

The Language of Capitalization in Shakespeare's First Folio

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The traditional approaches to Elizabethan capitalization—conventional noun groupings and contextual emphasis—fail to deal adequately with the many inconsistencies in the age's practice of capitalization. In addition they do not disclose the Elizabethan use of the capital letter as a linguistic indicator of the various emotional connotations of words. By using a representative sample of 11 of the 36 plays in Shakespeare's first folio, it is possible to show through patterns of capitalization frequency how the compositors of the folio used the capital letter to indicate connotations of emotional charge, elevation, uniqueness, and poetic respectability in a variety of words and word groupings.

When Letters are in vulgar Shapes,
'Tis ten to one the Wit escapes;
But when in Capitals exprest,
The dullest Reader smoaks the Jest:
Or else perhaps he may invent
A better than the Poet meant,
As learned Commentators view
In *Homer* more than *Homer* knew.
Jonathan Swift, "On Poetry: A Rhapsody"

By the eighteenth century, when Swift was jesting about the linguistic effects of capitalization, compositors and poets had a reasonably firm idea of the conventions governing the use of the capital letter. The early seventeenth century, on the other hand, was a transitional and experimental period of English orthography. Late Elizabethan capitalization occupies a gray area between an author's punctuation that clarifies or adds meaning and the subjective whimsey or arcane typographical conventions of compositors who were sometimes short of type. Compositors had great latitude in capitalizing within a somewhat unregulated system that was rapidly changing. The increased use of capitals from Shakespeare's quartos around 1600 to

the first folio in 1623 indicates the growth of a system that culminated with the eighteenth century's practice of capitalizing almost every noun of importance. Working with only some limited conventions to guide them, the compositors of the first folio frequently drew upon their own subjective devices to expand the capital letter into a viable form of visible language.

From the sparse commentary that does exist on Elizabethan capitalization two approaches to the subject, the conventional and the emphatic, emerge. The conventional approach was taken in 1640 by Simon Daines.¹ He attempted to establish an orderly system by listing standard practices which had little linguistic value, such as capitalizing the first letter in a sentence, and by compiling categories of words that must be capitalized, such as titles, particular animals, and religious references. Ironically, the actual printing of Daines's specific rules on capitalization illustrates with a vengeance his subject's chaotic state and the elusive criteria that any analyst of the subject must face. Even with the rules under his nose, the compositor (or Daines) produced many obvious inconsistencies between the theory and practice of seventeenth-century capitalization (Fig. 1). Daines's noun categories have been expanded by A. C. Partridge into a list of twelve general groups of substantives that were normally capitalized in Shakespeare's quartos.²

The emphatic approach, partly dismissed by Partridge, was foreshadowed by Elisha Coles in 1674. Coles, who sometimes viewed orthography from the perspective of the printer rather than the writer, says in concluding his section on capitalization:

Whatsoever words the Author laies any kind of stress of force upon, these he either writes in a different character, or else prefixes a Capital before them, or both. Hence those that think they write nothing but strength of wit and thunderbolts, will scarce vouchsafe you two words together without a Capital. They are indeed so much in fashion, that I reckon this a good Rule to go by, *viz.* Whensoever you are in doubt, whether you had best write a little letter or a great one, be sure you write a great one. For this is the safest hand to erre on.³

In 1911 Percy Simpson, without mentioning Coles, put forward three types of contextual emphasis in which the capital letter was used in Shakespeare's first folio: (1) where emphasis is due to contrast; (2)

where a word has special contextual significance (“But Brutus says, he was Ambitious”); and (3) where there is the “employment of a technical term or the heightened meaning conveyed by a metaphor.”⁴

Although contextual emphasis can explain some unconventional capitalizations, it is a very unreliable guide. Most of Simpson’s illustrations of his principles, for example, can be more easily explained by using Partridge’s more conventional noun groupings. Partridge’s classifications, on the other hand, are of necessity quite general and do not explain why so many of the words which fall into his categories often go uncapitalized in Shakespearean texts. Obviously Elizabethan compositors were either using many other conventions which we have not discovered or, more likely, were simply unsure, as we are today, about whether a specific word merited the connotations that accompanied the capital. Sometimes their decision to capitalize must have been based upon context, but often their feelings about the meaning of a word itself must have directed their actions. If their feelings about a word were compatible with their idea of the emotional significance of the capital letter, they may have capitalized the word. Since the capital letter conveyed feelings—as it still does—of reverence, respect, and the extraordinary, words that corresponded to that idea, often regardless of noun groups or context, were capitalized. As shall be demonstrated in the following pages, a compositor’s decision to use the language of capitalization was often based on the extent to which a word was emotionally charged, whether a word carried extraordinary feelings of elevation, uniqueness, or particularity, or whether it appeared in a high or a low literary genre.

