"WEDDED TO BOOKS": BIBLIOMANIA AND THE ROMANTIC ESSAYISTS

Romantic Libraries
"Wedded to Books": Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists
Deidre Lynch, Indiana University

1. At a moment when Britons were learning to value the vernacular literary tradition as a mechanism of social cohesion and hoping that the literary curriculum might serve (in the 1820 words of Oxford Professor of Poetry Edward Copleston), as a source of "common topics" that would "kindle a common interest" (qtd. in Carnochan, 30), the British bibliomaniac made himself a pest. He—and the plutocratic collectors who fascinated early-nineteenth-century Britain as they made, dismantled, and bartered libraries were almost always his—was pesty in part because the malady afflicting him was so unlikely to be transmitted. Bibliomania was much publicized between 1809 and 1826, when deflation brought this boom period for the antiquarian book trade to a sudden end. During these years, two verse epistles enumerated the bibliomaniac’s symptoms (Figure 1). A roman à clef that dubbed itself a bibliographical romance interspersed its account of the courtship yoking one of its collector-protagonists to the sister of another collector-protagonist with a history of valuable old editions—thereby folding two stories of desire into one. In 1812 Britons were, in addition, regaled with eye-witness accounts of the Roxburgh Auction, when frenzied bidding among dueling aristocrats drove up the prices of the volumes to utterly unprecedented heights. The splashy publicity does not, however, gainsay the fact that, by definition, the so-called "book disease" could not reach epidemic proportions. The etiology of this malady was a function of its exclusivity. The bibliomaniac preferred his books rare, savoring select volumes’ scarcity at the very moment when contemporaries were heralding the universal diffusion of reading.

2. Bibliomaniacs were censured, that is, for eschewing commonplace means of engaging the material traces of the literary past and commonplace means of cohabiting with the nation’s literary tradition. Period discussion portrays these collectors’ hoarding of rare books as ‘wholly unconnected with, nay, absolutely repugnant to, all idea of reading them” (Beresford, 4). Hence the list of ‘symptoms’ that one encounters in almost every period commentary—symptoms comprising 1. a liking for large paper copies; 2. for illustrated copies; 3. for copies printed on vellum instead of paper; 4. a liking not just for first editions but also 5. for particular copies rendered not simply rare but unique by printers’ errata. Such lists portray these collectors as downplaying meaning, and loving matter, in all its truculent particularity.[1] Another symptom of bibliomania, 6. the collector’s drive to acquire volumes in which the pages have never been cut, is described in telling terms in a poem from 1810: Bibliosophia heralds the delights of proprietorship in a book whose pages have never yet become "free, common, and accessible as the coffee-house volumes of a Newspaper” (Beresford, 29).

3. Since the eighteenth century, literary history in Britain had developed as a discipline founded on the drive to situate texts in time: in national histories, the context of particular periods, or the lines of literary influence linking men of genius across the ages. But, eschewing this new account of “English,” the bibliomaniac insisted, as Neil Kenny puts it, on locating books in space—as if dispensing with the premise that books were made for reading made it easier to see books as made for arranging and indeed endless rearranging, and in this way made for the dislocations and relocations that extract these objects from the public contexts of literary history. (Collectors, Susan Stewart has taught us, devise means to customize context so that its final signified will be their own selfhood.) (Figure 2) Certainly, Romantic-period collectors were zealous in the pursuit of incunabula, old plays, ballads, and medieval romances, in ways that made their collections crucial resources for the new literary history’s source studies, its investigations, for instance, into what was called Shakespeare’s and Spenser’s “blackletter lore.” (Thus, the seventh classic symptom of the book disease was, as described in John Ferriar’s 1809 verse epistle, the tendency when confronting an auctioneer’s ‘dusty lot’ to seek out "English books, neglected and forgot." “[D]ismal ballads, sung to crowds of old’ are, Ferriar notes, "now cheaply bought for thrice their weight in gold” ['Bibliomania,’ 203].) But this literary history justified itself by appealing to the charismatic idea, more plausible after the
4. Evaluating their sector of Romantic library culture in this manner, I have been following the lead of Philip Connell’s and Neil Kenny’s fine analyses of the vexation that bibliomaniacal self-indulgence threatened the ideological sleight-of-hand that invited Britons to understand others’ private properties as part of the common stock of the national heritage, and to understand gentlemanly book collecting—like that of Jane Austen’s Mr. Darcy, who maintains at Pemberley a family library that is “the work of many generations” (32)—as an act of patriotic munificence. This attempt (in Connell’s words [28]) to “promote the participation of distinctively aristocratic cultural practices within a broader . . . idea of the literary past as a collective . . . heritage,” to harmonize that new idea with traditional social structures, was fraught; it depended on the gentleman’s agreement to act as a disinterested public man in the precincts of his domestic library and to use that space to reiterate the nationalist themes of a shared public culture. Bibliomaniacs made themselves pests by, for a start, parading their aristocratic credentials and yet departing from this patrician script.

