



**HAL**  
open science

## 'To be or not to be': a hit or a miss for Shakespeare's early readers? (1603-1800)

Jean-Christophe Mayer

### ► To cite this version:

Jean-Christophe Mayer. 'To be or not to be': a hit or a miss for Shakespeare's early readers? (1603-1800). Arrêt sur scène / Scene Focus, 2024, Hamlet: The Play's the thing, 13, <10.4000/11njf>. <hal-04140473>

**HAL Id: hal-04140473**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04140473v1>**

Submitted on 25 Jun 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - International License

## **‘To be or not to be’: a hit or a miss for Shakespeare’s early readers? (1603-1800)**

Jean-Christophe Mayer

### **Introduction**

The rather facetious title of this paper is meant to draw our attention to the convoluted and sometimes contradictory ways this speech was handed down to us through two decisive centuries.<sup>1</sup> Its story is not over, by far, in 1800, but at the end of that period, I argue, it is possible to determine with some clarity the literary and theatrical reception of the ‘To be or not to be’ speech, or scene. One difficulty is that the speech is so famous today that it has become an epitome of the play itself.<sup>2</sup> Modern actors playing the part are regularly challenged because a fraction of their audience may know the speech by heart and recite it with them. Moreover, much ink has been spent by early critics and editors, as well as contemporary academics, in writing about the play.

---

<sup>1</sup> There is currently no critical consensus on whether ‘To be or not to be’ is a soliloquy (the actor would then be speaking alone to the audience), or a monologue (there is a chance that Hamlet may be overheard at least by the King and Polonius). Therefore, I refer to the famous passage as a ‘speech’ throughout this essay. On this issue, see A. Thompson, ‘Hamlet 3.1: “To be or not to be”’, in *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, ed. K. Rowe, T. Hoenselaars, et alia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016), pp. 1144-50, 1145 and 1147.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Thompson goes so far as writing that ‘it could be said to epitomize the play as a whole, and the questions it raises pervade the entire text’. See Thompson, ‘Hamlet 3.1: “To be or not to be”’, p. 1449.

Thus, it is time perhaps to go back to basics and, specifically to the early history of *Hamlet*'s reception, which might shed some useful light on our current debates on the play, and, I hope, not be another drop in the critical ocean.

In order to do so, I propose, to begin with, to examine the play's specific print configuration in its first editions and then move on to its early reception by its readers until the Restoration. I shall then focus succinctly on the 'To be or not to be' scene and on the debates around Hamlet's now famous speech. Then, I shall continue our survey of readers, this time from a later era (from c. 1700 to 1800). They were primarily literary annotators, transcribers, but also theatre people, and we will endeavour to determine what they might have thought of, or done with 'To be or not to be'. To conclude, I intend to look back on the early interpretation and adaptation of the 'To be or not to be' speech to answer our initial question: was the speech during that period a 'hit' or a 'miss'?

### **Early editions of Hamlet marked up for commonplacing—or what did these printed texts want their readers to recollect of the play?**

It is well-known that a number of passages in Shakespeare's early editions were demarcated for their readers. These highlighted parts usually took the shape of marginal single or double quotation marks placed to the left of the lines. It is easy for our modern eye to miss them, but their use was primarily to enable early readers to extract these passages and make a note of them in their commonplace books or miscellanies. One could argue that they pointed to what was to be retained of a text and perhaps that they encouraged reuse in another context. One can also see them as providing the commonplacing 'gist' of the play.

In recent years, scholars have been drawn to them and have found that (poetry aside) Shakespeare's First Folio (1623) contains some such marks, as well as earlier editions, such as

the First and Second Quartos of *Hamlet* (Q1 and Q2).<sup>3</sup> No explanation as to their presence is given. They could be the work of publishers, or stationers and printers, as they were called at the time. Authorial intervention is unlikely (especially for the First Folio published after Shakespeare's death in 1616), but not to be totally excluded for the quartos. They were most probably another marketing ploy aimed to please commonplacing readers.

Let us have a brief look at them, starting with Q1 (the First Quarto of *Hamlet* published in 1603, but only discovered in 1823).<sup>4</sup> Reading just the demarcated lines in Q1 and not knowing the play, one could get a sense that *Hamlet* is really an advice book meant for parents who need to educate a son and a daughter. Indeed, only two passages in the whole play are marked out in print. The verse lines are both spoken by Corambis (later to be called Polonius in Q2). Corambis addresses his son Laertes and the marked lines begin with 'Be thou familiar, but by no meanes vulgare;' down to 'For the apparell oft proclaimes the man' (sig. C2<sup>r</sup> in the original). A single line on the same page, which is part of Corombis' same speech, is delimited a similar fashion 'This above all, to thy owne selfe be true'.

As for the education a father could give his daughter, it is not only short but also opposes written communication between lovers, which, in the opinion of Corambis, fosters desire and threatens chastity. The marked up lines, even more than in the case of Laertes, are

---

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Stallybrass and Zachary Lesser, 'The First Literary Hamlet and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.4, 2008, pp. 371-420, esp. 384 and also Adam Hooks, 'Commonplace Books', in *The Encyclopaedia of English Renaissance Literature*, gen. eds Alan Stewart and Garrett Sullivan, 2 vols (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), vol. 1, pp. 206-9, 208.

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke* (London: printed for N. L. and John Trundell, 1603). STC 22275 [Q1].

generalisations that are equally easy to extract by readers for their purposes: ‘For lovers lines are snares to intrap the heart; / Refuse his tokens, both of them are keys’ (sig. C2<sup>v</sup>).

Let me add that in Q1, the ‘To be or not to be’ speech is not demarcated. How indeed could it fit in a play apparently on the education of children?

Yet, in Q2 (1604/5) and the ensuing quartos, the demarcated lines do not involve Polonius directly.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the marked up passages in Q2 offer readers a kind of female diptych – one in which the young Ophelia is seen as a potential victim of sin and another, spoken by queen Gertrude, in which she describes the personal consequences of sin.

