What Good Is an Old Book?¹

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At what point does the hitherto unrecorded anonymous 18th-century novel fetching upwards of £1,000 seem not only a silly but an institutionally irresponsible acquisition?—Michael T. Ryan

In December of 1984, the University of Pennsylvania Libraries bought an anonymous two-volume novel published in London by Thomas Lowndes in 1776. Item 99 in Catalogue 107 issued by the London firm of Marlborough Rare Books Ltd., *The Husband's Resentment; or, The History of Lady Manchester* cost £550, or approximately $687.50 at the then-current exchange rate. Marlborough fully described the physical copy offered for sale—("lge 12mo, half-titles, titles, 224 + 236 pp., cont. calf gilt, spine gilt with double labels [corners lightly rubbed, lacks one number-piece]")—but was otherwise fairly laconic: “Not in McBurney; Summers, *A Gothic Bibliography*, p. 363. Not in NUC.”³

Penn acquired this novel to add to a collection of early English fiction. Moreover, it seemed to be rare. The *National Union Catalog: Pre-1956 Imprints* reports no copy in North America. But NUC is wrong. The Eighteenth Century Short Title Catalogue reports one other copy in North America, at Yale University. *The Husband's Resentment* is nonetheless very uncommon. I find records for only two other copies, located at the British Library and at the State Library of Queensland (Brisbane, Australia).⁴

Not only rare, this book is also little known and little studied. Marlborough’s description was brief because so few sources say anything about the book that Marlborough’s catalogers found nothing to crib. Several bibliographies mention *The Husband's Resentment*; several others miss it.⁵ I know of only one modern scholar of the English novel who has read it, J. M. S. Tompkins. In 1932, she summarized its plot in one paragraph, concluding: “This novel, with its possible and impossible situations, its sensational folly and its tantalizing glimpses of something better, is not below the average quality.”⁶ This appraisal, cautiously judicious, does not encourage a Common Reader to suppose the book worth much of a glance.

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Yet *The Husband's Resentment* is worth thinking about, even worth reading. It brings a bit more clearly into focus what rare book collections and rare book librarians do in order to justify their existences—and what good libraries in general do. Libraries spend what is, in effect, public money—money that is untaxed—for their wares. The use of public monies to acquire an unread book gives, or should give, one pause. Penn has spent, and I have approved the expenditure of, $687.50 of the public’s money for what appears to be a piece of literary rubbish. In the world in which we live, such a purchase may seem merely small-scale instead of large-scale waste. But still it appears wasteful enough. The book survived in New Haven, London, and Brisbane. Who needed a fourth copy? What good is this book?

I

Early in a study of the interpretation of narrative, and in the *echt* mode of most professors of literature, the literary critic Frank Kermode chooses a text to help him make a point. “The text,” he writes, “is Henry Green’s novel *Party Going*.”

It is not yet part of the secular canon; that is, it has not yet been guaranteed to be of such value that every effort of exegesis is justified without argument, as it is in the cases of, say, Joyce and Faulkner. A confession that one had not read *Party Going* would not be humiliating (a rule-of-thumb of canonicity).7

More or less incidentally, Kermode here assumes the existence of a canon of accepted texts that, together, constitute what students of literature read, study, and write and talk about. He implies that this canon is constantly expanding. Joyce and Faulkner, writers of our own century, have entered it. Henry Green has “not yet” done so, but he may.

Even if the canon’s margins are expanding chronologically, its historical core has seemed fairly stable, at least until recently. The names—and at least some of the works—of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Donne, John Milton, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Butler Yeats, and James Joyce and their ilk, among the British, and of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Henry James, and William Faulkner, among the Americans, are familiar to all of us. We would probably be at least slightly uncomfortable if we had to admit that we had never read any of the works of these twenty people at all.

There are, of course, other canonical authors; equally “of course,” other literatures and other fields possess their own canons, too.8 Although I will not speak of them here, I hope that what I say is applicable to them, too. In any case, this highly abbreviated “A” list of twenty names, drawn solely from the heights of the Anglo-American literary tradition, contains no surprises. That it is indeed “highly abbreviated” needs
little demonstration. One could, and some do, place writers such as William Collins or James Kirke Paulding in “the canon.” With these twenty writers, however, “major authors” courses, at one time or another, leave us more or less familiar. We tend to take them and their fellows completely for granted.

