

The Anonymous Plotter in the Routines of Renaissance Theatre and Drama

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Abstract

Renaissance theatre, both in England and Italy, was a commercial enterprise and, therefore, it utilized procedures of division of labour to meet the challenge of the market. One of these procedures was the compilation of preparatory texts of various kinds. But, while about one thousand *scenari* of the *commedia dell'arte* (some anonymous, some with the author's name) survive, of the 'plots' compiled by the English 'plotters' in preparation of plays to be written only one incomplete specimen and a few fragments have been preserved; their nature, therefore, remains dubious. Furthermore, anonymous documents of a different nature, also confusingly called 'plots', but compiled as reminders for the actors' entrances during performance, have survived in six, mostly fragmentary, manuscripts. This article discusses these three kinds of preparatory texts in order to characterize their different nature and argues that, although suggestive, the idea of a derivation of the two kinds of English 'plots' from the *scenari* appears unconvincing; indeed, the compilation, in both contexts, of preparatory texts was simply an obvious and necessary measure in order to speed up procedures.

Keywords: Author Plots, England, Italy, Playhouse Plots, Scenarios.

Sono sempre d'avviso
che Shakespeare fosse una cooperativa.
Eugenio Montale, 'Le storie letterarie', 1977¹

1. *Preliminaries*

British Library manuscript Add 10449 contains five 'plots' presumably dating from the early 1590s to the early 1600s. These 'plots' are outlines of plays in performance, some fragmentary, which record little more than entrances – less frequently exits – (sometimes with the character's name, sometimes with the actor's, often with both) together with suggestions such as 'a dumb show', 'music', 'alarum', 'violls of blood', 'X speaks' (but without the content of the speech) and similar basic performance directions. A sixth 'plot' is held in the Archive of Dulwich College (MS XIX), the institution founded as 'God's Gift' by Edward Alleyn in 1619. The manuscript of a seventh 'plot' is not extant but the plot was transcribed by Steevens in his 1803 *Variorum*. All the plays



whose 'plots' are extant have been lost, except for *The Battell of Alcazar*, a play attributed to Peele and published in a 1594 quarto.

The presence of actors' names makes these texts especially useful as sources of information about the composition of companies and about Elizabethan and Jacobean casting practices; but, in spite of the critical attentions of a number of scholars, their exact nature remains somewhat mysterious.

However, the fact that these 'plots' are outlines of performances understandably suggests a resemblance to the *scenari* or *canovacci* of the *commedia dell'arte*. In some cases, explicit allusions have been made to possible derivation from Italian scripts, at least in the form of a transmission of routines and methods. In addition, the picture is made more complex by the presence, in the context of Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre, of another kind of preparatory text, also confusingly designated by the word 'plot'; from the information which we possess, it appears evident that these were much more detailed than the British Library and Dulwich outlines and structurally much more similar to the *scenari*, but functionally they differ from both. The British Library and Dulwich 'plots' were guides for performances, while the more detailed 'plots' were guides for the compositions of plays. The *scenari*, on the other hand, were the necessary pre-texts outlining an action whose details were to be 'improvised' and, therefore, they represented all that existed before the acted play and did not imply any further elaboration.

Although accepting what is now the prevailing opinion, that is, that in the context of English theatre the two kinds of 'plots' served entirely different purposes, I will discuss these texts historically and critically, with special attention to the issue of authorship. In conclusion, I will compare the basic structural characteristics of the two kinds of English 'plots' with those of the Italian *scenari* or *canovacci* and argue that in this instance no direct or indirect kind of communication with the procedures of the *commedia dell'arte* should be hypothesized: indeed, the Italian groups of *comici* no less than the English companies of players were commercial enterprises which needed to exploit collaborative routines in order to simplify and speed up procedures. The fact, therefore, that the Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre industry practised certain forms of schematization, either in preparation of the written texts or of their scenic rendition, only indicates that, like the *improvvisa*, it tended to maximize economic efficiency in responding to the requirements of a demanding and quickly-changing market.

2. *The Texts and the Facts*

A first account of the British Library and Dulwich 'plots' was given by W.W. Greg in his edition of the *Henslowe Papers*. Greg published the text of five of the extant plots and reproduced a sixth from the transcript made by Steevens (1907, 127-151).² Greg returned to these documents in 1931 in an extensive historical, bibliographical and critical study (1-171). Many of Greg's conclusions are still accepted, especially his assignment of the plays from which the

plots derived to an amalgamation of the Admiral's and Strange's Men (1931, 13), his dating and the function he attributed them as 'ephemeral documents' meant 'for the guidance of actors and others in the playhouse, to remind those concerned when and in what character they were to appear, what properties were required, and what noises were to be made behind the scenes' (3). That these sheets were prepared for 'the attention of the prompter or call-boy' (1907, 127) is suggested not only by their content but also by the fact that the sheets 'have a hole cut near the top' which, Greg argues, served to hang them 'on a peg in the playhouse' (129).³

In 1946 J.Q. Adams published a brief article on 'plots' in *The Library*. Quoting Greg's statement that the word 'plot' was also 'employed in the same theatrical circles to designate an author's "guide for the composition of a play"' (Adams 1946, 17; Greg 1931, 1), he adds that Greg was unable to give any example of another, quite distinct kind of plot, which he calls an 'author plot' in that at the time Greg wrote none was known to be in existence (Adams, 18). The 'example' found by Adams in a Folger Shakespeare Library manuscript is, Adams says, 'of a later age than the reign of Elizabeth' (17). It was published in his transcription with a reproduction of its physical layout but with no further comment on the text.⁴ By comparing the documents published by Greg and the one reproduced by Adams, it is evident that the latter is of a completely different nature from the former.

