Hamlet in the Closet

Balz Engler

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Plays are of particular interest where spreading the word and the role of print in the early modern period are concerned. It was print that made them available outside the theatrical companies, for the reading by individuals and affected their practice of reading. It was print that seriously raised the issue that plays have an oral and a literate dimension, and that they may be meant to be performed or to be read, or both. In the history of Shakespeare reception views have been radically different in this respect, and in recent years the question of how Shakespeare’s plays are to be used has been debated again. Using passages from *Hamlet* as examples, I should like to continue this debate and perhaps to take it one step further, by historicizing reading and the notion of the text.

After the play-within-the-play, the Queen urgently demands to speak with Hamlet “in her closet” (*Norton Shakespeare* 3.2.302) .[1] The closet, according to the note in the recent Arden edition, is “a private chamber used for prayer, study or in the case of Ophelia’s closet [...], needlework” (Shakespeare, Taylor and Thompson 3.2.323n), that is, also a place for reading.[2] After all, it has given us the the concept of the *closet drama*--a play to be read rather than performed. The term closet drama, by the way, is first documented by the *OED* for 1822, no coincidence, as we shall see.

// In the theatre the so-called *closet scene* (3.4), however, is rarely set in a “private chamber used for prayer”, but in a bedroom. One of the memorable moments in the 2008 RSC production by directed by Gregory Doran was certainly Hamlet’s (David Tennant’s) breath-taking leap on to his mother's bed. But the bed has only been a fixture of this scene since John Barrymore's 1922 New York production,[3] the first production to offer a Freudian, oedipal reading of the play. The scene, in other words, was moved from a place of individual prayer and study to one of passionate carnal acts.

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[1] She adds “ere you go to bed” --why she does so is a mystery to me, but it fits the kind of context into which the scene has been moved.

[2] For a more detailed study of the use of closets see Orlin.

In the same period, and in a different context, Harley Granville-Barker started writing his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (1923), studies that begin to take Shakespeare in performance seriously as a basis of the criticism of his works. They mark the beginning of an important shift in the history of Shakespeare criticism: The shift from Shakespeare as an author to be read, and to be studied as read, to one whose works can only develop their full potential in theatrical performance.

This was seen as a return to Shakespeare's own age, and went against the claim Charles Lamb had famously made in 1811, that at least some of his plays "cannot be acted,"

> To see Lear acted,--to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting. . . . The greatness of Lear is not in corporeal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches (Lamb 204–05).

Reading and the interest in the interiority of the figures obviously condition each other. As Lamb says: "while we read [the play], we see not Lear, but we are Lear,--we are in his mind". And still in 1904, A.C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy,* a study of character that proved to be immensely influential, took it for granted that reading is the correct way of dealing with Shakespeare, and added:

> [Good readers] read a play more or less as if they were actors who had to study all the parts. They do not need, of course [I like this *of course*], to imagine whereabouts the persons are to stand, or what gestures they

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[3] See Hapgood 209. Hapgood also points out that an illustration of the scene in Rowe's 1714 edition shows a double bed.

> ought to use; but they want to realise fully and exactly the inner movements which produced these words and no other, these deeds and no other, at each particular moment. This, carried through a drama, is the right way to read the dramatist Shakespeare [...] (xiii).

Since then, and since Granville-Barker, the attitude towards Shakespeare’s plays has changed radically, leading to claims that Shakespeare did not take any interest in publication, that plays should only be considered as performed, that the texts should be considered as something fluid, etc. This position achieved the status of a new orthodoxy with the publication of two standard editions towards the end of the 20th century. In his preface to the Oxford *William Shakespeare*: *The Complete Works* (which prints two *Lears*) Stanley Wells claims: “[I]t is in performance that the plays lived and had their being. Performance is the end to which they were created” (xxxix); and Stephen Greenblatt in *The Norton Shakespeare* (which prints three *Lears*) takes the same position: “Shakespeare’s plays were not written to be circulated in manuscript or printed form among readers.” (*Norton Shakespeare* 72). And the Arden 3 *Hamlet*, of course, also offers three versions of the play.

