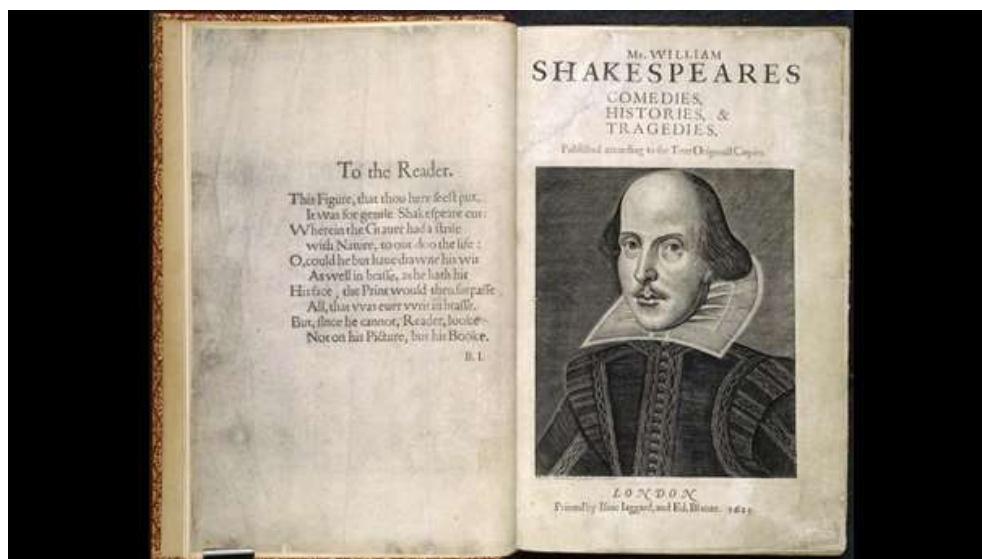


Shakespeare's First Folio

bl.uk/collection-items/shakespeares-first-folio



The First Folio is the first collected edition of William Shakespeare's plays, collated and published in 1623, seven years after his death. Folio editions were large and expensive books that were seen as prestige items.

Shakespeare wrote around 37 plays, 36 of which are contained in the First Folio. Most of these plays were performed in the Globe, an open-air playhouse in London built on the south bank of the Thames in 1599. As none of Shakespeare's original manuscripts survive (except, possibly, *Sir Thomas More*, which Shakespeare is believed to have revised a part of) we only know his work from printed editions.

Why is the First Folio so important?

Of the 36 plays in the First Folio, 17 were printed in Shakespeare's lifetime in various good and bad smaller quarto editions, one was printed after his death and 18 had not yet been printed at all. It is this fact that makes the First Folio so important; without it, 18 of Shakespeare's plays, including *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest*, might never have survived.

The text was collated by two of Shakespeare's fellow actors and friends, John Heminge and Henry Condell, who edited it and supervised the printing. They appear in a list of the 'Principall Actors' who performed in Shakespeare's plays, alongside Richard Burbage, Will Kemp and Shakespeare himself.

Heminge and Condell divided the plays into comedies, tragedies and histories, an editorial decision that has come to shape our idea of the Shakespearean canon. In order to produce as authoritative a text as possible, they compiled it from the good quartos and from manuscripts (now lost) such as prompt books, authorial fair copy, and foul papers (working drafts). The First Folio offered a corrective to what are now called bad quartos – spurious and corrupt pirate editions, likely based on memorial reconstruction.

What did Shakespeare look like?

The portrait of Shakespeare on the title page was engraved by Martin Droeshout and is one of only two portraits with any claim to authenticity. As Droeshout would have only been 15 when Shakespeare died it is unlikely that they actually met. Instead his picture was probably drawn from the memory of others, or from an earlier portrait. In his admiring verse 'To the Reader' at the start of the First Folio, the writer Ben Jonson declares that the engraver achieved a good likeness – he 'hit' or captured Shakespeare's face well.

The 'wonder of our stage'

Jonson also wrote a poem 'To the memory' of Shakespeare, which presents him as the 'Soul of the Age', 'the wonder of our stage'. Jonson generously compares Shakespeare to other playwrights including Christopher Marlowe, who was well-known for the 'mighty line' in his powerful blank verse plays. At the same time, Jonson makes the famous claim that Shakespeare had 'small Latine, and lesse Greeke', suggesting that he was not a good classical scholar.

What's special about this copy?

This copy is one of only four surviving which contain the engraving in the first state, before Droeshout made improvements to the engraved plate to enhance the appearance of Shakespeare's forehead and chin, and to add shading. In this version, Shakespeare's head appears to be floating above his ruff. Because the portrait in this copy is the early version, we know that it was one of the first copies to be printed.

It is estimated that around 750 First Folios were printed, of which 233 are currently known to survive worldwide. The British Library owns five.