

Shakespeare and Lost Plays

» DAVID McINNIS

In 1623, when a consortium of stationers and members of London’s premier acting company, the King’s men, assembled the First Folio of William Shakespeare’s plays, they ensured that at least 18 of his previously unpublished works would survive to the present day. Such plays as *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* and *Antony and Cleopatra* had not appeared in print by 1623. Possibly they would have been printed individually at a later date; *Othello*, after all, had only been printed for the first time in 1622, despite having been written c.1601 to 1604, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, written around 1613 to 1614 with John Fletcher, was printed for the first time in 1634. This latter, co-authored play, was omitted from the First Folio, as was another play that Shakespeare wrote with Fletcher, ‘The History of Cardenio’ (c.1612 to 1613).¹ Unlike *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, ‘Cardenio’ did not subsequently appear in print, either individually or in a Folio edition. It remains the Holy Grail of Shakespeare studies: a play whose Shakespearean co-authorship is assured, yet which has been lost.² Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of the ‘Cardenio’ example is the fact that it is not a freak

aberration, but rather is completely typical of the fate of playtexts from the early modern period.

My work over the last ten years has focused on lost plays from Shakespeare’s England: from assessing the extent of the loss to compiling the historical records pertaining to lost plays and theorising how early modernists might acknowledge and work productively with such lacunae in the canon. The late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century London playhouses were hosts to repertory companies: companies whose commercial survival depended on offering a variety of plays, up to six days a week, and who competed with rival companies for playgoer patronage. Between 1567, when the Red Lion (London’s first permanent theatre) opened and 1642, when the puritans succeeded in closing public theatres, these companies would have required around 3,000 plays. Shakespeare had a hand in the writing of about 40 of these. The latest estimates suggest that of these 3,000 plays, barely 543 have survived.³ On the basis of these figures, I’ve argued that a fundamental paradigm shift is needed: whatever we think we know about the drama of Shakespeare’s day is

(above)

Fig. 1. Lost Plays Database logo designed by Brett Greatley-Hirsch.

IMAGE: COURTESY DAVID McINNIS, <HTTP://LOSTPLAYS.FOLGER.EDU>

(background)

‘Cutaway view into the Second Globe playhouse’ by C.W. Hodges. Pen and ink, ca. 1973. Book pages from figures within this article.

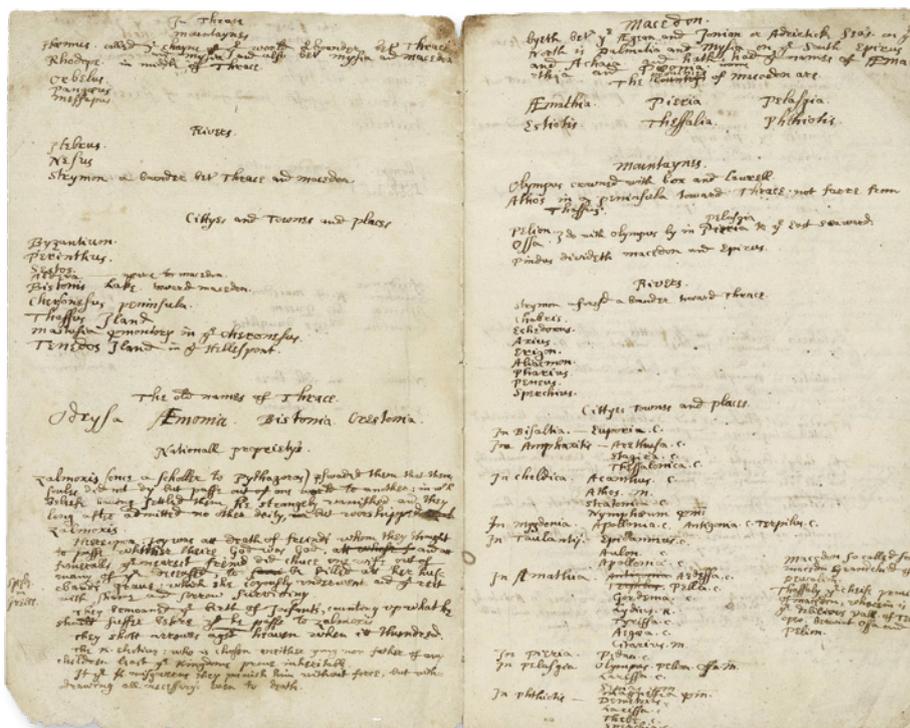
IMAGE: FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY COLLECTION, CC BY-SA 4.0.

based on one-sixth of the theatrical output, yet we continue to extrapolate trends and features from this minority as if they were typical or representative. The reality is that the very fact of their survival makes them atypical.

