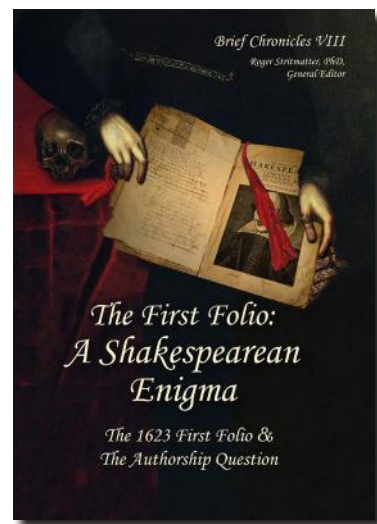


Foliolatry and Bardolatry Rampant: the First Folio

Reviewed by Michael Hyde

Brief Chronicles Vol. 8. *The First Folio: A Shakespearean Enigma*. By *Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship*, 2023. Roger Stritmatter, editor. 448 pages (paperback \$22.00).

As Adam Hooks asks in his article on “The Folio as Fetish,” why must we endure “yet another book about this book?” The answer is that the professional Shakespeare industry intends to ballyhoo the 400th commemoration of the First Folio of 1623. The cover of the *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s First Folio*, edited by professor Emma Smith, is a photograph of a Stratford bust now perched atop a pedestal in a leafy glade—not in Trinity Church. As Hooks observes, the missing “remains” of old Will are “entombed in his monumental book”—not in the walls of Trinity. Few read or consult a real Folio as the book is heavy, awkward to hold and hard to read. As Michael Dobson jibes in “Folio Freaks,” it is “awkwardly assembled and unevenly printed.” My sarcastic quotes are from articles in the aforesaid *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s First Folio*, NOT from the new Oxfordian critique titled *The First Folio: A Shakespearean Enigma*, the subject of our review.



A fetish is a “sanctified object,” which is why I invoke both “Foliolatry” and “Bardolatry” in my title. Recall the 2016 First Folio tour here in the USA; it was a reverse pilgrimage for the Holy Book that created “Shakespeare.” In

the UK this blatant marketing of the First Folio and of “Shakespeare” is now called Shakespeare Inc.—the Holy Book, the Birthplace, the putative Author. As Hooks says, the First Folio represents “immense financial capital” for Shakespeare Inc. Andrea Mays recounts in *The Millionaire and the Bard* the bidding wars for Folios between Henry Folger and Henry Huntington—two business magnates bidding up the prices of their treasures. No wonder that Prospero in the first play of First Folio, *The Tempest*, says that he prizes his books and his library above his dukedom. The *New York Times* of July 21, 2022 states the latest auction price of a Folio as over \$2 million; a “trifle” compared to the University of California at Irvine boasting of a “complete” Folio which it values at \$10 million. In “The Most Expensive Book Ever Auctioned” (*Smithsonian*, October 16, 2020), Iris Davis-Marks details a \$10 million transaction between Mills College and Stephan Loewentheil. The hypothetical market value today of the surviving 250 or so First Folios is thus astronomical, requiring more and more facsimiles in print and online so as not to besmirch the sacred relics of the Bard.

Oxfordians are fortunate that a frequent visitor to the Folger Shakespeare Library, Roger Stritmatter, has served as General Editor of both the *1623 Shakespeare First Folio: A Minority Report* (2016) and of the newly issued *The First Folio: A Shakespearean Enigma: The 1623 First Folio & the Authorship Question*. Professor Stritmatter contributed four of the twelve articles in *Minority Report*. His contribution has grown to six articles plus the Introduction in *Shakespearean Enigma*, three of these being reprinted from 2016—“Bestow How and When You List,” “Puzzling Shakesperotics,” and “Publish We this Peace.” The three reprints are worth rereading: “Bestow” discusses Susan Vere and the missing Shakespeare manuscripts; “Shakesperotics” reviews Leah Marcus and *Puzzling Shakespeare*; and “Publish” serves as a wakeup call to heed Peter Dickson’s history of the politics behind the First Folio in his book on the Spanish Marriage Crisis of 1622–23 (*Bardgate*, Vols. I and II, 2016—go to www.bardgate.com).

Stritmatter’s new contributions in *Enigma* are “Smalle Latine and Lesse Greeke: Anatomy of a Misquotation” (*The Oxfordian* 19 and 20) plus “Paratexts of the First Folio,” which is a page-by-page commentary on the First Folio Prefatory material. He uses Folger copy 68; he also adds the first

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page of the first play, *The Tempest*. The dreadful Droeshut engraving is “long-lamented”; the claim of “True Original Copies” is mere “bookseller’s puffery”; the supposed letters of John Heminge and Henry Condell were probably written by Ben Jonson as ghostwriter and cannot be accepted at face value. I recommend reading the “Paratext” chapter first with its concise remarks on the prefatory pages, as these are an “entry code” to the plays themselves.

Stritmatter’s “Smalle Latine” in two parts was first delivered at a 2014 University of Massachusetts Conference on Shakespeare and Translation, sponsored by the Department of Comparative Literature. This presentation is a wide-ranging discussion of the Spanish Marriage Crisis and England’s political turmoil, the background of the 1622–23 printing of the First Folio, as the Protestant Patriot party campaigned against any new alliance with Catholic Spain. London erupted in celebration when Prince Charles returned in October 1623 without the Spanish Infanta as his bride. William Boyle’s article, “Shakespeare’s Son on Death Row,” reprinted in *Enigma* from the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* of Summer 1998, also provides a straightforward account of the Spanish Marriage Crisis and its fearful implications for English Protestants, such as Henry de Vere, the 18th Earl who languished in prison for 18 months late 1623 until the Marriage project collapsed and he was finally released. This despite the Spanish Ambassador Gondomar urging his execution—as he had done successfully with Walter Raleigh in 1618.

