

SBReview_25:

Smith, Emma. *The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio*. Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2015. ISBN: 978-85124-442-3. 180 pages. 8 figures. 32 colour plates. £20.

Reviewed by Pervez Rizvi
Independent Scholar

We are seven years away from the 400th anniversary of the publication of the First Folio, an event less personal and poignant but more important than the one we are commemorating this year. No doubt some celebratory books will be published nearer the year 2023, perhaps even an affordable Norton facsimile. Emma Smith has got out of the starting blocks early and has written not one but two books about the Folio. The first is about the 'making' of that book, which Smith interprets generously as covering not just the Folio itself but the wider literary scene in London in 1623.

Smith opens with a guided tour of the Folio, starting with the Droeshout engraving and the dedications. She talks readers through matters such as the Shakespeare canon, genre, the ordering of the plays and textual provenance. Most of the material will be well-known to members of SHAKSPER and most of it is recited in many other places, but Smith offers some interesting insights along the way. For example, she notes that the servants' dialogue in the blinding scene in *King Lear* might have been written to allow the actor playing Gloucester at the Globe performance enough time to get ready for his entrance early in the next scene. But the dialogue was cut later for the Blackfriars performance because in that performance there would have been an Act break after the blinding scene, giving the actor the time he needed without cover from the servants' dialogue (p. 47). Unfortunately, Smith then shies away from the obvious conclusion and hedges her bets by claiming improbably that the cut was for both practical and artistic motivations. Consistent with the latest trends in Shakespeare scholarship, Smith ends the chapter by discussing collaboration and joint authorship, using *Macbeth* as her example.

The literary culture into which the Folio was received in 1623 appears to be of much more interest to Smith than bibliographical details. This is reflected in the greater liveliness of her next chapter, on Shakespeare's reputation among playgoers and readers. She is at her most evocative when she tells readers about St Paul's churchyard, a place that Carlyle called "a kind of *Times* newspaper" (p.75), revealing it not as a place of hushed reverence but the busy centre of the London literary scene, the place where people went not just to buy and read books but to be seen doing so.

She briefly adopts the style executed so successfully by James Shapiro in *1599*, weaving disparate facts into a novel-like narrative, as when she tells us that the Folio was published in an autumn which was “unremittingly wet, and the London streets were thick with mud” (p. 80). Sadly, this style does not last and the rest of the book is a dutiful but dry recital of mainly factual material. Except in a handful of pages, the eighteen-month long process that produced the greatest secular book in the English language is never brought to life.

The third and longest of Smith’s four chapters is called ‘Team Shakespeare: The Backers’. This is devoted to biographical information about the men who are named in the Folio preliminaries or who were involved in some other way in the project. Inevitably these biographies suffer from unevenness. Ben Jonson gets detailed treatment but Heminges and Condell, who of course deserve pride of place in any history of the Folio, are disposed of more briskly because so little is known about them. Smith has to make do with such facts as previous research has unearthed, as when she tells us that the Folio’s lead publisher Edward Blount “was associated with the import of art objects as well as seeds and exotic foodstuffs” (p. 116).

Smith leaves the technical details of the printing to a chapter at the end. Her account of procedures such as casting off and setting by formes is useful, though some diagrams would have helped the reader encountering the material for the first time. In matters of genre, textual provenance and printing history, *Troilus and Cressida* is the problem child among Folio plays. In her account of its printing, Smith leads readers astray with her statement that “a few copies [of the Folio] exist with a cancelled sheet following *Romeo and Juliet* printing only the first two pages of *Troilus...*” (p. 143). This is not correct and appears to be based on her garbled recollection of the fact that in a few copies of the Folio the tragedies section begins with the crossed-out last page of *Romeo* followed by all the pages of *Troilus* except the prologue. Smith would not have made the error if she had reproduced the relevant pages from one of those copies, held by the Folger. For an illustrated book about the making of the Folio to omit the most sensational evidence of its printing history is a noticeable shortcoming. Smith’s book is published by the Bodleian Library and naturally most of the illustrations come from that library’s treasures. But there are illustrations also from further afield, including Meisei University in Japan, so it is disappointing that Smith and her publishers did not seek, or did not receive, permission to reproduce images from the Folger copies of the Folio.

The chapter on printing is also short and somewhat perfunctory. For example, even before Charlton Hinman’s celebrated reconstruction of the Folio’s production, it was apparent to the naked eye that there had been some disruption involving *The Winter’s Tale*. The play has anomalous signatures and is unique in the Folio in being

preceded and followed by blank pages. It was obviously a late insertion and that fact might or might not be related to the lost document that Malone reported seeing in the eighteenth century, showing that in August 1623, while the Folio was still being printed, Heminges had had a copy of *The Winter's Tale* relicensed because the company had lost the original. A book-length account of the publication of the Folio needs to tell the reader these things; Smith's book does not.

A few errors have gone undetected. Smith tells us that Robert Greene died in 1593 and Christopher Marlowe in 1594 (p. 23), a year out in each case. She writes that *The Comedy of Errors* is the fourth play in the Folio (p.37); it is the fifth. More interestingly, she tells us that Ralph Crane 'definitely' transcribed *The Comedy of Errors* for the Folio (p. 126). She appears to have got this claim from John Jowett's book *Shakespeare and Text* which she stars as a key resource for readers seeking more information, but she should have alerted readers that the attribution is far from definite.

Smith ends with a coda called Early Readers which is obviously intended as an appetiser for her next book about the Folio. In the meantime, this book will appeal to general readers looking for an introduction to the Folio and especially to some of the men connected with it. But readers who want an expert and accessible account of the printing of the Folio itself will continue to be best-served by Peter Blayney's booklet 'The First Folio of Shakespeare' which the Folger Library generously makes available for free download (<http://shakespeare.folger.edu/other/folio/Octavo/BlyFFS.pdf>).