

A Companion to Renaissance Drama edited by Arthur F. Kinney
Chapter 12
The Transmission of an English Renaissance Play-Text by Grace Ioppolo

Transmission is circular: from author to acting company to theater audience to printer back to the author to literary audience and back to the stage.

Plays are written for performance. Print is a secondary and less interesting form.

Studies focus mostly on the printed form of the plays. There are not surviving manuscripts of any of Shakespeare's plays. But manuscripts from other playwrights of the period did survive. These need to be considered when studying the period.

The Author and his Text

Plays were acted 8-12 times over a 4-6 month period. Acting companies would keep a large supply of plays at hand. Authors were hired to write new plays and to change plays that they already owned. Authors would try to sell plays that they had already written or envisioned or theater owners could commission plays. Authors were both employed and contracted. They would receive an advance with the remainder of the fee paid on delivery. Playwrights would read an outline or finished play to the acting company. The play is owned by the acting company after purchase.

Authors worked alone as well as together. Collaborators wrote in various ways but usually by dividing up acts or scenes.

Foul-paper: the first complete draft of a new play

Fair-copy: recopied text

Professional scribes were paid to copy manuscripts. They were trained to copy it as they saw it, not make changes.

The Acting Company and their Text

The company had to submit the play to the Master of the Revels prior to performance. He would mark out text or write warnings in the margins and then sign the copy on the last page below the last line of dialogue as a license to perform it. Censors did not edit or collaborate. They only removed offensive material. Only a few plays required major censorship.

The play then went back to the author, book-keeper, or scribe to make the required changes. The book-keeper then adjusted it for performance by adding scene divisions, directions, and notes. Actors made suggestions and changes. The book-keeper was in charge of keeping a "book" of all the licensed plays the company owned.

Material from older plays was used to create new plays. Plays could be revived and recast to be used again. Revised plays were supposed to be re-licensed but often were not.

Special "presentation" copies of plays were occasionally given to the monarch or patron. Copies could also be commissioned. These copies were bound like a book.

The Printer and his Text

Prior to printing, companies had exclusive access to the text of a play.

- **Printing Pro:** There was prestige or publicity that came with printing.
- **Printing Con:** Once in print, plays could be stolen.

Printing was highly regulated by the government. Stationers' Companies included publishers, printers, and booksellers. They would pay for the play then produce and distribute the book.

1. The publisher would pay a print censor (archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of London, or the Master of the Revels)
2. Acquire a print license from the Stationers' warden.
3. They could also pay to have it registered.

Printing formats:

- **Folio:** two pages per side, four pages per sheet. Used for collected works or history books.
- **Quarto:** four pages per side, eight pages per sheet. Used for printing individual plays.
- **Octavo:** eight pages per side, 16 pages per sheet
- **Duodecimo:** twelve pages per side, 24 pages per sheet

Although the smaller formats saved paper, layout became increasingly complex.

The foul copy could be submitted for printing in order to keep the fair copy safe. If the foul paper was very messy a fair-copy may have been used. Sometimes a manuscript specifically copied for the printer was used. The printer's copy was damaged during the type setting process. The "book" was the only copy that would not have been sent to a printer because those copies had the license on them.

Type setting and printing:

1. Compositor would count off and mark the number of lines that would fit onto each page.
2. Type was hand set into a composing stick by placing each of the letters, numerals, or punctuation marks from a case a few lines at a time.
3. He would then transfer the type from the stick to a page-sized tray until it was full then tie it up with string.
4. When all pages in the forme were complete he would put a frame around them.
5. The forme would be locked into the printing press with ink on the type.
6. The pressmen would crank the press so that it would force a sheet of paper against the type.
7. Sample copies would be proofread and corrections made. Sample copies would still be used.
8. The forme was used to print as many copies as were needed.
9. The sheets would be hung to dry.
10. Once dry they were turned over and pressed on the inner forme and dried again.
11. Sheets would be bundled into like piles.
12. Sheets would be collated in the correct order.
13. Sheets were left unfolded if going to a binder or folded if going out for sale. Publishers would pay for binding expensive books. Others would be sold unbound. Quartos were usually stitched lightly through the spine.

Evidence that authors were involved during and after printing:

Jonson read his own proofs. Chettle was a dramatist and a printer. Printed copies of Massinger's plays exist with corrections and revisions written in his own hand. Jonson participated in printing his folios but others were put together after the death of the dramatists.

Title pages included a notice of the bookseller. Information was not always complete or accurate.

Students, middle-class businessmen, and aristocrats purchased quartos and folios. Printing was expensive and hard to make profitable.

Printed plays that survived have been read and performed by succeeding generations returning them back to their place of origination.