Yet well-publicized and ongoing debates insure that all of us now know that the very concept of “canonicity” can no longer be taken for granted. There are many reasons for this development. A bit more than fifty percent of the population is not male. But eighty-five percent of the twenty people on my “A” list were male. An equal eighty-five percent were Protestant. (Of the three Roman Catholics, one, Chaucer, did not live at a time when the benefits of Protestantism were available to him.) All were white. None was working class. The one “revolutionary” among them, John Milton, engaged in an extremely peculiar revolution. I am loath to speculate about the sexual preferences of these honored dead; even in this respect, however, most seem to have engaged in culturally sanctioned, majoritarian forms of sexual behavior.

Perhaps male heterosexual WASPs find this correlation between themselves and our culture’s canonized authors merely natural. Others, even some male heterosexual WASPs, are more doubtful. For it is easy, looking at the characteristics of those whose names appear in lists of canonical authors, to wonder whether extra-literary assumptions about the people who produce great literature govern commonly accepted judgments about what constitutes great literature.

It is also increasingly possible to wonder about the concept of “great literature” itself. Several different schools of literary theorists question this concept for various reasons, having concluded, with Tony Bennett, that

There . . . exists an element of indetermination as to what counts as ‘literature’ and what does not. Certainly ‘literature’ is not regarded as an immutable body of texts but as a function variably fulfilled by different texts in different circumstances (my italics—DT).

If we cannot be certain what “literature” is, then we can be even less certain about what “great” literature is.

It is in the context of this uncertainty about what, if anything, constitutes “the canon” of basic texts that I want to pursue my topic.

For our colleagues in the various academic disciplines who engage questions of canonicity, these questions are largely theoretical. The answers they provide will have certain practical implications, to be sure. An instructor may conclude that Susanna Centlivre, Aphra Behn, Mary Astell, Fanny Burney, and other women are unfairly neglected because of a male-dominated view of what constitutes Restoration and eighteenth-century English literature. His or her syllabus may therefore emphasize these authors instead of Pope, Swift, Gay, Addison, Steele, Richardson, Fielding, and their male contemporaries. Such an instructor will teach this period’s literature in a
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rather different way from one whose syllabus is more conventionally constructed. But
the student of such an instructor can always dig up the “standard” authors. The effect of
such a shift in subject matter need not be permanent.

In fact, it will not be permanent. Even the schools in which instructors with such
advanced views find a home institutionalize the standard pedagogical canon despite
these instructors. Traditions are conservative; they resist change. Contem-
porary exercises of choice and will battle a well-entrenched inheritance of attitudes, assumptions, and texts difficult to dislodge from their primacy of place and exemplary status. Sooner or later, students will be held responsible for knowing something about Pope and Swift. Their need to know Aphra Behn and Fanny Burney will not be reinforced to anything like the same degree. In addition, libraries and bookstores are well-stocked with the works of eighteenth-century male writers. Women’s works are less well represented. If they are, they tend to be found in library rare book departments, in original or other early editions and no others. A few publishers, Pandora and Virago among them, make some early women writers currently available. But not many can be found. Publishers institutionalize conventional canonical judgments both in those individual texts they choose to reprint and in those writers and texts they choose to include in heavily capitalized and nationally marketed anthologies. John Richetti’s view, expressed in a review of an anthology of essays on British women novelists, prevails: “With the notable exceptions of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth,” Richetti writes, “the[se] novelists . . . require the special perspective and enthusiasm of feminist criticism to come alive.”

This complex of attitudes affects not only eighteenth-century studies, not only
women writers. Much of the most provocative work on such matters is currently
produced by students of American literature. We have been self-conscious about the
stature of our writers from the beginning of American nationhood. Ours is, of course,
a literature to which women have contributed relatively little that has been noticed or
taken seriously until recently. Additionally, although our literature is the product of
a multiethnic, multiracial society, its guardians have a long history of responding badly
to knockers on the door whose faces, when glimpsed, are disconcertingly dark; who
prove to be Roman Catholic or Jewish; whose sexual identification is ambiguous
or whose sexual preferences are homo- rather than hetero-erotic; or whose politics are
radical and left-wing.

In short, many issues in many fields have convinced literary theorists to re-
examine the canon. But in literary practice, such efforts confront the reality that
proposed changes normally go nowhere. Simply enough, institutional support for a
reopening of canonical questions in ways that might make a real impact on the
curriculum or on the standards of the literary marketplace does not yet exist.

