

Chance, Choice, Evolutionary Canonicity, and the Anthologist's Dilemma: A Response to William E. Engel

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This response is a contribution to the debate on “Literary Anthologies and Canonicity” (<http://www.connotations.de/debate/literary-anthologies-and-canoncity>). Further contributions to this debate are welcome; contact editors@connotations.de.

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Abstract

This response takes issue with Professor Engel's contention that literary anthologists choose texts that perforce provide readers with a literary canon. By examining the British literary miscellanies of the long eighteenth century, I argue instead that the notion of a canon of literary works of consistent quality does not usefully apply to collections of works before the nineteenth century or after the twentieth. Rather, early-modern literary collections supply readers with topicality, variety, and novelty in the form of ephemeral miscellanies, while twenty-first century collections feature texts by new and marginalized authors. In both cases, too, serendipity and various conditions of production and readership complicate the anthologists' power of choice and limit the texts available for a canon.

In “Literary Anthologies: A Case Study for Metacognitively Approaching Canonicity,” William E. Engel examines the process of conscious choice that editors make when they compile a literary anthology, and argues that this process inevitably constructs and “promote[s] what amounts to a canon” (19). While his comprehensive essay traces the development of the form from Tudor England through to eighteenth-century Britain, with references to Classical Rome and beyond, his main

purpose is to expose and examine the “deliberations” (23, 25) that he and his fellow-editors made when compiling their volumes, *The Memory Arts in Renaissance England* and *The Death Arts in Renaissance England*. Engel rightly emphasizes the pedagogical purpose of early anthologies which aimed at educating readers in how to read poetry through providing them with what to read—selected and vetted works—and which constituted simultaneously “a taste-making exercise and a concerted effort to elevate the aesthetic sensibilities of the general reader” (20).

While Professor Engel and his editorial team have clearly produced an innovative, thoughtful, and forward-looking pair of anthologies, I would like here to expand specifically on two points raised by his article: the idea of a canon and the process of choice. His and his editorial team’s intention to make the process of anthologists’ decisions transparent is laudable because it enables readers to evaluate the inclusions, exclusions, omissions, and their implications more clearly, and thus to exercise more control over the development of their own literary tastes. Such was the asserted intention of early-modern anthologists also. Just as laudable is Engel’s team’s parallel intention of producing an anthology that preserves both the pleasure of reading and the pedagogical impulse of the “academic antholog[y]” (23). I remain skeptical that enough of an audience exists in the twenty-first century to provide publishers with an incentive to produce anthologies-for-pleasure, especially those that concentrate on poetry: novels appear to have conquered the field. Nonetheless, the enterprise recapitulates the procedures and policies of many anthologies over the centuries and fits into the anthological tradition, and I do not mean to question this ambitious agenda. Rather, my comments here address the implications of Professor Engel’s argument for my particular period: the long eighteenth century, from the Restoration to the Regency.

Professor Engel’s contention is that the anthologies, by their replication of textual choices, perforce construct a literary “canon,” irrespective of the overt intentions of the anthologists. I find two assumptions

here that need nuance. First, a secular literary canon is a latter-day concept and represents a nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eurocentric idea of the necessity, function, and effects of a literary education. While books on reading and appreciating poetry certainly proliferated in the Renaissance and seventeenth century, as Professor Engel observes, there is no compelling evidence that readers desired a mediated “canon” of literature in the late seventeenth or in the eighteenth century until the 1770s. Rather, readers wanted—or editors claimed they did—variety and novelty, and publishing booksellers supplied this by means of occasional, topical, ephemeral, and chance-driven miscellanies. Miscellanies are the antecedents and rivals of the anthology. Whereas the anthology purports to present an authoritative body of works, the miscellany promises only a fresh selection, written by a plenitude of hands—some more educated and talented than others—and culled fortuitously from unplumbed, unusual sources: perhaps from friends of the editor, or discovered scratched on a windowpane, or rescued from a fugitive existence in a periodical, a newspaper, or even a broadside. The whole point was freshness.

A literary canon, by contrast, constitutes a definitive collection of vetted texts of guaranteed worth and essential to the education of a cultured consumer. In his 1755 *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson defines the word as, “A rule; a law,” and “The books of the Holy Scripture; or the great rule,” and he derives his examples almost exclusively from religious contexts, although he does quote Isaac Watts’s 1725 *Logick: Or, The Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry after Truth, With a Variety of Rules to guard against Error, in the affairs of Religion and Human Life, as well as in the Sciences.* The *Oxford English Dictionary* solidifies this implication. It defines “canon” similarly as, “A rule, law, or decree of the Church” (1. a.), but includes the more general definition of, “a standard of judgment or authority; a test, criterion, means of discrimination” (2. b.), and, as the fourth definition, “The collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired [...] any set of sacred books; also those writings,

of a secular author accepted as authentic" (4). This early religious context is important because it reveals the absolutist foundational concept of the term. Equally significant are the criteria of authenticity and inspiration.