The issue was, therefore, by then, fairly clear. The two scholars had established the existence, in the same historical context, of two kinds of text, both designated by the word 'plot' but different in nature, content and function: one (the Folger plot) served as a 'guide for the composition of a play' (and was therefore written either before or during the composition of the play) and the others (the British Library and Dulwich plots) were certainly written after the play had been completed and served as a skeleton guide for the performance and, in particular, for the actors' entrances. Neither kind of text, in turn, can be said to have performed a function similar to that of the *scenari*.

The case of the 'two plots', however, soon started to give rise to conflicting interpretations. Strange to say, it was Greg himself who inaugurated the confusion. As proof of the existence of plots which served 'as a guide for the composition of a play' (1931, 1; my emphasis), he rightly quoted two passages from Henslowe's *Papers* where 'books' or 'plots' compiled by playwrights (Ben Jonson in this case) before or during the composition of a play are mentioned:

lent vnto Bengemen Johnson the 3 of desembz 1597 vpon a boocke w^{ch} he showed the plotte vnto the company w^{ch} he promysed to dd vnto the company at cryssmas next the some of ... xx s. (Foakes and Rickert, eds, 1961, 85)

Lent vnto Robart shawe & Jewbey the 23 of octobz 1598 to lend vnto m^r Chapmane one his playe boocke & ij ectes of A tragedie of bengemens plotte the some of ... iij^{li}. (100)

Greg correctly comments the author plot of the kind mentioned in the second passage saying that such a text ‘may have included, *though it can hardly have been confined to*, a list of scenes with the characters appearing in each’ (1931, 1-2; my emphasis). *Ergo*, it must have been different from (and more detailed than) the playhouse plots: ‘It is possible that the drawing up of such plots, as a recognized branch of the playwright’s profession, may be implied in Nashe’s claim of Greene as an excellent plotter and also in Mere’s definition of Munday as “our best plotter” ’ (1, n. 2). The two texts mentioned by Greg constitute the main evidence for the existence of author plots compiled by professional ‘plotters’ towards the composition of plays. Greg, however, undermines the evidential weight of these passages by saying that, by such expressions as ‘our best plotter’, ‘it is unlikely than anything more is meant than that their plays were well constructed’ (1, n. 2).

True, author plots which must have been compiled before a play was written or while it was being written – ‘can hardly have been confined to’ the scanty elements which appear in the playhouse plots: in other words, they must have been similar to the one published by Adams. And it must have been on account of their ability to produce similar outlines that, as we shall see, authors like Greene and Munday were singled out for praise.

The passages from Henslowe’s *Papers* were again quoted by Adams in his 1946 article (an article, I suspect, more often cited in footnotes than read); but the misunderstandings continued in a series of books and articles which started appearing in the 1990s, when attention to the playhouse plots resumed.

Again confusing the two kinds of plot, T.J. King comments on the two Ben Jonson entries saying that ‘“Bengemens plotte” was probably a list of scenes with the characters appearing in each’ (1992, 7); he adds that, in compiling such plots, ‘the author shows the actors that the casting requirements for his new play are suitable for their company’ (7), thereby implying that plots (author? playhouse?) were (always?) constructed with the requirements and the casting resources of a certain company in mind. But King makes an even more adventurous guess, namely, that the playhouse plots as we know them were nothing other than author plots to which the bookkeeper added the actors’ names: ‘When parts were assigned to actors’, he says, ‘the book-keeper or playhouse scribe *took the plot the author had prepared when he first offered the play*, and to it the book-keeper added the name of the actor who played each part’ (14; my emphasis). Since in the manuscripts of the six plots the actors’ names are written *currente calamo*, by ‘took the plot’ King must mean that the plots were copied simply in order to add the actors’ names: an untenable theory given that playhouse procedures tended to be extremely time-saving. David Bradley identifies the function of ‘plotter’ attributed to Munday with the activity of preparing ‘the ground-plan of the action *to be performed*’ and identifies this ‘ground-plan’ with the playhouse plots which we possess (1992, 2; my emphasis). Both he and King, therefore, entirely dismiss

the evidence for the existence of more detailed plots compiled as guides to the composition of plays.

More recently, discussing the six extant plots, Grace Ioppolo states that 'Greg's contention that there were two distinct kinds of plot ... may be incorrect' and argues that 'Henslowe may have used the word "plot" ... to denote a list of scenes and characters rather than a summary of the action' (2006, 55). She then argues that it may have been precisely on the basis of such lists of scenes and characters that plays were bought from their authors, who thus 'immediately contribute(d) to the production of the play by helping the actors to cast and stage it, rather than providing them with a general outline of the play' (55).

The latest voice to contribute to the debate is that of Tiffany Stern, who clearly distinguishes between the two kinds of plot. She calls 'plot-scenarios' those which, adopting Adams's definition, I have called 'author plots' and 'backstage plots' the outlines prepared for performances (my 'playhouse plots'). Stern argues convincingly that the 'plot scenario' was 'the first document written *towards the creation of a play*' (2009, 5; my emphasis) and distinguishes this from those she calls the 'backstage plots' which, she remarks, constituted 'another form of text called, confusingly, "plot"' and which were meant for use 'by the theatre personnel either before performance or during it' (201). Stern devotes to the two kinds of document two whole chapters of her book, thus making the distinction explicit and clear; she also produces important fresh documentation, especially regarding author plots. She accepts Greg's hypothesis about the function of the playhouse plots, but adds the suggestion that they accompanied the book, inside which they were folded (not all those manuscripts, however, present a folding mark).

