

THE EXCEPTIONAL PUBLICATION HISTORY OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

How can we know that an author was involved in the publication of his work? The fact that his name appears on the title page is not sufficient. The author might be dead; or he might just have left the edition of the work to another person; or this other person might have used a pseudonym instead of the author's real name. Ample evidence can be given for each of these three cases.

But there are three criteria permitting us reliably to conclude that the author participated actively in the publication of his work:

- 1) The work is prefaced by a dedication to some patron and the author has put his name at the bottom of the dedication.
- 2) The work is prefaced by an epistle to the reader written by the author.
- 3) The work is prefaced by commendatory verses.

In these cases we may be fairly sure that the author will also have proofread his work and that the text will not be corrupted. However, a text may be good without the author's involvement (if it was printed from an authentic manuscript, a "true copy" as it was then termed). Or the text may be good because the author was watching the printing process in the background without coming to the fore as the editor of his own work (this too happened). But if the text is corrupt, we may safely conclude the author was not involved.

It is clear that when an author dedicates his work to a patron and/or addresses the reader he is actively involved in the publication process. Also: the praise of an author by others makes no sense if the author himself does not acknowledge his authorship, either because he wants to stay anonymous or because he is using a pseudonym.

How do Shakespeare's plays compare with those of contemporary authors?

Let us compare Shakespeare with **Ben Jonson**, his most famous contemporary fellow-playwright. Jonson is the most appropriate choice for still another reason. Many (not all) of Shakespeare's plays had been published in a quarto format before the edition of his collected plays in 1623 in folio format. Many of Ben Jonson's plays (in fact all of them) had also been published in quarto format before they were edited in folio format in 1616 (during his lifetime, 21 years before his death).

Below is the table of the 36 plays contained in the Shakespeare First Folio (1623) followed by a table listing 8 plays of Ben Jonson that were first printed in quarto format and afterwards in folio. The tables answer to following questions:

- 1) In which year was the play printed for the first time?
- 2) Title of the play.
- 3) Did the first edition, the quarto edition, if there was one, show at least one of the three relevant criteria (dedication, epistle, commendatory verses)?
- 4) Did the subsequent folio edition contain single plays dedicated to a patron (a person or an institution)?
- 5) Does the author's name appear on the title page? Or was it published either pseudonymously or anonymously.
- 6) Is it a good or a bad text?

In this table the "F" behind the printing year means that no quarto edition of the play exists and that it was first printed in the First Folio in 1623, a case that only applies to some of Shakespeare's plays (16 in all) and to none of Ben Jonson's.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
No.	Year printed	Title	Quarto Dedication/ epistle commendatory verses	Folio Dedication	Anonymous or with name on title page of Quarto	Quality of text: good/ bad
1	1591	King John (quarto title: <i>The troublesome reign of King John</i>)	none	none	Anonymous	bad
2	1623 F	Henry VI, first part	no quarto	none		good
3	1594	Henry VI, second part	none	none	Anonymous	bad
4	1595	Henry VI, third part	none	none	Anonymous	bad
5	1594	Titus Andronicus	none	none	Anonymous	good
6	1597	Richard III	none	none	First anonymous, then William Shake-speare	good
7	1597	Richard II	none	none	First anonymous, then William Shake-speare	good
8	1623 F	Comedy of Errors	no quarto	none		good
9	1623 F	The Two Gentlemen of Verona	no quarto	none		good
10	1594	The Taming of the Shrew (titel of quarto: The Taming of A Shrew)	none	none		bad
11a	1597	Romeo and Juliet	none	none	Anonymous	bad
11b	1599	Romeo and Juliet	none	none	Anonymous	good
12	1598	Henry IV, first part	none	none	First anonymous, then William Shake-speare	good
13a	1597	Love's Labour's Lost	none	none	Anonymous	bad
13b	1598	Love's Labour's Lost	none	none	W. Shakespere	good
14	1600	Midsummernight's Dream	none	none	William Shakespeare	good
15	1600	The Merchant of Venice	none	none	William Shakespeare	good
16	1600	Henry IV, second part	none	none	William Shakespeare	good
17	1600	Much Ado About Nothing	none	none	William Shakespeare	good
18	1600	Henry V	none	none	Anonymous	bad
19	1623 F	Julius Caesar	no quarto	none		good
20	1623F	As You Like It	no quarto	none		good
21	1623F	Twelfth Night	no quarto	none		good
22a	1603	Hamlet, 1st quarto	none	none	William Shake-speare	bad
22b	1604	Hamlet, 2nd quarto	none	none	William Shakespeare	good
24	1602	The Merry Wives of Windsor	none	none	William Shakespeare	bad
25	1608	King Lear	none	none	William Shak-speare	bad
26	1609	Troilus and Cressida	(*)	none	William Shakespeare	good
27	1623F	All's Well that Ends Well	no quarto	none		good
28	1623F	Measure for Measure	no quarto	none		good
29	1622	Othello	none	none	William Shakespeare	good
30	1623 F	Macbeth	no quarto	none		good
31	1623F	Antony and Cleopatra	no quarto	none		good

