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INTRODUCTION

Introduction: To the Reader; or, What's in a Folio?

Miranda Fay Thomas[a] and Gabriel Egan[b]

[a]School of Creative Arts, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; [b]School of Humanities, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

It is difficult to comment on this special issue on the 1623 Shakespeare First Folio – and the surrounding festivities of the book's 400th birthday – without feeling rather sorry for Ben Jonson. Spoken of colloquially, both by the public but also sometimes by early modern drama scholars (who, it might be said, ought to know better), mentioning 'the first folio' often makes reference to the First Folio of Shakespeare's complete works (1623) rather than what might be more accurately – chronologically, at least – the first folio edition to include theatrical pieces (Jonson's, of 1616). Jonson was mocked for his audacity in believing that drama was worth publishing in folio format, with one writer taunting him with the license of ink: 'pray tell me Ben, where doth the mystery lurk, / What others call a play you call a work?'.[1] But Jonson – as surely he would have loved to hear – was right to invest time and money in the printing of his plays in the weighty and exclusive folio format: the influence and legacy of dramatic texts from the early modern period would go on to become a global cultural phenomenon. In 400 years, the plays of this era have gone from being 'filthy' (Christopher Marlowe was described as a 'filthy-playmaker') to the point where Shakespeare is largely considered to be not only indispensable to the canon, but a key development of the canon's formation. It is quite feasible that this would not have happened without Jonson's insistence on printing his plays as a collected folio edition, a move which doubtless influenced the decision by John Heminges and Henry Condell to create a publication containing 'workes of William Shakespeare, containing all his Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies' in 1623, in addition to Humphrey Moseley and Humphrey Robinson's folio editions of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher (1647 and 1679).

So, what's in a folio? Or, for the purposes of the special issue, what's in a Shakespeare First Folio of 1623? It is not a complete works (although it is the first of the playwright's collected works),[2] nor a definitive version of

CONTACT Gabriel Egan gegan@dmu.ac.uk School of Humanities, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH, UK

[1]Quoted in Zucker, 'Pedantic Jonson', 51.

[2]For more on canonisation, see Kirwan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Apocrypha*.

Shakespeare's plays. It is in no way a biography, nor sacred text, although its prefatory material marks a preliminary step along the journey to establishing what has since become an almost cult-like reverence of someone now referred to as 'the Bard'. And, as aforementioned, it is not *the* first folio of a dramatist's plays.

What might we say of the First Folio that has not already been said? During the Shakespeare Association of America annual meeting in Minneapolis 2023, one delegate – quite reasonably – enquired of the plenary panel discussing approaches to the 1623 Folio what had changed since the events in 2016, which commemorated 400 years since Shakespeare's death. After all, the 1623 Folio was that year featured in number of exhibitions (including the British Library's 'Shakespeare in Ten Acts'), and 18 First Folios owned by the Folger Shakespeare Library toured every state in America before being welcomed back with a champagne reception.[3] Emma Smith's cluster of book publications coinciding with the fourth centenary of Shakespeare's death also took the 1623 Folio as its focus (*The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio*, 2015; *Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book*, 2016; and *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's First Folio*, 2016). Perhaps it might be said that, culturally, the 1623 Folio serves as a synecdoche for Shakespeare himself. That these antiquarian books are now exhibited, go on tour, or are digitised for wider use, only confirms the notion that 'Shakespeare' – whoever he is, whatever we make of him – can be visited, observed, and experienced in the collection of leaves we now call the First Folio. Copies of the book are treated much like holy relics used to be.

Smith's *Shakespeare's First Folio* deftly notes how the value imprinted on the Folio can go in both directions: 'We are used to the humanistic idea that an encounter with Shakespeare changes individuals; the contention of this book is that the effect works the other way'.[4] From the numerous amendments, annotations, and commonplace under-linings in the Hervey copy (now at Meisei University in Tokyo), to the copy owned by Trinity College Dublin which features muddy pet paw prints over a scene from *Henry V*, the surviving First Folios are also noteworthy for the glimpses they provide into the lives of their owners or users. Smith also pertinently remarks that the 'investment in the individuality of First Folio copies' has also resulted in over-valuation that has a human cost.[5] Smith had planned to conclude her book – replete with narratives of ownership and engagement over the Folio as an object as much as a literary symbol – with the story of Raymond Scott, who has jailed for handling stolen goods (a copy of the First Folio stolen from the Cosin Library in Durham in 1998). Smith reflects on the process of finishing her monograph, in an interview with Ben Higgins:

[3]French, 'The First Folio Tour Comes to an End'.
[4]Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio*, 20.
[5]Ibid., 343.

