Filling in the Blanks in Early Modern Drama

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ABSTRACT This essay examines the staging of blank documents in early modern drama for the first time. It demonstrates the prevalence of blanks as props in over two dozen plays and argues for the blank as an important but neglected aspect of early modern textual culture. The permissiveness of the blank is shown to be dangerous within political dramas, both onstage and in real life. The essay also probes the theoretical implications of the blank as a symbol of literary interpretation itself. Attention is paid to historical and political contexts as well as minute bibliographical and typographical detail in a range of plays from Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, Shirley, and others. **KEYWORDS**: props in Elizabethan drama; stage business; printed forms; blanks in typography

> Omission to do what is necessary
> Seals a commission to a blank of danger.
> *Troilus and Cressida*, 3.3.232–33[1]

> [B]lanks leave open the connection between textual perspectives
> . . . they induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text.
> Wolfgang Iser[2]

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1. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. David Bevington, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd ser. (Walton-on-Thames, U.K., 1998). All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Arden third series editions. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from Ben Jonson are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge, 2012). Quotations from Thomas Middleton are taken from *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford, 2010). All other plays are referenced with their Short-Title Catalogue (STC) or Wing number from their facsimiles on *Early English Books Online*, https://search.proquest.com/eebo, denoted with an asterisk. In these cases original spelling is maintained, with *v/u*, *j/i*, and long *s* silently modernized.

2. "Interaction between Text and Reader," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, N.J., 1980), 106–19 at 112, original emphasis. This essay is extracted from Iser's longer work *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, first published in German as *Der Akt des Lesens* (Munich, 1976).

THE FIRST QUOTATION ABOVE, from Patroclus urging Achilles to "rouse" himself, relies on a complex interplay of absence and presence. Achilles's absence from the battlefield threatens to undo his reputation, as Ulysses has just reminded him, while Ajax takes Achilles's place as the competitor of Hector in single combat. In the martial environment of the Greek camp, Patroclus's image is a curiously textual one—commissions that conferred certain powers on their holders were common documents of authority in early modern England, as well as regular stage properties. The danger posed by a *blank* commission, complete with authorizing seal, is that it fails to limit the powers being conferred. Peter Stallybrass has said that "the history of printing is crucially a history of the 'blank.'"[3] Yet how this inflects our understanding of early modern drama remains, like the story of Viola's fictitious sister, a "blank" (*Twelfth Night*, 2.4.110). While it may be tempting to leave the following pages empty as a metatextual commentary, the space is more productively used, to showcase the many ways blanks intervened in early modern political, social, and literary life. Drawing on examples both metaphorical and literal, genuine and counterfeit, this essay argues for the blank as an important imaginative space in literature of the period, one that we have failed to recognize due to its very lack of content—a discursive black hole at the center of the early modern textual universe.[4]

Omission—seals—blank—danger: these are the compass points among which this essay navigates. Textual authority, under the hand and seal of an author, underpins early modern governance to a tremendous degree. Since over time it became impossible for English monarchs to sign and seal every document issued in their names, an administrative system had grown up—almost literally—around the sovereign to deal with the documentary demands of ruling a nation.[5] Hence the Privy Seal had morphed from a personal object to an office with a dedicated staff of more than fifty, while the Great Seal had evolved its own separate sphere of influence.[6] Who had access to these quasi-numinous objects was rigorously controlled by protocols and officials, yet there was always room for error and abuse, or to use Patroclus's word,

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3. Peter Stallybrass, "'Little Jobs': Broadsides and the Printing Revolution," in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Boston, 2007), 315–41 at 340. See also Peter Stallybrass, "Printing and the Writing Revolution," in *Explorations in Communication and History*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (Abingdon, U.K., 2008), 111–18. I am indebted to the work of Stallybrass on the history of jobbing printing and the prevalence of forms with blanks that accompanied the very earliest iterations of the printing press. I engage with this work in more detail below.

4. I am grateful to both Laurie Maguire and Jonathan Sawday for corresponding with me in relation to their own forthcoming work on early modern blanks and gaps while this piece was in development.

5. See Angela Andreani, *The Elizabethan Secretariat and the Signet Office: The Production of State Papers, 1590–1596* (Abingdon, U.K., 2017).

6. Andreani cites figures of fifty-five to sixty-five for the royal secretariat in the 1590s; *The Elizabethan Secretariat*, 6.

"danger."[7] Acknowledging the complex chains of command in early modern England, this essay probes the fissures and gaps that are opened up by texts in a state of incompletion. It brings together both real-world exemplars such as the Spanish blank plot with instances drawn from across the breadth of early modern drama, which staged scenes revolving around blank documents with surprising frequency.[8] If handwriting is an absent presence standing in for the author of a given text, blank spaces within documents are the opposite—a present absence. They productively complicate distinctions between print and manuscript, bringing the two into direct contact and occasionally collision on the early modern page. A blank can reveal the multiple stages of composition for documents from licenses (King James V) to love letters (Falstaff), exposing the varied hands that contribute to their contents, quite apart from the authorizing signature affixed. Like the proverbial "blank check," blanks contain nothing yet promise everything.

The power of the blank lies in its potentiality, and this is precisely what makes blank documents (and blanks within documents) so attractive to early modern dramatists as a plot device. In what follows I argue that the blank becomes an important signifier in a wide range of early modern plays, precisely because of its ability to call signification in question. Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, Shirley, Cavendish—all these writers resort to the blank at various moments of textual tension. This can have a gendered dimension, as when Falstaff is presumed to have "a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names" (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2.1.66–67). Alternatively, its use can be more politically motivated, such as Richard II's order that "Our substitutes at home shall have blank charters" (*Richard II*, 1.4.48). In city comedy the legalistic dimension is highlighted by Jonson at the culmination of *Epicoene*, while the poetry of John Donne even gives the blank a theological inflection:

> Men do not stand
> In so ill case here, that God hath with his hand
> Signd kings blanc Chartres to kill whom they hate.[9]

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7. See "A Warrant to Lord Chancellor Ellesmere for restraint of passing Bills," for Elizabeth complaining of the "great inconvenience" of warrants not being processed fully according to protocol, topped with a large holograph signature. For a similar complaint signed by James, see "The Kings Warrant restraining the passing of Bills." Respectively, MS EL 6237 and MS EL6238, Egerton family papers, box 144, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Rare materials from the Huntington are indicated with "Huntington Library, [call number]," while rare materials from the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C., are indicated with "Folger [call number]."

8. Twenty-six plays are touched on in this essay, and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

9. John Donne, "Satyre 3," *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 3, *The Satyres*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington, Ind., 2016), 93, lines 89–91. With thanks to the @BritishVirginia Twitter account for helping me to source the exact quotation during the 2020 pandemic.

The blank in its myriad forms offers an opportunity to redefine what is at stake when we consider the relation between authorship and authority. When both an unwritten letter with a manuscript signature and a printed form awaiting filling in by hand are designated as "blanks," this gives some idea of the range of meanings available to authors, quite aside from the potential for punning on "verse" or "point."

To say that early modern culture was text-based is something of a truism. Interpersonal relationships were increasingly governed by documents, be they letters of credit, challenges, bonds to keep the public peace, libels, poesies, or laws. What happens if we shift our attention from what is present in such documents to what is absent, *in potentia*? I begin by exploring the question of what a blank is, followed by an analysis of the more theoretical challenges offered by the blank. The second half of the essay is given over to literary exemplars, with a particular focus on the frequent staging of blanks in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. This proliferation of blanks helps us to make sense of early moderns' changing relationship with the written word, shedding new light on fundamental questions by introducing non-text into the study of early modern textualities. I seek to theorize the power of absence within a documentary culture that has hitherto been primed to focus on presence.

What Is—and Is Not—a Blank?

In his survey of early modern letter writers and their conventions, Jonathan Gibson explains his notion of "significant space": "All of these regulations amount effectively to the same thing: the requirement that socially superior addressees be honoured with as much blank paper as possible."[10] When a letter was signed, the relationship between the signature and the blank space surrounding it signified in and of itself—the more space that was left, the more respect was being shown. Blankness means something within early modern textual communities. Considering the excellent work already done in this area, my focus here is on the use of blanks *within* documents, as opposed to blank spaces *around* text.[11] By narrowing the focus to blank spaces that were supposed to be completed, I want to show the ways this opens the door to a space of textual instability that borders on postmodern. Rather than seeking to fill in the blanks, I want to pay attention to these blanks as meaningful in their

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10. Jonathan Gibson, "Significant Space in Manuscript Letters," *The Seventeenth Century* 12 (1997): 1–10 at 2.

