

# EDWARD BLOUNT AND THE PREFATORY MATERIAL TO THE FIRST FOLIO OF SHAKESPEARE

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*Six Court Comedies*, the little collection of the dramatic works of John Lyly published by Edward Blount in 1632 (a copy of which survives in the John Rylands Library), has long been recognized as an important document for students of Elizabethan literary history.<sup>1</sup> Not only did Blount bring together the majority of Lyly's plays in a single volume, but he restored many of the songs that had been omitted from the quartos, both ensuring their survival and affording his readers a fuller understanding of the effect of the plays as first performed. The volume was prefaced by a dedicatory epistle and an address to the reader and these too have proved significant in recovering a fuller context for the plays. In a celebrated passage, Blount records the prestige of the style inaugurated by *Euphues: the Anatomy of Wit*, the prose work with which Lyly first captured the imagination of the Elizabethan public,<sup>2</sup> while his encomium on the author affords some indication of the qualities upon which Lyly's reputation rested in his own age.<sup>3</sup> What has not previously been noted, however, is that the collection may also throw light on the much more prestigious venture with which the editor had previously been involved, the publication of the First Folio edition of the plays of the writer by whom Lyly's own brief period of glory was eclipsed.

The ambitious project to publish Shakespeare's dramatic works in a single volume is ascribed in the dedicatory epistle prefacing the

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sir Sidney Lee, 'An Elizabethan bookseller', *Bibliographica*, ed. A.W. Pollard, vol. i, pts i-iv (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1895), 496, and G.K. Hunter, *John Lyly: the humanist as courtier* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 286.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 'Our nation are in his debt for a new English which he taught them . . . All our ladies were then his scholars, and that beauty in court, which could not parley *Euphuism*, was as little regarded as she which now, there, speaks not French' ('To the Reader'). Spelling and punctuation in this and all subsequent quotations have been modernized.

<sup>3</sup> See my 'Edward Blount and the history of Lylian criticism', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., xlvi (1995), 1-10.

work to the desire of the playwright's 'fellows' to do honour to his memory, but it is now accepted that the task of bringing the plan to fruition fell to a syndicate consisting of the printer, Isaac Jaggard, his father, William, and the publishers Edward Blount, John Smethwick and William Aspley.<sup>4</sup> Of these Smethwick and Aspley appear to have played a relatively minor role in the undertaking. Both possessed rights in plays previously published and may have been incorporated into the group for this reason alone.<sup>5</sup> The major partners in the venture were Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount,<sup>6</sup> and though the position of the former has been seen as surprising,<sup>7</sup> the prominent part played by the latter is not difficult to understand. From the outset of his career Blount had been associated with the publication of major literary works,<sup>8</sup> he had friends among the intelligentsia, and held rights to compositions by leading dramatists, including Jonson's *Sejanus*. He had been associated with the King's Men for a considerable number of years, possibly acting as their 'friendly stationer' to prevent the unwelcome publication of two of their plays (*Pericles* and *Antony and Cleopatra*) in 1608,<sup>9</sup> and part of his function in the enterprise may have been to act as the players' representative.<sup>10</sup> His role, however, may have extended beyond part-funding the project, watching over the company's interests, and securing the copyright, where necessary, to the dramatist's works. (He held the title to sixteen of Shakespeare's plays until 1630.) A number of items precede the plays drawn together in the collection, and a complex web of associations serves to link the majority of them to Blount. There is the engraving of the dramatist by Martin Droeshout (which falls outside the scope of this paper) with a facing poem by Ben Jonson, verses by Jonson, Hugh Holland, L[eonard] Digges, and I. M. (James Mabbe), a dedicatory epistle to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery by Heminge and Condell, and an address to The Great Variety of Readers, also signed by the dramatist's 'fellows'.

<sup>4</sup> For a full account of the bibliographical and textual history of the First Folio see W.W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio: its bibliographical and textual history* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955). A detailed discussion of the materials prefacing the volume may be found in Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: local reading and its discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> See Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, 5–6.

<sup>6</sup> See Charlton Hinman, *The printing and proof-reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), vol. i, 24–6.

<sup>7</sup> For the involvement of William and Isaac Jaggard in the printing of Shakespeare's works, see Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, 8ff.

