Muslim Identity in North India:
A Perspective from the Hindi Regional Novel

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The problem of minorities in India has recently taken a complex turn. On the face of it, the struggles of minority communities that are either regionally concentrated or dispersed relate to questions of preserving cultural autonomy and communal identity. At the same time, however, the manner in which these issues figure in the contemporary political process and, particularly, the way the bases of communal identity give rise to group mobilisation require careful analysis. The proportion of Muslims in Indian population has been around 10% since the partition. Their number reached 61,417,934 in 1971. The proportion was around 25% in pre-partition India. Two-thirds of the Indian Muslim population migrated to Pakistan in 1947. My limited aim in this paper is to examine the depiction of communal self-identity of the Shia Muslims settled in the urban and rural areas of Eastern Uttar Pradesh in a Hindi novel, *Adha Gaon* by the late Rahi Masoom Raza.

PERSPECTIVE

There is no ethnographic monograph on Muslims in North India and, of course, none for the region depicted in *Adha Gaon*. In a sense the novel may be treated as a substitute ethnography, especially because it belongs to the *anchalik upanyas* (regional novel) genre of post-independence Hindi fiction. According to a Hindi literary critic, "In a regional novel the writer concentrates on a particular part of the country and depicts its life in such a way as to bring about a consciousness among the readers of its unique characteristics, distinguishing features and particular customs and patterns of life" (Upadhyaya, 1965). Just as in an anthropological monograph there is an element of 'construction', often guided by the theory of culture/society which the scholar works with, so also in the novel. In fact it would be wrong to treat a regional novel simply as a documentary source of data on particular customs and patterns of life in a region. The 'truth' contained in it has to be decoded, in the first place, in the context of the development of the Hindi novel. Secondly, largely on account of my lack of skills as a literary critic and my training instead as an anthropologist, an attempt will be made to locate the patterns discerned in the regional novel under the conceptual categories 'Great tradition; little traditions' developed by the anthropologists for understanding the nature and dynamism of cultural processes in India. Thirdly, the regional novel, being at the farthest pole from 'art for art's sake',

is a medium through which the author wishes to say something significant about the past, present, and future. The reflections of and on time are both explicit and implicit in these works. Fourthly, there is an aspect which is on the borderline of literary criticism and sociology. The objects/subjects (it is very difficult in the practice of literature to distinguish between the two) in the regional novel may be characters (where characterisation is the strong point, for example in novels with 'hero'), persons or peoples. In order to discriminate between these possibilities it would seem necessary to pay close attention to the novels' narration and construction as well as the sociological context delineated in them.

A: Development of the Hindi Novel and the 'Anchalik Upanyas'

In contrast to around three centuries of history of the novel in the West, there was hardly any literary prose written in the Devnagari script before the twentieth century. The publication of Premchand's (1880-1936) novel *Sewa Sadan* in 1918 establishes the novel as an independent genre in Hindi. His early novels show a conflict between the idealism of his approach and the realism of his observation. It has been contended that towards the end of his life Premchand had moved away from faith in Gandhism, reformism and his own idealist realism to complete realism (Pandey, I.P., 1979: 4). Indeed his later works depict exploitation by the zamindars and the possibility of personal rebellion by the victims of oppression. Nevertheless, the time-space-culture coordinates in these works of 'socialist realism' are not spelled out in their specificity. As revealed in his generalised depictions of north Indian rural society and the predicament of the urban middle class, Premchand's socialist realism was subsumed by nationalist idealism typical of the more rebellious kind of writing in Hindi before independence. However, Premchand's 'typifications' of caste and class inequities and oppression remained abstractions and his vision ultimately an idealistic one when seen against the backdrop of the post-independence development of the *anchalik upanyas* in Hindi.

The heroic vision of the above-stated brand of social realism may be contrasted with the stirrings of the post-independence regional novelists. The demand for and carving out of states in India after independence on a linguistic basis resulted in the substitution of the elan of the nationalist struggle by a return to regional and linguistic attachments in Hindi fiction. But this cannot be taken as a complete explanation of the change, for, even in the nineteenth century, regionalism and nationalism coexisted in the consciousness of writers in the Indian languages without a contradiction being perceived. It is altogether more likely that an acutely felt and experienced disillusionment with the idealist dream of social transformation occasioned in the first place by political distortions of the post-independence period led to a move towards the *anchalik upanyas*. All the novels of this genre do portray a shift from idealism to realism. In other words, the idealism of the nationalist movement having been over, we now find the

writer 'getting back to the earth' as it were. The two varieties of this genre may be illustrated with reference to *Adha Gaon* and *Maila Anchal* as specimens of socialist realism and humanist realism respectively.