11. See also Laksmi Cohen-MacGregor [a.k.a. Randall McLeod], "On the Typography of Blank Pages," *Chicago Review* 58, no. 1 (2013): 1–4; Jonathan Gibson, "Casting Off Blanks: Hidden Structures of Meaning in Early Modern Paper Books," in *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices, 1580–1730*, ed. James Daybell and Peter Hinds (Basingstoke, U.K., 2010), 208–28; and A. R. Braunmuller, "Accounting for Absence: The Transcription of Space," in *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Binghamton, N.Y., 1993), 47–56.

own right. I present here the briefest of overviews to illustrate the blank's ubiquity in early modern culture as well as its vulnerability to abuse.[12]

Denoting a space left empty by design, which is nevertheless supposed to be filled in, a *blank* is both there and not there. Etymologically the term has a suggestive link with the "blank" of a target, the central white spot to be aimed at—simultaneously blank/blanc and intended to be occupied. *Point-blank* is used for the aim and range of a cannon as well as other early modern ballistics. There is also the disc of metal awaiting stamping to become a coin, without which stamp it carries no intrinsic value—this too is known as a blank.[13] Blanks meet hands in the many spaces left in documents to be filled in. These are usually, but not always, printed spaces; or rather, unprinted. As Lisa Gitelman puts it, with reference to a later time period, the printer's ink is "paradoxically what made most blanks blank."[14]

Cultural familiarity with the blank is not surprising if we consider the range of documents that required filling out at the time. Bills of mortality are printed with spaces left for the numbers of the dead from the early seventeenth century.[15] Printed imperial mandates in Germany from the early sixteenth century have blank spaces for names and details of military contributions.[16] Blank spaces are left not only for names but also for pronouns to denote gender in documents as diverse as papal indulgences of the early sixteenth century and servants' indentures from the late seventeenth century.[17] Ale-house licenses, ships' certificates, receipts, loans, and passports all required multiple spaces to be completed at various points in the chain of composition. Figure 1 reprints an early example of a printed ale-house license, complete with uncomplete entries.[18] The accompanying "*Articles to be observed*" include a provision for cost control that is similarly left open: "That he shall not brew in his

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12. Preliminary thoughts on the blank can also be found in the present author's contribution to the Folger Shakespeare Library's *The Collation* research blog, "Sign Here Please: _____ Blank Forms from the Folger Collection," March 30, 2017, https://collation .folger.edu/2017/03/sign-here-please/. Frances Maguire surveys a broader range of administrative paperwork, including many different types of blank, in "Bonds of Print and Chains of Paper: Rethinking Print Culture and Social Formation in Early Modern England, c.1550–c.1700" (PhD diss., University of York, 2017).

13. *Oxford English Dictionary* [hereafter *OED*], s.v. "blank, *n*.," last modified 1989, https://oed.com/view/Entry/19884.

14. Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, N.C., 2014), chap. 1: "A Short History of _____," 21–52 at 23.

15. Examples include *STC 16743.5 (1609) and STC 16743.7 (1621) [Huntington Library, 69583].

16. Folger 269–696b (1505); Folger X.d.755 (1512). For this and subsequent Folger holdings, see also Dunne, "Blank Forms from the Folger Collection."

17. Folger V.b.16 (1682/3), available to be viewed via LUNA: https://luna.folger.edu /luna/servlet/s/c6bhs8; Huntington Library, 494536. See also Laura Gowing, "Girls on Forms: Apprenticing Young Women in Seventeenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 55 (2016): 447–73.

18. Suffolk (England), *Suff. ss. memorandum that the* [*blank*] *day of* [*blank*] ([London], [ca. 1625]; STC 23424.3). Huntington Library, 53379.

house, but take his drinke from the Brewer where it may be had, and the best to be but at _____ the barrell, and the small at _____ the barrell." Names, dates, locations, and prices all remain fluid and unfixed until they are filled in.

The phenomenon of the blank is not limited to printed documents.[19] A hand-written license from 1600 bears the signature of King James VI of Scotland, but the document leaves blank not only the date but also the crucial detail of its duration: "during the space of _____ moneths."[20] It is notable that the king's signature is not the final stage of preparing the document, as we might assume. The manuscript alteration of some printed forms, furthermore, complicates any neat distinction between print and manuscript. A printed receipt at the Folger includes manuscript modifications, with "in the Ward" struck through, and "Collector" amended to "Collectors."[21] Such documents can also even call into question scholarly norms of dating: is a form printed pre-1688 but filled out in 1690 to be dated according to its printing or its use? In an extreme example, the printed details of "*Anno Regni Regis Domini nostri* JACOBI *Secundi*" had to be scored out in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, with "and in the third year of the reigne of our Sovereigne Lord and Lady King William and Queen Mary over England" added by hand underneath. This comes from a ship's certificate in Antigua that describes itself at the bottom as "*Form of a Certificate for a Ship that hath produced a Certificate in the Plantations of Bond given in* England, *to return to* England, Wales, *or* Berwick *only*."[22] While there is a larger story to be told about the proliferation of such paperwork, my focus here is on the ways in which a blank form's utility can quickly slide toward the political. Blanks open up various interpretive cruxes that are all the more relevant within a literary context, where not only words but also gaps and silences require careful decoding.

When it comes to literature, blank and verse go hand in hand. However, while the development of early modern drama is synonymous with blank verse, on closer inspection it appears that for writers of the time, the term *blank* is more often associated with printed forms than with verse form. Take the following small sample:

> For him, I think not on him. For his thoughts,
> Would they were blanks rather than filled with me.
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> Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 3.1.101–2

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19. On scribal blanks, see also Naomi Tadmor, "The Settlement of the Poor and the Rise of the Form in England, *c*.1662–1780," *Past and Present*, no. 236 (2017): 43–97 at 54; Frances Maguire, "Bonds of Print."

20. Folger X.d.70, available to be viewed via LUNA: https://luna.folger.edu/luna /servlet/s/6in8fq.

21. Folger X.d.550 (1689), available to be viewed via LUNA: https://luna.folger.edu /luna/servlet/s/vku421.

22. Folger X.d.582 (1685?), original italics.

Suff. ff. Memorandum that the   *day of*
Anno Dom.

in the Countie aforefaid, vpon his Recognifance acknowledged according to the forme of the Statute in that cafe made and prouided, is Licenfed, afigned and allowed by

Iuftices of the Peace of the faid Countie, to keepe a common Victualling and Ale-houfe, in

aforefaid in the houfe wherein he now dwelleth, vntill the Sefsions of the Peace, to be holden next after Eafter, next enfuing : fo as in the meane time he doe obferue and keepe the Articles hereunder fpecified. In witnefse whereof, the faid Iuftices haue caufed the common Seale, by his Maieftie, for this purpofe fpecially afigned, to be hereunto fet the day and yeere firft aboue written.

Articles to be obferued.

THat he fuffer no neighbors children or feruants, nor any dwelling in the fame Towne to be tipling in his houfe.

That none be fuffered to ripple in his houfe in any day, aboue one houre.

That none be fuffered to tipple in his houfe on the Sabbaoth and feftiual dayes at the time of Sermons, or Seruice, nor any time after nine of the clocke at night.

That if any vagabonds or fufpicious perfons come to his houfe, he fhall acquaint the Officers with it, And fo if any goods be offered in his houfe to be fold by any.

That he fuffer no Diceing, Carding, or other play in his houfe.

That he fuffer no drunkennefse, or other difsolute diforder to be in his houfe, and if any happen to bee, to acquaint the Conftables of the Towne with it, that the offenders may be punifhed.

That he fhall not brew in his houfe, but take his drinke from the Brewer where it may be had, and the beft to be but at   the barrell, and the fmall at   the barrell.

That he draw out his drinke by the Ale-quart or pinte, & not by iugges or cuppes, and fell the beft after the rate of three pence the Ale-gallon, And the worft after the rate of two pence the gallon, And that if he muft needs brew himfelfe, to make it fo, as hee may fell it at the price aforefaid.

That he fuffer no flefh to be drefsed, or vttered in his houfe, vpon dayes prohibited.

FIGURE 1. Suffolk (England), *Suff. ss. memorandum that the* [blank] *day of* [blank] ([London], [ca. 1625]). Huntington Library, 53379.

