**John Norton, and the probable nature of the text**

John Norton, named as publisher of William Sampson’s *The Vow Breaker*,was probably the nephew of John Norton, bookseller, who died in 1612. Sampson’s John Norton was a printer who began publishing in 1621; he was elected a member of the livery of the Stationers’ Company in 1625, and died in 1640. He was the son-in-law of Matthew Law, bookseller in London 1595-1629.

Norton began printing in partnership with Augustine Mathewes 1624-27, apparently near St. Bride’s Church; he moved on to an irregular partnership with Nicholas Okes, 1628-35 in Foster Lane, though they shared imprints only in 1628-29, and continued there when the Okes printing house moved elsewhere. Norton’s widow, Alice, kept up his printing house and, in 1642, married Thomas Warren, who took over its management. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Sampson’s John Norton is not listed in the *Dictionary of National Biography* but he appears to have been a printer of some significance, although Paul Matthews credits Norton’s uncle with all his nephew’s publications as well as his own, even after his death, for the period 1590 – 1640.[[2]](#footnote-2) It may be seen from the records in the *Short-title Catalogue* for this John Norton that about two hundred publications are listed against his name, one hundred and twenty up to the end of 1636 when Sampson’s *The Vow Breaker* and *Virtus Post Funera Vivit* were published. Sampson’s John Norton printed several books of sermons and religion including those of John Jewel, Richard Bancroft and Francis Bacon. He also published three of Shakespeare’s plays and works of many different authors, including James Shirley, Gervase Markham, and Thomas Heywood.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I have considered whether this 1636 text may have been a prompt copy, or whether it is the author’s foul papers. There is no extant manuscript of the play. McKerrow points out:

the original manuscript of a play would not have been written with any thought of the press . . . It 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.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The 1636 text does not meet the criteria of a genuine prompt copy, as listed by McKerrrow. He is of the opinion that the author will probably write in the names of the actors he envisages playing the parts, and that stage directions, properties or characters may be in the text in advance of when they are actually required. In this text there are no hand-written notes and it does not appear to be a copy of the author’s manuscript in which could be expected full and unambiguous stage directions. It is clear, however, that the 1636 text includes stage directions that Sampson may have wished to see followed during a performance, which would suggest that the copy given to Norton was in a legible form, with some directions clearly included.

Apart from specific entrances and exits, we also see evidence of stage directions that appear to express clearly the wishes of an author who knows how he wants his play performed:

B1 (p. 428) Enter young Bateman *meeting* Anne

 *Kisse at the departure*

B4v (p. 432) *A march*, Enter Clifton, Souldiers.

C2. (p. 433) *After ſkirmiſhes* Enter ...

D1v (p. 437) *Shoote, . . .*

the French beate of, *place themſelves on the Walls hanging out a head* . .

D2v (p. 438) *Jervis, and Nan are in the Window*

E1 (p. 440) Enter Mortique *meeting* Clifton .

E1v (p. 441) *Fight, Clifton diſarmes him* . . .

Young Bateman *ins ſhirt, a halter about his necke.*

E2v (p. 442) *Falls, hangs,* Enter old Bateman *i’ns ſhirt, & Torch.*

E3 (p. 442) Boote, Anne, Urſula *above.*

E4 (p. 443) Enter, Anne *haſtily, purſuing Urſula, with lights.*

F2 (p. 445) Enter Joſhua, *his Cat in a ſtring,* . . .

F4 (p. 447) Enter Anne, *with a Torch,* Urſula, Bateman, *wailing his Picture.*

G1 (p. 448) *Takes the Picture.*

 *Stands between the Picture*, & Ghost

G2v (p. 450) *After ſquirmiſhes.* Enter Grey, *meeting* Clifton, *with Armour.*

G3 (p. 450) Monluck, Croſſe, *betweene the Armies.*

G3v (p. 451) . . . Enter . . . Barren *with a Child, Anne in bed.*

H2v (p. 454) *Sleepe.* . . .

H3 (p. 454) *Shee leaving her bed.*

Enter Women *bringing* Anne.

H3v (p. 455) Enter Bateman *with his Picture.*

H4v (p. 456) . . . *Souldiers on the Walls*

I1v (p. 457) Enter Joſhua, *reeling with Jacks*

I2 (p. 457) . . . *all embrace.*

I3v (p. 459) *Within.*

 *Sings.*

I4 (p. 459) Enter Boote *i’ns ſhirt.*

We also see evidence of physical features suggested by the author:

B2 (p. 429) Enter *ould* Boote *old* Bateman

We see sound and props indicated by Sampson:

B4 (p. 431) Grey, Arguile, Croſſe, Souldiours, *drume, Colors.*

C1 (p. 432) *A Trumpet*, Enter Trumball

C4 (p. 435) . . . *and the Frenchmen in Womens apparel with Piſtols.*

D1v (p. 437) *Alarums . . .*

D2v (p. 438) *Muſique*

G3v (p. 451) *A bed covered with white* . . .

 However, it is not easy to draw categorical distinctions. Paul Werstine, in his paper on ‘Foul Papers’ and ‘Prompt-Books’ with relevance to Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, expresses the opinion that it is difficult to identify the origin of a text. He writes:

There are, of course, still other categories of printer’s copy for English Renaissance plays, most notably intermediate scribal transcripts of ‘foul papers’ that may preserve many features of the original papers. Yet so many of the same features survive in contemporary playbooks that I find it impossible to distinguish . . . an intermediate transcript of ‘foul papers’, and a playbook.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I would suggest that the many clear instructions are evidence that the text indicates Sampson’s specific requirements for a performance of his play. It may, thus, be a fair copy of Sampson’s working draft, prepared either by Sampson himself (which seems most likely) or by a scribe.

1. Pollard A. W., and Redgrave, G. R. *A Short-title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland & Ireland and of English books printed abroad 1475-1640*, in 3 volumes.London: The Bibliographical Press, 1991.

vol. 3: A printers’ and publishers’ index . . . pp. 127; 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Morrison, Paul G. *Index of printers, publishers and booksellers in A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave ‘A short-title catalogue . .* ’. Virginia: Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Full details of works printed by John Norton may be found on Early English Books online. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McKerrow, Ronald B. ‘The Elizabethan Printer and Dramatic Manuscripts’, *The Library*, 4th series, vol. XII, 3, Dec 1931. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Werstine, Paul. ‘”Foul Papers” and “Prompt-Books”: Printer’s Copy for Shakespeare’s “Comedy of Errors”’. *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol. 41, 1988. p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)