

Loving Literature

A Cultural History

DEIDRE SHAUNA LYNCH

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On June 17, 1812, Hunt and Thomas Frognall Dibdin crossed paths at the Roxburghe sale when each showed up in his grace's late residence on St. James's Square to witness the bidding war over the unique copy of the *Decameron*. The year 1832 saw the pair renew that proximity, in their writings if not physically. In that year of parliamentary reform the Tory Dibdin and the liberal Hunt alike went public with works that seemed to yoke the arrival of modern representative government—an achievement often credited to the power of the press and the expansion of the reading public—with the passing of an era of bookishness.

In *Bibliophobia*, subtitled *Remarks on the Present Languid and Depressed State of Literature and the Book Trade*, Dibdin observes melancholically the slackening of the passions of formerly eager book champions and the disappointing prices recorded at recent auctions.⁹³ “Books were only the shadow of what they were,” his protagonist concludes when he returns from an excursion to London sale rooms and bookshops: “No money was stirring. . . . The Reform had frightened every one away.” Dibdin’s speculation that “perhaps booksellers, like the Romans, have had their day,” sounds to us a familiar note, accustomed as we now are to narratives about the imminent extinction of booksellers, books, readers, and literature—though it has done strange things to my usual scheme for periodizing the end-times to hear that note transmitted to me from 1832 (and in a book).

In his essay from 1832, titled “Men and Books,” Hunt sounds a surprisingly similar note as he both takes the measure of a new political modernity and self-consciously rehearses over again the examples of book love that his writings of the previous decade had assembled. Hunt casts himself and his readership as a disappearing race of old “book-men, who love the bodies as well as souls of our books”: like Walter Benjamin when he writes about his own collection of first edition books a century later, Hunt is convinced that he belongs to a type for whom (as Benjamin put it) “time is running out.” And like Benjamin, leery despite his Marxism about the supplanting of private collections by public ones, Hunt is unsure whether the change in the collector’s standing really amounts to progress. Though Hunt, unlike Dibdin, does not identify new forms of representative government as contributing in 1832 to books’ loss of their former lovability, he does express trepidation about the pressure exerted by the new democratic ethos of public-mindedness, which already, he states, is breaking up “narrownesses of all sorts, even of the better kind.” In the future, he predicts wistfully, modern collegians “will hardly have the *snugness* of the old times.”⁹⁴

CODA: FEMALE COLLECTORS AND THEIR PAPER CABINETS

When Hunt invites his readers to join him in his “small snug place,” the personal home he has made among and with books, or when Hazlitt declares books “the most heart-felt, home felt of enjoyments,” women are conspicuously absent from these authors’ visions of bookish domestic bliss.⁹⁵ The romantic period’s memoirs of book love, we have seen, testify amply to the sociological and architectural transformations that were by the early nineteenth century making marriage the privileged form of emotional intimacy and making the previously commercial, quasi-public space of the house into a personal sanctuary. We have seen how writers such as Hunt and Hazlitt appropriate the affective repertory generated by these transformations in order to bring print culture home to their readers. But while they do so, they write women out of the home. The relations between the genders are effaced by a “bibliographical romance” that brokers between modern domesticity and the older traditions—of European humanism, for instance—in which bookishness had been the transactional currency of those special male friendships that were valued as meetings of minds.

One component of this bibliographical romance is the fantasies that present the intercourse of these (male) readers with books, their companions for bed and board, as regenerative in a more literal sense than usual. As an advantage of the exclusive possession of books that he touts, Hunt in “Wedded to Books” mentions “the impossibility of other people’s having any literary offspring from our fair unique”; he then adds, in a comment that references the important role that anthologizing would play in his working life, that in this way the book-wedded state would save him from “the danger of loving any compilations but our own” (251). When, in “Men and Books,” having surveyed the book loves of writers from the past, Hunt exclaims, “How pleasant it is to reflect, that all these lovers of books have themselves become books!” (150), he both seems to state that the fate of bookmen, born of books, is to become books in their turn and seems to valorize this population increase, the multiplication of book objects, as in itself a sufficient rationale for book love. In the twentieth century, Holbrook Jackson gave particularly memorable expression to this fantasy of escape from the human world of reproduction into the artifactual world of print reproducibility: he wrote in his *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* of his “book-men” as “twice born, first of woman (as every man) and then of books and, by reason of this, distinct and unique from the rest.”⁹⁶

