

Introduction: What Is a Facsimile and Why Does It Matter?

In his short story ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’, Jorge Luis Borges, assuming the narrative voice of an academic pedant, describes how the writer Pierre Menard sets out, not to copy, but to produce ‘word for word and line for line’, a portion of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*.¹ Menard succeeds, but then the narrator explains that, because of the passage of time (although this is not exactly how he describes the situation), Menard’s *Quixote* is completely different in meaning to Cervantes’s, even though the words are identical. This little fable illustrates perfectly the paradox of the facsimile which I will be exploring in this Element. A facsimile is intended to be a replica rather than a copy; facsimiles reproduce the form of a text rather than just the content. If ‘facsimile’ literally means making something that is the same as something else, then the slippery status of the facsimile occurs because of the act of making – a slipperiness also indicated by the slippage between ‘similis’, meaning alike or merely similar. Like Menard’s *Quixote*, the facsimile of an early modern text is both identical and different: the closer one looks, and the more one takes into account the context of a particular facsimile, the more differences appear, even when at first glance the replica seems identical to the original.

In this Element, I argue that the rise in the number and quality of facsimiles coincided with the rise in formal editorial activity centred on Shakespeare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but extended to other early modern (and classical) texts. Throughout, I contend that a facsimile is different from a forgery, though the two are not unrelated. On the flip side, many a facsimile has also been mistaken for an ‘original’. Through exploring this history, I will also cast light on current interest in the affordances and drawbacks of modern digital reproductions of early modern texts (often referred to as ‘digital facsimiles’), especially of Shakespeare’s texts.

Because this Element focusses on Shakespeare and associated authors, I will be concentrating on facsimiles of printed texts, rather than manuscripts, though there will be some crossovers between the two. In historicizing the

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’, trans. Anthony Bonner, *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 45–55.

facsimile, I am taking my cue from the consideration of textual reproduction in David McKitterick's excellent, wide-ranging study *Old Books, New Technologies*.² McKitterick sees facsimiles as part of the way antiquarian books have been used and reused, within the context of what could be termed 'historical bibliography'. He outlines the development from what I would term 'artisanal facsimiles', whether drawn, traced, or printed with old type or pseudo-old type, through to the technological innovations of photographic and then digital reproduction. In this study, I contend that there are significant correlations between changes in approach to the editing of Shakespeare and the use of facsimiles as a mode of transmitting and permitting wider access to copies of early texts. Like McKitterick, I explore how a historical approach to the facsimile – one that understands it as related to other forms of textual production and reproduction – speaks to current debates about the nature and effectiveness of digital reproductions of early modern books, though I will be arguing for more of a balance between the positive and negative impact of the digital turn.³

As a prelude to a brief history of facsimiles, I want to begin with a particularly illuminating case history, which might be called 'The Case of the Facsimile That Kept Fooling People'. Here, side by side, are the title pages of a 1599 play usually attributed to Thomas Kyd, printed in quarto, entitled *Solimon and Perseda* (Figure 1).

The page on the left is the title page as printed in 1599, while the page on the right is of a facsimile dating from around 1805. This is specifically a type-facsimile produced by the printer Joseph Smeeton. This kind of facsimile can be contrasted with those that were traced or hand-drawn, sometimes referred to as pen-facsimiles.⁴ Traced facsimiles tended to be of single pages, done in order to supply what was missing from a genuine early modern book. Here, for example, is the traced final page of Shakespeare's

² David McKitterick, *Old Books, New Technologies: The Representation, Conservation and Transformation of Books since 1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³ See *ibid.*, pp. 211–13.

⁴ For more details about different kinds of facsimiles, see the Glossary.

