Shakespeare’s Openings in Action:
A Study of Four Plays from the Period 1591- c.1602

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Centre for Study of Drama
University of Toronto

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Abstract

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Ph.D., 2011
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Regardless of genre, Shakespeare’s plays open in many different ways on the stage. Some openings come in the form of a prologue and extend from it; others in the form of a framing dialogue; some may begin in medias res; and there is also a single case of an induction in The Taming of the Shrew. My dissertation, “Shakespeare’s Openings in Action: A Study of Four Plays from the Period 1591- c.1602,” subsequently referred to as “Shakespeare’s Openings in Action,” attempts to define the construction of openings in the context of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy and to understand texts which were written in the first place to be performed on a platform stage by actors experienced in theatrical practice. By analysing the playwright’s organization of the dramatic material, as reflected in the play-texts, I attempt to gauge how an opening set out to engage original audiences in the play, an essential function of theatrical composition, and to determine to what
extent the play-text may be considered as an extended stage direction for early modern actors.¹

**What is the present state of scholarship in the subject?**

Although sparse, critical interest in the openings of Shakespeare’s plays can be found as early as 1935 in the work of A. C. Sprague, *Shakespeare and the Audience*. In more recent years, other studies have appeared, for instance, Robert F. Willson, Jr., *Shakespeare’s Opening Scenes* (1977), and a number of articles included in *Entering the Maze: Shakespeare’s Art of Beginning*, edited by F. Willson Jr. (1995).

Existing scholarship provides a good general framework for further research into the openings of Shakespeare’s plays. In addition to the studies presented above, I shall draw on analytical approaches to play-text analysis which involve theatre practice, for example in the work of André Helbo, *Approaching Theatre* (1991), Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre* (1996), and John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare’s Plays in Performance* (1993); John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (1984), and Cicely Berry, *Text in Action*. London (2001). These works provide revealing insights into the theatrical possibilities of dramatic language and actor technique.

¹The analytical method presented in this dissertation supplements studies made of the complex textual histories of Shakespeare’s plays by considering the staging and characterisation information they contain. In the case of multiple-text plays, it takes account of editorial scholarship and explains the reasons for choosing to analyse the material contained in one version over the other(s).
To the Dark Gentleman ...

“Perfer et obdura; dolor hic tibi proderit olim” (Ovid)
Acknowledgments

Writing a dissertation in the humanities can be an arduous and, sometimes, lonely task. It requires an inordinate amount of willing, dedication, and support from an academic institution and the people it employs. First and foremost, I wish to record my deep gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Jill L. Levenson for her steadfast commitment, continued encouragement, and invaluable suggestions. Approaching her at the end of 2005, at the recommendation of Professor Enoch Brater (to whom I extend my gratitude), was the best academic decision I have made since landing in Canada. Her rigorous scholarship, firm dedication to excellence, and meticulousness as an editor are truly remarkable and nothing short of inspirational. Our meetings often generated stimulating debates, and I count myself fortunate in having benefited from her expertise and exacting standards of scholarship.

I should also like to thank my Ph.D. Committee members, Professor John H. Astington and Dr. Jeremy Lopez, who have reviewed this document in the course of its development, and have offered insightful remarks and suggestions. I am indebted to them for their ongoing support.

I am deeply grateful to the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto for offering me a five-year scholarship, and a conducive environment for conducting this piece of research. I have also benefited from a Ph.D.
Completion Grant, awarded in 2007/08, and two University of Toronto Ph.D. Bursaries, awarded in 2008/09 and 2009/10.

On a personal note, I owe my partner, Karen Gilodo, a huge debt of gratitude for her fortitude in having to listen to the subject of this dissertation over a long period with an attentive ear. Her encouragement and willingness to sacrifice her time to me was unwavering throughout the laborious period of gestation and eventually in the writing phase. Her grace and generosity of spirit are praiseworthy. Finally, a special thought is dedicated to my father, Isaac, mother, Alisa, and siblings, Daniel and Talia, for their love and patience over the elephantine labour pain, which bears fruit on these pages.
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General Introduction

In England, the sixteenth century is a famously dynamic period of theatrical activity, marked by a gradual transition from an itinerant enterprise presented on makeshift stages in inns, alehouses, private halls at court and at the estates of noble families to a commercial form of entertainment housed in purpose-built theatres and involving a play-text, a troupe of professional actors, and a paying audience.¹ This evolution, which represents the birth of English commercial theatre, gave rise to new modes of dramatic expression rooted in several performance traditions. The many artistic forms and styles it boasts are at once versatile and complex. They are a testament to a period of intensive theatrical experimentation. The hallmark of theatrical ingenuity may be located in the practice of Renaissance playwrights, English as well as European, of transgressing the generic boundaries of comedy and tragedy (and often banishing the unities) in search of new and exciting theatrical entertainments. In an article entitled “Comedy,” Jill L. Levenson has studied the versatility with which early modern playwrights handled the genre of comedy:

During its heyday in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, [comedy] took in whole genres, from romance and satire to sonnet and epigram; it borrowed sub-genres or modes; it incorporated theatrical conventions like the court masque; and it continued to admit the culture of carnival or popular culture. (256)
Peter Hyland has made a similar point with reference to Shakespearean comedy, which shares many of the features of tragedy: “One way of looking at Measure for Measure, for example, is to see it as an attempt by Shakespeare to fit tragic subject-matter into a comic structure” (133).

The relentless quest for theatrical ingenuity, evident in genre development, was no less relevant when it came to constructing the opening of a play. The opening launched stage action, introduced main characters, presented the principal themes and motifs of the play in a minor key, and disseminated a wide array of expository information perhaps not always easily assimilable by an early modern audience at the outset. More significantly, the combination of all these components in an opening had to aim at engaging the audience quickly and effectively.

In everyday speech, the term “opening” is used, for example, where it denotes inauguration, as in the phrase “the opening of an art gallery.” In some instances, “opening” can be used interchangeably with the term “beginning,” as in the phrases “the beginning of a play” or “the opening of a play,” where they denote a starting-point. In fact, the term “opening” is commonly used in order to describe how a play begins. The very indistinctness of the term undoubtedly makes it useful for this purpose. Yet it makes explaining what constitutes an opening in theatrical terms a challenging task.

Whether we consult the Folio text of Twelfth Night or the Folio and Quarto texts of Hamlet, the first few lines present themselves on the page as a beginning, i.e., the point from which the text starts and where a reader begins reading it. In moving towards a definition of an opening, I wish to make a distinction between an opening as applied to the medium of the theatre and a textual beginning. In the meaning given to the term
“opening” in this dissertation, I am referring not to the first few words, lines, or scenes in the play-text (or any other textual marker for that matter), but rather to a dramaturgical technique conveyed by the playwright through the organization of dramatic material as set out in the play-text. The opening, as opposed to the beginning of its text, is not explicitly demarcated on the page; and scholars may have studied openings by analysing the play-text, but they have given little attention to it as a theatrical construct.

Yet, in their respective studies, which occasionally draw on the ideas of rhetorical and poetic theorists, critics such as Arthur Colby Sprague, Thelma N. Greenfield, Robert F. Willson, Jr., Tiffany Stern, Douglas Bruster, and Robert Weimann have provided useful observations. Sprague’s research on dramatic exposition, Greenfield’s survey of the early modern induction, Willson Jr.’s examination of opening scenes in Shakespeare’s plays, and various studies of the early modern prologue by Stern, and by Bruster and Weimann contain interesting attempts to describe certain components of Shakespearean openings. Consequently, they can serve as a helpful point of departure for further research.

Among the definitions provided under the entry “opening” in the Oxford English Dictionary is the following: opening is “A vacant space between portions of solid matter; a gap, a hole, a passage, an aperture” (def. 2, 142). One might extend this definition by stating that an “opening” is an act of entry into a play. The OED indicates that the word “opening” in the senses described above was current in everyday speech during the sixteenth century in England, and the extended definition presented above appears to have been firmly lodged in the minds of playwrights and other literary writers of the period.
For theatre audiences of the sixteenth century, the opening of a play in performance constituted an act of entry into a play. However, for the playwright, the actors and those members of a company in charge of staging the play, the opening was a construction carefully shaped with practical aims in view. Building on this observation, I should like to suggest that in the context of early modern theatrical performance, for an audience an opening constitutes a beginning (in the sense of a starting-point). An audience may never acquire full cognizance of how the opening works on them because it engages them when they know little about the ensuing action. In contrast, for those in charge of staging a play, an opening is never a beginning, because a successful opening depends on a broad range of activity: the process starts with the playwright’s text itself, and how it may be constructed with a view to the development of the rest of the action; and it ends with the actors’ efforts and skills to pitch the opening at the appropriate level on the stage to engage the audience and attune their expectations. Seen from this angle, the opening poses challenges unsensed by an audience member at the outset of a play.

For the playwright, an opening also facilitates the process of gathering the disparate energies of an audience and channeling interest in the action about to unfold. An opening is aimed, first and foremost, at engaging an audience in a matter of minutes to activate their willing suspension of disbelief. Sustaining an audience’s interest in the onstage action is the mark of any successful play, of course, and the opening affords the playwright the opportunity to immerse the audience quickly, precisely because they have had no foreknowledge of how the actors staged the dramatic conflict/s they are about to witness. Yet they may be filled with expectations of the ways in which conflict will unfold. The opening is a result of careful preparation and focus, and audience
engagement in what follows depends on a successful gathering of energies from the outset.

For early modern actors, a well-constructed opening would have offered the opportunity to exhibit professional skills, to fulfil ambitions as performers on a stage; in other words, to channel their enthusiasm and their creative energies as actors from the moment they stepped onto that stage and came into contact with an audience. Furthermore, it is in the transactions offered by an opening that an actor could establish a meaningful and distinctive act of artistic communication.

Considering the fiercely competitive nature of the London playhouses as centres of entertainment in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, the challenges contained in an opening, for playwright and actor alike, were considerable. The prospect of losing a dissatisfied audience to the entertainment offered by a rival company—the greatest threat being posed to Shakespeare’s company by the other leading company, the Admiral’s Men, and their star actor Edward Alleyn—must have presented itself as a real concern for Shakespeare and his actors; and particularly before 1600, when Shakespeare may not yet have made his name as a leading playwright.4

For the scholar interested in critical analysis, an opening contains implicit challenges too. The basic problem of analysing an opening in a play-text as opposed to watching it on stage is a case in point. An early modern play-text may give, explicitly in the stage directions or implicitly in the dialogue, only the barest hint about time and location, perhaps a reference to visual and sound effects, and precious few details about the characters on stage.5 Several theatre scholars have addressed this problem. The most
prominent, perhaps, is Anne Ubersfeld, who supplies the following remarks about an opening by Molière:

If we look at the first exchange between Alceste and Philinte, in the opening scene of *Le Misanthrope*, we realize that we know nothing of the relevant situational context. Are the two characters already there? Do they run? Who follows whom, and how? All these questions are posed by the text with its necessary gaps. If these gaps were not there, the text could not be performed, for it is performance that bears responsibility for answering these questions. (10)

Referring to other problems intrinsic to analysing the opening in the play-text, André Helbo writes:

The first question that arises is “where to start?” At once we are faced with a difficulty: the analysis of the text and that of the performance cannot be superposed. Reading the text means a linear reading of details in which it is always possible to go back; following the performance implies a global polyphonic form of reading which inevitably highlights the succession of events that make up the fable. Paradoxically what is overlooked in the reading of the written text is precisely what is not overlooked by the spectator, that is the fable and the main conflicts; on the other hand the reader registers the details without perceiving the totality of the overarching structures. (136)
Shakespeare’s plays, like those by Molière, for instance, were composed with a view to performance, and the dramatic material they contain is organized to generate theatrical effect. Ubersfeld’s work exemplifies a semiotic approach to reading the play-text, as Helbo’s does. The latter has even called attention to habits acquired from the analysis of literary characters which blur the particularities of reading a theatre character:

The ambiguity of the character’s status derives from the fact that a reading habit inculcated mainly at school turns the character into a substitute for a real person. And so the habit is formed of searching the didascalia and the dialogue for all the details that enable the student to reconstruct the character’s personality and the story of his/her life. The procedure by which the character is analyzed should be exactly the reverse: one ought not to be looking, in the dialogue particularly, for a supply of information that will allow one to decipher the character’s personality, but rather, given the discourse/actions attributed to the character, with all his/her indeterminacy, look for whatever may elucidate his/her discourse, in other words, the conditions that govern the character’s speech. (145)

It is worthwhile remembering that the words in the play-text were written to be translated into stage action; and that a character’s behaviour is usually motivated by a state of mind; this aspect helps the actor construct character. It is also worth remembering that stage speech imitates human speech: typically we think first and only then we express our thoughts. Stage speech is an expression of thought, which in turn motivates the character
to speak and behave the way he or she does; this is how the actor can bring a character to life.

After pointing to these observations, it becomes clear that for spectators the difficulties posed by reading the play-text disappear once they watch a play being performed on the stage (as Ubersfeld implies). As a result, as Isaac Benabu has observed (64-66), the opening is, arguably, the hardest point at which to begin a study of the play-text, because it contains only the barest of textual indicators which could enable a reader to understand the context in which the action evolves, as well as the characters who appear in it. Since the playwright constructs the opening with the play as a whole in view, the play-text ought to be read not necessarily in a linear fashion, but more as a play might be read in rehearsal today, where the director and actors do not have to adhere to the order of the scenes as they appear in the play-text in order to work out staging and characterisation. Benabu suggests that tracing the threads of the action retroactively from the point where all is exposed to the point where little is known may be a good starting-point for elucidating what is not immediately discernible on the page at the play’s opening. This advice, though directed at the Spanish Golden Age play-text, is useful in approaching the Shakespearean play-text, too.

The nature of early modern play-texts poses an additional challenge to the modern critic interested in analyzing Shakespeare’s technique of opening. As indicated, during the period under study, play-texts were composed with a view to performance. They were written often with specific actors in mind, with a keen perception of contemporary forms of entertainment (from bear-bating to court masque) and acting styles, and always incorporating early modern theatrical conventions, if only to challenge and unsettle them.
In the first place, early modern playwrights addressed their play-text to professional actors and other members of a theatrical company charged with the task of translating words on the page into lively stage action. But actors usually received only their individual parts, which served primarily as memory aids.\(^6\) Bearing in mind that the play-text also provided a playwright with the means to communicate to the actor how his part was to be performed (spoken and acted), it did not constitute a final, polished, work of art. Instead, a play-text was only one among many components of a theatrical production; in W.B. Worthen’s understanding, a tool of performance (216), which contributes to the physical realization of a play on the stage:

"Tools always have an immediate purpose— they are used to accomplish a specific task— and like tools texts can be made to function in socially accredited ways, in illicit ways, and in ways that require a new technological adaptation, require us to rethink the technology and the work it accomplishes. (216)"

The aim of this dissertation is to define the construction of the openings of four plays from 1591- c.1602, and to understand texts which were written in the first place for actors experienced in theatrical practice. By analysing the playwright’s organization of the dramatic material, as reflected in the play-texts, I consider the practical challenges an opening might have posed for a playwright such as Shakespeare, as well as actors charged with the task of staging plays. Thereafter, I consider how Shakespeare communicates his instructions for performing the opening of a play through his play-text."
Theatre performance, which is subject to the limits of time and place, is, to some degree, dependent for a successful realization on the simultaneous response of audiences. Close contact with audiences must have deepened a playwright’s understanding of the methods by which an effective opening could be designed and staged. However, analysing early modern audiences is a complicated undertaking, as those who have attempted it are well aware. For example, little is known with any degree of certainty about the social composition, behaviour, and habits of early modern audiences, and even less about their horizon of expectations, and the ways they might have reacted to a play being performed on the stage. Evidence of early modern theatre reception is often gleaned from a handful of eyewitness accounts, which are subjective at best. Due to these circumstances, there is no body of scholarship on early modern theatre reception to provide insight into these important concerns.

That the early theatre offered audiences a rich and varied aesthetic experience was well-known to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, judging by the popularity of the public theatre as a centre for entertainment, where plays were performed within approximately two hours. The public theatre’s popularity may be gauged from the plays that have survived, few in manuscript form, many more in print. While every play contains similar components, its internal organization, always shaped with audience response in view, is what lends it artistic specificity as a work composed for the stage. These constructions include the physical presence of actors on the stage and the interplay of the actors with their roles, stage movement (entrances, exits, blocking), pacing of the action, the expressive force of dramatic language (the effects generated by the structures of verse and prose⁷), the frequent use of narrative as a staging device, as well as props,
costumes, sound effects, visual effects, and other extralinguistic components of theatrical production. In addition to these, and less apparent in the play-texts, are a plethora of meta-theatrical symbols and verbal references whose meanings and expressive reach may be found obtuse by someone reading or seeing a play today. All of these elements constitute the basic dramatic material of Shakespeare’s plays, which supplied the range of plots composed to meet the growing demands of early modern audiences.

While the public stage was the medium for which he wrote, Shakespeare’s writing often drew material from a broad range of narrative sources (for example, the fifteenth-century novella) and from the vibrant ritualistic traditions of the classical and mediaeval theatres. Shakespeare also drew material from a well-established tradition of lyric poetry, perhaps, indirectly via Spenser, Wyatt, Surry, and Sidney (Forster 50). Petrarch deserves special mention in this study, because in his openings Shakespeare often reworked the sonnet form and Petrarchan figures of speech for theatrical effect:

The whole temper of the time was in favour of imitation, so poets in the various countries imitated what was imitable—the stereotyped, yet infinitely flexible diction of Petrarchism, embodied in testing and demanding poetic forms like the sonnet. In this way the Petrarchan fashion was a kind of training in the creation of a new poetic language. (Forster 23)

Therefore, in constructing his openings, Shakespeare must have taken into account a broad range of considerations. Some factors, the specific actor for which he composed a part, for example, are not always immediately apparent to a modern scholar interested in
the critical analysis of a play-text.

At the turn of the twentieth century, scholars began to devote increasing attention to early modern theatre practice in England, and more specifically, to Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice. The extent of interest in openings is prominently reflected in the latest critical editions of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and also in more specialised critical works on openings. However, critical interest has focused largely on describing the dramatic forms which typically set plays in motion (i.e., prologue, induction, framing dialogue, etc.) rather than analysing how the dramatic material of an opening is organised. Evidence of this trend is the marked absence of an adequate vocabulary for describing the openings of Shakespeare’s plays.

As opposed to earlier scholarship, I approach the opening conceptually as a component of theatrical composition, integral to every play. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the openings analysed, I consult a range of sources from which Shakespeare may have borrowed material. I have also attempted to glean information about early modern reception from the play-texts themselves. In contrast to the accepted wisdom of theatre semioticians like Keir Elam, it is not my view that all the complexities of reception can be grasped and understood scientifically, and my interest in early modern reception is restricted to demonstrating that Shakespeare could perceive how his audiences might react. This study, therefore, does not subject openings to a semiotic analysis, although it relies on a semiotic vocabulary to describe the construction of an opening in Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice.

Since openings have not been conceptualised in modern scholarship of early modern theatre, I rely on a broad range of classical scholarship concerned with rhetoric
and poetry, texts which consider the challenges implicit in an opening for rhetoricians as well as for poets. Classical scholarship, however, constitutes only the conceptual basis for a theory of openings that has emerged from a close analysis of the organization of the dramatic material as laid out in the four case-studies selected for this dissertation.

Delimiting an opening is not an easy task, as this dissertation suggests. In his remarks on *Twelfth Night*, Keir Elam appears to be struggling to define the opening of the play: “[1.3] represents virtually a third ‘opening’ to the play, introducing not only a new environment (Olivia’s household), but also a distinct mood, that of the frenetic revelry presided over by Sir Toby” (1.3n). A play has only a single opening, and when Elam writes “virtually a third ‘opening,’” he appears to have sensed what I demonstrate in Chapter Three of this dissertation, namely that the opening of *Twelfth Night* does indeed contain three largely disconnected actions: 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3. In fact, a reading of *Twelfth Night*, with awareness of the practicalities of constructing an opening for the early modern stage, suggests that the comedy’s three independent actions, which constitute the opening, supply essential expository material for the play; and these actions are suspended sequentially in order to arouse the audience’s interest. An opening can be best compared, perhaps, with what is clearly defined as an overture in opera, an introduction which immerses the audience by hinting at themes which are elaborated in subsequent acts: “The overture may also introduce thematic ideas to be heard again later” (Sadie 801). With these observations in mind, one may trace a technique in composing the opening which is applied in different ways in the plays studied, but which always involves delaying the introduction of the action or actions that develop through the play in order to stimulate audience interest and channel audience response. Support for this
theory is found in classical and early modern treatises on rhetoric and poetry, and also in more recent studies on theatre semiotics.

Chapter One, “Openings in Theory,” includes two sections which consider the central ideas pertaining to the concept of an opening in rhetorical and poetic theory. Each examines how theorists have confronted the concept of an “opening” as a mode of initiation in the major treatises and handbooks of rhetoric and poetry from Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. in Greece to Sir Philip Sidney in the late-sixteenth century in England. This endeavour might be summarized at the start by the following questions: what does the concept of “opening” as mode of initiation mean in rhetorical and poetic theory, and what terms do theoreticians use to grapple with it? These complex questions are approached from a wide variety of angles which sometimes fail to correspond.

Chapter Two, “Openings in Shakespearean Dramaturgy and Stage-Practice,” which contains two sections, provides an introduction to the study of openings in modern scholarship. The first section presents a survey of past criticism on the subject and reviews the terms modern scholars have associated with openings. The second section posits a theory of Shakespeare’s openings that relies on ideas presented in Chapter One, and, more specifically, on the pronouncements of Aristotle, Donatus, and Scaliger. It goes on to illustrate the theory of openings through an analysis of the 1623 Folio text of Macbeth (1606)\textsuperscript{11}, as reproduced in the New Cambridge Edition (ed. Braunmuller).

Chapter Three, “Analysing the Openings of Four Plays: From Page to Stage,” which contains four sections, applies the theory defined in Chapter Two to analyses of the openings of Romeo and Juliet (1591-1597), The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597-1602), Twelfth Night (1600-1602), and Hamlet, (1599 - c.1601). I chose to examine four
plays which, as far as we know, are relatively close in date (1591-c.1602), in order to limit my field of research and help identify characteristics of openings that may be unique to a particular stage in Shakespeare’s career. By choosing two comedies and two tragedies, I sought to assess how conventions of genre might shape the composition and reception of an opening.

Furthermore, I consider some of the plays’ textual histories, which are pertinent to my argument. My focus falls on all the relevant information about staging and characterisation contained in the early editions, Quartos and Folio, as reproduced in widely consulted modern critical editions of Shakespeare’s plays. I am also aware of the controversy surrounding the multiple-text plays. When subjecting the openings to analysis, I explain my choice of text depending on the transparency and relevance of staging and characterisation material contained in it; for example, in the explicit stage directions and those contained within the body of the text.12

It is also important to note that the differences among the texts of a play are not necessarily theatrical in origin (i.e., they are not always indicative of deliberate revisions of the play in the course of its production history). As scholarship has determined, textual variants could be the result of the printing process and other such extra-dramatic processes. The printed text, therefore, may contain information that does not reflect what an early modern audience saw on the stage. The analysis, however, discusses the textual differences merely with a view to justifying my choice of text containing the fullest information for the construction of an opening, and, as I have already pointed out, to showing that despite the textual variance, it is possible to trace the openings in the various texts.13
Anthony D. Nuttall’s book *Openings: Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* is a particularly useful starting-point for elaborating my critical approach to analysing the four openings selected for this dissertation. Referring to what is surely the most distinguished and influential literary opening, that of Genesis, Nuttall observes that whereas to the reader of the Bible the famous words “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” appear as a “natural beginning,” to the author/s they constituted an artificial construction conceived and shaped to imbue in the reader the primacy of creation. From Nuttall’s perspective, an opening of the kind presented in Genesis makes important demands on those interested in critical analysis. It requires that we do not give in to the urge to interpret words only for what they say, but in addition pay close attention to the literary conventions that shape the reader’s experience. This advice, though useful for critical analysis of literary texts, must be treated with caution when considering play-texts that were read, in the first place, by professional actors and other theatre practitioners preparing a play for performance in the early modern theatre.

Since the early twentieth century, much has been written to explain the limitations of literary approaches to Shakespeare’s play-texts. The works of Harley Granville-Barker and later John Styan and Manfred Pfister are pioneering examples of such attempts. Subsequently, John Russell Brown devoted a number of books to defining theatrical parameters for analysing the play-text. Works ranging from John Barton’s *Playing Shakespeare* to Cicely Berry’s *Text in Action* offer revealing insights into the rhetorical possibilities of voice and dramatic language. While providing illuminating observations about stage practice, these works generally approach the play-text from a contemporary perspective, or to use Barton’s phrase, they “mak[e] the plays their own,”
not analysing the play-text within the early modern context.

What prompted an examination of play-texts within the early modern context has been, in large part, the important discoveries of E.K. Chambers, W.W. Greg, Alfred W. Pollard, and Charles William Wallace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently, Bernard Beckerman, T.J. King, Andrew Gurr, John H. Astington, and other scholars have conducted important research about the material conditions of early modern theatres. The seminal work of Alan C. Dessen on early modern theatrical conventions and stage practice has aroused interest in other specialized areas of research about early modern theatre in England, such as Tiffany Stern’s *Making Shakespeare from Page to Stage*, and Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann’s *Prologues to Shakespeare’s Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama*.

As background to reading the theatrical text, it is important to remember that early modern plays were written with particular conditions in mind that seem to have been common to all playing spaces. Prior to the opening of the Globe in 1599, when the Chamberlain’s Men became its resident company, Shakespeare and his fellow actors played for paying audiences on the platform stages of open-air theatres such as the Theatre, the Rose, and the Curtain, and also at entertainment halls at court and at the estates of noble families. In fact, as far as we know, Shakespeare’s company played almost daily after 1594 (Gurr 41-42), competing for audiences with rival companies that were active in the 1590s. Shakespeare’s company also took to the provinces (more frequently when the plague was rampant in London), and there is little doubt that travelling demanded a fair amount of flexibility with regard to certain aspects of staging, enough to accommodate the fluid circumstances of performance (e.g., stages of varying
configurations and dimensions). Yet research has shown that some of the play-texts contain evidence that Shakespeare composed for a stage that resembles the one represented in Arend Van Buchell’s sketch of the open-air Swan (Gurr 41-42), modelled on De Witt’s sketch from c. 1596; more specifically, a platform stage, projecting into an open yard, that contained a bare playing area and two backstage entrances at either side of a tiring-house, and a balcony. These are the basic features of the stages on which Shakespeare presented his plays almost daily.

Drawing on evidence from plays performed at the Theatre, the Rose, and the first Globe, Andrew Gurr has described the physical properties of the London open-air playhouses:

At the rear of the stage was a “tiring-house” or players’ changing-room, the front face of which had two or more openings onto the stage. At the first gallery level in the tiring-house façade was a balcony or gallery (sometimes called the “tarras” in the seventeenth century, which was occasionally used as a supplementary playing area in conjunction with the stage door). Near the front of the stage in some playhouses was a large trap-door. Over the stage, extending from the tiring-house above the balcony or the tarras was a cover or “heavens” supported by two pillars rising from the stage. This was to shelter the stage from the weather and to provide a place from which things could be let down onto the stage. (122)

Gurr provides only a very broad description of the main properties of the platform stage. He is well aware that the purpose-built playhouses in London differed from one another
in certain aspects of their design. A more recent publication on the discoveries at the Rose confirms this point: “There was no typical stage house and it seems clear, from the existing evidence, that they probably developed with time” (Bowsher 14).

When we consider the conditions of production in purpose-built playhouses like the Globe, which seem to offer more sophisticated possibilities for staging plays than, say, a private hall\(^\text{17}\), we might do well to search the play-texts for information as to whether the characters involved in an opening entered from the tiring-house, the trap door(s), or the balcony. Since staging the opening may also involve aural effects, we must pay close attention to the explicit instructions contained, for example, in the initial stage directions of Macbeth, where the 1623 Folio\(^\text{18}\) reads “Thunder and Lightning;” or in the 1594 Quarto text of Titus Andronicus, where we find the single word “Flourish.” We also find explicit instructions in the texts about portable properties required for an opening (a “Coffin covered with black” for Titus Andronicus [Q1]). In 3 Henry VI, the characters representing the York faction (identifiable by the white roses in their hats) march onto the stage for the first time only to be met by a large portable property, specified in the dialogue by the reference “that throne” (1.1.22).\(^\text{19}\) Smaller items like swords, books, torches, lanterns, tapers, and musical instruments are important too, and certain items may have had context-specific or conventional meaning on the early modern stage. For instance, in 2 Henry VI, the characters’ first entrance onto the stage is preceded by the sound of trumpets and hautboys, which as W.F. Sternfeld argues, perhaps signalled danger, and the prospect of social strife or even warfare. The Chorus in 2 Henry IV seems to invoke these associations verbally when he presents his character to an audience at the outset of the play:
Rumour is a pipe
Blown by surmises, Jealousy’s conjectures,
And of so easy and so plain a stop
That the blunt monster with uncounted heads,
The still-discordant wav’ring multitude,
Can play upon it. (15-20)

Similarly, in using the play-text as a guide for staging, attention has to be given to information about the costumes worn by the characters, as well as information that pertains to their physical appearances more generally. Though the openings of 2 Henry IV and Macbeth are very different, in both cases costumes make a strong visual impression at the start. Yet while the play-text of 2 Henry IV provides specific instructions about costumes, contained in the initial explicit stage direction “Enter Rumor [in a robe] painted full of tongues” (found only in the Quarto of 1600), the play-text of Macbeth is less specific as the initial explicit stage direction makes obvious: “Thunder and Lightning. Enter three Witches.” In cases where explicit stage directions are sparse, we must go beyond, to the text as a whole, in search of the playwright’s implicit stage directions, as in the analysis of the opening of Macbeth in Chapter Two.

One important observation about the early modern theatre is that plays were written to be performed before they were set in print (in some cases long beforehand), and that written texts, addressed to theatre practitioners, often supplied important directives for the staging of plays. Early modern play-texts also conceal a more intimate relationship
between playwright and actor than we might expect to find between a modern playwright and the company that performs the play. Shakespeare, as well as his contemporaries, may have composed the first draft in the isolation of his chamber, as the epilogue to *King Henry V* implies (5.3.3), but the draft could have undergone changes while the play was prepared to be performed on the stage\(^{22}\), and some plays had a very long production history. It has often been remarked, with regret of course, that none of Shakespeare’s manuscripts have reached us. This may be the case because the manuscript had little use outside the theatre except for printers who were on the look-out for new material.\(^{23}\) In the theatre, once the first draft was written (and in some cases transcribed into a prompt-copy), sent to be licensed by the Master of the Revels (now a particularly valuable document), and “parts” had been distributed and memorized, the manuscript remained in the possession of the company for further development (Beckerman 179).

The majority of play-texts from the early modern period have reached us in quarto and folio editions, and we may be particularly fortunate that Shakespeare’s plays have reached us in these forms; for unlike his contemporaries Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont, and John Fletcher, there is no solid evidence to suggest that he oversaw the publications of his plays:

Indeed, as Douglas A. Brooks has observed (echoing many other commentators), “Shakespeare seems to have been singularly indifferent about whether and how the plays he wrote made it into print”— an indifference which Richard Dutton suggests may have derived from a sense of loyalty to the company for which he served as principal playwright. (Murphy 16)
But the notion that Shakespeare may have paid little attention to preserving his texts in print needs re-evaluation. For what may appear at first hand to be a lack of concern with what he had composed, may instead reflect his awareness that the text was addressed in the first place to those who would translate it into lively stage action, in other words, to the professional actors, bookkeepers\(^{24}\), and all those that formed the theatrical company. The play-texts incorporated the acting and staging conventions of the early modern theatre.\(^{25}\) Through the play-texts the playwright conveyed instructions to the actors primarily in “parts”\(^{26}\) and to other members of the company who were familiar with these conventions through a manuscript (e.g., the bookkeeper). The play-text became a vehicle to convey directions to those in charge of staging the play. These directions, either explicit or implicit, are scattered through the play-text for the early modern actor to interpret. Seen from this perspective, the play-text becomes fully fledged only when it is interpreted, fleshed out, and embodied by theatre practitioners.

In order to elucidate this point and its implications for critical play-text analysis, I should like briefly to compare different sets of staging instructions for the opening contained at the outset of two Shakespearean play-texts. First, the initial explicit stage directions found in the Oxford edition of *Titus Andronicus* (based on the first Quarto)\(^{27}\):

*Flourish. Enter the Tribunes and Senators aloft, and then enter [below]*

*SATURNINUS and his followers at one door and BASSIANUS and his followers at the other, with drums and colours.*
Herein lies a wealth of information about the characters’ positioning on the stage, and also about sound effects, costumes and props. When we turn to the Oxford edition of Macbeth (based on the 1623 Folio), we find directions for an opening that are barely sketched: “Enter the three Witches.” From these short stage directions, we cannot be certain about the specificities of staging. While the term “enter,” which denotes stepping onto the stage, might suggest that the Witches are instructed to move from the tiring-house onto the stage via doors at either entry (not ascend through a trapdoor, for example), the short stage directions are silent about the Witches’ appearance and the way in which they are expected to enter the stage (in a motion of foreboding stillness or dancing and singing?)²⁸; more generally, these directions indicate no more than an entrance cue for the actors. These short directions, of course, do not mean that early modern actors preparing the play for performance were unaware of or unconcerned about their characters’ positioning on stage, appearances, and manners of entry. In fact, the contrary is the case: positioning, for instance, must have been a basic concern for the actors. What is the reason for such a terse and seemingly uninformative stage direction? We cannot say for sure, but if the play-text was used as an aid for staging, then one possibility is that the stage direction constituted a textual annotation for the playwright or bookkeeper (prompter), who could have provided clarifications to the actors verbally.

Another possibility, which perhaps better reflects the nature of theatrical writing for the early modern stage, is that the time allocated for collective rehearsal appears to have been much shorter than the time allocated in the modern theatre (Gurr 142).²⁹ This circumstance is likely to have compelled the playwright to convey as much staging information as possible in the form of words on the page (i.e., in the form of explicit
stage direction and implicitly in dialogue). However, the example given above from *Macbeth* indicates explicitly only the simple act of appearing on the stage. In this instance, for example, there is no need for the playwright (or in some cases the bookkeeper) to specify positioning, simply because the information would have been obvious to theatre practitioners charged with the task of staging the play in the early modern theatre.\(^{30}\)

What this example points to is that the play-text is only a shorthand among playwright, actors, and other practitioners, who were aware of a much broader production context that is only partially reflected in the play-text. In an article on *Hamlet* Q1, Alan Dessen quotes R.B. McKerrow’s remarks on the limitations of interpreting early modern play-texts:

> The original manuscript was merely the substance, or rather the bare bones, of a performance on the stage, intended to be interpreted by actors skilled in their craft, who would have no difficulty in reading it as it was meant to be read.

(Dessen 29)

Writing more specifically about the challenges contained in interpreting early modern stage directions (both explicit and implicit stage directions contained in the dialogue), Dessen and Leslie Thomson conceive of the play-text in terms similar to McKerrow’s, as a play manual or shorthand which was shared, understood, and interpreted by specialized theatre professionals:
In preparing what we hope is a useful and usable resource, our focus is on the terms—what we conceive of as the *theatrical vocabulary*—actually used by the playwrights, bookkeepers, and scribes of the period as reflected primarily in the stage directions to be found in the surviving manuscripts and printed texts of the plays. Behind this phrase lies our postulation then of a language of the theatre shared by playwrights, players, and playgoers that can easily be blurred or eclipsed in modern editions, stage productions, and on-the-page interpretations.

Dessen and Thomson are acutely aware of the inherent difficulty modern interpreters face in decoding a theatrical idiom that is codified only in the play-texts. They aptly remark, for example, that what eludes modern interpreters in the explicit stage direction “*Romeo opens the tomb*” (found in Q1) is whether the “tomb” was a stage property or an effect generated by mimed action involving the spectators’ imaginations. In spite of difficulties of this type, I examine the play-texts to obtain as much information as possible for an understanding of the construction of openings in the early modern context. My analyses do not offer a new interpretation so much as a way of approaching the play-text as a performable entity, an approach that attempts to trace how the playwright conveys both explicit and implicit instructions for staging the opening, and communicates the theatrical effect of a work through the particular organization of the dramatic material in the play-text.

The conclusion, “Shakespeare’s Technique of Openings,” takes a broader perspective on the evidence presented in the dissertation as a whole and by alluding to a
contemporary debate on performance criticism points to several implications this research has for the study of Shakespeare.

Notes

1 Andrew Gurr maintains that the Court facilitated some of these changes about 1572, by taking players under its patronage and securing their social status (9).
2 Emrys Jones makes a similar point in his analysis of the second scene of Julius Caesar:

   The scene communicates a great deal of information, about Caesar, Cassius, Brutus, and Anthony, and their relationship with each other, about the political situation of Rome which is the play’s starting point, and about the direction in which the main action is going to move. And all this information is conveyed to us so easily and quickly that the play is well underway before we realize that Shakespeare has solved, or evaded, the usual problem of exposition. For the scene does much more than communicate information. It is also successful drama: a mechanism so contrived as to arouse interest and excitement. (19)

3 The phrase was first coined in the nineteenth century by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who sought to revive the element of fantasy in works of literature, which became increasingly preoccupied with scientific inquiry. In the twentieth century, the “willing suspension of disbelief” has been applied very often to the theatre, and it is applicable to Shakespeare’s because theatrical representation on the early modern stage often relied on the willingness of the audience to overlook the physical limitations of the medium. The “suspension of disbelief” as a vital act of collaboration (an implicit contract between audience and actors) could have been activated in a number of ways. The most well-cited example is Henry V, where the Chorus encourages the audience to collaborate with the actors on stage by exercising their powers of imagination: “Suppose within the girdle of these walls / Are now confined two mighty monarchies, …” (Prol. 19-20).

4 Evidence for this statement can be found in the Quartos of Shakespeare’s plays: in striking contrast to the title-pages of Quartos published in the sixteenth century, those published in the seventeenth century print the name, Shakespeare. In Making Shakespeare from Page to Stage, Tiffany Stern indicates that “Shakespeare is not named on any quarto title page until Loves Labour’s Lost of 1598”(158). Seventeenth-century printers may have believed that the playwright’s growing esteem and popularity would help sell more books.

5 In contrast, modern texts generally provide a great deal of information at the outset. See, for example, Arthur Miller’s lengthy initial stage direction in Death of a Salesman (1949) and Eugène Ionesco’s lengthy initial stage direction in Rhinoceros (1959).

6 Therefore, the text in hand provided the actor with only a partial understanding of the entire play.

7 Russ Macdonald has considered this subject with regard to Shakespeare’s comedies in particular.

8 See Elam’s chapter entitled “Theatrical Communication: Codes Systems and the Performance Text.”

9 According to the Oxford English Dictionary “exposition” means: “The action or process of setting forth, declaring, or describing, either speech or writing” (def 4, 443). In theatrical terms, “exposition” is often associated with the dramatic material supplied by a character/actor to an audience before the play proper begins: a prologue, for instance, is a mode of direct address that establishes mood, and background, and supplies the setting for the action. Elam has called these types of actor-audience persuasion “conventionalized presentational devices” (90). Conversely, “exposition” can come about naturally, i.e., as part of the play proper. I refer to “exposition,” specifically, as background material supplied by the playwright for the purpose of attuning audience expectation. This material may be geared towards setting a particular mood, supplying information about the dramatic situation and characters, or both.

10 Among the definitions of “overture” in the Oxford English Dictionary is the following: “An orchestral piece, of varying form and dimensions, forming the opening or introduction to an opera, oratorio, or other extended composition; often containing or made up of themes from the body of the work, or otherwise indicating the character of it” (def 7, 333).

11 Dates are from Alfred Harbage.
Since modern editors often interpret explicit stage direction, I turn regularly to the earliest extant editions in order to verify accuracy.

I tend not to refer to discrepancies in the placement of entry and exit cues in the text and other such minor differences.

The most recent critic to challenge this long-established assumption is Lukas Erne.

John H. Astington indicates that the following conditions were common to all playing spaces: a bare stage that was equipped with a tiring-house, where actors changed costumes, and through which they could enter and exit (104).

For example, the Admiral’s Men, Worcester’s Men, Pembroke’s Men, the Children of Paul’s, and the Children of the Chapel.

For example, a projecting platform stage provided playwrights the opportunity to forge a close affinity between actors and audience (see my discussion of the prologue in Chapter Three: Romeo and Juliet). A pillar rising for the stage, another feature of open-air playhouses, could be used to create an atmosphere of secrecy. In the opening of Antony and Cleopatra, for example, the dialogue suggests that Demetrius and Philo may be hiding behind a pillar, overhearing the exchange between Antony and Cleopatra (1.1). Finally, stage machinery was employed for spectacular effects, as in The Tempest, where the goddess Juno emerges on a hoisting mechanism (descending from the heavens).

It is important to acknowledge the gap between performance and text in this instance. The initial stage directions were printed some seventeen years after the first performance, in a remarkably short text.

Ben Jonson refers to a flying “throne” derisorily as a “creaking throne” in the prologue of Volpone.

For a general discussion of the properties of costume see Gurr, who draws attention to the evidence contained in Henslowe’s diary about elaborate and colourful costumes: “Henslowe’s and Alleyn’s papers list cloaks in scarlet with gold laces and buttons, and in purple satin adorned with silver” (193). Gurr, however, does not discuss the significance of the costumes’ colour and material in reflecting light (and thus drawing attention to the actor) in the open-air theatre, where performances took place in natural daylight.

Macbeth is a case in point, provided that other texts of the play were not printed before the Folio of 1623.

Tiffany Stern devotes a chapter to this subject in Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan (80-122).

It is interesting to note that in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a thriving market for pirated theatrical manuscripts (McKendrick 262). There is little evidence to suggest that similar circumstances existed in England.

I refer specifically to bookkeepers, because they appear to have been in charge of coordinating the various production elements into a seamless whole, first during collective rehearsal and then during performance. In Making Shakespeare from Page to Stage, Tiffany Stern describes the function of bookkeepers thus:

But, much more importantly, the prompter also managed the entrances and exits, arranged the basic blocking on the stage, and saw to it that the timing was right during performance rather like a modern musical “conductor.” Medieval pictures of prompters show how sometimes performances were really “conducted,” the prompters clutching batons in their hands to indicate which actor is to speak. Renaissance prompters still performed a similar task, though by then they had retreated behind the stage, and were no longer visible to the audience. (88)

In Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters, Dessen refers to Raymond Williams’s concise and useful definition of “conventions” as “the terms upon which author, performance and audience agree to meet, so that the performance may be carried on” (10).

In Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan, Tiffany Stern corroborates this observation. Referring to the actor’s “part” for Orlando in Robert Greene’s Orlando Furioso, she writes:

The transformation from prose to verse marks a change in the pace and tempo of the scene, but it is also an actor’s stage direction, visually obvious from the arrangement of speeches in the part. “Actual” stage directions indicating similar occasions are simply other ways of conveying the same information in renaissance texts. (65)

The stage direction printed in Charlton Hinman’s facsimile of the play provides the identical information. I am citing a modern text for the sake of convenience.
Conversely, there are stage directions which are much more explicit. In the case of the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, the stage direction clearly indicates that Romeo climbs down from the balcony using a rope-ladder ("ladder of cords"), as that play-text attests at 3.2.31.

In *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan*, Tiffany Stern argues that actors probably had only one group rehearsal of a play before it was presented to audiences. Private study was the most essential part of an actor’s preparation in the early modern context (121). Nevertheless, it is likely that small group rehearsals of scenes often took place, where older and more experienced actors could have guided the younger and less experienced actors.

The play-text of *Titus Andronicus*, on the other hand, provides a lengthy and detailed direction, probably because it involves an entrance that is rather complicated.

Apart from this problem, the theatrical idiom, like any system of communication, was in a state of perpetual flux (see my comments on genre, p. 2).
Chapter One: Openings in Theory
To begin a study of Shakespeare’s openings by alluding to ideas on rhetoric and poetry may seem unorthodox. Yet I do so, primarily, because both branches of scholarship, which examine the practical implications contained in the composition of openings for orators and poets alike, present ideas which have helped me define a critical vocabulary for discussing the construction of openings in Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice. For example, Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* (c. 95 AD) contributes greatly to my research on Shakespeare’s openings because it provides rich insights into the practical aspects of composition and presentation confronting an auditor at the opening.

Rhetorical and poetic theory had also bequeathed to posterity certain ideas on openings which appear to have influenced early modern playwrights in England. This process can be traced back to ancient oratorical practice where, for example, as the eminent scholar on rhetoric George A. Kennedy has noticed, “[r]hetorical conventions of praise and blame have been constantly borrowed by poets and other writers” (74). The basic principles of rhetoric and poetry were taught to every child who attended grammar school during the period (Vickers 12), where Shakespeare could have absorbed some of the ideas which would later shape his artistry.¹ The significance and extent of this influence in the context of early modern performance in England have been discussed recently by Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann. More specifically, their attention has focused on the dramatic prologue, which often provided details about characters, genre, and setting, and which had absorbed certain oratorical conventions such as securing the goodwill of the audience:
Rhetorically, prologues embodied what the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* called the “principium” or “direct opening”…. As it is related in the popular handbook, “The Direct Opening straightaway prepares the hearer to attend our speech. Its purpose is to enable us to have hearers who are attentive, receptive, and well disposed.” (Bruster and Weiman 12)

As we shall see towards the end of this chapter, Ben Jonson’s prologue to *Volpone* and Shakespeare’s prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, though dissimilar in important ways, corroborate this finding. In fact, they exemplify the extent to which oratorical conventions of public address could be adapted to stage-practice, and are a testament to the resourcefulness of early modern playwrights.

Notwithstanding the work discussed above, the studies of rhetoric and poetry have traditionally been separated. The reasons for this separation are complex. One such reason, attributable to Aristotle’s often vague if not impenetrable ideas\(^2\), centres on the notion that rhetoric is associated with the utilitarian purpose of persuasion and poetic theory with aesthetics. In fact, this notion has led to the more serious charge that the former branch is somehow less artistic than the latter. Though in some senses the latter may be true, when the Greek meaning of the word is considered, where “art” (“techne”) means scientific discipline, it is not. The opposite is in fact the case: from the classical period onwards, theoreticians have sought to establish oratory and poetry as legitimate art, or worthy branches of scientific inquiry. This endeavour has typically involved describing and also perpetuating formal and affective principles, among which is a cluster dedicated to the mechanics of initiating a public speech, an epic poem, and a play. It
should be of little surprise, therefore, that Aristotle’s monumental philosophical
undertakings in the *Art of Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* constitute good starting-points for
conceptualising “opening” as a mode of initiation before advancing a theory of
Shakespearean openings.

**Openings in Rhetorical Theory**

The concept of opening is pondered frequently in rhetorical theory where, for
example, the terms “prooimion” in Greek and “exordium” in Latin refer to the part of a
rhetorical discourse known as “the introduction to a public speech.” During the fifth
century BC, the Ancient Greek Sophists Gorgias, Protagoras, and Antiphon employed
prooemia in judicial orations long before Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and others
theorized about the term in treatises and handbooks. The collected “prooemia” of the
Sophist Antiphon provide a case in point (see James A. Herrick 34). When the term
found its way into rhetorical theory during the fourth century BC, it served essentially as
a means to define the properties and functions of rhetorical openings. Other critical terms
have been used to elucidate the practical challenges contained in rhetorical openings for
Classical orators, who were in charge of constructing and presenting them. Some of these
challenges were relevant to early modern playwrights and actors too.

In the dialogue *Gorgias* (c. 387 BC), Plato famously dismisses rhetoric as mere
flattery. In response, Aristotle set out to prove that rhetoric was a branch of philosophy
(an “art”) worthy of scientific inquiry. Plato’s attack, which may have prompted Aristotle to write the Art of Rhetoric, has influenced subsequent work in at least one noteworthy way: it has stimulated a rich and varied corpus of work dedicated to the advancement of Aristotle’s position against Plato. It is within this context that the concept “opening” will be considered.

The effort to establish rhetoric as an “art” is already perceptible in the abundance of classifications presented in the early chapters of the Art of Rhetoric, where Aristotle famously defines the three branches of oratory: display (ceremonial), forensic (judicial), and deliberative (pertaining to policy making). We find the “prooimion” for the first time in the section on “composition,” where Aristotle presents the components of an oration, and then sets the “introduction” apart from the “public speech.” This distinction is crucial in order to emphasize that the “introduction,” which, as Aristotle explains, the orator draws upon only under certain circumstances, is not integral to a public speech, which depends on two organic elements: “statements” and “proof.” Aristotle attempts to delimit an opening for the first time. I shall devote more attention to this point later on, but for now it should suffice to say that this task is difficult, as indicated in the General Introduction, and it has implications for a study of Shakespearean openings too.

In chapter 3.14, which discusses the “introduction” in speeches drawn from the three branches of oratory, Aristotle provides a rather unsatisfying statement: “The introduction, then, is the beginning of the speech, which in poetry is the prologue and in flute music the prelude; for all these things are initiatory and, as it were, prepare the way for what is to follow” (246). These observations, which seem rather broad and indistinctive, soon give way to more helpful ones. The first pertains to display oratory,
which contains speeches that are rendered on commemorative occasions\(^7\) (i.e., public
ceremonies such as funerals) and derive from “praise and blame”\(^8\):

The prelude is similar to the introduction of epideictic oratory; indeed flutists, by
putting in the prelude whatever they should be able to play well, connect it with
the tonic key, and that is how one should write in display speeches, speaking out
immediately what one wants to say and so setting the tone and connecting this
with the subject, as in fact all speakers do. \((Art of Rhetoric 246-47)\)

Drawing on a musical metaphor, which is thought-provoking in the context of
Shakespearean openings, is an effective way to illustrate that the “introduction” must
provide the audience with a taste of what is to come, or in Lawson-Tancred’s words,
“establish, as it were, the home key of the speech as a whole” (246). What Aristotle
precisely means by “tonic key” is unclear. Marvin T. Herrick adopts the rather limiting
perspective that the introduction has simply to make clear the purpose of the speech (26).
A little further on, the text adds that the “keynote should be either exotic or cognate with
the speech” (247). Aristotle appears to address an aspect of style here. The term “exotic”
may be an allusion to an important initiatory function, which is to draw attention to the
subject of the main speech by appealing to the imagination. For example, the orator’s
careful choice of words, i.e., elocution, can elicit excitement and anticipation for what
follows. This type of rhetorical introduction is likened to the prelude of flute music,
because it draws attention to the main speech by establishing an atmosphere conducive to
its reception. Aristotle insists, moreover, that the introductory material provide the
listener with the impression that s/he is personally included in the orator’s address.\textsuperscript{9} This might be done by giving specific mention to the audience’s city of residence, or community, or alternatively by stating the names of well-known figures. The only provision seems to be that the arguments, or proofs,\textsuperscript{10} belong to “ethos” (the speaker’s attributes), “pathos” (the causes of human emotions), and “logos” (rational reasoning), Aristotle’s three basic proofs of rhetoric.