32	1623F	Coriolanus	no quarto	none		good
33	1623F	Timon of Athens	no quarto	none		bad
34	1623F	Cymbeline	no quarto	none		good
35	1623F	The Winter's Tale	no quarto	none		good
36	1623F	The Tempest	no quarto	none		good

From this table we can see that of the 36 plays in the First Folio only 20 were published in quarto format before 1623, 16 for the first time in the First Folio of 1623. Othello was published for the first time not earlier than in 1622.

The columns showing the dedications and epistles to the reader by the author are empty, simply because it is a particular feature of Shakespeare not to write dedications or epistles. Commendatory verses by other authors are equally completely lacking.

There is but one exception, indicated by the asterisk for *Troilus and Cressida*. This play is prefaced by an epistle to the reader, a rather odd epistle. The author of the epistle was not the author of the play himself. This is, to say the least, very odd: there is only 1 out of 20 plays (the quartos) of Shakespeare which shows an epistle to the reader, and this epistle to the reader was not by the author himself.

Compare with the table of 8 of Ben Jonson's Plays. The contrast is striking.

No.	Year printed	Title	Quarto: Dedication/epistle commendatory verses	Folio	Anonymous or with name on title page	Quality of text: good/bad
1	1601	Every Man in His Humour	none	Dedication to William Camden	Ben Jonson	good
2	1600	Every Man Out of His Humour	none	Dedication to the Inns of Court	B.I. (Initials)	good
3	1600	Cynthia's Revels	none	Dedication to the Court	Ben Jonson	good
4	1602	Poetaster	Dedication to M. Richard Martin	Dedication to Richard Martin	Ben Jonson	good
5	1605	Sejanus	Epistle to the Reader + commendatory verses	Dedication to Lord Aubigny	Ben Jonson	good
6	1607	Volpone	Dedication to the two Universities	To the two Universities	Ben Jonson	good

7	1611	Catiline his Conspiracy	Dedication to the Earl of Pembroke + Epistle to Reader + Commendatory verses	Dedication to the Earl of Pembroke	Ben Jonson	good
8	1612	The Alchemist	Dedication to Lady Wroth + Epistle to Reader	Dedication to Lady Wroth	Ben Jonson	good

All of Ben Jonson's texts were good texts. Ben Jonson cared for the edition of his plays.

Shakespeare seems not to have cared for them. Of the 20 quarto texts 12 were first published in corrupt versions. 3 of these bad texts were reissued in quarto format with good texts: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Hamlet*. The good texts of the second quartos of these plays suggest authorial cooperation. Indeed, if we look separately at the quarto editions from 1598 to 1604, it will appear that the author did care for the texts.

Period 1598-1608

No.	Year printed	Title	Quarto: Dedication/ epistle commendatory verses	Folio	Anonymous or with name on title page of Quarto	Quality of text: good/ bad
1a	1597	Romeo and Juliet			Anonymous	Bad text
1b	1599	Romeo and Juliet			Anonymous	Good text
2	1598	Henry IV, first part			First anonymous, then William Shakespeare	Good text
3a	1597	Love's Labour's Lost			Anonymous	Bad text
3b	1598	Love's Labour's Lost			W. Shakespere	Good text
4	1600	Midsummernight's Dream			William Shakespeare	Good text
5	1600	The Merchant of Venice			William Shakespeare	Good text
6	1600	Henry IV, second part			William Shakespeare	Good text
7	1600	Much Ado About Nothing			William Shakespeare	Good text
8	1600	Henry V			Anonymous	Bad text
9a	1603	Hamlet, 1st quarto			William Shake-speare	Bad text

