

Hiding in Plain Sight

An OU medievalist used to studying history, not making it, becomes part of an unprecedented discovery of a rare Shakespeare First Folio.

For Steven Livesey it was just another day of researching medieval manuscripts at the public library in the small northern French town of Saint-Omer. The Brian E. and Sandra O'Brien Presidential Professor in the History of Science was spending last fall as a Fulbright scholar. As he pored through ancient science and philosophy books held at the local library, its director of the medieval and early modern collection, Rémy Cordonnier, pulled the University of Oklahoma professor aside. Cordonnier was organizing an English language literature exhibition culled from the library's collection.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

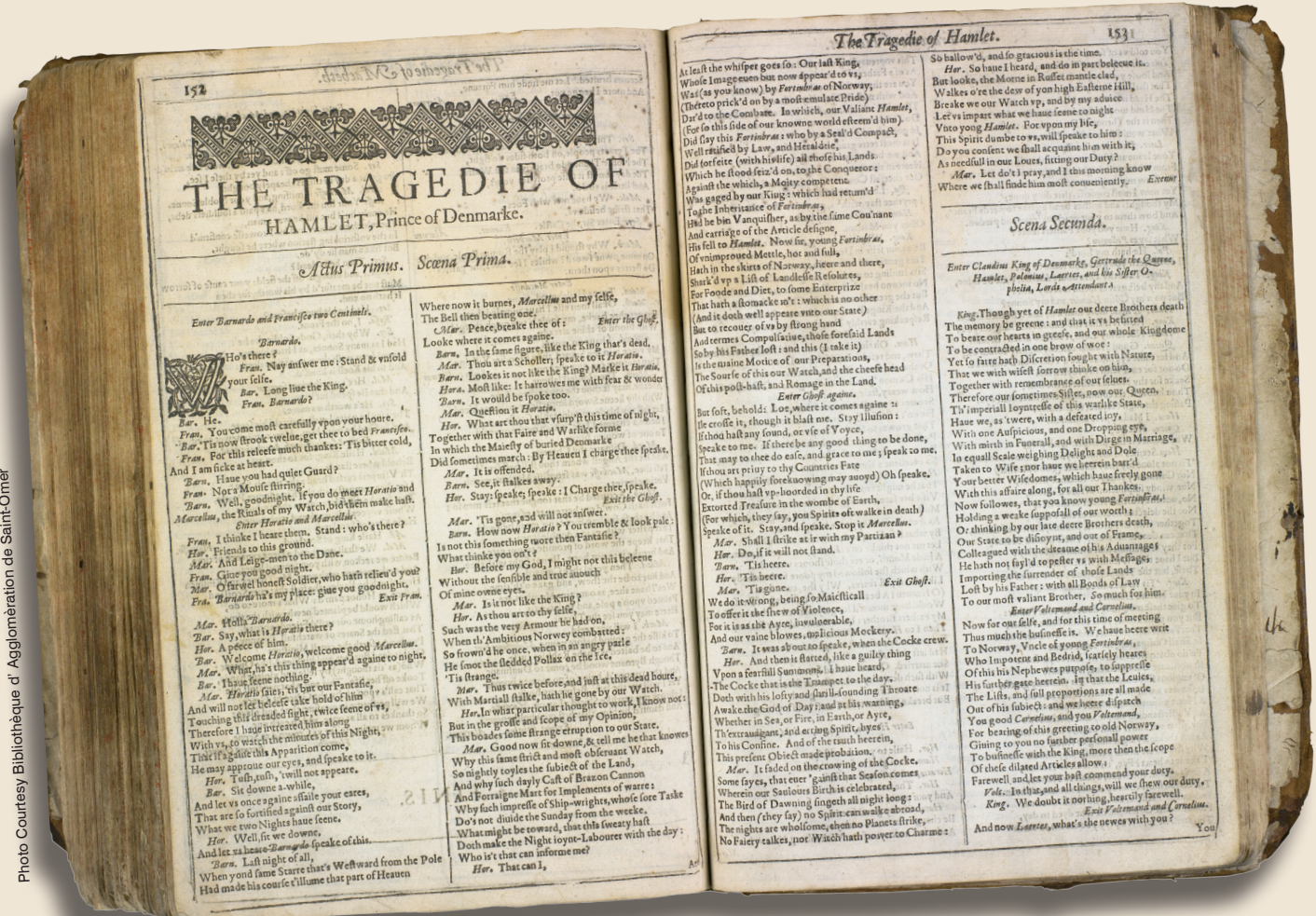


Photo Courtesy Bibliothèque d' Agglomération de Saint-Omer

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While assembling various books for this project, he ran across an edition of Shakespearian plays that had been in the library collection for more than two centuries. Although it was listed as a later edition, the librarian had a hunch the book, which had been virtually untouched for 200 years, was not what it seemed.

“The copy Rémy had was catalogued as an 18th-century edition of Shakespeare’s work, and there are lots of those in existence, but it was not until he took the book off the shelf for his exhibition and looked at it carefully that he had a feeling it was produced earlier than originally thought,”

“This is huge,” Rasmussen said at the time. “First Folios don’t turn up very often, and when they do, it’s usually a really chewed up, uninteresting copy. But this one is magnificent.”

Livesey says. “The title page and the first 12 pages were missing, which meant that the publication imprint was no longer available, yet Rémy suspected that this copy might actually be a First Folio, so he began comparing the content with published descriptions of Shakespeare’s work.”