The first highlighted passage carries evident moral overtones. Thus, the play could be read as a treatise not on education, but on righteous values in this case. Ophelia is, as it were, lectured on proper virtue for a young woman and warned about a possible fall into sin: ‘Vertue it selfe scapes not calumnius strokes / ‘The Canker gaules the infants of the spring’ (sig. C3<sup>v</sup>). Who is the speaker this time? No other than her brother, Laertes, who, at this point, sounds very much like his father, from whom he is also about to receive similar upright advice a few lines later (sig. C4<sup>r</sup>).

Now, the second demarcated passage is spoken by Queen Gertrude and carries greater moral overtones, as her female voice is unleashed and the Queen describes in detail and, in her own words, the torture of guilt:

‘To my sicke soule, as sinnes true nature is,  
 ‘Each toy seemes prologue to some great amisse,  
 ‘So full of artlesse jealousy is guilt,

---

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke* (London: Printed by I. R. for N. L. and are to be sold at his shoppe vnder Saint Dunstons Church in Fleetstreet. 1604). STC 22276. There are two issues of this edition: one is dated 1604, the other 1605.

‘It spills it selfe, in fearing to be spylt. (sig. K4<sup>v</sup>)

What about the most famous edition of Shakespeare's works, that is, the First Folio of 1623? Well, although the Folio does contain demarcated lines, there are absolutely none in what is now Shakespeare's most famous play. Was this a conscious decision on the part of the Folio publishing syndicate to point readers to more essential passages in other plays? The question remains open. What is sure is that the First Folio did not use quotations marks to draw commonplacing readers to *Hamlet*. The education of children (Q1) and the temptation and result of sin (Q2) are themes that come to the forefront of the first two quartos of *Hamlet*, leaving the celebrated speech totally aside. Are we to conclude that early readers were to follow suit and copy the same text? Certainly not. As we shall see, the intent of whoever chose to demarcate those passages had an overall limited influence on what early readers really sought in *Hamlet*.

### **The play's early reception and reputation**

Early allusions to *Hamlet*, and certainly references to its now famous speech, are in fact few and far between. A commoner by the name of Edward Pudsey (*bap.* 1573, *d.* 1612/13)<sup>6</sup> compiled a commonplace book, transcribing extracts from many works, including seven Shakespearean playbooks, one of which was *Hamlet* Q2 printed in 1604/5.<sup>7</sup> Yet Pudsey, who

---

<sup>6</sup> On Pudsey, see David Kathman, ‘Pudsey, Edward (*bap.* 1573, *d.* 1612/13)’, in *ODNB*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/71298](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/71298) (accessed 19 June 2023).

<sup>7</sup> The *Hamlet* extracts appear on both sides of one of four leaves now detached from a miscellany compiled by Edward Pudsey (1573-1613). They date from 1604/5, or shortly after

had undoubtedly been trained in his school years to recognise commonplaces and *sententiae*, focused primarily – and disappointingly for our purposes – on Polonius’s sayings. Taking them seemingly at face value, he copied in his commonplace book some of Polonius’s lines almost word for word, often simply by transforming the verse into prose and deleting speech prefixes and oral structures, thus completely decontextualizing the verse lines. Nothing is said about the appreciation of the play, nor on Hamlet’s speech.<sup>8</sup> Pudsey had a noticeable interest in rhetorical tropes and lines that he could extract and perhaps reuse in another context. Despite his curiosity for *Hamlet*, one cannot deduce the consideration he had for the play, other than by the few passages he lifted from it.

---

as they are based on the second Quarto of *Hamlet*. These leaves (together with extracts from *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and parts of *Romeo and Juliet*) were separated from the overall MS (Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. Poet. d. 3) and are now preserved by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, shelfmark ER 82, in Stratford-upon-Avon. Most of these extracts (apart from the *Othello* excerpts) were reproduced (not always accurately) in Richard Savage’s *Shakespearean Extracts from ‘Edward Pudsey’s Booke’* (Stratford-upon-Avon: John Smith, 1888).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a recently discovered tiny anonymous notebook, which dates back to the first half of the seventeenth century, and contains thousands of quotations of Shakespeare in only 48 pages, does not have a single reference to Hamlet’s famous speech. See Dalya Alberge, ‘Tiny notebook by “first Shakespeare geek” to go on show in Stratford’, *The Guardian*, Saturday 4th February 2023, *Guardian* online: [https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/feb/04/tiny-notebook-by-first-shakespeare-geek-show-stratford-first-folio-exhibition?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/feb/04/tiny-notebook-by-first-shakespeare-geek-show-stratford-first-folio-exhibition?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other) (accessed 4 February 2023). I would like to thank Jacqueline Mayer and Daniel Yabut for drawing my attention to this item.

Let us remember, after all, that quantitative figures show that readers and book collectors were more attracted to Shakespeare's English history plays, with *I Henry IV* topping the list. *Hamlet* is in fifth place only.<sup>9</sup> So, *Hamlet* in print was not an absolute bestseller, in any case.

What we can infer from some of the ensuing early comments on the play is that *Hamlet* created, at least in the eyes of some, a kind of niche for itself. Thus, famously, scholar and writer Gabriel Harvey (1552/3-1631) noted in his copy of Thomas Speght's folio edition of Chaucer published in 1598 that 'The younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeares Venus, & Adonis: but his Lucrece, & his tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, have it in them, to please the wiser sort'.<sup>10</sup> Written after 1603,<sup>11</sup> these lines represent, in some regards, an original attempt at looking at Shakespeare's reception sociologically (the young as opposed to older and no doubt scholarly readers like himself). *Hamlet* was probably one of his personal favourites,

---

<sup>9</sup> For more information on these figures, see Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Virginia F. Stern, *Gabriel Harvey, His Life, Marginalia and Library* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Taylor and Rory Loughnane differ and claim that 'Harvey's *Hamlet* reference could thus have been written at any time between late 1599 and 1612'. See their chapter 'The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare's Works', in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Authorship Companion*, ed. Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 417-602, 545. Nonetheless, since Q1 of *Hamlet* was published in 1603, it seems unreasonable to opt for 1599, unless the play had circulated in manuscript.