This new orthodoxy has in turn been challenged by Lukas Erne in his book *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (2003). He claims that “from the very beginning, the English Renaissance plays we study had a double existence, one on stage and one on the printed page” (23). The issue is, of course, the relative status of the two forms of existence, and the relationship between them. Does one take precedence over the other? (Erne, against the performance critics, would deny this.) This is how he introduces his argument: “If we have erred in the last thirty years or so, we have erred on the side of performance and at the expense of the text.” (23).

Before taking sides (if at all) we should ask ourselves about the implications of the two forms of existence. How (if at all) do they affect the meaning of the plays? In the following I’d like to juxtapose the two types of existence briefly and systematically.[4]

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[4] I am drawing on my article (Engler)

Performance in the theatre is *always* a *social* event, including those on stage and in the audience, all of them performing their roles. As to performing our role as an audience, it is sufficient to remember the courage it takes to leave the theatre during a performance. The performance has a socially determined place and time, beginning and ending. Communication, both among members of the audience and between the audience and those on stage, by speech and by gesture, is simultaneous. Performances may therefore vary from evening to evening. [5] On stage, except with soliloquies, conflicts between figures are presented, figures that are all of the same size. These conflicts are not only presented by language, but also by the scenic context, by voice, facial expression, gestures, movement, costumes, properties, scenery, sound, music, etc.--all those things that readers may neglect according to Bradley. All the senses, including smell, are involved.[6] What is important to note: The text is only part of the whole, and, except in literary theatre, not necessarily the most important.

Reading, on the other hand, can be practiced anywhere and anytime where there is sufficient lighting. It tends to be done in isolation,[7] forcing readers to concentrate on the text in front of them. Individual readers largely determine themselves when to begin and when to end, also when to interrupt. Reading mainly occupies the sense of sight--other sensory experiences are incidental and may produce distraction rather than enrichment.[8]

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[5] I remember seeing *The Merchant of Venice* with Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic on succeeding nights, the second being New Year’s Eve. The audience getting ready for the parties laughed more often, and the actors gave them more of what they wanted than in the previous night.

[6] With Elizabethan audiences probably balanced against each other differently from today.

[7] Of course, there are exceptions, like the communal reading of the Bible popular in the 1530’s and 1540’s. Play reading could be thought innocent precisely because it was not public. Unlike the charged readings of the Bible in the 1530s and 1540s, which both took place in public and were part of a process by which a godly community was constituted, the reading of drama a century later was increasingly a private activity and often (at least imaginable as) a gentrified female one (*Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England* 179) (Aston).

[8] One of the reasons why I studied English rather than French literature was that at the time the ink used in printing French books had a very unpleasant smell. This is no longer so.

The length and speed, and paralinguistic elements, like rhythm, to the extent they play a role at all, are largely determined by the readers. As the language is not embedded in a scene, readers tend to neglect the speech situation (on stage the silence of a figure may be more powerful than many words); they then read the speeches not as interventions in a dialogue but as expressions of thoughts and feelings, like soliloquies--in the way Lamb suggested.

We get a moment in *Hamlet* when reading plays an important role, and draws our attention to aspects I have so far neglected: At 2.2.165, when the King, the Queen and Polonius are in conversation, Hamlet enters the stage for the first time after his announcement that he is going to put on an *antic disposition* (1.5.170); in 2.2.74-97 the Folio text has the stage-direction *Enter Hamlet reading on a Booke*, which the Oxford and Norton editors expand to *Enter* [*Prince*] *Hamlet*, [*madly attired*,] *reading on a book*, taking up what Ophelia has reported on his appearance in her closet. The queen reacts to what she is seeing by saying “But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading.” (2.2.165), focusing our attention on Hamlet’s use of a book. Critics have speculated what book Hamlet may be reading, but, as Harold Jenkins has rightly observed: “Attempts to identify the book are pointless.” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 2.2.167n). The book serves as a property, as so often in the drama of the period. Here it is the attribute of the madman: reading, especially obsessive reading, is associated with melancholy--in the First Quarto text he immediately launches into the “To be or not to be” soliloquy after that. Hamlet, reading “words, words, words,” (189) is presenting himself as somebody who is deliberately isolating himself from society.[9]