<sup>8</sup> For a full account of Blount's career as a publisher see Sir Sidney Lee, 'An Elizabethan bookseller', *passim*, and my 'Edward Blount and the history of Lylian criticism', 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> See L. Kirschbaum, *Shakespeare and the stationers* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1955), 197 and 367.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

That Jonson's support should have been elicited for the enterprise is unproblematic. His acquaintance with Shakespeare is well-attested, and as the period's major living writer he appears an obvious choice for an encomium upon the work of his great contemporary. From a twentieth-century perspective, however, the selection of the remaining contributors is less easy to understand. Digges, Mabbe and Holland are hardly household names today, and none has any obvious connection with the King's Men. Digges, 'a great master of the English Language, a perfect understander of the French and Spanish, a good poet and no mean orator'<sup>11</sup> did, however, have associations with Stratford and was known to Shakespeare through his stepfather, Thomas Russell, who oversaw the execution of the dramatist's will. He was also acquainted with Heminge and Condell,<sup>12</sup> and on intimate terms with Blount, who published his *Gerardo, The Unfortunate Spaniard* in 1622.<sup>13</sup> Mabbe's association with Shakespeare is more tenuous and his links with Blount even better attested. A notable Spanish scholar, his version of Mateo Aleman's *The Rogue* was published by Blount in 1623, with congratulatory verses by Digges, who had been in residence as an undergraduate in Oxford while Mabbe was a fellow at Magdalen.<sup>14</sup> That a friendship had sprung up between Blount and Mabbe is indicated in a number of letters written by the former to the diplomat, William Trumbull, to whom Blount acted as literary advisor, which have survived among the Trumbull papers.<sup>15</sup> Blount mentions Mabbe on a number of occasions, recalling a convivial evening spent in his company, and a projected journey with him to Brussels. By the time of the publication of the First Folio the two men had known one another for over ten years. Mabbe had written an encomium for Florio's *Queen Anna's New World of Words*, published by Blount (with Barret) in 1611, and their continuing association is indicated by the fact that Blount was engaged in issuing Mabbe's *Christian Policie* at the time of his death in 1632. The close personal relationship between Blount, Mabbe and Digges during the publication of

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Paul Morgan, '“Our Will Shakespeare” and Lope de Vega: an unrecorded contemporary document', *Shakespeare Survey*, 16 (1963), 119, from Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxoniensis*, ed. P. Bliss, vol. ii (1815), cols 592-3.

<sup>12</sup> See Leslie Hotson, *I, William Shakespeare* (London: Cape, 1937), 244.

<sup>13</sup> For further evidence of Digges's association with Blount see Hotson, *I, William Shakespeare*, 250ff.

<sup>14</sup> For the prestige of this volume in comparison with the First Folio see Arthur W. Secord, 'I.M. of the First Folio Shakespeare and other Mabbe problems', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, xlvii (1948), 378.

<sup>15</sup> See E.A.J. Honigmann, *The stability of Shakespeare's text* (London: Edward Arnold, 1965), 34-5. I am indebted to Honigmann for a number of details regarding the members of Blount's circle.

*The Rogue* in 1622–23 suggests that it may have been Blount who was responsible for commissioning the Folio's commendatory verses, and he may also have been instrumental in securing the services of Jonson and Holland. As noted above, Blount held rights to Jonson's *Sejanus*, to which Holland contributed complimentary material, and Jonson had joined Digges in writing commendatory verses for *The Rogue* in the same year that the First Folio was published.

There is thus considerable evidence to support the contention that Blount was responsible for commissioning part, at least, of the Folio's prefatory material, and his influence may have extended beyond the poetic effusions. As noted above, the dedication to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery and the address to The Great Variety of Readers are both signed by Heminge and Condell but a number of scholars have doubted their authorship, adducing the quality of writing as evidence that they were composed by others involved in the compilation of the volume. George Steevens, at the end of the eighteenth century, proposed Jonson, a view supported by E.K. Chambers and W.W. Greg,<sup>16</sup> A.W. Pollard detected Blount's hand, while E.A.J. Honigman suggested that 'Jonson, Heminge and Condell, Blount and Jaggard may all have examined the preliminary matter and may all have had the opportunity to rephrase it'.<sup>17</sup> While there can be no doubt that additions or alterations to the material may have been made by any member of the production team, the original drafts of each of the two items must have been drawn up by a single hand, and since both are signed by Heminge and Condell there has been a tendency to assume that hand to be the same. W.W. Greg, for example, remarks that 'one thing is certain: whoever wrote the address – and we may fairly assume that the epistle came from the same pen – if it was not Jonson himself, was a close student of his works'<sup>18</sup> and the same assumption that a single writer was responsible underlies Pollard's equally trenchant case for Blount. In fact, however, the style of the two pieces is markedly different. The address to The Great Variety of Readers is racy and informal, strongly reminiscent of the prefatory material to *Bartholomew Fair*, and the formidable array of parallels

<sup>16</sup> See Isaac Reed (ed.), *Variorum* (London, 1803), vol. i, 166; E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: a study of facts and problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), vol. i, 142, and Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, 17–21.