as it also appears ('the Tragedie of Hamlet'), together with 'Richard 3' in marginalia listing his preferred fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works.<sup>12</sup>

If *Hamlet* was indeed a niche or elite play for those who saw themselves as lofty scholars, not everyone agreed. Clergyman Abraham Wright (1611–90) compared *Othello* and *Hamlet*, concluding, largely against the judgement of centuries to come, that *Hamlet* was 'But an indifferent play, the lines but meane: and in nothing like Othello'. Wright did enjoy the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* ('a good scene'), but found it 'better' in Thomas Randolph's *The Jealous Lovers* of 1632.<sup>13</sup> New work was overshadowing Shakespeare's in the decades after his death. As a matter of fact, around the time when Wright was taking his notes, William Cartwright wrote of Shakespeare's 'Old fashion'd wit' in 1647, a mere thirty years after the dramatist's passing and in the middle of the English Civil War (1642-1651).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the most damning, and no doubt the best remembered lines against the play, are by Wright, who remarked disparagingly: 'Hamlet is an indifferent part for a madman'.<sup>15</sup>

This vein of ridicule and mockery remained attached to the play and certainly to its main protagonist (seen as a character amusingly out of his mind), especially during the first half of

---

<sup>12</sup> These lines are in Harvey's copy of Guicciardini's *Detti, et Fatti* (1571), see Stern, *Gabriel Harvey, His Life, Marginalia and Library*, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham Wright cited in Arthur C. Kirsch, 'A Caroline Commentary on the Drama', *Modern Philology* 66, 1969, pp. 256-61, 257-8.

<sup>14</sup> William Cartwright, 'Upon the report of the printing of the Dramaticall Poems of Master John Fletcher, collected before, and now set forth in one Volume', in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Comedies and Tragedies, Never Printed Before* (London: Humphrey Robinson and Humphrey Moseley, 1647), sig. d2<sup>v</sup>. Wing B1581.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Kirsch, 'A Caroline Commentary on the Drama', p. 258.

the seventeenth century. Philip Edwards notes in his introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare *Hamlet* that this comical reputation was further fostered, in particular, by two works that contained direct and disparaging allusions to Hamlet's madness: *Daiphantus* by Anthony Scoloker, which was a verse romance published in 1604, and the city comedy *Eastward Hoe* by George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston (1605). Both included passages that indisputably poked fun at *Hamlet*.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, for some readers, *Hamlet* was no source of ridicule. Let us mention, for instance, what is currently the most annotated First Folio in the world by a single reader. MR774, as it is known now, is the property of the research library of Meisei University, Tokyo, Japan. The notes date back to the early decades of the seventeenth century and cover every play, including *Hamlet*, of course. The identity of this serious and even frenzied annotator still remains a mystery.<sup>17</sup>

Of the thirty-six plays in the First Folio, those he annotated most were Shakespeare's twelve tragedies.<sup>18</sup> Thus, one might wonder if the inscriber had any idea of tragedy as a literary genre. It seems that it was the case. His reading of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' speech is that

---

<sup>16</sup> For details see Edwards' introduction to the play in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 18-20.

<sup>17</sup> See, for the latest information on what we know of the author, Akihiro Yamada, 'William Johnstone, Signatory in Shakespeare's First Folio, and its Owners', *Notes and Queries*, Volume 65 (Issue 4), 1 December 2018, pp. 551-6.

<sup>18</sup> For details, see Akihiro Yamada, ed., *The First Folio of Shakespeare: A Transcript of Contemporary Marginalia in a Copy of the Kodama Memorial Library of Meisei University* (Tokyo: Yushodo Press Co., 1998), p. xxviii.

it is really a ‘question whether we ought to overcome our selves and our passions by extreme patience or die seeking desperate wrong’ (sig. Oo5<sup>r</sup> [TLN 1651-1716]).<sup>19</sup> In the text of *Hamlet*, the question is whether we ought to live or escape in death. But the annotator introduces ‘revenge’ here, which, for us, is a misreading of the passage, but actually shows what he, as an early reader, was expecting, as Stephen Orgel has pointed out.<sup>20</sup> The inscriber held the view that this speech was supposed to be about vengeance, and no mere arresting abstract reflection impeding the action of play. This was otherwise a common criticism of the dramatic function of the speech, which could be seen as hampering Hamlet’s decision-making process so late in the play. We shall come back to this point. Let us now turn to the next period of the play’s history.

Even though a few plays were written and performed in private venues during the Interregnum (1649 to 1660), some of which were inspired by Shakespeare<sup>21</sup>, it can be said that

---

<sup>19</sup> The digital facsimile is available at <http://shakes.meisei-u.ac.jp/search.html> (accessed 19 June 2023). The facsimile also makes the text of the reader’s annotations available and uses both signatures and the through line-numbering (TLN) system to reference pages.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Orgel, *The Reader in the Book, A Study of Spaces and Traces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> *The Grave-Makers* (Hamlet and the grave-diggers) is one such short play, or droll, to have been written during the period. For details, see Dale B. J. Randall, *Winter Fruit, English Drama 1642-1660* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), p. 55. On drolls, see Susan Wiseman, *Drama and Politics during the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 6 et passim. On the role of publishers establishing a literary canon in print during the Interregnum, see Heidi Craig, *Theatre Closure and the Paradoxical Rise of English Renaissance Drama in the Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

*Hamlet* had a very mixed reception during its early years and did not really resurface before the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. At the Restoration, a kind of nostalgia drew dramatists and readers back to works that had been composed before, under the Tudor and Stuart monarchies. Moreover, with the closure of the theatres in 1642, little dramatic work had been created and writers had to turn to Shakespeare and others in order to produce new plays. This led not only to a period of pilfering of preceding playwrights but also to adaptations of Shakespeare. On the market and freshly off the press was Shakespeare's Third Folio printed tellingly four years after the Restoration in 1664.

So, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare and his *Hamlet* re-emerged in various ways. Thus, for instance, naval official and diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), who had a notorious passion for women and for the theatre, bought several Shakespeare editions in July 1664, which he recorded in his famous diaries. In November of that year, he was learning Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' speech and was trying to recite it without the help of the book. In his entry for 15 August 1665, and amid an outbreak of plague, he mentions his dreams and his fear of death. At this moment, the lines from *Hamlet* he had learned the year before come to mind and allow him to express not only his fears but also his will to defeat death somehow: 'what a happy thing it would be if when we are in our graves (as Shakespeare resembles it) we could dream, and dream but such dreams as this, that we should not need to be so fearful of death as we are this plague-time'.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the 'To be or not to be' speech took on the value of a consolation piece for Pepys, who ignored, or oversaw, its ambiguities.

---

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Mynors Bright and John Warrington, 3 vols (London: Dent, 1953), vol. 1, pp. 102, 118, 173, 190, 214, 236, 339; vol. 2, pp. 27, 67, 152, 309-10; vol. 3, pp. 223, 226.

Thus, at the turn of the seventeenth century, *Hamlet* had definitely made its mark. Nonetheless, and as we have seen, its success as a play was not inevitable and remained unstable.

Before turning to the next period, let us pause a moment to consider the special features of the famous *Hamlet* speech.

### **‘To be or not to be’: probing briefly the nature of the scene**

As we know by now, modern editors of *Hamlet* have basically three source texts of the play to work with. The First Quarto version of 1603 (Q1) and the First Folio’s *Hamlet*, which varies slightly from the Second Quarto of 1604/5 (Q2). In Q1, the ‘To be or not to be’ speech is 23 verse lines long, as opposed to the Folio’s 35 lines, which makes for a twelve-line difference. However imperfect the Q1 version might be (this edition of the play has been referred to in the past as a ‘bad quarto’), it nevertheless keeps some kind of coherence. It is thus tempting for directors to make use of it.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the more pressing question is: what if the speech was misplaced? In Q1, it appears much before in the play, when Hamlet is still debating on whether to take action. Some theatre directors and academics argue that placing it in Act 3, scene 1, actually undercuts the process

---

<sup>23</sup> K. Irace notes indeed that ‘the first quarto has had its own surprisingly rich modern performance history, beginning with William Poel’s staging in 1881 and continuing to the present – with a cluster of successful productions beginning in the 1980s’. (William Shakespeare, *The First Quarto of Hamlet*, ed. K. Irace, The New Cambridge Shakespeare: The Early Quartos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 23. Anne Thompson writes also of ‘a strong theatrical tradition of preferring the Q1 ordering of events’ (for details, see Thompson, ‘Hamlet 3.1: “To be or not to be”’, p. 1446).

and dynamics of the play, as Hamlet is supposed to be closer to making his mind at this point – an argument we have already touched upon.<sup>24</sup> So, is the speech in truth a ‘detachable scene’ and a ‘portable scene’, ‘easily moved to one scene (some 500 lines) earlier if the director finds its traditional position in the two ‘good texts’ [i.e., Q2 and F1] ‘uncomfortable’. ‘Most people in most audiences would probably not notice any difference’, Anne Thompson surmises.<sup>25</sup> For that matter, some eighteenth-century readers had already pointed out, more radically, that the speech was ‘a perfectly detached piece’, as the last section of this essay will make clear.<sup>26</sup>

These questions indicate again that with Shakespeare, no text is actually sacred or fixed. There were substantial differences between the various source texts of *Hamlet* from the start. Nonetheless, modern directors – often blamed for tampering with the ‘holy text’ – have every reason to make the most of the fundamental flexibility of the Shakespearean material in order to serve their vision of the play. If we want to go further, we could argue with Philip Edwards

---

<sup>24</sup> This is exactly K. Irace’s position. The critic suggests that ‘the position of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy in Q2 and F may itself seem contradictory, for it interrupts Hamlet’s plan to test the king: in Q2 and F Hamlet hopefully seizes on this plan in Act 2, Scene 2, but the next time he appears (Act 3, Scene 1), he is meditating the pros and cons of suicide’ (Shakespeare, *The First Quarto of Hamlet*, ed. Irace, p. 21). As for theatre directors, see Trevor Nunn’s similar opinion on the matter (cited in Thompson, ‘Hamlet 3.1: “To be or not to be”’, p. 1447).

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, ‘Hamlet 3.1: “To be or not to be”’, p. 1145.

<sup>26</sup> A reader of a copy of Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition of Shakespeare’s works (Folger Shakespeare Library PR2752 1709a Copy 4 Sh. Col., vol. 5, recto of second back flyleaf; ESTC N10409), adapting Charles Gildon’s *The Laws of Poetry* (London: printed for W. Hinchliffe, at Dryden’s Head, under the Royal-Exchange; and J. Walthoe, jun. over against the Royal-Exchange, in Cornhill, 1721), p. 206. ESTC N10409.

that ‘the complexity of the play’s textual situation reverberates in the complexity, even ineffability, of its central character’.<sup>27</sup> This is a statement to ponder.

At all events, this logic of detachability, disarticulation, decontextualization / generalisation, or, alternatively, a tendency to merge textual elements is not one invented in contemporary times. It is one we have seen – and will witness again – employed by some of the first readers of *Hamlet*.

It is time now to pick up the story of Shakespeare’s early readers of *Hamlet* where we left it, and ask ourselves:

**What did early non-theatrical annotators and transcribers of ‘To be or not to be’ think of the speech from c. 1700 to 1800?**

In a volume of Nicholas Rowe’s 1709 edition of Shakespeare’s works, a reader wrote the following marginal note next to Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’ speech: ‘Voltaire Vol: 4. p. 275’.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Voltaire had commented on Shakespeare’s speech in ‘Letter xvi “On Tragedy”’ published in English first in 1733, in *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, and a year later in French, in his *Lettres philosophiques*.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, ‘Introduction’, *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> *The works of Mr. William Shakespear : in six volumes ; adorn’d with cuts / revis’d and corrected, with an account of the life and writings of the author*, by N. Rowe, Esq., 6 vols (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, within Grays-Inn Gate, next Grays-Inn Lane, 1709), vol. 5, pp. 2409-10. Folger Shakespeare Library: PR2752 1709a Copy 4 Sh.Col. ESTC T138297.

