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► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Christophe Mayer. Transmission as Appropriation: The Early Reception of John Benson's Edition of Shakespeare's Poems (1640). *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, Firenze University Press, 2016, 5, pp.409-422. <<http://www.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-jems/article/view/18098/16852>>. <10.13128/JEMS-2279-7149-18098>. <halshs-01398936>

HAL Id: halshs-01398936

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Submitted on 18 Nov 2016

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Transmission as Appropriation: The Early Reception of John Benson's Edition of Shakespeare's *Poems* (1640)

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Abstract

Described by modern critics as a 'mangled hodgepodge', John Benson's much edited and rearranged text of Shakespeare's *Poems* was considerably successful throughout the seventeenth century. While Benson's choices could be considered as attempts to cater for and partly shape the tastes of a new generation of readers, its form also incited a number of them to alter the printed work. The article focuses on the annotations of two seventeenth-century readers of the edition, the main hand in Folger STC 22344 copy 2 and that of the little-known Meisei University MR 1447 – two copies in which readers' reactions to and appropriation of Benson's edition are particularly visible. A final section is also devoted to Folger MS V.a.148, a miscellany in which some of Benson's *Poems* are recontextualised. In a culture where, as Joad Raymond has observed, 'any reader was potentially also a writer, or at least a reviser or commentator', the early appropriation and transformation of Shakespeare's text played a central part in its transmission. The practices and examples examined here were part and parcel of these processes.

Keywords: Appropriation, Benson, Editing, Shakespeare, Sonnets

1. *Introduction*

Since he was accused of 'stealing' from the 1609 quarto of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, John Benson and his reputation as an editor of *Poems vwritten by Wil. Shake-speare. Gent.* (1640) have not fared well.¹ His 1640 octavo volume merges many of the sonnets in the previous edition, giving them descriptive titles and adds other poems

¹ Faith Acker is currently writing a Ph.D. thesis that is concerned with contextualising the 1640 octavo printed by John Benson. This work may considerably alter our view of Benson's edition.

to the collection from different sources. At times, it ascribes to the poet lyrics that were not his. The order of some sonnet sequences is also changed. Despite the portrait of Shakespeare facing the title page, the address ‘To the Reader’ and the preliminary epistles by Leonard Digges and John Warren (all of which consciously mimic those found in the First and Second Folios of Shakespeare’s plays), the book has an appendix with poems from a variety of other writers, such as Ben Jonson, John Milton, Francis Beaumont and Robert Herrick. No wonder that Benson did not make it into the Oxford *DNB* – to the modern editorial eye his edition is not only considered as a ‘mangled hodgepodge’ (Wells and Taylor 1997, 38), but also as a betrayal of perhaps the only work in which Shakespeare spoke in a voice closest to his own.

Yet to a seventeenth-century reader, the 1609 quarto, with its rather cryptic dedication and equally baffling sequence of numbered sonnets, may have appeared rather unattractive and not so easy to comprehend. To reach out beyond their original social and cultural contexts, for which they were at least partly written, the sonnets had to be made more accessible and more appealing to a new market of would-be buyers – those who were interested in appropriating printed poems and recirculating them in manuscript. Indeed, this was what many readers often did – collecting printed poems in manuscript miscellanies remained a common activity in the more educated circles (Marotti 1995, 218 *passim*).

This was the publishing challenge that Benson had to meet – to entice and guide readers into the collection, while leaving them a measure of freedom. On the face of it, his heavily edited printed volume appears to lock the poems’ meanings because of his groupings and added titles. While there is no denying that Benson did produce his personal version of Shakespeare’s sonnets, his titles are sometimes so commonplace that they encourage readers to appropriate them as such, but also to alter them in a quest for a different meaning.² Likewise, some of his groupings have been found to lack coherence, perhaps because he wanted to leave them open to interpretation by others (de Grazia 2009, 94).

The ultimate confirmation that Benson’s volume did not preclude interpretation, but in fact fostered it, is in the empirical evidence we can find in some of the surviving copies of his *Poems*, but also in the miscellanies, which show that some readers went to poach on Benson’s lands.

