Exploring the Library

While on placement at the Alasdair Gray Archive in 2024, English and Creative Writing student at the University of Strathclyde, Ross Maneely was helping to catalogue Gray's library. In doing so, they found different curiosities within the collection which they decided to write about.

1. Moby Dick

One of my favourite oddities in Alasdair's library is his copy of Herman Melville's Moby Dick, which for some reason has been split in two, and is now displayed on his bookshelf with three other books sandwiched between the segments. On top of this, both front and back covers are missing and several loose pages from the second half of the book are placed alongside the first – so many questions! Did he read it so often it broke, or did he split it on purpose? If the latter, was there a reason he split it where he did (mid-sentence!), or even a reason why he didn't put the two halves next to each other on the shelf? Or, perhaps most puzzlingly, why did he never just get a new copy?

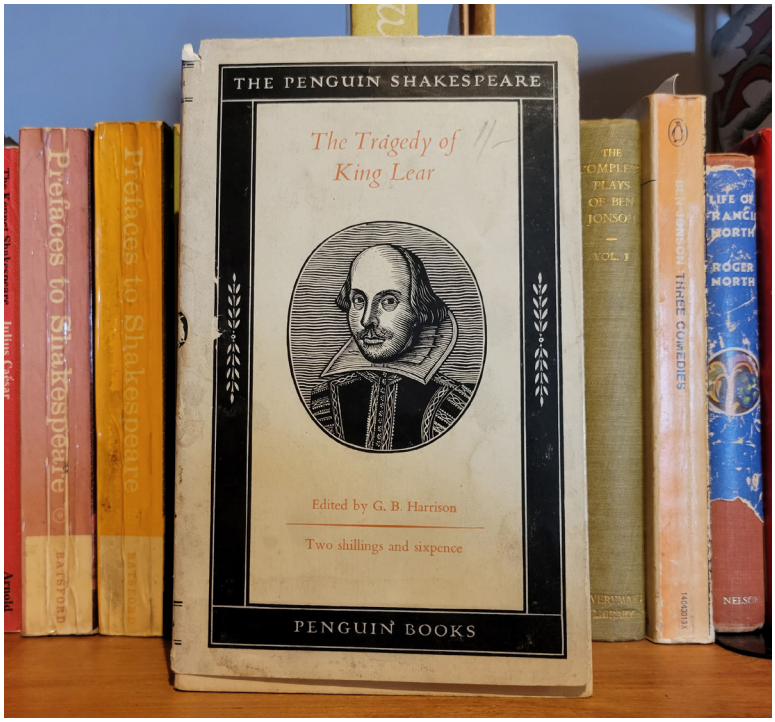
A quick glance at his library shows he was clearly not afraid of owning multiple copies of the same book, and yet during my time at the Archive I never came across another Moby Dick. Whichever way you look it, there is some sort of contradiction; either he liked it enough to keep but not enough to repair or replace, or he saw no point in buying a fresh copy despite apparently reading it almost to death. It doesn't make any sense! Or does it?

In 1961, Alasdair painted a mural in the new home of friends George and Rose Singleton, partly as a wedding present and partly as an apology for staining one of their new white walls. The result was 'Story of Jonah', depicting the Biblical tale that in part inspired Melville's novel. Alasdair said the mural was completed without any initial drawings or plans, suggesting he had a clear vision of the story in his head already, and when it was rediscovered by a new owner in 2001, he returned to repair some damage it had received. The story evidently held some significance for him, and seeing as he used similar Biblical allusions and retellings in many of his other works, it makes sense that he would have an interest in Moby Dick.

Story of Jonah:West Princes St, Glasgow, 1961, restored with added detail 2002, mural

