

## The First Folio and other editions of Shakespeare's works

In 1623, seven years after his death, thirty-six plays by William Shakespeare were published in an edition we now know as the First Folio. It was compiled by members of his acting company, the King's Men, particularly John Hemings<sup>1</sup> and Henry Condell.

The word 'folio' means a piece of paper folded to make two leaves, and it was a standard large-sized book, like many family Bibles. Probably around 750 copies of the first edition were printed, of which 228 are believed to be still in existence. Nowadays a copy of the First Folio is worth between two and four million pounds.

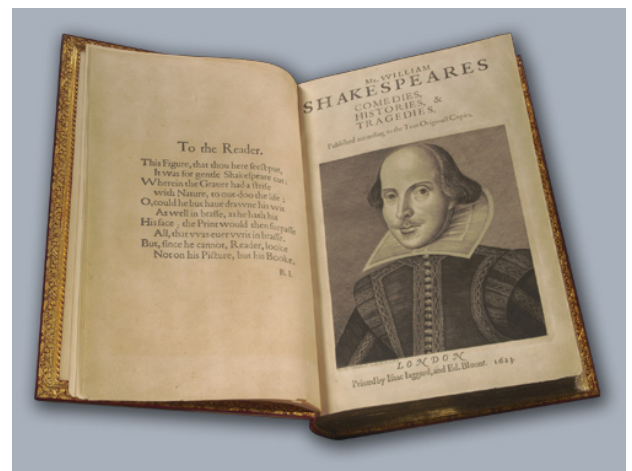
Shakespeare himself only oversaw the publication of two books, the long poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece", which both became very popular. We do not know whether he approved the publication of the sonnets, which also happened during his lifetime.

Versions of some of his plays appeared before he died, mostly in quarto size (with the papers folded into four). These quartos were not official publications and some of them were probably pirated. They may often represent the form of the play as it was acted, in many cases in a shortened version.

When the First Folio was compiled, it used the manuscript copies of the plays held by the company (to which they belonged). Today we might call these the 'prompt copies'. Sometimes these were the same as the published quartos, but often there were variations.

Of course the spelling and punctuation in these early editions differ from those in modern English. So an editor of a modern publication has to modernize the spelling and decide what the best punctuation should be. She or he will also have to decide whether what is in the Folio is right, or whether a quarto version should be preferred. That is why you will find differences in the different editions of the plays you can buy nowadays or in what is available online. Some editions explain what choices they have made in a section entitled 'An account of the text'.

The First Folio contains all the plays known to have been written wholly or mainly by Shakespeare except *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Shakespeare is believed to have written two further plays which have been completely lost. The first play in the book is *The Tempest*, followed by the comedies, histories and finally tragedies. The Droeshout print of Shakespeare's portrait was used as a frontispiece opposite a short poem by Ben Jonson. A longer poem by Jonson, with a dedication and introduction by Hemings and Condell and other poems, a list of the actors and the contents page follow.



<sup>1</sup> His name is often spelt differently, e.g. as Heminges or Hemminge

Here is the end of the address to the reader by Hemings and Condell, in the original spelling:

... But it is not our province, who onely gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that reade him. And there we hope, to your divers capacities, you will finde enough, both to draw, and hold you : for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost. Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe : And if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. And so we leave you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can bee your guides : if you neede them not, you can leade your selves, and others. And such Readers we wish him.

And here is an extract from Ben Jonson's second poem, headed: "To the memory of my beloved, the AUTHOR, Master William Shakespeare and what he hath left us":

*... Soule of the Age !*

*The applause ! delight ! the wonder of our Stage !*  
*My Shakespeare, rise; I will not lodge thee by*  
*Chaucer, or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lye*  
*A little further, to make thee a roome :*  
*Thou art a Monument, without a tombe,*  
*And art alive still, while thy Booke doth live,*  
*And we have wits to read, and praise to give.*  
*That I not mixe thee so, my braine excuses ;*  
*I meane with great, but disproportion'd Muses :*  
*For, if I thought my judgement were of yeeres,*  
*I should commit thee surely with thy peeres,*  
*And tell, how farre thou dist our Lily out-shine,*  
*Or sporting Kid or Marlowes mighty line.*  
*And though thou hadst small Latine, and lesse Greeke,*  
*From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke*  
*For names; but call forth thund'ring Æschilus,*  
*Euripides, and Sophocles to us,*  
*Paccuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead,*  
*To life againe, to heare thy Buskin tread,*  
*And shake a stage : Or, when thy sockes were on,*  
*Leave thee alone, for the comparison*  
*Of all, that insolent Greece, or haughtie Rome*  
*Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.*  
*Triumph, my Britaine, thou hast one to showe,*  
*To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.*  
*He was not of an age, but for all time !*

[Michael Mitchell]