In this essay, I wish to give some idea of the various practices of Benson’s ‘empirical’ readers. Although these practices often overlap, for convenience’s sake I shall divide them into several categories, which will be explored and illustrated: retitling, censorship, simplifications/clarifications/transformations, as well as extraction and the implicit recontextualisation that goes with the practice.

² Indeed, Heffernan (2013, 81) finds that Benson’s editing actually ‘disrupt[s] the potential for a sequential reading of the larger collection’.

2. Retitling

Folger STC 22344 Copy 2 is an annotated copy that is especially interesting because of the repeated retitling done by a hand that probably dates back to the second part of the seventeenth century.³ Another feature of this copy is that only a quarter of the book bears marks – the reader stops annotating on B7r having covered 26 of the 110 poems in Benson’s collection. The absence of markings after that page (containing a poem entitled ‘Inhumanitie’ from the *Passionate Pilgrime*) may just be another indication of readers’ complete freedom to poach on lands of their choice.

Be that as it may, the way the reader has marked this quarter of the book is extremely significant. Shakespeare’s sonnet 67 ‘Ah wherefore with infection should he live’, whose title in the printed edition is ‘*The glory of beautie*’, is turned into the more negative ‘Beauty sullied with inconstancy’ (A2r). The rather vague, if not commonplace, title of sonnet 59, ‘*The beautie of Nature*’, is crossed out by the annotator and replaced by a phrase resembling a gloss, or the extended titles used by early modern publishers: ‘The search into former Ages to know or Proficiency or deficiency’. The title is also accompanied by what looks like a Latin epigram in the outside margin (A5r; fig. 1).⁴

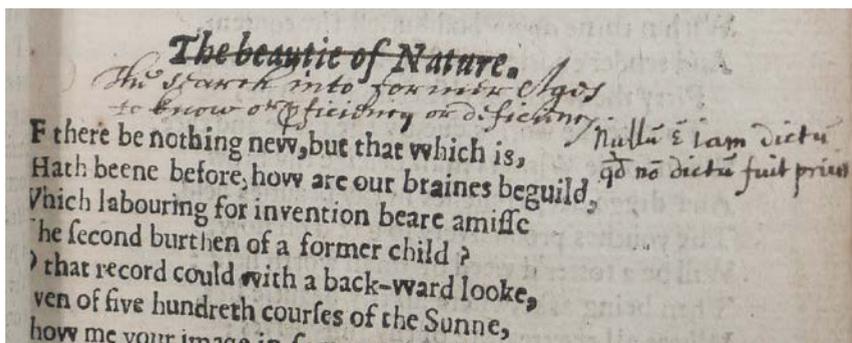


Fig. 1 – Folger STC 22344 Copy 2, sig. A5r

On the next page a similar Latin quotation is joined to the new title provided by the reader, ‘Motiues to procreation as *the way* to outliue Time’, thus replacing Benson’s ‘*Loves crueltie*’ (this was sonnet 1 in the 1609 edition). On B1v, the reader reveals some of the subtleties of his/her interpretations. sonnet 138 (‘When my Love swears that she is made of truth’) loses its printed title (‘False beleeffe’), which is replaced by the arguably more accurate ‘Mutuall flatterie’ (fig. 2).

³ For other features of this copy – including emendations – see also Roberts 2003, 167-169.

⁴ All photographs were taken by the author, in the collection and with the permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C., and of the Kodama Memorial Library at Meisei University, Tokyo.