At least to date, academic arguments about the canon have been . . . well, academic.
They agitate quite a number of people within the profession of literature and influence
a number of people who read, teach, or write literature. Increasingly frequently, they
incline culturally ambitious politicians to bleat. But little changes. A few books by women or minority writers drift in and out of print. New anthologies offer varying bits and snippets of their works which teachers may assign. Our institutions—publishers, bookstores, reviewing organs, critics, and academics—continue to esteem such writers as Saul Bellow and John Updike. They are polite—painfully polite—to other writers such as Shirley Anne Grau and William Demby. But whether such writers will eventually “matter” any more than Mary Wilkins Freeman or Paul Laurence Dunbar remains to be seen.21

Library decisions are not academic. They are always practical in effect. The decision to spend limited acquisitions funds on a first edition of Fielding’s *Tom Jones* or, instead, on a first edition of the anonymous *Husband’s Resentment* asks for a quite specific judgment about what matters. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, speaking about “the economics of literary or aesthetic value,” comments that

The traditional—idealistic, humanistic, genteel—tendency to isolate or protect certain aspects of life and culture, among them works of art and literature, from consideration in economic terms has had the effect of mystifying the nature—or, more accurately, the dynamics—of their value.22

Perhaps this is true for academics. For librarians, it is simply not true. Librarians always deal with one of the most basic criteria of value, price (although this may not be a criterion that Smith herself had in mind). Very little about price long remains mystifying. It’s worth it, one can afford it, and one buys or conserves an object at such and such a price. Or the price is too high, one can’t afford it, and one cannot buy or preserve it. These judgments have real (and quite public) pricetags attached to them. They may have equally real implications about what is available to be read, whether to confirm or challenge accepted ideas of canonicity or for any other reason.

The decision to acquire, the decision to preserve, is even an exercise of “power,” in fact, a kind of power that librarians have had for a very long time. It may be easier to recognize as power when viewed from a great distance—as, for example, when it is seen in the librarians at Alexandria, who, together with their colleagues among the critics and school teachers, were largely responsible for the peculiar pattern of survival of classical texts.23 It is not quite so easy to see ourselves exercising similar power as we decide what to send off for conservation treatment, what to deacidify, what to microfilm, what to weed—and what to purchase and keep. But we do.

Once there were three known copies of *The Husband’s Resentment*. Now there are four. A bookseller and a library have markedly improved the chances that this book will survive, rather more markedly than any resuscitation in a classroom or specialist journal could have assured, short of a new edition. This is not ultimate power; librarians don’t declare war, manipulate stock prices, or raise Lazarus from the dead.
But it’s power of a kind, even a kind of life-and-death power.

There is a question that remains, of course. The question is: so what?

II

*The Husband’s Resentment* is an epistolary novel, a story told in letters. Selena Belville of Somerset lives in London, a drudge dependent upon the generosity of relatives. Somehow, she attracts the notice of Lord Manchester, a man well beyond her tender years. As she writes to her best friend Fanny, he is “No Adonis, . . . neither young nor handsome, between Forty and Fifty, tall, well-made, an Air of the World, graceful in his Manner, an easy Elocution, sensible, spirited, and well bred” (I:30). 24 Manchester’s intentions turn out to be honorable. Very early in the novel he marries Selena. Although she worries that her feelings for him resemble the love she would feel for a father or brother rather than for a husband, she enjoys the glory and wealth which marriage to Lord Manchester brings her.

Her new husband’s best friend, Lord Darcy, has a son, Lord Hastings. Many readers, meeting this news, will sense the imminence of a plot. In fact, Lady Manchester must strive to control the “warmer Flame” (I:50) of passion she quickly comes to feel for Hastings and which, all too clearly, he returns. “Never will . . . [I] be guilty of a Crime which I shudder but to think of,” she writes (I:124).

Complications arise when another woman, who had sought to marry Manchester and now seeks marriage with Hastings, begins a series of machinations which eventually convince Manchester that Lady Manchester has been unfaithful to him. Following several trying scenes, Lady Manchester delivers a son six weeks prematurely and lies near death; Hastings is tricked into marriage with the conniving woman; and Manchester plans revenge for Lady Manchester’s presumed adultery.