B: Cultural Patterns: great tradition and little traditions

First published in 1954, Phanishwar Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal* created the genre of *anchalik upanyas* or regional novel in Hindi. Although Renu called himself a regional writer, he did not use a regional language for his prose. The dominant local language of Purnea District, the region of north-eastern Bihar of which Renu wrote, is Maithili; nor do his characters speak in Maithili except on rare occasions. The same regional setting is employed in Renu's other novels, notably *Julus* (The Procession) and *Parti Parikatha* (The Legend of the Fallow Land). There are certain striking features common to all his novels. First, he uses the standard sanskritised Hindi only as one of the many options available to him for writing. The words and sounds he chooses are those derived from the context regardless of whether or not they conform to the sensibilities of the gentleman reader of Hindi prose. However, the use of Hindi rather than a regional language is in Renu's work a distinct characteristic which means that we are witness in his work to a constant interaction between the great tradition (Sanskrit and sanskritised Hindi) and the little traditions (the languages of the region). Secondly, although in his various novels Renu has depicted the interaction between different Indian communities – Biharis and Bengalis, indigenous people and migrants, rural people and the urbanites, etc. – his focus has been on the Hindus of his chosen region. The values articulated by Renu's characters have an unmistakable grounding in the regional context but because of the overall framework of Hindu values, the little streams of local and regional culture are seen to feed into the mainstream of the great tradition of the Hindus and into Hinduism. For example, in Renu's prose fiction many song texts are interspersed with the narrative. In Chapter 11 of *Maila Anchal* portions of the traditional ballad "Suranga and Sadabrij" are juxtaposed with the narrative recounting Khalasi's courtship of the young widow Phuliya. The idealised romance of the legendary couple provides a refrain from the actualities of village romance and often enough Renu is able to convey through his characters, and directly as the omniscient narrator, the ironical identification of the village couple with those in the legend. The theme of this particular ballad is repeated in many regional ballads of India, and thus forms part of the continuing great tradition of Indian culture. Similarly, Chapter 24 relates the celebration of the Holi festival in the village. Here again, Holi songs are effectively used for the identification of village characters like Phuliya and Kamli with the *gopis* desiring a union with their lovers (identified with Lord Krishna). The all-India tradition of amour between Lord Krishna and the *gopis* and the identification of the village world with Braj, the scene of Krishna's amour in mythology, render the village world as part of a great tradition.

Rahi Masoom Raza's canvas in the novel *Adha Gaon* is definitely more restricted and to a large extent confines itself to the little traditions only. The novel depicts the condition of Shia Muslim zamindars in Village Gangauli, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, over a period of fifteen years, 1937 to 1952. Of course, the author goes into the part-historical, part-legendary stories about the founding of the village but by and large the action in the novel takes place during the fifteen years as noted above. All the characters are drawn from the village, mainly from the two rival factions of Shia Muslims, each comprising about five families and located at the northern and southern ends of the village. Interspersed with one another are the other communities in the village – the Julaha (weavers), the Chamar, the Raqui (Muslim traders), the barbers, the scavengers, and the Hindu Ahir (cattle-herders). These communities carry out their traditional occupations and the service-castes have their patrons (or Jajman) among the Shia zamindars who proudly state themselves to be the Sayyad (i.e., one of the purest and most exclusive communities among the Muslims of North India). The author who belongs to a lineage of Sayyads from the same village, but whose grandfather migrated to the nearby town of Ghazipur, sketches in great detail the cultural, social, religious and economic life of the Shias of Gangauli Village. In contrast to the construction of the novel in Renu where the great tradition framework is definite and strongly etched, the Muslim villagers described by Raza belong to a wider framework of cultural and political identity that is diffuse and weak. For instance culturally, the festival of Moharram which is almost an obsession for the Shia Muslims as depicted by Raza, is legitimised by reference to the legendary events which took place centuries ago in Mecca and Medina. However, except for stray references to the visit for pilgrimage to *haj* by some of Raza's characters, Mecca and Medina are extremely weak anchors of cultural identity of these Indian Muslims. Even more striking is their lack of identification with Pakistan. Indeed the comparative distrust displayed by them in regard to Pakistan makes them turn even more stickily to the region, literally to the soil of this village in the valley of the sacred Ganga. Their sense of belonging to the region where they and their forefathers were born and their clear disdain of Persianised Urdu spoken by the outsiders as against Bhojpuri Urdu, make them turn more inwards – a process of 'cultural involution' – so that they are caught up between three frameworks of wider cultural identity provided by Islam, Pakistan and India. If the former two remain legendary and 'political' (in a pejorative sense) respectively, the 'Indian' identity is not that freely available as it was (and even then with much difficulty) after the formation of Pakistan. That is the reason why the little tradition of these rural Muslims is unable to foster an organic linkage with a great tradition. And although the viewpoint which permeates the entire novel is an assertion of Hindu-Muslim harmony, because of this lack of anchorage in the great tradition Raza is unable to offer any solution. The novel therefore remains narrative and documentary. Here again, the contrast with Renu's novels is worth noting. Apropos his