At first glance, the prospect of studying something that does not exist — almost 2,500 somethings that do not exist, to be precise — seems unpromising. In a field where a play unlucky enough to lack the name ‘Shakespeare’ on its title page is often neglected by critics, a play whose script has perished rarely rates a mention in scholarship. The conventional wisdom has always been that some things are lost for a reason, and only the best plays survive.⁴ The effect of such Bardolatrous and pseudo-Darwinian value judgements is the rendering of lost plays as virtually invisible. In many cases, where the title of a lost play is unknown, the play cannot even be indexed, further impeding critical work on the topic.

But all is not lost. Of the thousands of lost plays, at least 744 are ‘identifiably’ lost in the sense that we know something concrete about them: their title perhaps; a fragment of dialogue from them or an eyewitness account of a scene; maybe even a document of performance such as a backstage plot or an actor’s part. A title alone is invaluable, and hundreds of these survive in licencing records of the Master of the Revels, in

Stationers’ Register entries asserting someone’s right to print the manuscript, and in the diary of Rose playhouse manager Philip Henslowe. A title can provide information about genre (‘The New World’s Tragedy’), about subject matter (‘Saul and David’), about form (‘The Second Part of Fortune’s Tennis’), about the topicality of drama (‘Amboyna’), or about the industry’s appetite for duplication of topics (‘Hamlet’; ‘Richard III, or The English Prophet’). Such information can be sufficient to complicate our sense of the kinds of plays an author was writing, providing a more holistic account of their career: Robert Wilson, for example, is known chiefly for his comic, late-morality plays *The Three Ladies of London* (1581) and its sequel *The Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (1588), but wrote at least sixteen now lost plays ranging from domestic tragedy to Chaucerian romance and English, Danish, and Classical history.⁵ Alternatively, knowledge of titles can stand to affect how we perceive entire categories of play: in my doctoral work on voyage drama I noticed that the surviving plays about travel were either romances (*The Tempest*) or satires (*Eastward Ho*) but only very rarely steeped in recent history. Adding the lost travel plays to the mix changes the picture significantly: ‘The Conquest of the West Indies’ (1601), ‘The New World’s Tragedy’ (1595), and ‘The Plantation of Virginia’ (1623), to name a few.⁶

