Hamlet and Textual Re-Production: The Case of "To Be or Not to Be" (1561-1726)

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Shakespeare's plots are staged and re-adapted world-wide as his, although most of them are borrowed. This double reproduction process has an analogue in the more localised success stories of phrases and metaphors from his plays. The fact that they live on as quotations and idioms in literary and everyday language is often cited as evidence for Shakespeare's genius, but is rarely investigated. Research in connection with the *HyperHamlet* databank, a corpus of *Hamlet* quotations (www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch), shows that Shakespeare was re-productive as a phrasemaker, too. Many frequently-quoted phrases are based on pre-existing formulae to which he gave a particularly memorable form. The case study of "to be or not to be" shows that Shakespeare "consistently seems compelled to outperform the very texts that provided the basis for his own mastery" (James Lynch), not only in plots but also in smaller linguistic units.[1]

Re-producing the Shakespeare canon has been an extremely popular activity for several centuries and is now a high-octane academic field. Shakespeare's plays have not only been reproduced in performance but re-written, adapted, anthologised, translated, filmed, travestied, parodied and edited, and the research into where his characters and plotlines now

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live on "stage, page and screen" is correspondingly intense.[2] However, there is one question which the burgeoning research in Shakespeare performance history and the history of adaptations from Garrick to "Shakespop" (Abele) and "Shaxxxspeare" (Burt) fails to ask: Where has all the language gone? Small-scale, phrase-size, linguistic repetition of bits of Shakespeare, more or less casual references in novels, book titles, advertisements, parliamentary papers and everyday conversation represent a kind of reproduction[3] that is even more popular than adaptation, but has received little sustained academic attention.

Shakespearean formulae are frequent enough in the phrase stock of English to have inspired a recurrent opening gesture in recent monographs: Shakespeare's contribution to the English language is mentioned in order to demonstrate the validity of "yet another book on Shakespeare." Here is an example from Catherine Belsey's *Why Shakespeare?*:

> Let me begin with a question. What do the following expressions have in common: . . . make short work, the primrose path, . . . suit the action to the word, more in sorrow than in anger, . . . sea-change, mind's eye, tower of strength, the milk of human kindness and the crack of doom? They all sound proverbial. More precisely, however, they are all drawn from Shakespeare. In some ways these two observations amount to the same thing: Shakespeare is part and parcel of English-speaking culture, and not only high culture. (1)

This is very true but remains undeveloped; after this kind of introduction, neither Catherine Belsey nor Frank Kermode (*Shakespeare's Language*) nor Marjorie Garber (*Shakespeare after All*) go on to discuss later uses of Shakespearean bits of language in the body of their books. Small-scale textual re-production has yet to make it beyond academic *captationes benevolentiae*, to use Stephen Orgel's term in his essay in this volume, such quotations are academically "unnoticeable."

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[2] There are not only bibliographies of adaptations and offshoots, but also bibliographies of the secondary literature; the online lists "Research Bibliography" and "Further Reading" at http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/research-biblio.php and http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/further-reading.php list over 150 titles on *Hamlet* adaptations alone.

[3] The term "reproduction" has been suggested by Balz Engler (28) as an alternative to the too-passive "reception" or to weighted terms such as "appropriation" (Desmet) and "re-vision" (Novy). The comparative neutrality of "reproduction" is suitable to the focus of this article.

1. Reproducing a pattern: "To verb or not to verb"

One project that does take notice is the *HyperHamlet* database that has been developed at the English Seminar of the University of Basel (www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch).[4] It records references to and quotations from *Hamlet* in the form of a hypertext of the play in which every line gives clickable access to later texts that quote it. A sizable part of its nearly 7,000 entries derives from searches in electronic full text collections which have brought many "unnoticeables" to light, for example *Hamlet* quotations in little-read works, or unobtrusive, not-yet noticed references in canonical texts. A further – unexpected but highly intriguing – result of such searches is that many "Shakespearean" phrases had been in use long *before* Shakespeare. The expression "mind's eye," for example, occurs in the Gospel of Matthew, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and many other earlier texts; and yet it is frequently listed as a *Hamlet* reference in annotated editions of later texts, even if neither Hamlet nor Shakespeare are named in the context. In fact, it also appears in Catherine Belsey's list of famous Shakespearean phrases quoted above. It seems that an investigation of small-scale Shakespeare reproduction needs to take account of Shakespeare's own reproductions as much as does the study of sources for his plots. In analogy with the plotlines he made famous, many of the phrases that we remember as his and then adapt to our own uses are not "original" but based on pre-existing models to which he gave a particularly memorable form or an especially evocative context.[5]

