



Exploring the possibilities and effects of performance in different early modern venues of *Hamlet*.

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Variant texts of *Hamlet* are valuable in identifying its different performance conditions in early modern sites of performance. Instead of relying on one text, alternative versions provide diverse textual evidence of theatre conditions and their effects in varying venues. *Hamlet's* alternative versions are 'the two quartos (Q1, 1603 and Q2, 1604) and the folio version (F), published...in 1623'.¹ For this essay, the textual versions considered will be 1603 (Q1) and 1623 (F). Both versions are notably disparate, which promotes a wide discussion of performance. The close relation between the 1604 (Q2) text and F suggests that an analysis of Q2 would be repetitive and fruitless as 'there is no evidence that...the Second Quarto of 1604-5, was ever played at all',² which justifies its exclusion from this performance-focused essay. Despite this, it is essential to note that 'we lack the extensive documentation available'³ for concrete assertions of where performances of *Hamlet* occurred, especially which version was performed. Based on critical opinion and the variant texts, this essay will involve conjecture and supposition to logically surmise that both Q1 and F were performed and the likely venues were Oxford and Cambridge Universities, the Globe and Blackfriars with greater focus on the latter two theatres. Q1 and F will be explored to determine the performance conditions within these venues and how their site, place and space influence the possibilities and effects of *Hamlet* performances.

Q1 presents textual evidence suggesting that *Hamlet* was performed at the Globe, despite there being no official record of this.⁴ Q1's title-page refers to *Hamlet* being performed by 'Shakespeare's company 'in the City of London...''⁵ Since Shakespeare and actors within his company were shareholders of the Globe, it is logical to conclude that Shakespeare wrote his plays – including *Hamlet* – for 'the Globe Theater in mind'⁶ to ensure business for their investment. Moreover Q1 is likely to have been performed at the Globe due to its shorter text. The Globe's architectural design required half of the audience to stand whilst watching plays, inferring that if performances were overly long, audiences were liable to 'hiss and pelt the unfortunate actors with oranges'.⁷ Bad weather would have exacerbated this as the Globe was an open-aired amphitheatre. Also Globe performances relied on daylight to illuminate the theatre, implying that play's brevity was crucial to prevent the loss

¹ Anthony B. Dawson, *Shakespeare in Performance: Hamlet* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 5.

² G. R. Hibbard, ed., *Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 18.

³ Dawson, p. 26.

⁴ Hibbard, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶ Arthur F. Kinney, *Shakespeare by Stages: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishes Ltd., 2003), p. 9.

⁷ Jessica A. Browner, 'Wrong Side of the River: London's disreputable South Bank in the sixteenth and seventeenth century', *Essays in History*, 36 (1994), 35-73 (p. 68).

of sunlight during performances. Therefore performances usually lasted for ‘two hours’⁸ with no intervals, ‘scene or even act breaks to create any pauses in the action’.⁹ Clearly Q1 reflects this performance condition as it has ‘shorter and fewer soliloquies...less philosophical’¹⁰ and lacks act breaks, creating the effect of *Hamlet* as ‘fast, plot-driven’.¹¹ Fewer soliloquies also affect the audiences’ inability to fully realise the character of Hamlet and his predicament unlike an F performance. Thus staging the simplified Q1 at the Globe gives *Hamlet* an ‘emphasis on action’,¹² which is appropriate for a venue whose ‘over three thousand spectators’¹³ wanted action-orientated, ‘punchier and less discursive’¹⁴ entertainment.

