

“Publish We This Peace...”:

A Note on the Design of the Shakespeare First Folio

and the Spanish Marriage Crisis

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alph Waldo Emerson, writing long before J.T. Looney, observed that “Shakespeare is a voice merely: *who* and *what* he was that sang, that sings, we know not.” Emerson’s recognition of the futility of the orthodox Shakespeare biography was not without precedent. Ben Jonson warns his his 1623 Folio encomium of “seeliest ignorance” misconstruing the contents of the book. Yet, the folio to which Jonson prefixed this sober warning is one which which has for a long time now been acquiring the reputation of an a “ancient and very fishlike smell,” partly for the reasons indicated in greater detail elsewhere in this volume.

Early 20th century scholars such as George Greenwood or Gerald Rendall thought they knew the reason for the smell. If you want to hide the writer, what better way than to pin someone else’s face to the cover of his work? When Sidney Lee finally threw down the gauntlet of folio editor Ben Jonson’s authority as the first “Stratfordian,” Greenwood smiled and replied, without missing a beat, “we of the heretical persuasion can afford to smile. For we see no reason to suppose that Jonson might not have taken the course we attribute to him [i.e. participate in a conspiratorial hoax] and considered himself quite justified in doing so....” (27). To Gerald H. Rendall, an early Oxfordian known primarily for the influence his two books on *The Sonnets* exercised on Sigmund Freud, proposed Jonson as the “skilled and most effective agent of anonymity” (7). Rendall then followed suit with additional materials pointing directly to folio editor Jonson’s employment by the family of de Vere’s son-in-law Phillip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery, during the two-year period in which the folio was under preparation. To this day a suite in Mary Sidney’s Wilton estate is known as the “Jonson room.”

Perhaps for obvious reasons, then, the folio has always been on the list of the seven things one does not discuss in a Freshman Shakespeare survey. Stratfordians,

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as Charlton Ogburn argues in *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* “have no case if they do not take the First Folio at face value” and “grant it the claim of authenticity” (1984, 1992).

Recently, however, the orthodox practice of backpedaling the folio’s irregularities has started to change. In 1988 Leah Marcus authored an astonishing expose of the folio. Although her intentions are orthodox beyond reproach, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading And Its Discontents* (1988) is on my list of the top ten orthodox Shakespeare books Oxfordians should love to hate. Indeed, it is the first book by *anyone* to *begin* the job of placing the curious semiotics of the folio in a proper comparative light. (see Stritmatter, “Bestow, When and Where You List,” this volume).

And now we have Peter Dickson’s exciting new research on the political context of the 1620s period [see Boyle, “Shakespeare’s Son,” this volume, 95-102]. Dickson shows that Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, and the Herbert brothers (William and Phillip) who patronized the folio (one, Phillip, being married to Susan Vere), were all at the forefront of the intense public opposition against the marriage negotiations between Prince Charles and the sister of Phillip V. These staunch English Protestants feared the worst—that the country was about to be auctioned off to the Spanish Crown, and all because the lovestruck James I had already delegated a frightening degree of power to the irresponsible Duke of Buckingham George Villiers while the implacable international chess player Gondomar watched, calculated, and maneuvered. The contretemps over the marriage became the greatest domestic dispute of James’s reign.

No careful reader of the two past *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletters* [Spring and Fall 1998] will find reason to doubt that Dickson has established a *prima facie* case for his theory. Even those who remain skeptical must admit that the circumstances seem remarkably suggestive. Let us consider some of the relevant facts.

The printing of the folio was a sloppy, rushed job; to this day a small industry—which includes the past labors of Emily Clay Folger, Charlton Hinman, Edwin Elliott Willoughby and other luminary scholars—is devoted to establishing a documentary record of folio publication anomalies. So bad is the folio typography, in fact, that each copy exists in a unique state. There are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of errors in many copies. Hinman, treading where no cypher-crunching Baconian would dare to go, actually invented a special machine to enable collation of the myriad textual variants to the giant book. Yet, the Stratfordians have no explanation for why the First Folio was so sloppily printed.

The folio was patronized by de Vere’s in-laws. Like de Vere’s son, they became leaders of the Protestant opposition to the impending Spanish marriage and resisting the rising influence of Villiers and Gondomar in the court. The dates of Henry de Vere’s imprisonment (April 1622 to December 1623) match the dates of production of the folio almost exactly (February 1622 *or later* to November 1623).

The folio effects a nationalist character which would have served such a political cause well. It celebrates a dramatic tradition which was reputedly an inspiration to both Elizabeth and James. It places the historic deeds of the ancient

Britains and their medieval and Renaissance descendants such as Henry V or the Bastard Falconbridge on a par with those of the ancients.

Are we left, then, with a case—however plausible—which must remain “speculative,” “subjective” or “unproven” in the absence of that much lamented category of thing, the “documentary evidence”? Do we need a note in the Earl of Pembroke’s handwriting to the publisher William Jaggard, “hurry it up, old man, my cousin’s in the tower”?

The purpose of this article is to propose that we do not. There is in fact a document, one well known, I should hope, to all readers of this *Newsletter* and now available in paperback for \$19.95 in many bookstores, which confirms the intrinsic plausibility of Dickson’s thesis. I mean the Shakespeare First Folio itself. Before passing negative judgment on Dickson’s thesis, find yourself a copy of any one of the popular facsimiles of this “smoking gun.” Review the introductory materials, the table of contents, and the general plan of the book; you may begin to understand what Jonson and the other architects of the folio (if any) were up to.