This had been recognised long before *Hamlet*. A school primer discusses spelling choices in 1582: "This shortness or lēgth of time in the deriuatiues is a great leader, where to write or not to write the qualifying, e, in the end of simple words" (Mulcaster sig. T4r). In an argument from 1583 about who is to blame for the death of one suffering from unrequited love, the responsibility of the unhappy lover is evoked: "[Aurelia:] But hath not he free choice, to loue or not to loue? / [Philotimus:] He hath. / [Aurelia:] Then he killes himself that loues" (Melbancke sig.

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[4] Like all *HyperHamlet* researchers, I am profoundly indebted to Balz Engler, who had the seminal idea of the database format as a research tool and then instigated the frame project "Passages We Live By." My thanks also go to our editorial student assistants Christian Gebhard, Olivia Rottmann and René Wallrodt, who have contributed many important insights.

[5] It is amusing to see a popular cliché vindicated in this way: from G. B. Shaw's *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* (1910) through *No Bed for Bacon* (1941) to *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), scenes with young Will busily noting down useful "quotes" that he hears (from passers-by, fellow playwrights, or actors campaigning for juicy roles) are a staple of Shakespeare biofiction.

G2r [50]). More specifically, the theological issue of human and divine will also attracted the "or not to" pattern. The poet John Davies uses it to explain that Judas' betrayal was not preordained since "in him it was / To do, or not to do that damn'd dispight" (*Yehovah summa totalis* sig. I1r), or to vary the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be mine, and mine be euer thine / giue me no pow'r to will or not to will / But as thou wilt" (*The Muses Sacrifice* sig. E1v). Finally, Davies also uses "to be":

> And which of both (thinkst thou) would Reason choose?
> *To be* made capable of endlesse blisse,
> With possibility the same to loose,
> And winne a Hell, where all is quite amisse;
> *Or not to Bee at all*, both those to misse:
> Sure, Reaz'n the first would choose,
> because the last is lowest hell, where highest horror is;
> For in *Not-beeings* bottome, being fast,
> Ought would to worse then nought, vnworen wast.
> (*Mirum in modum* sig. L1r; emphases mine)

This further develops Hamlet's predicament, from "life versus death" to "eternal existence (in either heaven or hell) versus complete annihilation."

Davies's poems postdate the first performance of *Hamlet* by only a few years, but I do not want to argue that, or explore whether, they are already borrowing from Shakespeare's play, although the fact that the last passage combines the double to-infinitive with a cliché of sixteenth-century literary love letters[6] may indicate that it is generally allusive. The main point is that the double to-infinitive was a widely-used means of expressing decision-making. In pointed contrast to Davies's piety, it was also used to posit free will as a human given: "I haue a will, and faculties of choise, / To do, or not to do: and reason why, / I doe, or not doe this; the starres haue none" (Chapman 315). More simply, a melancholy girl in a comedy loses will and reason "vvithin her selfe to doe, or not to doe any thing whatsoeuer" (Brome sig. G1r). The single most striking example of this use is the chapter on "Power" in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where Locke defines "Human liberty" as the

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[6] "Wholly yours, or not to be at all" can be found, for example, in Painter sig. ZZZ2v and H. C. sig. R2v. The formula reappears as a threat – possibly with a *Hamlet* undertone – in two seventeenth-century tragedies. In Nathaniel Lee's *The Duke of Guise*, Charles IX attempts to rouse himself ("'Tis time to push my slack'nd vengeance home, / To be a King, or not to be at all" [287; act 5, scene 1]), and John Caryll's villainous *Richard III* confronts Anne with the choice to "Prepare for marriage, or a Funeral; / To be my Wife, or not to be at all" (26).

power "to act, or to forbear acting" and employs no fewer than fourteen instances in his near-obsessive circling of the concepts of will and freedom. He defines liberty as "a power to act or not to act according as the Mind directs" (282): "so far as a Man has a power to think, or not to think: to move, or not to move, according to the preference or direction of his own mind, so far is a Man Free" (237). Locke's argument culminates in the combination of the double to-infinitive and the verb "to will": "This then is evident, That in all proposals of present Action, a Man is not at liberty to will, or not to will, because he cannot forbear willing" (246).