To publications: ha' your deed drawn presently,
And leave a blank to put in your feoffees.
                                    Jonson, *The Devil Is an Ass*, 3.5.59–60

Here are blank warrants of all dispositions.
                                    Middleton, *The Widow*, 1.1.67

Throw him the blanke . . . *Melantius*, write in that thy choice
My seale is at it.
                        Beaumont and Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy*[23]

Blank documents, or blanks in documents, are arguably the primary referent for the term *blank* in the period. This makes sense when we consider that the phrase *blank verse* requires the modifying noun *verse* to clarify meaning. Without this, *blank* still contained the dual meaning of "target" and "space for writing," but by the late sixteenth century the latter was in the ascendant. Taking the plays of Shakespeare as a sample, we have six usages of *blank* in the sense of target,[24] whereas there are nine usages indicating an empty space.[25] Meanwhile the word is accompanied by *verse* in only three instances.[26] A cursory search for the term on Martin Mueller's Shakespeare His Contemporaries database leads to as many instances of *blank* in reference to empty space as it does to point blank and blank verse combined.[27] James Shirley's *Changes, or Love in a Maze* (1632) even offers a fanciful etymology for blank verse tied directly to the material blank form, in this case a legal writ. In describing how best to compose a sonnet, Goldsworth decries the use of adjectives, likening their overuse to "[w]rits, that are first made, and after fild. / Thence first came up the title of blancke verse" (fig. 2).[28] The character then asks the provocative question "You know Sir, what blancke signifies?"—a question to which early modern studies has yet to provide a satisfactory answer. What is noticeable across all of these examples is just how unexceptional the use of the blank is; characters casually resort to blanks without the need for explanation or justification. Like letters, commissions, or pardons, blanks were a

23. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maides Tragedy* (London, 1619; STC 1677), act 5, sigs. K3v–K4r.

24. *Hamlet*, 4.1.42; *2 Henry VI*, 4.7.23; *Merry Wives of Windsor*, 3.2.30; *Othello*, 3.4.129; *Winter's Tale*, 2.3.5; I also include here *King Lear*'s "The true blank of thine eye" (1.1.160), although this is somewhat ambiguous.

25. *Coriolanus*, 5.2.11; *Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2.1.66–70; *Richard II*, 1.4.48, 2.1.249–51; *Troilus and Cressida*, 3.3.232–33, 4.5.82; *Twelfth Night*, 2.4.110, 3.1.102; *Hamlet*, 3.2.214.

26. *As You Like It*, 4.1.29; *Hamlet*, 2.2.324; *Much Ado About Nothing*, 5.2.34.

27. http://classify.at.northwestern.edu/corpussearch/pubsearch, accessed December 2022.

28. James Shirley, *Changes, or Love in a Maze* (London, 1632; STC 22437), 23 (sig. D4v). Huntington Library, 69452.

Love in a Maze.   23

Cap. Adjectives, would you have a Poem without
Adjectives? they are the flowers, the grace of al our language:
A well chosen Epithete doth give new soule
To fainting Poesie, and makes every verse
A bride, with Adjectives we baite our lines,
When we doe fish for Gentlewomens loves,
And with their sweetnesse catch the nibling eare
Of amorous Ladies, with the musicke of
These ravishing Nownes, we charme the silken Tribe,
And make the Gallant melt with apprehension
Of the rare word : I will maintain t against
A bundle of Grammarians, in Poetry,
The Substantive it selfe, cannot subsist
Without an Adjective.   *Gol.* But for all that,
Those words would sound more full, me thinks, that are not
So larded, and if I might counsell you,
You should compose a Sonnet cleane without e'm :
A row of stately Substantives, would march
Like *Switzers*, and beare all the field before e'm;
Carry their weight, shew faire like Deeds enrold,
Not Writs, that are first made, and after fild.
Thence first came up the title of blancke verse,
You know Sir, what blancke signifies ? when the sense
First framed, is tyed with Adjectives like points,
And could not hold together without wedges :
Hang't tis pedanticke, vulgar Poetry,
Let children when they versifie, sticke here,
And there these pidling words for want of matter:
Poets write Masculine numbers.
    Cap. You have given me a pretty hint, tis new.
    Gol. And will bee gratefull,
My daughter will affect it much the better,
And twill be honour, if shee be the first,
To whom so choice a Poem is presented.
I wish you well Sir.   *Exit.*
    Cap. You oblige my service,
I will bestow these verses o'my footman;

                                                    Theyle

FIGURE 2. James Shirley, *Changes, or Love in a Maze* (London, 1632), 23 (sig. D4r). Huntington Library, 69452.

regular feature of the early modern textual economy, just one more document at an author's disposal.

Why this matters in the larger culture of early modern England comes down to how that blank is filled in. The danger of the blank is potently illustrated by an incident from James's Scottish court in 1592 known as the Spanish blanks plot. This involved a group of Catholic lords intent on ousting King James in the aftermath of his marriage to Anne of Denmark. They had been in communication with the Spanish about an invasion, and to that end had readied a set of documents to be sent to Spain, which were found in the possession of George Ker. What was shocking about these documents was not their contents, but the absence thereof, as blank sheets with the signatures of the nobles were discovered awaiting completion with whatever the Spanish invaders might require.[29] These letters were to act as a carte blanche; their very lack of detail offered a direct threat to the safety of the sovereign. As for the moniker "the Spanish blanks plot," it is clear that the association with blanks was contemporaneous, as can be seen from the historical account describing the traitors and "the cryme thay war summonit for, foundit upoun the blancs."[30] The King's Commissioners met in Edinburgh in November 1593 to decide their fate, but the conspirators were shown mercy by James, and their blanks were "to remain aboleist [abolished] and in oblevioun, and the same to be null."[31] No explanation is given about how a blank is rendered "null."

In 1601, there was yet another case of treasonous blanks, this time in the form of the Great Seal of Scotland itself. James Daybell observes that the "danger of pre-signed copies was of course forgery," reporting,

> Richard Idelle, a servant to the scrivener John Savage, was examined concerning the blanks letters with the great seal of Scotland that were discovered in his desk. Idelle confessed that "his maister John Savage hath vsed to make theis Blankes for the space of three yeares last past. And that his said maister before his death did make divers of the said Blankes for mr Robert Sauage Ironmonger, for Mr Nicholas Pero[n], for Mr deputie Hanger and for Richard Marcoll. And that Mr Hangar hath the deal engraven in wood."[32]

29. W. B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge, 1997), 14.

30. *Historie and Life of King James the Sext*, Bannatyne Club 13 (Edinburgh, 1825 [from an MS of 1526]), 294. Patterson notes that the original author of this history appears to be one of the commissioners themselves; *King James VI and I and the Reunion of Christendom*, 15.

31. *Historie and Life of King James the Sext*, 294.

32. James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635* (Houndmills, U.K., 2012), 97, quoting CP 88/166 (October 21, 1601), Cecil Papers, Hatfield House Archives, Hatfield, U.K., https://www.proquest.com/cecilpapers/docview/1858034948.

I would suggest that the *deal* in the last line may be a transcription error for *seal*, as it appears that Savage the scrivener had easy access to the creation of these blanks over the course of years, suggesting perhaps he possessed a counterfeit seal on top of his other crimes. What is more important is the persistent threat to security offered by these various versions of Shakespeare's "blank of danger." An antisignature of sorts, the blank appears to endorse details that do not yet exist. Instead of locking the contents of a document in place, blanks open up infinite and dangerous possibilities. These examples from the Scottish court show how even empty space could contain treason.

∾ **Theorizing the Blank**

In the 1960s, when Wolfgang Iser sought to describe the interactions between texts and readers, he looked for a term for the work that a text invites a reader to do when making sense of disparate narrative fragments. In English, this became "an indeterminate, constitutive blank, which underlies all processes of interaction," representing for Iser the very core of what makes narrative tick. He goes on: "The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves. Hence, the structured blanks of the text stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader." Blanks ask to be filled in by readers, through a process whereby they "leave open the connection between textual perspectives, and . . . induce the reader to perform basic operations *within* the text."[33] This is meant metaphorically, but in fact the same ideas find far more literal expression in English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One neat example comes from the text of *Arch's of Triumph*, published in the wake of James's royal progress through London in 1604.[34] When we meet the first description of the "Device called Londinium," we encounter the following curious direction:

> So that in all the descriptions, where mention is to bee made of Heights,
> Breadths, or any other Commensurable proportions, you shall find
> them left thus—with a blancke, because we wish you rather to apply
> them to the Scale your selfe, then by setting them downe, to call either
> your skill or iudgement in question.[35]

This can be seen in figure 3, describing the Italian Arch.[36] The implied reader here is far more active than even Iser posits, intervening directly on the page. Clearly the idea of blanks to be filled in is well enough established by 1604 to be taken for granted by printer John Windet. Iser's wider point is about how blanks stimulate the reader to

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33. Iser, "Interaction between Text and Reader," 109, 111–12, emphasis original.
34. Stephen Harrison, *The Arch's of Triumph* (London, 1604; STC 12863). Huntington Library, 61302.
35. Harrison, *Arch's of Triumph*, sig. C1v.
36. Harrison, *Arch's of Triumph*, sig. Dr.

perform cognitive and interpretive work; the blank becomes a metaphor for the act of literary interpretation itself.

