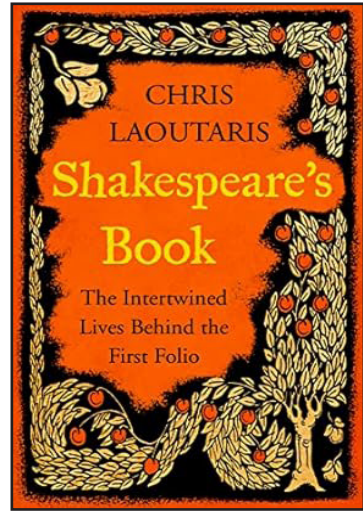


Chris Laoutaris. *Shakespeare's Book: The Intertwined Lives Behind the First Folio*. London: William Collins, 2023. Pp. xxxvi + 516. Hardback £25. ISBN 9780008238384.

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The year 2023 offered one of the more intriguing Shakespeare anniversaries, intriguing because it celebrated not an individual but a book: the 1623 folio edition of *Master William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*, widely known as the first folio. In place of the biographical impulse that propelled much of the commemorative work of 2014 (the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth) and 2016 (the 400th anniversary of his death), 2023 centred instead on a bibliographical impulse, encouraging us to think about the role of print publication in the survival and dissemination of Shakespeare's plays, and about the place of the folio itself within global cultures. This is not to say, however, that the biographical impulse has been absent from 2023's responses to the events of 1623. This impulse has instead shifted from Shakespeare himself to the people who produced the folio, as Chris Laoutaris's significant new monograph, *Shakespeare's Book*, demonstrates.¹



Mimicking the structure of one of the folio's plays, with five sections or 'Acts', plus a 'Prologue' and 'Epilogue', *Shakespeare's Book* tracks the process of the folio's genesis, preparation, and publication between 1619 and 1623, also offering a brief discussion of this book's afterlives. The 'Prologue' ponders the circumstances in which Shakespeare's colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell took on 'an act of reclamation, conservation and collation that they were expecting the author himself to have undertaken' (11). The first four 'Acts' then each focus on a single year. 'Act One — 1619' begins by looking at the circumstances surrounding the death of Richard Burbage in March 1619, which Laoutaris interprets as a 'catalyst' for the publication of the first folio. He then looks in detail at two key events of the same year. The first is the production by Thomas Pavier and William Jaggard

of a set of quarto playbooks, mostly with Shakespearean connections, that appear to have been sold as a set and bound together by owners as a collection, the project being variously known as the 'Pavier Quartos', the 'Jaggard Quartos', and the 'False Folio'. The second is an edict of May 1619 by the masters and wardens of the Company of Stationers that "no plays that his Majesty's Players do play shall be printed without consent of some of them" (77), which was prompted by a letter from the lord chamberlain, William Herbert, earl of Pembroke, later one of the first folio's dedicatees. 'Act Two — 1621' examines the processes through which the syndicate that published the folio came together, and it begins to examine Anglo-Spanish politics — especially the plan for Prince Charles to marry Infanta Maria Anna of Spain, which eventually collapsed in 1623 — and the late Jacobean court's performance cultures as contexts for the book's publication, a line of discussion that continues in the following 'Acts'.

'Act Three — 1622' and 'Act Four — 1623' juxtapose the printing of the folio with key events and performances linked with the 'Spanish Match', such as Prince Charles and the duke of Buckingham's voyage to Madrid and the presentation of plays on Spanish themes at the English court. 'Act Four' concludes with a detailed account of the marketing and selling of the folio in autumn 1623. 'Act Five', subtitled 'William Shakespeare's Will in his Book', pushes into new territory by exploring fresh contexts for the folio in Shakespeare's biography. In this section's three chapters, Laoutaris suggests that the choice of writers selected to compose dedicatory verses in the folio may reflect Shakespeare's own networks in Oxford, London, and Stratford-upon-Avon; speculates that a sonnet ascribed to 'Cygnus' in the 1605 edition of Jonson's *Sejanus* may have been written by Shakespeare; and plays with the idea that before his death Shakespeare may have been cultivating a stationer named John Robinson as a potential collaborator in printing his plays. The 'Epilogue' looks at the publication of the 1632 second folio and the ways in which copies of Shakespeare folios travelled beyond England through networks fuelled by colonialism and paternalist philanthropy.

