

PREFACE TO SHAKESPEARE: A SECOND EDITION

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The First Folio after 400 years

William Shakespeare died in 1616 where he was born in 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small market town on the edge of the forest of Arden in the English midlands. Soon after his death, a monument to his memory was raised in Holy Trinity, the town church. It consisted of a bust that shows him holding a pen and writing on a tablet laid on a cushion – a standard image used in memorials of writers – together with an inscription that credited him with the wisdom of the pre-eminent ancient philosopher Socrates and the genius of the most admired ancient poet Virgil. He became, in short, an instant classic. Even in his lifetime, when the profession of stage-player was anything but respectable, he was enormously admired. His debut literary work, *Venus and Adonis*, became the bestselling long poem of the Elizabethan age, while several of his plays – notably *Hamlet*, *Henry IV Part One*, *Richard II*, *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet* – were among the most in-demand printed theatre scripts in the bookselling hub of St Paul's churchyard.

Seven years after his death, his fellow-actors oversaw the publication of his *Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. The collected works of fellow-dramatist Ben Jonson had been published in the year of Shakespeare's death, but this included poems and court entertainments as well as plays. The Shakespeare collection of 1623 was the first example of an oeuvre consisting entirely of dramatic works written for the public stage, and classified according to the dignified classical genres of comedy, tragedy and history, enshrined in the lavish, expensive format of a Folio volume. Jonson himself provided the longest and most generous of the dedicatory poems in the preliminary pages, claiming that Shakespeare was a worthy successor to the tragic and comic geniuses of antiquity, such as Aeschylus and Aristophanes, Sophocles and Seneca, Euripides and Plautus. Shakespeare's plays, wrote Jonson, would travel the world; his genius would be a guiding star, presiding over the future history of the stage.

And yet, as we explain in the General Introduction, that vast global influence was by no means assured. In 1642, the Puritans closed the London theatres, sending the plays underground for nearly two decades. When the monarchy was restored and the theatres reopened, many of Shakespeare's plays seemed old-fashioned; they were either neglected or rewritten to conform to the norms of the time. The romantic tragi-comedies of the writing team of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher were staged more often, while new drama, especially comedy, was more influenced by Ben Jonson's comic types and city plots than Shakespeare's world of Arden, Illyria and Italy. It was only in the 1730s, around a hundred years after the publication of the First Folio, that Shakespeare began to outstrip all his contemporaries in popularity on both stage and page. There were several reasons for this, notably the talents of actresses and the support of well-to-do women who found in Shakespeare the richest array of female characters, and the rise of a middle-class reading public, for whom his playscripts – especially when read aloud – offered comparable delights to those of the newly emerging form of the novel. In 1741, a monument to Shakespeare was erected in Westminster Abbey. From this time forward, he came to be regarded as the National Poet.

By the time we reach the early nineteenth century, Jane Austen could write dialogue in her novel *Mansfield Park* in which she distinguishes between a worthy and an unworthy lover by means of Shakespeare. For the lazy and rakish Henry Crawford, the Bard has become part of the national furniture:

'I do not think I have had a volume of Shakespeare in my hand before since I was fifteen. I once saw Henry the Eighth acted, or I have heard of it from somebody who did, I am not certain which. But Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is a part of an Englishman's constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them everywhere; one is intimate with him by instinct. No man of any brain can open at a good part of one of his plays without falling into the flow of his meaning immediately.'

Austen's brilliant irony allows her to make fun of Henry's pretentiousness and superficiality, while simultaneously revealing how Shakespeare influences even those who have never seen or read a Shakespeare play. His role in popular culture continues unabated: one only has to think of the almost-daily newspaper headlines which play upon his phrases – much ado about this, to be or not to be that – or the use of a skull in the long-running 'happiness is a cigar called Hamlet' advertisement or the lyrics

of Taylor Swift's signature song 'Love Story' ('That you were Romeo, you were throwin' pebbles / And my daddy said, "Stay away from Juliet"').

In contrast to Henry Crawford, for the sensitive and reliable Edmund Bertram (and thus for Jane Austen herself), the art of reading the plays aloud with skill is a mark of true discernment and culture:

'No doubt one is familiar with Shakespeare in a degree,' said Edmund, 'from one's earliest years. His celebrated passages are quoted by everybody; they are in half the books we open, and we all talk Shakespeare, use his similes, and describe with his descriptions; but this is totally distinct from giving his sense as you gave it. To know him in bits and scraps is common enough; to know him pretty thoroughly is, perhaps, not uncommon; but to read him well aloud is no everyday talent.' (*Mansfield Park*, 1814, vol. 3, chapter III)

To know Shakespeare thoroughly and read him well aloud, it was necessary to have a usable edition of his works, a text that did away with printer's errors and the vagaries of old spelling and punctuation, that explained the more obscure words and allusions in the plays, and that was furnished with critical guidance as to the nature of Shakespeare's genius. For Jane Austen, there was no better guide to good writing, good sense and critical acumen than Dr Samuel Johnson, whose complete edition of Shakespeare was published a few years before she was born.

