

THE FIRST FOLIO DIS-COVERED (Written around the early 1980's and sometimes referred to as "The Bardcode.")

Not long ago a party of students searched the bookshops of Stratford-upon-Avon for a facsimile copy of the first edition of Shakespeare's collected plays; that is, for the great book known as the 'First Folio' published in 1623 seven years after the poet's death. They did not find a single copy. Perhaps they were especially unlucky, but this one story does illustrate the absurd rarity in recent years of this unique source book.

We have everything else on our shelves: paperbacks and hardbacks of the separate plays with lots of useful notes, fat modern editions of the collected works, wonderful illustrated tomes inherited from great-grandmothers, but hardly ever the book that lies so close to Shakespeare's own time, edited by two members of his acting company, who must have been familiar with the author's methods, and between them have known whole chunks of the verse by heart.

The reason for this neglect is, of course, also very well known. The First Folio is a book with a kind of double reputation. On the one hand it has been described as the most important book in the English language next to the King James' Bible: on the other it seems to be so full of spelling mistakes, mis-lineation and doubtful passages that it cannot be trusted. Scholars regard it as an unsafe text: and in fact one has only to leaf through the pages to find evidence of the grossest inconsistency in the way the plays are sub-divided and set out. All this is familiar to many; but since relatively few Shakespeare lovers have ever held a faithful copy of this book in their hands, I will describe it a little. This is to give context to a discovery that has become so clear and certain over the years, and is withal so enchanting that it needs to take courage at last and face its proper audience.

The First Folio, edited by John Heminge and Henry Condell, and printed by Isaac Jaggard in London, contains the text of 36 plays along with several prefatory pages. The very first of these contains a short poem in rhyming couplets signed B. I. which opens:

*"The figure that thou here seest cut
It was for gentle Shakespeare put."*

This points to the engraving of the poet's face and upper body on the opposite, right-hand page. Above this (rather odd) portrait, which everyone knows from the reduced and idealised version on the cover of early Penguin editions, there stands the title printed large on five lines "MR. WILLIAM SHAKESPREARE'S COMEDIES, HISTORIES AND TRAGEDIES." then in small print just above the portrait "*publish'd according to the true original copies.*"

On subsequent pages there follow: the dedication of the book to the two Pembroke brothers, William (Mr. W. H.?) and Philip; an address to the general reader; two poems, the first by Ben Jonson; a 'catalogue' or list of the plays; two more poems; a kind of second title page with the list of 26 principal actors below it; and finally the plays themselves, beginning with 'The Tempest' and ending with 'Cymbeline.'

All the pages here are divided into two great columns each of which contains exactly sixty-six line spaces except for the first and last page of each play, where the columns are shorter. Most of the plays show act divisions printed in Latin, but since these never appeared before in the earlier Quarto Editions and since there seems to be no evidence that they played a part in Elizabethan or Jacobean performances, they have generally been suspect. Possibly, it is thought, they are no more than 'decorative devices' inserted to give the plays the look of having a classical pedigree. Scene divisions, however, which have more traditional authority, are sometimes missed out, and altogether the way that shorter or longer breaks are indicated in a particular play, seems almost a matter of lottery. The three central plays in the block of eleven tragedies as printed in the 'Catalogue' (from which Troilus and Cressida is missing,) may serve to illustrate the astonishing inconsistency of presentation throughout the book. Thus in Julius Caesar we find act divisions, but no scene divisions; in Macbeth, act and scene divisions all neat and complete; in Hamlet, all divisions present as far as Scene 2, Act II, then no divisions at all any more. Was it laziness, weariness, or despair? How we would love to know what the editors (or compositors) were up to.

Above all we wonder what those 'True Original Copies' were like, from which the Folio texts were taken, and why they vanished from the face of the earth. We would almost give our lifeblood to possess them and to discover more nearly the poet's own ideas on lineation and spelling.