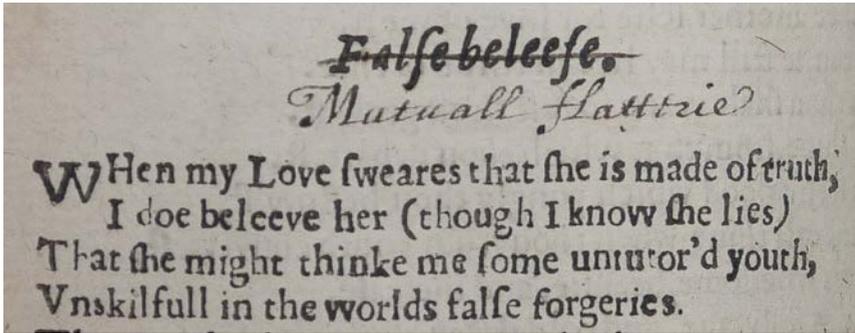


Fig. 2 – Folger STC 22344 Copy 2, sig. B1v

Revealingly also, Benson's *The Exchange* (sonnet 20) is subtitled 'The Mistris Masculine' by the annotator, in order to underline the androgynous identity of the lover in the poem ('A womans face with natures owne hand painted, / Hast thou the Master Mistris of my passion', B4r). The subtitling is not an infrequent practice, which shows that Benson's sometimes overly neutral titles could frustrate readers and encourage them to express their views in less uncertain terms.

What is also noteworthy is that the annotator occasionally deems Benson's titles not only inaccurate, but also unnecessary. We have already mentioned the reader's dissatisfaction with Benson's *Loves crueltie* as a title for sonnet 1 and its replacement by 'Motiues to procreation as *the way to outliue Time*' (A5v). The following set of titled poems '*Youthfull glory*' (sonnet 13; A6r), '*Good Admonition*' (sonnet 16; A7r), '*Quicke prevention*' (sonnet 7; A7v), '*Magazine of beautie*' (sonnet 4; A7v) is divested of its titles, the reader crossing them out and commenting each time: 'On *the same subiect*' or 'on *the subject before*' (figs. 3 and 4). In the latter case, another explanation is that the inscriber was in fact following the common practice in miscellany composition, where poems are often titled in this way ('On the same'; 'On the other'), rather than with Benson's more descriptive headings.

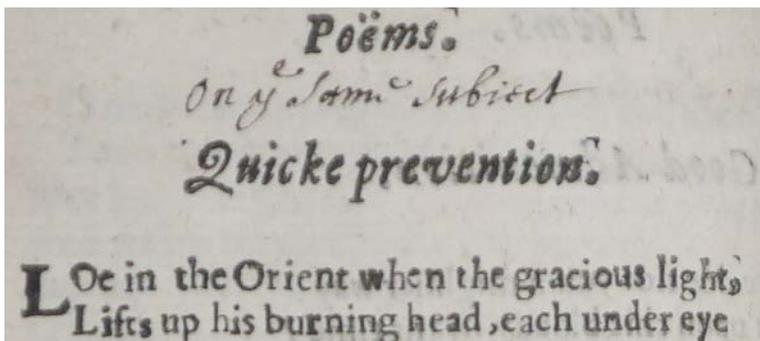


Fig. 3 – Folger STC 22344 Copy 2, sig. A7v

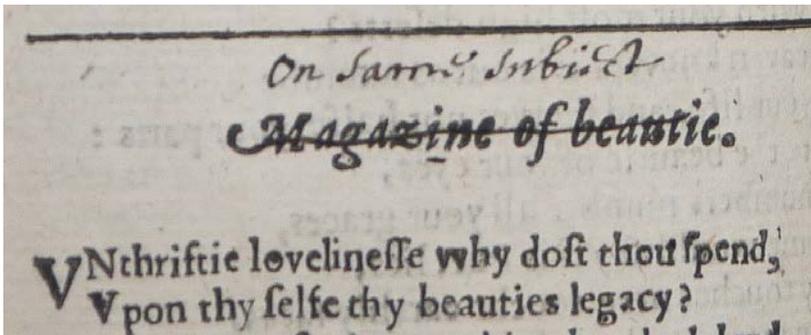


Fig. 4 – Folger STC 22344 Copy 2, sig. A7v

Despite the apparently rigid nature of print and of Benson's reframing and reshuffling of Shakespeare's sequence of sonnets, the reader here demonstrates that other combinations are not only possible, but can in fact be reinvented directly on the printed page. Conversely, Benson's 'True Admiration' (A4r-v) which compounds sonnets 54 and 57 is split by ink brackets into two poems, whose titles are respectively 'Imitability and Immutability' (A4r) and 'Chymistry of verse' (A4v, probably inspired by Shakespeare's 'my verse distils your truth') (figs. 5 and 6).