<sup>29</sup> Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet], *Letters concerning the English nation. By Mr. de Voltaire* (London: printed for C. Davis in Pater-Noster-Row, and A. Lyon in Russel-Street, Covent-Garden, 1733), pp. 215-8. ETSC T137614. Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques* (Amsterdam: E. Lucas, au Livre d’or, 1734), pp. 170-5.

What reason did this eighteenth-century reader have to bring *Hamlet* and Voltaire together?<sup>30</sup> Perhaps because Voltaire gave parts of Shakespeare's works some literary cachet. The French man of letters recognised that '*Shakespear* boasted a strong, fruitful Genius', but, according to him, he 'had not so much as a single Spark of good Taste' (p. 166). Voltaire believed that translation was the only way to redeem Shakespeare: 'methinks two Pages which display some of the Beauties of great Genius's, are of infinitely more Value than all the idle Rhapsodies of those Commentators' (p. 170). And what passage of Shakespeare did he choose? No other than *Hamlet*'s 'To be or not to be' speech. 'I have made choice', wrote Voltaire, 'of Part of the celebrated Soliloquy in *Hamlet*, which you may remember is as follows' (p. 170). He then cites the speech in English in full and gives his own version translated into French (pp. 173-4). You will note that 'celebrated Soliloquy' and '*Hamlet*, which you may remember' stand out as phrases of recognition by the Frenchman that, of all Shakespeare's passages, *Hamlet*'s 'To be or not to be' speech ought to be best praised. This may have been music to the ears of the annotator of Rowe's 1709 edition, especially in the context of discord opposing English taste to French taste, which increased during the eighteenth century and was not helped by ensuing military warfare between the two nations.

Yet, for other eighteenth-century transcribers of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*'s speech, there was still the temptation to resort to 'headings', or titles, that commonplace books favoured. Thus, 'Poems and translations by Hugh Wormington'<sup>31</sup> has a transcription of *Hamlet*'s speech-headed 'Futurity'. The *OED* defines 'Futurity' as a 'State or condition in the future. Also, existence after death', although this precise meaning is not attested before 1741 (*OED* 3.c.).

---

<sup>30</sup> The annotator's notes could not have been made before 1733-34, precisely because of the Voltaire allusion.

<sup>31</sup> Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection, MS Lt. 80, I, fos 7<sup>a-b</sup>.

Wormington probably copied Hamlet's speech from the First Folio. Written in a single autograph hand, around 1715-1723, the reproduction stands out because of its title and its implications; Wormington, unlike many ensuing transcribers or annotators, seems to have contemplated what the future held for him, suicide or death, like Hamlet himself.

No doubt more concerned with establishing the Hamlet speech as a set piece, our next reader steers clear of any mention of suicide evoked in the speech's course, as will be shown. An avowed friend and admirer of Pope, writer and classicist Walter Harte (1708/9-1774),<sup>32</sup> assiduously assembled one of the most extensive eighteenth-century dramatic commonplace books. Entitled 'Miscellanea tragica: Theatrical index of Sentiments & descriptions' (Folger Shakespeare Library, MS M.a.47) and composed *ca.* 1730, the manuscript is 231 leaves long and contains a wealth of passages by Shakespeare, as well as a comparatively extended section of extracts on *Hamlet*.

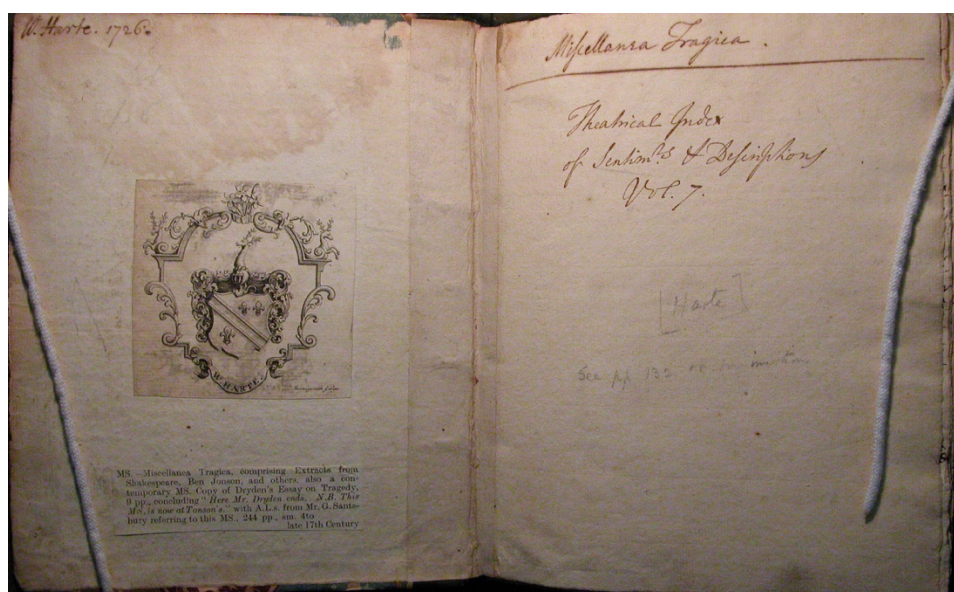


Figure 1: Opening page of Walter Harte's manuscript commonplace book entitled 'Miscellanea tragica: Theatrical index of Sentiments & descriptions' (MS M.a.47)

<sup>32</sup> See James Sambrook, 'Harte, Walter (1708/9-74)', *ODNB*, Oxford University Press, 2004, [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12492](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12492) (accessed 5 February 2023).

By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

Photographed by J.-C. Mayer.

