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Shakespeare's Maimed, Deformed, and Perfect Books in the First Folio's Epistle "To the great Variety of Readers"[1]

DEVANI SINGH

The prose epistle "To the great Variety of Readers" signed by John Heminges and Henry Condell in *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* (1623) is a contender for the most consequential piece of prefatory writing in the history of English literature. For the New Bibliographers of the early twentieth century, the epistle's contention that readers had previously been subjected to "stolne, and surreptitious copies"[2] seemed an indictment of some of the early quartos in which the plays were first printed. As such, the epistle gave rise to intricate theories which sought to account for the quality of Shakespeare's printed playtexts by inferring the circumstances of their transmission and speculating about the lost early modern documents which lie behind surviving texts. More recently, in the face of a greater awareness of the complexities of the textual tradition and a collective will to repudiate the moralising labels attached to "good" and "bad" quartos,[3] there has emerged a gradual scholarly acceptance that the epistle written by Shakespeare's fellow players is likely to be "an

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[2] William Shakespeare, *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London: Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount, 1623; *STC* 22273), A3r.

[3] Random Cloud, "The Marriage of Good and Bad Quartos", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33:3 (1982), 421–31; Paul Werstine, "Narratives about Printed Shakespeare Texts: 'Foul Papers' and 'Bad' Quartos", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41:1 (1990), 65–86. For discussion of the ideological underpinnings of another binary inaugurated by the New Bibliography, see B.K. Adams, "Fair/Foul", in Claire M.L. Bourne (ed.), *Shakespeare/Text: Contemporary Readings in Textual Studies, Editing, and Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 29–49.

advertising puff for their book rather than a description of its texts and its dead author".[4]

The astonishing afterlife of Heminges and Condell's words, alongside the declining fate of the theories espoused by the New Bibliographers, offers a corrective to the temptation to take early printed prefaces at their word. Emma Smith has argued that prefaces "need to be read as fictional, for their rhetorical effect rather than their testamentary accuracy".[5] Concurrently, scholars have increasingly recognised other means by which paratexts may throw light on the emergence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of an English drama with serious literary pretensions.[6] If the accounts proffered by Heminges and Condell in the First Folio do not necessarily bring us any closer to understanding the lines of textual transmission behind the assembly of that monumental volume, what they *can* (and what they do) convey is evidence about the status of printed books in Shakespeare's time.

Wendy Wall and Genevieve Love have incisively assessed the conventionality of prefatory rhetoric by pinpointing the pervasive ideological bases on which certain early modern tropes are constructed. Wall's influential work has argued that prefatory rhetoric often encodes sexual and social mores which reflect the anxieties surrounding the transmission of the printed text.[7]

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[4] Emma Smith, "Shakespeare's Early Modern Books: Printing, Paratext, and Text", in Lukas Erne (ed.), *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Textual Studies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 94–110, quote 106. For a similar view, see David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999), 90–1; and Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 255–8 for an opposing one.

[5] Smith (2021), 101.

[6] For example, Zachary Lesser and Peter Stallybrass, "The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59:4 (2008), 371–420; Thomas L. Berger and Sonia Massai (eds), *Paratexts in English Printed Drama to 1642*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Tamara Atkin, *Reading Drama in Tudor England* (London: Routledge, 2018), 69–100.

[7] Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). Most relevant here is Wall's identification of "images of sexual violation and wantonness" used to figure the "berayed and disfigured" printed text in the epistle to Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's *The Tragidie of Ferrix and Porrex* [*Gorboduc*] (1570; *STC* 18685), 182–5. However, the "corrupted" text of *Gorboduc* is described in terms of scratches on the face of a "faire maide" and in the tearing of clothing,

Meanwhile, Love has identified “the powerful figurative role of disability in both the early modern theatrical event and the transmission of early modern theatrical texts” and has noted its persistence “in an enduring bibliographical lexicon of diagnosis, mutilation, disfigurement, rehabilitation”.[8] Like Wall, Love locates the genesis of such rhetoric in the moment of textual transmission. In their readings, printed prefaces are more than the stuff of book trade custom; rather, the proximity of prefaces to the authors and agents of the early modern book trade renders them into expressive textual objects.

Building upon these methodological approaches and heeding the recent suggestion by Richard McCabe that “the apparently unconventional needs to be read in the context of convention”, this essay revisits the epistle to the reader in Shakespeare’s First Folio and considers what may be gained from studying its rhetoric of physical disability alongside that found in contemporary printed books. To foreground the textual quality of an early modern paratext like the printed epistle of Heminges and Condell, as Smith advocates, is also to attend to its embeddedness in a wider fabric of cultural and literary meanings. Such a reassessment reveals that, to a greater degree than has been previously observed, the First Folio’s prominent rhetoric of deformity and perfection mobilises common bibliographical and poetic tropes in order to advance the collection’s literary claims.