In forensic and deliberative oratory, which includes speeches that take place at court or in legislative assemblies and derive from prosecution and defence,\textsuperscript{11} the rhetorical introduction appears to be very different:

But in forensic and epic introductions there is an indication of the story, so that it may be known in advance what the tale is about and that the intellect be not in suspense….The most necessary function, then, of the introduction, and special to it, is to show what is the purpose of the speech. (\textit{Art of Rhetoric} 247-48)

The excerpt clearly indicates that the introduction must contain a synopsis of the main point presented in a speech so that the audience’s perceptions of the material are sharpened. Because the focus here is on preserving the audience member’s concentration, any aspect of style that might, for example, shift attention away from the subject-matter and create suspense is discarded outright. As indicated above, this type of rhetorical introduction is likened to the prologue in drama, because, according to Aristotle, the prologue summarizes the central point conveyed in a play.\textsuperscript{12}
Having dealt with the properties and functions of “introductions,” Aristotle proceeds to make another important distinction among the three branches of oratory. He maintains that whereas display speeches require “introductions” frequently, those of forensic and deliberative oratory do not. This is so simply because in matters of justice and policy, the audience is presumed to be already familiar with the content of the orator’s speech, and therefore, there is no need to restate the main arguments in short. In a court of law, for example, an “introduction” to the prosecutor’s speech which describes the details of the case is redundant simply because judge and jurors are presumed to be acquainted with them well in advance. Aristotle concedes, however, that under certain circumstances the orator of forensic and deliberative speeches benefits enormously from a rhetorical “introduction”; for example, when he meets a crowd that has been already won over by a previous orator, or if he anticipates that the audience may find him too old or too young to address certain topics. With regard to the first instance, the “introduction” can engender prejudice against the former speaker. With regard to the second instance, it can dissolve the crowd’s prejudice by praising the audience, making them laugh, and arousing their sympathy. These examples reinforce Aristotle’s conviction that the “introduction” is not an integral part of a public speech, and therefore should be used only when the orator feels that it can help to secure persuasion. Aristotle’s examples also display the variety of ways in which a well-constructed opening can shape the response of an audience.

Towards the end of the treatise, Aristotle makes one more remark that deserves attention. He states that an introduction alone does not produce attentive audiences. This belief, which may have been widespread in the Hellenistic era, as the Roman rhetorical
handbook to be reviewed next clearly attests, may be tackled in closing for the purpose of emphasis. At any rate, Aristotle maintains that every section of a rhetorical discourse must secure the attention of the audience, for if the orator loses control at any point during the oration, failure is imminent. Therein seems to lie the importance of consistency in the composition and representation of an opening on the early modern stage.

The practical utility of Aristotelian standards appealed strongly to Cicero, Quintilian, and other rhetoricians during the Roman period, which Lawson-Tancred has called “the Golden age of Latin oratory” (53). Its handbooks contained information about “prooemia,” for example, which was vital for state officials “[whose] persuasive speaking in the Senate and other bodies was crucial to forging the agreements and alliances essential to Roman government and expansion during this period” (Herrick 94-95). The interest in rhetorical praxis constitutes Rome’s major contribution to the debate on openings.

The anonymous pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 85 BC) is a Roman handbook on judicial rhetoric. In it, the author presents two Latin terms, “principium” and “insinuatio,”¹⁴ which mark the start of a departure from Aristotle’s approach. The handbook begins by delimiting the five Ciceronian faculties the orator must possess for public speaking. These are “invention,” “arrangement,” “style,” “memory,” and “delivery.” The terms “principium” and “insinuatio” are presented in a discussion of the first faculty, “invention” (“inventio”), which Herrick explains thus: “The process of discovering the arguments and evidence for a persuasive case” (8). This process, according to the *Ad Herennium*, is essential to the formulation of the six parts of
a rhetorical discourse: the “introduction,” “statement of facts,” “division,” “proof,” “refutation,” and “conclusion.” Moreover, as opposed to its counterparts, which in unison constitute the main speech, the introduction is the part that precedes and prepares the ground for the main speech, and if successful, wins the hearer over to the speaker’s side. This statement alone expresses the extent of Aristotle’s influence on Roman oratory, which exemplifies a staunch dedication to establishing rhetoric as an art (“techne”). But as the discussion unfolds, the author’s distinct voice emerges, and particularly when the handbook elaborates the Ciceronian objectives of the “introduction,” which are to secure receptive, well-disposed, and attentive hearers.

In considering how these objectives can be achieved, the author distinguishes between the “principium,” or the “direct opening,” and the “insinuatio” (or the “subtle approach”). The former, and the simpler type, is assigned to situations where the orator anticipates an already receptive audience, and subsequently, all effort is put into securing attentive and well-disposed hearers. The first objective, argues the author, can be achieved by promising to discuss important issues that have not been raised too often, for otherwise the crowd might become disengaged. The second objective can be achieved by the orator praising his own contributions to the Republic, without arrogance, or by pointing to the shortcomings of his detractors. Alternatively, he might pander to the crowd by commending its wisdom, an example of “captatio benevolentia,” or by alluding to an interesting fact that is to be elaborated in the main speech. These are devices typically found in the delivery of the early modern dramatic prologue.

In situations where the orator anticipates an unreceptive crowd, however, the challenge of generating receptive, well-disposed, and attentive hearers grows. What is
required in these cases is the more intricate and aggressive introduction, the “insinuatio,” which secures the objectives of the “principium” through subtle persuasion. In the case where the orator faces a crowd that has been won over by a previous orator, the “insinuatio,” properly constructed and delivered, of course, is able to shift alliances towards the speaker. In other cases, where an orator might face a crowd that is disengaged because of an uninspiring previous orator, the “insinuatio” can draw an audience out of the tedium and provoke interest. In still other cases, where the orator might deliver a speech that offends the crowd’s moral sensibilities (the author uses the term “discreditable” speech), the “insinuatio” can diffuse the danger of alienating the crowd.16

After explaining the rhetorical properties of the “insinuatio,” the handbook supplies practical advice as to how it might be composed and delivered. With regard to the first situation, it advises the orator to present the opponent’s strongest argument first followed by a bewildered facial expression. This manoeuvre is rendered even more effective, argues the author, if coupled with a vocal exclamation of astonishment. With regard to the second situation, the handbook advises the orator to open with a comical remark, a pun, an ironical inversion, or any other technique that might elicit dignified laughter.17 Finally, with regard to the third situation, the handbook advises the orator to voice his personal aversion towards what gives offence and to assure the crowd that he can never be personally implicated in it. These examples draw exclusively on Aristotle’s three artistic proofs and imply a moral task for rhetoric. Furthermore, they exhibit a reduction of the initial distance between speaker and listener, which is important for the purpose of making the audience receptive to the main speech. The key difference
between the two types of introductions is summarized thus by the anonymous author of this treatise:

Between the Subtle Approach and the Direct Opening there is the following difference. The Direct Opening should be such that by the straightforward methods I have prescribed we immediately make the hearer well-disposed or attentive or receptive; whereas the Subtle Approach should be such that we effect all these results covertly, through dissimulation and so can arrive at the same vantage point in the task of speaking. (Rhetorica 21)

After carefully defining a method for approaching “introductions,” the author considers a wide range of practical problems that can render them ineffective. He claims, for instance, that an introduction that is too long or uses anachronistic words and a laboured style will categorically result in the auditor’s displeasure. Interesting, and particularly relevant to early modern stage-practice, is the author’s unique perspective on “mimesis” (in the sense of imitation), whereby an introduction that is perceived to be too obviously prepared (or artificial) by the audience is deemed flawed. Moreover book three, which considers the significance of the orator’s voice and gesture, constitutes one of the earliest considerations of an acting method, and of the practical challenges contained in an opening for orators.

Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria (c. 95 AD), which is also devoted in large part to judicial oratory, deserves special mention, not only because it contributes greatly to the
debate on the nature of rhetorical introductions, but because it provides rich insight into practical aspects of composition and presentation before an auditor at the opening.

In book four of *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian begins by advancing many of the traditional statements about rhetorical introductions. Drawing on the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* first, he states that introductions must secure goodwill, attention, and the readiness to learn. Thereafter, he presents Aristotle’s three artistic proofs, “ethos” (human character), “pathos” (human emotions), and “logos” (logical reasoning), and provides examples of their persuasive power. He states, for example, that by giving the impression of weakness or vulnerability, the orator will gain the judge’s attention and sympathy. He also indicates that by eradicating certain negative emotions, the orator can win a judge over, especially if the judge is predisposed towards another orator. These arguments are drawn specifically from “ethos” and clearly point to the moral function of rhetoric, first presented by Cicero in *De Inventione* and later adopted by the author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.

The first remarkably striking feature of the handbook is Quintilian’s espousal of the Greek term “prooimion.” It is presented for the first time when Quintilian writes:

> What in Latin is called *principium* or *exordium*, the Greeks seem to have had rather better reasons for calling *prooimion*, because our words merely signify “beginning,” whereas theirs makes it clear that this is the part of which precedes the introduction of the subject to be treated.…In any case, a *prooemium* is what can be said before the judge before he takes cognizance of the cause, and it is bad
practice of our schools to assume in the prooemium that the judge already knows
the cause. (181)

A possible clue as to why Quintilian adopts the term “prooimion” appears in a
condemnatory reference to the Roman medical encyclopaedist Aulus Cornelius Celsus,
who understands the term to mean “exposition,” and what is more uses a “prooimion” as
an expository chapter to his work De Medicina (c. 30 AD). Quintilian appears to chastise
Celsus because he maintains that the “statement of facts” conveys exposition, not the
introduction. Chastising Celsus is also a useful way to disassociate himself, indirectly,
from Aristotle, who assigns an expository function to the introductions of forensic and
deliberative speeches. In spite of the uncertainty here, there is little doubt that
Quintilian’s arguments derive largely from Rhetorica ad Herennium. What is more, this
influential handbook shaped Quintilian’s thoughts about rhetorical presentation
(performing a speech), wherein lies his principal contribution to this study of
Shakespeare’s openings.

Quintilian exhibits an acute awareness of the many circumstances that shape the
reception of an oration. He subjects Aristotle’s discussion of the three artistic proofs to
close scrutiny by pointing, for example, to the significance of the space in which the
orator plans to speak, the size of the audience, and other considerations of this nature:
“Before he speaks, the student must consider what, in whose presence, in whose defence,
against whom, at what time and place, in what circumstances, and in what climate of
opinion he has to speak” (205-6). He also expects the student to hone his rhetorical skills
by ongoing practice. This preparatory work, of course, is essential to public speaking in
general, but perhaps especially to the introduction, where an orator is not yet fully warmed up. In reference to the faculties of delivery (“pronuntiatio”) and style (“elocutio”), Quintilian maintains the need for lexical economy and clarity of expression. This is so, Quintilian explains, because a convoluted and sententious introduction is likely to irritate the judge. After attaining proficiency in all departments of rhetorical practice, Quintilian adds, the orator can give an impression of the speech’s “spontaneity,” which must be expressed initially in the “introduction.”

Judging by these statements, there can be little doubt that Aristotle’s detailed definitions of “prooemia” would have been superfluous to the pragmatist Quintilian, who generally avoids philosophical argumentation: “The reason for a prooemium is simply to prepare the hearer to be more favorably inclined towards us for the rest of the proceedings” (181). This concise statement, which by now sounds familiar, appears to be a simplification of the argument presented in Rhetorica ad Herennium intended to emphasize the practical utility of “prooemia.” This point may be supported by the following pronouncement about the positioning of the “prooemium” in a rhetorical discourse. Because of its practical function, Quintilian explains, the introduction does not necessarily have to precede the “statement of facts.” Instead, it might come at any point in a public speech where there is need to win favour before the judge.

Critical interest in rhetorical openings declined rapidly during the Early Middle Ages (c. 450 to 1000 AD), or at least took a very different turn. The major medieval treatises are chiefly devoted to scholastic dialectics, and therefore, even when attention is given to the “introduction,” it tends to be brief and condemnatory. For example, St.
Augustine’s hugely influential treatise, *On Christian Teaching* (began in the mid-390s and completed in c. 426 AD), refers to the “exordium” thus:

> Who could dare to maintain that truth, which depends on us for its defence, should stand unarmed in the fight against falsehood? This would mean that those who are trying to give conviction to their falsehoods would know how to use an introduction to make their listeners favourable, interested and receptive, while we would not. (101)

The classical recommendation that the orator use subtle manipulation in composing and delivering the “introduction” to a public speech could not be endorsed by an Early Church Father, and certainly not openly. If the praxis of Roman oratory was off limits to St. Augustine and his advocates, the basic humanist objectives it sought, namely, to teach, to delight, and to move, were not. On the contrary, these objectives were eagerly espoused because they could be reoriented towards propagating Christian theology. Referring to the suspicion with which medieval scholasticism approached rhetoric, James A. Herrick writes that “Augustine urged the church to use what was useful in the classical rhetorical treatises. But he was concerned that education would not be given over to learning the systems so characteristic of Roman rhetoric” (128). Furthermore, because medieval scholasticism did not seem to embrace rhetoric as a means for training proficient orators, interest in rhetorical openings and their persuasive appeal waned. Herrick makes the point succinctly when he writes: “Rhetoric’s traditional role of
assisting the development of persuasive cases through the discovery and arrangement of arguments was gradually lost to view” (124).

It is surprising that during the High and Late Middle Ages (c.1000 -1500) and the early modern period, rhetorical openings do not fare much better, except, perhaps, in treatises on the art of letter-writing (“dictamen”). Whereas the major rhetorical treatises of the period gradually advocated a return to the study of classical rhetoric, the interest was devoted largely to the dissemination of classical teaching, and mainly for the purpose of education, not training. Thomas Wilson’s *The Art of Rhetoric* (1533) is a notable example. As Herrick, who quotes George A. Kennedy, explains, it was written in the vernacular for the purpose of schooling students in English composition and apprehension. Like its Roman forerunners, it is mainly devoted to judicial oratory. What is more, it discusses introductions to public speeches in a very similar way to *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, but with a slightly changed vocabulary and several original examples. For instance, the term “open beginning” replaces “principium” and “insinuation” replaces “insinuatio.” Besides these minor variations, the treatise amalgamates the major Greek and Roman pronouncements on rhetoric:

> And because the winning of victory resteth in three points— first in apt teaching the hearers what the matter is, next in getting them to give good ear, and thirdly in winning their favor— we shall make them understand the matter easily, if first of all we begin to expound it plainly, and in brief words setting out the meaning make them harken to our saying. (134)
In this short excerpt, Wilson combines the “prooimion’s” objectives in judicial and deliberative speeches as stated in Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* with those stated in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Thereafter, he provides an extensive discussion of artistic proofs, which appears to stretch Aristotle’s definitions. “Ethos,” “pathos,” and “logos,” argues Wilson, are too narrow to accommodate all the circumstances of public speaking. By way of example, he warns orators to be particularly vigilant on hot days when the crowd is less patient and more easily agitated. Wilson also provides an elaboration of Quintilian’s treatment of style (“elocutio”) and delivery (“pronuntiatio”) as presented in *Institutio Oratoria*. Peter E. Medine goes so far as to suggest that Wilson’s espousal of Quintilian’s pronouncements on style and delivery is unique to an era that, by and large, treated style as a source of aesthetic proof:

> Though illustrated mainly with negative examples, the remarks on the virtues of diction, decorum and syntax emphasize the fundamental practicality of clear communication, particularly in making a persuasive statement. The example of the letter with absurdly affected diction, or “inkhorn terms” (189/12-37), is famous. (21)

The wide attention given to Quintilian may not be surprising if, as Kennedy proposes, Wilson wrote the handbook for educational purposes. But the evidence presented here points to Wilson’s broader commitment to the dissemination of classical wisdom, as he saw it. This overarching humanist objective which, to use a metaphor, is the glue binding early modern rhetorical scholarship in Europe, is perhaps why the work
it produced appears less committed to engaging critically with the theoretical and practical questions about openings posed by the ancients. Not surprisingly, but ironically, perhaps, the fervent commitment to the advancement of classical wisdom robs early modern rhetorical scholarship of a noteworthy contribution to this debate.\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{Openings in Poetic Theory}

In contrast to opening in rhetorical theory, opening in poetic theory is a much more fluid concept which preoccupied the minds of poetic theoreticians for over two millennia. The categories of poetry discussed here offer a dimension to the dynamics of an opening in Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice considered in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

“Beginning,” a critical term associated with the concept “opening” in poetic theory, has not received a great deal of attention. When it has received attention, the interest has been relegated to a consideration of how writers handle, or ought to handle, artistic composition, and plot structure more specifically. The critical debate originates in Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics}, a treatise that has shaped all subsequent understandings of the term, either by way of imitation or reaction. It constitutes a basic source text from which later theoreticians drew either directly or indirectly to define the nature and purpose of poetry across genre boundaries. Before approaching the treatises critically, one significant stipulation must be made. According to the \textit{Poetics} both the epic and tragedy share a
“dramatic” plot structure, and as a result, the terms reviewed here are often discussed interchangeably in both kinds of poetry from Aristotle onwards. At points, however, where the attention shifts from the formal to the affective properties of poetry, emphasis is given to the specificity of the terms in each kind.

Aristotle’s Poetics is a natural starting-point for an examination of “Arche,” “beginning” in Greek. The term appears in chapter seven as part of an elaboration of the definition of tragedy, and specifically of plot, its most important component according the Aristotle:

We have stipulated that tragedy is mimesis of an action that is complete, whole, and of magnitude (for one can have a whole which lacks magnitude). A whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow necessarily from something else, but after which a further event or process naturally occurs. An end, by contrast, is that which itself naturally occurs, whether necessarily or usually, after a preceding event, but need not be followed by anything else. A middle is that which both follows a preceding event and has further consequences. (55)

Aristotle begins his discussion of plot with a rather confusing allusion to its three formal properties: “completeness,” “wholeness,” and “magnitude.” While the two latter properties are discussed fully, the former is not. Moreover, although “completeness” and “wholeness” are clearly designated as distinct properties, the difference between them is not easily discerned. But the difficulties do not end here. The first part of the chapter is
dedicated to defining “wholeness,” a property that appears to contain a certain ambiguity with regard to the word “necessarily,” which can be understood to mean that under certain circumstances tragic action can have antecedent material. Although this interpretation is incongruous with Aristotle’s mode of reasoning, as I will argue, it deserves mention because it constitutes the source of poetic theory written about the term “beginning” in Italy during the sixteenth century (see below, Castelvetro, for example).

A sensitive reading of the chapter reveals that Aristotle’s method of analysis is discursive, and therefore the definitions he provides ought to be considered in relation to one another. Approached accordingly, the word “necessarily” does not make any claim about antecedent material. Instead, it serves merely to distinguish the “beginning” from the other constituents of “wholeness” that are preceded by other parts of the whole, in the same way as the “end” is distinguished from the “beginning” and “middle” in that it is not proceeded by other parts of the whole. Aristotle’s definitions, then, appear ambiguous only from a misguided perspective, and thus should be taken to mean not that something might precede a beginning, but rather that a “beginning,” as opposed to “middle” and “end,” does not occur as a result or consequence of something else. Seen from this angle, the weight of the argument shifts from an emphasis on unity, which arises from the property of “completeness,” to ordering or, in other words, to the relationships between the parts.

My reasoning may appear argumentative, but insistence on certain epistemological distinctions allows the mechanics of a system to emerge more clearly, one which defines tragedy as the “mimesis” (representation) not only of a complete action but also of incidents that arise out of one another and not at random. Towards the
end of the chapter, Aristotle considers the final property of plot, “magnitude,” and goes on to tie up the threads of his argument by emphasizing the inextricable link among the three properties:

Beauty consists in magnitude and order, which is why there could not be a beautiful animal which was either miniscule (as contemplation of it, occurring in an almost imperceptible moment, has no distinctness) or gigantic (as contemplation of it has no cohesion, but those who contemplate it lose a sense of unity and wholeness), say an animal a thousand miles long. (55-57)

Aristotle cautions here that if the property of “magnitude” is not adequately maintained, then the other two properties, “completeness” (unity) and “wholeness” (ordering), will be compromised and as a result lead to a type of construction that is not tragic.

In chapter eighteen, entitled “further rules for the tragic poet,” Aristotle refers to the term “beginning” briefly once again, when he writes:

Every tragedy has both a complication and dénouement: the complication comprises events outside of the play, and often some of those within it; the remainder is the dénouement. I define the complication as extending from the beginning to the furthest point before the transformation to prosperity or adversity. (91)
The perspective here is much wider and the focus is on the twin task of "tying" (in Greek "desis") and "untying" (in Greek "lusis") of the plot. More significantly, perhaps, it introduces a glaring paradox in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. As the excerpt indicates, Aristotle makes a distinction between "complication" (tying), which, as he explains, can draw on incidents both within and outside the plot, and the "dénouement" (untying), which draws exclusively on incident inside the plot. Later, he adds that the "complication" extends from the "beginning" to the point where the tragic hero undergoes a change of fortune from prosperity to adversity (in Greek "metabasis"). Referring to Aristotle’s line of argument here, Stephen Halliwell does well to explain its practical implications with regard to plot construction:

It surely makes much better sense to contend with Kitto, that “we cannot in fact draw a circle around the play, or its action, and say that everything inside the circle is ‘within the play’ and everything else is ‘outside the play’… .” A work such as Oedipus Tyrannus dramatises the final stages of a much longer sequence of events stretching back before the start of the play. Though Sophocles’ dramatic art is focused on this final stage, the total significance of the enacted drama encompasses the past as well as the present. Oedipus’ past life invades and dominates his life in the present, and any final sense of the drama’s completed significance surely cannot limit to the relative brief span of time acted out in the scene of the play. (151)
The excerpt points to an important connection between the play and the material it is based on, i.e., myth. Furthermore, and more pertinent perhaps, it questions the viability of Aristotle’s definition of plot as a unifying whole (chapter seven), and in so doing sheds more light on the difficulty of delimiting an opening in Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s pronouncements would prove to be extremely productive in shaping subsequent understanding of the concept of an opening, and especially during the early modern period in Italy, when theoretician appropriated the term “beginning” in similar ways.

By examining the term “beginning” in chapters seven and eighteen of the *Poetics*, we have explored how Aristotle uses formal definitions in order to argue that tragedy has an internal logic. This effort is nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than in chapter twelve, entitled the “main parts of tragedy.” In it Aristotle draws on a second critical term associated with the concept “opening.” I am referring to the term “prologue” (“prologos” in Greek), which literally means “before the speech”:

> We spoke earlier of the components of tragedy that must be used as basic elements; but its formal and discrete sections are as follows: prologue, episode, exodos, choral unit (further divisible into parodos and stasimon). These are common to all plays, but actor’s songs and kommoi are special to some. The prologue is the whole portion of the tragedy prior to the chorus’ parodos. (67)

The first reference to the prologue serves to describe the intrinsic parts of tragedy, which are four in number: “prologue,” “episode,” “exodos,” and the “choral unit.” Aristotle
describes the prologue as the whole part of the tragedy which precedes the “exode,” the part where Chorus members enter singing and dancing. This description appears to be very closely based on the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, which typically begin with a scene among several characters, after which the Chorus enters in song and dance. The treatise often alludes to the classical plays of the fifth century as the standard by which tragedies should be measured. If this is also true of the prologue more specifically, then what emerges from the excerpt above is very different from our modern conception of the fully detached authorial prologue. Whereas we are inclined to perceive the prologue as an external element of the play proper, used for example, to introduce the play and welcome the audience, Aristotle conceives of it as an integral part of the tragedy which involves two characters or more and which precedes the first entrance of the chorus singing and dancing (in Greek “parodos”).

With regard to these observations, it may be significant to note that Aristotle wrote his comments on the division of tragedy during the fourth century B.C, approximately a century after the great classical poets composed their plays. This period, which has been often described as an age of political decline and social change in Athens, has yielded very little evidence about the development of drama and theatrical practice. The most substantial evidence, perhaps, is the few surviving specimens of New Comedy, where Menander dispenses with classical precedence so that the prologue introduces the plays themselves. In the Grouch, for instance, the prologue is embodied by the God Pan, who addresses the audience directly and after “setting the scene” appears no more. In this comedy, as in others, the prologue, which attains several new dramatic features, is not an integral part of the action any more. The lack of solid evidence prevents us from knowing
whether the prologues of tragedies were similar, but nevertheless if, as I have suggested, Menander’s comedies reflect an important development in the prologue during the fourth century BC, then Aristotle may be advocating in the Poetics for a return to the old inveterate models which had defined the Golden Age of Greek drama for over a century.

The nature of the evidence, however, allows us to conclude little with any measure of confidence. What arises with a greater degree of clarity from the Poetics is that Aristotle is less interested in discussing the prologue as a technique of starting a play, and more as a way to define tragedy as a system. For this reason, perhaps, there is no mention of the prologue’s functions at all. Thus Aristotle’s definitions of the four parts of tragedy, and the prologue more specifically, reflect the stage-practice of the extant classical plays of the fifth century B.C. to the extent that they help distinguish the formal properties of tragic composition. Aristotle’s interest in the prologue then should be seen as part of the treatise’s wider objective of classifying the formal components of poetic composition.

When the term “beginning” finds its way into Horace’s Ars Poetica (65-5 B.C.), it loses many of its Aristotelian implications. The term is mentioned on several occasions where Horace appears to be providing practical advice about poetic composition to two young aspiring Roman poets:

And you must not, like the cyclic poets of old, begin: “Of Priam’s fate I’ll sing and war’s renown.” What will emerge that will live up to such extravagant promises? The mountains will fall into labour, and there will be born—an absurd little mouse. How much more to the purpose are the words of a man who makes
no foolish undertakings: “Tell me, Muse of the man, who after the fall of Troy, made himself acquainted with the ways of many men and their cities.”

The reference here is short and vague. It may be an allusion to Aristotle’s important formal distinction between tragedy and epic stipulated in chapter twenty-three of the Poetics, and if so, it constitutes advice against constructing non-linear (or cyclical) plots that span too wide a period. However, the focus here may fall less on form and more on style, the central province of rhetoric, and if so, it is a warning against extravagant displays of poetic bravado, the types of mistakes young and inexperienced poets are likely to make. In spite of the uncertainty here, the treatise’s first reference to a “beginning” already points to a marked shift in terms, method, and concerns from Aristotle’s Poetics. Later in the same paragraph, Horace makes, arguably, the most influential and controversial statement about a “beginning” in the course of poetic theory. Referring to Homer’s Odyssey, he writes:

[In constructing the plot, Homer] does not trace Diomedes’ return right back to the death of Meleager, or the Trojan War to the twin eggs of Leda. All the time he is hurrying on to the crisis, and he plunges his hearer into the middle of the story as if it were already familiar to him; and what he cannot hope to embellish by his treatment he leaves out. Moreover, so inventive is he, and so skilfully does he blend truth and falsehood, that the middle is not inconsistent with the beginning, nor the end with the middle. (102)
In his edition of Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry*³⁵, R.W. Maslen argues that Horace is calling here for action to be dramatized from the middle, not the beginning. In Maslen’s own words: “*in medias res*, in the middle of the action” (236). This interpretation, which is precisely the one Scaliger and other Italian theoreticians adopted in their readings of Horace, seems to overlook the extensive evidence, in the treatise in general and in the excerpt in particular, that Horace follows Aristotle’s precepts of plot construction very closely. A more useful approach might be to examine how the treatise conceives of the relationship between tragic action and its historical source material. The *Ars Poetica*, based on the *Poetics*, encourages poets to manipulate historical events and personages, so long as their plots unfold according to strict precepts of causality. Horace does not suggest that poets begin their tragedies in the middle of the action, as Maslen would have it, or undermine the Aristotelian properties of plot (“completeness,” “wholeness,” and “magnitude”). Rather he advises that they begin at the principal point of the single action they intend to represent, for otherwise the plot is likely to be too diffuse. Seen from this angle, the excerpt appears to contain a warning about the pitfalls of dramatising material from the very outset of the historical narrative.

In spite of the clear affinity between Horace and Aristotle in matters concerning the construction of plots, the *Ars Poetica* and the *Poetics* are undoubtedly very different in terms of style and “telos.” The later work seems to advocate that a great deal more artistic licence be given to poets in several aspects of poetic composition. But this is not all: Horace is clearly unconcerned with debating the property of “wholeness,” and this may be why he does not provide a definition of a “beginning.” Whether the treatise was
written as an epistle for young Roman poets or for another purpose we do not know. A fuller sense of how the term is theorised might be gained by acknowledging that the *Ars Poetica* was written within a period of history that celebrated spectacular entertainments, and consequently, saw a growing divergence from classical models of poetic composition. Sparse as they are, Horace’s references to plot structure may belong to a broader effort encouraging Roman poets to abandon the new and fashionable for the old and inveterate. If this is so, then the term “beginning” helps to advance a new Roman poetics that is closely based on the Greek classical models provided by Homer and Virgil in their epics. Although Horace’s references to a “beginning” are ambiguous at times, his contribution to poetic theory is particularly noteworthy because it demonstrates a keen interest in the relationship between the formal and affective properties of poetic composition, which would shape the understanding of the term “beginning” in the late Roman and the early modern period in Europe.

Evanthius’s *De Comedia* (fourth century AD) and Donatus’s *De fabula* (fourth century AD) are two cases in point. These important late classical essays written by grammarians refer mainly to comedy. Although only fragments remain from these essays, their unique engagement with the term “beginning” and other terms related to the concept opening is indicative of important developments in poetic theory. The earlier essay provides two remarks where the term “beginning” is found. The first is of a general and familiar nature by now. It appears to be a tribute Evanthius makes to the comic poet Terence, who, we are told, “joined the beginning, middle and end so carefully that nothing seems extraneous and everything appears composed from the same material and to have a single body” (Preminger 304). The emphasis on unity here harks back to
Aristotle’s conception of plot as a unifying whole and points to the author’s espousal of this notion. The second statement is of a general nature, too. However, it refers more specifically to the differences between the two principal genres, tragedy and comedy: “In comedy the beginning is troubled, the end tranquil, in tragedy events follow the reverse order” (305). The distinction between the “beginnings” of tragedy and comedy is also familiar by now. It is based on the affective properties of play construction, which as stated above, are introduced by Horace in the *Ars Poetica*.

A specific and influential statement appears towards the end of the fragment, where Evanthius re-examines Aristotle’s discussion of the quantitative parts of tragedy in chapter eighteen of the *Poetics*. In *De Comedia*, the author provides a very different vocabulary for discussing the parts of comedy:

Comedy is divided into four parts: prologue, protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe. The prologue is a kind of a preface to the drama. In this part and in this part only it is permissible to say something extrinsic to the argument, addressed to the audience and to the benefit of the poet or the drama or the actor. The Protasis is the first act and the beginning of the drama. (Preminger 305)

Evanthius divides comedy into four parts (in effect three parts because the “prologue” is considered external to the play proper): “prologue” (preface), “protasis” (the first act and the beginning of the play proper, “epitasis” (complication) and “catastrophe” (dénouement). Whereas this type of division is modelled on Aristotle’s notion of the “tying” and “untying” of the plot, its more innovative feature pertains to the status of the
prologue. In Evanthius’s model, the prologue is replaced by the “protasis,” which now becomes the first integral part of the unifying whole. Being external to the play proper, the prologue gains the new and vigorous capacity to address a variety of issues that do necessarily relate to the plot. This enunciatory function, which appears to have been appropriated from rhetorical theory, is reflected in the comedies of Terence, whom, as we have already seen, Evanthius respected. Although the Roman prologue still maintains its more traditional Menanderian function of announcing or introducing the play (see Plautus’s comedies), it is utilized in Terence’s comedies, for the first time perhaps, as a vehicle for attacking enemies and critics, and complimenting the audience in order to secure attention and goodwill.36 These functions, which are identical to Cicero’s pronouncements on the “introduction” to public speeches (“exordium”), are indicative of the vital influence rhetoric had on Roman stage-practice.

Donatus’s classification of four types of prologues in De Comedia may be a testament to the extent of this influence. The author refers initially to Evanthius’s division of the parts of comedy as stated in De Fabula, and repeats the idea that the prologue is external to the play proper. Thereafter, he carefully defines the four types of prologues, a contribution which helps to explain the concept “opening.” The first type, explains Donatus, is the “sustatikos” (commendatory), where the poet or the play are commended; the second is the “epitimetikos” (of praise or blame), where the playwright either condemns a rival or praises his audience; the third, “dramatikos” (pertaining to the story), is where a synopsis of the play is rendered; and the fourth, “miktos” (hybrid), includes all of the above.
Apart from these rhetorically-based classifications, Donatus provides one of the earliest descriptions of the affective properties of the four parts of a drama. Referring to what he believes to be the first part of the play proper, he writes: “Protasis is the first action of the drama, where part of the story is explained, part held back to arouse suspense among the audience” (307). The emphasis here is on how the beginning of a play proper can engage and channel the response of an audience if composed coherently. This statement, though short, would have a significant impact on early modern Italian poetic theory, and Scaliger in particular.

By the time Evanthius and Donatus theorise the concept “opening” in comedy, the prologue appears to have undergone a huge transition in the theatre as well as in theoretical discussion of it. In the late Roman period, the prologue attains a very different status from that of its Greek predecessor, as scholars such as Averroes had observed during the Middle Ages and Francesco Robortello in the early modern period. As many Roman comedies attest, the prologue becomes a mode of play initiation which contains enunciatory functions that are not necessarily connected to the action proper. These enunciatory functions are perceptible in many early modern European plays, like Machiavelli’s Mandragola, for example, where the prologue constitutes an occasion for the playwright to denigrate his enemies and pander to the audience. I discuss similar enunciatory functions with regard to the prologue to Ben Jonson’s Volpone on p. 72. But before jumping too far ahead, our attention should be given to the reception of the ideas presented in these late classical fragments by early modern Italian poetic theorists, for they appear to have had the most direct influence in England.
The scholar and physician Julius Caesar Scaliger refers to the term “beginning” on several occasions in the often obscure, and yet immensely influential treatise *Poetices libri septem* (1561). Scaliger gives careful consideration to the term in a chapter entitled “Regulations for the Various Kinds of Poetry: Epic Poetry,” where he writes:

After one has determined in a general way the events and characters of a poem, has adjusted them to times and places, and has deduced the sequence of action, there remains the composition according to the well-known principle. The precept of Horace to begin “ab ovo” is by no means to be followed. Rather let the first rule be, to begin with something grand, cognate with the theme, and intimately related. This rule was observed by Lucan, who in writing of the Civil War, begins with Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon, because for this act the senate adjudged him an enemy, and compelled him to make war. (54)

The excerpt provides a sense of how popular Horace’s “well-known principle” must have been in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and how unreceptive Scaliger was to it. This critique is the first of many among Italian theoreticians during the early modern period, and it is particularly surprising because Scaliger advocates that poets should begin their tragedies at the principal point of action, as Aristotle prescribes, and provides the beginning of Lucan’s epic, *Pharsalia* (c. 64 AD), as an appropriate example. What is going on here? Though nothing can be said for certain, what seems to be happening, as I mentioned earlier, is that Scaliger interprets Horace’s *ab ovo* principle along the lines of
an *in medias res* beginning (as the modern critic Maslen has done), and in so doing sets off what would become almost a ritual of Horatian chastisement.

More certainly, however, Scaliger uses the term “beginning” in a manner that is very different from Aristotle’s. The perspective here is broad, and the focus is on describing ambiance or mood at the opening rather than on providing epistemological definitions. In fact, Scaliger’s apparent indifference to Aristotle’s method of reasoning can be detected in the visible absence of the term “beginning” from his intermittent reflections on plot, which are contained within a discourse of utility. As the first sentence in the excerpt indicates, the single stipulation Scaliger makes about the organization of the incidents is that it manifest verisimilitude, or that it approximate actuality as closely as possible. Scaliger insists on adjusting the events and characters of a poetic work to the early modern context because, unlike Aristotle, who saw “mimesis” (in the sense of “imitation”) as an end in itself, Scaliger viewed it as a vehicle to attain moral improvement, and poetic structure itself as a means to achieve this end.

The excerpt goes on to indicate that a “beginning” must be grand, and it should also prepare for the principal theme of the action. Scaliger’s insistence on a grand beginning requires special attention because it does not seem to imply spectacle. He is not calling for dazzling effects that lie in the domain of staging, or what Aristotle termed in chapter fourteen of the *Poetics*, “the sensational” (costumes, masks, etc.) (Halliwell 75). Instead, he is interested in exploring how the ordering of dramatic material creates tension, and influences auditor reception to what follows.
The very thing that you are going to take as your principal theme should not be placed first in the narrative, for the mind of the hearer is to be kept in suspense, awaiting that which is to develop. It is obviously a unique and chief virtue. (54)

A plot that is organized according to Scaliger’s model, where the beginning only prepares for the principal theme of the action, promises to plunge the auditor into a state of anticipation. The focus then is on stimulating interest and channelling response, but only through exploring the most theatrically effective method of internal plot organization. Seen from this angle, it is not surprising that the property of “wholeness” is absent from the definition of tragedy presented in the treatise.

The relationship between form, effect, and moral utility fascinated Scaliger, who reflects on it in a later reference to the beginnings of comedy and tragedy:

The beginnings [of comedy] are somewhat chaotic, the endings happy; the language is drawn from that of ordinary life. In tragedy there are kings and princes from cities, fortresses, and castles. The start is rather calm but the outcome is horrible. (101)

A more detailed discussion of this relationship follows in a re-examination of the quantitative constituents of comedy as laid out by Evanthius and Donatus. Even though Scaliger advances a new structural category, the “catastasis” (the climax of the play), he too considers the “protasis” as the beginning of the play proper, not the prologue. As a
matter of fact, this perception quickly becomes prevalent in Italian poetic theory more generally. What distinguishes Scaliger from his contemporaries, perhaps, is the attention he gives, once again, to the most theatrically effective way of organizing plot material, and the term “protasis” serves him well in this respect. Drawing on Donatus, who, as we have seen, had defined the affective properties of the “protasis,” Scaliger writes:

The protasis is the part where a summary of the action is laid out and narrated without revealing the ending. This is a procedure requiring some subtlety, since it always keeps the audience’s mind in suspense and anticipation. If the outcome is announced at the start, the play becomes somewhat dull. (102)

The beginning of a play, as Scaliger describes it, starts to sound very much like Donatus’s prologue “dramatikos,” where a synopsis of the play is rendered. Nevertheless, it should channel the auditor’s response, as Donatus advises, and the material it contains must be handled with great circumspection, for if too much is revealed, then the auditor will be dissatisfied.

Although only the constituents of comedy are considered here, later on the discussion encompasses tragedy too:

Tragedies also are divided into almost the same parts as comedy. I mean the protasis, and the rest, likewise acts and scenes. Protasis and catastrophe do not differ in type but in manner. For both are full of activity. (103)
This reference appears to imply that the “protasis,” the beginning of a play, irrespective of genre, must be exciting and packed with action to stimulate interest in the tragedy effectively.

In this excerpt, as in earlier ones, the terms “beginning” and “protasis” become almost synonymous for the first time. Furthermore, they are used to explain the importance of constructing an effective opening, for only by involving an audience emotionally, explains the author, can its members be brought to moral reflection. The attention given in the treatise to theatrical effect, and audience reception more generally, occupies an increasingly central position in early modern poetic theory. This is particularly evident in the work of its most rigorous and radical scholar, Ludovico Castelvetro, who, as Marvin Carlson rightly observes (1984): “saw the promulgation of pleasure alone as the end of poetry” (48), and the act of moral reflection as a false purpose.39

In *On the Art of Poetry*40 (1570), a vernacular translation and commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Castelvetro provides one of the most extensive and often bewildering discussions of the term “beginning” in early modern poetic theory. Though the term appears intermittently throughout the treatise (see, for example, the comment about tragedy having to begin with a probable incident on p. 143), it is discussed systematically only in a chapter entitled “The Plot and Its Eight Requirements,” where Castelvetro reconsiders Aristotle’s epistemological definitions of plot construction:

Aristotle now considers the nature of the three parts constituting the whole. The beginning must fulfil two requirements: its dependence on something preceding it
must not be a necessary one, and it must be that upon which incidents subsequent to it, both those already in being and those which will largely come into being at a later time, depend. Considered in relation to what precedes it a beginning possesses two characteristics: it either is in no way dependent on it, or it does not depend on it in such a way that it cannot exist without it. Considered in relation to what follows, it again possesses two characteristics: it logically precedes what is already in being or what will come into being at a later time. We say this because there are many things whose beginnings are immediately followed by the middle and the end, and many others in which the middle and the end appear sometime after the beginning. Yet in others the middle and the end must depend upon the beginning, otherwise they would not be middle and end. Hence Aristotle defines the end as that which naturally follows something else, for it is natural that the middle and the end should follow the beginning. The beginning of a plot then should not be bound by antecedent action. (73-74)

Castelvetro follows Aristotle’s argument that the property of “wholeness” is composed of three parts, a “beginning,” “middle,” and “end,” but offers a further stipulation that complicates the matter considerably. He maintains that a “beginning” can be preceded by something on which it is not dependent to exist. The main stumbling-block in the passage is identifying what Castelvetro means by “antecedent material,” a concept that seems to probe the relationship between poetic action and its historical source material (or myth). On the heels of Horace, early modern Italian theoreticians took it for granted that tragic action should be based on historical narratives, and they became

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increasingly fascinated with the implications of this relationship. Castelvetro, in particular, was interested in how an audience might react to the many incidents in the historical narrative that the poet leaves out. For example, referring to Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, he asks:

For assuming that Ulysses’ departure from Calypso’s island is the beginning of the *Odyssey*, does not that beginning depend upon an earlier fact? Will not the reader desire to know what fortune or misfortune had cast Aeneas on those shores? And if we agree with Aristotle that the *Iliad* recounts only a part of the Trojan War, is not its beginning bound by necessity to antecedent action? (78)

But like most of his Italian contemporaries, Castelvetro is a staunch advocate of the unity of action and, for this reason, attacks earlier in the treatise what he believes to be Horace’s stipulation that dramatic action should begin “in the middle of things” (75). As the excerpt above demonstrates, he staunchly maintains that because tragedy is limited in scope, it should dramatize only one part of the historical narrative, and therefore begin from its principal point.

How then might one account for the antecedent material an audience so avidly anticipates without undermining Aristotelian plot principles? This question appears to preoccupy Castelvetro repeatedly. In the instance cited, he proposes a distinction between material that is integral and material that is external to the action. Since the antecedent material occurs before the action begins, argues Castelvetro, it is not an integral part of it, and as such cannot undermine its unity. Poets, he adds, must begin at the principal point
of the tragic action, as Aristotle prescribes, and report the antecedent material as the action unfolds by way of a messenger or any other character for that matter. Castelvetro concedes that a spectator, for instance, perceives tragic action as a cumulative experience, and therefore a full appreciation of a “beginning” is always contingent upon information supplied later on. In the case of the Odyssey, for example, Castelvetro argues that Homer reports the incidents in the historical narrative that precedes the point at which the action begins, and in doing so, satisfies an audience’s interest without compromising the unity of action. Castelvetro concludes his discussion with one significant stipulation. He maintains that even though the antecedent material is not integral to the action, and therefore “a beginning does not necessarily depend on it to exist” (73), it must be supplied internally in the course of the action, and not through an outside source. To elucidate the point and warn about the detrimental consequences of ignoring it, he presents Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, which relies on Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato to supply its antecedent material, and as a result, cannot be understood adequately.

But like all of the theorists presented thus far, Castelvetro is unconcerned with the simple mediation of Aristotle’s ideas. Instead, by preserving the unity of action, he foregrounds a notion of “mimesis” in which dramatic action develops chronologically, as in historiography, and in so doing obscures the boundaries of art and actuality: “The credibility of drama lies in the accuracy with which poetry mirrors history, or with which it makes fiction just as believable as fact—often in both at once” (Sidnell 130).

Seen from this angle, Castelvetro tackles the property of “wholeness” in a manner which accounts for audience reception while preserving chronological ordering. The
tension between these two subjects in the treatise builds almost to a point of
contradiction, after which it is cautiously resolved:

Hence a playwright fashioning the plot should take no account of which part is the
beginning, which the middle, and which the end, of the action of which the plot
will be formed; he should, rather, take a whole action or a small or large part of a
larger one and then consider with great care if it is of a kind to produce the effect
he contemplates, which is to give an audience pleasure by means of a narrative
which represents an action under fortune’s sway that has never happened but is
recognised as possible. Having done that he will begin the story at the point best
suited than any other to produce the desired effect and will not prolong it beyond
the point where it will cease to give the maximum pleasure. He must bear in
mind, however, that the beginning is to be recognised as such by what is told
early in the poem or later. (78)

Here Castelvetro appears finally to grant the poet the licence to transgress historical
accuracy only in so far as the transgression heightens the pleasure of the audience. This
final and crucial stipulation reflects the extent to which “pleasure” is esteemed in the
treatise.

The major debates that preoccupied theoreticians in Italy directly informed the
poetic theory written in England soon thereafter. Sir Philip Sidney’s The Defence of
Poetry (written c. 1579 and published in 159542), for example, addresses several of
Castelvetro’s concerns. But in spite of the close affinity, Sidney debates neither
Aristotle’s definitions of plot construction nor the relationship between tragic action and the historical material it dramatises. Moreover, the treatise provides a very limited discussion of the term “beginning,” which is mentioned on two brief occasions towards the end. The first constitutes a critique of Horace’s *ab ovo* beginning, which suggests that Sidney follows in the footsteps of the Italians in believing that the *Ars Poetica* called for tragedy to begin in the middle of the action and not from its principal point as Aristotle demands: “Lastly, if they will represent an history, they must not (as Horace saith) begin *ab ovo*, but they must come to the principal point of that one action which they will represent” (66). The second constitutes a concise summary of the main principles of ordering the incidents of the plot as discussed in *On the Art of Poetry*.

On the surface, Sidney’s concise summary appears to reiterate the Aristotelian stipulation Castelvetro invokes that poets should begin to dramatize their stories from the principal point of the action. But on closer inspection, the points of divergence emerge more clearly. Sidney maintains that if a poet begins from an earlier point, the tragic action will necessarily have to dramatize many locations and vast periods of time. In order to avoid what Sidney calls “such absurdities,” poets are advised to bridge the gaps of time and place by reporting the information:

Again, many things may be told which cannot be showed, if they know the difference betwixt reporting and representing. As, for example, I may speak (though I am here) of Peru, and in speech digress from that to the description of Calicut; but in action I cannot represent it without Pacolet’s horse. And so was the
manner the ancients took, by some Nuntius to recount things done in former time or other place. (66)

Thus, in addressing a “beginning,” Sidney espouses Castelvetro’s arguments in order to advocate the confinement of dramatic action to a twenty-four-hour period and a single location. What emerges then is a theory that draws upon the premises of Castelvetro’s arguments, only to promote the unities of time and place, and in so doing, ensure the concentration of tragic action rather than its organic unity.

In order to gain a fuller appreciation of how Sidney theorizes the term “beginning,” it is important to acknowledge, as many scholars have (Sidnell 177), that the _Defence of Poetry_ was written within a cultural context that, on the one hand, saw a surge of neoplatonic hostility towards contemporary poetry (and the very institution of theatre in particular), and on the other, saw a growing divergence from classical models of poetic composition. Sparse as they are, Sidney’s references to plot structure are contained within a broader criticism levelled against the poetic practices of contemporary English poets, and specifically, at their disregard for the legacy of classicism. Referring to _Gorboduc_, the Senecan tragedy by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton (performed 1561 and printed c. 1570), Sidney compares the inadequate poetic practices of sixteenth-century England to the brilliance of classical Greece and Rome. Although he commends the tragedy for its lofty Senecan style and its adequate propagation of morality, he strongly criticizes its flagrant disregard for “the two necessary companions of all corporal actions” (65), the unities of time and place. By referring to the story of Polydorus in Virgil’s


_Aeneid_, Sidney directs his criticism more narrowly at contemporary practices of initiating a poetic work:

> Where now would one of our tragedy writers begin, but with the delivery of the child? Then should he sail over into Thrace, and so spend I know not how many years, and travel numbers of places. But where doth Euripides? Even with the finding of the body, leaving the rest to be told by the spirit of Polydorus. (67)

In a manner not all that different from Horace’s, Sidney invokes “the works of the past” in order to endorse certain aesthetic rules for poetic composition which received a great deal of critical attention on mainland Europe. Theorizing the term “beginning” serves him well in this respect.

The theory discussed thus far has been useful in bringing to light a wide array of ideas associated with the concept “opening” as a mode of initiation in several contexts. Although the interest in some cases is purely philosophical, in others it concerns practical aspects that have a bearing on the theatre as a medium of performance. As we have seen, openings were of great importance to classical orators whose goal, like the playwright’s, was to captivate audience attention quickly and effectively. The pronouncements of Aristotle, Donatus, and Scaliger are particularly helpful in order to investigate how a playwright may have approached the practical challenges implicit in composing openings for the theatre.

The ideas presented in this survey have sometimes been extremely influential, crossing the boundaries of culture and discourse. In the prologue to _Volpone_ (1605-1606),

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for example, Ben Jonson promises “To mix profit with your pleasure” (8). Jonson draws on the authority of classicism by promising a comedy which promotes the Horatian standards of pleasure and instruction. He also points a finger at his critics who argue that “all he writes is railing” (10), and in so doing, attempts to undermine their position. Shakespeare, on the other hand, rarely uses prologues for such enunciatory purposes. In *Romeo and Juliet*, as in most other plays, Shakespeare devises prologues that are auto-referential: they prepare for the action proper in a variety of ways and invite audience involvement. Without my running the risk of making too strong a statement, the examples above appear to conform to Donatus’s schema: Jonson’s prologue contains elements of the “epitimetikos” (of praise and blame), and Shakespeare’s of the “dramatikos” (pertaining to the story).

The types of transactions described above, as we have seen, had been practised by orators for centuries and carefully formulated by the grammarians Evanthisus and Donatus in treatises. Modern scholarship on openings has considered some of the influences of classical oratory and poetry on early modern theatrical practice in England. Although sixteenth-century English playwrights absorbed much into their respective playwriting practices, they very rarely marched to the drum of theory. Instead, they appear to have appropriated and integrated components in ways that best suited the play and the occasion of performance.

The next chapter considers the concept “opening” within the context of early modern theatre, specifically. As stated in the General Introduction (14), it begins by presenting a survey of modern scholarship on the subject and reviewing the terms scholars have associated with openings. Thereafter, it posits a theory of Shakespearean
openings that relies on ideas presented in Chapter One, and, more specifically, on the pronouncements of Aristotle, Donatus, and Scaliger.

Notes

1Referring to this point, Leonard Barkan writes:

But in an early modern education such as Shakespeare’s, the progression is not from language to literature but from grammar to rhetoric. Thus the real focus of reading in the middle and upper school years— and here Shakespeare’s studious familiarity is beyond dispute— is on that body of texts devoted to oratory. (34)

2In Aristotle’s Poetics, for example, there are several instances where it is difficult to discern whether the term “mimesis” means imitation or representation.

