



Shakespeare's
First Folio Revisited:
Quadricentennial
Essays

Edited by Remedios Perni



Ediciones Universidad
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SHAKESPEARE'S FIRST
FOLIO REVISITED

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REMEDIOS PERNI



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GENERAL EDITOR'S NOTE

I take great pride in presenting the inaugural volume of the THALIS Research Book Series. Edited by Dr. Remedios Perni, it results from the collective effort of the THALIS Research Team based at the University of Alicante and currently led by Dr. Teresa Gómez Reus. Put in a nutshell, the mission of this series is to explore the enticing capacity of the literary text—in English—to reflect and encode the overwhelming diversity that has characterized the English-speaking world both historically and in contemporary times. Consistent with this purpose, it seems quite fit that the first volume of the series should be devoted to commemorating the fourth centenary of one of the most distinguished texts in literary history—Shakespeare's First Folio. Aided by the Editorial Board and the THALIS Research Team members, I am prepared to consider strong, scholarly proposals following the programmatic line laid down above.

José A. Álvarez-Amorós
April 2023

CONTRIBUTORS

Sir Jonathan Bate studied at Cambridge and Harvard universities. Well known as a biographer, critic, broadcaster and scholar, he is Foundation Professor of Environmental Humanities in Global Futures, the School of Sustainability and the College of Liberal Arts at Arizona State University. He is also a Senior Research Fellow of Worcester College Oxford, where he was Provost from 2011 to 2019, and he holds the title of Professor of English Literature in the University of Oxford. He has wide-ranging research interests in Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature, Romanticism, biography and life-writing, ecocriticism, contemporary poetry, visual culture and theatre history. He is a Fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature, as well as an Honorary Fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge. He has served on the Board of the Royal Shakespeare Company, broadcast for the BBC, written for the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Telegraph*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *TLS*, and has held visiting posts at Yale and UCLA. In 2006 he was awarded a CBE in the Queen's 80th Birthday Honours for his services to higher education. He has been Vice-President (leading the Humanities) of the British Academy. In January 2015, he became the youngest person ever to have been knighted for services to literary scholarship.

Marta Cerezo is Lecturer of English Literature in the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department at the UNED (National University of Distance Education, Spain) where she teaches BA and MA level courses on Medieval and Renaissance Literature. Her current area of research is devoted to Shakespeare and religion and, most especially, to the Vatican reception of Shakespeare's production and Shakespeare commemorative sermons delivered at Holy Trinity Church (Stratford-upon-Avon) since the nineteenth century. She is Chief Editor of *SEDERI Yearbook*, the journal of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English

Renaissance Studies. She leads the UNED research group ELSSO (English Literary Studies in Society) and is the Principal Investigator of the Research Project PID2021-123341NB-I00 “Shakespeare’s Religious Afterlives: Text, Reception, and Performance” (SHAKREL) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

Craig Dionne is Professor of Literary and Cultural Theory at Eastern Michigan University, where he teaches Shakespeare and Early Modern English Literature. He specialises in Shakespeare and popular culture, early modern literacies and cultural studies. He has co-edited *Disciplining English: Alternative Critical Perspectives* (with David Shumway [SUNY Press, 2002]), *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture* (with Steve Mentz [University of Michigan Press, 2005]), *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (with Parmita Kapadia [Ashgate, 2008]), *Bollywood Shakespeares* (with Parmita Kapadia [Palgrave, 2014]), and *Posthuman Lear: Reading Shakespeare in the Anthropocene* (Punctum Books, 2016). He was senior editor of *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* for ten years, and he also co-edited the inaugural issue of *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* (with Eileen Joy [Palgrave, 2010]).

Evelyn Gajowski is an Emeritus professor of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She has published five books and many chapters and articles on Shakespeare: *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism* (Arden/Bloomsbury, 2021); *The Merry Wives of Windsor: New Critical Essays*, with Phyllis Rackin (Routledge, 2015); *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); *Re-Visions of Shakespeare: Essays in Honor of Robert Ornstein* (Delaware, 2004); and *The Art of Loving: Female Subjectivity and Male Discursive Traditions in Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (Delaware, 1992). She serves as Series Editor of the Arden Shakespeare and Theory Series for Bloomsbury, which has published thirteen titles since 2015. She is currently writing her book, *Shakespeare and Presentist Theory*, for the Series. She is Professor of English Emerita and Barrick Distinguished Scholar at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, USA, where she taught Shakespeare and related subjects for nearly thirty years, having directed twenty-seven doctoral dissertations and masters’ theses, and having served on a total of ninety-five graduate student advisory committees. Before that, she taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She still actively publishes books, chapters, and articles, and delivers conference papers in a global context.