Notice that the first play, for example, is *The Tempest*. Now, isn’t that, somehow, appropriate? On one level, *The Tempest* tells the allegory of the author’s life as an artist, the exiled magus Prospero. Prospero is an older and more alienated version of the same character we saw as the Duke in *Measure for Measure*—the artist himself, comically trying to have an impact on a social order which often spurns his humors and his magic. The play tells the story of how this man came to be marooned on the desert island of his own art, within the magic circle of the 1623 Folio. Imprisoned here, he is, as Samuel Shepherd wrote of Shakespeare in 1651, “a Shepheard cag’d in stone,” cut off from the common redemption which would be granted through the recognition of his identity could it be restored through prayer, scholarship, or any other means.

If you think that this sounds plausible but you aren’t yet convinced (after all, such an effect could be achieved, in this case, by mere coincidence), consider my second example of how the folio exhibits a structural character which appears to be intentionally designed. Editor Jonson has constructed the folio to communicate messages (particularly messages keyed to the date 1623, or more generally to the politics of the era or of de Vere’s life as the artist) which individual component plays cannot. In other words, the whole of the folio is more than the sum of its parts.

If you think I’m making this up and you can therefore safely ignore it, think again. I’m merely transposing what the best Jonson experts have already said about his careful design of his own 1616 folio. Consider Richard Dutton’s careful observations:

Over the last few years there has been a growing recognition that the organization of the *Epigrams*—like that of *Bartholomew Fair*—is far more subtle, sophisticated and significant than at first meets the eye; behind the apparent randomness or spontaneity, there is a careful and deliberate structure. In different, though related ways we may now begin to appreciate that the same is true of the first folio as a whole ...

Obviously, the idea that *The Tempest* was placed first in the Shakespeare folio to invoke an allegory of authorship finds ample warrant in this description of Jonson's editorial technique when applied to his own literary corpus. But can we find further evidence for the deliberate arrangement of the component parts of the folio in order to make architectonic statements? Undoubtedly many could be proposed and at least several of these might be "correct"—whatever that means here.

But the one I have in mind is special for one very good reason: to my way of thinking, it supplies all the "documentary" proof Dickson's theory could ever want. It also happens to make a nice complement to the example of *The Tempest*. In that case the allegory deduced is of a personal, authorial, perhaps even subjective nature. My second case, on the contrary, concerns public affairs of state and history. This is the fact—the documentary fact—that the last play in the folio is *Cymbeline*.

Now, why is that? Can anyone think of a really good reason which has escaped my notice? For Stratfordians the placement of *Cymbeline* is another unexplained anomaly. The play certainly does not belong in the concluding section of tragedies. An early Arden editor conjectured that its placement may have been "the result of late receipt of the 'copy' in the printinghouse." W.W. Greg supposed that it may have been "through a misunderstanding that Jaggard placed it at the end of the volume instead of the section [containing the comedies]." Other Stratfordians may discover other excuses for the play's placement. I think such explanations are wrong.

If, however, we instead consider the placement of *Cymbeline* from the point of view of Dickson's theory about the Spanish marriage crisis, everything seems to fall into place with no need to impute misunderstandings to Jaggard or any other party to the folio's production. *Cymbeline*, whatever genre we may assign it to, is conspicuously a play about the prehistoric battle for English independence from Roman rule. In it the English king Cymbeline, with the help of Posthumous Leonatus, defeats the Roman forces and runs them out of the land. The play ends with Cymbeline offering the comic promise that Britain,

Although the victor, [submits] to Caesar
And to the Roman empire, promising
To pay our wonted tribute, from the which
We were persuaded by our wicked queen.
(5.5.460-463)

No English reader of 1623 could have considered this plot without being reminded of the parallel between Cymbeline's war for the independence of Britain and the current Counter-Reformation politics of James's reign and the Spanish Marriage Crisis. The play concludes on a note of British victory, but the victory is tempered by strenuous protestations of Cymbeline's desire for peace with Rome—from the vantage of independent equality. As Francies A. Yates surmises, the play is one in which

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A vast Romano-British pax is being proclaimed, ratified with ceremonies and feasts in Lud's town (London), and the achievement of this pax, after misunderstanding and conflict, is the theme of the play.

The play, especially with this ending, makes a perfect conclusion to a volume sponsored by the era's leading faction of Protestant nobles and designed to send a forceful message to a monarch who was, they believed, flirting with disaster. Consider the play's concluding lines:

Cym. Laud we the Gods,
And let our crooked Smoakes climbe to their Nostrils
From our blest Altars. Publish we this Peace
To all our Subiects. Set we forward : Let
A Roman, and a British Ensigne waue
Friendly together : so through Luds-Towne march,
And in the Temple of great Iupter
Our Peace wee'l ratifie : Seale it with Feasts.
Set on there : Neuer was a Warre did cease
(Ere bloodie hands were wash'd) with such a Peace.
Exeunt (5.5.477-485)

Note the key phrase, from the point of view of the Folio "conspirators":

Publish we this Peace,
To all our Subiects....

As applied to the publication of the First Folio, the phrase means that Pembroke, Montgomery, de Vere, Southampton and the rest, not Buckingham and Gondomar, or even King James, were dictating the terms of an acceptable peace with Spain and international Catholicism. Their "magna carta" was the First Folio of "Shakespeare."

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 **WORKS CITED** 

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