

THE INVISIBLE GENRE: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF LITERARY ANTHOLOGY IN THE ANGLOPHONE CONTEXT

Niewidzialny gatunek. Próby definicji antologii literackiej
w kontekście anglojęzycznym

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Abstract

Anthology as a genre is often given short shrift in Anglophone dictionaries of literary terms. Despite the abundance of anthologies on the book market, this genre tends to be perceived as a given that does not require much explanation. The author of this article challenges such a standpoint and, taking her cue from C. Hugh Holman's handbook definition, considers the examples he gives in order to draw conclusions about how the concept of anthology has been used throughout the time starting from Richard Tottel's miscellany (1557) and finishing with Francis Turner Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861). Relying on recent research in the theory and practice of Anglophone anthology, the author discusses the main qualities of this genre from historical perspective. She traces in particular the anthology's involvement in democratization of literature, on the one hand, and its implication in constructing literary history and cultural imperialism, on the other hand.

Keywords: anthology, Richard Tottel, Francis Turner Palgrave, history of literature, democratization, imperialism

Streszczenie

Anglojęzyczne słowniki terminów literackich nie poświęcają antologii szczególnie dużo uwagi. Mimo znacznej podaży antologii na rynku książki gatunek ten traktowany jest jako oczywistość, która nie wymaga rozbudowanych wyjaśnień. Autorka niniejszego artykułu podważa zasadność takiego stanowiska, a przyjmując jako punkt wyjścia definicję zamieszczoną w podręczniku C. Hugh Holmana, omawia wskazane przez niego przykłady angielskich antologii, by wyciągnąć

wnioski odnoszące się do zastosowań pojęcia antologii od czasu publikacji zbioru sonetów i pieśni przez Richarda Tottela (1557) po wydanie antologii poezji angielskiej *The Golden Treasury* przez Francisa Turnera Palgrave'a (1861). Odwołując się do aktualnych opracowań na temat teorii i praktyki anglojęzycznej antologii, autorka artykułu omawia cechy gatunku w ujęciu historyczno-literackim. Uwagę skupia w szczególności na wkładzie antologii w demokratyzację literatury z jednej strony, a z drugiej – na ich uwikłaniu w tworzenie historii literatury i kulturowego imperializmu.

Słowa kluczowe: antologia, Richard Tottel, Francis Turner Palgrave, historia literatury, demokratyzacja, imperializm

Introduction

Hidden in plain sight, the concept of anthology has given rise to a number of misunderstandings. For one thing, it is (too) often taken for granted.¹ For another, it tends to be used (too) liberally to denote widely diverse publications.² Anthologies are all around us. We use them as students and teachers, often without a more sustained interest than an occasional and fleeting observation that one edition may vary from the next. These variations indicate changes in literary scholarship, though anthologies, at least the ones I have used over the past decades, are rarely harbingers of revolutions. They only respond to the Zeitgeist, gradually and reservedly, like a piece of heavy machinery. Anthologies have weight in both literal and metaphorical sense. To be included into an anthology as an author is a measure of literary success. To construct an anthology is a responsibility that relatively few of the best qualified specialists can take. Buying an anthology was a considerable expense in the analog times. If anthology is such a serious and ubiquitous genre, why is the concept – in contrast to the material object on a bookshelf – so easy to overlook?

Perhaps one of the most obvious answers to this question is that the name “anthology” is often used indiscriminately to denote collections of texts in any genre, literary texts as well as critical or theoretical ones, and texts by one or more authors. It seems at times that any book composed of short pieces or excerpts could qualify as an anthology, which defeats the aim of using such a label. Furthermore, a book may profess to be an anthology on the title page, but it may also use a different name instead (a treasury, a miscellany, a compendium, etc.), or dispense with such generic self-naming altogether. The books that declare to be anthologies, usually in the very title, seem to aspire to order, completeness, and definitiveness. In other cases, that is when the genre is not indicated in the title

¹ A. Ferry, *Tradition and the Individual Poem: An Inquiry into Anthologies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1.

² C. H. Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 3rd edition (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1975), 31.

or paratexts, the anthology emerges in the eye of the beholder, who decides if the book is orderly, complete, and definitive, at least for their own purposes. In other words, the user decides if the book at/in hand is an anthology. Thus, C. Hugh Holman remarks tentatively in his definition of the concept that *The Bible* and *The Koran* are “sometimes considered an *anthology*.”³ These two examples show, however, that identifying a text as an anthology is a matter of perspective and may well be highly divisive.

Anthologies are legion, and each culture has its own favorites. In the Anglophone literary tradition, Holman offers such historical examples as *Songes and Sonnettes, Written by the Ryght Honorable Lorde Henry Howard Late Earle of Surrey, and Other* (1557), which was labeled in the late nineteenth century as *Tottel’s Miscellany, England’s Helicon* (1600), Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), and Francis Turner Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* (1861). Interestingly, none of these influential books, spanning some three centuries of English anthologizing endeavors, has the word “anthology” in the title. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, the first known use of the word “anthology” in the sense of a collection of selected literary pieces or passages was in 1624, which explains the absence of the word in the first two examples, but not in the other two. There must be a different reason then for these onomastic choices.