But the meanings of the epistle are not exclusively rhetorical. As has long been noticed, the presence in printed English drama of “literary preliminaries” could authorise a play and mark it out as respectable reading material.[9] If the fact of including a dedication or address to the reader could signal a printed play’s aspirations of literariness by aligning it with other non-dramatic works, so too could its rhetoric. That is, paratexts enabled printed plays to inscribe themselves within the literary corners of the trade not only *via* the fact of their presence, but through the common conceits of which they partake. It might at first seem paradoxical that

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which I read as constitutive of gendered violence but not necessarily of physical disability (A2r).

[8] Genevieve Love, “Doctor Faustus’s Leg”, in Kirk Melnikoff and Roslyn L. Knutson (eds), *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 81–92, quote 82, 84.

[9] Atkin (2018), 74; Peter Blayney, “The Publication of Playbooks”, in John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (eds), *A New History of Early English Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 383–422; Paul J. Voss, “Printing Conventions and the Early Modern Play”, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 15 (2002), 98–115.

common tropes should be seized upon to elevate a dramatic text's literary status – that is, its potential as profitable reading material. We might recall here, however, Erasmus's view of adages, proverbs, metaphors, and sayings as endlessly generative, and of the figure's protean quality as that which enables language to be "creative and productive", or copious.[10] Accordingly, this essay offers a novel way of reading persistent prefatory tropes which have long been dismissed as merely conventional, by arguing that these conventions do nuanced literary work. The rhetoric of the First Folio epistle, when elucidated in this broader literary context, shows that the collection participates in the construction of common lexicons which were emerging for the purpose of promoting printed drama as reading material. In doing so, the essay traces one of the more sophisticated means by which paratexts (in Gérard Genette's words) "enable a text to become a book" – by their embeddedness within a self-consciously literary rhetoric.[11]

Memorably, the First Folio's address evokes physical dismemberment and deformity:

> It had bene a thing, we confesse, worthie to haue bene wished, that the Author himselfe had liu'd to haue set forth, and ouerseen his owne writings; But since it hath bin ordain'd otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envie his Friends, the office of their care, and paine, to haue collected & publish'd them; and so to haue publish'd them, as where (before) you were abus'd with diuerse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of iniurious impostors, that expos'd them: euen those, are now offered to your view cur'd, and perfect of their limbes; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceiu'd the*m*.[12]

The concept of corporeal deformity has been recognised by Love as constituting a powerful

[10] Brian Cummings, "Encyclopaedic Erasmus", *Renaissance Studies* 28:2 (2014), 183–204, quote 190; Neil Rhodes, *Common: The Development of Literary Culture in Sixteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 45–6.

[11] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

[12] A3r.

analogy for the fraught processes of literary creation and transmission.[13] I extend her work by identifying the conceits of deformity and perfection as constitutive of a common prefatory language used by early modern authors and book trade agents to make drama legible as respectable reading material. It is critical to observe, however, that images of maimed and deformed texts do not belong exclusively to the worlds of ideas or of rhetoric. They also resemble instances of what Katherine Schapp Williams has called "discursive pointing at bodily difference" and so represent "a kind of micro-compression of cultural assumptions about how bodies should look and function".[14] Scholars within disability studies have observed that the prevalence of literary narratives about disability – in which I include early modern prefatory allusions to physical maiming, deformity, and imperfection – is at odds with the elision of the experience of disability in the very societies which produced those narratives. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder put it, "disabled peoples' social invisibility has occurred in the wake of their perpetual circulation throughout print history".[15]

With this context in mind, it is instructive to compare the image of the deformed body employed to describe Shakespeare's plays in the First Folio to its appearance in other comparable works, and Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* supplies an influential contemporary intertext. In the dedicatory epistle to his sister the Countess of Pembroke, Sidney had wished for the fair judgement of his coterie of readers and expressed the "hope, for the fathers sake, it will be pardoned, perchaunce made much of, though in it selfe it haue deformities".[16] For Sidney, the professed deformities of the *Arcadia* provide a valid reason for eschewing the work's public consumption beyond a narrowly restricted group. It is easy to overlook the extent to which Sidney's seemingly common metaphor for literary creation taps into early modern

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[13] Genevieve Love, *Early Modern Theatre and the Figure of Disability* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 23–30, 103–28.

[14] Katherine Schaap Williams, *Unfixable Forms: Disability, Performance, and the Early Modern English Theater* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 4. Williams's study focuses on the dramatization of such moments on the early modern stage, but the normative assumptions about the body which she identifies also apply to other early modern cultural products, such as the paratexts of printed books.

[15] David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 52.

[16] Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembroke's Arcadia* (London: for William Ponsonbie, 1590; *STC* 22539), A3v.

discourses around disability, in which illegitimacy, monstrous births, and print culture were all simultaneously implicated. The dedication to *Arcadia* belongs to a time when printed descriptions and images of deformed children were consumed in the popular form of the printed broadside ballad. The broadsides which sensationalised newborn children as curiosities themselves occupied a precarious position in the book trade. Their frequently clandestine and unauthorised status therefore self-consciously mirrors the vulnerable status of the children they describe.[17] Furthermore, women with physical disabilities are documented as having worked as hawkers and ballad singers on the illicit fringes of the early modern London book trade.[18] These moments of resonance between the prefatory rhetoric of disability, its mobilisation in the book trade, and the social and historical experiences of disabled people offer a pressing reminder of the often prejudicial charge of the language reproduced in early modern books, as well as their real-world ethical stakes, then and now.

