

Emma Smith. *Shakespeare's First Folio. Four Centuries of an Iconic Book*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Terentianus, the third century grammarian, famously proclaimed that books have their own fates according to the dispositions of their readers (*Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*). In this particular book Emma Smith—who is also the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's First Folio* (2016)—explores the readers, the reception and the significance of one of the most singular volumes in the English canon. She starts with an account of the first recorded purchaser of the *First Folio*, Sir Edward Dering, whose book of expenses is also a record of his social and political progress—a case of renaissance self-fashioning through consumption. His purchase of the *First Folio* also dovetailed with other hobbies, which included the performance of plays adapted by Dering himself for amateur productions in his household. Smith uses Dering as one of the pillars in the opening of her overall narrative structure, with a more recent user of the *First Folio* at the other end of her book—more about that later.

Smith leaves few pages unturned or bindings unexamined. It is difficult to summarize all the things Smith's book does with the *First Folio*, and the fascinating episodes it tells about its production, circulation and reception. The complex history of the First Folio is of course the history of Shakespeare's elevation to the altars of the canon, of the paths taken by the political, cultural and economic capital invested in it, and of the communities who sought to appropriate it. Smith surveys the host of agents within the overlapping worlds of the public stage and the publishing business that facilitated its production. Patrons, actors, and publishers, among others, are all brought forward to demonstrate how they contributed to produce a printed artefact that circulated throughout far-reaching networks in both chronological and geographical terms. The author and its readers are only a fraction among the host of individuals and communities that have engaged with the *First Folio* over four hundred years.

For example, Smith examines the copy deposited now at the Glasgow University Library as part of the Cary family networks, which included Ben Jonson. This is, in the first place, an early episode in the public perception of Shakespeare as a towering modern in competition with the ancients, and then it is also an important step towards the further canonization of Shakespeare during the eighteenth century. Smith's book contributes to a detailed understanding of the role played by the *First Folio* and its reception in Shakespeare's progress from his status as national poet, on towards his emergence as a universal author, and his current status as a fetish of Anglo-American cultural and linguistic globalization. Many *First Folios* circulated through the same paths that have come to redefine the international balance of economic and political power: the fate of those copies that left Britain towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries coincided with the creation of great American collections, and the growing global weight of the Japanese economy around the 1980s took twelve *First Folios* to the Kodama Memorial Library in Tokyo.

In tracing the fortunes of the global circulation of *First Folios*, Smith's book complements other recent volumes that examine the emergence of World Literature as some sort of CompLit 2.0, and the establishment of the current global hegemony of Anglo-American literature upon the publishing business and academic institutions. In contrast, for instance, with Barbara Fuch's *The Poetics of Piracy*, or Emily Apter's *Against World Literature* (both published in 2013), Smith's book is more phlegmatic, which is why it dovetails so smoothly with more committed approaches. Whatever one's agenda, the fact is that the remaining copies of Shakespeare's *First Folio* have become global cultural treasures whose value tends to fluctuate with the circulation of political and economic capital. As Smith reminds her readers, in 1894 William Roberts presciently said that the rare book market was “a stock exchange in miniature”. The Folger

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Library exemplifies how the intersection of economic and political power with cultural and literary capital intervene in the creation of collections, which in turn become generators of further scholarly and cultural capitals. Smith does not fail to mention that Henry Clay Folger was an executive at the Standard Oil Company—accused in its day of monopolistic practices. It would appear that the ethos Folger displayed in his business practices he also applied when he set about cornering the market for Shakespearean goods: the library he founded currently custodies 82 copies of Shakespeare's *First Folio*.

The alarm raised in Britain towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the transatlantic transfer of *First Folios* led to episodes like the dramatic funding campaign by the Bodleian to gather the £3,000 necessary to repurchase a copy that had originally belonged to its collection. Discarded after the publication of a series of new Folios—perceived at the time as freshly improved editions—this originally Bodleian copy had passed to a private owner who had put it up for auction. Smith tells many similar episodes that exemplify the transformation of *First Folio* copies from “early modern print commodity to late modern secular relic” (p. 87). These include the fascinating case of the colonial legacy of the copies deposited by George Grey in Australia, South Africa and in the Free Public Library in Auckland—the latter of which became the symbolic center-piece for a grandiose project of Anglo-Saxon cultural and linguistic domination in the Pacific. In contrast with these, the Birmingham public library copy has a different meaning: acquired in 1881, it belongs in a public institution as “part of a vision of working-class education” (p. 107). These are cases of the public use and significance of the *First Folio*. As far as individual approaches are concerned, Smith describes in profuse detail how certain early modern readers culled information from the text for their own commonplacing purposes, and how some of them became proof-readers or copy editors as they sought to retrofit or re-engineer the book.

Smith recounts the twilight of the Folio format towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the publication in 1709 of the first six-volume collection of Shakespeare's plays in octavo edited by Nicholas Rowe. This inaugurates a section on the role played by professional publishers and editors in the canonization of Shakespeare. The second edition of Rowe's Shakespeare included ‘A Table of the Most Sublime Passages of this Author’, which both standardized the previous commonplacing tradition and contributed to establish Shakespeare's plays as a repository of universal wisdom and transcendental aesthetics. Alongside editors like Rowe, those who contributed to the canonization of Shakespeare included men of letters and scholars like Dryden, Pope, or Johnson, publishers like Jacob Tonson, and actors like David Garrick. Smith also informs her readers about the intense, and paranoid, scrutiny to which the *First Folio* was submitted by Baconians in search of the supposedly secret code contained in its editorial design and layout. In contrast with the host of *First Folio* examiners in search of secret authorship—whether Bacon or the Earl of Oxford—Smith also makes full justice to the more careful and rigorous collation of Folger copies conducted by Charlton Hinman in his *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare* (1963). His painstaking comparative analysis, descending to the minutest of details in many different copies, yielded a considerable amount of information that contributed to establish the history and chronology of the printing of the *First Folio* as well as the techniques and the methods employed in its production. Finally, Smith devotes a chapter to explore the relations of the *First Folio* with the private and the public stage, and with the actual performance of its plays. She examines certain copies that bear the marks and corrections of readers whose clear interest was in performance. The value of the *First Folio* as a source of original, and therefore authentic, performance instructions continued in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Richard Flatter, who in 1948 sought to extract from it Shakespeare's original theatrical text, and with Patrick Tucker in the 1990s.

In 1998 Raymond Scott was the peculiar protagonist of the last major theft of a *First Folio*. In her conclusions, Smith tells us how Scott tried (and utterly failed) to use this Durham copy as his ticket to the exclusive lifestyle of an international jet-setter. With all their differences, Edward Dering in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and Raymond Scott towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>,

projected their social aspirations upon their *First Folios*. And although Smith's treatment of Scott is not half as detailed as her investigation of the significance of Dering's copy, these two episodes provide the chronological and narrative framework for a book full of important information, fascinating episodes, and sophisticated critical insight, which will be of great interest to a variety of scholars in different disciplines—literary critics, cultural and book historians chiefly among them.

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