Such words as “reliques” and “treasury” are more deeply rooted in the English language than the foreign-sounding “anthology,” which explains why they seemed preferable in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well. With its belittling Greek etymology – flowers may be pretty but they wither soon – the word “anthology” did not signal the lasting value of the collected material, whereas the other two words did. “Reliques” and its contemporary equivalent “relics” connote a backward glance at “a tiny often physical indication of something lost or vanished.”⁴ Especially in plural, “relics” stands for “a dead body,” and invites the reader to play with the idea of the metonymic substitution of a dead body with a piece of writing that can come alive though the author is dead. The word “treasury,” especially intensified by the modifier “golden,” signals still more forcefully the value attached to the past literary achievements. In the following pages I consider Holman’s examples of anthologies in the Anglophone culture in an attempt to elucidate their aims that have persisted over the centuries, and the parameters of the concept in the Anglophone context.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relics> (acc. 8.07.2021).

Love Songs for Lawyers

Named after the publisher Richard Tottel, who monopolized the lucrative business of printing common law books in England,⁵ the “miscellany” was a breakthrough in that it made available to a relatively large reading public what had hitherto been reserved in manuscript for a courtly audience.⁶ Published during the last year of Queen Mary’s infamous reign, which was marked by cruel Counter-Reformation,⁷ the book was a monument to the English – as opposed to the continental – poetic talent, and to the joy of life at a time of religious controversy and persecution. The label “miscellany” attached by Edward Arber in his 1870 edition suggests neither completeness nor order, though Tottel’s book does establish a hierarchy between one poet named in the title and “the other” poets, who were meant to remain in his shadow. Some of the anthologized poets were still alive at the time of publication and their “otherness” alongside anonymity may have been occasioned by their non-aristocratic origin. At the time of printing his anthology, Tottel was, as Warner calculates, “29 or not much older”⁸ and belonged to “a large, vibrant, and certainly sophisticated social/occupational network in London, comprising law students, lawyers, and others in the trades and in government who maintained ties to the legal profession.”⁹ It seems reasonable then to assume that law students were both some of the anonymous contributors and the main buyers of the anthology for over thirty years that it remained in print.¹⁰ However, although Tottel’s collection “was popular by the standards of his day, it was not yet a cultural institution and canonical text for wider circles of society.”¹¹

Rather than pointing to ancient Greek antecedents, Holton and MacFaul see the origins of the sixteenth-century poetic anthologies, such as Tottel’s, in the tradition of commonplace books, that is, “volumes in which individuals or groups of people gathered material which was particularly interesting or useful to them personally or professionally.”¹² The tradition had persisted from the Middle Ages,

⁵ J. C. Warner, *The Making and Marketing of Tottel’s Miscellany, 1557: Songs and Sonnets in the Summer of the Martyrs’ Fires* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

⁶ A. Holton, T. MacFaul, “Introduction,” in *Tottel’s Miscellany: Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt, and Others*, eds. A. Holton, T. MacFaul et al. (Penguin Books Ltd, 2011), ix.

⁷ J. C. Warner, op. cit., 4.

⁸ Ibidem, 14.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 15.

¹¹ B. Korte, “Flowers for the Picking: Anthologies of Poetry in (British) Literary and Cultural Studies,” in *Anthologies of British Poetry Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*, eds. B. Korte, R. Schneider, S. Lethbridge (Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 22.

¹² A. Holton, T. MacFaul, op. cit., x.

with such later examples of a commonplace book as Ben Jonson's *Timber* (1640) or W. H. Auden's *A Certain World* (1971).¹³ While "[m]any collections of high-status verse were circulated [...] in England in the seventeenth century in manuscript rather than be subject to the vulgar and commercial process of printing," in the following centuries, "readers often compiled handwritten commonplace books [...] to create an individualized anthology of texts."¹⁴ Today the commonplace books compiled by Jonson or Auden would be regarded at best as authorial compendia verging on intellectual autobiographies. It means that though the genre of anthology may have derived from the same impulse of collecting that also guided the commonplace book, after such popular publications as *Tottel's Miscellany*, the two parted ways. Tottel may have actually contributed to reinforcing the distinction between the personal commonplace book and the public anthology. The involvement of "the Cambridge scholar Nicholas Grimald as contributing editor, sealed the book with elite authority: this was an authoritative edition of new, approved verse, not a reader's compilation."¹⁵ This endeavor to popularize hitherto secret knowledge benefitted from the democratizing impetus of the print revolution, associated with Johannes Gutenberg.

Songes and Sonnettes was a landmark in English literary history. According to Stephen Hamrick, it is still regarded as the most influential collection of poetry in the sixteenth century:

[c]opied by a monarch, set to music, sung, carried overseas, studied, appropriated, rejected, edited by consumers, transferred to manuscript, and gifted by Shakespeare, this multi-author verse anthology of 280 poems transformed sixteenth-century English language and culture.¹⁶

Songes and Sonnettes appeared at the time when both manuscript and print cultures coexisted and interacted. Hence, readers felt inclined to engage the text, amending and editing it to their own liking. Literary historians deplore, however, publisher's use of the liberties taken by the anthologist: either Tottel himself or the poet and scholar Nicholas Grimald, or perhaps an unknown editor of the manuscript. For example, since Sir Thomas Wyatt's "dark words and broken metres" were deemed less appealing to the Elizabethans than Surrey's

¹³ C. Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 70–71.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ B. M. Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 38.

¹⁶ S. Hamrick, "Introduction: Songes and Sonnettes Reconsidered," in *Tottel's Songes and Sonettes in Context*, ed. S. Hamrick (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.