More recently, in her book *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*, Lisa Gitelman brings together research on the blank for a chapter entitled "A Short History of _____ ." While she stresses the importance of the blank over time, her focus is on a late nineteenth-century U.S. context in which blanks "may have worked to structure knowledge and instantiate culture." She draws attention to the fact that printed forms act as

> the site of surplus meanings otherwise left out by the history of communication as well as by "print culture studies" or "the history of the book." These last two scholarly subfields are usually organized around accounts of authors, editors, booksellers, publishers, and readers: cohorts notably missing from the world of blanks.

The idea of surplus meanings resonates strongly with Iser's "process of ideation," with the added advantage that Gitelman uses actual rather than metaphorical blanks. She relates blank forms not only to ideas of state formation but even to the internalized structures of contemporary subjectivity: "More clearly than other forms of printing, preprinted blank forms help triangulate the modern self in relation to authority."[37] While I agree with much of this, I submit that these ideas need to be predated by several centuries.

Within early modern studies, there has been little work published on the use of blanks, despite their prominence. Stallybrass has done the most to show the prevalence of blanks in any serious history of printing, pointing out that the first products of the printing press of both Gutenberg and Caxton were blanks.[38] Where Stallybrass thinks of the *blank* as a printed official document in need of filling in, Tiffany Stern uses the same term to denote a "fake" within early modern theatrical practice, used onstage as a prop in place of a real document. In her discussion of detachable stage documents such as letters and proclamations, she creates a separate category for papers that were never intended to be read onstage and therefore do not have to be filled in: "They were, in the terminology of that time and later, 'blanks': documents that were not genuine, lacking real content, but that resembled written scrolls in appearance."[39] However, as the dramatic examples in the next section demonstrate, early moderns had no such straightforward understanding of the *blank*, a term that

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37. Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 24, 25, 49.
38. Stallybrass, "'Little Jobs,'" 316ff. I have subsequently had the good fortune to read the PhD thesis of Frances Maguire, "Bonds of Print," which establishes the ubiquity of preprinted forms, although this is as yet unpublished.
39. Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009), 188. Stern's example for contemporary usage comes from an actor in the 1770s proclaiming "a mere blank!" when his stage letter is opened and revealed to be empty of content (179).

The Italians Pegme ſtood in Gracious-ſtreete.

HE ſecond *Triumphall Arch* was erected by the *Italians* : the coſt theirs : the Inuention their owne : It tooke vp the whole breadth of *Gracious-ſtreete* (on which it ſtood) being —— foote : the height of it was —— foote. The lower parte of this *Building*, was a large ſquare, garniſhed with foure great *Corinthia Columnes* : In the midſt of which ſquare, was cut out a faire and a Spacious hie gate, Arched, being —— foote in the *Perpen-dicular-line*, and —— in the *Ground-line* : directly ouer the gate were aduaunced the Armes of the *Kingdome*, the Supporters whereof were fairely cut out to the life.

On the top of this firſt ſquare (beeing flat) was erected another Square which bare in the fore ſide foure more leſſer *Columnes*, on which were all the garniſhments belonging to thoſe pillars : as namely, the architriue frize and Corniſh, on which Square was placed a great *Canted Pedeſtall*, which with his moldinges did diminiſh vpwards to ſmaller *Cants*, on which top was fixed a *Perſonage* carued or molded out to the life, her leſt hand leaning on a ſword, with the point downeward, and her right hand reaching forth a Diademe, which, ſhee ſeemde by bowing of her knee and head, to beſtow vpon his *Maieſtie*.

On the foure Corners of this vpper parte, ſtoode foure naked *Portractures* (in great) with artificiall trumpets in their hands.

All which Shapes that were erected in moſt liuely colours, together with *Pyramides*, long Streamers, Galleries, and all other intichments belonging to this *Archtriumphant* : I referre you to the Modell or Peece it ſelfe, for the *Front* of it, as the next leafe will ſhewe you, ſo likewiſe proportionall was the backe ſide to the fore-*Front*.

The *Italians*, were placed within two little Galleries very richly and ſtately hung, vnder the Arch of the *Paſſage* : In whoſe behalfe, thus much Latine was deliuered.

The Italians Speech.

SAlue, *Rex magne, ſalue*. Salutem Maieſtati tuæ Itali, fœliciſsimum *Aduentum* læti, fœlices ſub te futuri, precamur. Eccè hic Omnes, Exigui Munere, pauculi Numero : ſed magni erga Maieſtatem tuam animi, multi obſequij. *At* nec Atlas, qui Cælum ſuſtinet, nec ipſa Cæli Conuexa, altitudinem attingant meritorum Regis optimi, Hoc eſt, eius quem de Teipſo expreſsiſti doctiſsimo (Deus ↑) & admirabili, penicillo, Beatiſsimos populos, vbi & Philoſophus regnat, & Rex Philoſophatur. Salue ; Viue Rex Potentiſsime, fœliciter. Regna, Rex ſapientiſsime, fœliciter. Itali optamus Omnes, Itali clamamus Omnes, Omnes, Omnes.

The ſame in Engliſh.

ALL haile mightie Monarch ! wee (the *Italians*) full of Ioy to behold thy moſt happie preſence, and full of hopes to inioy a felicitie vnder thy Royall wing, doe wiſh and pray for the health of thy Maieſtie. Behold, here wee are all ; meane in merite : fewe in number : but towardes thy Soueraigne ſelfe, in our loues great, in our duties more. For neither *Altas*, who beares vp heauen, no nor the Arched roofe it ſelfe of heauen, can by many-many degrees reach to the toppe and glorious height of a good and vertuous Kinges deſeruings. And ſuch a one is he, whome (Good God!) moſt liuely, moſt wiſely, and in wonderfull colours, thou didſt then pencill downe in thine owne perſon, when thou ſaydſt thoſe people were bleſt, where a Philoſopher rules, and where the Ruler playes the Philoſopher. All haile thou royalleſt of Kinges ; liue thou mightieſt of Princes : Reigne thou wiſeſt of Monarches in all proſperitie ; theſe are the wiſhes of vs *Italians* : the hearty wiſhes of vs all : All, euen All.

D.

FIGURE 3. Stephen Harrison, *The Arch's of Triumph* (London, 1604), sig. Dr. Huntington Library, 61302.

encompassed documents at practically all stages of composition. The relationship between a blank and a "genuine" document is not nearly as binary as we might wish. Stern and Stallybrass offer virtually opposite ideas of what a blank might be, neither of which can accommodate the Spanish blanks plot nor the libidinous scribblings of Falstaff. This lack of clarity can in fact be productive, alerting us as it does to the blank's amorphous nature and spurring us to broaden our definitions to accommodate the term's capaciousness within an early modern context.

More recently, Laurie Maguire has taken up the challenge of studying the blank in its infinite variety, from incunabula to Google Books, in *The Rhetoric of the Page*.[40] That book's opening comment that the blank "invokes its own indeterminate existence and activates the reader's restorative critical instincts" contains an echo of Iser's reader-response theory, while Maguire is alive to the duality of the blank "as a creator of both anxiety and of opportunity."[41] An earlier chapter by Maguire lays out the groundwork through a focus on *etcetera*. Maguire elegantly draws out the epistemological heft of such a seemingly ordinary term, radically defamiliarizing it in the process:

> "Etcetera" is not just what is absent from the text but also what refuses to go away: it is the ghost character of early modern writing, the site of perpetual exchange between the potential and the actual in knowledge. . . . It is a textual embodiment of absence.[42]

The parallels with the early modern blank are not hard to see. There has also been something of an upsurge in critical studies of the "gap" within early modern literary studies. This includes the work of Anne Toner, who aims to chart the history of ". . ." in *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission*. In her reading of *King Lear*, Toner notes how "the ellipsis and the eclipse share similar symbolic roles as manifestations of disorder. Both evoke dualities of absence and presence, darkness and light."[43] The typography of the blank has similarly garnered attention, with a focus on the works of Ben Jonson.[44] Notwithstanding the strength of bibliographic studies

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40. Laurie Maguire, *The Rhetoric of the Page* (Oxford, 2020). This work grew out of Maguire's Panizzi lectures at the British Library in 2018, available in podcast form: https://soundcloud.com/the-british-library/the-rhetoric-of-the-page-reading-blank-space-laurie-maguire, accessed December 2022.

