

Introduction

Shakespeare scholars face a significant challenge: our understanding of Shakespeare benefits from appreciation of the plays that he was responding to and influencing in the repertoires of the London-based companies, but most of the play-texts from those repertoires have been lost. Recent estimates suggest that for the period of c.1567–1642, whilst only 543 plays from the London commercial theatres have survived, as many as 744 plays are identifiably lost, with hundreds more completely untraceable.¹ At the same time, recent scholarship suggests that the data available about lost plays from Shakespeare's lifetime has never been greater, better assembled or more accessible. The advent of the *Lost Plays Database* (2009) and the publication of instalments of Martin Wiggins' multivolume *Catalogue of British drama* (since 2012) have been instrumental in making this information available.² What can be done with all this new knowledge? Scholars have long been fascinated by the influence of the lost 'Ur-Hamlet' on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and by the fact that two plays actually written by Shakespeare ('Love's Labour's Won' and 'Cardenio') have been lost, but those three lost plays are only a small part of a much bigger picture. In this book I am interested in how we cope with such loss. I return Shakespeare's dramatic work to its most immediate and (arguably) important context by situating it alongside the hundreds of plays known to Shakespeare's

¹ D. McInnis and M. Steggle, 'Introduction: *Nothing Will Come of Nothing? Or, What Can We Learn from Plays that Don't Exist?*' in D. McInnis and M. Steggle (eds.), *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1, drawing on figures generously provided by Martin Wiggins. London playhouses were not the only venues where the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were performed, but for the purposes of this book and the repertory studies approach that I use throughout, I tend to restrict my focus to the wealth of data about theatrical production in London where analysis of direct engagement between companies is clearer.

² R. L. Knutson, D. McInnis and M. Steggle (eds.), *Lost Plays Database* (hereafter 'LPD') (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2009–), <https://lostplays.folger.edu>; M. Wiggins in association with C. Richardson, *British Drama, 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 11 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012–).

original audiences, but lost to us. I reassess the value of lost plays both to the companies that originally performed them and to scholars who write about early modern drama now. I revisit key moments in Shakespeare's career and the development of the Chamberlain's (later King's) Men and, by prioritising the immense volume of information we now possess about lost plays, provide a richer, more accurate picture of dramatic activity than has hitherto been possible.

Why Do Plays Become Lost?

Beyond the impetus provided by the availability of copious new information, this study is timely and necessary because – despite their best intentions – those early scholars such as Frederick Gard Fleay who did glance in the direction of lost plays were as likely to distort the evidence as to handle it responsibly. More recent theatre historians have subsequently perpetuated those errors. One of my intentions in this book is to model a method of scholarship for working with lost plays; a method that is responsible, sceptical and which sees the value in complicating our understanding of the period rather than necessarily offering neat solutions. The early critics' neglect of lost plays is compounded by the baseless value judgments advanced by some scholars. Bernard Beckerman, a pioneer in privileging the commercial reality of what he called the 'repertory system' over 'an idolatrous love of Shakespeare', nevertheless dismissed lost plays as repertorial 'filler' of dubious aesthetic worth: 'As lovers of literature', he wrote, 'we need be grieved little by the disappearance of 75 per cent of the plays'.³ In a similar fashion, Andrew Gurr has more recently offered his readers consolation by adopting what he calls 'the self-comforting assumption' that 'only those plays that were most famous and successful in their own day' were likely to survive.⁴ There is no basis for these disparaging remarks, but the consequences are significant.

³ B. Beckerman, *Shakespeare at the Globe: 1599–1606* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 2, 14 and 16.

⁴ A. Gurr, 'What Is Lost of Shakespearean Plays, Besides a Few Titles?' in D. McInnis and M. Steggle (eds.), *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 56. Gurr is here reiterating sentiments he expressed earlier in *The Shakespearean Playing Companies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), where he supposed that '[t]he survivors are very likely to be the best or at least the most popular of the many original scripts' written for the London stages (26), and in his *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642*, 3rd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 18, where he characterised the majority of playwriting from the period as 'hack-work ... to supply an entertainment industry' and alleged that '[w]hat has survived into this century is probably not a large proportion of the total output, though it is likely to include most of the cream'.

