

### QUESTION 33

What kind of authority is the 1623 Folio collection of Shakespeare's plays?

David Bevington

The 1623 Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays, published seven years after he died, is an extraordinarily important authority in establishing what he wrote. Approximately half of the plays it contains, including *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*, had not been published prior to 1623 and might otherwise be lost to us. The lists of plays corresponds to many other pieces of evidence as to what plays were his. The editors, John Heminges and Henry Condell, Shakespeare's long time colleagues in the King's acting company had access to drafts and scripts of the plays that had been used in production. They prefaced it with tributes from prominent intellectuals and writers notably Ben Jonson who publicly proclaimed in the volume that he regarded Shakespeare as a genius of tragedy equal to Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, and the greatest writer of comedy the world had ever seen. This is stirring praise indeed, coming from a man of such fierce intellectual integrity. That Ben Jonson, and so many others, could have been bamboozled into praising Shakespeare's plays if the plays were not his, or would have consented to a widespread conspiracy to perpetuate a lie about the authorship, is simply inconceivable.