<sup>17</sup> See Pollard, *Shakespeare's folios and quartos: a study of the bibliography of Shakespeare's plays 1594–1685* (London: Methuen, 1909), 122, and Honigmann, *The stability of Shakespeare's text*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> *The Shakespeare First Folio*, 21.

that Greg assembles in support of his case for Jonson make it very hard to resist the conclusion that he was indeed the author.<sup>19</sup> The style of the 'Epistle Dedicatory', however, is altogether different. The piece is dignified and respectful, even 'tradesmanlike', the term used by Pollard in support of his argument for Blount,<sup>20</sup> but could scarcely be described, as has the address, as 'a fine piece of Elizabethan prose . . . beyond the range of the ordinary writer'.<sup>21</sup> Once the assumption that the two are by the same author is called into question the case for candidates other than Jonson may once more be considered and it is in this context that the material prefacing the *Six Court Comedies* assumes a new importance.

Noting Pollard's contention that the epistle and address are more likely to have been supplied by the publisher than the two players to whom they are attributed, W.W. Greg dismissed the argument for Blount on grounds of style. Maintaining that 'no attempt . . . has been made to show any stylistic resemblance between the Folio dedication and address and Blount's acknowledged writings', he notes the 'individual' character of the publisher's epistles, contending that 'there is no likeness of expression' between the phraseology of the Folio material and Blount's dedications 'even when he is trying to say much the same thing'.<sup>22</sup> In fact, however, to seek to ascribe a single style to Blount's prefatory epistles is wholly misguided. A man of sound critical instincts,<sup>23</sup> with close acquaintance in literary circles and aspirations as a writer (he published his own translation of Ducci's *Ars Aulica* in 1607), Blount was by no means a journeyman publisher, and he saw his books through the press with care. A number of his publications are prefaced by epistles of his own composition and these pieces vary very considerably in tone, depending upon the nature of the work with which he is engaged.<sup>24</sup> The epistle to Walsingham prefacing *Hero and Leander* (1598), for example, is sombre and highly personal, testifying to the warm relations between the publisher and the author of the work; the dedication to a colleague that acts as an introduction to *The Hospital of Incurable Fools* (1600) is witty and jocular; while the epistle prefacing *Ars Aulica or The Courtier's Art* (1607) is much more formal, playing

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15–21 and 26–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Shakespeare's folios and quartos*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> The view of 'a sound critic', quoted by Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See Leona Rosenberg, *Literary, political, scientific, religious and legal publishing, printing and bookselling in England, 1551–1700: twelve studies* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1965), vol. i, 51.

<sup>24</sup> For a fuller discussion of Blount's dedications see my 'Edward Blount and the history of Lylian criticism', 2–7.

elegantly upon the appropriateness of the subject matter to the dedicatees. The letter to the reader in *Micro-Cosmographie* (1628), by contrast, is self-justificatory, defending the publisher's role in issuing material that the author had sought to suppress, while the dedication to Viscount Lumley and the address to the reader, which function as a foreword to *Six Court Comedies* (1632), are fanciful pieces, adopting features of Lyly's style.<sup>25</sup> It is not merely the tone, moreover, of these compositions that varies. Sentences in the dedication to the *Hospital of Incurable Fools*, are long, and elaborately constructed, with a large number of dependent clauses, while those of the epistle to Lumley (written shortly before Blount's death) are shorter, giving the piece a far pithier quality, compare:

John of all Johns, I am bold to bring you into a guest-house or hospital, and to leave you there – not as a patient, but as a patron or treasurer. I could wish that upon this sudden calling to such an office you would not, like one swollen with the fatness of your place, grow bigger or prouder, nor indeed more covetous than you are, but like a man within compass, whose bare (or rather threadbare) content is his kingdom, tread all ambition under your ancient shoe soles, now the sixteenth time corrected. (*Hospital of Incurable Fools*)

The spring is at hand and therefore I present to you a lily, growing in a grove of laurels, for this poet sat at the sun's table. Apollo gave him a wreath of his own bays without snatching. The lyre he played on had no borrowed strings. (Epistle to Lumley)

Nevertheless, while Blount's style varies in accordance with his subject matter, a number of themes or motifs recur in the course of his writings, and it is in this context that Greg's remark that the Folio dedication does not conform to other material known to be by Blount 'even when he is trying to say much the same thing' acquires a fresh significance. Two of Blount's epistles are particularly noteworthy in terms of the repetition of ideas, the celebrated dedication to the 1598 edition of *Hero and Leander* in which he proclaims his friendship with Marlowe, and the epistle to Viscount Lumley in which he justifies the publication of Lyly's plays – and both pieces have motifs in common with the First Folio dedication.

