

Anthologies and Miscellanies

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Anthologies and miscellanies are perennially of interest to medieval scholars because they are characteristic of the type of book production and compilation that was increasingly common in later medieval Britain from c. 1350. Indeed books that might be described using either term preserve many of the most important literary texts from all regions of late medieval Britain; in particular anthologies and miscellanies are important to the preservation and transmission of short lyrics and other kinds of verse, but they are also witnesses to many types of genres of writing such as legal texts, scientific and medical writings, chronicles, letters, music, devotional texts, and recipes and charms, sometimes collocated with literary texts. Simply put they are the “typical environment for the survival of medieval texts” (Connolly and Radulescu 2015, 3). For example, and as Putter (2015, 81) states, miscellanies are the main way in which medieval English lyrics and romances have survived. Importantly they also contain codicological and bibliographical information that is central to understanding literate activity in the period, and remain one of the chief ways in which scholars encounter texts and versions of texts from the later medieval period.

However, miscellanies particularly present conceptual difficulties for modern scholars. Issues around taxonomy and nomenclature recur time and again in debates and discussions. The matter of what to call medieval manuscripts that preserve many texts, and

texts that sometimes differ generically and linguistically, is compounded by the tendency (in evidence even in the present work) to conflate this large category of manuscripts, problematic especially since terms have not properly been defined in scholarship on later medieval English manuscripts. In addition scholarship in this field does not consistently apply either or both terms, even though, ostensibly, the term “anthology” has a fairly strict definition (see below). The lack of precision in terminology has led to terms like “anthology” and “miscellany” being used “interchangeably, with others such as ‘commonplace book’ often invoked with misleading imprecision” (Boffey and Edwards 2015, 264), while Connolly and Radulescu observe that the “loose application of a variety of terms,” including others that are frequently substituted for anthology and miscellany, such as “collection,” “compilation,” and “household book,” can lead to the “easy dismissal of many manuscripts whose contents are of a heterogeneous nature” (2015, 4). The situation around terminology and classification, rather than indicating scholarly confusion, instead seems to reflect a certain fuzziness around the distinction between an anthology and a miscellany, one that is the direct result of incredible variance in terms of the formal qualities and contents of late medieval manuscripts. Moreover, there is the issue of overlap between the two: can intention and evidence of anthologizing be discovered in miscellany manuscripts, or does their selection of texts represent the difficulty that scribes had in procuring texts to copy, a situation that has been called “exemplar poverty” (Hanna 1996a, 31)?

Scholars are more interested now in the nexus between intentionality and practicality,

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and are less inclined to dismiss as insignificant and meaningless miscellany manuscripts: they survive in great numbers from the later medieval period and are central to understandings of scribal culture, reading habits, compilation, and textual variance. Nonetheless, they present very real problems of definition and scholarly approach. In a recent collection of essays editors Connolly and Radulescu refer to miscellanies as the “final frontier in the study of the medieval book”; in their view, because the contents of the miscellany volume are mixed they are consistently overlooked, being “in no one’s main interest ... overlooked, even ignored, and frequently dismissed as of marginal interest; where they have received attention they have tended to be ransacked by editors for their parts” (2015, xiii).

Although many scholars are in agreement about the cultural, textual, and historical significance of the miscellany, and that the term ought to be applied to describe a manuscript that has mixed contents and that is also frequently polygot, there is still little consensus over its precise definition (Connolly and Radulescu 2015, 1) or over what the term “miscellany” might say about a manuscript. However the 2012 Insular Books conference held at the British Academy concluded that a miscellany might usefully be reframed as a “multi-text manuscript” (Connolly and Radulescu 2015, 1). Indeed in the volume emanating from that conference the editors call attention to miscellany variety, noting that this itself can be mixed: books may preserve discrete items that are thematically linked (so, they may all be devotional, for instance) or different types of text (scientific, legal, courtly), in verse or prose, or list form, short or long, in several languages (3).

