

ON EARLY MODERN EDITIONS of SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS

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Any editor who prepares a Shakespeare play for publication makes a number of decisions about how to transform the earliest surviving copies of the play into a modern edition. None of Shakespeare’s handwritten play manuscripts has survived, and, as far as anyone knows, Shakespeare was not involved in the publication of his plays. During Shakespeare’s lifetime some of his individual plays were published in small books called “quartos.” After Shakespeare’s death, his collected plays were published in a large book called a “folio.” The first edition of his collected plays, published in 1623 and entitled *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, is now called the “First Folio.”

If you are studying a particular speech or scene in a Shakespeare play, looking at how it was published in the First Folio and any available quarto can be illuminating. What follows is an introduction, in six parts, to how early editions of Shakespeare’s plays can expand your choices for interpretation and performance.

1. [Online Facsimiles of Early Editions](#)
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ONLINE FACSIMILES of EARLY EDITIONS

If you are studying a particular speech or scene in a Shakespeare play, looking at how it was published in the First Folio and any available quarto can be illuminating. Happily, facsimiles of the earliest editions of Shakespeare’s plays are now available online. Here are some of the websites where you can find them:

[The Bodleian First Folio](#)

[The British Library Treasures in Full: Shakespeare in Quarto](#)

[The Folger Library Digital Image Collection “LUNA”](#)

[The Folger Shakespeare Library First Folio Image Collection](#)

[Internet Shakespeare Editions](#)



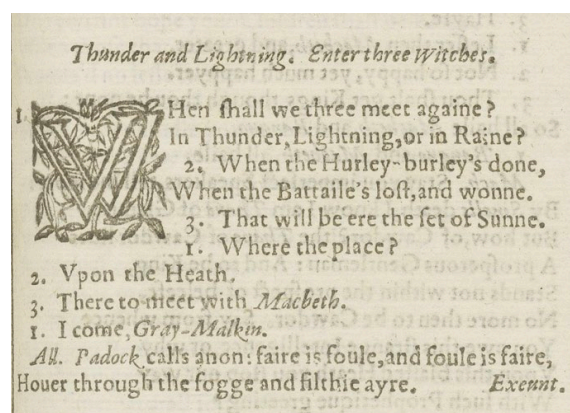
FIRST FOLIO vs. MODERN EDITIONS

Below is the first scene of *Macbeth* as presented in the Folger Shakespeare Library online edition and in the First Folio. As you can see, modern editions update spelling and punctuation to fit contemporary publishing practices, and they include line numbers. Editors sometimes add stage directions not in the First Folio or early quartos, and they include notes that explain selected words and phrases. The information provided in a modern edition of a Shakespeare play, drawn from years of scholarship, is enormously helpful. The information also is inevitably from the point of view of a particular scholar. There are times when you might like to look for yourself at the raw material of the early texts from which an editor has produced the modern edition you are reading.

Macbeth Act 1, Scene 1 in [Folger \(2015\)](#)

<i>Thunder and Lightning. Enter three Witches.</i>	
FIRST WITCH	
When shall we three meet again?	
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?	
SECOND WITCH	
When the hurly-burly's done,	
When the battle's lost and won.	
THIRD WITCH	
That will be ere the set of sun.	5
FIRST WITCH	
Where the place?	
SECOND WITCH	Upon the heath.
THIRD WITCH	
There to meet with Macbeth.	
FIRST WITCH	I come, Graymalkin.
SECOND WITCH	Paddock calls.
THIRD WITCH	Anon.
ALL	
Fair is foul, and foul is fair;	
Hover through the fog and filthy air.	
<i>They exit.</i>	

Macbeth Act 1, Scene 1 in [First Folio \(1623\)](#)



QUARTOS vs. FIRST FOLIO

The only existing early publication of *Macbeth* is in the First Folio. When a play, like *Hamlet*, exists in an early quarto or two in addition to the Folio, a modern editor must choose from among the variations in the early texts of the plays. Consider Hamlet's famous soliloquy as published in the three earliest existing editions of *Hamlet*, printed below. (Most modern editors base their edition of *Hamlet* on the 1604 Quarto and the First Folio.)