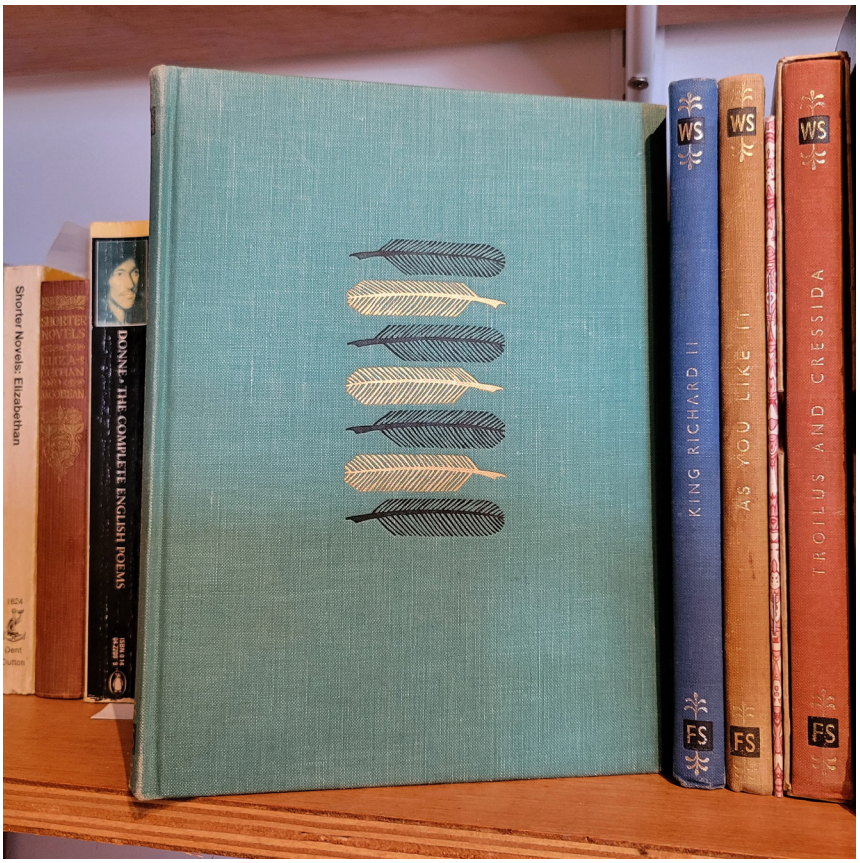
So why is his copy split in half and jumbled up? It seems baffling, until you consider one of Alasdair's most notable works, Lanark, subtitled 'A Life In Four Books'; those four books are presented in the order three, one, two and four, and there is an epilogue inserted several chapters before the actual end of the novel, leaving in what he felt was the ideal order. Perhaps Alasdair liked chopping up and rearranging other people's books as well as his own? Or perhaps it's really not that deep. Either way, the fact that these kinds of quirks are preserved alongside the rest of the detailed notes and research in his library is fascinating, and I think is part of what makes the Archive such an interesting and invaluable resource.

2. Shakespeare

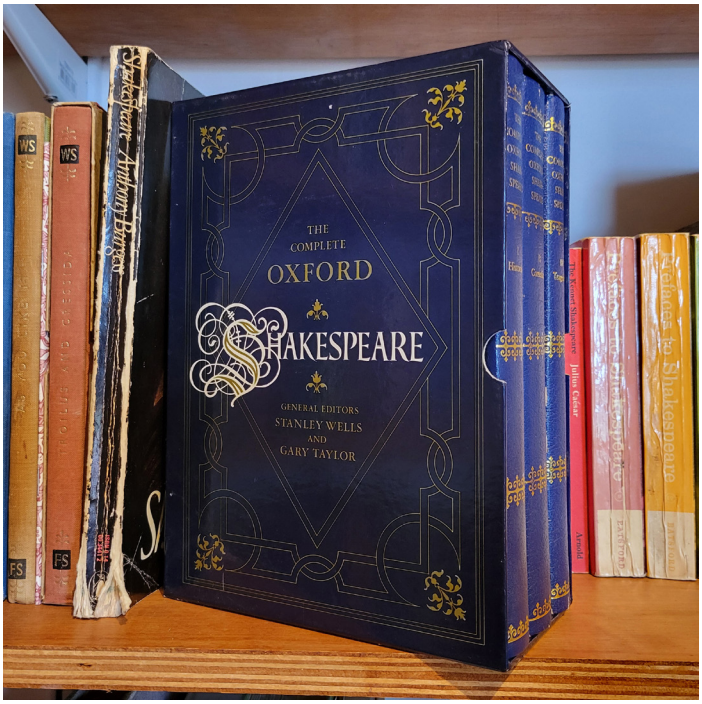


An interesting quirk of Alasdair's library is that there are often several different editions of the same book. For example, alongside dozens of books of Shakespeare criticism, there are at least two or three different copies of most of his plays, from various times and publishers. One of the oldest I found was a basic Penguin paperback of King Lear, the kind of edition that would be familiar to contemporary English students were it not for the fact that this particular printing dates from 1955, even declaring its price of 'two shillings and sixpence' on the front cover.

A step up from this are a handful of editions by The Folio Society, each presented in a solid colour hardback with a simple feather design on the cover and stunning, colourful illustrations displayed throughout.