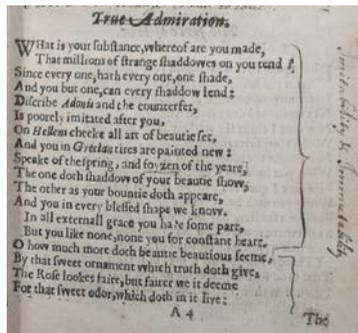


Fig. 5 – Folger STC 22344 Copy 2, sig. A4r

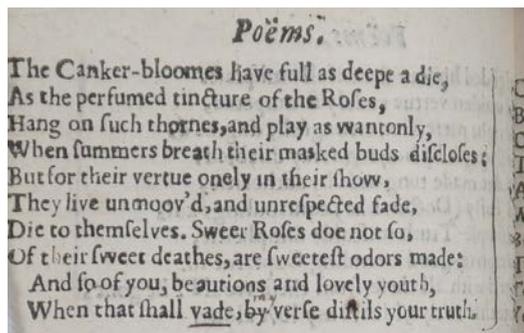


Fig. 6 – Folger STC 22344 Copy 2, sig. A4v

These practices show no real will to go back to the 1609 edition, but rather a wish to use Benson's own fashion of editing in a different way.

3. *Censorship*

Benson has been vilified not only for his rearrangement of Shakespeare's sonnets, but also for his alleged censorship of traces of homoeroticism in Shakespeare's poems (Shakespeare 1995, 44-45; Hammond 2002, 101-104). These charges do not quite stand up, as other scholars have observed (de Grazia 1994, 35-36; Shrank 2009, 272). There is no better proof that some readers were still discontented by the 1640 edition than the traces of censorship they left inside the book itself. What homoerotic details Benson had apparently not erased were sufficient to be picked up on disapprovingly by them.

This is very obviously the case in the little-known annotated edition of Benson's *Poems* now held by Meisei University, in Tokyo (MR 1447). There are a number of emendations in this edition, but what is most striking are the efforts to make it conform to this late seventeenth-century reader's sense of personal decency. Printed as an appendix to the 1609 edition of Shakespeare's *Poems*, some parts of 'A Lover's Complaint' are not to the annotator's taste. On H1r, the following is crossed out with the word 'nonsense' inscribed opposite:

What me your minister? for you obayes,
Works under you, and to your audit comes,
Their distract parcells, incombined summes. (Fig. 7)

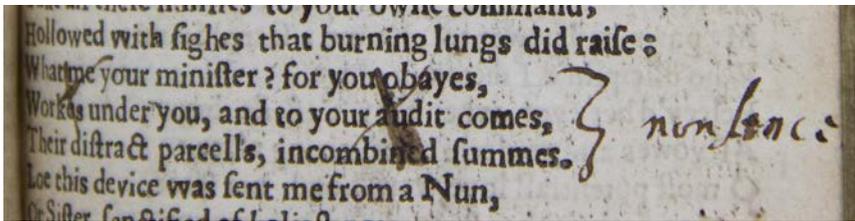


Fig. 7 – Meisei MR 1447, sig. H1r

What Katherine Duncan-Jones calls a 'contorted passage' (Shakespeare 1997, 225) may also have irritated the reader for religious reasons – as the word 'minister' is possibly too closely related to gifts of an amorous nature.

A few lines later, other lines are crossed out in the same way with the word 'nonsense' (H1v): 'Play the Place which did no forme receive, / Play patient sports in unconstrain'd gives' (fig. 8).

