

Historical Curiosities versus Imperishable Text.

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The field of literary studies is bifurcated by print practices at the discipline's inception into the historically mimetic and the aesthetically superior. Producing collections of poetic "curiosities" interesting to antiquarians while simultaneously publishing the disciplinary anthology – as did the literary establishment in Britain of the 1820s – enacts, in the physical language of books, the split described by Alexander Chalmers in his 1810 revamping of Samuel Johnson's collection, *The Works of the English Poets, with Prefaces Biographical and Critical* (1779) between "the BEST," canonical poets, on the one hand, and "the most POPULAR" poets, those of historical interest, on the other (I.v). This is no surprise, and of course the foundation of cultural studies rests precisely upon contesting the popular/best dichotomy.

While the table of contents appearing in Southey's 1807 *Specimens of the Later English Poets* offered a huge list of poets popular during their time, his 1831 collection, *Select Works of the British Poets, from Chaucer to Jonson, with Biographical Sketches*, is a disciplinary anthology like Hazlitt's, desiring to present writers of "the first class." On its table of contents appears a patriarchal literary tradition beginning with Chaucer, "the acknowledged father of English poetry" (headnote to Chaucer, 1). One can see its anthological ambitions by comparing it to Norton's 4th ([see Table 2](#)). Ironically, Southey does not include one of the poets mentioned in his title – Jonson. Southey gives us some of the canonicals that Hazlitt missed in his inattention to this earlier period, most notably, of course, Donne. But of the four greatest poets mentioned in his introduction – Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton – only Chaucer's and Spenser's poems are included in his collection. Milton is out of his date range. Shakespeare's name in Southey's introduction functions like Chaucer's and Spenser's to name not really a

person but a time: each one of these authors is seen not as the only name in the canonical list but as the name that best represents a style.

Unlike a more fully developed disciplinary anthology – unlike Hazlitt's collection -- Southey's anthology does present some poetry of historical interest. The omission of Shakespeare and inclusion of some writers that we now see as minor is partly a hangover from historical collections of curiosities in which the ambition is to provide poets not yet found elsewhere. Shakespeare's works are easy to get, and Southey announces in his Preface that he is proud to present authors (Tusser, Grevile, Wither, and Lovelace) who do not appear in both multivolume collections by Robert Anderson and Alexander Chalmers as well as others (Skelton, Gascoigne, Habington, and Sackville) who do not appear in one or the other. And one selection of an author's works, Thomas Tusser's "Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry," is clearly motivated by interests other than canonizing. Southey is proud to offer "the whole" of Tusser's poems, as do the multivolume collections to which Southey compares his edition. His selection of Tusser is also clearly motivated by historical interest: "Tusser's poem," Southey says, "though in all respects one of the most curious books in our language, and formerly one of the most popular, has never been included in any general collection of the poets" (143). Similarly, George Wither's works are collected because "they abound in curious, as well as interesting matter . . ." (828).

Thus far this collection presents us with historical curiosities. But Tusser and Wither stand in stark contrast to the rest of what we consider "minor" poets included by Southey. In the headnotes, Southey claims that these allegedly minor poets deserve recognition as part of a tradition: Gascoigne's poetry is selected because "he wrote the first prose comedy in our language"; publishing John Davies's works is a way, Southey says, of "erecting the best and

most enduring monument to his memory” (686). Even in the case of Wither, Southey selects poems based on their value, separating them from portions of the poets works that are “comparatively worthless” (828). In the case of each of his poetry selections, Southey claims superlative value for them and their works: Sackville’s works are “singularly important” (131); Lovelace’s “‘Song to Althea’ . . . will live as long as the English language” (1014); and finally, Hawes’s “The Pastime of Pleasure” is “the best English poem of its century” (76). Of value to whom? As Southey says in the Preface and in the headnote to Chaucer, he presents “the fathers of our poetry” (iii) to do “service” “to the literature of [our] country” (iv), addressing “Whoever aspires to a lasting name among the English poets” (1). Here we have exemplary, formative style and, with it, imperishable bliss.

In contrast to the 1831 collection, Southey’s 1809 *Specimens* collects “curious” writers whose works present historical facts rather than an exemplary style. By collecting poems in disciplinary anthologies that claim to contain the most important works to know as delineating a poetic period’s style and contribution to literary history, editors, literary critics, and booksellers created a notion of high art. Insofar as historical (and women’s¹) collections contain poems representing historical materiality, they are expelled from the disciplinary anthology, which can then claim enduring immateriality.

¹ See “The Character of Canons” in my book *Misogynous Economies*.