3Exordium” is a broad Latin term for “prooimion.”

4In ancient Greece oratory (the art of delivering a formal speech) was considered a component of rhetoric (the art of delivery and composition).

5In her book Rhetoric, Jennifer Richards identifies an important distinction among the three branches of oratory. She claims that forensic rhetoric deals with past events, display rhetoric with present events, and deliberative rhetoric with future events.

6Kennedy indicates that this is a striking feature of the treatise because the traditional Roman components of “arrangement” are the “introduction,” the “statement of facts,” “division,” “proof,” “refutation,” and “conclusion” (79).

7These types of speeches dealt with bestowing praise or blame on an individual, a community, a city, etc. Moreover, they constituted good opportunities for the orator to demonstrate and practise his rhetorical skills.

8Kennedy interprets “praise and blame” to mean that “the objective is to get the audience to view the person or the action in question as honourable or shameful” (74).

9A good example might be the famous speech Shakespeare gives Mark Antony in Julius Caesar which begins: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears. / I come to bury Caesar not to praise him” (3.2.71-72).

10For a comprehensive definition of the term, see Richards 184.

11See H.C. Lawson-Tancred 80.

12This argument pertains more closely to our modern understanding of an introduction as exposition, where the subject and purpose of the speech are announced. A good example in Shakespeare might be the Prologue to Romeo and Juliet, which provides a synopsis of the action.

13For a comprehensive discussion of the persuasive potential contained in “ethos,” the speaker’s attributes, see James A. Herrick 84-85.

14Quintilian discusses the term “opening” in book two of his treatise The Orator’s Education. I have decided not to devote attention to this work because it is very closely based on Cicero’s treatise, though Quintilian’s discussion pertains more closely to judicial oratory.

15For references to this distinction in other rhetorical treatises, see Cicero’s De Inventione 1.15-18, De Oratore 2. 78-80, Topica 97, and Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria 4.1.

16This argument appears to be based on the Platonic premise that an audience is naturally predisposed towards a speech which is moral. (The author uses the term “honourable speech.”)

17Rhetorica ad Herennium appears to draw a distinction between types of laughter. Since the author does not refer to the kind of visceral laughter directed at someone’s misfortune, for example, the emphasis here appears to be on sober laughter which fortifies the audience’s moral rectitude.

18The term “well-disposed” is replaced by a term that appears more suitable to forensic oratory.
Quintilian maintains, however, that if “the statement of facts” contains material that is useful to win the audience’s favour, it should be used.

Deborah N. Losse discusses the influence of rhetorical theory on the French medieval tradition of short narrative forms, the *conte ou nouvelle*. She suggests that these genres, which became popular across Europe, are distinguished by “prefaces” that were closely modelled on the rhetorical “exordium” and served chiefly to promote “a good reading.”

As book two clearly indicates, St. Augustine is not averse to the art of rhetoric. Whereas he appears to believe that the pagan discipline propagated immorality, he indicates that its fundamentals can be used for the dissemination of religious teaching.

The Latin title of the treatise is *De Doctrina Christiana*.

This Latin term appears to include both the “principium” and “insinuatio.”

Think of the way the immoral Gloucester humorously manipulates the audience in the opening of *Richard III* in order to get them on his side.

This conclusion may not be entirely accurate. Since Christian preachers were met by the daunting task of committing numerous and diverse passages of scripture to memory, the Roman treatises, which provided important guidelines for memory training, might have been useful to them for practical purposes.

For a discussion of the “captatio benevolentiae,” which secured the recipient’s goodwill, see James A. Herrick 134-35.

A case in point is Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *The Poetria nova* (c. 1200). It incorporates the five canons of rhetoric presented in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: “invention,” “arrangement,” “style,” “memory,” and “delivery.”

See James A. Herrick 167.

Moreover, I have demonstrated that Quintilian and Wilson by and large espouse *Rhetorica ad Herennium*’s conception of “opening.” Seen from this angle, a basic paradox appears to emerge in the attitudes of Roman and early modern rhetorical theory to Aristotle. The paradox disappears, however, if one is prepared not to interpret the tendency to dispense with epistemological definitions as a rebuttal of Aristotle. Instead, it may simply be an indication that rhetoric as “techne” had gained enough credibility during the Roman period to allow for the investigation of practical considerations.

After examining several editions of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, I have concluded that the ambiguity is not the result of Halliwell’s translation.

The term “resolution” is used interchangeably with “dénouement” in this dissertation.

If this type of “authorial presence” ever existed on the classical Greek stage, it was more likely contained in the “parabasis” of Old Comedy, the part in which the action of the play was suspended so that the chorus or the playwright could address the audience in matters of politics and social affairs.

Martin Revermann has recently indicated to me that the exception to the rule is Aeschylus’s *The Persians* and *The Suppliants*, both of which begin with the entrance of the Chorus.

Horace refers to the beginning of Homer’s *Odyssey* here.

During 1595, Sidney’s treatise was published twice: the first time by William Ponsonby as *The Defence of Poetrie* and the second by Henry Olney as *An Apology for Poetrie*. Brian Vickers and others have suggested that Ponsonby’s version is the more authoritative, and therefore it is the text selected for analysis in the section devoted to Sidney’s treatment of the term “beginning” on p. 25.

See for example, the prologues to Terence’s *Phormio* and *The Brothers*.

In chapter one of her book, Losse points to Remigius of Auxerre, Boethius, and Saint Thomas Aquinas as scholars who address this issue. Included in this list should be Averroes, who as Herrick indicates “called attention to the similarity between the exordia of orators and poets” (26-27). Robortello deserves special mention too, because he draws attention to influence of the rhetorical “exordium” on the dramatic prologue (for a fuller discussion, see Sidnell 84).

Although Scaliger was Italian, he wrote the treatise in France, where he obtained nationality. As its title suggests, however, the treatise is written not in French, but in Latin.

Like Scaliger, who wrote his treatise outside of Italy, Castelvetro wrote his in Vienna, Austria, where he was exiled.

The title of the work in Italian is *Poetica d’Aristotle Vulgarizzata e sposata*. 

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It is noteworthy that Geoffrey of Vinstauf had argued a similar point already in the thirteenth century. In response to Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, he proposed that an “artificial beginning” could introduce antecedent material by subsequent allusion (*diegesis*). See note 56.

The method appears to be irrelevant: introducing a messenger or any other figure, for that matter, so long as the events are reported, not enacted.

Sidney refers to Euripides’ tragedy *Hecuba*, which dramatizes part of the classical narrative of the killing of Polydorus at the hands of Polynestor.

Whereas the unities of time and place gain the widest attention in French neoclassical theory, they are addressed as early as 1517 in Italy. Interestingly, the unity of time is invoked not in a poetic treatise but in the comic satire by Niccolo Machiavelli, *Mandragola* (1517), where in act four Fra Timoteo dismisses it with a direct address to the audience.
Chapter Two: Openings in Shakespearean Dramaturgy and Stage-Practice

The subject of poetic closure, theorized by Aristotle in chapter eighteen of the Poetics, has received a great deal of attention in the academy. With particular regard to works of literature, the concept of an “ending” has captivated the minds of many scholars. Frank Kermode is a pioneering example. His influential work The Sense of an
Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction offers careful definitions of an “ending” using a variety of terms. Kermode has paved the way for a rich debate about the implications, philosophical and practical, contained in an ending for creators and consumers of art.¹ By comparison, the subject of openings has received far less attention. This critical lacuna in early modern theatre scholarship is particularly surprising because, like the “ending,” the “opening” contained implications for the composition, production, and reception of a play.

These implications may have been especially significant to early modern theatre companies because they worked in highly competitive “playing markets” across Europe. Consequently, playwrights were compelled to search for new, creative, and often very different ways of constructing openings, for otherwise they ran the risk of becoming predictable, thus losing their popular appeal.

Survey of Modern Scholarship

In modern scholarship, critical interest in the subject of openings can be found as early as 1935, in Arthur Colby Sprague’s influential book Shakespeare and the Audience, one of the earliest studies on Shakespeare’s technique of dramatic exposition. Sprague refers to the processes of play initiation and traces an evolution of “openings,” a term that is nowhere defined and often used interchangeably with “beginnings,” from ancient to early modern theatre practice.² He contends that the prologue in the classical theatre of
Ancient Greece constituted the sole method of initiating a play, and it functioned predominantly as a vehicle for supplying audiences with expository information about the classical legend dramatized in the play. In the early modern theatre, Sprague explains, stage-practice was less reliant on historical source material, and therefore, playwrights were under no obligation to acquaint an audience with what had gone before. As a result, Sprague adds, early modern theatre practice became less restrictive than its classical counterpart and more accommodating to a variety of methods of “openings.”

From a general outline of the argument, the study goes on to classify three types of Shakespearean “openings.” The first and most prevalent is the “keynote scene,” which appears to resemble the epideictic “prooimion” described by Aristotle in the Art of Rhetoric; it is a short scene (or part of one) that foreshadows the central theme or conflict of a play. Sprague refers to the gulling of Brabantio in 1.1 of Othello as an apt example, which prefigures the gulling of Othello in the play as a whole. Through the “keynote scene” more generally Sprague lays emphasis on the mood-setting aim of Shakespearean openings, distracting attention from their expositonal purpose. He suggests that in Othello, most of the expository information is deferred so that an audience’s interest can be engaged effectively. The second type of opening is “the framing dialogue,” which is a dialogue rendered by minor characters for the purpose of providing expository material. Referring to Antony and Cleopatra, Sprague writes that the dialogue between Philo and Demetrius supplies an audience with the names of the central characters and the location of the action. The third and final type is the “prologue,” which, as indicated earlier, is the conventional method of initiating classical plays according to Sprague. In Shakespeare’s late play Pericles, Sprague explains, the prologue “performs a truly astonishing variety of
functions” (202). Gower, the Chorus figure, makes use of it to introduce himself and the narrative, to plead for the audience’s attention, to negotiate the abuses of “time” and “place,” to invite the audience’s active involvement, and to apologize for the rather colloquial idiom of the play. After pointing to these myriad functions, Sprague distinguishes this type of opening from the rest as the only “non-dramatic” one. Although he rightly observes that the prologue stands outside the play narrative, he fails to explore the implications of this distinction in the early modern theatre.

In Sprague’s broad discussion of Shakespeare’s techniques of dramatic exposition, several important observations about openings arise. Despite the argument’s palpable lack of cohesion, it exhibits, first and foremost, the awareness that an “opening” is a concept worthy of critical attention in Shakespearean criticism. It also locates an interesting historical shift from a stiff and conventional handling of the opening to a sophisticated and productive one. Nevertheless, it offers classifications before providing a methodical definition of the concept and a careful account of its place within Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice throughout.

Thelma N. Greenfield refines some of Sprague’s observations in a broad study that explores the evolution of the induction, an introductory sequence featuring more than one character; a method of play initiation unique to the early modern theatre. *The Induction in Elizabethan Drama* approaches its subject as a malleable theatrical form that came to fulfil a wide variety of functions in the course of its evolution. At the very outset, the study delineates three major types of inductions: “dumb shows,” “introductory scenes with dialogue,” and “beginnings of frame-plays.” Drawing on a wide range of early modern plays, it examines the dramatic properties of each type; the relationship
each has with the main play; the sorts of figures each accommodates; and the theatrical
effects to which each gives rise. For instance, in reference to the earliest type of
induction, the “dumb show,” Greenfield observes that the scene includes mime, not
dialogue; allegorical figures; and symbolic material capable of both engaging an audience
and illuminating themes in the action proper.

Regardless of type, Greenfield considers inductions as part of a larger category of
separate dramatic material which precedes and stands outside the main play, like the
prologue for example, and usually provides commentary on it. Like its relative the
prologue, the induction constitutes an independent “imaginative realm” (xv) that leads
into the play proper, but constitutes a short and independent introductory scene, not a set
speech addressed to an audience. While it routinely increased an audience’s eagerness for
what was to come, its more wide-ranging function, explains the author, was to provide a
period of adjustment for the basic act of watching a play, in order to bring an audience to
accept the notion of what has been described as “the willing suspension of disbelief.”

Greenfield repeatedly points to the inherent difficulty of providing comprehensive
and definitive classifications for a theatrical form that was in a perpetual state of flux on
the early modern stage. By referring to the inductions of Marlowe’s _Dido Queen of
Carthage_ and Lyly’s the _Woman in the Moon_, which appear to blend seamlessly with the
play proper, she illustrates the ease with which categories could collapse: “[B]ut here the
materials in question (appearances of divinities in both instances) are inextricably fused
with the rest of the play” (xv).

Robert Willson, Jr. re-examines some of Greenfield’s basic ideas in the context of
Shakespearean criticism in a study indebted to Sprague. Drawing upon Emrys Jones’s
term “scenic form” (Jones 14), *Shakespeare’s Opening-Scenes* explores the principle of “unity of design” through an investigation of the relationship between the first scene of the play and those that ensue. According to this approach, an “opening-scene” is frequently described as a self-contained scene that possesses dramatic unity of its own: “The scene may also have separate episodes, and most of the opening-scenes do, but these are part of a unified whole” (11). More importantly, perhaps, it presents incidents that correspond often symbolically to later climactic ones and prefigures, enhances, and aesthetically enriches the central conflict of the play. While its structure can be either simple or complex (it may include the scene in its entirety or only part of it), an opening scene constitutes in some way a “prelude” or “rehearsal” of the play’s central conflict, and by virtue of its symbolic nature tends to be metaphorical. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet* Prince Escalus’s speech in 1.1, not the entire scene in this case, constitutes a self-contained structure, or mini-playlet, which introduces a central idea that governs the entire action: the disease in Verona’s society, which reverberates through the play, and it prefigures the downfall of the lovers.

Evidently, Robert F. Willson, Jr. borrows Sprague’s vocabulary to examine the properties and functions of “opening scenes,” which are viewed, rather problematically one might add, to be a part, and simultaneously independent constituents, of the dramatic action. More significantly, perhaps, because of Willson’s interest in “scenic form,” the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* is almost absent in his analysis of the play. Willson concedes that the prologue offers the audience an outline of the ensuing events and that it constitutes “a kind of mythic frame to the story” (4); however, because it lies outside the
plot, or in Willson’s terms, the domain of Shakespeare’s design, the prologue is not worthy of his critical attention.

Since Willson’s study, other scholars have followed in his footsteps, defining opening scenes along the lines of “scenic form.” In two short articles devoted to several Shakespearean plays which contain opening prologues, Nancy Cluck and Richard L. Nochimson focus their analyses exclusively on the action of *Romeo and Juliet*, from 1.1 onwards. Moreover, by following Willson’s general assumptions, they arrive at a similar conclusion about the “keynote function” of opening scenes.

Since E.K. Chamber’s scattered yet influential comments about the prologue made in 1923, little systematic attention has been devoted to the subject. In a recent publication entitled *Making Shakespeare from Stage to Page*, Tiffany Stern examines the prologue in an effort to explain the fragmentary nature of early modern play-texts. In chapter six, “Prologues, Songs, and Actors’ Parts,” she posits that enterprising theatre-practitioners in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were more interested in acquiring parts of plays rather than homogeneous compositions. Prologues, she argues, were not considered integral to the play proper, and therefore were traded independently by theatre companies. Drawing mainly on a reference in Philip Henslowe’s *Diary*, which notes a payment to Thomas Dekker of ten shillings for a prologue to a play now lost, Stern contends that prologues were considered meta-texts that were generally envisioned, composed, and sold independently of the plays they introduced. For this reason, she goes on to explain, prologues in the early editions of Shakespeare’s plays are often visibly separated from the body of the text by a larger print or a different type-face. Prologues were often tailor-made, she adds, for presentation on one particular occasion,
and therefore, were either discarded or sold after opening day⁹: “The reason for the division of prologue and epilogue from the play seems to be that prologues and epilogues were not permanent features of a production” (120).

Most recently, in a detailed study of the early modern prologue in the plays of Marlowe, Peele, Lyly, and Shakespeare, Douglas Bruster and Robert Weimann question some of the assumptions about openings described thus far, and also take Stern to task on her comments about the prologue.¹⁰ Drawing on several fields of study, including historicism, literary history, anthropology, and philology, *Prologues to Shakespeare’s Theatre: Performance and Liminality in Early Modern Drama* examines the prologue both as a literary form and as a theatrical mode of address in an effort to understand how the early modern theatre emerged as a centre for entertainment during the 1580s and 1590s in England.¹¹ Bruster and Weimann imagine the prologue as an usher figure that traverses the boundaries among the “playworld” (the fiction presented on stage), the reality of the playhouse, and the world beyond the playhouse. They begin with the rather conventional claim that the prologue transported early modern audiences into the fictional realm presented on stage, or the “playworld.” Thereafter, they indicate that the prologue, owing to its liminal position, was invested with the authority to comment both on the play it presented and on its own practices as well as those exercised outside the boundaries of the theatre without necessarily drawing attention to itself as a representative of the theatrical company.

Guided by these key observations, Bruster and Weimann read the prologue of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587) not only as an occasion to transport audiences into a fictional imaginary realm, but also as an opportunity for the playwright, actors, and
the very institution of theatre to foreground its legitimacy during a period of anti-
theatrical prejudice:

From Jigging Veins of rhyming mother wits,
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,
We’ll lead you to the stately tent of war,
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
Threatening the world with high astounding terms,
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.
View but his picture in this tragic glass,
And then applaud his fortunes as you please. (Bruster and Weimann 79)

By virtue of its liminal position, the authors explain, Marlowe’s prologue commands the
authority to establish a new type of performance, replete with momentous heroic figures
and bold poetic idiom on the back of the older tradition of “conceits and clownage”:
“[A]way with the old, here comes the new (and considerably better)” (79). Similarly, they
read the prologue to Shakespeare’s King Henry V as a complex usher figure that
galvanizes an audience through the eloquence of the idiom: “O, for a muse of fire”(1).
Moreover, by drawing attention to the theatre’s materiality, the prologue points to the
theatre’s limitations as a medium of representation: “Can this cock-pit hold / The vasty
fields of France?”(11). Yet it appeals to an audience’s imaginary forces, and in so doing
invests its members with the power to bridge the gap between the literal and the fictional,
or in the playwright’s words: “Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts” (23), or
participate in the act of artistic collaboration with the actors. While all these transactions intricately overlap, the prologue establishes itself as a suitable medium to accommodate and mediate the grand celebratory national narratives of pre-Tudor history.

Following from these examples, Bruster and Weimann go on to address the relationship between the prologue’s authority and the question of whose interests it negotiated: those of the monarchy, or the institution of the theatre, or the playwright, or the players, or the audience? All, perhaps? In the process of considering this question, they allude to the persuasive power of “prooemia” in rhetoric, and ultimately conclude that in the theatre, the prologue’s authority was never as permanent as the orator’s. Instead, it always existed in a state of flux, in a liminal zone: “the authority in question is— like a ‘candle in the wind’ - indistinct, divided, or inconsistent” (34).

Regardless of its inherent instability, or perhaps chiefly because of it, the prologue is considered a highly complex, dynamic, resourceful, and somewhat indomitable theatrical form on the early modern stage, which even playwrights could not control entirely. While its most basic theatrical function, according to Bruster and Weimann, was to command the attention of a noisy audience,\(^\text{12}\) the prologue’s more vital and culturally significant function, as “equipment for beginning” (156), was to usher spectators and actors across diverse and competing orders of representation, sometimes explaining, mediating, and even exposing the gaps between them.

The modern survey presented here is helpful for thinking more productively about what an opening means in the context of early modern theatre, and more specifically in Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice. What is more, the occasional references it makes to possible influences of rhetorical and poetic theoreticians on early modern
theatre-practice are thought-provoking. Though Sprague, Greenfield, Willson Jr., Stern, and Bruster and Weimann often point to the practical importance of an opening in engaging the audience at the outset of a play, they have appropriated the term without systematic investigation or conceptual consideration.

**Approaching the Concept of Openings**

Chapter One has suggested that rhetorical and poetic theoreticians have bequeathed to posterity a critical vocabulary which is likely to have influenced early modern playwriting in England, given that their works were on the grammar school curriculum (Vickers 12). Aside from the shared concern of the orator and poet alike in shaping the response of an audience, I wish to draw attention to specific points arising in both rhetorical and poetic theory which shed light on the construction of dramatic openings in the early modern context. Chapter One has argued that much of the critical debate on openings has been stimulated by Aristotle’s monumental works, the *Art of Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*, which constituted sources from which theoreticians drew either directly or indirectly (by way of imitation or reaction). The *Poetics*, which considers the exigencies of composing a tragedy and the structuring of the tragic plot more specifically, is perhaps a natural springboard from which an approach to analysing a playwright’s technique in devising an opening can be explored.
I have come full circle to Aristotle, and more specifically to chapter eighteen of the *Poetics*, where rules for the tragic poet are supplied. To recapitulate in brief: Aristotle explains the appropriate structuring of tragedy in terms of the twin tasks of “tying” (in Greek “desis”) and “untying” (in Greek “lusis”) of the plot. As indicated above (41), Aristotle considers “desis” as a process which draws on incidents both within the action of the play and prior to it (the emergence of the past in the present), and which extends from the principal point of the action to the point where the tragic hero undergoes a change of fortune from prosperity to adversity (“metabasis”). “Lusis,” on the other hand, is a process of “dénouement,” which draws exclusively on incidents within the plot, and extends from “metabasis” to the end of the play. Chapter eighteen explores a question that would become contentious after Aristotle, namely, how the playwright should handle antecedent material, or in other words, what is the appropriate way to represent incidents that took place before the play began? More broadly, it displays the practical challenges of organizing dramatic material for eliciting the proper emotions of tragedy: pity and fear. In order to contend with these challenges, Aristotle delineates principles first for introducing and developing dramatic material, and then for resolving it, and in the process draws attention to the difficulty of mastering the latter task:

Many poets handle the complication well, the dénouement badly: but constant proficiency in both is needed. As noted several times, the poet must remember to avoid turning the tragedy into an epic structure (by “epic” I mean with a multiple plot), say by dramatising the plot of the *Iliad*. (93)
Although the *Poetics* refers to important practical problems that playwrights encountered in composing plots, and not exclusively tragic plots but comic ones as well, it is important to remember that Aristotle was a peripatetic philosopher, not a practising playwright, and therefore, his approach to tragedy may have not been informed, as far as we know, by practical experience of creating theatre. A testament to this circumstance is perhaps his notorious and often-cited distaste for spectacle, “opsis” in Greek (Vince 90). Consequently, he appears to be indifferent to or simply unaware of the basic challenges of preparing a play for performance; challenges which playwright and actors faced, and perhaps even relished, in order to satisfy the appetite of audiences for entertainment, and which apply as much to religious festivals in Greece as to commercial theatres in Europe during the early modern period.

Nevertheless, as will be argued subsequently, Aristotle’s concept of “desis” can help explain how Shakespearean openings supply expository material, through which an audience becomes attuned to the development of the play as a whole (i.e., an opening delimits an audience’s field of reception).

In the *Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle refers to several ideas that are relevant to the construction of Shakespeare’s openings: he maintains that the “prooimion” is an independent component of rhetoric that is not integral to a public speech (see Chapter One, 20). This idea can help explain the division in numerous Shakespearean plays between the incomplete actions contained in an opening (i.e., actions that are not developed fully) and the action or actions that develop consistently through the play. Aristotle also maintains that the “prooimion” is initiatory: it “prepare[s] the way for what is to follow” (*Art of Rhetoric* 246). With particular regard to forensic oratory, he argues
that the “prooimion” must contain a suggestion of the main point presented in the public speech, so that the audience’s perceptions of the material are sharpened. The introduction’s expository function in rhetoric is thought-provoking in the context of Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice, because prologues typically situate the action of a play by supplying background information.

Finally, Aristotle maintains that the “prooimion” in display oratory should be “either exotic or cognate with the speech” (Art of Rhetoric 247). This pronouncement, though indistinct, appears to place emphasis on the mood-setting function of the “prooimion.” An exotic “prooimion” might draw attention to the main speech by creating an unusual, and therefore intriguing atmosphere that is conducive to its reception. The importance of generating a mood conducive for comedy and tragedy is reflected in the construction of the four Shakespearean openings analysed in Chapter Three.

Evanthus’s pronouncements on the beginnings of comedy and tragedy in De Comedia (57 above) also deserve mention, because they appear to shed light on how sixteenth-century conventions of genre were employed in constructing openings. The eminent Canadian scholar Northrop Frye has explored the implications of Evanthus’s distinction between the “troubled” beginnings of comedy and the “tranquil” beginnings of tragedy (Vickers 493) in Shakespearean comedy, identifying a trajectory from dissonance to harmony. In The Comedy of Errors and Twelfth Night, argues Frye, the action moves from shipwreck and separation to reunion and conciliation:
As the forest in Shakespeare is the usual symbol of the dream world in conflict with and imposing its form on experience, so the usual symbol for the lower or chaotic world is the sea, from which the cast, or an important part of it is saved.

(Frye 184)

Evanthius’s writings were familiar to early modern playwrights charged with the task of constructing openings: in An Apology for Actors (1612), the author and playwright Thomas Heywood repeats Evanthius’s generic distinctions.

Julius Caesar Scaliger elaborates many of the ideas presented above about the affective properties of poetic composition, making a vital contribution to the study of openings in this dissertation. In his treatise, Poetices libri septem, Scaliger, following Donatus’s observations on the “protasis,” recommends that in tragedy, what constitutes the main theme should not be anticipated at the opening. Instead, the poet should introduce some initiatory material and delay the presentation of the main theme to stimulate curiosity in the hearer:

The very thing that you are going to take as your principal theme should not be placed first in the narrative, for the mind of the hearer is to be kept in suspense, awaiting that which is to develop. It is obviously a unique and chief virtue. (54)

Scaliger’s recommendation of postponing the introduction of the “principal theme” to stimulate interest and channel auditor response is a premise that underlies the theory of openings presented here, which suggests that in composing the openings of his plays
(Scaliger refers to “narrative”), Shakespeare typically delays the introduction of the “principal theme,” to use Scaliger’s words, not by developing action in a continuum, but by introducing initiatory actions that are largely disconnected.

The technique theorised above suggests that an opening requires a great deal of preparation and focus by those in charge of devising it. Several literary critics have made a similar observation with regard to the construction of openings in novels, and their work provides a useful contribution to the discussion on these pages. Edward W. Said’s *Beginnings, Intention and Method* is an example. Anthony D. Nuttall’s *Openings: Narrative Beginnings from the Epic to the Novel* makes an important theoretical point about the artificial make-up of an opening (intimated above by Scaliger). Writing about the *Aeneid*, an *epos* that was originally read aloud as part of a long-established oral tradition, he observes:

> We seem to be confronted by a primary assertion of the priority in literature of form to matter. The laws of poetry are not the laws of nature and their radical autonomy must be declared, in a gesture of proud discrepancy. The beginning of the poem must never fuse with a known beginning in nature. (27)

In a chapter entitled “The Sense of a Beginning,” Nuttall elaborates this idea by stipulating that unlike nature, which has no beginnings (only the myth of creation), art carefully constructs its beginnings which appear seamless, or “natural,” only to their unsuspecting receptors, not to their creators, who have laboured to pitch them at the level
at which the receptors will be engaged. Referring to a poem by Geoffrey Chaucer, he writes:

The Book of the Duchess in effect discovers a new mode of in medias res opening in that it pitches the reader, not into the middle of the narrative sequence, but into the middle of an informal, gossiping monologue. (60)

Chaucer’s opening projects the reader into “the middle of things,” so to speak, and by doing so arouses curiosity about what has gone before. The opening constitutes an artificial beginning because it does not commence with the main narrative. It is conceived with reader response in mind, and the reader is typically unconscious of the transactions it contains.

In Reading Narrative, J. Hillis Miller offers a similar observation about the artificiality of a beginning. In a chapter entitled “Beginnings,” he rejects scholarly scepticism about the very possibility of a beginning in narrative by pointing to the practical challenges novelists face in constructing it:

The beginning is both inside and outside the narrative at once. If the novelist begins abruptly, with one character throwing the other out the window, sooner or later he will have to explain who threw whom, and why. This explanation, as Sterne well knew, in principle involves an infinite regress forbidding a writer ever to establish, except virtually and by a fictive “as it were,” the firm antecedent foundation necessary to get the story going. (58)
From these perspectives, an opening composed for the stage constitutes an artificial construction because it is worked on in advance of its presentation before an audience, and it is pitched at the appropriate level to engage the audience quickly and effectively.

The theatrical transactions contained in an opening have been described in quasi-metaphorical terms by Peter Brook in his well-known book *The Empty Space*: “In order to bring actors and audience together and to join them as a single source of energy, the audience’s interest must be engaged” (108). Later he adds: “What is important is to immediately present material that is capable of engaging progressively and simultaneously the spectator’s body, heart, and mind” (109). The challenges to which Brook alludes grow when we consider that the medium of theatre imposes a time constraint on the actors, too: if they are unsuccessful in engaging the audience within a fairly short period of time, then expectations are not fulfilled and attention dissipates.

Although Brook’s comments are framed within a discourse of modern performance, they may be relevant to the early modern context, because actors in the theatre were met by expectant audiences. Moreover, audiences were likely not to have been passive as, for example, modern audiences sitting in a darkened auditorium might be. Whereas in Brook’s contemporary theatre space lowering the lights can be a signal for silence and a useful way of gathering the disparate energies of the audience, in the early modern theatre, of course, this modern convention was not practised, though the sounding of fanfares that preceded performances at the Globe may have also proved effective in inviting silence (Beckerman 99). But then it was up to the actors and other
members of the company in charge of staging the play to ensure that the playwright’s opening would engage the audience.

In the General Introduction to this dissertation, I proposed that an opening is an act of entry into a play and this act, as mentioned above, is facilitated by introducing initiatory action, often organized in what I define later as “strands of action,” which are suspended. Thelma N. Greenfield also alludes to an opening as an act of entry when she writes that the induction constitutes a period of adjustment for the basic act of watching a play which brings the expectant audience to accept dramatic illusion willingly. The playwright produces this effect by inducing the spectator “to suspend disbelief willingly,” a gesture the spectator welcomes because s/he has come to the theatre in search of entertainment (i.e., to suspend one’s reality in order to accept a fictional reality, as the Latin etymon suggests: “intra tenere”). For the spectator to adopt such an attitude of “suspension,” the playwright must elaborate strategies which will engage audience interest quickly and in the direction in which the action unfolds: these strategies will immerse individual spectators in the “world of the play.”

While earlier modern scholarship (Sprague, Greenfield, Willson, Jr., etc.) addresses some of these observations, it appears to have considered an opening as a self-contained unit (i.e., a unit with a beginning and an end). However, whereas the start of an opening may be easy enough to identify, it becomes more problematic to decide where it ends, as Greenfield has conceded in studying the early modern induction (see above, 80).

The problem of delimiting an opening had preoccupied the minds of scholars already during the fourth century B.C. in Greece. In the Poetics, Aristotle clearly sets a limit to action as a whole through the terms “beginning” and “ending,” “mimesis” and
“diegesis,” which give the story that develops a linear and elementary structure. Aristotle’s theory, which provides poetry with a foundation in logic, may be philosophical in nature, but it has resonated loudly with those who have approached it purely as a manual for composing tragedy. Within this system, a “beginning” appears to be “natural”, to use Nuttall’s term: it has nothing before it, and therefore the effects it produces originate exclusively from the process to which it gives rise. In the mid-twentieth century, structuralist literary theorists, including Roland Barthes and Vladimir Propp, revived Aristotle’s long-established principles of composition. More recently, scholars such as Frank Kermode and Peter Brooks have examined this subject within the field of narrative study, and have considered the relationships between the story and its organisational principle, “muthos” (plot). They have espoused Aristotle’s pronouncements on the completeness, wholeness, and magnitude of plot as the principal ideas which give the story meaning. Brooks writes:

The very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be the meaningless, and the lack of ending would jeopardize the beginning. We read the incident of narration as “promises and annunciations” of final coherence, that metaphor that may be reached through the chain of metonymies: across the bulk of the as yet unread middle pages, the end calls to the beginning, transforms and enhances it. (94)
Yet several scholars such as J. Hillis Miller and Wallace Martin have identified certain limitations in Aristotle’s conception of plot structure, which have implications for this study of openings. Miller, for example, has voiced scepticism about Aristotle’s property of plot, “wholeness,” by arguing that the “middle” is somehow implied in the beginning (10). Referring to the problems implicit in Aristotle’s conception of plot, Martin, inspired by Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, provides a philosophical explanation: “Perhaps our sense of cyclic return that unites beginning and ends comes from nature—days, seasons, and years, which provide a model for conceptions of human death and rebirth (88). A similar thought appears to underlie Barbara Hardy’s understanding of a “beginning” in Shakespeare’s plays (developed in a chapter entitled “Some Narrative Beginnings”). Hardy argues that Shakespearean “beginnings” typically anticipate the play’s ending. Referring to Orlando’s “formal but integrated exposition in *As You Like It*” (67), Hardy writes: “The beginning is a match with the narrative at the end of the play, which tells the story of the brother’s repentance and retreat, a return to the subject and another blunt – even blunter— expository narrative” (67). This study, as opposed to my own, has focused on the “beginning” largely in an attempt to define narrative form and structure in Elizabethan drama, not the practical challenges the construction of an opening may have posed for early modern theatre practitioners. Nevertheless, it illuminates the problems of approaching Shakespearean openings as self-contained units.

Hardy has also argued convincingly, along similar lines to David M. Bevington’s argument, that Aristotle’s pronouncements on the elementary structure of “plot” (see *Poetics*, chapter seven) are, in large part, incongruous with Elizabethan drama, finding a
complex interplay between narrative forms which gives rise to the narrative whole. Hardy maintains that the narrative sequences of a play unfold in time and space, and they may relate to one another structurally, thematically, and rhetorically, even though these internal relations are often extremely difficult to decipher because of a diversity of forms. In several Shakespearean plays, Hardy explores the relationship between a micro narrative, which consists of a character’s telling of past events, and the overarching narrative of the play:

In Shakespeare there is the story, or stories, narrated by the play as a whole, like the story of Lear and his daughters, Hamlet and his revenge, and Macbeth and his murders, and there are stories or fragments of a story within these over-arching narratives, narrated by Shakespeare’s gifted story tellers, like Edmund, Edgar, Hamlet, the Ghost, Gertrude, Ophelia, Macbeth, Malcolm and the Witches. (13)

This idea has found favour with other Shakespearean scholars who have tested it in their respective analyses of plays. Jill Levenson, for instance, has extended Hardy’s argument through an analysis of narrative forms in *Romeo and Juliet*. Referring to the deep structure of narrative in the second quarto of 1599, she writes: “… structural repetitions of all kinds can interrupt a given series: one or more related sequences, whole or fragmentary, may be ‘interlaced,’ ‘imbricated,’ within the main sequence” (40-41). Later she adds: “In view of these complexities—each member of every audience producing a new narrative from many components—it is no wonder that theorists are questioning concepts of narrative opening, closure and linearity” (41).
Judging by these representative studies, which challenge if not collapse the traditional Aristotelian boundaries between “diegetic” representation and “mimesis,” early modern plays, in contrast to classical tragedy, present structures that tend towards multiplicity and an infinity of forms. I have alluded to this point in the General Introduction to this dissertation, which suggests that in fashioning their plays, early modern playwrights tested different genre conventions as a vital act of creation. A notable example of the mingling of comic and tragic conventions in *King Lear* is the use of a secondary line of action — a convention that is employed more often in Shakespearean comedy— which presents a sombre, not a comic, parallel to the principal line of action, Lear and his daughters; and, as many scholars have noted, echoes the central themes of filial disobedience and loyalty.29

My discussion on openings draws on recent scholarship about narrative to the extent that it can help illuminate the “deep structures” of Shakespearean play composition and the playwright’s diversity and technical versatility in constructing an opening more specifically. An opening may involve, to use Hardy’s words, the introductions of “a story or fragments of a story” (13). However, it does not seem to display an interplay of what Levenson describes as “structural repetitions” (40-41), where sequences correspond to each other dialectically in a manner that dissolves the distinctions between “mimesis” and “diegesis.”30 Instead, the sequences of an opening share only tenuous links, and they fulfil functions that are intrinsic to the processes of audience immersion in a play, but which may draw on diegetic strategies (like a prologue).

The study of theatre semiotics, dedicated in large part to theatrical production and reception, is better positioned, perhaps, to elucidate some of the points discussed thus far.
As opposed to the narrative scholars aforementioned, theatre semioticians such as Keir Elam, Anne Ubersfeld, and André Helbo have addressed questions of play composition with the active participation of the spectator in view. Their studies are anchored in the Aristotelian view of drama as action, a “mimetic” representation, which unfolds in time and space and is personified not described. Elam observes that, as opposed to other kinds of narrative, dramatic narrative does not “lend itself to a distinction between narrative order and the structure of events” (119). He maintains that in the theatre the spectator always infers the “story” from the particular organization of the dramatic material (i.e., the plot) as it unfolds in time and space (both synchronically and diachronically). The plot, then, constitutes the vehicle through which the spectator can infer the logical order of the story as the action unfolds on the stage. Addressing the same point from a different angle, Ubersfeld indicates that to reconstruct the “fabula” analytically (as opposed to watching it unfold on the stage) is to “transform drama into a non-dramatic story and consign the conflict to history” (32). From this perspective, the plot distinguishes itself starkly from the story:

The fabula, the basic story-line of the narrative, comprises the narrated events themselves in their logical order, abstracted by the reader or critic from the sjuzet or plot, which is the organization in practice of the narration itself (including omissions changes in sequence, flashbacks and all the incidental comments, descriptions, etc., that do not contribute directly to the dynamic change of events).

(Elam 119)
Even though Elam refers to the construction of modern plays, where, for example, flashbacks are a common convention of dramatic composition, he provides an important observation that characterizes the composition of early modern plays, too: the playwright’s dramatic material comprises actions that are heterogeneous, fragmentary and often discontinuous. Elam illustrates the point fully by alluding to act one of *Macbeth*, which presents a series of actions which, at the opening, bear little relation to one another:

In Act 1 of *Macbeth* the collaborative action between the Witches (fixing an appointment), the (reported) acts of treachery by the Thane of Cawdor, the witches’ predictions to Macbeth and Banquo, and so on, constitute a series of distinct actions whose intentionality is clear enough (we have little trouble in identifying what is going on) but whose relationship remains to be established.

(123)

In the events described above, the spectator passes sequentially from the scene with the Witches on the heath, to the battlefield where the bleeding Captain presents an account of Macbeth’s courage as a warrior, and then back again to the Witches. These distinct actions, to use Elam’s term, are shaped by the playwright so that the spectator, experiencing the action as it unfolds, will piece them together in time to perceive the logic of the play. The play then, forms an inner pattern that can be appreciated cumulatively even though the spectator at the opening cannot fathom the pattern.
In view of these observations, rather than look for a specific moment at which the opening comes to an end, it may be more useful to abandon the notion of an opening as a self-contained unit (proposed by modern scholarship on openings) and see it instead as preliminary and independent sequences of action that attune the interest of an audience in much the same way as the introduction of a theme in the overture to an opera can attune the auditor’s interest to the development of that theme in the opera as a whole.

(Interestingly, Aristotle uses the term “prelude” in the *Art of Rhetoric* [chapter 3.14].)

The spectator, of course, remains unaware of the process by which immersion occurs, but for the playwright constructing an opening, as for the critic analysing it, this notion of an opening is helpful because it combines a number of strategies for seizing attention and channelling response in the direction in which the action unfolds, strategies that have involved recognisable forms such as a prologue and an induction.

I now return to Aristotle’s term “desis” (tying), which is useful for explaining the mechanics of an opening, described above in broad theoretical terms, in order to understand how Shakespeare might have constructed many of his own openings. Drawing specifically on the idea of tying the dramatic material of the plot, I wish to propose the phrase “strand of action” in order to illustrate how a Shakespearean play typically delimits an audience’s field of reception at the opening.

Among the definitions supplied under the entry “strand” in the Oxford *English Dictionary* is the following: strand,^{\text{sb.4}} is “[e]ach of the strings or yarns which when twisted together or ‘laid’ form a rope, cord, line, or cable” (def. 1. 1076). This definition is pertinent to the discussion on these pages because Shakespeare often represents “action” (In Greek “praxis”) at the opening of a play that is organized in a “strand.”
Aristotle defines “action” in chapter six of the Poetics, suggesting that “action,” which tragedy imitates, refers to the mimesis of incidents that can be taken from reality:31

The media of mimesis are two components, its mode one, and its objects three; there are no others. Now, these have been used by a majority of poets as their basic elements, since practically every drama has items of spectacle, character, plot, diction, lyric poetry, and thought, alike. The most important of these things is the structure of events, because tragedy is a mimesis not of persons but of action and life. (51, my emphasis)

Referring to chapter six of the Poetics, Stephen Halliwell alludes to a subtle distinction between the concepts “action” and “plot” (“muthos”), which can be easily overlooked when plays are analysed using literary rather than theatrical vocabulary. Halliwell interprets “action” to mean the object of the “plot”:

**Praxis** might, indeed, be thought to be a synonym of plot-structure (*muthos*), which is itself a term elaborated beyond its ordinary meaning and refined by Aristotle to the status of a technical term. Strictly speaking, however, synonymity cannot be claimed, since *muthos* is defined (as is tragedy itself) as the mimesis of enactment of the (or a) praxis. (141-42)

The term “plot” also requires careful consideration in this context, because in literary studies “plot” and “story” are often used interchangeably.32 In the Poetics, these
terms are clearly designated as independent concepts. The former constitutes the structuring of the dramatic material while the latter may constitute part of the poet’s source material for assembling a “plot.” Referring to both terms in chapter seventeen of the *Poetics*, Aristotle writes: “With both ready-made stories and his own invention, the poet should lay out the general structure, and only then develop the sequence of episodes” (89). “Plot,” therefore, constitutes the basic organisational framework of the action in a play and how it functions. It imitates “action,” which may present characters and incidents from well-known stories.

Halliwell’s distinction between “action,” “plot,” and “story” places the terms within the specific context of dramatic poetry, an art form that is enacted or personified, not narrated or reported (“diegesis”). It suggests that in the context of theatre, “action” (“praxis”) means, at its most basic level, “that which happens on the stage.”

In order to illustrate this point fully, we might refer briefly to my discussion of “antecedent material” (see above, 68). To recapitulate, the term “antecedent material,” according to Castelvetro, refers to incidents that occur before the beginning of a play and are presented as the action unfolds on the stage (i.e., the emergence of the past in the present). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle considers such incidents, as well as, for example, deaths occurring off stage, as integral to the plot, but not to the action dramatised on the stage. This is so because these events are reported (often by a messenger) through “diegesis,” not personified by way of “praxis.” In *Oedipus Rex*, for example, Oedipus killing Laius and marrying Jocasta unwittingly is a case in point. These incidents constitute part of the “story” and the “plot,” but do not form part of the tragic action dramatised on the stage. In fact, the story, as distinct from the action dramatized, begins
with a lengthy series of events that originate in myth. And only when these events have occurred does the play proper begin.

To return to the theory presented in this chapter, in Shakespeare’s plays an opening typically introduces independent strands of action, which eventually lead into an action or actions that develop consistently through the play, by which point one may safely say that the opening is completed. Based on Halliwell’s observations above, “strand of action” emerges as a distinct component in analysing the opening of a play, because “praxis” unfolds in real time before a living audience (and by definition is ephemeral), while “plot” remains a category of composition, a pattern that can be appreciated on the analytical level, and re-examined repeatedly. A strand of action is clearly a component of the plot, but it is the particular part that facilitates the process of engaging an audience at the outset of a play, and channelling response in the direction the action unfolds (audience immersion).

Furthermore, by strand of action, I call attention to a theatrical sequence of action as opposed to a textual divider, as, for example, a scene division. The strands of an opening sometimes correspond to scene division but not always. They may be introduced in succession as in Twelfth Night, or as in the case of Macbeth and Hamlet, a strand may be postponed by the introduction of another strand and developed further when it is taken up again. Strands usually contain the same core of characters and often share tenuous links, or points of contact, such as an allusion to a character or to an event. As indicated already, a strand contains action by which the playwright supplies expository material to the unfolding of the play as a whole, but which must remain unresolved or suspended. By “unresolved” or “suspended” I mean that the strand comprises action that is presented
and then postponed. The opening sequence of a play is not complete, therefore, until the strands are no longer suspended and the action/s develops consistently.\textsuperscript{39}

Similarly, for early modern spectators an opening presented introductory action which, to a large extent, did not appear to connect between one strand and the next. Neither was the spectator likely to sense that the action was completed; rather, it was suspended by the introduction of new action. Suspension, then, is what principally arouses audience curiosity. As the play unfolds on the stage, the spectator may assimilate all of the expository material and consequently become attuned to the development of the play.

It is important to note that an audience became immersed in a play as much by the construction of dramatic material within a given strand as by its suspension. Interest in the events on stage is preserved not merely because the strands of action are suspended intermittently, but also because each is internally organised with the practical purpose of whetting the audience’s appetite for entertainment.\textsuperscript{40}

Strands are common to the construction of both Shakespearean comedy and tragedy. However, the composition of strands is different in the comedies and the tragedies examined here: in \textit{Romeo and Juliet} and \textit{Hamlet} there is a systematic development of one principal action which unfolds from the introductory strands\textsuperscript{41}, while in \textit{Merry Wives} and \textit{Twelfth Night} there is an intertwining of several actions that remain unresolved until the play’s ending. These distinctions are discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

To conclude, every opening is unique, of course, because it reflects a singular handling of the dramatic material. Nevertheless, the opening, as Scaliger has underlined,
delays the development of the “principal theme” at the start, which constitutes the most basic transaction that contributes to the process of audience immersion in a play.

Illustrating the Theory of Openings:
The Example of Macbeth

I now consider the construction of the opening of Macbeth by analysing the organisation of dramatic material contained in the Folio of 1623, the earliest edition we have of the play. I have chosen to refer to Macbeth, although it falls outside the period of the plays studied in this dissertation, because it illustrates in a very succinct way the use of strands of action at the opening. My analysis attempts to trace how the playwright conveys both explicit and implicit instructions for staging the opening, and communicates the theatrical effect of a work through the particular organization of the dramatic material in the play-text.

In 5.8, Macbeth undergoes anagnorisis when he realizes that he has been deceived by the Witches’ riddles:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed
That palter to us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope. (5.8.19-22)
This *anagnorisis* points back to 1.3, when the Witches tempted Macbeth with a promise of the Scottish crown. Macbeth’s temptation by the Witches provides the thrust for the development of the principal action of the play, i.e., Macbeth’s murder of Duncan and his accession to the throne, the murder of Banquo, and in act four the slaughter of Lady Macduff and her children, which sets into motion Macduff’s act of revenge.

The opening, however, consists of two independent strands of action which, as Elam has observed in his reading of the play, are largely disconnected. These strands display a marked difference in timing too: one contains thirteen lines while the other, sixty-seven lines (approximately five times as long). My analysis will show a correlation between the relative weight of each strand and its significance.

The first strand coincides with the first scene, and it is suspended as the Witches announce cryptically a future meeting with Macbeth on the heath. In using the play-text as a guide to analyzing the first strand of the opening, one must pay close attention to the sparse stage directions in act one. “*Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES*” supply an impression of the peculiar environment in which the action is situated: although there was not much scenic setting on the Jacobean stage, they imply that the action takes place in an unspecified location. They also point to the startling entrance of the Witches.

The sound effects that usher in the Witches — thunder probably being generated off-stage by a company member beating a drum or rolling a cannonball down a wooden trough, and lightning by setting off fireworks (Thomson 14) — are an obvious way to focus audience attention at the outset. They create the illusion of a powerful storm, which for early modern audiences was a symbol and promise of upheaval in nature.
(Rosenberg 1), while several characters in the play often perceive storms as heralding supernatural intervention.  

The stage directions do not specify, however, the point of entry of the Witches on the platform stage. Nevertheless, the theatricality of their language may offer important clues: frequent riddles in rhyming octosyllabic couplets and a back-and-forth dialogue build to a crescendo with the final couplet rendered in unison; and it may have been followed, judging by the rhythms of their language, by a dance that leads them off stage, at the end of the scene. Given the rhythmic quality of their speech, which seems to require the accompaniment of movement, an entrance from the tiring-house seems likely for the Witches’ debut.

Information about their physical appearance is supplied later in 1.3:

… What are these,

So withered and so wild in their attire,

That look not like th’inhabitants o’th’earth,

And yet are on’t?  (1.3.37-40)

[Y]ou should be women,

And yet your beards forbid me to interpret

That you are so.  (1.3.43-44)  

The textual markers discussed thus far convey practical information about staging and characterisation, which help actors bring their characters to life. They are relevant to the effect of the opening on the spectator, for they point not only to a general atmosphere
of mystery and suspense in the Witches’ weird appearance\textsuperscript{50}, but through equivocation to their capacity for playfulness and theatricality. The heightened atmosphere of the opening, with a discordant mixture of unnerving stage effects\textsuperscript{51}, a forceful entrance, animated gestures and rhythmical language, aspects of grotesque characterisation, and cryptic references to future events that are only hinted at here, is an effective way to captivate an audience quickly. With that, according to Robin Grove, “The play’s attack on certitude begins, and the treacheries of the next scene plunge [the audience] deeper still” (120).

The second strand of action coincides with the second scene. The bleeding Captain, and subsequently Ross, report to Duncan and his court on the progress of the battle in which Macbeth and Banquo demonstrate their prowess. This strand is signalled in the text by the initial stage direction “\textit{Alarum within},” which suggests an atmosphere of military emergency (0 SD.1 n). The stage direction “\textit{Enter King [DUNCAN,}
MALCOLM, DONALDBAIN, LENOX, \textit{with Attendants meeting a bleeding CAPTAIN}” indicates that the characters proceed from different locations, each represented by an entry point in the tiring-house. The physical state of the “bleeding” Captain underscores the fact that he has come from the battlefield, and it may be conveyed as much by signs of blood on his armour as by his gestures: it invites both the King and the audience to listen avidly to the Captain’s long narration.

A narrative speech is a remarkably economical diegetic device that supplies information difficult to present on the platform stage physically (an equivalent is the prologue of \textit{Henry V}, which describes the epic battles between England and France). The Captain’s narrative speech also helps situate the action in the opening by suggesting that
the enmity between the warring factions stretches back before the play begins. By alluding to the past (what I have called “the emergence of the past in the present”), the speech supplies an important dimension to the present: it plunges the Scottish kingdom into a state of uncertainty, contributing a sense of urgency and instability to the already charged atmosphere. Furthermore, it postpones the entrance of the illustrious warrior Macbeth, whom audiences expected to see. In so doing, it builds anticipation for his immanent arrival.