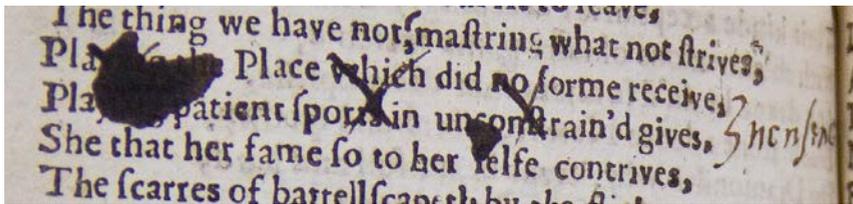


Fig. 8 – Meisei MR 1447, sig. H1v

The cryptic nature of the passage may have displeased the annotator, or the possibility that one might ‘play patient sports’ with ‘a nun, / Or sister sanctified’ could very well have been considered profanity. No doubt as to the nature of the censorship is left in the poem entitled ‘Helen to Paris’, which is in fact from Thomas Heywood’s *Troia Britannica* (1609). This is by far the poem that suffers most under the pen of the annotator, especially on sigs. 17v-18r when Helen’s confession of potential infidelity is visibly unacceptable and is crossed out repeatedly:

These would provoke me to lascivious play.
 Besides, I must confesse, you have a face,
 So admirable rare, so full of grace,
 That it hath power to woove, and to make ceasure,
 Of the most bright chaste beauties to your pleasure: (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9 – Meisei MR 1447, sigs. 17v-18r

The confession is situated near the beginning of the poem, at a point where Helen dwells on Paris’ pleasing physical features. A passage that follows,

which has three large ink crosses over it (K1v), is likewise about possible unfaithfulness: ‘The greater, but not the greatest liberty: / Is limited to our Lascivious play, / That *Menalaus* is farre hence away’.

Thus, religious profanities and sexual licentiousness seem to have been the primary targets of this reader-censor. The epitaphs in honour of Shakespeare at the latter end of the book are untouched. More surprising, given the apparent tendency towards religious and sexual orthodoxy in the changes introduced by the annotator, the poems addressed to the ‘young man’ do not appear to have particularly raised the reader’s eyebrows. While it would be churlish to draw overly broad conclusions from one case study, this is a reminder that early modern readers reacted differently to expressions of sexual behaviour.⁵

4. *Simplifications/Clarifications/Transformations*

If Benson has been blamed by modern scholars for modernizing the text of the 1609 edition of Shakespeare’s poems, seventeenth-century readers still struggled somewhat with the language of the 1640 octavo. Attempts at clarifying Shakespeare’s language are quite common on the part of the annotator of MR 1447. For instance, a line from Benson’s poem ‘A Complaint’ (sonnet 111) is altered from ‘O For my sake doe you wish fortune chide’, to the less subtle, but more straightforward ‘O for my sake does you my fortune chide’ (E3v). It is even more tempting for extractors – who are a further step removed from the book – to transform the meaning of lines in order to appropriate them and prepare them for further use. This is the case of the compositor of Folger MS V a 148, a manuscript miscellany of *ca.* 1660. A line in Benson’s ‘Complaint for his Loves absence’ (D8v; also sonnet 97), ‘How like a Winter hath my absence beene / From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year?’ is simplified and turned into the far more reusable ‘thou art *the* Pleasure of *the* fleeting year’ (f. 23r).

Reading and annotating are self-conscious activities and it is logical that a poem whose topic is partly the gathering of extracts into a table book should receive some special attention. Thus, ‘Vpon the receipt of a Table Booke from his Mistris’ (sigs. E6r-v; sonnet 122), is transformed in Meisei MR 1447 in order to make the aims of annotation and extraction, as well as the processes involved in these activities, perfectly clear. ‘That poore retention could not so much hold’ is replaced by ‘It was too little room my thoughts to hold’ and the more cryptic ‘To keepe an adjunct to remember thee’ is turned into ‘to keepe a copy to remember thee’ (E6v; fig. 10).

⁵ A counter-example is found in Folger MS V.a.148 where the compiler of the miscellany has feminized pronouns in lines taken from Benson’s ‘The glory of beautie’ (A2v), which was sonnet 68 in the 1609 edition. However, he/she does not pursue this in the rest of the extracts.