5. My argument today builds on this discussion. But I also hope to complicate it: by considering not simply the acts of possession but, in addition, the dramas of possessive love enacted and modeled within bibliomaniac libraries; and by thinking about how Romantic-era representations of bibliomaniacs might have contributed to the revisions of the maps of culture that made it possible for the domestic library, and the national archive for which the domestic library imperfectly doubled, to win recognition as scenes of individuals’ affective lives.

6. The account of cultural patrimony, literary heritage, and of the hegemonic work these new nationalistic notions performed that I have borrowed from Connell sounds themes that have become familiar. It explains culture’s invention of tradition and forging of canons by referring to imperatives of social control, thereby unmasking the politics hidden within those discursive formations. It ascribes to the bibliomaniac, accordingly, a kind of unwitting resistance to the mystified ideological solutions that Britain developed to manage its real social divisions. But if (as I will propose) the book disease affecting the aristocracy raised enticing questions for the Romantics about what it means to get intimate with a “national heritage,” and if it matters that, in this period, discussions of this bibliomania jettison the old framework in which acquisitiveness counts as sin and begin to gravitate toward the emergent idiom of the psychological case history, then it will be worth nuancing this paradigm for how the discourses of culture hit home. It will be worth developing an account of the relations between the self and institutions that instances not just the coercive power structures of the Foucauldian prison, but also those power structures that reside in the family and in sexuality.[2]

7. To write our histories of the notion of literary heritage in conjunction with the history of intimacy might help us to assess what, for instance, Leigh Hunt is doing when he imagines himself “wedded to books.” In the 1820 Indicator essay on that topic, Hunt not only declares his fidelity to a library but also, covertly, indulges the fantasy that books in their turn might, forsaking all others, cleave to him alone (104-05). When the Indicator gets all Romantic (in a double sense) with the canon, this essayist is, doubtless, chastising the bibliomaniac. But he is also, simultaneously, in his possessiveness, emulating the bibliomaniac’s ways of being private with the stuff of the public domain.

8. Hunt helps us to recognize a paradox that recent historians of book-collecting underplay, which is that the book-collectors’ obsessive acquisitiveness not only vexed their contemporaries but also beguiled them, as the undertone of affection in period commentaries hints. (The other reason indulgence and castigation often are hard to distinguish in an account of bibliomaniacal self-indulgence is that those diagnosing the disorder so often detect symptoms in themselves.) The author of Bibliosophia, for instance, appends to his text a footnote in which he invites the collector with whom he’s been remonstrating to accompany him “into this private corner of the page, where” he will “whisper” in his interlocutor’s ears (Beresford, 3n). The passage manipulates the material form of the page so as to snuggle up. To call this a joke does not preclude seeing it as a tribute, one making a collector feel totally at home, to the snugness enjoyed by those who immerse themselves in their collected worlds.