Shakespeare's Book, published by trade publisher William Collins, seeks to bring the story of the first folio to a non-specialist audience while also promoting its own intellectual agenda. Given its broad readership, it is a shame that aspects of this book's documentary research appear to have been rushed, resulting in some unfortunate errors. The elegy for Richard Burbage on which Laoutaris places significant emphasis in 'Act One', which includes the lines, "Dick Burbage was their mortal God on earth. / When he expires, lo! all lament the man, / But where's the grief should follow good Queen Anne?" (41), is almost certainly a forgery by John Payne Collier.² Similarly, a closer look at a document cited later

in the same section reveals that the singer-musician who entertained the court in 1619 was not the poet Emilia Lanier (54) but her kinsman Nicholas Lanier, a court lutenist.³ In chapter five — which pays valuable attention to legal disputes over the Globe playhouse in 1619–20 — Laoutaris reads a bill of complaint and other documents from the Court of Requests as straightforwardly authored by Heminges, Condell, and the plaintiff John Witter rather than as the highly mediated products of a specific jurisdiction.

In terms of its intellectual agenda, the closest antecedents of *Shakespeare's Book* are not scholarly books on the first folio itself but innovative takes on Shakespearean biography, such as James Shapiro's *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005). Laoutaris's work here also at times recalls an earlier mode of biographical scholarship. It is not a coincidence that he quotes approvingly the assessment of the relationship between Burbage and Shakespeare in Charlotte Carmichael Stopes's *Burbage and Shakespeare's Stage* (1913): 'As one scholar eloquently expressed it, "In the characters Shakespeare wrote for him Richard Burbage attained his greatest glory. Men did not realise that Shakespeare was dead while Burbage lived"' (56). Immersion in these sources is perhaps one reason why some oddly old-fashioned notes creep into *Shakespeare's Book*. This study describes Lanier with the outmoded term 'poetess' (54), for instance, despite Laoutaris's commendable insistence on the potential role of Anne Shakespeare in preserving Shakespeare's plays. *Shakespeare's Book* also revives the old idea that Shakespeare himself played Prospero in the earliest performances of *The Tempest*, albeit with the support of unpublished research by Martin Wiggins.

Biographical influence also accounts for why 'Shakespeare's Book' is both the title of this book and Laoutaris's preferred alternative to the 'First Folio' as a term for referring to the 1623 publication. Through this and other means, *Shakespeare's Book* simultaneously stresses the contribution of multiple agents in the production and publication of the folio and subsumes them into a joint enterprise for the glorification of Shakespeare. Two extended discussions of Shakespeare's potential role in its planning bracket the account of the folio's production. In the 'Prologue', Laoutaris speculates on whether 'Shakespeare, as he neared his end, had meant his will to send a message to his beloved theatrical friends.... Was his gift of money to his theatre colleagues for the purchase of mourning rings intended to seal a special bond, a covenant?' (10). Similarly, in the final paragraphs of 'Act Four' he sets up his biographical readings of the folio in 'Act 5' by suggesting that 'the processes which ennobled his plays as "Works" in the Folio had their origin in — or at least evolved within an ethos consciously cultivated by — the dramatist himself. Consequently, albeit subtly, Shakespeare's Book incorporates something of his own

design, not simply from beyond the grave but *through* his grave' (295; his emphasis). The idea that the first folio was 'Shakespeare's book' in this specific sense is one of Laoutaris's most significant interventions but also the point at which his arguments become most strained.

Having pointed to some of the limitations of *Shakespeare's Book*, I want to conclude this review by stressing the contribution that it also makes, not least in presenting a detailed account of the first folio's production to a broad audience. This considerable work of synthesis brings together in striking ways the theatrical, literary, and political contexts in which the first folio was produced, and Laoutaris is commendably willing to show his workings and his uncertainties. At its best, *Shakespeare's Book* offers a vivid picture of the production of the first folio as a complex material process, an artistic endeavour, and an act of commemoration.

Notes

- 1 Other notable works in this area include Ben Higgins's *Shakespeare's Syndicate: The First Folio, its Publishers, and the Early Modern Book Trade* (Oxford, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192848840.001.0001>, a deep dive into the work and lives of the five men identified as the folio's printers and publishers on the book's title page and colophon.
- 2 See Arthur Freeman and Janet Ing Freeman, *John Payne Collier: Scholarship and Forgery in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols (New Haven CT, 2004), 1.468–9, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300133301>.
- 3 Letter from Gerard Herbert to Dudley Carleton, 24 May 1619, The National Archives, SP 14/109, f. 100v.