The significance of these definitions for the question of the literary anthology lies in the emphasis on "authenticity." By extension, this definition implies that a canon of secular works perforce must include only works that are authentic in the sense that they were genuinely written by whomever is claiming them, and also that they must be authentically excellent. This presents two problems. First, as Professor Engel recognizes, only those works produced by writers accepted into the mainstream literary culture could achieve such an imprimatur: usually white men of a class that knew or had access to the means of publication through patronage or connections. Obviously, this omits a vast amount of literary material produced by writers marginalized by class, gender, geography, race, ideology, and a number of other factors. As a result (and as I explore below), as readership and access to literature grew, readers from marginalized groups demanded their own canonical anthologies—or anthologized canons—which empties out the authoritative and perhaps the authentic nature of "a" canon.

Correlatively, the *OED*'s definition implies that the works must be, in some way, *uniform* in their "genuineness" and "inspiration," in other words, in their conception and authenticity. These concepts encompass not merely or not necessarily the overt political content, but rather the understanding of the content as conceptually coherent in a certain way, a way defined, refined, and mediated by the anthologist. Michel Foucault addresses this problematic feature of editing in his essay, "What Is an Author?" Here, Foucault cites Saint Jerome to propose that the way authenticity is determined lies in four criteria: equivalent or consistent quality in comparison to other productions by the same author; doctrinal or conceptual consistency; stylistic consistency; and historical accuracy (which anachronistic comments would nullify). Consistency is the key, and since anthologists necessarily include texts by many

hands, they must provide this consistency. They do so just as Professor Engels does, by prefaces that set out their criteria.

Characteristically, early editorial declarations of aesthetic standards remain vague. The publishing bookseller and anthologist Robert Dodsley, for example, writes in his *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes, By Several Hands*, an expanded version of his two-volume edition of 1751, that

The intent of the following Volumes is to preserve to the Public those poetical performances, which seemed to merit a longer remembrance than what would probably be secured to them by the Manner in which they were originally published. [...] It is impossible to furnish out an entertainment of this nature, where every part shall be relished by every guest: it will be sufficient if nothing is set before him but what has been approved by those of the most acknowledged taste. (1-2)

While defending his choices by arguing that they *merit* a quasi-canonical status, “longer remembrance,” Dodsley preserves the obscurity which encases most anthologists’ values. With typically imprecise explanatory rhetoric, Dodsley declares a consistent aesthetic guaranteed by unnamed experts. Yet he acknowledges that the unpredictable and idiosyncratic tastes of his readers may dispute these experts’ judgment. This problem—the potential rambunctiousness of autodidactic readers—preoccupies early anthologists and underscores the fragility of any text’s claim to canonical status. At the same time, the inclusion of any text in a period-specific anthology impresses on it conformity with the editorial assertions, so that the reader is advised, if not indoctrinated, as it were, into accepting that the texts conform to these unexplained criteria of authenticity and inspiration, regardless of what s/he might think. This aspect of a canon, its necessary consistency, problematizes the anthology’s aim to provide “variety,” which has been a feature of the form from its inception. Thus, within the anthology’s very claims of authority lie the echoing strains of readers yearning to disagree.

The collections of the long eighteenth century provide a good illustration of the problems both with the concept of “a” canon and with the role of the anthology as a canon-consolidator. The reasons for concentrating on this period involve more than my specific expertise. This was the period when multiple social and economic conditions combined to make the anthology an important and ubiquitous form in literary culture just as reading literature itself was becoming, for the first time in history, a popular pursuit.¹ The conditions that facilitated the rise of the anthology include an inexpensive printing press that enabled new classes of readers to gain access to literary material and so enter literary culture, including women, urban workers, and rural audiences; a new Royalist political regime, shakily founded on the collapse of the Puritanical precedent and thus reluctant to impose the kinds of censorship that marked Oliver Cromwell’s previous Commonwealth; and the rise of congers, groups of publishing booksellers who collaborated to fix the prices and availability of printed matter and thus controlled both the distribution and copyright permissions of literary works. These congers bought dated material, like Chaucer’s tales, seventeenth-century poetry by Abraham Cowley, Andrew Marvell, and John Donne, amongst others, and Shakespeare’s plays, made newly popular by Samuel Johnson’s 1765 “Preface to Shakespeare,” which debunked previous critics’ insistence on the Aristotelian unities of plot, time, and space and instead endorsed Shakespeare’s mixed mode of tragi-comedy.