For his note-taking, Harte used Pope's 1725 edition, and Harte's record of the speech differs from Pope's text.<sup>33</sup> Let us take a closer look at what Harte has done to the 'To be or not to be' speech, which he entitled 'Death'. We will do this through a rough collation, or comparison, between Harte's transcription and Pope's text (at 3.1, pp. 400-1):

To be, or not to be, **ay there's the question**. [Pope: that is the Question—

[The following 8 lines on suicide are cut by Harte compared to Pope's edition:]

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind, to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune;

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them? ---- To die, -----to sleep -----

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to ; 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd. To die ----- to sleep -----

[Having cut the preceding passage, Harte continues:]

**To die**, to sleep—**perhaps dream** ay, there's the rub [Pope: To Sleep? perchance to dream

---

<sup>33</sup> William Shakespeare, *The works of Shakespear. In six volumes. Collated and corrected by the former editions, By Mr. Pope*, 6 vols (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson in the Strand, 1725), vol. 6, pp. 400-1. ESTC N26033.

For in *that* sleep of death *what* dreams may **come**? [Pope: come,

[Harte then cuts another 3 lines, which were perhaps too long-winded or too close to thoughts on suicide for him:]

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,

Must give us pause. There's the respect

That makes calamity of so long life.

[Harte goes on:]

**Else who** *would* bear the whips, & scorns of time, [Pope: For who

Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,

The **pangs** of disperse'd love, the law's delay, [Pope: pang

The insolence of office.

[One-and-a-half lines cut again by Harte when compared to Pope – perhaps the passage was deemed too opaque? Pope's lines:]

The insolence of office, and the spurns

That patient merit of th' unworthy takes;

[Harte continues:]

**Whereas** himself might his quietus make [Pope: When he

*With* a bare bodkin? Who *would* fardels bear,

To groan & sweat **beneath** a weary life? [Pope: under

But *that* the dread of something after death,

**The** undiscover'd **country** from whose bourn [Pope: (That discovery'd; country,

No traveler returns: puzzles the will, [Pope: )

& makes us rather bear those ills we have,

*Than* fly to others **who** we know not of. [Pope: that

Thus conscience does make cowards of us **all**, Act 3.Sc. 1 [Pope: all:

[At this point, Harte in fact adds two lines from a much earlier passage in Pope (1.2, p. 353), spoken by Queen Gertrude to Hamlet:]

Thou know'st tis **common** all that live must dye, [Pope: common,

Passing **thro'** nature to eternity. [Pope: through

[Finally, 7 lines from Pope's edition are left out. Harte certainly gets rid of a section expressing Hamlet's irresolution and decontextualizes the extract by removing it from the play's plot. Pope's text:]

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;

And enterprizes of great pith and moment,

With this regard, their currents turn awry

And lose the name of action. ---- Soft you now, [Seeing Oph.

The fair *Ophelia*? nymph, in thy oraisons

Be all my sins remembred.

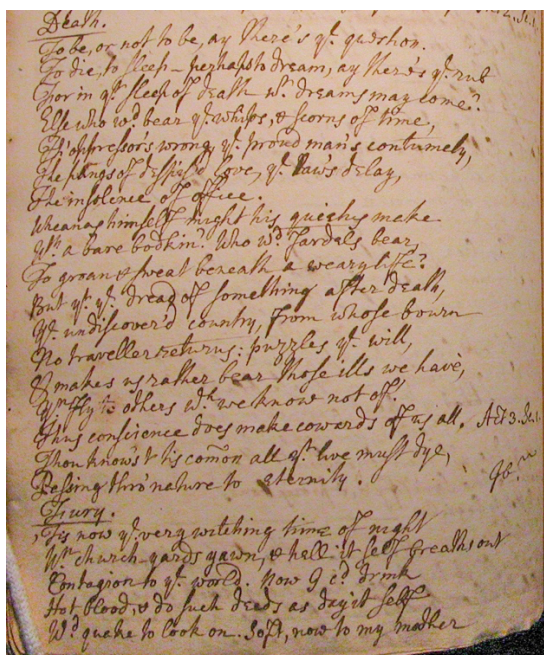


Figure 2: Walter Harte's transcription of 'To be or not to be', adapted from Alexander Pope's 1725 edition of Shakespeare's works in his manuscript commonplace book entitled 'Miscellanea tragica: Theatrical index of Sentiments & descriptions' (MS M.a.47)

By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

Photographed by J.-C. Mayer.

What can we conclude from this transcription? What is most striking is that Harte evacuated all references to suicide – no doubt because taking one's life is an unchristian act? It could also be argued that the couple of verse lines placed at the end introduce somewhat of a platitude, to what we regard now as an elevated speech. Nonetheless, it was the transcriber's choice and whatever our thoughts about it, I suggest we accept that this arrangement was satisfactory to Harte, who, like other transcribers, retained from Shakespeare's celebrated speech only a few verse lines on death – those he was ready to approve of and conceivably cherish.

During the eighteenth century, it is obvious that Shakespeare's 'To be or not to be', was no longer overlooked as easily as before. In truth, it was not only regarded as noteworthy, but also appropriated and adapted by the *literati*. As Britain was taking its place among the strongest nations in Europe, it naturally turned to the best in its vernacular literature – and Shakespeare who had served both Elizabeth I and James I in what began to be seen as an age to be admired – provided just that. So much so that what was later to become the epitome of English vernacular literature, *Hamlet* and the lines of its 'To be or not to be' speech, circulated quite casually in literary and nationalist circles, like those, for instance, of eighteenth-century patron of the arts Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800). Narrating the events of her existence, she regularly looked at everyday life around her through the prism of Shakespearean references. Thus, in a private letter to her sister, she writes about Lord Monfort's estate and his loss of

revenue and suddenly comes up with this phrase: ‘To retrench or to dye was the question, he reasoned like Hamlet, but left out the great argument of a future state’.<sup>34</sup>

### **‘To be or not to be’ on stage: early printed and annotated promptbooks**

Let us not forget that Hamlet’s famous speech owed its reputation, not only to literary readers, but also to theatre directors, or actors. Many used copies of Shakespeare’s four folios, others (more rarely) original quartos of the play. Yet during the Restoration, *Hamlet* was released as handy quarto handbooks, by publishers who sold them both before and after performances, with a view to attracting a performance-oriented public, who, in the case of theatre people, could turn them into promptbooks as well.

