

## TWO BOOKS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD – Shakespeare & the Gutenberg Bible

Address at the Penrith Museum of Print, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023 by Andy McCourt

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Shakespeare's First Folio of plays has been described by scholars as 'the most important non-religious book in history.'

It's 400 years since Shakespeare's First Folio and 570 years since Gutenberg's first printed Bible.

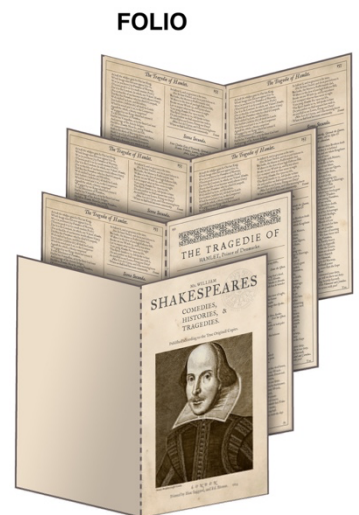
Think about this: Where will your PDFs and Word documents be in half a millennium's time?

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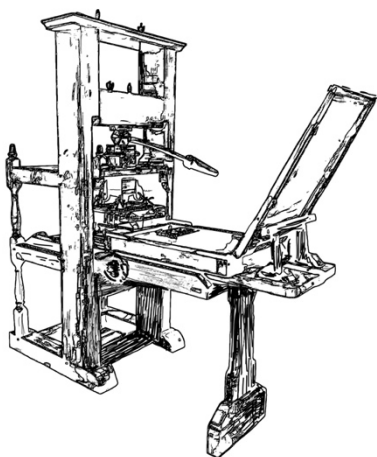
***"To be, or not to be, That is the question..."***

This famous quote from Hamlet just might have had another meaning 400 years ago when Shakespeare's First Folio went to print. When it came to printing the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays and Sonnets in 1623, some 7 years after the great Bard's death: – like any good printer, William Jaggard of London might first have asked the compilers, John Heminges and Henry Condell who were friends of and had worked with Shakespeare as business partners: *"B2 or not B2 guvna?"*

A folio is a large book made by folding printed sheets of paper in half, with each sheet forming four pages. This format was usually reserved for history, religion, and other serious subjects. Shakespeare's First Folio was the first ever devoted exclusively to plays.



folded and assembled



The sheet size used on the Common Press back in 1622-1623 would have been close to B2 but was called an 'Imperial' sheet. British papermaking was in its infancy and in short supply and the actual rag paper used was imported from France. Folio size was preferred as it was the first time all of Shakespeare's works had been collated into one bound volume. Individual plays had been printed before as cheap unbound Quarto, for scripts and stage directions, but very few have survived and at least 18 plays would have been lost forever were it not for Heminges and Condell's diligence and respect for *'The Sweet Swan of Avon'* – as Ben Johnson called Shakespeare.

Before we take the 'deep dive' into how the First Folio came into being, I'd like to note my own connection with Stratford-upon-Avon, birthplace of William Shakespeare. I went to King's Norton Boys grammar school not 20 miles away from Stratford and we enjoyed

many visits to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre which began life in 1897 as the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. We seemed to read and perform Shakespeare incessantly throughout school and we even travelled to King Edward 6<sup>th</sup> grammar school in Stratford for Athletics meets: this was the same school where Shakespeare was classically educated and it's still there today.



We staged many a Shakespeare play and were grateful for the existence of King's Norton Girls' Grammar School, because in Shakespeare's time, females were not allowed on the stage and those famous female parts like Juliet, Ophelia, Desdemona, Miranda, Cleopatra, Portia etc – were all acted by boys and young men. Can you imagine, if that ban had not been repealed in 1660, addressing a burly mate with whom you had been grappling with in a rugby scrum in the afternoon and now

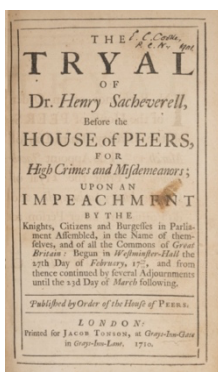
is up on a balcony, with:

*"But soft what light through yonder window breaks; 'Tis the East and Juliet is the sun. Arise fair son and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou, her maid, art fairer than she!"*

Back to the first book that literally, changed the world - Shakespeare first folio 1623

It truly is an extraordinary book. About half of Shakespeare's plays had never previously appeared in print. Without the First Folio, 18 of the plays might have been lost forever.