The Materiality of Textual Deformity, Perfection, and Cure

In the 1593 *New Arcadia*, Sidney's dedication is followed by an address "To the Reader" signed by the Countess's secretary Hugh Sanford, who adapts the conceit. Sanford's epistle is simultaneously critical of the former printed edition and deferential to the Sidneys' authority. He invokes the "disfigured face" of the prior publication – a deficiency which moved the Countess "to take in hand the wiping away those spottes wherewith the beauties thereof were vnworthely blemished".[19] In Sanford's formulation, readers will find in the book "the conclusion, not the perfection of *Arcadia*" for "*Sir Philip Sidneies* writings can no more be perfected without *Sir Philip Sidney,* then *Apelles* pictures without *Apelles*", with a nod to the ancient Greek artist familiar in contemporary idiom for the care he took in finishing his

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[17] Aaron W. Kitch, "Printing Bastards: Monstrous Birth Broadsides in Early Modern England", in Douglas A. Brooks (ed.), *Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2005), 221–36, quote 231.

[18] Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 58–62.

[19] Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembroke's Arcadia* (London: for William Ponsonbie, 1593; *STC* 22540), ¶4r.

paintings. As in the First Folio, the conceit alludes to *Arcadia*'s own tangled history of transmission: the tortuous transition of the text from one medium to another (manuscript to print, or stage to page), and its editorial reassembly following the author's death.[20] Sidney was a paragon of English Renaissance letters whose impact on Shakespeare has been well documented,[21] but my interest lies less in the possibility of certain influence from the prefaces of the prose romance to the play collection, than in the more fundamental fact of the reappearance of this self-consciously literary conceit of deformity and perfection in the epistles of Sidney, Sanford, and the First Folio. Although Sidney's preface originated as a manuscript dedication with a limited circulation it is, in Saenger's phrase, "inevitably inflected by the ambient culture of textual advertisement",[22] a culture in which the First Folio was likewise imbricated, as its use of the same conceit reveals.

This prefatory lexicon of perfection also contains an often-overlooked bibliographical facet. Where Sanford's epistle to the *New Arcadia* positions the perfected text as unattainable except by its author, for Heminges and Condell the Folio surpasses previously printed copies. These were textually compromised rather than "perfect of their limbes". While the early modern resonance of the adjective *perfect* spills over into the corporeal, the notion of perfecting a text encompassed a range of activities of improvement and completion which could variously be authorial, editorial, or readerly.[23] This equivalence between textual and bodily completeness is borne out by contemporary dictionaries in which the Latin *Imperfectus* is translated as "Vnperfect, maimed, or wanting some thing".[24] The twinned conceits of deformity and perfection are often applied in early modern prefatory rhetoric to ideas of the book, and this bookish usage endows textual concepts with a literary register. The tropes of physical disability in printed paratexts also help to render the properties of authorially conceived texts tangible as material goods. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have observed in their study of

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[20] On this transmutation, see Natasha Simonova, *Early Modern Authorship and Prose Continuations: Adaptation and Ownership from Sidney to Richardson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 29–35.

[21] Alwin Thaler, *Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney: The Influence of The Defense of Poesy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947).

[22] Michael Saenger, "The Birth of Advertising", in Brooks (2005), 179–219, quote 211.

[23] Sonia Massai, *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–10, 204.

[24] John Rider, *Bibliotheca Scholastica* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1589; *STC* 21031.5), 2L1v.

disability as metaphor, "[t]o give an abstraction a body allows the idea to simulate a foothold in the material world that it would otherwise fail to procure".[25]

Such images deploy disability as an "opportunistic metaphorical device" in order to achieve commercial or literary ends,[26] and I am suggesting that their self-consciousness allowed them to be coded *as* literary in the prefaces written for the early modern book trade. More specifically, when the First Folio's epistle presents the plays as now "cur'd" and perfect of limb, it invokes the visceral and cognitive awareness of dismemberment and the possibility of its miraculous reversal. Drawing upon contemporary discourses of physiology, early modern authors relied on the conceit of amputation to describe situations beyond cure. Josuah Sylvester describes the amputation of a patient in these terms:

> Euen as a Surgeon, minding off-to-cut
> Som cure-less limb […]
> To saue the whole, sawes off th'infected part.[27]

Similarly, in a lyric to a Lady who did not return his affection, one lover resigns himself to defeat at her hands: "My constitution boldly shall endure / To lose that *limb* which will admit no *cure*".[28] The image operates somewhat differently in the First Folio. Where the surgical analogies convey the necessity of dismembering limbs which "admit no cure", the prefatory epistle opens up the possibility of their return – the formerly "maimed, and deformed" plays in the new collection are printed "cur'd, and perfect of their limbes". Contemporary evocations of limb removal were presented precisely in terms of such perfection and its lack.[29]

One need not search far in the First Folio to find Shakespearean images which evoke the condition of deformity. The list of *dramatis personae* appended to *The Tempest*, the first play

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[25] Mitchell and Snyder (2000), 63.