In the preface to that edition, Johnson articulated a series of principles and judgements that have stood the test of time. He began with that very test: endurance. All literary works should be valued according to their truth to observation and experience. A literary work becomes a classic through 'length of duration and continuance of esteem'. The 'test of literary merit' is the capacity of writers to outlive their own century. In order to do so, they must create a world that is not confined to its own time. Shakespeare's characters 'are the genuine progeny of common humanity'; they 'act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion'. It was the multiplicity of passions in his works that so impressed Johnson. Too many other plays (and novels), he believed, were merely love stories. Yes, the experience of love drives the action of the majority of Shakespeare's plays, but an infinite variety of other feelings and ideas are expressed along the way. Again, in contrast to the ancient division of tragedy and comedy, 'Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition'. Like every human life, a Shakespeare play is a web of mingled joy and sorrow, 'an interchange of seriousness and merriment'.

Almost all his plays, Johnson reminds us, are peopled by a diverse crowd of noble and ignoble characters, rich and poor, loyal and deceitful, brave and cowardly, philosophical and playful, old and young. In the trajectory through the two hours' traffic of the stage, a single character might go through several of these antithetical states – Shakespearean 'character' is indeed a process, an evolution, shaped by circumstance and human encounters, not a predetermined set of attributes. In *Troilus and Cressida* (3.3.97–125), we are reminded that we only achieve our identity through a process of 'reflection' whereby other people serve as mirrors to the self. In the few cases where particular 'others' are absent – parents in *Twelfth Night*, women (save for the brief appearance of two prostitutes) in *Timon of Athens* – the omissions are purposeful.

The endurance of Shakespeare not merely beyond his own centuries, but into ours, is an incontrovertible fact of cultural history. The question for the future – and especially for a theatre company such as the RSC, committed to making Shakespeare our continuing contemporary – is whether the array of selves and the panoply of ideas in his plays are sufficiently capacious to speak to the cultural diversity and the unprecedented challenges of our time. The short answer is yes. Consider ten of the most pressing issues facing human society exactly four hundred years on from the publication of the First Folio.

Autocracy and democracy. Shakespeare lived in a nation ruled by a monarch (Elizabeth I, then James I of England, who was also James VI of Scotland), advised by a Privy Council of nineteen aristocrats and, to some degree, restrained by an elected parliament (though with a very limited franchise) and an independent judiciary guided by a common law tradition. In many respects, the unwritten, evolving mixed constitution of England was based on the division of powers between consuls, senators, magistrates and tribunes of the people during the republican centuries of ancient Roman history – a model that would be foundational to the republics that came into being in later years (Britain during the mid-seventeenth century Interregnum; the United States of 1776; the France of the 1790s). At the same time, the autocratic dimension of the monarchy gave the state a greater resemblance to the imperial centuries of Roman history. In what sounds like one of Shakespeare's few overt allusions to Queen Elizabeth, a passage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* alludes to an 'imperial votaress' in 'maiden meditation' (the 'virgin queen' used her unmarried status as a way of remaining above the factions of rival suitors and favourites).

In an age when plays needed court approval and the theatres could be closed for causing political offence, Shakespeare had to be very careful: he accordingly explored the politics of his own time indirectly by dramatizing tipping points in Roman

history and exemplars (positive and negative) from the medieval history of his own nation. *Titus Andronicus* begins and ends with the election of a new emperor, but it shows imperial Rome in a state of decline, invaded by the Goths; *Julius Caesar* dramatizes the most famous assassination in history, provoked by the anxiety that a republic is about to become a monarchy; *Antony and Cleopatra* explores the failure of rule by a ‘triumvirate’ and ends with Octavius Caesar becoming Augustus, the first Roman emperor, during whose reign *Cymbeline* takes place, with Britain as a colonized land; *Coriolanus* stages the allure and the danger to democracy of a strong leader; *Richard II* (to whom Queen Elizabeth once anxiously compared herself) dramatizes the deposition of a weak monarch, while *Richard III* and *Macbeth* track the bloody rise to power of tyrannical kings.

In a world where presidents such as Xi Jinping in China and Vladimir Putin in Russia yield power akin to that of a Tudor monarch, where Islamist extremists fight for the return of a Caliphate, and where populist leaders exploit the increasingly fragile and fragmented state of western democratic traditions, Shakespeare’s political tragedies and history plays remain as contemporary as they have ever been. In the 1990s, superb film versions of *Richard III* and *Titus Andronicus* interpreted the plays through the lens of 1930s fascism: four centuries on from the publication of the First Folio, these and other plays might just be needed as a bulwark against some kind of 2030s fascism. An event such as the storming of the United States Capitol in January 2021 almost feels scripted by Shakespeare’s Roman plays or the scene in *Hamlet* when a mob threatens the doors of Elsinore: ‘in a riotous head’, ‘the rabble call him lord’, ‘Antiquity forgot, custom not known’, ‘They cry “Choose we! Laertes shall be king.”’ Someone has ‘popped in between the election and [their] hopes’. Shakespeare understood the fragility of institutions and the danger of mob mentality.