As regards the function of the playhouse plots, most scholars have relied on Greg's interpretation. Foakes and Rickert, for instance, conclude with Greg that they were 'for the prompter's use' (1961, 326); others (for instance, King 1992) have embraced the same basic view, only suggesting refinements. Bernard Beckerman is interested in the implications of the system of entrances, but agrees on the function of the plot as 'a guide to memory' (1989, 109). David Bradley's interpretation of the way in which playhouse plots were used is partially different: they were not, he says, 'practical guides to actors, stagehands, and other employees' but were used by 'the Plotter himself' (1992, 77) who, he argues, managed the casting and compiled the plot 'fitting the play to the company and the company to the play' (84). Surprisingly, many have been perplexed by the fact that in the backstage plots only a few exits are recorded – exit reminders would have obviously been out of place in sheets to be referred to only *before entering the stage*. Ioppolo, for instance, finds it striking that 'surviving plots note all character entrances, but exits are marked only when the character exits immediately after an entrance' (2006, 53): that is, when it can be supposed that an 'immediate' exit is to be memorized together with the entrance.

With Stern's extensive treatment, however, the whole story seems once again to have been cleared up and explained by sound arguments. But can we really say that the story of the Elizabethan 'plots' ends here?

3. *Sketching, Advertising and Selling Plays*

We know that plays were usually not sold to companies as finished books and that frequently a 'plot', which must necessarily have been sufficiently detailed to give an idea of the play's subject and development, was presented to the company in advance of the finished play. A letter such as the frequently quoted one written by Nathan Field to Henslowe before the end of June, 1613, illustrates this practice:

M^r Hinchlow,

M^r. Dawborn and J, haue spent a great deale of time in conference about this plott, w^h will make as beneficiall a play as hath Come these seauen yeares, Jt is out of his loue he detaines it for vs; onely x^l. is desir'd in hand, for w^h, wee will be bound to bring you in the play finish'd vpon the first day of August; wee would not loose it, wee haue so assured a hope of it, and, to my knowledge, M^r. Dauborne may haue his request of another Companie; pray, let us haue speedie answe're, and effectuell, you know, the last money you disburs't was justly pay'd in, and wee are now in a way to pay you all so, vnlesse yo^r selfe, for want of small supplie, will put vs out of it, againe, pray, let vs know when wee shall speake w^h you; Till when, and Euer, J rest yo^r louing and obedient Son: Nat: Field. (Greg, ed., 1907, 84)

What is Field communicating to Henslowe in this letter? It is evident, in the first place, that he has a divided interest in the affair. On the one hand he is supporting Robert Daborne and a certain plot (written by Daborne, but maybe in collaboration with the same Field); on the other, he is serving the interest of his company (the inclusive personal pronouns 'we' and 'us' which he uses in the letter refer alternately to the company and probably also to him and Daborne, whose interests are in this case coincident). He and Daborne, he says, have 'spent a great deale of time' (jotting down? perusing? revising?) 'in conference about this plott' (does the demonstrative mean that he has sent Henslowe the actual plot together with the message?). In any case, after careful consideration, he and Daborne have concluded that that plot prefigures a very good play (something which could never be imagined from such skeleton outlines as those we have in the six extant playhouse plots). Field is proposing to Henslowe the plot which Daborne, 'out of his loue ... detaines ... for vs', that is, for Field's company (in 1613, the Children of the Queen's Revels); however, in order to make the offer more readily acceptable, he is warning Henslowe that, if 'speedie answe're' is not given, Daborne 'may haue his request of another Companie'. (This suggests that, at least in this case, the plot had not been written with a particular company's requirements and resources in

mind.) As appears from several letters from the same Daborne to Henslowe, it can also be argued that, after a play had been accepted in advance, probably on the basis of a 'plot' such as the one mentioned by Field, the finished acts were handed in by instalments. In his letters, Daborne both formulates promises and gives excuses to justify his lateness but asks for money all the same. The following letter appears to be a sort of contract:

Memorandum tis agreed between phillip hinchlow Esq. & Robert daborn gent, y^e y^e sd Robert shall before y^e end of this Easter Term deliver in his Tragoedy cald matchavill & y^e divill into y^e hands of y^e said phillip for y^e sum of xx^{ty} pounds, six pounds whereof y^e sd Robert acknowledgeth to hav receaved in earnest of y^e sayd play this 17th of Aprill & must hav other four pound vpon delivery in of 3 acts, & other ten pound vpon delivery in of y^e last scean pfited. Jn witnes hearof the sd Robert daborn hearvunto hath set his hand this 17th of Aprill 1613

p me Rob: Daborne. (Greg, ed., 1907, 67)

Daborne's play entitled *Machiavel and the Devil* is lost and we do not know on which basis Henslowe had decided to buy it. It may have been on the basis of a few scenes which the author had read to a company, on the basis of an oral report of the play's argument, or on the basis of a more or less diffuse written fable of the play's intended action (an author plot). In any case, it should be kept in mind that all plays were supervised by the Master of the Revels who acted as censor and that therefore the purchase of texts for performance was presumably made only when a good previous knowledge of the play's content, more detailed than the one contained in the playhouse plots, could be obtained.

