The nominal group may be defined briefly as a group of words which can act as the subject of a sentence. As we noted in the Introduction it is usual to posit that the nominal group in Modern English contains four elements: determiner, modifier, head and qualifier. The head is that part of the group upon which all the other elements depend and is the only obligatory element. The modifier and qualifier are those elements which precede and follow the head respectively and are defined formally by their position in relation to the head. There is theoretically no limit to the number of modifiers and qualifiers each head can carry. The determiner in Modern English precedes the modifier and consists of a small group of words like the articles and possessive and demonstrative pronouns which are mutually exclusive; there can be only one determiner per head in each nominal group. One cannot say in Modern English the his book. Hence the nominal group 'The beautiful, young girl with the black hair sitting in the corner' consists of the determiner the, two modifiers beautiful and young, the head girl, and two qualifiers with the black hair and sitting in the corner. It is characteristic of Modern English that whereas modifiers consist usually of single words like beautiful, though they can be modified by an intensifier like very, qualifiers are usually phrases such as with the black hair. This particular qualifier consists in its turn of a preposition and a subordinate nominal group (determiner, modifier, head). Of the two major sentence groups in English, the nominal and the verbal, it is the former which can be expanded at will and which carries the weight of descriptive meaning in a sentence. This is as true of Elizabethan English as it is today. Compared with prose, poetry of all ages exhibits looser organisation in the structure of the nominal group, particularly in the matter of qualifiers. In modern prose it would be normal to have qualifiers which are quite tightly structured so that the sense is clear, whereas in poetry the
relation of the qualifiers to the head is much looser. This is also the case in Elizabethan poetry. Thus in *Macbeth* we find the famous description of sleep:

Sleepe that knits vp the rauel’d Sleeue of Care,  
The death of each dayes Life, sore Labors Bath,  
Balme of hurt Mindes, great Natures second Course,  
Chiefe nourisher in Life’s Feast.  

(II ii 37–40)

In this passage each of the qualifiers starting from *The death of each dayes Life* stands only in a loose relationship to the head *Sleepe*, because each qualifier introduces a new metaphor which is itself a nominal group in apposition to the head. Each separate nominal group is related only by sense to the head, and not by any grammatical mechanism. However in a longer passage from *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, the qualifiers are more tightly organised:

A Post from Wales, loaden with heauy Newes;  
Whose worst was, That the Noble *Mortimer*,  
Leading the men of Herefordshire to fight  
Against the irregular and wilde *Glendower*,  
Was by the rude hands of that Welshman taken,  
And a thousand of his people butchered:  
Vpon whose dead corpes there was such misuse,  
Such beastly, shamelesse transformation,  
By those Welshwomen done, as may not be  
(Without much shame) retold or spoken of.  

(I i 37–46)

In this passage everything depends upon *Post* ‘messenger’ in a logical way that is made clear through the grammar. The preposition *from* and the participial adjective clearly relate to *Post* grammatically. The other parts within the qualifier are likewise grammatically tied in: thus *whose* depends upon *newes*, and *Leading* upon *Mortimer*; *Vpon whose* refers to *people*, and the final *as may not be retold* expands the *done* immediately before. This is a type of subordinate qualification as compared with the co-ordinate qualification of the *Macbeth* passage. Subordinate qualification is more prosaic, because it is more often used, as here, to put across information. One therefore finds it in historical plays and in opening or closing scenes where the background to or conclusion of the drama is being expounded. Co-