In comparison, F ‘was too long to be acted’¹⁵ and Peter Thomson states that it was unlikely to have been performed in its preserved form.¹⁶ Thomson’s view seems too absolute given that F’s textual structure implies it was suited for performance at the Blackfriars theatre. The conjecture is reasonable since Shakespeare’s company did perform at Blackfriars¹⁷ and in 1608 they acquired the private theatre, performing there during the winter months.¹⁸ Accordingly a performance of *Hamlet* at Blackfriars is possible as Shakespeare’s company regularly transferred Globe plays to Blackfriars.¹⁹ Blackfriars was architecturally distinct from the Globe as it was an indoor venue. This infers that bad weather was not a consideration for performances and that longer performances such as F were possible without depending on daylight to provide visibility. Another aspect that separates Blackfriars from the Globe is that all audiences were seated. Subsequently F’s longer performance can be staged without compromising the audiences’ comfort. An effect of F’s longer performance at Blackfriars is that the audience could familiarise with the characters and become emotionally invested in them, intensifying the performance. Furthermore Blackfriars’ geographical location within the city walls of London made it ‘socially reputable’²⁰ as it was located near the ‘the residences of the rich’²¹ and could only seat 600 spectators.²² Hence the Blackfriars audience was exclusive, frequently aristocratic and even royal.²³ This social dissimilarity with the Globe makes F better suited to Blackfriars’ audience because their social elevation implies them to be educated and more appreciative of F’s high-brow, philosophical version of *Hamlet*. Additionally, F has Laertes responsible for placing his foil’s point ‘with this contagion’²⁴ instead of Claudius, depicting Claudius more sympathetically as he is ‘unambiguously the villain in Q1’.²⁵ F’s less villainous interpretation of King Claudius would satisfy royal attendees in the Blackfriars audience, which suggests that perhaps F was composed specifically for venues with royalty like Blackfriars as well as Royal Court performances. This supposition is reinforced when F’s stage-directions specify

⁸ Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, *Staging in Shakespeare’s Theatres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 24.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bridget Escolme, *Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, performance, self* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), p. 56.

¹¹ Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, ed., *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), p. 16.

¹² Dawson, p. 23.

¹³ Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 128.

¹⁴ Dawson, p. 23.

¹⁵ M. C. Bradbrook, *Elizabethan Stage Conditions* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 60.

¹⁶ *Shakespeare’s Theatre*, 2nd edn., (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 123.

¹⁷ Kinney, p. 10.

¹⁸ Anniina Jokinen, ‘The Blackfriars Theatre’, *Luminarium*, (2002)

<<http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/blackfriars.htm>> [accessed 15 December 2008] (para. 7 of 8)

¹⁹ Gurr, p. 173.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 20.

²¹ Ibid, p. 116.

²² Kinney, p. 10.

²³ Ibid, p. 51.

²⁴ *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, p. 324. Further references to this play are taken from this edition and will hereafter be referred to as *Hamlet*.

²⁵ Escolme, p. 56.

that 'hautboys play'²⁶ before the dumb-show, which is not found in Q1. Gurr states that hautboys are only present in indoor venues like Blackfriars,²⁷ which emphasises Shakespeare's integration of specific venue's social conditions into the play-text. Evidently F is more adapted to Blackfriars and implies that textual variants are possible markers of playwrights catering plays for different venues. Therefore the variant texts demonstrate the power a site of performance has on a play, as its physical and social dimensions are incorporated into the play-text producing different effects depending on the venue.

Furthermore, candles provided lighting for Blackfriars performances and 'the five-act structure...originated in the intervals when...the candles [were] newly lit.'²⁸ This strengthens the likelihood of *Hamlet*'s performance at Blackfriars due to F's five-act structure. The artificial lighting would have a different sensory effect than natural daylight in the Globe. Candles would have allowed a degree of lighting control in *Hamlet*, especially the opening night-scene. The candles could be dimmed for this night-scene to create a more authentic atmosphere, which produces a sense of realism in the characters' words and actions. The ability to darken an indoor theatre further advantages F's performance as its opening night-scene is longer than Q1's, bathing the stage in darkness for longer; increasing the tension so that the Ghost's inevitable appearance would have a greater and more chilling impact. Thus an indoor theatre like Blackfriars has more stage resources and relies more on them to create authenticity rather than depend on the power and effects of words like at the Globe. With daylight entering the Globe, *Hamlet*'s night-scenes would be difficult to portray so the words and actors' performances were depended on to convincingly convey night-scenes and invoke the imaginations of the audience. This exemplifies how the limitations of venues can be overcome by the power of words, and in many ways defines amphitheatre performances as affecting the imagination, whereas indoor venues affected the senses.