Emotional Charge. An analysis of different capitalization rates of words within a single group can minimize contextual variables while indicating the degree of emotional charge which compositors attributed to them. Thus in a grouping of emotions themselves (emotions are not a class of capitalized substantives) the following frequency of capitalization occurs in eleven plays representatively selected from the first folio:⁵ Remorse (8 occurrences)—0% capitalized, Shame (41)—5%, Pity (25)—12%, Sorrow (39)—13%, Anger (21)—30%, Revenge (19)—37%, Rage (30)—37%, Ambition (20)—65%, Lust (14)—85%. When the comedies are not included, the

forth as our knowledge extends) have first laid in our English Tongue. But now to returne. Concerning the use of the Capitall Letters, therefore take these along with you.

1 Every Treatise, or written speech whatsoever, is to begin with a great letter, that is, to have the first letter of the first word of the Treatise, written or printed, with a Capitall, or great Character, in what hand or impression soever the discourse is to be delivered.

2 The same is to be observed in the beginning of every distinct sentence, or clause. For (as I said before) after every period point must ensue a great letter.

3 The pronoun, or word (I) must alwayes be written with a great letter; so must every proper name, or peculiar denomination of every individuall: as all the Attributes of God Almighty, the names of Angels, Saints, and evill spirits; the titles given by the Heathens to their fained Gods and Goddeses; the names of men and women of all sorts whatsoever; the names of moneths, winds, rivers, Cities, townes, Islands and Kingdoms: the particular name of any peculiar dog, horse, or beast of any kind soever: The first word of every verse, at least Heroique: any letter set for a number, as you had in the beginning of our Orthoepie: Any letter standing for any such, or the abbreviation as we there mentioned.

Lastly, all names or Titles of Magistrates, Arts, Offices, and Dignities, in what respect soever taken. In these, I say, altogether consists the use of Capitall Letters, in all other we use onely the smaller.

Where you may take notice, That in the abbreviations

Figure 1. Examples of inconsistent capitalization from Simon Daines's rules on capitalization in his *Orthoepia Anglicana* (London, 1640).

ations I spake of to be written with **great letters** I included not any such Charactericall abbreviation of a word, as *&* for *and*, *þ* for *the*, *þ* for *that*; and a thousand more commonly occurring, besides what every man hath peculiar to himselfe, which onely experience and practice must make familiar to you: but those which are thus to be distinguished; to wit, when you would abbreviate any word, whether proper name, or other word usfull in such abbreviations, which is to be expressed by the first letter of the word, then are ye to use a **great Letter** in all those **Abbreviations**, otherwise not. For examples, I referre you to our treatise of *Letters in genere*, in the first part of the *Orthographie* here specified, in this little book.

The next caution after the **great Letters** is for *E* finall, or when it falls in the end of a word, that you never omit it, where it ought to be inserted: whether for distinction sake, as in *win*, the verbe, and *wine*, the substantive: or onely to make the precedent vowell long, as in *shrine*: or after *v*, to make it a consonant, which otherwise seeming to be combined with the former vowell in the nature of a diphthong; might so alter the pronounciation, as in *love*, which without the *E* would be sounded like *lou*, in *loud*, so *move*, *live*, and a great many more of the like kinde: or for difference of diverse words ending in *G*, aswell substantives as verbs, as in *ring*, and *range*, &c. which I instanced before.

Or lastly, when in *es*, terminating either verbe or substantive, it ought of right to be put for any of the uses above rehearsed. Because many times as it makes a difference in pronounciation, so

capitalization rates are: Remorse—0%, Shame—6%, Pity—13%, Sorrow—17%, Anger—35%, Revenge—47%, Rage—50%, Ambition—81%, Lust—100%. An obvious pattern of high and low emotions emerges regardless of poetic contexts. The more highly charged emotions are more frequently capitalized. Not until the rise of sentimentalism around 1700 do the softer emotions gain equally heightened status with the heroic emotions. Another example of emotional charge is “murder” and “murderer.” Unless we cynically stretch the category of professional terms to include them, they fall outside normal capitalized noun groups. Yet their capitalization rate is 65% (20 occurrences) in the eleven plays and 93% when the comedies are excluded.