9. In the remainder of this essay, my strategy for reconstructing how bibliomaniacal self-indulgence might help us to assess what, for instance, Leigh Hunt is doing when he imagines himself “wedded to books.” In the 1820 Indicator essay on that topic, Hunt not only declares his fidelity to a library but also, covertly, indulges the fantasy that books in their turn might, forsaking all others, cleave to him alone (104-05). When the Indicator gets all Romantic (in a double sense) with the canon, this essayist is, doubtless, chastising the bibliomaniac. But he is also, simultaneously, in his possessiveness, emulating the bibliomaniac’s ways of being private with the stuff of the public domain.
10. Margaret Russett locates in these moments when magazine writing thematizes its own materiality an allegory of the minor Romantics’ insight that canonicity is not a quality inherent in the work but a product of the work’s transmission. She emphasizes the essayists’ shared recognition that those acts of transmission that constituted their vocation inevitably “produce[d] effects in excess of sheer replication.” Russett’s observation, in this context, that “the material excess of the signer sponsors the minor Romantic’s career” (8) helps me draw the following conclusion. Even as they chastise the bibliomaniacs for their faulty relationship to the reading of texts, and even as they display their cultural capital by adopting a stance of high-mindedness in relation to the materialism of those with real capital, the essayists deliver their own commentary on canonicity’s incarnation and the possessibility that helps to render a canon loveable. I turn now to that commentary: a series of moments when the encounter of well-heeled bibliomaniac and shabby-genteel minor Romantic seems to make them each other’s mirror images, united by a common unwillingness to conceive of books as something we might assimilate as pure mental phenomena, and a readiness to allow literariness to be effaced by the volumes that lodge it.

11. In the January 1825 *London Magazine* an unknown writer signing himself the Reverend Tom. Foggy Dribble made his debut, joining the ranks of such pseudonymic magazine eidolons as “the English Opium Eater,” “Elia,” and “Janus Weathercock.” Apparently, Dribble debuted only to return instantly to obscurity. The essay to which this signature is appended is the sole evidence of his existence. The work is at a second level selfless: as befits the author’s clerical office, the essay—entitled “The Street Companion; or the Young Man’s Guide and the Old Man’s Comfort in the Choice of Shoes”—presents itself as an act of public service. But from the opening line, it is easy to detect, lurking behind the public-spirited vade-mecum, the intimate confessions of a fetishist. I quote: “From the beginning to the end of this paper, I have never lost sight of what I consider to be the most material object to be gained from a publication of this nature; namely, the imparting a moral feeling to the gratification arising from a taste in leather” (De Quincey, 450).

12. “The Street Companion” is, of course, a parody, and not the record of real researches into footwear and feet (that said, I cannot resist remarking that Dribble’s special expertise seems to be the feet of actresses, “the thousand little niceties” distinguishing the feet of the ladies who presently tread the stage [451n]). The author of “The Street Companion” is De Quincey, no stranger himself, we might note, to what it means to take one’s gratifications somewhere other than the beaten track. And he here targets the latest publication of the Reverend Thomas Frognall Dibdin: the librarian who catalogued (incompetently, it is alleged) the Earl of Spencer’s great antiquarian book collection at Althorp, the collector whom the author of *Bibliosophia* invites into a private corner of the page, and the self-confessed bibliomaniac who authored the bibliographical romance I mentioned above and who, in 1824, had published *The Library Companion: The Young Man’s Guide and the Old Man’s Comfort in the Choice of a Library*.

13. Throughout its 912 pages, *The Library Companion* seizes every opportunity to parade its credentials as a work of public spirit, showing how taste is a patriotic duty and proposing that private consumption might advance the project of national definition. Fittingly, then, Dibdin begins his assessment of book production in the ancient and modern languages since the advent of printing by referring to the late King’s choice of library. He affirms, sounding a typically priggish note, that it instances His Majesty’s “not inconsiderable skills as a bibliographer” (vii). After going on to discuss bibles, histories, biographies, travels, poetry, and novels, Dibdin concludes with the drama and Shakespeare, in a chapter that appraises the diverse, modern editions of the Bard and also, in a rhapsodic foot-note, eight pages long, *classes* (his term) the thirty *First Folios* belonging to Dibdin’s acquaintance. (Dibdin’s eagerness to hint at how many aristocrats he knows—or, better still, his habit of only half-revealing their identities, in pseudonyms decipherable only by the cognoscenti—can make *The Library Companion* read like a contemporary silver fork novel or court calendar.) Earl Spencer’s Folio, we learn, is merely of the second class: “There are . . . in the centre of some of the pages a few greasy-looking spots, which might have originally received the ‘flakes of pie-crust’ in the servant’s hall” (811n). This bibliographical exercise is vintage Dibdin in seeking to link ‘the prestigious work’ to ‘the singular, expensive copy’ (Kenny, 285). Though of the second class, that copy is rendered all the more auratic—distanced all the more from the mass reproducibility that ordinarily defines the book—by those stains from pie crusts of yesteryear.

