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Shakespeare in Print Before 1623

In studies of Shakespeare in print, it is not uncommon to find narratives of the author's development that culminate in 1623 with the publication of the First Folio. These often-celebratory accounts chart Shakespeare's ascent from a glove-maker's son from Stratford-upon-Avon to the best-selling English playwright in St Paul's Churchyard, the centre of the London book trade. Such narratives have shaped how we read not only Shakespeare's authorship but also the material forms in which his texts appeared. For instance, as the mockable 'upstart crow' of the 1580s matured into the exalted literary author of the 1620s, his texts are said to have undergone a similar transformation from cheap pamphlet to elegant tome, from quarto to folio, from scattered ephemera to collected monument.

Many scholars have called attention to the haphazard path of Shakespeare's texts before 1623, and these accounts have taught us much of what we know about how Shakespeare became 'Shakespeare' and the vital role that stationers played in that transition. Yet, teleological narratives still persist and directly (or indirectly) reinforce readings of Shakespeare and his early publications as if they were always bound for Folio-greatness. Hence, this essay aims to highlight those moments in the history of Shakespeare's publication from 1593 to 1623 that interrupt, counter or simply run parallel to some of the most well-rehearsed accounts of his rise in print. The examples below and the retellings that ensue demonstrate both the diversity and multiplicity of relationships between Shakespeare and his books before the Folio.

Grown from Quarto into Folio

In early modern England, the folio format was associated with prestige, regularly used for books of 'superior merit or some permanent value',¹ and indeed, this is what disturbed the anti-theatricalist William Prynne in 1633 when he witnessed that 'Some Play-books . . . are grown from *Quarto* into

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Folio; which yet beare so good a price and sale, that I cannot but with grief relate it.² For Prynne, plays from the professional theatres were better suited to quarto, a smaller and often less expensive format, which would appropriately reflect the nominal value and moral lightness of plays.

Although Shakespeare's drama no longer qualifies as lowbrow entertainment, a common assumption in current scholarship is that the transformation of Shakespeare's books 'from quarto to folio' was an upgrade, not simply a lateral movement from one format to another. This narrative is not necessarily incorrect – Shakespeare's plays did gain prestige after their publication in Folio, and the collection was a larger, more expensive book – but when unchecked, this account of the author's emergence in print can have troubling implications. First, it can eclipse the bibliographical diversity of Shakespeare's printed plays, promoting the idea that 'cheapness' was uniform across quarto editions, and second, it can represent Shakespeare's works as always evolving into something larger and more valuable with each subsequent edition. A closer look at the bibliographical make-up of Shakespeare's playbooks and the financial aims of the London stationers who produced them reveals instead a variant account of his printed plays marked both by expansions and contractions across editions.

Before 1623, Shakespeare's plays were printed almost exclusively in the quarto format. Quartos were square-shaped books created by folding sheets of printing paper in half twice, thereby creating four leaves and eight pages per sheet. The average quarto playbook was about 7 x 9 inches and approximately 9 sheets (or 72 pages) long. The First Folio, in contrast, measured approximately 13 x 8 inches, and used around 227 sheets of paper (about 900 pages).³ Each sheet in the folio format produced 4 pages (or 2 leaves), the effect of folding sheets in half just once. Because paper came in a variety of sizes, folios were not always larger than quartos, but in the case of Shakespeare's texts, the Folio was the bigger book.

Shakespeare's quartos were relatively inexpensive merchandise. A quarto playbook of *Hamlet*, stitched but unbound, and with or without a paper cover, sold for about six pence. Purchasing the Folio unbound would have cost a customer about fifteen shillings, that is, about thirty times the cost of a single quarto.⁴ Of course, as Joseph A. Dane and Alexandra Gillespie show, quartos were neither inherently cheap to produce nor necessarily deemed inferior by early readers. Any author and any genre might appear in quarto, the choice of format guided by the length of the text, the amount of paper needed to print it and the intended durability of the product.⁵ Ultimately, the choice of format came down to an individual publisher's desire to create a product that was attractive to readers and cost-effective to print. Publishers were a book's financiers, providing the funds to pay for the manuscript, the

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licensing and entrance fees, the paper and the labour of press workers to set the type, ink the pages and assemble the folded sheets.⁶ Typically, paper was the principal expense in publishing a work and accounted for about 50 to 75 per cent of a book's production costs. Thus, any publisher's decision about format would be informed by the quantity (and quality) of paper needed to produce the edition, as well as by ongoing formatting practices in the book trade.⁷ By the 1590s, for instance, quarto was the choice format for professional playbooks; later publishers simply followed suit.

