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Folio Rodeo: Shakespeare's First Folio Visits Texas

Reviewed by LAUREN LIEBE

400 years after the fact, a death can be a glorious cause for celebration. To commemorate the life of William Shakespeare through his works, the Folger Shakespeare Library encouraged universities, museums, libraries, and other institutions to bid for the opportunity to host one of their 83 copies of the First Folio as part of their nationwide *First Folio! The Book That Gave Us Shakespeare* tour, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death. One location was selected from each state, as well as Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico. To be chosen as Texas's host venue, Texas A&M University organized a broad array of events to take place in the semester surrounding the folio's visit, including performances, a film series, public lectures, and educational workshops for both students and the general public. There was a great drive to foster interest in the Folio within the community by making all officially sponsored events free and open to the public, and several of the events—official or otherwise—were held in public venues off campus. The affectionately termed “Folio Rodeo” ran from mid-January until the beginning of May, extending Texas's celebration of the Bard well beyond the Folio's month-long visit. By contextualizing the Folio exhibit with community-centric events, Texas A&M University's Folio Rodeo encouraged scholars and enthusiasts of all ages to move beyond the book itself and shape their own Shakespeares as part of a living tradition.

The folio itself was housed in the Stark Galleries of the Texas A&M University Memorial Student Center, in a private viewing room. Dim lighting and carefully controlled temperature and humidity settings (no small feat in the eastern Texas springtime) were in place to preserve the book. My first encounter with the Folio was over the university's spring break, while I was serving as a docent for the exhibit. I had expected the exhibit to be relatively quiet, as most of the students had already left campus. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised to find that many Texans—mostly local, but some from quite far away—had chosen this relatively calm moment on campus to visit the exhibit. I spoke with several of them at length, interested in learning their reasons for visiting the Folio. During my time as a docent, I met a businessman with a long-standing interest in book history; an elderly couple who were decidedly unimpressed by the book itself, but very enthusiastic in speaking about various performances they had seen; a family with four young children who were excited to “meet” Shakespeare; and many others.

The Folio itself lay open to *Hamlet's* famous “To be or not to be” speech, and visitor after visitor read the words aloud, embracing the language that they had heard again and again in endless variation, from high school English classes to popular culture. In some respects, the Folio Rodeo might have more accurately been the *Hamlet* Hoedown. Of the twelve performances and film showings, five were various iterations of *Hamlet*, complementing the Folio's presentation of Hamlet's ubiquitous soliloquy. Although the core reason for the multiple iterations

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of *Hamlet* seems to lie in the play's familiarity, this repetition allowed for competing Hamlets, as demonstrated by the juxtaposed performances of Hidden Room Theatre's *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and Present Company's performance of the traditional playtext, both brilliant productions in their own rights, and utterly at odds with one another.

Brudermord is a condensed *Hamlet* performed in the style of an eighteenth-century puppet show, featuring Sicilian rod marionettes designed by Mystery Bird Puppet Show. The text was translated from a manuscript found in a German monastery, and the performance was constructed as a test of Tiffany Stern's hypothesis that oddities in the text reflected a version of *Hamlet* adapted by traveling performers as a puppet show, a hypothesis proven by the innovative performance's success at venues ranging from the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Conference (October 2013) to the London Globe (May 2015).¹

The performance opened with sound, temporarily directing the audience's attention away from the faux-gilded stage toward the back of the venue as the narrators (Judd Farris and Jason Newman) entered playing the performance's catchy theme music on drum and guitar. This entrance effectively drew the audience into the performance by traversing the boundary between audience space and performance space. Audience participation became a theme throughout the night: during intermissions to allow the puppeteers to change sets, the narrators slid into a comedy double act, with the foppish comic hassling his straight man with perfume or makeup before turning his attention on the audience and playfully drawing them into the act. The narrators also performed brief, vaudevillian song-and-dance routines inspired by 18th century pantomime performances.

The puppeteers brought a great deal of pathos to their performances, characterizing each puppet differently through their physical actions. Nervous Gertrude perpetually trembled; Horatio's quick entrances made him seem ever vigilant, and Phantasma, a French courtier who appears in the second half of the play, flew in and out of his scenes, ensuring that even grim moments like Ophelia's suicide and the final duel never become too serious. This darkly comic take on *Hamlet* was a magnificent performance, and it served as a perfect prelude to Present Company's *Hamlet* the following evening, reminding audience members how much *fun* Shakespeare's plays, even the tragedies, can be.

Both performances were held in the Amity building of downtown Bryan, Texas, a former furniture store turned community space. The run-down aesthetic of the venue made both performances seem slightly illicit and ephemeral, and both troupes embraced the atmosphere, albeit in drastically different ways. *Brudermord*, even with its elaborate costuming and gorgeous puppet stage, gave the illusion that it was being mounted by a shyster impresario and his troupe, coyly courting the audience's favor through curtain call and applause—then dashing out of the warehouse's back door into the night as if their creditors were in pursuit. The performance held all the wonder and ephemerality of a carnival, full of color and showmanship, with just a hint of something dark and scandalous underneath the narrators' welcoming facades.