The term “miscellany,” then, is used to describe multi-text manuscripts but also manuscripts of which the contents and form are heavily contingent on the manner

of and circumstances of production. The miscellany has often been dismissed for the very reasons that make it compelling: “the imperfection of texts due to the nature of the version(s) available for copying ... occasionally combined with a set of assumptions about the social status of the compiler or the environment in which the manuscript book was produced” (Connolly and Radulescu 2015, 1). Miscellanies evince a certain kind of response in the modern scholar, a response that according to Ralph Hanna, in a seminal essay on vernacular miscellanies, amounts to a “modern critical befuddlement” about them because they do not conform to contemporary beliefs about the form and content of a book and what that should constitute (1996b, 37). Bahr (2015, 181) echoes this view, stating that “terms like miscellaneity and variance are partly products of the distance between the past and the present.” Conversely, and remembering that it is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “miscellany,” the word “anthology” is more precise, used in most cases to refer to a “collection of texts within which some organising principles can be observed,” though it must be noted that both of these terms are still under debate in medieval studies (Connolly 2015, 5).

As mentioned above, anthologies and miscellanies both supply possibly the most common contexts for texts of all kinds in Middle English as well as in other vernaculars, and both anthologies and miscellanies preserve texts, sometimes in many languages, in the same volume. However, the key difference between the two seems to relate to the degree of planning that went into the production of the volume and, in that respect, most scholars are in agreement that, properly, anthologies are volumes that are less miscellaneous in content and structure.

A manuscript anthology might be defined as a manuscript “in which coherence is expressed in either the ordering of items or

similarity at the level of literary genre, or both” (Connolly and Radulescu 2015, 21). Most frequently scholars are compelled to discover homogeneity or similarity between texts as well as evidence of systematic copying (perhaps by a single scribe) and organizational schemes (in the form of, for instance, running headers, ruling, framing, and consistent programs of illustration and rubrication) to distinguish an anthology from a miscellany. However, the presence of one or more of these factors in a manuscript does not automatically indicate that the production was “planned” or that we might easily label it an anthology. Boffey and Edwards caution against an oversimplified definition of a volume based on content and aspect, arguing that only by “understanding the processes of assemblage” of manuscripts can we “determine evidence of some recoverable pattern which might underlie the collocation of contents in a manuscript collection” (2015, 265). It is their contention that attention to the physical and geographical evidence may reveal that manuscripts that may look like anthologies might not necessarily reflect “conscious design” but may instead reveal that books were put together pragmatically and over long periods of time.

One of the examples cited by Boffey and Edwards is the Findern manuscript (Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.1.16), a Midlands book which is often labeled an “anthology”; they state that although the manuscript has stimulated discussion with respect to its theme and tone,

the length of time during which it was effectively “under compilation” stands in the way of reading it as a purposively shaped whole. Physical evidence of its construction and copying, along with the larger history of the circumstances of its creation, suggest that it is better considered as an unusually literary kind of household book, and a collection which took shape accretively rather

than with any sense of overall plan or specific purpose. (2015, 266)

On this manuscript see also Connolly (2011, 132) who cautions against “the temptation to impose unduly narrow definitions on such anthologies.”

In order to demonstrate how terminology can be influential, Boffey and Edwards cite the example of a similar collection – the so-called “Glastonbury Miscellany” (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.9.38) – arguing that its contents “relate demonstrably to specifics of time and place” and that the single most important unifying feature is not a thematic focus but in fact the scribal hand (2015, 267).

It is difficult, then, to generalize about volumes occupying this category, and because they can be said to share so many crucial features, distinctions between them are not always visible and clearly drawn. A case might be made for the centrality of the miscellany to the medieval consciousness, especially since many texts from the Middle Ages themselves reflect the miscellaneous nature of volumes: recently Bahr has suggested that the “range of modern theoretical approaches to manuscript culture is itself a form of variance” (2015, 181). We might even be wise to think about the miscellany as a kind of proto-anthology, especially since fewer anthologies proper survive from the later Middle Ages (assuming that the rate of survival can be in part indicative of the contemporary landscape). Putter, when writing about lyrics and romance texts, states that literary anthologies were not “typical of the Middle Ages – at least not where Middle English texts are concerned” (2015, 81).