This moment shows that my very sketchy systematic account of reading, juxtaposed to theatrical performance, has at least two drawbacks:

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[9] By the way, in Q1 just after this Corambis/Polonius gives Ofelia a book to hold: “And here Ofelia, reade you on this booke,/And walke aloofe, the King shal be vnseene.” He apparently wants her to look like somebody who is lonely and deep in pious thought, as the fuller Q2 text has it (*Norton Shakespeare* 3.1.46–48). So both Hamlet and Ofelia seem to be standing there with books, as Hamlet launches into his soliloquy “To be or not to be; ay, there’s the point”.

It has not made explicit that reading is also a performance, albeit of a different kind than a theatrical one; that, in other words we should not juxtapose performance and text, but two different kinds of performance. It will not do, therefore, to take the reading of the text for granted (and call it *the text*) and to consider theatrical performance as something derivative.

My account does not register either, therefore, that reading, like theatrical performance, has a historical dimension. In recent years the history of the book and of reading has become an important area of research. I'd just like to mention the classical study edited by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier *A History of Reading in the West*, (first French edition 1997), and the Reading Experience Database (RED) at the Open University (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/) since 1996. Where Shakespeare's age is specifically concerned Heidi Brayman Hackel's *Reading Material in Early Modern England* (2005) may be particularly useful.

> In neglecting the performance aspect of reading and its historical dimension I have just followed, of course, a common practice among literary critics: the neglect of the actual reader's role[10] --we like to leave this to the book historians.

This uncritical notion of reading is based on a notion of literature that has become, as it were, "natural", but which only emerged in the eighteenth century. As Raymond Williams has reminded us, up to the eighteenth century *literature* was defined as a skill, i.e. something performative, it then came to mean "well-written books," or even "well-written books of an *imaginative* or *creative* kind," i. e. an object (186). The new notion of literature went along with the notion of the author as a creator, the sole responsible for the work, considered to be an aesthetic entity, harmonious and complete in itself. This is the Romantic notion of *literature* as we find it in critics like Coleridge. It is the task of the readers in this context to give up themselves and to identify imaginatively with the source of the literary expression. It is in this period that the term *closet drama* was introduced--not as a disparaging term, that plays suitable for reading rather than performing were produced by the

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[10] Even in a book like Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader*, readers are inscribed in the text.

Romantic poets, and that reading Shakespeare’s plays could be considered more appropriate than seeing them performed--as by Lamb.

As I said, I am speaking about an unquestioned, “natural” practice, which may have to do with the origins of the discipline of literary studies; in theory we have certainly moved beyond this. *The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature* of 2002, for example, defines its scope as follows:

> we want to construe 'literature' in the sense it had in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English [...].There is a close period association between literature and literacy [i.e. something performative!], and our volume aims to honour that inclusiveness by recognising as 'early modern English literature' a broad spectrum of what later would be classified as history, household advice, religious and political tracts, and much else (*Cambridge History* 6).

This admirably inclusive definition, however, seems to be difficult to apply consistently. Later in the same volume we read: “Religious, homiletic, educational, legal, historical, scientific and even literary texts were published and were 'gredely deuoured' by eager readers.” (Kastan, “Print” 95)[11]

Shakespeare worked under very different circumstances, but he was, of course, instrumentalized as a cultural icon in the development towards the Romantic notion of authorship, ever since Pope had declared him a natural genius.

In order to understand Shakespeare in his own time, we have to break through the barrier that the Romantic and post-Romantic notion of literature has erected between him and us. In many respects the challenge is similar to the one which forms the basis of Margreta De Grazia’s book *‘Hamlet’ without Hamlet*. In it she shows how “the modern Hamlet, the one distinguished by an inner being so transcendent that it barely comes into contact with the play from which it emerges" (De Grazia 1). This has made us blind to the issue of succession and dispossession which is at the core of the plot and responsible for Hamlet's state of mind. We can even see how the two issues are related: The preference given to reading facilitates the emergence of what De Grazia calls "the modern Hamlet".