Sometimes in their memoirs of book love the romantic essayists represent themselves as hyperactive borrowers and lenders of books, encouraging us to see their collections as perpetually in motion, and less as homes for books than as the boarding houses in which books temporarily take lodgings.⁹⁷ But their occasional indulgence of this fantasy of sexless, bookish reproduction suggests their affinity for the alternative account of the collection that Susan Stewart has elaborated—the collection as a site where history may be superseded by classification, an “order beyond the realm of temporality.”⁹⁸ In this account, the mutability and mortality of the sexual body make it part of the flux from which the ideal collection in its fixity stands aloof.

These fantasies were easier to sustain perhaps because in the romantic period female collectors of rare books—who have been conspicuous in their absence from this chapter—were themselves rare. This fact prompted much fatuous commentary by bookmen. In 1932 Holbrook Jackson was still writing about bibliophilia as a masculine passion: “Women are not collectors, nor are they lovers of aught save love and what pertains to it. They are notable readers, . . . but . . . it is only rarely that women have any affection for the books which delight them: *amours de femme et de bouquin ne se chantent pas au même lutrin* (Jackson’s footnote supplies the translation: “The loves of woman and of books cannot be sung on the same lyre”).⁹⁹ The campy innuendo contains a kernel of accuracy. A survey of booksellers’ catalogues from the period indeed yields about twenty announcements of the auctioning of a library that was the property of a gentleman for every announcement that involves a book collection assembled by a lady. The disproportion registers in part women’s alienation from the institutions of patrilineal inheritance underwriting the library that is the work of many generations, like that at Mr. Darcy’s Pemberley. Marriage and property law made the ancestral home a place where men’s wives, daughters, and sisters were not at home, so that they inhabited it only on sufferance. The romantic essayists tend to associate female readers, Mary Lamb included, with the kind of consumption, sponsored by the circulating library, that turns books into fungible merchandise.¹⁰⁰ They distinguish those indiscriminate appetites from their own connoisseurship, which takes books out of circulation or at least serves to disengage the particular edition or even copy from the unstructured mass of print products. Furthermore, a female bibliomaniac, should such a being have had the temerity to exist, would have found it difficult to participate in the tavern suppers of the Roxburghe Club, occasions when bad boy bibliomaniacs paraded their foibles and appetites with their toasts to the

memories of fifteenth-century printers. Her participation in the social and commercial networks that supported collecting would have impaired her reputation or, minimally, tested her discretion.

In his *A Bibliographical, Antiquarian and Picturesque Tour and Reminiscences of a Literary Life*, Thomas Frognall Dibdin did do homage to Frances Mary Richardson Curren, the “Book-Genius of ESHTON Hall” (in the East Riding of Yorkshire), whose passion “both for reading and amassing books has been extreme.”¹⁰¹ But even as he linked her, with that reference to her ardor, with his era’s bibliographical romance, Dibdin had to tread more carefully than usual, in view of the unmarried Miss Curren’s modest aversion to publicity. Despite his best efforts, Dibdin failed, for instance, to persuade her to permit her likeness to be included in his books. In his *Reminiscences* he made do with engravings of the rooms forming her library, reproduced from the catalogue of her collection of fifteen thousand volumes that she had had privately printed in 1831.

To conclude this chapter, I want briefly to consider an alternative forum in which women with intellectual aspirations and leisure time to kill could prove their love for literature: a forum both enabling them to make the print world a more intimate space and enabling them to ally the literary pleasures afforded by that world with the pleasures enjoyed by the collector. One defining artifact of this era’s culture of literary appreciation was the homemade manuscript anthology—a compilation of original poetry and prose mixed with hand-copied extracts from published sources sometimes augmented with clippings from newspapers and periodicals; amateur watercolor landscapes (sometimes souvenirs of travels); imaginary portraits of characters from novels or poems (especially Walter Scott’s); pastel pictures on rice paper achieving a tremendous level of zoological/botanical accuracy of sea shells, butterflies, and/or flowers; various other specimens of fashionable feminine accomplishments, decoupage and flower and fern pressing included; locks of hair; memorial cards paying homage to the recently deceased. This mixed-media medley, put between covers, formed a book that was often known as an “album,” the rubric that the era’s vendors of ornately bound blank books favored. Some compilers, however, dignified and customized their books with titles of their own coining—for example, “The Poetical Farrago,” “Memorials of Friendship,” “Medley, or Scrapbook,” “The Leisure Hours Amusement of a Young Lady,” “Cabinet of Music, Poetry, and Drawing.”¹⁰²