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By contrast, Present Company's *Hamlet* was designed specifically with the space of the Amity Building in mind, and its inventive use of the venue was one of the highlights of the performance. This show featured minimalist staging consisting of a wooden framework with six open windows—one for each of the actors other than Hamlet himself, who was the only character not doubled—containing metal chairs and framed by various hooks and hand-shaped pegs from which bits of costuming hung, ready to allow the actors to adopt multiple identities. The middle of the framework supported double black curtains to be used during the play-within-the-play sequence and for Polonius's death. A large, wheeled box served alternately as an elevated platform, a bench, and Ophelia's grave. Many of the play's scenes, however, took place beyond this conventional playing space. Hamlet's first entrance into the court of Denmark involved him noisily opening the building's warehouse door, interrupting Claudius's speech and redirecting the audience's attention from the royal gathering in the conventional playing space to Hamlet's entrance behind them. Clearly, this Hamlet would not be ignored, even if he was, at times, little more than a petulant child.

Hamlet opened in complete darkness, with the actors whispering “words, words, words,” priming the audience for a performance that emphasized the ways in which mere speech can never replace action. Just as Hamlet's loud entrance denied Claudius the ability to be heard, so too did Hamlet's later inability to act—whether in enacting revenge or in expressing his love for Ophelia—serve to highlight how ephemeral, how ghostly, words are in this play. In the great, echoing space of the warehouse, moments of silence and stillness felt oppressive, and Hamlet's constant need to “unpack [his] heart with words” took on the added significance of having to fill the cavernous room.

Even when the prince was not physically present, his letters to Ophelia appeared as a frequent stage prop, changing hands several times in her early scenes. Often, these letters acted as a means of binding Ophelia to her family members. Verbal and physical affection between her and Laertes developed their usually overlooked relationship, while making her romance with Hamlet seem cold by comparison, though through no fault of hers. Indeed, the interpersonal relationships in this play that often fall flat on the page were presented here as painfully tangible. With the removal of Fortinbras and the Norwegian invasion subplot, the turmoil in Denmark moved ever inward.

Although presented as a serious interpretation of the source text, Present Company's *Hamlet* evoked laughter as well as tears by highlighting the humorous moments in the text and allowing them to speak physically as well as verbally. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were frequently confused for one another by other characters due to their habit of finishing one another's lines or speaking as one. Hamlet's insistence to his former friends that “man delights not me” was playfully teased out throughout his interactions with the flirtatious Players (whose actors doubled as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). Polonius's inability to relate to his son and his infamous verbosity were both played for laughs to break up the utter seriousness behind this Hamlet's “antic disposition.” Some moments, however, that are usually played for laughs, took on a darker tone in this performance, with the gravedigger's scene presented as far more grim than funny. Lit only by the

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gravediggers' headlamps (and later by Horatio's and Hamlet's flashlights), this section of the play revisited the eerie darkness of the ghost's appearances, suggesting that while Ophelia might be dead, she was certainly not gone.

The use of space in this performance denied the audience the ability to maintain any semblance of a fourth wall. By placing the audience in the center of the playing space, Present Company forced them to be complicit in the story's horrors, both past and present. As the "attendees" of Claudius and Gertrude's wedding—and presumably Old Hamlet's funeral as well—the audience became a silent, but not passive, witness. As the court of Denmark crumbled, so too did the spatial boundaries between audience and player, forcing the audience into the action of the play. This blurring between playing space and audience became particularly effective when Ophelia distributed her "flowers" (here dried sticks) to the crowd, leaning over participants to reach others on the second row, and culminated with Ophelia's burial. The box which had served so many purposes earlier was moved to the center aisle of the audience—the center of the entire space—and opened to serve as Ophelia's grave. The final scene returned to the conventional playing space in a brief, if illusory, return to proper court etiquette for the fatal duel. Hamlet collapsed atop the same box used to bury Ophelia. The full cast chorused the final lines of the play with Horatio, and this highly condensed version of Horatio's final three speeches allowed for no hope of better days from the absent Fortinbras. Instead, the need to "speak to the yet unknowing world how these things came about" echoed the frequent refrain of "words, words, words" whispered from the shadows and the oppressive silences that Hamlet sought to fill, stressing both the necessity and the impermanence of speech which dominated this performance.

The first *Hamlet* of the Folio Rodeo season, however, presented the fall of Denmark without the "words, words, words" that haunted Present Company's performance. Svend Gade and Heinz Schall's 1921 silent film adaptation of *Hamlet* kicked off the Alternative Shakespeares Film Series. In this version, Asta Nielsen portrays Hamlet as a woman who has been forced to live as a man for the good of the kingdom. As with the other films in the series, *Hamlet* was introduced by a scholar working in a related field, in this case Anne Morey from Texas A&M University's English Department. The weeks that followed presented films such as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and Tom Gustafson's *Were the World Mine* that constructed modern Shakespeare as a fluid, eternally adaptable author. Another adaptation of *Hamlet*, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* was screened a few weeks before the live performances, and served as a notable example of how the play can be structured to speak to any time and any place. Set during the 1995 insurgencies in Kashmir, this harsh production emphasizes the connection between the family and the community—an element that is often overlooked in performances of *Hamlet*. The series showcased how different nations, cultures, eras, and age groups have adapted, appropriated, reshaped, and borrowed from Shakespeare's works to demonstrate the all-too-human concerns that connect his oeuvre.