Race and religion. In ancient Athens, Plato argued that the ideal republic should have no place for poets and dramatists because they stir up unhealthy emotions. Aristotle replied in his *Poetics* with the argument that the theatre is a safe space where unhealthy emotions can be explored – even purged – without real harm being done. A modern-day Plato would say that we should not stage or study *Othello* because of the racist sentiments expressed in the play – or *The Merchant of Venice* because of its anti-Semitism, or *The Taming of the Shrew* because of its misogyny. A modern-day Aristotle would reply that racism, anti-Semitism and misogyny are real, and that Shakespeare’s plays are an eminently safe space in which to confront their horrible reality, not least because, when seen whole, the plays (let alone Shakespeare himself) do not share the racism of Iago, the anti-Semitism of many of the Christian characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, or the patriarchal aspirations, language and behaviour of Petruchio. To study the stage-history of *Othello* might be a very good way of learning about the racist practice of ‘blackface’, but also of discovering how the part of the Moor of Venice provided access to Shakespeare for black and brown actors such as Ira Aldridge in the nineteenth century, and Paul Robeson and Abraham Sofaer in the twentieth.

Othello and *The Tempest* remind us that questions of race and slavery have a complicated history. The Mediterranean was the centre of the world as Shakespeare knew it. Islands such as Cyprus (the location of Acts 2 to 5 of *Othello*) and Malta (where Shakespeare’s contemporary Christopher Marlowe set a play bringing together Jew, Christian and Muslim) were pressure points in what may legitimately be described as a clash of civilizations between Islam and Christendom. The capitulation of Granada in 1492, which brought an end to the centuries of ‘Moorish’ rule in Spain, the moment when Vienna nearly fell to the Ottoman empire in 1529, and the victory of the Catholic powers over the Turks at the sea-battle of Lepanto in 1579 (celebrated in a poem by King James): these were events that shaped what we would call the ‘geopolitics’ of educated members of Shakespeare’s audience. The primary meaning of ‘Moor’ – the label attached to Othello, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, the dancing ‘Blackamoors’ of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and the unseen woman impregnated by Lancelet the Clown in *The Merchant of Venice* – was, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it, ‘a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting north-western Africa (now mainly present-day Mauritania), who in the 8th century conquered Spain’. A second meaning was simply ‘Muslim’ (in the words of a translated text published in the year of the Spanish Armada, ‘And wheras I speak of Moores I meane Mahomets sect’). The word originally denoted geographical origin and religion, not skin colour. But since most Moors were dark-skinned (pigmented by evolutionary adaptation to a sunny climate), the descriptive (and not originally derogatory) term ‘Black Moor’ or ‘Blackamoor’ emerged in the sixteenth century. It was often treated as a synonym for ‘Ethiophe’ or ‘Ethiopian’, a generic term for Africans. Another synonym was ‘Negro’, derived via Spanish or Portuguese from the Latin word for the colour black, *niger*.

And there the trouble begins: despite the description of Othello as a ‘noble Moor’, despite the awareness of Elizabethan scholars that the recovery of the Greco-Roman classical tradition which shaped their learning was in large measure due to Arab scholars, despite the Barbary alliance against Spain that brought a Moorish ambassador to Shakespeare’s London, blackness was given negative connotations: in Christian iconography, white was the colour of angels, black of devils; the night was associated with darkness and evil; combine this with the opposition between Christian and Muslim, and the way was paved for the racist Iago to elide ‘Moor’ with ‘negro’ (‘thicklips’, ‘old black ram’) and for Caliban, an illegitimate child born in

Algiers, to be called a demi-devil, a slave and an attempted rapist. Although *The Tempest* was written when British involvement in the Atlantic slave trade was in its infancy, the dynamic of the play powerfully anticipates the logic of colonialism (Miranda to Caliban: ‘thy vile race’; Caliban’s reply: ‘You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse’; Prospero’s final realization: ‘This thing of darkness I / acknowledge mine’). At the same time, the narrative of Othello (a Muslim turned Christian) about being sold into slavery and then redeemed is a reminder that in Shakespeare’s time, it was far more common for English merchants and sailors to become slaves in Africa than for them to transport Africans into bondage in the New World. Slavery has always been – and remains – a global scar upon humanity, and Shakespeare reminds us of this by representing enslaved people in Egypt, Greece, Rome and Britain as well as the prototypical ‘New World’ of *The Tempest*.

