

“A Seventeenth-Century Folio Reader Reading *Hamlet*, 5.1: The Gravediggers’ Scene”¹

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Introduction

In this essay, I would like to review the seventeenth-century Folio reader’s response to the text of the scene as preserved in the Meisei copy MR774, West 201 (readable online at <http://shakes.meisei-u.ac.jp/>), which, according to Anthony James West, “is distinguished by having more underlining and annotations, indicating a very close reading of the plays, than . . . any other copy.”² *Hamlet* is the eighth most densely annotated play in the copy³ and the four folio pages from sig. pp4^r through pp6^r that carry the Gravediggers’ Scene are certainly those of the most heavily annotated of all the pages belonging to the play.⁴ From “Judgement of those that kill them selues” (pp4^v, b) to “a louer truer in affection nor a brother” (pp5^v, b), the Meisei reader⁵ produced no less than 20 entries of annotation out of this scene.

1 This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP15202359. The earlier version of this essay was submitted as a seminar paper to the seminar entitled “*Hamlet*, 5.1: The Gravediggers’ Scene” held at The Wolfston Hall - Shakespeare Centre on August 1 in the 2016 World Shakespeare Congress. I am grateful to its seminar leaders, Atsuhiko Hirota and John Lee together with all the other members of the seminar for their valuable feedbacks. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

2 Anthony James West, *The Shakespeare First Folio: The History of the Book, vol. II: A New Worldwide Census of First Folios*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003, p.267.

3 Akihiro Yamada, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: A Transcript of Contemporary Marginalia in a Copy of the Kodama Memorial Library of Meisei University*, Tokyo: Yushodo, 1998, p. xxviii.

4 Ayumi Inoue and Noriko Sumimoto, “Manuscript annotations in a Meisei First Folio (MR774, West 201): a case study of *Hamlet*”, *Meisei International Studies*, no. 5 (2013), p.7.

5 The copy carries the name “William Johnstone” inscribed on sig. π A2 in Italian hand. Yamada writes, “Who wrote the marginal notes in this Folio is not known for certain. But William Johnstone, the earliest owner known to us, can be one of the candidates, although supporting evidence is meager.” (xviii) While some scholars like Jonathan Bate (*Soul of the Age*, Penguin Books, 2009) and Emma Smith (*Shakespeare’s First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book*, Oxford UP, 2016) prefer to refer to the annotator by that name presumably in order to make the description more readable and effective for their own (*to be continued*)

While it is always challenging to theorize the copy's annotation at any given moment of the Folio text, I intend to trace the reader's progress reading through this scene to make a kind of micro life story of that progress by focusing these entries one by one together with line by line observation of how the annotating reader marked the progress of his reading. At least a part of the reading method practiced here has sometimes been described as that of commonplacing,⁶ which assumes some kind of note taking typical of the early modern Europe. Michael Foucault has had a say about such reading practice in the early modern Europe.

Within a culture very affected by traditionality, by the recognized value of the already-said, by the recurrence of discourse, by the "citational" practice under the seal of age and authority, an ethic was developing which was very explicitly oriented to the care of oneself, toward definite objectives such as retiring into oneself, reaching oneself, living with oneself, being sufficient to oneself, profiting by and enjoying oneself. Such is the objective of the *hypomnemata*: to make of the recollection of the fragmentary *logos* transmitted by teaching, listening, or reading a means to establish as adequate and as perfect a relationship of oneself to oneself as possible.⁷

As Ann Blair remarks, Foucault here considers the practice as something "which [promises] to give quasi-psychoanalytic insight into the thinking of the individual reader free to choose what [is] worthy of attention." As a cultural historian, Blair herself declares that "[w]ithout denying the interest of notebooks for insights into

(continued) contexts, I would like to call the annotator "the Meisei reader" following the term adopted by Alan B. Farmer in his seminar paper, "Whoeres subtitle shifts': Commonplacing Women in the Meisei Copy of the Shakespeare First Folio," written for the workshop organized by Jean-Christophe Mayer and Noriko Sumimoto entitled "Reading First Folio Then and Now" in the annual meeting of Shakespeare Association of America, held in Vancouver, 2015. I would refer to the reader as a male for the sake of expediency.