[26] Ibid., 47.

[27] Iosuah Syluester, *Du Bartas his deuine weekes and workes translated* (London: Humfrey Lounes, 1611; *STC* 21651), N6r.

[28] Thomas Jordan, *The Muses Melody* (London: 'J.C.', 1680?; Wing J1048), []4v.

[29] For example, Thomas Watson, *The Christian's charter* (London: for Ralph Smith, 1654; Wing W1113) asks, "*Is Christ divided?* can he lose a member of his body? then his body is not perfect; for how can that body be perfect which wants a limb?" (L2v).

in the collection, labels Caliban "a salvage and deformed slave". Although the nature of Caliban's deformity is unspecified, much is made of it by the characters who insistently label him a "monster".[30] An association between disability and incompleteness is expressed in *Richard III*, in which the Duke of Gloucester laments his state as "Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time" (1.1.20).[31] Two discourses surrounding deformity – dismemberment and cure – are held in suspension during a charged scene in *Coriolanus*, in which the intransigent protagonist is conceived as a threat to the body politic:

> *Sicinius*: He's a disease that must be cut away.
> *Menenius*: O, he's a limb that has but a disease;
> Mortal, to cut it off; to cure it, easy.
> (3.1.296–8)[32]

The dramatic tension hinges on whether the presence of Coriolanus in Rome has a pernicious effect on the body politic. As in the First Folio's epistle, the normative human body is a figure for stability – in this case, a state brought about by the city's harmonious political organisation. Menenius' rejoinder in defence of Coriolanus is that it is much more dangerous – to patient and to body politic alike – to excise a limb than to effect its cure. But Sicinius' subsequent assertion appears to reject this prospect of cure and foregrounds anew the possibility of bodily transformation by way of disease and amputation[33]:

> *Sicinius*: The service of the foot
> Being once gangrened, is not then respected
> For what before it was
> (3.1.307–9)

[30] Jeffrey R. Wilson, "The Trouble with Disability in Shakespeare Studies", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37: 2 (2017), https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i2.5430.

[31] William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. by James R. Siemon (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2009).

[32] William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, ed. by Peter Holland (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2013).

[33] The Folio assigns the speech to Menenius, rendering it incongruous in the context of his defence of Coriolanus.

The 1623 epistle marshals these corporeal experiences and redeploys them in a bibliographical context. Its expression "euen those" anticipates the incredulity that a deformed body could be thus recomposed, while the fact that the plays are "offer'd to your view" invites the reader to serve as eyewitness to the miracle of their material reconstitution in the Folio.

The application of this corporeal thinking to self-consciously literary ends is apparent in an epistle to the reader appended by the publisher Thomas Walkley to the second quarto of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's tragicomedy *Philaster. Or, Loue lies a Bleeding* (1622). More so than many of his contemporaries, Walkley is known to have embraced the medium of the prefatory epistle in order to promote his printed titles,[34] and that of *Philaster* (like the play's full title) skilfully anticipates the violence enacted between its protagonists. The publisher writes in his epistle that the lovers "haue laine so long a bleeding, by reason of some dangerous and gaping wounds, which they receiued in the first Impression", and vows that he has "aduentured to bind vp their wounds" and to restore them "as they at the first were".[35] Strikingly, Walkley describes the text as "mained and deformed", anticipating the use of the same phrase by Heminges and Condell in 1623.[36] The fact of Walkley's publication of *Othello* (1622) and the necessity for the Folio editors to have secured the publication rights from him place them in his orbit in the same period of *Philaster*'s printing. Given the concurrence of these events, it has recently been proposed that the phrase *maimed and deformed* in the Shakespeare collection originates in Walkley's use of the near-identical phrase *mained and deformed*.[37] In another landmark dramatic volume, the Beaumont and Fletcher folio of

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[34] Devani Singh, "Dedications, Epistles to the Reader, and Prefatory Custom in Printed English Playbooks, 1559–1642", *Review of English Studies*, 72:304 (2021), 280–300, esp. 298–99.

[35] Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Philaster. Or, loue lies a bleeding* (London: for Thomas Walkley, 1622; *STC* 1682), A2r–v.Walkley's complaint about the inferiority of Q1 to Q2 has been confirmed by Robert K. Turner Jr., "The Printing of *Philaster* Q1 and Q2", *The Library* s5-XV: 1 (1960), 21–32.

