

GATHERINGS SIGNED 'W': A FOOTNOTE TO SAYCE

HISTORIANS OF PRINTING and editors of printed texts are periodically faced with undated or misdated publications or with publications whose printer, seller or place of publication is uncertain, either because one or all of them is not announced in the publication itself or because the announced printer, seller or place is doubtful, palpably wrong or purely fictitious. Familiarity with publications with imprints of unquestionable veracity may well allow such historians and editors to date or locate a doubtful volume on the basis of its general appearance: it may 'look' French (or provincial French, or Rouen) or it may 'look' like a Foulis Press book of the late 1780s, and so on. Or they may be aware that certain compositorial practices are typical of certain places or periods: the presence of press figures, for example, will suggest a British publication of the eighteenth century, and the form of the press figures may suggest late or early century and perhaps even the identity of the printer. Clearly a record assigning particular compositorial practices to particular places and periods would be of immense value to historians and editors. Giles Barber had written about catchwords and press figures in 1960,¹ but the major work of codification is R.A. Sayce's 1966 article, 'Compositorial Practices and the Localization of Printed Books, 1530-1800'.² Sayce's article was reprinted in 1979 as a memorial tribute,³ with 'addenda and corrigenda' based principally on his own notes. Otherwise there appears to have been no explicit attempt to add to his findings, which were based on an examination of just over 2800 books, a sample which he acknowledged as being 'too small to enable really firm conclusions to be drawn'.(p.2) Despite the seven pages of addenda and corrigenda it is likely that many additions and qualifications could be made on the basis of different samples. I think it uncontested that a more comprehensive record of compositorial practices is desirable — building on Sayce's invaluable codification — especially for the help it would be in localizing piratical and clandestine publications. That more comprehensive record will be attained, I suggest, when users of early printed books familiarize themselves with Sayce and report to one of the bibliographical journals their own observations, a procedure which I urge them to undertake.

The purpose of the present note is to add further to Sayce's comments on the letter W used as a signature. As descriptive bibliographers know, in the era of printing by hand, gatherings were signed with letters of the alphabet, running from A to Z but omitting J, U and W. The use of U *instead of* V is common, especially in British publications; the use of J instead of I is seemingly unknown; and the use of W, making a 24-letter alphabet, is exceedingly rare.

In 1966 Sayce reported that 'W occurs in only one case, the 1785 edition of Ames's *Typographical antiquities*. This work itself, however, mentions an undated English book of the sixteenth century with the same feature.'(p.19) A footnote draws attention to two other sixteenth-century [English] examples from the *Pforzheimer Catalogue*, and the reprint (p.49/19:10-14) adds, on the authority of P.J. Wallis, an English book of 1591. Ames's eccentricity apart, W appears to

be confined to a handful of English books of the sixteenth century. Sayce's conclusion was that 'It is perhaps not unreasonable to infer that W is not likely to occur except in English books.' (The reprint also has a cryptic reference, derived from Sayce's own notes, to 'an inserted extra sheet in a book printed at Speyer in 1581'. I have taken this observation to refer to a sheet inserted following the gathering V and signed W as a guide to the binder; consequently I have not regarded it as an example of compositorial practice.)

W was, however, used also in at least one continental printing of the early eighteenth century, the first three volumes of an octavo edition of *Bishop [Gilbert] Burnet's History of his own time*, dated 1725, the year following the publication in London of Vol.I of the authorised folio edition.⁴ One immediate problem is the imprint of these three volumes: it reads 'LONDON, Printed for the Company of Booksellers', but it is false, thus highlighting the potential danger of drawing conclusions from volumes which themselves have imprints designed to deceive. This danger Sayce acknowledged by excluding from his survey any volumes 'which seemed to be doubtful'. (p.2) The title pages of all three volumes carry the 'TJ' monogram of the bookseller Thomas Johnson of The Hague, where, it seems likely, they were printed.⁵ That they were printed outside England is implied by the fact that they were unauthorised, and the likelihood of The Hague as the place of printing is reinforced by a compositorial practice — the use of the asterisk to sign preliminary gatherings — which Sayce regards as 'specially characteristic of Holland' (p.3), being found at The Hague between 1599 and 1764.⁶