The books were frequently the work of multiple hands and circulated among multiple readers within particular circles of friends. Generally,

though, they were presided over by one lady, or pair of female friends or of sisters, who would have handpicked the books' contributors, solicited their "offerings" of original and copied prose and verse, and arranged these pieces and an array of sketches, pieces of decoupage, and souvenirs in relation to one another. Sometimes the owner of the album was more muse than she was editor/curator. A book in this mode could be given as a gift, in which case it would be construed as embodying the aesthetic preferences its contributors imputed to its recipient. To create such books was often to assert the fungibility of the identities of devoted reader and devoted friend. Thus on one leaf of a pocketbook "Memorials of Friendship," dated 1795, the stanza that concludes "The paths of glory lead but to the grave" has been copied out from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" and coupled with the following instruction to Anne Wagner, the book's dedicatee, "When exploring the latent excellencies of this stanza, may memory remind you of your eternal friend, & deeply affectionate sister, Elizabeth." On the first page of her album, Anna Maria McNeill described its contents as comprising "Wild flowers of Poesy, culled from rare exotics, transplanted from the rich soil of genius, by the hand of friends, guided by fancy." (The horticultural metaphor references the literal meaning of the Greek *anthology*, a gathering of flowers.)¹⁰³ Content providers who supplied such books with their own poems or selected and transcribed those of others would through such actions have been affirming that, as Hume said in the essay on taste we considered in chapter 1, "the study of the beauties either of poetry, eloquence, music, or painting . . . give[s] a certain elegance of sentiment to which the rest of mankind are strangers."¹⁰⁴

The reason to include this pastime, highly popular by the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century, within the account of the literary affections offered by this chapter is that through it hundreds of female votaries of taste gained access to some of the enjoyments catered to within the bibliomaniac's library—the pleasures connected with accumulation and appropriation, for instance, with a creativity detached from the exigencies of originality. The amateur anthologist scales down the book collection to fit within the confines of a single bijou volume. Like the book collector, she brings into being a space whose allure lies in its balancing between exclusivity and sharing, concealment and display. The shelves that present the books to the visitor's eye are crucial to the book collection, but the books arrayed upon them are closed and preserve their secrets. The blank books sold to would-be compilers of albums sometimes came with locks. That feature suggests how these collections could prop up a notion of the interior self,

even as—placed atop the parlor table for the entertainment of visitors—they formed the currency of a group's sociability.

Where the rare-book collector, as we saw, shows off his virtuoso ability to reach into odd corners of the print world and obtain copies of the books that can be treated as though they were handwritten originals, the lady assembling her album likewise displays her ability to reformulate print culture's accustomed ordering of the relations of the mass produced and the individuated. In the pages of her paper cabinet, the printed poem that a certain author once *wrote* is turned back into manuscript again. The conversion represents an essential part of its displacement from the realm of public discourse into that of private feeling.¹⁰⁵

This book object's history intersects at several additional points with the story I've told about the rare book collector's pleasures. Charles Lamb, for instance, who collected and published the verses he had written in ladies' albums, while he was in a contrarian mood decried the popularity of those same collections. The plight of the modern poet, Lamb maintained, had been made worse by "the unfeminine practice of this novel species of importunity." Their "closets and privatest retirements" "besiege[d] and storm[ed] by violence" by troops of lady poem hunters anxious to have celebrity signatures in their books, poets were now expected to versify on demand.¹⁰⁶ The Cruikshank cartoon referenced above was originally part of a book of "scraps" that bound up thirty sheets of such vignettes, sold in the expectation that their purchaser would scissor them out and paste them into a scrapbook of her own. (Presumably, the individual who included "The Pursuit of Letters" in her book of verse and prose excerpts would have *intended* to look as though she were being ironic at the expense of her own avocations.) Prefabricated images like that would, in the most ambitious examples of such books, be interleaved among pages featuring other fancier sorts of cutouts, and showcasing the dexterity with her scissors expected of the accomplished woman of the period. (Some books boast intricately bordered silhouettes, others, collages, like the page composed of tiny paper seashells linked by embroidery thread that has been included in Anne Wagner's "Memorials.") And though cutting out texts and images to recontextualize them in albums "was consonant with women's roles as arrangers of the domestic interior," that skill set actually bridged the female and male spheres of the leisure classes.¹⁰⁷ For the bibliomaniacal gentleman was also wont to approach some books with his scissors and paste pot in hand, snipping out of the less valued books in this group the engraved portrait frontispieces or the maps or, more rarely, the passages of print, that he had