[The 1603 Quarto \(The First Quarto or "Q1"\)](#)

King. See where hee comes poring vpon a booke.
Enter Hamlet.
Cor. Madame, will it please your grace
 To leaue vs here?
Que. With all my hart. *exit.*
Cor. And here *Ophelia*, reade you on this booke,
 And walke aloofe, the King shal be vsfene.
Ham. To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
 To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
 No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,
 For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,
 And borne before an euertlasting Iudge,
 From whence no passenger euer returnd,
 The vndiscover'd country, at whose sight
 The happy smile, and the accur'd damn'd.
 But for this, the ioyfull hope of this,
 Whold' beare the scornes and flattery of the world,
 Scorned by the right rich, the rich curst of the poore?
 The widow being oppress'd, the orphan wrong'd,
 The taste of hunger, or a tirants raigne,
 And thousand more calamities besides,
 To grunt and sweate vnder this weary life,
 When that he may his full *Quietus* make,
 With a bare bodkin, who would this indure,
 But for a hope of something after death?
 Which puzzles the braine, and doth confound the sence,
 Which makes vs rather beare those euilles we haue,
 Than flie to others that we know not of.
 I that, O this conscience makes cowardes of vs all,
 Lady in thy orizons, be all my finnes remembred.

[The 1604 Quarto \(The Second Quarto or "Q2"\)](#)

Enter Hamlet.
Pol. I heare him comming, with-draw my Lord,
Ham. To be, or not to be, that is the question,
 Whether tis nobler in the minde to suffer
 The slings and arrowes of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take Armes against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing, end them, to die to sleepe
 No more, and by a sleepe, to say we end
 The hart-ake, and the thousand naturall shocks
 That flesh is heire to; tis a consumption
 Deuoutly to be wish't to die to sleepe,
 To sleepe, perchance to dreame, I there's the rub,
 For in that sleepe of death what dreames may come
 When we haue shuffled off this mortall coyle
 Must giue vs pause, there's the respect
 That makes calamitie of so long life:
 For who would beare the whips and scornes of time,
 Th'oppressors wrong, the proude mans contumely,
 The pangs of despiz'd loue, the lawes delay,
 The insolence of office, and the spurnes
 That patient merit of th'vnworthy takes,
 When he himselfe might his quietas make
 With a bare bodkin; who would fardels beare,
 To grunt and sweate vnder a wearie life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The vndiscover'd country, from whose borne
 No trauiler returnes, puzzles the will,
 And makes vs rather beare those ills we haue,
 Then flie to others that we know not of.
 Thus conscience dooes make cowardes,
 And thus the natiue hiew of resolution
 Is sickled ore with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprizes of great pitch and moment,
 With this regard theyr currents turne awry,
 And loose the name of action. Soft you now,
 The faire *Ophelia*, Nymph in thy orizons
 Be all my finnes remembred.

[The 1623 Folio \("The First Folio" or "F1"\)](#)

Pol. I heare him comming, let's withdraw my Lord. *Exeunt.*
Enter Hamlet.
Ham. To be, or not to be, that is the Question:
 Whether 'tis Nobler in the minde to suffer
 The Slings and Arrowes of outrageous Fortune,
 Or to take Armes against a Sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them: to dye, to sleepe
 No more; and by a sleepe, to say we end
 The Heart-ake, and the thousand Naturall shockes
 That Flesh is heyre too? 'Tis a consumption
 Deuoutly to be wish'd. To dye to sleepe,
 To sleepe, perchance to Dreame; I, there's the rub,
 For in that sleepe of death, what dreames may come,
 When we haue shuffled off this mortall coile,
 Must giue vs pause. There's the respect
 That makes Calamity of so long life:
 For who would beare the Whips and Scornes of time,
 The Oppressors wrong, the poore mans Contumely,
 The pangs of dispriz'd Loue, the Lawes delay,
 The insolence of Office, and the Spurnes
 That patient merit of the vnworthy takes,
 When he himselfe might his *Quietus* make
 With a bare Bodkin? Who would these Fardles beare
 To grunt and sweate vnder a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The vndiscover'd Countrey, from whose Borne
 No Traveller returnes, Puzzels the will,
 And makes vs rather beare those illes we haue,
 Than flye to others that we know not of.
 Thus Conscience does make Cowards of vs all,
 And thus the Natiue hew of Resolution
 Is sicklied o're, with the pale cast of Thought,
 And enterprizes of great pith and moment,
 With this regard their Currants turne away,
 And loose the name of Action. Soft you now,
 The faire *Ophelia*? Nymph, in thy Orizons
 Be all my finnes remembred.