Rosa García-Periago completed her doctoral studies on Shakespeare, Bollywood and beyond at the University of Murcia, Spain, where she is a Lecturer. She was formerly an EU Marie Curie Individual Fellow (“Shakespeare and Indian Cinematic Traditions”) at Queen’s University Belfast. She is co-editor of *Jane Austen and William Shakespeare: A Love Affair in Literature, Film and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and *Women and Indian Shakespeares* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022) and has published extensively on Indian Shakespeares in *Adaptation*, *Atlantis*, *Borrowers and Lenders*, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, *Indian Theatre Journal*, *SEDERI Yearbook*, *Shakespeare* and other journals.

Sonia Massai is Professor of Shakespeare Studies at Sapienza, University of Rome. Her publications include her books on *Shakespeare’s Accents: Voicing Identity in Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and *Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), her collections of essays on *Hamlet* for the Arden Shakespeare “State of Play” series (Bloomsbury, 2021), on *Ivo van Hove* (Bloomsbury, 2018), *Shakespeare and Textual Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and on *World-Wide Shakespeares* (Routledge, 2005), and critical editions of *The Paratexts in English Printed Drama to 1642* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore for Arden Early Modern Drama* (Bloomsbury, 2011). She was Principal Investigator (PI) on “Wartime Shakespeare” (2018-2021), a Leverhulme-funded research project, whose outcomes will include an exhibition at the National Army Museum in London in 2023-2024 and accompanying exhibition book, *Shakespeare at War: A Material History* (to be published by Cambridge University Press). She is currently preparing a new Shakespeare Arden edition of *Richard III*, and she has recently been appointed as one of the General Editors of the New Cambridge Shakespeare (CSE) series.

Remedios Perni is a Lecturer in the Department of English Philology at the University of Alicante, Spain. She holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Murcia, where she received degrees in both Art History and English Studies. Her research primarily explores the intersections between Shakespeare’s works and the visual arts. Perni has published on the role of Ophelia in the history of madness, melancholia, and photography; for instance, “At the Margins: Ophelia in Modern and Contemporary Photography” (included in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, Palgrave 2012) or *Ofelia en la Cultura Visual: Memoria y Melancolía* (Comares 2023), as well as Shakespeare in the

digital world (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 [2016]). Apart from her research work, she translates critical theory books into Spanish, with works from authors like Elaine Showalter, W. J. T. Mitchell, and Mieke Bal, among others.

Ángel-Luis Pujante, an Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Murcia, Spain, has written mainly on English Renaissance drama (Middleton and Shakespeare) and literary translation. His translations of Shakespeare's plays are published by Espasa (Austral series, Teatro Selecto and Teatro Completo). In 1998 he was granted the "National Prize for the Best Translation" for his Spanish rendering of *The Tempest*. He has co-edited, among others, *Four Hundred Years of Shakespeare in Europe* (with Ton Hoenselaars, 2003), *Shakespeare in Spain: An Annotated Bilingual Bibliography* (with Juan Francisco Cerdá, 2014), *Romeo y Julieta en España: las versiones neoclásicas* and *Otelo en España: la versión neoclásica y las obras relacionadas* (with Keith Gregor, 2017 and 2020), and has published *Shakespeare llega a España: Ilustración y Romanticismo* (2019), a critical study of the early reception of Shakespeare in Spain. His main current area of research is the reception of Shakespeare in Spain and Europe. From 2000 to 2008 he was the head of the research Project "The Presence of Shakespeare in Spain in the Framework of Europe Culture," in which he still collaborates. He is honorary president of the European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA).

Miguel Ramalhete Gomes is an Associate Professor at the University of Lisbon and researcher at both ULICES-CEAUL (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies) and CETAPS (Centre for English, Translation, and Anglo-Portuguese Studies), at the University of Porto, in Portugal. He is the author of *Texts Waiting for History: William Shakespeare Re-Imagined by Heiner Müller* (Rodopi, 2014); he has co-edited, with Jorge Bastos da Silva, *English Literature and the Disciplines of Knowledge, Early Modern to Eighteenth Century* (Brill/Rodopi, 2017), and, with Teresa Botelho and José Eduardo Reis, *Utopian Foodways: Critical Essays* (University of Porto Press, 2019). He has also published on early modern drama, with a focus on Shakespeare, as well as on Utopian Studies and comics. He is currently working on a book on the uses of Shakespeare during the years of austerity in Portugal and has recently translated *Henry VI, Part 3* into Portuguese.