Sexual abuse and misogyny. The #MeToo movement of the 2010s gave global prominence to the phenomenon of men using positions of power to abuse and sometimes rape women. Shakespeare exposed this dynamic four hundred years ago, as witnessed by Tarquin’s rape of Lucrece, the treatment of Cressida in the Greek camp, Cloten’s scheme in *Cymbeline* to rape Innogen because she has rejected his advances, and Angelo’s near-rape of Isabella in *Measure for Measure* (of course he has every confidence that he can get away with it – ‘Who will believe thee, Isabel?’). Shakespeare was equally aware of the casual misogyny that objectifies women – in Sonnet 130, for example, he parodies the literary convention of reducing the object of desire to a list of body parts – and of the neurotic tendency of patriarchal figures to be disgusted at the idea of female sexuality (King Lear in his madness: ‘Behold yond simp’ring dame, / Whose face between her forks presages snow ... Down from the waist ... There’s hell, there’s darkness, there is the sulphurous pit: burning, scalding, stench’). At the same time, the most powerful person in Shakespeare’s England for the first four decades of his life was a woman, Queen Elizabeth. We know that Shakespeare’s plays were frequently presented at her court, and we can assume with assurance that she would have taken particular pleasure in the women such as the Princess and her ladies in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, who are stronger and cleverer than the men.

Sexual orientation and gender identity. Another idea that seems very much of the twenty-first century is the right of the individual to declare their own gender identity. That was hardly possible in Shakespeare’s time – though there were a few exceptions such as Mary Frith, aka ‘Moll Cutpurse’, the cross-dressed *Roaring Girl* about whom two of the other scriptwriters who sometimes worked for his acting company, Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, wrote a comedy. Shakespeare, meanwhile, was fascinated by what we would call gender fluidity. Several of the heroines in the comedies discover rich dimensions of their own selves whilst they are disguised in male attire: Julia as Sebastian in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Portia as the skilled lawyer Balthasar in *The Merchant of Venice*, Rosalind as Ganymede in *As You Like It*, Viola as Cesario in *Twelfth Night*. The device of the twin in the last of these plays has the additional effect of making same-sex love a ‘natural perspective’, a mirror of heterosexual desire.

Whether or not Shakespeare’s sonnets addressed to a beautiful young man reflect an autobiographical impulse (a matter much debated and never to be resolved), there is no question that they glorify what we now call gay or queer experience – just as Plato did in the ancient Greek *Symposium*. When Aufidius says that he took greater delight in dreams of being ‘down together’ with Coriolanus, ‘unbuckling’ and ‘fisting’ him on the battlefield, than in the arrival of his bride on his wedding night, or when Emilia in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* proclaims from experience that ‘the true love ’tween maid and maid may be / More than in sex dividual’, one can only conclude that Shakespeare had a bisexual imagination. Nor was he ignorant of the diversity of human sexual practices: in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina hits Petruchio (before he hits her) as they share a joke about oral sex; Antony and Cleopatra enjoy dressing in each other’s clothes; and in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Helena reveals a taste for bondage (‘The more you beat me, I will fawn on you ... spurn me, strike me’) and Queen Titania makes love to a working-class man wearing the head of an ass (‘And kiss thy fair large ears’).

Wealth and injustice. Shakespeare lived in an age of extreme inequality. Audience members leaving the Globe Theatre on the south side of the river Thames, waiting for a wherry to take them back across the river, or walking along Bankside to London Bridge, would have seen a row of palaces on the other side of the river, with their own river gates and landing places: Essex House, Arundel House, Somerset House, Durham House, York House, Cecil House, each of them the London home of a bishop or a royal courtier, who would also have owned a vast estate in the countryside. For much of Shakespeare’s residence in London during the 1590s, he rented rooms in the parish of Bishopsgate, close by the vast mansion of the merchant and financier Sir Thomas Gresham, founder of the Royal Exchange and the embodiment of new money. But Elizabethan London also teemed with labourers eking out a living, vagrants, thieves and prostitutes. Shakespeare’s plays reflect this inequality, notably when King Lear is stripped of his finery and finds himself in the company of a supposed Bedlam beggar. During the storm in the moments before the appearance of ‘Poor Tom’, Lear expresses pity for the homeless:

O, I have ta'en
 Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
 And show the heavens more just.

Again and again, Shakespeare exposes the hierarchies of society – we meet ignoble nobles and noble commoners, cruel masters and loyal servants, honest gardeners and clever cutpurses. The plays reveal social mobility at work, tracking the upwardly mobile, such as Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII*, a butcher's son who rose to unprecedented power and wealth, before falling foul of the King over the question of a royal divorce, and the downwardly mobile, such as Sir John Falstaff, a penniless knight in an east end tavern, and Timon of Athens, surrounded by flatterers and men on the make when he is fabulously wealthy, alone in the woods when he loses all his money (rejected by everyone save his devoted steward). In all this, the late-Elizabethan age of Shakespeare is not so different from the late years of the reign of the second Queen Elizabeth, with its equally extreme wealth gap.

