

Book Review: Paul Collins, (2009). *The Book of William. How Shakespeare's First Folio Conquered the World.* Bloomsbury

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If you want to write a novel with a lot of action in it, you will need to use a lot of verbs. By the same token, if you change your style and focus on an effective description of a memorable event or a marvelous place, you will have to switch to a plethora of adjectives. In our case, in 2009 Paul Collins used his erudite expertise and his quite impressive vocabulary to create a vivid history of Shakespeare's *First Folio* that came out in 1623. It is a masterpiece in the true sense and in its own class that ripened through the centuries. Not only did it survive the patina of time; it is now showing its uniqueness for all to see.

The relevance and the beauty of the Bard's *First Folio* can be synthesized in Collins' own words: books "have a body and soul." (p. 111) In other words, *the First Folio*, first auctioned at less than half of its original price, has become a rich heritage embodied in a book that traveled across centuries in a printed copy but with a character and soul of its own. However, its intrinsic value, now estimated to be hundreds of times more valuable than its weight in gold, has become arguably but unequivocally an asset to be envied by people from all social strata, from rich oil men and billionaires to ardent students or ordinary citizens.

From page to page, the reader's imagination follows the author's guided tour of places and people whose names are somehow related to the *First Folio*. Events are also worth mentioning, including the Great Fire of London that took place between September 2 and 5, 1666, when extremely valuable works of art, architecture, and literature perished or were heavily destroyed, and the Folios were not spared. However, it was in time discovered that, fortunately, some Folios had been traded and found a safe haven in places like Wales, Spain, or Italy. Over time, "Folios have been found in Africa and in Australia; there are Folios across Europe and Asia and America. [...] Their owners are a varied lot – from a Microsoft billionaire to a bucolic Irish college." (p. 127)

To mirror William Shakespeare's format of his comedies, tragedies, and histories, Paul Collins devised his ingenious approach in five acts, with their own scenes, exactly like the Great Will. This is how the Bard conquered the literary world, and this is how Paul Collins admirably presented his case to the avid readers of today. Among other similar works of historical value, time has made "the *First Folio* the most scrutinized book edition in the history of the written language." (p. 130)

In their attempt to find "what Shakespeare really wrote," researchers found themselves in an uphill battle, only to re-discover and embellish what is called today literary scholarship. But what is the real text? What did the early editions of Shakespeare look like? With so many Folios floating around, "the only way to untangle these texts was manual collation, to go back and forth from one copy to another to check each word and punctuation mark. It's an agonizingly slow process

dubbed the Wimbledon Method for its endless back-and-forth head twisting.” (p. 159) A worthwhile effort, considering the value and the relevance of this project. A so-called “census of censuses” would give us the following list: The *First Folio*, the Gutenberg *Bible*, Audubon’s *Birds of America*, Copernicus’s *De Revolutionibus*, and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Each generation of readers of such precious gems will undoubtedly find the *First Folio* to be not only a rare book, but also “a cornerstone of our cultural heritage and a connoisseur’s dream.” Furthermore, Shakespeare’s art of writing can be easily summed up as follows: “the boiling down and preserving of thoughts.”

Printers like Lewis Theobald, Jacob Tonson, and Robert Walker, writers like Alexander Pope, Ben Johnson, and Dr. Samuel Johnson, as well as Howard Staunton (the world’s greatest chess hustler), George Steevens (author and Shakespearean commentator), and Mitsuo Nita (First Folio dealer and publisher) deserve to be mentioned for their close connection to the Folios. Some Japanese scholars went as far as to regard Shakespeare as their own, and one of them (Koichi Doi) “brought a Japanese eye to Shakespeare’s work, and what he noticed were ... flowers. The highly stylized and deliberative philosophy of flower arranging known as *ikebana* is an art form in Japan. Only a Japanese scholar would have bothered to look for significance in the flowers of Shakespeare, yet significance is what he found. While skeptical Western scholars busied themselves with buried cryptograms and arcane references to the playwright in public records, Doi simply pointed out what was hiding in plain sight. The flowers in Shakespeare’s plays, he noted, were the ones that grew around Stratford-upon-Avon.” (p. 203)

The author of *The Book of William* spared no effort and traveled to far-away places, from St. Paul’s Churchyard in London to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., to Meisen University Hino, in Tokyo – to name just a few. The reader is enthralled and can barely wait for the next chapter to begin, afraid that the current pages will quietly slip away into oblivion, unless careful notes are taken constantly.

The body of this *First Folio* is also connected to a soul, the intrinsic value handed down from generation to generation, which in its turn speaks volumes to cultures and languages quite different from the one that came from Stratford-upon-Avon. A folio is roughly the size of a modern encyclopedia, and Shakespeare’s *First Folio* came to be what is it today – a marvel with its own body and soul – after its content was written, performed, read, re-read, copied, translated, memorized, interpreted, imitated, adapted, and let loose into the world cultures, for all of us to savor and admire.