

A new vision

Philip Kennicott's June 23 review, "A library worthy of, well, Shakespeare," did an excellent job of describing the new \$80 million renovation of the Folger Shakespeare Library. He captured the tensions between the Folger's efforts to reach out to the public and to expand the collection to include broader areas of interest such as race, Renaissance cooking, medicine and the role of the women, and its inability to detach itself from "bardolatry," with its exhibition of 82 first folios displayed "like treasure in a vault, or corpses in a morgue."

No one but the most die-hard Shakespeare scholars is interested in looking at 82 copies of the first folio. The Folger could use that space to create exhibits that would actually interest the public — and illustrate why Shakespeare studies can be interesting, fun and relevant.

Literary studies have been dying for some time, eclipsed by the STEM fields. It might be true, as Folger Director Michael Witmore told Mr. Kennicott, that "while the patient was on the table, we did everything we could." But for an operation to be successful, the surgeon has to think about the best ways to reintegrate the patient into the world in which he'll have to survive. Exhibiting 82 copies of the first folio is not going to help the Folger recover or interest the public the library needs to stay alive.

It's not too late to rethink this. After the opening, replace the first folio exhibition with rotating exhibitions that will interest and inspire the public and illustrate why we need to keep paying attention to the bard. Shakespeare's work is still relevant even if the folio exhibit is not.

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