

Introduction

If we are to take the fullest advantage of the exciting discovery of the sites of the Rose and Globe theatres, and of the building of the Globe replica, in reconstructing the conditions of Elizabethan playing, we shall need to understand more than we do at present about the documents made ready in those theatres for preparing and governing performances: the prompt-book, the cast-list, and the Plot. The aim of this study is to rescue the theatre Plots from the critical neglect they have fallen into, to interpret their function as working documents of the stage, and to explain the witness they bear to the way the dramatists of the age understood their craft and the requirements of the companies of men and boys for whom they wrote. The seven extant Plots were all associated with the Rose theatre and the companies that played there in the 1590s under the management of Philip Henslowe and his son-in-law, the famous actor Edward Alleyn. They were reproduced in photo-facsimile in Sir Walter Greg's edition, *Dramatic Documents from the Elizabethan Playhouses*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1931), and are reproduced in his transliteration in chapters 5 and 6 of the present work.

We do not know how performances in the Elizabethan theatre were actually directed, or who directed them. We may gather from the prologue to Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* that the author himself was sometimes in the tiring-house during the play, but whether playwrights regularly directed their own works is a matter for speculation. Certainly it cannot have been the common case at the Rose towards the turn of the century. The Admiral's Men were then embarking on a number of revivals of plays whose authors had been dead for some years, and commissioning others from free-lance writers.

In the preparation of the eighteen or so extant prompt-books, many seemingly magisterial hands have left their mark, but these we can rarely identify. Edward Knight is known to have been the Book-keeper and Stage-reviser for the King's Men in 1633, and had probably been so since 1625. His hand can be found on several manuscripts, but if he was also charged with constructing Plots, none survive. The known work of the scrivener, Ralph Crane, for the King's Men, is principally scribal, and may or may not identify him as a theatre functionary. Thomas Vincent was Book-keeper or Prompter of an earlier Shakespearean company, but unless

he was himself the Vincent who appears in the Plot of *2 Seven Deadly Sins* we cannot trace him in the written record.

It is not certain that the office of Book-keeper was also that of prompter, although that appears to have been so in the Restoration theatre. Several hands at a time may be co-operatively seen at work on early manuscript prompt-books, sometimes including those of one or more authors, but, the general director of affairs, whether we call him by the name of Stage-reviser or Plotter, was most probably the man who made out the Plot, the ground-plan of the action to be performed. Anthony Munday, playwright, balladist, translator, and composer of interminable Romances, is called 'our best Plotter' in Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia* (1598). He was the scribe of the manuscripts of *Sir Thomas More* and *John a Kent and John a Cumber*, and in several plays is satirised as a theatrical Jack-of-all-trades. He certainly had connections as a playwright with the Admiral's Men at the Rose at about the time the Plots were composed, but we have no Plot in his hand, and whether he was in the regular employ of any company is uncertain. In one case, however, the connection between plotting and revision can be made: the principal Stage-reviser of the Book of *Sir Thomas More*, known as Hand C, has been identified as the Plotter who wrote the Plots of *2 Seven Deadly Sins* for Strange's Men and *Fortune's Tennis* for the Admiral's.¹

It will make little difference whether we regard the Stage-reviser, the Book-keeper, the Prompter, and the Plotter as one man or a committee. In the following discussion I propose, for the sake of simplicity, to call this composite character the Plotter or the Stage-reviser indifferently. The prompt-book, or simply 'Book', as theatre terminology had it, must always have been the final authority for directing a performance, whether or not it was the same book as that actually in the hands of the prompter, but there are strong grounds for believing that any production of an Elizabethan play initially involved the making out of a Plot.

Of the seven Plots that have survived, three are badly decayed and two so fragmentary as to be almost uninterpretable. One exists only in a transcript made by Steevens, printed in the so-called Variorum Shakespeare of 1802, and probably contains a number of inaccuracies and omissions. The texts of the plays represented by the Plots have disappeared in every case but one – that of Peele's *The Tragicall Battell of Alcazar in Barbarie*. The interpretation of the relationship between the Plot and the text of *Alcazar* will therefore be the focus of our enquiry.