However, the swankiest has to be the Complete Oxford Shakespeare, a deep blue box set containing three luxurious hardbacks of all his 'Histories', 'Comedies' and 'Tragedies'. Considering the amount of content, the set is surprisingly compact, while still making for an impressive piece on the shelf. I think these different editions offer something of an insight



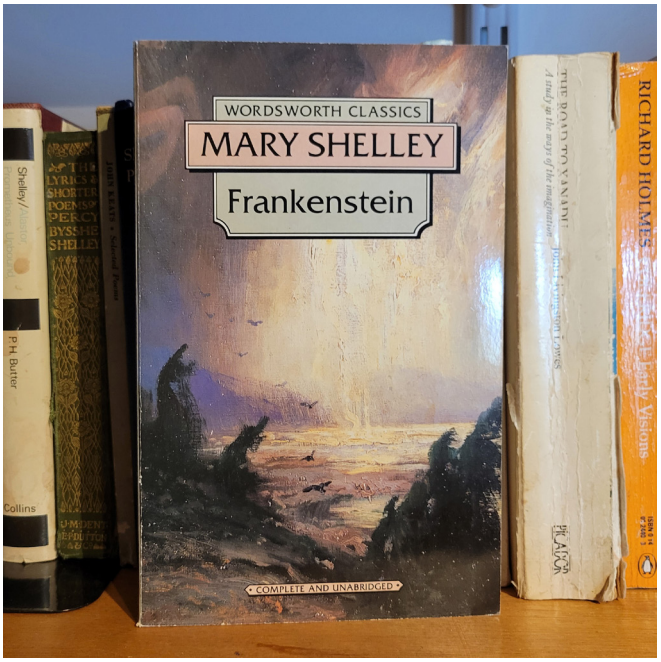
into Alasdair's life: perhaps the lavish, expensive Oxford boxset was gifted by a friend, or one of the many people he had worked with or helped throughout his life; perhaps Alasdair bought himself the Folio Society copies because he was interested in the illustrations, which then inspired some of his own pieces; perhaps the Penguin paperback was the very copy he read and studied when he was a student.

Regardless of if these theories are true or not, I think the fact that he held onto three such distinct styles of the same texts from three different periods reflects the complex, layered way in which he viewed the world and treated all his projects. Few things were ever 'complete' for Alasdair, as evidenced by the countless pieces of art he went back and altered, or the copies of his own books he filled with notes and corrections. Likewise, each of the books in his library holds something unique, be it an attractive design, notes and thoughts scribbled by Alasdair himself, or even just pure sentimental value. The Oxford box set can claim whatever it wants, but for Alasdair, what it could give him was anything but 'complete'.

3. Favourite Book

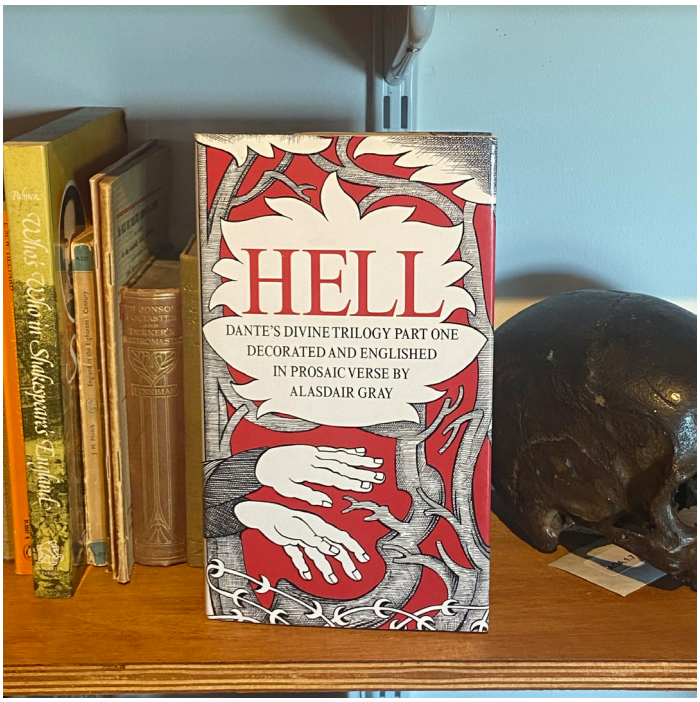
A favourite book of mine has always been Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, but I gained a whole new appreciation for it after reading Alasdair's stunning reimagining of it in Poor Things.

I was excited to come across it while cataloguing, and it felt a bit surreal to hold what might be the exact copy that gave him the inspiration all those years ago.



4. Book I'd Like to Read

Dante's Divine Comedy is something I've been curious about reading for a while yet never felt quite ready for, but after having to catalogue what felt like a hundred different editions and translations from Alasdair's library, I feel I can't escape it any longer. I was very excited to learn that Alasdair himself published a modern translation, so at least I don't need to worry about picking which version to read!



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THE ALASDAIR GRAY ARCHIVE