

The finest surviving copy of the most important volume in English literature—Shakespeare’s First Folio

William Shakespeare, *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. London: Edward Blount & Isaac Jaggard, 1623. 13 3/4 x 8 3/4 inches (350 x 222 mm), 908 pages.

In the career of a playwright marked by mystery and conjecture, as evanescent as a theatrical performance, the large memorial volume of plays known as the “First Folio” stands as the one sure thing. Shakespeare’s plays were written for performance; printing was a secondary matter. The texts of eighteen plays were published individually during his lifetime in small quarto pamphlets of varying textual reliability; it was not until seven years after Shakespeare’s death that two of his actor friends stepped in to assemble from scattered documents a worthy memorial. The First Folio (there would eventually be four editions) determined the canon of Shakespeare’s works, establishing the unassailable core of his productions—thirty-six plays in all, half of which had never before been published and are known in no other authoritative text.

This is the finest of the many dozens of copies in the unrivaled Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. That institution houses the largest and most important collection of printed Shakespeare ever assembled, including nearly one-third of all surviving specimens of the First Folio. This particular volume was famously owned by Baroness Burdett-Coutts and was housed in a special ornamental casket made of Herne’s Oak, presented to the baroness by Queen Victoria. The binding is late eighteenth-century full russia, lightly diced, sides with outer gilt roll-tooled border and floral tools at inner angles, spine gilt in six decorated and three lettered compartments with gilt-tooled bands. Gilt-lettered LONDON is in a shallow compartment at head of spine, similarly at foot MDCXXIII, SHAKESPEARE on a black skiver label beneath the first of the six decorated compartments.

No single volume in world literature occupies a more celebrated or coveted renown than the First Folio. Here is Shakespeare’s work as it was preserved by his contemporaries, full of vitality, wit, and melancholy—the timeless

reflection of its author's time, and all times.

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