The text of Peele's play was printed by Edward Alde in 1594, and is said on its title page to have been 'sundrie times plaid by the Lord high Admirall his seruants'. The date of its composition is certainly much earlier, probably soon after 1588, but we have no record of its performance before it passed into the hands of Lord Strange's Men, by whom, if it is the *mulomurco* or *mvlo mvlluco* recorded in Henslowe's Diary, as I believe it surely must have been, it was played fourteen times between February 1591 and January 1593.² The Plot was made for a performance some years

later, probably some time between 1598 and 1601. In that revival, Muly Molocco (Abdelmelec) was played by Thomas Downton and the part of his villainous rival, Muly Mahamet, by Edward Alleyn. Alleyn's presence in the Plot, although it provokes some doubts about the dating, is the link that binds the documents together, for he was also associated with Strange's Men in 1591, while retaining a separate allegiance as an Admiral's man, until 1594, and was still a leading member of the Admiral's company in 1598, even though it is believed that he had temporarily ceased playing.³ The Plot of *Alcazar* thus offers the only first-hand evidence upon which an interpretation of the Plots, and thus of the Plotter's behaviour in general, can be based. I hope to show that the text, too, is uniquely informative when studied in the light of the Plot.

The interpretation of the relationship of the two documents is, however, full of difficulties both of fact and logic. First, the documents are far apart in time and a direct relationship between them appears *prima facie* to be improbable. The Plot preserves a record of the first four acts of the play, but is badly damaged in the right-hand column which contains the third and fourth acts. That column must, therefore, itself, be reconstructed. While the first two acts correspond reasonably closely with the text, enough remains of the third and fourth to make it quite certain that they diverge strikingly in a number of instances. It is, nevertheless, possible to reconstruct the Plot with a fair degree of probability from the text. But when we attempt to interpret the apparent imperfections of the text by comparison with the Plot we are necessarily involved in circularity of argument and our conclusions will be so much the less certain.

The attempt was first undertaken by Sir Walter Greg in *Two Elizabethan Stage Abridgements: Alcazar and Orlando* (1923), with the intention of offering convincing independent evidence of the bad Quarto theory, and his arguments have ever since remained a cornerstone of textual bibliography. His judgment of the text, by comparison with the Plot was that it represents a version of the play:

drastically cut down by the reduction and omission of spectacles, elimination and doubling of parts, suppression of spectacular shows, for representation in a limited time by a comparatively small cast, with a minimum of theatrical paraphernalia. No scenes have been wholly excised (at any rate from the first four acts) and there is no evidence of matter having been added or of the remaining portion of the text having been tampered with or seriously corrupted. All indications point to the adaptation having been deliberately made for a special purpose or occasion in what one would *a priori* suppose to have been the normal manner.⁴

Such was the authority of Greg's promotion of the new bibliography that in the preface to the Yale facsimile of the Shakespeare First Folio in 1954, Professor C.T. Prouty, who had been sceptical of the bad Quarto theory, accepted the case about *Alcazar* and *Orlando* as 'a matter of definite knowledge'. John Yoklavitch, in Prouty's Yale edition of Peele's plays, went even further and adopted into his edition some of the directions

from the Plot, and even some of Greg's reconstructions and criticisms, as if they had independent textual authority. The unfortunate effect of Greg's hypothesis was, however, to divorce the Plot and the text of *Alcazar* from their seemingly close relationship, and to render the Plot – and, in consequence, all the other Plots – dumb.

In combating his arguments I shall no doubt arouse the scepticism of scholars who have internalised the orthodox bibliographical theories of the last seventy years without re-examining what I believe to be one of their more spectacular misapplications. I shall also try the patience of readers whose interest is in the theatrical outcomes. To them I can only apologise, for, if the evidence of regular theatrical practice is to be more convincing than the bibliographical arguments that confront it, the arguments for it must be equally stringent, and must be shown to operate for the great majority of texts. We shall therefore be seeking in many different directions for evidence of the limiting conditions and conventions to which the playwrights of the Great Stage conformed their imaginations; seeking, that is to say, the internalised rules of their craft.