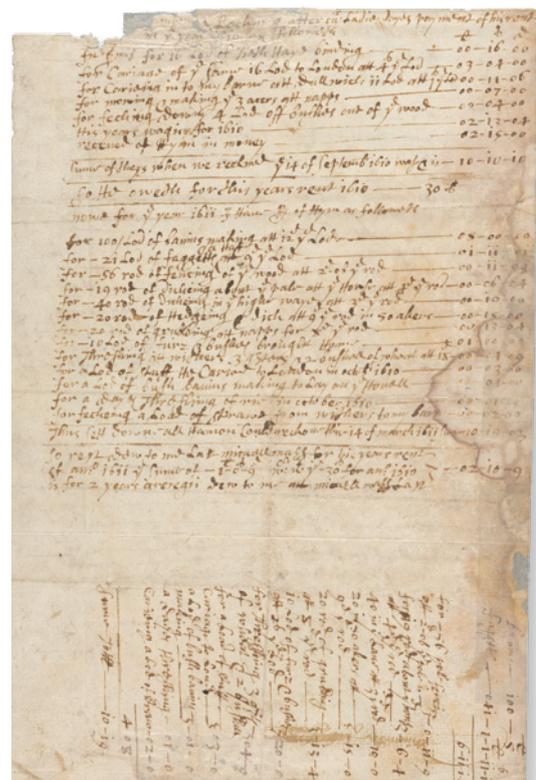
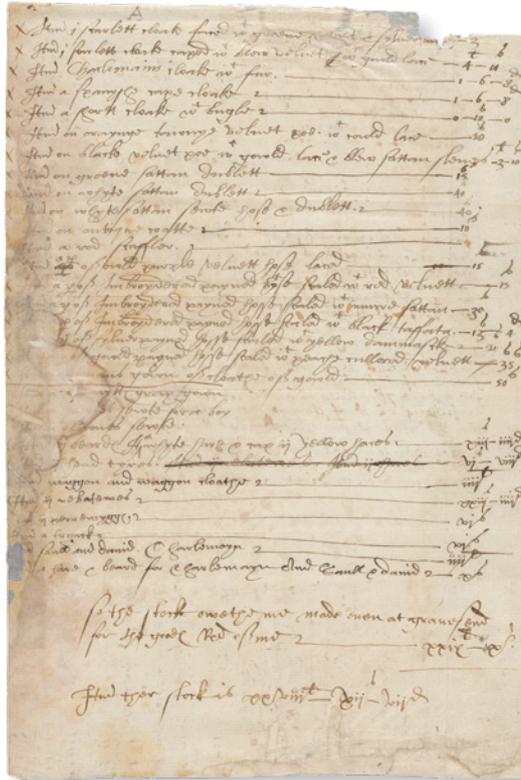


(left)
 Fig. 2. Scenario of a play set in Thrace and Macedon, X.d.206, 1v-2r.
 IMAGE: FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY (CC BY-SA 4.0 LICENCE)

(right)

Figs. 3 and 3a. List of theatrical costumes for 'Saul and David' (1588), f MS Thr 276 recto, f MS Thr 276 verso.

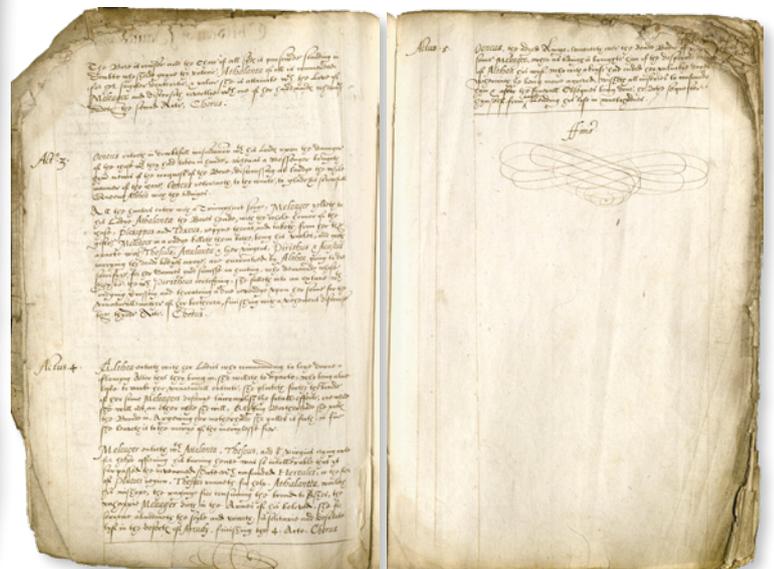
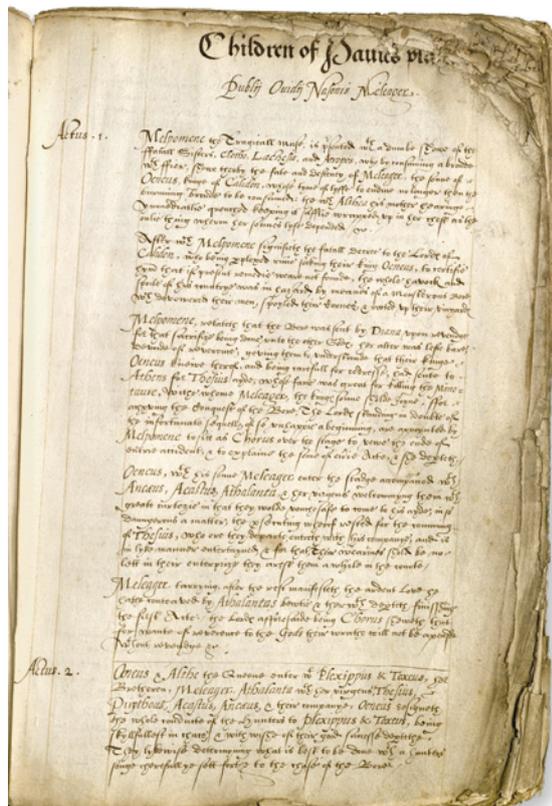
IMAGE REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM HOUGHTON LIBRARY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.



