What, you might well ask, is the relevance of a big, heavy, expensive old book to our modern world, even if that book does contain thirty-six plays by William Shakespeare? Now that Shakespeare can be read in cheap paperbacks or online, streamed, sampled, and reviewed in the theatre or on film, why should we care about the First Folio?

In part the answer is that, without the First Folio, no Shakespeare. No *Macbeth* or *Julius Caesar* or *The Tempest*, no familiar portrait with the big collar and balding head, no history of reading, performance and adaptation across time and place in the intervening centuries. All the Shakespeare we now have – from RADA to rap, and from Bollywood to GCSE – comes from this book. All the people who’ve been influenced by Shakespeare, from James Baldwin to Orson Welles, and from Margaret Cavendish to Stormzy, would be different without it. We wouldn’t be staging *Macbeth* in a warehouse, or arguing about who to cast in the title role of *Richard III*, if it weren’t for this book.It’s as if, within its leatherbound covers and cramped double-columns of type, there are not simply all those comedies and histories and tragedies listed in the catalogue. What the First Folio really contains is potential: an ongoing and inexhaustible inspiration to creativity in ways that Shakespeare could never have imagined.

If the First Folio gave us Shakespeare, it is also an important testimony to all the other people who make great art possible. Published after his death, this book was edited by his old actor friends, bankrolled by a publisher who saw its value, printed in London’s Barbican and sold in the small streets around St Paul’s. Everyone, from the apprentice printworker who typeset clumsily with a high error rate, to the engraver who etched extra shading for the portrait onto a copper plate, was significant in bringing this book to its readers and to history. Some of them are named, others are lost, but their work survives.

Some copies of this book have smudged fingerprints from where the individual printed sheets were handled by printshop workers with inky hands, literally leaving their mark on the book. The First Folio has come to be seen as the ultimate testament to a great solo genius – Shakespeare himself – but in fact it is actually a manifesto for team work. Art – especially the collaborative art of the theatre – exists in community. In preserving Shakespeare, the First Folio also preserves the craft and commitment of a whole support crew, in the playhouse, printing house, and book shop.

Most of us, however much we might hope otherwise, won’t actually become epic writers like Shakespeare. But many of us will have the opportunity to support talented artists – by sharing their work, talking about them, buying tickets or books, working in the industries around them that make creativity possible and bring it to audiences. The First Folio is a reminder of the vital importance of readers, workers, and advocates who bring their skills to the work of individual creativity.

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