41. Maguire, *The Rhetoric of the Page*, 1.

42. Laurie Maguire, "Typographical Embodiment: The Case of *etcetera*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford, 2016), 527–48. Maguire also notes *etcetera*'s "typographical cousins are ellipsis and the dash, features that call attention to what is not there" (528).

43. Anne Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission* (Cambridge, 2015), 11.

44. See Claire Bourne's chapter, "Jonson's Breaches and the Typography of Action," in *Typographies of Performance in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2019), 77–136. With thanks to the author for sharing this work in advance.

in the period, we have yet to account for this absent presence within the wider textual culture of the time, thus missing a rich "site of surplus meanings otherwise left out," in Gitelman's words.

Naomi Tadmor has argued for "the rise of the form" in her study of settlement certificates from the period 1662 to 1780. Tadmor is alert to the long history of forms but sees this historical juncture as marking a "step-change in the use of administrative forms in England and in the material culture of governance." Her study of John Coles, a prominent stationer in mid-eighteenth-century London, shows him to be a canny businessman who publishes a *Catalogue of Blanks, and Other Stationery Wares* (ca. 1750), within which can be found "Blanks relating to Justices of the Peace and their Clerks" totaling sixty-two types of forms. An earlier example comes from John Lenthall, who by 1716 was selling forms at St. Dunstan's Church, Fleet Street, where "are sold all sorts of Blanks."[45] If we step back a century to Middleton's *The Widow*, we hear a remarkably similar advertisement from the clerk Martino: "Here are blank warrants of all dispositions" (1.1.67). Preceding Coles's catalogue by some two hundred years is the text *A new boke of Presidentes in maner of a Register* (fig. 4), first published in 1543, which went through multiple editions and offered in excess of sixty precedents for forms ranging from indentures to letters patent to letters of attorney, warrants, leases, and deeds.[46] I do not dispute Tadmor's claim that there was a growth in the use of printed blank forms from the 1640s on, but rather I suggest that by going back even further, we can identify the necessary conditions for this "rise of the form," as authors of preceding centuries puzzled out what it meant to stage the blank. Dramatists of early modern England preempt Iser's theory and Gitelman's history by centuries, as the blank in their plays comes to mediate personal relations, substantiate networks of authority, and subvert fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of literary interpretation.

❧ Blanks on the Early Modern Stage

From *Hamlet* to Harold Pinter, drama tends to exploit the potential for miscommunication and subversion contained within innocuous documents, and blanks are no exception. The case studies gathered below demonstrate that the space of the blank is large enough to fit both treasonous correspondence and official documentation, a king's request for taxation and a miser's desperate plea for redemption. Frequently, dramatic action revolves around preprepared forms with blank spaces left to be filled in by hand. This includes the blank charters of *Richard II*, the blank warrants of Middleton's *The Widow* (discussed in more detail below), and the "blank *Mittimusses /*

45. Tadmor, "The Settlement of the Poor and the Rise of the Form," 90–91, 45, 60.
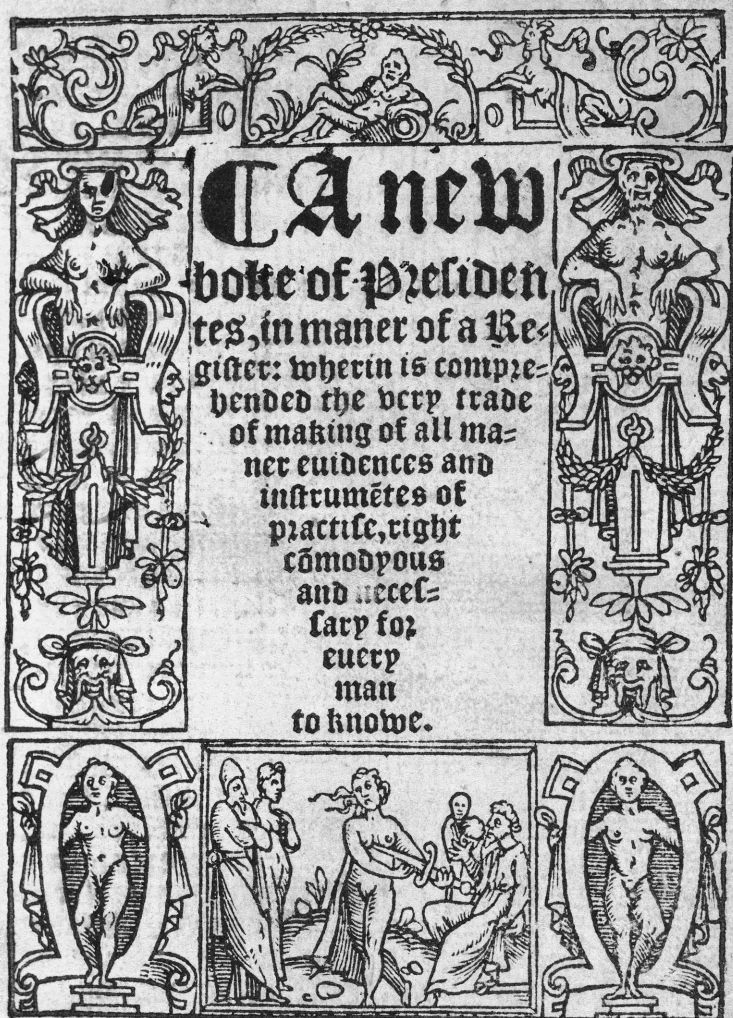46. *STC 3327. By the 1546 edition (*STC 3328.5), the text had grown from 237 pages to 320.

FIGURE 4. *A new boke of Presidentes* (London, 1544), title page. Huntington Library, 30088.

Printed in readinesse" (2.4) in Thomas Tomkis's *Albumazar* (1615).[47] Massinger's *The Bashful Lover* (licensed for performance 1636) sees the Duke of Florence issue the following order after victory in battle:

> Who brings *Gonzaga's* head, or takes him prisoner,
>
> .   .   .   .
>
>   . . . shall have a Blank
> With our hand and signet made authentical,
> In which he may write down himself, what wealth
> Or honors he desires.[48]

Here the blank is noteworthy for being unremarkable; not playing any part in the subsequent plot, the blank is a prop like any other—a sword, a book, a ring. In the climactic scene of Shirley's *The Ball*, we get the following exchange as Lord Rainbow chooses by lot between two ladies, Honoria and Rosamond:

Lord Rainbow:	Within the name of Venus,—ha a blanke,
	By this light nothing, neither name nor marke.
[Honoria & Rosamond]:	Ha, ha, ha
Lord Rainbow:	This is a riddle yet.
Rosamond:	Tis quickly solv'd.[49]

The lord's embarrassment at the culmination of this comedy revolves around a blank, as the ladies refuse to submit to his advances, literally absenting themselves from the play's textual/sexual politics.[50] However, the riddle of the blank is not so "quickly solv'd" as Rosamond would have us believe. Criminal, political, or romantic, the texts dealt with in this section are disparate, but what unites them is a shared interest in what happens when you do *not* fill in the blanks.

       Shirley's conceit in *The Ball* is a neat reversal of Shakespeare's most famous use of the blank in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, when the aging Sir John Falstaff seeks to woo two women with what is substantively the same letter. The knight's textual incontinence is discovered by Mistress Page, who shares her findings with fellow victim Mistress Ford:

47. Thomas Topkis, *Albumazar* (London, 1615; STC 24100), sig. E1. Huntington Library, 69695.

48. Massinger, *The Bashful Lover*, in *Three new Plays, viz. The Bashful Lover, The Guardian, The Very Woman* (London, 1655; *Wing M1050), act 2, scene 5, sig. C7v (p. 28).

49. James Shirley, *The Ball* (London, 1639; *STC 4995), sig. I2r.

50. For a contrasting use of the blank as romantic broker (used metaphorically), see John Ford's *The Fancies Chaste and Noble* where Romanello renounces his pursuit of Castamela in the following terms: "I dare not venture for a blank, excuse me"; (London, 1638; STC 11159), sig. K3r. Huntington Library, 59792.