A fuller picture of theatrical activity in London, 1567 to 1642, helps us understand what is arguably the single most important context for Shakespeare’s work: the plays he was responding to and influencing, in the repertories of his own company and of the rival companies. The first step towards such a recovery was the creation of an open-access website for theatre historians to contribute whatever snippets of knowledge they possessed about individual lost plays. The *Lost Plays Database* (www.lostplays.folger.edu), which I created and co-edit with Professor Emerita Roslyn L. Knutson (University of Arkansas, Little Rock) and Professor Matthew Steggle (University of Bristol), serves this purpose. Its primary function is to elevate the profile of lost plays as a valid subject of scholarly discussion. It does so by assembling all the scattered references to a lost play within a single convenient entry, where users can access digitisations or transcriptions of the relevant historical records; editorial summaries of the known facts pertaining to authorship, company and venue auspices; and scholarly conjecture about possible narrative and dramatic sources or analogues. Each entry conforms to a templated hierarchy of evidence, commencing with primary documents, progressing to interpretation, and ending with speculation that might one day bear fruit (but which, for the present time, is cordoned off in a separate category, not to be

mixed up with documentary evidence). Being a wiki, the site is always updatable by the editors and contributors as new information or insights come to hand, and the MediaWiki software facilitates easy linking of entries to other titles via shared category tags (e.g. ‘travel’; ‘classical’; ‘magic’). Unlike Wikipedia, contributors must apply for editing privileges, and we editors review changes to the database’s entries on a daily basis. Typically, new users require some mentoring as they craft their first few entries, particularly around the question of the subheading under which a given snippet of information should fall: academics tend to prefer confident narratives to admission of ignorance, yet something as seemingly neutral as ascribing a play to a particular company or theatre can in fact turn out to be nothing but supposition. In that case, the information more properly belongs under the ‘Critical Commentary’ section not the ‘Theatrical Provenance’ section, because it cannot yet be confirmed. A user’s contribution to an entry will be logged in the metadata associated with that page, even if their contribution is subsequently altered, emended, or dispensed with altogether.

As an Australian scholar, making the database open-access and providing users with high quality digitisations of archival documents was of paramount importance to me. Between 2014 and 2016, when I held an ARC Discovery Project grant for work on lost plays, I was able



to significantly improve the multimedia content of the site with a view to making remote access to primary documents available to scholars and the general public around the world. To the majority of Antipodean students, the historical documents pertaining to Shakespeare's lifetime are shrouded in mystery and reserved for inspection only by those with greater proximity to the holding libraries. Transcriptions are sometimes available but transcriptions almost inevitably introduce errors or require compromise in formatting and presentation. One of the rarest of playhouse documents is the backstage 'plot' or 'platt': a scene-by-scene roadmap of the play's action, including entrances and sometimes props or special effects. These single sheets of paper were apparently hung backstage to facilitate the performance. Of the six that survive, one is for an extant play (George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*) and the others are for lost plays. We have digitised all the extant backstage plots pertaining to lost plays: 'The Second Part of the Seven Deadly Sins', 'The Dead Man's Fortune', 'The Second Part of Fortune's Tennis', 'Frederick and Basilea' and 'Troilus and Cressida' (as well as George Stevens' transcription of the now lost plot of 'Tamar Cham, part 1', printed in 1803 but not previously available in digital form).⁷ The Houghton Library at Harvard has assisted with the digitisation of a number of unique documents of performance:

a costume list once associated with leading Elizabethan actor Edward Alleyn and his brother (figs. 3 and 3a); a plot 'argument' summarising the action of a lost Children of Paul's play, 'Meleager' (1580) (figs. 4 and 4a); and the entire actor's 'part' for the role of 'Poore' in a play which is otherwise lost altogether.⁸ Although it is often noted that actors in Shakespeare's time did not receive copies of the full script, only of their individual lines, access to such parts has been severely limited until now.