Nonetheless, not all quartos were created equal. Among Shakespeare's editions, we can see an array of lengths and thus different levels of investment from early modern publishers. Depending on the text, printers used between 6.5 and 13 sheets of paper per Shakespeare quarto. *The Taming of the Shrew*, published in 1594, 1596 and 1607, was the shortest play in terms of sheet length, using only 6.5 sheets for a 52-page playbook. The 1604 and 1611 editions of *Hamlet* required twice as much paper, using 13 sheets for a 102-page quarto. While the quarto of *Hamlet* may have been cheap in relation to the Folio, it was significantly more expensive to produce than *Taming*, assuming the same quality of paper was used. If the stationers produced 800 copies per edition, then the publisher of *Hamlet* was using 5,200 more sheets of paper than the publisher of *Taming*. Unfortunately, at the moment, we do not have enough data on production and retail prices of Shakespeare's playbooks to determine a correlation between paper costs and bookshop prices, but we might infer that booksellers could charge more for plays that were longer and used more paper.⁸

Hamlet is an interesting play to examine in terms of sheet length because we can see some of the widest variances across editions. The playwright wrote *Hamlet* for the Chamberlain's Men around 1600. There is no documentary evidence to explain how the manuscript was transmitted from the playhouse to the London publishers, Nicholas Ling and John Trundell, but we know that they hired the stationer Valentine Simmes to print the first quarto (Q1, 1603), using 8.5 sheets of paper per copy (66 pages). One year later, *Hamlet* was published again, this time by Ling alone, and it was again printed by Simmes. This version of the play added approximately 700 new lines and required 13 sheets of paper per copy (102 pages). The second quarto (Q2) also announced the augmentation on its title page: 'Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much againe as it was, according to the true and perfect Coppie.' Clearly, Ling hoped the textual supplements would appeal to readers who wanted the latest and most authoritative version of the play. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine why Ling would invest more money in producing a longer *Hamlet* if he didn't anticipate profiting from it.⁹

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Since the early twentieth century, scholars have been trying to explain the origins of the textual variances in Shakespeare's plays, proposing that early quartos were the author's drafts, scribally produced manuscripts, prompt-books from the theatres, memorially reconstructed manuscripts made by players or audience members or versions for touring, abridged by the author or his company.¹⁰ For Lukas Erne, in fact, the different lengths of these plays suggest that Shakespeare prepared his playtexts with the knowledge that they would be shortened for performance but then later printed in their expanded forms. Erne argues that the lengthier versions of Shakespeare's plays, many of which ended up in the Folio, were designed for readers in an attempt to 'raise the literary respectability of playtexts'.¹¹ All in all, Erne accords Shakespeare significant authority over the state and status of his printed plays and sees him actively engaged in the progression of his texts from quarto to folio.

Despite Erne's persuasive account, the agents with the most invested in the revision and expansion of Shakespeare's printed texts would have been the stationers who published them. The playwright's livelihood did not depend on the perceived improvement of his printed texts across editions, but the careers of the stationers did. Once a manuscript was in the hands of an English publisher, the author typically had no control over how and when it was reproduced, nor did he or she have any claim to the profits from its sale. In fact, in the 1590s and early 1600s, many professional plays were published without any authorial attribution. Specifically, 62.5 per cent of Shakespeare's editions of drama published to 1600 did not even bear his name, that percentage dropping to 12.9 per cent from 1601 to 1623; the publishers of those anonymous playbooks instead chose to advertise the playing company, performance venue and/or plot details. This is not to say that Shakespeare was unaware that his works were being published or that he lacked an opinion on their accuracy, length and marketing. Perhaps he even supplied stationers with different versions of his plays in manuscript. Nevertheless, the publisher would have much more to gain than the author. If stationers thought an expanded version would sell better (and/or at a higher price), then this is the text they produced whether Shakespeare approved of it or not.

While it offers a quintessential example of how Shakespeare's texts can be seen to be developing along a trajectory, *Hamlet's* expansion (from 8.5 to 13 sheets) was an anomaly. Across editions, the majority of Shakespeare's pre-Folio publications saw little to no growth, even though editorial agents made alterations and corrections to the texts with each impression.¹² Of the eighteen plays printed before the Folio, four remained in their first editions (*Love's Labour's Lost*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Troilus and Cressida*

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and *Othello*), and another seven saw no change in sheet lengths across editions (*Titus Andronicus*, *The First Part of the Contention*, *The Taming of a Shrew*, 1 *Henry IV*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Pericles*). Only two plays besides *Hamlet* saw increases in sheet lengths (*The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* and *King Lear*), while the remaining four plays experienced both contractions and expansions across editions (*Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry V*).

