

# The First Literary Hamlet and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays.

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## The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays

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### Abstract

Although Q1 *Hamlet* is usually seen as a performance text, we argue that it is in fact Shakespeare's first literary drama. Not only is it the only professional play in the entire period that claims on its title page to have been performed at a university, but it is also the first play of Shakespeare's to be printed with what was rapidly becoming a distinguishing feature of plays for the learned or scholarly reader: *sententiae* or commonplaces, signaled by commas or inverted commas at the beginning of each line or by a change in font. Q1 *Hamlet* participated in an emergent convention, beginning in 1600 with the publication of Ben Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour*. In the first decade of the seventeenth century, fully forty percent of printed professional plays included these commonplace markers. But this practice was preceded and inspired by John Bodeham, who published five vernacular commonplace books from 1598 to 1600, the last

two of which included a number of professional plays. Among Bodenheim's circle was stationer Nicholas Ling, who went on to publish Q1 and Q2 *Hamlet*. Bodenheim was ridiculed for treating vernacular poetry on a par with the classics; Q1 *Hamlet* participates in this struggle over whether "Moderne and extant Poets," writing in English, could produce literature. This initial attempt to treat Shakespeare as a literary dramatist, however, was something of a dead end. By the mid-seventeenth century, Shakespeare was beginning to be canonized, but for precisely the opposite reasons: not for his commonplaces but for his genius.

## The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays

ZACHARY LESSER AND PETER STALLYBRASS

*In memory of G. K. Hunter*

IT HAS BEEN GENERALLY AGREED that the 1603 quarto of *Hamlet* (Q1), which is scarcely more than half the length of the 1604/5 quarto (Q2), is an acting version of the play. Indeed, we are told as much on its title page: the play is printed “[a]s it hath beene diuerse times acted by his Highnesse seruants in the Citie of London: as also in the two Vniuersities of Cambridge and Oxford, and else-where.”<sup>1</sup> Not only is the text printed as the play had been acted, but also—if we are to believe the title page—this play has been acted in more, and more varied, places than any other play from the professional stage yet printed. Q1 *Hamlet* is the only printed professional play in the entire pre-Restoration period that claims on its title page to have been performed at any university—much less at both Cambridge and Oxford. Even as a London play, Q1 is advertised not as coming from the public playhouses in the suburbs but as inhabiting “the Citie of London,” a city that was doing what it could to prevent professional actors from playing within its precincts.<sup>2</sup> While the publishers Nicholas Ling

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This article would not have been written but for the seminal essay that George Hunter published in 1952, “The Marking of Sententiae in Elizabethan Printed Plays, Poems, and Romances,” *The Library*, 5th ser., 6 (1951–52): 171–88. Hunter wrote this essay long before Early English Books Online (EEBO) and other electronic databases simplified such a project. We also thank Roger Chartier and Margreta de Grazia, whose work on commonplacing inspired us, as has the research of András Kiséry and Adam Hooks, who generously shared their important findings and clarified many of our ideas. We are grateful as well to Eric Rasmussen, Bill Sherman, and Paul Werstine, whose careful reading improved this essay and saved us from several embarrassing errors.

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke* (London: [Valentine Simmes] for N[icholas] L[ing] and John Trundell, 1603).

<sup>2</sup> The claim to performance at the universities may simply be puffery; see John R. Elliott Jr., “Early Staging in Oxford,” in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 68–76, esp. 69. But even if the claim is only an advertising fantasy, it is the unique instance of such a fiction. Paul Menzer notes the rarity of the claim to playing within the city in “The Tragedians of the City? Q1 *Hamlet* and the Settlements of the 1590s,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 57 (2006): 162–82.



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