Such was the 1676, so-called *Hamlet* ‘players’ Quarto’.<sup>35</sup> The edition had been slightly rewritten and amended by the poet, playwright, and theatre manager, William D’Avenant (1606-1668). One specificity has to be noted: instead of demarcating passages to be remembered by the use of quotation marks, the publishers retained inverted commas, but this

---

<sup>34</sup> Letter by Elizabeth Montagu (Robinson) to Sarah (Robinson) Scott, 16 January 1755, Huntington Library, MS MO 5742. For more information on the circulation of Shakespearean extracts, including *Hamlet*, see Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold, eds, *Shakespeare and quotation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) and Douglas Bruster, *Quoting Shakespeare: form and culture in early modern drama* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> William Shakespeare, *The tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark. As it is now acted at his highness the Duke of York’s Theatre* (London: By Andr. Clark, for J. Martyn, and H. Herringman, 1676). Wing S2950.

time to indicate parts to be cut on stage. Looking at the performance cuts, it is easy to see that the play, although relatively faithful to the original, was heavily downsized.

Hazelton Spencer remarked that ‘In general the cutting is done with a view to retaining what is dramatic, and lopping off the lyric and sententious passages which have now become elocutionary arias for Hamlet’.<sup>36</sup> Hamlet’s speech, nonetheless, is left untouched. The 1676 *Hamlet* was quite a success, as its reprint dates seem to indicate: 1683, 1695 and 1703. Other such promptbooks of *Hamlet* followed, published by various stationers.<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, the Folger Shakespeare Library holds a 1676 quarto that was undoubtedly used for performance.<sup>38</sup> In this rehearsal copy, there are no stage directions but just checks and cuts, which – ironically but tellingly – do not follow the printed cuts for performance delineated by quotations marks. In fact, the hand-written erasures are often completely different. Again, despite the numerous cancellations, ‘To be or not to be’ escapes unscathed, which implies that it was increasingly regarded as a set piece for many performances of *Hamlet*.

One should not omit to mention the well-known Smock Alley (Dublin) promptbook of *Hamlet*, which, unlike the promptbooks we have studied so far, is part of a copy of Shakespeare’s Third Folio, published in 1664. A close look at the text reveals that several hands have been at work in the folio, some from the seventeenth century and others from the Augustan age. Thus, broadly speaking, the Smock Alley promptbook of *Hamlet* has become a hybrid

---

<sup>36</sup> Hazelton Spencer, cited in Andrew Murphy, *Shakespeare in Print: A History and Chronology of Shakespeare Publishing* (Cambridge UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Murphy, *Shakespeare in Print*, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Folger Shakespeare Library PROMPT Ham. 55 (1676).

piece, with not only blatant theatrical cuts, but also editorial emendations dating from the eighteenth century.

If we keep focusing on the ‘To be or not to be’ speech, we notice once more that it escapes cutting. One characteristic, which is found generally in many *Hamlet* promptbooks, is that there are very significant erasures before the speech, as if to showcase it better. Consequently, Polonius’s advice to his daughter and after that the King’s admission of guilt are crossed out.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, in the fields of reception and appropriation studies, one rarely encounters consensus. In the following example, the theme of Hamlet’s madness resurfaces and affects the status of the acclaimed speech. Indeed, during the first half of the eighteenth century, a reader and passionate annotator of Nicholas Rowe’s 6 volume 1709 edition of Shakespeare’s works took the idea of the detachability of the ‘To be or not be’ speech to its extreme limit:

The Famous soliloquy so much cry’d up  
in Hamlet To be or not to be &c. is a  
perfectly detached piece & has nothing  
to do in *the* play. for as it was produced  
by nothing before so has it no manner  
of Influence on w[ha]t fortunes after

vid. Gildons Lawes

---

<sup>39</sup> G. Blakemore Evans, *Shakespearean prompt-books of the seventeenth century*, 8 vols (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), vol. 4 (Smock Alley *Hamlet*), online facsimile prepared for the University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center: [https://bsuva.org/bsuva/promptbook/ShamP.html#div2\\_3.1](https://bsuva.org/bsuva/promptbook/ShamP.html#div2_3.1) (accessed 20 June 2023).

of poetry p. 206

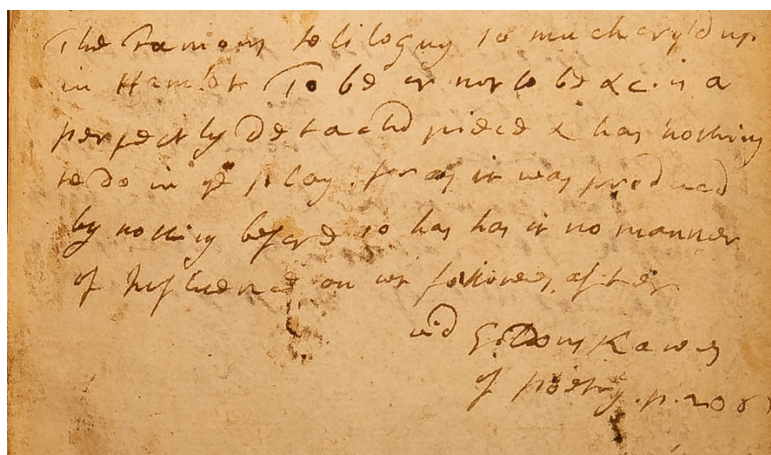


Figure 3: An anonymous reader's lines on 'The Famous soliloquy' – adapted from Charles Gildon's *The Laws of Poetry* (1721) – on the recto of the second back flyleaf, in volume 5 of Nicholas Rowe's 1709 edition of Shakespeare's works (PR2752 1709a Copy 4 Sh.Col.).