EARLY MODERN vs. MODERN PRINTING

When you compare the facsimiles of the early modern texts of a Shakespeare play to the modern edition you are reading, you will notice a number of differences that might, at first, make reading the early texts a bit confusing:

- Spelling was not yet standardized. Notice “to die” and “puzzles” in the 1603 Quarto, the 1604 Quarto, and the 1623 Folio publications of *Hamlet*:

To Die, to die To dye

puffles puzzles Puzels

- Nouns are sometimes capitalized, whether or not they are proper nouns. Notice “whips” and “scorns” in the 1623 Folio:

For who would beare the Whips and Scornes of time,

- Early Modern English included the “long s,” a letter no longer used, that looks confusingly like the letter “f.” Notice “sleep,” “suffer,” and “question” in the 1604 Quarto of *Hamlet*:

ſleepe, ſuffer queſtion,

Notice that the cross bar of an “f” is drawn completely through the stem of the letter. You can see this above in “suffer” and below in “fortune,” “life,” and “from.”

fortune, life: from

- Our letter “J” was often printed as “I” (and “j” as “i”). Notice “Judge” in the 1603 Quarto:

Iudge,

- “U” and “V” were not yet distinct letters. Our letter “U” was printed as “V” (and “u” as “v”) when at the start of a word. Notice “Love,” “Must give us,” “under,” and “undiscovered” in the 1623 Folio:

Loue, Muſt giue vs vnder vndiſcouered

STAGE DIRECTIONS in EARLY TEXTS

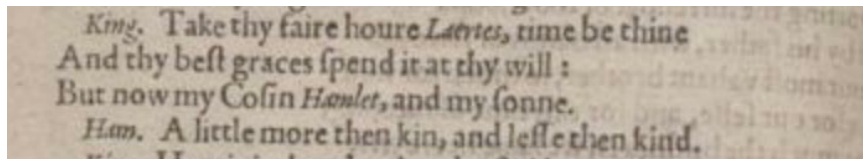
When staging or analyzing a scene, you can check to see what stage directions, if any, are included in the early texts and how they compare to those in your modern edition.

In his first line in the play, Hamlet responds to his uncle, King Claudius, who has recently married Hamlet's mother and, thus, become his stepfather. When Claudius addresses Hamlet as "my cousin" and "now my son," Hamlet remarks, "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.64-65). Although no stage direction is included in any of the early texts, many editors mark Hamlet's response as an "aside." Hamlet certainly might say this line "aside," but he also might say it directly to Claudius. How and to whom do you imagine Hamlet says his first line in the play?

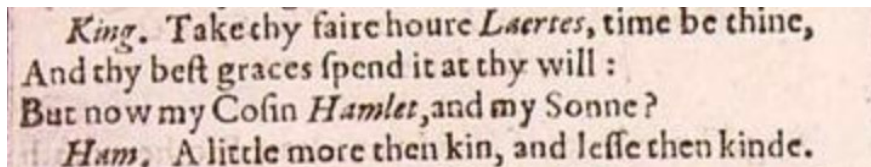
Here is Hamlet's response as published in the [2020 Folger Shakespeare Library edition](#) of the play. (The half brackets ([]) enclosing "aside" indicate that the stage direction has been added by the editor.)

KING	
Take thy fair hour, Laertes. Time be thine, And thy best graces spend it at thy will.—	65
But now, my cousin Hamlet and my son—	
HAMLET, [aside]	
A little more than kin and less than kind.	

Here it is as printed in [the 1603 Quarto](#):



And here it is in [the 1623 First Folio](#):



When staging or analyzing a scene, seeing what stage directions, if any, are included in the early texts can open up possibilities. Although many modern editions enclose stage directions added by the editor in brackets, half-brackets, or parentheses, not all modern editions follow this convention. Looking at facsimiles of the early texts lets you see for yourself what stage directions are included and gives you a fuller range of interpretative choices as you read, analyze, and perform the plays.