14. De Quincey recognizes the elitist, possessive politics at work when Dibdin’s close-up look at the matter of the page renders Shakespeare a family heirloom. Mischiefly, he both plays up that materialism, converting leather binding into leather shoes, and reverses that politics, replacing the gentleman’s private library with the pedestrian’s public street (*The Street Companion*).
This may be the scandal and allure of the book obsessions publicized, and never more than half-heartedly condemned, by provision for snugness and the erotics of exclusive possession was required. The cabinet library registers a cultural agreement that the interior spaces of private houses needed supplementing, that extra collection might also be seen as bestowing legitimacy on a new topography of the reading mind. The category of the library for a watering place” (vii). The seal of royal approval that bestows legitimacy on this partitioning of the book original document in the King’s own handwriting,” the book-list the monarch used to assemble what he called “a closet chosen for him, he honors the works that his ancestors honored. By this means he demonstrates, as Samuel Johnson had his responsibilities to tradition. Public men might also have their “cabinet” or “closet libraries”: terms the period used to attach to persons, might be rendered personal effects. The book-collector’s peccadilloes—understood less and less as occasions for lectures on temperance and increasingly as evidence for his standing as a psychological marvel—offered testimony to what might be personal about desire: testimony that was reassuring for a culture made anxious by the expansion of the book trade and the increasing impersonality of the satisfactions which that market afforded.[3]

15. But dissociating texts from the books giving them material form, or wishing, with Wordsworth in the fifth book of the Prelude, that the mind could dispense with lodging its spirit in “shrines so frail” (l. 48) can work to two, diverging ends: either to elevate reception over mere possession, or to conceptualize a relationship to texts that might be more proprietary, because more private, more personal. Marking this distinction makes it easier to acknowledge how often that opposition between accumulating books and reading literature comes under pressure in the Romantic essay.

16. Doing something more complex than simply castigating the book-collector’s possessiveness, Leigh Hunt’s “My books” in fact goes on to cast the great private library as a site of imperfect possession. When thinking of one of those libraries, Hunt finds, he claims, that he cannot think of the books “and the proprietor together.” It is no accident that Hunt turns next to his disappointment with the latest thing in library furniture, the round table made newly fashionable by designer Thomas Hope: “instead of bringing the books around you, they all seem turning another way, and eluding your hands” (80). At Earl Spencer’s great house at Althorp, the books were dispersed among an entire series of libraries he had had constructed—the Billiard Library; the Marlborough Library; the Gothic Library, and so on (Wainwright, 15), suggesting that the Earl might well have sympathized with that sense of books’ easiness evoked by Hunt’s remark on the round library table. (Hence, perhaps, the reference to how the Earl “has a great many old SHOES . . . so many . . . that he does now know where to find them when he wants them”: this claim appears in the Reverend Dribble’s “The Street Companion,” where it is located, aptly, in the footnotes [452n]). But the bibliomaniac may in fact have supplied his contemporaries with a resource for thinking about how books—or, better still, the canon (that “imaginary totality of works” referenced by John Guillory, who cautions us against the ideological misprision involved in thinking that it might be materialized anywhere)—might be more firmly attached to persons, might be rendered personal effects. The book-collector’s peccadilloes—understood less and less as occasions for lectures on temperance and increasingly as evidence for his standing as a psychological marvel—offered testimony to what might be personal about desire: testimony that was reassuring for a culture made anxious by the expansion of the book trade and the increasing impersonality of the satisfactions which that market afforded.[3]

