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Shakespeare: ‘Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies’

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Reflections on the various works in the exhibit

Imprints and Impressions: Milestones in Human Progress

Highlights from the Rose Rare Book Collection, Sept. 29-Nov. 9, 2014
Roesch Library, University of Dayton

William Shakespeare
Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies
- 1632
- Second Folio

In his edited collection *The Poems and Plays of William Shakespeare* (1790), Edmond Malone wrote that “no one who wishes to peruse the plays of Shakespeare should even open the Second folio,” although Malone clearly had opened it, since he used it to make corrections for his own edition. Thus began a long history of overlooking the Second Folio and downgrading its importance as an artifact in the critical history of Shakespeare studies.

But indeed, it is impossible to consider the Second Folio without some mention of the First. That the First Folio exists at all is remarkable. Fortunately, two of Shakespeare’s fellow actors, John Heminges and Henry Condell, had the sense to gather some of the earlier published quartos and loose manuscripts of Shakespeare’s plays to publish them in a single volume. Heminges and Condell also relied on other actors in their company to build this corpus, as they all recalled from memory the lines that they’d performed.

The folio format in which Heminges and Condell published was risky, a sure financial disaster. Plays were not popular private reading materials—they were public forms of entertainment. As Peter Stallybrass and Roger Chartier wrote, to publish Shakespeare “as a dramatic author in the form of the bound book” was quite radical. And Folios were incredibly expensive, large volumes, printed on good paper, and thus cost about as much as one could feed his family for most of a year.

Yet, the financial gamble paid off. In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare’s death, the First Folio was published in London, containing thirty-six plays, half of them published for the first time. In fact, if not for the First Folio, many plays—including *The Tempest, Julius Caesar, The Taming of the Shrew, Macbeth*, and *Twelfth Night*—likely would have been lost forever. The First Folio sold out in nine years (unheard of) and required a second printing, the Second Folio, in 1632. From the success of the Second Folio came the need for additional printings in 1663, 1664, and 1685.

The Folio, therefore, has a richly complex history. It is the creation of William
Shakespeare, but it is also a creation of his fellow actors, the stationers who printed it, and even our modern editors who make decisions about textual variants in spelling, punctuation, lines, passages, and even entire speeches. The First Folio has become the definitive text for book historians and literary scholars as having the most authority and authenticity of any Shakespeare edition. As John Jewett has written, it is through the First Folio that we have Shakespeare “the cultural icon.” The First Folio produced our vision of Shakespeare through the title page’s iconic woodcut by Martin Droeshout through the dedicatory verse written by Ben Jonson: “Soul of the Age! … the wonder of our Stage!”

If the First Folio is the reason we have our Shakespeare—the writer, the art form, the high school and university curricular requirement—then what is gained from studying this Second Folio? What the Second Folio tells us is that Shakespeare was a bestseller in his own time and the years immediately following his death; it also tells us that even an expensive volume like the First Folio was a “must-have” book for a wide range of early modern readers, not just the cultural elite. The second printing of Shakespeare’s plays thereby reinforced not only the popularity, but the significance of the First. To be sure, it is the Second Folio that began to secure Shakespeare’s position as playwright, as “author,” as the phenomenon we know him to be, who lives prominently in our own popular culture precisely because “he was not of an age, but for all time.”

But even more importantly, the Second Folio can remind us all of the ways that Shakespeare privileged “seconds” (after all, Shakespeare famously willed his “second-best bed” to his wife, Anne Hathaway). While most critics and historians have ignored Shakespeare’s special affinities for “seconds,” Patricia Parker has noted that, of all of his word play, Shakespeare especially enjoyed using *hysteron proteron*, or the “preposterous,” a classical figurative language device that “puts the cart before the horse,” thus placing first what should come second. Shakespeare’s plays are full of second sons who upstage their elder brothers—Marcus Andronicus (*Titus Andronicus*), Richard III, Don John (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Jaques (*As You Like It*), Macduff (*Macbeth*), and Claudius (*Hamlet*), to name a few. Several characters in the plays enjoy second marriages, or the prospect of a second marriage becomes a significant site of contest for dramatic plots, notably for Juliet, Gertrude (*Hamlet*), and Henry VIII.

And Shakespeare loved a good sequel—he wrote two series of history plays (or tetralogies), both of which include kings’ lives told in two or more parts (*Henry VI, Parts I and II; Henry IV, Parts I and II*). The order of that last example is no mistake: it is certainly not lost on us that Shakespeare wrote his tetralogies out of chronological order, composing *Richard II, Henry IV, I and II*, and *Henry V* after the successes of
Henry VI, I, II, and III and Richard III. What’s more, the second tetralogy, deemed the “Great Tetralogy” by critics and actors alike, includes some of the most masterful plays in Shakespeare’s canon. In Shakespeare, as the saying goes (he was one of the first writers to use it), seconds are often “second to none” (Comedy of Errors, 5.1.7; Henry IV, II, 2.3.34).

The Rose Rare Book Collection, then, creates for us a delightful and fruitful opportunity: to take a closer look at and reconsider the Second Folio by thinking about all the ways in which Shakespeare appreciated the figure of the “second,” not seeing it as a mere copy, but as a text with its own significant value.

—Elizabeth Mackay, PhD, Lecturer, English