
ERNE, Lukas Christian
S4

Thomas Lodge (1596) as early as 1589 (Thomas Nashe), which was performed in 1594 and 1596 (as recorded by Philip Henslowe and Thomas Lodge). The evidence that this earlier play was by Thomas Kyd, author of The Spanish Tragedy (1587), is strong, and the hypothesis that it might have been by Shakespeare faces a number of problems, such as its absence from Francis Meres’s list of Shakespeare plays in 1598 or the widely-held assumption that Shakespeare did not start writing plays for the London stage until 1590 or 1591. But the gravitational pull of Shakespeare’s name has been such that a series of scholars have been tempted to relate all Hamlets to Shakespeare. From there, it is only one step to argue that there is no razor like Occam’s and that the first quarto is in fact the Hamlet referred to from 1589 to 1596. Among those who have taken this line of argument are Charles Knight (editor of The Pictorial Shakespeare) in the 19th century and Eric Sams (who also argued for Shakespeare’s authorship of Edmund Ironside) in the late 20th. In Young Shakespeare’s Young Hamlet, Terri Bourus revives this view and builds on it a series of other arguments: the Q2 text (usually dated c.1600) did not come into existence until 1604 and constitutes the last step in the play’s evolution (pp. 185–96); Gabriel Harvey’s famous comment that Shakespeare’s Hamlet is stuff ‘to please the wiser sort’ refers to the text of 1589 (pp. 138–40), and this version is an early ‘Shakespeare-Burbage collaboration’ (p. 156); its language and verse, whose unevenness has often been commented upon, ‘is typical of the best poems and playwrights of the late 1580s’ (p. 172). Bourus does not leave a stone unturned to try to justify her claims and put in their place the many scholars with whom she disagrees. Her association with Gary Taylor, who is working with her on a new Oxford edition of Shakespeare, whose revisionary rhetoric pervades the book, guarantees her arguments some time in the limelight. Once the dust will have settled, the scholarly community may well rediscover the good sense of what has long been the orthodox view.

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When the first quarto edition of Hamlet, originally published in 1603, was rediscovered in the early 19th century, it was at first assumed that its text – only about half as long as that of the second quarto of 1604/5 and quite different from it – constituted an early version of the play Shakespeare later revised and expanded. What more natural than to assume that chronology of publication corresponds to chronology of creation? But soon after, discordant voices started to make themselves heard, arguing that the text of the first quarto in fact derives from the longer versions printed in the second quarto and the First Folio (1623). This became the majority opinion and has remained so ever since, with scholars variously arguing that the first quarto reflects a theatrical abridgement (whence the many stage directions), a short-hand report, a memorial reconstruction, or a combination or variation of these.

The early textual history of Shakespeare’s most famous play has remained contested though. What adds to its complications is an allusion to a Hamlet play as early as 1589 (Thomas Nashe), which was performed in 1594 and 1596 (as recorded by Philip Henslowe and Thomas Lodge). The evidence that this earlier play was by Thomas Kyd, author of The Spanish Tragedy (1587), is strong,