

The 957th meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on 14 November 2023 when Professor Emma Smith gave her Presidential Address entitled "Shakespeare's First Folio: the first 400 years". The meeting was chaired by Dr Susan Brock.

Professor Smith began by explaining how the publication in 1623 of this large and expensive book, collecting 36 plays, propelled Shakespeare out of the sphere of cheap printed theatrical texts making his work something lasting that would repay study.

Early readers consulted it not for character or plot, but for language. There are several examples of commonplace books in which owners wrote their favourite lines. Edward Pudsey for instance omitted names so he could make his own use of the quotations. The *Tempest* receives a lot of attention because it is first in the book but instead of speeches popular today such as Prospero's "The cloud capp'd towers", it is the scene between Ferdinand and Miranda that is quoted where the reader finds "chat-up lines" like "'tis fresh morning with me/When you are by at night".

Existing copies of the book show many signs that they were used and enjoyed, including animal pawprints, drawings and signatures. Private reading of Shakespeare has many advantages. The dense, layered poetry can be appreciated in small chunks whereas in performance the finest speeches can quickly flash by.

The Folio is an ambivalent book, both celebrating Shakespeare as a player and making it difficult for other actors to use since the plays can not be easily separated for performance. The eighteenth century actor and playwright David Garrick set the fashion by buying his own copy of the Folio, but ignored it as a source of theatrical scripts, writing his own version of plays such as *Catharine and Petruccio*. For him and for others, the book was more of a talisman than an authoritative text.

In the same period, collected editions containing three or four plays to a small volume became popular. Editors such as Samuel Johnson and Edward Malone also acknowledged the importance of the First Folio, contributing to the over-reverence for it over other versions.

Professor Smith dismissed as nonsense the idea that the Folio contains Shakespeare's original instructions, as many hands intervened between Shakespeare's script and the published book, inserting punctuation or example. We can not know exactly what Shakespeare wrote: the book contains scripts, not scripture.

Nowadays we want small texts, a more democratic, transitory Shakespeare, not the seemingly authoritative big book. There is renewed interest in the quartos and in textual study rather than performance. Global Shakespeare is being studied, where his work is adapted into other media and languages.

Copies of the Folio were quickly acquired abroad, being recorded in Europe by 1640. More recently, copies have found their way into libraries in countries once part of the British Empire such as New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. Here they can be seen as symbols of the wealth and high culture of the eighteenth century, embarrassing reminders of colonial oppression and slavery. For others, these highly valuable books represented the high culture that needed protecting.

Professor Smith concluded that whatever the fate of copies of the First Folio, Shakespeare is so pervasive that he needs no protection.

At the end of her excellent talk Professor Smith entered into discussions with members of the appreciative audience on subjects including anti-semitism in productions of *The Merchant of Venice*,

the relationship of the book to the King James Bible, and why both Pericles and Shakespeare's poems are omitted from the First Folio.