How to Read Like an Elizabethan

The Fell Types are digitally reproduced by Igino Marini. www.iginomarini.com. Thanks to Signor Marini for the use of IM FELL DW Pica (c) 2004. This font reproduces a medial-s similar to the one you will find in Shakespeare's 1623 Folio. Medial-s (ſ) resembles a Roman f with the right side of the bar removed.

What follows is a guide—by no means exhaustive—on how to read Elizabethan print. It should help you become familiar with the main conventions of the period. Remember that it is helpful to sound out the text instead of reading it silently.

Suggestion: Go to the Folger Library Website's 1623 Folio reading copy at https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeare-in-print/first-folio/bookreader-68/ and navigate first to pp. 32-33 of 912, where Ariel sternly addresses Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian, saying "You are three men of ſinne...." Also examine pp. 34-35, where you'll find the famous passage that begins "You doe look (my son) in a mou'd ſort, / As if you were diſmaid...." Prospero, stung by his remembrance of Caliban's conspiracy against him, calls a halt to the "Reuels" (Revels) that he has been staging for Miranda and Ferdinand. We can use these passages, and others nearby, to illustrate the following observations:

Spelling

Elizabethan words often include a final e, as in drowne, fooles, fellowes, and sometimes a twinned consonant, as in ſinne ("sin"). In the passages we are focusing on, you'll find noteworthy spellings: Ayre for Air, fabricke for fabric, capt for capped, Towres for Towers, Pallaces for Palaces, it ſelfe for itſelf, vext for vexed, infirmitie for infirmity, Ile for I'll. You will often see the same word spelled variously—in fact, Shakespeare did not spell his own name consistently: Shakspere, Shakspeare, etc. There's a whimsicality about the written word in Shakespeare's time. Britain's was still partly an oral culture, and the written language hadn't yet been regularized. (That could, of course, be seen as an

opportunity, not a defect.) The first major English dictionary was Samuel Johnson's in 1755. See https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/.

Capitalization

In general, the Elizabethans capitalize substantives when they want to lend some emphasis or elevation, some importance or inflection, to the word being capitalized. Words of address like "My Lord" and personifications like "Nature" are obvious candidates. However, the Elizabethans don't capitalize all substantives. See, for example, this passage: "Our Reuels (Revels) now are ended : Theſe our actors, / ... were all Spirits, and / Are melted into Ayre (Air), into thin Ayre...." Read the rest of the passage and try to figure out why certain substantives are capitalized and others are not. In the passage above, why would "Reuels," "Spirits," and "Air" be capitalized, while "actors" is not? (David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, 3rd ed., Cambridge UP, 2019 may be of interest on the issue of capitalization and other matters.)

Punctuation

Punctuation seems rather light in Shakespeare's Folio, which makes sense if we presume that the Folio edition is founded upon actor-oriented texts that nonetheless leave room for experimentation. "Why the Folio? Part I: WTF Punctuation?" reflects upon the Folio's punctuation habits and philosophy at https://shakespeareanruminations.wordpress.com/2011/11/04/wtfpunctuation/. The author summarizes the main differences between modern punctuation and Elizabethan as follows (paraphrasing from the author's chart):

In modern punctuation a period is a full stop, while in Elizabethan it's *a full stop with emphasis*. A modern comma is usually just a short pause, a breath, while in Elizabethan it may *mark a shift in thought*. In modern punctuation, a colon introduces a new idea, while in Elizabethan, it *leaps to a new thought*. In modern punctuation, the semicolon often means little more than a semi-stop, while in Elizabethan it implies that the writer means *to carry on with an idea that's already been stated, perhaps to offer additional explanation*.

Andrew Jarvis's "First Folio Punctuation" offers fine reflections on the stated topic. See https://shaksper.net/current-postings/33477-first-folio-punctuation. There's also David Carey's piece "In search of Shakespeare's use of the period-stopped line: a Folio punctuation investigation" at Taylor & Francis online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23268263.2013.829708.

Letter s / ſ

Lowercase words that begin with an s-sound use the medial s: "You are three men of ſinne (sin)...."

Words that have an internal s-sound also use the medial s: "whom deſtiny (destiny) / That hath to inſtrument (instrument) this lower world...."

If the letter s appears at the *end* of a word, a modern s is used: "this," "you fooles, I and my fellowes...." Moreover, it appears that if there's an end-syllable contraction, a regular s can be used: "caus'd."

If the word is uppercase, a regular capital S is used: "the neuer ſurfeited Sea."

When character names and places with an internal s show up in the regular text, as with "you three / From *Millaine* did ſupplant good Proſpero ...," a long s will be used. In these references (with or without internal s), italic lettering is employed.

It's easy to mistake the basic letter f (with the horizontal bar extending to *both* sides) for a medial-s letter ſ. But an f is just an f-sound, as in fabricke or favour.

Letter v

When a word *begins* with a v-sound, v stands for that sound: "valour."

When a word *begins* with a u-sound, v stands for that sound: "being most vnfit (unfit)...." But note that when the u-sound is *not* at the beginning of the word, u represents our u-sound: "inſtrument," or "buſineſſe" (business).

The Classical Roman letter v was used for both a w-sound (or digamma *wau* sound from very early Greek, written as uppercase F and lowercase ϝ) and a u-sound; there was no letter u: thus "Marivs" for "Marius." So "In vino veritas" was

pronounced in classical Latin approximately as, "In wino weritas." The multipurpose use of English "v" among early modern printers probably owes something to this ancient complexity.

When a word contains a v-sound that is *not* at its beginning, u is used: "I haue (have) made you mad."

Letter u

As mentioned just above, the letter u sometimes represents a v-sound, as in "haue." Also as mentioned above, a u-sound at the beginning of the word is written with a v, as in vnfit for unfit and vp for up. But when the u-sound occurs elsewhere than at the beginning of a word, the letter u represents it, as in "buſineſſe" (business).

Letters ct / ct (called a ct-ligature) and st / ſt (called an st-ligature)

A word such as "actors" will be written "actors." Similarly, "rest" will be written "reſt." These are common combinations, so you'll see the ligatures frequently.

Abbreviations by omission of letters or use of an apostrophe to save space

Alonso says, "Giue vs kind keepers, heauēs:what were theſe?" If you examine the line in the Folio on pg. 33, you'll see that it is very cramped. There was no room for a space before and after the colon, and the letter "n" has been omitted from "heavens" and a macron-like mark has been included above the letter "e": heauē[n]s. Abbreviations of this sort seem to occur when the printer must save space. Another practice is to use an apostrophe: "droun'd" for "drowned," etc.

Letter W (capitalized)

Seeing how well Ferdinand and Miranda are coming along, Prospero says, "So glad of this as they I cannot be, / VVho are ſurpriz'd with all..." (pp. 30-31). Due to whatever technical limitations, the printer has used a pair of capital letter V's instead of producing the usual joined "W."