Referring to this speech, Cecily Berry, the Voice Director of the RSC, writes:

Now the actor working on this part has to think of many things: his status with the King; the need to get the facts across, the information is very important; the fact that he has lived through this scene himself and has been in battle many hours; and the need to tell the story before he collapses. It is, therefore, not just a splendid account of the battle, but one man putting the shapes he has seen into the form of words. And by finding out the internal rhythms in this way, this will be made clear. (107)

The Captain’s speech is written in heightened verse. Its animated descriptions, full of dazzling images, contribute a sense of immediacy to the events being reported. This evidence gives weight to Berry’s observation that the character is reliving the moment, seeing the battle unfold in his mind’s eye: “Doubtful in stood, / As two spent swimmers that do cling together /And Choke their art.” (7-9).
The metrical irregularities of the speech have suggested to Dover Wilson and others the presence of another author’s fingerprints. However, approached from a dramaturgical perspective, the rhythms of the speech supply the actor cues as to how he might communicate his character’s physical pain with both intensity and nuance in the early modern theatre. These are additional textual markers which help the actor bring his character to life.

The Captain’s injury would undoubtedly affect the way the actor speaks the speech. Its register of language is that of a wounded soldier. In order to get a better sense of the implicit instructions contained in the speech for the actor, we need to look more closely at the way the narrative is composed. Its rhythms are often irregular, suggesting subtle shifts in tone to the actor delivering the speech, and it jumps from subject to subject abruptly. At times, it also contains broken utterances, and moments where the speech is uninterrupted, suggesting that the Captain, gasping for air, utters his words briskly before running out of breath. Duncan’s interjection at line 24 “O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman” may allow the Captain a moment to catch his breath.

The bleeding Captain describes a bloody scene that threatens the Kingdom’s sovereignty through several acts of treason. These subversive acts introduce the keynote theme of the rebellion of traitors against their King, a prelude of sorts to the hero’s treason; and for dramatic purposes, Shakespeare appears to have deliberately referred to the defeated Irish traitor MacDonald and to the hero of the battle, Macbeth, as Holinshed has done. However, there is no suggestion of Macbeth’s transgression in the Captain’s speech. Instead, it supplies a laudable description of the hero in language best described as epic. As the following examples suggest, the rhetorical vocabulary of epic storytellers
served Shakespeare well for his purposes: the Captain’s verse contains hyperbole and several epic similes, in the heightened style of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which communicate a strong impression of Macbeth’s heroism:

For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—

Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel,

Which smoked with bloody execution,

Like Valour’s minion carved out his passage

Till he faced the slave….” (1.2.16-20)

The intricacies of this speech are remarkable, and its “awareness” of the realities of production on the early modern stage is extensive. A close reading of the speech suggests that the Captain’s language, at times, is eerily reminiscent of the Witches’. For example, the reference to his inability to foretell the progress of the battle as it rages, “So from that spring whence comfort seemed to come, / Discomfort swells” (1.2.27-28), echos the paradox in the Witches’ “[w]hen the battle’s lost, and won” (1.1.4). Similarly, the mention of “direful thunders” (1.2.26) in his narrative echos the Witches’ “In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” (1.1.2). This use of language elevates dramatic tension by suggesting that, in spite of the Witches’ physical absence from the stage, their equivocating voices ring faintly below the surface of the narrative, which is unclear as to who is winning and who is losing the battle. This point may have led Alexander Leggatt to assert that the ensuing events of the scene “celebrate[] the victory of Duncan’s
generals, but in language that works against the assertion of order by allowing unsettling ambiguities” (129).

As the bleeding Captain is escorted off-stage, a second urgent report from the battlefield is delivered by two new characters, Ross and Angus. Their entrance must be hasty and urgent, as Lenox’s remarks about Ross’s appearance indicate: “What a haste looks through his eyes!” (46); and there is expectancy on the stage— as well as in the theatre— because the outcome of the battle is still undecided. Ross and Angus have come from Fife, as line 48 states, and the mention of a new location suggests that the battle involves several fronts, and therefore is widespread and particularly perilous. Interestingly, Ross’s lengthy narrative speech is far less passionate than the Captain’s. It is written in a simpler style and is devoid of epic descriptions. The speech constitutes a commander’s briefing from the frontline, and his formal linguistic register seems appropriate for this purpose.

The speech also delays any suggestion as to the outcome of the battle for Scotland, and in so doing it plays on the audience’s anticipation that Scotland will be victorious. References to the flags of Norway masking the sky, an attack mounted by a vast number of Norwegian soldiers, and the defection of the mighty Scottish warrior Cawdor, contribute significantly to creating the impression that Fife may have been lost. However, impressions prove false as the focus shifts to Macbeth, who is reported to have fought heroically on both fronts, alongside Banquo\(^{54}\), and the pronouncement of victory is made suddenly on account of his courage: “And to conclude, / The victory fell on us…” (1.2.57-58). The speech is organised internally to create suspense and by gradually narrowing the focus on Macbeth, it accentuates the pivotal role he plays in delivering
Scotland swiftly and resolutely from the precipice of ruin. The characters then leave the stage by different doors – the text specifies that they exit in separate directions – and the second strand is suspended.

The second strand of the opening clearly supplies a broad description of Macbeth’s unwavering loyalty to King and country in advance of his appearance. Why introduce Macbeth as Shakespeare does in the opening? One possible reason is that the playwright is providing essential background for the temptation of Macbeth by the Witches, presented in the following scene. Without providing a broad impression of Macbeth’s peerless moral imperatives in advance of his appearance, audiences would be unable to comprehend the character’s internal *agon* in 1.3 between moral justice and desire, through which the idea of usurpation is conceived in Macbeth’s mind. Seen from the angle of plotting, the second strand sows the seed of dramatic conflict.

With the beginning of 1.3, the first strand is taken up again and developed. The Witches are reintroduced, this time conversing about the revenge they will wreak on a sea captain, without making the slightest reference to Macbeth. The scene’s initial stage direction “*Thunder. Enter the three WITCHES*” alludes to a sense of mystery pervading the opening scene, but the atmosphere here is strikingly different. The dialogue that ensues points to the Witches’ shared concern in trivialities, not to any frightening sides of their personas; this effect is generated, in part, by a modulation in verse from the Witches’ heightened style in 1.1 to a more informal style in 1.3. Meeting on the heath at dusk now provides an occasion to prattle and boast about their daily exploits; and the punishment the first Witch wants to mete out to the sailor on account of his wife’s insolence has a comic effect because of the Witch’s inability to specify what punishment
she will exact (“I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do” [1.3.9]). In fact, the dialogue has comic undertones throughout. And a vocal shift from blank verse (1-6) to rhyming verse, a nuance of speech to which early modern audiences may have been more sensitive than modern audiences (Kliman 4), has led Robin Grove to assert that “language trivialized to the witches’ doggerel will not carry serious meaning’s ordinary weight, and to make human meanings feel spurious and banal is what they aim to do” (115). Later he adds: “Tempting is hardly what the [Witches] do. They merely declare what the future will be. But their voices get into the mind, and that is what makes the difference” (116). As this observation suggests, the opening establishes a premise for the reception of succeeding scenes when it prescribes that the Witches’ power is limited: “Though his bark cannot be lost, / Yet it shall be tempest-tossed” (1.3.23-24).

The sound of the “Drum within” alerts the Witches to the approach of Macbeth, and like a well-trained stage chorus, they hold hands, dance in a circle, and resume the chanted rhymes and prophetic riddles first heard in the initial strand of the opening. With their undisputed talent for acting, the Witches have a profound impact on Macbeth and Banquo. Although Shakespeare has Banquo address the Witches first, their abnormal physical appearance startles the generals, as suggested by their interrupted conversation: BANQUO “How far is’t call’d to Forres? What are these, / So withered and so wild in their attire,” (1.3. 36-37) “…you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3. 43-45). The words “withered” and “wild,” linked by alliterative consonance, serve to emphasize the compelling power of the Witches’ presence on other stage characters. In fact, they maintain a hold over the generals by controlling the terms of the encounter. As Banquo questions the Witches, they signal for
silence in unison, as line 42 indicates: “But each at once her choppy finger laying / Upon her skinny lips.” After enduring Banquo’s twelve lines of interrogation, they proceed to “prophesy,” completely ignoring Macbeth’s command to disclose their identities. Their greetings all start with “All hail Macbeth!” each greeting delivered in turn by a different sister.

Macbeth appears to lose the capacity of speech, and his facial expressions and gestures are emphasized in Banquo’s lines: “Good sir why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” (49-50). Macbeth becomes increasingly distracted in the course of Banquo’s second address to the Witches, and by line 55, he appears to have fallen into a trance: “My noble partner / You greet with present grace…/ That he seems rapt withal” (52-55). The Witches finally respond to Banquo with a second display of slippery promises which only confuse Macbeth and whet his appetite for more information:

…Say from whence
You owe this strange intelligence, or why
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I
charge you.

Witches vanish. (1.3.73-76)

While the Witches are found intriguing by both generals, only Macbeth is captivated by their promises of future glory. Through a number of asides in the ensuing
action, the audience observes the character’s internal *agon* between moral justice and desire through which the idea of usurpation is conceived in Macbeth’s mind. Thus, the Witches’ “prophecy” introduces the temptation of Macbeth, which, as mentioned above, is the point at which the spectator realizes the relevance of the two strands of the opening as providing essential exposition to the play as a whole.

The focus of the analysis presented here has fallen on describing how the opening of *Macbeth*, as reflected in the play-text, is organised into strands of action. It is a representative case of how opening strategies function. Seen from this perspective, the opening is an occasion by which it becomes possible to engage the interest of an audience in the direction the action unfolds, or channel audience response, as Scaliger recommends. The next chapter demonstrates further Shakespeare’s method for constructing an opening and conveying it through the play-text.

Notes

1The concept of an “ending” has been theorised in poems, works of literature, and works of theatre. See, for instance, the studies of Philippa Berry, Arnold Davidson, Barbara Hodgdon, Earl G. Ingersoll, Barbara H. Smith, Robert F. Willson, Jr., and R.S. White. With specific reference to endings in Shakespearean comedy, see C.L. Barber and Ian Donaldson.

2In a chapter entitled “Beginnings,” Mary Carpo Hyde follows Sprague in tracing an evolution for certain conventions of openings from the classical period to the early modern period in England:

   In considering the beginnings of Elizabethan plays, it is well to have clearly in mind the practice of dramatists before the sixteenth century. For a comprehensive picture one should go back to the classic writers who established many conventions which the Elizabethans consciously or unconsciously accepted and which profoundly affected their play form. (95-96)

3This argument, which focuses on audience reception, resembles Castelvetro’s in *On the Art of Poetry* (see p. 68).
Sprague concedes that several of Shakespeare’s plays begin with a prologue that is devoted to exposition, but maintains that the practice is much more common in classical Greek plays. He also indicates that Shakespeare gradually expanded the prologue’s artistic capacity to include a wide range of functions apart from the more standard purpose of supplying the names of the central characters, locations, and so forth.

Both articles are found in Willson’s *Entering the Maze* (see Works Cited).

For an example see Chambers 542.

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Bruster and Weimann draw attention to a comprehensive examination of the prologue in a Ph.D. dissertation by James William Gousseff, Northwestern University, 1962 (26).

While evidence to support the idea of “tailor-made” prologues exists, and especially in those written for court performance, the broader implications of Stern’s argument fail to convince. Shakespearean prologues, for example, are always tightly integrated by subject and reference to the rest of the play. For instance, in *Troilus and Cressida*, the “armed Chorus” locates Troy as the setting for the play, and proceeds to describe cynically how the abduction of Helen from the Greeks by Prince Paris sparked the siege of Troy. He then invites the audience to behold the story of Troilus and Cressida, but taints the invitation with a warning about the precariousness of war. The Chorus of *King Henry V*, while apologizing for the inadequacies of the Globe’s empty stage, locates the setting of the action in England and France, but also encourages the audience to collaborate with the actors on stage by exercising their powers of imagination: “Suppose within the girdle of these walls / Are now confined two mighty monarchies, ...” (Prologue 19-20).

Stern provides the example of Rowley’s *All’s Lost by Lust* (1633) and Dekker’s *Wonder of a Kingdom* (1636) which use the same prologue (118).

Although willing to entertain the evidence of tailor-made prologues, and especially those written for court performance, Bruster and Weimann dispute the broader implications of Stern’s argument that, by and large, prologues were not custom-written for specific plays.

Bruster and Weimann examine prologues from three perspectives that overlap repeatedly. These perspectives are defined in the introductory chapter thus:

Our use of “Prologue” acknowledges in particular three manifestations of the early modern prologue that, although closely intertwined, will reward serial examination in this chapter. These manifestations of prologue include:

- The scripts for and textual traces of introductory performances that survive in printed playtexts and in other sources (sources which include mention of playhouse practices and expectations);
- The costumed actor who introduced plays in the theatres of Shakespeare’s day; and
- The performance of those theatrical introductions. (1)

Bruster and Weimann choose to depict early modern audiences as “noisy,” even though there is no hard evidence to support this claim. For a comprehensive discussion of audience behaviour in the theatres see Gurr 222-29.

In context, “spectacle” refers to the manner of imitation (i.e., stage presentation), not dazzling stage effects.

I refer to the concept “desis,” even though Aristotle’s model of plot construction is clearly restrictive in an analysis of Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice.

Alexander Leggatt, and many others, have challenged Frye’s theory by showing that Shakespearean comedy more often ends on a suspended note, not harmony.

Scaliger appropriates Donatus’s pronouncement that in the protasis “only part of the story is explained, part held back in order to arouse suspense in the audience” (see above, 59).

I have alluded to this idea in the General Introduction.

The challenges contained in the opening for the early modern actor are parodied in the induction of John Marston’s *Antonio and Mellida*, (1602), when Feliche, about to enter the stage for the first time, grumbles about not understanding his role and how to execute it effectively: “I have a part allotted me which I have neither able apprehension to conceit nor what I conceive gracious ability to utter” (Ind.105-7).

Heinz Fischer refers to this point in an article on audience reception, where he examines the ways in which different theatre companies have sought to involve their audiences at the outset of a performance. He...
indicates that “in some [instances], an attempt is made to establish physical contact: actors may flirt with spectators before they are allowed to take their seats, or a purring actress may adjust a bewildered spectator’s tie” (81). Later he adds: “As long as the audience does not become involved, any theatrical effort is wasted. The spectator who is not moved will move out. For this reason alone, if for no other, the audience is the most important element in the theatre” (81).

20] J. Hillis Miller points to similar processes of “suspension” in describing how Shakespeare produces tragic irony (pp. 36-37).

21] Keir Elam describes this process in semiotic terms:

The theatrical frame is in effect the product of a set of transactional conventions governing the participants’ expectations and their understanding of the kinds of reality involved in the performance. The theatregoer will accept, at least in dramatic representation, an alternative or fictional reality to be presented by individuals designated as the performers, and that his own role with respect to that represented reality is to be that of a privileged onlooker. (88)

22] Mary Bly indicates that the conventions of an opening in plays written for boy companies, in marked contrast to plays written for adult companies, often “challenge[d] the audience’s suspension of disbelief” (138). Later she adds:

Boys’ plays persistently challenge the audience by referencing the artificiality of stage practice. This characteristic can be seen in the earliest plays of the period, which sometimes open with inductions featuring actors in partial undress, or discussing their parts or ages. (147)

23] Elam makes a similar point that the formation of dramatic world is contingent upon: “The necessary projection by the spectator of possible future developments in the action, his inferring of probable causes and effects, his filling of gaps in information, etc.” (101)

24] Since Johann Gottfried von Herder in the eighteenth century, scholars have discussed plays in terms of a self-contained metaphor which artistically reflects the world outside the theatre. For example, Eleanor Shaffer introduces the term “world of the play” to represent a “whole dramatic world where everything [is] essential and interconnected” (123). This assertion, though useful, is problematized in the early modern context by the existence of scenes that appear to be loosely connected to the play as a whole: the “Porter scene” (2.3) in Macbeth and the “Latin lesson” (4.1) in The Merry Wives of Windsor. Elam provides a semiotic explanation for the problem:

The *sjuzet*/plot, similarly, includes happenings which, though part of the immediate “actual” dramatic world— such as the exchange between Macduff and the Porter in II .iii – will not be included by the spectator in the structure of the *fabula*/story proper (since they contribute nothing to the progress of event: in narratological terms, they are not propulsive “cardinal” functions but indices or static catalysts….) (120)


26] In the second half of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have challenged Aristotle’s long-established principles of plot construction, arguing for their arbitrariness.

27] Frank Kermode appears to take the polar opposite position, arguing that narrative is shaped with a view to the ending, with its philosophical associations of finality and death (4).

28] In Mankind to Marlowe, Bevington argues convincingly that the composite structures of early modern plays derive, in large part, from the medieval dramatic tradition:

Again, the inclusive medieval point of view saw no virtue in eliminating one element or the other, and structural success must be measured not by the movement toward classical “purity” but by the integration of obverse and alternating textures into a single and yet multiform art. (4)

29] For a fuller discussion see Richard Levin 12.
A notable example can be found in J. Hillis Miller’s chapter on Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, “Ariachne’s Broken Woof” (129-45).

Aristotle’s *Poetics* offers an early systematic engagement with the term “action,” which is deemed an intrinsic component of all forms of mimetic poetry. The challenge of interpreting the term stems from Aristotle’s invariable use of it. For a comprehensive discussion of the meanings of “action” in the *Poetics* see, Halliwell 138-49.

Halliwell attributes this confusion to Plato, who refers to “muthos” as “story”: Plato is apt to treat poetic muthos simply but pejoratively; a “muthos” is a story or fable which embodies and asserts, without qualification, a set of propositions about the world” (23). Later he adds:

Although the term *muthos* remains crucial to Aristotle’s theory of poetry, its sense has shifted markedly, and in a way that displays significant originality, from Plato’s use of it… [It denotes] the plot structure which is both the organised design and the significant substance or content of a poem. (23)

Patrice Pavis describes action in semiotic terms as a harmonising of stage enunciations. He quotes the modern director J. Coupéau, who conceives of the term “action” in similar terms to mine:

The design of dramatic action is the entirety of movements, gestures and attitude, the accord between faces, voices and silence; it is the totality of the stage performance, emanating from the a unique thought which conceives it, orders and harmonises it. (63)

As indicated elsewhere in this dissertation, Castelvetro’s theorised the concept of an opening mainly as part of a long-standing early modern debate about how poets ought to handle historical source material. Even though many of its observations are obscure, his treatise provides one of the most extensive discussions of a “beginning” undertaken in poetic theory. In the final analysis, then, a “beginning,” for Castelvetro, constitutes a fixed point from which a self-contained process begins to unfold, but it is always, somehow, incomplete at the moment of reception and contained within the broader “telos” of pleasure.

I discuss the plot’s formal property of “wholeness” in my analysis of the *Poetics* on p. 49.

“Mimesis” and “diegesis” allow Aristotle to delimit the boundaries of action. Yet the distinction between the terms is rather artificial, and particularly within the context of theatrical performance: a character reporting an event on the stage always embodies the events through facial expressions, emotions, and gestures.

Emrys Jones makes a similar distinction in describing “scenic form,” another aspect of Shakespearean stage-practice that is reflected only in the play-texts:

Would [Shakespeare] have accepted the five-act division for his plays? Did he think in terms of this structural scheme when he was composing a play? These questions are pertinent, since none of the Quartos (with the exception of the 1622 Quarto of *Othello*) has any act or scene division, so that those versions of his plays which were printed during his lifetime (including the Good Quartos) bear none of the editorial marks of division which any modern reader of Shakespeare takes for granted. (66-67)

In the process of composing a play, the playwright must also decide, among many other considerations, whether to assemble his dramatic material in a simple or complex structure (typically principal and secondary lines of action); the number of strands involved in an opening; and the distribution of sequences that compose each strand (i.e., the micro units of action that are introduced and suspended).

A strand can be identified by the scholar in retrospect, i.e. by tracing the action in the play-text from the ending to the beginning (see above, 15).

For example, *The Merchant of Venice* contains two strands of action. The first runs from 1.1.1-1.1.184. The action presents Antonio, Salarino, and Solanio in conversation about Antonio’s wealth, deposited at sea in argosies. Three additional characters soon enter and join the conversation. This strand is suspended after Antonio agrees to finance Bassiano’s voyage to woo Portia in Belmont, and instructs him to secure a loan on the Rialto. From the very outset, the action on the stage is defined not only through the words
exchanged, but visually too through movement and positioning, which declare Antonio as the focal point on stage. The merchant’s inflated confidence in the safety of his ships at sea reflects behaviour uncharacteristic of a savvy, successful, and well-respected merchant, trading in the most vibrant commercial market in Europe. These aspects of Antonio’s character can, therefore, invite the spectator to question his behaviour. Why does the experienced merchant act imprudently in his efforts to help Bassiano? What does his demeanour, as represented in the opening, reveal about the mercantile world of the play?

Richard Levin uses the term “line of action” (1).

Some of the analysis presented here is found in an article I published in 2008 (see Works Cited).

Unlike Shakespeare and his fellow actors, modern interpreters are faced with perplexing questions about Macbeth and its evolution from its first performance by the King’s Men at the Globe playhouse, around 1606, with Richard Burbage in the leading role, to its publication in the 1623 Folio. Several scholars have done well to emphasize the play-text’s ongoing evolution in this seventeen-year period. After all, only a flexible script can reflect the changing demands of production (different playing spaces, actors being replaced by others, etc.) Although, as Jill Levenson aptly remarks in Romeo and Juliet (2000), “Obviously all plays change in the theatre, influenced by the response of the actors and audience to the texts” (69), the emphasis in Macbeth has been on extensive authorial revision. In his recent publication, William Shakespeare’s Macbeth: A Sourcebook, Alexander Leggatt refers to the “Hecate scenes”, 3.5, and 4.1 as later additions integrated some time before John Heminge and William Condell compiled the Folio. Even though this belief is widely accepted, Leggatt reminds us that there is still uncertainty in this matter:

It is generally assumed that 3.5 is a later addition, possibly by Middleton, almost certainly not by Shakespeare. The same assumption is made about Hecate’s brief appearance in 4.1 (not given here) which includes another song, extra witches and a dance. (162)

Not only is it unclear who supplied the changes, if indeed changes were made, but also the grounds for revision are unknown. With very little evidence about the play’s early performance history and with no early quarto of the play, it is impossible to decipher the origins of this dramatic material. Moreover, Middleton’s The Witch (c.1609 –1615), which “contains two songs verbally similar to fragmentary references in the F’s stage directions” (Braunmuller 225), does not contain proof. Braunmuller concludes his section on “Thomas Middleton’s contribution to the Folio” with the following remark:

Rather than adding suspect text to Folio Macbeth, as editors have done or been tempted to do ever since The Witch was rediscovered, I have preferred to reprint Middleton’s text in Appendix 2, p. 270 below, where readers and producers may make what use of it they choose. (259)

I have checked all stage-directions in the Folio, but I am citing the New Cambridge series (Braunmuller) for the sake of convenience.

Marvin Rosenberg quotes Walter Hodges, who believes that fireworks ran down from the “heavens” on a fixed wire, but, as Thomson argues, there is no hard evidence to support a particular location. On a different note, the effect of fog, indicated in the dialogue, was perhaps a visual effect that was generated by bursts of resin smoke (Rosenberg 1).

The Tempest, for example, opens with a storm generated on the stage by thunder, lightning, and other special effects. While Twelfth Night does not stage a storm, the comedy presents characters who are shipwrecked on the Illyrian coast as a result of one. In Julius Caesar, a storm precedes the murder of Caesar, and, of course, the most famous storm is the one King Lear confronts in act 3 of his tragedy. For a fuller discussion of storms and the meanings of thunder and lightning on the early modern stage, see Thomson.

Referring to this point, Rosenberg writes: “One of Shakespeare’s paradoxes is that these ultimate expressions of nature’s energy are likely to be perceived by Shakespearean man as ‘unnatural,’ as if they bode cosmic disturbances” (1).

As opposed to 1.1, 1.3 contains an explicit indication that the Witches dance:

The weird sisters, hand in hand,
Poster of the sea and land,
Thus do go, about, about,
Thrice to thine and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine. (32-34)

49 These lines help construct a crude but revealing portrait of the Witches as strange and fascinating characters when they first appear. Their beards, for example, are not found in Holinshed. The lines above might also contain a clue about the significance of the actors’ gender for purposes of characterisation. It is well known that male actors played female roles on the early modern stage, and, in this case, by speaking in a deep masculine voice, the actors may have accentuated their characters’ androgyny.

50 Peter Stallybrass identifies an ambiguity in the presentation of the Witches: on the one hand, they have features typical of the English village witch, on the other, they look “not like th’inhabitants o’ th’earth 1.3.39 (195).

51 As Frances Shirley has observed, lines 8-10 may contain an implicit direction that sounds made by cats and toads (the Witches’ familiars [9n.] prompt their urgent exit:

First Witch I come Graymalkin.
Second Witch Paddock Calls.
Third Witch Anon.

52 The opening of Macbeth suggests that a meeting among the Witches took place before the play begins: “When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” (1-2).

53 This dramaturgical characteristic of an opening is evident in the four case studies and, indeed, in many other plays.

54 The portrait of the brilliant and decisive warrior is perhaps most vividly drawn in lines 18-20 (quoted above), where Macbeth carves his way through the Norwegian army until he finally meets the traitor Macdonald, defeats him, and places his head on a spear, a common practice done to rebels (1.2.23n), and a detail to which the play returns in the closing lines, this time with reference to Macbeth.

55 By delimiting the Witches’ powers early in the action, Shakespeare makes an early modern audience focus on the process by which Macbeth succumbs to the very Christian sin of temptation. Establishing the Witches’ status as confidence tricksters and not as portents of fate is imperative in order to show that Macbeth’s course of action is free, chosen by him alone. His internal conflict, which brings him such extreme suffering, and makes him the object of the audience’s pathos, is, as he eventually realizes, of his own making.
Chapter Three: Analysing the Openings of Four Plays: From Page to Stage
This chapter examines the openings of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet*. Since it is difficult to identify and define the opening of a play *ex nihilo*, my analysis begins often by tracing the action/s developed through a play retroactively from the ending to the beginning (according to the theory presented above, 14, and as I have done in my analysis of *Macbeth*): I make it clear when talking about action specified by the play-text, i.e., the playwright’s stage directions, explicit as well as implicit; and what effect I believe that action is designed to have on the early modern spectator. When describing staging information, or clues for the delineation of character, I follow the text line by line in order to ensure accuracy.

The textual histories of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Hamlet* are a matter of controversy which arises, at least in part, because the relationship among the early texts of each play is unknown. In spite and perhaps chiefly because of the marked differences among them, not enough attention has been given to their striking similarities, which become salient in the context of early modern performance. One such similarity is that all early texts present a similar construction of the opening. The compositional principle at the base of the texts of a play might suggest that the dramatic composition of the opening remains remarkably stable in the course of the plays’ production histories. Because of these considerations, case studies one, two, and four include an additional section (II) that demonstrates how the extant versions of the plays, despite their varying lengths, display a similar construction of the opening. After pointing to what the texts have in common, I examine the few substantive differences among them. Before proceeding any further, I should note that my scope of analysis in the case
studies on comedy is more limited compared with those on tragedy, a testament to the simpler construction of comic openings.

Romeo and Juliet

The opening of Romeo and Juliet is unique among Shakespeare’s tragedies, because it is not cast in dialogue from the outset, but contains a prologue delivered by a Chorus. According to Classical precedent (Donatus’s prologos dramatikos), the Chorus outlines the tragic tale of a pair of star-crossed lovers who will die as a result of a family feud. The Chorus’s prefatory remarks, however, are quickly subverted or at least delayed, because the opening provides very little suggestion of grave peril and misfortune besetting the lovers. Instead, it presents a comedic exchange between two Capulet serving-men whose humour is couched in bawdy language, and the exchange is followed by a clash among members of the feuding households that is suspended by the intervention of Prince Escalus (1.1). The stage clears to leave the Montague parents to show Benvolio their concern for Romeo, who in private conversation with Benvolio bemoans his love not for Juliet, as foretold by the Chorus\(^1\), but for Rosaline (1.1). In the following scene, County Paris asks Juliet’s father for her hand in marriage and is advised to woo her at the banquet (1.2); and it is only when Romeo and Benvolio meet Peter (1.2) that they decide to attend the banquet wearing masks. In 1.3 Juliet acquiesces to comply with her parents’ choice of a suitor, and in 1.4, Romeo’s attendance at the banquet is delayed by Mercutio’s long narrative about Queen Mab.
In “Echoes Inhabit a Garden: The Narratives of *Romeo and Juliet,*” Jill L. Levenson writes: “It will quickly become apparent that *Romeo and Juliet* is constantly preoccupied with its own narration, an account enriched by various stories and fragments of stories” (41). The composition of the opening corroborates this assertion. In fact, Shakespeare supplies expository material through fragments of action (which often originate in the playwright’s sources) that bear little connection to one another. The strands of the opening are disconnected, i.e., an audience is not able to see the relevance of one action to the next (Elam 123), and each is suspended and developed subsequently in order to delimit the audience’s field of reception.

These largely independent strands, which introduce three quite separate actions, give rise to the tragic tale of adolescent love at 1.4.154-55, when Romeo falls in love with Juliet, and Tybalt vows revenge on the Montague intruder²: “I will withdraw, but this intrusion shall /Now seeming sweet convert to bitt’rest gall. Exit” (1.4.204-05). 1.4.154-55, then, is the point from which the tale of “a pair of star-crossed lovers” (6) develops continuously.

By contrast to the example of *Macbeth,* presented in Chapter Two, the opening of *Romeo and Juliet* works through many delaying tactics. Why present such a prolonged opening? Although little can be said for sure, it may be that *Romeo and Juliet,* being a relatively early play, displays a less practised technique in tying together (“desis”) the dramatic material of an opening. Another option, which takes a broad view of the play as a whole, suggests that the play’s prolonged opening and the sudden turn from comedy to tragedy in act three plays with the expectations of early modern audiences by postponing the tragedy announced by the Chorus in the prologue.
Three substantive versions of the tragedy survive in print: Q1 (1597), Q2 (1599), and F (1623), which derives from Q3 but does not contain a prologue. The following case study analyses the construction of the opening in Q2, as it appears in the Oxford Shakespeare (ed. Levenson). It goes on to demonstrate how Q1 and Q2 despite their varying lengths and textual variants, reproduce all the strands which make up the opening.

I

The Chorus as Prologos Dramatikos

The play’s title, if we go by the title-page of Q2, would have indicated to early modern audiences what type of play would occupy “the two hours’ traffic of our stage” (Prol. 12): “The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.” The Chorus enters and delivers a monologue directed at the audience. Before the Chorus (who appears only twice in the play) pronounces a single word, there is a need, I believe, to work out the effect his entrance was designed to have on the audience: to create the mood proper to tragedy.

The initial stage direction, “Enter Chorus,” does not supply information about the character’s costume, props, and positioning on the platform stage. What is more, the following speech appears to contain only the slightest hints about these components of presenting the Chorus on the platform stage. This economy may occur because the
Chorus’s function, with all the conventions associated with the role, would have been well known to the early modern actor playing the part.

The Chorus’s costume, probably a black velvet cloak (Chambers, vol. 2, 547), is an effective visual marker because the colour black is often associated with mourning, as in Hamlet’s costume and those of the grief-stricken characters at the opening to All Well That Ends Well. Furthermore, the contents of his speech, which create an atmosphere of intimacy between actor and spectator, and which are appropriate to the tragic tale he narrates, suggest that the speech should be pronounced from the front of the stage. Therefore, the Chorus probably entered ceremoniously and advanced slowly to the front edge of the stage, perhaps carrying any of the following items: the playbook, a scroll, papers, and a hand-held staff (Bruster and Weimann 25).

When the Chorus reached the appropriate place on the platform stage for delivering prologues, he faced the audience whose curiosity had been aroused by the ceremonious approach of this silent, solemn figure, and stimulated further by the serious tone in which the speech must be delivered. What is more, the figure of Chorus, indicated as such in the play-text but not specifically mentioned in the spoken prologue, would have been familiar to early modern theatre-goers since a number of plays opened with a Chorus figure. The Chorus’s exit is similarly marked by a slow withdrawal in keeping with the tragic tale he has foretold.

The way the narrative is presented requires consideration. The prologue begins with four lines of verse which contain much foreboding. These lines clearly awaken an expectation of tragedy in the audience by suggesting that the play will deal with a long-standing conflict between two noble houses which resolves itself only with blood. The
cause of spilled blood is underlined by the repetition of the word “civil,” which denotes that violence arises from turbulent social conflict rather than through the intervention of some transcendental force. The setting in Verona is conveyed in a subordinate clause, interestingly contained in brackets in Q2’s text (see Halio 20), which I have already identified as the text containing most information about staging and characterisation. This clause underlines the secondary details about setting when compared to the dramatic description of the renewed clash between the families.

From general foreboding, the speech focuses on the protagonists of the tragedy, and announces their deaths as the direct result of their unfortunate actions, as well as the resulting reconciliation between the feuding families:

A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,

Whose misadventured piteous overthrows

Doth with their death bury their parents’ strife. (6-8)

Verses 9-11 seem to round off the narrative by stressing the “fearful” link between the family feud and the deaths of the lovers, thus restating the subject of the tragedy. The final couplet contains conventional rhetoric which appeals for the audience’s continued attention and in practice enables the Chorus to withdraw from the stage. The Chorus concludes, therefore, by bringing the narrative to a close, but awakens the audience’s interest as to how the tragedy will unfold. The audience’s continued attention is precisely what the Chorus is asking for when he appeals for benevolence for the actors’ “toil” (14).
Some details are worthy of further comment: in composing the Chorus’s prologue, Shakespeare looked to the sonnet, whose affective properties are explored thoroughly in the tragedy as a whole. Sonnets can be used with infinite variety, of course, but the rigidity of the form—a set pattern of fourteen lines of rhyming iambic pentameter—facilitates transactions that are of practical importance to the playwright as well as the actor. The sonnet’s controlled metre implies a slow delivery, which enables the actor to impart a great deal of play content with clarity in a relatively short time span.11

Through his delivery of the sonnet, the Chorus may call attention to the artifice of using poetic conventions that can sound formal, even overly contrived. By appropriating the conventions of an established aristocratic literary genre, the words of the Chorus sounded weighty and resonant. Sonnet conventions conferred on the Chorus the power invested in “author’s pen or actor’s voice” (24), to use the words of the Chorus in Troilus and Cressida. The playwright may have used them as a way of imbuing a character with poetic authority.12

The sonnet also could have compelled original audiences to share a complicity with the Chorus on the stage, an intrinsic part of “suspending disbelief willingly,” because it contains familiar conventions of story-telling (a modern equivalent is the “once upon a time” conventional opening of fairy tales). The fusion of these rhetorical elements creates for the spectator a unique frame for theatrical perception, which may lead him/her into receiving the sad tale of love about to unfold on the stage as only make-believe, in spite of its ominous overtones, an example of the playwright calling attention to his own craft.
This final point merits some closer scrutiny because the sonnet echos loudly in the opening both in monologue and dialogue. For example, the combative exchange between Samson and Gregory in 1.1, though different in tone from the prologue, modulates sonnet conventions frequently, as I shall demonstrate shortly. Apart from suggesting both continuity and contrast, the sonnet helps to forge both social and personal identities in the play, because all the characters are defined not merely visually though the ways they look and behave, but also audibly through the ways they talk. All of these considerations elucidate the prologue’s initiatory functions.

The basic structure of the prologue (three quatrains and a concluding couplet), as well as its poetic and rhetorical devices, is significant too. There are instances where words are set against each other antithetically, as in line three, where “ancient” is set against “new” (Prol. 3). Word duplication, an example of diacope or ploce, occurs in line four, which, according to Levenson, balances the verse: “Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (Prol. 4n). The verse, neatly balanced, not only stimulates sensory perception but also arouses a sense of symmetry. Shakespeare’s preoccupation with symmetry is reflected in many components of the opening. It resonates deeply in a tragedy that presents the impossible love of two characters, members of two feuding households, and action that unfolds in the span of two hours and takes place in Verona and Mantua.

Long vowels and the caesura also fulfill important theatrical functions. The caesura, explains Berry, creates “[a] poise on a word— i.e. the word holds and lifts for a fraction of a moment before it plunges into the second half of the line” (58). Its repeated use, particularly in the first eight lines, in conjunction with long vowels, slows the rhythm.
of the speech, creating sound effects that contribute to the mood of sombreness. In this instance, then, rhythm reinforces mood.

The effect the Chorus creates seems to contain a contradiction. On the one hand, the lovers’ deaths are attributed to civil causes (the feud), and on the other, the adjective “star-crossed” seems to imply that a transcendental force causes their deaths. A reading of the play shows that most of the events that trigger the tragic action are caused by accidents, and therefore Shakespeare’s “star-crossed” may refer to accident rather than fate. The prologue thus appears to be flouting dramatic convention by unsettling the play’s *modus operandi* (i.e., the basic rules of engagement prologues typically establish for the spectator before the action proper unfolds on the stage). The Chorus seems to provide the spectator with ambivalent information about the action proper, which leaves him/her uncertain as to whether the downfall of the lovers is instigated by accidents arising from the turbulent social reality of the play or by transcendental intervention. This ambiguous state of affairs reverberates, or remains suspended, until the audience is led to see, in the course of the play, how an apparent contradiction is resolved on the stage.

Furthermore, to disclose the tragic outcome of events that are about to unfold may seem risky for a playwright, but, seen from a theatrical perspective, an opening of this sort arouses the audience’s curiosity for what is to come. Levenson makes an observation relevant to this point when she explains that the Chorus presents a popular European tale that would have been familiar to contemporary audiences via several renditions that had emerged during the sixteenth century. This circumstance suggests that Shakespeare’s audience knew and expected the tragic ending of the famous story. The Chorus,
therefore, seems to be reassuring the audience that they will be seeing the familiar story unfold on the stage:

[T]he allusions of contemporary writers to the Romeo and Juliet story indicate only that Renaissance audiences took from the novellas a straightforward, melancholy tale of young love. Apparently readers perceived what the authors explicitly directed them to see: “The unfortunate death of two unhappy lovers, one of whom died of poison, the other of grief, with a number of unforeseen events.” (Levenson 14-15)

Finally, by unconventionally disclosing the ending at the opening of a play, and following it with a humorous and noisy scene (1.1), Shakespeare distracts audience attention from the eventual deaths of the young lovers, and perhaps from the promise that the ending will be tragic. This opening sequence, therefore, plays with audience expectation.

The Chorus thus sets the scene for tragedy by providing background material, i.e., the social circumstances which threaten to impede love’s fulfilment (lines 1-8), and only then proceeds to describe the “death-marked love” (9) of the young protagonists. It is particularly interesting that the prologue outlines the development as well as the outcome of the principal action of the play as it unfolds on the stage. Consequently, the first brawl scene (1.1) looks forward to the crucial turning-point in 3.1 (the death of Mercutio) by showing how the atmosphere of comedy can unexpectedly give way to that of violence.
The final narrative sequence in the prologue traces the general movement of the tragedy, which ends with the reconciliation of the feuding families.

The Street Brawl:

Slipping into Chaos

The first scene in large part is Shakespeare’s invention. It creates a very different atmosphere from that created by the Chorus, as it takes the spectator to a Veronese street, and within seconds the stage is filled with lively activity. The initial stage directions amount to an entrance cue which calls attention to the weapons the Capulet serving-men carry: “Enter Samson and Gregory, with swords and bucklers, of the house of Capulet” (1.1. 0.1-2). Levenson has suggested that these weapons by themselves may add a touch of humour through caricature because of the disproportion between the “heavy weapons [sword] and small round shields usually carried by a handle [bucklers].” The weapons “indicate the social positions of the two men and caricature the violence of the ancient feud” (1.1.0.1-2n). The serving-men’s weaponry might send an early signal to a sixteenth-century audience about the Capulets’ quarrelsome nature, especially if the two men are on their way to a Veronese equivalent of Smithfield, where Elizabethans typically congregated on Sunday mornings to witness and partake in recreational duelling contests (0.1-2n).
Yet these explicit instructions do not determine the positioning of the characters on the stage. Samson’s first utterance, which contains implicit staging information, is written as a response to some utterance Gregory would have made prior to his first appearance.\textsuperscript{18} The \textit{in medias res} entrance, as well as the words spoken, suggests that the characters appear from the same entry point and are engaged in an animated exchange as they move downstage. An entrance in mid-conversation thrusts the audience into the middle of an action, and in so doing can arouse curiosity about what occurred before the characters appeared.

The characters keep picking up on each other’s words: they pun on “coals,” “colliers,” “choler,” and “collar,” echoing “strife” and “rage” in the prologue. This dynamic is repeated, and it supplies obvious bawdy puns on “stand” and “it” (Levenson 26-27n.), which represent a stark change of register from the Chorus’s formal and rhetorical verse. Instead, the characters speak in prose, an informal linguistic register that suggests a degree of familiarity between the characters. The dialogue displays many modulations and a variety of figures of speech which reinforce the activities of contest suggested by the content of the dialogue. Levenson points out that puns, quips, and bawdiness constitute a gender-specific “mode of expression,” a distinct male idiom that betrays testosterone. She goes on to explain how these linguistic devices supply an impression of Verona’s combative and ego-driven youths at the outset of the play (24).

Highlighting these violent masculine traits, Samson’s self-possessed avowal to provoke the Montagues is countered by Gregory’s cool and playful cynicism. Instead of cooperating, Gregory appears stand-offish, especially once he picks up on Samson’s “move” and “strike,” and through bawdy wordplay, he punctures his counterpart’s
blustering expressions of sexual and martial bravado. The comic spring is wound fully towards the end of the verbal exchange only to be released once the Montague serving-men enter, in a situation where Samson’s fear is immediately exposed to ridicule:

GREGORY …Draw thy tool, here comes of the house of Montagues.

Enter two other Serving-men

SAMSON My naked weapon is out. Quarrel, I will back thee.

GREGORY How, turn thy back and run?

SAMSON Fear me not.

GREGORY No, marry, I fear thee!

SAMSON Let us take the law of our sides; let them begin.

GREGORY I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list.

SAMSON Nay, as they dare: I will bite my thumb at them, which is disgrace to them if they bear it. (30-40)

The play-text shows clearly how Samson is made to look ridiculous: Gregory provides Samson with the opportunity to prove his courage by challenging the Montagues; Samson
disguises his fear by declining to offer Gregory protection from behind, which in turn confirms to Gregory as well as to the audience that Samson has been making a hollow show of courage. The outcome is amusing because there is yet another sudden change in Samson: as Gregory prepares to confront the Montague serving-men, Samson instantly springs into action and provokes them himself. For original audiences, the action would have been entertaining, not only because of the wordplay and bravado, but also because it expresses the impetuosity of the serving-men by parodying well-established fencing codes (Levenson 39n).19

As the scene unfolds, however, the stage dynamic, which presents the first outburst of violence among members of the feuding households, or in the words of the Chorus, “ancient grudge break to new mutiny” (3), shows how swiftly the action slips into chaos (even though the brawl does not end in calamity).20 Gregory hears a sound off stage, because he refers to the serving-men moments before they enter and tells Samson to draw his sword. The ensuing dialogue between Gregory and Samson unfolds presumably as the other serving-men make their ways downstage. It is more certain that, by the time Samson takes the initiative and scornfully bites his thumb at the men in provocation, all four characters are closer to one another, ready for engagement.21 Swords do not clash, according to the play-text, until Benvolio enters, and Gregory, who may be responding once again to a sound off stage, announces the imminent arrival of Tybalt. Noticing the serving-men fighting, Benvolio instantly rushes with sword drawn to defuse the violence. Tybalt, on the other hand, witnessing the scene, draws his sword, threatens and insults Benvolio, who pleads for assistance, and then, blatantly ignoring the codes of duelling, proceeds to draw Benvolio into the widening scuffle.22
The violence escalates further as “three or four Citizens with clubs or partisans” rush in and join the fight. The Officer’s exclamation, “Down with the Capulets, down with the Montagues!” (70), reflects the urgency of the situation and implies that the citizens enter in a hurry, perhaps from opposite sides. The subsequent entrance of Capulet and his Wife, textually noted by “Enter old Capulet in his gown, and his Wife,” may contain a clue that the brawl has driven the couple out of their beds: the characters appear in dressing gowns, which signal to the audience that the disturbance occurs early in the morning. The ensuing dialogue conveys a very clear sense of his consternation and of his determination to join the fight, while Lady Capulet mocks him by suggesting that at his age a crutch is more appropriate than his long sword. Her words are comical, in part, because they are directed at an aging gentleman wearing garments inappropriate for combat. The same words may have been particularly resonant to original audiences, because she appears to draw a parallel between Capulet’s old-fashioned heavy weapon (“long sword” 71n), and his age:

CAPULET What noise is this? Give me my long sword, ho!

CAPULET' S WIFE A crutch, a crutch— why call you for a sword?

CAPULET My sword, I say. Old Montague is come,

And flourishes his blade in spite of me. (71-74)

Montague enters with another expression of rage. His line, “Hold me not, let me go” (75),
addressed to his wife, shows his resolve to fight. But unlike Lady Capulet, Lady Montague, far from making fun of her husband, tries to restrain him. These examples also indicate how the two sets of parents, entering from two different directions, may reflect the playwright’s preoccupation with configuring stage-space symmetrically in the scene.

The Prince’s anger, evident as he enters with his retinue, indicates that the feuding factions, busy fighting, do not notice the lawgiver. The play-text suggests that his first two lines go unheard on the stage: “Will they not hear?” (79). It is only when the Prince delivers another stern and vocal “What ho!” (79) that the characters take notice of him and stop fighting. The change of register from the informal and confrontational language of the street to the formal and punitive language of the lawgiver is significant. It conveys the Prince’s fury by invoking conventional images from love-poetry: “Fire” and “fountains” in lines 80-81. His imposing authority is obvious when the brawlers cast their “mistempered weapons to the ground” (83) in submission, and these props remain on the stage until the end of 1.1 as witnesses to the violence. The rest of the speech contains a stern reprimand for the hostility which has recurred on Verona’s streets, as well as a warning to Capulet and Montague alike as to the serious repercussions should the peace be disturbed again. Shakespeare, as opposed to his sources, has the Prince allude to three previous outbreaks of violence “bred of an airy word” (85). These allusions as well as other references to the past (for example, 90) are particularly significant to the construction of the opening because they suggests that the feud has disrupted life in Verona far too often in the past, and that its citizens are unwilling to tolerate civil disorder anymore. They highlight how easily a violent past threatens to encroach on the present in this tragedy. And in doing so, they help situate the action at a point of crisis in
Moreover, the Prince’s speech reintroduces an atmosphere of austerity by repeating rhetorical devices from the prologue. For example, antithesis and diacope or ploce in lines 90-91 balance the verse, adding an element of formality to the speech: “To wield old partisans in hands as old, / Cankered with peace to part your cankered hate.” These lines call to mind: “From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, / Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (Prol. 3-4), both of which also have supplied a historical dimension to the violence presented in the tragedy and a suggestion of its intrusive nature.

The action described to this point would have proved effective on the early modern stage precisely because it ensures that, as the action unfolds, the audience is acutely aware of how violence can erupt from an unexpected source, and how easily a situation can turn. As a result, the notion of “reversibility” becomes implanted, even unconsciously, in the audience’s perception of how the action unfolds.

**Romeo and Rosaline:**

**Sketching the portrait of Romeo, the melancholic lover**

The second strand of the opening is indicated in the play-text not by a new scene, but by the gradual exits of many characters, except for three members of the Montague family. Moreover, the charged atmosphere of the violent brawl is gradually replaced by
an atmosphere of tranquility where characters may speak with a degree of intimacy: Montague asks about the culprit responsible for the latest outbreak of violence, and Benvolio narrates what the audience has seen in the form of action. Here, as in two other instances in the tragedy, a character attempts to recount an event from the past. Benvolio’s account seems to contain embellishments and humour. It also displays contempt for Tybalt’s style of fencing: “He swung about his head and cut the winds, / Who, nothing hurt withal, hissed him in scorn” (107-8). Consequently, the narrative may be supplying an early impression of Benvolio not only as a peacemaker, but also as a typical blustering youth. Narrative as stage device may also allow an audience a moment to catch their breath.

Lady Montague’s line, “O where is Romeo-saw you him today?” (1.1.112), which explicitly remarks the absence of the protagonist from the brawl, constitutes a change of focus to Romeo’s whereabouts, and it includes the first mention of the protagonist, whom audiences must have expected to see. In response to Lady Montague’s query, Benvolio delivers a lengthy and poetical speech which sketches the portrait of the anguished lover. It serves to distance Romeo as much as the spectator from the turbulent social reality of the play, and aids in making the transition into a story of unrequited love.

Romeo enters in the middle of this dialogue. He is presumably clad in the garments of a Montague and may appear dishevelled because love-sickness has deprived him of sleep. Romeo will likely enter from a point in the tiring-house that is far off from the three characters present, because Benvolio spots him from a distance: “See where he comes. So please you step aside” (152). The play-text also implies that after Benvolio asks to query Romeo’s recent change of mood in private, the Capulets exit in a hurry.
from a different point because Romeo catches a glimpse of his father exiting: “Was that my father that went hence so fast?” (158). The older generation’s hasty departure is a further expression of their concern for Romeo’s well-being, and it underscores the protagonist’s solitude as he enters the stage for the first time.  

Romeo’s initial line of dialogue, “Is the day so young?” (157), suggests that the speaker suffers from weariness, a symptom typical of melancholia. The distracted lover has lost track of time (Levenson 165n.), because he has been awake before dawn, and has made sleeplessness a habit (as Montague had mentioned at 127-30). Romeo admits instantly to being hopelessly in love, and manages repeatedly and with nimbleness to elude Benvolio’s questions about the cause of his grievance through equivocation and wordplay. These figures of speech infuse the lines spoken by both characters.  

Romeo’s “Where shall we dine?” (169) may seem strange because anguished lovers typically have no appetite. It makes good sense, however, if Romeo is only love-posturing at this juncture. The line also expresses how easily Romeo is distracted because it throws the dialogue in a new direction. The following line, 170, reinforces this impression because it changes the subject of conversation once again: “O me! What fray was here?” Romeo’s verse, full of oxymora, is confused, even frenzied, mimicking in speech the uncontrollable violence presented only recently in the form of action. The fact that Romeo, noticing the weapons on the stage, realizes only now that a street brawl had erupted, underscores the extent to which he is self-consumed and distant; and his youthful immaturity comes into view when he converts the symbols of violence on stage into an image of his heart’s oppression: “Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate, O anything
of nothing first created” (172-73). The brawl has been transformed through speech into an evocative metaphor of Romeo’s tormented psyche, a battleground of sorts.

In using the conventions of Petrarchan love poetry, Romeo takes delight in rehearsing his anguish, even self-consciously.\textsuperscript{28} This circumstance is nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than in the following depiction of love as an all-pervading power which mirrors the lover’s immoderation:

\begin{quote}
Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs,

Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes,

Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears. (186-89)
\end{quote}

The speech also represents the speaker’s intense confusion about desire through conventional Petrarchan metaphors and contrasting images such as “fire” and “sea.” However, the marked and regular rhythm of the speech counterpoints its content, expressing a degree of detachment in the speaker.