4. *Our Best Plotters*

A different group of texts, which provides evidence for Adam's belief in the existence of author plots, concerns (at least) two writers (Anthony Munday and Robert Greene) who, in different contexts, were designated as 'plotters'. Even though the evidence is circumstantial, we might conclude that the authors defined as 'plotters' were among those who wrote author plots, that is, outlines of *fabulae* which would be developed (by themselves, alone or in collaboration with others, or by others) into well-made plays. Anthony Munday was a rather complex figure. He was an actor, a poet, probably an anti-catholic spy, a playwright and a miscellaneous writer. He was the chief pageant-writer for the City from 1605 to 1616. In Act I sc. i of Ben Jonson's comedy *The Case is Altered* Munday is presented satirically under the name of Antonio Balladino (i.e., a ballad-writer), of whom it is said that he is 'the best plotter' (1609, I.i.108); Balladino is a hack and is qualified as 'pageant poet to the city of Millaine (53-54)'. Another text from which we know that Munday

was a plotter – indeed, again ‘our best plotter’ – is Francis Meres’s *Palladis Tamia*, where his name is included in a long list of what Meres thinks were ‘the best for Comedy amongst us’. In the list, which comprises the cream of the playwrights and poets writing at the end of the 1590s, including Shakespeare, only two of the writers mentioned deserve special qualification: ‘eloquent and wittie *John Lilly*’ and ‘*Anthony Mundaye* our best plotter’ (Meres 1598, Oo3^v).

Robert Greene was a playwright, a poet, an author of euphuistic romances, a pamphleteer and one of the first professional writers; one of the first, that is, to realize the potential of printed works as a means to make money. In a pamphlet thought to have been written when he was on his deathbed, Greene penned a confession: ‘many things’, he said, ‘I haue wrote to make money’ (1592, A4). His skill at play-plotting was acknowledged in a pamphlet thought to have been written shortly after his death by his friend Thomas Nashe, who defended his own excellence as a writer and Greene’s skill as play-plotter against Gabriel Harvey’s attacks. This is how Nashe rejected Harvey’s charge of imitating Greene:

What truly might be spoken of *Greene*, I publisht, neither discommending him, nor too much flattering him (for I was nothing bound to him ... None that euer had but an eye, with a pearle in it, but could discern the difference twixt him & me; while he liu’d (as some Stationers can witnes with me) hee subscribing to me in any thing but plotting Plaies, wherein he was his crafts master. (1596, sig. V3)

Nashe seems to be divided between the urge to defend himself as an original writer and, as such, not a plagiarist of Greene and the wish to preserve his dead friend’s reputation; on the one hand, therefore, he must affirm that he was a better writer than Greene (‘hee subscribing to me in anything’) and, on the other, he must discern a motive for praising Greene above all other writers (‘plotting Plaies, wherein he was his crafts master’). In making this last gesture, he is careful to point to what may be described as an ancillary activity as the one in which Greene might be said to have exceeded him. Play-plotting appears to be a sort of preliminary and subsidiary activity to playwrighting, although one which required a ‘craft’ and was, therefore, practised by experienced writers.

We do not know whether a plot was always compiled by a play-plotter before the actual five acts of the plays were written. But, as regards those cases in which an outline of the intended play was prepared as a guide to the author or authors, the question is: how far did this determine the nature of the finished work?

5. *Author Plots and the Authorship Question*

J. Dover Wilson’s argument that Greene ‘plotted’ *1 Henry VI* from the chronicles was based on the fact that, as soon as he started editing the play, he ‘saw Greene everywhere’ (Wilson, ed., 1952, xxxviii). Wilson is evidently hypothesizing the existence of preparatory texts in which an author’s (or plot-

ter's) 'style' can be detected. This hypothesis opens up a series of important authorship questions about the relationship between source and plot and, most interestingly, between plot and play and, consequently, between the role of plotter and that of playwright, especially when these are not the same person. Wilson was probably right, although his attribution was only the fruit of speculation by an experienced reader; he failed, however, to take his argument to its extreme, disquieting consequence. When we comment, say, on the structure of a Shakespeare historical play whose source is known and discuss the playwright's alterations of that source, certain brilliant modifications and remodulations of the sequence of events in the source (be it Holinshed, Hall or Plutarch) such as the sagacious use of post hoc to suggest the proper hoc of historical causation, how is the credit for such structural interventions to be attributed? In other words, what weight should we attribute to the hypothesis that somebody else devised the additions, the subtractions, the compression, the temporal displacements, and so on? In the final analysis, whose work are we commenting on?

Such considerations open up a new, and not simply theoretical, perspective on the myth of Sole Authorship and reconfigure the idea of collaboration and multiple authorship in a direction different from the traditional one which aims at discriminating the various hands whose individual styles can be detected, distinguished and isolated. A relevant question is, therefore, how important was a (well devised and detailed) plot to the actual composition of a play?

Writing in 1937, W.J. Lawrence stressed the importance of plot-writers and argued that authors' plots were commissioned by companies from dramatists 'well known for [their] skill in plot-writing' (101) and that 'so much stress was laid in the late sixteenth century on the necessity for good plotting that those who excelled in the work were patted on the back, gaining reputation for that sort of work alone' (102). Quoting the cases of Greene and Munday he claims that 'An engrossing story, if well schemed, was then half the battle' (101).⁵ Lawrence then devotes the last pages of his chapter to Ben Jonson as 'scenario writer' and argues that for many of the plays in which he collaborated he was simply the author of the plot.

Lawrence may have reached part of his conclusions on the basis of speculation. He did, however, perceive the relevance of an aspect of Elizabethan theatre routines which was to be discussed from a new perspective starting in the late 1990s: the issue of collaboration. In the last two decades this issue has accompanied significant developments in the field of authorship studies. On the one hand, computational stylistics and stylometry now offer refined tools for identifying the peculiarities of a writer's style; on the other, it has been shown that collaboration was so intrinsically inherent in the practice of playwriting (in all the phases of the process) that individual style markers cannot be extracted from the 'finished' texts which we possess. The composition of plays, it is affirmed, was so 'patchy' that 'Modern critics, struggling to "discover" which of a handful

of collaborative authors wrote which passage of a play, are not always asking the right question' (Stern 2009, 30). More radically, Jeffrey Masten considers collaboration not as a 'more *multiple* version of authorship' but as involving a 'dispersal' of authorship and the authority that it assumes (1997, 19).

