

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Punctuating 'Hamlet'

Stephanie Wilson · Thursday, April 4th, 2013

Shakespeare can drive you crazy.

I have always loved the song from *Hair*, “What a Piece of Work is Man,” so I decided to check the text in Hamlet. and. First, I went to my mother’s old copy of the Complete Works from her days at the Pasadena Playhouse.

To my surprise, I discovered that the wording was different in my mom’s edition. It said ‘What a Piece of Work is A Man’ instead of ‘What a Piece of Work is Man.’ Hmmm... So I went to the Quarto editions. The First Q did not have this speech at all; the Fifth had the same text as mom’s Complete Works.

Then I read the Second Q and lo and behold and hark! Something startling! It read ‘What piece of work is a man.’ I used a lifeline and phoned an expert friend, who confirmed that the Second Q is generally considered to be based on Shakespeare’s prompt book and therefore followed most closely the intent of the author.

I ventured forth and found that the Second through Fourth Quartos have a consistent – and yet different – punctuation of this passage. So, I went back to the folios and all of the published works, plus a few versions on film, and they are fairly consistent and written the way that you all probably know it:

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an Angel! in apprehension how like a god!

For someone who has lost his mirth, Hamlet sure seems excited with all of those exclamation marks. But this is the generally accepted version. And this piece is written in prose, so there are no hard line breaks: strange for such a romantic piece. The performer breathes and phrases based on the punctuation, rather than with the assistance of blank or rhyming verse. Publishers, dating back to the so-called [Cambridge Shakespeare](#), have taken great pains to avoid corrupting the original text, the stage directions and the earliest manifests. They provide pages and pages (and pages) of notes when text is omitted from the Folios, and endlessly renumber the lines, so as not to disturb the references in Schmidt or Bartlett.

So I went back to the Second, Third and Fourth Quartos, which have the text thus:

What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an Angel in apprehension, how like a God:

Note that ‘God’ is not in lower case in these earlier Q’s, nor is the word ‘faculties’ singular. These changes to the lower case ‘god’ and man being infinite in a singular ‘faculty’ happen somewhere between the Fourth and Fifth Q and they continue into the Folios.

The real story is in the punctuation!

Enter J. Dover Wilson, a professor and scholar who made Hamlet a life-long project. He is certain that the Second Q is the correct version claiming, among other things, that Elizabethan Angels

were not able to take action, but only to apprehend. So, “in action how like an Angel” makes no sense, but “how like an Angel in apprehension” is lovely. Then there’s God. I always had a hard time – even when I was ten – singing “In apprehension how like a God.” What does that even mean? Is God fearful of the future or is this the God who understands, which might make sense but is rather redundant, like ‘God is Omnipotent.’

Shakespeare always hands us a rhythm, if we can find it. Here is where theatre folk must trust the gut. Which is correct? Which trips trippingly off the tongue? What was Hamlet’s ironic and mirthless speech trying to tell us? Is this what John Barton calls “crude reality break[ing] in with the prose”? Well, you read Cultural Weekly so you must be brushed up on your Shakespeare. What do you think?

Me? I think it is lovely to begin these phrases with the word “how” and to end the piece with the simple phrase, “how like a God”. If the prose is written with line breaks it might look like this:

*What piece of work is a man,
how noble in reason,
how infinite in faculties, in form and moving,
how express and admirable in action,
how like an Angel in apprehension,
how like a God:*

Sigh. So much better. I’m not feeling crazy any more.

Photograph of an angel in a cemetery in Oaxaca, Mexico, by Larry Janss.

This entry was posted on Thursday, April 4th, 2013 at 3:43 am and is filed under [Theatre](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.