many other collections on the play, the authors of the papers gathered here have all agreed to focus on a particular scene, and from this point of vantage to illuminate the logic of the whole play.
- 6 The present issue originated in a conference on *Hamlet: The Play’s the Thing*, organised in Montpellier in February 2023 by Sarah Hatchuel, Pierre Kapitaniak, and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, with the assistance of IRCL (UMR 5186) and RIRRa21 (EA 4209), as part of a diptych with an earlier conference, *Hamlet ... by the book?*, organised for the Centre for Anglophone Studies (UR 801, Université Toulouse Jean Jaurès) in December 2022 by Nathalie Rivère de Carles.
- 7 Though focusing on the different scenes of the play, the present volume follows the tragic pattern from the opening conflict, to various complications, to resolution in death. Its nine articles are inevitably close readings of specific passages of the play, but they are more than that. Such is the density of Shakespeare’s metaphors that each scene harbours in itself echoes of the play as a whole reinforced by the play’s self-reflectiveness articulated beyond the obvious metadramatic devices it contains.

Opening night: two micro-analyses and a real start

- 8 The three articles in the first section examine the play’s two opening scenes: the first which introduces the Ghost of the dead king and the historical context it brings with it, and the second which complements this context with the political situation exposed by the living king and his nephew.
- 9 Brian Walsh opens the volume with a micro-analysis devoted to the exploration of complex meaning of the word ‘mote’ in Horatio’s metaphor of ‘a mote [in] the mind’s eye’ (1.1.112). Following in the steps of the ‘un-editing’ or ‘un-conflating’ tradition, Walsh demonstrates that the unique presence of this metaphor in Q2 affects the way the whole play will be perceived by the audience, insisting more than the other versions on self-reflection and interiority, while the Biblical phrase about hypocrisy already suggests that the Ghost might well be ‘a guilty thing’, thus tainting its moral authority.
- 10 Yan Brailowsky next tackles Claudius’ inaugural speech in the next scene, and his study of the shift from failed eulogy of Old Hamlet to the justification of his legitimacy through marriage to ‘th’imperial jointress’ takes the form of another micro-analysis around the legal notion of jointure. Likewise, the tensions ingrained in the new king’s speech bode his later unceremonious demise, while urging Hamlet to ensure his own be appropriate.
- 11 In the third article of this opening section, starting from the same lines as Brailowsky, Andrew Hiscock takes a step back to encompass the entire second scene of the first act to study how Shakespeare plays with the expectations of his audience, who have come to see a new version of an old story, which the critics traditionally refer to as *Ur-Hamlet*.

Hiscock minutely analyses the rhetorical implications of the scene, which starts with Claudius, Polonius, and Gertrude's Senecan *sententiae*, contrasted then by Hamlet's Petrarchan sufferings, and culminating in his first soliloquy which leaves the audience in doubt about the soundness (or solidity) of the prince's memory.

The resistant *pièce de résistance*

- 12 Hiscock's preoccupation with audience's expectations paves the way for the next section which hosts one single article devoted to the play's iconic feature, probably the best remembered line of the global world literature – 'To be or not to be' (3.1.56). Jean-Christophe Mayer traces the fluctuating fortunes of the soliloquy's reception in the early modern period. This long-term investigation of annotations left on the various editions of the play suggests a divergence between its reception on the stage and on the page. If the readers seem to resist the possible meanings and implications of the speech throughout the period, its audiences cannot help partaking in the emotions stirred by its rhetoric. Neglected or side-lined at first during the seventeenth century, the speech has imposed itself as a paragon of literary achievement by the end of the eighteenth century.

