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Literary Annual

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Literary Annual

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Literary annuals were early nineteenth-century British texts published yearly in England from 1822 to 1860, intended primarily for a middle-class audience and therefore moderately priced (12s.–£3). “The Annuals,” wrote Southey in 1828, “are now the only books bought for presents to young ladies, in which way poems formerly had their chief vent.” And the young ladies found them much more to their liking than the manuals of conduct’ (Erickson 1996: 30). Initially published in duodecimo or octavo, the decoratively bound volumes – filled with steel plate engravings of nationally recognized artwork and sentimental poetry and prose – exuded a feminine delicacy that attracted a primarily female readership. The engravings were typically copied from various artwork, varied in theme, and verbally illustrated with a poem. Published in November and sold for the following year, the annual constituted an ideal Christmas gift, lover’s present, or token of friendship. It was produced as a small, portable volume with paper or leather boards and gilt edges, and marketed both as an extravagant object because of its rigid boards and material stability and as an object to be desired, reread, memorized, memorialized, and treasured for its internal and external beauty.

The literary annual made its British debut at a moment in print culture when innovative technological advances, expanding literacy, demand for reading materials, and publishing and bookselling practices increased the production of printed materials. Competing serial publications at the annual’s advent were predominantly periodicals, journals, and cheap twopenny newspapers. Annuals were something new, different, and substantial. Their contents and physical appearance communicated a different standard of propriety and morality than even the ubiquitous temperance pamphlets. Though the genre is also often shuffled into the category of periodicals or classed with ladies’ magazines, it is not an anthology, journal, magazine, newspaper, bound novel, or any other such form of popular media, such as the gift-book or lady’s album, that was produced during the genre’s lifetime. The annual’s proper separation from other genres comes from its preparation, production, and packaging of the literary, artistic, and beautiful in such a way that it transported and translated its readers away from the daily life represented in the periodicals and newspapers of the day.

Despite these differences, the genre capitalized on the popular, successful, and proven forms of media, subsuming the focus and purposes of emblems, almanacs, diaries, and albums into itself. Similar to ladies’ magazines, an annual typically includes plates of various scenes (pastoral, foreign, nautical, etc.), poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. However, the annual’s ornate production marks its luxury, signals its material stability,

and promises its morality and propriety – goals articulated by the annuals' early creators: Rudolph Ackermann, Alaric Watts, Frederic Shoberl, Frederic Mansel Reynolds, Charles Heath, and other male publishers, editors, and authors.

The annual was introduced to the British public in November 1822 with the publication of Rudolph Ackermann's *Forget Me Not*. With many competitors entering the market each year, the literary annual soon became a favourite form of publication. By 1828, 100 000 copies of 15 separate annuals earned an aggregate retail value of over £70 000, the *Forget Me Not*, *Literary Souvenir*, *Friendship's Offering*, and *Keepsake* the leaders among them, both in technological innovation and literary quality. By November 1829, the number had climbed to 43 separate titles published in Britain alone. America imported British annuals soon after but established its own literary annual genre in 1826 with the best-selling *Atlantic Souvenir*. Inspired by the sentiment to be remembered, other annuals were titled with a plea, *Remember Me*, or the purpose of the book, *Friendship's Offering*, *Keepsake*, and *Hommage aux Dames*.

Generally, 80 to 100 entries of prose and poetry were compiled for each annual, with over 50 different authors included in any one volume. Well-published but 'minor' poets (both men and women) earned a comfortable income by contributing to literary annuals. Even members of the Romantic and Victorian British literati were coaxed into contributing by lucrative financial remuneration, including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Shelley, Walter Scott, Robert Southey, John Clare, Richard Polwhele, Mary Russell Mitford, Maria Jane Jewsbury, Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Ruskin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, and William Thackeray. Byron and P.B. Shelley's writings were wildly successful in the annuals, though published posthumously. And Scott was paid £500 for two contributions to the 1829 *Keepsake*. More commonly, though, well-known authors were paid £50 for a 40-line poem. Popular women poets, including Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, were in demand for their domestic and sentimental contributions to annuals and were officially, yet begrudgingly, accepted into the professionalized world of authorship despite their 'poetess' poetry.

The criteria for defining a literary annual were established by Ackermann with the first *Forget Me Not* volume. Most elements listed below became standards of the literary annual form but Ackermann has very seldom received credit for the specifics. Instead, Charles Heath and Alaric A. Watts typically receive recognition for establishing the innovative form – erroneously, though.

Purpose: Annuals are 'expressly designed to serve as annual tokens of friendship or affection' (Advertisement in *Forget Me Not* 1823). Ackermann establishes not only the purpose of the volume but also its sentiment and gift-giving status.

Publication time frame: 'It is intended that the Forget-Me-Not shall be ready for delivery every year, early in November' (**Shoberl 1823**: vii). Critics adhere to this criterion and blast any publication that is published outside the holiday time frame (November to January) yet still claims to be of the literary annual family.

Continual evolution: '[T]he Publisher has no doubt that, in the prosecution of his plan, he shall be enabled, by experience, to introduce improvements into the succeeding volumes' (**Shoberl 1823**: vii). Each editor hereafter uses the preface to proclaim improvements to his or her title for each succeeding year. This promise suggests a continued longevity to the title and asks readers to look for a better product the following year.

