

New Boston exhibit features early editions of the Bard's beloved plays

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Book conservator Lauren Schott (left) walks past a banner meant to resemble a theater scrim featuring the exhibit name "Shakespeare Unauthorized" at the Boston Public Library in Boston, Massachusetts, October 11, 2016. The public is to get a rare glimpse of first and other early editions of some of Shakespeare's most beloved plays, including "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Hamlet." Photo: AP Photo/Steven Senne

BOSTON, Mass. — People will get a rare chance to see some early editions of William Shakespeare's most beloved plays.

The Boston Public Library is celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death with a free exhibition that opens Friday. The exhibit is titled, "Shakespeare Unauthorized."

The library famously holds a copy of the "First Folio," the earliest published collection of Shakespeare's works.

The exhibition also has early "quartos," or booklets for individual works, including "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "Hamlet" and "The Merchant of Venice."

"These are the books that all modern Shakespeare texts are based on," says Jay Moschella, the library's curator for rare books. "They're extremely valuable and we're one of the few places that has them. They're one of the great cultural treasures of Boston."

Materials Last Exhibited 100 Years Ago

"Shakespeare Unauthorized" features roughly 60 items, a relatively modest selection from the library's sizable holdings of original works by Shakespeare. The library's Shakespeare collection is considered among the largest and most comprehensive among public institutions in the United States.

The last time the library showcased these materials was 100 years ago, on the 300th anniversary of the Bard's death, according to Moschella. Most of the year, they are securely kept and made available to researchers by request.

The library purchased much of its collection of Shakespeare materials, along with thousands of other early works of English literature, for \$34,000 from the family of a prominent collector in 1873.

Early Versions Of "Hamlet" Differed

Tucked in the library's grand Beaux Arts building downtown, "Shakespeare Unauthorized" opens with a discussion of "Hamlet." The exhibit shows how early versions of the important work differed.

The famous line, "To be or not to be, that is the question," for example, is written "To be or not to be, ay, there's the point" in the earliest version.

"It's not only significantly less poetic, but it's also one of the central questions of Shakespearean scholarship," Moschella explains. "Why is that text different and how does that affect what we're reading?"

Elsewhere, the exhibit delves into the conspiracy theories surrounding the Bard, such as the theory that the true author of his works was the famed English philosopher and scientist Sir Francis Bacon. It also spotlights copies of notorious forgeries and works that were initially credited to Shakespeare but later dismissed.

"First Folio"

The main highlight of the exhibition is the richly made "First Folio," one of about 230 copies still in existence.

The handmade, encyclopedia-sized book, titled "Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies Published According to the True Originall Copies," is displayed in a large glass case along with copies of later folios. An interactive screen nearby lets visitors study a digital copy of the 900-plus-page book.

Published in 1623, years after Shakespeare's death, the "First Folio" contains 36 of his works, 18 of which had never been printed before, including "Macbeth," "Julius Caesar" and "The Tempest."

"These are major, important Shakespeare works. Without these, Shakespeare would not be Shakespeare," Moschella says. "And it is a pretty safe bet that most if not all of these plays would have been lost if they had not been memorialized in the "First Folio."

Prompt: Think about what Shakespeare has accomplished and how the exhibit is showcasing his work. If you were honored in a similar way, what accomplishments of yours would be highlighted? How would your work be showcased? What artifacts would it include?