selected in order to illustrate another, more highly valued book. He would mount the material he had cut out on leaves that were uniform in size with the pages of that more valued book and bind up the pages together. This practice of extra-illustration, of bringing in illustrative materials *from outside*, is number three in Dibdin's list of the symptoms of the bibliomania. Its consequences are exemplified by the copy of a nineteenth-century *Plays of William Shakespeare*, originally six volumes, that in the wake of its extra-illustration weighed in at twenty-one volumes.¹⁰⁸ (Figure 1.2 in chapter 1 reproduced a tipped-in page from a copy of *Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments under the Hand and Seal of William Shakspeare* that was extra-illustrated by William Henry Ireland himself.)

Book love so practiced shocked, because it betrayed the lovers' propensities for book destruction. Those suffering from this strain of the book disease left trails of dismembered books in their wake: in the 1807 text in which he poses as a Spanish traveler to England Robert Southey commented, "You rarely or never meet an old book here with the author's head in it; all are mutilated by the collectors."¹⁰⁹ (In another way, though, the effects obtained through the cutting and pasting were thoroughly assimilable to the usual bibliophilic dreams. Extra-illustration converted a copy of the book that had been published in large print run—like a *Plays of William Shakespeare*—into a unique association object.) What affiliated the extra-illustrated book with the lady's album filled with copied-out beauties from published authors was their makers' shared insistence on conceiving of the books they bought or borrowed as remaining open to revision and as spurring their own acts of authorship. Notoriously, there is often a willfully tangential quality to the selection of inserted materials in an extra-illustrated book, which, more faithful to the selector's idiosyncrasies than the author's meanings, gloss "terms that even an indexer would skip."¹¹⁰ The individual who transcribed a stanza of Lord Byron's into an album—as hundreds of participants in album culture did—might take the liberty of changing a "he" in the lines to a "she," the better to lodge a tier of private circulation beneath the consumerist exchanges of the public sphere.¹¹¹ Or she might re-present a recopied passage of literature as a garlanded, gilded work of visual art, bordered around with a frame of her designing and painting, so that the piece of poetry would become something to look at as well as something to read.

Yet for all their unwillingness to let authors have the last word, a trait that could betoken disrespect, makers of both these sorts of books have also contrived to prolong their interaction with their reading matter, generally well past the time of reading. That could bespeak a desire for continued

involvement. Extra-illustration depends on a kind of close reading, after all: like a philologist, the extra-illustrator weighs every word. The copying out of extracts into one's album, appropriative to be sure, also enhances intimacy with the copied text.

It is possible to view those albums of extracts as documenting, by extension, just how often nineteenth-century readers understood themselves as taking *authors'* parts—not doing battle against authors, as per Lamb's description of importunate ladies besieging and storming, but instead taking authors' sides and doing them service. The manuscript commonplace book of the nineteenth-century Scotswoman Eliza Graeme, for instance, pointedly amasses anecdotes from publishing history that exemplify booksellers' stinginess in their dealings with authors. This reader, who memorializes such raw deals as the fifteen pounds that John Milton received for the copyright of *Paradise Lost*, may in that very action be declaring herself an ally of authors against their oppressors.¹¹² (This declaration glosses over the fact that commonplacers' habits of transcription could also be deemed a form of illicit reproduction that cheated authors of the copyright payments that were their due.) The inclusion of group portraits of the illustrious authors forming the literary pantheon in some of these books makes them seem the vehicles with which their makers declare their allegiance to the literary tradition—and maybe too more elusively, their sense that readers as well as critics and booksellers were agents of canon making. Thus in the "Medley, or Scrapbook" that a certain Elizabeth Reynolds "published," as her title page cheekily puts it, in 1817, one finds a page of collage that is headed "Flowers of Literature" and that comprises pasted-in pictures of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Sterne as well as some more surprising choices (Benjamin Franklin, Charles Churchill) and, in the center, a drawing of a book opened to pages featuring copied-out lines of verse by or about each. The memorial page that Miss Reynolds devotes to the poet Mary Robinson has a cut-out portrait of Robinson at its center, some of Robinson's verse transcribed on the left-hand side, and "Tributary Verses Addressed to Mrs. Robinson" on the right: pasted-in pictorial ornaments in the shapes of butterflies and birds are scattered across the surface.¹¹³ Such ways of recontextualizing and recycling English literature seem to convert writings by authors into love tokens to authors.

