



Introduction

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Long before the current vogue for big data and distant reading led literary scholars to examine ever larger corpora of texts, Roger Lonsdale argued in his groundbreaking of “the landscape of eighteenth-century poetry” was limited because we hadn’t read enough of what was published in the period:

It will seem outrageous to suggest that we still know very little about the subject. Yet given the sheer quantity of verse published in the century—the thousands of substantial, separately published poems, the hundreds of volumes of collected poems by individual authors, the innumerable miscellanies by several hands, all the verse which appeared in the poetry sections of hundreds of magazines and newspapers—this must literally be the case.¹

The vastness of this terrain is both the reason it demands scholarly attention and the chief deterrent preventing engagement. The quantity of verse published in just one of those categories Lonsdale mentioned—“the innumerable miscellanies by several hands”—is staggering: across the period, tens of thousands of poems were published in well over a thousand mis-

Eighteenth-Century Life

Volume 41, Number 1, January 2017 DOI 10.1215/00982601-3695909

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cellanies. Moreover, such miscellanies came in all shapes and sizes, from multivolume anthologies of literary verse, to hastily put-together pamphlets of topical and scurrilous satire, and everything in between. As Michael Suarez has observed, for many years the problem confronting the scholar interested in exploring these publications was knowing where to start: “Lacking adequate maps, few scholars have been willing to venture into so vast an uncharted territory.”²

In 2010, a team of researchers based at the University of Oxford began a project that sought to make a map. In compiling a database of the contents of eighteenth-century miscellanies, they would sketch out, for the first time, the contours of the poetic territory identified by Lonsdale and Suarez, developing a resource that would act as a guidebook to assist scholars in making sense of this vastly uncharted land. The project, which became known as the Digital Miscellanies Index (henceforth “DMI”) was funded by the Leverhulme Trust and headed by Abigail Williams and Jennifer Batt. The database that underpins the index was built by Oxford University Computing Services, and remodeled and launched in a beta phase by Gnostyx Research, thanks to the generosity of Joe Gollner. The DMI team made use of Michael Suarez’s bibliographical survey of the period’s miscellanies in order to catalog as many eighteenth-century poetic miscellanies as possible. Key information was recorded about each miscellany: about the books themselves, about their makers, about the poems they contained, and about the authors of those poems. When the first phase of the project reached a conclusion in 2013, the DMI contained records of over 40,000 poems by several hundred named poets (and countless unnamed ones) printed in almost 1,500 miscellany volumes published between 1700 and 1780. Users of the DMI, now freely available at <http://digitalmiscellaniesindex.org>, can investigate how a particular poem, or author, or genre of verse, appears across this body of miscellanies; zoom in on particular collections in order to track their evolution across multiple editions or evaluate their contents against rival publications; focus on the varied practices of different miscellany makers, be they editors or compilers, printers or publishers; or explore broader patterns across the whole dataset including trends relating to popularity and canonicity. A comprehensive guide to the database, together with hints and tips on how to use it, can be found on the project website.³ Though, as Lonsdale notes, miscellanies are just one facet of a complex and varied poetry publishing landscape, they are undoubtedly a vital part of it, and consequently, the data-driven reception history

enabled by the DMI has the potential to challenge—or confirm—some of the customary narratives that persist regarding eighteenth-century poetry.

This special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Life* presents articles that draw on the DMI to demonstrate the richness and complexity of the contribution miscellanies made to eighteenth-century poetic culture. The essays in this collection employ various methodological approaches. Some focus closely on a particular poem, or volume, or miscellany series; some take on the oeuvre of an individual writer in whole or in part; some consider genres of poems or genres of miscellany; and some step back to consider broader issues, such as the history of reading, the relationship between popularity and canonicity, and the connections between notions of authorship and practices of attribution. From close to distant reading, these essays model how the DMI might be used to generate new hypotheses concerning the ways that eighteenth-century readers and writers experienced poetic culture. They also draw attention to the difficulties in interpreting the evidence we are left with—what do we actually mean by popularity and how do we measure it? How much did miscellany readers actually know about the verse they encountered in their collections? How might we best use the surviving evidence of publication history to uncover the stories of the literary past?

The articles in this collection suggest that the DMI has the potential to consolidate or challenge a number of enduring narratives about eighteenth-century poetry. One of the most significant contributions that the DMI can make is to offer new evidence regarding the publication and reception history of the hundreds of poets—both those active in the eighteenth century and those writing earlier—whose work it documents. Several essays in this collection explore the implications of the DMI for particular authors, familiar and not so familiar. Christopher Salamone considers the place of Shakespeare in the miscellanies; Louise Curran focuses on Milton; Claudine Van Hensbergen on Rochester; Kathleen Lawton-Trask on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu; Adam Rounce on Donne, Herbert, Blackmore, and Cowley; Simon Dickie on Hildebrand Jacob and William King. Examining the afterlives of very different authors with very different “brand” identities, these essays collectively explore the myriad roles miscellanies played in shaping an author’s cultural presence in the period. In doing so, they shed new light on the connections between poetic miscellanies and the literary canon as we have come to understand it. As several of these essays note, the works with which we are today most familiar are not,