Congers also bought new material, helping to establish fresh aesthetic tastes. This problematizes the idea of choice further since, rather than choosing works on purely aesthetic grounds (if that were possible), publishing bookseller-editors were compelled to use texts whose copyright their conger owned, texts that no-one else had published, and texts that their members had themselves often commissioned. Their choices thus bowed to serendipity and economics. Moreover, to wring as much worth out of their stock as possible, they re-contextualized it by publishing literary fragments and short works in novel, lightweight collections, like *Miscellaneous Poems and Translations* (1712), in which the first, two-canto edition of Alexander Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* appeared,

before, delighted by its popularity, Pope expanded it, and his publisher, Bernard Lintott, produced it in a lavish, illustrated five-canto edition. Publishing booksellers also issued compendious, authoritative compilations, like Dodsley's *A Collection of Poems*, for which he solicited fresh verse from up-and-coming poets like Edward Young and Oliver Goldsmith, along with better-known ones like Pope, Samuel Johnson, Mark Akenside, and William Shenstone. As a publishing-bookseller, Dodsley himself sold the volumes in a handsome edition smacking of consistent quality, authenticity, and poetic inspiration; Dodsley, indeed, was familiar with anthologies, having already published several anthological series, including a twelve-volume *Select Collection of Old Plays* (1744). Accordingly, congers monopolized the copyrights and therefore the publication of a vast amount of literature. The congers' business enterprise and the conditions of the early eighteenth century, in turn, gave rise to a vigorous, rivalrous, chaotic, and hungry surge of new writers to compete with those from the traditional writing-classes, the aristocracy, clergy, and gentry.

The early anthology was really just a collection of literary pieces, but it was the form designed *par excellence* to cobble together works to appeal to reading audiences from the disparate groups of early eighteenth-century Britain and to produce these in reading forms accessible and available to them. Readers could find the material both in physical locations such as coffeehouses, bookstalls, and bookshops, and in printed locations in the form of periodicals and, later in the century, magazines (often shared and thus inexpensive to consume), pamphlets, and extemporaneous collections of remaindered or ephemeral works, bound and sold cheaply by booksellers. All these supplied readers with an expanding, ubiquitous, and visible trove of reading material. These conditions also promoted competition between congers and stimulated the growth of new kinds of literature—notably collections of poetry, old and new, of plays, sermons, histories, ballads, and songs (newly revived since the death of the Commonwealth and the opening of the theaters, and popular with the musically adept Samuel Pepys), translations, particularly of Classical Roman verse, and multiple other genres.

Indeed, some collections print various versions of a minor genre like the pastoral together, or alternative translations of the same Latin poem, one after the other, so that readers could compare them—a practice that enfranchises the reader at the expense of the value of consistency as s/he ponders which is the better translation and hence brings into question the authority of the anthologist. All of these kinds of literary material appeared in competing collections: big and small, long and short, ambitious and frivolous, aimed at women or men or both, the young, the educated, the serious, and the superficial.

However, the anthology also fed and fed on new literary genres that, importantly, include the novel. Early novels themselves resemble miscellanies: like contemporary collections of poetry, they aimed to appeal to a wide swath of readers by shifting tones from the humorous and ironic to the sentimental and sermonic; by claiming factual bases and fictional license; and by an episodic structure that welcomed generic variety. Indeed, eighteenth-century novels often interpolate other literary forms within (sometimes overwhelmingly) the main narrative: mini-narratives, parables, and tales, letters, songs, poetry, dramatic scenes, and comic dialogues. And virtually all early novels promise “novelty”: narrative freshness and variety. These techniques enable not only the concentrated and prolonged reading that hefty texts demand, but also the dip-and-skip reading encouraged by the anthology. The full title of Daniel Defoe’s 1721 *Moll Flanders*, for example, indicates its range: “The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous *Moll Flanders*, &c. Who was born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu’d Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a *Whore*, five times a *Wife* (whereof once to her own Brother) Twelve Year a *Thief*, Eight Year a Transported *Felon* in *Virginia*, at last grew *Rich*, liv’d *Honest*, and died a *Penitent*, Written from her own Memorandums.” Such a titular catalogue promises readers “continu’d Variety” in the forms of a Newgate biography of repentant criminality; an urban georgic on avoiding theft; a scandalous tale of incest and sexual adventure; and a travelogue to North America. Like anthologies, these novels combined many sorts of literary material beneath the rubric of a single story.

