Typographical memoranda regarding the folio text

The Tragedy of Macbeth came frighteningly close to vanishing into oblivion. Some of Shakespeare's plays were printed as quarto pamphlets during his lifetime; many were not. *Macbeth* was one that was not. If Shakespeare's friends had not thought to organize a posthumous edition of his collected works, we would not even know that he had written a play with this title.* If we thought that the astrologer Simon Forman could be relied on, we would know that a play based on Holinshed's account of a passage in eleventh-century Scottish history was being performed at the Globe theatre in 1610 or 1611 -- but we would not know that the play was Shakespeare's work, nor know much about the play itself.†

* The quarto printed in 1673 would not exist, because that was copied from the folio edition. Davenant's adaptation of *Macbeth* would not exist, for the same reason.

† Forman's notes, besides being too vague to be trusted far, do not give the names of the authors of the plays that he had seen.

The play survives because a manuscript copy survived -- survived long enough for the play to be put into print. In 1623, when the moment came, the manuscript of *Macbeth* was transferred from the theatre to the printing-house, and the printers set to work on it.

Because the book took the form of a folio in sixes (that is, it consisted of gatherings of three sheets folded together), the printers, much of the time, were working on two plays in parallel. The end of the previous play, *Julius Caesar*, had to overlap with the beginning of *Macbeth* (sig ll); in due course, the end of *Macbeth* had to overlap with the beginning of the next play, *Hamlet* (sig nn). (Why the plays were put in that particular order is a mystery.) This may sound complicated -- but there was nothing abnormal about it, as far as the printers were concerned. The work appears to have proceeded smoothly enough. In this part of the book there are no signs (such as occur elsewhere) of any delay or change of plan; there are no mistakes in the quiring or the numbering of the pages. Once the sheets had been printed and folded together, the text of Macbeth began with page 131 and ended with page 151.

It is worth knowing that nothing out of the ordinary happened while *Macbeth* was passing through the press, but it is not very exciting.* There is, however, one important point which has emerged from examination of the typographical evidence. The text of *Macbeth* is the product of a collaboration between two compositors. We might wish that we knew their names; it seems

almost insulting to call them 'A' and 'B', but that is what we are reduced to.

* Nor is it very exciting that two of the copies collated by Hinman (1963 1:301) have variant readings on page 147: "on my with" where other copies have "on with" (147a48), "*Roffe.*" where other copies have "*Rosse.*" (147b57).

They worked together on most of the book, not just on *Macbeth*, but it was someone looking in detail at the text of this particular play who began to distinguish between them. This someone was a man named Thomas Satchell, about whom I know very little. In a letter written to the *Times Literary Supplement*, he pointed out that there were differences in the spelling of certain words which fell into definite patterns (Satchell 1920). Roughly speaking, the first half of *Macbeth* had spellings of one pattern, such as "doe" and "goe", and the second half had spellings of another pattern, such as "do" and "go". On the evidence of a single play, it was (as Satchell recognized) impossible to say whether the dichotomy originated with this book, or whether it had been inherited from the manuscript supplied to the printers (which, conceivably, might partly have been written by one scribe and partly by another). But eventually it became clear, through work by other people on others plays (specifically those plays where the folio text could be compared with the quarto from which it was copied),* that there were indeed two compositors at work -- at least one of whom had ideas about spelling which he was prepared to impose on the text that he was setting.

* Never the actual copy put into the compositors' hands: nobody has ever located one of them. The actual copy might possibly have undergone all sorts of manuscript annotation before it was given to the printers. So the evidence is not as clear-cut as ideally might be wished.

(Since there were two compositors, there must have been two cases of type. Sure enough, by tracing the occurrence of individual types which had some distinguishing feature, Charlton Hinman was able to prove the point. There was, he showed, one assortment of recognizable types which belonged in the case being used by compositor A, another assortment of recognizable types which belonged in the case being used by compositor B. This evidence has a solidity which the evidence of spelling -- dependent on snap decisions made by fallible human beings -- cannot even nearly approach. But it does not tell us anything more that we need to know, as far as *Macbeth* is concerned, except at one point. There is a column here (135b) which was begun by B but mostly set by A, and the typographical evidence helps to bracket the point at which the handover took place (Hinman 1963 1:385, 2:198-9).)

This is how the work was distributed:

page	columns set by A	columns set by B
ll6r	131a 131b	
ll6v	132a 132b	
mm1r	133a 133b	
mm1v	134a 134b	
mm2r	135b*	135a 135b*
mm2v	136a 136b	
mm3r	137a 137b	
mm3v	138a 138b	
mm4r	139b	139a
mm4v	140a 140b	
mm5r	141a	141b
mm5v		142a 142b
mm6r		143a 143b
mm6v		144a 144b
nn1r		145a 145b
nn1v		146a 146b
nn2r		147a 147b
nn2v		148a 148b
nn3r		149a 149b
nn3v		150a 150a
nn4r		151a 151b

* Begun by B, completed by A.

Discrepant spellings are not the only difference between the two compositors, and certainly not the most significant difference. There is reason to think that they sometimes took distinctly divergent attitudes towards the exemplar put in front of them.