[36] The printing of the First Folio began in early 1622 and was completed in November 1623; Blayney surmises that by November 2023 "the preliminaries were either in progress or finished"; see Peter Blayney, *The First Folio of Shakespeare* (Washington, D.C.: Folger Library, 1991), 5, 18.

[37] Akihiro Yamada, "'Maimed and Deformed': Shakespeare's First Folio and Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster*", *Notes and Queries* 25:1 (2023), 18. Yamada's article has spurred

Comedies and Tragedies (1647), the plays are presented in Humphrey Moseley's address "The Stationer to the Readers" as "the perfect full Originals without the least mutilation".[38] The insistence on the absence of mutilation in the printed playtexts seems a deliberate echo of the First Folio (and even of *Philaster* behind it), a sense reinforced by other suggestive gestures to the Shakespeare Folio in Moseley's epistle: his disapproving mention of "A *Collection of Playes*" in which "the scattered pieces which were printed single, being then onely Republished together" and his profession that "here is not any thing *Spurious* or *impos'd*".[39] It emerges from these correspondences that the *Philaster*, First Folio, and Moseley epistles make use of a shared lexicon of deformity, that this language attempts to authorise the printed books, and that a pattern of direct influence from one book to the next might be deduced. I would further contend that the persistence of these tropes is not the effect of coincidence or even mere imitation but evidence of the emergence of a recognisable lexicon adopted by the writers of dramatic prefaces for the purpose of framing printed English drama as a literary genre.

"Perfect" and "Impositors": A Print Lexicon

While the common conceit of the dismembered body was one resource which Heminges and

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renewed debate about the status of the "bad quartos"; see "Letters", *The Times Literary Supplement*, Nos. 6260, 64-65, 67 (March 24, April 21, April 28, and May 12, 2023).

[38] Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Comedies and tragedies* (London: for H. Robinson and H. Moseley, 1647; Wing B1581), A4r. Erne (2003), 149–50 argues that Moseley's phrase suggests the printed texts were unabridged authorial versions rather than abridged performance texts, a point to which I will return.

[39] Compare, too, "His mind and hand went together: […] wee haue scarse receiued from him a blot in his papers" (A3r) to "What ever I have seene of Mr *Fletchers* owne hand, is free from interlining; and his friends affirme he never writ any one thing twice: it seemes he had that rare felicity to prepare and perfect all first in his owne braine" (A4v). Furthermore, Moseley's praise of Fletcher resembles Jonson's homage to Shakespeare's "picture": "his unimitable Soule did shine through his countenance in such *Ayre* and *Spirit*, that the Painters confessed it, was not easie to expresse him: As much as could be, you have here, and the *Graver* hath done his part" (A4v).

Condell used to promote the suitability of the printed plays as reading material, the more specialised language of print itself was another. There is an overlooked bibliographical resonance – indeed, a deliberate *jeu de mots* – at work in several of the phrases I have been discussing, for *perfect* by this time had emerged as a term not only applicable to bodies and to texts in general, but to printed books in particular. This bibliographical usage is apparent in the earliest extant printing manual, Joseph Moxon's *Mechanick Exercises* (1683–4), where the printer refers to "gathered books" (individual printed sheets assembled into complete copies) as constituting the "perfect Books" intended for distribution.[40] Another use of *perfect* in the printing house may be located in Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chesse* (1625), in which printed sheets gathered into books and on the threshold of distribution to their readers are described as "Ready for publication: / For I saw perfect bookes this morning (sir)".[41] In this light, the plays vaunted as "cur'd, and perfect of their limbes" enact a conceit that is at once corporeal and bibliographical. In activating this double meaning of *perfect*, the image as employed in the First Folio also pinpoints the printing house as the locus of this textual perfecting.

A further bibliographical echo may be gleaned from the phrase "injurious impostors", used in the epistle to refer to the agents who committed "frauds and stealthes". Pollard extracted from these words the basis of a theory that would form the basis of the New Bibliography and the Shakespearean textual criticism which grew out of it.[42] Yet for all the scholarly attention to these lines over the better part of a century, the bibliographical meaning of "injurious impostors" has not, to my knowledge, been previously noticed. As with *perfect*, the full effect of the word *impostor* here relies on a *jeu de mots* between at least two senses. The dominant

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[40] Joseph Moxon, *Moxon's Mechanick Exercises, or, The Doctrine of Handyworks Applied to the Art of Printing*, in Theodore Low De Vinne (ed), 2 vols. (New York: Typothetæ of the City of New York, 1896), II, 380.

[41] Thomas Middleton, *A Game at Chesse* (London: [s.n.], 1625; *STC* 17885), D3v. Discussed in Aaron T. Pratt and Kathryn James, *Collated and Perfect* (West Haven, CT: GHP, 2019), 31. The use of the verb *to perfect* in printing to denote the impression of the second forme on a sheet is probably a later usage; see Devani Singh, *Chaucer's Early Modern Readers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 30–9.