In Volume II, Lady Manchester recovered, Manchester takes his revenge, conducting her “to a lonely and gloomy old Mansion . . . calculated to excite Melancholy, . . . and convey[ing] . . . the Idea of a Prison” (II:30–31). It conveys this idea because it *is* a prison, and here he imprisons her.

Within a few weeks Lady Manchester escapes. En route, she meets her husband’s sister to whom, following an accident, the conniving lady had made a deathbed confession of her crimes. The sister, hurrying to tell Manchester that he has wronged his wife, insists that Selena accompany her. Selena does so; the sister’s effort at reconciliation almost succeeds. Lord Manchester, on his knees, begs Selena’s pardon.

“Rise, my Lord,” she responds, “pray rise; I cannot bear to see you in that humble Posture. Appearances were against me” (II:56). But she cannot bring herself to return to a man for whom she has come to feel “a Sort of Repugnance” (II:68). They separate. Manchester’s friend Darcy (Hastings’s father) comes to visit him some time later and falls ill. Darcy recovers, but Manchester catches his illness, with fatal results. On his deathbed, Manchester makes Lady Manchester promise, in Darcy’s presence, that,
should Hastings ever ask for her hand in marriage, she will accept it “as soon as Decency would permit” (II:105). Under mysterious circumstances that clearly involve him with another woman, Hastings puts Selena through still more complications before the novel reaches its obvious end in their marriage.

**III**

Many things could be said about this book. But should they? Does it merit any attention? I have now read it several times and it stands up to repeated rereading. But an ability to withstand repeated rereading is not a necessary criterion of merit and, whatever the other merits of this book may be, they have not been so obvious that they need no demonstration.

*The Husband’s Resentment* is clearly a book without stature, very nearly without existence, with no known progeny, with notably few readers. (Some of the book’s substantive details suggest to me that it may just possibly have been known to Jane Austen. At present, this notion must remain mere speculation. Were it ever to prove demonstrable, however, Austen as a reader would be worth remarking. I mention this point because it is intrinsically interesting for its own sake, and certainly not because a demonstration of Austen’s—or any other “great” author’s—familiarity with *The Husband’s Resentment* would somehow “justify” an otherwise incomprehensible regard for this novel.) That the book was not entirely without some early readers—whoever they may have been—is, however, worth emphasizing. Some explanation of why an original copy is something that scholars need access to (as opposed to a facsimile or a modern edition) is also suggested by considering the evidence that supports this point.

The University of Pennsylvania copy comes from the library of the Duke of Beaufort. It has been decently bound in calfskin with gilt borders on the upper and lower covers, tooled and gilt spines bearing two (red and black) leather labels, and marbled endpapers. All edges have also been marbled. The marbled front pastedown endpapers bear the Beaufort bookplate, marked in ink to show the fixed location in the Beaufort library to which the volumes were assigned during their obviously lengthy stay with that family. An older pressmark has been crossed out on the verso of the front free endpapers. All this is indicative of the far from negligible regard in which the book’s early owners held it as an object. The book itself is a similarly decent, although by no means spectacular, specimen of late eighteenth-century bookmaking, a point perhaps similarly indicative, if not of its publisher’s opinion of it then, perhaps, of his hopes for it. I find a marginally corrected typographic error in what I take to be a roughly contemporary hand (II:168) and numerous dog-eared pages (dog-eared, to my eye, long ago): someone read it “then.” Some pencilled underlinings indicate what I take to be a more recent reader: someone before me has read it “now.” A facsimile might, a modern edition would surely not, offer such indications of the book’s
reception or readership, one argument for the evidentiary significance of an original edition of any book, where it can be found.

In other respects, the novel is rhetorical, conventional, and moralistic in ways we no longer admire. It does not even offer us the illusion of a slice of life. A fantasy view of the world of the aristocracy, how a young girl can join it, and the price she must pay for her success, the book’s long suit is not realism. Was it worth buying? Should four libraries be spending staff time and energy, public money, and shelf space to acquire, catalog, house, and preserve it, and to make it accessible to the one other reader who, in the next fifty years, may bumble across it?

Yes.

