

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
SHAKESPEARE'S

FIRST  
FOLIO

# An Introduction to William Shakespeare's *First Folio*

By

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Cover illustration courtesy of Stephen Collins

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# *Brush up your Shakespeare*

The comic gangsters in *Kiss Me Kate*, Cole Porter's 1948 musical based on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, offer Shakespeare's poetry – by which they actually mean his plays – as a guaranteed way to a woman's heart: quoting Shakespeare will impress her and be a sure-fire aphrodisiac. Today, Shakespeare has become a supreme icon of Western European high culture, which is ironic since in his own day Shakespeare's craft – jobbing playwright – was not a well-regarded one. Indeed, those who wrote plays to entertain the 'groundlings' (as the people who paid just one penny to stand in the open yard round the stage in public playhouses were called) were often considered little better than the actors themselves – who, in their turn, were only one level up, in the minds of Puritan moralists, from whores.

Shakespeare himself did not seem eager to advertise authorship of his plays by seeing them into print, and when some of his plays were printed, in the handy quarto-sized editions for individual consumption, his name was not always on the title page. (The terms 'folio' and 'quarto' refer to the size of the pages in a book: in a Folio, each sheet of paper was folded just once, with a page height of approx. 38cm. (15")); a quarto sheet had

been folded twice, and octavo three times, so the pages in these editions were correspondingly smaller.)

Eighteen of the 36 plays in the 1623 First Folio had not been previously printed, and there may have been many more plays in which Shakespeare had a large hand which are lost to us because they were never published either in quarto or in the First Folio. What he did take care over was the publication of two long erotic poems which were dedicated to his then patron Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton. These poems were probably written by Shakespeare in a time of plague (1593-4) when theatres were closed down for fear of contagion and a playwright-actor had more time on his hands, and a greater need to earn income, than when the theatre season was in full swing. When it came to his Sonnets (first published as a sequence in 1609), we cannot be sure how much time Shakespeare spent on revising and preparing them for print, but we know that at that time lyric poetry, with its classical ancestry, was perceived as a more civilised, respectable genre than plays for the public theatres.

It is perhaps surprising then that in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, two of his colleagues and fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, felt it was worth putting much time and effort into producing a

Folio (what we might think of as a ‘coffee-table book’) of three dozen of Shakespeare’s plays. However, a book brought out in 1616, the year of Shakespeare’s death, may go some way to explain the shift in attitudes to the status of plays. In this year, Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s sometime colleague and professed admirer, and never one to take a back seat where self-promotion was concerned, personally oversaw the publication in Folio form of a collection of his own works, including nine previously published plays, two poems, thirteen masques and six ‘entertainments’ – the latter two genres much more prestigious than playhouse plays. Masques were a form which became popular in the court of James I; they were one-off, jaw-droppingly expensive spectacles which drew heavily on classical myth and terminology. Jonson’s 1616 book was the first Folio to feature dramatic works, and may have opened the way for other Folio collections of plays, rendering work done for public theatres more respectable by inclusion in the same edition as courtly entertainments.

## What’s in it?

Heminge and Condell provided the copy for the First Folio, and this material included not just the texts of 36 plays known at that time to be by Shakespeare, but also

a number of dedicatory verses praising him; an engraved portrait of him by Martin Droeshout; a stately and flattering letter of dedication to the Herbert brothers (William Herbert, Third Earl of Pembroke and Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery); a more chatty and jokey address ‘To the great Variety of Readers’, and, of particular interest to theatre historians, a list of members of Shakespeare’s company (the King’s Men) who would have taken parts in the plays. For groups of actors it was very important to have an aristocratic patron in order to qualify as a licensed acting company. Of the two Pembroke brothers, William had the added value to the King’s Men of being, in 1623, the ‘Lord Chamberlain to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty’, and hence, being the person who had ultimate authority over what plays and entertainments might be allowed performance, either at court or in public theatres. Reading the opening of this dedication now we might think it grovellingly sycophantic:

“To the most noble and incomparable pair of brethren ... Knights of the most Noble Order of the Garter, and our singular good lords...”

But as the rest of the letter goes on to show, the brothers had much enjoyed Shakespeare’s work while he lived, and therefore, although aristocrats of the highest rank,

they might be happy to have a collection of the dead poet's work dedicated to them.

## The copy for the plays

Of the 36 plays which Heminge and Condell included in the First Folio, 18 only exist in the Folio text, but for the other 18 there may have been several previous quarto printings. Two plays now widely accepted as largely by Shakespeare, although in collaboration with other playwrights, are *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and to the list of plays thought to be by Shakespeare in collaboration with others we can add *Sir Thomas More* and *Edward III*, and possibly a now lost play, *Cardenio*. Certainly Artistic Directors at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre have felt there was enough credibility about Shakespeare's hand in these plays that they have in recent years been performed in the RST as 'by Shakespeare and others'.

