



Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book

Emma Smith

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This is a biography of a book: the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays printed in 1623 and known as the First Folio. It begins with the story of its first purchaser in London in December 1623, and goes on to explore the ways people have interacted with this iconic book over the four hundred years of its history. Throughout, the stress is on what we can learn from individual copies now spread around the world about their eventful lives. From ink blots to pet paws, from annotations to wineglass rings, First Folios teem with evidence of its place in different contexts with different priorities.

This study offers new ways to understand Shakespeare's reception and the history of the book. Unlike previous scholarly investigations of the First Folio, it is not concerned with the discussions of how the book came into being, the provenance of its texts, or the technicalities of its production. Instead, it reanimates, in narrative style, the histories of this book, paying close attention to the details of individual copies now located around the world--their bindings, marginalia, general condition, sales history, and location--to discuss five major themes: owning, reading, decoding, performing, and perfecting.

This is a history of the book that consolidated Shakespeare's posthumous reputation: a reception history and a study of interactions between owners, readers, forgers, collectors, actors, scholars, booksellers, and the book through which we understand and recognize Shakespeare.

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