

Rose, Jonathan: The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot

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The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot. Leah Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. vii + 224. \$24.00 (paper).

Leah Price is not the first to explore the anthology as a genre, but she does light out for some new scholarly territory, venturing beyond the tiresome business of counting up the authors included or excluded. "Anthologies are more than a referendum," she recognizes. "They determine not simply who gets published or what gets read, but who reads, and how" (3).

Anthologies (for instance) have often been targeted at readers of one sex or the other: thus (Price argues) they reinforce gender distinctions. In the process of excerpting or summarizing, they often transpose texts from one genre to another. Richardson's epistolary novels were (before 1868) commonly recast as impersonal narratives, and bits of Shakespeare were ripped out of their dramatic context to be rendered as poetry. Alexander Bain extracted quotations (and misquotations) from *Middlemarch* for his 1872 volume of *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse Selected from the Works of George Eliot*-editing out Eliot's narrative and presenting her as more of a moral philosopher than a novelist.

Price considers the consequences of these abbreviating strategies. In mining her work for quotable quotations, Main did for Eliot what had long been done for Shakespeare. Thus he explicitly placed the two authors side by side at the pinnacle of literary hierarchies, sacramentalizing her work. To accomplish that, however, he had to devalue narrative as a genre. Far from engaging in "mere story-telling," he insisted, Eliot had "for ever sanctified the Novel by making it the vehicle of the grandest and most uncompromising moral truth" (107, Price's emphasis). Thus anthologists signal to the reader not only which authors are worth reading, but what to read them for: the story, the philosophy, or the poetry. Editors train readers how to do their own editing.

Moreover, to make Eliot into an ethical philosopher, Main had to chop up her prose, occasionally rewrite it, and sometimes present her characters' opinion as her own. Eliot was by no means entirely happy with this, and Price's research into the Blackwood archives reveals the tensions and confused signals between her and her publisher. But Price shows that Eliot eventually learned to play the role that Main had created for her. *Daniel Deronda* and *The Impressions of Theophrastus* Such were more epigrammatic than her earlier works because they "were both written in the expectation of being excerpted" (106).

Leah Price has a thrilling talent for making just this kind of imaginative leap, but one may reasonably ask whether her audacity sometimes outruns her research. She tries to

cover not only anthologies per se, but also summaries, abridgements, bowdlerizations, reviews, commonplace books, calendars, birthday books, and the epigrams sprinkled throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Given that these are all forms of condensation, it makes sense to treat them together, but there is a limit to what one can do in 150-odd pages of text. In fact Price only deals with four authors in any depth: Shakespeare, Richardson, Walter Scott, and Eliot. More thorough coverage of this literary form, in an earlier period, is achieved in Barbara M. Benedict's *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (1996). The anthology as a genre has a long and intricate history, going back at least as far as the florilegia of the twelfth century. But Price stays within the bounds of the mid-eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries, rarely glancing backward or forward.

Price's observations are often original but (given the evidence) overconfident. "The anthology," she asserts, "trained readers to pace themselves through an unmanageable bulk of print by sensing when to skip and where to linger" (4). That would be a brilliant insight if it were true, and it might well be. But how do we know? "Common readers" scarcely make an appearance in this book, and inferring their responses can be a risky business. Yes, anthologies were often aimed at males or females, but can we be sure that readers only read what was deemed proper to their sex? Kate Flint, Christine Pawley, and Ronald Zboray have found that, surprisingly often, women read men's books and men read women's books, even in the benightedly gendered nineteenth century.

And yet, after all the necessary qualifications, I believe that Leah Price is on to something important. Clearly there has been a broad secular millennium-long trend toward anthologization in Western society. Digests become ever more necessary as the volume of written and printed matter expands exponentially. Price is right to situate her study within the "Reading Revolution" postulated by Rolf Engelsing—a shift, around 1800, from "intensive reading" of a few canonical texts (mainly the Bible) to "extensive reading" of an endless torrent of ephemeral texts (mainly newspapers, magazines, and novels). She recognizes that anthologies made possible reading that was at once intensive and extensive: "Within each source, they distinguished some passages to be read once and immediately forgotten from others to be quoted, memorized, republished, and reread" (4).

Readers of this journal will wish, as I do, that Price had carried her story forward into modernity, when anthologization becomes especially important and interesting. If George Eliot began writing novels with an eye toward their eventual quotation, the next generation of authors carried the trend a step farther. Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, G. K. Chesterton, and even Winston Churchill would pen epigrams and then build literary works around them. Occasionally they wrote essays that were already anthologized, consisting entirely of quotable witticisms: e.g., Wilde's "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young" (1894) and Shaw's "Maxims for Revolutionists" (1903). In a crowded and competitive turn-of-the-century literary marketplace, where the press eagerly broadcast clever snippets by celebrity authors, this was an effective publicity strategy. And it has become ever more necessary over the past century, as Woody Allen can attest. As media glut increases and attention spans shrink, we inevitably spend less time with multivolume narratives and more time with slogans, selections, and quickie digests. One

may question whether the anthology contributed all that much to the rise of the novel, but it certainly did a lot for the sound bite.

[Sidebar]

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[Footnote]

Note

1. See Jacqueline Hamesse, "The Scholastic Model of Reading," in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

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