> I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space
> for different names—sure, more, and these are of the second edition.
> He will print them, out of doubt; for he cares not what he puts into the
> press, when he would put us two.
>
> <div align="right">2.1.66–70</div>

Beginning with another document of authority, the "warrant" (used here metaphorically), Mistress Page is alert to the danger of copied letters, whose contents cannot be trusted. Her description segues from the manuscript image of the "letters, writ with blank space" to a mode of textual production drawn from printing: "second edition," "print," "press."[51] Clearly a printed love letter would be a bridge too far for any mistress. Yet in one of Dekker's cony-catching pamphlets, he describes a similar trick that is reliant on blank spaces to flatter the receiver. Here the "falconer" will patch together a book from odds and ends, and go into the country to present it to potential patrons, "printing of[f] so many Epistles as they have names [of local gentry]," in order to gull them of patronage money. Such con artists are even equipped to fill in the blank spaces in print rather than manuscript, "with an Alphabet of letters which they car[r]y about them, being able to print any mans name (for a Dedication) on the suddaine."[52] Both examples illustrate the roguish possibilities of filling in the blanks in order to deceive the dedicatee, destabilizing any firm link between author and recipient.

At other times the blank becomes a bargaining chip, such as the climactic moment in Jonson's *Epicoene*, when Morose begs Dauphin to release him from his marriage, offering to sign to anything, including "a blank, and write thine own conditions" (5.4.153–54).[53] The link between this document *ex machina* and the eponymous Epicoene is almost biological: the bride does not have the expected "lack" of sexual organs, and the written document is to be left unfilled for Dauphin, inverting norms of propriety for both sex and text. As we await the unmasking of Epicoene, Jonson stalls the action with the production of a document by Dauphin guaranteeing his portion, which is to be signed onstage (see also fig. 5):

> Come, nephew, give me the pen. I will subscribe to anything, and seal to
> what thou wilt for my deliverance. Thou art my restorer. [*He signs and*

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51. See also Elizabeth Pittenger, "Dispatch Quickly: The Mechanical Reproduction of Pages," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1991): 389–408 at 405: "As we saw in Falstaff's letters, woman is addressed in the blank, as the blank."

52. Thomas Dekker, *Lanthorne and Candle-light* (London, 1609; *STC 6486), sigs. F4v, F4v–G1r.

53. For original typography, see *The Silent Woman* (London, 1620; STC 14764), sig. O3r. Huntington Library, 62049 and 62050. By coincidence, the quarto text is printed by William Stansby, who operated out of a shop in St. Dunstan's churchyard, Fleet Street, which is where the young John Lentall advertised his blanks in 1716, some two centuries later (Tadmor, "The Settlement of the Poor and the Rise of the Form," 60).

returns the documents.] Here. I deliver it thee as my deed.

<div align="right">5.4.161–63</div>

It is made clear that the signing occurs there and then by the stage direction implied in "give me the pen," and that the document is then "deliver[ed]" to Dauphin "as my deed." The desperation of Morose is made manifest in his willingness to "subscribe to anything." Only after this business is concluded does Dauphin put Morose and the audience out of their collective misery: "Then here is your release, sir. / (*He takes off Epicene's peruke*) / You have married a boy" (5.4.165–67). Notably, in both the 1616 folio and 1620 quarto printing we encounter a blank of sorts in the middle of the line when Morose swears, presumably to God: "I protest before—" (5.4.164). This appears to have been expurgated according to the Jacobean ban on profanity in 1606, introducing a typographical blank in the text alongside the documentary blanks on the stage. If the devil is in the details when it comes to binding contracts, God is relegated to the blanks.

This scene marks Jonson's most intense examination of the power of blanks, but we can note in passing that blanks also make an appearance in a range of his other works, including *Every Man Out of His Humour, Volpone*, and *The Devil Is an Ass*. In the first, the jester-figure Carlo Buffone rails on the use of blanks to entrap "poor unthrifts":

> O I cannot abide these limbs of satin, or rather Satan indeed, that'll walk like the children of darkness all day in a melancholy shop, with their pockets full of blanks, ready to swallow up as many poor unthrifts, as come within the Verge.
>
> <div align="center">*Every Man Out of His Humour*, 4.3.100–104[54]</div>

The precise meaning here is obscure, but the link between blanks and fraud is apparent, relying on "poor unthrifts" signing in desperation like Morose.[55] In *The Devil Is an Ass*, it is the projector Merecraft who tells Fitzdottrel, "To publications: ha' your deed drawn presently. / And leave a blank to put in your feoffees" (3.5.59–60), again showing the vulnerability of documents and the people who agree to them unwittingly. Just like the false beard and "double cloaks" that are used to dupe unsuspecting gallants in this city comedy, the blank is part of the con man's stock-in-trade. Volpone, too, resorts to blanks for the success of his schemes. He casually tells Mosca:

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54. With thanks to Hester Lees-Jeffries for providing the exact quotation when libraries were inaccessible due to COVID-19.

55. On the use of bonds to entrap "poor unthrifts," see Tim Stretton, "Written Obligations, Litigation and Neighbourliness, 1580–1680," in *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England*, ed. Steve Hindle, Alexandra Shepard, and John Walter (Woodbridge, U.K., 2013), 189–210.

The silent Woman.

of it more, what shall I hope for, or deserue of you?

Mor. O, what thou wilt, Nephew! thou shalt deserue me, and haue me.

Daup. Shall I haue your fauour perfect to mee, and loue hereafter?

Mor. That, and any thing beside. Make thine owne conditions. My whole estate is thine. Manage it, I will become thy Ward.

Daup. Nay, Sir, I will not be so vnreasonable.

Epi. Will Sir *Dauphine* be mine enemie too?

Daup. You know, I haue beene a long Suter to you, Vncle, that out of your estate, which is fifteen hundred a yeere, you would allow me but fiue hundred during life, and assure the rest vpon mee after: to which I haue often, by my selfe and friends tendred you a writing to signe, which you would neuer consent, or incline too. If you please to effect it now--

Mor. Thou shalt haue it, Nephew. I will doe it, and more.

Daup. If I quit you not presently? and for-euer of this cumber, you shall haue power instantly, afore all these, to reuoke your act, and I will become, whose Slaue you will giue me to, for-euer.

Mor. Where is the Writing? I will seale to it, that, or to a Blanke, and write thine owne conditions.

Epi. O me, most vnfortunate wretched Gentlewoman!

Hau. Will Sir *Dauphine* doe this?

Epi. Good Sir, haue some compassion on me.

Mor. O, my Nephew knowes you belike: away *Crocodile*.

Cen. He do's it not sure, without good ground.

Daup. Here, Sir.

Mor. Come Nephew: giue me the Pen. I will subscribe to any thing, and seale to what thou wilt, for my deliuerance. Thou art my restorer. Here, I deliuer it thee as my Deed. If there bee a word in it lacking, or writ with false Orthographie, I protest before—I will not take the aduantage.

Daup.

FIGURE 5. Ben Jonson, *The silent woman: A comoedie* [*Epicoene*] (London, 1620), sig. O3r. Huntington Library, 62050, https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll3/id/4132.

> I will ha' thee put on a gown,
> And take upon thee, as thou wert mine heir;
> Shew 'em a will. Open that chest, and reach
> Forth one of those, that has the blanks. I'll straight
> Put in thy name.
>
> 5.2.69–73

The will is the document around which the entire plot of *Volpone* revolves, and it is clear that Volpone has a store of blanks for the sole purpose of infuriating his would-be heirs. The real-world power of the will is both accentuated and called in question by this persistent staging of blanks. While not strictly a blank, the marriage license in *Bartholomew Fair* is also vulnerable to manipulation when Quarlous claims the license he has stolen is easily doctored: "I have a licence and all, it is but razing out one name and putting in another" (5.2.66–67). This raises the possibility that all documents are potential blanks, with contents that could be edited with serious consequences.

   In *Greene's Tu Quoque, or The City Gallant* (1614), the association between the writing of documents and blanks is obvious enough that the scrivener's name is simply "Master Blanke."[56] An early scene sees the said Blank summoned to provide a bond for the prodigal Spendall, which he signs onstage with Pursenet as a witness. Later there is the staging of another signature to a preprepared document, in this case a marriage contract, when the desperate Spendall seeks to force a widow to marry him in order to gain access to her fortune:

> Spendall: Then set your hand to this, nay 'tis a contract
>   Strong and sufficient, and will holde in Lawe,
>   Heere, heere's pen and Incke, you see I come provided.
> Widow: Give me the penne.
> Spendall: .   .   .   .
>   Yet write your name faire I pray,
>   and at large; why now 'tis very well.

