

## Colin Burrow

### St John's College, Cambridge, MS S.23

St John's College, Cambridge, MS S.23 is a verse miscellany which appears to have been prepared by a professional scribe. Its neat layout, regular secretary script, and careful use of italic for authors' names, all suggest that it may have been produced for, rather than by, a gentleman or undergraduate from one of the Universities some time in the 1630s or early 1640s. This period was the great age of manuscript poetical miscellanies, which ranged from more or less casual collection of verse which happened to appeal to the taste of the transcribers, through planned collections which were arranged under topical headings by professional scribes.

John's S.23, like many contemporary miscellanies, chiefly contains verse written close to the time of its production, rather than poems from the age of Elizabeth or before. Most of the significant poets active in the 1630s did not systematically print their verse during their lifetime. Figures who enjoy a high reputation today, such as John Donne and George Herbert, generally avoided print, as did poets who were extremely popular among manuscript miscellanists of the period but who do not now enjoy such a high reputation, such as Thomas Carew, Aurelian Townshend, William Strode, Thomas Randolph and Richard Corbett, all of whose works are represented in this manuscript. By the late 1620s that list would even include Ben Jonson (four of whose poems appear in this manuscript), who had printed scrupulously arranged volumes of his verse in his *Works* of 1616, but whose later verse was not gathered in print until after his death in 1637. Some of these authors (notably John Donne) seem to have compiled and disseminated large groups or collections of their poems. Others, including Jonson, appear to have sent copies of poems to particular individuals or addressees who might have an interest in their contents, whilst perhaps also encouraging wider dissemination of some pieces of more general interest, such as the 'Ode to Himself' which appears as the first item in John's S.23. Possessing copies of such poems in a manuscript miscellany might carry cultural cachet, and the particular selection in an individual's private miscellany might also testify to his friendships and wider social circle.

The poetic miscellanies which survive from this period were generally compiled in one of two ways. Some were put together seriatim as the scribe happened to encounter copies of particular poems. These might grow over a number of years, and include a number of hands. Typically these more casual productions might also contain jests or financial accounts, or doodles to test out a new pen. Other manuscript miscellanies might be produced in a number of long sessions of connected transcription by professional scribes or dedicated amateurs, with a view to producing a fair copy. John's S.23 falls into this second category.

This division of poetic miscellanies into two types simply according to their mode of transcription is, of course, extremely superficial: books are not judged by their covers, and manuscripts should not be judged by their hands. Most

manuscripts of the second ('fair copy') type were probably based on one or more notebooks of the first type. Equally, some manuscripts which appear to belong to the first type (casual notebooks compiled over many years) may have been enriched by materials (perhaps single poems, perhaps runs of half a dozen or more) culled from manuscripts of the second type. The physical features of the artefact—its hands, its presentation—are less significant than a careful analysis of its contents. These can reveal clues about the networks of friendship and manuscript circulation from which a manuscript derives. These clues in turn can help editors of the individual poets whose works appear in the miscellany when they come to assess the readings which it records. They can also illuminate the cultural history of the period, and give a sense of the milieu in which particular poems circulated, and of the networks which underlay their production.

The difficulty of reconstructing these networks and positioning any individual manuscript within them is, however, immense. Imagine a possible genesis of a manuscript miscellany such as S.23. X sends a poem to Y. Z sends him another, as does Q. Y collects all of these pieces as they arrive, more or less seriatim, and he writes an answer to X's poem which he transcribes next to that poem. He then receives another answer to X's poem a little later on, which he has to position towards the end of his ever-growing miscellany. Y might then make a fair copy of his miscellany and lend it to A, who might copy some poems from it. A, it so happens, has also received poems from X and Z as well as verses by B and C, which he copies into his manuscript. One of these poems might be another response to X's poem. A's miscellany might then be shared with others at a social gathering, who might transcribe from it into their own miscellanies individual poems or extended runs of entries, or consign some shorter pieces to memory for subsequent transcription. His audience might also transcribe additional pieces into A's miscellany, or gather together from it sequences of apparently connected poems, such as X's poem and the different responses to it. Meanwhile Y continues to add to his miscellany, and makes another fair copy of it, which he lends to R, who augments it in the same way that A had done. A few years later D has access to Y's miscellany as well as its partial derivatives belonging to A and R. D might pay a professional scribe to prepare a copy. D might ask the scribe to collect his favourite poems, or he might just ask the scribe to copy out everything, in which case the manuscript which resulted might contain several versions of the same poem which may or may not derive from a single archetype, as well as multiple answers to different poems, which may or may not be collocated with the poems to which they respond. D might check one text against the other, or he might just make fair copies of them both. His miscellany might in turn be plundered by E, F, and G, who might eventually pass them on to a printer of verse miscellanies such as *Parnassus Biceps* (1656) or *Recreation for Ingenious Head-peeces* (1645).