The moments when stationers reprinted Shakespeare and sought to save money by cutting paper costs reveal just how much the format and size of the author's works were contingent upon the profit-driven motives of individual stationers. *Richard II*, for instance, decreased in size by a half sheet from Q1 (1597) to Q2 (1598). Using 9 sheets instead of 9.5 sheets per copy may not seem like a noteworthy alteration, but the labour involved in shortening the quarto is worth discussing. To reduce the edition by a half sheet, the printer Valentine Simmes, or his compositors, had to squeeze 75 pages worth of text onto 72 pages. Eliminating three pages required that the compositors increase the number of lines per page in some cases and move some stage directions, which had been centred on their own lines in Q1, to the margins. Simmes was in charge of reducing Q2 in the print shop, but the directive probably came from the play's publisher, Andrew Wise, who was the agent paying for the paper and presswork as well as the one to reap the profits from the sale of the second edition. It seems likely that Wise, not Simmes, made the decision to reduce Q2, for the same cost-saving measure was used with another of Wise's playbooks in 1602, this one printed by Thomas Creede. For the third quarto of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Creede compressed the edition from 12 to 11.5 sheets. That *Richard III* had already reached a third edition just six years after its initial publication suggests that Wise was profiting nicely from his Shakespeare history plays, but this fact did not keep him from seeking ways to trim costs on those same titles. Indeed, it may surprise some scholars to know that Andrew Wise was practising his money-saving strategies on some of the first playbooks to bear Shakespeare's name. While Wise's investments are sometimes treated as a testament to the playwright's rising fame in print, we should not forget that shrinking Shakespeare came with financial incentives for those who were investing more (or less) over time to produce them.

Wise was not alone in seeking out the most economical format when investing in Shakespeare. As Steven Galbraith reminds us, the First Folio was published *in folio* because it was cheaper than publishing all thirty-six plays plus preliminaries in quarto.¹³ In quarto, the project would have required more paper (approximately 352 sheets), and thus more money from its publishers. To create what Galbraith calls this 'folio of economy',

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the number of sheets per play was drastically reduced. Q1 of *Richard II*, for instance, used 9.5 sheets of paper whereas in folio, the play used 5.75. At its shortest, *Richard III* was printed on 11.5 sheets, but in the Folio, the play shrank to 8. These reductions in paper were possible because the publishers, Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount, used double columns and pica typeface, which allowed compositors to squeeze far more text onto a single page than any quarto page realistically could.

The shift from quarto to folio was not a smooth progression, nor one simply reflecting the growth and refinement of Shakespeare's authorship or his texts. In fact, if we consider the format, layouts and sheet lengths of Shakespeare's printed plays, a far less linear account of the author's books, in all their shapes and sizes, emerges.

Shrinking Shakespeare

The phrase 'from quarto to folio' is even less helpful in representing Shakespeare's printed works before 1623 because it excludes an entire class of the author's output: his poetry. When we include his narrative poems and sonnets in our study, another format enters the picture, complicating any sense of a trajectory from one format to another. Despite its relative neglect in textual scholarship, Shakespeare's poetry comprised about 29.4 per cent of his printed editions before the Folio (23 out of 78). *Venus and Adonis* was his bestselling title, going through twelve editions by 1623, and although *Lucrece* only went through half as many in that same period of time, it was reprinted the same number of times as Shakespeare's most successful play-book, 1 *Henry IV* (six editions). Except for 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', published in the quarto volume *Love's Martyr* (1601), the *Sonnets* of 1609 and early quartos of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, the preferred format for Shakespeare's poetry (16 editions out of 23) was octavo, small pocketbooks created by folding printing paper in half three times, thereby creating eight leaves or sixteen pages per sheet.

Of course, even Shakespeare the poet began his life in quarto, a decision made by the publishers of his narrative poems. *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* were the first of Shakespeare's texts to reach print and the first signed with the author's imprimatur, not on the title pages, but in his dedicatory epistles. The publishers of both poems were linked from the start. In 1593, the stationer Richard Field published and printed Q1 *Venus and Adonis*, and he hired his fellow stationer John Harrison to function as the edition's wholesale bookseller, which meant distributing copies to other retail booksellers from his shop at the White Greyhound. The first edition sold out within a year, and the second quarto appeared from Field's press in