Migration and nationalism. Shakespeare lived in a time when Britain had recently broken from Europe. The divorce from Katherine of Aragon (the subject of his co-written *Henry VIII*) meant that, after centuries of being part of Catholic Christendom, with allegiance to Rome, England (and then Britain, when King James of Scotland united the two thrones) became a small, independent, vulnerable new Protestant state. This had twin, and to some degree mutually incompatible, consequences: on the one hand, in the face of the threat from the much more powerful Spanish empire, a new nationalism emerged; on the other hand, London became a safe haven for Protestants, so-called Huguenots, fleeing the religious civil war in France or Spanish oppression in the Netherlands. Shakespeare's project of telling the history of his England in his two tetralogies of medieval plays, and of exploring Catholic-Protestant tensions in *King John* and *Henry VIII*, arose from this historical context. With his usual even-handedness, he rejoiced in both the expression of patriotic sentiment (most notably in *Henry V*) and the critique of domestic political corruption ('this sceptred isle', says John of Gaunt in *Richard II*, 'is now leased out'). Similarly, he both advanced and questioned notions of national character (the English as drunkards, the French as affected, the Italians as Machiavellian). We might say, to make him our contemporary yet again, that he argued the case for Brexit (in *Cymbeline* plucky Britons fight against the might of Rome, in order to avoid paying tribute money) and against Brexit (in *The Merchant of Venice*, bad things happen as a result of deregulated banking and impediments to free trade).

Most prophetically, in the scene he contributed to the revised version of the collaborative play of *Sir Thomas More*, he voiced extraordinary sympathy for the migrant workers persecuted by little Englanders complaining that the 'strangers' are taking away their jobs and should accordingly be deported. The archetypal Shakespearean move is to ask us to put ourselves in the position of the 'other', the outsider:

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
 Hath chid down all the majesty of England.
 Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
 Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage
 Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,
 And that you sit as kings in your desires,
 Authority quite silenced by your brawl
 And you in ruff of your opinions clothed.
 What had you got? I'll tell you: you had taught
 How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
 How order should be quelled, and by this pattern
 Not one of you should live an agèd man,
 For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought
 With selfsame hand, self reasons and self right,
 Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
 Would feed on one another.

Shakespeare tells us never to forget that a time may come when we will be strangers ourselves.

Pandemic and climate change. Throughout Shakespeare's career, the word 'plague' is a curse, sometimes fortified by its symptoms, as in *King Lear*'s denunciation of Goneril: 'thou art a boil, / A plague-sore'. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio tells of how Mab, the angry dream-Queen, plagues with blisters the lips of ladies who dream of kisses; when he dies, he wishes a

plague on both the houses of Montague and Capulet, and it is indeed plague that indirectly precipitates the tragedy – Friar Laurence’s letter informing Romeo that Juliet has only taken a sleeping potion, not poison, goes undelivered because his messenger is forced into quarantine after ministering to the sick in a house ‘Where the infectious pestilence did reign’.

As we explain in the General Introduction, epidemics of plague often closed London’s theatres, forcing Shakespeare into the country. Early in his career, this time away from the pressures of scriptwriting and his work as an actor in both his own plays and those of others, gave him the freedom to develop his craft. Comparison between plays written before the plague closure of 1592, such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and the *Henry VI* trilogy, and those written shortly after the reopening of the theatres in 1594 – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II* – reveals an extraordinary advance in emotional range, stylistic variety and poetic accomplishment. Equally, as we suggest in the General Introduction, there may well be a correlation between the frequency of plague closure in the years 1603 to 1609 and the greater length and complexity of the plays – nearly all tragedies – that Shakespeare wrote after his company became the King’s Men with the accession of James I. One of the earliest accounts of the dramatist’s life claims that ‘he frequented the plays all his younger time, but in his elder days lived at Stratford and supplied the stage with 2 plays every year’ (*Diary of John Ward*, vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon). Lockdown may lead to deeper meditation about the tensions inherent in any community, the sanctity of love and friendship, and the inevitability of death: the matter of tragedy.

Airborne contagion is another Shakespearean theme. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when the spirits of the night – Oberon and Titania – quarrel in a custody battle over an Indian boy (which carries a whiff of child abuse), the elements respond with disruption of a kind that we might call climate change: ‘Contagious fogs’ are sucked up from the sea, rivers overflow, corn rots in the fields, sheep meadows are flooded and muddled, ‘rheumatic diseases’ abound:

And through this distemperature we see
The seasons alter; hoary-headed frosts
Fall in the fresh lap of the crimson rose,
And on old Hiems’ thin and icy crown
An odorous chaplet of sweet summer buds
Is, as in mockery, set. The spring, the summer,
The chiding autumn, angry winter, change
Their wonted liveries, and the mazèd world
By their increase now knows not which is which;
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension:
We are their parents and original.

Oberon and Titania are projections of human instincts, desires and dreams, which means that Shakespeare is recognizing that *we* are the ‘parents and originals’ of a nature that has gone out of kilter.