But there is yet another idea of 'collaboration' – let us call it 'influence', 'contagion', 'infection' – an idea which casts another light on the issue of authorship and deserves, therefore, to be discussed here, also because it touches on the issue of plots.

Reflecting on the fact that none of Shakespeare's manuscripts has been handed down to us, Edward Gordon Craig suggests that the loss was not accidental but was due to the fact that 'a glimpse of the manuscript of the plays would reveal a mass of corrections, additions, and cuts made in several handwritings', for Shakespeare's plays were created 'in close collaboration with the Manager of the Theatre and with the actors' who, Craig argues, 'were great improvisators'. Craig then comments on the 'naturalness' of Shakespeare's plays, on 'their grossnesses' and 'their popular appeal' and envisages a different, more immaterial form of collaboration: though not doubting that 'the poetry and beauty of some of the unique figures in the Plays were born of Shakespeare's imagination', he argues that Shakespeare's 'chief assistants were the actors', who were great improvisers and that Shakespeare's plays were created 'in close collaboration with ... practically the whole of the company who invented, produced, and acted them'. But Craig has something to say also about the origin of the compositional method he hypothesizes for Shakespeare's plays:

The naturalness of the Dramas was, I believe, wafted to England from Italy. Italy had awakened just previous to the birth of Shakespeare to a new sense of Drama. It was red hot ... spontaneous ... natural ... It was not a literary effort – quite the reverse. It was good talk, wonderful patter ...

I claim that Shakespeare's works are the fruit of a poet's collaboration with this newly formed dramatic art. (1913-1914, 163-165)

It has been argued that, in European Renaissance theatre, 'the influence [of the *commedia dell'arte*] is at once self-evident and intangible' (McKee 1967, xvii); and it is probably this form of pervasiveness that Craig had in mind. Often, however, the idea of 'influence' has been treated as direct, recognizable derivation rather than as a form of *cultural dissemination* whose sources and whose means of absorption are not easily retrieved.

In the final sections of this article, I will discuss the tendency to assimilate Elizabethan (-Jacobean) 'plots' to the *scenari* of the *commedia dell'arte*, a tendency which has also created terminological confusion among words which denote a range of phenomena and practices (the words are *plot*, *scenario*, *scene*).

6. *Pre-Texts: Scenes, Plots, Scenarios*

I apprehend that the greater portion of the dialogue, at least between the principal characters, was to a certain degree extemporaneous, and that this production and the three others of a similar kind, were got up as experiments in the nature of the *Commedie al improvise*, in which the actors invented, or were supposed to invent, the dialogue for the occasion. (Collier 1831, vol. III, 398)

Collier was the first to suggest that the playhouse plots which he was examining were similar to *scenari*, but his idea was confuted by subsequent commentators. Chambers sees an argument against Collier's view in the fact that 'one of them is for the extant *Battle of Alcazar*' (1923, vol. IV, 404) and that therefore those plots cannot have been written for impromptu performances. Greg, too, rightly objects that 'there is little resemblance between the Plots and the Italian *scenari*, which always provide not only an outline of the action but a summary of the dialogue as well' (1931, 3, n. 1).

Arguments comparing the playhouse plots to *commedia dell'arte* scripts, however, have recently been resumed. Robert Henke, discussing the *commedia dell'arte* as 'the perfect transnational machine appropriating a transnational language of gesture and acrobatic-style theater' (2008, 19), recalls that, after a temporary lapse of attention, documents which 'indicate a specifically technical interest' in the *improvvisa* start to reappear in England in the 1590s. Henke quotes various references to the *improvvisa* (in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and in *An Almond for a Parrat*, a pamphlet attributed to Nashe). As further proof of this revival of interest, Henke cites the playhouse plots and says that they 'resemble *commedia dell'arte* scenarios in some respects' (32; one of his arguments concerns the presence of a *Pantalone* in the plot of *The Dead Man's Fortune*). Andrew Grewar, on the other hand, although not excluding the possibility that the playhouse plots may have been 'used back-stage in extemporary performances', thereby creating a hypothetical link with the Italians' playing methods, concludes that 'these stage plots were not in fact the equivalents of *scenari*, as Collier thought' (1993, 18).⁶

I believe, however, that, as far as the outline of plots is concerned, the idea of a general kinship between the practices of Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre and those of the Italian *improvvisa* should be further explored and clarified. Grewar, who has written extensively about the transmigration of themes, materials and stock characters from the *commedia dell'arte* to the Elizabethan drama and theatre (with particular attention to Shakespeare's early comedies), draws an important and useful distinction between 'materials', that is, 'stock characters and stock situations' and 'techniques and methods' (1993, 21). That materials were widely circulated has been convincingly shown, especially in studies of the Italian *improvvisa*.⁷ But can any similarities in techniques and methods be also attributed to some kind of (direct) influence? And, as

far as plots and scenarios are concerned, can the fact that both impromptu performances and well-written plays were preceded by preparatory texts be considered in the light of some recognizable derivation?

That in the context of the *improvvisa* there existed some other kind of preparatory written material apart from the *scenari* is well known. These were the *generici* of the various roles, repertories of set speeches, either as monologues or as dialogues, which provided the actors with speeches apt for all circumstances. At an early stage, the actors fed their treasury of impromptu speeches by assiduously reading books; in Pier Maria Cecchini's words, they were invited to 'una frequente lettura di libri continuatamente eleganti, poich  rimane a chi legge una tale impressura di amabilissima frase, la quale, ingannando chi ascolta, vien creduta figlia dell'ingegno di chi favella' (1628, 19).⁸ At a later stage, the actors started to commission such repertories from writers employed for the purpose by the companies.

