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Press variants in Shakespeare

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"Press variants in Shakespeare" by Gabriel Egan

This paper arises as spin-off from an attempt to tell the story of how scholars have theorized and practised the editing of Shakespeare across the twentieth century (Egan 2010). At the end of that story I concluded that there were two areas of unfinished business in the study of early editions of Shakespeare. One is the identification of particular printshop compositors and their habits, and the other--the one I will speak about today--is the editorial treatment of press variants, those differences between exemplars of one edition that occur because type was altered during a print run, usually to correct an error that had been noticed. In 1904, R. B. McKerrow established that the unit of correction was the forme of type used to impress one side of a sheet, not the page or the sheet, and hence that an editor should use this unit, the forme, when selecting what best represents the ideal intention imperfectly embodied in an edition (Barnes 1904, xiii-xviii). But even supposing that one is able to tell which of the two states of a forme is the uncorrected and which the corrected, which of them is to be preferred by an editor? On the whole, W. W. Greg leaned towards accepting the readings in the corrected state of a forme, except where an accident of the press seems to have necessitated the corrections, or where it seems clear that copy was not consulted to make the changes (Greg 1942, xlvi). Fredson Bowers leaned in the opposite direction and argued that in the absence of evidence that the printers consulted their copy when making press corrections (and rarely can one show that they must have) the default assumption should be that correction was done without reference to copy and hence the uncorrected state is closer to the authorial manuscript--for it was in sight when the uncorrected forme was set--and should be preferred (Bowers 1952).

Let us take a concrete example of the problem of telling the uncorrected from the corrected state of a variant forme, or indeed the less corrected from the more corrected where there were multiple rounds of correction. Q2 *Hamlet* (1604-5) survives in seven exemplars, and their collation has revealed twenty-six variants across eleven formes, ten of them clustered on forme N(outer). Aside from N(outer), the variants involve just one or two short lines of type and the changes fix literal errors of some importance. [SLIDE] A typical example is "Your Officres" becoming "Your Officers" (L1r). That correction could be made by anyone literate person without consulting copy. [SLIDE] The same is perhaps true of "Showe me the step and thorny way to heauen" becoming "Showe me the steepe and thorny way to heauen" (C3v), although the error is rather less obvious and the correction either considerably more reliant upon the poetic insight of the corrector or else it was done by consultation of copy.

Since the unit of correction is the forme, the standard procedure is to examine all variants within a forme looking for one or more that incontrovertibly shows directionality. Since no-one would intentionally alter the good reading "Your Officers" to the bad reading "Your Officres" or "steepe" to "step", the good readings seem to be the results of stop-press correction of the bad ones. However, it *is* possible for good readings to be turned bad by miscorrection, and there are often variants where both readings are equally good, or bad. Q2 *Hamlet* has examples of both these problems, and there seems to be nothing in the way of a rule, a default assumption, that editors might apply in such cases. Where there are multiple variants within a

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forme, the editor has at least the chance to consider them as a batch to see if directionality emerges. Assuming that all the changes were made at once, a determination of the directionality--which state is the uncorrected and which the corrected--should help with the indifferent variants. For if it can be determined which is the corrected state it might be possible to tell that copy was consulted if some of the improvements are too good to be attributed to the unaided wit of the corrector. If copy was consulted then the corrected state should be accepted for all the readings, except those that are clearly miscorrections.

[SLIDE] This table shows that there are three extant states of N(outer) in Q2 *Hamlet*, which must therefore have been corrected twice. (The variants are here shown out of their contexts, and if there is time at the end I could show them in their contexts in order to illustrate my claim that for all of them it is hard to be certain which, if either, of the two readings is correct.) I show the states here in the order that John Dover Wilson put them in (Wilson 1934, 129), with correction occurring between the three rows reading down the page. First the forme was typeset as show in the Folger, Huntington, Yale, and Polish exemplars (the top row) and the sheets that ended up in those copies (plus more, presumably) were wrought off. [SLIDE] Then the press was stopped and 8 corrections were made: *thirtie* > *thereby*, *pall* > *fall*, *dosie* > *dazzie*, *yaw* > *raw*, *neither in* > *neither*, *in*, *too't* > *doo't*, *be hangers* > *be might hangers*, and *A did sir* > *A did so sir*. The press was restarted and the sheet that ended up in the British Library exemplar (plus more, presumably) was wrought off. [SLIDE] Then the press was stopped again and two more corrections were made (*sellingly* > *fellingly* and *reponsiue* > *responsiue*) and the the press restarted to produce, amongst others, the sheets that ended up in the Cambridge and Bodleian exemplars. [SLIDE] This order of correction is an hypothesis based on variants themselves and we might disagree with it: [SLIDE] why not say that the Cambridge and Bodleian exemplars (bottom row) are the least corrected and the Folger, Huntington, Yale, and Polish exemplars (top row) the most corrected? We can at least rule out other permutations such as the British Library exemplar (middle row) being the most or least corrected--let's move it to the top [SLIDE]--because that would require a second round of correction to undo the first no matter how we order the other two states. Here's the problem if the Folger, Huntington, and Wroclaw exemplars show the intermediate state [SLIDE]; see how *dazzie* has to become *dosie* and then be turned back to *dazzie*. And if we switch the bottom two so that the Cambridge and Bodleian exemplars show the intermediate state, *sellingly* would have to become *fellingly* and then be turned back to *sellingly*. If we agree that a second round of correction undoing a first in this way is impossible, then the British Library exemplar is the intermediate state and the options are either [SLIDE] this or [SLIDE].