Eric Rasmussen is Regents Teaching Professor and Foundation Professor of English at the University of Nevada. He is three-time winner of the Falstaff Award for Best Shakespearean Book

of the Year for *The Royal Shakespeare Company's Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (2022; 2nd. edition 2007) and *The Royal Shakespeare Company's Collaborative Plays by William Shakespeare and Others* (2013), both co-edited with Sir Jonathan Bate, and *The Shakespeare First Folios: A Descriptive Catalogue* (2012), co-edited with Anthony James West. His narrative account of *The Shakespeare Thefts: In Search of the First Folios* (2011) was serialized by Australia's national newspaper, *The Age*, and has been translated into Portuguese and Japanese. He is General Editor, along with Paul Werstine, of the New Variorum Shakespeare series; he has co-edited *The Norton Anthology of English Renaissance Drama* as well as critical editions for the Arden Shakespeare, Oxford's World's Classics, the Cambridge Ben Jonson, Arden Early Modern Drama, and the Revels Plays. He has served on the Board of Trustees of the Shakespeare Association of America and on the Council of the Malone Society.

Emma Smith is a professor of Shakespeare studies at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. Her research focuses on the reception of Shakespeare in performance, print, and criticism. She has published widely on Shakespeare's First Folio, including *The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio* and *Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book* (both in second editions, 2023). Her recent book, *This Is Shakespeare*, was a Sunday Times bestseller and has been translated into several other languages.

Jesús Tronch is a university teacher and researcher at the Universitat de València. His research focuses on the transmission and editing of early modern English drama (often in comparison with Spanish play-texts), on the reception and translation of Shakespeare in Spain, and on the use of digital technologies in this research. His works include *A Synoptic Hamlet* (2002), a co-edition, with Clara Calvo, of *The Spanish Tragedy* for Arden Early Modern Drama (2013), and English-Spanish co-editions of *The Tempest* (1994) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2001). He has published commissioned essays in book collections by Routledge, Palgrave, University of Delaware Press, Iter Press, Peter Lang, Cambridge UP, Firenze UP; and articles and reviews in journals such as *TEXT*, *SEDERI*, *Shakespeare Survey*, *Critical Survey*, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, and *Atlantis*. He is editing *Timon of Athens* for the New Internet Shakespeare Editions at the LEMDO project, and co-directing the open-access EMOTHE database and digital library of Early Modern European Theatre.

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Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the authors of this volume for sharing their work with us and contributing to the revisiting and celebration of the First Folio in their unique ways.

Remedios Perni
April 2023

FOREWORD
GHOST FOLIOS

Emma Smith
University of Oxford

In Susan Hill's ghost story *The Small Hand* (2010), the protagonist Adam takes a wrong turning and arrives, in the late evening, at a derelict Edwardian house in an overgrown garden. His curiosity is piqued. He begins to explore. "And as I stood I felt a small hand creep into my right one, as if a child had come up beside me in the dimness and taken hold of it." They stood together, as a father and his child. "But I am not a father," Adam acknowledges, "and the small child was invisible" (15).

The combination of chill, familiarity, and mundanity, the matter-of-factness of the uncanny experience at the edge of normal life, and the raised hairs on the back of the neck, will be familiar to fans of Hill's better-known fiction, most especially *The Woman in Black*. But *The Small Hand's* relevance to the foreword to a collection of new essays on Shakespeare's First Folio lies in Adam's profession. He is an antiquarian bookseller. This ghostly encounter happens on the way back from dining with the Merrimans, wealthy clients who want him to find for them a special volume for their collection: a First Folio of Shakespeare. The novella is structured by the intertwined quests for the book and to understand the invisible, confiding child.

Discussing his commission with a friend who works for the Bodleian library (and who mistakenly claims they have three copies: in the real world, the Bodleian has only two), Adam reviews the likelihood of finding a First Folio. A knowledgeable discussion of recent sales includes those copies deaccessioned from Oriel College (this copy was sold at auction in 2002)

and Dr Williams's Library (2006), and "one other First Folio, somewhere in India" (Hill, *Small Hand* 40-41). He could have learned a great deal from the current volume. For a book that is so well-informed about Folio ownership, it is surprisingly lacking in confidence that a copy can be secured for the Merrimans: one of the ways that the adjective "priceless," sometimes attached to descriptions of First Folios, is inappropriate is that it is untrue. We can track prices closely, not least because of the relative frequency with which copies come up for sale. In the last twenty years, for instance, there have been half a dozen opportunities to buy a First Folio in open auction. Money, not availability, has always been the gateway to this book. Adam needs to be patient.