7. *Comparing the Texts*

Let us now go back to the Elizabethan-Jacobean plots and then cast a glimpse on the *commedia dell'arte* scenarios.

The author plot published by J.Q. Adams has characteristics which seem to show close kinship with the scenarios. It begins by giving details (indeed more than would have been necessary) about the locations of the action (Thrace and Macedon), including the names of their rivers and mountains; the plot proper opens with a list of characters in which a character's relationship to other characters is specified ('Philander King of Thrace. Suauina his sister'), or some particular characteristic is indicated ('Nimias an idle lover. Vasco a Captain'). Of the play (probably *Philander, King of Thrace*) all that is extant is the outline of the first three acts and of part of the fourth, all divided into scenes. For each scene a short indication of the content is given, in the following form:

Act I

Sc en: i.

Philander and his sister Suauina walke and conferre:
she greiues for y  warre.

Sc. 2.

Philander telleth Euphrastes y  cause why he will not
marry Suauina to any but a present K.

Sc: 3.

Aristocles and Suauina discover theire passions and are
discoverd by Phonops.

Sc: 4.

Philander doth banish Aristocles. (Adams 1946, 24)

Another specimen of an author plot is in the manuscript of a play dated about 1614, *The Faithful Friends*, in which Fletcher's hand (and Beaumont's?) has been hypothesized. The manuscript is in a neat (a scribe's) hand. The text runs smoothly until 4.4, after which a scene (4.5) is missing. On the verso of what is now fol. 68 (marked as 69) are the two final speeches of 4.4, a dialogue between Tullius and Philadelphia. Following these closing speeches, in the same page, is the summary plot of the missing scene:

The Plott of a Scene of mirth

to conclude this fourth Acte.

Enter s^r Pergamus the foolish Knight like a Bridegroom leading Flauia his Bride, Bellario the singing Soldier, Black Snout the Smith, Snipp the Tayler and Cauleskin the Shomaker. An Altar to be sett forth with the Image of Mars. Dindinus the Dwarfe bearing s^r Per: Launce and shield wch are hung up for trophees, and s^r Perg. Vowes for the loue of Flauia neuer to beare Armes agen, the like dos Bla: snout who hangs vp his sword and takes his hammer vowing to God Vulcan neuer to Vse other Weapon, The Taylor and the Shoemaker to vowe the like to God Mercury Then Bellario t^{so} Sings a songe how they will fall to there old Trades, a clap of Thunder and all run of /

finis 4 Act. (Victoria and Albert Dyce MS 10, fol. 69)

Two loose sheets, now pasted in the right place, provide the dialogue for the scene in a different hand. This may show, as Stern hypothesizes, that the scene had been commissioned from an author different from the one responsible for the rest of the play (2009, 22) and that when the scribe copied the text he only had the plot as a guide to the content of what was missing and reproduced this instead of the fully developed scene, which was to be supplied later. The plot of the scene, however, may have been reconstructed from memory, as was probably also a passage in a manuscript of Fletcher's *Bonduca*:

Actus: Quintj: Scaena: pri^a

Here should be A Scaene of the Solemnitye of

Paenius his ffunerall: mourned by Caracticus:

Here should A Scaene be betwene Iunius & petillius: (Iunius
mocking petillius for being in loue wth Bonducas Daughter that Killd
her Selfe: to them: Enterd Suetonius: (blameing petilius for the
Death of paenius:

The next Scaene · the Solemnitye of paenius his ffuneral mourned
by Caracticus:

The beginning of this following Scaene betweene petillius & Iunius
is wanting. the occasion. why these are wanting here. the
booke where it by it was first Acted from is lost: and this hath
beene transcrib'd from the fowle papers of the Authors w^h were
found: (British Library MS Add 36758, fol. 24)

Of this passage Greg says that it 'must have been written from memory, for the description of the missing scenes is incorrect' (1931, 5-6, n. 1). But what interests us here is mainly that, although with a different emphasis on character delineation and on scene setting, all these texts are predisposed for translation into dialogue and stage directions. 'Philander telleth Euphrastes y^e cause why he will not marry Suauina' gives the same basic information as 's^r Perg. Vowes for the loue of Flauia neuer to beare Armes agen' and the same instructions for the development of an actual dialogue.

If we turn to the playhouse plots, we immediately see that in these nothing is indicated about the argument of the scene and that the main emphasis is put on entrances and on the actors who impersonate the various characters. In other words, the information they contain only gives instructions for the dynamics of a particular performance of the scene. The following fragment is taken from the plot of *The Battell of Alcazar* and can be considered a typical example of the way in which playhouse plots were constructed:

Enter Portingall [to him] m^r Rich: Allen to him
 I Domb shew
 Enter Muly Mahamett m^r Ed: Allen, his sonne
 Antho: Jeffes: moores attendant: m^r Sam, m^r Hunt
 & wth Cartwright: ij Pages to attend the moore
 m^r Allens boy, m^r Townes boy: to them 2
 young bretheren: Dab: & Harry: : to them
 Abdel[m]enen w Kendall: exeunt (British Library MS 10449)

On the left margin of this fragment is the indication: 'sound S[e]nnet'. As can be seen, the instructions only indicate the entrances of characters with the names of the actors impersonating each, the performance of a 'Domb Shew' but without its content and a sound element at the beginning of the scene. The end of the scene is marked by 'exeunt'. From these instructions it is impossible to gather the contents of the scene; indeed, as David Bradley says, it would be impossible to reconstruct the play's action 'if we did not possess the text of Peele's play' (1992, 124).