17. To explain this view of the aristocratic book glutton, I return to the statements about the social meanings of literacy embedded in the era’s much-disseminated images of gentlemen’s libraries. The reader who occupies that scene, all but crowded out by folios, quartos, busts and figurines of Shakespeare and Milton, and medieval stained glass, has agreed to his conscription into a historical process that is endlessly reiterative (Figure 3).[4] Choosing again what has already been chosen for him, he honors the works that his ancestors honored. By this means he demonstrates, as Samuel Johnson had averaged in the eighteenth century, that the test of canonicity is the test of time (440). Yet the period’s discussions of how to live with books also negotiated for the gentleman reader spaces, literal and conceptual, in which he might play truant to his responsibilities to tradition. Public men might also have their “cabinet” or “closet libraries”: terms the period used to designate books of less weight, both morally and materially, than the well-ordered collections of folios and quartos that were otherwise front and center in accounts of sober-sided, gentlemanly literacy. Even King George, or so we learn when Dibdin opens The Library Companion, recognized the need for off-hours reading. Dibdin loyally reproduces, “copied from the original document in the King’s own handwriting,” the book-list the monarch used to assemble what he called “a closet library for a watering place” (vii). The seal of royal approval that bestows legitimacy on this partitioning of the book collection might also be seen as bestowing legitimacy on a new topography of the reading mind. The category of the cabinet library registers a cultural agreement that the interior spaces of private houses needed supplementing, that extra provision for snugness and the erotics of exclusive possession was required.
This way of unsettling the codes of library culture might well have appealed to the Romantic essayists. They, after all, belonged to the first generation to confront a ready-made canon, the first generation who, thanks to series such as “Cooke’s Uniform, Cheap and Elegant Pocket Library” of the British poets (which figures prominently in Hunt’s Autobiography), found the classic texts of the literary tradition already collected for them, as already recommended reading. The literary heritage this generation encountered as its birthright might also have been experienced as an “infringement on their individuality”: a phrase I borrow from Julie Carlson, who uses it to delineate the discomfort Hunt, Hazlitt, and Lamb each endured when subjected to other people’s conceptions of Shakespeare (162).

It might be worthwhile, therefore, to trace how often the Romantic essayists’ often-discussed negotiations with high Romantic authorship—negotiations that merge authoring and reading and make it hard to differentiate creativity from receptivity—register and depend on a mimic, second-order bibliomaniac. We might consider, for instance, how Elia’s little back-room study in Bloomsbury and Leigh Hunt’s redecorated prison cell at Surrey Gaol (adorned by Hunt with several book-cases, busts of the poets, and a portrait of Milton) each miniaturize and pastiche the library-shrines that were the show-pieces of the country houses of the elite.[5] Confinement—whether the effect of limited means or (as for Hunt) the effect of a prison sentence for libel—becomes in these locales a version of the provisions of interiority that are furnished to the gentleman by his cabinet library. Or we might engage in this context the many passages in Hunt’s Indicator and Literary Examiner essays, in the “Elia” essays of the London Magazine, or the memoirs of their contemporaries that show Hunt and Lamb surpassing the bibliomaniac, outdoing his capacity for getting agitated about the books that went astray and spoiled his sets and his capacity for being finicky about the symmetry of his shelves.[6] Henry Crabb Robinson, for example, marveled in his journal over the fervor Lamb displayed in “banish[ing]” four quarto volumes of Burke from his collection (qtd. in Lucas, 569). Explaining why, as Lamb’s neighbor, he would sometimes catch sight of books that had been sent sailing over the trees growing in their shared garden, Thomas Westwood suggested that those rejected volumes were “unharmonious on [Lamb’s] shelves” and “clashed, both in outer and inner entity” with the books Lamb deemed his “household gods” (qtd. in Lucas, 589). In “Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading,” similarly, Lamb’s Elia no sooner declares that as a reader he has “no repugnances” than he begins to parade them, staging in prose something like the high dramas of de-accessioning described by Westwood and Robinson. Cataloguing the variety of biblia a biblia, “books which are no books,” Elia makes a point of denouncing specifically “those volumes which ‘no gentleman’s library should be without’” (149). The denunciation announces the reverse-snobbery that informs Elia’s vaunted love of the city streets’ second-hand book-stalls, locales for bibliographical discovery, where the literary heritage has been splintered and reordered by chance. It also parodies the priggishness the Reverend Dibdin enacts in his inspections of high-society libraries.

