Introduction: Playwrights as play-patchers

As well as being called 'play-makers' and 'poets', playwrights of the early modern period were frequently known as 'play-patchers' because of the common perception that a play was pieced together out of a collection of odds and ends: it was not a single whole entity. The term was unflattering and designed to wound, as was 'playwright', with its implication that constructing plays was a craft – equivalent to being a cartwright or a wheelwright – rather than an art. But, just as 'playwright' over time lost its pejorative implications, so 'play-patcher' too came to be seen as an unpalatable truth. Well may Randolph sneer at the poet who makes a 'Comedy' out of 'patches of his ragged wit, as if he meant to make Poverty a Coat of it', and Wither lament the men who can do little more than 'patch up a bald witlesse *Comedy*' out of 'rotten-old-worme-eaten stuffe'; there was something 'patchy' in the very substance of early modern plays.[1] Dekker articulates this when he describes a 'play-patcher' as 'a Cobler of Poetrie'.[2] Again, he is being uncomplimentary – to him plays are all too often 'cobbled together' – but 'cobbler' also simply implies that the writers of the texts are, like shoe-makers, constructing their artifacts of discrete and separate pieces; when the joins are ill-fitting or overly visible, that is a problem – but the patch remains a feature of the whole, that notwithstanding.

Other writers are specific about what constitutes a 'patch' of play. 'Constantia Munda', discussing poetasters who 'can but patch a hobbling verse together', finds patchiness inside the very verse form used by playwrights; and a manuscript poem of the time is more pointed still: it refers to the men who out 'Of . . . other mens songs . . . patcht us up a play', where the 'patches' are the ditties and lyrics because they are authored by 'other men' and at other times from the rest of the dialogue.[3] George Whetstone takes this idea further, seeing 'patches' as the segments that, in a collaborative play, are contributed by separate authors; he writes of a selected group of 'Comedians' who conjointly are able to 'patch[] a Comedie together'.[4]

Whatever the nature of the 'patch' – and writers are more united in the idea that plays are patchwork than in their definitions of what a 'patch' is – the notion that a playbook is made up of 'patched rimes' was, at the time, self-evident.[5] But the segmentation of plays from their initial construction to their first performance and thereafter tends to be ignored by modern critics. It is usual now to concentrate on the poetic logic that unifies a text, as though a playbook is as coherent a piece of literature as an epic poem. A sense that the play is a complete and finely honed work of art leads to various linked assumptions: for instance, the idea that plays were written in the order performed, or plotted by the people responsible for the dialogue, or revised (when they were) in their entirety.

But in fact plays were from the start written patchily. They were composed to scenarios sometimes drawn up by professional 'plotters' (scenario-writers) rather than playwrights, and were parcelled out to be written in segments. Even the plays plotted and composed by a single playwright might be written out of order, so that comic and tragic sections, for instance, might come about at different times. Prologues and epilogues were frequently drawn up first on separate pieces of paper from the plays they flanked, and were not always by the author(s) of the rest of the text. Songs too were completed and sometimes written by composers, and disseminated to be learnt separately by singers; and they might then be brought textually onto the stage during performance; while scrolls (letters, poems, proclamations, challenges, epitaphs, etc. to be read on stage) were copied and occasionally even written by a scroll-scribe, and were regularly designed from the first on detached papers; in performance they too might be read on stage; outside performance they belonged together with other stage-props. Meanwhile, an abstract of a play's story, a passage that would never be spoken on stage, might be an important performance document though not part of the performed play. Known as an Argument, it was written to be handed to the audience – something akin to a primitive theatre programme – and would 'interpret' the play while it was being enacted; similarly another non-playable document, consisting of a briefer but more lurid summary, was printed and posted around London as a playbill; it too shaped understanding of the perform-ance in the theatre. Together with the playbooks, some or all of these papers would be submitted to the playhouse though not all of them would make it into or become the prompter's book (and, equally, any might).

