
Despite being the greatest playwright of the English language – and possibly any other language – William Shakespeare's life and career are surrounded by doubt and mystery. Even authorship of the plays is disputed. That mystery and doubt should also surround the text of plays and their transmission over time comes, therefore, as no surprise. Navigating the vast and complex literature of Shakespearean bibliographical scholarship is, however, no easy task for either scholars or laypeople – particularly in an era with strong ideological arguments against the claims of descriptive, analytical, and textual bibliography.

Just the same, a wide range of readers are interested in bibliography and would appreciate an easily accessible survey of the textual transmission of the plays along with a discussion of their related problems. There is particular curiosity about twentieth-century bibliographical scholarship and its claims of mastering the sources, production, and publication of the plays. Who are the leading figures in this school of scholarship? Will they be read and studied in the future? Does their work amount to anything other than make-work antiquarianism, as detractors claim? Or do their publications provide, as supporters argue, the only dependable body of Shakespearian knowledge upon which future ages will be able to rely? While addressing these issues implicitly rather than explicitly, the book is clearly intended to counter the attacks of theorists, and defend the
reputation of bibliographers. The appearance of this brief, gracefully written book will, therefore, be appreciated by many readers.

The book’s author is Richard Proudfoot, editor-in-chief of the third series of Arden editions of Shakespeare’s plays and poems, who first presented the text as lectures marking his retirement from King’s College, London. In addition to being an outstanding editor and commentator, Proudfoot has also directed and acted in the bard’s plays. As a consequence, the three chapters — Text, Stage, and Canon — focus upon his particular preoccupations: “the editing of [Shakespeare’s] plays in the twentieth century; the attempts to recover an authentic stage for the performance of the plays; and the authorship both of the plays habitually attributed to [him] and of some others on the fringe of his canon.”

Carefully footnoted, the book reverts constantly to material and bibliographical evidence for its assertions. Of particular interest to this reader was learning about the impact of bibliographers — such as Greg, Pollard, McKerrow, Hinman, and Bowers — not only upon the Arden Shakespeare but also upon other scholarly editions such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Riverside. Equally interesting was learning about specific criticisms of bibliographers, such as Bowers. Comparison of the Branagh and Olivier film versions of Hamlet illustrates the range of variations possible in text and interpretation. Indeed Proudfoot argues, “There is no ideal text of Shakespeare. No simple edition will supply the need of the full range of likely users.”

Canadian readers will appreciate the references to Stratford, Ontario, and the CBC, misidentified at one point as CBI. The latter reference is to the CBC radio presentation of The Reign of King Edward III, to which Proudfoot accords semi-canonical status. The discussion, in chapter three, of the various non-canonical and semi-canonical titles is fascinating.

Equally fascinating is his discussion in chapter two of how “play texts may help us to understand the physical features of the undocumented Globe stage.” Proudfoot is particularly concerned with the use of quarto editions for what “they may tell us of performances.” His handling of the “good quartos” “bad quartos” controversy is most adroit; for his purposes, the bad are more helpful than the good. He also makes effective use of the ancillary evidence on staging found in the Records of Early English Drama, published by the University of Toronto Press.

This book takes a very complex and technical field and makes it easily accessible to a wide range of readers and students. The footnotes
will provide ample guidance for those wishing to explore further. A foreword by R.A. Foakes, himself a notable editor of Shakespeare, provides additional context. The book is illustrated and indexed.

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I suppose every member of the William Morris Society believes that there can’t be too many books about the heroic nineteenth-century polymath. Here is another one, compiled by a life member to add to a very extensive corpus of secondary material.

What should be made clear from the outset is that this is not “a descriptive bibliography,” at least not in the sense that the phrase is normally understood by anyone engaged in bibliographical research. It is, rather, an annotated list of the works of Morris published in English (i.e., in Britain and the United States) that are illustrated. The only bibliographical information given in a typical entry is author (surely redundant), title, imprint, pagination, size, a brief description of the binding, and a note on the illustrator and illustrations, sometimes lengthy.

There is nothing inherently wrong with annotated lists, but the annotations must be useful and accurate. As an example, consider The Life and Death of Jason. The first illustrated edition was published by the Kelmscott Press in 1895. It contained two wood engravings (not woodcuts, as Coupe refers to them) and is fully described in detail by William Peterson in his standard bibliography of the Kelmscott Press. There is no reference to Peterson, the pagination is given incorrectly (compared with Peterson) and even the size is given differently. The binding and contents (surely an odd conjunction) are described in some detail, but admiring comments concerning Kelmscott Press books are made as well. We then get the note on the illustrator, a single paragraph of potted information on Sir Edward Burne-Jones, one of the most famous English artists of the nineteenth century, about whom numerous books have been written. The only reference is to Penelope Fitzgerald’s 1975 biography