The alternative texts indicate how different venues can also affect the names of characters. Certain characters in *Hamlet* have different names depending on the version, with F's Polonius and Reynoldo named in Q1 as Corambis and Montano. Hibbard insightfully suggests that these names could potentially generate negative effects at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Polonius' name is reminiscent of Robert Polenius who founded Oxford University.²⁹ This close association in names would possibly offend the university as Polonius is mocked by Hamlet and is murdered. Reynoldo's name is close to John Reynolds, the President of Corpus Christi College who opposed theatres, publishing *Th'overthrow of Stage Plays, etc.* in 1599.³⁰ These name changes present a conscious effort to avoid possible adverse reactions towards F's performance at the universities and demonstrates how the historicity and social contexts of sites can produce unintentional textual signifiers. Yet playwrights do intentionally incorporate geographical, physical or social signifiers into the performance to magnify performance effects. For example, both Q1 and F include passages that signify site-specific locations to enhance the performance of *Hamlet*. When Horatio asks Hamlet 'what if [the Ghost] tempt you toward the flood, my lord,/That beckles o're his base into the sea'³¹, it is reasonable to infer that Shakespeare intended for the actor to gesture towards the River Thames, close to the Globe (see Fig. 1). Horatio's gesture would promote the audience to relate his words to the Thames in order to make the world of Elsinore more vivid in the audiences' imaginations. Therefore both variant texts show how the locality of a venue can contribute to performance effect. Both *Hamlet* variants continue to display textual relations to the Globe. Both include Hamlet claiming Claudius to be 'no more like/[Hamlet's]

²⁶ Hamlet, p. 271.

²⁷ p. 156.

²⁸ Kinney, p. 10.

²⁹ Hibbard, p. 74.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 7.

³¹ Hamlet, p. 71.

father than [Hamlet is] to Hercules'.³² This first of many Hercules references specifically resonates with the Globe audience because 'on its flag was an image of Hercules carrying the globe on his shoulders...'³³ Resonance is heightened if the Ghost gestured to his head whilst delivering the line 'memory holds a seat/In this distracted globe.'³⁴ This gesture would signify the head as being like the globe on Hercules' shoulder,³⁵ alluding to the mental burden Hamlet has on his own shoulders. Also Shakespeare is purported to have played the Ghost,³⁶ making this passage simultaneously imply that the Globe is like Shakespeare's head; as the memories of Shakespeare's plays are held within the audience seated in the Globe, so too are they held within his head. The combination of the Ghost's words and Shakespeare's gesture can resonate with the audience to signify this dense and complex set of allusions. In other venues such as the Court, the Ghost's words lose resonance because they lack the relevant physical cues of the Globe to signify and create meaning. Hence both variant texts present the theatrical convention of fixing performances to specific venues in order to produce effects only possible at that site.

F reinforces this performance-venue fixity by specifically localising *Hamlet* to London in the scene between Hamlet, Rosincrance and Guildensterne about the Players. Q1 offers sparse details behind the Players' presence in Elsinore but F elaborates that this is due to 'little eyases...[who] berattle the common stages'.³⁷ This refers to social events in London of Boy companies attracting audiences away from public to private theatres.³⁸ Presumably this affected Shakespeare's company as F directly alludes to the Boy companies carrying the Globe's 'Hercules and his load [away] too.'³⁹ Audiences would recognise this and find the scene ironic, topical or a means of Shakespeare conveying through performance the negative effects Boy companies had on his company in order to gain sympathy and support. This allusion to the War of the Theatres emphasises the subsequent analogy Hamlet 'draws between the public reaction to the new players, the Children of Blackfriars, and the new king, Claudius.'⁴⁰ Paralleling the popular reaction towards Boy companies with Denmark's reaction to Claudius enables the audience to comprehend the extent to which Hamlet is a social outcast in a country that favours Claudius. This analogy loses meaning in a venue external to London, for example the Sierra Leone performance in 1607-1608, as the Portuguese guests⁴¹ would not recognise the social context of the War of the Theatres.

Both textual variants also specifically localise *Hamlet* to the Globe when Polonius mentions that he 'did enact Julius Caesar...[and] was killed...'⁴² by Brutus. This evokes the performance of *Julius Caesar* at the Globe in 1599,⁴³ and 'reminds the audience that the actor now playing Polonius also played Caesar to the Brutus of Richard Burbage, now playing Hamlet.'⁴⁴ Shakespeare employs this meta-theatrical reference to invoke the collective social memories of the *Julius Caesar* performance as a means of foreshadowing Hamlet's murder of Polonius. This foreboding would not exist in a venue other than the Globe because the allusion depends on the performance history of *Julius Caesar* infused at the Globe playhouse by the very same company of actors. Thus sites of performance are influential as they can convey meaning otherwise lost in other sites. Moreover F localises *Hamlet* to the Globe when

³² Ibid, p. 57.