So, we can at least narrow down the possibilities to two orders of correction. Let us focus on the ninth of these ten corrections, since it seems to have been bungled [SLIDE]:

[HAMLET]

I would it be hangers till then
(F, HN, Y², Wro, sig. N3)

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[HAMLET]

I would it be might hangers till then
(L, C², VER, sig. N3)

Hamlet is referring to the word *carriages* that the Courtier Osric had used for the leather and metal straps by which rapiers are suspended from the belt. Hamlet thinks that this word *carriages* would be appropriate if cannons, not swords, hung at a man's hips; until they do, he says, let the word be *hangers*. If the word *might* were essential to Hamlet's meaning, we could say that the second version of this speech shows a press correction that was intended to put *might* before *be* but mistakenly put it after *be*. That is, the correction was meant to the "I would it be hangers till then" into "I would it might be hangers until then". However, the word *might* is not essential to the meaning, for the subjunctive mood is already clear from Hamlet's *I would*. Indeed, one could argue that there is more sense in seeing correction going the other way, from the ungrammatical *be might hangers* to the perfectly acceptable *be hangers*, if such a change could be explained.

Let us look closely at the adjustment of type necessary for this correction, and the proof-sheet that must have been used to make it, as Peter Blayney tells us we should do (Blayney 1982, 219-57). [SLIDE] This requires first constructing the forme of type for N(outer), done here using images from the printed book, [SLIDE] then making a mirror image [SLIDE] to produce the printed proof-sheet that the corrector wrote upon [SLIDE], which we may rotate [SLIDE] to see him working on the pages with the most extensive corrections, and then we may zoom to see just where the proof-reader made his handwritten corrections. Blayney hypothesized that if the proof-reader folded the proof-sheet (down the black vertical line here), long instructions written in the right margin for one page (here, N2v on the left of the screen) could become isolated in the left margin of the adjacent page (here, N3r on the right of the screen) and so cause the compositor to make perform miscorrections on that adjacent page. Only on this forme in the book are there multiple press corrections on subsequent lines, and it is noticeable that the only two occasions when this happens were thus aligned horizontally on the proof-sheet. But applying the conjectured proof-reader's marks that Blayney shows appearing in other books printed by Nicholas Okes, I have been unable to produce convincingly confusing marks in the right margin of N2v that sprawl across the gutter so as to cause miscorrection in N3r. Here I have marked up in boxes all the adjustments, but of course the proof-reader did not call for these. [SLIDE] In order to change *be hangers* to *be might hangers* [SLIDE] within a prose passage, the compositor had to adjust the three lines below to get the extra word in. [SLIDE] When writing his marks (indicated by crosses here) the proof-reader merely indicated the readings wanted, not how to achieve them, and trying out the various symbols that Blayney thinks were used I am unable to reproduce spurious marks across the gutter that could affect the press correction on the adjacent page [SLIDE].

However, I think we *can* account for the adjustment to the type on N3r with a quite different explanation involving this headline [SLIDE]. Studies by Fredson Bowers, John Russell Brown, W. Craig Ferguson, Adrian Weiss and Eric Rasmussen all point to Q2 *Hamlet* being set by two compositors using two distinct sets of type with differing faces and two independent pairs of skeleton formes, dividing their work by

