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Shakespeare's Libraries

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Introduction

Lukas Lammers and Kirsten Sandrock

Shakespeare's Libraries

2023 marked the 400th anniversary of *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, known as the First Folio, published in 1623. It included 36 plays, some of which had not been published before. On the website of what is arguably the most famous library dedicated to Shakespeare's work, The Folger Shakespeare Library, readers are invited to "learn more about Shakespeare's language, life, and the world he knew," suggesting that we might be able to unlock, or at least better understand, Shakespeare's works by studying what he and his contemporaries not only read but also saw or heard. One of Shakespeare's earliest editors, Samuel Johnson in the preface to his edition of Shakespeare's works ventured, "There are a few passages which may pass for imitations, but so few that the exception only confirms the rule; he obtained them from accidental quotations, or by oral communication" (Preface). Johnson's comment arguably makes a claim for Shakespeare's 'originality,' but it also draws attention to the importance of hearsay and oral transmission for the production and reception of Shakespeare's works – 'libraries' that we can access only indirectly at best. Geoffrey Bullough's multivolume *Narrative and Dramatic Sources* of Shakespeare remains the most comprehensive attempt to document possible sources of Shakespeare. However useful, impressive, and illuminating, this multivolume work focuses almost exclusively on written works. Much has been written about 'Shakespeare's books,' and the notes in critical editions attest to the enormous spectrum and continued interest in possible sources. But what counts as a source? Digitisation and the use of AI in literary studies as well as transcultural and anthropological approaches to Shakespeare have opened new chapters in this debate. Current developments ask us to reflect critically on conceptions of authorship and authenticity in Shakespeare studies, on the role of orature as a source as well as the historical prioritisation of particular kinds of 'sources' that reflect on our understanding of Shakespeare's libraries and, indeed, Shakespeare's role in world literature, then and now.

An enduring question to ask, therefore, is what might be meant by 'Shakespeare's libraries'. Papers at the Shakespeare Seminar 2023 explored this topic from a variety of angles, a selection of which is presented here. The first article, "Shakespeare's (Fake) Library, Book Ownership, and Historical Evidence" by Tim Sommer, in a sense considers the most literal meaning: what happened to Shakespeare's books? The article reviews the intriguing case of William Henry Ireland, who, in the 1790s, caused a stir when he announced that he had discovered part of Shakespeare's original library: "dozens of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century books with copious annotations supposedly in the author's own hand appeared out of thin air" (5). Ireland, as Sommer reminds us, even created a 'virtual library,' a catalogue, a detailed account that conveniently lists all of Shakespeare's works. Instead of simply dismissing the forgery

as a curious anecdote, the article revisits some of the arguments that ultimately led scholars to call the bluff and explores their reverberations.

In Marlene Dirschauer's contribution, "'The Secret of Perpetual Life': Virginia Woolf's Shakespeare," the library in question is not Shakespeare's but Woolf's. Noting that "[Virginia] Woolf's appraisal of the egalitarian character of literature is in stark contrast to her critique of the patriarchal institution of the library as expressed in *A Room of One's Own*," (16) Dirschauer explores Woolf's somewhat ambivalent relation to Shakespeare. The article shows how Woolf, unable to simply 'inherit' Shakespeare from a male tradition, made the writer her contemporary and envisioned him as a pool of language that she was free to "tap into, explore, and transform" (17). Reading a scene in *Jacob's Room* as symbolic of Woolf's coming into her own, the article suggests that, paradoxically, Woolf had to 'drown' Shakespeare to make his language fully available. In doing so, Dirschauer argues, Woolf "helps preserve the living library that is Shakespeare" (22). Ultimately, therefore, "Shakespeare needs Woolf just as much as she needs him" (21).

In "Rethinking Shakespeare Source Studies: Shakespeare's Trans*Textual Encounters and the Plausibility of African Re*Sources," Susan Arndt challenges us to entertain the idea of a library that consists not just of books but also of oral traditions. The article is interested in how folktales from Africa may have served Shakespeare as a library of sorts. In an attempt to address – and, at least partly, redress – a double neglect, Arndt invites us to ponder the question, "why not consider that Shakespeare might indeed have known folktales from all around the world, including Africa?" (28). Where and how might Shakespeare have come across African folktales? The article submits that "[w]ithin the current confines of Shakespeare source studies – namely, identifying a direct impact traceable to a written document – it is impossible to claim beyond doubt that Shakespeare's work was influenced by African orature" (31). It therefore proposes to complement the concept of "source" with that of "re*source." As an example, Arndt discusses relations between Shakespeare's *Othello* and two possible re*sources, the "Handsome Stranger" and "Un capitano moro." To capture connections between Shakespeare's works and non-European, oral tales, the article puts forward three related concepts: "re*source," "rhizomatic remixing," and specific understanding of "trans*textuality."

Together the articles in this issue might serve as a reminder that even if we were to find 'Shakespeare's library,' it will never be complete.[1]

1 We would like to thank Sophie Schönfeld for the diligent help with formatting the articles in this issue of *Shakespeare Seminar Online*.