William Shakespeare's First Folio

A Commemorative Lecture

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Introduction

We are gathered to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the publication in November 1623 of the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays. Nearly seven years after his death, this Folio edition was edited and prepared for publication by two of Shakespeare's fellow actors, John Heminges and Henry Condell. There is no evidence that Shakespeare himself ever planned such an edition, so their publishing it may be seen as an act of memorialising their friend and colleague and his works – though we will see that the question of his *authorship* might be considered a rather more complex thing. By selecting the folio format, they were certainly declaring the prestige and importance they believed the work to have. On a more mercenary level, it might just have been a smart commercial venture they were undertaking, as their words to "the great Variety of readers" make clear:

> Well it is now publique and you will stand for your priviledges we know to read, and censure. Do so, but buy it first. That doth best commend a Booke, the Stationer saies.

But be their motives more than mixed, we are tonight joining countless celebrations around the world commemorating their act of commemoration. From April to November this year (2023), there have been celebrations around the world, from really small ones, to numerous productions of plays, operas and ballets on the stages of London, Stratford and elsewhere. Books have been published, films have been made, websites have been launched, and precious original copies of the First Folio have been placed on display in libraries and archives around the world. Everywhere it is acknowledged that this Folio, containing 36 of Shakespeare's plays, is one of the most influential books ever published. Despite 400 years of busy scholarship, none of the plays so published has ever been dislodged from the Shakespeare canon, and only two subsequently added: *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

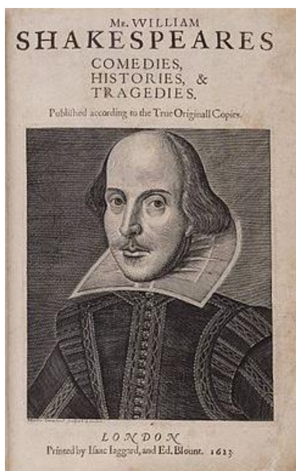
A folio is a large-format publication, usually reserved for treasured texts such as the Bible and the classics, or for prestige items such as Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* or Ben

Jonson's self-glorifying Folio edition of his own *Workes* (1616). Poetry might have been considered sufficiently 'high class' to be published in a folio, but plays generally were not. In his own lifetime, Shakespeare's reputation was that of a *poet*, the author of *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *Lucrece* (1594), but even these two long poems were published only in the smaller quarto format. His sonnets circulated in hand-written copies (not his own handwriting) until they were published, apparently without his permission, in 1609.

Shakespeare's Folio was the first ever large-format publication to contain only drama, and the preservation of the 36 of the 38 as a corpus is entirely thanks to this major undertaking of the Bard's two friends and former colleagues. It is very likely that several of the plays would have perished, had they not been gathered into this collection. 18 of his plays had previously been published in quarto format and might have stood some small chance of survival, but half of them had not previously been published at all. So we particularly celebrate the *fulness* of Heminges and Condell's gift to posterity. In the context of the survival of texts like those of the plays of Aeschylus (approximately 2500 years) or of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* (at least 1000 years) the survival of 38 of Shakespeare's plays for 400 years seems slightly less remarkable. But the depth of Shakespeare's influence on us and the civilization of which we are a part is arguably greater than that of any other single writer. Without this First Folio, there would have been no *Macbeth*, no *Antony and Cleopatra*, no *Twelfth Night*, no *Tempest*, *Julius Caesar* or *Winter's Tale*; like it or not, no *As You Like It,* no *Henry IV Part 1*; no *Measure for Measure, Coriolanus* or *The Taming of the Shrew.* I could go on, but will merely refer you to the full list in the Appendix. Worth noting, too, is that the quartos of *Hamlet* differ extensively from the Folio version, which tends to dominate modern texts of the play, and the editors of *The Oxford Shakespeare* print no fewer than THREE versions of *King Lear*.