[42] A.W. Pollard, *Shakespeare Folios and Quartos: A Study in the Bibliography of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Methuen, 1909) and *Shakespeare's Fight with the Pirates and the Problems of the Transmission of His Text* (London: Moring, 1917).

sense, made much of by Pollard and his successors, is that of "One who imposes on others; a deceiver, swindler, cheat".[43] A further bibliographical sense, active in the seventeenth century, conjures the process of imposition in handpress printing, whereby "pages of set type are arranged in a chase to create different formats".[44] The person responsible for this work of *imposing* was known in the period as the *impositor*. Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* (1656) defines the role thus: "Impositor (Lat.) the Impositor or Monitor in a School. also he that imposes the Pages into a form for the Press, after the *Compositor* has set the Letters into pages".[45]

The phrase may be interpreted, that is, as a linguistic play which implicates the agents who printed the prior unauthorised copies, a reading which (like *perfect*) situates the transgression as having taken place in the printing house. Of course, the epistle is silent on the point of who those injurious impostors were, and the oblique nature of Heminges and Condell's claims supports the reading of their words as a piece of prefatory writing which does rhetorical and literary, rather than documentary, work. This reading of *perfect* and *impostors* locates a more specialised language of the printing house within the apparently conventional trope of textual deformity. Crucially, both layers of the conceit – the common corporeal trope and the punning bibliographical references – contribute to the self-referentiality at the heart of prefaces' literariness.

"absolute in their numbers": A Literary Lexicon

The epistle's phrase "absolute in their numbers" similarly adds to the rhetoric which inscribes the First Folio in the milieu of literary drama. The expression appears to derive from the classical Latin of Cicero, with *numbers* referring to *numerus*, meaning a part of a whole.[46] In his *Epistles*, Pliny used the expression *liber numerīs omnibus absolūtus* to describe "a book

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[43] *OED*, "impostor, *n*.".

[44] Sarah Werner, *Studying Early Printed Books, 1450-1800* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), 175.

[45] Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* (London: Thomas Newcomb, 1656; Wing B3334), X1r. See also *OED*, "impose, *v*.", 1.d..

[46] "omnes numeros virtutis continent"; see Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 3.24.

complete in all its parts".[47] In early modern England, *absolute in all numbers* meant *complete in all respects* or indeed *perfect*, and was used to refer to people as well as to books. Ben Jonson praised Sir Kenelm Digby in his dedication to *Eupheme* as "a Gentleman absolute in all Numbers".[48] For early modern writers, the expression was a fitting one with which to encapsulate the harmonious and pleasing arrangement of the body. Later in the century, Thomas Stanley's *History of Philosophy* (1656) defined "Perfect good" as "καλός, fair, because it is absolute in all numbers required of Nature, and perfectly proportionate".[49] As the telling use of *fair* as a synonym reveals, the Greek concept καλός had been applied in antiquity to denote beauty, nobility, or goodness (of people, things, or ideas).[50] This sense of *perfect*'s proportionality is summoned by Milton's Adam when he describes God's self-sufficient solitariness:

> Thou in thy self art perfet, and in thee
> Is no deficience found: […]
> […] No need that thou
> Shouldst propagat, already infinite;
> And through all numbers absolute, though One;[51]

Influenced by Aristotelian and Galenic medical theories which characterised the physical conditions of castration, disability, and dismemberment (as well as the biological state of femaleness) as "deformity" or "mutilation", writers in the early modern period seized upon the notion of the human *corpus*, with its constituent parts, to elaborate ideas of perfection and its absence. And the same trope was repeatedly mobilised in the period to describe print publication and its discontents. The image of the book as body long predates print, but the

[47] Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Vol. II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 9.38.

[48] Ben Jonson, *Workes* (London: for Richard Meighen et al., 1641; *STC* 14754), 2L3r.

[49] Thomas Stanley, *The history of philosophy* (London: for H. Moseley and T. Dring, 1656; Wing S5238), 5I2v.

[50] Hugo Shakeshaft, "The Terminology for Beauty in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*", *The Classical Quarterly*, 69:1 (2019), 1–22.

[51] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Barbara Lewalski (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 8.415–21.

philological urgency expressed in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries by scholars in the humanist tradition saw texts insistently tethered to this language of mutilation, deformity, and deficiency.[52] Thus emerged in early modern English writing the conjunction of the concepts of completeness and beauty on the one hand and mutilation and deformity on the other, and we have already observed the application of *perfect*, *maimed*, and *deformed* to texts and bodies alike.