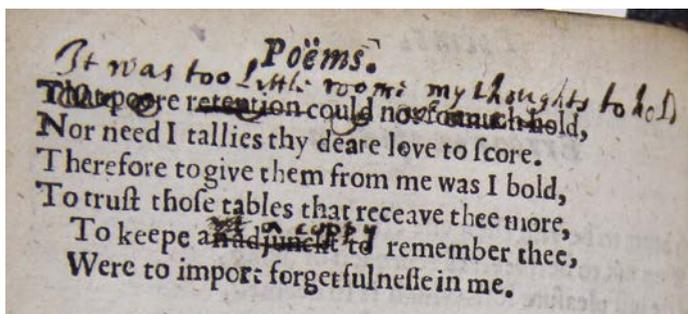


Fig. 10 – Meisei MR 1447, sig. E6v

The annotator was no doubt drawn to the poem because it dwells so strongly (but not always so clearly) on the transmission and circulation of extracts from one human being to another. It addresses issues of human communication but also speaks of a possible tension between human memory and the storage of that memory through inscription.⁶

Sonnet 122 suggests that human memory may retain more than what is written on paper. Indeed, and paradoxically, the poem is also there to inscribe the affirmation that natural memory is superior to artificial memory. From the perspective of most annotators, a poem is a ‘poore retention’ if it is not allowed to grow, circulate and transform itself in order to survive in human memory. In this way, early modern annotators were also *respondents*. They marked works of literature because some parts deserved to be remembered but they annotated them as well because they deemed them worthy of literary engagement. The last fourteen lines of Benson’s ‘Injurious Time’ are circled in ink by the annotator of Folger STC 22344 Copy 2 (they correspond to sonnet 66 in the 1609 edition). In the margin, opposite the last two-thirds of the poem, is a manuscript gloss or response to the poem: ‘O Tempora! o mores! / Love salues all sores’. The Latin expression (meaning ‘Alas the times, and the manners’) is from Cicero’s famous and indignant *Oration against Catiline* and captures the tone of the poem. Likewise, the rhyming addition English made by the reader appears to indicate that, despite the times, only love can cure the ills described in the lyric. But this is not all. Two manuscript verse lines are added in black ink and could be related to the relatively common early modern practice of providing ‘answer poems’, that is, a reader/annotator would inscribe a personal response to a poem directly next to it:⁷ ‘Wer’t not for Loving, Living irk would prove / I love to live, because I liue to loue’ (A4r; fig. 11).⁸

⁶ On these issues, see also de Grazia 2009, 98.

⁷ On early modern manuscript responses and ‘answer poems’, see Marotti 1995, 160.

⁸ Likewise, and as Orgel explains, ‘The poem headed “Inhumanitie” in Benson’s 1640 *Poems* (f. B7^r) is Sonnet 9 from *The Passionate Pilgrim* (no longer considered to be by Shakespeare). It has only 13 lines, and the rhyme scheme reveals that line 2 is missing.