This is a far cry from Hamlet's "dread" that "puzzles the will" and makes him "lose the name of action," but also from other tragedies in which the will is paralysed or completely denied. Robert Daborne's *Christian Turn'd Turke* is based on the adventures of "heroicke" pirate captain John Ward, a famous Christian convert to Islam. The death of a companion inspires him to ponder the immovability of fate and to compare human actions to clockwork motions, and when a friend tries to interpose, he cuts him off: "Perswade no more, we haue no will to act, / Or not to act more, then those orbes we see, / And planetary bodies" (sig. B4v). In William Heming's *The Jew's Tragedy* Eleazer similarly reasons: "We know the weakness of our State to be / Vnable to resist, yet know not how / To yeeld, or not to yeeld, or what to do" (13).

"To verb or not to verb" serves both the philosopher Locke and a group of tragic characters – a confused Danish Christian, a Muslim convert and a Jew – in their contemplation of human will. In this context, it may come as no surprise that it cannot do so in *Paradise Lost*, the ultimate Christian panegyric to free will and human beings "[S]ufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (III:99). Milton's epic does not contain a single instance of the formula. This is not the place to discuss why this focused, uncompromising structure may have seemed inappropriate to the issue of free will in a theological context. But it may be indicative of *Hamlet's* much-bruited modernity that – despite the underlying fears of hell or purgatory – the Prince's dilemma is presented in this stark and neutral form, in a phrase which was originally deployed in a near-mathematical, expository context.

2. Coining and quoting a phrase: "To Be or Not to Be"

If Milton's avoidance of "to verb or not to verb" is taken as a refusal to reduce the issue of free will to a merely human question, it remains to

be accounted for why John Locke, who squeezes fourteen variants of the "or not to" pattern into a single chapter, should avoid "to *be*" completely. There are two possible reasons which have wider implications. The first is Locke's focus on action. Familiarity makes it easy to forget just how unusual it is to take decisions about "being." "To-Do Lists" are far more popular than "To Be Lists." To be sure, the intentional aspect of the "to"-infinitive sits very oddly with this naked verb, a contradiction which literally and disturbingly embodies the loss of "the name of action" which Hamlet deplores. In fact, Dudley Fenner's "to be" has nothing to do with intention, nor do other earlier versions. In an unpublished article which discusses Cicero's *Tusculanae Quaestiones* as a possible source for the famous soliloquy,[7] Brian Vickers quotes some phrases from John Dolman's English 1561 translation of the *Tusculans* which resemble "the speech's formulaic opening" and which Shakespeare may have had in mind, although he may have "consulted the original Latin" (Vickers n.p.):

- "not to be when you have bene, I thinke is the greatest misery that may be" (1.6.12; sig. B6v)
- "they be not as they have bene" (1.7.13; sig. B7r)
- "whatsoever you do so pronounce must not either be or not be" (1.7.14; sig. B7v)

In rendering Cicero's "id aut esse aut non esse," Dolman avoids the double to-infinitive since, again, the context is not one of decision-taking. It was left to Shakespeare to combine the implicit decision-making potential of the to-infinitive with the bare, existential use of "to be." This is his contribution; and it is, interestingly, like others among his memorable strokes, essentially a reproductive, combinatory gesture, which gives maximum effect to familiar elements.

Like Shakespeare's recycled plots, the pattern he reproduces here is so forceful that there seems to be a need for toning-down when it is quoted. In order to avoid the intrusive semantico-syntactical oddness of Hamlet's phrase, we straighten it out by substituting action verbs or by so-called copular extension in structures like "to be or not to be happy."[8] While "to verb or not to verb" precedes *Hamlet*, the "to be or not to be something" pattern became popular in its wake from the

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[8] The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that copular extension weakens "the idea of actual presence, into the merely intellectual conception of 'having a place' in a class of notions" (OED, online edition).

eighteenth century onwards, in increasingly bathetic and jokey versions, including a tradition of parodic rewritings of the entire soliloquy which started in the 1740s and reached its high point in the Romantic decades. But whatever the modification pattern, the striking flavour of Hamlet's problem is often "lost in quotation." It becomes trite.