A number of similarities serve to link the epistle to Walsingham with that to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, and it is worth quoting the relevant passages at length:

Sir, we think not ourselves discharged of the duty we owe to our friend when we

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the punning, syntactic patterning and alliterative pointing of 'light airs are now in fashion, and these being not sad fit the season' and 'these his plays crowned him with applause and the spectators with pleasure'.

have brought the breathless body to the earth, for albeit the eye there taketh his ever farewell of that beloved object, yet the impression of the man that hath been dear unto us, living an after-life in our memory, there putteth us in mind of further obsequies due unto the deceased, and namely of the performance of whatsoever we may judge shall make to his living credit, and to the effecting of his determinations prevented by the stroke of death. By these meditations (as by an intellectual will) I suppose myself executor to the unhappily deceased author of this poem, upon whom knowing that in his lifetime you bestowed many kind favours, entertaining the parts of reckoning and worth which you found in him with good countenance and liberal affection, I cannot but see so far into the will of him dead that whatsoever issue of his brain should chance to come abroad that the first breath it should take might be the gentle air of your liking, for since his self had been accustomed thereunto, it would prove more agreeable and thriving to his right children than any other foster countenance whatsoever. At this time, seeing this unfinished tragedy happens under my hands to be imprinted, of a double duty, the one to yourself, the other to the deceased, I present the same to your most favourable allowance, offering my utmost self, now and ever, to be ready at your worship's disposing. (*Hero and Leander*)

Since your lordships have been pleased to think these trifles something heretofore, and prosecuted both them and their author, living, with so much favour, we hope that, they outliving him, and he not having the fate, common with some, to be executor to his own writings, you will use the like indulgence toward them you have done unto their parent. There is a great difference whether any book choose his patrons, or find them. This hath done both; for so much were your lordships' likings of the several parts when they were acted as, before they were published, the volume asked to be yours. We have but collected them, and done an office to the dead to procure his orphans guardians, without ambition of self-profit or fame, only to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive . . . Therefore we most humbly consecrate to your highnesses these remains of your servant Shakespeare, that what delight is in them may be ever your lordships', the reputation his, and the faults ours, if any be committed by a pair so careful to show their gratitude both to the living and the dead. (First Folio)

In both cases the tone is personal, with the writer commending works to the patronage of those known to have distinguished the author in the past (cf. 'in his life-time you bestowed many kind favours' / 'prosecuted both them and their author, living, with so much favour'). The writer regrets the incapacity of the dead man to see his own works through the press, casting himself as executor in one case, and noting the inability of the author in the other to act as executor to his own effects (cf. 'prevented by the stroke of death . . . I suppose myself executor' / 'not having the fate, common with some, to be executor to his own writings'). The work that is offered for patronage is seen in both instances as the offspring of the dead man, his 'right children' in one case who require a 'foster countenance', and 'orphans' in the other, standing in need of 'guardians'. The act of publishing the work is seen as a species of funeral rite (cf. 'further obsequies due unto the deceased' / 'an office to the dead') while the performance of this duty is described as an act of

friendship through which death may be transcended by memory (cf. 'living an after-life in our memory . . . the performance of whatsoever we may judge shall make to his living credit' / 'only to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive'). The writer sees his own role as a facilitator (cf. 'happens under my hands to be imprinted' / 'we have but collected them'), while the act of dedication is seen as a two-fold obligation, towards the living and the dead (cf. 'of a double duty, the one to yourself, the other to the deceased' / 'a pair so careful to show their gratitude both to the living and the dead'). Although none of these formulations is distinctive in isolation, their conjunction in a context in which Blount's hand is known to be at work is suggestive at the very least, and the case for his authorship is supported by the recurrence of a similar complex of ideas in the dedication to the *Six Court Comedies*, a work in which, like the edition of *Hero and Leander*, Blount had a particular interest, and the publication of which may have been prompted by the First Folio.<sup>26</sup> The dedication is shorter than those quoted earlier and may be presented in full:

It can be no dishonour to listen to this poet's music, whose tunes alighted in the ears of a great and ever-famous queen: his tunes were so curiously strung that Eliza's court held his notes in admiration. Light airs are now in fashion, and these being not sad fit the season, though perchance not suit so well with your more serious contemplations.