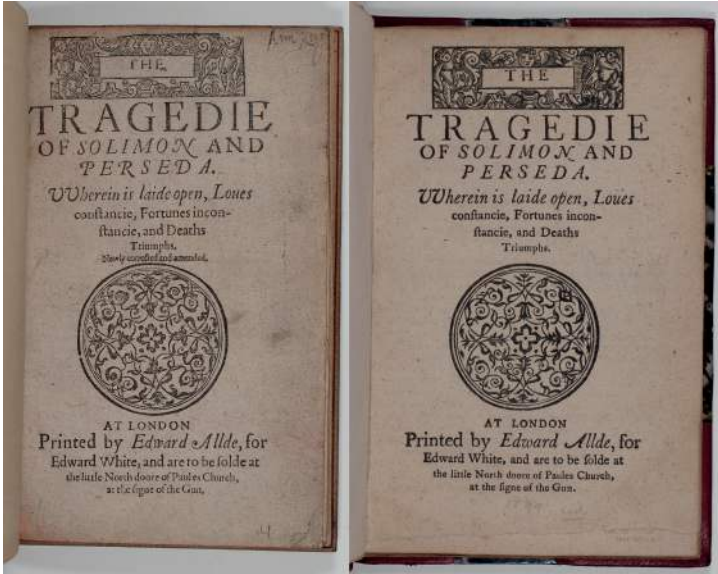


Figure 1 Title pages of *Solimon and Perseda*, Harry Ransom Center, Pforz 953, Pforz 953 PFZ

first folio, done by the most famous of all nineteenth-century practitioners of this art, John Harris (Figure 2A).⁵

If you look very closely beneath the elaborate final ornament, you can see that Harris has signed his work (Figure 2B).⁶

⁵ I do not use capitals for Shakespeare's first folio given that this is a descriptive term, not the title of the book.

⁶ On Harris see especially Sarah Werner's excellent Folger Shakespeare Library 'Collation' entry, 'Pen Facsimiles of Early Print' (<https://collation.folger.edu/2013/05/pen-facsimiles-of-early-print>, accessed 11 December 2021), and McKitterick, *Old Books, New Technologies*, pp. 105–8.



Figure 2A Final traced page of first folio, Folger Shakespeare Library STC
22273 fo. 1 no. 23



Figure 2B

Harris was the most acclaimed practitioner of this specialized art in the nineteenth century, and I will discuss his work in more detail in Section 2. Here I just want to note the paradox that Harris's pen-work produces an extremely accurate facsimile of a printed page, albeit one deliberately signed so you know that what you see is not the original.

In contrast, a type-facsimile like *Solimon and Perseda*, where the apparent replication of the actual process of early modern printing is a less exact reproduction because it uses type like but not identical to the original, was still capable of fooling people. Joseph Smeeton, who produced the early nineteenth-century type-facsimile of Kyd's play, belonged to a dynasty of printers, with his printing shop responsible for far more than just facsimiles.⁷ The more closely one examines Smeeton's facsimile of *Solimon and Perseda*, the more departures from the original become

⁷ All of Smeeton's work is signed 'J. Smeeton', which has perhaps led to some confusion. A. T. Hazen suggests the printer was a John Smeeton ('Type-Facsimiles', *MP* 64 (1947), pp. 209–17, at p. 209). In fact, as David McKitterick notes, Joseph Smeeton and his son George were printers in St Martins Lane, and Joseph was certainly responsible for the *Solimon and Perseda* facsimile; see McKitterick, *Old Books, New Technologies*, p. 88. The date of the facsimile is hard to determine, but given that Joseph died in a fire at the print shop in 1809, with George carrying on the printing work, the facsimile has to have been printed earlier, possibly around 1805 (see British Book Trade Index, Smeeton, Joseph, bbti.bodleian.ox.ac.uk, accessed 23 February 2020).

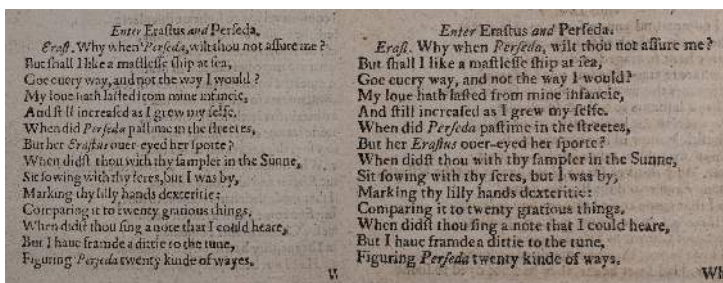


Figure 3 Comparison of original and facsimile, Harry Ransom Center, Pforz 953, Pforz 953 PFZ

apparent – but only, of course, if an original is available for the comparison. This is the kind of type-facsimile where the printer has not used remaining examples of the original type, but rather has used type that closely resembles the original. In this instance, it appears that Smeeton used a Caslon typeface designed by William Caslon in 1722. The differences become apparent when the original and the facsimile are placed side by side and examined line by line. This is more obvious with the typeface than with the printer's ornaments, such as the one on the title page, where the ornaments were almost certainly traced from the printed original and then made into woodblocks.⁸ For example, the type that Smeeton used did not contain the same italic capital E used for the character name Erastus, as we can see when the examples are placed next to each other (see Figure 3).