The result of these processes of exchange and transcription, which happened at enormous speed in the course of just a few months or years in the 1630s and 40s, is a large pain in the ingenious headpieces of modern editors, as exchanges and interactions between copyists and collectors rapidly transform both the texts of the poems and the company in which they appear. Marks of authorship—often abbreviated in manuscript miscellanies to initials, which are easily confused—might become garbled or lost altogether. Readings of difficult passages might become variously confused, while processes of lateral

contamination (in which a scribe checks a reading in what turns out to be a different authorial version of the same poem) make it virtually impossible to determine not only what an author may have originally written, but also how a particular group of manuscripts relates to another.

Where might S.23 sit within the infinite possible variety of narratives about the growth and dissemination of manuscript miscellanies? It is, as we have seen, an elegant example of a 'fair copy' poetical miscellany, and its scribe was in many respects accomplished. The manuscript appears to have been transcribed effectively in one extended session, although there are changes of ink (as apparently at fol. 76v and following), and occasional signs of later insertions (folios 44v and 31v), as well as signatures on fols 26r and 56r. A later hand has used blank pages at its end for makeshift accounts (endleaf 4v). On only one occasion does it appear that the scribe adopted the practice, common in the period, of copying a poem which happened to fit into a blank space at the foot of a page: William Browne's 'On the Countesse of Pembroke' on fol. 44v has been inserted on to blank space below the poem by Aurelian Townshend which precedes it. This may indicate that the scribe had access to more than one exemplar.

There are other teasing signs in the manuscript that its compiler had access to other poetic miscellanies. John's S.23 concludes with what appears at first sight to be an index. This, surprisingly, appears to relate to another poetical miscellany containing poems by Thomas Carew (endleaf, 6r-v). The first ten items correspond to Carew poems scattered around John's S.23, but the rest appear to relate to another, unidentified manuscript.<sup>1</sup> There is another curious feature of this 'index' or list. The numbers after each title or first line are not page or item numbers, but records of the number of lines in that poem. We cannot be sure why these details were recorded, but it may well be that this list represents the first stage by which a scribe sought to transform a 'type 1' miscellany into a fair copy by a rudimentary form of what compositors term 'casting off': that is, it may show a scribe calculating how many pages he will need in order to fit the contents of another manuscript, or selections from it, into a fair copy. The list may therefore tell us something about the production of S.23 itself. It was the product of quite careful scribal casting off, which perhaps involved prior selection from a larger miscellany by the individual for whom it was prepared. The layout of poems on its pages is elegant and regular, and this is achieved because the scribe worked with a norm of approximately twenty-four lines per page, where a 'line' might be either a line of verse or the space between stanzas. Later in the manuscript, perhaps under pressure of space, the scribe squeezes 29 lines to a page for Alexander Gill's 'vpon Ben Iohnsons Magnetique Lady' (Item 54, fols 81v-82v). On 30r (which contains 26 lines of text plus a subscription) there are only slight signs of compression. These are evenly spread throughout the page, which the scribe clearly anticipated would be an unusually full one. When a poem consists of stanzas, the transcriber is careful not to leave 'widows' or 'orphans' (that is, single lines from the start of stanzas at either the foot or head of a page), even if this is wasteful of paper. So with Ben Jonson's 'Ode to himself' (Item 1, fols 1r-2r), which consists of ten line stanzas, there are only twenty lines of verse

---

<sup>1</sup> Scott Nixon, 'The Manuscript Sources of Thomas Carew's Poetry', *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700*, 8 (2000), 186-224, (pp. 217-19).

and therefore (effectively) three to four lines of blank space per page. In Richard Corbett's non-stanzaic 'Iter Boreale' (Item 3, fols 4r-14v), however, the scribe contentedly works with a norm of twenty-three lines per page. These features of S.23 cast some light on the list at its end, and vice versa: a professional scribe needs to know how many lines a poem contains in order to work out how long it will take him to produce a transcription, and how many leaves it will require. The 'index' could well have been the first stage in compiling a companion volume of poems by Carew.