9b	1604	Hamlet, 2nd quarto			William Shakespeare	Good text
10	1602	The Merry Wives of Windsor			William Shakespeare	Bad text
11	1608	King Lear			William Shak-speare	Bad text
12	1609	Troilus and Cressida	*		William Shakespeare	Good text

Of the 10 plays between 1598 and 1604 eight (8) had good texts. Two (2), *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, had bad texts. *Henry V* was published anonymously, but *Merry Wives* was published with the name William Shakespeare on the title page. Yet the author undertook nothing to provide for a good text.

Romeo and Juliet:

A bad text was published in 1597, anonymously. But the play was re-issued in 1599 in a good version. On the title page of this second edition we find an additional information: “Newly corrected, augmented, and amended.” The augmentations and amendments are such as “to suggest an author’s hand” (E.K. Chambers, *Shakespeare*, Vol. I, Oxford, 1930, p. 341). Yet there was no author’s name on the title page. The second edition was still an anonymous one.

Love’s Labour’s Lost:

There was a first edition in 1596/7. No copy of this edition is extant. In 1598 it was republished. On the title-page was a remark similar to that on the title page of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1599: “Newly corrected and augmented”. The title page bears the name of the author: “By W. Shakespere” (without “a”).

Apart from two plays, all plays published between 1598 and 1604 were good texts, suggesting that a “true copy”, an authentic manuscript, an author’s manuscript had been used. Apart from one, *Romeo and Juliet*, all of them bear the name William Shakespeare on the title page. None of them was prefaced by a dedication, an epistle to the reader; none of them contained commendatory verses.

The two bad texts are:

Henry V:

The first good text appears in the Folio of 1623. The author undertook nothing to immediately remedy the bad text.

The Merry Wives of Windsor:

The first good text appears in the Folio of 1623. The author undertook nothing to immediately remedy the bad text.

A third bad text, *Hamlet*,

is a special case. A good text did exist as early as July 1602 when it was registered for publication. For some reason the printing was delayed. From this authentic text, the “true copy”, was printed the good text of 1604. Note on the title page: “Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much again as it was according to the true and perfect copy.”

What was happening?

If Shakespeare of Stratford, who lived on until 1616, were the author, it is difficult to explain why, contrary to other playwrights like Ben Jonson, George Chapman, John Marston, etc., he never dedicated one of his plays, he never wrote an epistle to the reader, he didn’t care adding his name to the title page of the good version of *Romeo and Juliet* and he didn’t care to procure good versions of *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

If Shakespeare of Stratford were the author we have to resort to all sorts of tales. In 1598 he started taking a keen interest in having his plays printed in good versions. But after 1604 he lost any interest — completely. He didn’t even care that another wrote an epistle to the reader for *Troilus and Cressida* in 1609. For the remaining 12 years, he left it to his fellow-actors to collect his plays and to provide

them with corrected texts. He seems to have been indifferent to the publication of a bad text of *King Lear* in 1608. In the same year 1608 it was even nothing to him that his name was put on the title page of a play which was not his: *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, “written by W. Shakspeare”.

We need some explanation. For instance, Shakespeare was so absorbed by his business in Stratford that he was not willing to squander his precious time with correcting a bad text such as that of *King Lear* in 1608. Nor of *Henry V* and the other plays with bad texts.

It does not sound convincing. But in fact we don't need this sort of tales. The epistle to the reader of the editors in the First Folio of 1623 supplies us with a credible explanation.

“It had been a thing, we confess, worthy to have been wished, that the author himself had lived to have set forth and overseen his own writings; but since it has been ordained otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you don't envy his friends, the office of their care and pain to have collected and published them, as where, before, you were abused with divers stolen copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors that exposed them: even those are now offered to your view cured and perfect of their limbs; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them.”

The text expressed in other words: Shakespeare did oversee the printing of some works, between 1598 and 1604. But he could not do it for all of the plays, not for *Henry V*, *Merry Wives*, etc. Because in the midst of his overseeing the publication he died.

It is in 1604 that the stream of publications broke off. It is reasonable to infer that the author Shakespeare died in 1604.