The literalization of metaphor—the bond of marriage—is coupled with a complex critique of the documents themselves, and the power they can have over interpersonal relations. The widow goes on to test Spendall's motives, literally binding him while tearing the contract to pieces in "triumph": "Thus your new fancied hopes I teare asunder."[57] By integrating such moments of textual transmission into the stage action and staging the signature as Jonson and others had done, the play shows an early modern sensibility finely tuned to what it means to be bound by a document.

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56. John Cooke, *Greene's Tu Quoque* (London, 1614; STC 5673), sig. D4r. Huntington Library, 56563.

57. Cooke, *Greene's Tu Quoque*, sig. L1r, L1v.

It also raises interesting questions about the physical nature of the props: If they are to be torn asunder, does this imply a new contract is needed for each performance? Or is the statement "I teare asunder" sufficient for the audience to fill in the blanks for themselves?

In Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619), in the aftermath of the tyrannical king's death, the fate of Melantius is decided by blank. The new king, Lysippus, approaches the citadel held by Melantius and his reluctant ally Calianax, as part of a broader restoration of order:

Strato:	Throw him the blanke.
Lysippus:	*Melantius*, write in that thy choice,
	My seale is at it.
Melantius:	It was honours drew us to this act,
	No gaine, and we will only worke our pardons.[58]

Calianax interrupts to ask that the blank be made to accommodate him also: "Put my name in too . . . Ile have it in." The inner workings of the blank pardon are put on display for the audience, combining political expediency with almost bathetic concerns for personal safety. Some twenty years later, the final scene of William Habington's *The Queen of Aragon* (1640) hinges on Descastro's refusal to fill in the blanks, when asked by his queen:

Queen:	Good my Lord
	Write in that blancke all your demands, and by
	The honour of a Princesse, Ile deny
	Nothing you shall insert. *He lookes on it and*
	returnes it.
Descastro:	There tis agen:
	The paper innocent as when you gave it.
Queen:	My Lord you have writ nothing.
Descastro:	And tis nothing
	Now I have mist your selfe, I can demand.[59]

The blank remains blank, thus losing its "real-world" power at the same moment as its dramatic function is heightened. Descastro subsequently decides to become a hermit, citing political reasons tinged with blankness: "I shall secure / Your Kingdome best by absence."[60] Both *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Queen of Aragon* stage blanks at critical moments of political turmoil, as the fate of characters hangs in the balance.

58. Beaumont and Fletcher, *The Maides Tragedy*, act 5, sigs. K3v–K4r.
59. William Habington, *The Queene of Arragon* (London, 1640; *STC 12587), 5.1 (sig. Ir).
60. Habington, *Queene of Arragon*, 5.1 (sig. I2v).

Although one remains empty and the other is doubly occupied, they both make dramatic capital out of the same dangerous expansiveness that we encountered earlier in the Spanish blanks plot.

In Shakespeare's *Richard II* the blank becomes a kind of shorthand for the king's disregard for his citizens:

> if that come short,
> Our substitutes at home shall have blank charters;
> Whereto, when they shall know what men are rich,
> They shall subscribe them for large sums of gold,
> And send them after to supply our wants.
>
> 1.4.47–51

The king's substitutes are tasked with substituting the names of the rich "to supply our wants." Unsurprisingly this is not taken kindly by those affected, who complain how "daily new exactions are devised, / As blanks, benevolences, and I wot not what. / But what, i'God's name, doth become of this?" (2.1.249–51). The blank is simultaneously political weapon and symbol of tyranny, foreshadowing Richard's downfall. This is also identifiable in the earlier *Thomas of Woodstock*, also known as *Richard II, Part One*, at the beginning of act 3 when Richard describes his use of blank charters with distinctly autocratic overtones: "Thus like an emperor shall King Richard reign."[61] Tresilian is tasked with creating "Blank charters, to fill up our treasury" (3.1.7), and it is clear they are present onstage due to a marginal note in the play manuscript for "Blankes."[62] Indeed, the workings of these blanks are staged for all to see, with Tresilian promising that "cartloads of money soon shall follow them" (3.1.23):

> Tresilian: See here, my lord, only with parchment, innocent sheepskin.
>   Yet see here's no fraud, no clause, no deceit in the writing.
> All: Why, there's nothing writ!
> Tresilian: There's the trick on't.
>
> 3.1.11–13[63]

The flexibility of the blank as a tool of oppression is clear, becoming a potent symbol of Richard's own negation of kingly responsibility long before his abdication.

Before we turn to Middleton's *The Widow* as my final case study, it may be useful to glance at other dramatic moments where blanks are placed center stage. A more positive, and potentially feminist, blank is presented at the end of Margaret

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61. *Thomas of Woodstock*, ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Manchester, 2002), 3.1.2.
62. *Thomas of Woodstock*, 101n5.
63. Lines 15–23 describe in detail how this will work in practice: "All landed men" will be forced "to set their names and forthwith seal these blanks."

Cavendish's *Bell in Campo*, when the returning army of women are rewarded with a blank: "the Lady *Victoria* shall be brought through the City in triumph, which is a great honour . . . there shall be a blank for the Female Army to write their desires and demands."[64] Clearly we have moved on from Falstaff's conflation of womanhood and blankness. Glapthorne's *The Hollander* (1635) gives an intricate description of a decree, complete with the blank spaces left for one Captain Pirke:

> [I] have to the premisses set my mighty hand, together with hands of
> our trusty and our couragious assistants (this blanke's for you Captaine
> *Pi[r]ke*) *Holafernes Make-shift*, *Rosiran Knock-downe*, and twenty six
> more of our principall companions of the order.[65]

The blank is encased in parentheses, replicating the document's textual lacuna. Pirke responds to the omission in the following terms: "Twas the safest course to leave a blanke for me, or *I* had Blank'd your whole decree!" (sig. E3v). The blank morphs from a passive noun of assent into an active verb of destruction, underlining the blank's threatening and unstable nature.

A more extended interest in the uses to which blanks can be put is apparent in Middleton's city comedy *The Widow* (pub. 1652).[66] The action centers on the house of Brandino, justice of the peace, who issues warrants with the help of his clerk, Martino. One valued customer, Francisco, frequents the shop only in order to gain access to Brandino's wife, Philippa. The opening scene sees Martino telling Francisco, "Here are blank warrants of all dispositions. / Give me but the name and nature of your malefactor, / and I'll bestow him according to his merits" (1.1.67–69). In describing the blank warrants, and particularly their profitability, Martino likens them to a bridle: "see you these blanks? I'll send him but one of these bridles, and bring him in at Michaelmas" (1.1.56–58). Here we see the power of the blank to control movement, coupled with unscrupulous behavior on the part of the clerk. Of course Francisco has no genuine interest in using the warrants, serving as they do as a pretext to cross Brandino's threshold. Curiously this leads to a conflation of stage blank and typographic blank, when Francisco must invent a felon to occupy the space of the blank (fig. 6): "This Coxcomb will be prating.——One *Astilio*; / His offence wilful murder" (1.1.74–75).

64. Margaret Cavendish, *Bell in Campo*, in *Playes written by the thrice noble, illustrious and excellent princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* (London, 1662; Wing N868), scene 18, p. 627 (sig. Ttttttt2r). Huntington Library, 120136, 120157.

65. Henry Glapthorne, *The Hollander* (London, 1640 [written in 1635, according to the title page]; STC 11909), 3.1 (sig. E3v). Huntington Library, 59946, 60690. The full description of the decree stretches over a dozen or so lines.

66. I quote here from *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*. I have also consulted the 1652 quarto text to check the typography: Middleton, *The Widdow* (London, 1652; Wing J1015). Huntington Library, 109546. This text attributes the play to Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, and Thomas Middleton on the title page.

The VViddow.   3

will help him to ſcape to, and I can ; hear you me that : Ile have
him in at all times at a months warning : nay, ſay I let him run
like a Summer Nag all the Vacation : See you theſe blancks, Ile
ſend him but one of theſe bridles, and bring him in at Michaelmas
with a vengeance : nothing kils my heart, but when one of 'em
dyes Sir ; then ther's no hope of more money : I had rather loſe
at all times two of my beſt kindred, than an excellent Thief : for
hee's a Gentleman I'm more beholding to.