novel *Julus* Renu had stated in a brief preface that he feels himself part of a big procession which nobody seems to know where it is heading. However, Renu refuses to be a mere onlooker, and is a participant in this procession. If one may typify the distinct feelings about the future depicted in their respective sense of the 'ending' of the novel one is struck by the optimism and enthusiasm of Renu and by an equally strong sense of despondency and anomie in Raza. The explanation for this, I should like to submit, is the positive interaction between the great tradition and the little traditions in Renu's novels and the lack of such an interaction in Raza.

C: Problems of Historicity and the Depiction of Time

Under Section A, I had noted the influence of external circumstances in the growth of the Hindi novel and set the rise of the *anchalik upanyas* in a developmental framework. In speaking about the internal time in *Adha Gaon* we shall look at the vicissitudes of the Shia Muslim villagers depicted in the novel as also the manner in which the author, a Shia Muslim himself, visualises the past, the present and the future. A first clue is provided by the way in which the novel is constructed. It is divided into ten chapters: Unghta Shahar (The dozing city), Mera Gaon Mere Log (My village, my people), Udgam (The origin), Miyan Log (The Sayyads of the village), Tana Bana (The warp and the woof), Namak (Salt), Gatha (The long tale), Pyas (Thirst), Tanhai (Loneliness), and Nayi Purani Rekhayen (New and old etchings).

I shall pursue the theme that despondency and anomie characterise the overall construction of this novel. The very title, "Adha Gaon" (Half a village) is not only a factual statement that the Shia Muslims constituting approximately half the population of the village are going to be the main focus. It is also *adha*, half, in the sense of the author's feeling about the community it describes. It is a community without an anchorage into the mainstream of the country or even of the countryside. Even the village community at Gangauli is split into two factions, each organised around a core of Shia Muslim families residing at two polar ends of the village. Hence, there is a 'halfness' in the objective circumstances being depicted. But even more acute than this seems to be the halfheartedness (as contrasted with the ferment and enthusiasm in Renu) of the author, his sense of incompleteness, because of his subjective interface with the objective reality. He belongs physically to the 'dozing city' of Ghazipur but immediately enters into nostalgia by describing 'my village, my people'. From Chapters 3 to 5 he is purportedly being factual about the origins, about the dominant community of 'Miyan Log' and concerning the 'warp and the woof' upon which the relationships in the village are woven. Chapters 6 and 7 called "Salt" and "The long tale" focus respectively on the notions of loyalty according to the old code of honour and on the tedium of going on living in the traditional set-up. Chapters 8 and 9 give stronger colouring to the feeling of being lost and are aptly titled "Thirst" and "Loneliness" respectively. The final chapter

