CHAPTER 3

Piratical Reporters?

“My tables: meet it is I set it down”

The first edition of *Hamlet* was not pirated by its publishers and was not pirated by actors. But the determined search for pirates continues. Although theories of memorial reconstruction dominated the twentieth century, the earliest attempt to discredit the first quarto, and the most recent, both offer an alternative theory of piracy. Only months after the 1825 facsimile again made the text publicly available, *The European Magazine* published “A Running Commentary on the Hamlet of 1603.” It claimed that the earliest edition of *Hamlet* was “the production of a careless reporter,” its text “having been surreptitiously taken down piecemeal in the theatre by a blundering scribe.”1 That 1825 article was quoted, and endorsed, in the first paragraph of an enthusiastically applauded paper, published in November 2013 by Cambridge University Press as the lead article in *Shakespeare Survey*, and written by the most influential theatre historian of her (and my) generation, Tiffany Stern, professor of early modern drama at the University of Oxford.2

The 1825 article was written by Ambrose Gunthio. His position was actually more complicated than Stern suggests, and significantly differed from her own. For one thing, Gunthio quoted several “new lines worth preserving” in the first edition, which he regarded as “improvements” on the traditional text.3 He applauded a ten-line exchange between the King and Laertes (13.119–29), unique to the first quarto: “questionless ’tis Shakespeare’s.” He singled out, in that passage, the line “To bury grief within a tomb of wrath,” which he considered “very fine.” His other favorites included “Both of them are keys / To unlock
chastity unto desire” (3.67–8) and the King’s response (13.43–6) to Ophelia’s madness:

A pretty wretch! This is a change indeed.
O Time, how swiftly runs our joys away!
Content on earth was never certain bred.
Today we laugh and live, tomorrow dead.

These passages might not be much to postmodernist taste; they reflect, and appeal to, an earlier aesthetic, which valued pithy generalizations and pathos. But Gunthio recognizes those qualities as Shakespearian; critics still often celebrate the way that Shakespeare personalizes and particularizes abstract nouns. Notably, Gunthio’s favorites are all perfectly regular, end-stopped iambic pentameter, much more characteristic of Shakespeare’s earliest work than of his verse at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Ignoring Gunthio’s praise of material unique to the first quarto, Stern focuses on his “careless reporter” theory, which was less original. Gunthio specifically cited, as a precedent, Samuel Johnson’s view of the early printed texts of The First Part of the Contention (2 Henry VI) and Richard Duke of York (3 Henry VI): Johnson was “inclined to believe them copies taken by some auditor who wrote down, during the representation, what the time would permit him, then perhaps filled up some of his omissions at a second or third hearing, and when he had by this method formed something like a play, sent it to the printer.” Gunthio’s only originality was to apply to the newly discovered 1603 edition of Hamlet Johnson’s speculation about those two other plays. But Gunthio recognized that Johnson’s theory could not, by itself, satisfactorily explain the phenomena. The accuracy of “Voltimand’s narrative of the embassy to Norway” forced him to conjecture that the reporter “procured a faithful transcript of the speech in question” from the actor who played that small role, who “was of course one of the inferior performers.” Acknowledging that Q1’s “Corambis” could not possibly be an error, he concluded that it was “therefore doubtless the name originally given to the character” (345). The name “Polonius” must therefore represent a later revision. Likewise, one of the Queen’s speeches “appears evidently to be Shakespeare’s first rough draft.” He also recognized that the 1603 text represents Gertrude in a substantially different way. Gunthio hypothesized three agents at work on the manuscript behind the 1603 edition: a reporter taking notes on performances, an accurate transcript of one minor actor’s part, and Shakespeare (producing a first draft that he would later revise). Stern retains only the note-taker.