I referred earlier to some of the anniversary celebrations that have been held this year; the *first* celebration in fact took place a year ago, in Germany, when the 2022 Frankfurt Book Fair celebrated one of its biggest scoops of all time. For it was there, of all places, that William Jaggard, "Printer to the City of London", made his first announcement, in 1622, of his projected publication of the comedies, histories and tragedies of Mr William Shakespeare. Textual scholars have since amassed a vast amount of information about almost everything to do with Elizabethan and Jacobean printing houses, and for the most part they have nothing but respect for the seriousness with which the First Folio was prepared and printed. Following his Frankfurt announcement, it was more than 12 months later in a very busy printing house before Jaggard was finally in a position to record his monumental Folio publication in the Stationers' Register of the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, in Maria Lane in London.

A folio is formed by folding a standard sheet of paper, known as a broadsheet, once – creating two sheets, printed with four pages. The sheets are cut free from each other along the top. (A second fold would produce a quarto, then an octavo, and four folds would produce a duodecimo.) The printing was done from loose metal type, laid out manually, in reverse (hence the importance of "minding one's /p/s and /q/s"). The compositors, or type-setters, may have been skilled journeymen, or apprentices in the print shop. To date, no fewer than five different compositors, each with individual quirks, have been shown to be at work on setting up the First Folio. While the setting up was going on, our two editors would have paid frequent visits in order to read proofs, and mistakes were certainly found. Sometimes corrections were made during the progress of the printing, with the result that differences occur between copies of the same edition. These may extend to the insertion or omission of whole lines. Some typographical errors escaped all correction and thus survive in all copies.



Heminges and Condell included in their Folio a portrait of Shakespeare, which is today very famous, but not regarded as either technically or artistically great. The image was made by one Martin Droeshout, 22 years old. He was able to work only from existing paintings and drawings rather from life, and made his image by engraving fine lines into a sheet of copper, which was then used to print multiple copies. It appears that the engraving itself was amended twice during the printing, making for further fascinating differences between individual copies of the Folio.

Some statistics

Approximately 750 copies were printed. Paper comprised about 70% of the cost of the volume, and the best paper had to be imported from France. A bound copy sold for one sovereign (or ₤1-1s), while an unbound copy went for 15 shillings. Once out of the hands of Messrs Heminges, Condell and Jaggard, each of those 750 volumes went its own way, some to storied lives in famous homes and libraries, others to eventual oblivion. Today, 235 copies survive (85 in the Folger Library in Washington DC alone), in various states of repair. That is just shy of a 32% survival rate. Once the Folio had been published, however, the plays were no longer at risk of being completely lost. The Folio saw three subsequent editions, at more or less twenty-year intervals, but none of them has any textual authority. Subsequently, as we know, the publication of the Complete Works of Shakespeare has become an industry in itself. But it did all hinge on that initial publication in 1623. Folio expert

Emma Smith affirms, “Without the First Folio ... we wouldn’t have the sense of significance, weight (literally) and permanence that this large volume gives to the author.”[1]

As you can imagine, there are laboratories full of scholarly detectives dedicated to the study of the surviving copies of the First Folio, poring over their small differences and reconstructing their histories. Just as every copy is unique – a fact that has proved useful in tracing stolen copies! – each copy also has its own life story. Here is one such story: Queens College in Oxford owns a copy of the First Edition that had previously belonged to the legendary David Garrick, a famous Shakespearean actor and producer of the mid-eighteenth century. Garrick’s bookplate survives in the front of this copy. After him it passed through the hands of two further owners before being purchased by Queens (1843, £86). It is bound in heavy boards and red goatskin, with gold tooling, and contains an original Droeshout portrait. Some paper repairs are evident, and there are burn holes, tobacco stains, and a variety of markings and annotations in at least three hands and types of ink.