Let us now look at what instructions the *scenari* of the *commedia dell'arte* present. The *scenari* or *canovacci* open with the following sections: Argomento (especially in Scala's printed texts), title of the play, often followed by an indication of the genre (eg. 'pastoral comedy', 'pastoral fable', etc.); a list of characters and a list of stage props ('Robbe') follow. The texts are divided into three acts and each act contains the entrances and exits of the various characters (occasionally the various doors are indicated as A, B, C, etc.), a summary of the content of each character's speech and, especially when a Zanni is onstage, the indication 'fa azzi' or 'lazzi', i.e., the character performs a brief mimic or spoken scene which interrupts the dialogue with comic effects. Often, the feeling of a character is briefly indicated.

The passage quoted below can be considered a typical fragment:

Lidia dalla strada C: d'esser fuggita dale mani del Satiro con l'inventione, cercar di Nespola per andare alla festa, che fanno le Ninfe; dice sopra l'amore di Filandro; in q.^o

Florindo dalla strada B: scopre l'amor suo a Lidia; lei lo discaccia, non volendolo udire parte per la strada A. *Flor* resta disperandosi della crudeltà di Lidia, fa lamenti dolendosi delle sue miserie; per strada C.

Coviello dalla strada A, in habito di Ninfa fa azzì, dice volere andare alla festa delle Ninfe per trovar Lidia sua innamorata, et goderla; fa azzì del passeggiare, e parlare Ninfesco, che ha paura di trovare lo dio priapo che s'namorì di lui credendolo donna, ma che non si vorria trasformare in albero per che non saria bono se non per far legna; (Neri 1913, 49)⁹

The following is a fragment from Flaminio Scala's *Il cavadente* (*The dentist*):

Orazio va per far riverenza a Isabella, prima del suo partire; batte.

Isabella fuora; fanno scena amorosa; Isabella prega *Orazio* a mangiar alcune confezzioni che li manderà prima che parta. *Orazio* promette. Ella in casa; *Orazio* via.

Flavio da cavadenti, grida sotto la finestra di Pantalone. In quello

Pantalone fuora, lo bastona, credendolo Arlecchino cavadenti, poi entra. *Flavio* fugge via.

Capitano vestito come Pantalone. In quello

Flavio lo crede Pantalone, lo bastona ben bene, via tutti, e qui finisce l'atto secondo. (Testaverde, ed., 2007, 63)¹⁰

In none of the *scenari* the dialogue is developed; but not because it has not yet been written but because it is going to be 'improvised' by the actors. However, there is certainly some kind of kinship among all these texts: they are all constructed *with a view to a certain realization*; they all appear as *preparations* for some final goal yet to be completed: a well-made text, the reconstruction of a missing scene or the outline of a scene yet to be provided, the staging of a quickly-rehearsed production, or of an impromptu performance. But are the similarities between all those texts so striking as to allow us to hypothesize some direct influence? Are the gestures which motivated or even prescribed all these kinds of preparatory work so specific as to allow us to identify an initial, common impulse and origin? Or is some sort of preliminary work, in two theatrical contexts facing equally strong if different challenges from extremely demanding markets, the obvious means to survival? After all, division of labour was not an invention of industrialization and Renaissance theatre was, both in Italy and in England, a sort of mass production.

That in theatrical quarters there was a generalized need for preparatory materials is shown by a fragment in the dedicatory letter of Alessandro Piccolomini's astronomical treatise *La sfera del mondo*. In it, Piccolomini tells

the story of *una impresa* (an enterprise) to which he had been attending. He had outlined a number of roles suitable to be represented in comedies; to each role he had attributed various 'soliloquies' illustrating various situations and harmonizing with each role's decorum; finally, variously combining the diverse roles, he had constructed various plots. He had meant to jot down at least 500 of those 'scenes' to be used 'in diverse favole, con levar solo o aggiungere qualche cosetta' (in different fables, only by adding or subtracting something; 1573, 3); but, when he had composed 'only' 300 'scenes', the manuscript had been stolen from the chest in which it was kept. This fragment belongs to an early date, near to the dawning of the *commedia dell'arte*; and it is therefore often cited as marking a *terminus a quo* for the birth of the *scenari* and of the *generici*. Piccolomini, it is suggested, had probably invented the *ars combinatoria* which, in the following years, would permit the construction of innumerable *favole* by shifting and combining diverse subjects and roles. However suggestive this hypothesis may be (and the theft, someone has argued, was probably performed by the *comici* in need of plots), there is a different interpretation to be considered. His work, Piccolomini says, would have been 'utilissima a tutti coloro che sien per fare Comedie' (very useful to those who intend to make comedies; my emphasis). The point is that 'fare Comedie' may mean both to perform (impromptu) comedies and to write down well-made comedies.¹¹ Thus, those stolen sheets may have contained specimens of pre-scenarios and pre-*generici* (see, for instance, the allusion to the composition of 'soliloqui'), but also specimens of pre-plays comparable to the pre-plays constituted by the Elizabethan and Jacobean author plots. Whatever his final aim, Piccolomini is expressing the general need for some kind of 'plotting', a need which, as we have seen, was present, *mutatis mutandis*, also in the Elizabethan-Jacobean context. Are we to conclude that Piccolomini's stolen 'scenes' were the forefathers of a particular writing method which inspired or even directly influenced the methods of text-production in other contexts, or was not plotting an obvious way of easing the various stages in a collaborative commercial enterprise?

