

Rare early shakespeare compilation found in small French library

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File photo shows a First Folio edition of William Shakespeares' plays, dating from 1623 and considered to be one of the most important books in English literature, pictured at Sotheby's auction house in London on March 30, 2006.

A copy of William Shakespeare's First Folio, the first-ever compilation of the Bard's plays published in 1623, has been discovered in the library of a small town in northern France, a librarian said Tuesday.

One of the most valuable and coveted books in the world, the First Folio

was uncovered when librarian Remy Cordonnier dusted off a book of Shakespeare's works dating to the 18th century for an exhibition on English literature in the town of Saint-Omer near Calais.

"It occurred to me that it could be an unidentified First Folio, with historic importance and great intellectual value," he told AFP.

The copy of the book, which was published seven years after Shakespeare's death, was authenticated on Saturday by First Folio expert Eric Rasmussen from the University of Nevada.

"It is the 231st copy found in the world and the second in France," said Cordonnier.

The book, a compilation of 36 of Shakespeare's plays, is in good condition but missing about 30 pages, including the title page, which could explain how it went unnoticed for centuries.

Rasmussen wrote a book on the First Folio called "The Shakespeare Thefts" detailing his thrilling global hunt for what remains of the initial 750 copies of the book, a favourite for thieves across the centuries.

He describes "run-ins with heavily tattooed criminal street gangs in Tokyo, bizarre visits with eccentric, reclusive billionaires, and intense battles of wills with secretive librarians," according to the publisher.

Rasmussen's book speaks of several First Folios which have had pages ripped out of them, and one with a bullet lodged in it.

The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, which houses the largest collection of Shakespeare material, says on its website that the First Folio is the only source for 18 of Shakespeare's plays, including Macbeth, "which would otherwise be lost."

It is believed that the copy found in France was taken to Saint-Omer by English refugees from Anglican persecution, said Cordonnier.

Library director Francoise Ducroquet said that while First Folio copies were valued between 2.5 and five million euros, the damaged version found in his library would probably be worth less.

However she said France would not sell the book, and that it would be stored in the library's safe with other precious items.

Saint-Omer is an ancient port town that bustled with economic and cultural activity in the Middle Ages. Its library has 800 important manuscripts, 230 incunabula—[books](#) printed in Europe before 1501—as well as a Gutenberg Bible.

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