6 See recent contributions, for example, Stephen Orgel, *The Reader in the Book: A study of Spaces and Traces*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015; Emma Smith, *Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016; Akihiro Yamada, *Experiencing Drama in the English Renaissance: Readers and Audiences*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

7 Hubert L Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow eds, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014, p.247 (Kindle version).

individuals. . . [she] can also study note-taking not as peculiarly unconstrained but rather as the product of practices of reading and writing taught in school and reinforced by various cultural models."⁸ In 2010, referring to the reading practices of the Meisei reader in the light of Foucault's idea about authorship, Jean-Christophe Mayer contended as follows: "While it is easy to dismiss these statements as primitive forms of literary criticism, they are, notwithstanding, extremely valuable traces of a living, feeling individual's meeting with the world of Shakespeare's plays."⁹ And this serves as a conceptual framework for this essay.

Beginning at the top of column b, sig. pp4^v

Although the gravediggers' scene itself starts toward the foot of column b, sig. pp4^v, it is appropriate to begin our life story at the head of that column so that we can let the story tell about the way the reader had read the adjacent text, i.e. the closing lines of Act 4 Scene 7. Before he reached the gravediggers' scene, the Meisei reader had entered pp4^v with three annotations all inscribed on the upper margin above the column a since all the texts that might have triggered these three annotations are found in column a. He had produced no annotations to enter in column b. Nevertheless, he left, as was usual with him, diligent markings (putting short horizontal lines above the beginning of each line) to the lines in column b. How he marked will tell its own story that might inform our life story suggesting the immediate context of his reading.

After "*Enter Queene*" (TLN 3154), as are shown in Figure 1, Meisei reader's horizontal lines are applied only to 21 lines out of 34 (TLN 3155-88), which is rather sparse by contrast to what he did to the text printed on column a of the same page. The lines he didn't underline are as follows:

Laer. Drown'd! O where?

Queen. There is a Willow growes aslant a Brooke,

⁸ Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2010, p.74.

⁹ Jean-Christophe Mayer, "Shakespeare's Commonplacing Readers", paper read at a conference on the topic of "Shakespearean Configurations" held at York, 2009.

That shewes his hore leaves in the glassie streame:
There with fantasticke Garlands did she come, (TLN 3157-60)

There on the pendant boughes, her Coronet weeds
Clambering to hang; an enuious sliuer broke,
When downe the weedy Trophies, and her selfe, (TLN 3164-66)

Till that her garments, heauy with her drinke,
Pul'd the poore wretch from her melodious buy,
To muddy death.

Laer. Alas then, is she drown'd?

Queen. Drown'd, drown'd. (TLN 3173-77)

Kin. Let's follow, *Gertrude* (TLN 3185)

Except for the last King's short line, which exhibits his typical practice, the Meisei

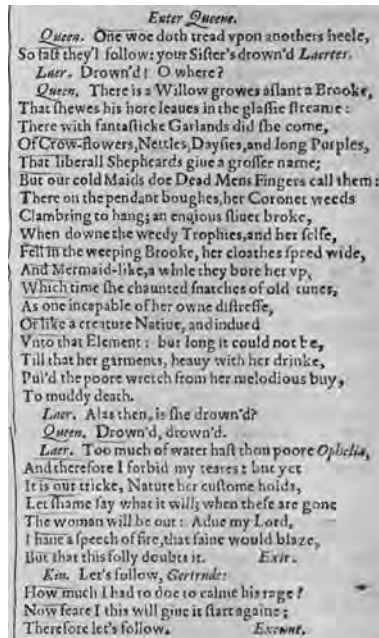


Figure 1 F1 (MR 774) , sig. pp4^v , column b. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

reader seems to have avoided marking lines more directly touching upon the topic of the [suicidal] death of Ophelia.

“*Enter two Clownes*”

And that was the topic, he was to find, of the immediately ensuing dialogue between the two Clowns (TLN 3190-218). Triggered by these lines, the Meisei reader produced the first annotation, which he inscribed in the column b of the upper margin on pp4^v. Although the exchanges on this particular topic continues to TLN 3218, the 7th line on the facing pp5, he decided to inscribe his annotation on pp4^v as is shown in Figure 2:

- (1) “Judgement of those that kill them selues”

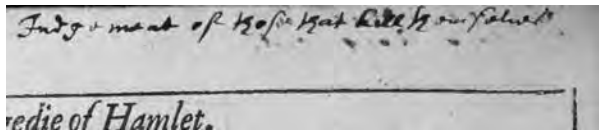


Figure 2 sig. pp4^v, upper margin above column b. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

“Judgement” here probably does not mean God’s Judgement but human opinion or legal decision as in another marginal annotation, “Judgement of a play” (Oo4, b), where the Meisei reader picked up the word from the Folio text. He might have been in sympathy with the Clown’s rather critical stance over the [Ophelia’s] burial he is preparing in the authentic graveyard. He marked up all the lines except for three short lines spoken by ‘Other’: “Why ‘tis found so”, “Nay but heare you Goodman Deluer”, and “But is this law?”

