

DEATH TO THE ADVERB



by Ralph Berry

When the Parliamentary Privileges Committee considered whether Boris Johnson had misled MPs over lockdown breaking parties in Downing Street, they did so in the form of a simple yes/no question. Later they augmented the question to include whether Johnson “knowingly or recklessly” misled MPs. They added an adverbial weighting to the case against Johnson.

Clearly this was unacceptable and the committee responded by suspending all judgment, leaving it in limbo. As I write it is still there.

The adverb has of course had many historic enemies. I am one. So was Shakespeare. His plays consist in the main of dramatic speeches with no collateral indication of delivery. It is up to the actors to impart meaning, which is latent in the words but needs to be spelt out in action. And this may involve choices that take the words far beyond adverbial promptings.

Take the great MACBETH scene (1.7) when the two conspirators decide on the murder of King Duncan. At the crucial moment Macbeth asks, "If we should fail?" and Lady Macbeth responds, "We fail" accompanied by a question mark in the text as provided by most editors. "We fail?" is wholly unjustified. I've seen a spoken emphasis on "fail," which itself goes two ways, depending on "We." One way is confident ('The two of us can pull it off, never fear'). But a heavily emphasized "We" continues Lady Macbeth's doubts about her husband. "We'll be all right, so long as I'm on the case. Pull yourself together." In this partnership doubts are always present, as the play goes on to prove. The editor, with his squad of auxiliaries, presumes to determine a meaning that is not his to give.

Directors love to pull the text in directions that suit their concept of the play. Let's glance briefly at the big one, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. What is it about? Many would say suicide. The play is undoubtedly fascinated with the idea of ending it all. But that does not have to mean that Hamlet is being sucked into the vortex of self-destruction (however fashionable the topic might be). He might be studying the matter objectively as a philosopher or psychoanalyst. An earnest sophomore study group would suit the ethos of the best university in Europe, Wittenburg. "What actually is the point of living?" Discuss.

But the soliloquy cannot be corralled into a single issue. Take old age. "When we have shuffled off this mortal coil" may seem a harmlessly dismissive term ("got rid of, cast aside"). But shuffle is what old men actually do. The word is a living, active description of meaningful activity. And the term links up with the following line, "there's the respect/That makes calamity of so long life," a phrase that anticipates De Gaulle's "le naufrage de vieillesse." This soliloquy is as much about old age as death and suicide.

Neither suicide nor old age will cover the riches of the

play's issues, which always move on. The final soliloquy, "How all occasions do inform against me," concludes logically that action is the only solution to Hamlet's problems.

"O, from this time forth

My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth."

The grand progression of the soliloquies stays only at the last. It is absurd to admit seriously the claims of some adverbs here and there to bear upon Shakespeare's plays. The main body of the text is itself alone.