John Heminges and Henry Condell were two actors and were shareholders of the King's Players (formerly the Lord Chancellor's Men), who knew little of the book business, but they knew a great deal about Shakespeare. The pair scorned all previously published quarto versions of the plays, disparaging them in their book's preface as: "stolen and surreptitious" copies that were "deformed by the frauds and stealthies of injurious imposters." The Folio, they insist, is the real deal. There had even been a false folio where unscrupulous printers had used works NOT by Shakespeare to sell books and trade on his good name.



There was no workable copyright law until Queen Anne's Statute of 1709, just negotiated rights deals or royal patronage. Printing was still considered a 'menace.' Henry VIII, used the Court of the Star Chamber to curtail the:

*"greate enormities and abuses" of "dyvers contentyous and disorderlye persons professinge the arte or mystere of pryntinge or selling of books."*

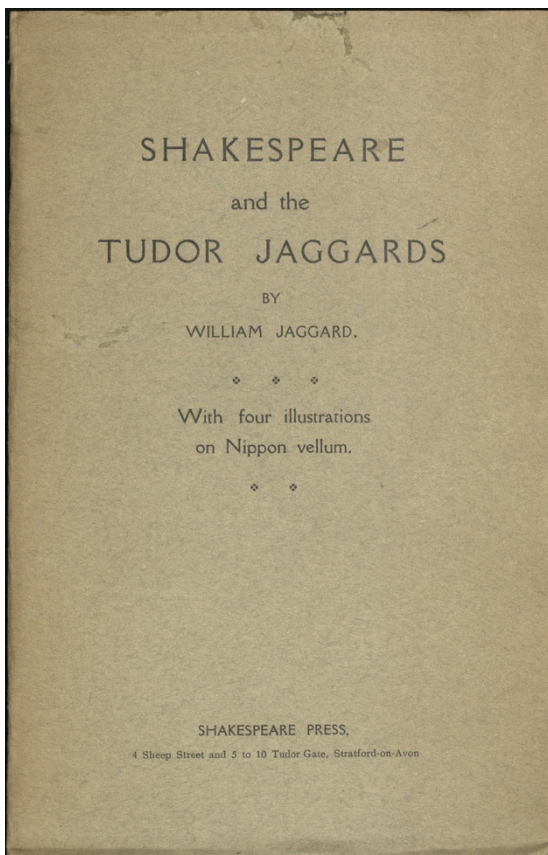
The term 'stationery' comes from his desire to fix the sites of all printers, so they could be identified and not moved without permission.

By 1623, King James 1<sup>st</sup> was on the throne, and he encouraged printing and learning – including of course the King James English-language Bible of 1611.

The First Folio's full title is "Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies, and it groups his plays into those categories—comedies, histories, and tragedies- for the first time. A folio was more expensive and sturdier than quarto, so it was more likely to last. And last it has, with around 233 copies surviving – one of them in our very own NSW state library.

Researchers think that there were probably about 750 copies, which was a typical print run at the time. It was very time-consuming as it was only 160 years after Gutenberg's invention of moveable type and the Gutenberg Bible. Of the First Folios currently known to survive, two were discovered as recently as 2016. The last one sold at auction by Christie's fetched USD\$10 million. The Folger Shakespeare Library in the USA has 85 copies, the British Museum five.

By the time of the First Folio, Heminges was the company's business manager. Shakespeare left money to both men in his will to buy memorial rings, a sign that he considered them very good friends.