Why Do Plays Become Lost?

3

Plays become lost for a variety of reasons and appeals to ‘quality’ as the basis of non-preservation are not genuine explanations: without comparative data, ‘quality’ is unmeasurable. Yet even those recent critics who have been willing to acknowledge that ‘plays were printed (or not) and survived (or not) for multiple reasons’ paradoxically insist that ‘there is no reason to suggest that the plays that survive are either unrepresentative or over-representative of the general performance trends’.⁵ Unfortunately for us, the great variety of causes of loss means that the surviving drama is, statistically speaking, atypical precisely because of its survival; these plays constitute the distinct minority of the total dramatic output for the period. Unpredictable and arbitrary causes including fire and vandalism, for example, are responsible for the loss of a large number of play-texts. John Warburton (1682–1759) notoriously claimed that his invaluable collection of unpublished play manuscripts was lost through the callousness of his cook Betsy, under whose care ‘they was unluckily burnd or put under Pye bottoms’.⁶ (In the final chapter of this book I explore in greater detail the veracity of Warburton’s scapegoating of Betsy and the implication that he owned the titles from his list.) The tragedies that befell the playing companies who occupied the Cockpit and the Fortune playhouses are less contentious, in that they demonstrably did occur. On Shrove Tuesday, 1617, the Queen’s Men became the victims of the riots accompanying what was the traditional holiday for apprentices. Thousands of rioters took to the streets, some of them breaking into the Cockpit theatre in Drury Lane and (as one contemporary letter-writer reports) ‘cutting the players apparell all in pieces, and all other theyre furniture and burnt theyre play books and did what other mischief they could’.⁷ The immolation of the Fortune playhouse in December 1621, in which all the ‘apparell and play-bookes’ were lost, likewise struck a significant blow to the survival rate of plays in the repertory of the Palsgrave’s Men.⁸

Censorship has also played a hand in the loss of drama. Most famously, performances of Ben Jonson and Thomas Nashe’s seditious ‘Isle of Dogs’ play (1597) almost brought about the tearing down of playhouses and the suppression of playing across London and further afield. Quite how the play caused offense is a matter of conjecture and dispute. E. K. Chambers

⁵ S. Dustagheer, *Shakespeare’s Two Playhouses: Repertory and Theatre Space at the Globe and the Blackfriars, 1599–1613* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6.

⁶ British Library, Lansdowne MS 807, fo. 1^r; digitised in the *LPD* entry for ‘Warburton’s List’.

⁷ John Chamberlain to Sir Dudley Carleton, 8 March 1617, quoted in G. E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 6.55.

⁸ John Chamberlain, quoted in Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 6.153.

suggested that the offence centred on the King of Poland, whose ambassador had been in London very recently to visit Elizabeth.⁹ Glynne Wickham thought the play must have been critical of the government.¹⁰ More recently, Ian Donaldson has provocatively suggested that the topicality of the rivalry between the Cecils and Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, may be relevant: around the time of the play, Essex had voyaged to the Canary Islands, whose Latin name (*canaria insula*) translates as ‘Isle of Dogs’.¹¹ Whatever the supposed offence, the Privy Council instructed the governmental inquisitor Richard Topcliffe to ascertain ‘what copies’ of the play had been circulated and to ‘peruse soch papers as were fownde in Nash his lodgings’.¹² Ultimately, these attempts to locate and destroy copies of the play-text may have had less to do with the play’s actual contents than the exaggerations of the governmental informer, William Udall, in his testimony to Topcliffe about the play.¹³

Legal notoriety, if not explicit censorship *per se*, also took its toll on a play by George Chapman. In 1603, a bookbinder named John Flasket allegedly approached Chapman and supplied him with the plot of a play that Flasket wanted written. The play, ‘The Old Joiner of Aldgate’, was performed several times by the Children of Paul’s; it was purportedly intended to humiliate Flasket’s lover, Agnes How, who had recently married one John Milward despite being affianced to Flasket. Though the accused parties strenuously denied the charges, the Attorney-General’s Bill alleges that Flasket devised the play in order to intimidate How into marrying him ‘rather then to suffer her name to be so traduced in euery play house as it was lyke to be’.¹⁴ In his deposition, Thomas Woodford, who bought the play from Chapman, claimed that ‘he hath the booke itself without alteringe of it’.¹⁵ Presumably such a play, though the ‘booke’ was still extant in 1603, was not going to find a willing publisher, given the Star Chamber proceedings. Chapman’s play was at least performed: a play about the Dutch massacre of English merchants in

⁹ E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 3.455.