Romeo’s poetic speech concludes with “Farewell, my cuz” (191), suggesting that the character has been intent all along on evading Benvolio. Poetry, in this instance, seems to allow Romeo to deflect attention from disclosing Rosaline’s identity with the finesse and dexterity of a master sonneteer, even though, at times, it betrays a lack of proficiency: “Romeo temporarily exhausts his conceits” (188n). His evasion tactics may suggest that at points during the dialogue the character tries physically to get away from his interrogator.
The characters display bravado and one-upmanship, a mark of adolescence common to all the ego-driven male youths of the play, and their taunting wordplay echos Samson’s and Gregory’s in 1.1: “ROMEO A right good markman, and she is fair I love. / BENVOLIO A right fair mark, fair coz, is soonest hit” (202-3). However, as opposed to the first part of 1.1, which is action-packed, the emphasis here appears to lie on character delineation (principally that of the protagonist): as many scholars have suggested, Romeo’s poeticizing in this scene is a vital expression of the love melancholic. The sequence serves to introduce through dialogue, rich in wordplay and imagery, the typical or perhaps even the stereotypical characteristics of Romeo the lover, who has thrown himself headlong into unrequited love.

As indicated in the introduction to this dissertation (p. 7), the playwright constructs the opening and the characters who appear in it with an awareness of the play as a whole. Consequently, we might do well to consider Romeo’s characterisation in view of later scenes. With the information obtained, I return to earlier ones in order to provide a consistent reading of Romeo in the opening. However, before doing so, I should note that in the tragedy as a whole, Shakespeare appears to be concerned with portraying the extremities of youth, and Romeo particularly, as a victim of uninhibited passion rather than love. This portrayal of youth gradually acquires a threatening dimension, which compounds the perils the lovers face at the hands of their feuding households.

Following the balcony scene, Friar Laurence receives Romeo’s new protestations of love for Juliet coolly. Troubled by Romeo’s sudden change of heart, he warns that “Young men’s love then lies / Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes” (2.2.67-68). In
spite of Romeo’s new infatuation, Friar Laurence agrees to marry the young lovers in the hope that the union will settle the long dispute between the households; however, aware of the threats posed by Romeo’s impulsive behaviour, the Friar offers his services only after warning of the perils to which a young lover’s emotions are subject:

If e’er thou wast thyself, and these woes thine,
Thou and these woes were all for Rosaline.
And art thou changed? Pronounce this sentence then:
Women may fall, when there’s no strength in men. (2.2.77-80)

In 3.3, when learning of his banishment to Mantua, Romeo wallows in anguish and then attempts to take his own life. His impulsive reaction is clearly juxtaposed with Juliet’s more measured response in 3.2, when she learns about the deadly brawl and Romeo’s banishment from Verona. Romeo’s impetuosity is crystallized in a moment of extreme emotional anguish, when the Nurse enters Laurence’s cell in search of Romeo, and finds him lying helpless on the floor consumed by sorrow:

NURSE
O holy Friar, O tell me, holy Friar,
Where’s my lady’s lord? Where’s Romeo?

FRIAR LAURENCE
There on the ground, with his own tears made drunk. (3.3.81-83).
It is noteworthy that in the banquet scene—the point at which the principal action begins to unfold—Romeo, captivated by physical beauty, instantaneously forgets his infatuation with Rosaline and transfers his emotions to Juliet in the blink of an eye. His sudden change of heart is extreme and impulsive, considering that until this point, he could not get Rosaline out of his head:

ROMEO (to a Serving-man)

What lady’s that which doth enrich the hand
Of yonder knight?
SERVING-MAN I know not sir.

ROMEO

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! (1.4.154-57)

In acting the way he does, Romeo displays the typical volatile behaviour that distinguishes all the male youths of the play. Why, then, introduce Romeo as a besotted lover in the opening? One possible reason is that in order to impress Romeo’s volatility upon original audiences in the banquet scene, and thereafter, Shakespeare must provide a strong impression of the character’s propensity for falling in love at the drop of a hat. The opening, which provides the backdrop for Romeo’s rapid infatuation with Juliet, supplies an important dimension to the character’s adolescence.

Juliet and County Paris:
Marriage negotiations

The exchange between Capulet and County Paris is unexpected in view of the Chorus’s opening remarks about Romeo and Juliet. In devising this strand of the opening, Shakespeare appropriated an incident that appears later in Brooke’s poem and developed it here with a substantial amount of new material, some comic (1.2n). In fact, Shakespeare transformed a single reference to County Paris in the poem into a narrative about a prospective marriage suit of Juliet, which defers further the introduction of the principal action. The organization of the dramatic material suggests again that Shakespeare was playing with audience expectations.

“Capulet, the County Paris, and a Serving-man” enter while Capulet shares his hope to resolve the enmity between the feuding households. If one accepts Jean MacIntyre’s contention that servants on the platform stage wore blue livery (145), then the characters’ social identities were represented visually by contrasting costumes: lavish garments for the gentlemen and blue livery for the serving-man. The allusions in the dialogue to the turbulent social reality of Verona, already witnessed by the audience, suggest familiarity between Capulet and Country Paris, because the former confides in the latter about his private concerns. Illustrating the trust shared between the characters is important in order to explain why Capulet gives his backing to the potential suitor in the course of the scene.

At this early stage in the scene, however, County Paris has had no reassurance from Capulet, and the subject of conversation quickly changes from the earlier brawl to
Paris’s suit. The abrupt transition expresses the suitor’s enthusiasm and impatience to marry Juliet. His determination is implied in Capulet’s refrain that the negotiations over Juliet’s hand have been ongoing: “But saying o’er what I have said before: / My child is yet a stranger in the world, / She hath not seen the change of fourteen years”\(^3\) (1.2.7-9).

Capulet seems to be genuinely concerned that Juliet is too young to be married. He supplies important information about Juliet’s youth and vulnerability, characteristics that will be emphasized in 1.3, when Juliet appears on the stage for the first time. The high hopes he has for his young daughter, expressed in the following speech, may be ironical in view of the tragedy as a whole, and especially in act three, when the marriage negotiations continue even after Romeo and Juliet have been married by Friar Laurence:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And too soon marred are those so early made.} \\
\text{Earth has swallowed all my hopes but she;} \\
\text{She’s the hopeful lady of my earth.} \quad (1.2.13-15)
\end{align*}
\]

However, the atmosphere here is far from gloomy, and Capulet’s excitement about the prospects of a future wedding is conveyed through a subtle change of tone in his speech that combines lyricism, repetition of words, and wordplay as evidenced by these poetic devices: “The sonnet idiom crosses not only social ranks but generations” (Levenson 56). The financial connotations in the word “inherit” (line 30) suggest that, to some extent, its speaker anticipates social advancement through his daughter’s marriage. The character also encourages Paris to woo Juliet later that night at the Capulet banquet, a pivotal event in the tragedy, which is presented with a touch of humour: Capulet instructs an illiterate
The action returns to the subject of Rosaline, as Romeo and Benvolio enter in the middle of a witty and combative conversation. The two characters are likely to appear from an entry point in the tiring-house that is farthest from the servant who has not exited, because they do not appear to notice him until line 57: ROMEO “Good e’en, good fellow.” This line, which indicates that the time of day is after noon, implies that Benvolio has been pursuing Romeo for hours, because the earlier sequence involving these characters took place at dawn. Benvolio still demands to know the identity of Romeo’s tormentor, and the dynamic is amusing, because Romeo has managed to elude him for hours.

Benvolio depicts Romeo’s infatuation with physical beauty as an infection that blurs and poisons sight: “Take thou some new infection to thy eye / And the rank poison of the old will die” (1.2.49-50). This depiction is fitting considering that Romeo is
infatuated with the daughter of a foe. Also, Romeo’s interrupted speech in line 57 suggests that he is so preoccupied with his unrequited love for Rosaline that he bumps unwittingly into the illiterate servant: “Not mad, but bound more than a madman is: / Shut up in prison, kept without my food, / Whipped and tormented, and— Good e’en, good fellow” (55-57). As indicated, Romeo has concealed the identity of his lover with success until this point. But once he reads the servant’s letter aloud and discovers among the guests the name of Rosaline, his facial expressions or his tone of voice seem to betray him. Evidence for this implied stage business is found at line 85, when Benvolio, who has interrogated Romeo repeatedly about the identity of his tormentor, suddenly knows the culprit’s identity: “At this same ancient feast of Capulet’s / Sups the fair Rosaline, whom thou so loves, / With all the admirèd beauties of Verona” (85-87). Even after Benvolio discovers Romeo’s secret, the battle of wits does not abate. By this point, then, Benvolio, in spite of his fortitude, is unable to restrain Romeo’s adolescent passion for Rosaline.

Juliet and County Paris:

Mother and Nurse communicate Paris’s suit to Juliet

The action returns to the marriage negotiations over Juliet. This time, however, three female characters conduct them. This domestic scene derives from two short passages in Brooke’s poem which bear little relationship to each other. The first supplies biographical information about Juliet’s childhood, and the second presents Lady Capulet’s wish that Juliet marry Paris after Romeo’s banishment (1.3n). Shakespeare
fashioned this material into a sequence that displays the Capulet household for the first
time. This strand of the opening introduces the female protagonist of the play, Juliet,
whom an audience undoubtedly expected to see, although her appearance is delayed by a
brief exchange between Capulet’s Wife and the Nurse, perhaps to create anticipation for
her entrance:

Capulet’s Wife

Nurse, where’s my daughter? Call her forth to me.

Nurse

Now by my maidenhead at twelve year old,

I bade her come. What lamb, what ladybird,

God forbid! Where’s this girl? What Juliet! (1.3.1-4)

“I bade her come” and “Where’s this girl?” indicate that Nurse had summoned Juliet
before the exchange. The Nurse may be expressing concern that Juliet has defied her
mother’s call, and as a result becomes impatient (3-4n). However, with Juliet’s
appearance disobedience quickly proves to be nothing more than simple forgetfulness, a
trait typical of youth: “Madam, I am here, what is your will?” (7).

The ensuing dialogue, which is dominated by the older women, displays a rather
uneasy relationship between mother and daughter, where the Nurse acts as an
intermediary between them. Her animated verse about Juliet’s childhood is distinguished
by short lines and prose rhythms (1.3n). It repeatedly interrupts Lady Capulet’s controlled
verse with bawdy, serving both to temper Lady Capulet’s authoritative tone through
comedy and to stimulate Juliet’s enthusiasm for the match with County Paris. Her language is also affectionate and warm, supplying an impression of the strong bond she shares with Juliet. It also communicates the speaker’s boisterous personality, impatience, and intensifies the atmosphere of comedy, which pulsates just below the surface of the action from 1.1.

Determined to convince Juliet to consider marriage, Lady Capulet praises Country Paris’s eloquence, fair looks, and wealth. Her interest in possessions and class may not be surprising considering that, like her husband and many of the play’s characters, she is motivated by social advancement. But Lady Capulet speaks in high-flown language infused with metaphors that are obtuse, even nonsensical. Here, convoluted language may be an expression of the character’s indecisiveness in negotiating the delicate subject of marriage. After all, the tension between mother and daughter is sustained throughout the scene and beyond. Her Petrarchan idiom also contains many extravagant monetary metaphors, perhaps meant to persuade Juliet to accept her point of view. However, Juliet is underwhelmed by these efforts, a response which suggests that her mother’s financial view of love, superficial and conventional, is of no interest to her:

Juliet

I’ll look to like, if looking liking move.

But no more deep will I indart mine eye

Than your consent gives strength to make it fly. (1.3.99-101)
Critical attention in this scene has been given far more to Lady Capulet’s characterisation as a domineering matriarch, or to the Nurse as a comic intermediary, and less to Juliet, who plays the central role in the tragedy. This is so, perhaps, because the older women are considerably more forceful and complex in the scene, and they have many more lines of dialogue (Juliet has only seven lines in the entire scene). In order to supply a deeper reading of Juliet in the opening, we might do well to consider her characterization in view of later scenes, as I have done earlier with Romeo.

The “balcony scene” (2.1) contains indications that, despite her suffering and the enormity of the difficulties ahead, Juliet has been actively seeking a solution to her predicament. When Romeo first notices Juliet on the balcony, he states repeatedly that “She speaks, yet she says nothing” (55), and that “Her eye discourses” (70). Romeo’s words indicate that Juliet is speaking to herself, absorbed in thought. The famous first sentence she utters confirms the subject of her preoccupation:

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name;

Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I’ll no longer be a Capulet. (2.1.76-79)

Juliet sees her situation in realistic, not romantic terms, and even though she is deeply in love, and sexually curious, her judgement is never totally clouded by emotions and instinct. Keeping a level head, she instructs Romeo to arrange a binding marriage contract, according to God’s law, and to send word to her on the following day. Based on
this condition, which guarantees her protection, or so she thinks, she makes a firm
commitment to Romeo which she is determined to honour even in death: “And all my
fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay, / And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world” (2.1.190-
91).

Juliet’s maturity and growing courage are never clearer than in 4.1, when she is
forced by her parents to marry County Paris on the Thursday. She shows strong resolve in
front of Capulet, who aggressively threatens to exile and later disown her should she
refuse County Paris’s suit, an incident which highlights the growing distance between
Juliet and her family. Juliet does not yield to her father’s will even when her staunchest
and closest ally, the Nurse, has dismissed her marriage to Romeo. From 4.1.239-40 on,
Juliet does not confide in the Nurse.

In view of these scenes, it is striking that Juliet is obedient to her mother’s wishes
in 1.3. She also speaks very few lines in the scene, as indicated, and only when she is
addressed. Shakespeare may be representing here a typical almost fourteen-year-old
daughter in the late sixteenth century, but Juliet’s timidity, appropriate to her tender age,
is emphasized by the presence on the stage of two mature and confident older women.
Interestingly, here, as in the earlier scene between Capulet and Paris, other characters
paint Juliet’s portrait. By presenting the female protagonist largely through the eyes of
others, Shakespeare can expresses in the opening both her passivity and her total
dependency on her parents. The Nurse’s repeated references to Juliet’s childhood serve to
emphasize further her youth and vulnerability. When Juliet finally acquiesces to her
mother’s wish to consider Paris’s suit, perhaps she hides her discomfort or
embarrassment through wordplay: “I’ll look to like, if looking liking move” (99). It is
surely significant that, in contrast to all her male counterparts, Juliet is the only youngster who appears not to be conscious of her sexuality in the opening.

In large part, 1.3 paints a portrait of Juliet that is clearly incongruous with her characterisation later on, when she turns against her family, defiantly, and at great personal risk, to honour her commitment to Romeo. Why then introduce Juliet in the opening as an obedient daughter? Shakespeare may be plotting the female protagonist’s rapid and sobering transformation in the play as a whole from adolescent to adult. Also, by providing an impression of the strong bond between Juliet and her Nurse in the opening, Shakespeare can accentuate Juliet’s growing isolation from her family in the ensuing action, and particularly at the point when the Nurse betrays her trust: “Go, counsellor; / Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain” (3.5. 239-40).

**Romeo and Rosaline:**

**On the way to the banquet**

The action returns, one last time, to the subject of Rosaline, in a sequence that has no precedent in the sources. The initial explicit stage direction, “Enter Romeo, Mercutio, Benvolio, with five or six other masquers, torch-bearers,” suggests that the Montague characters are prepared to gatecrash the Capulet household undetected. The reference to “torch-bearers” indicates that the action is taking place at night. Mercutio’s line 2.3.43
implies that Romeo enters clothed in masquing-attire: “There’s a French salutation to your French slop.” The term “French slop” refers to “loose-fitting French slops and dancing-pumps”(43n.), which Romeo wears until the end of 2.3.

Romeo’s opening words in 1.4, which contain an allusion to the Elizabethan convention of masquerading, betray reluctance about attending the Capulet banquet uninvited. The character’s worry about the possibility of having to explain their presence at the door is juxtaposed with the other youths’ bravado, and it is a subtle expression of Romeo’s dejection over Rosaline. His sombre mood is also evident as he refuses to join the revelling on the stage, prompted by Benvolio, instead preferring to stand motionless along with the attending touch-bearers: “Give me a torch, I am not for this ambling” (9).

Mercutio, a character created from a short reference in Brooke and introduced here for the first time (although mentioned earlier on the invitation list in 1.2), cannot tolerate Romeo’s glumness, and goads the lover repeatedly, using flamboyant rhetoric and stereotypes: “You are a lover; borrow Cupid’s wings, / And soar with them above a common bound” (1.4.15-16). Notwithstanding his mocking tone, Mercutio is keenly aware of Romeo’s love posturing, and his language, at times direct and matter-of-fact, suggests that he is unwilling to indulge the lover’s emotions: “If love be rough with you, be rough with love” (25). More often Mercutio punctuates Romeo’s pretensions with bawdy: “Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down” (26).

The “Queen Mab” speech, which occupies much of this strand, despite its dark overtones on the page, may have been a source of entertainment for original audiences, because Mercutio is clearly intent on cheering Romeo up by playing a comic role. When Mercutio calls for a mask at line 27, he is clearly attempting to use disguise in an act of
self-conscious theatricality, and especially if his brand of dark comedy relies on exaggerated facial features: “Here are the beetle brows shall blush for me” (30). According to Levenson, “His idiom of choice is the pun, unsubtle and ribald, characteristic of the language these young men share” (24). But even Mercutio’s acting capabilities, his sharp wit, and cynicism, full of sexual innuendoes, distract Romeo only momentarily from his melancholy. Although he is persuaded to attend the banquet, Romeo has premonitions of doom:

I fear too early, for my mind misgives
Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
With this night’s revels, and expire the term
Of a despised life closed in my breast
By some vile forfeit of untimely death.
But he that hath the steerage of my course
Direct my suit. On, lusty gentlemen. (1.4.104-111)

After Romeo delivers this speech, the characters remain on the stage (perhaps standing to one side), while the action moves to a new location as the explicit stage direction indicates: “They march about the stage, and Serving-men come forth with napkins.” Props, such as “napkins” and a “trencher” (114), help represent the domestic setting. Referring to the fluidity of early modern stage conventions, G. Blakemore Evans
writes that “Like many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, *Romeo and Juliet* offers examples of continuous scenes which begin in one location and change location during the course of the scene” (30). This scene is a case in point: as the servants enter, the location changes to an inner room, where the chief serving-man, ordering household utensils to be cleared, demands more helping hands to prepare the great chamber for the guests (125); and when the servants exit, the location changes to the great chamber, which is represented by the entrance of Lord Capulet, Lady Capulet, Tybalt, Juliet, and their guests. It is a continuous scene, during which the stage never remains empty, and which solves the problem of getting Romeo and his companions from a Verona street into the Capulet household.

Lord Capulet soon invites everyone to dance, and then retires to reminisce fondly with a cousin about the last occasion when they took part in a masque. Within the span of about fifteen lines of this dialogue, while “*Music plays and [guests] dance,*” Romeo, masked and placed presumably in a location different from that of Capulet and his cousin, because he takes an active part in the dancing, is overwhelmed by Juliet’s beauty: “ROMEO (to a Serving-man) What lady’s that which doth enrich the hand / Of yonder knight?” (154-55). These poetic lines throw Benvolio’s earlier warnings about Romeo’s infatuation with physical beauty into sharp focus, because the lover is captive to his eyes. Significantly, at this point the tragedy takes a new direction, when the audience may assimilate all of the expository material and become attuned to the development of the action of Romeo and Juliet, which the Chorus introduced in the prologue, and which emphasizes the danger of their alliance.
II

Textual Variants in the First and Second Quartos

Do I need to repeat this constantly? The earliest textual versions of Romeo and Juliet, Q1 and Q2, display the construction of the opening hitherto proposed and analysed. Having pointed to what the texts have in common, I now turn to examine the few substantive differences between them. Apart from minor lexical variants between Q1 and Q2, several striking differences can be found in the Chorus’s prologue. While Q2 prints a fourteen-line speech in conventional sonnet form, Q1 prints a shorter twelve-line speech. As far as staging is concerned, Q2’s sonnet-narrative offers more opportunity to establish the prologue’s self-referential quality. By alluding to the sonnet, indirectly, as I have already pointed out, the playwright can imbue the tragedy about to unfold on the stage with the authority of a literary art form that was fashionable in the early 1590s. Moreover, Q2’s sonnet form, spoken from the stage, may have provided a more acute sense of the narrative’s artificiality. Consequently, it appears to be more effective at inviting the early modern audience into a perception of the play as a fiction.

In addition, Q2 includes a reference to the reconciliation of the feuding families, which is absent in Q1:
And the continuance of their parents’ rage—

Which but their children’s end naught could remove….(Prol.10-11)

These lines establish at the very outset what will become too obvious at the end of the play: that only the death of the lovers can reconcile the families.

While Q2 conveys the argument of the play in the present tense, Q1 does so in the past tense, but not consistently. As a result, only Q2 sets the story in a “perpetual present,” creating a sharper sense of the dangers the social reality of Verona poses to the lovers.

In Q2, the explicit initial stage direction in 1.1 provides staging information about costume and props that is absent in Q1: “Enter Samson and Gregory, with swords and bucklers, of the house of Capulet.” The difference supports my contention that Q2 supplies more detailed staging information than Q1, and it appears to introduce a comic dimension to the brawl from the very outset, as indicated above (15).

Q2’s dialogue also contains additional lines which supply more opportunity to dramatize the playful dynamic that pervades the early part of the scene. For instance, the exchange among the four serving-men, moments before words turn to blows, is considerably longer. It presents several short phrases that are repeated by both sets of serving-men in a manner that suggests defiance. The phrases provide a fuller sense of the characters’ propensity for contest and one-upmanship. Moreover, Q2 has the staging information as part of the dialogue unfolding on the stage, while Q1 provides only a lengthy explicit stage direction, omitting the dialogue that appears in Q2: “They draw. To
them enters Tybalt. They fight. To them the Prince, old Montague and his Wife, old Capulet and his Wife, and other Citizens, and part them” (1.1.50. 01-3). In fact, this detailed stage direction represents a different configuration of the action for, after the serving-men begin to fight, the Prince enters first, followed by the heads of the households, their wives, and “other Citizens” to put an end to the scuffle. Only then does Q1 provide dialogue in the form of the Prince’s lengthy speech.

In contrast to Q2, the staging information in Q1 suggests that only the serving-men and younger Capulets and Montagues are involved in the violence. Dessen’s analysis of the staging information in Q1 supports this claim:

But Q1, if read in its own right and not through the lens of Q2, is not only shorter but significantly different in that the fathers seem to be restraining influences (at least at this moment) rather than eager participants. Such a different sense of agency or dynamics in turn sets up a different context for Capulet’s restraint of Tybalt in 1.5. If the father has not been seen as a near combatant, his praise of Romeo (who is reported to be a “virtuous and well gouern’d youth”) and his desire to avoid any disturbance (“I would not for the wealth of all this town,/ herein my house doo him disparagement,” C3r) make excellent sense and, as in 1.1, link the passions of the feud to the servants and the hotheads of the younger generation epitomized by Tybalt. (112)

Q2 also contains twenty additional lines of dialogue that are absent in Q1. In terms of staging, Q2 fleshes out the action of the brawl scene considerably by interspersing
dialogue with stage directions so that dramatic action evolves as the situation unfolds on the stage.

Furthermore, the dialogue in Q2 offers more opportunity to present important aspects of character such as Benvolio’s good nature and the efforts he makes to contain a potentially explosive situation, Tybalt’s hot-headedness and his aching to pick a fight, and more generally the process by which light-hearted repartee gradually turns to violence and conflict.

When Montague, Capulet, and their wives enter, the fuller dialogue in Q2 underlines their readiness to renew the feud, and shows that the brawl is far more pervasive than at the start of the strand, where it may be understood as a comic exchange devoid of any real threat. Q2 shows that violent words lead to violent actions and implicate all levels of the social hierarchy. All in all, Q2 shows that the Capulet youths are more likely to instigate violence than the Montagues, as witnessed by Tybalt’s inflammatory remarks in the banquet scene (1.4).

The arrangement of lines 77-99 is quite different in Q1 and Q2. From the standpoint of staging, the Prince’s longer monologue in Q2 suggests that he finds it difficult to make his voice heard; demonstrates the displeasure he feels for his subjects by referring to them as “beasts”; and emphasizes his order to abandon their weapons. In addition, lines 85-91 in Q2 provide a historical dimension to the conflict and its recurrence between the warring families. The progression of the monologue in Q2 demonstrates the points I have made; these lines are omitted in Q1:

Profaners of this neighbour-stainèd steel—
Will they not hear? What ho! You men, you beasts,
That quench the fire of your pernicious rage
With purple fountains issuing from your veins:… (1.1.78- 81)

And hear the sentence of your movèd Prince. (84)

And made Verona’s ancient citizens
Cast by their grave beseeming ornaments,
To wield old partisans in hands as old,
Cankered with peace to part your cankered hate. (88-91)

Immediately following the brawl scene, the exchange among Montague, Lady
Montague, and Benvolio is significantly longer in Q2 than the equivalent in Q1. First,
Benvolio provides a description of the brawl that is eight lines longer than in Q1:

I drew to part them; in the instant came
The fiery Tybalt, with his sword prepared,
Which as he breathed defiance to my ears,
He swung about his head and cut the winds,
Who, nothing hurt withal, hissed him in scorn.
While we were interchanging thrusts and blows,
Came more and more, and fought on part and part,
Till the Prince came, who parted either part. (1.1.104-111)
At Montague’s request, Benvolio in Q2 provides a detailed account of how the violence arose and reiterates, in narrative form, stage action that the audience has already witnessed (as indicated above, 22). The account also emphasizes Tybalt’s unruly disposition, evident in his flagrant disregard of a well-established duelling code in the sixteenth century. Benvolio’s second narrative, which is present in both texts, has the advantage in Q2 of linking the unexpected emergence of violence with the innocence of a Romeo lost to his affections. In 3.1, the order of events will be repeated as Romeo, ecstatic after his recent marriage to Juliet, intervenes in the brawl between Mercutio and Tybalt.

Montague’s speech, after Benvolio has spoken, is also ten lines longer in Q2 than the corresponding speech in Q1. The additional lines of dialogue in Q2 supply a fuller description of Romeo, the unrequited lover. They underline Romeo’s isolation, his detachment from the turbulent social reality of the play. Moreover, the lyrical style of the speech further emphasizes Romeo’s innocence, in contrast with the Capulets’ quarrelsome nature:

Many a morning hath he there been seen,
With tears augmenting the fresh morning’s dew,
Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs;
But all so soon as the all-cheering sun
Should in the farthest east begin to draw
The shady curtains from Aurora’s bed,
Away from light steals home my heavy son,
And private in his chamber pens himself,
Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out,
And makes himself an artificial night. (127-36)

The exchange between Montague and Benvolio, which immediately precedes Romeo’s entrance in Q2, is also absent in Q1. The additional lines in Q2 provide a fuller account of Romeo’s silent suffering, and his detachment from both his family and friends:

BENVOLIO

Have you importuned him by any means?

MONTAGUE

Both by myself and many other friends,
But he his own affection’s counsellor
Is to himself—I will not say how true—
But to himself so secret and so close,
So far from sounding and discovery,
As is the bud bit with an envious worm
Ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air
Or dedicate his beauty to the same.
Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow,
We would as willingly give cure as know. (142-151)
Q2, then, provides two examples of narratives, absent in Q1, which supply background information pointing to Romeo’s entrance.

The dialogue between Benvolio and Romeo in Q2 includes twenty lines that are absent in Q1. As we might expect, textual variances can sometimes affect character delineation: the lines in Q2 contain poetical and rhetorical devices such as wordplay, alliteration, and rhymes, which provide a sharper impression of Romeo’s wit and the enjoyment he derives from his suffering. As a result, Q2 appears to supply a fuller description of the male protagonist as a lover in the opening. Q2 may also emphasize the affinity between the Montague cousins earlier than in Q1: the measure of Benvolio’s compassion for Romeo’s suffering is shown, for example, in his remarks that the lover ought to give liberty to his eyes and observe other beauties (1.1.221-23). In Q1, on the other hand, there is no suggestion of the practical advice Benvolio provides Romeo until 1.2.90.

While the texts correspond very closely in the domestic setting of Juliet’s house (1.3), the Nurse’s lengthy speech in Q2 includes eight lines that are absent in Q1.

Yes, madam, yet I cannot choose but laugh,
To think it should leave crying and say “Ay”;
And yet I warrant it had upon it brow
A bump as big as a young cock’rel’s stone;
A perilous knock, and it cried bitterly.

“Yea,” quoth my husband, “fall’st upon thy face?

Thou wilt fall backward when thou comest to age,

Wilt thou not, Jule?” It stinted and said “Ay.” (1.3.52-59)

These lines contain much ribaldry that adds humour to the scene. They provide a broader description of the Nurse’s vivacious personality, and perhaps, her effectiveness in defusing what is a tense conversation between mother and daughter. The lines also supply many more details about Juliet as an infant, which, as indicated above, emphasize the female protagonist’s youth and vulnerability in the opening.

Lady Capulet’s poetic speech in Q2 is also absent in Q1:

What say you, can you love the gentleman?
This night you shall behold him at our feast;
Read o’er the volume of young Paris’ face,
And find delight writ there with beauty’s pen;
Examine every married lineament,
And see how one another lends content;
And what obscured in this fair volume lies,
Find written in the margin of his eyes.
This precious book of love, this unbound lover,
To beautify him only lacks a cover.
The fish lives in the sea, and ’tis much pride
For fair without the fair within to hide.
That book in many’s eyes doth share the glory
That in gold clasps locks in the golden story.
So shall you share all that he doth possess,
By having him, making yourself no less. (1.3.81-96)

This speech supplies character information about County Paris’s eligibility as a would-be wooer to Juliet: his striking good looks, his elevated social status (also emphasized in Brooke’s poem), and his wealth. In Q1, Lady Capulet has a single reference to County Paris at line 65, which supplies far less character information: “Verona’s summer hath not such a flower.” Her high-flown language in Q2 provides an emotionless description of the suitor, and her view of marriage as a financial transaction is juxtaposed with that of the Nurse. Q2 appears to paint a portrait of Lady Capulet as an unsentimental mother, an impression which underscores Juliet’s solitude.

On the way to the Capulet banquet in 1.4, the first dialogue between Mercutio and Romeo is ten lines longer in Q2 than the equivalent in Q1. The lines express more fully Mercutio’s flamboyant personality, because they elaborate to a larger degree the character’s efforts to alleviate Romeo’s glumness though amusing displays of wit.

Q2 also contains an explicit stage direction indicating that Romeo and his friends “march about the stage,” while Q1 conveys the same information through dialogue (1.4.92). Both texts identify by different means a transition from an outdoor to an indoor location, which, as indicated above (145), solves the practical problem of getting Romeo
and his companion into the Capulet household; in neither do the masquers leave the stage.

Q2 has another explicit stage direction indicating that as the masquers remain on the stage, “Serving-men come forth with napkins.” This entrance is followed by a short dialogue between the servants, who are shown to banter as they clear up dinner and prepare for the dance. In Q1, on the other hand, there is no mention of the servants at all; rather, Romeo’s speech is followed by the stage direction: “Enter old Capulet with the ladies [and attendants]” and Capulet’s greetings. The sequence in Q2, which is humorous, seems to provide a touch of comic relief in advance of the meeting of Romeo and Juliet. Addressing these textual variants, Dessen writes:

The effect in Q1 is therefore comparable but simpler and more direct, with fewer personnel required, a more abrupt change of place, and no specifying of physical action by the masquers to suggest, however elliptically, a movement from street to house. (115)

Finally, the dialogue and an explicit stage direction in Q2 indicate that during the exchange between Capulet and his cousin (1.4.142-153), music plays and some of the attending guests dance. “Come, Musicians, play” (138), and “Music plays and they dance” are references to stage business that is not specified in Q1.

The case study of Romeo and Juliet has suggested that Shakespeare’s construction of the opening works through many delaying tactics. The principal action, which
encompasses the growing love between Romeo and Juliet, may mislead the audience into a false sense of security, forgetting the prologue’s solemn words. During the first half of the play, comic episodes may cause the audience to hope that everything will turn out well. In the second half, however, their expectations will prove false when violence rises again unexpectedly as it does in 3.1—as it did in 1.1—where an accident provokes crisis and tragedy proves irreversible.

Notes

1 Since Shakespeare dramatized a European tale that was popular during the sixteenth century, an early modern audience would have known that the Chorus was referring to Romeo and Juliet as “a pair of star-crossed lovers” (6).

2 The danger posed by the meeting of Romeo and Juliet is instantly apparent because Tybalt, by chance, recognizes Romeo’s voice and vows, against Old Capulet’s explicit wishes, to avenge the intrusion. This moment constitutes the point at which Romeo and Juliet, just having met and fallen in love, and the brawl become intertwined. This episode in the banquet scene does not occur in any of the sources. It constitutes the impetus behind Tybalt’s aggression in 3.1, which, as indicated, throws the action in the direction of tragedy.

3 Q2 supplies the most information about the construction of the opening; it also contains a significant portion of text that is absent in Q1 (Levenson 103).

4 In the Oxford edition to Romeo and Juliet, Levenson explains that many translations of the Romeo and Juliet narrative were current long before the play was composed. One English version, it is generally agreed, is Shakespeare’s most immediate source, Arthur Brooke’s verse translation of Boaistau’s The Tragicall Histroye of Romeus and Juliet written first in Italian by Bandell, and nowe in Englishe by Ar. Br., 1562, in which the narrative unfolds as a moralistic “tale of woe” about adolescent love (14-15). In the process of composing his tragedy Shakespeare refashioned the well-known narrative; he may have relied on the title of the play, as reflected in the title-pages of Q1 and Q2, to attune the tragic expectations of prospective spectators.

5 This statement finds support in the work of Bruster and Weimann:

So numerous are the dramatic cues for proximity of presenting-actors (prologue and epilogue alike) to audience, however, that it seems likely the prologue would have been positioned downstage, where one could make use of the platea area of the stage and that area’s proximity to the audience. (27)

6 Both Quarto versions of Romeo and Juliet appear to corroborate this argument, because they contain a hint that in some sixteenth-century performances of the tragedy, at least, the Chorus carried a playbook onto the stage (Prol. n).

7 To contend with the limitations posed by the text of Romeo and Juliet, through which the playwright communicates his design to the actor by a type of a shorthand (see dissertation p. 72), a scholar might begin by consulting research on the early modern Chorus. With reference to the Chorus’s cues to enter the platform stage, E.K. Chambers writes: “For an overture, the public theatre seems to have employed nothing beyond three soundings of a trumpet, the last of which was the signal for the prologue to begin” (542).
Later he adds: “The trumpeter is no doubt giving some of the ‘three soundings’ which preluded the appearance of the prologue in his traditional long black velvet coat” (547).

With regard to the physical appearance of the Chorus, recent research has suggested that the Chorus’s traditional black costume and the props it carried were reminiscent of the accoutrements of scholars or ecclesiastical figures. Bruster and Weimann (16) maintain that the above-mentioned items imbued the Chorus in performance with scholarly or ecclesiastical authority in a variety of ways. They also consider evidence about the Chorus’s movement on the platform stage, and propose a blocking sequence which underscores the close association between ceremony and authority:

The entrance of the conventional prologue speaker— at least in many cases— was introduced by three short trumpet calls at intervals of unknown length. At the third such sounding, the prologue actor entered the principal acting area of the theatre or hall in which the performance was being given….The speaker took his stand near the lateral center of the tiring-house façade. He began his performance by making three bows (in exact manner prescribed by the latest courtly fashion) to his audience. [each bow bringing him closer to the audience, perhaps?]. The bows completed, he was ready to address the assembled spectators. (27)

While Bruster and Weimann do well to describe certain staging conventions associated with the Chorus, their observations appear incongruous with much of Shakespeare’s playwriting, where conventions are refashioned from time to time in order to form new characters and generate other imaginative effects. Shakespeare’s “armed Chorus” in Troilus and Cressida and “Rumour [in a robe] painted full of tongues” in 2 Henry IV are cases in point. They are proponents of a dynamic theatrical language of continuously shifting conventions.

Nevertheless, it is possible that some of Bruster and Weimann’s observations apply to Romeo and Juliet, where the Chorus is conceived not as an allegorical character (i.e., a symbolic representation of a theme in the ensuing action), but as a character that represents the spokesman of the company staging the play.

As opposed to Romeo and Juliet, in Troilus and Cressida the conventions pull together in order to create a very different effect. The Chorus wears the costume of a soldier and expressly declares that he does not represent the playwright (i.e., he is not a spokesman of the company):

And hither am I come,
A prologue armed, but not in confidence
Of author’s pen and actor’s voice, but suited
In like conditions to our argument…. (22-25)

In this instance, several kinds of representations appear to be conflated in a novel and exciting way by a Chorus figure that emerges from the “world of the play.”

Bruster and Weimann argue, for example, that early modern dramatists often appropriated the rhetorical resources of earlier theatrical traditions, the Classical and Medieval traditions most readily, which had actors resemble doctors and other figures of authority to introduce plays.

It introduces a social situation that leads through discord to the absence of civility (Levenson, 4n): “where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (4).

In Playing Shakespeare, John Barton examines similar directives to the actor contained in prologues. He considers the significance of tone and mode of delivery, and also reminds us that without meticulous considerations of the actor’s skill-set, — a component that is not always transparent in play-texts though intrinsic to their realization on the stage — the process by which prologues facilitate the transactions between actor and spectator at the outset of a performance, in early modern as well as modern contexts, cannot be fully grasped:

You see though our theme is set speeches, I’m starting to talk about something very down-to-earth and practical. I am not stressing golden language or high astounding words. I am acknowledging a crude fact of life in the theatre. An audience’s attention wanders if an actor does not hold it, and the blame often lies with the actor as much as the audience. (87)
By encouraging his actors actively to seek the implicit directives in prologues and other set speeches through ongoing experimentation and rehearsal (a luxury that early modern actors did not seem to have), Barton demonstrates the strength of his argument, and illuminates the actor’s role in initiating the audience in the play. Referring to *Romeo and Juliet*, Barton reminds Shelia Hancock of the responsibility she bears in pitching the prologue at the level that would engage the audience: “Make the audience sit up and excite them about what is going to happen. Start by grabbing their attention with the extra stress at the very beginning” (115).

The evidence presented here suggests that Bruster and Weimann are right in noticing the relationship among protocols of formality, ceremony, and authority, as the poetical and rhetorical devices contained in the Chorus’s prologue seem to derive from these very protocols:

> Perhaps needless to say, across the many references to prologues in many dramatic and extra dramatic texts of this era runs an acknowledgment of the prologue’s deep connections to the interests and protocols of *formality*. (28)

13 For a comprehensive analysis of the prologue’s metrical structure and the use of caesura, see Berry 54-59.

14 The equivocation presented here can overshadow and unsettle the implicit vital agreement between actor and spectator which makes theatrical entertainment possible (i.e., I, the actor, tell a story in exchange for your currency and complicity in the artifice about to be presented on the stage).

15 The tension between “fate” and “accident” is strong in the anthropocentric world of the play, and particularly during the pivotal brawl in 1.3, where Romeo, trying to prevent the violence from escalating, accidentally comes between Mercutio and Tybalt, and precipitates the disaster. While Romeo cannot help but see himself as the victim of providence, or in his own words “fortunes fool!” (3.1.136), the audience, whose perspective is broadest in the theatre, perceives that his misfortune results from an inauspicious accident. In fact, as the action unfolds a disparity of awareness seems to be created between the characters and the audience: a gap between what the characters see and what an audience knows to be true. The tragic force of the action lies partly in the spectator’s acknowledgement that the characters are unable to perceive their true condition, and in their lack of perception, the characters achieve the status of tragic and ironic figures.

16 Levenson indicates that ample proof of the story’s currency in England exists (10n). This evidence comes in the forms of reprintings of the translations made by Brooke and Painter, and references to Romeo and Juliet in contemporary literature.

17 We have no way of tracing the origins of these explicit instructions, but since they represent the action as it had been staged, herein lies an example of how hand-held props can be used effectively on the stage in order to deflate the expectation of a violent feud set up by the Chorus in the prologue.


19 The action described here instantly subverts the earlier expectation for tragedy set up by the Chorus. What might be going on here? Shakespeare appears to surprise his audience by promising the conventional sombre story of the sources and then unexpectedly throwing the action in the direction of comedy.

20 In order to consider the effect here, I should like to adopt Sprague’s concept “keynote,” but with a qualification. Instead of arguing, as Sprague does, that the keynote scene foreshadows a theme in the action proper, I propose that it dramatizes action that can alert the audience as to how quickly a casual situation which promises comedy can spiral out of control and precipitate the potential for disaster in the world of the play. In this way, it anticipates and heightens the events of the pivotal brawl in 3.1, where, as Susan Synder has observed, the action changes from the comic to the tragic mode (56). This “keynote,” therefore, is vital for attuning audience expectations in the direction in which the action unfolds.

21 In Q2, then, the entrance of the Montague serving-men, punctuated with the stage direction, “*Enter two other Serving-men,*” marks the point at which the light-hearted atmosphere begins to change, where repartee and playful bravado evolve into terse verbal exchange. The quick succession of entrances by several characters creates a conflict which becomes infectious, all-pervading, and dangerous.
In the Oxford *Romeo and Juliet*, the stage direction “they fight” comes after the dialogue between Tybalt and Benvolio. It may be more theatrically effective to have placed the stage direction after Tybalt sneers at Benvolio in line 63 so that the dialogue which follows takes place while the characters are fighting.

For a general discussion of how nightgowns denoted interrupted sleep on the Elizabethan stage, see Dessen 71. I should add that “his gown” probably refers to the costume worn by both Capulet and his wife, and is an example of the economical use of stage directions.

The parody of duelling in the brawl scene is confirmed by Benvolio’s reference to Tybalt, who “swung about his head and cut the winds” (1.1.107). As Levenson suggests, Tybalt’s cutting manoeuvre points to his Spanish style of fencing, which is juxtaposed with the Italian style displayed by Benvolio (68n).

The play-text seems to contain evidence that, like Romeo, Benvolio is preoccupied by unrequited love. After all, he can recount details of Romeo’s whereabouts because he, too, walks through groves of sycamore in the early hours of the morning. If, indeed, Benvolio enjoys indulging his fantasies, because he appears not to have a female companion, then the role of “unrequited lover” is coveted by youth more generally in this tragedy.

Benvolio appears to believe that the older generation’s presence would somehow hinder his attempt to discover Romeo’s grievance. This example of a generational divide is intimated first by the Chorus in his prologue, and identifiable on at least two occasions in act one: the palpable tension between Lady Capulet and Juliet while discussing marriage prospects in 1.3, and the polar opposite attitudes displayed by Tybalt and Old Capulet about the presence of Romeo at the banquet in 1.4.

This incident, like several others, emphasizes the generational gap between youths and adults in the tragedy.

The emotions of unrequited love, and its physical manifestations, had been explored thoroughly in Petrarchan love lyrics written during the early modern period (Gellert 25).

In her book *Voices of Melancholy*, Gellert Lyons associates Romeo, among other Shakespearean characters, with the “love melancholic,” a type associated with the long and illustrious tradition of medieval courtly love. Romeo sighs and pines from the moment he enters the stage. Consequently, he may have appeared familiar to sixteenth-century audiences, through a stylized manner of behaviour that became customary for the “love melancholic.”

Levenson point to conventional images such as tears, dew, sighs, and clouds, associated with the unrequited lover (127n.).

According to Q1, the serving-man enters after 1.2.26.

The claim that the colour blue was associated with servitude on the early modern stage had been made by Marie Channing Linthicum already in 1936:

> Livery of a shade lighter than the midnight sky-blue, but near the sky blue of a clear October day was the mark of servitude in the sixteenth century. Blue with connection to the dress of servants is noted in *Everyman In His Humour*, *Taming of The Shrew*, *I Henry VI*, *Roaring Girl*, *Eastward Hoe*, and *Two Angry Women of Abington*, &c.” (27)

Linthicum make an interesting point that refers to the function of costumes in creating comic confusion, when she identifies a shift in conventions from servants wearing blue coats to servants wearing blue cloaks, a costume typically worn by their masters.

In Brooke’s poem, Juliet is depicted as a sixteen-year-old maiden. Shakespeare adjusts his heroine’s age to not yet fourteen in order to emphasize her youth and resulting vulnerability in the opening.

There is evidence in Q1 and Q2 that the role was played by a clown, which would have enhanced the humour. Most scholars agree that Shakespeare had relied on Will Kempe, the famous Elizabethan extemporizer, to play the role of Peter after 1594 when he joined the company.

The familial tension between mother and daughter is evident in Lady Capulet’s indecisiveness in negotiating the delicate subject of marriage. Initially, she thinks that being left alone with Juliet is the right approach to take; however, she changes her mind once she realizes that the bond between Juliet and the Nurse, who has played an active role in her upbringing, could be effective in order to defuse the tension. Lady Capulet, who sees marriage as a financial transaction, describes County Paris in glowing terms in an effort to make Juliet come around to her point of view. And even though, as Juliet says herself, she has not
considered marriage, (“It is an honour that I dream not of” [68]), she obediently, though unenthusiastically, agrees to keep an open mind: “I’ll look to like, if looking liking move” (1.3.99).

36 County Paris is depicted as an ideal suitor to Juliet. The gentleman is young and handsome; he comes from a noble family (as his title suggests); and he is the son of an ally, not a foe. His role throughout the play is ironical, because in this tragedy of youth love is romantic: Juliet entertains the suitor she desires, not the suitor who is right for her.

37 See, for example, Michael Basile.

38 Line 142 also suggests that at least one of the masquers carries a drum.

39 The most notable difference is that the “fish joke” is transposed in the scene. The following reference in Q2 is presented earlier in Q1: “SAMSON Me they shall feel while I am able to stand, and ’tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh. GREGORY ’Tis well thou art not fish; if thou hadst, thou hadst been Poor John” (1.1.27-30).
The Merry Wives of Windsor

In the closing scene of The Merry Wives of Windsor, two actions are resolved: the outwitting of Falstaff is openly revealed (the “trickster tricked”) and the conspiracies to woo Anne Page, involving Slender, Dr. Caius, Fenton and their supporters, result in Fenton’s triumph.

At the opening, Shakespeare presents incidents linked to a comic dispute between Justice Shallow and Sir John Falstaff, the affable rogue, among which is a plan by Hugh Evans, a Welsh parson, to match Slender, one of Falstaff’s alleged victims, with the wealthy Anne Page.

The opening, corresponding to 1.1.1-182, displays a number of distinctive compositional features. In marked contrast to the tragedies analysed thus far, the dramatic material of the opening does not derive from any narrative source. Also, it is the only opening in the entire canon written entirely in prose. Significantly, its construction involves a strand of action that supplies expository material for the comedy’s two actions, developed through the play, after which it leads almost imperceptively into the simpler one, and subsequently into the more intricate one. This type of construction involves delaying the “trickster-tricked” action in order to attune the interest of an audience to the development of the comedy as a whole. The lack of rigidity with which Shakespeare approached and handled the construction of this opening is the mark of a playwright whose creativity was not bound by any rudimentary formula.

A reading of the play-text reveals that Shakespeare introduces in the opening two distinct dramatic situations which present a great number of farcical male characters. The
first includes Justice Robert Shallow, Abraham Slender, and Parson Hugh Evans; the second, the previously mentioned George Page, Sir John Falstaff, Pistol, Bardolph, and Nim. The male characters’ command over the stage is almost absolute. This dynamic, however, is inverted, in a manner typical of Shakespearean comedy, when Mistress Page and Mistress Ford take the lead and outsmart their male counterparts repeatedly. Seen from this angle, the opening introduces the focal theme or motif of “outwitting” in a ludicrous fashion through an incident which exposes Falstaff to ridicule, because he is incapable of executing his schemes successfully. The incident involving Shallow’s allegations against Falstaff, for example, is a conspiracy gone wrong, as a foil to the clever and highly intricate conspiracies devised by the female protagonists, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, in the ensuing action.

Accusations of the types that both Shallow and Slender make about Falstaff and his companions would have been familiar to original audiences acquainted with the figure of Falstaff, his cronies, and the pranks they play. Since this observation has relevance for much of the analysis presented in this case study, it merits closer scrutiny:

Most editors date The Merry Wives of Windsor at c. 1597. Around the same time, several plays had been composed involving Oldcastle, an earlier incarnation of Shakespeare’s Falstaff, and his followers. One of the earliest plays to feature Oldcastle is the anonymous The Famous Victories of Henry V (1586), which was perhaps originally performed by the Queen’s Men, with Tarlton in the role of Oldcastle. More certain it is that on its heels, several other plays involving Oldcastle and his followers emerged, such as 1 Henry IV (c.1596-1598), 2 Henry IV (c.1597- c.1598), The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597-1602), Henry V (1599), and 1 Sir John Oldcastle by Robert Wilson in
collaboration with Anthony Drayton, Michael Munday, and Richard Hathwaye (1599).

Scholars often refer to The Famous Victories of Henry V because it appears to have been one of Shakespeare’s main sources for 1 and 2 Henry IV and Henry V. But it may have constituted a source for Shakespeare, and other contemporaries, in a different sense. If one judges by the examples presented above, the play appears to have won Oldcastle and his followers a prominence on the early modern stage that was novel, and highly useful from a playwright’s standpoint. Moreover, the examples above reflect the growing popularity Oldcastle and his followers enjoyed among audiences during the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. If indeed Shakespeare composed the play c.1597, he did so, at least in part, in order to capitalize on the characters’ theatrical appeal, as other dramatists would do subsequently.

In The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642, Andrew Gurr points to another aspect worth considering with regard to the construction of the opening. I am referring to the popularity Will Kempe enjoyed in the late sixteenth century, and particularly around the time the play was composed. Gurr believes that Kempe, who became the resident extemporizing comedian of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, played the role of Falstaff in Shakespeare’s plays. Whereas there is a general agreement among scholars that Kempe played the roles of Peter in Romeo and Juliet and Dogberry in Much Ado About Nothing, it is entirely possible that he played many of Shakespeare comic characters up until 1599, when he appears to have left the company.5

The assumption that the role of Falstaff in The Merry Wives of Windsor was written specifically for Will Kempe is plausible. After all, the style of comedy it presents would appear to gain enormously from the extemporizing capabilities that had made
Kempe so famous. If indeed Kempe played Falstaff in the play, then the popularity the actor enjoyed, as much as the theatrical appeal of the character, could have been vital components of Shakespeare’s stage-practice. Thus, presenting action that revolves around Falstaff and his followers is a useful way to heighten excitement and anticipation at the outset of the play in performance.⁶

In the Arden Shakespeare, Giorgio Melchiori refers to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as “the comedy of language(s)” (5). The play-text, which attests to copious linguistic experimentation, displays the most vigorous attempt by Shakespeare to explore the dramatic possibilities of prose. For example, in the opening many forms and rhythms of prose help to express the characters’ social status and their individual voices as representatives of low comedy. In *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language*, Russ McDonald indicates that rhythms of prose are often indicative of a character’s style: “Often the rhythms of prose are situational, developed according to the topic of the speech and the particular impulses or style of the speaker” (88-89). Later he adds: “[E]very major character is given a more or less distinctive style, and naturally some speakers lean more towards the patterned style [of prose] than others” (91). If one judges by this observation, careful attention should be given in the opening—without running the risk of privileging one aspect over another—to the linguistic specificities of each character and the ways in which Shakespeare modifies prose from character to character.