By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

Photographed by J.-C. Mayer

The annotator was not an eccentric reader, but one who had been influenced by the writer Charles Gildon (c. 1665-1724) and his *Laws of Poetry* published in 1721, which was really a compilation of other treatises on poetry.<sup>40</sup> The passage in question is actually from *The*

---

<sup>40</sup> Charles Gildon, *The laws of poetry, As laid down by the Duke of Buckinghamshire in his Essay on Poetry, By the Earl of Roscommon in his Essay on Translated Verse, And by the Lord Lansdowne on Unnatural Flights in Poetry, Explain'd and Illustrated* (London: printed for W. Hinchliffe, at Dryden's Head, under the Royal-Exchange; and J. Walthoe, jun. over against the

*Essay on Poetry*, a work published in 1682 by the deceased John Sheffield, first duke of Buckingham (1647-1721), which Gildon reprints with a few comments.

The duke was no lover of soliloquies and regarded Shakespeare's and his contemporaries' soliloquies 'equally unnatural and absurd in all, none but madmen talking aloud to themselves' (p. 205). Just before tearing down Hamlet's speech to pieces and suggesting it should be cut entirely, he notes that '*Shakespear* has frequently *soliloquies* of threescore [i.e., sixty] lines, and those very often, if not always, calm, without any emotions of the passions, or indeed conducive to the business of the play' (p. 206).

Needless to say, few followed that radical track in the history of Shakespearean productions. G. Blakemore Evans records only a couple of promptbooks (that is, early editions of *Hamlet*, especially annotated for the theatre) that omitted Hamlet's speech entirely. These are two Q6 editions now in the Shakespeare Folger Library and published in 1703 and 1766.<sup>41</sup>

While we are completely entitled to disagree with Buckingham's writing and the decisions of those two Q6-based productions, they do take us back to the idea of madness attached to *Hamlet*—both the play and the character. This, as we are aware, did much to mar the play's early reputation. Some hundred years later, the accusation was still there, even if it revolved around the nature of soliloquies, like Hamlet's, which were allegedly fit for 'madmen talking aloud to themselves'. So, by the 1750s, there was some kind of general critical agreement about the value of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' speech, but that consensus was not complete.

---

Royal-Exchange, in Cornhill, 1721), p. 206. ESTC N10409. Ensuing references will be given in the text.

<sup>41</sup> See note 6 of G. Blakemore Evans's *Shakespearean Prompt-Books*, online at: <https://bsuva.org/bsuva/promptbook/ShamP.html> (accessed 3 February 2023).

Be that as it may, a late eighteenth-century promptbook of *Hamlet* (Folger Shakespeare Library PROMPT Ham. 82; 1773), appears to confirm that opinions about the famous speech had definitely changed. The main character comes in from the left of the stage, as a handwritten inscription in ink indicates. The text of this performance edition<sup>42</sup> has an asterisk, leading to a footnote, just before Hamlet is about to deliver ‘To be or not to be’ (sig. R2r-v; pp. 39-40). The note reads thus:

\*There never was so much philosophical reasoning expressed so nervously, in so narrow a compass, by any author, as in this excellent, we may say unparalleled, soliloquy, which gives a good orator great latitude for the exertion of his abilities—the thought of death being a desirable consummation; the doubts arising from that translation; the picture of life; which our uncertainty forces us to bear, are admirably conceived and expressed.

In other words, in the theatre of the late eighteenth century, ‘To be or not to be’ had become a showpiece for a talented actor to demonstrate his skills.

### **Conclusion: the early circulation and adaptation of the ‘To be or not to be’ speech**

From almost total blindness to the speech, ridicule, some mixed appreciation, a relative disappearance to a rediscovery tinged with some misinterpretation (from our perspective), this is the journey the play and Hamlet’s speech took from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century.

---

<sup>42</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. A tragedy, by Shakespeare. As performed at the Theatre-Royal, Covent-Garden. Regulated from the prompt-book, With Permission of the Managers, By Mr. Younger, Prompter. An introduction, and notes Critical and Illustrative, are added by the Authors of the Dramatic Censor* (London: printed for John Bell; and C. Etherington, at York, 1773), Folger Shakespeare Library PROMPT Ham. 82. ESTC T62810.

Even the most appreciative and learned readers never openly embraced the speech fully, perhaps because it touched a chord that was so sensitive in them: the value and necessity of their own existence. So, from our modern standpoint, we can call, especially, its very early reception somewhat of a ‘miss’.

As a matter of fact, ‘To be or not to be’ had a very appealing ‘competitor’, which was much more popular among readers and annotators than Hamlet’s ‘lofty’ speech: Claudio’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* (3.1.118-132),<sup>43</sup> which begins with the catchy ‘Ay, but to die and go we not not where, / To lie in cold obstruction and to rot, [...]’.<sup>44</sup> Claudio’s speech, which is neither a soliloquy, nor a monologue, but is directly spoken to his sister Isabella addressed the fear of death in more pressing, more concrete and horrifying terms. Quotations of Claudio’s lines appear far more frequently in miscellanies and commonplace books than Hamlet’s speech.<sup>45</sup>

Still, what happened on early stages was rather different. When *Hamlet* was performed the speech was never, or extremely rarely cut, as theatre managers, or directors, sought to stir genuine emotions in their audiences – sentiments that readers seemingly could not wrestle with completely on their own.

By hardly ever cutting it, the stage gradually gave the ‘To be or not to be’ speech a special aura. Often repeated, it began to disclose the pains of the ebbs and flows of existence.

---

<sup>43</sup> First printed the 1623 First Folio, but first performed in 1603.

<sup>44</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. Brian Gibbons, updated ed, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> This statement is supported by my own experience of looking at hundreds of early miscellanies and commonplace books in a substantial number of libraries and archives.

In sum, the speech was undeniably invaluable and unavoidable in British theatre by the late 1770s and – if well performed – it was a definite ‘hit’ on stage.