Of the 235 surviving copies, only 56 are complete, with all original leaves intact. (That is an 8% survival rate!) The other 149 have either missing pages or, if complete, then pages which have been cunningly restored. As the demand for complete Folios grew from the late eighteenth century onwards, less perfect copies were probably plundered to fill gaps in collectors’ copies. Two hundred years after publication, a copy of the First Folio – if you could get it – cost £35; in 2020, another 200 years on, a pristine copy fetched $10 million at auction. This was the most expensive literary work ever auctioned. Henry Condell and John Heminges could not have foreseen this story. In time, their book acquired the status of a secular Bible. Our two heroes both lie buried in the garden of St Mary Alderman on Love Lane in London, where they are commemorated with a memorial to the book which also features a bust of William Shakespeare.

The Folio and the idea of the single author

The Folio publication did not only preserve Shakespeare’s work. By treasuring up the loose play scripts in a single massive volume which could not easily be held in the hand, but had rather to be laid on a desk, or displayed on a shelf, our two editor-heroes also radically altered the nature of the work, and permanently influenced the world’s perception of the Bard. The Folio publication removed the plays from the dynamic, interactive and textually unstable context of a stage performance where they had been born and had hitherto had their being, to the silent, contemplative and awed – if sometimes critical – atmosphere of the study or private library, where they could be reverently pored

[1] Quoted in Harriet Sherwood, “Surviving copies of Shakespeare’s First Folio to go on show”, *The Guardian* 12 March 2023. Online: https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/mar/12/shakespeare-first-folio-to-go-on-show-uk-british-library

over. This transference had the effect not only of freezing the wording of the former playscripts, but also of fixing, as in amber, the apparently single identity of the author.

On the famous title page of the Folio, the editors claim that the plays are “published according to the True Original Copies”, and in their preface they claim that, whereas heretofore their readers had been “abused with diverse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed and defamed by the frauds and stealthes of injurious imposters”, the texts they were offering in the Folio were “cur’d and perfect of their limbes, absolute in their numbers [syllables, poetic music], as *he* conceived them.” *He* was of course the person whose name they engraved on the cover of their beautiful artefact. Inevitably, they launched the perception that the texts are the sacred and unalterable creation of a single and inspired imagination, that of William Shakespeare. On reflection, it is hard to believe that two members of the King’s Men, the company of actors to which Shakespeare belonged, could have made these claims without at least one conspiratorial nudge and wink. Together with the legendary Richard Burbage, Henry Condell was a principal actor among the King’s Men and he probably appeared in every one of Shakespeare’s plays. Both editors would have had intimate knowledge of just how the company’s scripts came into being.

The King’s Men were a competitive commercial enterprise, concerned with ‘bums on seats’ and cash in the bank, and the hyperbole and puff of their Folio preface must perhaps be seen as part of their promotion of the ambitious business venture they were undertaking in publishing the plays. Let me pause here to say that I have no intention of arguing that Shakespeare was not the author of his plays, much less that he was really Francis Bacon, or James I, or “not Shakespeare at all, but somebody else of the same name”, as an inspired schoolboy once argued. Nor will I go to the length of deconstructing his authorship to the extent that may be done with Homer, or the Bible, both of which are the products of multiple authors composing over hundreds of years, with deep origins in an oral tradition. While the documentary evidence for Shakespeare’s existence is extremely slender – maybe six or eight objective and establishable facts – I believe it *is* meaningful to speak of William Shakespeare, poet and playwright, while remaining somewhat agnostic as to whether what we read today represents *with a high degree of accuracy* what Shakespeare himself actually wrote. Without a doubt, the plays as we have them today cannot be taken as direct unmediated emanations from his mind alone.

