

From Commonplace Book to Rhyming Dictionary to Beauty

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The first miscellanies in England, from *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557) and the *Mirroure for Magistrates* (1559), on up to the *Miscellany Poems, by the most eminent hands* published by Tonson and Dryden (1684), *The Miscellaneous Works of the late Earls of Rochester and Roscommon; to which is added a curious collection of original poems by the Earl of Dorset, Devonshire, Buckinghamshire* (1707) and the *Miscellaneous poems and translations by several hands*, also called *Lintot's Miscellany* or *Pope's Miscellany* (1712)--all of them either directly reproduce or imitate manuscript collections of verse circulated among members of a coterie or a family.

Handwritten miscellanies – commonplace books – appropriate verse from authors. The compilers whose names appear on the manuscript often fail to attribute poems or misattribute them and then put them to the compilers', coterie's, or family's own uses, retitling them for example "to conform to conventional situations" (Marotti 52). Poems were revised in the process of being copied (sometimes from memory, the copyist having heard the poem read aloud) or in the process of being circulated among friends and family. Coterie culture does not sharply distinguish readers from writers. In manuscript circulation, it is difficult to see where one author ends and another begins: "the concept of authenticity is not applicable," Stallybrass and De Grazia write, "to what must be imagined as, [to quote Stephen Orgel,] an `unstable and infinitely revisable script'" (260). Thus, Marotti points out that a section of the Arundel Harington manuscript is entitled, "Certayne verses made by unceratyen autors, wrytten out of Charleton his booke" (Marotti 14). We know that "Charleton" copied these verses, that he selected them as

good, and gave them to Harington to copy, but not who originally wrote them. The malleable text of the elite miscellanies (as opposed to university commonplace books and the Inns of Court collections, Marotti 32-9) constituted a kind of collaborative writing taking place among members of a particular coterie within the aristocracy: poetry writing and revising was really part "of the social life of the upper classes" (Marotti 272).

The manuscript poetry collection as a place and record of transactions among members of a coterie or what J. W. Saunders calls "a finishing school where members polished each other's art" (43) became in printed form an "academy" for would-be aristocrats. Although explicitly addressed to "Ladies & Gentlewomen," the Preface Humphrey Moseley's *Academy of Complements* [sic.], as Ann Baynes Coiro has shown, is "actually aimed" at the chambermaid or "serving woman [who] is pleased to be reading a text pointedly addressed to her social superiors" (280-1). *The Academy* is "the self-help miscellany form [and thereby] feeding the needs of a seemingly inexhaustible middle-class market for the tools of gentrification" (Coiro 279). *The Academy of Complements*, which went through 15 editions between 1640 and 1683 (Coiro 276 n. 35), and John Cotgrave's *Wits Interpreter, or the English Parnassus* (1655, 1662, 1671) "were mongrel combinations of conduct book and commonplace book, epigram book and personal miscellany" (Coiro 277). "Philomusus," the persona introducing Moseley's *Academy of Complements*, jibes at his anti-aristocratic, puritanical, Republican reader who, as Coiro points out, would be ashamed to be seen in public with a volume providing "Novellae from the Academy, or the Court," but reads it "more privately than his Prayer-book and perhaps with more devotion." The idol to which this member of the middle classes is devoted is gentrification. Volumes with similar titles, styled on Moseley's plan, were

published throughout the eighteenth century as well. These volumes often contain dictionaries (Marotti 266 n. 118).

The most popular, earliest miscellany collections such as Edward Bysshe's *The Art of English Poetry* (1702) are how-to manuals for writing poetry which contain rhyming dictionaries. Poetic diction was to coterie society what "specific jargons and trade languages associated with the various crafts and guilds" were, according to Wlad Godzich, to illiterate members of medieval society: "It was a sphere of immediate contact and transactions within a community of shared values and social orientations, however hierarchically differentiated. The variability of the languages represented the variability of social interactions: full knowledge of the language of a craft or a guild was a mark of one's participation in it and of one's rights to its privileges" (6). Circulating manuscript miscellanies, the coterie was defined by who is giving poetry to whom. Printed "academies" disseminated way beyond small social groups the criteria for coterie membership, rendering them imitable – and, as one can see in the history of the miscellany's development, imitated for the sake of obtaining a specific privilege.

Published in 1738, Thomas Hayward's *The British Muse, or A Collection of Thoughts Moral, Natural, and Sublime, or our English Poets: Who Flourished in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries* contains a preface and an essay, "an Historical and Critical Review of . . . all the Collections of this Kind hitherto published," written by William Oldys. In this essay, Oldys attacks previous collections for erroneous attributions, as would be typical insofar as outsiders are guessing at specific unnamed or initialed authors in coterie manuscripts and printed miscellanies. For Oldys,

misattribution is so serious because, for him, printed collections provide one of the most successful means for immutably and eternally assigning to an author his words:

[*England's Parnassus*], bad as it is, suggests one good observation however upon the use and advantage of such collections, which is, that they may prove more successful in preserving the best parts of some authors, than their works themselves.

Similarly, in *The Muses Library; Or a Series of English Poetry from the SAXONS to the Reign of CHARLES II* (1737), the compiler Elizabeth Cooper declares her mission to be preservative: "I am told, Time and Ignorance have devour'd many important Names [of poets] If this is the Case, . . . it is no[w] high Time to think of some Expedient to Cure this Evil; and secure the Poet in his Idol-Reputation" (viii). The point, she says, is to secure for poets "a sure Immortality" (vii). We can see the ambitions of such collections changing, then, from presenting usable phrases to assigning immutability to specific passages.

