

The First Folio of Shakespeare

The First Folio of Shakespeare, published in 1623, is one of the most famous books in the world—and for good reason. Published seven years after Shakespeare's death, the First Folio was the first collected edition of William Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's fellow actors John Heminge and Henry Condell put together the text of the First Folio.

When Shakespeare died in 1616, only about half of his plays had been published, in small, one-play editions called quartos. Another eighteen are known today only because they were included in the First Folio; without it, they would probably have been lost. Among them are *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Tempest*.

The First Folio also includes a title-page portrait of Shakespeare by Martin Droeshout. This engraving is one of only two likenesses of Shakespeare that are considered authentic, because it was approved by those who knew him. (The other is the bust from his memorial in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon.)

Folios are large books, created by folding printed sheets in half to create two double-sided leaves, or four pages per sheet. They were usually reserved for important matters—Bibles, history, and science—a category that typically did not include plays! Shakespeare's friendly rival Ben Jonson published a folio of his own writings, including plays and poems. The 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare, however, is the earliest folio made up only of plays.

The Folger and the First Folio

Folger Shakespeare Library founders Henry Clay Folger, an oil company executive who ultimately became chairman of Standard Oil Company of New York, and his wife, Emily Jordan Folger, shared a deep fascination with William Shakespeare and his works.

The Folgers worked for decades to gather the world's largest collection of Shakespeare materials, with a special focus on the First Folio and other early editions. To house the collection, they built the Folger Shakespeare Library on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.

The Folgers' collection includes 82 copies of the First Folio, by far the largest holding of First Folios in the world and more than a third of the surviving copies. A total of 233 First Folios are known today.