The play that is showcased at the beginning of the First Folio is named for the weather. In the twentieth century, *The Tempest* was often read, performed and rewritten (as in the Martinique poet-politician Aimé Césaire’s *Une tempête*) in the light of imperialism, colonization and slavery. In the twenty-first, it will come to seem prophetic of the hubris of humankind’s attempt to control the elements by means of technology, for which Prospero’s words are ‘magic’ and ‘art’. Ariel’s island will look and sound very different in a world of rising sea-levels, diminishing natural resources and impoverished biodiversity: would Caliban be able to hunt on behalf of Trinculo in a world of extinct marmosets and insufficiency of fish, wood and berries?

The crisis of mental health. We no longer believe that the human body is made of a compound of four ‘humours’ – the sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholy – that correspond to the four elements of air, water, fire and earth. But the excess of melancholy that characterizes Jaques in *As You Like It*, Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, and especially Hamlet, is profoundly akin to the condition that we call depression. We use a different language to talk about mental illness and the relationship between mind and body, but Shakespeare’s plays remain an arena of profound psychological insight into many kinds of mental illness. In all his plays, ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’ are locked in combat. In many of them, there are particular manifestations of ‘madness’, ranging from the sleep-walking and obsessive-compulsive handwashing of Lady Macbeth to the ‘infection’ of Leontes’ brain in *The Winter’s Tale*. He is sensitive, furthermore, to the abuse that may come with a diagnosis of madness (does Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* really deserve to be locked in a dark house?) and to the overlap between different forms of supposedly ‘abnormal’ behaviour – as when Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* reminds the theatre audience that ‘The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact’.

Conspiracy theories and ‘fake news’. Four hundred years on from the publication of the First Folio, the dominance of the internet and social media as sources for information, together with political polarization and loss of faith in traditional institutions (governments, ‘experts’, ‘mainstream media’), has led to a proliferation of conspiracy theories and questionings of received wisdom in realms as diverse as climate science, election results and medical advice. Shakespeare’s plays offer rich explorations of the mechanics of conspiracy and the means of creating ‘fake news’: Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Richard III, Don John in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Iago in *Othello*, Edmund in *King Lear* and Iachimo in *Cymbeline* are among his many skilled purveyors of disinformation. Hamlet is – as in many respects – a peculiar case, in that he creates his own ‘fake news’ (his feigned madness) in a court rife with conspiracy.

In addition, the very identity of Shakespeare himself has long been the object of conspiracy theories and outlandish alternative narratives involving a disguised aristocrat, or the purportedly faked death of Christopher Marlowe, or alleged cryptograms embedded within the Folio. The internet is not peer-reviewed: a Google search on a phrase such as ‘Shakespeare authorship debate’ will throw up an indiscriminate mix of authentic scholarship and ‘alternative facts’. Our advice to anyone wishing to enter this murky arena is to begin with a careful reading of the section ‘Cult and Heresy’ in our General Introduction and then, if nagging doubts remain, proceed to the website oxfraud.com.

Family life. For all that Shakespeare’s plays provide schoolings in great questions of public import – politics, money, social relations, race, gender, class, law, diplomacy, war – their essential building block is the family: the individual as parent, child, sibling, lover, spouse. *Romeo and Juliet* speaks with special force to young people in communities where it remains the custom for parents to decide on their children’s marriage partners; *King Lear* strikes a chord with those who have to live with a parent who has not adapted well to retirement, who is angry in old age and who may be beginning to lose their mind; Prince Hal is every rebellious teenager; *Othello* pierces to the heart of anyone who believes that their beloved has been unfaithful. In these, and a thousand other representations of human relations, Shakespeare is, as Ben Jonson wrote in his commendatory poem, ‘not of an age, but for all time!’

The ‘Second Folio’ of the RSC Shakespeare

Why are we producing a second edition? Our first edition has been very warmly received, but no edition of Shakespeare is perfect and we were conscious when undertaking the project that a number of legitimate criticisms could be made. First, in exactly what sense, beyond that of branding, was it ‘The Royal Shakespeare Company Edition’? How is it possible to be simultaneously a modern-spelling reconstruction of ‘The King’s Men Edition’, that is to say the collection of Shakespeare’s plays authorized by his fellow-actors, and a template for the staging of the plays in the twenty-first century by the acting company that maintains his name and his royal warrant?

All our texts have been made available to the directors of RSC productions, but all directors make their own choices as to cuts, stage business and interpretations. In some cases, a director will choose to be led by a Quarto text from Shakespeare’s lifetime as opposed to the posthumously published Folio that we chose to edit. In others, notably *King Lear*, where the two early texts are most divergent, directors will want to pick and mix: they will acknowledge the superiority of the Folio over the Quarto, but be reluctant to follow the Folio in omitting the highly theatrical mock-trial of Goneril in the hovel. Equally, an actor making the huge commitment of playing Hamlet might legitimately ask to include (at least some of) Hamlet’s soliloquy, ‘How all occasions do inform against me’, which the Folio omitted. It was in order to allow for such flexibility that we included ‘Quarto-only passages’ at the end of plays where there were substantive cuts of this kind.