The process of mounting a production then merely increased the patchiness that writing had already given a play. The dialogue – the one section that, though created patchily, had been given to the playhouse as

something like a unified text – was resolved on receipt into a collection of fragments. As T. H. Howard-Hill writes:

> the [prompter's] book was itself the origin of another set of theatrical documents: a casting table and list, the plot, and the actors' parts, not to mention such items as lists of properties and instructions to the musicians, which are virtually unknown to theatrical historians – all of which necessarily precede performance, and, for the most part, rehearsals. Once these documents were prepared, then the primacy of the book was diminished; it became one of a set of documents by which performances were governed.[6]

In fact, as *Documents of Performance* will also argue, the prompter's book is not necessarily the source for all these separate texts – but Howard-Hill's point remains key: the play in whatever form it reached the playhouse was either already a collection of scattered papers, or quickly became one. Even the playwrights who wrote their dialogue as a tightly unified document did so in the knowledge that it would be distributed as actors' parts, having been rewritten by a copyist; those parts would then be learnt by a player who may not have thought textual fidelity important. Entrance stage-directions, meanwhile, which define much of the action of the play, were likely to be extracted onto a backstage-plot – and even, sometimes, created there. So knowledge of parts and backstage-plots combined with other separable features of production will have shaped playwrights' thinking, their notion of the full play, and their relationship to each separate 'patch' of text.

Together, the fragments that the playhouse made, in conjunction with the fragments that play-writing had produced, and the additional fragments brought about for advertising and explaining the play, were the documents that amounted to 'the play' in its first performance.

Each patch, however, had a separate home, a separate circulation and, as often as not, a separate writer: the song lyrics going to composers or originating there; the parts going to actors' separate homes if not copied there; the scrolls being inscribed and perhaps written in the theatre by a scroll-scribe; the stage-directions being extracted by the prompter or his helper, again in the theatre, again in a process that involved authorship in addition to copying; the bill and Argument making their way to printers having been designed by author or playhouse. The first performance was a (re)uniting of separate texts: thereafter some would be relegated, some lost, some 'improved', while others would reside with the dialogue in the playhouse, perhaps written into the 'book', or perhaps placed in the loose folder made for playbooks and related material when the stiff backstage-plots were bent in two.

Thus each separate document that made up a play has its own story, its own attachment to the other documents, its own rate of loss and survival. And, as any fragment could be separately written aside from the playscript, so it could easily and at any subsequent time be updated or freshly composed or added to by someone else: the story of a play's patches is also the story of its cuts, revisions and additions.

This book will tell the story of the documents created for performance by playwrights and the playhouse. It will provide chapters that hover between bibliography and theatre history in that each section considers a different theatrical manuscript that contributed to the play's first (and sometimes subsequent) days, and each considers what this means for the fully written play in the form in which it survives. In addressing the manuscripts that actually made up a production, *Documents of Performance* will show that the early modern notion behind the term 'patchwork' for playtext – the early modern distrust of the unity and completion of the playscript – is just as visible now as it was then.

Much here relies on looking for and then thinking about the many play fragments that survive in manuscript and print and that, unlike full playbooks, are not generally addressed by scholars – although they collectively form a repository for lost plays, or rather, a series of 'found' sections for lost plays or lost moments in plays. Some of these fragments are hidden within surviving playtexts but have not been seen for what they are; others are in miscellanies or songbooks whose contents have not always been catalogued; others still, including rare printed ephemera, have been misidentified by libraries so that their true nature has been hidden. Many of the documents considered here are being discussed for the first time. Using a body of fresh evidence about early modern theatre and early modern texts, as well as taking a survey of printed and manuscript playbooks of the early modern period, this book explores the piecemeal nature of the playtext in the theatre, and so on the page, redefining in fundamental ways what a play actually is.

As entire chapters are given over to documents not extant (playbills), not hitherto known to have existed (Arguments), or not previously thought to survive in full (plot-scenarios), as rich a range of examples from as many sources as possible will be provided. For this reason, texts and fragments discussed here range widely: the book explores plays performed from the very beginning of the professional theatre, in the 1570s, to just before the interregnum, looking forward at some Restoration and eighteenth-century texts when they provide details for issues not exhaustively documented in the early modern period. This is because early

modern information itself survives in patches; only by providing as wide a range of references as possible can patterns visible in later theatrical practice be shown to have their origins in the early modern period. The result, of course, is a book of tendencies, trends and likelihoods. In its nature *Documents of Performance* cannot absolutely determine which separate papers were created for one particular play in a particular play-house at a particular time; it can, however, say what documents were generally brought about when plays were readied for production, and how regularly plays of the period were discussed, thought of, and disseminated as a series of pieces.