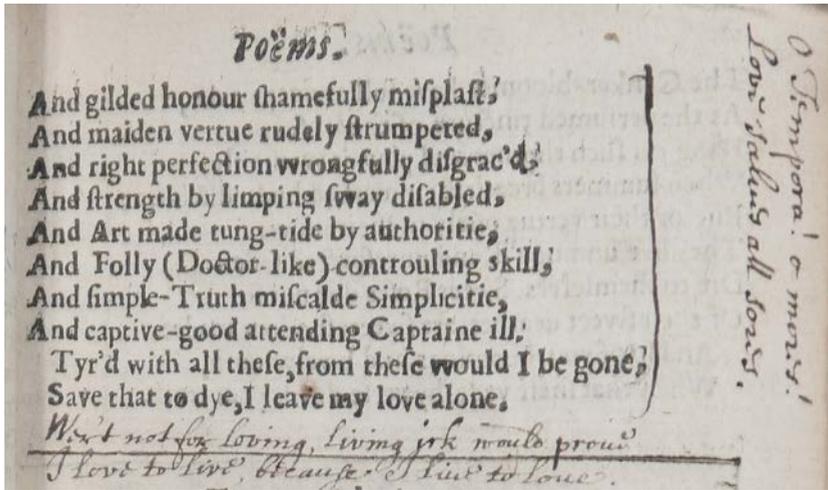


Fig. 11 – Folger STC 22344 Copy 2, sig. A4r

5. Extraction and Recontextualisation

In this last section, I shall focus on what happened when Benson's *Poems* left the printed page and joined the world of manuscript. Folger MS V a 148 will serve as a case study – as an example, in other words, that is revealing of the ways in which the Shakespearean lyric circulated because it was appropriated and partly transformed, but also as a particularly enlightening and unique receptacle of a human being's aesthetic tastes.

In Folger MS V a 148 the Shakespearean extracts on ff. 22-24 have been identified as Bensonian (Marotti 1990, 163-165; Baker 1998, 170). These extracts are a portion of a miscellany assembled by an anonymous compiler containing various other materials: notes on the Bible and on Hebrew grammar; notes on the use of the quadrant; notes in shorthand, possibly of sermons; poems, by such authors as J. Gibbon, Crashaw, Ravenshaw, Benlowes, Sherburne, Hooke and Llewellyn, as well as epigrams by Thomas Fuller. David Baker has argued that Benson's so-called 'Jonsonian and cavalier Shakespeare' (1998, 172) facilitated royalist appropriations of the collection and this may explain what Baker sees as pro-royalist extraction in Folger MS V a 148. There might be a measure of truth in this, as Benson's edition could have been pilfered by a nostalgic mid to late seventeenth-century reader.⁹

An early reader has crossed out lines 2 and 3 and supplied a new version of lines 2-4 (2007, 296).

⁹ Cf. the epitaph on the death of Charles I (ff. 17r-19r).

However, what transpires from his/her choice of extracts are also concerns outside the political sphere: love, decay and death, the will to choose passages for their intrinsic literary beauty, the desire to use Shakespeare's lines in other contexts.¹⁰ Moreover, what is significant is not only that the extractor is extremely selective, but also the progress made through Benson's collection is not strictly uniform. Some lines are rid of unnecessary elements, so as to make them more striking, or more commonplace. Through these processes of textual decontextualization, the compiler exercised even greater freedom of choice than Benson, in a fashion totally in keeping with the practices of manuscript culture.¹¹

Love – a common theme among compilers of miscellanies (often because these are young) – is given its due. On f. 22v the compiler has taken his / her pick in Benson's 'Fast and loose' (B4r; lines now known to belong to *The Passionate Pilgrime* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act 4, scene 3). The square brackets indicate what the extractor has excised in Benson's text: '[Did not] the heavenly Rhetoricke of thine eye, / Gainst whom the world could not hold argument'. While the cut produces in effect two decasyllabic lines, the affirmative mode makes the extract reusable in other contexts by altering the meaning of the printed version slightly.

On f. 23r, all that is left of 'In prayse of his Love' (sigs. D4r-v in Benson; sonnets 82-85) are the following lines. The extractor has universalized his extracts, focusing on the power of rhetoric and on a striking declaration of love, which could be readily recycled in another context:

What [replaced by 'Devise' in the manuscript] strained touches Rhetorich can lend,

There lives more [replaced by 'all'] life in one of your faire eyes,

Typical subjects for compilers to reflect upon, death and decay also figure prominently in the miscellany – such notebooks being receptacles of private as well as public concerns for readers set on existential quests. Two lines in Benson's 'Youthfull glory' (A6r; sonnet 13) seem to have struck a particular chord in the extractor: '[Against the] stormy gusts of winters day / And barren rage of deaths eternall cold?' (f. 22v; sonnet 13, 11-12).

Trained as many of these annotators and extractors were in the skills of tracking and storing passages of particular beauty for further use (humanist

¹⁰ For a description and short analysis of the contents of this manuscript, see Marotti and Estill 2012, 60.