³³ Gurr and Ichikawa, p. 132.

³⁴ Hamlet, p. 214.

³⁵ Gurr and Ichikawa, p. 131.

³⁶ Dawson, p. 28.

³⁷ Hamlet, p. 243.

³⁸ Gurr and Ichikawa, p. 22.

³⁹ Hamlet, p. 244.

⁴⁰ Hibbard, p. 112.

⁴¹ Dawson, p. 30.

⁴² Hamlet, p. 269.

⁴³ Thomson, p. 63.

⁴⁴ Hibbard, p. 4.

the Gravedigger asks his companion to ‘get thee to Johan, fetch me a stoup of liquor.’⁴⁵ There is speculation that this refers to a Johan who owned an alehouse near the Globe.⁴⁶ With Shakespeare’s propensity for meta-theatrical references, it is sensible to believe this speculation, especially considering the Gravedigger’s purpose on the stage. After all, he is situated within the trap in the middle of the stage called the *platea*,⁴⁷ which functions as a theatre semiotic of the ‘common place where ordinary folk went about their usually comic business.’⁴⁸ This is appropriate since the Gravedigger is a clown and his location in the *platea* increases his proximity to the groundlings, making them identify him as a low-character who shares their similar social status. Considering there was ‘a proliferation of drinking establishments within [Southwark],’⁴⁹ his reference to Johan’s local alehouse would enhance their similarities, implying him to be a fellow Southwark resident who shares the groundlings’ enjoyment for liquor. Therefore the groundlings would react favourably to the Gravedigger as he symbolises the viewpoint of the common-man, making his religious debate surrounding suicide more compelling and relatable and accentuate Hamlet’s own religious dichotomy.

The Gravedigger’s scene highlights how the stage-space and specific placement on it can create effects. Both texts present how the stage is used to produce meaning to the audience, especially regarding the Ghost. The Ghost is traditionally believed to enter through the trapdoor from the under-stage, which ‘had a symbolic function as hell’⁵⁰ and serves to magnify the religious themes that permeate the play. Hence the trapdoor is a fundamental stage feature for both *Hamlet* variants and implies that it can only be staged in a venue that contains a trapdoor. This is notably true for the graveyard scene but Thomson challenges this conjecture, arguing that *Hamlet* can be performed without ‘a sunken grave’.⁵¹ However this diminishes the importance of the stage’s influence. Public theatres had minimalistic stages so it was crucial to preserve any stage-features that performances relied on to produce meaning, such as the trapdoor, for without it resonance was lost. Both Q1 and F use the trapdoor for Ophelia’s funeral but Q1 deviates somewhat. In Q1 both Laertes and Hamlet jump into the grave whereas in F Hamlet does not. Having Ophelia, Laertes and Hamlet in the trapdoor signifies to the audience that the grave-trap is ‘the gate-way to hell’⁵² and that all three are damned as they violate Christian doctrine: Ophelia commits suicide and Laertes and Hamlet perpetrate revenge. The religiously conscious audience would recognise this stage semiotic and understand the meaning it evokes, showing how essential the trapdoor is. If *Hamlet* were performed in a venue that lacks a trapdoor, this religious signifier would be lost and detracts performance effect. Therefore a play concerned with religious themes is ideally suited for a venue that contains a trapdoor, suggesting that Blackfriars and the Globe were considered appropriate for this because of the strong affinity the textual variants have for these venues. Nonetheless the Globe is more fitting for religious-themed performances because the ‘painted heavens covering the stage [ceiling]’⁵³ provided resonance for scenes like Hamlet’s soliloquy lamenting God’s ‘cannon ‘gainst self-slaughter’ and repeating ‘heaven’ three times.⁵⁴ The ceiling becomes a constant semiotic the actors could depend on to signify to the audience the religious profundities of their words. The Globe’s ceiling and trapdoor, symbolising Heaven and Hell, signifies to the audience the religious struggle at the

⁴⁵ *Hamlet*, p. 329.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Deighton, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1919), p. 264.

⁴⁷ Kinney, p. 22.

⁴⁸ Gurr and Ichikawa, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Browner, p. 52.

⁵⁰ Gurr and Ichikawa, p.49.

⁵¹ p. 53.

⁵² Gurr and Ichikawa, p. 50.