Noting that the situation was different for French lyrics, for which *chansonniers* and collected works existed, Putter observes that “[b]efore the 16th century there is only one planned anthology of secular English

lyrics,” and that there is a comparable situation for romances which, prior to the second half of the fifteenth century, were transmitted in miscellaneous collections. He finds only one romance anthology – London, British Library, MS Egerton 2862 – a late fourteenth-century volume (2015, 81–82). However, it must be noted that anthology-like volumes were in production, especially throughout the fifteenth century, apparently driven by the commercial practices around the copying of texts in booklet form, but manifesting similarities to other volumes in circulation at the time that had a certain appeal (Boffey and Edwards 2015, 268; on the production of booklets and independent quires see Robinson (1980), Hanna (1996a, 21–34), and Gillespie (2011)). Indeed examples of commercial production of such booklets and volumes survive from the workshop of John Shirley (Connolly 1998). Mooney (2003, 182), however, argues that Shirley’s anthologies have more features in common with miscellanies, stating that Shirley’s compilations, dating from the first half of the fifteenth century, are “more miscellaneous” than is suggested by other scholarly studies of his output.

It might also be argued that anthologies – seemingly increasing in popularity throughout the fifteenth century – could grow around a core text or set of core written work that were originally fabricated separately and that were augmented over time by further additions that in some way related to the original core text, a point made by Boffey and Edwards (2015, in particular 272ff.). And, as Richard Firth Green argues, productions like those volumes associated with Shirley – which he terms “medieval anthologies” – invite speculation about “implied textual communities” and what “principles underlie the selection of anthologized items” (2009, 32).

All things considered, the evidence would seem to support Hanna’s much-repeated assertion that miscellaneity is the normal context for medieval book production and for the transmission of medieval texts of all kinds (1996a, 9). Hanna’s assertion has been reiterated by many scholars, including Scahill (2003, 18) who notes the importance of the miscellany in the preservation of “the bulk of Middle English verse” and in the very “presence of English in the manuscript records between the middle of the thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth.” Connolly and Radulescu (2015, 8) also note that in Welsh manuscripts of the later Middle Ages “the multi-text codex was the norm rather than the exception.”

Though miscellanies and anthologies are features particularly of the later medieval period, c. 1350 onward, there are some important survivals from the Old English period: the Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501), a tenth-century anthology of poetry and riddles which is one of the most significant repositories of Anglo-Saxon literature; the Vercelli Book, a miscellany of religious texts produced in England; the Nowell Codex (London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A XV), notable for its preservation of the epic poem *Beowulf*; and the tenth-century Junius manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11), a collection of poems on biblical subjects. Some less well-known examples include London, British Library, MS Harley 585, a miscellany containing prayers, medical texts, and poems in Old English, Latin, and Irish. Some of the remedies found therein bear similarities to the book known as *Bald’s Leechbook* (London, British Library, MS Royal D 12 XVII).

Miscellanies and anthologies are also a feature of the production of chronicles: for instance, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 139, is a twelfth-century historical miscellany in Latin, copied by various scribes,

which was probably produced at Fountains Abbey (for which see Baker 1975). Miscellanies or anthologies that grow out of monastic contexts implicitly relate to a community of producers and readers; as Firth Green notes, every medieval monastery constituted an *ipso facto* textual community (2009, 33), but it is less easy to speculate on the kinds of readers that are indicated by the miscellanies and anthologies that begin to appear from the middle of the fourteenth century and, crucially, whether the texts selected for copying demonstrate local interest or the existence of a community.

It is sometimes easier to speculate when evidence points to an institutional context for the production of a manuscript. The so-called Vernon manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a. 1), the largest surviving Middle English manuscript, dating from the 1380s or 1390s, preserves material that is devotional and didactic, including “some of the most widely-disseminated vernacular works in later medieval England whether in prose or verse,” among them the A-text of *Piers Plowman*, the South English Legendary, the *Prick of Conscience*, and Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* (Scase 2013, xx; see also *The Vernon Manuscript: A Facsimile Edition*, and the project website <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript/>).

Scholars generally are in agreement that Vernon was “produced in a religious house in the West Midlands,” most likely Bordesley Abbey, a Cistercian house in Warwickshire (Horobin 2013, 27). It might be considered an anthology and it seems certain to have originated in or emanated from a definite community involving a network of readers, copyists, and texts, but the extent to which it accurately reflects that community is uncertain. Because it was likely intended for public reading or for recitation, the nature of its audience remains uncertain, as does the precise relationship between the community and

the texts that Vernon preserves (Firth Green 2009, 33). The same might be said for Vernon’s sister-volume, the Simeon manuscript (London, British Library, Add. MS 22283), which matches Vernon “in most but not all of their contents so far as they survive” (Doyle 2013, 19). However, both volumes are “utterly anomalous in their scale and ambition among English vernacular books of the later Middle Ages” (Perry 2013, 71) as well as “physically ... distinct from most other devotional manuscripts of the period” (Scase 2013, xxiii), so questions remain as to how they might be categorized and may have been used (though Firth Green describes them as “anthologies” (2009, 32–33)).