Greg was, of course, well aware of the circularity of his arguments about the text of *Alcazar*, and attempted to find external support for them by a comparison of the allegedly corrupt and shortened text of Greene's *Orlando Furioso* with Edward Alleyn's acting scroll for the part of Orlando, of which a good portion is preserved. The discrepancies between these documents, however, are not great enough to hang an independent theory about the text of *Orlando* upon, without risking some very rash literary judgments, and the interpretation of that text requires support, in turn, from the supposition that *Alcazar* already illustrates the stigmata of a shortened text and a reduced acting cast, even though shortened in a different manner and with a different object in mind.

The quasi-scientific prestige of the new developments in bibliographical method no doubt contributed to the overwhelming success of these circular arguments, but Greg himself knew that their application was illogical. He at first regarded his demonstration that *Alcazar* was a text reduced for performance by twelve actors as little better than a game, and revealed in an inconspicuous footnote that, even as a game, it will not work. The difficulties in generating evidence of the working principles of the Elizabethan theatre nevertheless spring immediately from the general acceptance of Greg's illusory casting of the Quarto text for twelve men.

In attempting to escape from the shadow of bibliographical authority, perhaps we should remind ourselves of the most elementary question that can be raised about Elizabethan playscripts: does not the almost universal absence of expected instructions for performance or production in the early printed texts and the surviving manuscripts suggest the probable existence of widely understood mimetic conventions that must have compensated for their lack of magisterial detail? At the very simplest level of observation, we see, throughout the period, an arrangement of the text by which the action is divided into very short segments, or scenes, and the

story told by the sequential appearance and disappearance of groups of characters. As this is not a necessary method of building a play, we may ask why it should have persisted as a structural principle, almost without exception, for the whole period during which the particular architecture of the Great Stage endured.

Universally characteristic of both printed texts and manuscripts is the extreme meagreness of their stage directions, their frequent failure to mark segments of the action, including entrances and exits, their almost total silence in registering indications of time and place, and their complete indifference about stage-positioning and the working of spectacular effects. Even in copies that have undoubtedly served as prompt-books, description of detail necessary for the realisation of the action is often omitted. The direction of exits, whether by the left or right door, is never recorded, and, except for one late printed play, directional entrances also are wholly lacking. May we not infer, from the very absence of such information, the existence of a regular and universal method of theatrical interpretation that allowed the texts to achieve their proper effect in performance?

Two obvious and interconnected considerations are involved in the quest for an answer. One is the response of both playwright and actors to the physical structure of the Elizabethan theatre itself; the other, the casting of the plays according to the usages governing the employment, availability, and status of actors. These are the major influences on the practical shaping of the text as we have it on the page, on the playwrights' imaginative handling of time and place, and on the structuring of the dramatic narrative.

The replica of Shakespeare's Globe itself will be of no greater informative value than any other experimental stage-setting for Shakespeare, unless we can re-create, at the same time, an approximation of the model of the pre-Commonwealth companies for whose use it was designed. Professor T. W. Baldwin's study of the records of the later King's Men in *The Organisation and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (1927) showed the importance for our understanding of Elizabethan working methods of the joint-stock arrangements of the major companies. My own study is much indebted to it. But Baldwin followed the more engaging speculations of reconstructing the actor-lists of Shakespeare's plays as they were performed in his own lifetime, and his work did little to refute the general suspicion of authorial ignorance or whimsicality that is one of the residual, unexplained myths of bibliographical inference.

Editors, whose object has been to recover the true original text of their authors through the study of the imperfections of its transmission, have sought their evidence in the printing-house, rather than in the gaudy and unreliable theatre, and have established their picture of theatrical practice from the assumed regularity of compositors' habits. This kind of evidence is now open to challenge on its own terms, but its implications have long seemed improbable to theatre directors and to some literary scholars. It has

led us to believe in a race of otherwise incomparable artists who were ignorant of the basic mechanics of their stage and of the capacities of the companies of actors with which they worked; who were liable in the heat of composition to make absurd demands, well aware in their sober fit that the cast available would fail miserably to support them; who commonly composed up to twice as many blank verse lines as could be spoken in the time available and then indifferently left to the company the task of discarding the poetic flesh and discovering the dramatic bones beneath. In the absence of any known limits to the artists' freedom, some scholars have cautiously accepted the assumption that, whatever may be said of others, Shakespeare was a skilled professional craftsman who could fit the needs of his theatre and his company so expertly that his comrades scarcely recalled having seen a line crossed out in his papers. Baldwin concluded from his study of the King's Men after the time of Shakespeare's death that, in that company at least, 'the play was regularly fitted to the company not the company to the play'.⁵