VARIATIONS in EARLY TEXTS

When a Shakespeare play exists in the Folio and an early quarto, you can consult the facsimiles to see what variations exist. (Although some modern scholarly editions provide notes about textual variations, many editions do not.)

Here, for instance, is Othello's final speech in the 1623 Folio and the 1622 Quarto publication of *Othello*. You will notice:

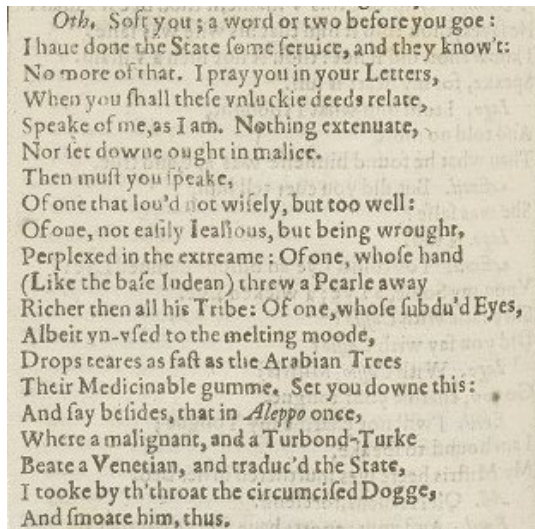
- In the Folio Othello compares himself to the "base Judean." ("Base" is spelled with the obsolete "long s," and J is printed with the letter "I.")

(Like the base Judean)

- In the Quarto he compares himself to the "base Indian."

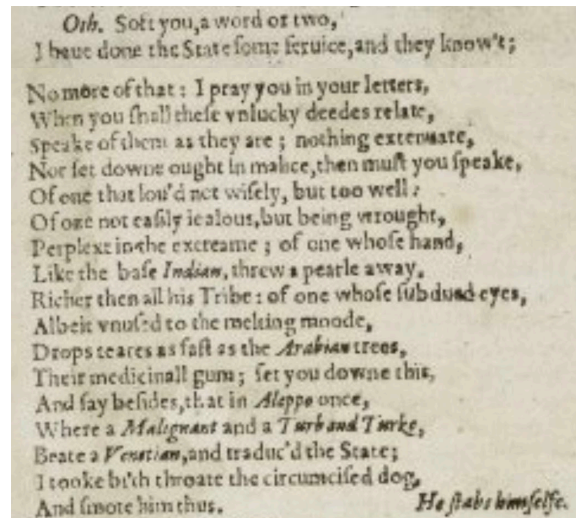
Like the base Indian,

1623 First Folio *Othello*



Oth. Soft you; a word or two before you goe:
I haue done the State some seruice, and they know't:
No more of that. I pray you in your Letters,
When you shall these vnluckie deedes relate,
Speake of me, as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set downe ought in malice.
Then must you speake,
Of one that lou'd not wisely, but too well:
Of one, not easily Iealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreame: Of one, whose hand
(Like the base Judean) threw a Pearle away
Richer then all his Tribe: Of one, whose subdu'd Eyes,
Albeit vn-us'd to the melting moode,
Drops teares as fast as the Arabian Trees
Their Medicinable gumme. Set you downe this:
And say besides, that in *Aleppo* once,
Where a malignant, and a Turbond-Turke
Beate a Venetian, and traduc'd the State,
I tooke by th' throat the circumcised Dogge,
And smoate him, thus.

1622 Quarto 1 *Othello*



Oth. Soft you, a word or two,
I haue done the State some seruice, and they know't;
No more of that: I pray you in your letters,
When you shall these vn lucky deedes relate,
Speake of them as they are; nothing extenuate,
Nor set downe ought in malice, then must you speake,
Of one that lou'd not wisely, but too well:
Of one not easily iealous, but being wrought,
Perplex in the extreame; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearle away,
Richer then all his Tribe: of one whose subdu'd eyes,
Albeit vnus'd to the melting moode,
Drops teares as fast as the Arabian trees,
Their medicinall gum; set you downe this,
And say besides, that in *Aleppo* once,
Where a *Malignant* and a *Turband Turke*,
Beate a *Venetian*, and traduc'd the State;
I tooke by th' throate the circumcised dog,
And smoate him thus. *He stabs himselfe.*

Modern editors have to choose one of these variations—base Judean or base Indian—for their edition of the play. How does the difference affect your understanding of Othello's sense of himself? Which analogy do you imagine Othello would make before he takes his own life? And what do these analogies reveal about the culture of Early Modern England?