The Clown calls for his spade and the clownish exchanges start developing around the topic of their profession as grave-makers, which the Meisei reader followed marking line by line, only omitting to do so for “Go too” (TLN 3229), until he met the passage: “*Clo.* I like thy wit well in good faith, the Gallows does well; but how does it well? it does well to those that doe ill” (TLN 3234-36). He marked and picked up the passage, integrating these three short sentences into a crisp one, which he wrote in the upper margin above column a of pp5 as is shown in Figure 3:

(2) “The gallows does well to them that doe ill”

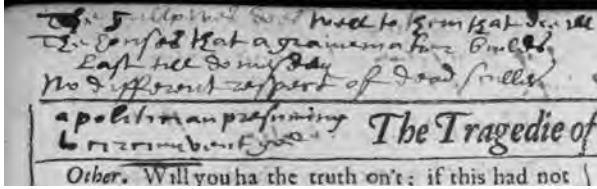


Figure 3 sig. pp5, upper margin above column a. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

He omitted marking six lines where the two clowns resume their initial question: “Who builds stronger then a Mason, a Ship-wright, or a Carpenter?” (TLN 3239-40).

“Enter Hamlet and Horatio a farre off.”

After the stage direction that calls for the entrance of Hamlet and Horatio, the Meisei reader resumed marking each line and was inspired to record the answer section to the question (TLN 3247-49) in the column a of the upper margin (see Figure 3) as:

(3) The houses that a grauemaker builds /Last till domesday

After leaving the Clown’s first song (TLN 3252-55) unmarked, the Meisei reader proceeded to mark the Prince’s response expressing his disgust against the singing together with Horatio’s proverbial wisdom commenting on it. But again he ignored the ensuing Prince’s comment, “‘Tis ee’n so; the hand of little Employment hath the daintier sense” (TLN 3260-61), which he apparently did not find worth recording, and the former half of the Clown’s next song. From which point on, he continued to mark almost all the lines on pp5 with very few lines skipped: Horatio’s “It might, my Lord” (TLN 3272) and “I, my Lord” (TLN 3279) are the only lines left unmarked if we do not count the number of sentence-closing-one-word lines which are also left unmarked.

Reading Hamlet’s lines showing the prince’s reaction to the ongoing [stage] business of digging a new grave on the ground that had been apparently used as a burial place for several dead people successively in the course of history:

That Scull had a tongue in it, and could sing /once: how the knaue jowles

it to th'grownd, as if it were *Caines* Iaw-bone, that did the first murder : It / might be the Pate of a Polititian which this Asse o're Of-/ fices: one that could circumuent God, might it not? (TLN 3267-71)

the Meisei reader was highly inspired to produce, first, his fourth annotation, which he entered below his third (see Figure 3), presumably sharing Hamlet's feelings toward the gravedigger's professional nonchalance or the common destiny of human body after death that is symbolized by that nonchalance:

(4) No different respect of dead sculles.

Given that the folio text does not provide any such stage directions as "He throws up a skull", "He throws up another skull", "He takes the skull" or "He throws the skull down",¹⁰ it is almost remarkable that he could immediately respond to the materiality embedded in the text of the skulls to that depth here. He was to meet later, on column b, another passage that would elaborate the fate of human dead bodies (TLN 3278-83). Second, he took notice of the prince's fierce criticism of a politician, which he entered below the previous annotation (see Figure 3):

(5) a politician presuming / to circumvent god.