Two substantive versions of the comedy survive in print, Q1 (1602) and F (1623). The following case study analyses the construction of the opening in F, as it appears in Arden 3 (ed. Melchiori).⁷ It goes on to demonstrate how the two extant versions of the
comedy, despite their varying lengths and textual variants, display the construction of the opening.

I

Windsor’s Comic Displays of Avarice and Profiteering

Even before the opening of The Merry Wives of Windsor, the title of the play, if we can take the title-page of Q2 as evidence of the popularity of certain Shakespearean characters, would have promised sixteenth-century audiences a domestic (i.e., English) comedy involving many amusing situations and lively characters. The most famous in the gallery of characters is Falstaff, who is privileged with the first mention in the printed text:
The title-page also refers to the “merrie Wives of Windsor,” the comedy’s principal female protagonists. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term “merry” means specifically: “of Persons and of their attributes: full of animated enjoyment (in early use chiefly with reference to feasting or sports; joyous, mirthful, hilarious). Also of permanent temper or disposition: Given to joyousness or mirth” (def 3. 363). The adjective’s connotations, which were current in the sixteenth century, supply evidence for the female protagonists’ comic theatrical appeal.

The comedy begins with an amusing exchange among Slender, Evans, and Shallow, who alleges that Falstaff has wronged him. The exchange occurs during the day on the way to Master Page’s house, where Evans, along with the other “umpires,” Page and the Host, have planned to resolve the dispute amicably. The initial lines of dialogue provide clues about the characters’ social status and occupations which original audiences could have recognized easily by the clothes they wore: Justice Shallow must have worn the costume of magistrate and Evans, the costume of a Parson. Shallow’s first utterance is a response to some utterance Hugh Evans would have made prior to their first appearance. The characters are engaged in a lively conversation as they move downstage. Moreover, the lines contain a cue for the actors that their action upon entering should convey Shallow’s inflated agitation and Slender’s echoing of it:

SHALLOW Sir Hugh, persuade me not: I will make a Star Chamber matter of it. If he were twenty Sir John Falstaffs, he shall not abuse Robert Shallow, esquire.

SLENDER In the County of Gloucester, Justice of Peace and Coram.
SHALLOW Ay, cousin Slender, and Cust-a-lorum.

SLENDER Ay, and Rato lorum too; and a gentlemen born, Master Parson, who
writes himself Armigero, in any bill, warrant, quittance, or obligation,

Armigero. (1.1.1-9)

Slender’s “Coram” (line 5) is a common blunder for “quorum,” which is a Latin
reference to a select committee of judges, as Craik notes. Shallow does not pick up on the
blunder, of course, and contributes one of his own, “Custalorum,” which is followed by
Slender’s “Rato lorum.” Craik indicates that “Cust-a-lorum” and “Rato lorum” are
blunders for custos rotalorum (keeper of the rolls), the principal justice in a county. The
flagrant misuse of legal jargon, other examples of comic malapropism, and the constant
play on words invite laughter. Slender and Shallow also keep picking up on each other’s
words; for example, Shallow picks up on “esquire,” followed by Shallow on “Coram,”
Shallow again on “Custalorum,” and finally Shallow on “Armigero.” This verbal
dynamic accelerates the tempo. It also contains repetitions of short “and” phrases and
many stressed sounds. These patterns can produce a punchy regular rhythm. The
interplay between the misuses of language and the strong rhythmic prose, spoken
typically by agents of low comedy from a range of social classes, can make the exchange
sound highly animated, even absurd.

The verbal humour, though entertaining, cannot be appreciated independently of
the significant contribution it makes to comic characterisation. In the theatre, the
formation of character is a cumulative process. As John Russell Brown implies, it is
extremely difficult to trace accurately in the play-text (63), and, one might add, especially
at such an early point in the action where “character” has not been delineated at any length. But as I have argued elsewhere, any staging of the play in the early modern theatre would have required knowledge of the entire action, and those charged with staging the play would have likely had it (Stern 60).  

The dynamic on the stage can be extremely funny, for it emphasizes what is unmistakably the inflated ego of the doddering octogenarian, Shallow, whose indignation towards Falstaff implies farcically that social rank is the measure of personal worth. Over and above his hollow values, the nervous rhythms of his prose, produced by a pattern of stressed sounds, and his penchant for correcting the verbal errors of others, usually with no success, suggest that Shakespeare intended from the start to create an unflattering portrait of this injudicious low-ranking magistrate. Pointing to comic effect in the initial lines of the play, Peter F. Grav writes: “Slender’s argument in support of his uncle points to the magistrate’s ancestry and coat of arms, using the signs of nobility (and in the process rendering them meaningless) to bolster the claims of a civil servant turned gentleman” (56-57). The stage dynamic also hinders Hugh Evans from participating in the conversation. And when Evans finally manages to interject—his first phrase comes only at line 16— the comedy does not abate. In the play-text, one can detect immediately Evans’s strong Welsh accent, an accent Shakespeare would expose to ridicule in subsequent plays, such as Henry V (1599). Evans’s comic mispronunciation of “luces” (a voracious freshwater fish presented on a coat of arms) as “louses” (lice), for example, is amusing, and especially once Shallow draws attention to it in line 19. Kiernan Ryan has analysed Evan’s comic characterisation by considering his unique linguistic profile:
The hallmark of Evan’s defective dialect...is the way his Welsh accent wraps the native English sound of words, substituting “t” for “d”, “p” for “b” and “f” for “v”…. And he’s just as adept as Quickly at mangling words and phrases through malapropism, although in his case the result is less often unconscious innuendo and more often the mutation of ordinary parlance into fully intelligible gobbledygook: “Take your ’visaments in that” (I.i 33-5)”… in the context of the dialogue we know exactly what he means. (160)

That actors playing the role of Slender on the early modern stage had small builds might be reflected in the symbolic name Shakespeare gave the character. But this is only one possibility; “Slender” could refer to the character’s intellectual capacity. Furthermore, the property of “slenderness” on the stage could also have been expressed and even exaggerated for comic effect by dressing the actor in a conspicuously large costume, but there is no documented evidence to support this claim. In lines 130, 145, 153, and 157, there are also repeated references to items of clothing and accoutrements that associate the character with the élite of Elizabethan society. They suggest that Slender enters clothed in the fashionable garments of a gentleman. It is noteworthy that the character’s verbal and physical traits, which reflect, particularly in the echoing of Shallow, a persistent nagging quality, are the means by which Shakespeare begins to delineate the comic character at the outset of the play in performance. However, the comical portrait of Slender as he first appears on the stage is described (and derided) most fully by Mrs. Quickly and Simple in 1.4:
QUICKLY Does he not wear a great round beard, like a glover’s paring-knife?
SIMPLE No, forsooth, he hath but a little wee face, with a yellow beard: a Cain coloured beard.
QUICKLY A softly-spirited man, is he not?
SIMPLE Ay, forsooth. But he is as tall a man of his hands, as any is between this and his head. He hath fought with a warrener.
QUICKLY How say you? – O, I should remember him: does he not hold up his head, as it were, and strut in his gait? (1.4.18-28)

Whereas references to costume in the dialogue also convey additional clues about the social status and occupation of the characters, and in the case of Evans about his ecclesiastical authority, they reveal much less about the physical features of Evans and Shallow than about the characters’ demeanour. For example, Shallow’s exaggerated and uncompromising effort to admonish Falstaff reflects petulance, and if his high-court costume in any way represents the higher echelons of Elizabethan society, then the superficiality, expressed symbolically in his name, conveyed satire that would not have gone unnoticed by original audiences. Within moments, then, the audience is immersed in a comic altercation among three ridiculous characters.

The hyperbolical back-and-forth dialogue, full of puns, quips, and mispronunciations, is designed, I believe, to elicit laughter, especially as Evans may find it difficult to get a word in edgewise. Meanwhile, the dispute between Shallow and Sir John Falstaff remains obscure at this early stage in the development of the opening. All
that is evident is Shallow’s uncompromising determination, bolstered by an inflated ego, to avenge an alleged offence committed by Falstaff, and Hugh Evans’s struggle to assuage Shallow’s anger. Evans then succeeds, though not for long, in deferring attention from the quarrel by proposing to arrange a marriage of convenience between Slender, Shallow’s cousin, and the wealthy Anne Page. The mere mention of Anne’s financial prospects instantly excites Slender and Shallow, who instigates the visit to Master Page’s house, even though he discovers to his dismay that Falstaff is already there. Here is Shallow’s response to Page’s greeting:

PAGE  I am glad to see your worships well. I thank you for my venison, Master Shallow.

SHALLOW Master Page, I am glad to see you. Much good do it your good heart! I wished your venison better; it was ill killed. How doth good Mistress Page?— And I thank you always with my heart, la, with my heart.

PAGE  Sir, I thank you.

SHALLOW  Sir, I thank you; by yea and no, I do. (1.1. 72-79)

The dialogue is playful but loaded here because Shallow, who owns a deer park, knows that Falstaff is in the house. The word “venison” may be his allusion to Falstaff’s alleged wrongdoing. The intention behind Shallow’s words appears to go unnoticed by Master Page but not by an audience, who has been aware of his consternation for a while, and is familiar with Falstaff’s antics. Shallow’s nervousness is expressed subtly through
confused prose: the character jumps from subject to subject erratically in a manner that leaves him perplexed, as line 79 attests. The layered effect generated by this comic situation has been described by Cicely Berry in *The Actor and His Text*: “We laugh as much with the rhythms, which are comedic, as with the reasoning” (208).

This is how Slender responds to Page’s greeting, and how Shallow reacts:

PAGE  I am glad to see you, good Master Slender.

SLENDER  How does your fallow greyhound, sir? I heard say he was outrun on Cotswold.

PAGE  It could not be judged, sir.

SLENDER  You’ll not confess, you’ll not confess.

SHALLOW  That he will not. [Aside to Slender] ’Tis your fault, ’tis your fault.

[To Page] ’Tis a good dog. (1.1. 80-86)

Slender believes that Master Page’s dog has lost a race on the Cotswold Hills\(^2\), and mocks him for not admitting the fact. The editorial stage directions represented in the square brackets, though not incontrovertibly implied in the dialogue, indicate that Slender persists until Shallow reprimands him publicly and offers Page an apology because he realizes that Slender is unaware of the degree to which he is compromising his suit as prospective son-in-law. This short exchange underscores Slender’s tactlessness, immaturity, pettiness, and most importantly, perhaps, his total ignorance of the effect of what he says. Lines 77-78 and 85 also supply a further dimension of Shallow’s comic characterisation: ploce, the repetition of phrases with little or no break, is a typical feature
of Shallow’s speech. This rhetorical device expresses the speaker’s verbosity and by extension his folly. By contrast, Slender’s repetition of the phrase: “You’ll not confess” (84), the only example in the opening, constitutes a second attempt by the character to echo Shallow’s manner of speaking: a persistent nagging quality.

Shallow’s anger towards Falstaff bubbles to the surface again when he confronts Page about Falstaff’s whereabouts. Even though Page insists on acting as mediator between the parties, as Evans had done earlier, Shallow again demonstrates an old man’s petulance: he is stubborn and defiant, qualities which highlight the ridiculous picture he cuts. His insistence on having been wronged by Falstaff is blatantly exaggerated, and therefore amusing. Page’s efforts to assuage Shallow are interrupted by the sudden and abrupt entrance of “the accused,” Falstaff, and his followers, Pistol Bardolph, and Nim.

Falstaff, “the intruder from another social and moral sphere” (322), according to Anne Barton, boldly calls on Shallow to voice his complaint, and an animated verbal boxing match ensues between the two characters:

SHALLOW Knight, you have beaten my men, killed my deer, and broke open my lodge.

FALSTAFF But not kissed your keeper’s daughter?

SHALLOW Tut, a pin! This shall be answered. (1.1.102-5)

The action here reveals, for the first time, what the knight has allegedly done to Shallow. Falstaff responds with a playful question that angers Shallow. This phrase
introduces sarcasm, a tone of speech not used on the stage previously. As opposed to the prose of Shallow, Slender, and Evans, Falstaff’s adheres to a smoother rhythm. Often, his lines contain unstressed sounds and they generally avoid unnecessary repetition. Furthermore, they do not contain malapropisms and other linguistic blunders. Instead, they express fluency and control of language (as we might expect from a seasoned schemer) so that the dominant features of this character include an inflated self-confidence and sharp wit.

Nobody is spared Falstaff’s rejoinders. Falstaff silences Evans next by parodying his strong Welsh accent: “EVANS Pauca verba, Sir John, good worts. / FALSTAFF Good worts? Good cabbage!— Slender, I broke your head. What matter have you against me?” (1.1.111-13, see Craik’s note). Evans intercedes in an effort to dissolve the tension, but is silenced by Pistol, Nim, and Bardolph, who mock Slender, in turn, by addressing his physical leanness and the fashion he sports. Their prose may contain allusions to the gallant, a satirical character George Chapman began to develop c. 1597. “As in 2 Henry IV and Henry V, Pistol is characterised by his fondness for alluding to and misquoting from popular Elizabethan tragedies” (122n). At line 22, for example, he misquotes from Doctor Faustus. Nim supplies a blunder on a common oath (154-6n): “Marry trap with you” (155). Such instances of linguistic self-awareness are part of the comedy’s broader metatheatricality. However, they also identify the brand of comedy typical of Falstaff’s companions: one-line witticisms, which come often as sharp retorts to Slender’s accusations.

Bardolph’s love of alcohol, found also in 2 Henry IV and Henry V, is intimated by the character’s nicknames “red face”(157) and “Scarlet” (160). The character’s fiery
complexion, for example, may have been represented visually on the early modern stage by make-up. It is more certain that early modern audiences familiar with Bardolph, Pistol, and Nim would have expected to see their stock characteristics exploited for comic effect. In line 162, for example, Bardolph’s mangled speech which, ironically, Evans corrects, suggests that alcoholism has dulled his senses: “BARDOLPH Why, sir, for my part, I say the gentleman had drunk himself out of his five sentences. / EVANS It is ‘his five senses.’ Fie, what the ignorance is!” (162-63).

Confused by his opponent’s frivolity, Slender struggles to identify who had picked his pocket in the tavern. Initially he accuses Pistol, then points the finger at Nim, and then at Bardolph, and finally he gives up accusing them by stating that the next time he will get drunk with decent folk rather than with “drunken knaves.” The effect of his comparison is comic:

SLENDER Ay, you spake in Latin then too. But ’tis no matter. I’ll ne’er be drunk whilst I live again but in honest, civil, godly company, for this trick. If I be drunk, I’ll be drunk with those that have the fear of God, and not with drunken knaves. (1.1.166-70)

The sequence undoubtedly puts Slender in a ridiculous light. It also demonstrates how Falstaff and his cronies manage, chiefly through their clowning, to undermine both Shallow’s and Slender’s allegations, and extricate themselves from the situation with dexterity, confidence, and ease.

Referring to compositional features of the comedy, Giorgio Melchiori identifies
confusions, inconsistencies, and loose ends in 1.1:

For instance, the play opens with the quarrel between Justice Shallow and Falstaff, who is accused of stealing (“stolne” in Q) and killing (in F) Shallow’s deer. But leaving aside the question of how a Justice of the Peace and Coram “[i]n the County of Gloucester” (1.1.4-5, a detail ignored in the Quarto version) could have owned a deer park in Windsor, and in spite of the fact that Parson Evans, Master Page and the Host of the Garter are accepted as “the three umpires in the matter” (1.1.127-35, cf. Q sig. A3v), actually the “matter” itself is pursued no further. (43)

Shakespeare sets the comedy in motion by presenting action that involves the merry-making deceits of Falstaff and his followers, whose entrance is delayed until 1.1.89. In the meantime, other characters discuss Shallow’s allegation and often refer to Falstaff in disparaging terms, as thief, rogue, and so forth. Delaying his entrance is a useful way to heighten anticipation and excitement in the opening until the point when an audience can relish the comic antics it had come to expect from a rogue and his companions. Seen from an early modern performance perspective, the problems Melchiori alludes to disappear.

Mistress Margret Page, Mistress Alice Ford, and Anne Page enter in the middle of the animated dispute, and remain onstage only briefly. While Anne appears from the entry point in the tiring-house that represents Page’s house, because she carries wine from within, as 1.1.174 indicates, Margret and Alice must appear from a different entry point because they are met by customary words of greeting which suggest that they have
just arrived on the scene from an undisclosed location. The information contained in the play-text implies that the women, whom audiences expected to see (judging by the play’s title), have walked into a situation engineered exclusively by the male characters of the play: a comic reality governed by avarice and profiteering. This circumstance has led Marilyn French to assert that the play presents values that are “overwhelmingly masculine” (102).

In spite of her brief appearance, Anne makes a strong impact on Slender, who is clearly nervous: “O heavens, this is Mistress Anne Page” (158). If silence speaks louder than words in the theatre, then the play-text also implies that Falstaff’s subsequent kissing of Mistress Ford may produce an uncomfortable moment on the stage, which Master Page pierces by calling everyone into dinner. Of course, early modern actors preparing the play for performance could have played the scene in a number of ways. Yet the dramatic situation suggests, a second time, that Falstaff is willing to take liberties where others do not, and in so doing, flouts social codes of etiquette. If one judges by Mistress Page’s and Mistress Ford’s chastity, which they defend fiercely in 2.1, and indeed throughout the comedy, their faces and gestures are likely to express dismay, because Falstaff’s indecorous behaviour threatens to compromise their reputations as chaste married women.

The kissing incident, therefore, reflects as much on the women as it does on Falstaff (and surely on the other male characters, who seem less than willing to intervene). Mistress Page and Mistress Ford instantly display the capacity to respond in a measured fashion to a situation of social and moral transgression. Furthermore, their lack of speech is noteworthy in a comic opening where the vagaries of language, in all its
aspects, are the province of male characters. This evidence suggests that in the opening, Shakespeare creates a picture of female characters whose sobriety and intelligence are markedly contrasted with the impulsive behaviour and farcical antics of their male counterparts.

Over the years, much feminist-oriented research has focused on how the opening to this comedy establishes a sense of a society governed by male values which threaten the female citizens of Windsor. For example, Marilyn French claims that Falstaff has “the rebelliousness and interest in sexual freedom that characterize the outlaw feminine aspect” (101). In a similar vein, Grace Tiffany considers the underlying societal values of Windsor as fundamentally misogynistic: “But Ford surpasses mistress Page in his objectifying act, reducing his wife’s selfhood: sexual honour to his own personal treasure” (147). On the surface level, these critiques appear to find accommodation in the play-text: the commodification of Anne by Evans, Shallow, and Slender, and Falstaff’s kissing of Mrs. Ford are cases in point. Yet the threat posed by male characters in this comedy appears to be overpitched in these studies: the construction of the opening suggests that the comedy’s images of masculinity are derisory and therefore innocuous. Any threat to objectify Anne can hardly be taken seriously by an audience because Slender is emasculated through comedy from the moment he sets foot on the stage. Anne, Slender’s so-called “objectified victim,” derides him from a position of moral and intellectual superiority. Similarly, Falstaff may be “an intruder from another social and moral sphere,” to use Anne Barton’s phrase, but he is quickly shown to be incapable of being in charge of the stock-in-trade of comic scheming. These circumstances suggest that at no time are the women of Windsor vulnerable; in fact the opposite appears to be
true, and amusingly so. Grav makes the point concisely when he says that any tyranny of
gender in this comedy “appears to be all smoke with precious little fire” (57).

Theatrical performance in the sixteenth century has often been described as a
conduit of culture. There is little doubt that Shakespeare presented his characters in social
situations that bore some resemblance to preoccupations of audiences in their daily lives.
Original audiences may have been moved in the theatre to reconsider contemporary
social and cultural questions through the ways in which they were represented on the
stage. The opening of The Merry Wives of Windsor, for instance, appears to have engaged
with sixteenth-century notions of gender and domesticity by presenting female characters
whose wit and capability of producing highly entertaining conspiracies outshine the
feeble profiles of their male counterparts. The comedy’s female stage characters are
socially transgressive in the language of the early modern theatre. On the stage, therefore,
their conspiracies to outsmart the notorious Falstaff must have contained the promise for
lively entertainment.

II

Textual Variants in Quarto and Folio

The textual versions of The Merry Wives of Windsor, Q and F, display the
construction of the opening hitherto analysed. Having pointed to what the texts have in
common, I now turn to examine the few substantive differences between them. The analysis of textual variants in Q and F supply evidence to suggest that the construction of the opening remained largely unchanged in the course of the comedy’s production history. However, certain elements may have been tweaked in order to emphasize thematic concerns (economical, social, and cultural) and invigorate the element of farce in the comedy.

Apart from minor variants, several striking differences can be found in the opening between F and Q. While F introduces Master Page at 1.1.69, Q does so at the outset, when the character enters along with Shallow, Slender, and Evans. F also gives Parson Evans the role of peace-keeper exclusively, while in Q the role is shared between Master Page and Evans. The initial dialogue in F is also considerably longer than the equivalent in Q, which is not devoted to Shallow’s farcical heraldic pretensions to gentility and to the discussion of Anne’s hefty dowry. William Bracy, believing that Q is an abridged version of F, suggests that Shakespeare excised this material in order to bring Falstaff, the comedy’s main attraction, onto the stage more swiftly:

In this long opening scene, only one conclusion will logically explain the striking differences in length. The opening has been shortened in order to hasten the action, present the situation, and get the character of main interest, Falstaff, upon the stage. (82)

Peter F. Grav, believing that F is a revision of Q, argues conversely that Shakespeare included the material in order to emphasize the comedy’s thematic concern with money.
Addressing Bracy’s conclusions, Grav writes: “This seems to be a rather simplistic explanation, as the mercenary elements of Slender’s courtship of Anne are a rather integral part of the ‘situation’ in F” (72).

The organisation of the dramatic material in F suggests that the “the trickster tricked” action is given more prominence at the outset than the equivalent in Q1: the action in F involves a dialogue that is almost entirely concerned with Falstaff, his followers, and their comic antics. In Q1, on the other hand, Master Page’s presence from the outset gives more prominence to the wooing of Anne Page, because the matter of Anne’s pursuit is introduced earlier, when Master Page is designated as advocate for Slender.

The longer opening dialogue in F also displays far more wordplay; and it presents many more opportunities for situational comedy among the three characters as, for example, when Shallow petulantly vows to avenge Falstaff, Slender echoes him, and Evans finds it difficult to interject in the conversation. The subsequent altercations between Falstaff and Shallow, Falstaff’s followers and Slender are also much longer in F than in Q1. They display more fully Falstaff’s comic characteristics as an affable rogue, his followers’ antics (particularly Bardolph’s)26, and expose to a greater extent Shallow’s and Slender’s dull wits. The information in F, therefore, provides far more details about comic characterisation. It supplies evidence of a highly animated scene that appears more adept than its counterpart at generating the lively atmosphere of jest customary of this comedy. This point is particularly noteworthy considering the overarching argument of this chapter, namely that the opening presents a wide range of male characters whose overtly farcical behaviour is exposed to ridicule repeatedly and to great comic effect.
F also contains several humorous references made by Falstaff and his followers to Slender’s appearance (references to his hat, gloves, etc). Alluding to evidence of satire in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Walter Cohen writes:

Though the social complexion of the community is especially clear in the First Quarto of 1602, the Folio (1623), which the present edition follows, also takes a jaundiced view of nearly every elite character with roots outside the citizenry of Windsor. Slender’s pretensions to the gentility are mocked from the very outset.

(1225)

This “jaundiced view,” to use Cohen’s phrase, is never more prominent than in the sequence where Slender airs his complaint against Falstaff and his cronies, and is mocked repeatedly (1.1.114-67). If indeed, as Melchiori proposes, in all these instances Slender mimics the gallant’s habit of swearing by his articles of clothing (141n.), then his demeanour, which is repeatedly exposed to ridicule in this sequence, also implicates the social type he appears to represent.

The references to Slender’s fashionable accoutrements in F, therefore, broaden the play’s satire. Their absence in Q suggests that F presents a more layered and sophisticated action that is able to comment on contemporary social and economic realities. Addressing the satiric dimensions of the play, Grav writes that the Folio text “emerges as a more coherent and cohesive satire of economic mores and Shakespeare’s contemporary society” (81).
Finally, while in F the two female protagonists, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, appear briefly not uttering a sound, in Q1 they are each given several lines after Falstaff kisses Mistress Ford:

FALSTAFF Mistresse Foord, I think your name is,
If I mistake not.
Syr John kisses her.
MISTRESS FORD Your mistake sir is nothing but in the Mistresse. But my husband’s name is Foord sir.
FALSTAFF I shall desire your more acquaintance.
The like of you good misteris Page.
MISTRESS PAGE With all my hart sir John.
Come husband will you goe?
Dinner staiies for us. (Elam 297)

From the tone and the content of their speech in Q1, there is little to suggest that Mistress Page and Mistress Ford perceive Falstaff’s kissing as an indiscretion. In contrast, as I have argued above, in F the wives’ silence may be an expression of their dismay, a point that makes good sense when we consider their peerless moral imperatives revealed explicitly in 2.1. The information supplied in F accentuates more fully the divisions between male and female characters in the opening, for it presents, not so much Falstaff’s brazen readiness to compromise the women’s reputations in public (for which evidence
clearly is supplied in Q), but the onlookers’ foolish incapacity to confront the indiscretion and protect the women.

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* contains a short opening which would prove effective both on the early modern stage and in the modern theatre. As I have suggested earlier, it may have also had an added dimension for original audiences, if we entertain the possibility, as several sources of evidence suggest, that Shakespeare composed the play with characters whom audiences knew well, liked, and even expected to watch. In fact, the popularity of Falstaff, Pistol, Bardolph, and Nim may have been the basic motivation behind the unusually brief opening of Shakespeare’s only comedy of English middle-class life. The characters’ popular appeal on the early modern stage appears to have been so effective for the task of audience immersion that Shakespeare needed only to create a comical situation involving their typical antics.

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Notes

1 Shakespeare has organised the dramatic material of his comedy into two actions developed through the play (I use “action” here in the sense of a homogeneous and continuing sequence). The simpler action is developed first, when Slender is shown comically to fail miserably as a would-be wooer to Anne (1.1.184-1.2.12). It also involves the pursuit of Anne by two other would-be wooers, and develops fully with the union of Fenton and Anne at 5.5, which is intrinsically connected to the action set in 1.4. The more intricate action introduces Falstaff’s conspiracy to bed Mistress Page and Mistress Ford as a means to getting their husbands’ money (1.3), and the merry wives’ repeated conspiracies to outwit Falstaff, which include his dumping in the Thames inside a basket full of dirty linen and his disguise as the aunt of Brentford. By the end of 5.1, Falstaff disguised as Herne is openly humiliated in Windsor Park.

2 It is important to note that the strand of the opening introduces the wooing of Anne Page in conversation (*diegesis*, not *praxis*, to borrow Aristotle’s terms). Consequently, it provides a backdrop to the actual wooing of Anne Page, which is presented as *praxis* only from 1.1.84 on.

3 This realization is never clearer than when the wives discover Falstaff’s identical love-letters and refer to him derisorily thus:

> What tempest, I trow, threw this whale, with so many tons of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor? How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease. (2.1. 58-61)

4 For a comprehensive discussion of plot structures in early modern plays, see Richard Levin.

5 Kempe’s departure, as Brian Parker, editor of the Revels edition of *Volpone* explains, is corroborated by his disappearance from the cast list of Ben Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour*, dated 1599, after having appeared in the cast list of *Every Man in His Humour* only a year earlier. Referring to the cryptic circumstances of his departure, Gurr writes: “It has even been suggested that [Kempe’s] departure from the
Chamberlain’s Men in 1599 was because he had a hand in the piracy of the last Falstaff play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (lim.1597-1602)” (104).

It is interesting that the title-page of Q1 *The Merry Wives of Windsor* specifically mentions the names of the main characters and the play’s central comic conceits. By 1602, the year Q1 was published, some members of the theatre-going public had seen performances of the play, others had heard or read about the material it contained, while others yet had seen performances of plays involving some of its characters. It is quite possible that Thomas Creede, the printer working for Arthur Johnson, printed the title-page for marketing purposes. Referring to Falstaff, the Merry Wives, etc., and to the play’s “Entermixed [] sundrie variable and pleasing humours,” is an effective way to appeal to readers, and at the same time, arouse interest in performances of the play. This possibility is backed by the specific inscription on the title-page which indicates that the play had been staged several times before its publication: “As it hath been divers times Acted by the right Honerable my Lord Chamberlain’s servants. Both before Her Majesty, and elsewhere.” The Q1 title-page then is another confirmation of the popularity of John Falstaff. The printer presents the comedy followed immediately by Sir John Falstaff in order to capitalize on the character’s popularity in 1602. After all, the title of the play is not *Falstaff and the Merry Wives of Windsor*, as the editor implies.

I have chosen to analyse Q2 because it supplies the most information about the construction of the opening; it also contains a significant portion of text that is absent in Q1 (Melchiori 109).

Melchiori proposes a variation which gives the first syllable emphasis in performance. Slender’s “Rota lorum”, according to the editor, “is meant to compensate for what he considers Shallow’s omission of part of his title” (125).

As opposed to Jeanne Addison Roberts, Melchiori has emphasized rightly that the play reflects Shakespeare’s preoccupation with the comedic potential of several languages, not only English. The “Latin Lesson” (only in F) is the example most often quoted in support of the argument. However, the opening dialogue also reflects how Latin is appropriated for comedic effect. For instance, Shallow’s misuse of legal jargon in Latin suggests that he is pretentious.

In her book *The Actor and His Text*, Cicely Berry identifies in the dialogue implicit stage directions to the actors about delivery and pitch. Her observations are highly informative even though early modern actors did not approach the text in the way Berry and her modern actors do. Instead, it is possible that many of the acting directions Berry identifies were intuited by early modern actors, and especially as they became more and more familiar with Shakespeare’s writing for the stage.

The point worth making is that character and plot are not independent dramatic constituents, as Aristotle would have it, but rather two sides of the same coin; each constitutes an integral part of the other, and in unison their development drives the action forward.

The second type of reading took place when the playwright, having completed his approved play, read it in front of the full company…. These occasions introduced the story of the play to the players, and also gave the playwright a chance to speak the text in the manner in which he wished to hear it performed— the nearest, perhaps, he might get to having any “directorial” influence over the production…. A third kind of reading might follow (or perhaps substitute for) the second. This was when the actors themselves had a read-through of the play before taking each part home to learn. (60)

The Oxford edition helps us once again with references such as “louses,” “coat,” and “passant.” There is little agreement among editors about the word “coat” as it appears in line 20, and this is so perhaps because a scribe or compositor has tampered with the sentence (See Craik, appendix A). While the editors of the Oxford, Cambridge, and Arden print “coat,” Melchiori, following the NCS editors, sees a possible pun on “cod” (a salt-water fish):

The F reading as it stands suggests that Shallow, resenting Evan’s equivocation on “coat,” though pronouncing the word correctly, alludes to the Welsh mispronunciation as “cod,” acknowledging that, in contrast with an ancient coat of arms, a much-worn coat may well smell like stale fish.
A.J. Hoenselaars provides a broad analysis of foreign characters on the early modern stage.

In the Oxford edition (6), T.W. Craik examines the long-held belief that the word “luce” may contain a satirical allusion to the Lucy family, who, tradition has it, owned a deer park from which Shakespeare had supposedly stolen a deer on his way from Stratford to London. Craik indicates that Sir Thomas Lucy had never owned a deer park, only a rabbit-warren, and subsequently puts the belief to rest.

This point forms the basis for Melchiori’s speculation that John Sinclair played the role originally: “The only reasonable guess involves an actor who does not appear in [the Folio list of ‘The Names of the Principall Actors in all these Plays’]: the exceptionally lean John Sincklo or Sinclair as Slender.” (83)

In the New Cambridge Shakespeare, David Crane comments that Slender’s linguistic blunder points to the fact that his Latin is laughably ignorant. In line 34, the character ludicrously transposes “successors” and “ancestors,” as Crane puts it, an error which points to the fact that Slender’s English fares no better. Craik indicates that “Banbury cheese” in line 117 is an allusion to Slender’s physical leanness, because the cheese produced at Banbury was thin. This evidence suggests that Slender, the first would-be wooer to Anne Page, is introduced in a starkly ridiculous light. He is designated as an unnatural mate for Anne from the moment he sets foot on the stage.

In Shakespeare and the Economic Imperative, Peter F. Grav sees this dispute symbolically as a confrontation between social classes in sixteenth-century England: “The clash between the values of court and the existent class structure in Windsor is evident in the opening lines of the play when Justice Shallow poignantly contrasts his and Falstaff’s titular achievements” (57).

Alluding to this incident, Marilyn French argues that “the major themes of the play are the cornerstones of bourgeois life: the possession of property, possession of women and fear of theft” (106). Grav is the latest in a series of scholars to emphasize that Anne is perceived as a commercial enterprise rather than a love interest:

In the Merry Wives, Anne Page’s ultimate importance lies in what she is, rather than who she is. What she may or may not have to say is of little consequence; as put by White, she is “a possession to be bought and sold… a prize to be won…. The Merry Wives is barely fifty lines old when the idea of Anne being an economic objective is introduced. In a way, the play’s opening scene encapsulates how wealth was supplanting rank as a social barometer in early modern England as the conversation shifts from Shallow’s coat of arms to the proposition of tapping into middle class wealth. (62)

Anne Barton indicates that the comedy’s real Windsor locales and middle-class mores provided original audiences a sense of collusion with the fiction presented on the stage: ‘The Merry Wives of Windsor, however, is unique among the comedies in that it is set explicitly in an English town well known to Shakespeare’s audience. Moreover, it set out to remind this audience of local topography and detail” (320).

The corresponding reference in Q indicates that Falstaff has allegedly injured Shallow’s keeper, killed his dogs, and stolen a deer.

Shakespeare’s ability to comment on the social habits of contemporary English society has led Alexander Leggatt to classify the play as a citizen comedy:

The prevailing spirit is satirical. Sexual behaviour and financial abuses are the prime target, though other, more topical subjects, such as upstart courtiers and thirty-pound knights, are also touched upon. There is a keen awareness of knavery in the world, an awareness in which there is often as much relish as criticism. (8-9)

Social satire may have been especially popular on the stage around 1597, when the gallant as a social type was popularised by George Chapman in An Humorous Day’s Mirth (1597). Ben Jonson, however, is probably best known for his satirical treatment of the gallant, in Every Man in His Humour (1598) and in subsequent plays.

Also, humorous references to popular catch-phrases express the dialogue’s self-conscious theatricality: “The tevil and his tam,” what phrase is this?” (138).
Nim refers to the word “humour” repeatedly in his speech. Melchiori suggests that these are ironical references to a fashion of presenting stage humours in comedies (121).

Bracy observes that the dialogue in Q appears to give Bardolph a far less active role in the opening (82).
Twelfth Night

In the closing scene of *Twelfth Night* (5.1), Antonio is reconciled with Duke Orsino; Sir Toby turns against Sir Andrew Aguecheek, after gulling him; Viola and Sebastian are reunited; lovers are paired off with the partners they wish to marry; and the gulling of Malvolio is openly disclosed. These five resolutions are the culminations of three lines of action in the comedy: the romantic action, which involves Olivia, Sebastian, Orsino, and Viola; the identical-twin action, which involves Viola, Sebastian, and Antonio; and the gulling action, which involves Sir Toby exploiting Sir Andrew on the one hand, and on the other, Maria, Sir Toby, Fabian, and Feste gulling Malvolio.

At the opening Shakespeare presents three largely disconnected strands of action, which are suspended sequentially, and from which flow all the complications in the comedy. As my earlier remarks on *Twelfth Night* indicate (p.13), Shakespeare’s technique of opening involves delaying the introduction of the actions that develop through the play in order to immerse audiences in the comedy. The three strands of the opening correspond to the three initial scenes of the comedy. With reference to timing, the strands are brief (compared with the tragic openings analysed), and there may be a correlation between their relative weight and significance: the former two (forty lines and sixty-one lines) give rise to action that has a single focus, whereas the latter (136 lines) gives rise to action that has two foci. In keeping with the broader tradition of comedy, where situation is complicated, not character, the strands display a wide range of extroverted types, marked not by any depth of character but by the peculiarities of their appearance, language, and behaviour.
The first strand (1.1) introduces Orsino’s unrequited love for Olivia, which leads into the romantic complications involving Viola and Sebastian; the preliminary development of this incident ensues in 1.4, when Viola enters Orsino’s service disguised as Cesario and unwittingly falls in love with her master. The confusion generated in 1.4 sets into motion many other complications which arise through the play. The second (1.2) introduces the separation of Viola and Sebastian. This incident is not taken up until 2.1, which presents Sebastian, the second twin, and the complications produced by the confusion of their identities, as witnessed for example, in when Antonio assumes that Cesario is Sebastian. The third (1.3) introduces the gulling motif (the two actions mentioned above involving Sir Andrew and Malvolio as victims of deception, both of which take place in Olivia’s residence). These deceptions are developed in 1.5, when Feste mentions the tension between Sir Toby and Malvolio for the first time (1.5.75-77), and Olivia reprimands her steward for behaviour that will be exposed to ridicule in the ensuing action (1.5.86-87).

The opening of Twelfth Night is markedly different from the opening of The Merry Wives of Windsor. Nevertheless, it still operates by suspending the early modern spectator’s interest in any one direction in the development of the action; and it is only subsequently, once the comedy’s parallel lines of actions are identified, that the spectator understands that the opening has provided expository material to the comedy as a whole.

Shakespeare may have relied on many different sources to compose the opening of Twelfth Night. He probably consulted “Apolonius and Silla” (1581), a moralizing romantic tale derived from Bandello through Belleforest and found in Barnabe Riche’s Riche His Farewell to Military Profession. This literary work is generally accepted as
Shakespeare’s immediate source. Other possible sources for the opening are the anonymous Italian comedy *Gl'Igannati* (1537), and Shakespeare’s earlier comedies; specifically, *The Comedy of Errors*, which opens with a tempest that prizes apart a pair of look-alike twins.

The story of *Twelfth Night* appears to have had little currency in England during the late sixteenth century. Unlike the story of Romeo and Juliet, for example, there is no evidence to suggest that the story of *Twelfth Night* was either printed or staged very often in England. Consequently, Shakespeare may not have relied on his narrative source to play with audience expectations in the opening of *Twelfth Night*, as he seems to have done in *Romeo and Juliet* (see above, 126). Nevertheless, Shakespeare borrowed material from it, as well as from other sources, to compose a lively romantic comedy which became one of the most popular in his repertoire.

The following case study analyses the construction of the opening in F, the only existing text of the play, as it appears in Arden 3 (ed. Elam).

I

**The Fanciful Courtly Lover**

In *Twelfth Night*, the opening sets the central theme of unrequited love in an atmosphere of jest or “high fantasy,” to borrow Orsino’s own expression (1.1.15). It does
so in a largely invented scene that revolves around a duke, one of four noble characters found in all earlier versions of the story (Beecher 76). “Riche tells us that to Juliana, Apolonius [the duke] played the courtier with ‘fair words, sorrowful sighs, and piteous countenance’” (Beecher 78). By exposing Orsino’s excesses, Shakespeare transformed the sober figure of romance in the narrative source into the fanciful courtly lover, a comic type that was popular on the early modern stage. Orsino’s volatile temperament appears nowhere in the play to be as exaggerated as in the first strand of action, which serves as a useful strategy for creating the mood proper to comedy from the very start.

The play-text provides very few details at the outset about the dynamics of the opening, and for a fuller perspective, one must go beyond the first few lines. In the case of *Twelfth Night*, the context can easily elude the modern reader because the opening begins in the middle of an action, *in medias res*, but it would not have mystified an early modern audience because theatre practitioners charged with staging the opening would have supplied the context.

The comedy is set in motion by the entrance of Duke Orsino, followed by attendant lords. The initial explicit stage direction contains clues about the characters’ elevated social status, “[Music.] Enter ORSINO, Duke of Illyria, CURIO and other Lords,” which would have likely been discernible to original audiences by the lavish clothes they wore as they entered. Implicit in the dialogue are directives implying that the Duke wore a conspicuous shot-silk garment, which may be symbolic of the character’s impulsive behaviour: “FESTE Now the melancholy god protect thee, and the tailor make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal” (73-75). Alluding to this point, Jean MacIntyre writes:
Orsino seems a likely candidate for costuming like that of Fastidius Briske / Fungoso or perhaps of Puntarvolo in Every Man Out; Feste’s proposal that his “tailor make [thy] doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal” (II.iv.76-77) suggests the appropriateness of a “high fantastical” (I.i.15) costume to match Orsino’s love posturing. (189)

The entrance of Orsino, Curio, and the other lords takes place from the same point in the tiring-house, which represents Orsino’s palace. This is so because only one entry-point in the entire scene represents this location. The initial distribution of entrances might give the audience to understand that the attending lords have been trying to comfort the Duke as they move from one room in the palace represented off stage to another room represented on stage.

Furthermore, implicit in the initial line of text is a directive implying that Orsino and the lords attending on him should be accompanied by the playing of music, as Elam has noted with a music cue contained in brackets: “If music be the food of love, play on” (1).6 Orsino’s calling for musical instruments to be played is a direct appeal to the healing power of music, which is another early clue about his unstable mood, as is the swiftness with which he asks for the music to stop. If, as Sternfeld suggests (126), string music in the sixteenth century was widely believed to have had a pacifying influence on the soul, then it is likely that an attendant lord playing a string instrument (a lute perhaps) accompanied Orsino’s entrance.
From the moment Orsino enters, he is likely to appear impatient and subject to quick changes of mood as, for example, his initial monologue suggests. His self-indulgence is underscored textually by the repetitions of the exclamation “O” at lines 5 and 9; and by many other conventional figures of speech that come from Renaissance amatory verse, a lyrical form that derived ultimately from Petrarch. Leonard Forster writes:

Petrarch had forged for posterity a poetic idiom of great flexibility, which could be non-committal or serious, as desired; which could be used to parade fictitious emotions or to conceal real ones; which permitted intense poetic concentration (Maurice Scève) or endless elaboration (J.C. Scaliger). The drama and even the novel show that the Petrarchistic idiom became the obligatory language of love.

(8)

Orsino’s speech contains hyperbole and a frequent mixing of sensory images, which are familiar Petrarchan devices. The extravagant language of the speech as a whole, rich in metaphors of consumption and excess, expresses the enjoyment Orsino derives from his suffering. What is more, the changes of mood, which are underlined by Orsino’s speech, might be particularly effective on the stage if Curio and the attendant lords follow in Orsino’s footsteps, hopelessly trying to keep up with him:

ORSINO

If music be the food of love, play on,
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again, it had a dying fall.
O, it came o’er my ears like the sweet south
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. Enough, no more,
’Tis not so sweet now as it was before.
O spirit of love, how quick and fresh art thou…. (1-9)

Curio is the only character who dares to interrupt Orsino’s monologue, perhaps to get his attention, because Orsino is clearly lost to his emotions: “CURIO: Will you go hunt my Lord? / ORSINO: What? / CURIO: The hart” (16). As Orsino’s pun on “hart” (deer) suggests, the character hears the word “heart” and continues to moan unhindered by Curio’s attempts to communicate. The humour is accentuated by Orsino proceeding unopposed to draw on the meaning of Curio’s “hart,” and creating an alternative and hackneyed image of himself as an abused lover, hounded like a “hart” by his merciful predatory emotions. The image may contain sexual overtones if, as Elam suggests, “Orsino’s allegory alludes to the story of Actaeon, who— having seen Diana naked— was transformed by her into a stag and then hunted to death by his own hounds” (20-2n):

O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first
Methought she purged the air of pestilence;
That instant was I turned into a hart,
And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
E’er since pursue me.

Enter VALENTINE (1.1.18-22)

Valentine, who has come from Olivia’s house, at once captures the attention of Orsino: “How now, / What news from her?” (23). When Valentine reports that he has not been given access to Olivia because she has abjured the sight of men for seven years in memory of her dead brother, rather than face up to the pain of rejection implicit in Viola’s message, Orsino wastes no time in fantasizing about Viola’s love for him when finally conquered: “How will she love when the rich golden shaft / Hath killed the flock of all affections else” (34-35). This attempt on his part to evade any response which is not to his liking is nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than towards the end of the speech, when the character delivers a rhyming couplet rich in metaphors of sleep, after which he exits the stage followed by the rest of the characters: “Away before me to sweet beds of flowers! / Love thoughts lie rich when canopied with bowers” (40-41). Like his initial monologue, Orsino’s extravagant language, which appropriates sonnet conventions and love stereotypes, seems to express high opinions of himself as well as the enjoyment he derives from his suffering.

Orsino’s emotional volatility is best exemplified in the dénouement, when having pursued Olivia through the entire action, he suddenly abandons his quest for Olivia and proposes marriage to Viola. This character trait argues in favour of Orsino coming across as the “love melancholic” (Gellert Lyons 25), a male stock character who, according to
Gellert Lyons, had a long literary history and a notoriously contradictory nature that dramatists in the sixteenth century found useful as a model of comic characterisation:

While the melancholy state is a solitary, painful and undesirable one, the cultivation of style implies everything opposite: the desire to communicate, conscious intention in choice of costume, gestures or language, and a certain energy of self-presentation. It is this contradiction that comic writers exploited in their creation of melancholy types. (34)

Shakespeare had already created several melancholic figures in comedy (e.g., Valentine in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* [c.1590-1598] and Antonio in the *Merchant of Venice* [1594-1597]). Orsino bemoans unrequited love when he first appears. He is reminiscent of the “love melancholic” in so far as he expresses feelings of love connected with rejection. In Orsino, Shakespeare saw great comic potential in these emotions.¹¹

Referring to Orsino’s behaviour in the opening of *Twelfth Night*, Elizabeth Story Donno writes:

When Orsino in the opening scene invokes music as the “food of love” (I.I.1) and speaks of the sea in the same breath as “fancy” and the “fantastical” he establishes a self-indulgent, almost hothouse atmosphere (sweet beds of flowers), in which he performs, to an on stage audience of servants, his idea of the Petrarchan lover. (16)
The comparison between Orsino and the Petrarchan lover has been made repeatedly in scholarship on the play and therefore requires no elaboration. More significant to the argument presented here is that the words Shakespeare gives Orsino in the first strand of action indicate the parody of a courtly lover: his whimsical nature, his enjoyment of suffering, his exaggerated mood swings. These traits clearly express the nature of the comic courtly lover, who enjoys being in love with a figment of his imagination rather than with an actual woman. In the early modern theatre, then, once the nature of Orsino’s character was determined from his very first appearance, no spectator could have perceived him as anything other than the fanciful courtly lover of comedy.

“Perchance he is not drowned”

The opening introduces the action of the identical twins (Viola and Sebastian) in an atmosphere of jest, because it presents the predicament of a high-spirited character in a comic mode. In constructing this strand of the opening, Shakespeare appears to have transferred material from the middle of Riche’s narrative to the beginning of the comedy, adding a substantial amount of comic material at the expense of elements of romance. For example, the high-spirited Viola is nothing like Riche’s Silla, a desperate woman besotted by unrequited love. Beecher observes that:

[I]n bringing these narrative configurations back to the theatre, Shakespeare abandoned the earlier episodes of the expanded version in order to concentrate on
the final phases of the story to the extent of eliminating all references to the cause of Viola’s voyage by sea to Illyria. (75-79)

Moreover, Viola’s allusions to a conspiracy involving disguise, a stage device used in the anonymous Gl’Igannati as well as in earlier Shakespearean comedies, would likely have led early modern audiences to expect entertaining complications in a comedy that displays the rituals of inversion and misrule¹².

Viola, a Captain, and Sailors enter in the middle of a conversation—in other words, as much an in medias res start to the second strand as to the first. However, in marked contrast to Orsino in the first strand, the characters speak in a linguistic register that is less lyrical, suggesting greater moderation or self-control. The first few lines pinpoint the Illyrian shore as the setting for the action and indicate that the characters have survived a storm¹³:

VIOLA: What country, friends, is this?

CAPTAIN: This is Illyria, lady.

VIOLA: And what should I do in Illyria?

My brother he is in Elysium.

Perchance he is not drowned. (1.2.1-5)

Tempests are recurrent motifs in Shakespearean plays. Rosenberg among others has suggested with particular reference to Macbeth (see above, 106) that they signalled some kind of upheaval in the ensuing action, offering original audiences an early promise
of exciting events. The earliest signal on the platform stage that the characters have survived a recent shipwreck resulting from a tempest may have been visual, provided the characters wore travelling costumes\textsuperscript{14}, “sea gowns” (MacIntyre, 186), and their costumes or faces appeared to be wet.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, as the dialogue suggests, the tempest at the opening of \textit{Twelfth Night} has prized a family apart (3-5), and the protagonist, Viola, faces a potentially serious situation in its wake. These details about a family’s misfortune and the possibility of a member dying resemble Egeon’s long narrative about a sea storm that opens the earlier \textit{Comedy of Errors} (c.1590-1594).\textsuperscript{16}

In fact, like the earlier comedy, where the prospect of personal loss is quickly dispelled for the audience by the appearance of both brothers Antipholus (1.2), \textit{Twelfth Night}, which begins with a focus on the fate of Viola’s brother, Sebastian, presents a situation that is only as serious as comedy would permit: the prospects of loss are quickly dispelled by Viola, whose refrain in 1.2.4 echoes her optimism about her brother’s survival because “she wills her brother alive against the odds” (Elam 1.2.4n.): “Perchance he is not drowned.” The prospect of loss is further dispelled when the Captain, who quibbles with the word “chance” (here in the sense of “circumstance”), assures Viola that Sebastian is tied to a mast, and therefore is probably safe:\textsuperscript{17} “Where like Arion on the dolphin’s back / I saw him hold acquaintance with the waves / So long as I could see” (15-16). The Captain’s words allude to Ovid’s legend of the poet Arion (Elam 14n), which told a fantastical story of deliverance through magic. According to Elam, the story’s preoccupations with song and musical instruments (the lyre principally) are significant, because they provide another “illustration of the importance and redemptive powers of music in this comedy” (14n).
Once the Captain is rewarded for his comforting words, Viola instantly and rather unexpectedly forgets her personal predicament, i.e., her worry about Sebastian’s well-being. In fact, her quick recovery from grief suggests that the whole dialogue should not be morose. Viola’s repetitions of the Captain’s words, “name” (23) and “Orsino” (24), could be comical if they have the subtle effect of parroting, but short lines in the play-text provide only a clear indication that the dialogue takes a brisker pace. Viola’s attitude to loss in the opening suggests, once again, that Twelfth Night does not dwell on serious emotions.\(^\text{18}\)

Viola inquires about Illyria, and the Captain informs her about Orsino’s love for the grieving Olivia.\(^\text{19}\) Viola reveals her desire to serve Olivia perhaps out of sympathy for her: Olivia, she is told, mourns for a father and a brother, as she does. Furthermore, Viola has been robbed of her social standing by circumstances that go beyond her control, and therefore, is compelled to assume a new identity:

\[
O, \text{ that I served that lady,}\\
\text{And might not be delivered to the world—}\\
\text{Till I had made mine own occasion mellow—}\\
\text{What my estate is.} \text{ (1.2.38-41)}
\]

Considering that women’s perceptions of selfhood during the sixteenth century were inextricably linked with traditional notions of family, and, in fact, “the trajectory of their existence extended itself within the family—as daughters, wives, and widows, as workers
and survivors” (King 24), Viola’s predicament leaves her with no alternative but to conceal her true identity if she is to get a husband.