To begin with, it’s enjoyable. I apologize for my deplorable lack of literary taste and standards, to say nothing of the dementia implicit in holding up so low a virtue to justify so great an expense. But Tompkins’s response in 1932, and my own, are the only ones I have got; and she, too, seems not to have utterly despised the book. Nor is it entirely artless. I am inclined to attribute some genuine skill to this anonymous author’s ability to keep the interest of an unforeseen reader—216 years, a hemisphere, and several stylistic, cultural, and political revolutions down the pike—in what is, after all, a pretty silly story about some pretty silly people.

The details of its plot are beneath comment. But that is no criterion. Were we to judge Hamlet or The Tempest by that standard we could all afford our own copies of Shakespeare’s First Folio. Underlying the plot are some things worth noting.

Tompkins discusses the book in a chapter on women novelists. The book is anonymous; she could not know that it was written by a woman. But I thought so, too (before I read Tompkins); and I still do. Eighteenth-century male writers might have understood the power relationships detailed in The Husband’s Resentment but I know none who would have treated them in this way. Selena is the property of other people from volume one, page one, to the last page of volume two. Dependent first on her relatives, she becomes dependent on Manchester, abjectly so when he imprisons her. Later, he does not permit her to choose her own terms of separation. After Manchester’s death, she remains dependent, first on Hastings’s ability (and willingness) to ask her to marry him, and finally on Hastings as her new husband. Selena’s only power is emotional, and, of course, the power of her physical attractions which, we are told repeatedly, are very great. These powers have some obvious effects but they are small change in the world the book delineates.

A reader cannot finish this novel without a profound sense of the powerlessness, indeed the sheer desperation, of Selena’s situation. The only avenues open to her are negative or passive: flight, separation, and, always, waiting for the man—Manchester, Hastings, anyone—to open his mouth and say the words. The strain, the sense of bitterness, in The Husband’s Resentment’s contemplation of the situation of the woman who is at its center, can with some justice stand comparison to the similar sense (less melodramatically presented, of course) that I think pervades Jane Austen’s
portrait of Anne Elliott, frozen and powerless, waiting for Captain Wentworth to speak, in *Persuasion*.

Passive Selena also resembles, but is really quite unlike, Richardson’s Pamela. Far more literally than Selena a household drudge, Pamela is also (as Maynard Mack wrote long ago) “in many respects simply a pioneer capitalist, a middle-class *entrepreneur* of virtue, who looked on her chastity not as a condition of spirit but as a commodity to be vended for the purpose of getting on.”[25] The male Richardson does not emphasize Pamela’s lack of options. He celebrates instead Pamela’s sexual enterprise and how it leads to her economic self-improvement. In contrast, *The Husband’s Resentment* regards Selena’s economic improvement as contingent upon her acceptance not only of sexual but also of a host of other restraints. Unlike Richardson, this female author knows restraints when she sees them. Such perceptions are not likely to encourage a male-dominated literary culture to assimilate works that express them to canonical status. Works that do express them are not therefore without interest, possibly even value.

In addition, *The Husband’s Resentment* offers a wide range of literary reference—for one example only, to Shakespeare. Plot actions involving Shakespeare in which characters engage—such as going to see productions of his plays—help to define them. Also, by showing off the author’s own knowledge of the plays, some of the novel’s linguistic turns define and enhance a reader’s sense of the author’s “literariness.” The book also depicts life in the lower reaches of the aristocracy; illustrates contemporary responses to the theater; comments on Methodism (and on Quakers, although perhaps only a Philadelphia reader would notice this); and shows how a housewife sets about ordering a large and complex noble household. All this “stuff” serves to deepen a modern reader’s grasp of the later eighteenth century. Of course, it is mere information—and even on that level it must be taken cautiously in so generally fantastical a work. But information, too, has its uses. It is worth preserving when it can be found.

For all these reasons, I believe it was not a mistake to acquire *The Husband’s Resentment* for Penn’s library. The book is worth reading; I am pleased that I have. It is worth having; I am pleased that Penn does.

### IV

Essays have their conventions, just like novels, and readers will have expected this conclusion—that Penn ought to have acquired this book—right from my start. In this genre, the writer asks why some old book is worth bothering about and discovers that it is in fact a hitherto unknown treasure. This is the librarian’s version of the literary critic’s act of discovery, the shock of recognition.

