

Hidden Codes in Shakespeare's First Folio

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Abstract: One of the most important volumes in the history of English literature is Shakespeare's First Folio (1623), which preserves thirty-six plays, many of which had never been printed before. The Folio's typographic and numerical elements, such as page numbering, the use of Roman and Arabic numbers, and purported hidden codes, have long drawn interest in addition to its literary merits. This article investigates the actual number-related practices of early modern printers and critically assesses assertions—often connected to Francis Bacon—that the Folio contains cryptography or secret numerical information. The essay demonstrates that most assertions of hidden codes stem from retroactive pattern-seeking rather than deliberate design by situating the Folio within the historical context of seventeenth-century printing and Renaissance numerology. The First Folio is therefore best understood not as a cryptic manuscript but as a complex, transitional, and historically invaluable artifact of early modern print culture.

Keys words: Shakespeare; First Folio; early modern printing; numerology; typography; Arabic numerals; Roman numerals; Francis Bacon; cryptography; Renaissance book culture.

Introduction. Shakespeare's *First Folio*, published in 1623—seven years after the playwright's death—was created with one clear purpose: to preserve his work. Compiled by John Heminges and Henry Condell, two of Shakespeare's close colleagues, it brought together his plays into one large, carefully produced book. At the time, only a few hundred copies were printed, and today fewer than two hundred and fifty are known to survive. This rarity makes each copy extremely valuable, but even more importantly, the Folio offers us a unique window into how books were made in the early modern period.

Main body. One of the most interesting features of the First Folio is the way it uses numbers. The early seventeenth century was a time of change in European printing, especially in how numbers were written. Printers were beginning to shift from Roman numerals to Arabic numerals, the system we use today. This transition can be clearly seen in the Folio. Page numbers appear in Arabic numerals, which was still a fairly new practice, while the names of kings and historical figures are written in different ways. In *Henry V*, for example, we find “Henry V,” “Henry the Fifth,” and even “Henry 5.” To modern readers this may look inconsistent, but for printers of the time it was simply a practical response to the tools they had available.

Printing in Shakespeare's day was a slow and physical process. Every page had to be assembled by hand, letter by letter, using small metal pieces of type. Printers did not always have enough of every character, especially Arabic numerals, which required special pieces. Roman numerals, by contrast, were made from ordinary letters like I, V, and X, which were plentiful. For this reason, Roman numerals were often used for things like money and dates. In plays such as *Henry IV, Part One*, prices and expenses are written in Roman numerals not because of symbolism, but because those were the easiest characters to set in type. Many numbers in the Folio were there to help printers organize the book rather

than to convey meaning to readers.

Mistakes were also unavoidable. One famous example appears in *Hamlet*, where the page numbers suddenly jump forward by almost a hundred. Today this might look mysterious, but in reality it was simply a printing error. Fixing it would have required resetting many pages, which was costly and time-consuming, so the mistake was left in place. Such errors remind us that the First Folio is not a perfect or polished object, but a working document created under real-world limitations.

Even so, the Folio has inspired centuries of speculation. In the nineteenth century, some writers suggested that Shakespeare did not write the plays at all and that the true author was Francis Bacon, a philosopher who was interested in codes and secret writing. According to this theory, Bacon arranged for printers to hide messages in the Folio using numbers and letter patterns. Supporters point to supposed acrostics spelling “F. Bacon” or to the word “Bacon” appearing on certain pages, such as page 53 of *Henry IV*, which they connect to mystical number symbolism.

The problem with these claims is that they rely on picking out coincidences from a very large text. If one searches long enough, patterns can be found almost anywhere. Without clear evidence that printers were instructed to create such codes, these interpretations tell us more about modern readers’ desire for mystery than about how the Folio was actually produced.

This does not mean that numbers had no symbolic meaning in Shakespeare’s time. On the contrary, Renaissance culture took numerology seriously. One popular form was the chronogram, a phrase—often in Latin—in which certain letters that were also Roman numerals were highlighted so that their values added up to a specific year. Chronograms were common on buildings, monuments, and title pages, and their numerical meaning was clearly marked for readers to see. The supposed chronograms in Shakespeare’s plays, however, lack this visual clarity and depend on rearranging letters in creative ways, making them historically unlikely.

Conclusion. The strong interest in numbers in the First Folio reflects its enormous cultural importance. Because the book is so rare and so influential, people are tempted to believe it must hide secret messages. In truth, its numbers are best understood as part of the everyday reality of seventeenth-century printing. The Folio was shaped by human hands, limited technology, and economic pressures. Its errors, inconsistencies, and mixed use of numerals are not flaws but signs of its authenticity.

Rather than being a book of hidden codes, the First Folio is a powerful reminder of how fragile Shakespeare’s legacy once was. His plays survived not because of secret messages, but because a group of printers, editors, and publishers worked—sometimes imperfectly, but with great care—to preserve them for future generations.

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