Whatever answer we give to this question, the one category that remains hazy is precisely that of Author. Although, as Lawrence argues, 'an engrossing story, if well schemed, was then half the battle' (1937, 101), we do not have, in the English context, a single authored plot. The plotter as author is absent; not in the Barthesian-Foucaultian sense of an author controlled by ideology or 'spoken' by a dominant discourse, but in the basic, factual sense that none of the plotters' names appears on the title-page of printed plays. Furthermore, most of the extant *scenari* are anonymous and when, in 1611, Flaminio Scala published his, he performed an unusual gesture, one which in a sense strained the very nature of the *improvvisa*, typically based as it was on 'the ghost of a text, always too easy to be assembled and therefore not requiring the skill of a Poet' (Tessari 1989, 76; my translation).

Renaissance theatre, both in England and in Italy, remains a unique example of collaboration and thus of authorial dispersal. It is therefore an enterprise to which a principle of unity can hardly be applied. We do not know how much of the 'impromptu' texts of the *improvvisa* contained verbatim literary quotations from the 'libri continuamente eleganti' (uniformly elegant books) whose reading Pier Maria Cecchini recommended to the *comici*, nor do we know how much improvisation there was in the staging of a Shakespeare play, how much, as Craig argued, the words of each 'part' were varied and reformulated by the players nor, consequently, how many of those variations remain in the carefully edited texts which we read.

At the end of her treatment of the various steps which constituted the early modern 'play-patching' in which she has given evidence of 'the constituent pieces that make up the whole' of a play, Stern formulates a few radical questions; the last of these, addressed 'to the theoretician', demands 'in a play that is at its roots fragmentary, how "authored" is each section, and what *is* the text?' (2009, 256).

It is perhaps by addressing this question that we should reconsider authorship in early modern drama.

¹ 'I have ever been of the opinion / that Shakespeare was a cooperative'.

² The five 'plots' of MS Add 10449 are entitled: *The plotte of the deade mans fortune*, *The plott of Frederick & Basilea*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Plott of the Battell Of Alcazar* and *The Plott of the second Part of Fortunes tennis*. The Dulwich plot is entitled *The Platt of The Secound Parte of the Seuen Deadlie Sinns*; the seventh plot, now lost, is entitled *The plott of The First parte of Tamar Cam* and was reproduced by Greg in Steevens's transcript (Greg, ed., 1907, 145-148; G. Steevens and S. Johnson, eds, 1803, vol. III, 414). A digital version of the Dulwich MS XIX may be read in the Henslowe-Alleyn website: <<http://henslowe-alleyn.org.uk/images/MSS-19/01r.html>>, 1 Aug 2011. I owe the stimulus to study the Elizabethan 'plots' to Robert Henke.

³ Owing to their fragmentary state, two of the manuscript plots (that of *Frederick & Basilea* and that of *Fortunes Tennis*) do not allow us to claim the presence of a hole; the generalization, therefore, has been made on the basis of the four plots in which holes are visible. Another inference (that the 'sheets' were hung in the backstage) has been made without considering that the 'sheet' of Alcazar only contains the first four acts. The manuscript folio is fully written and therefore the backstage memorandum cannot have been contained in a single sheet, as would have been apt for a quick consultation.

⁴ Adams quotes the Folger MS as Catalogue 434, item 576.

⁵ Similarly, Stern says that 'Plots were the backbone of a good play; they preceded plays, but were also visible within them' (2009, 35).

⁶ Hamlet issues a verdict again improvisation when he instructs the First Player not to encourage a practice which belonged to the *zanni*: 'And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them ... That's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it' (*Hamlet*, III.ii.37-44).

⁷ See, among others, Neri (1913), Lea (1934), Clubb (1989), Grewar (1993 and 1996).

⁸ 'Frequently to read uniformly elegant books, because in those who hear them remains such an impression of most pleasing sentences as, deceiving the hearer, they are believed to be the daughters of the speaker's wit'.

⁹ 'Lidia from C: [says that] she has escaped from the hands of the Satyr by a trick, she is now looking for Nespola to go to the feast of the Nymphs; she speaks of her love to Filandro. Here, Florindo [enters] from B; discovers his love to Lidia; she drives him away and, refusing to hear him, exits from A. Florindo utters his despair for Lidia's cruelty and laments his misery; from C. Coviello from A, decked as a Nymph; he performs azzi, says that he wants to go to the Nymphs' feast to meet his lover Lidia and make love to her; performs azzi while walking and talking like a Nymph, he is afraid to find there the god Priapus who might fall in love with him believing he is a woman, but he does not want to be transformed into a tree, for then he would only serve as firewood'.

¹⁰ 'Oratio enters to say farewell to Isabella before he leaves; he knocks on her door. Isabella comes out, and they play a love scene. Isabella asks Oratio to eat some candy, which she will give him before he leaves, and he promises to do so. She goes into the house and Oratio leaves. Flavio, dressed like a dentist, now appears and shouts under Pantalone's window. At that, Pantalone comes out and beats Flavio, thinking he is Arlecchino disguised as a dentist; he then goes back in, and Flavio runs off. The Captain, dressed as Pantalone, enters. Then, Flavio returns, and thinking the Captain is Pantalone, gives him a good beating. As they all run off, the second act ends' (Salerno, ed., 1967, 89).

¹¹ Piccolomini was the author of two well-made plays, *Alessandro* and *Amor costante*. Gloria Guidotti interprets the passage as referring to playwrighting: she speaks of 'dramaturgical creation' and 'advice to those who want to write comedies' (1999, 110). Indeed, what use would 'soliloquies' have been to the extremely schematic instructions which were all that was needed for impromptu playing?

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