We did not, however, find a way of reflecting particular RSC staging choices within the first edition. It was always our intention to roll out individual paperback volumes (our equivalent of quartos) for each play, once the *Complete Works* was finished. These duly appeared in thirty-four volumes between 2008 and 2012. Each volume included a stage history, more detailed accounts of RSC productions of the play in question and interviews with directors (and occasionally actors). These were manifestly ‘RSC editions’. Now, in response to audience demand, our main innovation in this second edition of the *Complete Works* is to roll the RSC approach into every play. The digital preservation of productions over the decade and a half since our original publication has allowed our co-editors Ian de Jong and Molly G. Yarn to view one hundred RSC productions – two or three for each play in the canon – and to note stage business, interpretation and significant cuts.

One of the innovations in our first edition was to distinguish stage directions derived from the Folio – mostly, but not exclusively, exits, entrances and music cues – from the implied staging that can be extrapolated from the text and that editors have traditionally mingled with Quarto and Folio directions. We made this distinction by moving the ‘editorial’ directions to the right margin, printing them in a different typeface and sometimes making them permissive as opposed to prescriptive

(e.g. ‘*Aside?*’, ‘*Stops him from kneeling?*’, ‘*This citizen may be Hubert*’). The idea was to allow readers to construct an imaginary performance in their head. For this second edition, we have replaced these platonic performances with a hundred actual ones.

We have identified each production with the siglum ‘P’. Experienced users of Shakespeare editions will be accustomed to an editorial apparatus signalling that a particular reading comes from F (the Folio) or F2 (the corrected second Folio that was published in 1632) or, say, *Hamlet* Q2 (the revised and improved Second Quarto printing of a play that had first appeared in Q1, a messy, unauthorized text somehow reconstructed from an early performance). Only the most diligent users of our edition will wish to consult the record of Q variants and such like in the textual apparatus at the end of each play, but all readers will now have the opportunity, through the marginal staging notes, to relive the way in which each play was staged in two or three twenty-first-century Royal Shakespeare Company productions, identified as P1, P2 and P3.*

The RSC Shakespeare Second Edition is accordingly the first ever *Complete Works* to reflect the staging practice of a specific theatre company.

Our entirely new marginal staging notes have given us another opportunity. When we chose to edit the First Folio, in contrast to all other modern-spelling editions since the eighteenth century, which have adopted a ‘pick and mix’ approach of Quarto and Folio copy-texts, we had one major regret, the consequence of the 1606 Act to Restrain Abuses of Players, a parliamentary law that levied a fine of ten pounds (about £3,000 or \$4,000 in today’s money) upon any stage-play that dared to ‘jestingly or profanely speak or use the holy Name of God, or of Christ Jesus, or the Holy Ghost, or of the Trinity, which are not to be spoken but with Fear and Reverence’. This meant that in the Folio Hamlet frequently says ‘O heaven’ instead of the Quarto’s stronger ‘O God’ and that such splendidly theatrical oaths as ‘Sblood’ (‘God’s blood’) and ‘Zounds’ (‘God’s wounds’) were stripped out of the Folio texts of such boisterous plays as the two parts of *Henry IV*. Now, we have respected the integrity of the Folio, but restored all the censored Quarto oaths and exclamations by including them in the marginal staging notes (flagged by the siglum ‘Q’). We have also recorded other significant Quarto variants that were adopted in our chosen productions.

Our minor regret in the first edition arose from a late discovery in the printing house that affected inclusions and exclusions. By a nice irony, something not dissimilar happened with the original Folio of Shakespeare’s allegedly complete plays, where the printing process was thrown into disarray by the late arrival of a text of *Troilus and Cressida*. In our case, we discovered that no binding machine in the world could cope with more than 2,550 pages of paper at the thickness we required to avoid excessive show-through of print from page to page. But we had produced an edition of nearly 2,700 pages! We made some cuts to the introductions to individual plays (eventually incorporating these in the longer introductions that were written for each of the *solus* editions), but this was far from sufficient, so we removed certain elements from the printed book and placed them on the edition’s website. These were: scenes from the plays *Edward III* and *Arden of Faversham* that have plausibly been attributed to Shakespeare; the collection of twenty poems entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim* that was attributed to him in 1598–9; the poem *A Lover’s Complaint* that was published with *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* in 1609; and a long essay, originally intended as an appendix, entitled ‘The Case for the Folio’, in which the rationale for our editorial practice was laid out in detail, together with examples of our process, a brief history of Shakespearean editing and a census of quartos and copy-texts.

