

Mid-Century Miscellaneous Collections: the Dodsley Group.

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The miscellany medium reached its heyday in the Dodsley group. The Dodsley group is the series of poetry collections that begins with Dodsley's *A Collection of Poems. By Several Hands. In Three Volumes* (1748)-- extended to four volumes in 1755, and to six volumes in 1758 (rptd. in various forms in 1748-9, 1751, 1760, 1763, 1765, 1766, 1770, 1775; a new edn. 1782)--and is then "supplemented" by Francis Fawkes and William Woty's *The Poetical Calender* (1763, 12 volumes; rptd. 1764), Richardson and Urquhart's single volume *A Collection of the Most Esteemed Pieces of Poetry that have appeared for several years, with variety of originals, By the late Moses Mendez, Esq., and other contributors to Dodsley's collection* (1767, 1770), George Pearch's *A Collection of Poems in Two Volumes* (1768)--extended to four volumes in 1770 (1775, 1783)--and finally John Nichols's eight-volume *A Select Collections of Poems* (1780-82; 1784). From 1748 on, they try to collect every poem "of merit" published in the five to ten years preceding the publication of each volume. The last editions of these collections are changed slightly in a way that pushes the miscellany toward anthological form: footnotes describing who authors are appear for the first time in the 1763, 1780-82, 1782, and 1783 editions, respectively, of Fawkes and Woty's *The Poetical Calender*, J. Nichols's *A Select Collection of Poems*, Dodsley's *A Collection of Poems*, and Pearch's collection with the same title. The appearance of these footnotes marks one step toward headnotes and thus heralds the change from eighteenth-century to Romantic modes of collecting poetry.

The Dodsley group's tables of contents, like those found in earlier miscellanies, offer individual poems. However, they move slightly toward Bell's volumes that will group poems by author. After poem titles, their tables of contents often reiterate "By the same," thus partially

aggregating an oeuvre in consecutive pages. Still, a poet may appear in one portion of a table of contents of one volume, and then in another in the same or other volumes; poems are not ordered thematically, nor even by tone, though there are occasional spates of thematically connected poems.

By mid-century, the volumes of the Dodsley group collect a mass of writers performing their entry into what William Mason called in his "Life of Gray" (1775) "the poetical class" (335, qtd. in Kaul 40), a cultural aristocracy (Kaul 47, n. 20). The mid-century Dodsley collections take the democracy of print to its limit, including virtually every poem printed from 1730 until 1780. Thus, Pearch says that his collection

is compiled from the best productions published within that time [within the seventeen years since Dodsley's volumes were first published], with the addition of others, which seem to have escaped Mr. Dodsley's researches, and several original Poems, with which the Editor has been favoured by gentlemen, whose names are sufficient to give reputation to any Collection. (1775, Vol. I., p. 6)

Their stated mission is merely to preserve ephemeral poetry that is entertaining because written in "good taste," so that Pearch ends the Preface to his collection by quoting Dodsley's Preface approvingly: "it is impossible to furnish out an entertainment of this nature, where every part shall be relished by every guest" because, he says, "the taste of persons is very different" (7). And yet Pearch's worry is not to provide entertainment for readers but something much more serious:

many poetical performances, whose merit might entitle them to a longer remembrance than fugitive pieces usually meet with, are daily thrown upon the public, and left to perish in oblivion. (5)¹

These volumes hold out via the medium of print what Pierre Bourdieu has called "one of the most sought-after social privileges," viz., "eternal life" (72).

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¹ According to Eisenstein, Pearch's worry that printed poems would vanish was reasonable: in the first few centuries of print culture, only books printed in huge quantities actually preserved texts better than single manuscript copies did because of differences in the ways that manuscripts and books were valued (Eisenstein 113ff). Unless huge quantities of an edition were printed, printed literature was less likely to last than literature preserved in only one or two manuscript copies.