A similar example can be found on the final page, where once again the type cannot be matched exactly, so the last word, 'Finis', has a swash capital in the original and a plain capital in the facsimile.

It is difficult to know whether Smeeton intended his facsimile to deceive people into believing they were looking at an original; like Harris, Smeeton signed his work, but, unlike Harris, he left his mark in a spot (at the very

⁸ The title page fleuron is in Henry R. Plomer, *English Printers' Ornaments* (London: Grafton & Company, 1924), No. 93.

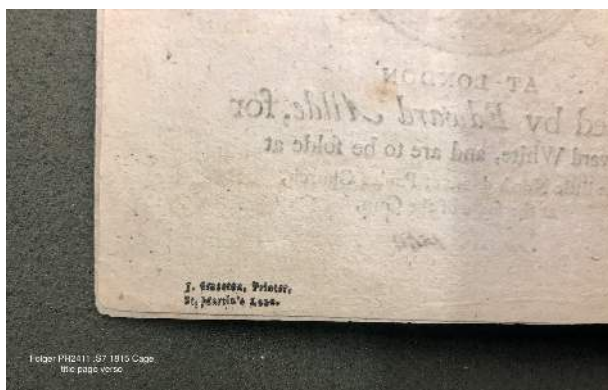


Figure 4 Facsimile title page verso, Folger Shakespeare Library

bottom of the verso of the title page) where it might easily be cut away without leaving much evidence that it had ever been there (see Figure 4).

Indeed, the copy held by the British Library is an example where this ‘signature’ has carefully been cut away.⁹ There are two copies in the Harry Ransom Center, both of them with the Smeeton signature cut away, but one copy has the faint impression of the cut away on the facing page, indicating that it was there for some time before someone removed it, possibly for a sale (see Figure 5).

The *Solimon and Perseda* facsimile seems to have been reasonably popular: there are still copies in a number of libraries, and it is impossible to know how many might be in private hands. Why did Smeeton produce a facsimile of an obscure play like *Solimon and Perseda*? Smeeton did produce other type-facsimiles, but of the many early modern possibilities, this does not seem the most obvious – he did not, for example, produce a facsimile of *The Spanish Tragedy*, which was already in 1805 a play of

⁹ For a similar strategy which J. Sturt employed on a number of facsimiles of pamphlets printed similarly in Caslon around the period 1810–20, see A. T. Hazen, ‘J. Sturt, Facsimilist’, *The Library* 25 (1944), 72–9.

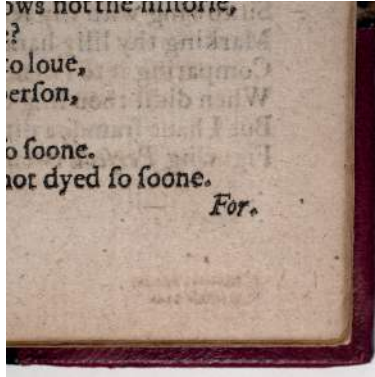


Figure 5 Harry Ransom Center Pforz 953 PFZ

considerable interest. *Solimon and Perseda* was a much more obscure play, though it was available in Thomas Hawkins's three-volume *The Origin of the English Drama*, first published in 1772. Hawkins notes that he based his edition on Garrick's copy of the 1599 edition.¹⁰

It is possible that the very obscurity of the play facilitated a facsimile designed perhaps to allow people to pretend that they had a copy of a rare edition: the kind of boast some of us might still make about the obscure corners of the early modern world we lay claim to. While copying the ornaments would have taken some time, a type-facsimile was not especially expensive or time-consuming to produce as opposed to a traced facsimile where everything had to be copied meticulously by hand. I cannot determine Smeeton's motives in producing the *Solimon and Perseda* facsimile; I am unsure if he intended to deceive, but deceive he did. Here I beg to differ with Lukas Erne, who is sure that the signature on the verso of the title page means Smeeton intended no deception, but, as I noted earlier, the placement of that signature so close to the bottom edge of the page allows

