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Making Shakespeare's Books: Assembly and Intertextuality in the Archives

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Abstract

Scholars have long been interested in the mutability and combinability of Shakespeare's works in early print culture: how parts of *Love's Labour's Lost* were mixed with texts by other poets in William Jaggard's *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), or how John Benson's 1640 *Poems* volume changed the order of the *Sonnets* (and at times, the gender of Shakespeare's addressee). This article reveals that early modern book owners *physically* combined and compiled Shakespearean works, creating bound multi-text volumes to suit their tastes and needs. Surveying extant compilations from numerous British and American archives, I demonstrate that the combinatory activities of publishers like Jaggard and Benson reflected a more general readerly desire for flexible, adaptable works in print. These works, with each new assembly, gave rise to different juxtapositions and different forms of canonicity, many of which are surprising to us today. But

in rare book archives, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most of these early compilations were disassembled, their texts rebound separately, eliminating the evidence of previous uses in favor of a Shakespearean text that *looks* modern: slim, self-enclosed, bound alone in fine morocco. This article argues that such assembly practices play a role in generating meaning—that the parameters of reading and interpreting Shakespeare are frequently established, and sometimes imposed, by the collectors, compilers, conservators, and curators who, in a very literal sense, *make* books.

Making Shakespeare's Books: Assembly and Intertextuality in the Archives

JEFFREY TODD KNIGHT

AMONG THE MOST VALUED ITEMS IN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS at Oxford's Bodleian Library is a volume of Shakespeare's poetry containing quartos of *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and the *Sonnets* gathered together by an eighteenth-century owner named Thomas Caldecott.¹ So highly valued is this book that it cannot be consulted according to the usual procedures. One must first appeal for special permission at Duke Humfrey's Library, then trudge across Broad Street to the New Library to read it under close supervision in the Modern Papers Room—and for good reason. The volume brings together rare early editions of its three constituent works: *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* from a 1594 printing and the *Sonnets* from 1609. The texts themselves are nearly flawless (or in bibliographical terms, perfect), that is, with no major defects or latter-day adulterations;² their pages have been cropped, washed, and rebound in stately red morocco with gilt tooling and crisp marbled endpapers. In fact, only a few scant traces of the books' four centuries of use and circulation remain, most of which are annotations written by modern archivists and connoisseurs. The earliest record of provenance is one that Caldecott himself left in the flyleaves: "I purchased the contents of this volume June 1796 of an obscure bookseller of the name of Vanderberg near St. Margaret's Church Westminster. He had cut

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¹ Bodleian Library MS Arch. G.e.32. According to a note in the first flyleaf the book was donated to the Bodleian in 1833. Caldecott was a barrister and prominent collector of works by Shakespeare. He also produced controversial editions of *Hamlet* and *As You Like It* in 1819.

² There is, according to the Bodleian catalogue entry, one slight imperfection in the title page of the *Sonnets* volume. The Bodleian catalogue is available online; see the University of Oxford OLIS (Oxford Libraries Information System) at <http://www.lib.ox.ac.uk/olis/> (accessed 22 July 2009), searching by individual titles. The entire volume can be viewed at <http://www.rarebookroom.org/Control/shaluc1/index.html>. Unless otherwise specified, dates supplied in these notes are taken from the Oxford online catalogues.



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