

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Shakespeare's Plays from Folger Digital Texts. Edition

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Volume 42, numéro 3, été 2019

Situating Conciliarism in Early Modern Spanish Thought  
Situier conciliarisme dans la pensée espagnole de la première  
modernité

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066369ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066369ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Barger, M. (2019). Compte rendu de [Shakespeare's Plays from Folger Digital Texts. Edition]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(3), 188–191. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066369ar>

**Mowat, Barbara, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, eds.**  
***Shakespeare's Plays from Folger Digital Texts. Edition.***

Folger Shakespeare Library. Accessed 1 April 2019.

[folgerdigitaltexts.org/](http://folgerdigitaltexts.org/).

The *Folger Digital Text* database is a free online searchable format of the Folger printed editions of Shakespeare's plays as edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine and published by Simon & Schuster. For many teachers, the Folger editions of Shakespeare's texts are a mainstay in their classrooms. For teachers familiar with the Folger methods for teaching Shakespeare and the Folger Teaching Institute, the printed versions of these texts are indispensable ([folger.edu/classroom-resources](http://folger.edu/classroom-resources)). The Folger editions of Shakespeare's plays are well edited with excellent notes and additional information for context. There is also plenty of space on the page which is especially useful for students just learning to annotate. For those unaware, the Folger Institute encourages teachers to explore Shakespeare's works with their students as interactive plays rather than traditional texts like novels. It provides professional development opportunities such as the Teaching Shakespeare Institute, and hosts "Forsooth! The Folger Teacher Community," where teachers can interact and trade lesson plans and other ideas and thoughts ([teachingshakespeare.folger.edu](http://teachingshakespeare.folger.edu)). The Folger also provides several teaching modules that correspond to both its digital and printed texts ([folger.edu/teaching-modules](http://folger.edu/teaching-modules)). The digital database uses the same text as the beloved printed editions in an online searchable format.

The *Folger Digital Text* database is searchable, making it incredibly convenient. When using it in conjunction with the printed texts, teachers do not need to worry that the digital text on the board will differ in either words or line numbers. The appearance is also virtually the same as in the printed text, though without footnotes. Any teacher, researcher, or student of Shakespeare can relate to the frustrations that come with the vastly different appearance and line numbers among different versions of Shakespeare's texts. Moreover, any discussion of close reading with students as they look for meter, pauses, breaks, interruptions, and embedded stage directions is often frustrated and stalled when the version on the board does not match with the version the students have in their hands. Likewise, the interruption while the teacher tries to jump to a new line or scene is overcome by Folger's search bar which allows users to search by line number, act, scene, page, and even word. Instead, a teacher can

simply type in an act and scene or even just a word or phrase, and then give the page number to students.

The easy maneuverability of the digital text also becomes useful when the class begins to work on a scene. While the printed Folger texts are an invaluable tool, they are cumbersome to read and handle when students explore a scene on their feet. Instead, being able to directly print one specific scene allows students to work from just one or two sheets rather than an entire text. For middle school students especially, this becomes much easier. They can then make cuts as needed as they create their scene without losing those lines in their own text for later study. In this way, the students will not conflate their acting notes and edits with their annotations and other notes. Moreover, any teaching modules posted on Folger's website are directly linked to the database, allowing the teacher to jump directly to the texts they will need. The database is also searchable by word or phrase, empowering students to investigate the various uses of a word in a text without feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the work. The digital text also marks with brackets where lines differ between quarto, folio, and other versions of a text. Hovering over the bracketed text will reveal a note about the differences.

The *Folger Digital Text* database does not simply provide a searchable digital format. It provides a quality database for students to use free of charge. Their free, searchable database is advancing the open access to Shakespeare's work regardless of resources provided to teachers by their schools and districts. In a world of shrinking education budgets, it is an incredible gift. Since a typical internet search for Shakespeare's texts generally brings up various questionably translated texts, the Folger database provides a much-needed scholarly alternative. One of the most important things an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher can instill in their students is that they are absolutely capable of grasping the complexity of Shakespeare's texts without the aid of dubious translations, which often remove much of the depth. Furthermore, by having students learn to work with difficult texts, they learn to ask questions and analyze a text on their own, a skill that is invaluable both in college and across many professions.