Particularity. The effect on a compositor’s feelings that a word is unique or particular is a much more subtle matter than emotional charge. Though “barke” and “barge” have a higher capitalization rate than “ship,” “mutton” higher than “meat,” and “cottage” higher than “house,” the “particular” words appear so infrequently in the text that their samples are too small to have statistical value. In the previous section we have seen that the capitalization rates of the particular emotions of anger, revenge, rage, ambition, and lust are high. Generic emotional terms are rarely capitalized: Affection(s) (25)—24%, Passion(s) (39)—5%, Humour (8)—0%. Although “passion” is highly charged today and the other two now have very particular meanings, the compositors of the first folio felt them more in the general senses of emotion, feeling, or psychological faculty.

Elevation. The effect of the feeling of heightening cannot be discussed without also considering emotional charge and particularity. An examination of specific words often reveals an interrelationship between these factors. For example, one general category of capitalization encompasses words relating to natural phenomena and geographical terms. In the eleven plays “river” and “stream” occur nineteen times. Their capitalization rates are: River—100%, Stream—7%. River is not only grander or more elevated than stream, but river also has particular associations in Shakespeare with proper names of specific geographical reference. Relative to elevation and emotional charge in the area of natural phenomena, it is interesting

that “rain” is more frequently capitalized than “shower” and “thunder” more frequently than “rain”. Finally, associations with nobility have a heightening influence on the capitalization of objects: Knife (13)—38%, Sword (123)—68%.

Literary Genre. The most striking deviations from the supposed conventions of Shakespearean capitalization appear when the first folio’s capitalization patterns in the comedies are compared with the patterns in the serious plays (the tragedies, the history plays, and the heroic romances of *The Winter’s Tale* and *Cymbeline*). The examples that Partridge used to illustrate his twelve groups of capitalized nouns in the quartos were drawn exclusively from Shakespeare’s tragic literature. If he had used only the comedies of the first folio, his list might have been shorter. A comparison of the rates of capitalization in the comedies and serious plays for words in the class of familial relationships reveals the following: “Brother” in comedies (73)—12%, in serious plays (73)—97%; “Mother” in comedies (9)—33%, in serious plays (62)—95%; “Sister” in comedies (45)—11%, in serious plays (21)—100%. The sharp difference in capitalization of family relationships between the two types of plays may be partly attributable to the fact that the serious plays have many royal relationships. Yet most of the main characters in the comedies are also nobles. Likewise it is not clear whether “gate” has a heightened association with fortification in the serious plays but not in the comedies. In the sample plays “Gate” breaks down: comedies (19)—0%, serious plays (55)—67%. In the category of precious objects “Gold” divides: comedies (27)—11%, serious plays (53)—95%. In the category of religion and reverence “Prayer(s)” breaks down: comedies (7)—0%, serious plays (33)—60%. Yet gold is not less valuable or prayer less reverent in comedy than in tragedy. Although emotional charge and heightening may have an effect on the higher proportion of capitalization in serious plays, there may have developed the following convention in the first folio: When in doubt, capitalize in high genres and don’t capitalize in low genres.⁶ Thus the capital letter became an indicator of heightened poetic value (Fig. 2).

The addition of this broad convention will not, of course, reduce the remaining chaos of Shakespearean capitalization to comfortable order. Some conventions can help clarify textual problems, such as

Merch. Oh had the gods done so, I had not now
 Worthily rearm'd them mercilesse to vs :
 For ere the ships could meet by twice fivē leagues,
 We were encountred by a mighty rocke,
 Which being violently borne vp,
 Our helpfull ship was splitted in the midst ;
 So that, in this vniust diuorce of vs,
 Fortune had left to both of vs alike,
 What to delight in, what to sorrow for,
 Her part, poore soule, seeming as burdened
 With lesser waight, but not with lesler woe,
 Was carried with more speed before the winde,
 And in our sight they three were taken vp
 By Fishermen of *Corinth*, as we thought.
 At length another ship had seiz'd on vs,
 And knowing whom it was their hap to saue,
 Gaue healthfull welcome to their ship-wrackt guests,
 And would haue rest the Fishers of their prey,
 Had not their backe beene very slow of saile ;
 And therefore homeward did they bend their course.
 Thus haue you heard me seuer'd from my blisse,
 That by misfortunes was my life prolong'd,
 To tell sad stories of my owne mishaps.

Duke. And for the sake of them thou sorrowest for,
 Doe me the fauour to dilate at full,
 What haue befallne of them and they till now.