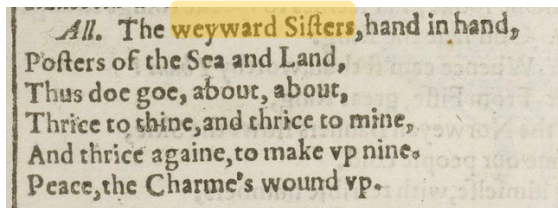
AMBIGUOUS WORDS in EARLY TEXTS

The Weïrd—Weyard, Weyward, Wayward—Sisters and a Wayward Son

The earliest existing text of *Macbeth* is in the First Folio; there are no existing early quartos of the play. Before the very first scene of the play, the Folio prints the stage direction, “Enter three witches.” ([See page 2.](#)) But the word “witch” appears only twice in the dialogue of the play: the “First Witch” quotes the sailor’s wife who shooed her away by saying, “Aroint thee, witch” (1.3.4), and the “Third Witch” lists “Witch’s mummy” as among the ingredients added to their cauldron (4.1.22). Elsewhere in the dialogue, the “witches” are called the “weyward Sisters,” the “weyard Sisters,” or the “weyard Women.” Some modern editions, like the Folger, print “weïrd” wherever the Folio prints “weyward” or “weyard.” (The spelling “weïrd” does not appear in the Folio.) Other modern editions print “wayward” where the Folio prints “weyward.”

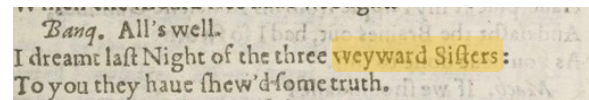
Below are the places in the [Folio](#) where the sisters are called “weyward” or “weyard” and where Macbeth is called “wayward.” (These phrases have been highlighted.)

The sisters dance before they meet Macbeth (1.3.32-38):



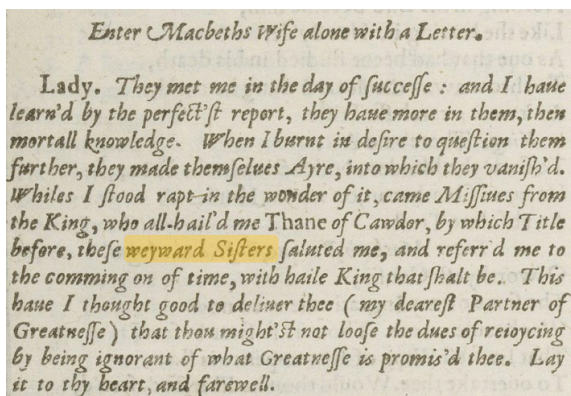
All. The weyward Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the Sea and Land,
Thus doe goe, about, about,
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice againe, to make vp nine.
Peace, the Charme's wound vp.

Banquo contemplates Macbeth’s becoming king (3.1.1-3):



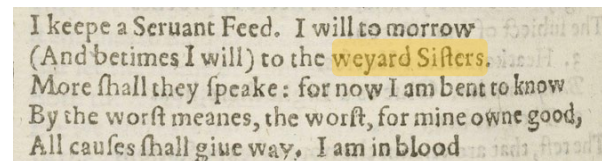
Banq. All's well.
I dreamt last Night of the three weyward Sisters:
To you they haue shew'd some truth.

