

**Laura Estill.** *Dramatic Extracts in Seventeenth-Century English Manuscripts: Watching, Reading, Changing Plays.* Lanham: University of Delaware Press, 2015. Pp xxviii, 254.

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Laura Estill's new book enriches and extends scholarly interest in early modern reading practices and shows how those practices can help us understand dramatic texts of the era. Many of us were introduced to early modern reading practices through the quirks of Gabriel Harvey annotating his Livy; this left the unfortunate impression that reading was an altogether idiosyncratic art. Laura Estill's survey of dramatic extracts in the manuscripts of seventeenth-century England provides a corrective to that very singular picture. Using drama as her focusing genre, and examining an impressive array of archival materials, Estill methodically itemizes and evaluates the ways in which early readers recorded the plays of early modern England.

Because this book chronicles the labours of many hundreds of hours in rare books rooms, Estill's task is to stage a double act of reading: what it is like, on one hand, to turn the pages of seventeenth-century manuscripts that attend to early plays, and, on the other, imaginatively to recreate — on the basis of such reading — the ways in which those responsible for these manuscripts themselves turned the pages of printed and transcribed texts. Owing to its historical sweep (the six chapters of this study cover the era from approximately 1580 to 1680), *Dramatic Extracts* offers a thin description in which close reading serves to illustrate rather than organize historical narrative and analysis. The book's variety of approaches to its subject — sometimes dwelling on particular dramatic texts, sometimes on particular readers and manuscripts, and even, in its final chapter, on a particular proverb from Shakespeare — serves to introduce material that, as Estill observes, remains promisingly open to further study.

This book's initial chapter connects the rise of dramatic extracting — the recording of words from the text or performance of a play or masque — to the practice of commonplacing and the increase of published playbooks during the 1590s and after. Early plays were formally fragmented in their very composition, of course, and their readers were only too happy to continue the practice. We are generally familiar with the form of such printed collections as *Englands Parnassus* (1600) and *Bel-vedère or the Garden of the Muses* (1600), where flowers from the plays of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Kyd, among others, are presented to the

reader for their literary quality and philosophical import. In this first chapter Estill expands this picture of what was recorded from such plays and why, showing a variety of motivations for copying and transcribing the words of dramatic texts and a variety of ways of doing so. Significantly, songs would prove to be the most attractive subgenre for extracting throughout the era. This must have been in part because of the compelling nature of lyrics: songs both then and now have a way of suggesting complete, concentrated moods, even universes. Songs often had the further attraction, Estill points out, of being typographically distinct — presented on the page in a form that encouraged attention and sponsored retention.

Remarking that ‘selections from masques and entertainments follow a separate yet parallel trajectory to those from plays’ (43), Estill turns, in her second chapter, to representative instances from a variety of masques and courtly entertainments. Two prominent examples are Jonson’s *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* (1621) and Milton’s *Comus* (1634). Estill shows how real-life scandals surrounding Lady Purbeck (Frances Coke, 1599–1645) influenced the initial extracting of her ‘fortune’ from Jonson’s masque and perpetuated its transcription in subsequent years. In relation to *Comus*, Estill identifies and explores an instance of Milton setting himself up as an author: sometime in or around 1639, Milton signed the *album amicorum* (‘friendship book’) of an Italian visitor named Camillo Cerdagni. A quotation Milton chose for the occasion came not from Homer or Virgil but from Milton himself: ‘— *if Vertue feeble were / Heaven it selfe would stoope to her*’. Evidently proud of the closing couplet from *Comus*, Milton thus extracted material from his own dramatic production, commenting, in this way, on what must have seemed a promising career.