> But just as I was writing that last bit I discovered that this man had killed himself in prison. He'd got a very long sentence; in some ways a ridiculously long sentence for a non-violent crime. I love books as much as anybody but I don't think that tearing a page of a book, however venerable that book is, makes you a danger to the rest of the world. He had got a very long sentence and killed himself in prison. And suddenly that was a real ethical problem for that book. I felt that the overvaluation of the First Folio that I had worried about suddenly took an enormous price. And I felt that bibliography and book history stuff had contributed in a way to this situation. I thought it was very striking that the leading bibliography expert on the Folio was the expert witness at the trial, and it seemed as though bibliography had taken on this very dark aspect.[6]

The severity of Scott's sentence reflected not (or not only) the monetary value of the book he mutilated, but its symbolic and cultural value.

New discoveries, new research, and new perspectives have emerged since 2016. Claire M. L. Bourne and Jason Scott-Warren's article in *Milton Quarterly* (2022) showcased an astonishing piece of collaborative scholarship, making the argument that a copy of the 1623 Folio held in the Free Library of Philadelphia once belonged to John Milton. Their work closely examined the book's annotations, demonstrating the similarity of the Folio's penmanship with other handwritten remnants of Milton's work, and also surveyed how the marginalia demonstrated Milton's direct engagement with Shakespeare. Scholars such as William H. Sherman have previously engaged with the materiality of readerly annotations (*Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England*, 2008), but the recognition of the Free Library's First Folio as Milton's personal copy ushered in a wealth of international media coverage. Given the reputation of both Milton and Shakespeare, this evidence of direct engagement between the two was irresistible to the press.

Recent monographs by Ben Higgins and Molly G. Yarn have also enabled us to think about the First Folio and the history of Shakespeare in print in new ways. Higgins's book *Shakespeare's Syndicate: The First Folio, its Publishers, and the Early Modern Book Trade* (2022) reorientates the book's stationers 'in relation to one another and to their book-trade peers' in order to 'consider the possibilities of a networked model of literary production'.[7] Astutely noting that 'the success of the First Folio has resulted in [the stationers' contributions] being almost entirely effaced', Higgins's book offers a process of rehabilitation, bringing to the surface the contributions these publishers made to shaping the Folio's sense of textual authority.[8] While offering some deprecation – referring to how '#FolioFatigue' has created something of a reluctance to keep considering the Folio 'as a publication event',[9] Higgins' reframing of the Folio's creation as a collaborative project

[6]'Interview of Emma Smith by Ben Higgins'.
[7]Higgins, *Shakespeare's Syndicate*, 32.
[8]Ibid., 38.
[9]Ibid., 30.

through a careful study of its imprint and colophon provides rich insight into the practices of the early modern book trade far beyond Shakespeare. Where Higgins's book ends by noting that 'the bibliographic history of the First Folio is overwhelmingly male',[10] Molly G. Yarn's work is a self-described 'new history of the Shakespearean text' that recovers the work of almost 70 female editors. Yarn takes her title from an anonymous reviewer who wrote of Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke's edition that he (we assume the reviewer was male), 'wished that "the lady editor had refrained from thus tampering with our great poet's language"'.[11] Because 'no attempt has previously been made to comprehensively identify and study these women and the editions they produced as a driving force in the way the Shakespearean text has been shaped and transmitted', Yarn's scrupulous archival work across libraries in Britain and America makes up for much lost time.[12] Her monograph offers rich detail on female editors neglected by traditional narratives, including Dorothy Macardle, an Irish nationalist who was imprisoned in Kilmainham Jail in 1922 by the Irish Free State government for activities in opposition to the Anglo-Irish treaty, but not before she had edited *The Tempest* and posited key prompts such as 'discuss the justice of Prospero's treatment of Caliban'.[13] Alongside her focus on gender, Yarn's conclusion also acknowledges two major influences on Shakespeare in print, namely publishing trends and 'market forces'.[14] While Yarn's scholarship here is less about the First Folio itself than the subsequent history of printed Shakespeare and the gendered erasure of the labour which underpinned it, she nevertheless acknowledges the importance of commercial viability in the publication of Shakespearean texts for which the First Folio set the initial standard.

More recently still, Paul Menzer has argued that, because 'criticism prefers the apparent-ness of print to the provisionality of performance', the reception of Shakespeare's plays has been denigrated by the 'inflated preeminence' of the printed text.[15] His self-described polemical thesis that 'whatever we may mean by "Shakespeare" is already preconceived by print' is heightened by his claim that print is 'a medium alien' to the expression of performance,[16] countering Graham Watts's assertion that the First Folio is the best way for actors to understand how to perform Shakespeare (*Shakespeare's Authentic Performance Texts*, 2015). Menzer highlights the undeniable influence that print – of which the First Folio is the most iconic mascot – has had on our

[10]Ibid., 211.
[11]Yarn, *Shakespeare's 'Lady Editors'*, 10; quoting from Thompson and Roberts, 'Mary Cowden Clarke', 178–79.
[12]Ibid., 7.
[13]Shakespeare and Macardle, *The Tempest*, 88; quoted in Yarn, 160.
[14]Yarn, *Shakespeare's 'Lady Editors'*, 198.
[15]Menzer, *Shakespeare Without Print*, 3.
[16]Ibid., 6–7.

conception of Shakespeare not just in terms of book history, but performance and cultural reception.