 Fra. You betray your myſtery too much Sir. Yet no comfort ?
'Tis but her ſight that I waſte precious time for,
For more I cannot hope for, ſhe's ſo ſtrict,
Yet that I cannot have.

 Mar. I'm ready now Signior.
Here are blanck **W**arrants of all diſpoſitions, give me but the name
and nature of your Malefactor, and Ile beſtow him according to
his merits.

 Fra. This only is th' excuſe that bears me out,
And keeps off impudence and ſuſpition
From my too frequent comming : what name now
Shall I think on, and not to wrong the houſe ?
This Coxcomb wilbe prating.———One *Aſtilio,*
His offence wil full murder.

 Mar. Wilfull murder ? oh I love a life to have ſuch a fel-
low come under my fingers ; like a begger that's long a taking
leave of a fat lowce, I'm loth to part with him, I muſt look upon
him over and over firſt ; are you wilfull ? y'faith, ile be as wilfull
as you then.   [Philippa *and* Vio-
 Phil. *Martino*?   letta *at a Window.*]
 Mar. Miſtriſſe?
 Phil. Make haſte, your Maſter's going.
 Mar. I'm but about a wilfull murder forſooth, Ile diſpatch that
preſently.
 Phil. Good morrow Sir : oh that I durſt ſay more.
 Fra. 'Tis gone agen, ſince ; ſuch are all lifes pleaſures,
No ſooner known, but loſt ; he that enjoys 'em
The length of life, has but a longer dream,
He wakes to this i'th end, and ſees all nothing.
 Phil. He cannot ſee me now ; ile mark him better
Before I be too raſh : ſweetly compos'd he is ;
Now as he ſtands, he's worth a womans love,

       B 2   That

FIGURE 6. Thomas Middleton, *The Widdow* (London, 1652), 3 (sig. B2r). Huntington Library, 109546.

In describing the operation of these blanks, Martino goes into detail about the hidden safety features of the document:

> Martino: Nay, look upon't, and spare not. Everyone cannot get that
>   kind of warrant from me, signor. Do you see this prick i'th'
>   bottom? It betokens power and speed. It is a privy mark,
>   that runs betwixt the constables and my master. Those that
>   cannot read, when they see this, know 'tis for lechery or
>   murder; and this being away, the warrant comes gelded
>   and insufficient.
> Francisco: I thank you, sir.
> Martino: Look you; all these are *nihils,*
>   They want the punction.
>
>   1.1.110–19

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *nihil* as "Nothing. Freq. as a count noun: a thing of no worth or value. Now *rare*," using Middleton's *The Widow* as an illustrative example.[67] This "privy mark" transforms the blank from insufficient to sufficient and implies a complex system of checks and balances to prevent misuse. However, later in the play when the criminal Latrocinio and his followers come into possession of blank warrants, no such security features come into play. One of the band, Occulto, breaks into Brandino's house and finds "Some threescore dollars . . . / . . . a silver seal, / Two or three amber beads, and four blank warrants" (4.2.271–73). It is neither money nor seal that attracts Latrocinio's attention, who responds, "Warrants? Where be they? The best news came yet. / Mass, here's his hand, and here's his seal, I thank him" (4.2.274–75). It would seem the warrants are examined immediately and onstage. The reason for Latrocinio's enthusiasm is that one of their party is imprisoned, and the blanks will enfranchise him, which is precisely the opposite of the blank's proper usage, as described by Martino in the opening scene. The tools of the justice may not dismantle the justice's house, but they will undermine his efforts to control a criminal population. Documents define people's movements at both a literal and a social level, while the blanks open up unexpected—and unsanctioned—routes of mobility. The destabilizing force of the blank is felt through decades of early modern drama and is inseparable from early modern culture's increasing dependence on documents of all types. In this the blank epitomizes what is most "modern" about early modern print. In the modern era, filling out paperwork correctly has become a social imperative; not supplying the blanks has real-world consequences, including denial of access to services, loss of benefits, deportation, and worse.

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67. *OED*, s.v. "nihil, *n.,*" sense 1, last modified 2003, https://oed.com/view/Entry /127087.

Coda

While conducting research for this essay, I came across *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, volume 13 (1875) through Google Books, and proceeded to search for *blank*.[68] Of the five plays collected in the volume, all dating between 1624 and 1641, four of them make dramatic use of the blank. This is both serendipitous and, I feel, illustrative of just how common the staging of blanks becomes throughout the course of early modern drama. The plays include *The Queen of Aragon*, which has been touched on already, and *A Match at Midnight*, where the blank is only used meta-phorically ("You have drawn a blank" [96]). The last two instances return us to the problem of marriages that are contingent upon blanks. First we have the relatively straightforward example of *The City Match* (1639): when a young woman inquires about her jointure, she is assured by the old merchant Warehouse, "But to remove your doubts, / I've brought my Lawyer with blank deeds, / He shall put in your Name, and I, before / We go to church will seal 'em" (4.8).[69] Shakerley Marmion's *The Antiquary* (published 1641) is more involved in its staging of the blank, revisiting and innovating upon Jonson's use in *Epicoene*. The final moments see the wealthy Mocinigo agreeing to sign unconditionally to a blank, much like Morose:

Mocinigo	With all my heart;
	I yield possession to whomsoe'er
	She [Lucretia] shall choose for a husband. Reach a paper
	Or blank: I'll seal to it.
Lucretia:	See, there's a writing!
Mocinigo	And there's my hand to it:
	I care not what the conditions be.

5.1

However, when Lucretia chooses her beloved, the disguised Aurelio, Mocinigo real-izes the mistake he has made:

Mocinigo	A plot, a plot upon me! I'll revoke it all.
Lionell	Nay, that you cannot, now you have confirm'd it.
Mocinigo	Am I then cheated? I'll go home and die,
	To avoid shame, not live in infamy.

5.1[70]

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68. *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, vol. 13, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (London, 1875), available via Google Books, https://tinyurl.com/vbgyqva, accessed November 2018. Quotations below are accompanied by their page numbers from this edition.

69. *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, ed. Hazlitt, 294. See also Jasper Mayne, *The City Match* (London, 1639; STC 17750), sig. Pv. Huntington Library, 131166.

70. *A Select Collection of Old English Plays*, ed. Hazlitt, 521.

This is Mocinigo's final utterance. He, along with many of the cast of characters assembled here, has been defeated by the blank.

My aim here has not been to nail down what a blank signifies for early modern audiences but rather to showcase the multivalences and ambivalences provoked by the blank within the textual economy of the time. The blank operates as metaphor (*A Match at Midnight*), bold romantic gesture (*The Queen of Aragon*), prenuptial agreement (*The City Match*), and deus ex machina (*The Antiquary*)—and this is within a single volume of "old English plays." A concern for the blank stretches back well into the Elizabethan period, while antecedents can be traced to the earliest printing presses of the fifteenth century. This study indicates just how often playwrights from Shakespeare to Shirley exploit the dramatic potential of the blank. A dearth of scholarship on the subject cannot be said to be reflected in the preoccupations of early modern drama. In the preceding pages, I sought to provide a more detailed frame of reference for understanding instances such as Patroclus's warning to Achilles, demonstrating that the "blank of danger" in my epigraph is not some obscure Shakespearean aberration but rather a regular feature of early modern life. This utterance, along with the many other examples gathered here, both replicates and interrogates a textual culture that puts its faith in the blank, often ignoring the inherent "danger" such documents contain.

The dispersed authority of the blank, both licit and illicit, challenges us to reevaluate how we describe and understand not only words but also spaces. What could or should be understood by these textual gaps, and how do we as critics respond to their insistent blankness? This is not something for which the ordinary parsing tools of the literary scholar are designed.[71] The blank sets itself apart from the constituent parts of language that we are accustomed to dealing with, demanding we pay attention instead to   . Literary critics have much experience in grappling with the ineffable but less so with the invisible. We would do well to bear in mind the injunction from *Arch's of Triumph*: "you shall find them left thus—with a blancke, because we wish you rather to apply them to the Scale your selfe, then by setting them downe, to call either your skill or iudgement in question." As far as the blank is concerned, both our skill and judgment are required to develop an adequate vocabulary for these unwritten parts of early modern textual culture that nevertheless play a pivotal role.

71. *OED*, s.v. "parse, *v*.," sense 1.a, last modified 2005, https://oed.com/view/Entry /138159: "To describe the syntactic role of (a word) in a sentence or phrase. Also: to resolve (a sentence, phrase, etc.) into component parts of speech and describe each part syntactically."

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