There are, in fact, two separate octavo editions of 1725 with the 'TJ' monogram and the false London imprint. One is represented by sets in the Bodleian Library⁷ and the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds;⁸ disregarding preliminaries, which vary, the volumes collate:

I: A-V⁸ W⁸ X-2G⁸ 2H⁶

II: 2I-2V⁸ 2W⁸ 2X-3T⁸

III: 3V-4S⁸ 4T⁴ 4V⁸ 4W⁸ 4X-4Z⁸ 5A⁴. [NB: no 3W]

The other is represented by sets (both on large paper) in Monash University Library⁹ and the Brotherton Library;¹⁰ again disregarding preliminaries, the volumes collate:

I: A-V⁸ W⁸ X-2G⁶

II: 2H-2V⁸ 2W⁸ 2X-3O⁸ 3P⁶

III: 3R-3V⁸ 3W⁸ 3X-4P⁸.

If the use of W is not confined to England and Sayce's inference therefore needs to be qualified, the number of observations is probably still too small to allow of any firm conclusions. W may be so rare that a larger number of observations may be impossible; being so rare, it may have to be considered only in conjunction with other evidence. W is peculiar, however, in a study of compositorial practices: it is not a case of there being variant ways of representing the signature, but simply that the use of W marks a departure from a well-established convention. The implication is perhaps that the presence of W points to somebody (a com-

positor or pressman?) unfamiliar with the convention (perhaps even because engaged in an illicit activity), so that its value as an indicator of locale may be negligible. In 'The Bookseller's Advertisement, on this new Edition' prefaced to both editions Johnson certainly bemoans the fact that 'I have laboured with unskilfull and incorrect workmen', but whether their lack of skill and correctness was the source of the W signatures would be impossible to determine.¹¹

A further peculiarity of W is that its appearance might be expected to be confined to volumes printed in those ('Germanic') countries whose alphabet contained it. On the other hand its use might be determined by the nationality of the user: migrating workmen would be expected to take at least some of their conventions with them. A well-documented example of the migrating workman and his alien convention is John Terrill, who alone is responsible for the only press figures used at the Cambridge University Press in the period 1697-1712¹² — i.e. the press figures are not a characteristic of Cambridge but of a London pressman who was employed there from November 1701 to May 1703. Other 'sports' may be explained in the same way, but it will be only by the reporting of the less frequent phenomena that they will be identified for what they are.

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NOTES

¹ 'Catchwords and press figures at home and abroad', *The Book Collector* 9(1960), 301-7.

² *The Library*, 5th series, 21(1966), 1-45.

³ By the Oxford Bibliographical Society as its Occasional Publication No.13.

⁴ Vol.II of the London folio edition was published in 1734, and Vols.IV-VI of the octavo in the same year: W is not used in them.

⁵ On Johnson and his career see H.L. Ford, *Shakespeare 1700-1740; a collation of the editions and separate plays, with some account of T. Johnson and R. Walker* (Oxford, 1935), especially pp.46-56.

⁶ And elsewhere in Holland between 1575 and 1799. In England, by comparison, the asterisk is rare after 1590: Sayce records instances in 1672, 1687, 1710 and 1733.

⁷ Vet. B4 f.195-7.

⁸ Special Collections, Mod.History P-7.00.

⁹ SW *942.06 B964 H.c.

¹⁰ Same call number as other set.

¹¹ The publications of Johnson that I have looked at have been predominantly his editions of English plays, none of which are long enough to reach signature W; so I cannot say that W was typical of him.

¹² D.F. McKenzie, 'Press-figures: a case-history of 1701-1703', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 3, no.1 (1960), 32-46.

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