John's S.23 is a fair copy, then; but fair without can of course be foul within. It is possible to 'freeze' the chaotic processes of manuscript compilation and circulation sketched out in my fictional example above at any point, and produce what looks like a 'fair' copy of what might be, so far as textual transmission is concerned, a complete mess. Can the contents of S.23 tell us anything about the stage of transmission which it captures, or about the networks from which the collection derives, or about its value to editors of the poets whose works it includes? The short answer to the last of these questions is that the manuscript is, so far as most of its contents are concerned, not what would traditionally be regarded as a 'good' one: that is, it probably does not derive from sources close to the authors whose works it includes, and probably its texts have gone through extensive processes of retranscription and scribal modification. The text of Ben Jonson's 'To the Right Honourable, the Lord Treasurer of England. An Epigram', for example, includes a number of unique variants ('the' for 'what' in line 21, to take just one example) which are likely to be the product of this scribe. Nonetheless the manuscript also clearly relates to a group of texts of this poem which derive from an authorial version which precedes that which was finally printed in the second folio of Jonson's *Works* in 1640. It combines layers of scribal error, with, in some cases, some degree of access to early authorial versions.

This means that S.23, like many similar manuscripts, has its uses for editors. And there are other respects in which it is both valuable and interesting. Most of the poems it contains are ascribed, either in their titles or in their subscriptions (more than forty of its 57 items are ascribed either by names or initials), and these ascriptions appear to be very accurate. Where ascriptions are lacking this is sometimes the result of physical constraints rather than a lack of concern about authorship: there is no space for a subscription at the foot of items 10 and 20 (Ben Jonson's 'Ode Pindarique' and Browne's 'Underneath this sable hearse'), for instance. There is the odd stumble, as when in Item 55 Zouch Townley is conflated with the more famous Aurelian Townshend, and there is the odd surprising silence too: only one of three poems by Thomas Randolph is ascribed. But in general this manuscript is as solid a guide to attribution as any seventeenth-century poetic miscellany.

John's S.23 has two further distinctive features. A number of the poets whose work it includes were associated with the London stage (Jonson, Shakespeare, Massinger, Beaumont). It also contains a high proportion of poems which are addressed 'to' particular people—answer poems or epistles—which carry the name of the addressee or the occasion of the poem in their titles. Indeed, in comparison with other manuscripts of similar date and appearance it is unusual in containing few lyrics which do *not* have a particular occasion: only a handful of poems by Strode and Carew present general meditations on music or

love. It would be naïve to suppose the manuscript's quasi-epistolary poems derive directly from copies sent by the author to the titular addressee, but the high density of this kind of poem in the manuscript, combined with the high frequency of accurate ascriptions, is unusual and perhaps significant. It may indicate that the compiler of the manuscript or his ultimate sources knew who the people so addressed were, and may have been a member of a circle near to the individuals directly named. These features make it tempting to suppose that somewhere behind this manuscript lay a collector or copyist who was closely connected with London and the theatre, and who was interested to an unusual degree in the authorship and occasions of the poems he recorded, and who found a scribe who could produce an attractive manuscript, even if he was not an entirely reliable copyist.

But pinning a manuscript from this period to a single milieu is difficult, and can be as problematic and potentially misleading as attempting to assess the quality of its texts by assessing its hand and presentation. John's S.23 does not just contain poems by writers linked to the theatre. It also includes poems by William Strode, Henry King, and Richard Corbett, whose poems circulated freely among miscellanists associated with Christ Church, Oxford—although many of these writings spread in manuscript far beyond this single location through its connections with the Church and the law. This leads to a more general point about manuscript miscellanies in the period. Rather than simply representing the tastes of a single person or group, any manuscript from the 1630s and 40s might combine the interests of several distinct milieux as a result of a chance connection between two or more individuals who happened to exchange copies of poems. Copyists Y and A in my fictional model of chaotic transmission above might belong to substantially different circles, and yet, by chance, their miscellanies might be combined to make up the core of a collection by a third poetic enthusiast, the contents of whose volume would as a result appear to indicate that he was an Inns of Court man, say, with friends at Christ Church. In fact he could have been an undergraduate of St John's College, Cambridge, who had never been to Oxford but who happened to meet a couple of friendly collectors of manuscript poetry at a dinner in London.

S.23 could be a hybrid collection in other respects. The manuscript may retain vestiges of a type 1 manuscript, compiled seriatim, since there is no attempt (as there is in several other manuscripts from the period) to present Jonson's 'Ode to himself' alongside replies to it by other authors: here Owen Felltham's attack on Jonson is transcribed almost sixty pages after the poem to which it responds. It does not appear to have been ordered or grouped into genres or by subject-matter.