The largest contributor to *Enigma* is Gabriel Ready—a Canadian researcher whose four articles comprise 110 pages, or 25% of the *Shakespearean Enigma* volume. He states clearly his Oxfordian viewpoint in his “First Folio Reconsidered” summary of doubts about First Folio and concludes: “The First Folio was an authorized collection of Edward de Vere’s plays based on underlying copies of the highest authority” (67). Next in “The Knotty Wrong- Side” (2018 *The Oxfordian*, 49–82), Ready outlines “Spanish Connections to the First Folio,” including Jonson’s use of the octosyllabic Spanish decima verse form, which was used in Spanish encomia to Prince Charles attending a Spanish fiesta in his honor in August 1623. He sees *The Tempest* being placed first in the Folio as a bow to the “planned dynastic marriage of (Prince) Charles and the Infanta.” He argues that “this most Spanish of Shakespeare plots is framed by an interfaith wedding between Alonso’s daughter Claribel and the King of Tunis,” written at a less fraught time of Protestant versus Catholic tensions.

Ready’s article on the actual printing and reception of First Folio, “History of Fixing,” discusses how the canonical new First Folio in its “luxurious folio format” was “destined for the libraries of nobles...the book chests of lesser nobles, gentlemen, clergy, physicians, lawyers...the social influencers of their day” (338). He notes that “at the center of the collection is a series

of plays presenting England's dynastic history, signaling the book's nationalist aims" (339). English purchasers were both Protestant and Catholic, such as the anti-Catholic bishop of Durham John Cosin, and the recusant Catholic Thomas Howard, the 14th Earl of Arundel (339). He credits Jaggard and Blount for launching a "book that appealed to both Catholic and Protestant factions" during this "period of intense religious polarization."

The most intriguing claims made by Ready in "Fixing" involve the First Folio in terms of "authorship and doubt." The two most "quarrelsome" subjects that later "came up again and again were questions about the author as portrayed in the First Folio—his 'small Latin and less Greek'" and "doubt about the likeness of the Droeshut woodcut" (339). Ready's final article in *Enigma* is a full review of Professor Chris Laoutaris's newly published *Shakespeare's Book*. His review (pp. 393-401) is also in this issue of *The Oxfordian*. Ready states that *Shakespeare's Book* "finishes on a high note of sorts, moving ever closer to the real author: Edward de Vere" (401). Ready then proceeds to reattribute the Cygnus sonnet "published with Jonson's *Sejanus*" in 1605 which is signed CYGNUS in caps—his last sentence asks if this final swan song is the final sonnet written by Edward de Vere (d. 1604).

I have read and admire all the other contributions to *Enigma*—I even wrote one of them in 2020 on "Calygreyhounds and the First Folios of Jonson and Shakespeare." Other contributors include Shelly Maycock, "The Book that Shakespeare Gave Us or the Book that Gave Us Shakespeare"; Katherine Chiljan with "First Folio Fraud" and "A Vere of 'Great Vertue'"; Bruce Johnston's challenging "What Role Did the Herbert Family Play in the Shakespeare Cover-Up?"; Richard Whalen's 2011 article on "Ambiguity in the First Folio"; John Rollett's immortal words on the Droeshout Engraving, "Shakespeare's Impossible Doublet"; Alexander Waugh's paradigm-shifting piece on "Jonson's Sweet Swan of Avon"; Heidi Jannsch's "One Pretty Secret" essay on Gervase Markham; Bonner Cutting's 2018 reprint from *Necessary Mischief* on the three panels of giant tryptichs of Lady Anne Clifford and the lone surviving Appleby Tryptich; and Michael Dudley's "Looking Not on His Picture, But His Books," which reviews the obsessive searches of Henry Folger for Folios as documented by Andrea Mays and Stephen Grant—reprinted from *Minority Report* discussed above.

My last comment is my own answer on the status of efforts by Oxfordian scholars since 2016 to alter perceptions of the true author of First Folio and its Paratext materials. Are there now more doubters of Shakespeare's authorship? What in First Folio is most dubious—the Droeshout Engraving? The five blank Prefatory pages suggesting the job was rushed at the end? The roles of the immensely wealthy Herbert brothers who patronized and most likely financed printing of First Folio? Does Gabriel Ready win his war of words with Chris Laoutaris in the final essay of *Enigma*? Yes, I think the

list of reasonable doubters is still growing. No, I do not think the prefatory pages of First Folio are a compelling case for William Shakspeare's authorship. The absence of evidence for Shakspeare as an author (after 400 years of fruitless searching) is an immutable fact. Virtually no one today believes the Droeshout image represents Shakespeare himself. Both Herbert brothers were members of intermarried noble families, including Edward de Vere, married to Anne Cecil; his son Henry de Vere, married to Lady Diana Cecil; and daughter Susan Vere, married to Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke, one of the dedicatees of the First Folio. Lastly, I believe that Gabriel Ready has refuted the arguments of Chris Laoutaris.

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