"New and old etchings," though it sounds a note of expectancy in the reader, again withers away into a sense of loss of direction. As a departure from the established practice of novel-writing, Raza introduces a second Preface in Chapter 9. He says it was imperative to do so because of a decisive change in the circumstances of life depicted in the novel; it is not clear as to what this change is, but the formation of Pakistan and some migration of villagers to the new country of Islam seems to explain his intervention in the narrative by means of a second Preface. As is true of many a novel, in this case too the portrayal of objective reality is shot through with the subjective emphasis of the author who participated in the life of the community as a born member. Indeed he keeps on changing from the role of a narrator to that of a character, but he hardly ever becomes a detached observer. It is significant to note that Raza himself regards this novel as a dissertation on time. He says, "This novel is in fact a voyage for me. I am looking for the town of Ghazipur, but first I wish to stay in my Gangauli. If I am able to have a grip on the reality of Gangauli then only I shall venture to write an 'epic' about Ghazipur. This novel is a preface to that epic. Let me please tell you that this is not a story either of some persons or of some families. Nor is this a story of a village where some good and bad characters are trying to realise themselves. This story is neither religious nor political, since there is no religious time or political time, this is a tale of time. This is a tale about the passing time in village Gangauli. Many old people have died, many young men have become old, and many children have been born. It is a story about the dreams and aspirations of these people. This is a tale of those ruins which were once houses, and a tale of those houses which have been built upon those ruins. . . ."

As a first-person teller of the narrative, the author intervenes in the depiction of time in the novel. Raza acknowledges this much when he says that the epoch of our own times lies like an open, unbounded book, half-opened due to the action of the wind. By the technique of the first person narrative all Raza wishes to do is introduce some order into the randomness of experience, to depict what was, is and will be by active intervention on behalf of time.

In his selection of the events from 1937 to 1952, the novelist has been guided by the broad political developments in the country affecting the Muslims as a minority. In 1937 there were for the first time elections for provincial legislatures and the establishment of Indian-based assemblies in the provinces. In 1942 the Quit India movement was launched, and this brought forward the most repressive aspect of British rule in India. In the same year the Allied forces' need for food-rations from India combined with the callous greediness of the traders to make a fast buck resulted in the Bengal famine which took a toll of nearly 30 lakhs of people. On 16 August 1946 the Muslim League declared 'direct action' leading to communal riots; in Calcutta alone some 7,000 innocent people became victims of these riots. After a bloody contest between the Hindus and the Muslims came the

partition in 1947, creating the State of Pakistan. In 1950 the Constitution of the Republic of India was promulgated. The state governments now passed ordinances for the abolition of zamindari. In 1952, in accordance with the new Constitution, the first general elections were held in the country which resulted in a widespread awakening in the masses for a democratic way of life. It will not be possible in this presentation to illustrate how these developments in the macro world of Indian polity affected the Shia Muslims in the micro-context of Gangauli. However, the ordering of events through the sense of time deployed by the author takes care of these and other developments of the period 1937 to 1952. These include the participation in the Second World War of the village youth.

So, in brief, we have the declarations by the author himself on what he means by *Adha Gaon* being a novel about time, we also see how a succession of political events over a period of 15 years gets reflected in the consciousness of Muslims in North India, a section of whom is treated extensively in this novel. Quite apart from these conscious uses of history, there is an unconscious influence of their past in the mentality of Shia Muslim zamindars in Gangauli. This has been brought out most vividly by the novelist Raza, though I must say that like the villagers of Gangauli he too is oblivious of its connection with the historical forces.

My reference here is to the ideas concerning status and prestige among the Sayyads of Gangauli. Time and again throughout the novel one finds the characters extolling the virtues of pure birth of the Sayyads, most commonly phrased in terms of "haddi bedagh hona" (the untainted bone) of the strong protagonists. So long as the purity of blood in this sense is maintained by the Sayyad zamindars in finding proper spouses for marriage, what happens next (for example the birth of *harami* offsprings resulting from the sexual relations of the Sayyad males with females of the lower communities – Barbers, Weavers, Scavengers, etc.) – does not matter in itself. It is inconceivable even in jokes, fun, and gossip as in the many obscene songs sung at the time of marriage, to visualise the liaison of a Sayyad female with the males of the lower communities or with the *harami* males, i.e., those born of illegitimate unions of Sayyad males and non-Sayyad women. There is a great deal of hypocrisy in this regard – on the one hand, the Sayyad males imposing a stringent norm of 'purity' for purposes of marriage and on their own women, and on the other hand, taking advantage of their superior birth, and of economic and political power, subduing the lower status women to their own wishes while denying their own women sexual access to men of the same lower statuses. Indeed remarks such as the pleasures of sowing grafted seeds (*qualmi santan* or illegitimate offspring) and that one need not worry about the looks of one's wife so long he has access to good-looking prostitutes and 'keeps' become a constant refrain in the talks of men expressing the values of bravado and machismo among the males. The kind of hypergamy which is practised certainly implies double standards for sexual relations among men and women as seen by the men. Characteristically in all

sources of information, including the novel, about the values, attitudes and social relationships, the women's point-of-view is conspicuous by its absence.