Authorship: '[H]e shall neglect no means to secure the contributions of the most eminent writers, both at home and abroad' (**Shoberl 1823**: vii). Ackermann establishes the literary annual as more than an anthology with this promise; the authors are generally contemporary figures instead of the Classical greats.

Originality: 'To convey an idea of the nature of the pieces which compose the bulk of this volume, it will be sufficient to state that they will consist chiefly of original and interesting Tales and Poetry' (Advertisement in *Forget Me Not* 1823). This claim of originality would plague the editors of the annuals through the 1830s, but most continued the declarations of originality that Ackermann set up in this initial advertisement for the 1823 *Forget Me Not*.

Engravings: '[W]hile his long and extensive connexion with the Arts, and the credit with which he has acquitted himself in his various undertakings in that line, will, he trusts, be a satisfactory pledge that his best exertions shall not be wanting to give to this Work in a decided superiority in regard to its embellishments, over every

other existing publication of the kind' (**Shoberl 1823**: viii). Though this is a standard claim of superiority, Ackermann means to use his experience and established audience to create visual entertainment in addition to the literary. An annual must carry both in order to be considered within the family.

Useful information: 'The third portion comprises a Chronicle of Remarkable Events during the past year: a Genealogy of the Reigning Sovereigns of Europe and their Families; a List of Ambassadors resident at the different Courts; and a variety of other particulars extremely useful for reference to persons of all classes' (Advertisement in *Forget Me Not* 1823). Ackermann attempts to establish the literary annual as referential and useful across class boundaries, similar to the almanac. However, it is assumed that the working or lower classes are not included in this declaration because of the cost (12s.). Because it is mere information, this element was eventually discarded around 1825 in favour of additional creative contributions.

Exterior format: 'The Forget Me Not is done up in a case for the pocket, and its external decorations display corresponding elegance and taste with the general execution of the interior' (Advertisement in *Forget Me Not* 1823). The diminutive size (3.5 in. × 5.5 in.) represents a particular form of femininity that is portable in the pocket or the hand – specifically of a lady. Though the size eventually grew, the annual's embellished boards mark the extravagance of the entire genre and were continued through its lifetime even in the rebindings.

During that first decade of success, the literary annual format altered according to public demand, alterations which affected readers and authors alike. The first major shift occurred in 1825 with the publication of Alaric Watts's *Literary Souvenir*, a volume that excised the almanac-like informational pages, excluded the album-like blank pages and appended two facsimile pages of famous authors' autographs. With the debut of the 1828 *Keepsake*, Charles Heath and Frederic Mansel Reynolds provided a decadent annual in larger form with silk boards and exceedingly well-paid literary names.

The annuals became so numerous that reviewer Jane Wilde described the genre as an 'epidemic'. Writing in 1855, three decades after the first annual, Wilde refers both to the early proliferation of titles and the 'sickness' that drove readers to desire, own, read, and receive annuals. Though pummelled in the British critical press to the point that a 'modern literary lady's maid [would] ... sneer at the Annuals', the genre nevertheless served the larger purpose of exposing a burgeoning audience of women and girls to 'very many of the best lyrical poems of nearly all our most popular contemporary writers [which] appeared in the first instance in their pages', as is noted in the 1858 *Bookseller* article, 'The Annual of Former Days'.

By 1830, regardless of the hostile criticism, annuals flourished into subgenres, including Thomas Hood's parodic *Comic Annual*, which ushered in many other humorous volumes. In addition, these symbols of the feminine became representations of an empire when they were (re)produced in Bengal and Calcutta: 'A love of the arts is also kindled by [the literary annuals'] presence in the remotest corners of the empire, whither such admirable specimens of the pencil and the graver might not otherwise have reached in the course of a century' (Review 1825: 279) – a patronizing comment that implies the indigenous inhabitants of India were not capable of the ingenuity and creativity offered by the British homeland. Typically, in the Preface an editor represented the annual as a marker of British superiority by using images of warfare and defeat especially against the French and Germans. This move conflicts with representations of femininity to which the genre's initial creators aspired – and it is only one of many such gendered differences.

By 1831, even men had become targets with the publication of *A Father's Present to His Son* and later the *Young Gentleman's Annual*. Literary annuals fed a popular frenzy that drove authors, publishers, and editors alike. Not until 1840 did the number of titles fall below 40, lingering in derivative forms until the early twentieth century in both the United States and Europe. Indeed, annuals were not forgotten; they appear in both British and American nineteenth-century novels, among them George Eliot's 1872 *Middlemarch* (set in 1820s England), Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (set in 1830s America), and William Thackeray's 1847 *Vanity Fair*. The male editors' attempt to commodify in the annuals a particular form of femininity was finally subverted as the annual's audience gained strength and pulled its production in new directions.

SEE ALSO: **Ackermann, Rudolph**; **Clare, John, Poetry**; **Croker, John Wilson**; **Gothic Chapbook**; **Hemans, Felicia, Poetry**; **Hogg, James, Poetry**; **Lamb, Lady Caroline**; **Literary Annual, Poetry**; **Mitford, Mary Russell, Prose**; **Scott, Walter, Poetry**; **Shelley, Mary**; **Taylor, William**.

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