Close readings of the closet scene

- 13 Yet it is the intimate encounter between Hamlet and his mother – or the closet scene as it was nicknamed by the critics – that attracted most attention in the present collection. The scene offers a central climax for Hamlet who accidentally kills Polonius thus setting in motion the third revenge of the play, that will eventually provide Shakespeare with the resolution of the other two. But, as Laurent Berger observes, it is also one of the three scenes that make up the core of Hamlet's plot through his relation to three major figures: his father in 1.5, his beloved in 3.1 and his mother in 3.4. The three articles that compose this section are representative of the diversity of Shakespearean scholarship, in turn exploring the text or texts of the scene as intertext, as material performance, and as a generative matrix.
- 14 Agnès Lafont revisits the sequence of the portraits in which Hamlet opposes his idealised father to his vilified uncle, reading those mythological portraits as allegories to be interpreted in a fashion similar to that of the emblematic tradition. She shows how those mythological allusions in the scene echo a wider network of classical references that permeate the whole play, but also prompt the spectre of the Oresteian matricide, while reminding the reader of how this strategy is played down in Q1.
- 15 Sarah Hatchuel focuses on the material possibilities of the same sequence, following Kenneth Branagh's five productions of *Hamlet* and his use of miniatures in the scene. The very status of such props is problematic as on a theatre stage it is quite unlikely that the miniatures could be visible to the audience, contrary to full size portraits hanging on a wall. Hatchuel shows that even if the screen allows such miniatures to be shown to the spectator, most film adaptations choose not to. Branagh's opposite choice in 1996 introduces a metadramatic dimension by overlapping paternal figures from the play with the actor's own relation to his mentor Derek Jacobi playing Claudius.

- 16 Laurent Berger chooses to ponder on the differences between Q2 and F in this scene, which is much tightened in the final Folio version, by analysing the editing strategies in 21 European stagings of the play over the second half of the twentieth century. Summoning the findings in the field of chaos theory, Berger elaborates a ‘spectroscopy of a friable scene’, where directors tend to follow the choices operated between Q2 and F, privileging action over reflection.

Endgames: dissecting madness and death

- 17 The final articles of the collection look at the closely connected tragic outcomes of the play – madness and death – both authors approaching the play with the surgical knife of the anatomist (or Hamlet’s rhetorical daggers?).
- 18 Following Laertes, Pascale Drouet examines Ophelia as ‘a document in madness’ (4.5.176) contrasting the staging of her madness with Gertrude’s later account of her drowning in 4.7. The confusion of pronouns combined with the fragmentary nature of her words, a compendium of shreds and patches of songs, ballads and proverbs, produces a subversive discourse on the isolated condition of early modern women, and it takes Gertrude’s elegy to virtually ‘re-member’ Ophelia’s shattered mind, for ever remembered as the archetype of the sacrificed feminine.
- 19 Jean Du Verger provides the concluding article in which he literally dissects the graveyard scene, excavating the various ways death was perceived in early modern England. Hamlet’s musing over Yorick’s skull thus reactivates the late medieval visual traditions of *memento mori* and *transi*, as well as the collective memories of the mural paintings of dances and triumphs of death, which the Reformation did its best to whitewash. Du Verger reads Hamlet as ‘the personification of Death itself’, his ‘customary suits of solemn black’ (1.2.78) an apt depiction of the Black Man. But Polonius’s murderer is also an anatomist who dissects bodies and souls to reveal their true nature. As in the case of Ophelia, Hamlet’s contemplation of Yorick’s skull ‘literally re-members the disjointed body of old Yorick’. Shakespeare does the same with his protagonist, exposing through soliloquies the ‘anatomy of the human soul’ and, beyond, the triumph of human genius over Death itself.
- 20 Approaching *Hamlet* through the prism of the scene or sequence thus appears as the most logical entry into Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy. For what else is *Hamlet* remembered for if not its emblematic scenes – the soliloquies, the Ghost’s apparition, the closet scene, the madness scene, the graveyard scene? Those are elements known to all, whether or not they have read or seen the play. And ultimately, *Hamlet* is remembered in popular culture as an emblem built from two *membra disjecta* of the tragedy: a prince holding a skull associated with the subscription of ‘To be or not to be’.

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Mots-clés: Hamlet, William Shakespeare, fragments, membra disjecta, scènes, nouvelles approches

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