The book was published by a London syndicate headed by Edward Blount and Isaac Jaggard. Isaac's father William Jaggard printed it at his London printing shop, but he became blind and died before the book was completed. Isaac Jaggard took over the print shop after his father's death. It took 18 months to complete.

The all-important composition of the moveable type, according to scholars, comprised of five craftsmen, given the labels A-to-E – one of them clearly an apprentice due to the frequent errors. Such typos and errors were fixed 'on the fly' – and sheets containing them were not reprinted as paper at the time was at a premium. Thus, almost every one of the 750 or so copies, would have been different, getting progressively better as the corrections were made.

It was printed 'in sixes' 2-up each side with 12 pages at a time, section sewn and compiled with other 'sixes' for binding.

The scholar Peter Blayney suggests that an unbound copy of the First Folio cost 15 shillings and a copy with a plain calf binding cost a pound (20 shillings), about \$300 today.

How did Shakespeare change our world? He changed the way that English people think. He even introduced at least 1,700 new words to the English language, at a time when the average agricultural field worker's total vocabulary comprised about 300 words in total.

If you've ever been *'in a pickle'*, waited *'with bated breath'*, or gone on *'a wild goose chase'*, you've been quoting from Shakespeare plays. *'Where Eagles Dare – a great film from the 1970s, – comes directly from Richard III.*

"Gossip" was invented for A Midsummer Night's Dream, and "The be-all and end-all" is uttered by Macbeth as he contemplates King Duncan's murder, "Fair play" is spoken by Miranda in The Tempest, whereas 'Fair Dinkum's Shakespearean origins have been lost to antiquity!

Shakespeare's plays were mostly performed at The Globe Theatre on the South bank of the river Thames. It was the Cinema, Television and Internet of its day. People flocked there to be amazed and entertained, and Royal Courts also welcomed performances by Shakespeare's company.



In our modern era, Shakespeare has even stimulated the production of games, such as the Shakespearean Insults and Profanities.

*"Thou lump of foul deformity"* from Richard III (act 1, Scene II) or *"Thou Hateful wither'd hag"* from Richard III (act I scene III)

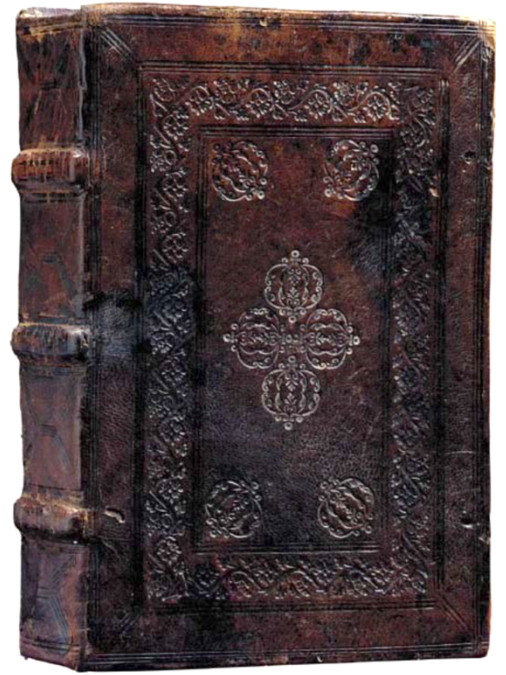
The Globe Theatre has been replicated close to its original site by a marvellous film director, Sam Wannamaker, father of actress Zoe Wannamaker. It is a close replica of the original, with electricity added, and a must-visit place on any visit to London.

Shakespeare's time was a dangerous age of plague, violence, wars, vicious rivalries and political assassinations and his very survival is something of a miracle. Writing about the Queen's Dad and forebears was a risky business, so he must have had some Ministerial backing.

Shakespeare changed the way we all talk and write, the words we use, our films, books, catchphrases and memes, the very way we think - Language is a very powerful tool when used wisely - Churchill knew that well and often quoted Shakespeare - *'This Sceptere'd Isle'* for example.



