



Zachary Lesser. "Hamlet" after Q1: An Uncanny History of the
Shakespearean Text

Zachary Lesser. *"Hamlet" after Q1: An Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 292 p., 27 ill. ISBN 9780812246612. US \$59.95 / GBP £52.00 (hardcover).

Zachary Lesser begins *"Hamlet" after Q1: An Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text* with an account of Sir Henry Bunbury's discovery of the volume containing the infamous "bad quarto" of *Hamlet* to introduce a story Lesser tells the reader will deal with "loss, destruction, and reconstruction" (1). Lesser explores the rather strange and indeed uncanny history of Q1 and its troubled relationship with the Q2 and 1623 Folio versions of the play. He thus relates a crucial notion about the "uncanny" Q1, arguing that it "challenges both traditional bibliographic scholarship and the historicist criticism that has recently dominated Shakespeare and early modern studies" (11). Lesser specifically challenges strictly bibliographic studies of Q1, Q2, and F because they narrowly focus on chronological creation and not on the sequence in which they became known to the world. Lesser therefore demonstrates that "historicist scholarship repeatedly discovers in archival research, philological inquiry, and bibliographic analysis truths about the Shakespearean text...derive from the very process of 'discovering' them" (17). Lesser uses the strange history of Q1 to highlight these phenomena and to pose important questions about scholarly and editorial processes themselves.

Lesser employs an intriguing methodology in revisiting these scholarly practices; in the introduction, he announces that at the end of each chapter he returns to Q1, Q2, and F to "reexamine what they might tell us" through this adjustment of the critical lens. In Chapter 1, Lesser notes that a "transformation in bibliographic theory and evidentiary standards derives in part from the emergence of Q1" (27). Offering a lucid account of the nineteenth-century debate about Q1 between Charles Knight and John Payne Collier, Lesser explains how this debate ultimately informed new bibliography scholars R.B. McKerrow, A.W. Pollard, W.W. Greg, and Fredson Bowers.

The subsequent chapters of the book engage with more specific aspects of Q1, Q2, and F. Exploring the bawdy pun *country*, Lesser argues in Chapter 2 that Shakespeare editors' "glossing" practices significantly contribute to "shaping the meanings" for modern readers,



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which simultaneously avoids crucial "hermeneutic problems at the heart of historicism, problems that more explicitly theoretical discourse subjects to intense debate" (81). Chapter 3 focuses on the closet scene and the ghost's nightgown to argue that Victorian "prudery" does not lead to "disavowals of the Freudian bed," but rather critics who imagine that the "general reader or spectator" typically does not understand the "meaning" of "closet" or realize that a bed does not belong in the scene at all (119). In Chapter 4, Lesser argues that the "overt religiosity" of the "To be or not to be" scene "played a crucial role in its later nineteenth-century reception, helping to promote a reading of the Q2/F soliloquy as far less orthodox, perhaps even atheistic" (159). As promised, each of these chapters ends with close readings of the three versions of *Hamlet*.

In the concluding chapter, Lesser speculates that the "versioning" by new textualists will likely dominate critical approaches to Q1 in addition to "other variant Shakespearean texts" for the foreseeable future (220). Ultimately, Lesser boldly claims that "in each period of critical and editorial engagement with Q1 since 1823, certain assumptions about the nature of that text and about Shakespeare as an author have come to seem inevitable and have created scholarly blind spots that we are able to perceive only in hindsight" (220). Throughout his monograph, Lesser uses Q1 as a case study to analyze and critique editorial, critical, bibliographical, and performance implications, thereby highlighting not only the utility of Q1 but also the pitfalls that await editors and critics in the endless parade of new editions, new critical perspectives, and bibliographical practices. Leah Marcus's 1996 monograph *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Milton* immediately comes to mind as worth a second look after reading Lesser's volume.

Because it focuses on Q1, this book's primary audience is Shakespeare specialists, as undergraduate Shakespeare instruction typically will not engage with these kinds of textual problems. On the other hand, Lesser's archaeological method (which he acknowledges is influenced by Michel Foucault) offers a unique and rather accessible account of the history of early Shakespearean scholarship that spans the Victorian period, the new bibliography, and into the new textualism (see Jürgen Meyer's recent essay on new textualism and its older sibling, the new historicism) alongside the debates involving the important names associated with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Shakespearean scholarship. The hardcover



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version appeared in 2014 and the paperback appeared in 2016, and unlike the uncanny differences between Q1 and Q2, both printed editions are identical.

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