Besides these documents of performance, we have now digitised theatrical ephemera including the entirety of Jacob Henry Burn's transcripts of Sir Henry Herbert's licensing records from the Beinecke Library at Yale, and the snippets of J. O. Halliwell-Phillips's transcriptions of Herbert's records from the Folger; between them, these cover most of the known copies of the Master of the Revels' licensing documents for the period.⁹ Other digitisations include various manuscript accounts of lost plays in diaries and letters; court records and other correspondence from the National Archives; and a number of manuscript and printed accounts of plays once in a collector or publisher's possession. We have even been fortunate enough to digitise musical manuscripts containing songs from plays which have otherwise perished, and had these fragments recorded by professional musicians using modern replicas of historical



(above)
Figs. 4 and 4a.
A plot 'argument' summarising the action of a lost Children of Paul's play, 'Meleager' (1580), MS Eng 1285.

IMAGE: REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM HOUGHTON LIBRARY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

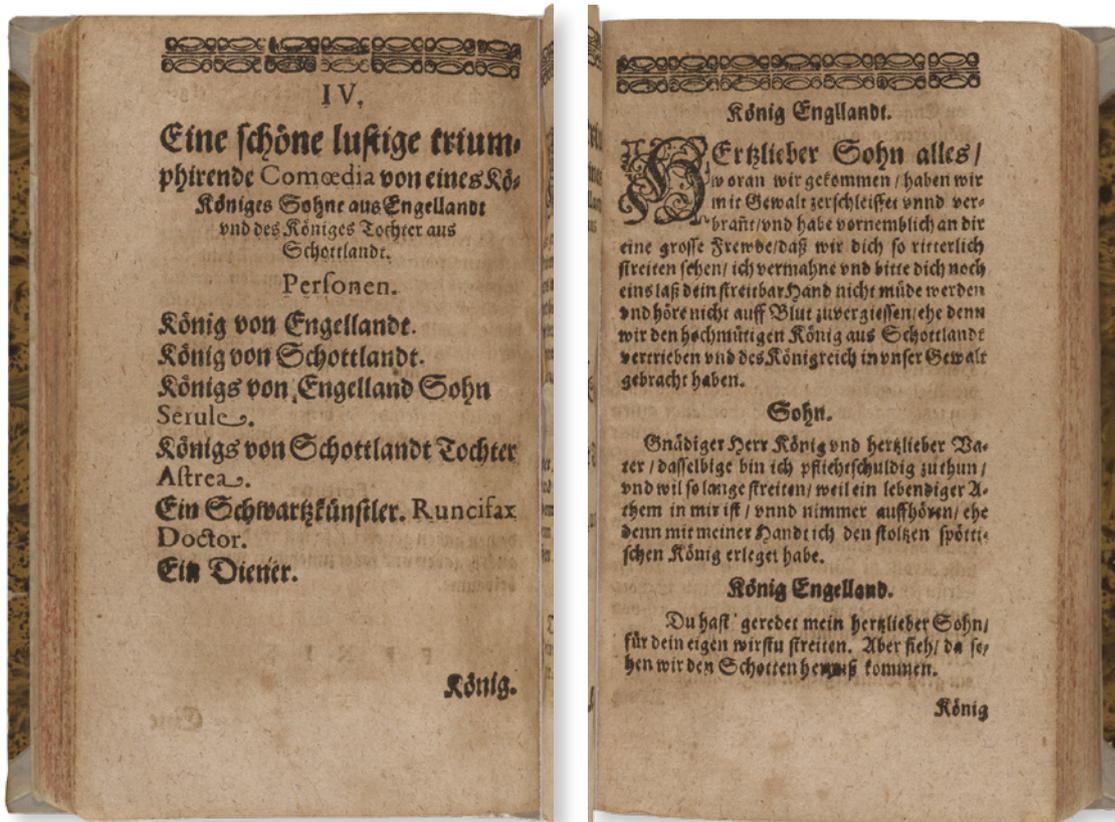
instruments. Anyone using our site can now listen (for example) to a recording of a song that seems to have originated in the lost Shakespeare-Fletcher 'Cardenio' play, performed by mezzo-soprano Sally-Anne Russell and accompanied by triple harp, baroque violin, theorbo and viola da gamba.¹⁰

