The First Folio's Collation Statement

A collation or "signature statement" is a way to describe a book. Here's how Folger cataloguers describe the First Folio:

<p align="center">πA^6(πA1+1 πA5+1.2) A-2B⁶ 2C² a-g⁶ ˣ2g⁸ h-v⁶ x⁴ "gg3.4"(± "gg3") ¶-2¶⁶ 3¶1
2a-2f⁶ 2g² "Gg⁶" 2h⁶ 2k-3b⁶</p>

For a specialist, this is an orderly, rules-bound, short-hand way of understanding the makeup of a book. Signatures are a more reliable description of an early modern book than pagination. Many books in this era do not have page numbers, and those that do, like the First Folio, often have repeated, missing, or incorrect page numbers. Still, to the uninitiated, a collation statement can look a lot like a chemical formula. It needs to be decoded.

The first thing to understand is that this description is based on the key that printers added as signals for binders to nest and fold the sheets in order and make sure nothing was missing. When you read a collation statement, therefore, you are potentially working in two time frames—the *then* of production and the *now* of description. For purposes of the assembly of printed sheets, the printers' key contained two elements, a letter of the alphabet (in A to Z order) and a number (from 1 to 6, for the order of leaves within the gathering). **A-D⁶** is an example of a simple collation statement. This statement describes a book with 4 gatherings (A, B, C, D), and 6 leaves (or 12 pages) in each gathering, for a total of 24 leaves and 48 pages. The printers' symbols appear on the *recto*, or front, of the first three leaves of the gathering, and would generally appear as A, A2, A3 for a folio in sixes. Once you get these three in order, the rest follow. The reverse of the leaf, or the *verso*, doesn't get a signature. (Consult the DIY First Folio pdfs for our glossary of terms.)

There was nothing simple about the printing of the First Folio. It was a job that took about two years to complete in a large printing house with a number of employees. The instructions for assembly were crucial for a large print job like the First Folio, with over 75 gatherings of sheets and multiple discrete parts to the job.

We will follow the printers' practices in decoding the First Folio collation statement. The printers started the alphabetical sequence with the plays themselves. In reading this statement, we will also pass over the preliminaries for now.

Comedies: A-2B⁶ 2C²

Let's start instead with the unit **A-2B⁶ 2C²** in the First Folio's collation statement. This section indicates the sheets used to print the First Folio's Comedies. **A-2B⁶** indicates complete regularity in the gatherings through the entire alphabet and onto the first two letters of a second round. **2B** is a scholarly transcription of the doubled letters (Bb) that the printers used in this case. **2C²** tells us that the next printed unit (Cc) contained only two leaves. This is because printers needed only one more sheet to finish *The Winter's Tale*. The next section of the First Folio, the Histories, started with a new sequence of letters.

Histories: a-g⁶ ˣ2g⁸ h-v⁶ x⁴

The printers assigned each genre in the First Folio its own self-contained designators—so for the Histories, that meant starting a new sequence with lowercase letters (a through x). There is one irregular gathering

that is used to complete the play *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*: 2g (or gg) follows g in the sequence and also uses one more sheet in the gathering to complete the play in a gathering of eight rather than the usual six. Because there is also another gg sequence in the Folio, the collation statement distinguishes this one by adding the Greek letter **χ** even though this letter is not on the page.

Tragedies: "gg3.4" (±"gg3") ¶-2¶⁶ 3¶1 2a-2f⁶ 2g² "Gg⁶" 2h⁶ 2k-3b⁶

The printers started this genre with a new sequence again (aa). As with the Comedies and the Histories, the Tragedies are also separately paginated. In the case of the Tragedies, the pagination and the regular part of the new sequence both begin with *Coriolanus* and run **2a-2f⁶ 2g²**. There are two major interruptions in this sequence, and they can both be explained by the fact that printers had started printing *Troilus and Cressida* in the 2g (gg on the page) gathering, then had to stop, and when they resumed printing the play, they put it at the beginning of the Tragedies, as its own self-contained—and highly irregular—unit.

The *Troilus and Cressida* exercises in the Virtual Printing House walk you through the changes in the printing of *Troilus*. The DIY First Folio pdf allows you to assemble the gatherings to understand how the gg sheets and the ¶ sheets were combined to print that play. *Troilus and Cressida* represented the most complicated interruption and resumption of printing in all of the First Folio. The irregular sequences in the collation statement are evidence of those interruptions and the problem-solving strategies deployed by the printers.

First Folio Preliminaries: ᵖA⁶(ᵖA1+1 ᵖA5+1.2)

Experts add the superscript greek letter **π** when talking about the introductory materials to distinguish the gathering, signed 'A' from the first gathering of *The Tempest*. Though these pages are placed *before* the book's main content (the plays in this case), they were usually printed *after* the main content. The +1 and +1.2 indicate leaves that have been added to the gathering. That first +1 (**ᵖA1+1**) is the famous portrait of Shakespeare, added in after **ᵖA1**. The second +1.2(**ᵖA5+1.2**) indicates two leaves inserted after **ᵖA5**. In some copies of the First Folio, however, those leaves are found inserted after **ᵖA⁶**. Again, the exercises in the Virtual Printing House walk you through the printing of the preliminaries. The DIY First Folio pdf allows you to assemble the gathering and better understand the source of its irregularity.

Let's read that statement again:

Preliminaries: ᵖA⁶(ᵖA1+1 ᵖA5+1.2)
Comedies: A-2B⁶ 2C²
Histories: a-g⁶ ˣ2g⁸ h-v⁶ x⁴
Troilus and Cressida: "gg3.4" (±"gg3") ¶-2¶⁶ 3¶1
Tragedies: 2a-2f⁶ 2g² "Gg⁶" 2h⁶ 2k-3b⁶

Now you know the code. In the DIY First Folio's downloadable plays, you can use this statement as a key to assemble your own copy of the plays. See how these plays were printed, how many cues to the proper order are provided, how many are missing, and how many are misleading.