The anonymous scrapbook maker who inserted a pressed fern beside a pasted-in printed portrait of Sir Walter Scott might have aimed to preserve a keepsake of a visit to the Highlands. Or along the lines I have just adumbrated, she or he might have been supplying evidence that where devotion

to Scott and his fictional world was concerned, she or he was willing to go the extra mile.¹¹⁴ Harkening back to chapter 1's discussion of the hierarchy of munificent genius and grateful audience that sometimes structures the scene of literary appreciation, I want to say that this fern to me looks like a gift left at a shrine. What is from one angle a keepsake—an addition to the collection—can from another angle be a votive offering to an authorial saint.¹¹⁵ The collection documenting a fan's devotions can be a way of keeping and giving simultaneously. The collector's forte for taking possession is sometimes a forte for expending care and affection.

An alternative, and rather more wry, mode of collecting—a mode that doubles as a commentary on the sharedness of a print culture's reading matter—is set out in a certain Miss Mary Watson's "The Scrap Book: Containing a Choice and Amusing Selection from the Standard and Floating Literature of the Last Twelve or fifteen Years Together with an Introduction and Occasional Remarks and Contributions."¹¹⁶ Like everything else in this book, the words forming the title on the title page have been scissored out from preexisting sources—in this case, an advertisement marketing a printed book—and pasted in. That is the case even with words composing Miss Mary Watson's name, which appear on her title page courtesy of a record of a commercial exchange: to mark the scrapbook as her own, she has clipped a receipt made out to her, dated February 22, 1821, and carefully pasted it too into her volume. The effect of all the little snippets of paper hoarded up and lifted from other contexts is to give Miss Mary Watson's volume the look of a multipage ransom note.

Miss Watson appears to have been keeping within this book a kind of diary of her social engagements, especially ones involving a certain Miss Ross, whose name also appears in the pages courtesy of the detritus of the nineteenth-century paper world. It is tempting to think that with sufficient patience one could piece together the itinerary of the two women's days by studying the fragments of newspaper announcements, advertisements, and handwritten letters that fill the pages of "The Scrap Book." Literary pursuits were clearly central in these lives—at the same time that the nature of Mary Watson's investment in those pursuits is difficult to decipher, with detachment built, as it were, into her very medium. Take, for instance, the Byron page that Miss Mary Watson includes in her book (fig. 3.2), which omits the poetry to concentrate on the scandalous life. The page affiliates her with scores of other album makers, who clipped out engraved portraits of the poet and/or his baby daughter and transcribed scores of his lines, but she also keeps her distance. (For one thing, she organized the volume so that