Significantly more work needs to be done on creating and continuing entries for the database, but we have demonstrably raised the profile of the subject area now. In 2016, the New Oxford Shakespeare cited the *Lost Plays Database* as the authoritative source of information about lost plays of the period,¹¹ and in late 2017 the Folger Shakespeare Library offered to host the LPD as a Folger Resource (an offer we've gratefully accepted). The database was featured as the MLA International Bibliography's 'Website of the Week' in 2017, has provided the impetus for a performance-based research symposium on lost plays at King's College London in 2016 and is taught as part of a graduate course syllabus ('Digitizing the Early Modern') at University of California, Davis. The British Government's *Intute* site cites the LPD as a state of the art resource making Web 2.0 serve scholarly purposes. More importantly, scholars now use it in their work, and analyses of the early modern theatrical marketplace no longer gloss over the inconvenient fact that the vast majority of plays from the period have perished.

A pleasing corollary is the changing attitude to what constitutes a 'play' and a heightened recognition that a playtext is merely one document of performance; it is not the live event itself, and nor does it fully encapsulate the history and dimensions of a play. We have three significantly different early editions of *Hamlet*, for example, but significantly less information about its early stage history than we have for many lost plays (dates and box office takings for which have been preserved in Henslowe's diary accounts of the Rose playhouse throughout the entire 1590s). We do not have a backstage plot for *Hamlet*, an authorial manuscript, a promptbook, related ballads or chapbooks, any of the actors' parts, a playbill, or an eyewitness account of a live performance (except for an ambiguous report of a possible rendition aboard a ship anchored off the coast of Sierra Leone in 1607). Unlike numerous lost plays, we cannot

ascertain precisely when *Hamlet* premiered or what its repertorial partners were. By my count, a mere 34 plays can be associated with the Lord Chamberlain's men (Shakespeare's company) between 1594 and 1603; yet to remain competitive with their chief rivals, the Lord Admiral's men, the Chamberlain's would have required over 300 plays in their repertory. How *Hamlet* originally fitted into that context remains unclear.

Whilst the significance of attending to lost plays is no longer doubted, the challenge remains as to how scholars who are not working exclusively on the topic might nevertheless incorporate discussion of lost plays into their own work. Perhaps Shakespeareans are late to the party: students of Classical literature have been coping with loss for centuries, after all. The example of the preserved fragments of Sappho is instructive in this regard. Recent estimates suggest that Greek scholars in Alexandria in the third and second centuries BC edited nine or ten papyrus scrolls of Sappho's poetry, amounting to approximately 10,000 lines, of which only 650 have survived.¹² Traditional textual scholarship changes in the context of such fragments, where emendation gives way to more elaborate conjecture, and close-reading is de-emphasised. Learning from this example, English literary scholars might adjust their approach to playtexts to allow more explicitly for the fact that scripts do not capture live events perfectly, let alone live events that have been collaboratively produced by a team of actors using texts of uncertain authority which, if they survived at all, were subjected to further mediation by typesetters, printers and publishers, and modern editors, before reaching us. The parallel case in the Classics saw the rise of such specialised scholars as fragmentologists and reconstructionists; it fostered increases in collaborative scholarship, and the provision of expertly edited transcriptions of the primary sources has been key, as has a willingness to revise received narratives on the basis of new archival discoveries. Fragments may require a context in order to elucidate their meaning, but as Classicists have known for a long time, fragments also provide a context for extant drama.