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1594, again with Harrison wholesaling copies. The tale of Venus and her reluctant lover apparently proved an attractive investment for Harrison because he purchased the rights to publish the title from Field on 25 June 1594. Harrison had a larger plan for Shakespeare's printed poetry, for just seven weeks prior, he registered his right to copy the author's second narrative poem, *Lucrece*. When Harrison hired Field to print this second title in quarto, he modelled its title page on that of *Venus and Adonis*: two quartos, both alike in layout, both Ovidian in origin, both dedicated to the Earl of Southampton and both clearly attributed to William Shakespeare. If the author intended the poems to be read as a pair, as the Arden Shakespeare editors have argued, then Harrison was taking the cue and marketing the quartos according to Shakespeare's wishes.¹⁴

Around 1595 or 1596, John Harrison shrank Shakespeare, publishing *Venus and Adonis* and then later *Lucrece* (1598) in octavo. Peter Stallybrass and Roger Chartier interpret the format change as an attempt to elevate the standing of Shakespeare's poetry: 'It was perhaps to avoid the ephemeral status of the quarto that John Harrison the elder [published the poems in octavo] . . . The smaller format of the octavo usually carried greater prestige, having been made famous for high-quality, pocket-sized classics by Aldus Manutius at the beginning of the sixteenth century.'¹⁵ The octavos issued from Aldine's Venetian press were highly esteemed volumes in Italian, Latin and Greek; their high price reflected the exceptional care that was taken in printing and editorial labour. Stripping classical and vernacular texts of the cumbersome commentary that so often accompanied his folio editions, Aldus marketed his octavos as *libelli portatiles* [portable books] or *enchiridii* [handbooks], their attraction being that readers could carry these books to and fro, catching a few pages of reading during their busy days.¹⁶

Its size and portability was, in fact, what kept Shakespeare's contemporaries from treating the octavo as simply a medium of prestige. In his octavo *Certain Elegies* (1618), Henry Fitzgeffrey, for instance, jests that the real benefit to being published in octavo (rather than folio and quarto) was that his books would be too small to be repurposed as wrapping paper – or worse, toilet paper. He tells his bookbinder to publish him in

the Smallest size,
Least I bee eaten vnder Pippin-pyes.
Or in th' Apothicaries shop bee seene
To wrap Drugg's: or to dry Tobacco in.
First (might I chuse) I would be bound to wipe,
Where he discharged last his Glister-pipe.¹⁷

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Indeed, it is worth asking whether any of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have considered publication from quarto to octavo an advancement. When building his Oxford library, Sir Thomas Bodley discouraged the keeper from acquiring octavos from donors, instead directing him to solicit larger and more expensive volumes. Not only were octavos more accessible in price than some larger folio and quarto editions, they were more difficult to secure and chain to shelves, a problem that had to be negotiated throughout the first decade of the library's formation.¹⁸

For Harrison, then, a variety of factors probably motivated his decision to shrink Shakespeare and reformat both narrative poems. First, using the octavo format was a cost-saving measure. In octavo, each copy of *Venus and Adonis* used only four sheets of paper per copy, down from seven in quarto. The savings in paper for *The Rape of Lucrece* were even larger, the octavo using only five sheets instead of twelve. Andrew Murphy concurs that Harrison's choice was a financial one, remarking that the octavo editions would also have even been faster to print for Field's pressmen.¹⁹ If Harrison expected to publish subsequent editions of the poems, then he was positioned to save even more in production costs over the long run. Faster and cheaper production of Shakespeare seemed to have been Harrison's end goal.

Shrinking Shakespeare also helped the bookseller brand the narrative poems as Ovidian. That both *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* draw from Ovid's works is common knowledge in Shakespeare criticism – the title page of *Venus and Adonis* even touting a Latin epigram from Ovid's *Amores*, but for Shakespeare's earliest readers, this association had to be constructed and then maintained in the bookseller's stall. As Adam Hooks has shown, Harrison and Field were already publishing editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as well as the *Amores* when they added Shakespeare's poems to their *oeuvre*, and thus Harrison's bookshop, the White Greyhound, 'served as a nexus in which a nascent vernacular Ovidianism coexisted with the Latin originals that inspired it'.²⁰ Moreover, it should be noted that all of Ovid's editions at Harrison's bookshop were formatted as pocketbooks: *Opera* (1585, 1603) in octavo, *Heroides* and other amatory poems (1594, 1603) in octavo, and *Metamorphoses* (1589, 1603) in sixteenmo (smaller than the octavo). Although Ovid could be found in a variety of quarto editions in St Paul's Churchyard, the poet's works were consistently published in small book formats in England as well as on the Continent. If creating a link to Ovid was deemed a successful way to market Shakespeare, then Harrison's choice of format further cemented the association. Sixteenth-century critics drew the connection quickly, and in the first literary review of Shakespeare as author, his poems and their Ovidian origins are cited. Francis Meres comments in *Palladis Tamia* (1598), 'the sweete