Following Hamlet who goes on to extend his imagination to a [now dead] courtier's ridiculous behaviors, and proceeding to read on to column b where another skull is thrown out, the Meisei reader was impressed by what the prince's 15 lines (TLN 3289-3303) talked about and formed a maxim to enter in the very top of the upper margin, column b as is shown in Figure 4:

(6) Lawers and Land buyers Inioy no Land after / death

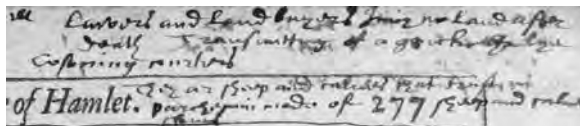


Figure 4 sig. pp5, upper margin above column b. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

Without being struck by the ensuing Hamlet's witty remarks about lawyers (TLN 3305-08), the reader then proceeded to read, at least for the first sitting, directly on

10 G.R. Hibbard ed. *Hamlet* (Oxford World's Classics), 2008, pp. 324-29.

to the witty exchange between the clown and the prince (TLN 3308-20), producing two of his annotations, which he entered after his sixth annotation (see Figure 4):

(7) Transmitting of a quicke ~~by~~ lye

(8) Cosoning courtiers

These two annotations may actually construct a single entry approximately meaning: the clown is transmitting a quicke lye back and forth to the prince, thus “cosoning” courtiers like the prince himself. The eighth is a bit tricky: it might independently refer to courtiers who are flattering into cheating others, for example, a notion possibly inspired by Hamlet’s lines toward the foot of column a (TLN 3273-76). Why he entered it here needs to be explained, though.

Sometime at another sitting, he seemed to have found the prince’s witty remarks about the lawyer (TLN 3305-08) worth recording:

(9) They ar sheep and calues that trust in / parchemin made of sheep and calues / skins

He entered this annotation in the running title box above column b because the marginal space was already crowded to the full (see Figure 4).

Toward the foot of column b, being inspired by a bit of social criticism by the prince, “these three yeares I haue taken note of it, the Age is growne so picked, that the toe of the Pesant comes so neere the heeles of our Courtier, hee galls his Kibe” (TLN 3330-33), the Meisei reader produced an annotation:

(10) our age is so picked that the toe of the pesant treads on the heeles of the courtier

Finding no space left in the upper margin, he entered this annotation in the foot of the text space using both columns so that he could manage to write it in a single line as is shown in Figure 5.

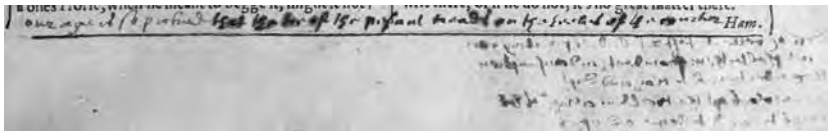


Figure 5 sig. pp5, foot of the page. Reproduced by the curtesy of Meisei University.

Turning the page to pp5^v, the Meisei reader continued to mark almost every

line on column a of the page except for some short conversational connectors: Hamlet’s “Why?” (TLN 3343), “Whose was it?” (TLN 3363), “Nay, I know not” (TLN 3366), “This?” (TLN 3370) with the Clown’s “E’ene that” (TLN 3371), and again Hamlet’s “Let me see” (TLN 3372) despite the fact that the line also carries the beginning of the next (at least to modern audience) substantial speech of the Prince: i.e. “Alas poore *Yorick*, I knew him *Ho*–”, and Horatio’s “What’s that my Lord?” (TLN 3384).

After reading through the dialogue that develops around the topic of the prince being sent to England because of his madness (TLN 3339-49), to which the Meisei reader, whose Scottish affiliation has been strongly suggested, did not leave any other responses than marking, he reached the line where Hamlet asks the Clown as a gravedigger: “How long will a man lie ’ith’ earth ere he rot?” (TLN 3353) He obviously took a great interest in the Clown’s answer: “Ifaith, if he be not rotten before he die (as we have many pocky Coarses now adaies, that will scarce hold the laying in) he will last you some eight yeare, or nine yeare.” (TLN 3354-57) These lines inspired him to enter two annotations, the eleventh and the twelfth, in the upper margin, column a as are shown in Figure 6:

(11) Many men rotten ere they die

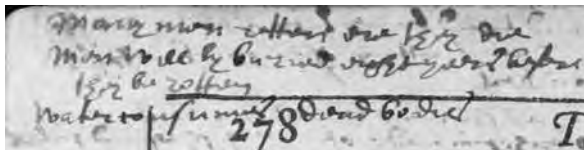


Figure 6 sig. pp5^v, upper margin above column a. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

The way he reconfigured the Clown’s utterances here is interesting since the result looks so simple that it highly invites allegorical reading at least for modern readers such as finding strong resonance of Marcellus’s “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (Oo1, TLN 678) and so on. In his reconfiguration, he left out the concrete and physical information the Clown gave about the ailment thought to have been frightened of its spread at that time.¹¹ Generalization is certainly one of the common

11 Philip Edwards ed. *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985, p. 219 n.

features of this (commonplacing) reader but generalization alone could not have produced this particular expression (see Figure 6).