Lady Macbeth reads the letter from Macbeth (1.5.1-14):



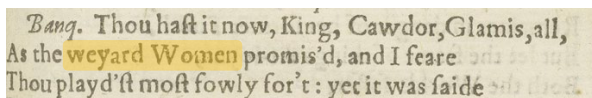
Enter Macbeths wife alone with a Letter.
Lady. They met me in the day of successe: and I haue learn'd by the perfect'st report, they haue more in them, then mortall knowledge. When I burnt in desire to question them further, they made themselves Ayre, into which they vanish'd. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came Missiues from the King, who all-hail'd me Thane of Cawdor, by which Title before, these weyward Sisters saluted me, and referr'd me to the comming on of time, with haile King that shalt be. This haue I thought good to deliuer thee (my dearest Partner of Greatnesse) that thou might'st not loose the dues of reioycing by being ignorant of what Greatnesse is promis'd thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.

Macbeth plans to visit the sisters (3.4.164-68):



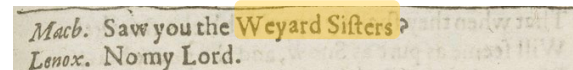
I keepe a Seruant Feed. I will to morrow
(And betimes I will) to the weyward Sisters.
More shall they speake: for now I am bent to know
By the worst meanes, the worst, for mine owne good,
All causes shall giue way, I am in blood

Banquo speaks to Macbeth (2.1.23-26):



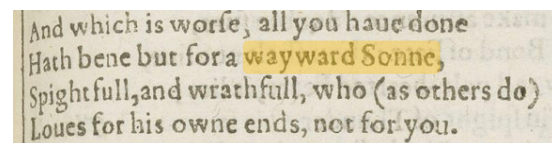
Banq. Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weyard Women promis'd, and I feare
Thou playd'st most fowly for't: yet it was said

Macbeth asks Lennox if he saw the sisters (4.1.155):



Macb. Saw you the Weyard Sisters?
Lennox. Nomy Lord.

Hecate scolds the sisters (3.5.10-14):



And which is worfe, all you haue done
Hath bene but for a wayward Sonne,
Spightfull, and wrathfull, who (as others do)
Loues for his owne ends, not for you.

How does the printing of weyard, weyward, and wayward in the First Folio and the forms and meanings these words outlined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* enrich or complicate your understanding of *Macbeth's* witches? How might noticing the closer relation between “weird” and “wayward” in early modern spelling and pronunciation affect your understanding of the nature of the sisters? What new questions and ideas emerge about the place of the prophetic sisters in *Macbeth's* Scotland?

Here are the online OED’s definitions for the adjective “weird” that pertain to people (1, 2a). Notice that “weyward” is listed as a form of “weird.”

weird

— ADJECTIVE —

[Factsheet](#) [Meaning & use](#) [Etymology](#) [Pronunciation](#) [Forms](#) [Frequency](#) [Compounds & derived words](#)

Variant forms

Also Middle English **wyrde**, Middle English–1500s *Scottish* **werd(e)**, 1500s **veird**, 1600s **weyard** (**weyward**), **weer'd**, 1700s **weird**, 1800s **weerd**.

- 1.** Having the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings, etc.; later, claiming the supernatural power of dealing with fate or destiny. c1400-
 Originally in **the Weird Sisters** = †(a) the Fates; (b) the witches in *Macbeth*.
- 2.a.** Partaking of or suggestive of the supernatural; of a mysterious or unearthly character; unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; uncanny. 1817-

And here are the online OED’s definitions for “wayward” that pertain to people (1a and 1c). Notice that “weyward” is listed as a form of “wayward.”

wayward

— ADJECTIVE & NOUN —

[Factsheet](#) [Meaning & use](#) [Etymology](#) [Pronunciation](#) [Forms](#) [Frequency](#) [Compounds & derived words](#)

Variant forms

Middle English	waiwerd, weiward, weiwerd, weyward, weywerd
Middle English–1500s	waywarde, weywarde
Middle English–1600s	waiward
Middle English–	wayward
1500s	waiwarde, waywerde
1600s	waward

- 1.a.** Disposed to go against the wishes or advice of others or what is proper or reasonable; intractable; self-willed; perverse; (of a child) disobedient, refractory. c1384-
 In later use, in milder sense, tending to merge with sense [A.2](#).
N.E.D. (1926) states: ‘If applied to conduct deserving severe moral reprobation it would now be apprehended as euphemistic.’
- 1.c.** Of a person’s appearance, words, actions, etc.: indicating or manifesting obstinate self-will. 1528-