Shakespeare was well educated, although unlike Marlowe and Johnson, he never went on to University. He had a highly literate and well-off Mother in Mary Arden. The Ardens owned vast tracts of farmland around Stratford and there is still a 'Henley-in-Arden' to this day. Shakespeare seemed to disappear for 6 years in his youth – perhaps he wandered all over Europe gathering material, who knows. We do know he was influenced by Titus Maccius Plautus was a Roman playwright of the Old Latin period 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC. His comedies are the earliest Latin literary works to have survived in their entirety.



He was indeed the greatest writer that ever lived. Apart from Court Jesters, he invented mass entertainment. His plays have been adapted into modern media such as West Side Story – the Jets and Sharks are parallels of the Capulets and Montagues from Romeo & Juliet.



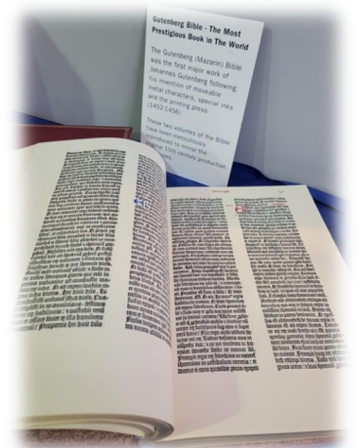
Speaking of Jesters, does anyone know who this is? Yes it's Yorrick – the source of the most mis-quoted line from Hamlet 'Alas poor Yorick, I knew him Horatio – A man of infinite jest...' He didn't say 'I knew him well.' – he was addressing his friend Horatio and recalling his childhood, growing up with his father the King's official Jester, Yorrick.

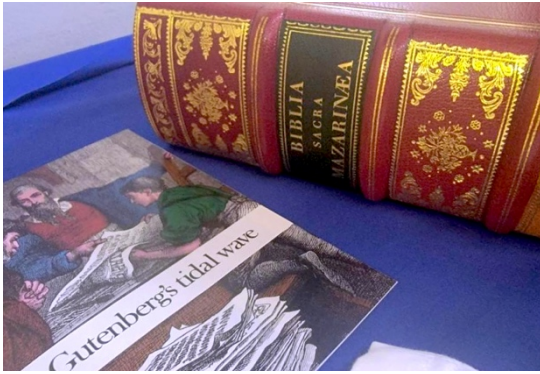
And so, as we leave Shakespeare and move on to the Gutenberg Bible; I hope my infinite jesting has not hindered your gaining interesting insights into the production of the First Folio, 400 years ago in 1623. Yorrick agrees

## GUTENBERG'S 42-LINE BIBLE

Before Gutenberg's printing press, all religious books were hand-copied by Scribes. This restricted the spread of knowledge to the privilege elite, controlled by the Church in Rome.

As printing took off in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, an Abott, one Johannes Trithemius of Sponheim, modern Germany; being outraged at the audacity of a mere printer doing the work of his Scribes, wrote a treatise "In Praise of Scribes" extolling the learned profession and denigrating wicked printing. His hand-scribed books proved very popular – so what did he do to meet demand? He had copies typeset and printed! Enough said about that.





Gutenberg's first major print run was the Bible in 2 volumes, and we have here today a superb 1985 facsimile copy that faithfully replicates the real thing, even down to the paper and ink used, courtesy of the Visual Media Association from the Victor Alberts collection.

Only about 180 original copies were sold, with just 49 surviving today.

Gutenberg made no money from printing these Bibles – his partner Johan Fust sued him for the return of his loan capital – and won his press and typefaces. Gutenberg went broke.

Today, even if one came up for sale, an original Gutenberg Bible would fetch over USD\$35 million.

Set in Latin, what Gutenberg's Bible did was start the world on the road to freedom of information. Translations into English followed – for which people like William Tyndale were burned at the stake but, ironically, under Henry VIII, a common English translation known as the Great Bible came into being – based on Tyndale's work and completed by Myles Coverdale. Marvel at this example before you – it represents the beginning of the Renaissance and the spread of literacy and learning throughout Europe and beyond. Truly, these are books that changed our world.