¹⁰ G. Wickham, *Early English Stages, 1300 to 1660*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 2.12.

¹¹ I. Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 118.

¹² J. R. Dasent et al. (eds.), *Acts of the Privy Council of England, New Series: 1542–1631*, 46 vols. (London: HMSO, 1890–1964), 27.338 (via British History Online).

¹³ See M. Teramura, ‘Richard Topcliffe’s Informant: New Light on *The Isle of Dogs*’, *Review of English Studies*, 68 (2017), 44–59.

¹⁴ Attorney-General’s Bill, quoted in C. J. Sisson, *Lost Plays of Shakespeare’s Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 58.

¹⁵ Thomas Woodford’s deposition, quoted in Sisson, *Lost Plays of Shakespeare’s Age*, 70–71.

Why Do Plays Become Lost?

5

Amboyna, Indonesia was suppressed by the Privy Council in 1625 following appeals by Dutch ministers in London, who feared that the scheduled Shrove Tuesday performance at an unknown playhouse would incite riots.¹⁶

Wilful destruction of play-texts also accounts for the loss of some plays. Sir Fulke Greville, first Baron Brooke of Beauchamps Court, is best known as the author of short poems and Senecan closet dramas including *Mustapha* (c.1596) and *Alahum* (c.1600). He also wrote a play about Antony and Cleopatra, but it perished in an act of self-censorship. In the wake of the failed coup and subsequent execution of the Earl of Essex in 1600, Greville realised that the play he had recently written might be misconstrued as dangerous political commentary. Fearing the repercussions of such an identification, Greville decided to burn his manuscript himself, even though he maintained that no such allegory was intended. (He likened himself to the Greek philosopher Thales, who was so preoccupied with gazing at the stars that he fell down a well).¹⁷

The logistics involved in bringing a play from the stage to the page were also undoubtedly a contributing factor to the loss of so many play-texts. As Donaldson observes, ‘for a variety of aesthetic, social, religious, and political reasons’, when Ben Jonson published his First Folio in 1616, he did not attempt to print everything he had written.¹⁸ Jonson told William Drummond of Hawthornden in 1619 that ‘half of his comedies were not in print’, despite his First Folio having been published just three years previously. Although some of these comedies eventually found a home in the two-volume folio published in 1640 (e.g. *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Devil is an Ass*), Jonson was also presumably alluding to comedies now lost altogether, such as ‘Hot Anger Soon Cold’, which he wrote with Henry Porter and Henry Chettle in 1598, and which he must have knowingly excluded or been unable to include in the 1616 folio.¹⁹ He notably omitted co-authored plays such as ‘Page of Plymouth’ (1599), early works he likely judged to be ‘artistically inferior’ (*The Case is Altered*) and

¹⁶ See Chamberlain’s letter to Carleton dated 26 February 1625 in N. E. McClure (ed.), *The Letters of John Chamberlain* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939), 2.602 and the LPD entry for ‘Amboyna’.

¹⁷ F. Greville, ‘Dedication to Sir Philip Sidney’ in J. Gouws (ed.), *The Prose Works of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 93.

¹⁸ I. Donaldson, ‘Collecting Ben Jonson’ in A. Nash (ed.), *The Culture of Collected Editions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 27 (and see 25–27 in general on the rationale of Folio inclusions/exclusions).

