



Keeping Shakespeare Relevant

The island of Ven is visible from Elsinore Castle in Denmark. One end of Ven is visible from the other. On it, the foundations of a mansion still trace its ancient floor plan. In its heyday, Ven was the personal fief of Tycho Brahe, an eccentric scientist who built the mansion in the 1500s after he was granted the entire island as an immense private laboratory. There, he discovered supernovas, then considered scientifically impossible. Luminaries from across the world visited his Gatsbyesque estate. Among them were members of the King's Men, William Shakespeare's acting crew.

For Professor Eric Rasmussen, who recently visited the island, this explained the opening of "Hamlet."

In it, Bernardo, a guard at Elsinore Castle, describes a visitation by a ghost as occurring "Last night of all/When yond same

star that's westward from the pole/Had made his course to/illuminate that part of heaven/Where now it burns."

The Bard had made a popular culture reference.

Rasmussen, 54, is the chair of English at the University of Nevada, Reno. An expert on Shakespeare, Rasmussen's work on the subject has consisted of two things: Tracking down the first print edition of Shakespeare's plays, and making literature, especially Shakespeare, accessible to students.

He likes to explain literature by way of pop culture references and jokes. He gestures with his hands as he relates old ideas to modern life. The publication of the First Folio in 1623, he said, marked a revolution in literature.

The word "folio" refers to a large, once-folded sheet of paper, or to a book

made of them. Bigger and heavier than other books printed by the same publishers, folios were books of great weight (literally). The Bible and works of science or philosophy were usual candidates. They were usually sold unbound, allowing wealthy buyers to customize their purchases.

Thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays, bound in an estimated 750 folios, were the equivalent of scripts from a sitcom being bound in leather and passed off as high art. They preserve so much slang that many common words appeared in literature for the first time through Shakespeare's plays, leading to the popular misconception that he invented them.

With time, hundreds of those Folios were lost to history.

Professor Anthony James West was interested in the fate of the Folios that survived nearly 400 years of use, display and decay. He discovered the location of all of the First Folios now known to exist. But he did not have the resources or assistance to catalog the condition of each book. He called Rasmussen for help.

Rasmussen called Don Bailey, an old friend and bibliophile. He also enlisted the help of Lara Hansen, then a graduate student.

"I suggested the research model that Eric approved," she said.

Multiple meetings determined how many details about the Folios would be included. Paper imperfections, past owners and repairs all made the list. It was also clear that more research assistants were needed.

"The others were all PhD students of mine," said Rasmussen. Trey Jansen, Sarah Stewart and Mark Farnsworth all helped to document the First Folios, and went on to earn their PhD's.

"Eric likes to do teamwork," Bailey said.

Farnsworth volunteered even though cataloging the First Folios was useless to his dissertation. He went to sleep at 4 a.m.,

when Rasmussen would wake up, to keep the work flowing continuously.

"It meant a lot of late nights," said Farnsworth. "It was something I took very seriously." Rasmussen complimented his former student's attention to detail.

"Couldn't have done it without him!" he said.

The collaborators travelled to catalog each Folio. Bailey often studied whichever First Folios happened to be close to vacation spots he visited. He visited 12 Folios at Meisei University in Tokyo, Japan. Lara Hansen went on road trips to universities across the United States.

In Skipton, Yorkshire, Professor West tracked down a First Folio that had been donated in 1936. He was informed that the book was really a Second Folio, but visited anyways. He proved the book to be a First Folio after close examination.

"In due course the museum put the Folio on permanent display and invited me to give a lecture and cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony," he said.

In summer of 2009, the entire team went to work on the 82 First Folios at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

"I never had so much fun going to work every day," said Hansen. "All of us worked together."

In 2012, each of the 232 books was listed in "The Shakespeare Folios: A Descriptive Catalog." All have a story to tell.

Book 211, "Meisei II," had at one point been shot and the hole mended. The bullet stopped at "Titus Andronicus." Rasmussen considers the play impenetrable.

To listen to some students, Rasmussen lamented, all of them are. He teaches, nonetheless, that Shakespeare remains relevant.

"The whole point about Shakespeare is that he knows what it's like to be human!" he said. "I want everyone to know that this guy rocks!"

Rasmussen points, for example, to the breathless awkwardness of the balcony scene in “Romeo and Juliet” – something that he believes will always characterize young love.

His favorite play is “Measure for Measure,” the story of a woman whose imprisoned brother can only avoid capital punishment if she sleeps with the man who jailed him. Sexual harassment, in other words, has long been a problem.

Shakespeare’s plays were originally staged with few props, making necessary the descriptive dialogue loved by English purists.

“Theater was very sparse,” Rasmussen said. Props and period dress were uncommon. “In Shakespeare’s time, they were not at all obsessed with historical accuracy.”

It is for this reason that Rasmussen likes minimalistic productions of Shakespeare, like the Reno production of “Hamlet” that he dramaturged in 2011. The most prominent prop was a lump of dirt used for burial scenes. Many actors wore 21st century clothing.

One thing he did preserve from the original play, though: The accent. The Original Pronunciation “Hamlet” was among the first staged in the United States. Professor David Fenimore, who played the ghost of King Hamlet, said that a voice coach taught him how to speak English as Shakespeare knew it.

“To me, it sounded sort of like a Scottish accent sometimes,” he said. “The tendency, even among professional actors, is to shout Shakespeare, is to declaim Shakespeare, in these rich, plummy, BBC English accents. And that’s probably really not the way it was done.”



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