Now the values of purity of blood coexisting with a plethora of illegitimate liaisons with women of inferior communities may be explained in a number of ways. According to one theory, the dogma about purity of descent coexisting with strongly developed norm of hypergamy are the direct imitation of these customs as practised by high caste Hindus for a very long time. Another theory would trace the prevalence of these beliefs and practices to the supposedly original homeland of the Muslims in the Middle East. The permission in Islam for men to marry up to four wives could be seen as translatable into a certain laxity of norms concerning men's relations with women of lower communities. But most of all, it also reflects the abject surrender of their rights by the menfolk of the lower communities in order not to upset the apple cart of authority.

There is, nevertheless, a more contextual explanation of the over-emphasis on values of descent and purity in the novel *Adha Gaon*. The last two hundred years have seen the loss of real power on the part of Indian Muslims. As in this case having been confined to their zamindaris in the villages of Eastern U.P., they were cut off from any real contacts with their own brethren either in the same region or outside it. But what is even more serious is the fact that real power at this stage – i.e., power outside the village and in the bureaucracy – rested with a colonial power that had succeeded the Muslims in overall control of the country. In such circumstances of cultural and political involution, the formerly powerful community of Shia Muslims is reduced to chasing the shadow rather than the substance of real authority. They try to make good the loss of real power and authority by resource to an excessive concern with status-symbols. This is clearly portrayed in the novel. In writing the story of the Shia Muslim zamindars, the writer is aware of the decline in their effective power, the costs which they have to pay on account of factionalism, and the dilemma which has been created due to the formation of Pakistan. However, Raza fails to connect this fact of the consequences of decline in real power with excessive concern with the display of the purity of blood to keep their prestige high in society. This hypothesis might indeed be extended even to the dominant Hindu caste groups in India where the distinctions of purity and impurity, though inherent in the cultural tradition, receive much bolstering during a period of shifts in the general social, economic and political condition, "shifts that opened up a new contest for real power or more precisely, since real power was increasingly appropriated by the colonial authority, a fierce contest for an uncertain prestige" (Pandey, Gyanendra 1983: 20).

D: Implications of the Novelist's Craft for an Understanding of the Symbolic World Being Constituted

Rahi Masoom Raza after having written novels and some poetry in Hindi

joined the world of commercial films in Bombay as a script writer. I think the narrative and documentary style of *Adha Gaon* foreshadows the particular development in Raza of a shift from literature to cinema. There is also the question of the class and community bearings of the author himself. Again, unlike Renu in this, Raza belonged to the minority community of Shia Muslims, belonged to a family of zamindars in decline, put his bet on higher education (obtaining a Ph.D.), worked for some time in a university, and finally decided to join the film industry. It may seem odd that this progression in career should have characterised the active and creative life of someone who displays socialist realism in his novels. However, to understand even this seemingly strange progression, a comparison with Renu is called for. To the extent that Renu himself belongs to the great tradition, has an integrative, even moralistic, solution to the problems of cultural crisis, he is also in the same measure lacking in protest against the realities he so skilfully portrays. In the case of Raza at least there is this personal protest, a desire to jump out of the skin of his ascribed identity. And here, there is a parallel in his characterisation of one character in the novel. One of the Sayyads of Gangauli having lost much of his zamindari lands now takes up the petty business of selling shoes. This is something done exclusively by the Chamar in traditional society. But precisely because the constraint working in the Muslim society against selling shoes was not one of ritual status (rigid adherence to the principles of purity/impurity) but of prestige in a more secular sense, the taking up of this 'lowly' occupation by the erstwhile Sayyad zamindar is both possible and understandable. Similarly, while at the level of stated values, the Shia Muslim of *Adha Gaon* may stick impeccably to the highest standards of descent-purity in marriages, we find towards the end a placid acceptance of marriages of Shia boys with girls of the lower communities. In this sense at least the possibilities of socialist transformation stand to meet with less resistance among the Muslims than among the culturally entrenched Hindus of Gangauli or comparable villages. A touch of pragmatism is inescapably present in Raza's own career and that of his protagonists in the novel. The recurring image of Moharram is not so much a symbol of pathos with which the author empathises. It is rather depicted with a certain sense of sarcasm; if the tears are real in the mourning, this must be so for the lost generation of traditionalists.