Originally produced in 1623, “Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies” is the first complete collection of Shakespeare plays published together and is known as the First Folio. Prior to that date, Shakespeare’s plays had been printed in quarto texts, meaning the paper was folded twice to produce eight pages on four leaves of paper. The folio book was printed on sheets folded only once, produc-

ing two leaves of paper rather than four.

Cordonnier describes finding the book for his exhibit and how he came to realize that he might be holding something much older than originally thought.

“When we got into the book we realized quite fast that it wasn’t an 18th-century book but probably an earlier one,” he says. “We used several tools, trying to identify precisely the edition we had. Rapidly we realized that it was probably a First Folio, and of course I was proud to have brought it to light.”

It is believed the book came to France from England in the 17th century when Catholics were banned from English universities and the Jesuits established a college in Saint-Omer. While the college is long gone, a large portion of its library collection was appropriated to the municipal library, the *Bibliothèque d’Agglomération de Saint-Omer*, where Livesey has been conducting his research. Its rare holdings also include one of only 49 extant copies of the Gutenberg Bible, a copy of the 1590 edition of Edmund Spenser’s “The Faerie Queene,” a manuscript copy of Newton’s *Abridged Chronicle* annotated by his hand, and several other rare and precious books.

A leading authority on Shakespeare, Eric Rasmussen from the University of Nevada, was nearby in England and was able to make the short trip to Saint-Omer last November. He quickly authenticated the book as a First Folio.

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Photo Courtesy Steven Livesey



This battered, unassuming cover gives no clue that the pages within represent one of only 233 existing, premiere collections of Shakespeare's work. The 1623 book is considered among the most important in literary history, containing 18 plays that otherwise would have gone unpublished. "This is huge," Shakespeare expert Eric Rasmussen said of the First Folio's finding.

Of the approximately 900 First Folio copies printed, 233 are known to survive, including the latest one discovered in Saint-Omer. In addition, the Saint-Omer First Folio has stayed in the town virtually from the time it was produced in the 17th century, marking its special place in history as other copies have traveled or have been sold to different countries and institutions.

David Anderson, assistant professor of Renaissance literature at OU, says the 1623 folio of Shakespeare is one of the most important books in literary history, offering the world copies of major plays that might otherwise have gone unpublished.

"It was unprecedented, at the time, for a commercial writer like Shakespeare to have his plays collected and published in such a handsome, expensive book; it says a lot for the high regard in which he was held by his contemporaries," he says. "It also provides us with copies of major plays we wouldn't otherwise have, such as "Macbeth," "The Tempest" and "As You Like It."

The discovery also affords scholars the opportunity to perhaps piece together new information about the Shakespearian era. First Folios, like the quartos, often contain handwritten notes in the margins which were intended for performers, and because printing at that time was incredibly difficult and time

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OU Professor Steven Livesey captures a rare double rainbow over the 7th-century ruins of Abbaye Saint-Bertin from his temporary apartment in the northern French town of Saint-Omer. The abbey was founded by Bishop Audomar of Theouranne, now known as Saint-Omer.

consuming, there often are differences among the books themselves as printers were changing type as the process went along.

“There is some variation among copies of the First Folio, because printing was such a messy, imprecise business in those early days,” Anderson explains. “That means it’s always worth seeing what a newly discovered [First Folio] copy might say that’s slightly different from other versions. A difference in spelling could be the difference between one word and another, hence one meaning and another. And there’s always the possibility that a book could have been annotated by an early reader, meaning we get the chance to read what a person from the 17th or 18th century thought about a given speech or line.”

However, Anderson cautions, one shouldn’t expect too

much uniqueness from this find as the odds are it won’t tell scholars much of anything new about Shakespeare as writer.

“But,” he adds, “It is a wonderful discovery, especially for the library that found it, and it gives us yet another concrete point of connection to Shakespeare’s era.”

Cordonnier describes his discovery of one of the most famous books in the world as an emotional one, and that he imagined what the news would mean for his library and his town.

“It is, after all, only the second copy found in France and has a tremendous historical and intellectual value,” he says. “The first edition of his complete works is the oldest source for studying his plays so it’s very important.”

The first French copy of the Shakespeare First Folio is in



Photo Provided

OU professor Steve Livesey, left, stands with Remy Cordonnier, curator of rare books at the Bibliothèque d' Agglomération, who discovered the 1623 First Folio while gathering books for an English language literature exhibition. This first collection of Shakespeare's works was originally thought to be from the 18th century and had gone undetected since becoming part of the library's holdings 200 years earlier.


the national library in Paris. By law, the Saint-Omer First Folio cannot be sold because it belongs to France and will remain in the town library. After spending a week on display at the French Institute in London, it will be on exhibit for three months at the Saint-Omer Library this summer and again at the Globe Theater in London next year.

"The people of Saint-Omer are interested in showing it off, as they should be," Livesey says. "They will be encouraging people to come and see it."

Livesey will remain in the northern French town on sabbatical leave until May where he continues to examine medieval manuscripts held in the library. And for all of its impressive rare book and manuscript collection, the professor observes that many aspects of the library are the same as

one would find in their hometown library.

"Important as this discovery is, I have also been impressed with the smaller, routine activities that the library sponsors," he says. "Dozens of small groups of primary and college students have come to be introduced to medieval manuscripts – their structure, their manufacture, their beauty, and their content and its importance for the culture of France."

"As I enter in the morning and leave in the evening, I see young families in the library taking full advantage of the wonderful resource at the heart of the community. The First Folio may be a gem in the library, but it certainly is not the only center of excellence in this extraordinary institution." 

Susan Grossman is a freelance writer living in Norman.