But seven hundred dollars for an obscure novel is not cheap, even if *The Husband’s Resentment* were “a hitherto unknown treasure” (which is not what I am suggesting). And who can predict that this, or any other, acquisition will perform any service to scholarship and literature? It is hard to predict the “ultimate” impact of a generally
unknown book (whatever that might be), but relatively easy to guess that it will remain generally unknown for a long time to come. Who is likely to come by to read it? Will that reader enjoy it even to the degree that I did? Will any publication result? If it does, will it convince a doubtful John Richetti to make room in the canon of eighteenth-century English fiction for *The Husband’s Resentment*—or even to cross 34th Street from the Department of English to his very own university’s library to *read* it? The answers are: almost no one, probably not, probably not again, and no.

But such short-term answers are really not answers at all: they are simply cynical guesses based on my deep suspicion about the reading and curiosity of most people, even scholars, too many of whom seem not to read anything that has not been edited and reprinted in a modern text except for the most obvious of older printed books, and even these only infrequently. That is one reason why canons—in literature or in any other field—are so resistant to change. The few who investigate their margins are vastly outnumbered by the many who do not, so the institutional investments in conserving the energies of the many are great. This does not mean that change is impossible, only that it is slow. My point is that change *will* be impossible if the texts are not around for the few to investigate.

Literature and its canons are not simply received, they change. Like all traditions they are handed down; but they are also altered to suit new needs, new people, new times.26 Men and women change them. It is slow and difficult work to change them, but change they do. When I was an undergraduate, John Donne was regularly anthologized even in highly selective anthologies devoted to what I earlier called the “A” list of English authors. He had not always been so highly regarded. Donne was a highly specialized taste prior to T. S. Eliot’s famous “rediscovery” of him in the earlier part of this century (although I suspect that he is well on the way to returning to something closer to his pre-Eliot status as Eliot himself drops out of mind).27

This is not something that happened a long time ago. It happened almost within living memory to a writer dead since 1631. The revaluation of Herman Melville—with due regard to the much later date at which Melville died and was forgotten and the much shorter time that elapsed before his rediscovery—is not an entirely dissimilar tale. No history of, no course in, American literature is now complete without reference to Melville, but this too was not always so. The rapid decline of T. S. Eliot, this tale of shifting evaluations told in reverse, *has* happened within living memory. Initiated even before his death, most notably in an article by Karl Shapiro for a general circulation periodical, some thirty years later Eliot’s decline was something that an author—in this case, Cynthia Ozick in another article for a general circulation periodical—could quite simply assume without argument (if with a curious mixture both of nostalgia for the days when Eliot mattered and a sense that he had it coming).28

Right now many scholars are reinvestigating English women of letters; American women and minority writers; kinds and genres of writing normally ignored as “subliterary” (e.g., mysteries and science fiction; travel writing; modern pulp ro-
mances); and writers who originate in geographically, politically, or culturally marginalized environments (English-speaking Africa or India; the Chicago or San Antonio barrio). Scholars who deal in such stuff look at books and writers whom we do not, by and large, read. Where do they find them? Could Donne, Melville, or Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* have survived without libraries prepared to acquire and then keep the refuse of the ages? It would, today, be impossible to reconsider the eighteenth-century English novel without libraries that collect its remains in bulk, with no exercise of what librarians are pleased to call “selectivity.”

The truth is that we cannot collect selectively for we lack any principles that permit us to make proper selections for people not yet born whose interests and standards we neither know nor share. We cannot even select with confidence for the living. Some of them are smarter, others just plain more curious, than we are. Some may even have what we would regard as bad taste in literature. Which of us is right? We only know what we like; we don’t also know what is good. If we think we do, and collect with that “selection principle” in mind, we are only fooling ourselves, assuming the permanence of the merely contingent and time-bound. We also short-circuit our successors’ ability to second-guess us.

Therefore, had I found *The Husband’s Resentment* worse than I did, I would still have called it an acquisition worth making. Penn’s copy aids the likelihood that the book will survive despite any accidents to it in London, New Haven, or Brisbane. It makes it more likely that someday, too, the work may find its ideal reader and propagandist, the reader who will be convinced and convincing when he or she argues that it is not simply a moderately acceptable book to have in one’s library but a book that truly literate readers, or, at the very least, period specialists, need to know because it does a, b, and c so well.\(^{29}\)

We know that “the canon” is under reconsideration. We know that the criteria thought to make a text “literary” are also being rethought. But even if we had known neither of these things, we ought to know that Catholic readers may well want to read anything and are likely to want to read texts that are neither approved nor commonly available. Such readers come to special collections departments not to read *Tom Jones* or *Roderick Random*; these they can check out of the general stacks or—dare a librarian say this?—buy for themselves in paperback. But how much Charlotte Smith, how much Charlotte Lennox, is available to them in similar locations? And their works are much more readily available than novels which, like *The Husband’s Resentment*, have never been reprinted. There are lots of them. Most books fail.