In the Preface to the third edition of Edward Bysshe's *The Art of English Poetry* (1708), Bysshe attacks collections such as the *Academy* for simply passing out lists of poetic words, for having "threaded tedious Bead-rolls of Synonymes and Epithets together, and put them by themselves" (p. 3 of Preface). Bysshe himself is attacked in 1738 by William Oldys for "having furnished so many weak heads with those tools" (xiv). But Bysshe says that he provides quotations from great poets' works rather than mere lists of synonyms and epithets

because I am very unwilling it should be laid to my Charge, that I have furnish'd Tools, and given a Temptation of Versifying, to such as in spight

of Art and Nature under take to be Poets. . . . Such Debasers of Rhyme and Dablers in Poetry would do well to consider, that a Man would justly deserve a higher Esteem in the World by being a good Mason or shoo-maker . . . tha[n] by being an indifferent or second-Rate Poet. . . . I resolv'd therefore to place these, the principal Materials, under the awful Guard of the immortal Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, &c. (pp. 4-5 of Preface)

Thus Bysse sees the mere throwing of such "crusts" at his readers as allowing Masons and shoo-makers into the poetic class. Instead of throwing such crusts at the masses, he proposes to give synonyms and epithets embedded in great poets' lines rather than "standing alone," he justifies his decision on stylistic grounds: "when [synonymes and epithets] stand alone, they appear bald, insipid, uncouth, and offensive both to Eye and Ear." Words not used in quotation are like colors not used in a painting: "And can we not better judge by a Piece of Painting, how Beautifully Colours may be dispos'd; than by seeing the same several Colours scatter'd without Design on a Table?" (p. 6 of Preface).

Visibly emergent in Oldys's history of collections of poetry in the Hayward volumes, the "beauties" or excerpts of poetry cited in rhyming dictionaries and rhetorics grow longer and longer as how-to manuals shade into volumes devoted to the appreciation of poetry. When *The Beauties of the English Stage* came out in 1737--one of the first of myriad succeeding volumes with "Beauties" in the title--it meant "extracts," as did the Rev. William Dodd in his 1752 publication, *The Beauties of Shakespear*. The meaning of the term changes between the publication of *A Poetical Dictionary; or, the Beauties of the English Poets*, alphabetically displayed in 1761 and *The Beauties of*

English Poesy in 1767, the former sometimes attributed to Oliver Goldsmith, the latter definitively his compilation. In the Preface to the 1761 *Poetical Dictionary*, Goldsmith (or perhaps Samuel Derrick) claims to be continuing in the tradition of Bysshe. The 1767 *Beauties* differs from both Bysshe and *The Poetical Dictionary* of 1761 insofar as Goldsmith's collection presents whole poems rather than snippets, the volume claiming to contain only those poems that are "well known, and possessed, or the public has been long mistaken, of peculiar merit" (iii). Goldsmith's 1767 volume does not always mention the author of a particular poem, as if their names were too well known to be needed. But an 1800 compilation of "beauties," the Rev. Thomas Janes's *The Beauties of the Poets: Being a Collection of Moral and Sacred Poetry From the Most Eminent Authors*, looks more like an anthology than that, containing extracts from long poems, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, intermingled with whole poems, short lyrics. The extracts are actually indistinguishable for the uninformed reader from the lyrics because Janes gives them titles ("On Creation," "Adam's Relation to Raphael," "Adam's Penitential Reflections after his Fall," etc.). One can think of the anthology, structurally, as expanding the quotations found in rhyming dictionaries and rearranging them under authors and titles rather than indexically by subject, word, and theme.

Early on, a beauty is a quotation in a dictionary like Bysshe's. As the century wears on, an excerpt or even a whole poem appearing in a collection that is designed, in the words of Oliver Goldsmith, "to advance the reader's taste" (*Beauties*, 1767, ii). One factor influencing this transformation is a change in attitudes toward copying. By mid-century, or a bit later, straight repetition had come to be firmly counted as plagiarism--a shift that is felt by Pope, Roger Lonsdale points out, but actually first catches up to Gray,

the canonical tradition's most aggressively "allusive," "borrowing," or "plagiarizing" poet, depending upon one's point of view. Lonsdale dates 1757 a major moment in the process of re-conceiving borrowing as plagiarism, the date when Bishop Hurd's "Letter to Mr. Mason on the Marks of Imitation" was published (42, 44). This assault on unquoted copying as plagiarism coincides with the production of beauties that attribute quoted lines to specific authors and quote them correctly¹ rather than "scattering [quoted words] without design on a Table" – in Bysshe's usage, a "table" being a kind of canvas. This medium, the collection of beauties, then feeds two other media. The first is the collection of whole poems, poems attributed to authors, that ultimately develops into the disciplinary anthology when poems are arranged on the table of contents by author. The second is the literary critical essay which can be seen as a short book of beauties interleaved with critical commentary.

[BACK](#)

¹ I do not mean here to enter into the debate between Adrian Johns and Elizabeth Eisenstein as to whether printed matter in the late eighteenth century produced exact copies – exactly reproducible images, as Eisenstein claims -- or texts that were riddled with errors and inaccuracies, as Johns points out. I am interested here not in what print actually did to authors' texts but with how productions by and for readers imagined themselves to be treating authors' texts.