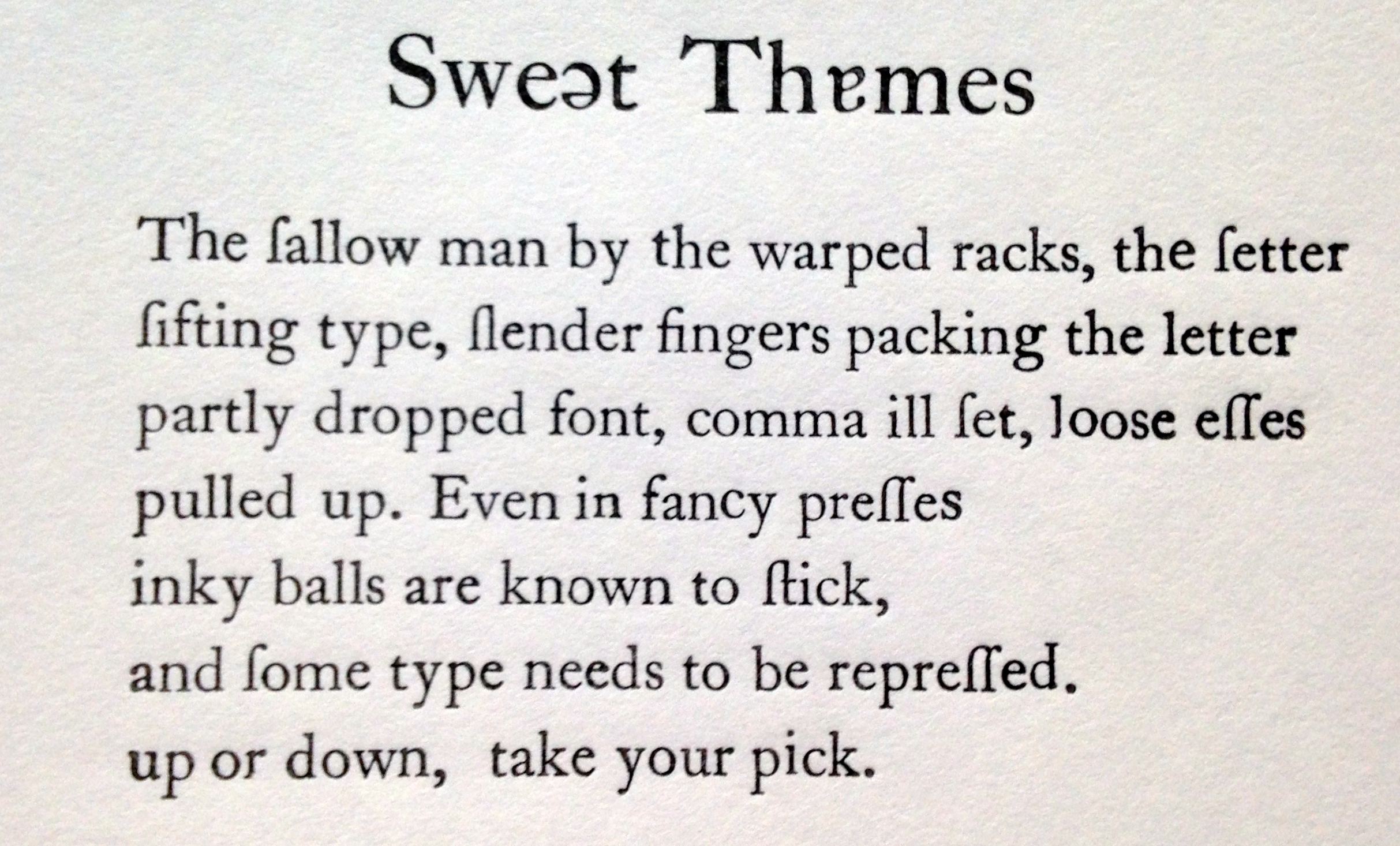
**Sweat Themes: An Experiment in Turned-Type**

One of my favourite typos is the turned-type error, where a single letter sort gets locked into the chase upside-down. So what should be an n is set as a u (or vice-versa); what should be a p might be a d. You may even get an e for an a. And sometimes the typo produces a word which makes as much - or more - sense that its alternative. So Shakespeare editors have to wrestle with Othello’s line that he ‘like the base Indean threw a pearl away’ (*Othello* V.ii.347): if we imagine a turn-type error here, then *Indean* becomes *Iudean*, or *Judean*. A reference to Judas makes more sense in this context, doesn’t it? Perhaps we should disregard the printed evidence in the earliest copies; perhaps we should *assume* that an error has occurred.