The First Folio dangled before Adam's eager eyes is owned by a Cistercian monastery in France, "one of the finest and oldest and best-preserved monastic libraries in the world" (43). His Oxford companion believes, given that extant copies have all been extensively catalogued, that it is the "one that was supposed to be somewhere in India" (45). Later that same day Adam has a kind of panic attack. The combination of the ghostly encounter in the garden and the fantastical possibility of acquiring this First Folio collude to upset his mental equilibrium. On a visit to the monastery to view the book, he sees a vision of a child and believes he has hit him in his car; the brothers look after him and they pray for the restless spirit. When he finally encounters their First Folio, he feels temporarily "quite safe" from "feeling the small hand creeping into mine" (112). His bookseller-self notes with surprising calm that the book carries the signature of Ben Jonson.

The First Folio in this ghost story is itself a ghost: a mirage that is part Gondomar's famed copy, part William Henry Ireland's forgery (Ireland claimed to have spent the enormous sum of 30 guineas on a First Folio because it carried Ben Jonson's signature) (Smith 282), and part an eerily prefiguring of Eric Rasmussen's authentication of a long-forgotten copy in a French monastic library in St-Omer only a few years after the publication of Hill's story. Hill draws skilfully on the allure of phantom copies, including the one in India that has emerged into the light at intervals over the last century and is decisively dispatched in this current volume. Adam's encounter with a ghostly past is partly about discovering the truth about himself, partly about the familiar gothic trope of the ruined grand house, and partly about handling a copy of a famous book. Shakespeare's First Folio, a bibliographic revenant from times and places long past, is a perfect analogue for the small, insinuating hand that almost brings Adam to destruction.

It may seem odd to think of the robust, substantial First Folio as in some sense ghostly. The popular name for this book defines it by its significant size, emphasising that monumentality that is evoked by the eulogising prefatory verses. This book's material features have been more extensively described than those of any other, particularly in Rasmussen and West's invaluable *The Shakespeare First Folios: A Descriptive Catalogue* (2012). Rasmussen and West's precursor, Sidney Lee, produced the first census of copies at the beginning of the twentieth century: bibliography as an emerging discipline was heavily shaped by Shakespearean textual scholarship, including studies of the First Folio by W. W. Greg and Charlton Hinman. Given that Shakespeare's texts—the contents of the First Folio—are ubiquitous and freely available, it is the material heft of the First Folio as object that now really matters. The curators of the University Library at Durham are currently debating how to deal with their copy, seriously damaged by thieves to the extent that it can no longer be opened and its pages turned. In its metamorphosis from book into object, the Durham copy is an extreme version of something that happens to all First Folios: the alienation of their use value into something more monumental. All these features of First Folio culture emphasise its physical and material bookhood.

And yet, as in *The Small Hand*, there is still something spooky here too. One consequence of the large-scale transfer of copies of the First Folio from English aristocrats to American billionaires at the turn of the twentieth century is the absent presence of this book from numerous collections in the UK. There are places where Folios once were which hold their faint memory. A ghostly Folio-shaped shimmer, for example, might be visible in the Bishop's Palace in Truro. The Gott family amassed a substantial collection of early texts, including several Shakespeare quartos alongside a First Folio which was bought up by Henry Folger in 1910 (and is now catalogued as Folger 9|West 67). I feel a particular affinity with this copy because of the time it spent, before going to Cornwall, just a mile or so from my own childhood home in industrial West Leeds. The Gotts were major Victorian wool entrepreneurs, who had owned the nearby Armley Mills, once the biggest factory in the world. Their name was everywhere in my childhood—parks, street names, a school, museum collections. Recently, retreading the streets of my hometown, I looked up at the blackened shabby stone of their family mansion, Wyther Grange, now the clubhouse for the municipal golf course. Was that the twinkle of their once-Folio at a dark, cracked window?

For the 400th anniversary of the publication of the First Folio, the aim in the UK has been to encourage as many

copy-holding institutions as possible to put their book on public display. But there could also be a shadow, or ghost exhibition; a trail of ruined houses, lost mansions, and other vestiges of those past worlds, families, and individuals that have owned this book across four centuries. These ghost folios are not the heavily guarded and protected material copies stored in research libraries and special collections, and occasionally flashing by at auction, but rather their imperceptible traces: a more fugitive and spectral exhalation of presence, and history. They slip a confiding hand into ours when we least expect it.

By the end of *The Small Hand*, Adam discovers something that has been forgotten or suppressed, and he has also to face the unnerving vagaries of his own memory. The monastery First Folio is the symbol of this psychological journey: its own itinerary, like the provenance narratives of other First Folios in this current account, is obscured, even uncanny. Uncovering—sometimes inventing—their stories is a version of the famous critical injunction to speak with the dead. First Folios have always been objects of desire and of imagination, as much as they have been objects of crown paper and pica type and Morocco binding. What we want these books to be and what they actually are do not always coincide. However much we continue to investigate copies of this book, however much we find out, there is still an aspect that eludes our rational description: something ghostly.

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