Since the discrete interpolated genres within an eighteenth-century novel facilitate extraction and can stand as literary forms on their own, many eighteenth-century novels became fodder for the ever-ravenous anthological miscellany. So ripe are these novels for anthological cannibalism, indeed, that they furnished the contents for a specific set of anthological collections: booksellers' editions of selected excerpts (or "extracts"). Of the dozens of these miscellanies published, those termed "Beauties" stand out as exemplary of the form. These little books promised readers the best passages of prose and verse from the most revered historical and modern sources: there were Beauties of Shakespeare, Fielding, Johnson, Goldsmith, Sterne, Hester Piozzi, and many more. So uniform in length, format, and presentation are the excerpts included in these Beauties that some juxtapose both prose and verse by their author without any distinction—although each Beauty-editor publishes different selections. The anthological form subsumes the content and the promise of beauty guarantees consistent quality.

This multiplication of collections each proposing a uniformly excellent, stylistically consistent, and conceptually coherent body of works introduces a related complication inhering to the question of a period-specific canon. In the eighteenth century (and afterwards, especially in the late twentieth century), there are many collections with different agendas, contents, purposes, and readerships, some overlapping and some distinctly not. Moreover, particularly in the period of rapidly exploding publication and readership, the late seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries in Britain, the entire enterprise of these very enterprising writers and booksellers lay in multiplying their product, forging niches, inventing new ways of reading and thinking about literature. All these anthological forms thus explode the notion of "a" single canon. Obviously, there would be neither purpose nor profit in producing identical replicas of an anthology containing an immutable canon of familiar works: the form depends upon variety and novelty, as the popular, definitional, and persistent metaphor of the garland implies. Professor Engel's examination of the garland metaphor proves this well.

However, another metaphor, similarly ubiquitous, suggests the correlative, if apparently contradictory, impulse governing the anthology: it is the metaphor of the miscellany—the feast of varied and extemporaneous dishes, fresh, new, as-yet-unsampled, and picked to appeal to varied (and perhaps jaded) tastes. This splintering of the anthology undermines the autonomy and authority of *a* literary canon—a single, dominant collection of curated, excellent (according to some criterion or criteria) literary pieces. Instead, miscellanies, collections of literary works, whole or in fragments, abound, each tailored to the taste of a particular moment. In fact, there are no real anthologies in the eighteenth century as nineteenth-century critics would understand them, until the last third of the century at least.

Thus, because of the volatility of readership and literary production during the long eighteenth century, the concept of a printed literary canon before the nineteenth century at the earliest seems to me shaky, and indeed brings into question the idea of an earlier manuscript canon. More generally, as Professor Engel recognizes, canonical claims are fated to fall. While canonicity seems to imply, by definition, the persistence of a defined body of literary works through time and space, history and geography, canons stimulate their own demise as new audiences, writers, and publishing media arise. Likewise, these new forces problematize the notion of choice because they presuppose a breadth of knowledge, infinity of resources, lack of restraining conditions, and accessibility of literary material that does not, indeed cannot, exist. In fact, I do not think I am overstating the situation by suggesting that there is no literary canon anymore, and little chance of one in the future. Instead, there appears to have developed a principle of *evolutionary* anti-canoncity that encompasses genre as well as aesthetic, social, ideological, and geographical grounds. New canons arise to push old canons into the dustbin of history. Who now knows that Alexander Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock*? Who has read it? Indeed, who even knows who Pope was? Or what a mock-heroic poem is? But entire college courses are now offered on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Such shifts in taste have sped up with new technology and canons now fall in the

blink of an eye. This Professor Engel well knows. As he writes, his anthology is “‘a selection and not the final say’” (26), because anthologies exist in an evolving conversation with tradition and innovation, which itself is part of an important conversation about history and meaning. Professor Engel’s article appears to me to add a wise and elegant voice to the discussion.

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NOTES

¹For the conditions and rise of book production and sales, see J. H. Plumb, “Commercialization and Society,” 270; John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 125-97; John Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 67-83; J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction*, 149; Jan Fergus, “Provincial servants’ reading in the eighteenth century, esp. 217-21. In *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies*, I argue that literary collections burgeoned from the Restoration to the Regency and provided a key means to bridge popular and high culture, esp. 30, 73, 155-56, 215.

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