In their introductory address, Heminge and Condell stress that the texts they have collected are what Shakespeare actually wrote. Pirated copies of some of the play texts had been in the public domain for some years but whereas these were 'diverse stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds

and stealths of injurious imposters’, the versions of the plays in the First Folio are ‘offered to your view cured, and perfect of their limbs ... as [Shakespeare] conceived them’. In fact, it was an indication of the popularity of these particular plays that they had been subject to ‘pirate’ publishing. There was no such thing as copyright then, so anyone who wanted to make a fast buck by rushing a pirated text into print might do so – the so-called ‘Bad Quartos’ of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* are two examples. Heminge and Condell assert that they were working in many cases with Shakespeare’s own manuscripts – the so-called ‘foul papers’ (although they say they ‘have scarcely received from him a blot in his papers’) – but otherwise, from prompt copies or scribes’ full copies of the text which were held by the ‘book-keeper’ in the playhouse.

One of the fascinating things about some of the First Folio play texts is that they include annotations – stage directions or actors’ names – which seem to have been added, not by Shakespeare, but by what we would call the stage manager. In the case of some plays, the First Folio seems to give a slightly cut version – possibly for a touring production. (In plague years or the winter months, when London theatres were closed, the acting companies might have to go ‘on the road’, moving between patrons’ great houses and major towns,

performing their repertoire with a reduced cast and text.) So, whereas we might assume that the First Folio has all the text that Shakespeare wrote for each play, there are some quite substantial or important speeches and scenes which do not appear in this book, but are only in earlier quartos – for example, Hamlet’s soliloquy ‘How all occasions do inform against me’, in Act 4 of *Hamlet*, the ‘kind servants’ coda at the end of the blinding of Gloucester scene in *King Lear*, and the famous Prologue at the start of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The fact that the First Folio texts seem to be so close to Shakespeare’s own intentions, or at least to what was actually acted by his company, has persuaded Professor Jonathan Bate and the Royal Shakespeare Company, when preparing the RSC Shakespeare editions, [to take Folio texts as more authorially authentic](#) than alternative Quarto versions. Ultimately, the decision about which version of a Shakespeare text to use in a production is up to individual directors.

An interesting decision Heminge and Condell made was to divide the plays into just three categories: comedies, histories and tragedies; later scholars would offer a number of additional sub-categories, such as Romances, Roman, and Problem plays. Heminge and Condell further divided some of the plays internally, although somewhat

inconsistently, into acts and scenes. Both these types of regulation of the plays hinted at classical conventions; indeed the act and scene divisions are given in Latin: ‘*Actus Prima, Scoena Secunda*’ etc. Intriguingly, the collection opens with a comedy which is believed to be one of Shakespeare’s last works, *The Tempest*.

Since publishing a Folio edition of plays was a financially risky and technically demanding venture, Heminge and Condell were fortunate in having the collaboration of experienced printer-publishers William and Isaac Jaggard, and the backing of a syndicate of three other men: Edward Blount, John Smethwick and William Aspley. In the event, the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays was such a success that a second Folio was produced in 1632, a third in 1663 and a fourth in 1685, these last two including seven additional plays attributed (rightly or wrongly) to Shakespeare. Print technology was still new enough to be exciting but established enough for printers to produce accomplished work, which often included illustrations of high artistic quality.

The rather stiff portrait by Droeshout (in which Shakespeare’s head, with its high forehead and receding hairline seems to be balanced on the platter of his collar!) is the only illustration in the First Folio, although there are beautiful head- and tail-piece decorations between the

plays. What is impressive is how the type-setters managed to interpret the manuscripts and sometimes imperfect Quarto copy, and more or less correctly set the type for the printing press. Imagine trying to set metal fonts in wooden frames, in mirror writing form, for printing onto a large sheet of paper which will then be folded and combined with two similar sheets into one 'quire' of 12 pages. (If you take three sheets of paper, fold them in half and number each page front and back, then look at each sheet, you'll see that it's NOT a simple process of printing pages 1 and 2 on the first sheet and 3 and 4 on the back of it!). For more information on this, and about the First Folio, see the introductions to the *Norton Facsimile edition of the First Folio* (edited Charlton Hinman, 1968 and revised by Peter Blayney, 1996).

Little wonder, with the investment involved, and the kudos of having two noblemen as dedicatees, the First Folio sold at £1. It is thought that around 750 copies were printed, of which over 220 still exist, most held by libraries and museums. Each one of these copies could now command a sale price in the millions. In 1623, when an ordinary quarto cost 6d (old pence), and the day-wages for a skilled worker were something between 6d and 12d, £1 was a huge amount. But Heminge and Condell maintained the First Folio was worth it –

because it contained the work of the very ‘Soule of the Age’, as Ben Jonson had apostrophised his former colleague in his adulatory verse: ‘To the Memory of my beloved, The Author, Mr William Shakespeare, And what he hath left us.’ Read him, say Heminge and Condell, and criticise if you like – but above all, buy the book!

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