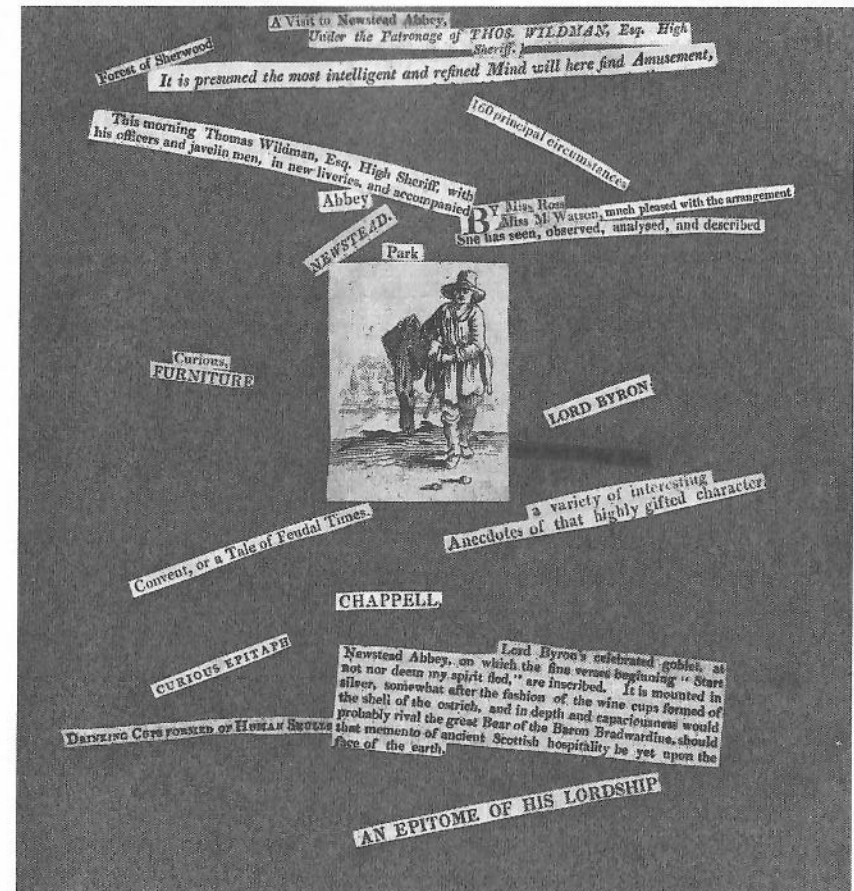


FIGURE 3.2 A Byron page from Mary Watson's "The Scrap Book: Containing a Choice and Amusing Selection from the Standard and Floating Literature of the Last Twelve or Fifteen Years Together with an Introduction and Occasional Remarks and Contributions" (ca. 1821). The page of printed fragments that Miss Watson, perhaps with the assistance of "Miss Ross," assembles is framed by the words "A Visit to Newstead Abbey" (Byron's ancestral home) and "An Epitome of His Lordship." Photograph: Courtesy of the Special Collections Library, Manchester Metropolitan University. Scrapbook numbered 88 from the Sir Harry Page Collection of Victorian Scrapbooks, Albums and Commonplace Books held at Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections.

this page was immediately followed by one headlined “A Christian Library,” surely a deliberate act of mischief. Then there is the tease of the clipping referring to “160 Principal Circumstances,” which promises circumstantiality and the intimate knowledge it brings but doesn’t deliver.) In the early nineteenth-century culture of the tasteful excerpt, “picking texts apart” was a tried-and-true way to “draw readers together”: such at least was the premise, Leah Price teaches us, of many of the published anthologies of the era, which aspired to form a public by facilitating the reading of a manageable quantity of verse and prose excerpts.¹¹⁷ What to make, though, of the literalism with which Miss Watson approached the project of picking texts apart?

Earlier in the book she has set floating across the space of the page, without explanatory context, such clipped out, deracinated words as “Books,” “Literature,” “Read,” “Female Literature,” and “Art of Reading”—a display of the buzz words of the era that here, as elsewhere in its pages, make her book appear an anticipation of modernist collage. In the history of art, collage is seen as a revolutionary formal innovation because of the directness of its response “to one of the crucial characteristics of modernity, the availability of mechanically reproduced images.”¹¹⁸ The maker of a collage acknowledges her place in a world flooded with representations and collects them to master it. The diaristic quality of “The Scrap Book” bears out a punning claim about books made in Hazlitt’s essay “On Reading Old Books”: books form “links in the chain of our conscious being . . . [and] bind together the different scattered divisions of our personal identity.”¹¹⁹ The pun on “bind” is central to Hazlitt’s and his fellow bookmen’s bibliographic imagining of the self. Still, these records of Mary Watson’s industry with scissors project an account of personal identity in which the binding can never quite offset the scattering.

The collector always collects himself, Jean Baudrillard says: the objects within the collection refer back to the primary term, the collector.¹²⁰ In collecting within her scrapbook/diary the detritus of a new world of mass literacy, this female collector reveals an awareness of the ironies of that collecting project that Baudrillard’s judgmental portrait of the collector cannot really explain and that Hazlitt doesn’t allow himself to ponder. It’s by reading again and recycling the literature that everyone reads that we craft our own singular individualities.

PART 3

English Literature for Everyday Use