The organisation of this book is determined by its two interests: the play in its first performance, and the way the play on the page manifests that. Its structure mirrors that bifold interest. It considers texts theatrically in the order in which their separate patches were created and/or encoun-tered, with the proviso that several came into existence simultaneously. So it begins with the first document written towards the creation of a play, the plot-scenario, goes on to look at the documents an audience member might meet on the way to the playhouse (playbill), and in that house (Argument), and continues from there to discuss the documents that amounted to 'the play' in performance: first the prologue, and then the play itself, with its songs, scrolls, entrances from backstage-plots, dialogue from parts, and its guiding book that ran the performance but had not shaped all of its documents. But as *Documents of Performance* is equally interested in the effect of the separate dissemination of theatre documents on the printed playbook, its structure is simultaneously designed to mimic that of reading a play (for a playbook is set out in the order in which performance happened). So the playbill chapter is also the chapter on the title-page, the chapter on the performance Argument is also on a printed play's Argument, the prologue is what happens when the next page of the playbook is turned, as well as the way the play starts, and of course the songs, scrolls, entrances and dialogue make up the printed play as they do the performed play. The patchwork construction that defines early modern plays thus also defines the way this book has been designed and written.

In more detail: the first chapter will be about the plot-scenario, because the first time anyone confronted a playscript was as a fragment that promised a whole text: it could be judged, sold, stolen, and waved in front of a company as promise of a play to come. Physically and mentally the 'fragment' remained the unit in which a play was written and learnt. The second chapter is on the playbill, printed in large numbers and

liberally scattered as flyers and posters over the London that had rejected
playhouses. They advertised the play to be performed by using the same
vocabulary and information as title-pages and hanging on the same posts
as they did; that some title-pages may have inherited the playbill's content
will naturally be considered. The next chapter turns to Arguments, also
(usually) printed, which were an early form of theatre programme avail-
able only for some productions: they told the story of the play to come,
and often contained a character-list; they were published at playwrights'
expense and given out as souvenirs of what had been performed. These
texts, like the Arguments to playbooks that they reflect or become, ensure
that readers can follow what is happening in a complex narrative, but risk
upstaging the very story they introduce by doing so; they were limited to
special, court or first performances. Chapter 4 looks at prologues and
epilogues, which were so often extracted from the play to be read out
onstage that, like the scrolls they strongly resemble, they could frequently
become 'lost' from the playbook, surviving elsewhere in books of poems
or jests, as other forms of literature. A discussion of their relationship to
benefit performances, and how often they and related interim texts were
intended for single performances at court, or on first days, will lead to
questions about the authorial nature of prologues and epilogues, the
relationship they have to the real playwright(s), and whether they should
be seen as temporary or permanent residents in the plays that contain them.

Documents of Performance then turns to the documents that made up
the body of a performed play. It looks at the documents that descend
from the full playbook or that were written in advance of its completion.
Chapter 5 is on songs, which sometimes needed to be taken out from the
playscript before it had even been completed in order to be sent to a
composer: with their requirements for music from another source they
represent collaborative moments even in single-authored plays. But if an
old tune were to be used for a song, the text still continued to be regularly
removed from the play and written out afresh, partly because it could, on
its separate paper, be flanked by the musical notation to the words, partly
because it also could sometimes be sung from onstage, and – when neither
of those pertained – because it needed a particular variety of rehearsal
from the actor, or actor and instrumentalist/singer combined. It too was
frequently lost, removed, altered, added and written by someone other
than the playwright. Then chapter 6 addresses the theatre 'scrolls', which
were extracted and inscribed onto separate papers mimicking the docu-
ments they pretended to be – letters, bills, proclamations. They were often
read out onstage, saving the actor from learning more than he had to, and

so returning the enacted play at that moment to a paper medium (as songs sometimes did): plays performed were made up of a combination of the remembered word and the written one, part text, part action.