Reading Shakespeare quotations as banal or "common-hackneyed in the eyes of men" (cf. Rumbold) is usually assumed to be an eighteenth-century phenomenon that peaked after Garrick's bicentenary celebrations. However, there are traces of an earlier history of conscious repro-duction, which may be the second reason why Locke, as early as 1689, avoided the phrase. It may already have felt so much like "a quotation" to him that was no longer freely available. Consider this question to the devil in Thomas Heywood's 1635 *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels*:

> Tell me, (ô thou of Mankind most accurst)
> Whether to be, or not to be, was first?
> Whether to vnderstand, or not to know?
> To reason, or not reason? (well bee't so,
> I make that proposition:) all agree,
> That our Not being, was before To be.
>   (Heywood sig. A6r)

This passage exhibits some features that are typical of quotations. First of all, the elements of "to be or not to be" take the syntactic role of "subject" (classically occupied by nouns or pronouns): they are *nominal-ised*, singled out by their syntactic unusualness as an extraneous, im-ported element that is at some slight distance from the rest of the text. Heywood further makes them conspicuous by *repetition* and *variation* ("Not being"), achieving a complex form of nominalisation that amounts to punning and could be taken as evidence that Heywood is conscious of using an established phrase, given that creative variation is a typical way of handling pre-existing phrases and idioms (cf. Langlotz). Heywood further underscores the emphasis which the subject position bestows *typographically*, with capital letters: "our Not-being was before To-be," and finally, he *positions* the "quoted" element prominently, con-cluding his argument with Hamlet's conspicuous opening.

It is not obvious whether all this means that Heywood is actually quoting Shakespeare. Like the classic inverted commas, which are often (reductively) taken as defining quotation, these signals are polysemous. Nominalisation, repetition, variation, typographical marking and posi-tioning *may* indicate an intertextual reference but can also stand for em-phasis, irony or a more generally extraneous origin (cf. Quassdorf and Hohl Trillini), although co-occurrence (as in Heywood) or a thematically

fitting context can be taken as additional evidence for quotation. Abraham Cowley's powerful "Life and Fame" (written twenty-one years after Heywood's text) already sounds more "quoted":

> Oh Life, thou Nothings younger Brother!
> So like, that one might take One for the other!
> What's Some Body, or No Body?
> In all the Cobwebs of the Schoolmens trade,
> We no such nice Distinction woven see,
> As 'tis To be, or Not to Be.
>   (Cowley lines 1-6)

Cowley marks the nominalisation of "to be or not to be" typographically and puts it in a conspicuous position at the end of both a line and a sentence.

A *Hamlet* reference also seems rather probable in the following passage from 1699, which combines modification and nominalisation:

> Something there needs must be, which ne're began.
> As all were nothing once, So 'twould be now.
> A Number from bare Cyphers could not grow.
> Nothing's a Barren Womb. If that could breed,
> To be and not to be were well agreed.
>   (Mason 16)

John Mason achieves conspicuousness by replacing "or," the semantic core of the phrase, with "and," and by splitting the phrase into two separately nominalised items, as indicated by the plural verb form "were." That these two might, hypothetically, be reunited or "agreed" may imply a reference to Hamlet's obligation to choose between the two components of what for him is a single noun phrase. Philip Ayres, twelve years earlier, also uses "and":

> Whilst in this Torment I remain,
> It is no Mystery To be, and not to be;
> I dye to Joy, and live to Pain.
> So that, my Fair, I may be justly sed,
> to be, and not to be, Alive and Dead.
>   (Ayres 66)

As in Mason, the two halves of the dilemma are made to "agree," but the whole concept is then made into an oxymoronic conceit (which may or may not refer also to "yours, or not to be at all") and even includes the potentially bathetic device of copular extension ("to be alive" / "to be dead"). Again, it is the degree of self-conscious, elaborate punning that may imply a wink to a knowing reader who is invited to recognise an established phrase.

Finally, two passages by Daniel Defoe, who quotes Shakespeare quite frequently, as John Robert Moore has demonstrated in "Defoe and Shakespeare." Such frequency can of course be taken as additional evidence that also lightly marked instances are indeed intertextual references, as for instance in *The Political History of the Devil*, where "to be or not to be" is in sentence-final position but otherwise unmarked: "Might end by death all human misery, / Might have it in our choice, to be, or not to be" (38). A far more salient passage (from Defoe's *Hymn to Peace*) does not, however, feature in Moore's article at all:

> Tell me no more of, wild Philosophy, . . . [which]
> Attempts to square th' Extent of Souls,
> As Men mark Lands, by Butts and Bounds.
> Wou'd the Great Be, and not to Be Divide,
> And all the Doubts of Entity decide; . . .
> Wou'd fathom Chaos, Life and Sp'rit dissect,
> And all Superiour Light reject.   (10)