In the light of errors in the Folio that shout aloud, (like 'Barlet' in Macbeth instead of 'Martlet'), it has been hard to take John Heminge and Henry Condell perfectly seriously when they tell us in their address to the general public that they have taken an enormous amount of trouble over collecting and editing the plays and have finally got everything absolutely right. And yet what they say is so emphatic that it is really very strange. They knew that their claims to accuracy could be very quickly checked and that they would continue to be checked in the centuries to come. What I wish to argue (knowing full well that it will at first sound absurd) is that they have not yet been checked enough, in short, that it is we who are wrong and Heminge and Condell who are essentially speaking the truth. The address 'to the Great Variety of Readers' only fills one page and was meant to be read, again and again, in its entirety. I quote now from the beginning, the middle and the end. The beginning: *"from the most able, to him that can but spell. There you are number'd. We had rather you were weighd. Especially, when the fate of all Bookes depends upon your capacities: and not of your heads alone, but of your purses."* The middle: *"... we pray*

you do not envie his Friends, the office of their care, and paine, to have collected & publish'd them (i.e. the 36 plays); and so to have publish'd them, as where (before) you were abus'd with diverse stolne, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealthes of injurious impostors, that expos'd them: even those, are now offer'd to your view cur'd, and perfect of their limbes, and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them."

The end: "*... for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost. Reade him, therefore, and againe, and againe: And if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. And so we leave you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can be your guides: if you neede them not, you can leade your selves, and others. And such Readers we wish him."*

They might have added a rider: "And if you do not like **us** - our slipshod work, our idle boasts, our choice of printers - surely you are in some manifest danger not to understand us." Our most serious misunderstanding relates to the phrase "*absolute in their numbers.*" This is taken by scholars to mean 'correct' as regards metre. The simpler meaning of numbers, the one more accessible to children or accountants, is dismissed, because no rational application can be found for it; yet to assume that by 'numbers' Heminge and Condell meant 'metre' is once again to take for granted their carelessness and inaccuracy; because the metre of the plays is not a bit 'absolute': it has great variety, like the readers here addressed; indeed it is often not easy to tell what stresses and pauses the poet intended.

In fact the simpler meaning of 'numbers' is the correct one. I state this not as a theory but as an unshakeable certainty, which almost anyone "*from the most able to him that can but spell*" could verify for himself given one more condition: that he can also **count**.

The first hint of a clue was encountered by me, a long time ago, during a production of scenes from Macbeth. The concept of scene symmetry in Shakespeare, now familiar though not universally conclusive, was strongly in my mind at the time because I had lately discovered a very clear example of it in the opening scene of The Merchant of Venice.

Where there is symmetry there has to be a centre, a mirror surface. In the human body, this is the plane dividing our whole left side from our whole right side; in a leaf it is the central vein; in the facade of a Renaissance palace it is the central vertical line of the portico or grand entrance, with great wings stretching away on either side. In those Shakespearean scenes where symmetry has been clearly traced, we find such balancing wings enclosing a centre that seems to be marked by a special kind of picture or emblem. In Macbeth, there are two lines in Scene 4, Act III (where the ghost of Banquo appears to Macbeth), which must at least be noticed by producers and stage designers because some degree of stage symmetry here is almost unavoidable. These lines struck me because they would have fitted so naturally at the centre of a scene; but they do not come at the centre of this scene: they come close to the beginning.

The Lords have arrived and have exchanged greetings with Macbeth, their host. Lady Macbeth, who seems to be sitting apart from the table on what must be a great chair or throne tells Macbeth, now king, to bid their guests welcome on her behalf. The Lords acknowledge her welcome probably by smiling and bowing and then seat themselves at the table. Macbeth turns to his wife:

"See, they encounter thee with their heart's thanks."

Then he looks at the seated Lords:

"Both sides are even: here I'll sit i'th' midst."

The guests are sitting in two equal rows with one empty stool dividing them. Macbeth, of course, never sits on it; the ghost of Banquo does so instead, a little while later. *"Both sides are even"* sounds like a centre; but a centre of what? Could it be of a group of scenes? Or could it conceivably be the centre of the whole play? A quick inspection of the copy in my hand showed that it could not be far off; but how, by counting lines, could one ever find certainty? There are four passages of prose in Macbeth: the letter, in Scene 5, Act 1, the porter in Act II, Lady Macduff and her little boy in Act IV, and the sleepwalking scene in Act V. They must confuse everything. Besides, editors have different ideas on lineation and some believe the Hecate scenes to be interpolations by another writer. In short, my guess had to stay in the air, and there it stayed for a space of years.