Shakespeare appears to have had no interest in asserting exclusive authorial rights over his scripts. He was a shareholder in the King’s Men who, like all the other theatrical companies at the time, were the legal owners of the plays which they produced as well as of such copyright as then existed. The journey between playwright’s pen and published text is a long and complex one, and if we – after centuries of scholarly endeavour – peel away some of the single-author myth, it is possible

now to unravel the probable creative process by which the plays came into their final form. A Shakespeare play would have begun with an author's draft – but it was a *draft only*. It was a working script, which in repertory would come to deserve its description as "foul papers", as it became covered in crossings out, insertions, and general "blotting". These amendments and marginalia were the marks left by a company of actors in creative collaboration, as they tried out in the few brief rehearsals allowed them what the playwright had put before them, and made their own suggestions as they went along. The script might continually be reshaped by endless revisions both major and minor, with probably no final veto power for any member of the team, even if he were the author himself. Again, there is no evidence that Shakespeare disagreed in any way with this practice. As in this lecture tonight, *collective composition* was the order of the day.

Only once this process of co-creative ferment was over, or at least well advanced, would the author (or a professional scribe) produce the so-called "fair copy". This would be annotated with stage directions and pass into the hands of the company, who would submit it to the Master of the Revels for licensing. It might well be returned with the Master's own notes and further changes required – including instances of censorship. Once licensed, the fair copy of a script would become "the book of the play", or the promptbook. Only one or two full copies would be made, and these would be the only *authorial* versions of the play. Certainly none of the actors would have had complete copies. To reduce expenses, and also to avoid the risk of unauthorised publication, each actor would have received only his own part, along with his cue lines. Shakespeare humorously alludes to this in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (3.1.80-88), where he has the naïve "mechanicals" read all their lines in one go.

Adjustments to the text concerning emphasis, stage business, tone of delivery, pacing, and even the odd cut or interpolation probably continued to be made throughout the brief rehearsal process. Some of these would have remained unrecorded – the kind of invisible para-text that develops amongst a company of actors at work – but some of them would have been written into the promptbook, becoming part of the ever-evolving text. The order of scenes may well have been fluid at this stage. It was only in the First Folio that the plays became divided into numbered acts and scenes – another aspect of its importance. Even in the later stages of production, it seems likely that Shakespeare would have had to accept the possibility of adaptation to suit a particular occasion. When we consider the two-and-a-half hours of performing time available during English daylight hours, and the length of some of Shakespeare's plays, it seems that he sometimes deliberately offered his fellow actors more than they could use on any single occasion. Greenblatt writes (67):

> There is an imaginative generosity in many of Shakespeare's scripts, as if he were deliberately offering his fellow actors ... abundant materials with which to reconceive and revivify each play again and again, as they or their audiences liked it.[2]

This generosity, however, shows Shakespeare even further relinquishing his authorial hold on the script. The abundance that he offers, while not all being useable by the Elizabethan actor, has of course become a limitless treasure trove for later Shakespeare lovers.

During performance there was yet more room for "corruption" of the text. The scripts were written to be performed by players before an audience, in a relationship that gave wide scope for "contamination". Think of the thrust stage of the Globe – interactive. There are several examples in the plays of an awareness of the role of audience. Shakespeare never forgot the importance of that audience response which alone gives life to a script, and, as any actor will know, may produce strange variations from performance to performance.

When, some years after Shakespeare's death, his literary heirs hatched the plan to collect and publish the plays in a single staggering volume, yet another round of collaborative editing occurred. We have no surviving foul papers, no fair copies, and no prompt books, but Heminges and Condell would have had access to all the messy manuscripts stored by the King's Men. From these they would have assembled their "True Original Copies" for publication, selecting and editing as they went, "curing and perfecting the limbes", and finally presenting the scripts as *he* ostensibly conceived them. In applying the seal of *his* name to the plays, the input of the company at large – ironically, their own input – became subsumed in the project of promoting a single, authoritative and marketable identity as author.