Some of the seventeen or eighteen manuscript plays which, in various states of preservation, carry evidence of preparation for performance, do suggest that the Plotter's primary task was the fitting of the play to the company, but in these he seems to be chiefly concerned with the minor members of the company and in only one case (that of Massinger's *Believe as You List*) can we generate a record of the actors that is convincingly complete. In the Plots the casts are more fully listed, but, as we have seen, there is only one that bears a close relation to an extant text against which its evidence may be tested. The evidence of both the Plots and the manuscripts is thus uninterpretable without external confirmation of the actual composition of the companies: that is to say, without our having a fair idea of the answer before we begin.

We must therefore go round about and attempt to generate evidence of cast sizes and company composition from the texts themselves, to test that evidence by offering an explanation of the constraints that bear upon the behaviour of the Plotter of *Alcazar*, and to formulate the fewest and simplest rules that may be seen to govern his responses to the extant text of that play. If these explanations win acceptance and may be seen, as I believe they may, to function generally, a new way forward will be opened for the understanding of Elizabethan theatre-craft.

Two other major obstacles stand in the way of our enquiry and force upon it a degree of circularity. The first is the mismatch between the actual practice of Elizabethan writers and the universal lip-service they paid to neo-classical dramatic ideas. It is curious that the finest players in Europe, performing at Court before the most sophisticated and learned audience England has ever known, left no independent body of theory. They looked over their shoulders at the principles of classical decorum and of the unities of time, place, and action, but for the most part they did otherwise. They spoke of Acts, but they wrote in Scenes. From this innocent habit has descended a long line of scholarly misconception of their working principles.

The five-act structure of Roman tragedy was certainly well known in the sixteenth century. It was imitated in academic drama and in some plays of the children's companies, but it is doubtful if any playwright of the period had internalised it as a working imaginative principle, and in the plays of the public theatre it was of little moment until 1608.⁶ In that year the King's Men took over the Blackfriars theatre and adopted some of the practices of the children, including the punctuation of the action by musical interludes. These do commonly divide the action into five segments, but, both in the manuscripts, where act divisions are arbitrarily shifted, and in the printed plays, as the sporadic marking into acts in the Shakespeare First Folio show, act divisions are made, for the most part, merely for convenience or as nostalgic gestures towards classical respectability. Even in the early plays of the University Wits, in which a five-act division was sometimes reinforced with dumb-shows or choruses, the dominant structural principle of the drama was, and remained, the scene, the sequence of action between two points at which the stage lay momentarily empty. By 1625 the customs of Blackfriars had been adopted at the Phoenix and other private theatres and the majority of plays published thereafter show division into acts.

Ben Jonson divided the plays in his *Works* (1616) into acts and noted the scenes eccentrically in the continental manner. He attempted to impose on his plays, and on his audience, principles of classical decorum derived somewhat slavishly from Horace's *Ars Poetica*. But even he rarely managed to achieve a true unity of time. His innovative creation of a unity of place in *The Alchemist*, figuring the stage for four acts as the interior of a single house, and, for the fifth act, as its exterior, did not depart from the fundamental structural division of the play into scenes in the sense in which his contemporaries would have understood them. His invention was not understood, and remained un-imitated for many years.

The second major obstacle is the sheer diversity of the material itself, the uncertainty of its provenance, and the imperfections of its transmission. There is also, one might add, the occasional difficulty of laying hands on the crucial evidence. Edited texts are nearly always misleading in some essential detail for our present purposes. The labours of the best and most conscientious editors inevitably obscure some element of the working principles. Editors may not now have the confidence of Malone who regarded the stage directions as wholly under his control, but even Greg declared: 'the editor has nothing to do with the technicalities of the ancient stage'.⁷ The process, indeed, began contemporaneously, not only with wholesale regularisation in the printing houses and further 'unconscious' editing by compositors. Jonson's careful edition of his own plays revises the playtexts, and regularises the stage directions in such a way as to remove the evidence of any marking-up for performance they may have carried.