(left)

Figs. 5 and 5a. 'Eine schöne lustige triumphirende Comœdia von eines Königes Sohn aufs Engellandt vnd des Königes Tochter aufs Schottlandt', a German redaction of a lost English play 'King of England's Son and the King of Scotland's Daughter' published in 1620 in an octavo volume edited by Friedrich Menius (1593–1659) entitled *Engelische Comedien und Tragedien*, sig R6v and sig.R7r (pictured).

IMAGE: FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY (CC BY-SA 4.0 LICENCE).

Like the crumbling ruins of castles valued by the Romantic poets, fragments of lost plays can provide fascinating insights into the construction and purpose of surviving drama. Unsurprisingly, most of the manuscript fragments of lost plays are drafts, plot outlines, or works-in-progress by amateur playwrights: many of the writers are unknown, but others include famed antiquary and politician Sir Edward Dering and the philosopher John Locke (both of whom tried their hands at writing travel drama), and East India Company factor Benjamin Greene. Their attempts at writing provide insights into amateur perceptions of the play-writing process. On the other hand, plays that were translated into new languages and cultures provide interesting perspectives on dramaturgy and adaptation. The plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries were performed on the Continent throughout his lifetime. In the 1580s and 90s, travelling English players tended to perform redactions of London plays in English as they toured Germany, Austria, the low countries and Scandinavia; by the early seventeenth century, they were performing in German and other languages. Surviving examples of these German language versions of English plays have received little attention since the early twentieth century and the World Wars. The German version of Thomas Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (1599) apparently corresponds to the English author's pre-publication draft of the play,

prior to the alterations made for performance before Elizabeth I. Another play, *Comœdia von eines Koniges Sohn aufs Engellandt vnd des Koniges Tochter aufs Schottlandt* — which in English is roughly 'The King of England's Son and The King of Scotland's Daughter' — is apparently a witness to a play of the 1590s that no longer survives in English but is fully preserved in the German version published in 1620 (figs. 5 and 5a).¹³ The play is premised on the King of England sending his son (Serule) to fight the King of Scotland but with him instead falling in love with the Scottish king's daughter (Astrea). The lovers negotiate a year's truce, during which time they hope to engineer a more lasting peace. Serule, however, is barred from engaging with the Scots. To overcome this injunction, he places a spy in the household of the Scottish king's advisor, the magician Runcifax (subsequently referred to as 'Barabas'), and manages to enter the Scottish court himself by adopting the disguise of a fool. The magician's magic mirror reveals that the princess will marry the fool, news of which enrages the Scottish king, but Serule escapes — only to return disguised this time as a Moor. This plan, too, is thwarted and Serule flees with the now disguised Astrea. He is captured by the Scots, and she by the English; a battle ensues and tragedy is narrowly avoided when Serule is poisoned (but only with a sleeping potion). A kiss from Astrea revives him and a royal wedding is



(above)

Fig. 6. David McInnis being presented with the 2016 Max Crawford Medal at the Annual Fellows' Dinner, Melbourne.

IMAGE: MICHELLE McFARLANE

planned. We've recently digitised the German text printed in 1620 and I am collaborating with a native German playwright, Dr André Bastian, to translate the German back into English and prepare a critical edition of the retranslated play.

There is, then, a great deal we can do with lost plays; the challenge is to convince even textual scholars that absent playtexts deserve more than mere footnotes or lip-service. The strategy I propose in the monograph I'm currently drafting is that we avail ourselves of some instructive interdisciplinary metaphors for working with perceptions of absence. The first bears upon the relationship between a single extant play and a single lost play: a one-to-one relationship. The metaphor comes from astrophysics, and the historically unique circumstances in which the existence and characteristics of the planet Neptune were predicted before it was first sighted through a telescope. Observation of irregularities in the elliptic orbit of Uranus led the French mathematician Urbain Le Verrier to realise that something significant must be disrupting Newton's universal law of gravitation. He was able to calculate the precise location and size of the cause of these disruptions, leading to the discovery of Neptune within half an hour of notifying the Berlin Observatory of his theory. Plays, too, exert influence on their repertorial neighbours in the early modern theatrical ecology, and anomalies in extant plays can potentially be accounted for via

the study of lost plays. The second metaphor comes from art history, and elucidates the one-to-many or many-to-many relationship between the surviving and lost drama of the period. I'm thinking here of 'Rubin's vase', the black and white illustration of the silhouette of a vase — or is it two faces looking at each other? — developed by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in 1915 as part of his dissertation on visually experienced figures. Art historians sometimes refer to this interplay of the figure and ground in terms of 'negative space'; the space around a focal object in an artwork that is itself particularly significant in its own way. In this metaphor, I suggest that rather than thinking of lost plays as gaps in the corpus that resist scrutiny, we should revalue them more productively in terms of how they have contributed to the structure of the extant corpus.

