

First Folios Compared

Using the First Folio in Undergraduate Teaching

Lesson ideas for use in the seminar room devised by Emma Smith, Professor of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Oxford.

Designed to accompany the Open Access website [First Folios Compared](#).



Credit Pete Le May

References to places within the First Folio are given by either page number or signature mark (or sometimes both). You can search all First Folios on [firstfolios.com](#) by page number or browse by signature mark. For more information on signature marks, see the [About page](#).

Introductory reading

- > [First Folios Compared](#)
- > On the making of the book, see [folio400.com](#)
- > [The Folger Shakespeare library](#) has a good site, and a number of [podcasts on First folios](#).
- > Eugene Giddens, *How to Read a Shakespearean Play Text* (2011)
- > David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (2001)
- > Emma Smith (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's First Folio* (2016).

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Lesson 1: First Folio, gender and race

Suggested reading

- > *Shakespeare Quarterly* 74 (2023), On Shakespeare's First Folio and Early Modern Critical Race Studies. Guest Editor: Noémie Ndiaye.
- > Jeffrey Masten, 'Glossing and t*pping: editing sexuality, race, and gender in Othello', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford, 2016) pages 567–85.
- > Leah S. Marcus, 'Constructions of race and gender in the two texts of Othello', in *Rethinking Feminism in Early Modern Studies: Gender, Race and Sexuality*, ed. Ania Loomba and Melissa E. Sanchez (New York, 2016) pages 113–32.
- > Lois Potter, 'Editing Desdemona', in *In Arden: Editing Shakespeare, Essays in Honour of Richard Proudfoot*, ed. Gordon McMullan and Ann Thompson (London, 2003), pages 81–94.
- > Ayanna Thompson (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge, 2021).

Reading Gender and Race in the First Folio

- > In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron is variously called Aaron, Aaron the Moor/e, and Moor. How might tracing these across the speech prefixes and stage directions, as well as across the spoken language of the play, demonstrate the play's investments in race-making?
- > Consider this statement: '[Aaron] delivers the first black power speech, how could you not love this play?' (Ayanna Thompson). Read more about Thompson's reasoning [in this link](#).
- > Compare the opening scene of *Othello* in the First Folio with the comparable scene in the [1622 Quarto](#).
- > Do you agree with Leah Marcus's assessment that if we assume that the First Folio is a revision of the Quarto, then 'Shakespeare [...] deliberately intensified what look from our modern perspective like racist elements of the play'?

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- > For another point of comparison – in Act 1 scene 3 there is a debate about whether Desdemona gave Othello a ‘world of sighs’ or ‘a world of kisses’. How do the collations and notes of modern editions engage with these issues?
- > What is the significance of the name of Kate/ Katherine/ Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew* and the lack of stage directions to clarify the play’s conclusion?
- > Consider the toggle between ‘Shylock’ and ‘Jew’ in the naming of the character in *The Merchant of Venice*.
- > ‘Peace, I’ll stop your mouth’, at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*: the First Folio gives this line, apparently addressed to Beatrice, to Leonato; most modern editions assign it to Benedick. Why?



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Lesson 2: The First Folio and theatre: from stage to page to stage

Suggested reading

- > Claire M. L. Bourne, 'Typographies of Performance in Early Modern England'.
- > Sarah Dustagheer and Gillian Woods (eds), *Stage Directions and Shakespearean Theatre* (Bloomsbury Arden, 2019).
- > M. J. Kidnie, 'Text, Performance, and the Editors: Staging Shakespeare's Drama', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51.4 (2000), pages 456–473.
- > Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Stage directions

Read through a play in the First Folio (whichever best suits your course teaching) and note down all its stage directions.

- > What props would be needed?
- > What choreography is not described?
- > What actions are left unclear?

Editing specific scenes

Macbeth

An early theatregoer, Simon Forman, described the scene of Banquo's ghost in some detail. It clearly made an impression on him:

The next night being at supper with his noblemen, whom he had bid to a feast (to the which also Banquo should have come), he began to speak of noble Banquo and to wish that he were there. And as he thus did, standing up to drink a carouse to him, the ghost of Banquo came and sat down in his chair behind him. And he turning about to sit down again saw the ghost of Banquo which fronted him so that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury, uttering many words about his murder, by which when they heard that Banquo was murdered they suspected Macbeth.

[Forman's account of seeing plays at the Globe: Macbeth, Cymbeline, Winter's Tale](#)

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Use this quote to review the scene in the First Folio (sig. mark Mm5r-v (pages 141-2 in the Tragedies section), adding whatever additional directions seem necessary. Compare with modern editions.

Othello

In Act 4 scene 1 of Othello, Iago attempts to give Othello 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's infidelity. He lets him overhear a conversation with Cassio about the handkerchief (sig. mark tt6v-vv1r, pages 328-9 in the Tragedies). Again, this scene has limited stage directions.

- > With the stage of the Globe Theatre in mind (a useful virtual tour [of the replica in London](#)), add in the stage directions you think are necessary to help readers make sense of the scene.
- > Would this be different in the [Blackfriars Theatre](#)?