If no contemporary manuscript survives which can verify these many layers of mediation, how dare we speculate in this way about the scripts? Most of this kind of research rests on the existence of a handful of separately printed quarto editions from Shakespeare's own lifetime which (obviously) predate the First Folio. Six of the major works are available to us in this form (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *2 Henry IV*, *King Lear*, *Richard II* and *Troilus and Cressida*), and when these quarto versions are compared with the versions in the Folio, they reveal hundreds of variant readings. From these variants, scholars deduce the multifaceted process of creation, reconstructing each play's journey from manuscript to print. It becomes evident that different plays took very different journeys before they reached their final form in the hands of two daring editors and a London printer, and became immortalised as the genius of one man.

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[2] Greenblatt, "Introduction" to the Norton Edition, p.67.

Even if Shakespeare was not the sole, uniquely inspired author of the plays, readers everywhere and at all times have had little difficulty in recognising that the plays possess a unique poetic power. Even if he was only the leading member of a collective enterprise, there is no question that the King's Men possessed a singular human treasure among their number. While Heminges and Condell may have nudged each other when claiming that the Folio contained the true and original scripts as *Shakespeare* conceived them, they would surely not have hesitated to call down immortality on this one member of the team.

Assessments of Shakespeare

Ben Jonson, rival and first to include plays in a Folio volume of his own *Workes* (1616), in his tribute included in the front matter of the First Folio, having sneered – like a true intellectual snob – at Shakespeare's "small Latine and lesse Greek", was perhaps the first to make the big claim that Shakespeare was "not of an age/But for all time". It is a claim echoed in our own time. But before we precipitately leap four centuries, I want to pause with two important tributes from the nineteenth century.

The first is from the Letters of John Keats, in which the great Romantic poet refers to "that quality ... which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[3] In another letter, a clearer picture emerges of what Keats means by that teasing phrase: "the poetical Character itself ... enjoys light and shade – it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon Poet."[4]

At mid-century (1850), while his own great work, *Moby-Dick*, was still incomplete, Herman Melville wrote a review of his contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, in which, while comparing Hawthorne to Shakespeare, he – almost by accident – touched on a vital part of the Bard's greatness:

> ... it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality – these are the things that make Shakespeare Shakespeare. Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates, the things which we feel to be so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any man, in his own proper character, to

[3] Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, Sunday 22 December 1817, p.71.
[4] *Ibid.*, letter to Richard Woodhouse, Wednesday 21 October 1818, p.227.

> utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic king tears off the mask, and speaks the same madness of vital truth.[5]

Harold Bloom would pick up these themes at the turn of the twenty-first century: “In Falstaff, Hamlet, Rosalind, Iago, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra,” Bloom asserts in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), “new modes of consciousness came into being, which we continue to inhabit today”: “[For] many, many generations our education, even beyond the English-speaking world, has been Shakespearean; we cannot conceive of ourselves without him. He taught us to understand human nature, especially the inward abyss of ambivalences, ironies, hypocrisies.”[6]

The truth is everyone who truly encounters Shakespeare is touched uniquely, according to his or her own individual make-up. The fact that the incalculable human resource, wellspring of wisdom, sorrow and joy, which is designated by that single word “Shakespeare” is still available to us today, is largely – if not solely – thanks to the work of the team – however mixed their motives – which gave the world the First Folio edition of Shakespeare’s plays four hundred years ago this month. Finally, it is tempting to extend the referent of the concluding couplet of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 to include his own oeuvre (not least in the form of the Folio) and its creator:

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives THIS, and THIS gives life to thee.

[5] Meville, “Hawthorne and his Mosses”, *The American Tradition in Literature*, p.913.
[6] Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p.16.

APPENDIX

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN PERMANENTLY LOST WITHOUT THE FIRST FOLIO?

Macbeth

Antony and Cleopatra

Twelfth Night

The Tempest

Julius Caesar

As You Like It

Henry IV Part One

A Winter's Tale

Measure for Measure

Coriolanus

The Taming of the Shrew

The Comedy of Errors

Two Gentlemen of Verona

Timon of Athens

All's Well that Ends Well

King John

Henry VIII (All is True)

Cymbeline

Hamlet (the version we know; quarto versions very different)

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