The five essays included in this special issue have used the 1623 Folio's 400th birthday as an opportunity to take stock, using a number of different approaches. In 'One Book to Rule Them All: "The King James Version" of Shakespeare's plays', Gary Taylor argues that while the 1623 Folio presents itself as containing authoritative versions of Shakespeare's playtexts – a literary monument – the scripts contained therein would have been subject to change based on individual performance circumstances such as location, audience, and recent politics. Drawing on previous work by Murat Ögütcü on the January 1605 production of *Henry V* at court,[17] Taylor emphasizes that the First Folio version is in no sense a final, fixed, static text for performance, but is closer to a 'medley' of previous versions, augmented at different points to suit new needs and requirements. For instance, the expansion of the role of the French Queen, compared with the texts previously published, can be read as a way to flatter King James's peace-making Queen Anna, who would have been sitting next to the King for the play's performance. Taylor encourages us to take the First Folio's prefatory claims to textual stability with a huge pinch of salt, demonstrating that the Folio's plays offer possibilities rather than apotheosis – and that we should extend such an approach to new incarnations of Shakespeare in performance.

Like Taylor, Joshua R. Held examines two different published versions of the same play, in this case the quarto of 1600 and the First Folio text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Held analyses some notable distinctions between stage directions and speech prefixes in the quarto and Folio. There are two key cruxes. First, while in the quarto, Philostrate acts as *de facto* Master of the Revels, this office falls to Hermia's father Egeus in the Folio. Second, while the quarto has Theseus list the menu of plays available for their entertainment, in the Folio these lines are given to Lysander, who converses with Theseus about the options. These differences, close to the play's conclusion, are indicative of potential amendments but do not necessarily imply authorial preference. By considering the history of how this scene has been edited, starting with Nicholas Rowe's following of the Folio and Alexander Pope's subsequent reversion to the quarto, Held notes how Lewis Theobald was the first to consider the influence of performance on the cruxes. He then considers the editorial choices made by Edward Capell, Edmond Malone, Richard Grant White, and H. H. Furness, before turning to more recent analyses by Sukanta Chaudhuri and Lukas Erne. Held tracks an editorial trend that, over time, gives greater prominence to the practicalities of performance, reminding us that our urge to correct or reinstate the Folio's supposed preeminence is itself a barometer of changing views of the relationship between page and stage.

[17]Ögütcü, 'Masculine Dreams', 79–91.

In 'Dogs Urinating on the 1623 Folio: The Jaggard Press's Dionysus Ornament in Context', Erika Boeckeler considers the 'semiotic potential' of an ornate headpiece featured on three pages of the Folio. The baroque image features a seated Dionysus, archers, rabbits, birds of paradise, intricate vines, and – in the bottom left and right corners – dogs relieving themselves. Boeckeler traces this extraordinary illustration in the context of its use as a headpiece by the Jaggard Press in previous publications such as Jonson's Folio of 1616 and Helkiah Crooke's *Mikrokosmographia*. The repurposing of the image creates a paratexual relationship between the books that share it. The liveliness of the early modern stage that Jonson and Shakespeare wrote for is evoked through the scenes of bacchanalia and perhaps also the earthy exuberance of open urination amid lush foliage. Simultaneously, the centrality of Dionysus in the headpiece connects Renaissance drama to its ancient ancestors. Boeckeler's focus on whether the dogs are urinating or perhaps even ejaculating provokes imaginative links between the image and correlatory moments within Shakespeare's own plays, not to mention the excitement of theatre-going.

Two final essays meditate on the process of collecting First Folios. Zoltán Márkus takes the Folger Shakespeare Library as his subject, advocating for wider recognition of the efforts and scholarship of Emily Jordan Folger. Her husband, Henry Clay Folger, has traditionally been given substantial prominence in the acquisition, exhibition, and study of First Folios. But Márkus urges a reassessment. Emily Jordan Folger's own scholarship, resulting in a Master's thesis, has previously been somewhat dismissed by Peter W. M. Blayney, but Márkus not only advocates contextualising the academic requirements of an MA at the time, but also argues that her work created a consensus about the First Folio's role as the preferred version of Shakespeare's text, contributing to the nineteenth century's fetishisation of the book. Amy Lidster completes proceedings with her essay 'Not on His Picture, but on his Booke: Shakespeare's First Folio and Practices of Collection'. This article compares the First Folio with other collected play editions from the period, including Samuel Daniel's *Whole Works* (also printed in 1623) and John Lyly's *Six Court Comedies* (1632) among several others, to consider the processes of collecting an author's plays together and how this constructs reading practices. Lidster makes a particular focus on the fetishisation of the book's materiality, arguing that by constructing the history play as a distinct genre, the First Folio's project is not merely dramatic or literary but serves to centralise the stories of English monarchs and, in doing so, position Shakespeare as a national writer. This line of argument indicates that the presentation and curation of play collections is far from a neutral act.

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