Each film was followed by a question and answer session led by the scholar who introduced the film. By framing these films with scholarly discussion, the film series invited audience members to think critically about the performances

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they had just witnessed. Since the film series unofficially began the Folio Rodeo festivities, this presentation of entertainment alongside scholarly critique set the stage for some of the more academic events to follow. As part of the opening ceremony for the Folio exhibit, Laura Estill presented a lecture titled “In Praise of Quartos: Shakespeare’s Early Books,” contextualizing the significance of the Folio by focusing on the works that preceded it in print. Just as the films and performances stressed Shakespeare’s continuing importance across time and space, Estill’s presentation and further scholarly lectures stressed the importance of understanding Shakespeare’s historical moment as a means of connecting him to the present. Douglas Bruster’s (University of Texas at Austin) lecture “Shakespeare Today” further emphasized the need to continue reexamining Shakespeare’s works with his argument that *Arden of Faversham* will soon be included in the Shakespearean canon. However, the final lecture of the season from James Shapiro (Columbia University) refocused on a narrow segment of Shakespearean history in a talk based around the language of equivocation in *Macbeth* and the findings in his book *The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*.

Likewise, the Cushing Rare Books Library’s “Within the Book and Volume” exhibit on early modern printing sought to portray the world that Shakespeare inhabited. This exhibition featured displays on the origins of English printing, the development of the popular press, early New World exploration, and the rise of English nationalism. Early printed editions of the works of Jonson, Donne, Milton, and others demonstrated the variety of forms that early modern English literature could take. The Cushing Library further emphasized the materiality of the early modern book through hosting a hands-on book printing workshop. At this family-friendly event, participants made and marbled paper, set type, and printed on an English common press. Beyond the performances, these scholarly events and exhibitions illuminated the methods through which Hamlet’s words survived to be spoken today.

In addition to these events, performances, and exhibitions, Texas A&M University hosted a series of teaching workshops designed by the Folger Shakespeare Library and aimed toward helping grade school teachers become more adept at instilling a love of the Bard in their students. Much like Present Company’s *Hamlet*’s focus on “words, words, words,” these workshops focused on getting the teachers—and through them, their students—comfortable with Shakespeare’s language. By removing the intimidation factor of Elizabethan English through interacting with short scenes and small snippets of text, students of all ages become fluent in Shakespeare in a way that isn’t possible through historical context alone. Led by Cushing Library’s Kevin O’Sullivan and the Greta Brasgalla from the Folger Teachers Corps, these workshops were attended by teachers at both public and private schools whose students ranged from 5th to 12th grade. Each session began, as all good Shakespeare begins, with insults to acclimate the students (or teachers) to the colorful possibilities behind the Bard’s seemingly impenetrable language. From there, the workshops moved through a series of activities designed to get students speaking and performing their way through the texts. Using brief but powerful scenes such as the murder of the Macduffs, the workshops placed the teachers in the roles of their students, having

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them cut, direct, and analyze the texts through an active engagement with the language and processes behind making Shakespeare's plays continue to speak to modern audiences.

Students were also encouraged to play with Shakespeare's language themselves through a series of acting workshops. Elementary, middle, and high school students participated in acting classes taught by the EmilyAnn Theater Company, which introduced them to the basics of performing Shakespeare. Texas A&M University students had the opportunity to attend master classes with Hidden Room theater director Beth Burns to learn directing techniques, scansion, and puppetry. These events encouraged younger members of the community to engage in making Shakespeare and to continue the legacy that has carried Shakespeare's name into the present and around the world.

The spirit of Shakespeare inspired the community beyond visiting the Folio in person or attending the performances, films, lectures, and workshops organized as an official part of the Folio tour. Local bars teamed up with the New York Shakespeare Exchange's Sonnet Project to host Shakesbeer, a bar crawl interspersed with live performances. The campus libraries themed their annual Edible Books Festival around Shakespeare, offering a special prize for "best bard." Professors across the university incorporated the Folio events into their syllabi, occasionally producing additional events in the process. The department of performance studies presented a selection of Shakespeare's sonnets and scenes from *Twelfth Night* as a pre-show for *Brudermord*, as well as staging an experimental *Macbeth*. Visual arts students designed digital illustrations for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which were displayed in the lobby of the Amity building to be viewed before both *Brudermord* and *Hamlet*. The community involvement in expanding and shaping the Folio Rodeo highlighted Shakespeare's persistence in the public sphere, in the ability of his words to be performed and reformed in ways that can still surprise us.



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Notes

1. Tiffany Stern, “‘If I could see the Puppets Dallying’: *Der Bestrafte Brudermord* and Hamlet’s Encounters with the Puppets,” *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 31.3 (2013): 337-352.

Lauren Liebe is a Ph.D. student at Texas A&M University. Her primary research interests are in English drama from the late medieval period through the Restoration, video game and new media studies, and the aesthetics of hyper-violence in popular culture.