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[11] This may also remind us that, even though the modern *concept* of literature did not exist yet, there was an awareness of texts striving for an ideal state, that is, of an aesthetic character. Our main source for this, which has also given it such an important place in the genealogy of literary studies, is Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry*. But we should note that it was written in response to an extremist Puritan attack on such texts, and was obviously not, therefore, a position generally held. And contemporary drama does not figure among the texts defended.

How then should we approach Shakespeare's text? Hamlet's advice to the actors is useful here, by offering, as is commonly assumed, some insight into the status of dramatic texts. In his speech Hamlet juxtaposes two types of theatre: on the one hand the traditional popular theatre with its familiar figures like Herod and its hectoring acting-style (Weimann and Bruster 100), on the other a more reticent style that holds "as 't were the mirror up to nature" (*Norton Shakespeare* 3.2.20).

At the end Hamlet says:

> And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be considered. That's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it (*Norton Shakespeare* 3.2.34–40).[12]

Here two notions of language in the theatre seem to clash: On the one hand, there is a theatre where the actors' liberty goes so far that they may invent speeches of their own in acting together with the audience, reminiscent of the *commedia dell' arte,* on the other, one where they must "speak no more than is set down for them". We seem to be present at a moment in which there is a struggle for authority between those present in the theatre and the author who is trying to impose his text on them, and where the victory of what we may now call "literary theatre" is uncertain; otherwise, Hamlet's advice would not be necessary. It is a struggle in which authors have never really been successful; note the recent spat between theatres and the Beckett estate.

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[12] The end of Hamlet's speech is followed in the first Quarto by an illustration of what kind of jokes the clowns would extemporize, which suggests the following note to Harold Jenkins: "In Q1 an addition of 10 lines at this point provides, ironically enough, an instance of the thing complained of." (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2.44–45n).

But it is not only in this brief but intriguing passage that we can see the yet uncertain status of authorship. Actually, the complexities of the textual situation of Shakespeare's plays suggest that, as the authority of the author could not be taken for granted, the *ideal* of a perfect text may not be taken for granted either.

We have taken leave of the Romantic idea, still articulated by W. W. Greg, that Shakespeare wrote one perfect text, and that it is the task of the editor to reconstruct this text that left his desk. We have come to accept that Shakespeare revised his own texts, but we still do so, I suppose, on the assumption that he was trying to produce the one perfect text, perhaps for a specific medium or for a specific occasion (on the stage or in the closet).

But he may not have aimed at creating the one perfect work but have offered material for the actors to choose from, rather than letting them invent their own speeches. The length of the texts and the differences between them may testify to this--not least the different versions of *Hamlet* that we have (and there may have been others that have been lost).

I cannot help feeling that Heminge and Condell's remark at the beginning of the Folio edition that Shakespeare's "mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he vttered with that easinesse, that wee haue scarce received from him a blot in his papers" (*Norton Shakespeare* 3350) and Ben Jonson's later reference to it should be understood in this context:

> I remember, the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing, (whatsoever he penn'd) hee never blotted out line. My answer hath beene, Would he had blotted a thousand. [...] Hee was (indeed) honest, and of an open, and free nature: had an excellent *Phantsie*; brave notions, and gentle expressions: wherein hee flow'd with that facility, that sometime it was necessary he should be stop'd: *Sufflaminandus erat* (*Norton Shakespeare* 3361)

Note that the theatre people *praised* him for not blotting out line!

It would be a pity, therefore, if the acknowledgement that Shakespeare’s texts were also meant to be read led to a relapse to a romantic notion of reading and textual authority. Instead, we should ask ourselves what reading would have meant at different times of Shakespeare in cultural history. Let us just look at what the texts themselves may tell us.