¹⁹ See I. Donaldson (ed.), ‘Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden’, line 306 in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 5.378.

controversial plays such as ‘The Isle of Dogs’, as well as other poetry and writings.²⁰

Claims that half of Shakespeare’s plays would have been lost had they not appeared in his First Folio of 1623 are somewhat overstated (presumably attempts would have been made to publish at least some of them in cheaper formats), but it is certainly the case that eighteen plays by Shakespeare appeared in print for the very first time in *Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. Drawing a comparison with palaeontology and the singular events that produce exceptional preservation conditions, Matthew Steggle describes the publication of the First Folio as ‘one of the biggest and most significant mudslides of early modern drama’.²¹ Unlike Jonson, Shakespeare could not assist with the publication of his collected works, having died in 1616. Play selection seems to have been determined by availability (what the stationers involved in the project already had rights to or could acquire) and perhaps some other principle of aesthetic resembling Jonson’s criteria for folio inclusion. *All is True* (*Henry VIII*), co-authored with Fletcher, was included, but *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and ‘Cardenio’ (also Fletcher collaborations) were not, and neither was *Pericles*, co-authored with George Wilkins. ‘Love’s Labour’s Won’, which was apparently in print by 1603, was also omitted.²² (More on this play below.) The plays that were included stem from a variety of cypertexts of varying quality: it was not simply the case that the ‘best’ were published. The *New Oxford Shakespeare* editors conclude that scribal copy underlies seven of the previously unpublished plays, though the nature of those transcribed manuscripts remains uncertain, with *Two Gentlemen of Verona* probably a playhouse manuscript, *Measure for Measure* probably a late playhouse manuscript (including additions made after Shakespeare’s death), and *The Tempest* probably not originating in

²⁰ Donaldson, ‘Collecting Ben Jonson’, 26; see also Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life*, 332. Loss could actually be beneficial on occasion. Jonson seems to have preferred to let some plays disappear, and at least one critic of Dekker has unkindly suggested that judicious jettisoning of that playwright’s works may have increased his reputation: ‘Oddly enough, it seems likely that Dekker’s reputation would be greater if all but *Shoemakers’ Holiday*, *Old Fortunatus*, both parts of *Honest Whore*, and the delightful *Gull’s Hornbook* had been lost’. See J. H. Conover, *Thomas Dekker: An Analysis of Dramatic Structure* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), 213.

²¹ M. Steggle, ‘They are all Fossils: A Paleontology of Early Modern Drama’, in R. L. Knutson, D. McInnis and M. Steggle (eds.), *Loss and the Literary Culture of Shakespeare’s Time* (Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 186.

²² The inclusion of ‘Love’s Labour’s Won’ on the inventory list of Exeter-based bookseller Christopher Hunt (1603) strongly implies that this lost Shakespeare play had been printed; see T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare’s Love’s Labor’s Won* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957).

Why Do Plays Become Lost?

7

the playhouse at all, given its permissive stage directions.²³ A further three plays evidently seem to have been printed from theatrical manuscripts (*All's Well*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*); three appear to be authorial papers annotated for performance (*Coriolanus*, *King John* and *1 Henry VI*); and one (*All is True*) seems authorial but lacks theatrical annotations. The nature of the copytext for the remaining four plays that appeared in print for the first time in the Folio (*As You Like It*, *Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Timon*) remains unclear.²⁴

The 'mudslide' of the Folio offers a just cause for celebration, but the process of its creation also helpfully illuminates the various contingencies associated with attempting to preserve plays in print. The variety of copytexts used, from disparate moments along the continuum from authorial papers to scribal copies and performance texts, suggests that manuscripts were not superseded by newer transcriptions, and that the latest iteration of a play-text did not offer cause to discard earlier iterations. As Paul Werstine has recently shown, although older generations of critics (influenced by W. W. Greg) postulated 'that for every play some company once possessed just a single document', it must actually have been the case that multiple playhouse manuscripts of individual plays co-existed simultaneously.²⁵ The versions of extant plays that survive are not necessarily the most recent, authoritative or any other ostensible index of quality – they might be old or inferior copies that happened to still be available when the Folio editors began their project of assembling Shakespeare's works. The above editorial inferences can be supplemented with historical evidence from 1623, the year that the First Folio was printed, when the Master of the Revels had to re-license for the King's Men '[a]n olde playe called Winter's Tale' since 'the allowed booke was missinge': the licensed text was not available, but clearly the company had recourse to an alternative manuscript, and the play was printed that year.²⁶

Certainly some early modern readers accorded little value to playbooks. Sir Thomas Bodley famously classed 'Englishe plaies' alongside almanacs and pamphlets as 'riffe raffes' and 'baggage books' that his first Keeper, Thomas James, should take care not to admit into the Bodleian library ('hardly one in fortie' of them being 'worthy the keeping'). Nicholas Ferrar expressed a

²³ The other scribal plays are *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cymbeline*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter's Tale*.