Then, in a public library, I chanced to take out the one book I had never looked at, a facsimile of the First Folio of Shakespeare's collected plays, whose reputations for carelessness had deterred me. The book I was looking at was a special facsimile, edited by the American scholar, Charlton Hinman, who instead of just numbering separate scenes, had through-numbered each play counting 'one' for each printed line, including stage directions. Finding the position of those two enigmatic lines in Act III would be relatively easy here. Almost idly I set out to number the play in large steps, subtracting the stage-directions as I went. The total number of speech lines in the play came to 2392. The two lines:

"See they encounter thee with their heart's thanks,

Both sides are even: here I'll sit i' the midst."

were numbered 1196 and 1197. Since 2392 divided by two equals 1196, these two lines straddle the exact mathematical centre of the play.

What did it mean? Was this chance? Or a one off, a joke, planted in a single play, to please the odd traveller in numbers? Or did the implications go much, much further? Anyway, this manner of counting was crazy! It was democracy in the world of printed lines carried to the absurd. How could

pentameters, tetrameters, short lines, long lines, single words, single syllables above all **prose** lines, all be treated as equal? And yet, counting after this fashion, in just this book, brought this singular result.

Scene Symmetry in Macbeth

The rest must be told from a later standpoint and with great brevity. The next step was to look at the scenes in Macbeth. The seven scenes in Act I made a convenient group even though the nature of an act was not yet clear. At the centre of five out of these seven scenes there appeared images with a certain common theme: birds, animals, the root of a plant, the action of planting, in short things that live and grow. The centre of Scene 6 seemed at first to be an exception, but in fact we do find the idea of growth there: the growth of a geometrical progression. Only the centre of Scene 1 is actually different. In this very short scene of eleven lines, (not twelve as usually printed) the central line is line six: "*1st witch: Where the place?*" The answer, in this context must be "the centre". Scene 1, in effect, points to all the scenes that follow.

As scene symmetry is by now a familiar concept to a number of scholars, I need not describe here, how one passage mirrors another balancing passage across a scene centre. The one new element is that the uncertainty which has beset most studies in the field (especially where verse-lineation is doubtful or prose passages intervene) is replaced by a kind of mathematical precision, which is confirmed when light is shed at last on the nature of relationship between prose and verse in a Shakespeare play in this particular printed book.

Clearly the two media are not wholly different, else we should sit up in our seats with shock whenever verse gave way to prose, or prose to verse. Yet we do not, not even when the verse is actually spoken as verse. The difference is at once so slight and so profound that to attempt definition in a short space cannot do it justice. I can however report on an experiment or rather a small series of experiments, relating strictly to the passages of prose that occur in the plays in the first Shakespeare Folio.

One can take a piece of prose with a beginning and an end, and write it out as if it were free verse, a natural phrase to a line. Then one can count the lines and compare the total with the number of lines on which the original prose passage was set out. The results have always been either identical, or very close. If the match is not quite exact a slight rearrangement of the free verse rendering can easily make it exact. This may be called cheating: it may also be called a lesson in speech, coming straight from a Master: "this is how the waves of speech should go, this is where significant pauses should lie."

I believe there is a very simple law, by which elements that are apparently loose and free find their place in a structure that proves to be astonishingly exact. The law for counting prose is this. One prose phrase equals one verse line. The average length of the first will be a little longer than that of the

second, because syllables usually tumble out faster in common speech than they do (or should do) when we read a poem.

I give one example to illustrate what will only cease to be looked on as theory when more people have joined the experiment. Here is the letter that Lady Macbeth was reading at the beginning of Scene 5, Act I, set out in separate phrases. The prose is printed on twelve lines, in the First Folio edition.

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Lady. They met me in the day of successe:</i> | 1 |
| <i>and I haue learn'd by the perfect'st report,</i> | 2 |
| <i>they haue more in them, then mortall knowledge.</i> | 3 |
| <i>When I burnt in desire to question them further,</i> | 4 |
| <i>they made themselues Ayre, into which they vanish'd.</i> | 5 |
| <i>Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it,</i> | 6 |
| <i>came Missiues from the King, who all-hail'd me Thane of Cawdor,</i> | 7 |
| <i>by which Title before, these weyward Sisters saluted me,</i> | 8 |
| <i>and referr'd me to the comming on of time, with haile King that shalt be.</i> | 9 |
| <i>This haue I thought good to deliuer thee (my dearest Partner of Greatnesse)</i> | 10 |
| <i>that thou might'st not loose the dues of reioycing by being ignorant of what Greatnesse is promis'd thee.</i> | 11 |
| <i>Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.</i> | 12 |