Here again, the evidence has to come from those plays of which the folio text can be compared with a copy of the quarto edition delivered to the printing-house. Alice Walker, who developed a close acquaintance with their workmanship, was more favourably disposed towards compositor A; in fact, she seems to have conceived a personal dislike for compositor B and never had a good word to say of him. As she summed it up: "Compositor A was, in general, the more attentive and the more faithful to copy. B was less conservative and more slapdash, carried more in his head than he could memorize, omitted lines and words more frequently, and was more prone to memorial substitutions and even deliberate bodging" (Walker 1953:11). In one play in particular, *1 Henry IV*, he was, she thought, "unusually prone to take liberties" with the text (Walker 1954:55). Discrepancies between quarto and folio were roughly five times more frequent

in the stretches of text set by B than in the stretches set by A (Walker 1954:58).* But she does not seem to have asked herself how far the changes made by B might have been, or might have been thought by him to be, changes for the better.

* Walker's results are summarized by Greg (1955:466), who echoes her own conclusion by saying that "the textual implications for plays like *King Lear* ... are serious". That goes for *Macbeth*.

I read this evidence differently from Walker. It should, I think, be taken to mean that A was outranked by B. Compositor A was a competent worker, but he was not expected to do much more than reproduce the exemplar put in front of him. Compositor B was allowed (or allowed himself) a greater degree of freedom. He was trusted (or trusted himself) to do some editing as he went along, correcting any errors that he came across, making any changes that he thought were changes for the better.

With *Macbeth*, even without the help of comparison with a quarto, the text can be seen to take on a smoother, neater appearance when B is in charge. For one thing, this means that the verse becomes more regular. Passages of mock verse (sequences of ragged-right lines that look like verse but are not) occur fairly frequently in the text set by A -- but they stop appearing when B takes over;* and the presumption is that they disappear because B made them disappear. He was, that is, enough of a poet that he could knock the verse back into shape, where that needed to be done. He did, for his own share of the text, what Rowe and Rowe's successors were left to do for A's share.

* A point noted by Wilson (1928:vi): apart from some single lines printed as two half-lines, "not a single example of misdivided verse is to be found after the entry of Banquo's ghost". (After the beginning of the scene, in fact; the ghost has no say in the matter.) Chambers, similarly, remarked that "mislineated passages" are "rather numerous" in the first three acts but "rare thereafter" (Chambers 1930 1:471-2). Neither of them realized that Satchell (1920) had pointed them towards the explanation. His letter seems not to have been taken much notice of until it was cited and summarized by Willoughby (1932:56-9).

The likelihood is, in short, that features of the manuscript are better preserved in A's work than in B's (Walker 1954:53). The word "weird", for instance, mispronounced by Shakespeare as two syllables, is consistently "weyward" for A, consistently "weyard" for B; and we are probably safe in supposing that "weyward" was the spelling in the manuscript, and that "weyard" was B's idea of an improvement.

What shape the manuscript took -- what size of paper, how many sheets, how many lines of writing on a page -- I frankly have no

idea. If (as I suppose) the botched passages of verse are the fault of the manuscript, not of compositor A (see above), that can be taken to mean that the manuscript was at least one remove (but perhaps just one remove) from Shakespeare's original. I see only one other point which might be thought significant, a persistent tendency for final "-e" to be confused with final "-es".* Thus "Sonnes" which should certainly be singular (III vi 28), "Natures lyes" (I vii 79), "sense are" (V i 27), and so on.* This, I imagine, may be due to some quirk in the scribe's handwriting, final "-e" being given an extra squiggle which made it look like the squiggle denoting "-es". Acting on that thought, I allow myself some freedom in adding or subtracting a final "-s", depending on what the context seems to require. But none of these changes affect the meaning to any extent worth mentioning.

* I speak only of *Macbeth*. I do not know whether the same or a similar ambiguity occurs in other plays.

This brings us up against the question of emendation. By that I do not mean the sort of tidying up in the margin which editors have always felt free to do -- "Duncan" for "King", "Lady Macbeth" for "Lady" (or "Lad." or "La."), "Lady Macduff" for "Wife", and so on. Those, so to speak, are subliminal changes: they make no difference to what the audience gets to hear when the play is performed. Nobody is going to start squabbling about changes of this kind -- so the changes, once made, persist, and subsequent editors appear to approve of them, just because they do not disapprove. Emendation is on a different level from that.

No one will think that the received text -- the text printed in 1623, modernized as to the spelling but otherwise unchanged -- is perfect as it stands. Of course it is not. Transcribers err; compositors err; in general terms, it can be taken for granted that there are likely to be mistakes. But what of some particular instance? If we think of proposing some emendation, we face two obstacles. First, we have to hope to persuade almost everyone that the received text is wrong. Second, we have to hope to persuade almost everyone that the change which we are suggesting is exactly the change required to put things right. (I say "almost everyone" because some degree of recalcitrance is always to be expected.) In the whole of *Macbeth*, very few emendations have ever been proposed -- Rowe's "martlet" (I vi 9), for example, or Theobald's "shoal" (I vii 6) -- which pass this double test. The first test may not be too difficult; the second is practically impossible. In fact it becomes more nearly impossible with the passage of time, because the person proposing some emendation has to explain why every previous editor failed to see the need for it.

To illustrate this last point, I am posting a note about a passage in *Othello* which, after 400 years, is -- in my opinion, to the best of my knowledge -- still waiting to be put right. I think I know what changes ought to be made. But I cannot reasonably hope that anyone will agree with me. Nevertheless, for what it may be worth, the note will be listed here:

https://www.durobrivis.net/macbeth/parallels/index-parallels.html

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