Lost plays are now part of the critical landscape for early modernists as a discrete subject of inquiry. The task ahead is to ensure appropriate integration with wider discourses and hopefully to bring about, in the process, a fundamental shift in the way we regard the theatrical activity of Shakespeare's London. ¶



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He is author of *Mind-Travelling and Voyage Drama in Early Modern England* (Palgrave, 2013) and co-editor (with Claire Jowitt) of *Travel and Drama in Early Modern England: The Journeying Play* (Cambridge UP, 2018). With Matthew Steggle, he edited *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England* (Palgrave, 2014), and he is currently preparing a second co-edited collection and a monograph on lost plays. He is editing Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* for the Revels Plays series (Manchester UP) and his *If This Be Not A Good Play, The Devil Is In It* for Jeremy Lopez's new Routledge Anthology of Early Modern Drama. His essays have been published in *Review of English Studies*; *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*; *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*; *Notes & Queries*, and elsewhere. With Roslyn L. Knutson and Matthew Steggle, he is founder and co-editor of the *Lost Plays Database*.

1. The established convention is to use italics for titles of extant plays and quotation marks to distinguish titles of lost plays.
2. Testifying to the abiding critical interest in 'Cardenio' are such publications as *The Quest for Cardenio*, ed. by David Carnegie and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Roger Chartier, *Cardenio between Cervantes and Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); and *The Creation and Re-Creation of Cardenio: Performing Shakespeare, Transforming Cervantes*, ed. by Terri Bourus and Gary Taylor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
3. See the figures generously provided by Martin Wiggins in David McInnis and Matthew Steggle, 'Introduction: *Nothing* will come of nothing? Or, What can we Learn from Plays that Don't Exist?', in *Lost Plays in Shakespeare's England*, ed. by David McInnis and Matthew Steggle (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 1–2.
4. Such unfounded judgments have been made most famously and influentially by Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 26.
5. See my 'Robert Wilson and Lost Plays', *Performance as Research in Early English Theatre Studies: The Three Ladies of London in Context*, <<http://threeladiesoflondon.mcmaster.ca/contexts/DavidMcInnis.htm>>
6. See David McInnis, *Mind-Travelling and Voyage Drama in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 10–11 and 'Lost Plays from Early Modern England: Voyage Drama, A Case Study', *Literature Compass* 8 (2011), 534–42.
7. See the LPD entries tagged with the 'plots and arguments' label, <https://www.lostplays.folger.edu/lpd/Category:Plots_and_arguments>
8. See the LPD entries tagged with the 'Houghton' label, <<https://www.lostplays.folger.edu/lpd/Category:Houghton>>
9. See the relevant entries at <https://www.lostplays.folger.edu/lpd/Category:Burn_transcript> and <<https://www.lostplays.folger.edu/lpd/Category:Halliwell-Phillips>>
10. See the LPD entry for 'Cardenio' <<https://www.lostplays.folger.edu/lpd/Cardenio>>
11. Gary Taylor and Rory Loughnane, 'The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare's Works' in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Authorship Companion*, ed. by Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 422.
12. *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works*, ed. by Diane J. Rayor and André Lardinois (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 7. Reference to fragment numbers (fr.) quoted in what follows pertain to this edition.
13. The play is printed in *Engelische Comedien und Tragedien* (Leipzig?, 1620) and the LPD entry for 'King of England's Son and the King of Scotland's Daughter' can be found here: <https://www.lostplays.folger.edu/lpd/King_of_England's_Son_and_the_King_of_Scotland's_Daughter>