Chapter 7 is on the backstage-plots that hung in the tiring-house detailing entrances and 'personals' (the properties that actors were to take onstage with them). They were written to govern onstage performance from backstage, and were some of the theatre's most important manuscripts: they alone of all play fragments were mounted on special boards and penned with several quills for clarity and beauty. In this way they were more valued than the book they protected when not in use, the full 'approved' play. But that will be because backstage-plots really ran the performance, while, as chapter 8 shows, the full play only did in some respects: it had been divided, often before being approved, into 'parts' from which actors were to learn their characters; those parts, however, were not always faithful to the playbook from which they were copied, nor were they always faithfully followed by actors.

How does the printed book reflect these dislocated texts? If what was performed from the first was completed, disseminated, learnt or read on the stage in a series of large and small fragments, what documents did printers receive? Though published plays often have a 'finished' appearance, they will be shown regularly to be missing some of those sections written for manifestation in the theatre but also lost there, which might extend from prologues to epilogues to songs to choruses to interim entertainments to internal masques to Arguments to playbill lures as well as other paper witnesses of the text. So in telling the story of the theatre's separate documents, *Documents of Performance* also tells the story of printed playbooks, explaining where and why the patch is as visible in the printed whole as it is in the performance. Again, it will be shown that issues barely considered now were regularly in early modern discussion. Indeed, the same terms of opprobrium, 'patch' or 'patchy', were used for writers of print as for writers of performance: one poet is described by Rankins as having 'Thrust[] forth a patched Pamphlet into print', for instance. What is interesting, however, is the response of the readers to that patched pamphlet. They, according to Rankins, are conscious of the book's patchy nature, and delighted by it, gazing at it 'as on a pide coat'.[7] He calls them 'fooles' for so doing, but the patched text, with its various segments visible either in print or in performance, is well compared to a multi-coloured coat for the effect that it had: some, like Rankins, found it ugly because it lacked uniformity, and others, for exactly the same reason, found it stylish and beautiful.

CHAPTER I

Plot-scenarios

INTRODUCTION

Abraham Wright, the divine, had performed in plays when at Oxford in the 1630s; he had even written a play, *The Reformation*, now lost, that had been acted with some success. So when, in around 1640, he started taking notes about the plays he was studying, he did so as an afficionado. He realised, for instance, that lines might read poorly on the page but act well, saying of *Vittoria Corombona* (John Webster's *White Devil*) that it was 'indifferent' as a text, 'but for ye presentments I beeleeve good', and of Henry Shirley's *Martyrd Souldier* that its songs had been 'much taken' by the 'people', though it too had, to his mind, second-rate lines. Wright's method was to analyse plays for two features both of which he commented on separately. One was the writing style. The other was the 'plot'. Thus there were plays like James Shirley's *School of Complement* that Wright found to be 'a good play for ye plot rather then lines'; and there were plays like *The Lady of Pleasure*, also by Shirley, that Wright thought 'ye best play . . . for ye lines', whilst finding 'ye plot is as much as none'. Ideally the play should be strong in both, like Shakespeare's *Othello* which was 'A very good play, both for lines and plot, but especially ye plot'.[1]

Wright's notes are accompanied by excerpted passages from plays, often paraphrased, to be learnt and reused. Thus Wright's analyses of plot-versus-lines might seem to be, like his extracted texts, thoroughly rooted in the act of reading. But his reference to the response of the 'people' gives pause: he is also interested in how plays worked as performance texts for he is analysing them with an eye to the audience. Moreover, his subjects of concern match those of theatregoers. Picking their way through a production, spectators seem often to have considered deeply, and separately, the way plot contributed to the play's success. When Thomas Locke wrote a letter to Carleton on the reception of Fletcher and Massinger's *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*, his critique muddled

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political commentary (the play, depicting a real event, was causing ructions) with artistic choices about structure:

Our players have fownd the meanes to goe through with the play of Barnevelt, and it hath . . . received applause: yet some say that . . . Barnavelt should perswade Ledenberg to make away himself (when he came to see him after he was prisoner) . . . and [that] to tell him that when they were both dead (as though he meant to do the like) they might sift it out of their ashes, was thought to be a point strayned.[2]

Other audience criticisms similarly concern the way specific plot moments were liked or disliked. Hausted's Cambridge play, *The Rivall Friends*, was damned, grieves its author, principally because the four 'Gulls' in the third act were thought 'impertinent to the Plot'.[3] Even Charles I watched plays with strong views on plotting. 'Though the kinge commended the language' of Davenant's *The Wits*, writes Henry Herbert, he 'dislikt the plott and characters'.[4] Here Charles I simultaneously praises and criticises the same play because, like Wright, he is able to analyse 'plot' as a totally separate entity from dialogue.