⁵³ Gurr, p. 182.

⁵⁴ *Hamlet*, p. 191.

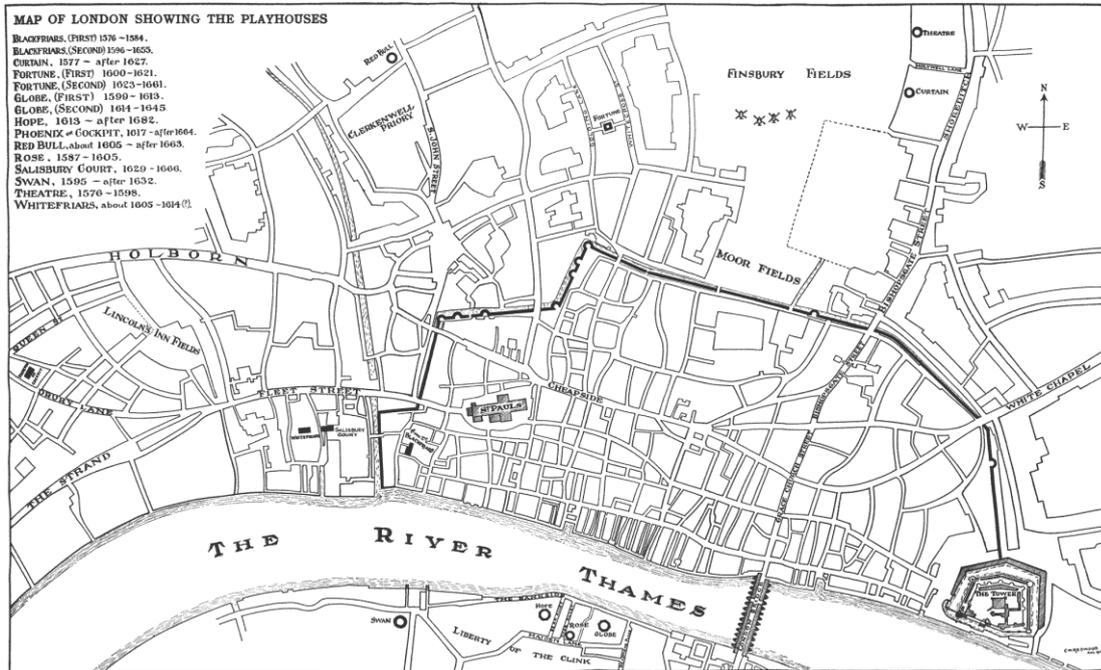
core of Hamlet's dramatic dilemma. Without these site-specific stage features, *Hamlet* loses this religious effect, showing how fundamental the Globe venue is to *Hamlet* and how important sites of performances are on plays. Even the significance of the ceiling-heavens is emphasised in F as Hamlet refers to 'this brave o'erhanging, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire...'⁵⁵ These words specifically invoke the paintings on the ceiling (see Fig. 2) and strengthens the connection of *Hamlet's* performance to the Globe. It is noticeable that F's reference to the Globe seems anomalous since it is more likely to have been performed at Blackfriars. Perhaps F was written before its publication in 1623 – even as early as Q1 – but was edited to suit a quicker pace at the Globe but used in its entirety at Blackfriars. This suggests that F predates Q1 but whether this is the case is impossible to ascertain.

The exploration of Q1 and F shows that both offer significant textual clues to dramaturgy, performance conditions and unique effects in different sites of *Hamlet's* performance. After all, venues are imbued with physical and social resonances that playwrights and companies must consider in order to produce maximum effect on audiences. Thus it is possible to discern *Hamlet's* performance conditions and effects because sites of performance are integrated and incorporated into the play-text, influencing the words, actions or structure. As a result plays like *Hamlet* become a reflection of the sites they were intended for performance in, as Q1 is reflective of Globe performances whereas F is reflective of Blackfriars. Not only does this demonstrate how influential and powerful performance sites are but also suggests that performances at multiple venues could be responsible for the existence of variant texts. Ironically as variant texts help to understand various sites of performance, the sites themselves can help understand the existence of the variant texts of *Hamlet* themselves.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.240.

Appendix

Fig. 1 Map of London Showing the Playhouses



<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22397/22397-page-images/f001.png>

Fig. 2 The 'Heavens' of the Reconstructed Globe Theatre

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