Miscellanies that were produced in or at least that survive from the period between the middle of the thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth are often trilingual; an example is Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.14.39 which has 140 items in Latin, French, and English but which, Scahill argues, has more unity than most early English miscellanies since most of the items are religious and gnomic (2003, 19). However, the Auchinleck manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.2.1), produced in London in the 1330s can claim to “mark the appearance of a public whose literacy is essentially confined to English” (Scahill 2003, 18; for a facsimile see Burnley, David, and Alison Wiggins, eds., *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, www.nls.uk/auchinleck/). Auchinleck is widely acknowledged as one of the most important manuscripts to preserve works of Middle English and is frequently the topic of conferences, papers, and book-length studies (see most recently the essays collected by Fein (2016)); it is especially notable for the number of popular vernacular romances it preserves, among them the *Guy of Warwick*, *King Horn*, *Floris and Blancheflour*, *Kyng*

Alisaunder, and *Sir Orfeo*. Although popular romance dominates, it is an important context for “many of the types of English verse writing of the period, including saint’s legends, religious tales, and didactic works” and must have been intended for use by readers who “wished to be both edified and entertained” (Pearsall 2016, 13). It is generally understood to be an anthology (see for instance Baswell 2007, 43) – though Fein uses the term “compendium” in the introduction to her recent collection of essays (2016, 4) – that was compiled from booklets and “a professional production, a bespoke book organized around romance-heavy booklets” copied by five or six scribes under the direction of “scribe 1” (Shonk 2016, 178). Unlike the typical medieval miscellany, Auchinleck would have been underpinned by rigorous planning and direction, though its direct intended readership remains under question.

Another anthology that attracts regular scholarly attention is the so-called “Harley” manuscript (London, British Library, MS Harley 2253), a trilingual collection that was produced in the 1340s in London, also constructed from booklets, and also witness to important works of Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin, in particular prayers, lyrics, political verse, saints’ lives, moralistic, devotional, and didactic material, and *fabliaux*. The contents seem to be miscellaneous, but Fein et al. (2015, 13ff.) note the influence of the Ludlow scribe and his “anthologizing impulses,” calling attention to how he “arranged texts with an eye to clustering topics, themes, and/or antithetical arguments inside units smaller than the whole book.” However Firth Green notes that despite the work carried out by Revard (2000, 21–109) on the circle of gentry families in Shropshire that might be associated with the Ludlow scribe, there remains the tension between what is available and what is interesting in an anthology (2009, 32).

The debate about and scholarly interest in medieval books that do not self-describe, or that do not offer up clear ways in which they might be understood, has been a concern for scholars of Middle English literature in particular since the new direction in manuscript studies, spearheaded by Derek Pearsall and others in the early 1980s and heavily invested in the context for Middle English texts (Pearsall 1983, 2000). Since then influential essays and studies have combined descriptive, empirical research with more speculative arguments. Boffey and Thompson’s study (1989) remains central not just for considerations around verse texts and books preserving them but also as an important landmark of knowledge about and attitudes to anthologies and (especially) miscellanies at the time, particularly those associated with courtly audiences and readers. Also influential have been contributions to the volume edited by Nichols and Wenzel (1996), which think through some of the salient conceptual and theoretical issues around miscellanies and modern scholarly approaches to them, and the essays contained in Kelly and Thompson (2005), perhaps most especially Pearsall’s own contribution (Pearsall 2005), which calls into question the search for intentionality and organization in miscellany manuscripts and anthologies.