Here, by 1726, the phrase has become so much of a noun-like "item" that it has an adjective of its own. Conscious and intentional intertextual reference seems very probable, here at the end of the first phase of Shakespeare quotation history. Defoe concludes an early stage during which linguistic figurations are reproduced and increasingly marked as a recognisable pre-existing elements by syntactic markers such as modification, nominalisation, repetition, variation and salient position. Long before late-eighteenth-century Bardolatry encouraged the habit of making Shakespeare quotations obvious by name-tagging and metalinguistic remarks, these unobtrusive structures began to reveal changing perceptions of mobile bits of language.[9]

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[9] The collaboration between linguists and literary scholars within the *HyperHamlet* project has greatly sharpened my sensitivity to the syntactic and morphological structures which indicate such phenomena. I am deeply grateful to Andreas Langlotz and Sixta Quassdorf, who have been inspirational research partners across the language-literature divide.

3. Shakespeare reproducing

If post-*Hamlet* versions of "to be or not to be" mark it as reproduced by
various devices, how does Shakespeare mark the phrase as a "quoted" –
and "quotable" – item? Apart from clinching the shortest, most Anglo-
Saxon and syntactically and semantically most daring version, he stage-
manages the formula as a memorable inset in exactly the ways in which
many later reproductions do:

> POLONIUS I hear him coming: let's withdraw, my lord.
> > *Exeunt KING CLAUDIUS and POLONIUS*
> > *Enter HAMLET*
> HAMLET To be, or not to be: that is the question;
> Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them;
> > (*Hamlet Second Quarto* III:i:54-59)

Like its later incarnations, Hamlet's own "to be or not to be" is nomi-
nalised, treated as a single unit and then put into additional relief by a
demonstrative pronoun and a summing-up noun ("*that* is the *question*")
which complete a straightforward iambic pentameter, a portable unit of
thought.[10] The phrase is also marked by its position:[11] heralded by the
comments of characters who announce his entrance, it is the first thing
which Hamlet utters in this moment of crisis. Moreover, Claudius,
Polonius and Ophelia remain within earshot, so that, as Ann Thompson
remarks, "the most famous of all soliloquies is not, strictly speaking, a
soliloquy at all" (Shakespeare *Hamlet [The Second Quarto]* 284, note to line
54). In fact, it has its own curious audience of potential "quoters,"
which more than compensates for the quotation marks that a play-
wright, strictly speaking, does not have at his disposal. Finally, Hamlet
proceeds to restate and repeat his dilemma, unfolding and contemplat-

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[10] The earliest undoubted quotation in 1662 is unequivocal because it includes the "that
is the question" tag: "To be, or not to be, I there's the doubt" (Heming 37; act 3, scene
2). I am grateful to the anonymous reader who reminded me that Hemings is actually
much closer to the 1603 First Quarto's "To be, or not to be – ay, there's the point"
(vii:115) than to the still-popular phrasing that is recorded in the Folio and Second
Quarto.
[11] The soliloquy comes at a different point of the play in the First Quarto, which how-
ever preserves the introduction of eavesdroppers. Corambis/Polonius asks the Queen to
leave and the proceeds: "And here, Ofelia, read you on this book / And walk aloof. The
King shall be unseen" (vii: 113-114). Corambis and the King presumably hide at this
point, and Hamlet enters to deliver the soliloquy.

ing the life-death issue in over thirty lines that further spotlight the initial, cryptic statement.

All in all, then, it is not surprising that later generations should reproduce "to be or not to be" as Shakespeare's rather than Dudley Fenner's phrase. Shakespeare regularly reproduced familiar elements; his plots are borrowed and his texts are, maybe more than other literary works, a store of "transformed formulas and lexical phrases" (MacKenzie 178); but what Shakespeare reproduced, he made his, unmistakeably. Like his plots, his phrases confirm James Lynch's statement that Shakespeare "consistently seems compelled to outperform the very texts that provided the basis for his own mastery" (Lynch 118). And in a further twist (which will need to be investigated in more depth), these reproductions, which are more successful than the "originals," compel us to go on using them as if they were ours, reproducing them yet again, remembering or not, as the case may be, where we encountered them first. Thus his most famous phrase is a miniature exemplar both of "how Shakespeare worked" and of "how 'Shakespeare' works," of the reproduction process which was an essential part of Shakespeare's creative make-up and which his texts continue to stimulate in others. Catherine Belsey answers her own question "Why Shakespeare?" by citing sources that Shakespeare reproduces, namely the fairy tale plots that underpin some of his plays. More answers will certainly be found through further case studies of textual reproduction on the phrasal level.

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