Merch. My yongest boy, and yet my eldest care,
 At eighteene yeeres became inquisitiue
 After his brother ; and importun'd me
 That his attendant, so his case was like,
 Rest of his brother, but retain'd his name,
 Might beare him company in the quest of him :
 Whom whil'st I laboured of a loue to see,
 I hazarded the losse of whom I lou'd.
 Fivē Sommers haue I spent in farthest *Greece*,
 Roming cleane through the bounds of *Asia*,
 And coasting homeward, came to *Ephesus* :
 Hopelesse to finde, yet loth to leaue vnough
 Or that, or any place that harbours men :
 But heere must end the story of my life,
 And happy were I in my timelie death,
 Could all my trauels warrant me they liue.

Cassi. I know that vertue to be in you *Brutus*,
 As well as I do know your outward fauour.
 Well, Honor is the subiect of my Story :
 I cannot tell, what you and other men
 Thinke of this life : But for my single selfe,
 I had as liefse not be, as liue to be
 In awe of such a Thing, as I my selfe.
 I was borne free as *Caesar*, so were you,
 We both haue fed as well, and we can both
 Endure the Winters cold, as well as hee.
 For once, vpon a Rawe and Gustie day,
 The troubled Tyber, chafing with her Shores,
Caesar saide to me, Dar'st thou *Cassius* now
 Leape in with me into this angry Flood,
 And swim to yonder Point ? Vpon the word,
 Accoutred as I was, I plunged in,
 And bad him follow : so indeed he did.
 The Torrent roar'd, and we did buffet it
 With lusty Sinewes, throwing it aside,
 And stemming it with hearts of Controuerfie.
 But ere we could arriue the Point propos'd,
Caesar cride, Helpe me *Cassius*, or I sinke.
 I (as *Aeneas*, our great Ancestor,
 Did from the Flames of Troy, vpon his shoulder
 The old *Anchyses* beare) so, from the waues of Tyber
 Did I the tyred *Caesar* : And this Man,
 Is now become a God, and *Cassius* is
 A wretched Creature, and must bend his body,
 If *Caesar* carelesly but nod on him.
 He had a Feauer when he was in Spaine,
 And when the Fit was on him, I did marke
 How he did shake : Tis true, this God did shake,
 His Coward lippes did from their colour flye,
 And that same Eye, whose bend doth awe the World,
 Did loose his Lustre : I did heare him grone :
 I, and that Tongue of his, that bad the Romans
 Marke him, and write his Speeches in their Bookes,
 Alas, it cried, Giue me some drinke *Titinius*!

Figure 2. A comparison of these two similar passages from Shakespeare's first folio illustrates the different approaches to capitalization in the comedies and the tragedies. Both passages contain serious narratives involving elevated characters with troubles at sea, yet the one from *The Comedy of Errors* (page H1^v), left, has a much smaller number of capitals than the one from *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (page kk1^v). Note especially the differences in "gods" and "story."

choosing between two homonyms or identifying the technical use of a term. Yet capitalization may also provide us with a different type of information about Elizabethan literature. It may reveal not only what a compositor did but how, as a literate *homme moyen sensuel*, he reflected contemporary feelings about the connotations of different words and ideas.

1. *Orthoepia Anglicana*, ed. R. C. Alston, *English Linguistics 1500–1800*, XXXI (1640; facsimile rpt. Menston, Eng.: The Scholar Press, 1967), 76–77.
2. *Orthography in Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska, 1964), pp. 75–78. His list in brief is: personifications and images, names of animals, precious substances, arts and sciences, religions and their institutions, diseases, terms of cosmology and geography, terms of kingship and statecraft, professions and occupations, technical terms, family relationships, and foreign terms.
3. *The Compleat English Schoolmaster*, ed. R. C. Alston, *English Linguistics 1500–1800*, XXVI (1674; facsimile rpt. Menston, Eng.: The Scholar Press, 1967), 107.
4. *Shakespearean Punctuation* (Oxford, 1911), pp. 103–107.
5. All percentages in this paper are derived from a sample of eleven plays in the first folio and are meant to indicate trends and not close approximations of overall percentages for specific words in the whole first folio. The eleven plays (four comedies, four tragedies, and three histories) are: *The Tempest*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *I Henry VI*, *III Henry VI*, *Henry VIII*, *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. For my statistics I have used the old-spelling, first folio *Oxford Shakespeare Concordances* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) still in production. I have not included in my statistics stage directions, items which are not true substantives, some exclamations, and items which are normally capitalized under fixed conventions such as the first word in a sentence.
6. Two of the thirty-six plays in the First Folio do not follow this pattern. An explanation of these exceptions involves a developmental view of the capitalization practices of the different Folio compositors. I am involved in such a study. In relation to the capitalization patterns relevant to this paper, it is clear to me that although the compositors of the Folio differed in their capitalization habits, they all capitalized with greater frequency in the serious plays than in the comedies.