Absolute in their numbers advances the First Folio's corporeal conceit, likening the plays to a perfect human form originally "conceived" by Shakespeare, and returning to the rhetoric of parenthood which was associated in the period with poetic labour. Yet intertwined with this idiom of the book as a perfect body is a further allusion to Shakespeare's literary achievement, for *numbers* involves a play on the poetic form of the text. In the quarto edition of *Sejanus* (1605), Jonson's address "To the Readers" professed that "this book, in all numbers, is not the same with that which was acted on the publick stage", and one of Jonson's recent editors has interpreted this expression as "likely to mean here that the text of Q is not the same 'in all details' as that performed".[53] But *numbers* for Jonson could also mean poetic lines, as evident in his epigram to Elizabeth Manners, Countess of Rutland (d. 1612) and the daughter of Sidney. Jonson's praise imagines what the celebrated Sidney would think of the Countess: "On whom, if he were living now to looke, / He should those rare, and absolute numbers view, / As he would burne, or better farre his booke".[54] Gavin Alexander has noticed the melding of bodily and poetic form which animates this image, as Jonson's subject "becomes a work of poetry" herself.[55] It is likely, however, that Jonson intends *absolute numbers* to represent not just the

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[52] Leah Whittington, "The Mutilated Text", in Alexandra Gillespie and Deidre Lynch (eds), *The Unfinished Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 429–43.

[53] Ben Jonson, *Sejanus his fall* (London: G. Eld, 1605; *STC* 14782), ¶2v; Tom Cain, "*Sejanus*: Textual Essay", *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson Online*, https://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/benjonson/k/essays/Sejanus_textual_essay/1/, last access 30 April 2023.

[54] Ben Jonson, "Epigram 79. To Elizabeth, Countess of Rutland", ed. by Colin Burrow, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson. Vol. 5*, gen. eds. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 151.

[55] Gavin Alexander, *Writing after Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney 1586-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 145.

Countess as a perfect work of art, but also the poetry which she produced in her own right.[56] Further evidence for the poetic valence of *numbers* comes from the first edition of Thomas Dekker's *Whore of Babylon* (1607) which was prefaced with an address to the reader, titled "Lectori", and which complained of the play's corruption in performance: "let the Poet set the note of his Nombers, euen to Apolloes owne Lyre, the Player will haue his owne Crochets, and sing false notes, in dispite of all the rules of Musick".[57] The "Nombers" here are lines of verse, poorly animated by inexpert players. Later in the century, Milton's prose preface on the verse of *Paradise Lost* included "apt Numbers" as part of the formula for the "musical delight" engendered by well-composed poetry. Although the exact meaning of the expression remains debated, it is clear that Milton used *numbers* to refer to some aspect of prosody.[58]

Milton's prefatory comments on versification in *Paradise Lost* also return us to the corporeal conceits in which this essay has been interested. In the preface he expresses his disdain towards rhyme whose function is only "to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter".[59] Milton's identification of metre with lameness is a classical commonplace which equates poetic and metrical feet and is at least as old as Ovid.[60] *Numbers* in the seventeenth century, that is, might at once refer to bodily limbs, to poetic lines or, more specifically, to rhythm at the level of the poetic foot. All of these meanings are active in the *Whore of Babylon* epistle. After decrying the "false notes" sung by the players who animated his "Nombers", Dekker figures the writer as labouring woman, whose delivery into the world of their works is soon deformed by "ill nurses":

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[56] Margaret Hannay, "Barbara Gamage Sidney, Elizabeth Sidney Manners, Lady Mary Sidney Wroth", in Margaret Hannay, Michael Brennan, and Mary-Ellen Lamb (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Sidneys, 1500-1700. Volume 1: Lives* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 103-22, quote 113.

[57] Thomas Dekker, *The Whore of Babylon* (London: for Nathaniel Butter, 1607; *STC* 6532), A2v.

[58] G. Stanley Koehler, "Milton on 'Numbers,' 'Quantity,' and Rime", *Studies in Philology* 55:2 (1958), 201–17, quote 216.

[59] Lewalski (2007), 10.

[60] Koehler (1958), 205. On the intersecting political and literary factors which influenced Milton's rejection of rhyme, see Barbara K. Lewalski, "*Paradise Lost* and the Contest over the Modern Heroic Poem", *Milton Quarterly* 43:3 (2009), 153–65, quote 157.

> (tho that heauenly issue of our braine be neuer so faire and so well lymd,) is it made lame by the bad handling of them to whome it is put to learne to goe: if this of mine bee made a cripple by such meanes, yet dispise him not for that deformity which stuck not vpon him at his birth; but fell vpon him by mis-fortune[61]

Where Milton's directed his scorn at poets' use of rhyme to conceal the "lameness" of poorly composed metre, Dekker uses the same figure to reveal that his poetry had been butchered in performance. The nature of the "deformity" visited upon the formerly "so faire and so well lymd" text by the players is not clear,[62] but the multiple valences of *numbers* to mean limbs, lines of verse, or poetic rhythm suggest that the complaint might refer not only to the play's delivery on stage, but to the nature of the text as performed. This possibility is supported by an analogy used in Dekker's address to characterise the poets and players: "'It fares with these two, as it does with good stuffe and a badde Tayler: It is not mard in the wearing, but in the cutting out".[63] For Dekker, the "stuffe" of his play, its composite material, is "good" but its execution is ruined in the hands of unskilled actors. "[C]utting out" suggests, of course, abridgement of the play for performance. Evidence from the text of the quarto affirms that Dekker's statements reflect the transformations of *The Whore of Babylon* between its composition by the author and its later adaptations by the Prince's Players at the Fortune theatre.[64] The allusion by Dekker to theatrical cuts and especially his use of *numbers* to refer to his ostentatiously literary publication has two important implications for reading Heminges and Condell's epistle.