Some people suppose that special collections departments collect books that exhibit the triumph of the printer’s art: beautiful books. Or that such departments collect, for talismanic purposes, the earliest editions of once certifiably “great” books. Some do. Most don’t, although they may seize upon such examples of the printer’s art or of the great obvious works of the past as come their way for the sake of their public relations. The truth is at once less sensational and more important. Special collections
departments collect old books. Most are unattractive or undistinguished, physically and substantively. They are leftovers. The texts everyone already knows about can be read in the general collections or even bought. Our job is to be, not the “treasure room,” but the rubbish heap.

The current state of ferment in literary study is matched by similar ferment in other disciplines. Scholars in many fields turn to texts and materials they would not have dreamed of looking at just a few years ago. They do not need the obvious texts they already know about, the texts whose stature and status have long been recognized. They need the rubbish. They need that rubbish whatever its date, whether it is found in “rare book” or in “general” collections.

Petroleum geologists try not to forget old wells; you never know when they will repay reinvestigation with new drilling techniques. Research libraries should be like such old wells. You ought not to know exactly what you’re going to find when you go to them. But you ought to be able to hope for a serendipitous surprise. If we do not collect the dross, we will provide no one with any surprises. And we will have failed the future of the institutions, the disciplines, and the students and scholars we try to serve.

NOTES

1. This essay has its origins in nearly 25 years of arguments about the value of fictions with my friend E. Norman Dukes (Wichita, Kansas, 1942–Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984). His contribution to this essay is incalculable, as is the loss incurred in his untimely death.

In another form, this essay was originally delivered at the 22nd Annual Rare Book and Manuscript Section/ACRL/ALA preconference held at Stanford University in June 1987. I am indebted to the preconference organizers, most especially to Samuel A. Streit (Brown University) and Donald A. Farren (University of Maryland), for their invitation to speak, and to David H. Stam (Syracuse University), a respondent. The paper has been read since then to the Philomathean Society of the University of Pennsylvania (April 1988), the Friends of the Library of the University of Pennsylvania (November 1990), and at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge (October 1991). It has benefited from auditors' responses on each occasion.

For help in the composition of this essay, I thank Toni Bowers (University of Pennsylvania); James N. Green (Library Company of Philadelphia); Jean E. Howard (Columbia University); Kathleen Reed (Drexel University); Barbara H. Traister (Lehigh University); and Georgianna Ziegler ( Folger Shakespeare Library). It was Georgianna Ziegler who, in addition, first suggested purchase of The Husband's Resentment. For this I also thank her—I think.


4. Word of the Brisbane copy reached me only after this essay had been accepted for publication. I am grateful to Laura Stalker (ESTC/NA and the University of California, Riverside) for drawing it to my attention while time remained to note its existence here. The existence of this fourth copy obviously changes the mathematics of the novel's survival, but it has prompted me to concede no other changes to the argument of this paper.


rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). There are even “negative” canonical figures (“anti-canons”), e.g., in literature, Richard Blackmore; in geology, Thomas Burnet; or in the history of evolutionary theory, Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford. These figures so totally epitomize inadequacy or error, have been so completely discredited, that no one need read them at all. Amusingly, even these negatives are in question nowadays: see, for instance, on the “canonical misrepresentation” of Burnet, Stephen Jay Gould, *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*, The Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 24.


10. See, for example, James Atlas’s journalistic account of the issues, “On Campus: The Battle of the Books,” *The New York Times Magazine* (June 5, 1988), pp. 24–27, 72–75, 85, 94. More academic treatments abound (many more than I can claim to have read). *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), a gathering of essays that originally appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, is still a good place to begin reading scholarly discussion of the topic. Interested readers may also find useful some of the other essays I cite elsewhere in these notes. The scholarly literature on this subject is vast and constantly increasing.

11. John Guillory notes the “structural homology between, on the one hand, the distinction of the canonical from the non-canonical, and on the other, the process of inclusion or exclusion by which social groups are represented or not represented in the exercise of power” (“Canonical and Non-Canonical: A Critique of the Current Debate,” *ELH* 54 [1987]: 483).