²⁴ See discussions under each title in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Critical Reference Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁵ Werstine, 'Lost Playhouse Manuscripts' in Knutson, McInnis and Steggle (eds.), *Loss and the Literary Culture of Shakespeare's Time*, 41.

²⁶ N. W. Bawcutt (ed.), *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama: The Records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of the Revels, 1623–73* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 142 (item 43).

similar attitude to vernacular literature with his dying wish: he ordered his brother John to ‘take out of my Study those three great Hampers full of Bookes’ (being his collection of ‘Comedies, Tragedies, Love-Hymns, Heroicall Poems, & such like’) and have them carried ‘to the place of my grave, & upon it, see you burn them all’.²⁷ Critics no longer uniformly accept such disdain for playbooks as representative of early modern attitudes to English plays, and the reputation of playbooks has been recuperated by book historians.²⁸ However, it would be a mistake to assume that the incidence of play loss decreased in the early seventeenth century, when the market for playbooks became more established.²⁹ In an examination of playbook publication patterns in the period spanning 1576–1660, Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser describe 1576–1597 as ‘an initial period of low production’ and the subsequent period covering 1598–1613 as a ‘boom followed by sustained high production’.³⁰ Moreover, Farmer and Lesser’s work demonstrates that stationers appear to have embraced the opportunity to print playbooks (which is not to say that it was a lucrative business so much as a valued one: lower in risk and not as low in profit as previously assumed).³¹ In the course of comparing the ‘popularity’ of playbooks to other print publications of the period (in particular sermons and treatises), they note that market share was determined not only by demand (the public’s willingness to purchase certain kinds of books), but also by supply (i.e. the availability of manuscripts to print).³² Acknowledging that play-texts occupied a smaller

²⁷ See Letter 220 (1 January 1612) and Letter 221 (15 January 1612) in G. W. Wheeler (ed.), *Letters of Sir Thomas Bodley to Thomas James, First Keeper of the Bodleian Library* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), 219–222; and B. Blackstone (ed.), *The Ferrar Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 60–61.

²⁸ See, e.g. Aaron T. Pratt’s recent recuperation of the status of playbooks as they appeared in stab-stitched quarto format, the pamphlet form of which ‘did as much to align playbooks with respectable forms and genres as it did to set them apart’: A. T. Pratt, ‘Stab-Stitching and the Status of Early English Playbooks as Literature’, *The Library*, 16(3) (2015), 304–328, esp. 308–309 and 327–328). See also L. Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁹ On the status of playbooks and Bodley’s sentiments, see L. Erne, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 194ff.

³⁰ A. B. Farmer and Z. Lesser, ‘The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 56 (2005), 7. This ‘boom’ was in turn followed by a ‘gradual contraction’ (1614–1628) with only thirty-one first editions. Successive periods within their date range alternate between booms and contraction, but are beyond the scope of this book’s own date range.

³¹ Farmer and Lesser, ‘The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited’, 25. Their article was written in response to the very different conclusion offered in Peter W. M. Blayney’s still influential ‘The Publication of Playbooks’ in J. D. Cox and D. S. Kastan (eds.), *A New History of Early English Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 383–422.

³² A. B. Farmer and Z. Lesser, ‘Structures of Popularity in the Early Modern Book Trade’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 56 (2005), 212.

Why Do Plays Become Lost?

9

portion of the marketplace than sermons, Farmer and Lesser nevertheless imply that if publishers had been furnished with more playscripts, the market would have happily absorbed them:

We simply do not know how many more playbooks stationers would have published if theaters had produced plays in the same quantities that preachers produced sermons or divines produced treatises (although the high reprint rate for playbooks seems a good clue).³³

The implication is that once the market for playbooks began to enjoy its first ‘boom’ in 1598 or so, the rate of loss was curtailed.

