CHAPTER 4

How Old Is Young?

“Young Hamlet”

There are no pirates in the first edition of Hamlet. That text cannot be convincingly attributed to a piratical publisher, a piratical actor, or a piratical spectator. There are errors in the printed text, of course, as there are errors in all early printed texts of Shakespeare’s plays—and, indeed, in all books produced by Gutenberg’s complicated hand-press printing machine. But since the rediscovery of the 1603 edition, almost two centuries ago, no one has ever provided convincing evidence that the first quarto of Hamlet is a radically illegitimate text, produced by some fundamentally unauthorized person or mechanism of transmission. No early witness ever impugned Nicholas Ling’s authority to publish it or the quality of its text. The manuscript from which it was printed may not have been in Shakespeare’s own handwriting; it was probably a copy, perhaps even a copy of a copy, and it undoubtedly contained the kinds of mistakes introduced when people copied manuscripts. But the errors of copyists and the errors of printers can be found in the 1623 collection of Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, and in all the “good quartos” printed in Shakespeare’s lifetime. Editors vary in their willingness to emend, but no serious scholar doubts Shakespeare’s authorship of other printed texts just because they are imperfect. In the three preceding chapters, I have tried to show that there is no good reason, and no good evidence, for claims that the first edition of Hamlet fundamentally differs from any of those other texts, which form the basis for all modern editions of Shakespeare’s works. The first quarto is innocent until proven guilty.

Anyone persuaded by the three preceding chapters must accept the authority of the title-page of Ling’s first edition. Ling was the first person
to claim, in print, that *Hamlet* was written by William Shakespeare, and the first person to claim, in print, that *Hamlet* was performed by the acting company to which Shakespeare belonged. Everyone accepts the accuracy of those claims. Ling was also the first person to publish hundreds of lines and phrases reproduced in subsequent editions of *Hamlet*, and everyone accepts Shakespeare’s authorship of that material. Once we have eliminated the various unsubstantiated accusations of piracy, then we must also accept that Shakespeare wrote the rest of the text of the first edition (not counting normal errors). In place of the implausible, improbable, anachronistic conjectures of modern criticism, we must trust the text published by Nicholas Ling and legitimated by the London book trade in Shakespeare’s lifetime.

But no one believes that the material unique to the first edition could have been written by Shakespeare in the early seventeenth century. Stylistically, even the most cursory comparison of that text with *Twelfth Night*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, or “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” suggests that the text *printed* in 1603 must have been *written* long before 1603. As it happens, the first reference to an English play about Hamlet was published long before 1603. That first document, in 1589, does not name an author, but it does say that the play was full of “tragical speeches,” and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* contains more famous tragical speeches than any other play in English. In this chapter, and the two to follow, I will assume that the first quarto is a legitimate text of a play written by Shakespeare, and I will consider how best to reconcile the reliable, empirical, material historical evidence of that printed text with our conjectural understanding of Shakespeare’s evolving style and his changing relationship to the early modern theatre.

This approach may require some adjustment to our prevailing theories about Shakespeare’s early career. It forces us to imagine a Shakespeare who, as Leah Marcus puts it, “was not yet sounding like ‘Shakespeare.’” Consider, for instance, Sonnet 145. You will not find it in many anthologies of English poetry. Most scholars, including such mainstream Shakespearians as Stanley Wells and Peter Holland, believe that it is Shakespeare’s earliest surviving writing:

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Those lips that love’s own hand did make
Breathed forth the sound that said “I hate”
To me that languished for her sake;
But when she saw my woeful state,
Straight in her heart did mercy come,
Chiding that tongue that ever sweet
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