



# This Rough Magic

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*Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature*



*How To Read a Shakespearean Play Text*, by Eugene Giddens.

Cambridge: Camb. UP, 2012. 187pp.

Reviewer(s): Darlene Farabee

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Eugene Giddens' *How to Read a Shakespearean Play Text* manages to pack an extraordinary amount of information in its four tightly organized chapters. Usefully, Giddens defines Shakespearean play texts fairly broadly (c.1588-1642) and draws many examples from playwrights other than Shakespeare. The book takes the reader from the origins of the play texts, through the particular elements and features that appear in those play texts, to the experience of reading copies of the originals, and ends with a consideration of reading modern editions. In this fashion, we start with the earliest considerations (of writing, printing, and circulation) and end with the choices facing us as we set texts for our courses.

In keeping with the framing of the book as informational, Giddens offers clear, direct descriptions of the contents of the chapters and an extensive index. Although the introduction establishes the book within the context of the wider field of bibliography (and points readers to the standard works of McKerrow, Pollard, Greg, and Bowers and introductions to bibliography by Gaskell and Greetham), Giddens offers original bibliographic work on early modern play texts. His section on *dramatis personae*, for

example, mines Farmer and Lesser's *Database of Early English Playbooks* to describe the changes in inclusion of these lists with original play texts. His chapter on modern editions usefully compares the glossing of words in sections of text from the Oxford, Arden, and Cambridge editions. These comparisons serve as templates for his larger contentions about different editions' emphases in text, collation, and commentary. Because of the proliferation of Shakespearean editions, this final chapter depends mostly on Shakespeare plays.

In the first chapter, "The creation and circulation of play texts," Giddens sets out the main bibliographic and textual points of early modern play texts including commissioning plays, foul papers, promptbooks and licensed copies, and likely modifications of plays by actors. Moving on from manuscript to print, Giddens describes the main aspects of publishing in the period including brief details about the construction of books themselves and the steps the printer took in printing. Giddens sets out the main points of New Bibliography and the "near-scientific study of material texts [...] in the first half of the twentieth century" (12). Particularly useful is Giddens' emphasis on the collaborative nature of playwriting in the early modern period; as he states it, "The 'author' of an early modern play is more likely to be part of a collaborative theatrical enterprise than an isolated genius" (7). Giddens' second chapter, "The features of play texts," explores the physical features of a printed play text. The chapter opens with a bullet-pointed list of those features, which are clearly organized to appear in the

order in which a reader encounters them, beginning with title pages and dedications and continuing through marginalia, signatures and page numbers, to colophons and advertisements. The revelatory section on *dramatis personae* appears in this chapter.

The third chapter of the book, "Reading the originals," explains how attention to the earliest printings might alter how we understand the texts. This chapter focuses on two main areas of this experience, the speeches and stage directions in original printings and the "material features of a text that particularly need to be investigated when producing a critical edition" (99). Giddens offers a brief but useful outline of the stakes involved in choosing a copy text, and his descriptions of difficulties with reliance on images from *Early English Books Online* serve as cautionary reminders. This chapter clearly lists individual elements to be investigated in an early modern printing and includes diagrams of chain lines and an explanation of collation notation. In the final chapter of the book, Giddens moves on to consider modern editions, both modernized and original spelling. As he describes, the chapter "discussion especially focuses upon stage directions, which tend to offer the most striking variations across editions" (147). Giddens presents an example passage from *Timon of Athens* to demonstrate how editorial principles and textual apparatus develop an interpretation. The book concludes with a consideration of electronic editions of Shakespeare and other early modern playwrights: "The profession has not decided, and indeed may never decide, what kinds of digital scholarly editions are most appropriate for classroom use" (171).

Although it would be the rare undergraduate course that would include Giddens' book on its own reading list, perhaps the increased access to digital versions of texts will encourage us all to consider using this book and images from original printings in our classrooms.