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Essay by Christopher Flannery

## SHAKESPEARE AGAINE AND AGAINE

*The First Folio at 400.*

“Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe.”

—John Heminges and Henry Condell

“To the great Variety of Readers” of Shakespeare’s *First Folio*

**T**HIS YEAR MARKS THE 400TH ANNIVERSARY OF SHAKESPEARE’S *First Folio*, published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare’s death. This historic book—put together by Shakespeare’s friends and fellow actors, John Heminges and Henry Condell—was the first published collection of his plays and is our most important source of information about them. For 18 of his 38 (or so) plays, it provides the only text existing.

The title page calls this folio: “Mr. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARES COMEDIES, HISTORIES, & TRAGEDIES. Published according to the True Originall Copies.” On another page the editors claim that all the plays in the volume are “Truely set forth, according to their first ORIGINALL.” This is determined and admirable originalism. In their letter “To the great Variety of Readers,” Heminges and Condell complain of “diverse stolen, and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious imposters.” They promise to present here “even those” stolen and deformed texts, now “cured, and perfect of their limbs” along with “all the rest [of Shakespeare’s plays], absolute in their numbers, as he conceived the[m].” (What they meant exactly by “absolute in their numbers,” nobody knows.)

What a gift in this folio these friends of Shakespeare gave to all future generations—to us. Without their beautifully discerning act of friendship, a great gap would have opened in the history of the world. *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *Measure for Measure*, and a dozen other Shakespeare plays would have been buried in silence for these 400 years and forever.

A folio is a large, relatively expensive book made by folding printed sheets of paper in half, creating four pages per sheet. The four printed pages of a folio were each about 13½ x 8¼ inches. Shakespeare’s folio was over 900 pages, in double columns. Before 1623, Shakespeare’s plays were published individually in quartos, inexpensive editions about half the size of a folio, made by folding printed sheets twice, making eight pages per sheet. Before the *First Folio*, no collection exclusively of plays—by anyone—had ever been published in folio form in England.

Scholars estimate that about 750 copies may have been originally printed. Some 235 are known to exist today. Eighty-two of them are owned by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. As she and her husband began creating, in the late 1880s, what would become the world’s largest Shakespeare collection, Mrs. Emily Jordan Folger sought advice about studying the Bard from the renowned Shakespeare scholar Horace Howard Furness, editor of the New Variorum edition of Shakespeare’s works, the most authoritative and reliable edition then in existence. He advised her: “Take Booth’s Reprint of the First Folio, and read a play every day consecutively. At the end of the thirty-seven days you will be in a Shakespearian atmosphere that will astonish you with its novelty and its pleasure, and

its profit. Don’t read a single note [explaining or interpreting Shakespeare] during the month.”

**T**O FOLLOW THIS VERY AMBITIOUS PEDAGOGICAL ADVICE TODAY, one would best turn to *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile*, second edition (1996). In a few ways, this beautiful volume is superior to all the original *First Folios*. As the publishers inform us, because of the way the original *First Folio* was printed—“two pages at a time, on a small hand-operated press over a period of nearly two years,” with corrections made as printing proceeded—“no extant Folio shows the finally corrected state of every page, and no two Folios are identical.” The great achievement of the *Norton Facsimile* is to present the “finally corrected state of every page,” and of these pages the *Facsimile* uses “the clearest and cleanest” available. Not least of its advantages is that the *Facsimile* costs nowhere near \$10 million, which is more or less what an original could go for on the open market these days.

If Mr. Furness’s advice proves too stern for today’s students—and well it might!—they could pick up a reliable edition of Shakespeare’s works, say, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by David Bevington, in its fourth edition, which modernizes some spellings and forms and in other respectful ways makes the plays more accessible to us. Its extensive general introduction, the introductions to each play, and the footnotes are intelligent, informed, and sensible on the whole and provide interested students with most of what they need and want to know. In later editions, alas, the introductions and commentary, like the world at large, get increasingly “woke.”

Heminges and Condell wisely advise their readers to “reade” their author “againe and againe.” Today’s student has the advantage also of being able to listen to recordings of all the plays, very ably dramatized by *The Complete Arkangel Shakespeare* and available in a CD set and as audiobooks. Eager beginners who feel a bit overwhelmed could consult *Shakespeare A to Z*, a handy reference book (out of print but still obtainable cheap and secondhand) that, among other things, offers a brief synopsis of each play and brief biographies of every character.

In his visit to America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville famously observed that “[t]here is hardly a pioneer’s hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare.” A half-century after Tocqueville’s visit, a less well-known German visitor concluded that “[t]here is, assuredly, no country on the face of this earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such high esteem as in America.” No visitor to today’s university English departments would come away with such impressions, but step outside the barbed-wired ivy walls into America and you find the great variety of inhabitants, as we strut and fret our hour upon the stage, still happily reading our Shakespeare—and our Bible!—and againe and againe. It is good for the soul and for the country, and it holds out hope for the civilization so greatly enhanced by Shakespeare’s *First Folio*.

*Christopher Flannery is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books.*

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