After the Captain reports that Olivia “will admit no kind of suit” (42), Viola is shown, once again, not to take her setback seriously, and quickly contrives an alternative plan to conceal her identity. In doing so she exudes a confidence in herself that echoes an attractive trait Shakespearean characters tend to share at the outset of comedy: a carefree and steadfast attitude to overcoming the obstacles to which she is subjected in the world of comedy. Viola’s self-assurance is reflected by her attempt to win the Captain over by using persuasion: “I will believe thou hast a mind that suits / With this thy fair and outward character” (47-48). She also promises the Captain a vast sum of money in exchange for his help, when she appears to be penniless:

VIOLA I pray thee and I’ll pay thee bounteously—
Conceal me what I am, and be my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent. (1.2.49-52)

Viola’s fertile imagination also serves to introduce the trope of disguise, which in turn supplies many opportunities for comic complication in the romantic action. It is also reworked repeatedly for comic effect in the gulling action when, for example, Malvolio’s yellow cross-garters, which are a form of disguise, expose him to ridicule in front of Olivia, whom he hopes to impress. In the opening, however, the link between the theme of unrequited love and disguise is only suggested, when Viola’s desire to serve the
Duke as a eunuch is given as an explanation as to why she dons a disguise. Surely Viola, robbed of her patrimony by her father’s death and the subsequent disappearance of her brother, feels that she is able to make a living only by posing as a man before the Duke.

In a recent study on the performance of gender in sixteenth-century England, Stephen Orgel argues that interplay between male actor and female role on the early modern stage challenged a deep-rooted fear of female sexuality:

The dangers of women in erotic situations, whatever they may be, can be disarmed by having the women play men, just as in the theatre the dangers of women on the stage (whatever they may be) can be disarmed by having men play women. The interchangeability of the sexes is, on both the fictive and material level, an assumption of this theatre. (18)

Orgel identifies “disguise” as a trope that enabled a complex interplay of cultural exchange in the theatre. With specific reference to disguise in Twelfth Night, he adds:

What allows for boys to be substituted for woman in the theatre, however, is nothing about the genial nature of boys and women, but precisely the costume, and more particularly, cultural assumptions about costume. Orsino’s love for the youth he knows as Cesario is paralleled by Antonio’s love for Sebastian, the youth he knows as Roderigo, and despite the fact that there were no twins in Shakespeare’s company, the two are represented on the stage as being
indistinguishable – an effect achieved, then as now, by simply dressing them in identical costumes….Clothes make the woman, clothes make the man: the costume is of the essence. (104)

The effects of Elizabethan theatre conventions must have been powerful considering the possible levels of meaning produced by a boy actor inhabiting a female role and disguised as a page-boy.28

Elam quotes Samuel Johnson, who observes that Viola’s behaviour reflects the character’s resourcefulness as a comic schemer, for learning that Olivia will not accept petitions, Viola will serve Orsino instead (1.2.52n.). This decision points to a character trait that has been presented repeatedly by this point, namely, Viola’s high-spiritedness, which is reflected here in her change of mind.

The final lines of dialogue, cue to the scene’s end, also clearly express Viola’s high-spiritedness. Rhymed speech, in lines 57-61, constitutes an expression of her enthusiasm. Lines 57 and 58 echo her tacit belief that she is in control of her plan, although not able to anticipate its consequences:

VIOLA

What else may hap to time I will commit;

Only shape thou thy silence to my wit.

CAPTAIN

Be you his eunuch, and your mute I’ll be.

When my tongue blabs then let mine eyes not see.
VIOLA

I thank thee. Lead me on. *Exeunt* (57-60)

The organization of the strand’s dramatic material, which contains important textual indicators for the early modern actor marking the build-up in comic tension, would have helped generate excitement in the early modern theatre. The strand is suspended once the comic tension builds to a point of climax, when the Captain, preparing to leave the stage with Viola, responds with a couplet, a conventional way to signal the entrance of actors for the next scene.

**The Comic World Set Below Stairs**

The third strand of the opening contributes a distinctive atmosphere to the comedy over which Sir Toby and Maria preside. It supplies opportunities for sophisticated verbal and physical jocularity that can be extremely funny. This strand’s dramatic material has no counterpart in Riche’s narrative source. However, the anonymous *Gl’Igannati* may have supplied Shakespeare with some farcical material and an informal style of dialogue that counteracts the styles of previous scenes: “*Gl’Igannati* is a farce entirely in prose, and the creative powers with which Shakespeare transformed its prosaic, situational comedy are pervasive throughout any reading of it” (Edmonson 16). The dynamic of 1.3 emphasizes what is unmistakably Sir Toby’s and Maria’s propensity for generating comedic stage business, which is presented more fully in the gulling of Malvolio. It also
presents Sir Andrew’s fastidiousness, stupidity, and erratic mood swings, character traits that are obviously risible.

The action takes place in a domestic setting, the downstairs of Olivia’s house, and introduces the location in which most of the comedy takes place. The action, like that of the first two strands, begins in medias res, with the entrance of a drunk Sir Toby and Maria in the middle of a combative dialogue. However, here, animated prose, not verse, is the characters’ linguistic register:

The prose passages make abundant use of “everyday” idioms, for example so-called discourse makers, namely “small words and phrases, which add emotional tone and colour to what is being said (Blake, Grammar, 290).” (Elam 79)

The dialogue follows from what can only be Maria’s admonishment of Sir Toby for keeping late hours and drinking excessively. Sir Toby’s initial line constitutes a flagrant defiance of Maria’s warning, which would have been made prior to their first appearance. His vocal attempts to defend the pleasure of drinking at all costs, all the while treating Olivia’s loss with contempt, suggest that the character is drunk from the moment he enters the stage. The play-text allows for the character’s inebriation to be expressed on the stage by doddering and belching (as the character’s name implies); by the character’s clothes looking untidy and rumpled; and by his face being visibly red (this physical mark of alcohol consumption can be achieved by using make-up). These theatrical signifiers underscore the basic absurdity of the situation, because the character is incapable of making any sense in conversation.
Maria’s explicit demand that Sir Toby adopt more moderate behaviour is instantly resisted: “MARIA Ay, but you must confine yourself within the modest limits of order. SIR TOBY Confine? I’ll confine myself no finer than I am” (8-9). The pun on the word “confine” is funny because the term connotes childbirth (the process of labour and delivery), and also because the character is clearly unwilling to submit to any form of restriction. The words printed in lines 8 and 9 gain in effect when uttered by a character who is noticeably overweight, because Sir Toby alludes to his portly physical form as an expression of his unwillingness to restrain his behaviour.

The portrait that begins to emerge here is that of the comical rogue who enjoys “quaffing and drinking” (13) and who defies authority flagrantly. Elizabeth Story Donno sees Sir Toby in the opening as an allegorical character that represents resistance to the self-denial of Lent: “Sir Toby and his fellow-roisters, with their creed of cakes and ale, symbolize a refusal of the self-denial required by this religious tradition” (9). This observation, though interesting, threatens to occlude Sir Toby’s role in the comedy as a typical Shakespearean rogue who, like Falstaff, gratifies his base physical needs and readily defies authority all year round.

When Maria refers to Sir Andrew as a fool, a coward, and a spendthrift, Sir Toby vigorously disputes the claim by saying that the wooer is cultured, educated, and good-looking: “Fie that you’ll say so! He plays o’th’ viol-de-gamboys, and speaks three or four languages word for word without book and hath all the good gifts of nature” (23-26). The incessant back-and-forth that ensues is punctuated by colloquialisms, allusions to contemporary dance routines, and quibbles that provide the dialogue its comic tone. Moreover, Sir Toby’s repeated misuses of language (for instance, “substractors” instead
of “detractors” [32]), perhaps a symptom of his drunkenness in the opening, heighten the comedic effect because the character’s portrayal of Andrew is obviously skewed. The combative exchange, in which Toby’s defiance is accentuated repeatedly, illuminates both characters’ proclivity for unadulterated humour, and, because they give as good as they get, they are poised from the very outset as worthy rivals in the business of comedy (as Feste implies in 1.5.24-26).

The combative comic exchange also serves to introduce the third character of the scene, Sir Andrew, and place him in a comic light before he enters for the first time. In fact, Sir Andrew’s appearance on the stage in 1.3.41 constitutes a perfect occasion for displaying many of the characteristics of the aristocratic fool that the initial combative dialogue introduces. From a purely visual standpoint, the character’s hair, which “hangs like flax on a distaff” (98), and his leanness, which is echoed in his name (Elam 158) and often emphasized in modern productions, are important visual indicators of the character’s laughable appearance. For example, in the BBC production of the play, the actor wears a wig of long and thin blond hair, which may be a mark of his character’s infertility and effeminacy (Elam 98). The modern actor in the BBC production of the play is dressed in a very tight costume that emphasizes the slender contours of the character’s body, which can also mark ailing health. Similar indicators of comic characterisation would likely have suggested to an early modern audience in advance of the unfolding action that, from the very moment Sir Andrew appears on the stage, even before he utters a word, he has not got the slightest chance of being successful with Olivia.

In the play-text, Andrew’s senseless repetitions of Sir Toby’s name (line 43) are further expressions of the character’s stupidity. An entertaining example of the derisory

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light in which the character is placed can be found in his attempt to greet Maria, which takes the protocol of courtesy and turns it upside down, leading to a broader comic action. The intricate levels of play here can be gauged by tracing the action from Sir Andrew’s boorish address of Maria as “fair shrew” (45), which Sir Toby is shown to relish, because he encourages Andrew to continue: “Accost, Sir Andrew, accost.” Andrew, who is ignorant of the term “accost,” asks for clarification: “what’s that?” (48). Sir Toby picks up on the question and gives it an entirely new meaning, as the following line indicates: “my niece’s chambermaid” (49), and Sir Andrew goes on to readdress Maria as “Good mistress Accost” (50). The display of verbal gymnastics is funny, because it leads to an absurd breakdown of communication. But the comic spring has not yet been fully twisted. When Sir Toby explains the meaning of the term “Accost,” Sir Andrew takes his words to mean that he is expected to have sexual intercourse with Maria on the stage: “SIR TOBY You mistake, knight. ‘Accost’ is front her, board her, woo her, assail her. SIR ANDREW By my troth I would not undertake her in this company. Is that the meaning of ‘accost’?” (54-57).

The comedy does not abate even at the point when Maria attempts to leave, perhaps exasperated by Sir Andrew’s display of stupidity, because Sir Toby encourages Andrew to stop her by brandishing his sword and Maria retorts with a powerful display of wit that exposes Andrew to even further ridicule. If, as Elam suggests, Maria physically prevents him from sheathing his sword, which could be construed as a phallic symbol on the stage (64n), then she may be pointing inadvertently to his sexual impotence.

When Maria exits, the drinking partners share a dialogue that serves to expose more of the “flaxen” wooer’s laughable traits, and here, perhaps, with explicit parodic
overtones. Andrew’s exaggerated self-pity, his repeated pretensions to gentility, and his palpable lack of wit are comic inadequacies which Sir Toby knocks through repartee and innuendo. For a sixteenth-century audience, the character’s portrait, and especially his alleged wealth (three thousand ducats a year [1.3.20]), ability to play a string instrument (“he plays o’th’ viol-de-gamboys” [1.3.23]), fluency in foreign languages (see 1.3.24), and interest in fencing and bear-baiting (1.3.91) may have been allusions to the gallant, a stock character whom Shakespeare exposed to ridicule in the opening of _The Merry Wives of Windsor_.

Sir Toby, it is now discovered, has been pulling the foolish knight by the nose for quite some time with promises of a match with Olivia, while the knight, who is not an Illyrian, wishes to return home (101). Sir Toby implores Andrew to persevere in his pursuit of Olivia using flattery, and in typical comedic fashion, Sir Toby requires very little effort to convince Andrew to stay. Sir Andrew goes on to engage with Sir Toby in lively dancing on the stage until the very end of the scene. Referring to the cultural significance of this type of behaviour on the early modern stage, Elam writes:

_Twelfth Night_ owes a great deal to this Saturnalian tradition, most appropriately in the scenes of revelry echoing the feasting and especially the communal drinking (traditionally form wassail bowl) associated with the 6th of January celebrations. (19)

The scene’s animated action undoubtedly contains allusions to the customary revelling and dancing on Twelfth Night, a period of licensed misrule. But what may have struck an
early modern audience in advance of the allusion to the Christian festival is the rapidity with which the character is shown to forget his grievances. The knight’s languid complaints of dejection, self-pity, and low self-esteem are instantly and whimsically pushed aside, after he agrees to stay for a month longer and woo Olivia in spite of not having been given access to her company. Within the span of a single line audiences are invited to witness the character’s instant change of mood from melancholy to sudden jollity, where he becomes fully committed to dancing and merry-making: “I’ll stay a month longer. I am a fellow o’th’ strangest mind i’ th’ world. I delight in masques and revels sometimes altogether” (108-110). Sir Andrew, like Orsino in the first strand of the opening and Viola in the second, is shown to be volatile. The abrupt change of mind constitutes yet a further confirmation that comedy refuses to dwell on dignified emotions. The characters’ penchant for fun and tomfoolery in the closing moments of the scene is an invitation for audiences to be entertained in the most farcical of ways. The action concludes on a crescendo of physical comedy, where the characters dance their way offstage with great excitement. This action best represents the indomitable spirit of comedy, which heightens anticipation and excitement for what is yet to come.

*Twelfth Night*, part of Shakespeare’s farewell to romantic comedy, contains a fast-paced, amusing, and animated opening. Its construction, as reflected in the Folio of 1623, has not always been adhered to in productions ranging from the Restoration to the present day. Sonia Massai has summarized Laurie E. Osborne’s observation about the long legacy of reorganizing the opening of *Twelfth Night*, with an emphasis on the nineteenth century:
The second type of alteration affecting the performance editions, the pervasive rearrangement of the Folio Twelfth Night’s scenic order, significantly reworks the comedy’s structure. Nine performance editions between 1808 and 1900, including individual as well as collective editions, open Twelfth Night with Viola’s entrance and thus substantially change the play’s initial emphasis. (120)

The changes described here may have been provoked by material considerations (i.e., the physical demands of the proscenium theatre, which included heavy and elaborate sets). Referring to this point, Massai explains: “it was more theatrically convenient to get the seashore scene out of the way and consolidate the interior scenes in Orsino’s and Olivia’s houses” (120).

Of course, Shakespeare and his actors were not bound by the material constraints of a proscenium theatre, and more importantly, perhaps, the Folio does not reflect the type of non-authoritative reordering later editors of the play would undertake. In fact, because the Folio’s is the only version of the opening that exists from a time shortly after Shakespeare’s death, we have no way of assessing the extent to which the construction of the opening may have changed, if at all, in the course of the comedy’s early stage history.

Nevertheless, among the earliest recorded performances of the comedy is a performance at the Middle Temple in 1602, which John Manningham witnessed. Scholars continue to debate the details of Manningham’s testimony, often speculating broadly about the circumstances of Twelfth Night’s first performance on the Elizabethan stage. Those who believe that Manningham witnessed the debut of Twelfth Night have
been fascinated by the implications that Shakespeare wrote a play for an audience comprising members of the social elite seated in a private hall. I refer to this debate not to offer new insight but to provide a closing observation that seems relevant to the discussion of the opening in this chapter: the performance of 1602 is particularly interesting in context because the play was likely presented after the spectators would have eaten and drunk generously, and so an atmosphere conducive to the festive comedy would not have taken long to establish.

Notes

1Keir Elam has observed that: “Sir Toby having milked Sir Andrew dry can now reveal all his contempt for him” (5.1.202-3 n).

2In 1.5.162-304, for example, Olivia unexpectedly falls for Cesario (Viola in disguise), and further developments occur in 2.2 and 2.4, where Orsino’s attraction for Viola is intimated for the first time.

3This deception is developed further at 2.3, when the steward bursts into the company assembled downstairs and delivers a stern reprimand to them. This event supplies them with the motive to “gull” Malvolio. The gulling of Sir Andrew is developed in 1.5, when Sir Toby detains Cesario at the gate (100), fearing that he brings a rival suit, which could endanger Andrew’s chances with Olivia, and leads to Sir Toby instigating the duel between Cesario and Andrew. This material is taken up again in 3.1. 82-91, when Sir Andrew witnesses the impact his rival has on Olivia, and in 3.2.1- 62, where Fabian and Sir Toby convince Andrew to challenge Cesario to a duel. By 3.4, then, the three lines of action introduced by the strands of the opening overlap and give rise to the complex network of incidents, with the intermingling of characters, which lies at the core of the play.

4As mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, Jean MacIntyre indicates that costumes on the early modern stage reflected the wearers’ social status among other attributes (13).

5Elam indicates that a “changeable taffeta” functions in a similar way in Lyly’s Eupheus: “[It] is associated with mood changes under the influence of love: ‘you have given unto me a true loves knotte wrought of chaungeable silke’ Lyly’s, Euphues, fol. 24” (74n).
This implicit stage direction may have been directed at a performer/musician who could have entered, along with Curio and the other attendants, playing a musical instrument (though there is nothing to suggest that music could not have been played by a musician off stage).

Elam claims that this pun suggests Orsino’s narcissism (16-17n).

Elam indicates that Valentine, the name of the patron saint of lovers, became common in romantic comedy of the sixteenth century (158).

Valentine must use an entry point different from the one representing Orsino’s palace. If the servant wore blue livery on the platform stage (MacIntyre145), then the actor’s costume instantly signalled the character’s social identity.

The comic atmosphere in which the action of Twelfth Night is cast is apparent as Valentine describes Orsino’s object of love, Olivia, as a character who also indulges emotions to the point of excess. She has vowed to mourn the death of her brother for seven years, a period of time that is obviously exaggerated.

This aspect of character has been discussed in the case study of Romeo and Juliet, when Romeo poetises about unrequited love for Rosaline during his first exchange with Benvolio (1.1.156-233).

Alexandra F. Johnston has studied the legacy of medieval ceremonies of misrule in Western European drama.

Dessen makes a point with regard to The Tempest that is relevant to Twelfth Night, too: in these examples, “the spectator has been shown not the action itself (the shipwreck) but the results or effects of that action. (Figures ’as shipwrecked’)” (16).

Viola’s costume, more specifically, may also supply an early clue about her aristocratic lineage, which the dialogue corroborates at 2.2 when the Captain refers to her as “lady,” and much later in the action when Orsino, who has been confounded into taking Viola’s hand in marriage, draws attention to her lineage again: “So far beneath your soft and tender breeding- /And, since you called me master for so long, / Here is my hand” (5.1.317-20).

This type of verisimilar effect, though not stated in the play-text explicitly, is plausible because in the Folio text of The Tempest, the stage-direction, “Enter Mariners, wet” 1.1.43, spells out visual effects in a text addressed to actors.

The later and collaborative Pericles, Prince of Tyre also presents a tempest that has prized a family apart.

The same is true of The Comedy of Errors, where immediately after Egeon’s lengthy narrative, the well-being of both brothers Antipholus is established, when they are presented in succession in 1.2, and the gravity of the opening situation is diffused.

While the dialogue from lines 19 to 38 supplies additional background information about the situation involving Orsino and Olivia, it also presents another example of a character whose attitude to loss is less than credible. This trait is discernible in many of the comedy’s characters, and never more clearly than in Olivia, who is too willing to abandon her grief for her brother when she removes her veil of mourning and flirts with Viola disguised as Cesario (1.5.224-28).

The first and second strands are linked only tenuously by the Captain’s mention of Orsino’s infatuation with Olivia, and Viola’s intention to conceal her identity and enter into Orsino’s service. This effect results because Orsino and Olivia are mentioned in conversation (“diegesis,” not “praxis,” to borrow Aristotle’s terms). Consequently, the action in 1.2 provides a backdrop to Viola’s personal predicament.

Stephen Orgel suggests that Viola’s social predicament has implications even for her sexual identity. Presenting a sociological argument in place of a theatrical one, Orgel argues that Viola, recently orphaned, attempts to perform a symbolic act of sexual castration by assuming the identity of a eunuch:

That single moment when Viola conceives herself as a eunuch has received very little editorial attention. The word “eunuch” is always glossed as if it were simply a term for a male treble voice, with no underlying history of surgical procedures. This, however, is an editorial fantasy; there is no such usage recorded in English. As with the later term “castrato” eunuch only meant “singer,” if the singer was a eunuch. We ought, therefore, to confront the implication of Viola conceiving herself as not simply a youth in disguise, but as surgically neutered in addition. She seems to be proposing a sexlessness that is an aspect of her mourning, that will effectively remove her, as Olivia has removed herself, from the world of love and wooing. (54)
In *Identity in Shakespearean Drama*, James P. Driscoll makes the point that in comedy “[Shakespeare] usually follows a general pattern in which identity is temporarily lost through disruption of contact and the emotional bonds uniting families, lovers and friends” (90). Later, alluding to Northrop Frye’s theory of social rejuvenation at the end of comedy, he claims: “Restoration of social order and identity depends on family reunion…. Once Viola publicly establishes the family ties that determine her social position, she can discard masculine disguise to assume her feminine real identity. Having defined and confirmed their lineage, Viola and Sebastian can join with Orsino and Olivia to extend their family into another generation” (91).

Bearing this point in mind, it is particularly interesting that in the Spanish Golden Age theatre, female characters who have lost their identities as a result of a relative dying or the loss of honour, are compelled to disguise themselves as young men (McKendrick 1974).

As Lloyd Davis indicates, disguise, in the most basic sense, conceals the speaker’s identity resulting in the deception of other characters. He adds: “The traces of premeditation in these uses imply that disguise is *motivated* guise, the latter’s meanings in this period including usual manner, behaviour, attire, and external appearance” (7). Disguise is an extremely versatile device, accommodating a plethora of situations and rich potential for comic confusion. Referring to the *Comedy of Errors*, for example, Dorsch indicates that for disguise to be effective, the characters, as opposed to the audience, must see the male twins as being identical, and therefore, cannot distinguish between them: “Only then can we fully experience the mismatch between what each character in turn sees and what we know to be true” (20). Dorsch is referring here to an example of what Bertrand Evans has called the disparity of awareness between audience and character which is generated by this stage device.

The dialogue in 1.4, for instance, quickly indicates that at least three days have passed since the scene on the Illyrian seascape, and it will gradually absorb the trope of disguise and romantic love by suggesting a romantic attraction between Orsino and Cesario. The impact Viola, disguised as Cesario, has had on Orsino in only three days is apparent in the following lines of dialogue which suggest intimacy: “Thou knowest no less but all: I have unclasped / To thee the book even of my secret soul” (1.4.13-15). Orsino offers his page-boy a lesson in the art of wooing, all the while alluding to the page-boy’s feminine semblance: “Diana’s lip / Is not more smooth and rubious. Thy small pipe / Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman’s part” (1.4.32-34). Orsino’s remarks contain subtle allusions to Viola’s beauty, which is reflected through her disguise, and suggest, perhaps, that Orsino is drawn to her on a physical level even though he is not necessarily conscious of the attraction. Conversely, Orsino’s appeal for Viola might register on the stage at this point through the actor’s facial expressions and gestures, which the character must conceal from Orsino but not necessarily from the audience. The play-text contains evidence that seems to reinforce a point Jean E. Howard makes about disguise as a theatrical device on the early modern stage: “While in performance the fact of the boy beneath the woman’s clothes could usually have been ignored by playgoers, it could also at any time have been brought to consciousness by a self-reflective gesture or comment” (175).

Viola discloses her love for Orsino in an aside. Her revelation is surprising, first and foremost to her, because she had never anticipated falling in love with Orsino. For the audience, the incident contains the promise for lively entertainment. It is the first among several examples in the play of comic confusion resulting from the use of disguise. Seen from this angle, the action in 1.4 appears to contain seeds of continuity, because the promise for comic confusion originating in disguise is suspended until the second half of 1.5, when the audience can relish the fuller impact of the comedic stage device.

Though dressed “*in man’s attire*,” Viola enters in 1.4 disguised as a page-boy, not a musician. Scholars have invariably interpreted this circumstance as one of the most surprising and controversial aspects of the play. Some critics have seen it as an oversight by Shakespeare, who allegedly changed his mind in the course of the play’s production history, perhaps because of casting problems (a talented singing actor having to be replaced), but there is no hard evidence to support this theory. This apparent discrepancy leaves question marks in the text, but not necessarily in early modern performance. There is no contradiction here if “eunuch” is used comically to refer to the identity of the emasculated page Viola wishes to assume. On the other hand, the unexpected transition from “eunuch” to “page-boy” may express what is emerging as a central comic motif in the opening, namely the whimsical nature of the characters of *Twelfth Night*. 
Not only does Viola fear that her brother has drowned, but, as we discover later, her father has also recently died, and therefore, she has no guardians when she first appears on the stage (or so she thinks). Several studies have emerged in the last two decades devoted mainly to investigating how “transvestism” on the early modern stage may have shaped social and cultural constructions of gender and sexuality in sixteenth-century England. In addition to Orgel, see Jean E. Howard, Marjorie Garber, and Michael Shapiro.

In the excerpt below, Shapiro describes the double nature of Viola in disguise. The convention of boy actors suggests the likelihood that at least some of Viola’s traits in early modern performance were represented by the corporeality of the actor’s body:

At times, the actor playing Viola displays Ganymede’s audacity if not Balthazar’s commanding resourcefulness. At other times, the role calls for different aspects of boyishness—delicacy and shyness. The two sides of Cesario’s personality represent Viola’s tendencies towards assertiveness and vulnerability, modulated to suit a young male servant. (143)

As Orsino flirts with Cesario in 1.4, early modern audiences witnessed a male actor’s attraction for a pageboy (Cesario) who is, of course, none other than the female character of Viola, played by a boy. In view of Elizabethan theatre conventions, the intricate parody of gender, in which two young male actors are engaged in a love scene, may interrogate normative notions of sexuality, for the action might throw into focus an underlying sexual tension that arises from the interplay between the actors’ bodies and the genders of their roles.

Elam suggests that Olivia’s house is configured in the comedy into two distinct spaces, a private and a public space. The former is the space into which the comic characters are introduced in 1.3, and the latter is where Cesario meets Olivia for the first time. In this comedy, location seems to be configured into two distinct comic spaces. The former is occupied by Sir Toby, Maria, Sir Andrew, Feste and Malvolio, and constitutes the setting for the gulling action (for example, 1.3 and 2.3). The latter space is generally reserved for the scenes involving the romantic action and for the confusion generated by disguise. It is where Olivia meets Viola, disguised as Cesario, for the first time (for example in the second part of 1.5).

MacIntyre believes that 1.3.11-12 contains evidence that Sir Toby’s costume was visibly tattered on the early modern stage. While the similarities owe part of their being to the physical peculiarities of the actors Lowin and Sincklo, the explicit resemblance of Toby to Falstaff suggests that the Falstaff costume was being used for “clothes good enough to drink in, and …boots, too” (I.iii.12-13). Perhaps the old Falstaff’s costume had grown too shabby even for so disreputable a knight (who was, after all, the companion of a prince) and passed to an even more disreputable knight…(188).

For an extensive discussion of the symbolic uses of make-up in Shakespearean plays, mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, see Annette Drew-Bear.

Sir Toby’s sarcasm is reflected in the fact that Sir Andrew cannot speak a word of French: “SIR ANDREW:… I’ll ride home tomorrow, Sir Toby. SIR TOBY: Pourquoi, my dear knight? SIR ANDREW: What is pourquoi?” (1.3.86-89).

The reference may also contain an allusion to the character’s effeminacy (1.3.98n), which points to another aspect of the character’s comic inadequacy as a suitor.

The situation presented here, in which a crafty character exploits a dolt for money with promises of a match, may anticipate the opening of Othello (1604), where Iago manipulates Roderigo with promises of Desdemona’s love in exchange for money.

Elam indicates that the text provides opportunities for Sir Toby to expose Andrew’s dancing skills to ridicule (136 SD).

Flippancy, a central component of comic characterisation, may also be represented by the full title of the play, “Twelfth Night Or What You Will.”
In the concluding duelling scene of *Hamlet*, the postponed act of filial revenge, which constitutes the principal action of the tragedy, is accomplished with the deaths of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet. This act of vengeance points back to 1.5.40, when the Ghost informed Hamlet of the murder of his father and called on him to avenge it. There is no other point in act one from which the action of filial revenge unfolds: what follows is consequent on the pivotal meeting between Hamlet and the Ghost on the battlements, and Hamlet’s pursuit of retribution.

However, the opening contains three independent strands of action that are suspended in turn. The first (1.1.1-174) takes place on the battlements and presents mood-setting material pertaining to the nightly visitations of a ghost; the second (1.2.1-159) occurs at court and underlines the recent death of Old Hamlet and Claudius’s succession to the crown of Denmark; a third (1.3.1-135) happens in Polonius’s house and follows from Laertes’s hasty departure from the Danish court. Remarkably, 1.5.40 constitutes the point at which the strands of action, which mark the opening, give rise to a story of filial revenge.

Shakespeare has supplied his tragedy with a secondary action that is inextricably connected to the principal action. The former, the story of Polonius’s household, merges with the latter soon after it begins, because the actions enumerated below form part of the principal action even though the characters it presents were formerly part of the secondary action: Hamlet’s love for Ophelia is affected immediately by the filial responsibility he bears for his murdered father. Similarly, Ophelia’s suicide comes as the
result of Hamlet’s apparent rejection of her love and the fact that he kills her father by mistake. When Laertes finally reappears in 5.1, Claudius exploits him in a new act of revenge against Hamlet.

The opening of Hamlet, the latest of the plays studied, suggests that Shakespeare initiated early modern audiences into the tragedy by delaying perpetually the story of filial revenge, until Hamlet exclaims: “O, my prophetic soul!” (1.5.40). Compared with the earlier plays, Hamlet displays the most sophisticated construction of the opening, whereby the first strand of action is postponed twice in order to highlight the build-up to Hamlet’s meeting with the Ghost of his father.

Judging by Thomas Nashe’s preface to Robert Greene’s Menaphon (1589), Shakespeare may have appropriated a story that was known in England for at least a decade, and popularized through various dramatizations. This practice of narrative appropriation was prevalent in the sixteenth century as the case study of Romeo and Juliet attests. However, as opposed to the Romeo and Juliet story, the first translation of the Hamlet story from French into English appeared only in 1608, about seven years after Shakespeare composed his tragedy.

Therefore, Shakespeare may have relied on several sources to compose Hamlet, including an earlier play, the lost Ur-Hamlet. The least controversial source among scholars is Belleforest’s Histoires tragiques, first published in 1570 (Hibbard 7), from which Shakespeare may have borrowed material to construct the opening. However, there is much in the opening to which the source narrative can provide no obvious counterpart. The presence of a richly ambiguous Ghost, an immensely popular character on the Elizabethan stage, the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia, and Laertes’s journey to
Paris are notable examples. If the so-called *Ur-Hamlet* existed, then some of this material likely derives from it, or possibly from other sixteenth-century Hamlet plays: “In 1594, Philip Henslowe recorded a performance of a play called *Hamlet* at Newington Butts” (Thomson and Taylor 44). Shakespeare could have also relied on his source material to play with audience expectations in the opening of his tragedy, as he seems to have done in *Romeo and Juliet*, his earlier romantic tragedy. It is interesting to note that while the ghosts of Elizabethan plays ranging from Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* are quick to voice their grievances, *Hamlet*’s Ghost is eerily silent until 1.5.2. This supernatural character was undoubtedly useful for generating suspense in the opening.

Notwithstanding the uncertain origins of the tragedy’s dramatic material, the opening is organised to supply a lengthy and complex exposition through five scenes. And in so doing, it helped to transform the Hamlet story into a fiercely original Elizabethan tragedy:

> Revenge still provides the basic structure; but the heart of the play is in the intense human relationships it creates and explores, and above all in the hero’s struggle with, and reflections on, the world in which he finds himself.  (Hibbard 32)

Three substantive versions of the tragedy survive in print, Q1 (1603), Q2 (1604-5), and F (1623). The following case study begins by examining the construction of the opening in Q2, as it appears in Arden 3 (ed. Thompson and Taylor). Q2 contains a substantial portion of text which is absent in Q1, while F shows only minor variants when compared
to Q2 (Thompson and Taylor 82). It goes on to demonstrate how the three extant versions of the play display the construction of the opening by looking first at what they have in common and then at the few substantive differences among them.

I

“It harrows me with fear and wonder”

The play-text provides very few details at the outset about the dynamics of the opening on the early modern stage. For a fuller perspective, one must go beyond the first few lines of text, and sometimes even farther.¹ The dialogue suggests that the play opens in the middle of an action, in medias res.² It involves two characters on the battlements at night as the initial stage direction denotes: “Enter Barnardo and Francisco, two sentinels.” “Sentinels,” which specifies their occupation, implies that both characters wear military garb and carry weapons as they enter.

Barnardo’s “Who’s there?” (1) are the first words of the text, but there is stage action which occurs prior to any speech in this play. Despite the order of entrances supplied by the initial stage direction in Q2, Barnardo’s words imply that there is another character on the stage: Francisco appears to enter first, for he is on duty on the battlements. Moreover, early modern audiences seeing Francisco in military garb pace across the stage would have gathered that he is a guard on duty.
From a reading of the entire scene, it becomes clear that the two sentinels have seen the Ghost twice before the play opens, and, therefore, they are likely to appear unsettled from the moment they enter. Francisco’s “sick at heart” supplies the textual direction for the mood of the characters at the opening: the character must show unease, even fear, while he patrols. Francisco’s uneasiness is also confirmed textually by his nervous response to the voice he hears in the darkness, which comes in the form of a challenge: “Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself” (2).

The characters’ initial alarm subsides once they recognize each other at line 4, but unease replaces alarm. Lines 4 to 6 reflect the respite Barnardo’s presence affords Francisco after what must have been a tense watch. Though the cause of tension is not yet specified, Francisco’s relief is conveyed through his appreciation of Barnardo’s punctuality: “You come most carefully upon your hour…. For this relief much thanks” (4-6). Barnardo is also nervous about the nightly visitations and asks whether the Ghost has already appeared to Francisco. He implores Barnardo to hasten the arrival of his partners Horatio and Marcellus to the watch, because he fears being left alone: the Ghost, which had appeared two nights running a little after midnight, may appear before they arrive.

Horatio and Marcellus enter in the middle of Barnardo’s speech, as the explicit stage direction indicates: “Enter HORATIO and MARCELLUS”; and their entrance startles the sentinels. Francisco believes that he hears familiar voices, and reacts cautiously to what he can make out in the darkness: “I think I hear them. Stand ho, who’s there?” (1.1.12). His uncertainty echos Barnardo’s in the first line of the play and, as before, adds to the atmosphere of tension and fear created by the fact that it is night-time.
After Francisco exits, the characters on stage finally recognize one another, and they speak about the Ghost’s nightly visitation. Horatio’s disbelief in the appearance of the Ghost contrasts with the sentries’ fear of the supernatural, the contrast helping to construct the character of Horatio as the sceptical scholar.4

The Ghost’s theatrical impact constitutes another important component of the opening; that is, Shakespeare introduces the subject of the Ghost first as an indeterminate entity, “this thing,” then as an “apparition” and as “it,” as underlined in the speech below. This indeterminacy signals the fact that both interlocutors know what they are referring to without having to mention it explicitly. It is also a way of arousing audience curiosity about the subject of their conversation:

HORATIO

What, has this thing appeared again tonight?

BARNARDO

I have seen nothing.

MARCELLUS

Horatio says ’tis but our fantasy…

That, if again this apparition come,

He may approve our eyes and speak to it.

HORATIO

Tush, tush, ’twill not appear. (20-29)

The lines spoken subsequently by Barnardo, designed to counter Horatio’s scepticism,
contain another indeterminate reference to the Ghost:

Sit down awhile,
And let us once again assail your ears
That are so fortified against our story

*What* we have two nights seen. (29-32, my emphasis)

These important textual indicators mark the build-up in tension on the stage, which reaches a climax with the entrance of the Ghost. As I stated earlier, the progression from indeterminacy to a concrete reference measures a spectator’s growing expectation.

The Ghost enters once the others have sat down, as the excerpt above suggests, while Barnardo begins to recount the story in ominous terms, perhaps drawing the audience’s eye away from where the Ghost will enter by pointing to “yon same star” (Hibbard 36n). The “beating bell” strikes one o’clock, according to Barnardo’s last line of dialogue, and Marcellus, noticing the Ghost first, cuts off Barnardo in mid-sentence by bringing it verbally to Barnardo’s and Horatio’s attention. The Ghost’s ominous entrance would certainly have deepened the atmosphere of suspense in the early modern theatre, and especially when the characters, being caught off guard, are shown to react to it by rising to their feet.

However, “*Enter GHOST*” and the lines of dialogue following this stage direction do not specify the character’s point of entry on the platform stage, a difficulty that has generated disagreement among scholars about the play’s original staging at the Globe.5 This aspect of staging deserves careful consideration because an entrance from one of the
doors in the tiring-house, from which the Ghost crosses the stage, could produce an effect
different from that of entrance from a discovery area or from a trapdoor. The trapdoor is a
particularly attractive possibility, considering that the Ghost comes from an unworldly
dimension, purgatory, as 1.5.3 indicates: “My hour is almost come /When I to sulphurous
and tormenting flames /Must render up myself.”

Less speculative is the effect the Ghost’s appearance and behaviour have on the
characters. The earliest clue in the play-text about the allusive power of costume can be
found at line 1.1.59, which provides details about the Ghost’s military apparel in the form
of armour. It is only at line 1.2.203 that the play-text specifies that the Ghost carries a
“truncheon,” a military staff. This information is supplied when Horatio informs Hamlet
that he saw the Ghost of his late father, part of the fullest description of the Ghost to be
found in the play-text:

[A] figure like your father

Armed at point, exactly cap-à-pie,

Appears before them and with solemn march

Goes slow and stately by them; thrice he walked

By their oppressed and fear-surprised eyes

Within his truncheon’s length whilst they, distilled

Almost to jelly with the act of fear,

Stand dumb and speak not to him. (198-205)

The Ghost has had a decidedly strong effect on Horatio, because he was initially
dumbstruck for the duration of several lines (1.1.38-41). When Horatio finally spoke, all he could do was respond to the fear that gripped him: “It harrows me with fear and wonder” (43).

The Ghost marches solemnly, or “stiffly” (1.1.49n), across the stage, and is eerily silent. It appears to stay its course unhindered by the motions of the other characters on the stage, and particularly by Horatio’s charge to speak: “What art thou that usurp’st this time of night?” (45). The fact that the Ghost walks away is reflected both in Marcellus’s “It is offended” (48) and more specifically in Barnardo’s “See, it stalks away” (49). The Ghost exits in spite of Horatio’s repeated “Stay, speak, speak, I charge thee speak” (50), an order suggesting Horatio’s growing lack of composure. Even after the Ghost leaves the stage, the characters remain under the spell of the supernatural visitation. This is particularly the case with Horatio, who has to navigate the course from scepticism to acknowledgement.

In between the Ghost’s appearances, while its presence still hovers over the stage, Horatio renders a lengthy and at times foreboding political speech about the imminent military threat Norway poses to Denmark. The speech alludes to the possible link between the Ghost’s visitation and Denmark’s political instability, and therefore, from a purely practical standpoint, it constitutes the opportunity to deepen suspense for the second visitation of the Ghost. The military buildup occupying the state is a symptom of the broader cosmic unrest represented by the Ghost’s visitation, which is a symbol of an act of transgression: “A universe sick with the killing of a ruler” (Rosenberg 31). This association is intimated further still in Horatio’s depiction of Rome the night before Julius Caesar fell, which is reminiscent of Calpurnia’s depiction of Rome in Julius
Caesar 2.2. The speech presents a parallel to a famous classical example of treason committed for political ambition. Its heightened register of language, its many ominous references to supernatural events, and the links it draws between omens of disaster in Caesar’s Rome and anxious Denmark all conjure a picture of cosmic disorder.

The second visitation of the Ghost is a careful echo of the earlier visitation (Booth 144). While the play-text contains no evidence that the Ghost enters from a different location or that its appearance and behaviour change, it does suggest that the Ghost’s impact on Horatio is strikingly different from its effect on the other characters because, once he overcomes his fear, Horatio prepares to confront the Ghost: “I’ll cross it though it blast me” (1.1.126). The Ghost, however, remains silent, and presumably gestures as the ambiguous Q2 stage direction implies: “It spreads his arms.” The Ghost might spread its arms sideways in a motion symbolic of a cross (and by extension of the crucifixion of Christ), alluding, perhaps, to Old Hamlet’s “sacrificial” killing as an offence against heaven. At lines 127-38 Horatio repeatedly orders the figure to reply to his questions. However, when “The cock crows,” signalling the break of dawn, the figure proceeds towards an exit in a stately manner, unhindered by Horatio’s subsequent order to Marcellus to impede the Ghost’s movements by using his weapon, and, presumably, at the point where the Ghost comes closest to Marcellus on his way out. The short lines spoken by each character in turn—“BARNARDO: ’Tis here, HORATIO ’Tis here, MARCELLUS ’Tis gone” (1.1.140-41)—generate a sense of the characters’ confusion as they fail to stop the Ghost; and they also plot the Ghost’s movements on the battlements at night, especially when we remember that “darkness” on the Elizabethan stage was effectively conjured by dialogue and gestures.
The edition I am following (Thomson and Taylor) supplies a stage direction at 1.1.40 to indicate that the Ghost exits. Q2 has no such stage direction. It is difficult to conceive what the Ghost’s movements were on the Elizabethan stage, and there are limited ways of making a character disappear on a stage of this type. However, the identical exclamations uttered by Barnardo and Horatio, “’Tis here / ’Tis here” (l.140), suggest that they think they see the Ghost almost simultaneously. The absence of a stage direction in Q2 has prompted a great deal of discussion, which has led to some rather colourful suggestions. In the Arden 2 edition we find the following note at 1.1.146:

MacManaway supposes the Ghost disappears through one trap and rises again through another (PBSA, XLIII, 315); W. J. Lawrence (Pre-Restoration Stage Studies, pp. 107-8), following Calvert (An Actors Hamlet), [suggests] that the illusion of the Ghost’s being in two places was effected by having two ghosts (a practice still sometimes followed).

It is also interesting to remark from the note to 140-41 in Arden 3 (ed. Thompson and Taylor) that in nineteenth- and twentieth-century productions, when more mechanically sophisticated effects were at hand, the number of ghosts on stage multiplied: “Many nineteenth and twentieth century productions have made use of sound effects or even multiple ghosts to enhance the impression that the Ghost is ubiquitous.” In Q2, where there is no direction, the problem is resolved if the Ghost exits at 1.1.40. Both Barnardo and Horatio are chasing an illusion that has evaded them, i.e., the Ghost has exited already.
The characters’ bewilderment and fear at the supernatural visitation are evident even after the Ghost exits, when Marcellus voices his regret at having confronted the Ghost with force, and Horatio admits to a change of attitude towards the apparition, no longer sceptical but reverent. That “The time is out of joint” (1.5.186) must have been expressed forcefully on the early modern stage because Marcellus evokes a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil that resonated with apocalyptic stories and the prophetic theme of Tribulation in the New Testament. Marcellus’s reverential language, associated with divine grace (Jenkins 169n), might also express his paralyzing fear of evil:

And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch has power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is that time. (160-64)

Horatio adopts artificial literary language in order to project, once again, the semblance of control and emotional detachment. The scholar’s anthropomorphic depiction of dawn is richly suggestive of the Ghost’s recent appearance on the stage: “But look, the morn in russet mantle clad/Walks over the dew of yon high eastward hill” (165-66). It suggests, perhaps, that in spite of Horatio’s efforts to conceal his fears, the supernatural figure has made an inedible mark on his psyche.

The focus of the dialogue finally falls on young Hamlet, who is mentioned in name for the first time. By this point in the action, original audiences, prompted by the
play’s title (in Q2 it appears as “The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”), were likely eager to see the relevance of the events to a character who has not yet made his appearance. However, with the characters’ resolution to communicate the news of the strange visitations to Hamlet, the first strand of action is suspended.

First and foremost, the organization of the dramatic material involving a mysterious supernatural visitation reveals the practical importance of engaging the audience’s attention within moments of the opening and building suspense gradually in order to create the threatening mood proper to this tragedy.

**Royal Tensions at Court**

The action shifts to a new location, the palace, which may have been represented by a dais on which a throne rested. A new set of characters enters in royal procession and heralded by a fanfare of trumpets, as the initial stage direction indicates. This ceremonious entrance may have been particularly effective in the early modern context if it culminated in tableaux, where the King and Queen were placed centre stage, on the dais, and the rest of the characters were positioned at either side, with Hamlet closest to the audience. This stage configuration, inferred from the staging information contained in the play-text, would give the royal couple a command over those present on the stage as well as over the audience.
In the course of the action, the audience’s attention would doubtless be drawn to the animosity between Hamlet and Claudius, clear in Hamlet’s sarcastic rejoinders to Claudius’s questions. But the audience’s eye might be drawn to Hamlet long before Claudius addresses him for two reasons: he is likely to be positioned front stage in view of the aside he utters at 1.2.56-57, which would not be heard from another position; and the black costume of mourning\textsuperscript{11} he is wearing, as line 75 indicates, supplies a strong contrast with the extravagant and colourful costumes of a court that no longer observes mourning. Furthermore, in performances of the play, as Booth has suggested (150), Richard Burbage played the role of Hamlet, and the presence on the stage of the most famous actor in London, not uttering a word during some sixty-four lines of text, would have struck the audience and awakened their interest.

Claudius delivers a forceful speech, in a ceremonial tone, which attests to the recent change of regime in Denmark. His command of the stage is emphasized by his rhetoric, which addresses the crowd and particular individuals, and is punctuated by short phrases, like “for all our thanks” and “so much for him” (Booth 147), which mark the transitions from subject to subject. At these junctures, Claudius’s court in the early modern context might applaud obsequiously, as shown in the BBC production of *Hamlet* (1980). The staging of the transference of power in a period of potential social instability is the way Shakespeare has chosen to demonstrate how Claudius consolidates his rule by dominating the court and silencing any opposition.

Claudius begins his address to the court by speaking about the death of Old Hamlet and thanking his counsellors for approving the marriage to Gertrude and his accession to the throne (14-16n).\textsuperscript{12} And through frequent antithesis both matters are deliberately
counterpoised: “With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage” (12). Alliteration and word repetition in the speech make for emphasis. Coupled with regular rhythm, they supply an impression of Claudius’s confidence. By indicating that his counsellors have approved of the marriage and his accession to the throne, and by expressing gratitude for their loyalty, Claudius can make the assembled court receptive to his speech: “For all, our thanks” (16). These manoeuvres point to the King’s proficiency in the art of persuasion, and the effects of an introduction to a public speech more specifically.

To get a fuller sense of Claudius’s words in context, we should follow Helbo’s advice and examine the play-text for the conditions that govern the character’s speech, and with the information gathered reconstruct a consistent line of characterisation. Claudius shows only his public face in the presence of others, and, as I have stated above, the rhetorical tone of his speech to the court supports this view. Despite the play-text containing only instruction for the construction of character, the early modern actor playing Claudius would have created the role through word, voice, gesture, and expression (Joseph 24), and the character’s manifestation of gratitude to the counsellors may be construed, in part, as a display of flattery, calculated to win them to his side.

The address quickly turns to young Fortinbras and the Norwegian military threat, which Horatio first mentioned on the battlements in 1.1. This part of the speech suggests that Claudius, as a new ruler, seeks to display his commitment to confront Fortinbras’s army without delay and, by speaking at length about the threat which Norway poses to Denmark, he may hope to intimidate his subjects. But this is not all: the speech paints a picture of a young Norwegian prince whose father has been defeated and killed, and whose uncle, now on the throne, pays no attention to his desire to launch an attack on
Denmark. Narrated now by Claudius, it is the uncle/nephew relationship which is highlighted, revealing an uncle who ignores his nephew’s plan to avenge his dead father. This detail supplies essential background to the way the principal action will unfold:

Now for ourselves, and for this time of meeting,
Thus much the business is: we have here writ
To Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras—
Who impotent and bedrid scarcely hears
Of this his nephew’s purpose— to suppress
His father’s gait herein, in that the levies,
The lists and full proportion are all made
Out of his subject. (1.2.26-33)

Having dispatched the envoys to Norway, Claudius picks out Laertes from the court and addresses his request to leave for France. Claudius has to prompt Laertes four times (41-49) to speak, an action which suggests that the young courtier is reticent to do so. Laertes’s conduct may derive from his uncertainty about how to behave in front of the new King, and perhaps from distrust towards him.

It is particularly noteworthy that Claudius turns to Hamlet last in his address. What we might infer from this action is that Claudius is mustering courage in order to address Hamlet. After all, by retrieving information supplied in his and Gertrude’s speeches later in the scene, it is clear that Hamlet has been showing signs of disapproval towards them for over a month, and they might be expected to regard him with suspicion.
By adopting a conciliatory tone towards Hamlet, as well as by his public display of affection, he wishes to show the court that he bears Hamlet no grudge: “my cousin Hamlet, and my son—” (64).

Much has been written about whether Hamlet’s opening lines are designed to be rendered privately (in the form of an aside) or publicly so that Claudius can hear them: “A little more than kin, and less than kind” and “Not so much, my lord, I am too much in the ‘son’” (65 and 67). While interpretations vary, most editors do print them as an aside. The edition I am following does not, suggesting, as Thompson and Taylor do at note 65, that Hamlet’s words are a deliberate piece of effrontery directed at the King.13

In order to appreciate the significance of Hamlet’s words in context, we must go to the end of the scene to recover the conditions that govern the character’s speech, as we did with Claudius. As I have already suggested, Hamlet’s behaviour reveals his grief as well as his resentment towards the marriage between his mother and his uncle, a marriage he finds immoral and incongruous because of religious sanctions, and because he considers his uncle no match for his dead father. In theatrical terms, these later thoughts expressed in soliloquy supply Hamlet’s sub-text during the scene we are considering, sub-text original audiences would have likely had from the Hamlet story. By drawing on information gleaned from the play-text, we can reconstruct what lies behind the mask Hamlet adopts in the court scene. Hamlet’s defiant attitude could have been emphasized in the early modern context by placing the character on the edge of the stage, with his back to Claudius, and addressing the audience directly prior to his first aside.