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[61] A2v.

[62] An opinion shared by Bowers: "whether he is referring only to bad acting and possibly to memorial failure on the part of the actors, or, in addition, to their cutting of the text, is not certain, perhaps"; see Thomas Dekker, *The Dramatic Works*, ed. by Fredson Bowers. Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 493.

[63] A2v.

[64] Bowers (1955), 493–4; Cyrus Hoy, *Introductions, Notes, and Commentaries to Texts in 'The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker'*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 300–8. Hoy disagrees with Bowers on the extent of post-performance revision because of the presence in the text of Q of numerous inconsistencies but concludes that "the manuscript from which the text was printed seems clearly to have been his own original draft" (308) – a draft which was likely longer than the text as performed.

The first is that when Shakespeare's fellow players speak of the plays as *absolute in their numbers* they not only invoke the corporeal conceit initiated with mention of the "maimed, and deformed copies" but they also declare to readers that the harmonious quality of the poetry contained in Shakespeare's plays remains intact. As in Dekker's address "Lectori", the *numbers* advertised in the First Folio epistle promote the drama as having literary value and the status of the playwright as poet.[65] Secondly, this appreciation of the poetic virtues of the dramatic verse contained in the First Folio contributes a further sense in which Shakespeare was promoted as a literary dramatist by the early seventeenth century. Lukas Erne has suggested that early modern playwrights distinguished between a "play" and a "poem"; for John Webster, the two differ "in that the 'Play' is the result of a collaborative effort that includes the company and is designed for performance on stage, while the 'Poem' is what Webster claims as his own creation which lives on in print in order to be read".[66] Whatever the actual state of the texts printed in the First Folio, the claim by Heminges and Condell that the book's contents are *absolute in their numbers* orients readers towards an understanding of these works as "poems" in the sense implied by Webster. As Erne observes, "A crucial difference between 'Poem' and 'Play' seems to have been that of length".[67] Thus *absolute in their numbers* is a play on bodily limbs which presents an assurance about the poetic quality *and* the poetic completeness of Shakespeare's printed plays. Far from being *maimed, and deformed* (profess Heminges and Condell), the Folio's plays are presented in their longer, authorial, unabridged versions – that is, as texts that are here proclaimed to be poetic rather than performative, and readerly rather than theatrical.

Conclusion

This essay has traced the conceits of deformity and perfection, as well as their latent bibliographical and poetic valences, from the First Folio's epistle to other contemporary works, including Sidney's *Arcadia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. To these examples of common prefatory conceits others – such as the play as child, or the reader as magistrate – might be

[65] Dekker also called the *Whore of Babylon* a "drammatical poem" (A2r).

[66] Erne (2003), 145.

[67] Ibid.

added,[68] and my approach to the vast corpus of surviving early modern prefatory material has necessarily been selective. My aim in scrutinising those selected here has been threefold. First, to foreground the historical and social experience of physical disability on which the First Folio's epistle and others trade; second, to illustrate that this common lexicon operates not only on the corporeal level, but on the bibliographical and poetic levels too; and third, to identify this use of a conventional language as an additional means by which prefaces do their literary work. It has long been argued that authors and stationers of printed English drama included prefaces in their books in order to align the genre with more respectable publications. This essay has identified another crucial means by which prefaces, including the First Folio, promoted the value of drama as reading material: by speaking a common and self-consciously literary language.

Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von der der Rhetorik der körperlichen Behinderung im Vorwort "To the great Variety of Readers" des *First Folio* (1623), bietet dieser Beitrag einen neuen Ansatz zum Verständnis rhetorischer Figuren in frühneuzeitlichen Vorworten. Lange Zeit wurden diese als rein konventionelle Texte abgetan, doch wird hier gezeigt, dass diese Konventionen eine nuancierte literarische Arbeit leisten. Es wird argumentiert, dass Vorworte es den gedruckten Stücken ermöglichten, sich in den literarischen Nischen des Buchhandels zu etablieren, und zwar nicht nur durch die Tatsache ihres Vorhandenseins, sondern auch durch die gemeinsamen Vorstellungen von Literarizität, an denen sie teilhatten. Der Aufsatz beleuchtet die in Vorreden weit verbreiteten Vorstellungen von Deformität und Perfektion in ihrem breiteren historischen Kontext der frühen Neuzeit und kommt zu dem Schluss, dass die Sammlung an der Konstruktion eines selbstbewussten literarischen Vokabulars beteiligt war, das auf die Förderung des gedruckten Dramas als Lesestoff abzielte.

[68] "We haue but collected them, and done an office to the dead, to procure his Orphanes, Guardians" (A2v).