

Experience Shakespeare's lyric verse as never before in this rare 1640 first edition

William Shakespeare, *Poems*. London: John Benson, 1640. 5 9/16 inches x 3 9/16 inches (141 x 91 mm), 200 pages.

Shakespeare's verse, like his plays, has established itself at the very foundations of English literature: again and again the reader is confronted with phrases that have become proverbial ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?") and with combinations of words ("the remembrance of things past") that bear the special resonance of cultural icons. Only the King James version of the Bible can claim a greater influence over the shape and cadence of English-language expression. William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote nearly all of the best-known and most enduring of his poems, the 154 sonnets, in the first decade of his theatrical career, during the brief literary vogue of the form. These compellingly personal works were circulated in handwritten copies among their author's circle of acquaintance in the mid-to-late 1590s, and were published in book form in 1609.

The first attempt to collect a larger range of Shakespeare's lyric verse did not occur until the 1640 *Poems* was issued, nearly a quarter-century after the poet's death. This unauthorized edition, printed in the small octavo "pocket" format characteristic of the times, was published by John Benson, a bookseller specializing in broadside ballads, popular literature, and music. It contains all but eight of the sonnets, a few songs from the plays and from *The Passionate Pilgrim*, "A Lover's Complaint," and "The Phoenix and the Turtle," as well as elegies on Shakespeare by the young John Milton and others.

Why Benson omitted eight sonnets remains a mystery, but perhaps they were simply lost in the shuffle: Benson did not print them in the familiar numerical sequence (still used today) of the 1609 edition, but regrouped them under new titles. Benson does, however, include many poems not written by Shakespeare at all, but by his contemporaries Christopher Marlowe ("Come live with me and be my love"), Ben Jonson, Thomas Heywood, John Fletcher, Sir Walter Raleigh, and several latter-day authors of light, witty, amorous verse, known as the "Cavalier" poets.

This rare complete copy of Shakespeare's *Poems*, from the Warnock Library, is preserved in its original binding of contemporary dark brown calfskin. The spine is divided into five panels, with the red leather label in the second panel, and gold-tooled lettering on the label running up the spine. It is housed in a slipcase made by Rivière & Son of dark burgundy goatskin with a red leather lining and gold titling on the spine.

Octavo code: shapms