Though forced by circumstance, the choice of scenes and poems for omission had a rationale. Our primary goal was to edit the Folio, because nobody had done so since 1709, but at the same time we knew that an edition of Shakespeare’s *Complete Works* should include all the works that are agreed by all reputable scholars to be his, or at least substantially his. We therefore had no doubt about retaining two collaborative plays that were omitted from the Folio: *Pericles*, which was begun by George Wilkins and concluded by Shakespeare, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, for which Shakespeare wrote most of the first and last acts, John Fletcher most of the middle acts. Equally, although as a theatre company’s edition our primary concern was with Shakespeare’s plays, it was essential to include his poems: the narratives *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, which made his name as an author; and the *Sonnets* that reveal his literary art at its most intricate. We also retained the beautiful short poem that became known as ‘The Phoenix and Turtle’, of which he was unquestionably the author; and a rather fine and very little-known epilogue or closing prayer for a court performance, addressed to Queen Elizabeth I, which we strongly believed to be his. The justification for the exclusion of *The Passionate Pilgrim* was that the only poems in it that are unquestionably his were also included in other works (two of them among them the *Sonnets*, three incorporated in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*) and, furthermore, that Shakespeare seems to have objected to the presence of his name on the title-page of the little volume.

As for *A Lover’s Complaint*, there has been a long tradition of scholarship questioning Shakespeare’s authorship. At the time when we were preparing our first edition, computer-assisted stylometry – identification of authorship on the basis of statistical

* The three parts of *Henry VI*, staged as a sequence, are a special case, given distinctive sigla.

analysis of a large database of early modern texts – was calling the attribution into further question. So, knowing that we would be reuniting the poem with the 1609 *Sonnets* in our edition of *Sonnets and other Poems*, we had no qualms about relegating our edited, annotated and typeset text to our website, where it would be readily downloadable for Shakespeare ‘completists’. We do, however, regret our assertion in the first edition that stylometric analysis had ‘devastated the claim to Shakespearean authenticity’ of the poem. This was over-confident: the more nuanced electronic stylometry has become, the less certain its conclusions. The case for John Davies of Hereford as author of *A Lover’s Complaint*, which persuaded us in the first edition, now looks weak, whereas the case for Shakespeare stands as very possible, but by no means conclusive. For this reason, we are pleased that, thanks to a different paper size and binding, it has been possible for us to include the poem in this revised edition.

So too with *The Passionate Pilgrim*: though the authorship of short poems such as sonnets is far harder to prove than that of whole scenes in plays, recent studies have given credibility to the possibility that some or all of a group of sonnets in the collection on the very Shakespearean subject of Venus and Adonis may well be his.

One item we were determined not to lose from the first edition was the only surviving literary creation in Shakespeare’s own hand: the scene that he wrote for a revision of the multi-authored play of *Sir Thomas More*. We included – and again include here – a photograph of the precious holograph, a transcription and an annotated modern text of the scene. Some modern editions have gone further and included the entire play. We have not, because we restored the scene to its context in our companion volume, *William Shakespeare and Others: Collaborative Plays* (The RSC Shakespeare, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). This is our equivalent of what used to be called ‘The Shakespeare Apocrypha’: that is to say, plays attributed to him in his own lifetime or soon after, and plays for which there is reasonable evidence, either stylistic or external, that he may have been a contributing force. That edition includes, as well as *Sir Thomas More*, edited and annotated texts of *Arden of Faversham* and *Edward III*, two plays where computer-assisted stylometry has strengthened the case for Shakespeare’s authorship of individual scenes; the revised version of *The Spanish Tragedy*, for which there is a strong possibility that Shakespeare wrote some additional scenes portraying the protagonist’s madness; *The London Prodigal* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, two plays of his acting company that were attributed to him in his lifetime (although his authorship seems most unlikely, the company association suggests some involvement); *Locrine* and *Thomas Lord Cromwell*, two further plays associated with ‘W. S.’; the popular romance of *Mucedorus*, to which he may have contributed to a revision for the King’s Men; and *Double Falsehood*, believed by most (but not all) scholars to be an early eighteenth-century adaptation of the lost *Cardenio*, a late collaboration with John Fletcher.

As in the first edition, we have distinguished between the thirty-six Folio plays and the non-Folio works by printing the former in single column, the latter in double – a deliberate inversion of the original printing practice of the double-column Folio and single-column quartos. The question of the extent of non-Shakespearean material in certain Folio plays remains hotly contested. The current consensus is that there are elements of collaboration or signs of revising hands in the three parts of *Henry VI* (especially *Part One*), that the first act of *Titus Andronicus* is primarily by George Peele, that *Timon of Athens* is partly by Thomas Middleton, who may also have been involved in the revision of several other plays, notably *Macbeth* and perhaps *Measure for Measure* and/or *All’s Well that Ends Well*; and that *Henry VIII*, like *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and the lost *Cardenio*, is a collaboration with Fletcher.

For a fuller account of textual matters, we once again direct readers to our website essay ‘The Case for the Folio’.*

Four hundred years after its publication, the collection of thirty-six plays assembled by Hemmings and Condell endures as perhaps the most admired and influential secular volume in the history of the world. We are proud to offer a second edition of our modern-spelling version of it, standing by the claim made by the pioneering editors Charlotte Porter and Helen Clarke in the preface to their old-spelling edition of 1903 that ‘The First Folio remains, as a matter of fact, the text nearest to Shakespeare’s stage, to Shakespeare’s ownership, to Shakespeare’s authority’.

* bloomsbury.pub/rsc-shakespeare