(12) Men will ly buried eight yeeres before / they be rotten

We may note that the annotator shaped the annotation to suit as an answer to Hamlet's initial question rather than repeating the Clown's wordings in giving the information. Proceeding to read the immediately ensuing exchange on the topic of human bodies decaying in the graves, the Meisei reader again was inspired to enter what he thought was worth recording in the upper margin above column a using the running title box as well (see Figure 6):

(13) Water consumes dead bodies

This annotation is obviously triggered by the Clown's, "And your water, is a sore Decayer of your horson dead body" (TLN 3360-61). Like the skull, the physical materiality of human bodies after death seems to have animated this reader's imagination.

When he was reading the eleven-line recollections of Hamlet with "Yorick's" skull in his hand, as if he could perceive the fact with no stage direction available to him, he seems to have been impressed by this now disfigured former "Kings Iester" (TLN 3369) who is so cherished and admired by the prince with such phrases as "infinite Iest" and "most excellent fancy" (TLN 3273). He produced an intriguing short entry and entered it in the foot margin below the column a as is shown in Figure 7, since the left hand side of the upper margine was already fully occupied so far nor the foot of the text space was available to him due to a severe show-through from the recto page. And that was his fourteenth annotation:

(14) an excellent Iester.

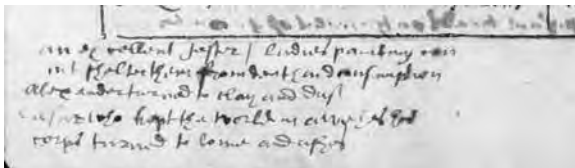


Figure 7 sig. pp5^r, lower margin below column a. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

This is intriguing partly because it seems to hit the topos characteristically

Shakespearean as Thompson and Taylor point out.¹² Within the eleven lines, Hamlet's recollections were to reveal the prince's misogynistic irony again (TLN 3380-82), which triggered the next typically commonplacing annotation (see Figure 7):

(15) ladies painting can / not shelter them from death and consumption

The Meisei reader entered this annotation in the foot margin right after the previous annotation, marked off by a slash as if wanting to secure the space for other entries well anticipated to follow. And did follow the two more entries to enter there as are shown in Figure 7: one is

(16) Alexander¹³ turned to clay and dust.

And the other is:

(17) Casar who kept the world in awe hes his / corps turned to lome and ashes

The last word of this annotation, "ashes", which does not occur in *Hamlet*, is added by the annotator. It might be interesting to note that he used "ashes" instead of "dust" repeatedly used in the grave-digger scene.

"Enter King, Queene, Laertes, and a Coffin, with Lords attendant."

The reading reaches to the point where the funeral procession enters (TLN 3405-06). From this point to the end of the scene on pp6, column a, the Meisei reader continued his usual practice of marking the lines as he read. The lines he omitted to do so are: Laertes' twice repeated "What Cerimony else?" and Hamlet's identification of the speaker inserted (TLN 3412-14), again Laertes' "Must there no more be done?" and Priest's reply "No more be done" (TLN 3424-25), Hamlet's interjectional "What, the faire *Ophelia*?" (TLN 3434), so far being shown in Figure 8, King, Queen and Gentleman's respective "Pluck them asunder", "*Hamlet, Hamlet*", and "Good my Lord be quiet" (TLN 3460-62), Queen's another interjectional "Oh my Sonne, what Theame?" (TLN 3465) and, finally on pp6v, King's entreaty "I pray you good *Horatio* wait vpon him" (TLN 3492).

12 Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor eds., *Hamlet*, (The Arden 3), London: Thomson Learning, 2006, p. 422n (themselves quoting Keir Elam's Arden 3 edition of *Twelfth Night*).