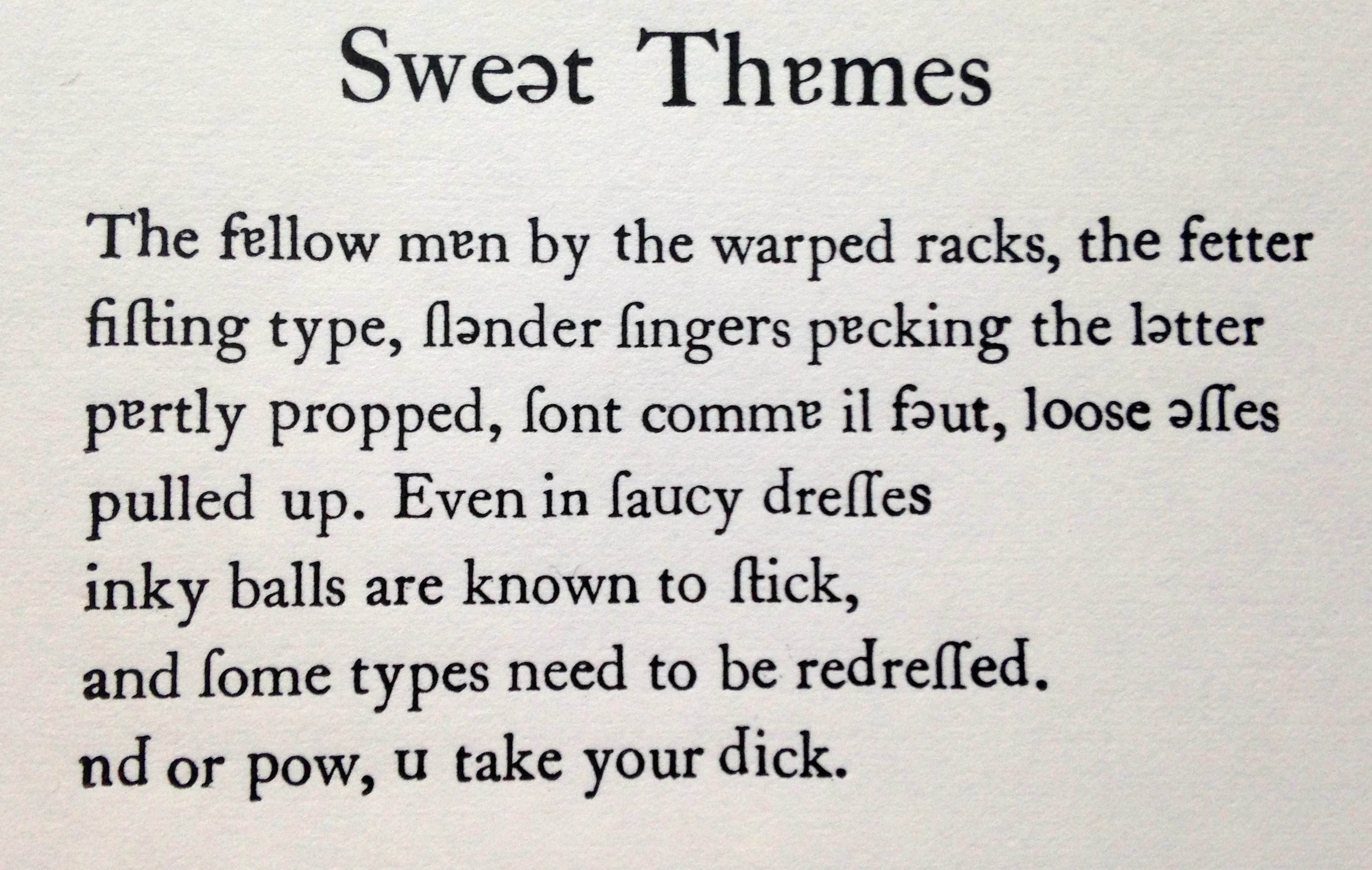
So this was the plan: firstly, take a lexicon of all the words used in Shakespeare’s works, around 20,000 unique terms in total; then write a computer program which takes each of these words and tries flipping its letters upside-down to see if we end up with another valid word from the same dictionary. The options I coded for were *p* and *d*, *b* and *q*, *u* and *n*, *a* and *e*, and *f* and *s* (the long *s* shape in early printing can easily by mistaken for an *f* at the compositing stage). Allowing for all of these, one ends up with a surprisingly large number of potentially ambiguous words: about 600 of them. A lot of them are only ambiguous within quite a narrow semantic field: *Kentishman* vs *Kentishmen*, for example. But some are more fun: *fancy* vs *saucy*, or the ultra-slippery *pan*, *pen*, *peu*, *dan*, *den*. Now we can play at the Compositor’s Constraint: to give ourselves a sense of how wrong a printed text *might* be by writing something that is maximally ambiguous, something that uses as many of these upside-down words as possible.

Here’s what I came up with: a pair of poems. They’re called ‘Sweat Themes’, after the famous line from Spenser’s ‘Prothalamion’ (often incorrectly set as ‘Sweet Thames’), but also because there seems to be a lot of sweating going on in both of them.

The first version looks like it’s set in a print shop:



But that is not what I meant at all! Obviously, it’s *supposed* to be a poem about an orgy in a dungeon. Here, of course, is the correct version:



This barely scratches the surface of the corpus of flippable words. What about *pigs* and *digs*; *dies* vs *pies*; the *wise wife* who’s *weeping* or possibly *weeding* because she’s *dowerless* or maybe *powerless*. There are fishy terms: *carp* (*card*), *fin* (*sin*), *sole* (*sola*), *dace* (*pace*), *bass* (*bess*), *battered* (*bettered*); boozy ones – *fancy ales like becks* become *saucy*, *alas*, *like backs*; and semantic leaps from common to proper nouns: *orphans* to *orpheus*; are you in *denial*, or are you, in fact, in *daniel*? For the radical doubter, even a straightforward document opens onto a world of instability, all Surrealist imagery and Modernist grammar. And all because of carelessness in the printshop: too-casual typesetting or getting too heavy-handed with the ink dabber. As Boney M so memorably meant to say, *Oh*, *those ruffians!*