



# The First Two Quartos of Hamlet: A New View of the Origins and Relationship of the Texts

*Margrethe Jolly*

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It is nearly two centuries since the first quarto of Hamlet was rediscovered, yet there is still no consensus about its relationship to the second quarto. Indeed, the first quarto, the least frequently read Hamlet, has been dismissed as "corrupt," "inferior" or like "a mutilated corpse," even though in performance it has been described as "the absolute dynamo behind the play." Currently one hypothesis dominates explanations about the quartos' interrelationship, supposing that the first quarto (published 1603) was reconstructed from memory by one or more actors who had performed minor roles in a version of the second quarto (published 1604-5).

The present study reports on a detailed linguistic reassessment of the principal arguments for memorial reconstruction. The evidence--including a three way comparison between the underlying French source in *Les Histoires Tragiques* and the two quartos, and the informal features and specific grammatical aspects, and a documented memorial reconstruction in 1779--does not support the dominant hypothesis. The cumulative evidence suggests that the earliest scholars to examine the first quarto were right: the 1603 Hamlet came first, and the second quarto is a substantial, later revision.

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