Written by an older American literature scholar ("older" even in 1972), well before "the canon" became a topic of fashionable critical discourse, and by a relatively conservative scholar—in contrast to many of the feminists and Marxists who have taken on this subject since Hubbell's book appeared—Who Are the Major American Writers? is exceptionally clear both about the variability of what readers had long assumed to be a stable canon and about some of the political underpinnings any canonical designation involves.

17. Louis A. Renza, "A White Heron" and the Question of Minor Literature (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), while beautifully illuminating the difficulties of reading carefully and with proper respect a "simple" text, also makes clear the constraints with which Sarah Orne Jewett, as a female writer, had to contend, and the strategies she developed simultaneously to adapt to and counter these constraints.


19. To suggest the reception accorded Jewish-American writers, see, for example, "Lands That Were Golden: I. New York and the Hinterland," by the southern agrarian and literary critic Donald Davidson. Here Davidson remembered the 1920s as a time when New York writers, obsessed by "sex, Zionism, and the down-trodden proletariat," presented to a people "schooled in Protestant religion and morality . . . the works of voluptuaries and perverts"—i.e., themselves, representatives of the "heterogeneous new racial stocks" inhabiting New York (American Review, 3:5 [October 1934]: 554–55, 561). (Davidson did not care for Dreiser or Mencken, either.) Thirty years later, Katherine Anne Porter would disparage the "curious kind of argot, more or less originating in New York," that mixes "academic, guttersnipe, gangster, fake-Yiddish, and . . . dirty words" in "an appalling bankruptcy of language" characteristic of the work of certain unnamed writers who "hate English and are trying to destroy it" ("A Country and Some People I Love," Harper's [September 1965]: 68). At the beginning of the 1970s, Gore Vidal repeated such sentiments, with equal obliquity (but citing for corroboration the shell-shocked Henry James of 1904, whose ears and sensibilities had recently been assaulted by immigrant speech on the streets of New York). His remarks appeared, entertainingly enough, in Commentary ("Literary Gangsters" [March 1970]: 62); lest venue and obliquity seem to militate against the reading I here suggest, see Sander Gilman's The Jew's Body [New York: Routledge, 1991], pp. 36–37, and n. 44). The exclusion of Jews from participation in American academic literary studies until the present century parallels their general exclusion from American literature itself during the same period; see Susanne Klingenstein,
WHAT GOOD IS AN OLD BOOK? 41


21. A referee who read this essay for RBML asked if, about this point—which might have seemed true in 1987 when I began to write it—I have since had occasion to change my mind. I have not. In truth, things curricular seem largely unchanged to my eye, and the Modern Language Association of America, embroiled in political battles over what literature teachers include in their classes, agrees. For a quantitative analysis of the persistence of conventionally canonical texts in the university curriculum, see the report of a study recently undertaken by the MLA, summarized in the MLA Newsletter 23:4 (Winter 1991): 12–14 (a more detailed version is forthcoming in the Spring 1992 issue of the ADE Bulletin). The study finds “no evidence that faculty members in English have abandoned traditional texts in their upper-division literature courses” (p. 12). Anyone whose professional life revolves around universities and books and who, like me, wanders hopefully into bookstores to check out the new textbooks every fall and spring semester, knows that this report—which conservatives have criticized as self-serving and defensive—is dispiritingly accurate. The instructor who surprises me by what he or she assigns is appallingly rare in the two universities I regularly follow in this way. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. It would be astonishing if this were not so, if, that is, alarmists really had anything to be alarmed by: on “the principle of academic recirculation” (“academics tend to teach what they have been taught,” etc.)—a point that would be witty were it not also true—see Wendell V. Harris, “Canonicity,” PMLA 106 (1991): 114.


23. This scholarly topos may be traced in many different studies; see, for example, Erich Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, trans. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series, 74 (New York: Pantheon, 1965); Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series, 36 (New York: Pantheon, 1953); and Henri-Irénée Marrou, A History of Education in Antiquity, trans. George Lamb (1956; rpt. New York: Mentor, 1964).


29. Harris, “Canonicity,” proposes a text’s historical resonance, multivalency, “fortunate sponsorship,” and malleability as criteria that “interact to determine how much interest the text can sustain over how long a period” (p. 112).
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