



Shakespeare: Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies

William Shakespeare

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The first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1623, seven years after his death, is probably the most famous literary printed book in the world. Not undeservedly: the massive single-volume, double-column edition of thirty-six "Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies" presents eighteen plays for the first time, and provides superior texts of four of the others, which had earlier appeared in separate smaller-format versions. Had the 1623 collection never been issued, we would now possess no trace of *The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Measure for Measure*, or *The Winter's Tale*.

The volume itself (about 13 by 8 inches, 908 pages) is an imposing size and shape—a mark of esteem in its day. This folio format bestowed on English drama the prestige, authority, and monumentality that was traditionally reserved for lectern Bibles, annals and law books, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and the classics in translation. Its use for literary works had been largely restricted to such proven poets as Chaucer and Spenser, and it had never before been devoted entirely to plays.

Invaluable though it is as text, and impressive as an object, the First Folio was not always so venerated as nowadays. Less than a thousand copies took more than a decade to sell, and a reprint of 1632 (The Second Folio) proved more attractive to contemporary book lovers. The Third Folio (1664) was a new and "more complete" version of Shakespeare's oeuvre for which many seventeenth-century book collectors exchanged their copies of the "old" and presumably "obsolete" First Folio. It fell to readers, editors, and bibliophiles of later centuries, such as Samuel Johnson, to recognize how momentous the First Folio really was. This Octavo Digital Edition reproduces one of the finest copies in existence, from the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Commentary by Arthur Freeman, essays, monograph, searchable live text.

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