The spring is at hand, and therefore I present to you a lily, growing in a grove of laurels, for this poet sat at the sun's table. Apollo gave him a wreath of his own bays, without snatching. The lyre he played on had no borrowed strings.

I am, my lord, no executor, yet I presume to distribute the goods of the dead, their value being in no way answerable to those debts of duty and affection in which I stand obliged to your lordship. The greatest treasure our poet left behind him are these six ingots of refined invention, richer than gold. Were they diamonds they are now yours. Accept them, noble lord, in part, and me.

The tone once again is personal, while the author writes with an air of authority, confident of his capacity to pass literary judgements and his knowledge of the affiliations of those whose work he promotes. More significantly, the imagery employed is again testamentary, with Blount representing himself as the poet's executor, overseeing the distribution of his effects, cf:

I am, my lord, no executor, yet I presume to distribute the goods of the dead. (*Six Court Comedies*)

<sup>26</sup> For the circumstances surrounding the publication of *Six Court Comedies* see my 'Edward Blount and the history of Lylian criticism', 8-10.



I suppose myself executor to the unhappily deceased author of this poem. (*Hero and Leander*)

Not having the fate, common with some, to be executor to his own writings. (First Folio)

In all three instances, moreover, the writer sees himself as a 'presenter', cf:

The spring is at hand and therefore I present to you a lily, growing in a grove of laurels. (*Six Court Comedies*)

I present the same to your most favourable allowance. (*Hero and Leander*)

It hath been the height of our care, who are the presenters, to make the present worthy of your highnesses, (First Folio)

while the closing concept of the 'double duty' recurs in the request to 'accept them . . . and me'. Both the dedication to the First Folio and the epistle to Lumley open, furthermore, with a consideration of the value of the work in relation to the dignity of the recipient, cf:

It can be no dishonour to listen to this poet's music, whose tunes alighted in the ears of a great and ever-famous queen. (*Six Court Comedies*)

When we value the places your highnesses sustain, we cannot but know their dignity greater than to descend to the reading of these trifles, (First Folio)

while the address to the reader in *Six Court Comedies*, which follows the epistle to Lumley, is again concerned with the transcendence of death through the publication of the writer's work, cf:

These papers of his lay like dead laurels in a churchyard, but I have gathered the scattered branches up and . . . made them green again, and set them up as epitaphs to his memory. (*Six Court Comedies*)

We have but collected them, and done an office to the dead . . . only to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive. (First Folio)

What is significant here, over and above specific similarities of expression is the fact that faced with the same situation, i.e. the posthumous publication of the work of an author with whom the writer is personally engaged, the composer of these three dedications says, to use Greg's phrase, 'much the same thing'. The concept of the publisher as executor with responsibilities to the deceased, which runs throughout these epistles, is not common to this type of composition and the recurrence of a tissue of related associations serves to support the contention that a single mind is at work.

The collected works of Beaumont and Fletcher published in 1647 and dedicated to the surviving recipient of the dedication to the Shakespeare First Folio (the Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery), is signed by ten members of the former King's Men.<sup>27</sup> It can hardly be supposed that all ten were responsible for drafting the epistle and it is made clear by the publisher, Humphrey Moseley, that every aspect of the compilation of the volume had been his responsibility. The similarities with Blount's role in relation to the collection and publication of Lyly's work in 1632 is striking, and the two projects may cast light backwards upon the process by which the First Folio came into being. Blount had dedicated his own translation of *Ars Aulica* to the Herbert brothers in 1607, and *Gerardo, the Unfortunate Spaniard*, issued from his shop in the year before the First Folio was published, is dedicated (by Digges) to the same patrons. Accustomed to furnishing prefatory material to his own volumes and experienced in the art of presenting literary ventures to the great, Blount may well have appeared to the First Folio syndicate to be the obvious person to act as the players' representative, the discrepancies between the styles of the two prefatory epistles suggesting that while Jonson was responsible for commending the work to the reading public, it was Blount who shouldered the task of recommending the volume to its patrons. In short, seen in conjunction with the dedication to *Hero and Leander*, the little duodecimo collection of Lyly's plays that constitutes Blount's final endeavour to preserve the products of the Elizabethan–Jacobean stage, may well add to our understanding of the process by which the syndicate fronted by Heminge and Condell 'sought to keep the memory of so worthy a friend and fellow alive'.

<sup>27</sup> See Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, 1n.