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Shakespeare's Capital Letters

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Modern scholarship¹ agrees that the first Quarto of *Love's Labour's Lost* (1598) and the second Quarto of *Hamlet* (1603-4) were both set up from copy written in Shakespeare's own hand. Sadly, the rest is silence. Nothing follows; nobody follows up, not even in this present age of computer analysis. One reason is uncertainty about the part played by Tudor compositors; another, that the *More* manuscript (generally accepted as undoubtably if undatably in Shakespeare's own handwriting) is a compositor's nightmare in its weird and wild variability of speech-prefixes and spellings including capitalisation. For example the hero is introduced as 'moo', 'moor' and 'moore' as well as 'more'; other proper nouns such as flanders and portigall begin with small letters, though Fraunc (sic) has a capital F; the word 'sheriff' is spelt in five different ways, none modern, twice with a capital S (the corresponding facts and figures for 'sergeant' are thrice, never and once); the modal auxiliary verbs appear solely as coold, shoold or woold, sixteen times all told. Perhaps the passage would have been recopied more rationally when the flame of inspiration had died down. On any analysis, though, either Shakespeare or his compositors must have radically changed his style, since few such eccentricities ever appeared in any printed source.

But who made the alterations, and what exactly were they? That question may now be too late to answer beyond a peradventure; perhaps Tudor compositors would have corrected upper to lower case in all words except nouns. It is surely true, though, that no capital letter would have been *added* to any noun, at any stage, in the finalised text of a famous playwright whose work had been entrusted to them for printing. In that respect, then as now, they would have passed on what they saw before them to their readership, unchanged. So if the capital letters form a recognisable pattern, it was *prima facie* Shakespeare's own.

And they do. Thus, taking only the two plays generally agreed to have been set up from copy in his own hand, we can list those words which are capitalised in each source. These results, especially when they are found in both plays, surely cannot be attributed to chance or coincidence, least of all when they clearly fall into definable categories. Thus the shared occurrence of such words as Ape, Asse, Calfe, Capon, Crab, Dasie [daisy], Dogge, Hobby-horse, Lyon, Owle, Rauen, Rose, Serpent, Sheepe, Violets, Whale, in both *Love's Labour's Lost* 1598 and *Hamlet* 1603-4 surely show that that Shakespeare, who by the latter date was nearly forty years old, had been taught (presumably from the first) to award upper case letters to flora and fauna, or even their derivates as in Hobby-horse, which owes its capitalisation to its Horse component. And that finding is clearly confirmed by the many other words in that same category found in one or other of those two plays: Beast, Birde, Bran, Bucke, Bush, Calfe, Carnation, Ceder, Cockell, Coppice, Corne, Cuckow, Cuckow-budd, Cullambine, Dawes, Deare [?], Eagle, Eele, Flea, Flower, Foxe, Ginger, Goose, Greyhound, Horse, Hound, Humble-bee, Ladi-smocke, Lambe, Larke, Lemmon, Logges, Meadowes, Minow, Mint, Nutmegg, Oke [oak], Osier, Oxe, Pease, Pidgion, Plantan, Pricket, Rabbet, Roe, Rooke, Siccamore, Snake, Snayle, Sorrel, Swine, Turtle, Woodcock, Wormes, Wort [?], etc. in the former and Adders, Camelion, Camell, Cat, Cock, Colembine, Crocadile, Crowflowers, Deere, Doue, Fennill, Gloworme, Hart, Hauke, Lapwing, Mouse, Nettles, Pelican, Rat, Rewe [rue], Rosemary, Serpent, Sparrowe, Wezell [weasel], Willow etc. in the latter. Further, Wethercock, like Hobby-horse, may well owe its capitalisation to its second component. Of course such observances can be characteristically inconsistent; many other words might have been thus treated and are not. But enough are left to form a plain pattern. Further,

¹ as recorded in e.g. two collected editions: the American *Riverside* 2/1997 (pp. 246 and 1234) and the *Oxford Shakespeare* 1986 (pp. 315 and 735).

they confirm that Shakespeare was obsessed (hardly too strong a word) with all manner of natural phenomena; so of course the word Nature is thus spelt in both plays.