The plays were published *after* they had been performed on stage.[13] We need not speculate on the reasons for this--enough of this has been done--but we should ask ourselves about the consequences. We can take it for granted that contemporary readers would be familiar with the theatre, that they would have specific expectations, or would have known the play from having heard of it or even seen it. Their memories of performances would then have been part of their reading experience and have supplied information, concerning the staging, which is so obviously lacking or unhelpful in the printed text (I am especially thinking of the stage-directions). Or then they would have had to supply this material from their own imagination, which would have given them considerable authority over their reading, also in focusing on or skipping passages.

How then should we understand Heminge and Condell’s admonition in their preface to the First Folio: “Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe”--addressed to all kinds of readers. What does *read* mean here? Perhaps we should first note that the words are part of a sales pitch for the book: Read, “but buy it first”. The kind of reading suggested is not the extensive reading, primed on the reading of novels, that became common at the end of the eighteenth century, according to Reinhard Wittmann, but one that focuses on critical understanding: “you wil stand for your priuiledges wee know: to read, and censure” (*Norton Shakespeare* 3350); and “Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe: and if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. and so we leaue you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can bee your guides [...].” This kind of reading may be selective and focus on certain passages that may not have been understood. In Roland Barthes’ terms, these are writerly rather than readerly texts, texts that need repeated reading and study.[14]

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[13] We need not be impressed by the preface to *Troilus and Cressida*.

The history of editing shows a growing division between Shakespeare in the theatre and Shakespeare read.[15] Editions become more distant from the theatre and less resistant to reading, by indicating the location of scenes (as in Rowe's edition of 1709), by standardizing and modernizing spelling and punctuation, by making explicit, expanding and systematizing stage directions, and by adding explanatory notes and illustrations.

Instead of sketching this history I should like to contrast what we get in the early texts to what we get in an early 20th century edition clearly prepared for readers used to reading novels, an edition which follows dramatists like George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill in this. But it also registers the theatrical turn by taking into account the view that the play is one to be performed. John Dover Wilson published his *New Shakespeare, "Hamlet"* edition in 1934.

Hamlet's entrance in 2.2, carrying a book, which I quoted earlier, is here introduced as follows (editorial additions marked, according to convention, by square brackets):

> *[Hamlet, disorderly attired and reading a book, enters the lobby by the door at the back; he hears voices from the chamber and pauses a moment beside one of the curtains, unobserved]* (2.2.159)

In the following Hamlet overhears the conversation between Polonius and the King, then there is another stage direction: *[Hamlet comes forward, his eyes on the book].*[16]

The passage quoted is just one example of a text prepared for readers. But it also contains an editorial intervention by Wilson,[17] moving Hamlet's entrance forward to make sure that Hamlet is aware of the plot hatched against him. By preparing the text for readers, making it more readerly, Wilson also limits their choices, and significantly, considering what I said about the effects of reading, he does so to clarify the motivation of the protagonist.

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[14] Perhaps an analogy to what we know about theatre-going may be useful here: In the early modern theatre people would go to the same play several times, and they would not necessarily see the whole of it. In the literary theatre of the 19th and 20th centuries they would attend the performance once--like doing an extensive reading of a book.

[15] The closing of the theatres in 1642 led, as David Scott Kastan has shown, to an increased popularity of play reading and may have "ensured the transformation of drama into a literary form" (176).

[16] In the following lines we get further stage directions like *the King and Queen hurry forth, he reads again, bears down upon him, Polonius retreating backwards, he reads again, he bows low, he returns to his book,* etc.

The discussion of his edition may remind us of the four things that have been important to me in preparing this paper:

(1) that reading too is a performance, albeit one with characteristics quite different from the experience of a theatrical production.

(2) that reading, too, has a history, which presents specific problems to us in returning to Shakespeare.

(3) that as students of literature we should take into account the practice of reading, and

(4) that the changing notions of reading are also associated with changing notions of authorship and the status of the text.

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[17] Wilson explains his editorial conjecture on pp. lviii-lix.

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