Yet before the court, though he alludes to his “suits of woe,” Hamlet often channels his anger and frustration into sarcasm. This is manifest, for example, when
Hamlet turns his mother’s insensitive words into a pointed accusation about marrying Claudius so quickly after her husband’s death: “Ay, madam, it is common” (73, my emphasis). “[It is common” refers specifically to Hamlet’s perception of Gertrude’s licentiousness. Hamlet’s provocation recurs when he defiantly points out to her that appearances are often misleading, and that his black costume is merely the external trapping of woe (86). The tension on the stage is high, considering that the exchange is happening in public in front of other members of the court, as the initial stage direction indicates. The tension among the characters on stage might be particularly high when Claudius remarks that Hamlet’s mourning duties to his father are disingenuous, irreverent, and unmanly (92-95), and Hamlet reacts by keeping perfectly silent.

The King goes on to address Hamlet’s wish to return to Wittenberg. This request is reminiscent of Laertes’s measured request to return to France. Both petitions suggest that the future promise of Denmark, i.e., its youth, shares a distrust of the King and his new regime because individually they are prepared to forsake the country at a time of political instability, when Fortinbras of Norway still poses a military threat. The tension onstage is perhaps nowhere more apparent than when Hamlet decides, reluctantly, to stay in Denmark, and Claudius responds obsequiously: “Why, ’tis a loving and a fair reply” (121). The King is undoubtedly pleased because, as long as Hamlet is in Denmark, he can easily keep watch over him.

The true measure of Hamlet’s suffering at having to play a part before the court (a part he struggles to play convincingly because he must hide his true feelings) is revealed only after the royal procession exits.\(^{14}\) and he opens his soliloquy with a death-wish:
O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon ’gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world! (129-34)

The speech comprises a set of antithetical thoughts, punctuated by short exclamations of shock. As opposed to Claudius’s controlled and calculated language, Hamlet’s contains irregular rhythms, which suggest that the character has less control over his thoughts and feelings than his uncle. Frequent repetition of the stressed sound “s,” as in “self-slaughter,” for example, helps to express the character’s built-up frustrations through sibilance. Therefore, the change of register from the public and authoritative rhetoric of the King to the intensely personal register of the Prince is rapid and explicit in the soliloquy.

Hamlet’s outburst of suppressed emotion will confirm not only that he mourns for the loss of his father, but also that he is angered and repulsed by his mother’s hasty remarriage to Claudius. Hamlet’s outrage is expressed when, for example, he supplies an unflattering comparison between Claudius and his father using epic descriptions from classical mythology:

That it should come to thus:
But two months dead— nay not so much, not two—
So excellent a king, that was to this

Hyperion to Satyr, so loving to my mother

That he might not beteem the winds of heaven

Visit her face too roughly. (137-42)

Hamlet also scoffs bitterly at his mother for not being able to control her sexual desires, “Frailty thy name is woman” (146); and for forgetting the memory of her husband after shedding so many tears at his funeral: “…[S]he followed my poor father’s body, /Like Niobe all tears”(148-49). These indignant accusations are punctuated by the phrase “But within a month,” which is an emphatic expression of Hamlet’s disgust, disbelief, and pain.

The soliloquy, then, offers the character emotional release because Hamlet can finally give voice to what he has struggled to conceal from the court from the moment he entered the stage. It provides an opportunity for the character, standing alone, to express his innermost thoughts and feelings. For the actor, on the other hand, the soliloquy supplies information suggesting that the character, seeking privacy, must deliver the speech in proximity to the audience, perhaps from the edge of the stage. For the audience, the resulting atmosphere of intimacy has the potential to create a bond with the character.

The very last line of the soliloquy, “But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (159), puts an abrupt end to the intimate confession and leaves the audience in suspense as to what course of action Hamlet will follow. Clemen argues that “the last line marks the end of Hamlet’s freedom to speak openly since the encounter with those who are already seen approaching will once more demand a withdrawal into reticence” (132).
It also constitutes the point at which the second strand of action is suspended, when an audience is reminded about what has become only too obvious on the stage, namely, how careful Hamlet is to conceal his innermost thoughts, suspicions and feelings from other characters, a task that proves extremely difficult.

Resumption of First Strand

“Season your admiration for a while”

Though the location, the palace, has not changed, the action returns to the subject of the Ghost’s appearance, as Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus inform Hamlet of what they saw on the battlements. Hamlet is so overwhelmed by his thoughts, suspicions, and emotions that the entrance of Horatio and Marcellus goes unheeded: “HORATIO Hail to your lordship. / HAMLET I am glad to see you well- /Horatio, or I do forget myself” (159-60). After an exchange of greetings, Horatio and Marcellus report the Ghost’s nightly visitations to him. Elevating tension, Hamlet exclaims: “My father, methinks I see my father”(1.2.183). Horatio, who is aware of the Ghost’s existence, may interpret the line literally (184) and, therefore, turn his head to look for it. We can also infer from the play-text that the sentinels may follow suit, and if so, Hamlet will appear confused by their behaviour. When Horatio explains that the Ghost of Old Hamlet has appeared to them on the battlements for a third night running, a sudden change comes over Hamlet, as Horatio’s line clearly indicates: “Season your admiration for a while” (192). Hamlet is
surprised by the appearance of the Ghost in the form of his father; but his reaction considered in context might give the audience to understand that Hamlet has been suspicious of wrongdoing on Claudius’s part for a while, and not just in his hasty marriage to Gertrude, but has kept his suspicions to himself. Shock gives way to feelings of fear and premonitions of evil once Horatio and the sentinels exit. In soliloquy, Hamlet shares, for the first time, the suspicion of foul play, and also expresses a fear that he himself fails to understand: “My father’s spirit in arms! All is not well” (257). While Hamlet’s premonitions may suggest that there is something more to the events presented thus far, an audience is kept in suspense, of course, because the Ghost has not shared its secret revelations yet. With Hamlet’s brief soliloquy expressing his suspicion of foul play in his father’s death, the sequence is interrupted once more as the action moves to a different location and focuses on a conversation between Laertes and Ophelia.

Domestic Platitudes: “Beware of Hamlet”

The action follows from Laertes’s expressed wish to leave the Danish court in 1.2. It begins with the entrance of Laertes and Ophelia in mid-conversation. According to Jean MacIntyre’s conclusions, it may be that Laertes’s imminent departure was signalled visually on the platform stage by a travelling costume, a “sea-gown”(186),¹⁵ and also by appropriate physical gestures (an embrace or a clasp of hands), because the opening exchange implies intimacy; but the context of the scene is established earlier by the mention of Laertes’s intended departure in the second strand.
As Hibbard rightly observes: “[1.3] is a scene that is essentially domestic in nature and that moves to a different tempo from that of its predecessors” (33). The initial dialogue, for example, is informal both in style and subject. It also facilitates a gradual transition from the sombre atmosphere of previous scenes to an atmosphere that, at times, is comical. Laertes offers Ophelia his brotherly advice, which contains a lengthy and trite warning about rejecting Hamlet’s advances. Laertes appears to be especially concerned that Hamlet’s elevated position, as a prince, will allow him to use Ophelia for sexual gratification. Ophelia’s response to her brother’s sententious lecture, that he should practise what he preaches, suggests rather comically that it is out of character for Laertes to speak the way he does because his own departure for France may be in pursuit of pleasure:

But, good my brother,

Do not as some ungracious pastors do
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven
While a puffed and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And recks not his own rede. (1.3.45-49)

This exchange is interrupted by the sudden entrance of Polonius, who comes across as a domineering and overprotective father, and especially by Laertes’s lines 52-53, which imply that Polonius has bidden him farewell once before. Taking leave of his son a second time may anticipate the view we get of Polonius later in the play as “a
wretched, rash, intruding fool” (3.4.29). Judging by Polonius’s rather comic tendency to be a nagging father in the scene as a whole, the lines delivered by Laertes upon his father’s hasty entrance may have been expressed with sarcasm on the early modern stage: “A double blessing is a double grace: /Occasion smiles upon a second leave” (52-53). Obviously, the dynamic is also amusing, because Polonius implores Laertes to exit hastily, but then proceeds with long-winded platitudes. The exchange between Polonius and Laertes may be presenting, by the power of suggestion, the central theme of a disordered world that calls for the separation of sons and fathers. It appears to provide a comic parallel to the Hamlet story at the early stages of its development, i.e., before the Ghost shares its revelations, when Hamlet is still mourning the death of his father, not his murder.

As Laertes departs, Polonius happens to overhear private words exchanged between the siblings, and another exchange ensues between Polonius and Ophelia about Hamlet. The common thread between the exchanges involving Ophelia is that brother and father, both in a long-winded style, warn Ophelia against succumbing to Hamlet’s advances. On the page, their words read as though the characters are worried that Hamlet’s elevated position in Denmark will lead him to abuse Ophelia. On the stage, however, the same words may attain broader significance than mere familial anxiety, particularly if we consider the presence of Polonius and Laertes in the court scene. It would seem productive to avoid interpreting Laertes’s and Polonius’s advice to Ophelia exclusively as an act of repression, or a reflection of patriarchal privilege, as, for example, Peter Erickson has done, and to hear the advice as genuine concern. This suggestion makes good sense because the presence of Polonius and Laertes in the court
scene may have indicated to early modern audiences that the characters were aware of Hamlet’s aggressive undertone in his address to Claudius and Gertrude. Approached from this perspective, the stage action may present, for the first time, other characters’ awareness of a change in Hamlet’s behaviour.

But this is not all: for early modern actors playing their roles, the exchanges contain information that suggests how they might accentuate, through word, mime, and gesture, important aspects of characterisation that must be given expression at this stage of the action’s development: Laertes’s effusiveness, Polonius’s tendency to meddle in the affairs of others, and Ophelia’s obedience. For example, Laertes’s effusiveness is marked in the play-text by high-flown hyperbolic speech: “LAERTES The chariest maid is prodigal enough / If she unmask her beauty to the moon” (35-36). For the audience, on the other hand, the strand of action supplies important early impressions of the love affair between Hamlet and Ophelia, and of the attitudes of the strand’s characters towards it.

The third strand is suspended once Ophelia is bullied into promising to respect her father’s wish not to entertain Hamlet’s advances, and the characters exit the stage. This matter is taken up again and developed further once the principal action of the play begins.

**Continuation of the First Strand of Action**

**Hamlets’ Suspicions are Confirmed**

The action on the battlements (coinciding with 1.4 and 1.5) supplies more highly dramatic material in preparation for the pivotal meeting between Hamlet and the Ghost,
when fraternal regicide is disclosed, and Hamlet promises to avenge Old Hamlet’s untimely death. The meeting on the battlements at night takes place as Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus enter from the same door, because they are engaged in conversation, and proceed downstage, where they are likely most visible to an audience. The change of location from Polonius’s house to the battlements is signalled to an audience first by the earlier reference to the location supplied at court: “HAMLET: But where was this? / MARCELLUS: My lord, upon the platform where we watch” (211-12). Denoting cold weather could have required some stage machinery (even though the play-text is silent on the matter) to communicate the charged atmosphere on the battlements; and there are implicit directions as to how the characters should act: perhaps, rubbing themselves against the cold? “HAMLET The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold” (1.4.1). The gestures inferred in the dialogue suggest discomfort. References to the bitter climate and the wild weather in the dialogue provide here, as in the first strand of action, a sinister backdrop for the Ghost’s expected visitation.

The sound of trumpets and two rounds of artillery, which might startle the audience as well as the characters who nervously await the Ghost’s visitation, shifts the subject of conversation from the Ghost to a critique of Claudius’s governance or lack thereof. The exchange begins with Hamlet sharing his bad feelings towards the King, whose recent and abhorrent custom of drinking and dancing riotously into the night betrays the sanctity of the monarchy and contrasts sharply with the way his deceased brother behaved. According to Hibbard, Shakespeare’s scene may have invoked “the popular notion of the Danes, current in England of the latter sixteenth century, as a nation much given to drinking” (5). However, the relationship between the moral imperatives of
God’s representative on earth, the King, and the health of the nation he heads, requires special attention with regard to Hamlet’s remark, because Denmark is often depicted in the play as a physical body polluted by Claudius’s personal corruption. The act of drinking riotously, which reflects Claudius’s lack of responsibility, particularly in times of political instability, extends to and contaminates the state. Hamlet’s reference to the “kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out” (1.4.11) creates a powerful image of military impotency resulting from inebriation, because the instruments of war, the kettledrum and the trumpet, have lost their natural sounds and instead bray out like donkeys. Hamlet also mentions that the ruler’s immoral indulgences have broader ramifications for the country’s reputation beyond its geographical borders. The frequent alliteration of stressed syllables in the play-text also suggests that the actor might deliver the speech in a harsh tone:

This heavy-headed revel east and west
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations:
They clepe us drunkards and with swinish phrase
Soil our addition, and indeed it takes
From our achievements, though performed at height,
The pith and marrow of our attribute. (1.4.17-22)

These remarks about Claudius, which show Hamlet’s disapproval and resentment of his uncle, remind the audience, seconds before the Ghost reveals Claudius’s crime, that Hamlet is highly critical of his uncle’s performance as monarch. Finally, Hamlet’s
remarks need to be borne in mind when constructing the character of Claudius at this juncture. Claudius’s drinking may be a clue to the way he is trying to escape his guilt, which is hinted at in 3.1.50-54 and fully confronted in his “prayer” scene: “O, my offence is rank: it smells to heaven” (3.3.36).

The Ghost enters as in previous visitations, unexpectedly for the characters on the stage as well as for the audience in the theatre. However, since the Ghost has appeared twice before, an audience will probably focus on the immediate impact its presence has on Hamlet, who catches sight of it for the first time and prays to the heavens. The following exclamation clearly conveys the sense of Hamlet’s alarm: “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” (39). The qualities of the verse, the rhythm and accent in particular, help bear out Hamlet’s bewilderment at what he sees. The first few lines (39-44) reflect a remarkably steady metrical structure. Several forms of repetition, alliteration and antithesis most notably, help to suggest through speech that the character is overwhelmed by the Ghost’s presence.21

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,

Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,

Be thy intents wicked or charitable,

Thou com’st in such a questionable shape

That I will speak to thee.

Open vowels and voiced consonants express the character’s distress, and the allusions to the “unworldly” intensify the foreboding atmosphere. As Hamlet addresses the Ghost, it
refuses to respond the first time, and instead signals Hamlet to follow it, as the explicit stage direction indicates: “[Ghost] Beckons.” It will continue to do so repeatedly,perhaps motioning statically from a position close to the door through which it will exit.

The Ghost’s beckoning hand not only generates additional tension and suspense, but also sharpens the audience’s perception of Hamlet’s inability to withstand the magnetism of the Ghost, who resembles his dead father. Horatio and Marcellus try to dissuade Hamlet from following the Ghost by appealing to reason (i.e., by questioning its identity and motives), but they fail, and shortly thereafter, they attempt to obstruct Hamlet’s passage by holding onto him: “MARCELLUS You shall not go, my lord. / HAMLET Hold off your hands” (79-80). Hamlet, however, manages to free himself and proceeds to warn Horatio and Marcellus to leave him alone before following the Ghost off stage. Hamlet’s harsh words in line 85 conceal the act of placing his hand on his sword (perhaps drawing it), for he threatens the characters with death: “By heaven I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me!” (85). The Ghost might wait a few moments and then begin to walk off stage in the customary stately fashion, presumably from the door closest to it, and Hamlet follows slowly at a distance. Noting the slow and gradual exit is important because Horatio’s line, “He waxes desperate with imagination” (87), is theatrically effective if it is uttered while Hamlet physically crosses the stage and exits with his eyes fixed on the Ghost’s beckoning hand.

The characters that are left on stage express dread and quickly follow Hamlet and the Ghost off stage. Marcellus’s “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (90) and Horatio’s subsequent appeal to God, which suggests that he believes that only God’s
intervention can save Hamlet, heighten the mood of tragedy even more, because the men are shown to be in the grip of forces they cannot control.

Hamlet re-enters following the Ghost, stops moving, and finally regains control of himself by challenging the Ghost to speak: “Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak! I’ll go no further” (1). Subsequently, the Ghost turns to face Hamlet, because his brief response “Mark me” (2) implies that he is asking Hamlet to look him in the face, and in view of the ensuing conversation, when the Ghost repeatedly demands Hamlet’s full attention, it is likely that their eyes are fixed on each other. The Ghost’s directive “Mark me” is powerful because the character has not uttered a sound until this point. The information it goes on to supply about the royal murder has never been shared, and the Ghost’s revelation is presented in stages elevating tension. At first, it calls on Hamlet to execute revenge, and Hamlet’s response “What?” (8) reflects lack of comprehension and perhaps shock on the Prince’s part. The Ghost proceeds in foreboding terms to reveal that Old Hamlet was murdered, and thereafter reveals the identity of the culprit: “The serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown” (38-39). Finally, Hamlet’s reaction is “O, my prophetic soul!” (40), alluding to his premonitions of foul play, which may be suggested by the early modern actor from Hamlet’s very first appearance, and constituting the character’s satisfaction at having his worst fears confirmed. For the audience, who has perceived the action cumulatively, this is the point at which the present becomes explicable by the hitherto unrevealed actions that took place before the play began, and where the spectator sees the direction which the action will follow: Hamlet’s path to revenge.\(^{25}\)
The three texts of *Hamlet*, Q1, Q2, and F, all display the tripartite construction of the opening. Having pointed to what the texts have in common, I now turn to examine the few substantive differences among them.²⁶ I shall begin by comparing Q2 and the F text, contained within a luxury edition of Shakespeare’s plays intended primarily for a growing reading public: “To the Reader. /This Figure, that thou here seest put / It was for gentle Shakespeare cut…” (Preface to Folio 1-3).

Horatio’s second line of dialogue in Q2 is given to Marcellus in F: “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?” (1.1.20). Q2 offers the more consistent and effective reading of the character because the line reflects Horatio’s scepticism about the Ghost, and Horatio is shown to express this scholarly attitude until the Ghost appears unexpectedly. Moreover, Horatio’s sceptical tone can be deduced from what other characters say about him, too (see above, 216). Seen from this perspective, F offers fewer possibilities in suggesting the tone of mockery that underlies Horatio’s character in the opening.

A little after Horatio’s speech about the military threat Norway poses to Denmark, Q2 prints four lines spoken by Barnardo which do not appear in F:

I think it be no other but e’en so.
Well may it sort that this portentous figure
Comes armed through our watch so like the King
That was and is the question of these wars. (1.1.107-110)

Although these lines seem to supply important character information about the Ghost’s physical appearance, i.e., its resemblance to the former King on the battlefield, by this point the Ghost has appeared on the stage. Thus the differences do not supply additional staging information that could affect the development of the opening.

Immediately after these lines, Q2 prints a fourteen-line speech by Horatio about Rome when Caesar was murdered. Editors preferring F have often passed over this speech hurriedly, claiming that it is insignificant to the action. Referring to the main purveyors of this view Thompson and Taylor write:

F-favouring editors such as Edwards and Hibbard argue that Shakespeare intended to delete [it], the former on the grounds that this “is not a strong or necessary speech,” the latter arguing that “[it does] not advance the action in any way.” (107-24n)

I have already explained the significance of this speech in context (see above, 219). In part, the speech helps sustain the eerie atmosphere prevalent in the theatre between the Ghost’s appearances on the stage.

Several scholars have also argued, with little solid evidence, that this speech (which does not appear in Q1 and F) was incorporated in Q2 to promote Shakespeare’s recent
play *Julius Caesar*. A prominent example of this dismissive critical attitude is Stephen Booth, who regards the speech as “impertinent digressions, sufficiently so to have been omitted from the Folio” (144). It is surely significant that Horatio delivers the speech, given that the sentries call on his scholastic capacity for impartial observation to help them make sense of the mysterious events that have transpired. Also Horatio’s knowledge of both antiquity and the historical enmity between Denmark and Norway further constructs the character of Horatio as a scholar and lends him credibility.

During the second visitation of the Ghost, Q2 supplies the following information about the Ghost’s gestures on the stage: “It spreads his arms.” Once again, the differences do not necessarily reflect a deliberate revision of the play. Instead, they point to a feature of Q2 that is becoming increasingly apparent: it offers the fullest account of the staging material contained in the opening.

The initial entrance of the royal procession is indicated by an explicit stage direction, which in Q2 includes the music cue “flourish.” Alan Dessen, who has written extensively about the nature of early modern stage directions, has alluded to this type of difference in an article entitled “Weighing the Options in *Hamlet* Q1”: “In printed texts of this period stage business often is not spelled out or, when it is spelled out, varies in detail in multiple-text plays” (69). There is little doubt that in all performances of the play, a fanfare of trumpets routinely announced the entry of the scene’s characters in royal procession. Q2 in this instance supplies more staging information about the opening.

In addition, Ophelia’s presence in the court scene is stipulated only in F, which prints the character’s name in the explicit initial stage directions. The origin of this
difference is undeterminable. It may be a textual variant that represents “a slip by the revising Shakespeare, who having mentioned Polonius and Laertes, goes on to complete the family” (Hibbard 382), or alternatively, a deliberate choice on Shakespeare’s part to mention only the speaking-parts in his direction (this is an important point about Q2, since it shows a concern for staging). That said, there is little to suggest that it could not represent a change in staging, introduced at some point during the play’s production history. Though her appearance is plausible, there is no way of knowing for certain that Ophelia was present on the stage during this scene. What is more, the proceeding dialogue offers no help in the matter because, if Ophelia is present, then she speaks to no one and no one speaks to her. If the difference reflects a deliberate revision of the scene, then the staging, as reflected in F, may have been quite different, because the silent presence of Ophelia can subtly bring the romantic theme, developed in the principal action, into focus. Referring to the staging possibilities of the scene according to F, Rosenberg writes:

The first court scene will be our only chance to see this young woman on stage in company with Hamlet, the man she loves, before their tempestuous meetings and cruel separation two acts later—an opportunity that would be sad to waste. In the theatre, non-verbal signals between them—or the barriers to such signals—have anticipated and illuminated their later misadventures as lovers. She has given him a letter, he has given her one. Naïve spectators have instantly seized on a possible connection between the two to project a story of young love that will be followed intently through the play. (37)
The entrance of the envoys immediately after 1.2.24 is also stipulated only in F by an explicit stage direction. But Q2 may not give unnecessary stage directions when the entrance cue may be understood from the text: “CLAUDIUS: Now for ourselves, and for this time of meeting/ Thus much the business is” (24-25). These lines, which suggest a marked transition in Claudius’s speech from domestic to foreign affairs, could imply (as F attests) that the envoys enter the stage at this point. Thompson and Taylor clearly feel that the evidence in support of this theory is not strong enough. They evade the problem by suggesting that the term “Cum Alijs” (in the original Q2 text) includes the envoys, so that the characters enter with the royal procession: “Flourish enter Claudius, KING of Denmark, Gertrude, the QUEEN, council —as POLONIUS and his son LAERTES [and] Hamlet, with others [Including VOLTEMAND and CORNELIUS].” Yet the entrance of the envoys at 1.2.24 is effective because it punctuates Claudius’s three-part speech more fully on the stage. The envoys’ entrance could visually demarcate the speech’s change of focus from internal affairs (the death of Old Hamlet) to external affairs (the Norwegian threat).

The last noteworthy difference in the court scene can be found in advance of the royal procession about to exit the stage, where Q2 supplies a music cue. In this instance, too, Q2 supplies more information for staging the opening than the other texts.

Before the Ghost enters at 1.4, Hamlet’s speech in Q2 contains twenty additional lines not found in F. These lines (1.4.17-37) include a reference to Denmark’s reputation abroad tarnished by Claudius’s custom of drinking and dancing riotously (“This heavy-headed revel east and west” [17]). The information the reference supplies offers a broader
appreciation of Claudius’ moral depravity. Since Hamlet’s speech constitutes a negative assessment of Claudius, the lines also provide a fuller perspective of Hamlet’s ill feelings towards his uncle (the resentment he had first shown at court in the second strand of action). From a purely practical standpoint, the longer speech in Q2 may reflect a more gradual, and therefore, effective way of building tension for the Ghost’s appearance on the stage.

Finally, Horatio’s warning about the Ghost tempting Hamlet to the edge of the cliff in Q2 is four lines longer than the equivalent in F. The additional lines (1.4.75-78) provide an embellishment of Horatio’s pledge for prudence, and therefore, do not add any additional staging information.

The first striking textual difference between Q1 and Q2 can be found in the opening dialogue between the sentries where, apart from several changes to words, the sentry on guard speaks the first line in Q1, not the approaching sentry, as in Q2:

“Enter Bernardo and Francisco, two sentinels.”

BARNARDO

Who’s there?

FRANCISCO

Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
Based on this observation, it is plausible that the explicit initial stage direction in Q2 mentions the first character to speak, not the first character to be seen. Moreover, Q2 prints five lines that do not appear in Q1:

1. **BARNARDO**
   
   Long live the King.

   **FRANSISCO** Barnardo?

   **BARNARDO** He. (3)

2. **BARNARDO**
   
   'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.

   **FRANCISCO**

   For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold

   And I am sick at heart.

   **BARNARDO**

   Have you had quiet guard?

   **FRANCISCO**

   Not a mouse stirring.

   **BARNARDO**

   Well, goodnight. (5-9)
The difference noteworthy of mention is that the sentries’ fear and discomfort are much less pronounced in Q1, suggesting that the scene’s level of intensity is not as high as in Q2.

In addition, Horatio’s speech about the military threat to the state (1.1.71) is four lines longer in Q2 than the equivalent speech in Q1. Also, only Q2 prints Horatio’s speech about Julius Caesar. As I have pointed out, the additional material printed in Q2 supplies important information for constructing the character of Horatio as a scholar. The difference between the texts impacts the development of the opening because Q2 supplies the fullest and most consistent delineation of Horatio’s characterisation.

During the Ghost’s second visitation, Q1 (similar to F) does not supply information about the Ghost’s gestures on the stage: “It spreads its arms.” This circumstance suggests that both texts supply less staging information for opening than Q2.

Claudius’s public address to the court in Q1 starts at what is line 27 in Q2, excluding references to the death of Old Hamlet and the marriage to Gertrude, which constitute the first part of the speech in Q2 and F. This difference would not seem to affect the development of the opening, because what is absent in Q1 in terms of exposition is provided later when Claudius addresses Hamlet. However, being considerably shorter than the equivalent in Q2, the speech in Q1 provides less opportunity to establish an atmosphere of ceremony that is clearly important for dramatizing the transference of power in the scene (see above, 224); and it also fails to supply many background details that explain Hamlet’s resentment of Claudius and Gertrude.
Later in 1.2, the King’s address to Laertes in Q2 is seven lines longer than the equivalent speech in Q1:

You cannot speak of reason to the Dane
And lose your voice. What would thou beg, Laertes,
That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?
The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.
What wouldst thou have, Laertes? (1.2.44-49)

The speech in Q2 offers more opportunity to represent Claudius’s hiding behind his mask of pretence, because these lines imply flattery of Polonius. Moreover, the speech in Q2 provides the opportunity to represent Laertes’s reticence in addressing the King on the stage (see above, 226).

In addition, only Q1 supplies both explicit and implicit exit cues for Laertes just before Claudius addresses Hamlet: “KING: With all our Heart, Laertes, fare thee well. / LAERTES: I in all love and duty take my leave. Exit” (2.24-25). As reflected in Q2, the silent presence of Laertes during the terse exchange involving Hamlet could explain to an audience why he shows such persistence in warning Ophelia against Hamlet’s advances later in the third strand of action. In addition, Laertes’s exit for France, implied only in Q1, may seem rather strange because the character appears on stage again preparing to depart in 1.3.
The exchange between Claudius and Hamlet is also considerably shorter in Q1, and the Queen has no speaking part. The material in Q1 affords less opportunity to convey Hamlet’s resentment towards Claudius and Gertrude on the stage. The silent presence of Gertrude in Q1 may also point to a scene more fully focused on the tension between Hamlet and Claudius. In addition, in Q1, as opposed to Q2/F, Hamlet responds to Claudius’s address directly (he does not bite his tongue). This minor difference may suggest that the characters interact differently on the stage. Finally, Claudius’s platitudes about accepting death like a man (“’Tis unmanly grief” [1.2.94]) are much shorter in Q1 and suggest that there is less opportunity to convey the King’s hypocrisy in performance.

Hamlet’s first soliloquy in Q2 is nine lines longer than the equivalent in Q1. The additional lines in Q2 describe Hamlet contemplating suicide and rejecting it on religious grounds (1.2.130-32). First and foremost, they reveal more fully the extent of Hamlet’s despair over the events of the court scene (1.2). Moreover, they demonstrate that Hamlet deems suicide a divine prohibition, and thus, they draw out aspects of the character’s Christian conscience, which will be tested repeatedly when Hamlet is set on the path of revenge. Finally, the soliloquy in Q2 is punctuated by repetitions of the phrase “a month,” with variations, which help convey the character’s persistent inability to comprehend the adversity he has met in such a short time: within a month his father has died and his mother has married his uncle. The differences between Q1 and Q2 are noteworthy because the staging material in each could affect the development of the opening.

In 1.3, Laertes’s speech of advice to Ophelia and the dialogue between Polonius and Ophelia after Laertes exits are longer in Q2. Unlike Q1, where Laertes only warns
Ophelia about Hamlet’s sexual appetite and its consequences to her honour, the equivalent in Q2 includes a further argument about the dangers of forging a romantic relationship with a future king whose will is governed not by personal choice, but by the welfare of the state. The additional lines in the exchange between Polonius and Ophelia in Q2 contain repetitions of words such as “tender” and “fashion,” which may supply a fuller perspective of Polonius’s long-windedness; the extended dialogue draws out more clearly the comic undertones of Polonius’s characterisation.

Finally, three potentially significant differences can be located in 1.4 and 1.5: Hamlet’s negative assessment of Claudius on the battlements (1.4); the exchange between Horatio and Hamlet upon the Ghost’s entrance (1.4); and the exchange between the Ghost and Hamlet (1.5) are longer in Q2. The first difference among the three has been discussed at length with reference to F, which presents the identical textual variants, and therefore, requires no further elaboration (see p.33). The second difference requires special attention because Q2 present lines which suggest a more sustained struggle on the part of Horatio and the sentries to restrain Hamlet from following the Ghost. The additional lines allow more opportunity to present the powerful impact the Ghost’s presence has on Hamlet during the scene. The third difference is also significant because Q2 contains an exchange between Hamlet and the Ghost (lines 1.5.3-8) that does not appear in Q1. This exchange, which immediately precedes the Ghost’s revelatory monologue about the murder of Old Hamlet, contains short phrases by Hamlet which suggest fear and bewilderment. They provide a fuller sense of the extent to which Hamlet is captivated by the Ghost’s addresses to him. Thomson and Taylor allude to the exchange because it contains a reference to Catholic purgatory, which is absent in Q1.
Since references to purgatory can be found in other parts of the scene in both texts, this observation seems less important as far as staging is concerned than noting the reference (also absent in Q1) made by the Ghost to the coming of morning (line 3). In context, the reference supplies a sharp sense of the urgency of the situation on stage, which can contribute tension to the scene.

In marked contrast to the opening of Belleforest’s narrative, Hamlet contains an ominous and suspenseful opening. Its complex construction suggests how Shakespeare initiated early modern audiences into the tragedy by delaying the introduction of the principal action until Hamlet exclaims: “O, my prophetic soul!” (1.5.40). In his commentary on Hamlet, Hibbard offer several pertinent remarks about openings of early modern tragedies, and how Shakespeare constructed the opening of Hamlet:

The additions and the alterations Shakespeare makes [to his source], together with his shifting of focus, go far towards solving the most difficult technical problem that revenge tragedy posed for every playwright who sought to write it: that of how to fill in the interval between the commission of the crime that calls for revenge, with which such a play begins, and the carrying out of such revenge, with which it will end. An extremely complicated situation demands a full and detailed exposition. Shakespeare’s provides one, and in doing so copes, at least in part, with the central difficulty by postponing the revelation of the crime to the last scene of his first act, which is entirely expository. Yet despite its length and the sheer mass of information it contains, that first act remains consistently
dramatic, holding the interest of an audience riveted throughout its course. It is a demonstration of the art that conceals art. (33)

From the late seventeenth century onwards stage managers and directors have often sought to transpose the scenes of Shakespeare’s plays. Davenant’s *Hamlet* is a pioneering example. Discussing this adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragedy, Thompson and Taylor point to several practices that were honoured more in the breech than the observance:

As recorded in the so-called “player’s Quarto” of 1676, Davenant had not only “refined” the language but, “This play being too long to be conveniently acted,” he had cut Voltemand, Cornelius and Reynaldo, Polonius’s advice to Laertes, most of Laertes’s advice to Ophelia, all of Hamlet’s advice to the players, and Fortinbras’s first appearance. (98)

The excerpt printed above provides a good sense of the liberties many a director from Davenant onwards has taken when it came to understanding the organization of the play’s dramatic material, and the construction of the opening more specifically.

Notes

1 I draw attention to this problem first with regard to the opening of *Twelfth Night* (see above, 98).
2 1.1.5 contains the first verbal allusion to the time of day: “‘Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco,” making it clear that the sentinels cannot see each other because it is dark. Based on this argument, it is possible that in performances of *Hamlet* the sentinels entered holding a torch or a lantern (Dessen 75).
3 The word “relief” in line 6 has a double sense, conveying Francisco’s gratefulness that Barnardo is taking over and his release from the anxiety caused by the night’s watch.
4 Referring to this point Rosenberg writes:
Horatio, secure in his pragmatic philosophy, speaks with more or less friendly scorn, sometimes laughs. “Its all your imagination…”—

Tush, tush ’twill not appear.

He has, as Marcellus said, protected himself from believing. No one in the play will get more surprises than Horatio. (8)

5For instance, the editor of the Oxford edition of Hamlet (1987), G. R. Hibbard advocates the more popular view that the Ghost entered from one of the doors located at the back wall of the tiring-house: “There has been much debate about whether the Ghost was meant to come up through a trap or not. There is much to show that it does not, and nothing to say that it does” (145). On the other hand, in an essay entitled “The Shakespearean Stage,” Andrew Gurr expresses a different view, when he explains that the trapdoor was not only the location from which the Ghost emerged, but also the only location in act 1 reserved exclusively for the Ghost’s entrances:

In the original staging of Hamlet at the Globe, the stage trap had two functions. Besides serving as Ophelia’s grave, it was the distinctive entry point, not used by any other character, for the Ghost in Act 1. When he tells his son that he is “for the day confined to fast in fires,” the first audiences would have already taken the point that he had come up from the underworld. (3288)

Gurr gathers evidence from the Ghost’s third visitation, when in 1.5.124 there is a reference to the Ghost coming from the grave. Later in line 153, there is another reference to the Ghost’s voice coming from the “cellarage,” which may have been the actual word that described the physical space underneath the stage. Another clue can be found later yet in line 165, when Hamlet responds to the voice from the cellarage: “Well said, old mole. Canst work in the earth so fast? A worthy pioneer.” But even though these references constitute compelling evidence for the use of the trapdoor in 4.1, there is nothing in the play-text to indicate the Ghost’s entrance was necessarily staged in the same way in its first and second visitations.

6The reference to Julius Caesar is printed only in Q2 (Thompson and Taylor 107-124n.).

7As with the first visitation of the Ghost, the play-text does not specify the location.

8Thompson and Taylor indicate that the question has been raised as to whether the stage direction might refer to Horatio (126 SD). If so, then the gesture may be indicative of Horatio’s attempt either to protect himself, warn the Ghost, or hinder its passage. Judging by the pronoun “It,” however, the reference is more likely to apply to the Ghost.

9Thompson and Taylor indicate the possibility of two thrones for the King and the Queen (1.2n.).

10The lengthy opening stage direction does not indicate the location from which this entrance occurs, and whether all the characters enter from a single door or from both doors of the tiring-house. While Mariko Ichikawa suggests that royal entrances would have been made from the central opening (134), because the tiring-house represents the palace in this scene, there is no reason why the doors could not be employed. A great deal has also been written about the order in which the characters enter. The problem arises, at least in part, because of the precarious nature of early modern stage directions (see p. 31), which do not necessarily reflect stage practice with regard to entrance distribution. In Q1 and F the stage direction indicates that Hamlet enters directly after Gertrude, whereas in Q2 the stage direction indicates that he enters after Laertes (Hibbard 382).

11Shakespeare would use similar costume conventions to signal mourning in the opening of All’s Well That Ends Well (c.1601- c.1604), where the four main characters enter dressed in black.

12Thompson and Taylor represent the view that, according to Judaeo-Christian tradition, Claudius has committed incest by taking Gertrude to be his wife (157n).

13This argument may seem improbable, because criticizing a king directly would have been considered indecorous if not an act of treason.

14In a chapter entitled “Speeches around Entrances and Exits,” Ichikawa suggests that a convention on the Shakespearean stage operated between onstage characters and exiting characters: “Shakespearean audiences knew that when a character turns his back and begins to move towards the tiring-house, the character is assumed to move out of earshot” (54-55).
For a fuller discussion of how this travelling garment may have been used in the play, see MacIntyre 186-87.

See chapter three, “Maternal Images and Male Bonds in Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear.”

Horatio’s line “I think it lacks of twelve” (3) is a reminder that the action is taking place at night, but, as with 1.1, the audience may have been aware of this circumstance immediately, if the characters entered with torches or lanterns.

This “custom” strikes Hamlet as unethical. An audience is likely to share this view because the old King has only recently been buried.

The loudness here foreshadows the inappropriateness of the tragedy’s final scene, where Fortinbras demands loud sound effects to accompany the body of Hamlet as it is taken off the stage.

This idea is based on John Barton’s approach to teasing aspects of characterization out of the play-text.

In fact, interspersed in the dialogue are five references which point out that the Ghost signals to Hamlet repeatedly in the course of the exchange, the last reference spoken moments before Hamlet follows the Ghost off stage (84).

There is no suggestion in the play-text that the Ghost walks by the characters as it has done on its first visitation.

While the blocking appears relatively flexible here, what seems vitally important to sustain tension is that distance be maintained between the two as they exit, because the Ghost poses a threat to Hamlet throughout the scene.

In the transition from act one to act two, the prospect of damnation converts the hero’s vehement resolve to avenge the alleged offence into a debilitating insecurity, emphasized, perhaps, by Hamlet’s tender years and the responsibility he bears:

That I, the son of a dear murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
A stallion! Fie upon’t, foh! About, my brains! (2.2.518-522)

The character’s prolonged internal agon has led recent scholarship to assert that the hero’s pursuit of revenge is transformed into a pursuit of truth. For instance, in an article entitled “Aletheia: Oedipus, Hamlet,” Jill Levenson has addressed this subject by drawing parallels between the protagonists of Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Hamlet.

As indicated already, I tend not to refer to discrepancies in the placement of entry and exit cues in the text and other such minor differences. For example, whereas in Q2 the explicit stage direction “Enter GHOST” follows Horatio’s line “The bell then beating one” (1.1.38), in F the corresponding stage direction is placed after Marcellus’ subsequent line: “Peace, break thee off, look where it comes again” (1.1.39).
General Conclusion: Shakespeare’s Technique of Openings

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
Our bending author hath pursued the story,
In little room confining mighty men,
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.

(King Henry V, epil. 1-4)

In the growing commercial society of sixteenth-century London, theatre had to sustain the members of professional companies who worked in a highly competitive entertainment market. The degree of Shakespeare’s concern for a “living theatre,” capable of perpetually diversifying in order to maintain its appeal, is apparent in the imaginative openings of his plays.

This dissertation has explored Shakespeare’s technique in composing the openings of four plays from the period 1591-c.1602. It provides new insights into Shakespeare’s dramaturgy, the play-text, and the playwright’s directives for translating its content from page to stage. As background to this study, I have presented ideas on rhetoric and poetry which offer important dimensions for understanding the construction of an opening in Shakespearean dramaturgy and stage-practice. One such idea, alluded to repeatedly in this dissertation, is that an opening poses many practical challenges for those in charge of designing and presenting it. Therefore, any opening must have required
careful preparation and focus. For Shakespeare, who rarely marched to the drum of theory, the practicalities of the theatre offered new means by which prevalent ideas about openings in rhetorical and poetic theory could be approached, and the idea presented above seems to be no exception.

The case studies analysed provide evidence of the organising principle contained in Shakespearean openings: it works differently in each play, but as a method for constructing an opening and conveying it through the play-text, the principle typically involves action that is not developed consistently from the start, but rather action which is introduced and then suspended in order to engage an audience and delimit its field of reception at the outset of a play in performance. Hence my choice of the term “strands of the opening,” to define the suspended sequences of action that typically make up the opening.

If one judges by the evidence presented in the case studies, the process of audience immersion in a play tends to be more gradual in the tragedies analysed than in the comedies: the openings of Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet appear to work through many delaying tactics. By means of contrast, my analyses of the openings of The Merry Wives of Windsor and Twelfth Night suggest that in comedy, where “complication” is an overriding principle in the construction of the plot, the process of audience immersion tends to be much shorter; and broad brushstrokes are sufficient for generating the jovial mood proper to comedy.

This evidence points to a technique of openings malleable enough to accommodate the range and permutations of Shakespeare’s comic and tragic plots between 1591 and c.1602, and suggests that daily work in the theatre as actor and
playwright deepened his understanding of actor technique as well as audience expectations.

Shakespeare became progressively more proficient and creative as a man of the theatre between the writing of *Romeo and Juliet* in the mid-1590s and the writing of *Hamlet* in the early 1600s, for, as indicated already, his later tragedy displays a more sophisticated construction the opening. Notwithstanding the evolution of Shakespeare’s skills as a playwright, his resourcefulness is evident in the ongoing search for new and exciting forms of immersing audiences thirsty for theatrical entertainment, and renewing formulae for openings which had lost their effect through having become conventional.

**Contribution of this Research to Shakespeare Scholarship**

In a recent exchange in the British Shakespeare Association’s journal *Shakespeare*, W.B. Worthen and R.A. Foakes debated the discursive functions of writing for dramatic performance.¹ This subject was hotly contested at the 2008 British Association Conference, which I attended as a panel member. Considering the current text and performance divide in scholarship, and, of course, the rhetorical posturing of each writer (an unrelenting “ideological tennis match,” according to one observer), it should be of little surprise that Foakes and Worthen were pitted against each other as representatives of opposing camps: structuralists versus post-structuralists / modernists versus post-modernists. Placed in these broad ideological categories, the nuanced and
often self-examining observations each makes about approaches to the study of Shakespeare can easily go unnoticed.

For example, in response to Foakes’s opening charge that much critical discourse has been flattened by the “steamroller of [performance] theory” (47), Worthen provides a somewhat unexpected rejoinder: he criticises much performance-oriented scholarship for being overdetermined by ideological considerations, and warns of the dangers inherent in discourses of performance that are politicised at the expense of intellectual integrity:

…the palpable power with which Performance Studies has politicised both the disciplinary place of performance partly as a means to greater institutional leverage, has tended to polarize the kinds of expertise that might rejoin textual theory, performance theory, and cultural studies to the study of drama. To my mind, this diffusion of expertise across a contested institutional landscape is part of the problem. (216)

Among the contributions made to Shakespeare scholarship by performance theorists such as Joseph Roach, Peggy Phelan and Diana Tailor, are illuminating studies about performance as social and cultural activity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These studies, however, reflect the growing allure the social sciences have had for Shakespeare scholarship, perhaps at the expense of humanist approaches. Important though it is, much performance-oriented research seems to have taken an indirect interest in Shakespeare, a stance which Worthen calls, “Performance via Shakespeare” (218). Moreover, much performance-oriented research has contributed to Roland Barthes’s
efforts to resist authorial control in a broad range of critical discourses.³ Sarcastic as they may be, R.A. Foake’s observations on recent attempts to unseat the author/playwright are pertinent:

From a deconstructionist viewpoint, …[an] emphasis on material practices rather than the author, tends to elide the notion of authorial intention in the belief that “Whatever they may do, authors do not write books” ([de Grazia and Stallybrass] 273)….The academic critics who deal in such matters nonetheless proclaim their agency and their authorship of the books they write in order to advance their careers. (48)

Considering the philosophical implication of Barthes’s contribution, Foakes quotes Sean Burke, who writes that:

The abolition of the author is the necessary and sufficient step to bring about the end of a representational view of language, for it is only through the function of the author as the possessor of meaning that textual language is made obeisant to an extratextual reality. (48)

With particular regard to Shakespearean studies, Foakes charges literary theory with “unseating the author” by giving undue emphasis to the indeterminacies of early modern textuality, to the changing circumstances of staging and printing production, and to the implications of collaborative playwriting in the sixteenth century:
The author has been further distanced by recognition that a lot of plays were put together as collaborative texts in the late sixteenth century. Jeffrey Masten argues that “by demonstrating a thematics of collaboration in some ‘Shakespearean’ texts and by illustrating the emergence of the author as contemporaneous with (not prior too) those texts and their publication” he could detach their signification from the domain of their anachronistic author (10). (48)

He adds that the influence recent textual theory has had on performance theory has liberated recent productions of Shakespearean plays from any dependence on the text as an interpretive anchor. Susan Bennett is described as a scholar who exemplifies a desire to free play production from the confines of the so-called “restrictive text”:

Reworking and intercultural refashioning of plays can be fascinating in their own right, and may serve as one mode of contemporary criticism and interpretation, but in being released from the text they are likely to float free and become something other than Shakespeare. (52)

Both performance and textual branches of theory, one might add, have been instrumental in purveying a binary division of “text/performance” which keeps both terms in a mutually exclusive relationship. This division, which is often explained and reified through arguments relating to the historical indeterminacies of the early modern play-text, has led to a prevailing scepticism about the authority of the extant texts of
Shakespeare’s plays. A case in point is Stephen Orgel’s *Authentic Shakespeare*. This scepticism, I believe, threatens to obscure the ways in which the corporeal realities of performance in the early modern context shaped the writing practices of contemporary dramatists, evidence for which may be found in the play-texts themselves.

In fact, the theoretical premises behind this binary division are so pervasive that they can be detected in many of the arguments both Foakes and Worthen expound. For example, the binary division allows Worthen to talk about “playwriting” as a literary construct:

>[Foakes] actually reciprocates a view of dramatic performance that has come to characterize a disciplinary practice that should collaborate with Shakespeare and drama studies, but which increasingly sees nearly all dramatic performance (text-based theatre) as oppressively overdetermined by textual meanings, by writing.

(209, my emphasis)

The notion that theatrical writing is a form of literature is a fiction that emerges, at least in part, from approaches to reading the play-texts that are overdetermined by literary parameters.

Apart from raising key questions about “authority” and “textuality,” the back-and-forth between Worthen and Foakes hinges on the very important encounter between writing and the reading practices that inform critical approaches to analysing plays. Worthen questions several underlying assumptions that have shaped our readings of Shakespeare’s plays. He argues, for example, that approaches to reading early modern
play-texts, taught mainly in English departments, and inextricably linked to the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, have proven ill-suited for addressing the complexities of early modern stage-practice and, more specifically, the “eventness of the drama” (218).  

The idea that dramatic performance should be overdetermined by textual meanings should be resisted. Texts do not direct how we use them. To regard the work of the theatre as “reading” by other means not only collapses the theatre into the institutions of literature, it ensures our ongoing inability to address what performance does with writing, and so perfects a literary frustration with the incapacity of the stage. (209)

Foakes, on the other hand, questions the implications recent critical theory has for the act of reading, interpretation, and the status of the reader more generally. From a deconstructionist viewpoint, argues Foakes, the reader replaces the dramatist as the sole omnipotent constructor of meaning. As a result, any attempt to explain a work of art in terms of formal and effective properties through an investigation of the text as a tool of performance is rendered problematic if not futile. The “rise of the reader,” according to Foakes, is the by-product of releasing the plays from their bond to the text, inexorably blurring the relationship between the playwright and his medium.

Judging by these critiques the basic vocabulary for historicizing theatrical texts appears unstable, because our methodological paradigms for explaining how writing for the early modern stage relates to performance are too stringent. As pointed out by Worthen:
The question of writing and performance is not the only question we should ask of Shakespeare, but it is time to begin asking it in different ways. How do we conceive, imagine, represent the value of drama across several different platforms of understanding, critique, interpretation, significance? How might our ways of imagining the uses of drama enable and disable a better understanding of drama?

(218)

“Shakespeare’s Openings in Action: A Study of Four Plays from the Period 1591-c.1602” has aimed to address some of the questions raised in the debate summarized above by investigating the practice of writing for dramatic performance in the early modern theatre, the discipline of reading plays, and the points at which they can intersect most fruitfully. I have attempted to do so by approaching theatrical writing as a practice distinct from other literary genres of writing, a practice elaborated by the playwright and communicated to the practitioners by means of the written word which reflects, in turn, the corporeal realities of performance in the early modern context.

In order to elucidate the specificities of theatrical writing, one must formulate an approach to analysing the play-text that underscores its theatricality. Primarily, the approach must consider what action is specified by the play-text, i.e., the playwright’s stage directions, explicit as well as implicit; and what effect that action personified could have had on the spectator. Furthermore, when studying the organization of the playwright’s dramatic material, there is a need to follow the text line by line in order to ensure a high degree of accuracy. By considering dramatic texts from these three core
perspectives, one may gain the fullest sense of the theatrical potential of a play as a work devised for the stage, where one of the most significant ways by which a playwright can “speak” directly to the practitioner is through the play-text.

Notes

1 The titles of both articles allude playfully to the last scene of *As You like It*, where Touchstone explains the seven reasons for quarrelling.

2 In his book *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Marvin Carlson presents an overview of the still-emerging field of performance studies. The term *performance*—as trope, as practice, and as interdisciplinary field of study—is prevalent across a wide range of contemporary critical discourses; however, whether it be anthropology, ethnography, or feminist and poststructuralist theory, the concept remains highly contested and rather fluid. Less contested is the impact the discourses of *performance* in the social sciences have had on the humanities. In the context of Shakespeare studies, *performance* is often discussed in purely theoretical terms, often neglecting a consideration of the practical realities of theatre as a medium of communication based in a dynamic language of shifting conventions.

3 It is important to note that Barthes resists the notion of authorial control, because the “author” in the criticism of a literary text had come to be regarded as the projection of a singular meaning. This study finds the notion of authorial control useful not to reify the idea of singular meanings, but in order to illuminate how the opening of a play has been organised by the playwright for the purpose of eliciting audience response.

4 The binary division of “text” and “production” may be more useful because it does not obscure the inherent theatricality of writing for the stage.

5 Worthen addresses this point when he writes: “The tendency towards what Martin Puchner calls ‘antitextualism’ (24) in Performance Studies arises from the fact that its proponents share a surprising ‘literary’ understanding of dramatic performance, of theatre,…” (216).

6 In her brilliant book *In Defence of the Imagination*, Helen Gardner refers to the influence that the rise of the novel has had on theatrical practice. With regard to the discipline of acting she writes: “With Fielding the rise of the novel begins, at first as a rival to the drama, but quickly to become the dominant literary form, eclipsing drama and powerfully affecting the art of acting”. Later she adds: “[The rise of the novel] also shows very interestingly the tendency to make a dramatic character awake the kind of sympathy which is called out to by a character in a novel, that the novelist tells us that his real feelings are at variance with his behaviour, that his real self is different than the self he shows” (63).

7 My use of the term “theatrical” does not exclude literary parameters in play-text analysis, rather I am interested in placing them (as well as other parameters drawn from other disciplines) in the wider context in which they contribute to an understanding of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy.
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