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sheets (Bowers 1953, 19; 1953-4, 79-80; 1955; 1956; Brown 1955; Ferguson 1989, 15; Weiss 1989; 1991; Rasmussen 2008). Or rather, these two compositors kept their skeletons independent until this page, N3r, was imposed, when one of the compositors borrowed this headline from the other compositor in order to get the forme N(outer) ready for printing. Borrowing this headline from the other compositor was a mistake, since the two men were setting to a slightly different measure and the headline was about three-quarters of a millimetre too large. We can tell this by measuring the width of the type pages in all seven of the surviving exemplars, which show that the other compositor was consistently setting to a slightly larger measure, which means that this borrowed headline was fractionally too big to sit above this page of type. If the compositor failed to take up the difference by adding something to the type page, the type below this headline would be slightly loose. Obviously, it was not loose enough to fall out while the forme was being carried to the press, or if it was then the entire print run for this forme began after the compositor had recovered from that accident. Once in the press a little looseness in the type could be exacerbated by machining, but even this would at most cause just a few letters to be pulled out during inking, which would not necessitate resetting these four lines. However, if the forme was removed from the press during the run--say, because the press was wanted to pull a foul-proof of another forme for this or another job (Blayney 1982, 209)--then a block of loosened type this size might become pied on the coffin of the press and have to be reset.

This is of course conjecture. One way to substantiate it would be to look for small adjustments of spacing between words within the four lines that had to be reset, since these would suggest that the type was set afresh (to recover from pieing), whereas in orderly adjustment to reflow a prose paragraph one would expect whole phrases to be moved as units of type if possible. The way to check for this is to slide an image from one exemplar over an image from another exemplar, using either photocopied acetate sheets or digital images. EEBO's images are ideal for this [SWITCH TO GIMP], and here I have the allegedly uncorrected Folger exemplar at the top of the screen and the allegedly corrected British Library exemplar at the bottom. As you can see, it appears that whole phrases were moved as single blocks of type. Although this is not a proof--since spacing *can* be preserved in resetting and, equally, spacing *can* be changed in orderly relining--it does make a process of orderly relining the more likely explanation. So, we are left with a mere possibility: an accident of the kind I attribute to an oversized headline. If enough pieces of type fell out that the printer's copy had to be consulted in order to put it back, the need to change *be hangers* to *might be hangers* (assuming that that is the correct reading) could have been spotted when the copy was consulted and since there was resetting to be done in any case the change would be worth making.

Reviewing Blayney's *The Texts of King Lear and their Origins* a quarter of a century ago, Paul Werstine thought that it heralded "the disappearance of a genre of scholarly publishing--the article offering a reconstruction of the printing of a play-quarto" since there was just too much work to be done; each play requires a whole monograph (Werstine 1985, 125). These monographs have not appeared and critical editions have not filled the gap either. When the second series of Arden editions began in the 1950s, some editors, such as John Russell Brown, undertook fresh bibliographical investigations, inspired by the technical approaches of Virginian

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school of New Bibliography headed by Fredson Bowers. The latest Arden *Hamlet*, however, reconsiders the problem of press corrections in Q2 only briefly (Shakespeare 2006, 478-80) and without the extensive attempts to recreate the conditions that might have given rise to them that Blayney used for Q1 *King Lear*. In the absence of the rules that the high New Bibliographers gave us, such as Greg's 'prefer the corrected state' or Bowers's 'prefer the uncorrected state', the problem of dealing with press variants is vulnerable to editorial caprice. The Arden editors Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor accepted part of the New Bibliographical tradition--they accepted Wilson's conjectured order of stop-press correction in forme N(outer)--while rejecting other parts, such as rules about whether to prefer the corrected or uncorrected state as a whole. Indeed, they picked and chose between the individual variants on a forme, seemingly judging each on its literary merits rather than treating them as a collection that came about all at once in a round of adjustments. This makes for an incoherence which is particularly surprising since the Unique Selling Point of their edition was its sensitivity to the larger adjustments that gave rise to the differences between Q1, Q2, and Folio *Hamlet*.

The whole problem of press variants needs rethinking and fresh examination of the evidence. We now know that concurrent printing--that is, printing two or more books at once in the printshop-- was common and that the technical approaches to headline reuse and type recurrence pioneered by Bowers and Hinman yield much less certain knowledge than they thought. Blayney was aware of this, but not that compositor identification by the so-called psycho-mechanical habits of spacing around punctuation developed by T. H. Howard-Hill, which he relied upon (Blayney 1982, 234n1), are also entirely unreliable (McKenzie 1984; Zimmerman 1985). New long monographs like Blayney's are unlikely to fill the need for a reexamination of press variants, but a large and properly-funded digital project might. It need not be very expensive, since we already have digital transcriptions and digital images of most of the surviving exemplars of all the early editions of Shakespeare.

If more needed, go through the other nine variants on N(outer) using the remaining slides.

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