There is in this novel an overcrowding of characters. To that extent, characterisation is not the strong point of *Adha Gaon*. The same effect is strengthened by the fact that the author as narrator is part and parcel of the reality being described. He is therefore in a position to dispense with strong characterisation as media for what he wants to put across. This is a novel without a strongly-etched hero except perhaps one character whose personality, views and life-history are those of a 'strong' man in an otherwise unbroken tale of anomie and despair. I refer to the character of Phunnan Miyan, one of the Sayyad small zamindars, through whom the protest as well as the trials of Shia Muslims of Gangauli, is sought to be articulated.

Unbounded by the niceties of descent and status, Phunnan is married to a woman whom his neighbour had brought in wedlock but whom Phunnan 'kept' with the consent of the woman concerned (Kulsum). He is a man of action as revealed by his prowess with lathi against the outside oppressors of the village – the police and head constable. He is courageous and outspoken despite the fact that he is one of the poorer zamindars and is illiterate. He has been to jail several times as part of his vendetta against the police. He is a staunch anti-communalist, is shown as someone who has connections with the Congress party and whose opposition to Pakistan is complete. He is hardened by the realities of life he has had to face; one of his sons never returned as a soldier in the second world war and another lost his life in the struggle for independence. In his own down to earth manner he is able to see the falsity of ideological rationalisations offered by those Shias of Gangauli who migrated to Pakistan. The real reason, as he accurately sees it, lies in the economic and political decline of the old zamindari way of life and the maladaptation of the emigres to changed conditions. He is also the one who exposes clearly the sham about 'purity of the bone' and advocates progressive marital alliances. However, the denouement of the novel lies in showing that the conditions of living are impossible even for Phunnan. The outside oppressors overtake him as he is ambushed by a host of lathi-wielders late at night and done to death.

Not humanist hope but a certain sense of anger at the warp and woof of traditional relationships of the village is indicated in the entirely insignificant and staccato sense of the ending in this novel. One cannot do better than translate the last passage of the novel:

> The morning outside was beautiful. In the courtyard a cock was chasing a hen. A crow sitting on the tiled roof was calling someone, one doesn't know whom. A flock of sparrows flew past the shoulders of Phussu Mian. By the side of the tank a few naked boys were throwing water at each other. A young girl with her sari drawn up to the knees was sitting and washing the utensils. On the zigzag white road paved with stones a jeep was passing emitting clouds of smoke. In front of the tank the chimney of a brick-kiln was emitting thick smoke. A small child with a satchel on his shoulder ran away fast by the side of the kiln.
>
> Phussu Miyan kept looking at him till he turned left and got out of sight.

It is here that one perceives the impact of cinematographic craft as in Raza's case. And this austerity is certainly quite alien to the rich cultural tapestry of song, colour and flesh in Renu's humanist realism.

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Making Sense of the First Quartos of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, The Merry Wives of Windsor,* and *Hamlet*

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Dealing with a highly complex and controversial problem in Shakespeare bibligraphy, Y.S. Bains proposes that editors from J. Payne Collier to Harold Jenkins and Brian Gibbons have been mistaken in characterising the First Quartos of *Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Hamlet* as memorial reconstructions by a number of actors-turned-pirates. Instead of the nonsense they are supposed to contain, Bains suggests that the First Quartos make good sense if one reads them independent of the Second Quartos or Folio texts of the same plays. He proposes that the first Quartos are the earlier versions of the plays which were subsequently revised by Shakespeare and included in the Folio. Bains argues persuasively that these multiple versions provide unusual insights into Shakespeare's evolution as a playwright through trial and error and his mastery of the language and the potentialities of the stage for dramatic representations.

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