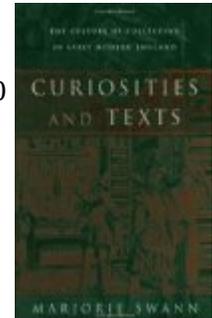




Marjorie Swann. *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England.* Material Texts Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. 280 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3610-1.



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Published on H-Albion (February, 2003)

Collecting Identity

Swann has produced a fascinating book that at once develops earlier historiographical themes and opens up new vistas for examination. Her goals are extensive and, perhaps, contentious at times, but in the end they are largely accomplished and it would be difficult for anyone to denigrate the extensive and solid research that underpins her theses.

In part, the overall success of the book is a consequence of the clear organization and lucid writing. Though she focuses extensively on literary production and identity formation, one is rarely challenged with esoteric vocabulary. Her various intentions, objectives, and arguments are made plain in the introduction and carried through the rest of the book with confidence. She quickly and with authority identifies a "proliferation" in the forms, the locations, and the objects of collecting in early modern England, carried out not only by political and social elites but by an increasing number of the middling sort as well. Indeed she reminds us that physical things have an ever-increasing importance in early modern cul-

ture and that the words "collection" and "collector" themselves attained their modern meaning in Elizabethan and Stuart England.

But her goal is not simply to catalog the rising tide of collecting. She sees in this new endeavor the exhibition of emerging, even occasionally radical, social and cultural priorities among particularly non-elite collectors. She argues that "people in the seventeenth century creatively inhabited their rapidly expanding world of material things" (p. 6) and, because of the unique conditions of Stuart England, were able to fashion for themselves new identities and authority based upon something other than (and consequently more malleable than) ancient blood lines: "an autonomous identity rooted in proprietary relationships between the collector and the physical objects he accumulates" (p. 35). There is an extensive analysis of how John Tradescant senior and junior created a reputation of honor and wisdom for themselves by reshaping their activities as the gardeners to nobility into personal cultural capital. In doing so they "sought to camouflage--or legitimize--their innovation beneath signs of membership

within a social order predicated on blood" (p. 38). But their accomplishments paled in comparison with those of Elias Ashmole who absorbed the identity and careers of the Tradescants into his own life story by first publishing a catalogue of the Tradescants' collection and then acquiring it wholesale upon their death. When he later bequeathed the curiosities contained therein to Oxford, the collection became known as the Ashmolean Museum, securing his future reputation.

Swann's analysis moves on to suggest that Baconian science itself and the activities of the Royal Society in general emerge from an adaptation of the collecting impulse. Francis Bacon certainly did not envision himself as a mere collector, but the utopia he imagined placed the acquisition of a vast array of facts, and the subsequent ordering and examination of those gathered pieces, at the heart of society. In this world Bacon would be the ultimate collector and organizer not of individual details but of knowledge and truth. Others had less grandiose schemes but were also interested in acquiring authority for themselves in non-traditional ways. Even those in contact with the most traditional sources of authority, land, began by the middle of the Stuart age to regard land as a physical and tangible entity rather than an abstract set of rights and responsibilities. Landholders became increasingly interested in producing inventories of their land and other movable and immovable property to the great financial enrichment of chorographers and antiquarians such as William Lambarde, William Camden, Richard Carew, Sir Thomas Browne, and Robert Plot.

The great service such men provided to their clients was a cataloguing of possessions, but the advancement achieved by these cataloguers was not limited to their purses, according to Swann. It was the written documents themselves, transformed into collections in their own right, that solidified the social and cultural reputations and authority of such authors. In the end anything, including intellectual and literary production, could

be collected and imbued with value: "the accumulation of other types of artifacts not only encouraged the textualization of collected objects, but also reflexively conferred a new status upon the gathering and display of literary materials" (p. 11). Ben Jonson and Robert Herrick, for example, revolutionized the relationship of author to literary production by "innovatively construct[ing] author-functions which were conceived as activities of collecting and cataloguing" (p. 152). In publishing his *Workes*, Jonson claims ownership of his literary creations (ownership passed from the writer when the piece was sold); rewrites his past, giving his professional career a unity and sense of purpose and direction that was lacking in the original; and creates in the process a new identity: "authorial possessive individualism" (p. 159). Herrick's *Hesperides* highlights his productive output as a curiosity cabinet and in doing so collects and catalogues his history much as Jonson and Ashmole did.

Swann's research and her efforts to place this work at the cutting edge of current historiography and theory also make it valuable. She acknowledges her debts to Susan Pearce, Richard Helgerson, and Patricia Fumerton, among others, but is not reticent to challenge when necessary. Particularly compelling is her claim that "collecting, could become a site of conflicting ideologies and identities" (p. 122). The history of this tumultuous era abounds with examples of instances in which seemingly conservative beliefs and actions have consequences that are anything but reactionary, and may indeed have been intended. Swann presents a world of collecting in which intentions and consequences are similarly equivocal. And, finally, she links what she has discovered to a continuing story that indicates fruitful avenues for future investigation. This book may be heartily recommended to any scholar interested in identity formation, collecting, literary culture, material culture, and consumerism in early modern England.

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Citation: Kathryn Brammall. Review of Swann, Marjorie. *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2003.

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