13 Yamada reads "alexander" (*The First Folio of Shakespeare*, p. 244)

And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken,
 The Coarse they follow, did with desperate hand,
 Fore do it owne life; 'twas some Estate,
 Couch we a while, and mark.
Laer. What Cerimony else?
Ham. That is *Laertes*, a very Noble youth: Marke.
Laer. What Cerimony else?
Priest. Her *Obsequies* haue bin as farre inlarg'd,
 As we haue warrantis, her death was doubtfull,
 And but that great Command, o're-swaies the order,
 She should in ground vn sanctified haue lodg'd,
 Till the last Trumpet. For charitable praier,
 Shards, Flints, and Peebles, should be thro wne on her;
 Yet heere she is allowed her Virgin Rites,
 Her Maiden strewments, and the bringing home
 Of Bell and Buriall.
Laer. Must there no more be done?
Priest. No more be done:
 We should prophane the seruice of the dead,
 To sing sage *Requiem*, and such rest to her
 As to peace-parted Soules.
Laer. Lay her i'th' earth,
 And from her faire and vnpolluted flesh,
 May Violets spring. I tell thee (*churlish Priest*)
 A *Ministring* Angell shall my Sister be,
 When thou liest howling?
Ham. What, the faire *Ophelia*?
Queen. Sweets, to the sweet farewell.
 I hop'd thou should'st haue bin my *Hamlets* wife:
 I thought thy *Bride-bed* to haue deckt (*sweet Maid*)

Figure 8 sig. pp5^r, column b. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

The first annotation to arise from this section of the scene may reveal the fact that the reader was reminded of the initial question that interested himself at the opening of Act 5 Scene 1.

(18) Great command ouersweyes order

Inspired by the reluctant priest's explanation to Laertes' protest, the Meisei reader shaped this annotation picking up the priest's wordings almost verbatim and entered it on the upper margin above column b as is shown in Figure 9. The Priest's lines also triggered the reader's next entry to be inscribed below the previous one on top margin (also see Figure 9):

(19) Murtherers of themselues not admitted to burial

Great command ouersweyes order
 Must be, rest of vn sanctified haue lodg'd to be
 vn sanctified of ground
 The Tragedie of Hamlet.

Figure 9 sig. pp5^r, top of the page above column b. Reproduced by courtesy of Meisei University.

The exact lines of the Priest that triggered this annotation are: “She should in ground vnsanctified haue lodg’d, / Till the last Trumpet. For charitable praier, / Shards, Flints, and Peebles, should be throwne on her” (TLN 3418-20). The Meisei reader might have valued these concrete regulations or custom about the suicidal death verbalized here.

As he proceeded to read on, his sympathy seems to have gone, as was usual with him throughout the play, not with the angry and grieving Laertes but with the protagonist, which his last two annotations clearly show. The first of these is (see Figure 9):

(20) emphasis of grief

It is fairly certain that he was inspired here by Hamlet’s “What is he, whose griefes / Beares such an Emphasis? Whose phrase of Sorrow / Coniure the wandring Starres, and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers?” (TLN 3449-52). The word “emphasis” here means now obsolete “amplification” according to *OED* online, the 4th definition of which quotes this Hamlet’s line as the earliest recorded occurrence.¹⁴ Grief and anger stricken Laertes’s words irritate Hamlet because they are, to Hamlet, but outward ‘seems’ and ‘shows’ and even ‘amplification’ that do not denote the truth within.¹⁵ In abstracting the passage by these three words, the Meisei reader might have aligned himself with the prince. The second and the last is (see Figure 8):

(21) a louer truer in affection / nor a brother

This is a shrewd paraphrase of Hamlet’s “I lou’d Ophelia; fortie thousand Brothers / Could not (with all there quantitie of Loue) / Make vp my summe” (TLN 3466-68) meant for commonplacing purpose. And the present micro life story has come to a close.

Conclusion

Having taken this opportunity to read the scene again with this seventeenth century reader of Shakespeare Folio, I realized that this scene was above all a scene

¹⁴ *OED* online Accessed on the 30th of April 2016.

¹⁵ Cf. Philip Edward’s beautifully written note to the line in his edition (p. 222n).

about a doubtful death by drowning of a woman of very high social status (a bride-to-be of a prince, as Gertrude acknowledges). Given the information that, “from about 1500 until after 1660, suicide was punished more severely than ever before or afterwards”¹⁶ and the critical opinion that tells us that “[i]n *Hamlet*, Shakespeare . . . exploits changing attitudes to suicide that began during his lifetime. He presents current interpretations of suicide, but does not resolve the contradictions among them”,¹⁷ it is interesting to speculate whereabouts of the ideological alignment of this reader reading in 1630s concerning the attitudes towards the matter of self-destruction. His text selections and line markings as reviewed in this essay suggest, I think, that his sympathy rather went with the grave-maker and the priest and not with Ophelia and the Queen (as I depicted his markings at the outset of this essay) and Laertes.

16 Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 75.

17 Michael MacDonald, “Ophelia’s Maimed Rites”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, xxxvii (1986), 316.