The rival volume, the Shakespeare First Folio (1623), has been shown to contain much revision of a similar kind, but it purported to represent 'the true and perfect coppie' from the hand of a master whose 'mind and

hand went together' and who wrote with such ease that 'we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers'. This loyal assertion by Shakespeare's fellows of his effortless expertise in his craft set running the hare of subsequent editorial ambition to reconstruct for readers the original texts of the plays, 'perfect in their numbers as he conceived them', of which ambition the volume produced from Jaggard's printing-house had clearly fallen somewhat short.

There has been much dispute about the nature of the manuscript copy underlying the thirty-six plays printed in the First Folio. McKerrow thought the plays were generally printed from the author's original drafts, but subsequent research has suggested widely various origins. W. W. Greg's summary in *The Shakespeare First Folio* (1955) is not undisputed, but it serves as a convenient account of the possible diversity of material we have to deal with. He argues that of the twenty-two plays first appearing in the Folio, eight were printed directly from Shakespeare's foul papers. Most of these are likely to have undergone annotation in various degrees by the Book-keeper. *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* in particular are held to show careful preparation for production. The extent to which playhouse annotation has been retained or ignored in the printing must, however, remain uncertain. Three others in this class, *Measure for Measure*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* are thought to be transcripts made from Shakespeare's autograph by the scrivener Ralph Crane. Of these, however, *The Winter's Tale* is furnished with massed entries, untypical of playhouse use, and *The Tempest* with unusually elaborate stage-directions. The former suggests preparation for a private patron rather than for prompt copy; the latter is sometimes thought to have been annotated by Shakespeare with greater care than usual because of his absence from the London scene. The other plays in this group are: *A Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry V*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Timon of Athens* (unfinished), and *Henry VIII*. None is believed to have served as prompt copy.

Authorial fair copies that had served directly as prompt-books are thought to underlie the Folio texts of *1 Henry VI*, *Julius Caesar*, and *King John*, which all appear for the first time. To these may be added *2 Henry VI* and *3 Henry VI*, versions of which had previously appeared in the *Contention* volumes. Six other plays are held to be printed from non-autograph prompt copy or from transcripts of the prompt-book: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Only the last had previously appeared, in a shorter, variant version. The remaining fourteen plays were printed from copies of pre-existing Quarto editions, some after having been collated in varying degrees of thoroughness either with the author's foul papers or with the official prompt-book. We should, indeed, be treading like Agag before the Lord in attempting to derive any normative picture of dramatic composition or theatrical practice from the internal evidence of the First Folio.

The prospect is little better with the ten earlier Quartos believed with varying degrees of assurance to have been printed directly from Shakespeare's foul papers. These are *Titus Andronicus*, *Love's Labours Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet* Q. 2, *Richard II*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1 & 2 *Henry IV*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *Hamlet* Q. 2.

It might seem that we are on firmer ground with the six so-called 'bad' Quartos: *The Contention*, *The True Tragedy*, *Romeo and Juliet* Q. 1, *Henry V*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Hamlet* Q. 1. These are all short versions of the plays as printed in the Folio, sometimes containing only half as many lines as the 'original' versions, but believed to derive from playhouse copies. There is, thus, a chance that they retain more evidence of actual performance than the author's manuscript might do, and they often retain textual readings and stage directions that are of use in reconstructing or validating the copy-texts chosen by editors.

Despite the occasionally more elaborate stage-directions of the shorter versions, particularly those of Q. 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, current theories, deriving from Pollard and Wilson's identification of four of these texts as 'bad' Quartos in 1919, have explained their composition as having taken place by a process of memorial reconstruction.⁸ The need for such reconstruction is usually thought to have arisen in exceptional circumstances, such as the loss of the company's licensed playbook during country touring, necessitating its re-vamping either directly from memory, or from a combination of the recall of the stage action together with the actors' parts. Reconstruction from memory alone may have come about through the venal action of players recalling as much of the performed text as they could for sale to a publisher. The theory of the pirating of texts by reporters in the audience with the aid of stenography has proved less enduring, but is, no doubt, still believed by many.

