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Shakespeare and the Emperor's Clothes

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What is the theory of “memorial reconstruction by actors” (MRA for short) and why does its supine sixty-year acceptance by professional Shakespearians mean that all their books and editions will have to be rewritten?

Several Shakespeare plays appeared in two or more distinct versions. The first to be published appeared in quarto format (Q) between 1594 and 1608. They are mostly shorter, simpler in style and textually more defective than their First Folio counterparts, which remained unknown until 1623, seven years after their author's death at fifty-two. Two explanations are proposed. The Q plays are either (a) Shakespeare's own first versions which he later revised as F, or (b) illicit MRA corruptions of the pre-existing F versions. Since (a) entails the priority of Q and (b) of F, one of them must be wrong. If (b) is wrong, then so is the whole basis of modern Shakespeare scholarship.

All the facts, and common sense, and the rules of reasoning, unanimously clamour for the unitary and economical answer (a). On massive evidence, Shakespeare started early and revised his plays; so the Q and F counterpart versions are *prima facie* his Q originals and his F revisions. In confirmation, many of the Q editions proclaim his name and that of his theatre company on their title pages. Nothing whatever supports (b). On the contrary, it is self-evidently vitiated by its own needs to invent all the facts and dates it requires, beginning with the pretence that texts unknown before 1623 had been written and performed up to 30 years earlier. Yet an entire profession persists in denouncing (a) as a lie and announcing (b) as the truth.

The quickest way for the Shakespearians in the street to see through the emperor's clothes is to display them in process of fabrication. Here is the MRA theory required to fit Q *Hamlet* 1603, as designed by Harold Jenkins in his 1962 admired 1982 edition. “What we have to suppose is that a group of actors, wishing to perform a play of which they had no book, would make a book for what could be remembered by one or more of their number who had acted in the play before”. Almost every word of that entirely typical sentence entails baseless and continuous invention and self-contradiction.

First, a whole imaginary five-act play is magically created. Then its equally imaginary book appears, complete with written parts. Then the whole lot disappears, to be amazingly replaced by a quite different book. Meanwhile a whole company of imaginary actors has been recruited, for imaginary performances of the imaginary plays at imaginary theatres to imaginary audiences. Then almost the entire imaginary troupe also disappears leaving a small group, such as one, which amazingly expands into an entirely different group of equally imaginary actors. The professional good memories of the first imaginary company are instantly exchanged for the unprofessional bad memories of the imaginary group, and again for the good memories of the expanded group, who are ready to resume their professions. Thus the facts of plays and their dates, the agencies of actors and memories, and all the necessary corollaries of wishes, abilities, and availabilities are manufactured out of whole cloth, just to suit the theory, which has all been spun out of one solitary fact only, namely “a book”, i.e. Q *Hamlet* 1603. All the rest, and a very great deal more of the same, are just ancient legends intoned in the high halls of Academia to the strains of MRA lyres. They are well described as “what we have to suppose”; and if all concerned had refrained from supposing the, which seems little enough to ask, nothing would ever have been heard about them.

Why then are they still being sung in unison by massed choirs of self-congratulatory commentators? This at least is easy to explain. The MRA theories grant a general license for despising whole categories of ordinary people as knaves or fools, exactly as in the Hans Andersen parable. Elizabethan and Jacobean editors, printers and publishers obligingly turn into pirates, and their administrators, audiences, readers and editors become dupes, at the drop of a hypothesis. Better still, MRA prohibits Shakespeare himself from writing plays of which modern editors disapprove, and thus fully confirm the infallibility of their feelings. No wonder such notions have proved so popular and profitable within the profession, and hence so immune from criticism for so long.