King Lear

The scene in which Edgar tricks Gloucester into believing he is jumping off Dover Cliff is a complex mixture of imagination, stage trickery, and linguistic persuasion. It also has very few stage directions in the Folio text. The scene is on pages 302-3 in the Tragedies section (or sig. marks rr5v-rr6r). Compare with the stage directions at the equivalent point in the [1608 Quarto](#).



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Lesson 3: The First Folio and early readers

Suggested reading

- > Folger Shakespeare Library podcast on [commonplacing](#).
- > Meghan C Andrews, 'The Commonplacing of The Commonplacing of Professional Plays Revisited: Print, Theater, and Early Modern Institutional Exchange', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 73 (2022), pages 199-223.
- > Sasha Roberts, 'Reading Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love: Romeo and Juliet, Othello, and Antony and Cleopatra in Early Modern England', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: Tragedies* ed Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard.
- > Emma Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book* (2023).

First Folio focus

Lots of the First Folio copies on the [First Folios Compared](#) site have commonplace marks. Sometimes these are underlinings and sometimes crosses or other marginal marks. The [Wurttemberg](#) and [Auckland](#) copies are good places to start.

Turn the virtual pages until you find some of the marginal marks or underlining. Have a look at the phrase or speech that has been marked.

- > What do you think the reader particularly saw in it?
[Perhaps it was proverbial, or beautiful, or confirmed his (usually) prejudices?]
- > How might this compare with the ways in which modern readers might appreciate the play, e.g. in a modern dictionary of quotations or online resource?

Compare this with another online resource, the [Database of Dramatic Extracts](#). This focuses on the other end of the commonplacing process: the handwritten books or papers in which readers recorded these chosen passages.

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Lesson 4: The First Folio and ‘Shakespeare’

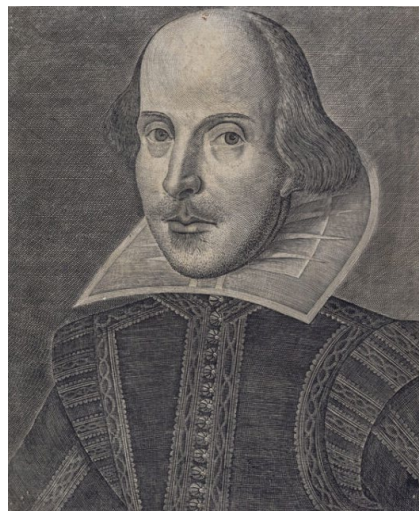
Suggested Reading

- > Brandi K. Adams, “‘Whither are you bound’: The Publication and Shaping of Shakespeare in 1623 and 1923” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 74 (2023), pages 190–203.
- > David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (2001).
- > Laurie Maguire, ‘Actions that a man might play: Mourning, Memory, Editing’, *Performance Research* 7 (2014), pages 66–76.
- > Kathryn Vomero Santos, ¿Shakespeare para todos?, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 73 (2022) pages 49–75.
- > Valerie Wayne, ‘The First Folio’s Arrangement and Its Finale’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 66 (2015), pages 389–408.

Paratexts

What do the pages of paratexts tell us about the ways in which this book was marketed? How might a comparison to Jonson’s 1616 [Workes](#) or other Folio texts published around the same time clarify what is specific and what is generic here?

Author portraits



Compare Shakespeare’s portrait with the other engravings by Droeshout [at the National Portrait Gallery](#).

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Textual apparatus: character lists

Seven plays in the First Folio (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest*, *Othello*, *Timon of Athens*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *The Winter's Tale*) contain lists of characters. These come after, rather than before, the plays themselves.

Take a look at these lists: what do you think about the way the characters are listed [social hierarchy, gender, importance to the play?] and how does that compare with the list in your edited text?

Othello

The character list for *Othello* in the First Folio gives a lot of information about the characters and the play world. What is the significant about the following:

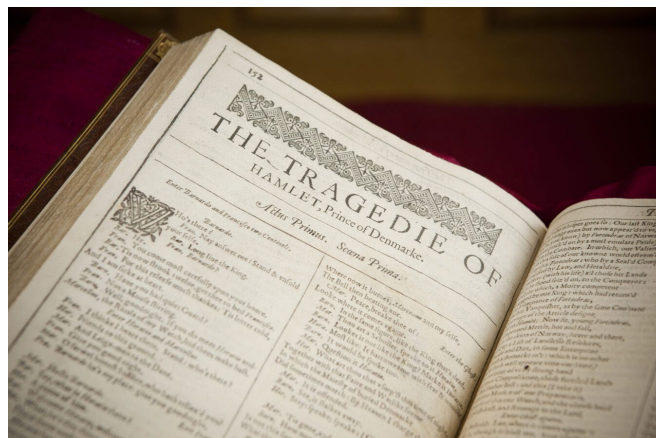
- > The order in which characters are listed.
- > The accuracy of the descriptions (e.g. 'a villaine' for Iago, a 'gull'd gentleman' for Roderigo, a 'courtesan' for Bianca)
- > The implications of the term 'Moore' ([TIDE's Keyword resource on Blackamoor/Moor](#) is recommended).

Could there be an alternative way to construct this character list?

Final reflection question for Shakespeare's First Folio

'Not of an age, but for all time'.

How far has Jonson's prediction been realised, and with what costs as well as benefits?



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