usually, the ones that miscellanies print and reprint. Nor do familiar poems or authors appear in the forms we might expect. In repackaging verse, miscellanies typically established new (and sometimes unusual) contexts for the verse, and as several essays in this collection explore, one extreme kind of de- and recontextualizing involved breaking long poems or verse dramas into bite-size gobbets that could be repurposed as moral apothegms, witty epigrams, or set-pieces designed for performance. Moreover, though some authors developed distinctive reputations (Rochester, for example, becoming closely associated with anything smutty or bawdy), when miscellanies repackaged the work of many authors, they often failed to include details of attribution. As the DMI reveals, about half of the poems published in miscellanies were printed without attribution; even when attributions were given, the information provided to readers was not always correct. As Jennifer Batt shows, miscellanies often contained verse that was willfully, or accidentally, misattributed, and it is not always possible to know which was which. Readers of verse in eighteenth-century miscellanies frequently did not know whose work it was they were reading. Moreover, they often experienced poems in forms or formats quite different from those in which they had first proceeded from their author's pen, or in which we might encounter them today.

Several of the essays in this special issue, observing that authorial identity was not always what induced readers to pick up a miscellany, suggest other factors that may have guided their selections. Simon Dickie's essay suggests that genre played an important role in recommending collections, and poems, to readers. As his essay demonstrates, the popularity of comic verse in miscellanies—especially poems that appear to delight in cruel or bawdy humor—implies that this critically neglected genre was especially attractive to readers in the period. While some readers were engaged by the topics and themes of verse included in miscellanies, others may have been lured by the reputations that particular collections acquired. Don Nichol's essay explores how long-running series such as *The Foundling Hospital for Wit* (later developed into *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit*) catered to an interest in satirical, topical, and political verse and prose over several decades. The period saw many fads and trends in miscellany subgenres. In her essay, Abigail Williams discusses a late-century development: the spouter's miscellany, a compendium of short extracts of verse designed to be learned and performed. These miscellanies, like so many others, were designed to encourage or support distinct kinds of reading experience.

As the pieces here reveal, miscellanies helped shape the poetic landscape of the eighteenth century. But who was responsible for shaping the miscellanies? Authorial intention is not much present in this special issue of essays, since few authors exercised any kind of close control over the printing and reprinting of their work in miscellany collections. Instead, we must look to editors and compilers, printers, publishers, and booksellers as primary agents in the process. Some miscellany makers, including Jacob Tonson and Robert Dodsley, are well known to literary scholars, but as John McTague's essay shows, the identities of many others are obscured. Even when identities are known, an individual's motivations can often only be guessed at. In many cases, an editor or compiler's reasons for choosing this poem or that poem, for reproducing a popular piece for the umpteenth time, or for not bringing a more neglected one to light, can only be inferred from the printed record. There are, as McTague notes in his study of cancels and censorship, moments where bibliographical analysis can yield important insights into some of that editorial decision-making, but more often than not, the rationale behind such choices remains indistinct. The corpus of eighteenth-century poetry delineated by the DMI is the product of thousands of separate decisions, made—for reasons ranging from the literary and aesthetic to the commercial, pragmatic, and expedient—by hundreds of individuals, at least some of whose names are completely lost to literary history.

Every miscellany produced in the eighteenth century has its own—sometimes unique, often contingent—story to tell, about the people who made it, the poems it contains, about what was liked and not liked, and about the reading experience it might have fostered in those who encountered it. This special issue makes a significant contribution to telling those stories—and the broader story of miscellanies in the period—but many of its essays are marked by a sense that much work remains to be done to understand this considerable terrain fully. Several of the pieces here urge caution in the ways we interpret the available data, and warn us, especially, about how complex the idea of popularity is. Thus, these articles—and the DMI as a whole—are presented as a provocation to further research. Some of that work will be conducted by members of the DMI team, thanks to a further grant from the Leverhulme Trust that has made possible a subsequent phase of the project's development, which includes an important collaboration with the Verse Miscellanies Online proj-

ect (<<http://versemiscellaniesonline.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>>) run by Michelle O'Callaghan at the University of Reading. The result of this will be an expanded DMI with a chronological reach from 1557 to 1780. Further studies of the evidence brought to light by the DMI will also be forthcoming.⁴ But we also hope that the DMI will be an important resource for the scholarly community at large: in sketching out the contours of this literary landscape, we believe we have produced a map that will be useful to anyone interested in exploring some of the relatively untrodden paths of eighteenth-century poetry.

Notes

1. *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1984), xxxv–xxxvi.
2. Michael F. Suarez, SJ, “The Production and Consumption of the Eighteenth-Century Poetic Miscellany,” in *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays*, ed. Isabel Rivers (London: Continuum, 2001), 245.
3. See <<http://digitalmiscellaniesindex.org/faqs/>>.
4. For details see <http://digitalmiscellaniesindex.blogspot.co.uk/p/work-in-progress.html>.

