**Studying reception through the archive**

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This lesson was offered as part of a 200-level course titled “*Hamlet* from Page to Stage to Screen” offered to non-majors as part of the core curriculum at CWRU. Over the course of the semester we read *Hamlet* alongside a number of faithful and unfaithful reworkings in different media in order to study adaptation, appropriation, remediation and performance. This lesson, in the rare books room at Kelvin Smith Library, was offered as a kind of “palate cleanser” between the first unit (on *Hamlet* and source texts) and the second (on adaptations). In previous classes, we had already discussed the relationship between the Quartos, the Folio and the edited text in their Arden editions of the play, as well as the relationship of text to paratext.

Although CWRU owns some really important historical texts, Shakespeare has never been a focus of their collection. Consequently, the materials I could assemble for the students were in some cases “*Hamlet* adjacent,” rather than directly connected the theme of the course. For example, the collection doesn’t contain any Elizabethan quarto play texts, but does have some Philip Massinger quartos from the 1630’s, which I showed as the closest available analogue. While in some ways the constraints of the collection are a limitation, I think that exposure to more obscure texts can actually advantage students by giving them a better sense of the range of print production at a given point in history.

One really interesting acquisition KSL does have is a series of scrapbooks of materials connected to the Cleveland Play House in the early twentieth century. The 1922-23 volume documents a production of *Hamlet* through newspaper reviews, advertisements to alumni associations, and drawings made by members of the cast (see photos). Although this is a little outside the predominant focus on textual history, it was simply too cool to leave out, and the questions it raises about performance are ones we would be asking towards the end of the semester.

Rather than lecture about the assembled books, I asked the students to explore the texts with relatively little guidance and tell me what they found. I think a student-centered approach is important in this context to help students overcome their (sometimes excessive) deference to the books as valuable objects. Moreover, given this was a course for non-majors, I was more interested in training them habits of understanding and analyzing evidence than in ensuring they came out with a complete narrative of Shakespearean textual history.

**Lesson Plan**

Goals:

* Students should put their theoretical study of paratext into practice, by looking at various examples of paratext from different points in history and considering their effect.
* Students should consider what physical layout of a book can tell us about its creation and reception, and learn something about the history of printing, typography and binding.
* Students should gain as a fuller sense of Shakespearean textual history (and especially of non-scholarly traditions, such as those represented by the Scrapbook)
* Students should have fun touching and playing with beautiful objects, and subsequently fall in love with the humanities.

Lesson Breakdown:

1. Introduction to Special Collections from Melissa Hubbard, Team Leader of Scholarly Resources & Special Collections at KSL.

(5 minutes)

1. Students break into groups. Each group is given responsibility for one or two texts as follows:

Group 1

1. Elizabethan Handwritten Letters
2. Philip Massinger, *The Bondsman* (1638)

Group 2

1. *Mr William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (Folio, 1623) [facsimile]
2. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1703)

Group 3

1. William Shakespeare, *The Works of Shakespear in Six Volumes* (1723)
2. Lewis Theobald, *Shakespeare restored: or, a specimen of the many errors* (1726)

Group 4

1. Robert Allot, *England’s Parnassus* (1600)
2. Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespear designed for the use of young persons* (1807)

Group 5

1. *The Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Charles Knight (1880)
2. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, illustrated by Rockwell Kent (1936)

Group 6

1. 1922-23 Cleveland Play House Scrapbook

In their groups, students should look carefully their assigned texts, working through the questions on the handout below. Maggie Vinter and Melissa Hubbard will move around the room, suggesting new approaches and answering questions.

(35 minutes)

1. Each group presents their findings to the class as a whole (20 minutes)
2. Students have time to look at the texts they were not responsible for, take pictures, ask questions. (15 minutes)

Handout

**Rare Books Day**

*Today, you’re historians. We’ll be looking at a number of old, rare and strange books and papers, dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. I’m going to put you into pairs, each with special responsibility for one or two items from the collection. Your job is to learn as much as you can about how* Hamlet *was understood at a particular historical moment from these materials, and then present your findings to the class as a whole.*

*To get as much out of your book(s) as possible, work through the questions below (not all of them will necessarily be relevant to all texts). Pay attention to the content of the books (both text and paratext) and also to their material qualities. Don’t be afraid to touch things, take pictures, and look stuff up on your phones. Above all, have fun!*

*There will be time at the end for you to look at all the different books*

* Writers Who wrote this text? Why did they write it?
* Editors and Illustrators Have people other than the writer contributed to this text? What do they add to the text? What is the effect of their additions? Do you think that the writer would have approved of these changes?
* Publishers Who published the text? How expensive do you think it was? Do you think the writer was involved in the publication or not? How do the publishers advertise the text? How does the typography and layout of the text affect how you respond to it? If your text wasn’t published, how do you think it circulated between people?
* Readers Who do you think this text was written for? What sort of background knowledge does the text expect from readers? Is there any evidence of how readers responded to the text (for instance, marginal notations)?
* Theater How does the text you’re looking at reflect the play’s origin in the theater? Does it tend to stress its relation to the theater or to downplay it? Can you find any evidence within the text of how the play might have been performed or of what an audience would have appreciated most about the play?
* Then and Now How easily can you understand this text? Can you think of a present day analogue to the text you’re looking at? How would the present day text resemble the older one? How would it differ from the older one?
* *Hamlet* How do the different contributors to this text understand *Hamlet*? What do they assume readers already know about the play? What do they consider the most important components of the play? Do they promote a particular interpretation of the play?