Early modern playwrights presented their plays for criticism in exactly the same terms. Regularly dividing plot from language, it was they who, as Davenant had it, first 'taught you [the critical audience] how t'unweave a plot,/And tract the winding Scenes'.[5] Examples show him to be right. Playwrights continually regard the plot as something with merits or demerits separate from those of the dialogue. 'First for the Plot', writes Habington of *The Queene of Arragon* (1640), 'it's no way intricate', continuing, 'The Language too is easie'; Carlell insecurely fears the watchers of *The Deserving Favourite* who will say both that 'the Plot was dull,' and that 'The Language [was] rude'.[6] Shirley even appends a prologue to the start of his *The Brothers* that concludes, insecurely, 'two houres hence you may/(If not before) laugh at the plot, and play', as though simultaneously worried that the audience might laugh at the structure of the 'plot' (which would be a critical act), whilst hoping that they laugh at the substance of the 'play' (an appreciative act: this play is a comedy).[7] Indeed, R. D. compliments Tatham on his *Distracted State* by praising its masterful fusion of the two separate elements of the drama: 'if we may/Conclude Language and Plot do make a Play,/Here they are met'.[8]

Why do playwrights, and so audiences, have a sense that there is a separation amounting almost to a rivalry between a play's plot and its language? The answer lies in the fact that the two were created as, initially, separate documents: they were different texts. For 'plot' in this period did

not simply stand for 'story'. The prologue at the Blackfriars to Massinger's *The Emperour of the East*, for example, can frankly confess that the 'story' of the play is borrowed, whilst asking the audience to admire the 'proportion' and 'drawing' – the structure – of its drama:

> Hee hath done his best, and though hee cannot glorie
>   In his invention, (this worke being a storie,
> Of reverend Antiquitie) hee doth hope
>   In the proportion of it, and the scope,
> You may observe some peeces drawne like one
>   Of a stedfast hand.[9]

'Structure', in this period, was created before the rest of the play was, and was called in its initial formation 'the plot': these days it would be called a 'scenario'.

Writing a letter to his friend William Walsh in 1693 Dryden casually referred to the progress he was making with his play *Love Triumphant*: 'I have plotted it all,' he commented; '& written two Acts of it.'[10] He was articulating the usual method for composing a play: first 'plotting' the full outline, then 'writing' the play proper. His routine had long held in the theatre, probably having its origins in the humanist educational process: as students had been encouraged to resolve full texts into summaries and to broaden summaries back into full texts, 'plotting' before 'writing' was an obvious way to conceive of any literary document. Puttenham had, years previously, recommended writing a play in layered form: 'our maker or Poet is . . . first to devise his plat or subject, then to fashion his poeme, thirdly to use his metricall proportions, and last of all to utter with pleasure and delight'.[11] In this model the plot or 'plat' starts as everything, what the play is, and is later encroached upon by different stages of play-writing and perfecting. Using 'metricall proportions' – writing verse – is presented as a decorative flourish on top of a written play on top of a plot, while the plot's final end, an 'utterance' or performance, implies that the document is still in some sense 'there' in the enacted play, blurring the distinction between plot as a unit of construction and plot as a unit of play.[12] Even playwrights excluded from practical theatrical concerns – closet and female writers – knew that careful advanced plotting was the secret to the success of any play, Margaret Cavendish drawing a distinction not between playwrights who plotted and playwrights who did not, but, rather, between playwrights who devoted all their time to 'plotting', and playwrights who also spared some effort for writing the text: 'some take more pains a Plot to lay,/Than other some to plot, and write a Play'.[13]