Writing in 2005, Farmer and Lesser were distinctly ahead of the curve in acknowledging the peculiar problem that lost plays pose to such calculations. Their method of calculating the popularity of playbooks takes loss rates into account in two distinct ways. First, they note that approximately thirty-six titles entered in the Stationers’ Register in anticipation of publication pertain to manuscripts that may have been professional plays, but for which there are no extant specimens. (‘Cloth Breeches and Velvet Hose’, a ‘morall . . . As yt is Acted by my lord Chamberlens servantes’, entered for James Roberts in the Stationers’ Register on 27 May 1600, is a good example.)³⁴ Although their study sometimes covers a chronological range of 1576–1660, this particular statistic is derived from W. W. Greg’s bibliography of printed drama, and pertains to the more limited period of c.1591–1646 (being the titles of ostensibly professional drama appearing on pages 965–977 of the ‘lost plays’ section of Greg’s work).³⁵ It therefore omits reference (for example) to the approximately fifty-eight old plays registered for publication by Humphrey Moseley on 9 September 1653, forty-seven of which appear to be lost.³⁶ To what extent did the actions of stationers such as Moseley result in the non-survival of plays that could have been saved by printing? Second, Farmer and Lesser offer the salient reminder that not everything that was printed was necessarily registered beforehand at Stationers’ Hall; in fact, by their calculations, only four-fifths of the first-edition playbooks printed between 1576–1640 were registered. If the thirty-six entries (by their count) for lost plays represent four-fifths of the plays that stationers intended to publish (but which are

³³ Farmer and Lesser, ‘Structures of Popularity’, 212.

³⁴ E. Arber (ed.), *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640 AD* (London, 1875–1894), 3.161 (accessed via Columbia University Libraries’ digitisation).

³⁵ Farmer and Lesser, ‘The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited’, 29, citing W. W. Greg, *A Bibliography of the English Printed Drama to the Restoration* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1939–1959), 2.965–977 (hereafter ‘BEPD’).

³⁶ See Greg, *BEPD*, 2.979 (header note for entries ‘θ 58 to 102’).

not known to exist), Farmer and Lesser project an upper limit total of forty-six lost first editions of play-texts – or ‘less than one playbook per year’ of their studied range. They subsequently qualify their assumptions to arrive at an even leaner range of between one and twenty lost first editions.³⁷

Farmer and Lesser’s conception of lostness pertains exclusively to those presumed play-texts which had made their way into the hands of willing stationers, but which were either not printed or, if they were, did not survive. Similarly, Alexandra Hill (in her more recent analysis), claims that of the 411 plays registered for publication at Stationers’ Hall between 1557 and 1640, 319 saw their way into a printed edition that still survives today. This implies a survival rate of something like eighty percent.³⁸ Such reassuring statistics need to be understood within context, however. Several plays – e.g. *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy*, *The Welsh Ambassador* or *Sir Thomas More* – survive in manuscript but not in print sources. Survival is not to be equated with whether stationers printed something and whether that printed edition survives.³⁹

What of the many hundreds, if not thousands, of plays that never even made it as far as the stationers? In his preface to *The English Traveller* (1633), Thomas Heywood offers an unusually explicit commentary on the process of loss and survival in the period:

True it is, that my Playes are not exposed unto the world in Volumes, to beare the title of Workes, (as others) one reason is, That many of them by shifting and change of Companies, haue beene negligently lost, Others of them are still retained in the hands of some Actors, who thinke it against their peculiar profit to haue them come in Print, and a third, That it never was any great ambition in me, to bee in this kind Volumniously read.⁴⁰

Heywood’s claim of having had ‘*either an entire hand, or at the least a maine finger*’ in the composition of some 220 plays remains unverified, but if his explanation for their non-appearance in print is to be trusted, Heywood’s lost plays were unlikely to have ever been offered to stationers, and thus

³⁷ Farmer and Lesser, ‘The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited’, 29.

³⁸ A. Hill, *Lost Books and Printing in London, 1557–1640: An Analysis of the Stationers’ Company Register* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 135.

³⁹ The question of why certain manuscripts survive and not others warrants more space than I can devote to it here; that a mere eighteen theatrically annotated play manuscripts survive from the period implies a kind of randomness yet the provenance of these manuscripts offers insights into the complex reasons for survival.

⁴⁰ T. Heywood, ‘To the Reader’ in *The English Traveller* (London, 1633), sig.A3^r.