¹¹ Bearing in mind that they were often the work of men, printed and manuscript miscellanies 'contributed to the construction of a desirable ... masculine self, humanist-educated and socially aspiring' (Heale 2003, 233).

methods of writing recommended *imitatio* as a means to write in a copious style), they inevitably set aside lines that were aesthetically pleasing and, in the best cases, rich with sense as well as ornamentation.¹² Interestingly, Robert Herrick's poem entitled by Benson 'His Mistris Shade' (L5r; taken from Herrick's *Hesperides* (1648)), a lyric in which the poetic voice speaks of the greatest dramatists of the age (including Jonson and Shakespeare), is pilfered for its elegant lines. It is decontextualized and the homage to Jonson is simply cut out in what follows (see square brackets):

[There yet remains brave soule than thou canst] see
 By glimmering of a fancie [: doe but come,
 And there Ile shew thee that illustrous roome,
 In which thy father *Iohnson* shall be] plac'd,
 As in a Globe of radiant fire, and grac'd,
 To be of that high Hyrarchy, where none
 But brave soules take illumination:
 Immediatly from heaven [, but harke the Cocke,] (f. 24r)

In a further extract (on the same manuscript folio page), part of the poetic voice is also excised in order to focus on the sole chronographic description:

[Of late strucke one, and now] I feele the prime
 Of day breake through the pregnant East [, tis time
 I vanish: more I had to say,
 But night determines here, away.]

As a further illustration of the freedom provided by the manuscript world, the extractor goes back to the beginning of the poem (L5v in Benson's edition) to choose another stylistically luxuriant passage:

And all the shrubs with sparkling spangles shew,
 Like morning Sunshine tinselling the dew:
 Here in greene medowes sits eternall May,
 Purfling the margents, while perpetuall day,
 So double guildes the Ayre, as that no night,
 Can ever rust th'ennamell of the light:

While modern commentators have complained about Benson's reordering of some sequences of Shakespeare's sonnets, the editor of the 1640 *Poems* was really only transferring to the sphere of print practices that were entirely normal in the manuscript world. Not only were these practices customary,

¹² On this tradition, see the now classic study on the subject: Cave 1979.

but they were some of the ways in which Shakespeare's words came to be disseminated and exchanged through the scribal medium, only to reappear in the oral sphere or be absorbed later through further scribal and print imitation, which wavered of course between homage and plagiarism – what we now call intertextuality. Likewise, a current practice among extractors was to change the addressee of a literary text so as to guarantee the lines' transferability to the ordinary world. In this way, 'How like a Winter hath my absence beene / From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year?' is transformed into 'thou art *the* Pleasure of *the* fleeting year' (from 'Complaint for his Loves absence', D8v; sonnet 97, 1-2; f. 23r in the manuscript).

6. Conclusion

This brief survey of annotating and extracting practices of Benson's 1640 edition of Shakespeare's *Poems* shows that perhaps greater attention should be paid to readers' appropriation techniques in order to understand how early modern printed texts came to be edited. If the gradual dominance of print becomes a fact in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one should not be blinded by the idea of a 'printing revolution'. Moreover, it is one thing to recognise that print and manuscript remained intertwined for longer than we think, it is another to come to realize their true *interdependence*. Probably because so much is at stake when we speak of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (these providing a potential – but in fact illusory – access to the poet's 'heart'), we tend to stress the far greater authenticity of the 1609 edition compared to Benson's 1640. What we should bear in mind is that for early readers 'authenticity' often went hand in hand with accessibility. To alter Shakespeare was to give him greater outreach and more purchase on people's lives. But it was also to provide his text with the possibility of change – a condition of its transmission. This does not mean of course that contemporary editorial studies should abandon their quest for more 'accurate' texts. What is implied here is that, whether in the seventeenth century or in the twenty first, all editing is a form of appropriation in the very act of transmitting the text.¹³

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¹³ As Margreta de Grazia has argued about John Benson's edition, 'The authenticity he seeks stands with his readers' (2009, 101).

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