Perhaps, while investigating in this manner how the essayists’ rites of book-possession, book-devotion, and book-profligacy might have both repeated and refuted those of the bibliomaniacs, we might find it helpful to recollect the case of the Regency dandy—another figure who had a flair for making the era’s great gentlemen look like pale imitations of themselves. For when Lamb and Hunt make a show of cherishing not just literature, but also the material appurtenances of literariness, the show works to some of the same ends that are implemented when the dandy over-values cravats and snuff boxes and intimates that clothes can make a man. Both the essayist and the dandy express a volatile amalgam of cross-class identification and resentment. Both escape the theater of good taste through the theater of good taste. Reread against the bibliomaniac’s revision of the patrician script for library culture, the minor Romantics’ essays on getting private with the poets by getting intimate with books can seem to pose in another form some of the questions the dandies posed. They inquire into the nature of that entitlement that we call personal style, while they ask how English Literature comes to be legitimately one’s own.

Works Cited


Back

Of the well-to-do ensured that domestic libraries increasingly made their statements about literacy in a single voice. Raven establishes, the dissemination of the pattern books published by cabinet-makers, of booksellers' auction catalogues, and of descriptions of the country houses of a "bibliomane" who in his dreams supposes himself to be purchasing "early editions on vellum" for "trifling" sums (18).

Back

Those sources also provide tantalizingly partial glimpses of how Mary contributed to the script that the Lambs' Bloomsbury household devised to guide its cohabitation with literature. Tellingly, the Essay elucidates the doctrines of psychological associationism by instancing the case of a "bibliomane" who in his dreams supposes himself to be purchasing "early editions on vellum" for "trifling" sums (18).

Back

We see in Raven for an account of the ample guidance that owners of domestic libraries received in decorating their rooms and arranging and displaying their books: "The library of the peer could be recreated on an appropriate scale and to an appropriate budget in any gentleman’s house" (191). As Raven establishes, the dissemination of the pattern books published by cabinet-makers, of booksellers’ auction catalogues, and of descriptions of the country houses of the well-to-do ensured that domestic libraries increasingly made their statements about literacy in a single voice.

Back

Those sources also provide tantalizingly partial glimpses of how Mary contributed to the script that the Lambs' Bloomsbury household devised to guide its cohabitation with literature. The brother and sister enacted their book-love as if performing a duet. "[B]oth great readers," but in "different directions," according to Elia, they appear to have arranged matters so that Charles would be the book-collector, and Mary, the book-borrower, a client of the circulating libraries that kept their "common reading-table" supplied with daily doses of "some modern tale or adventure" ("Mackery End," qtd. in Lucas, 259).
according to Elia, they appear to have arranged matters so that Charles would be the book-collector, and Mary, the book-borrower, a client of the circulating libraries that kept their "common reading-table" supplied with daily doses of "some modern tale or adventure" ("Mackery End," qtd. in Lucas, 259).
Bibliomania has thousands of e-books, poems, articles, short stories and plays all of which are absolutely free. You can read the world’s greatest fiction by authors such as Dickens and Joyce, Sherlock Holmes mysteries, all Shakespeare’s plays, or just dip into some short stories by writers such as Mark Twain, Anton Chekov and Edgar Allan Poe. We add many books every month along with new articles and interviews by our team of dedicated literary sleuths. Click “Discuss” at the bottom of the page on any book or author to join our messageboards where you can ask your fellow re The phenomenon of Romantic bibliomania was a literary form of antiquarianism, and the Other Ozymandias in the title of this talk was the bibliomaniac. Event Sponsor: Seminar on Enlightenment and Revolution 1660–1830, a Stanford Humanities Center Research Workshop in Honor of John Bender. October 9, 2013 – 5:00pm to 7:00pm. Romantic poetry. Background. Romanticism is the name given to a dominant movement in literature and the other arts – particularly music and painting – in the the period from the 1770s to the mid-nineteenth century: It is regarded as having transformed artistic styles and practices. Like many other terms applied to movements in the arts, the word covers a wide and varied range of artists and practices. It is a retrospective term, applied by later literary, art and musical historians. None of the artists we refer to as Romantics would have so described themselves. Work by these writers can be found in two anthologies, both with useful introductions discussing the justification for extending the canon in this way.