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# Introduction to Colloquium: John Shirley's Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.20 and the Culture of the Anthology in Late Medieval England

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## Introduction

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**T**HIS COLLOQUIUM EMERGES from a roundtable convened at the 2014 New Chaucer Society Congress in Reykjavik, Iceland. That conversation sought to explore late medieval England's multilingual manuscript culture through discussion of Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.20: a large, 187-folio anthology copied in the early 1430s by the scribe and bibliophile John Shirley. Generically and linguistically, Trinity College, MS R.3.20 is a diverse collection, encompassing both courtly and religious texts and spanning the genres of lyric, prose, and drama. The volume preserves important copies of poems by Chaucer, Lydgate, and Hoccleve, as well as longer Latin works and a variety of French texts, including a lyric by Alain Chartier that is ascribed in the manuscript to the prominent contemporary English political figure William de la Pole, duke of Suffolk, famously married to Chaucer's granddaughter, Alice. By the sixteenth century, the manuscript had fallen into the hands of antiquarian John Stow, who annotated it and drew from it when preparing his 1561 edition of Chaucer's *Works*. The diversity of the compilation's contents, coupled with what is known about its production and early circulation, make R.3.20 an ideal site for exploring the intersections of several vibrant areas of scholarship in Middle English studies, including book history, scribal cultures, patronage and coterie lyric production, medieval England's multilingualism, and premodern periodization practices.

The essays contained in this colloquium speak to the growing interest in the late medieval compilation among literary scholars and book historians.<sup>1</sup> In the past, the bewilderingly varied contents, idiosyncratic production methods, and complex afterlives of late medieval compilations

<sup>1</sup> The surge in recent editions of late medieval manuscript compilations testifies to the growing interest in the anthology: e.g., *The Poetry of Charles d'Orléans and His Circle*:

have marginalized their study as a specialist concern. Their complexity is reflected in ongoing debate over their taxonomy: when is a compilation an anthology and when is it a miscellany? The term “anthology” suggests—following the word’s etymology (literally, “collection of flowers”)—an assortment of *like* things, thus pointing to an overarching organizational genius behind its production and arrangement. The “miscellany,” on the other hand, implies a collection of *disparate* items, brought together by idiosyncrasies of personal whim and/or vagaries of circulation.<sup>2</sup>

Julia Boffey and John J. Thompson use both labels in discussing compilations in their seminal 1989 essay “Anthologies and Miscellanies: Production and Choice of Texts.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, as they show, the hard and fast distinction between the “anthology” and the “miscellany” is often occluded by the complexity of these manuscripts’ production and circulation. Booklets of texts could be produced on bespoke commission for inclusion in a specific compilation, but they could also circulate independently, to be rebound in new combinations in other manuscripts. As Ralph Hanna further points out, booklets that were circulating as independent textual units often went on to be altered, continued, split, and recombined to produce new booklets tailored to a specific compilation for a specific book owner.<sup>4</sup> It is this fluidity of production that makes the compilation so difficult to taxonomize.

The complexity of their production, however, does not mean that

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*A Critical Edition of BnF MS. fr. 25458, Charles d'Orléans' Personal Manuscript*, ed. John Fox and Mary-Jo Arn with Stephanie A. V. G. Kamath, trans. R. Barton Palmer (Tempe: ACMRS; and Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); *A Facsimile Edition of the Vernon Manuscript: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet. a. 1*, ed. Wendy Scase (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2012); and *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, ed. Susanna Fein with David Raybin and Jan Ziolkowski, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2014–15).

<sup>2</sup>See Theo Stemmler, “Miscellany or Anthology? The Structure of Medieval Manuscripts: MS Harley 2253, for Example,” in *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: The Scribes, Contents, and Social Context of British Library MS Harley 2253*, ed. Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 111–21.

<sup>3</sup>Julia Boffey and John J. Thompson, “Anthologies and Miscellanies: Production and Choice of Texts,” in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375–1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 279–315 (esp. 283); see also Julia Boffey, “The Reputation and Circulation of Chaucer’s Lyrics in the Fifteenth Century,” *ChauR* 28, no. 1 (1993): 28–40 (esp. 33ff.).

<sup>4</sup>Ralph Hanna III, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 25. See also P. R. Robinson, “The ‘Booklet’: A Self-Contained Unit in Composite Manuscripts,” *Codicologica* 3 (1980): 46–69.

compilations, particularly when they contain formally or generically similar texts, lack discernible shapes and organizational strategies, and in the case of manuscripts—such as Trinity College, R.3.20—in which both the identity of the compiler and something about his background are known, these strategies can shed particular light on late medieval literary cultures. Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet enjoins scholars to focus on this figure of the compiler, and identifies three dominant anthologizing impulses in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>5</sup> The first is the meticulous anthologization of one's own collected works (e.g., Machaut, Christine de Pizan), where texts are recopied agglutinatively over time to foster literary self-preservation. The second impulse is that of a coterie of friends and peers, composing lyrics for and with one another, sharing incipits and refrains in friendly dialogue and genial competition.<sup>6</sup> The third impulse Cerquiglini-Toulet defines as having an explicitly memorial function, where texts are being brought together in the service of literary canon-building. These concerns intersect, in provocative and sometimes surprising ways, in John Shirley's life and works.

Focusing on John Shirley himself, A. S. G. Edwards looks at the compiler's relationship with John Lydgate, the author featured most prominently in R.3.20 and Shirley's other anthologies, and suggests that Shirley's compilatory activities have commercial motivations. Also looking at Shirley, Kathryn Veeman draws on new archival evidence to place Shirley in close social proximity to Geoffrey Chaucer towards the end of the latter's life. Julia Boffey makes the case for a sequential reading of Shirley's anthologies as a larger body of work responding to contemporary sociopolitical events by tracking his choice of texts across compilations. Arguing for the need to look more closely at his inclusion of French texts in R.3.20, Kara Doyle explores the ways in which Shirley's arrangement of French and English lyrics within the manuscript distinguish between Chaucerian and Lydgatean approaches to women and courtly love, while Stephanie Downes directs our attention to the didactic French works that Shirley includes to shape his presentation of both

<sup>5</sup>Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, "Quand la voix s'est tue: La mise en recueil de la poésie lyrique au XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles," in *La présentation du livre: Actes du colloque de Paris X-Nanterre*, ed. Emmanuelle Baumgartner and Nicole Boulestreau (Paris: Centre de recherches du De'p. de français de Paris X-Nanterre, 1987), 313–25.

<sup>6</sup>On such collections, see the seminal study by Jane H. M. Taylor, *The Making of Poetry: Late-Medieval French Poetic Anthologies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

didactic Lydgatian and courtly French material. Finally, R. D. Perry considers Shirley's loquacious headnotes as a form of community-building that, following Lydgatian models, construct "virtual coteries" of textual agency.

Thinking about Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.20 in all of its complexity provides a means of expanding our thinking about John Shirley beyond his role in the transmission of Chaucer's works and paves the way for a richer understanding of Shirley's productions in the context of calls by scholars such as Seth Lerer and Arthur Bahr to attend to the compilation as a material object.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in their close engagement with features of cross-Channel literary exchange, as well as in their heavy attention to Lydgate, the essays in this colloquium are symptomatic of both new directions in the study of the late medieval compilation and of the current "fifteenth-century turn" in Middle English studies away from a Chaucer-dominated understanding of late medieval English literary culture.

<sup>7</sup> See Seth Lerer, "Medieval English Literature and the Idea of the Anthology," *PMLA* 118, no. 5 (October 2003): 1251–67; and Arthur Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).