Professor C. T. Prouty made a valiant, and, I believe, convincing, attempt to show that the *Contention* versions could reasonably be read not as corrupt, memorised versions of 2 & 3 *Henry VI*, but as versions forerunning the form in which those plays appear in the Folio.⁹ More recently, Professor J. K. Walton has argued that the prestige of the bibliographical method is overrated in distinguishing the stigmata of good and bad texts, and that all arguments in fact proceed from the assumption that a 'bad' Quarto text is greatly inferior in literary quality. The case against the possibility that these versions may be Shakespeare's first drafts is thus derived chiefly from the literary judgment that they are so 'degenerate' that they could not conceivably have been written by him.¹⁰

The case for revision in either direction could be proved only by the convincing demonstration that a single reading in one version *must*, beyond any possibility of alternative explanation, have preceded the reading in the other. On literary grounds alone, this kind of evidence is exceedingly difficult to produce. Prouty's case for the precedence of the *Contention* plays appeared to fail on the garbled genealogy of the Duke of

York, which introduces Edmund Mortimer among the seven sons of Edward III, but his demonstration of the possibility of a heavily revised manuscript having misled the compositor is no better and no worse in logic than the invocation of an exactly similar set of circumstances by the proponents of the bad Quarto theory to explain anomalies in the good texts. For the maintenance of their arguments, as Hardin Craig observed, 'a reporter is always conveniently at hand for the removal of any obstacle that stands in need of removal'.¹¹ Certainly it is hard to believe that Shakespeare could ever have written the garbled nonsense of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy as it appears in *Hamlet* Q. 1, but is it not equally inconceivable that the memories of the supposed reporters of *Romeo and Juliet*, who, it is necessary to believe, were Paris and Romeo, should have failed utterly in the very scene in which they are on stage together? Were the enthusiasts who paid their sixpences for the Elizabethan equivalent of French's Acting Editions unlikely to notice the gross deception, if any had been intended? The late Margaret Webster, the only director I know who had taken the trouble to study the bad Quarto theory, used to observe that it involved the supposition that the actors who are identified as reporters had, uncharacteristically, in nearly every case forgotten their cues.

It would take us beyond all reasonable bounds to attempt in this study a survey of the textual questions raised by the bad Quartos, but, as we shall be much concerned with the texts that are supposed to have offered the proof of the existence of such a class of memorially reconstructed plays, I must at least foreshadow the direction in which the arguments of the following pages appear to lead. My belief is that the evidence so far produced for memorial reconstruction is unconvincing and vulnerable in fact and logic. In two cases, those of *Henry V* and *Hamlet*, however, the argument is at least a tempting explanation of the state of the texts. *Henry V* Q. 1, was, of course, the text on which Pollard and Wilson based their theory, and this text alone, in the garbled language and the transposed endings of the scenes in the French camp, satisfies the criterion proposed above of demonstrating a direction of derivation (in which Q is the debtor) that appears to be unassailable. That the choruses, the Duke of Burgundy's oration, and others of the great speeches left no trace in the reporter's memory, however, admits at least the possibility that the Folio text (as the internal evidence itself suggests) had undergone one or more revisions from a common, lost original. An area of doubt must, therefore, always be allowed. It is of interest that Dr Gary Taylor, the editor of the New Oxford edition, appears to believe strongly enough in the existence of an *Ur-Henry V*, to have retained Q's Bourbon in his text in places where, in the Folio, he has been replaced by the Dauphin.

Romeo and Juliet, on the other hand, shows examples of the contrary kind that appear to establish the precedence of the Q. 1 text. It is hard to imagine, for instance, how Q. 1's exact rendering of a Ciceronian apothegm that is rhetorically flourished beyond recognition in Q. 2 (I, i, 124 ff.) could have been restored by the kind of mechanical recall that is