Students often experience what Ralph Cohen terms "Shakesfear" even before they actually encounter Shakespeare in a classroom.<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare's

7. Ralph Alan Cohen, *ShakesFear and How to Cure It: The Complete Handbook for Teaching Shakespeare* (Clayton, DE: Prestwick House, 2006).

reputation is such that students will have heard of his name and influence long before they crack open their first play or sonnet. When teachers give students a translated version of his texts, they are essentially feeding their Shakesfear by telling students they are incapable of understanding Shakespeare's words and that the work of analysis is beyond them. Such versions erect a fence between students and the text. The impulse to use translated works is often fed by a teacher's fear. If they were taught Shakespeare poorly—reading it in class like a novel and listening to lectures—they may feel incapable of teaching him well and instead rely on these translated texts as a supplement. The Folger echoes the need to fight these fear cycles in its own manifesto.<sup>8</sup>

Many students encounter Shakespeare for the first time in middle school or early high school classes. Their first experience with these texts will shape how they feel about them for years. Any ELA teacher that has ever mentioned to a stranger that they are teaching Shakespeare has likely been met with a myriad of stories that can be summed up as “he’s too boring” or “he’s too hard.” If pressed further about their experience, they generally describe learning Shakespeare while sitting in their desks, perhaps reading parts out loud, and listening to their teacher lecture about the scene. These unengaging methods often turn students away from Shakespeare and learning in general, leaving them to believe they either can't understand it or that it's not worth their time. Sadly, most college classrooms will teach Shakespeare in the same way, despite the overall ineffective nature of lecture and passive learning. As Filene points out, “students learn more when they're active rather than passive.”<sup>9</sup> The Folger's methods are incredibly useful in a middle school classroom where students struggle to sit still for more than fifteen minutes at a time at any given moment. Actively engaging in close reading on their feet allows them to be up and moving and thinking while working through the problems in the text. Using Folger's methods, students are rarely bored. Instead, they use the text to work in groups and maneuver through their understanding. Best of all, after some practice, they begin to scaffold themselves and one another. In my class, they are often vocally disappointed on days we will not be working with Shakespeare.

8. Folger Shakespeare Library, “The Folger Manifesto,” *Forsooth! The Folger Teaching Community*, 2017, accessed 31 March 2019, [teachingshakespeare.folger.edu/about-us/folger-manifesto](http://teachingshakespeare.folger.edu/about-us/folger-manifesto).

9. Peter G. Filene, *The Joy of Teaching: A Practical Guide for New College Instructors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 48.

In these active lessons, the ability to print any section of a text at any given moment is invaluable. Students do not need to worry about writing over their reading notes, messing up their text, or even misplacing it, as another can always be printed. If a lesson only requires select scenes from a play, students with limited budgets do not need to buy the entire text. If they need to look at another scene and cannot remember the scene number, they can simply search the database for a word or phrase. This is similarly useful for research. If a student wants to examine the use of a particular word, they can simply search and jump directly to a line rather than drag a cumbersome concordance off the shelf. The database also provides convenient character lists and a synopsis off to the side to aid students when they inevitably forget character relationships and other information, which is especially useful in history plays where characters are alternately called by both names and titles. These features are also available on a mobile browser, though the search function is slightly more cumbersome. However, reading the text through the mobile browser is fairly easy, something that cannot be said for many other databases. The Folger also provides the ability to download texts in multiple file formats.

For students who are constantly interacting with an online world, to leave Shakespeare in a primarily print medium would be unthinkable. Instead, the Folger is responsibly moving Shakespeare into a digital and searchable format that more clearly reflects the various ways students interact with the world around them.

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