Supernatural too, as witness Angell, Angels and Celestiall, again in both plays. Perhaps religion is a unifying theme here; both plays have a capitalised Priest, while *Love's Labour's Lost* adds Curate, Divel, Hermit, Oracle, Parradise, Parson and Welkin, *Hamlet* Cherub and Hell. Another impulse may just be those concepts to which the writer instinctively raises his hat, such as Court and Crowne (and perhaps Coach) in both plays, as well as Sea, Sunne and Moone, with Starrs as well as Ayre (air), together with Earth and Worlde in *Love's Labour's Lost*, which also has Age, Beauty, Oth (oath) and Vow, Peace, Vertue and Worthies. In that play, Shakespeare also takes special pains to capitalise substances and textures, with Agot [Agate], Christall, Copper, Diamondes, Ebonie, Flint, Gold, Jewel, Pearle, Ribbon, Silke, Taffata, Velvet, Wax. An even more clearly defined category consists in the weapons and accoutrements of war. Thus both plays have Armes, Cannon and Rapier, with Arrowes, Birdbolt [?], Bow, Bullet, Butshaft [?], Club, Duella [?], Fauchion, Gunne, Launces, Passado, Scutchion [?], Shield, Sword, Targe, Visor in the earlier Quarto and Armes, Dagger, Foiles, in the later. By a simple shared modulation via Drum and Trumpet, the writer proceeds to capitalise instruments of music; thus the earlier play has Cyterne, Lute and Taber as well as Musique, while *Hamlet* famously contains a lesson on playing the Recorder. Perhaps the importance of these instruments is also extended to implements, such as Plough. The dance is not forgotten, in either source; *LLL* has Daunces and Gigge, while *Hamlet* has ligge. Even so, music is quite eclipsed by literature. Both plays capitalise Art(e)s, Autho(u)r, Comedie, Clownes, and a Letter or Letters, together with a Play or Players. *Love's Labour's Lost* in particular teems with allusions to Academes, a Ballet [ballad?], Bookes, Charg-house (school premises), Consonants, a Critick, Dialogue, Epithat or Epythat, Hiperboles, Incke, Languages, Learned, Learning, Lenvoy, Minstrels, an Ode, Paper, Pen, Poetrie, Philosophie, Prologue, Rethorique, Reuells, Rime [= rhyme], a Scaene, Scholler, Schoole, Sonnets, Studies, a Table-booke, Tables, Verses, Vowels, Wisdome and Wit; but the same or similar literary expressions, such as Poem, Prologue, Schoolefellowes or Table booke, also occur, though less profusely, in *Hamlet*.

It will be seen that this category includes literary types such as Author and Critick. Also capitalised, however, are some less exalted and less independent non-literary functions, such as Courtier, Lie(d)ge and Officer, again in both plays. In addition, the earlier source pays its own respects to the dignity of ordinary trades and professions, with capital letters for Bedell [Beadle], Constable, Constable, Farborough [?], Forrester, Herald, Law, Libbards [?], Page [?], Painter, Parrator [?], Ploughmen, Souldier, War-man. Further, that same source seems to be equally impressed by lowlier characters or occupations, to judge from Begger, Bragart, Butcher, Chimnie-sweepers, Colliers, Cowards, Cuckold, Fooles, Gamster [?], Pedler and even Tapster, Tooth-drawer and Tumbler [?] as well as Vassall.

It also capitalises everyday items and activities (Blood, Bodkin, Boy, Brooch, Candles, Clocks, Cradle, Cup, Dinner, Fann, Fier [?], Flaske, Horne-booke, Housekeeping, Impe, Infant, Man, Milke, Plague, Porridge, Poxe, Razor, Sacks, Sawcers, Shirt, Shop, Suger, Supper) including articles of clothing (Caps, Codpeeces, Gowne, Hat, Placcats [?], Slipper [?], Smocke) and bereavement (Epitaphs, Sorrow, Tombes) and the outside weather or seasons (Frost, Snow, Spring). Both plays capitalise compass-points, with East, North and South; *LLL* adds West. Both plays capitalise Father; *LLL* adds Daughter, Grandam, Grandmother, Graundfather. Both plays have Louer; *LLL* adds Courtship, Swaine and Suters (suitors). Generally, the earlier play is far more concerned with sex, as illustrated by Damsel, Dowrie, Feminine, Lasse, Maide, Nuptiall, Virgin, Virginitie, Votaries [?], Wenches, Wife, Woman, Women. Of course one would expect to find, in both plays, that certain words, such as God, or any titles like King or Queene, begin with capital letters; and this is indeed so, down to such details as Gentleman, Grace, Knight, Lady, Lord, Madame, Maiestie, Maister, Mistris, Prince. But what seems entirely unpredictable and indeed quite unexpected, not to say inexplicable, in two plays printed from the hand of the same playwright, is first of all the apparent function of capital letters and then their proliferation in one playscript and their comparative scarcity in another, only five or six years later. How can this have happened?

Perhaps Shakespeare changed his style completely? More plausibly, the compositors concerned were conforming with current practice; capital letters, though still acceptable in the later 1590s, were less favoured in the 1600s. That would be the simple explanation for the other puzzling feature of

finding capital letters in *Hamlet* 1603-4 after *Love's Labour's Lost* 1598.

If so, we would expect to find a comparable profusion in the *More* manuscript. And we do; it contains no fewer than 35 examples in 147 lines. Further, the system of capitalisation seems the same. Thus *More* has Beefe and Dung; *Love's Labour's Lost* has Mutton. Again, *More* has Brother; both plays have Father. *More* awards a capital to the concept of Bushell; *Love's Labour's Lost* has Hogshead and Measure. There is further correspondence in the capitalisation and spelling of Charg, without the final e; in a capital C for Credit or *More* Credyt; the variant spellings of Country and City; the preponderance of capital C (only), presumably for the reason, as the *More* authorities say², that Shakespeare's small c was unclear. Again, both sources have Lord, Earle, Peace and Wisedome [?], while *More*'s Seriant or Seriaunt (Sergeant) corresponds with *More*'s Corporall.

This last comparison may afford a clear clue to Shakespeare's spelling of uncapitalised words.