In her third chapter, Estill looks at dramatic miscellanies during the closure of the playhouses (1642–60), arguing for both continuity and change in the way that plays were extracted at the time. Here Estill includes more printed extracts than elsewhere in her study, in part because such texts as John Cotgrave’s *English Treasury of Wit and Language* (1655) illustrate the growing stature of drama as a literary form. Prior to the civil wars, Estill points out, collections had interspersed extracts from drama with extracts from other forms, such as lyric poetry. During and after the Interregnum, the institutionally enforced separation from dramatic performance created a nostalgia for the plays of the public theatre that solidified drama’s standing as a genre of note. We can feel the winds of another change in Estill’s description of the attention that Cotgrave’s treasury gives to various of its commonplace headings. As she points out, the entries for ‘Of Warre’ run less than a page and half long, while those under ‘Of Whores’ occupy more than five pages (92). It is understandable that war would seem less attractive a topic in 1655

than earlier; what remains fascinating is the way in which Cotgrave's distribution anticipates the shape of literary and court cultures to come.

What Estill refers to as 'particular moments of play reading' (116) in the Restoration contribute to her fourth chapter. It was during this time, as *Dramatic Extracts* makes clear, that readers had growing options between two eras, and thus types, of plays from which to record attractive matter. The new popularity of such playwrights as Dryden, Behn, and Wycherley was reflected in the commonplace book of 'PD', an anonymous reader responsible for what is now Bodleian MS Eng. misc. c. 34. In its copious extracts this text, according to Estill, 'has the potential to be as important to early modern literary reception as Samuel Pepys's diary is to the discussion of Restoration audience response' (136). As Estill points out, PD values wit, and the wit of the Restoration over that of the Elizabethan era. PD wishes, in various places, that *Othello* had featured the wit of 'a greasy Cook' instead of that of Iago and Roderigo, and finds the otherwise witty *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 'so plain, that 'tis scarce worth reading' (137). PD is far from the only extractor here to read Shakespeare in a puzzling manner: earlier in the study Estill quotes the dramatic extracts of Abraham Wright during the 1640s; Wright calls *Hamlet* 'But an indifferent play, the lines but meane, and in nothing like Othello' (83).

The evocative fifth chapter, which could itself be extracted for use in graduate seminars, traces the voluminous transcriptions of Archbishop William Sancroft (1617–93). Sancroft is familiar to historians of the era for his resistance to changing political authority during the non-juring episode. As Estill demonstrates, however, Sancroft is equally significant for his indefatigable extraction from the texts he read; he is remarkable for 'his roles as academic, manuscript compiler, theatre enthusiast, discerning reader, rhetor/writer, and literary analyst' (162). Sancroft shared PD's enthusiasm for wit but, unlike PD, valued Renaissance playwrights over those of the Restoration. Like Gabriel Harvey, Sancroft seems rarely to have laid his pen down. Also like Harvey, Sancroft treated his reading as something 'to be adapted for personal use' (191). As Estill shows, this approach becomes clear in his use of *Measure for Measure* as a 'customized statement of religious martyrdom' (190).

*Dramatic Extracts* closes by focusing on a single proverb from *Love's Labour's Lost*. This consists of a couplet uttered by Longaville early in the drama which few readers today may have thought twice about, but which was endlessly repeated in the play's wake: 'Fat paunches have lean pates, and dainty bits / Make rich the ribs, but bankrupt quite the wits' (1.1.26–7). It is an appropriate sentiment for Estill to scrutinize, for 'wit' is indeed the central value of the humanist era treated

by her study. With meticulous analysis, Estill shows how Longaville's utterance was dispersed into various printed and manuscript collections before finding its way into still further books, both printed and transcribed. It is a strong ending to the study, and the selection of a seventeen-word passage allows Estill to consolidate her central insight: that dramatic texts were always already fragmented and open to transposition; readers and writers in the seventeenth century both followed textual leads in how they recorded playwrights' words and also fashioned independent ways of acknowledging the utility of written, printed, and performed dramas.

At one point in *Dramatic Extracts* Estill notes that 'There are hundreds of manuscripts that contain extracts from and commentary on early modern drama, most of which have been overlooked to date' (140). It is one of the many virtues of this admirable study that it encourages, even as it paves the way for, future inquiry into its rich archive.