However, it seems to be the humble miscellany that is increasingly of interest to scholars who, like those who engage in holistic studies of anthologies, have begun to appreciate these volumes in their entirety, attempting to understand them in terms of the rationale behind their production and the ways in which they might have been used, read, and shared. As miscellanies become more numerous in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they are less likely to have been professionally produced and bear more marks of domestic, amateur production; according to Connolly, “miscellany production in the

fifteenth century was a more modest undertaking, increasingly personal and individual,” while productions such as the Findern and the Winchester manuscripts “seem to be late flourishing of that earlier tradition of collecting and preserving literary works in one large repository” (2015, 291). Some manuscripts from this period have received editorial and critical attention, most notably perhaps the Thornton London and Lincoln manuscripts (see Thompson 1987; Fein and Johnston 2015), and the commonplace book of Robert Reynes (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 407) (Louis 1980). Nonetheless, full editions and facsimiles of multi-text manuscripts are still rare (Connolly 2015, 285, 287) and are varied and sometimes uneven in terms of approach and focus. However, scholars are still heavily invested in studies of individual manuscripts and genres of texts as well as in more conceptual work.

The recent work on the Vernon, Harley, and Auchinleck manuscripts testifies to lively academic interest in these books and to a healthy, productive reconsideration of earlier work. Those scholars involved are invested in the production of quality facsimiles or editions/translations alongside essays that tease out the various intricacies of their production. In addition, scholarship that is committed to case studies of manuscripts, groups of manuscripts, and compilers or to studies relating to the problems of editing texts from miscellany and anthology manuscripts continues to be produced at pace, as witnessed in recent collections of essays (Connolly and Radulescu 2015; Gillespie and Wakelin 2011, in particular essays therein by Connolly and Mooney), as well as in the important collection edited by Hardman (2003), which presented studies of specific manuscripts and/or groups of manuscripts, and which also usefully involved discussion of early modern miscellanies. Other work that attempts to understand literary miscellanies

includes that of Salter (2012) who examines the *Carle of Carlisle* extant in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Porkington 10 (Brogyntyn 2.1) with attention to how readers might have understood it in the wider context of the miscellany manuscript; and recently Johnston has examined the locally produced miscellanies and anthologies compiled for the rural landed gentry that preserved many vernacular romances and other texts, arguing that the texts and volumes “encode socio-economic fantasies that would have held a particular appeal for the English provincial elite” (2015, 90).

We also have experienced a surge in work that looks at nonliterary textual genres, such as scientific and medical works that, more often than not, are found in miscellaneous contexts: work by Keiser (1999), for instance, refocuses miscellany volumes that seem to be random collections of mainly scientific and utilitarian texts, examining the kind of milieu in which they are produced to argue for planning and organization, while scholars such as Mooney (2004) have argued that evidence of the use of scientific and utilitarian manuscripts offers a way of understanding how and why such collections were compiled. Meanwhile, volumes such as Taavitsainen and Pahta (2004) collect some case studies of scientific/utilitarian miscellanies that privilege considerations of audience and unity. And significant work by Connolly (2007) on devotional and practical texts in miscellanies highlights synergies between these genres of text but also similarities in how they might have been imagined and read in a miscellany context.

Connolly and Radulescu conclude that in order to gain a greater understanding of late medieval Insular manuscript miscellanies, “focused case studies of multi-text manuscripts would be welcome, not least because this would allow the details of the

overall picture to be shaded in incrementally” (2015, 10). What seems to be emerging in newer research is attention to a combined approach to miscellanies in particular: intensive study of the texts, codicology, and paleography, alongside theoretical considerations of the kinds of manuscripts that transmit medieval texts, those concerns that have been the mainstay of scholarly work in this area over the past decades. Attitudes to miscellanies more often than not acknowledge that “cohesion of some kind” is at play and that cohesion may be “external – directed towards some function – or internal, in which the relationship of texts with each other and the shaping of the whole are factors” (Scahill 2003, 18, after Corrie 2000, 427–28). The “blended approach” advocated by Bahr (2015) – a combination of speculative and descriptive approaches to miscellanies and anthologies – seems to be one that is currently favored by scholarship, even if it is mostly implicitly at play. Connolly (2003, 172), writing about miscellanies, states that “it should not be assumed that no methodology existed simply because none is apparent.”

SEE ALSO: Auchinleck Manuscript; Book of Aneirin; Book of Leinster; Book of Taliesin; Book of the Anchorite; Book of the Dun Cow/*Lebor na hUidre*; Chronicle Tradition; Exeter Book; Findern Manuscript; Glosses and Glosing; Hendregadredd Manuscript; Manuscript Production; Percy Folio; Thornton Manuscripts; Vercelli Book; Vernon Manuscript; White Book of Rhydderch/*Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*

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