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wittie soule of *Ouid* liues in mellifluous & hony-tongued *Shakespeare*, witnes his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his priuate friends'.²¹

That Shakespeare's poems, including those published in the anthology *The Passionate Pilgrim*, continued to circulate in little books surely affected the ways that readers did and were imagined to engage with the author and his texts. In the university play *The First Part of the Return from Parnassus*, the foolish courtier Gullio vows to 'worship sweet Mr. Shakespeare' and that 'to honoure him will lay his Venus and Adonis vnder my pillowe.'²² Gullio's sentiment gestures not simply at the portability of the volume, which shapes when and how it was read, but also the book's associations with bed-time reading, helpful in arousing a little more than reverence for sweet verse, as Sasha Roberts suggests.²³ While *The Return from Parnassus* mocks Gullio's gushing response to Shakespeare, the play captures just how a little book might inspire a sense of intimacy with an author's words. Unlike a family bible or a thick folio chained to shelves in Bodley's library, Shakespeare's poetry could be taken into one's own private chamber to be enjoyed according to one's predilections. Gullio not only sleeps with his Shakespeare, but has also memorised it, reciting passages verbatim from *Venus and Adonis*. Once Gullio learns his Shakespeare 'by heart', he recites it like a prayer, exalting the author as a deity, treating *Venus and Adonis* as the guiding book of prayers. That devotionals and Shakespeare's poems were similarly formatted as pocketbooks would have helped readers make the connection.

Gullio idolises Shakespeare the poet, but the octavo format was thought to inspire a different kind of rapport between reader and author. In her study of Aldine's octavos, Helena K. Szépe demonstrates how the printer designed the format to 'promote a close relationship between the reader and the author', the book shaping the author as the reader's companion with whom one might pass the time.²⁴ If the smaller editions of Shakespeare's poems were available and for a price that was unrestrictive to a great variety of readers, then Harrison helped to facilitate this kind of access to a small and companionable Shakespeare. While the 1623 collection garners so much critical attention for marking an important shift in the bibliographical presentation of the author's works, another change in format from quarto to octavo may have been just as important in guaranteeing a readership for his poetry and perhaps securing his name a place in literary history.

From Scattered to Collected

In their prefatory epistle to the First Folio (1623), Shakespeare's fellow actors John Heminge and Henry Condell direct readers to view the previously

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printed editions of Shakespeare's plays as 'maimed, and deformed'. Claiming that these early publications were surreptitiously printed by 'injurious impostors', Heminge and Condell promise readers that the plays have now been 'cur'd' and made 'perfect of their limbes'.²⁵ According to the Folio's makers, the attraction of the collection was that it nursed the 'maimed' corpus of Shakespeare back to health by making it whole. But, this construction of Shakespeare's works gives way to another related narrative, one still present in scholarship: the representation of his texts as dispersed, untended and disabled before 1623. It is unlikely, however, that Shakespeare's texts were thought of as parts missing from a whole before 1623. Before the Folio, both stationers and readers treat his works not as disorganised fragments but as parts of specialised stock, items in a historical series and works of a particular genre. While the First Folio was apparently successful in persuading readers that this gathering of plays was the unified corpus of a single author, we should not allow this narrative to overshadow the many effective and alluring ways, other than and in addition to authorship, that Shakespeare's texts were assembled before 1623.

In his study of Renaissance playbook publication, Zachary Lesser demonstrates that to protect their investments, London publishers developed specialisations and focused on producing certain kinds of books for specific groups of customers.²⁶ With a specialisation guiding investments, publishers could construct relationships among books and market them, perhaps even encouraging customers to buy a volume or two at a time. Because most small-format books were sold to customers unbound and stitched with a simple paper cover, readers had the option of buying any selection of titles, storing them as paper books, or hiring a binder to secure them in a protective material such as calfskin or vellum;²⁷ these bound volumes, still in their sixteenth- or seventeenth-century bindings and also known as *Sammelbände*, can show us how readers organised their books as well as indicating when they were responding to a stationer's advice to buy titles together. As we saw above, the bookseller John Harrison was specialising in Ovidian poetry at the White Greyhound, positioning Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* in close proximity to both each other and other love poems on the market. A *Sammelbänd* at the Folger Shakespeare Library joins the two titles with three other poetry octavos in vellum, indicating that at least one reader was willing to compile a collection of Shakespeare titles, not necessarily because of their authorship or their Ovidian origins, but simply because they were of the same genre.²⁸

Andrew Wise provides another fine example of a publisher who was investing and organising Shakespeare's plays according to a specialisation. Wise seems to have had a knack for publishing series or books that could be