Nonetheless the accuracy of its attributions and the range of authors it includes make it probable that the manuscript reflects at some removes the taste of a member, or several members, of a London literary circle or circles, some of which were theatrical. Societies such as the sketchily documented Mermaid club,<sup>2</sup> which brought together members of the Inns of Court, University men, and writers with links to the theatre, could lie behind its particular combination of content. It is possible that John's S.23 was put together at the request of the John

---

<sup>2</sup> See Mark Bland, 'Francis Beaumont's Verse Letters to Ben Jonson and "The Mermaid Club"', *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700*, 12 (2005), 139-79.

Nutting who left his mark prominently on a number of leaves (fol. 26r, 56r), but it is more likely that his hand is later than that of the scribe. Since Nutting appears to have used the book to break in a nib or to test his signature he is unlikely to have been the person who went to the trouble and expense of having the manuscript compiled. With a manuscript such as this, however, knowledge about the individual compiler usually is valuable for what it can reveal about the networks with which he or she can be associated rather than simply being of interest in its own right. And it is the presence of a number of quite rare pieces deriving from London theatrical circles that makes John's S.23 of interest, and potentially of value to editors who are attempting to produce editions of the works of single authors who were associated with this milieu.

In this respect the most tantalizing item in the manuscript is the text of Shakespeare's Sonnet 2 (Item 16, fols 38r-38v). This differs at a number of points from the version printed in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* of 1609. The variants recorded in S.23 are minor in comparison to those in the manuscript tradition descending from Westminster Abbey MS 41, which is thought by many to represent an early authorial version of Sonnet 2, and as a result have often been simply disregarded by editors.<sup>3</sup> Its variants are not without interest, however. At lines 10-11 of Sonnet 2, the 1609 Quarto reads 'If thou couldst answer this faire child of mine | Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse', where John's S.23 gives the text as 'If thou couldst say that this faire child of mine | Shall som my count, and make thy ould excuse'. This could be a simple corruption of the printed text. But the S.23 reading is neither nonsense nor a clear scribal simplification: 'and make *thy* ould excuse' shifts pronoun to mark a transition from direct to indirect speech, and by doing so suggests that the friend is pumping out habitual excuses which are not worth recording ('and you go on to make the same old excuse'). The variant may be scribal, but it does encourage critical thought about the text of Q. Its 'and make my old excuse' sits awkwardly as direct speech, and is not easy to gloss. Stephen Booth suggests that 'old' is an ellipsis for 'when I am old', and others (notably Rollins) have suggested it is a noun. Maybe, as Katherine Duncan-Jones proposes, Q's 'my' suggests that the language of the poet and the addressee are blending together ('and adopt the excuse which I used in previous sonnets, that having a son protects against the ravages of time'). Did a compositor mechanically repeat 'my' in the 1609 text, and is John's S.23 preserving an authorial reading in 'thy'? Probably not, but it is not impossible. Only two other sonnets from Shakespeare's sequence are known to have circulated in manuscript before their publication in 1609. Francis Meres wrote of Shakespeare's 'suggared Sonnets among his private friends' in 1598, suggesting that other sonnets were circulated in the late sixteenth century to a coterie. If they did so it is very likely that that coterie included men of the theatre. The apparent connections between John's S.23 and London theatrical circles shortly after Shakespeare's death may support the view that it records a version of Sonnet 2, which is close but not identical to the printed version. The occasional

---

<sup>3</sup> For an edited text of the early version, see *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 691. For discussion of the manuscripts of Shakespeare's Sonnets, see Gary Taylor, 'Some Manuscripts of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 68 (1985-6), 210-46. Taylor briefly considers and dismisses the text of John's S.23 on p. 215, although he does suggest on the weak foundation of its spelling of Shakespeare's surname without the medial 'e' that 'the manuscript may derive from some source other than the 1609 edition.'

waywardness of the scribe, despite his fair hand and careful casting-off, however, suggests otherwise.

### Further Reading

Beal, P., *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and their Makers in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

Hobbs, M., *Early Seventeenth-Century Verse Miscellany Manuscripts* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992)

Marotti, A. F., *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995)

Nixon, S., 'The Manuscript Sources of Thomas Carew's Poetry', *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700*, 8 (2000), 186-224

Taylor, G., 'Some Manuscripts of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 68 (1985-6), 210-46

This essay is published under a version of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDeriv license.

You are free to copy, distribute and transmit it, under the following conditions:

**Attribution.** You must attribute it, in all cases, to Colin Burrow.

**Non-commercial.** You may not use it for any commercial purposes.

**No Derivative Works.** You may not alter, transform, or build upon it.

Any requests to use the essay in a way not covered by this license should be directed to the author.