¹⁰ Thomas Hawkins, ed., *The Origins of the English Drama*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1772), vol. 2, p. 199.

for plausible deniability, so that Smeeton can appeal to two markets: buyers happy with a declared reproduction, and those who might like to pretend that they had an original.¹¹

Increasing interest in Kyd during the nineteenth century culminated in what was intended to be an authoritative edition of the play published by Oxford University Press in 1901 and edited by Frederick Boas.¹² Boas followed on from W. W. Greg's mistaken classification of the facsimile as an original copy in Greg's 1900 *List of English Plays*.¹³ (Greg lists two British Library copies of the 1599 edition, but one of these, shelfmark G18612, is in fact the Smeeton facsimile.) Accordingly, Boas included the facsimile in his collation of copies of the play and listed variants from it. Meanwhile, Greg had realized his error and, in a rather mean-spirited fashion, reviewed the Boas edition for *The Modern Language Quarterly* and roundly criticized Boas for not realizing that the Smeeton facsimile was not an original text!¹⁴ (Boas admitted his mistake in a reissue of the Kyd edition.)

Perhaps the most interesting confusion was manifested in the 1912 Tudor Facsimile Text series edition of the play. This volume is a handsomely produced collotype facsimile, edited by John Farmer, the general editor of the series.¹⁵ Collotype facsimiles used an expensive and labour-intensive photographic process which allows for a much more detailed and fine-grained reproduction of the original. Except in this case, the original was not the original, as Farmer thought, but was in fact the Smeeton facsimile re-facsimiled, so to speak, rearing up again unstoppably like King Charles's Head in Mr Dick's *Memoire* in Dickens's *David Copperfield*. Here, for example, is the telltale final page with the substituted N type in 'FINIS' (see Figures 6 and 7).

¹¹ Lukas Erne, ed., *Soliman and Perseda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), Malone Society No. 181, pp. viii–ix.

¹² The information which follows is outlined in detail in Hazen, 'Type-Facsimiles', pp. 209–11; see also Erne, *Soliman and Perseda*, pp. viii–ix.

¹³ W. W. Greg, *A List of English Plays Written before 1643* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1900), p. 129.

¹⁴ W. W. Greg, review of Boas, *MLQ* 4 (1901): 185–90.

¹⁵ John S. Farmer, ed., *Solimon and Perseda* (Tudor Facsimile Texts, 1912).

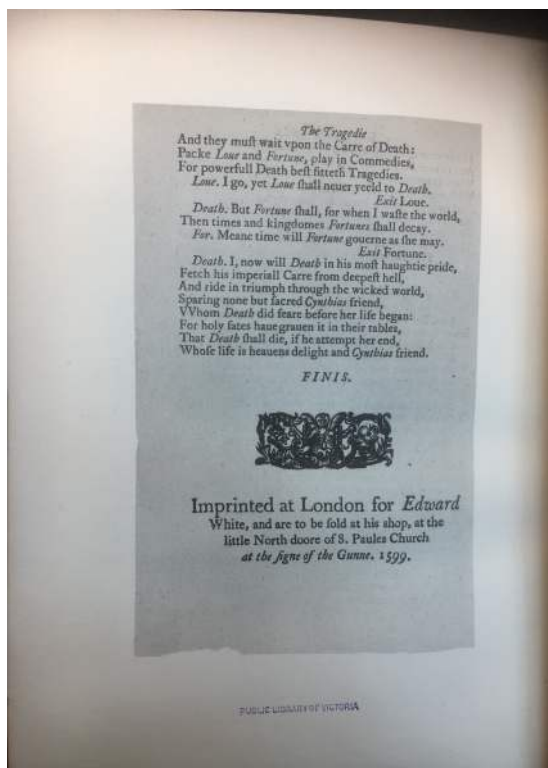


Figure 6 Final page of Tudor Facsimile Texts edition of *Solimon and Perseda*, ed. John Farmer, 1912, State Library of Victoria

A. T. Hazen discussed the ironic further recalibration of the ever-present facsimile in a 1947 article in *Modern Philology*, which was essentially a warning directed at those who had what Hazen termed ‘insufficient opportunity’ to handle original early modern books.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Hazen, ‘Type-Facsimiles’, pp. 209–17.