

Introduction to the English Canons of Poetry *your guide to studying the best poets in English*

A literary canon is a standard of judgment, a list of works agreed upon by a general consensus or readers, that represents what Matthew Arnold called “the best that has been thought or said.” The Master List encloses a generous prospect of English poetry. It is a comprehensive canon of every poet who has contributed in some way, no matter how small, to traditions in English poetry.

This list was compiled to help readers navigate the large body of English-language poetry. As Hippocrates said long ago, *Life is short, art is long*. Human life is tragically brief, and the amount of poetry in English accumulates each day. I hope these canons make the process of reading (and choosing what one reads) less forbidding.

Additionally, I hope this list may begin to recover a systematic approach to the study of English literature that existed before the neglect of canons and set curricula within American university English departments. By reflecting the poets who have been valued by a consensus of readers, critics, scholars, editors, and other poets, this catalog provides a map of discovery for self-learners, public readers, university students, and literature educators. My method of compiling the first four “canons” described below is primarily documentary and bounded-set: they represent a hierarchy of value. However, the Master List was compiled to be as center-set and inclusive as possible, reflecting an ever-widening canon.

The Ranking System

Popularly anthologized poets are listed with the number of appearances within the registers of 16 major volumes of anthologies and lists published from the eighteenth to the twenty first century. I aimed at discovering a ranking of poets based upon their appearances within the 16 major anthologies. Although such rankings would vary if a different set of anthologies were used, these anthologies reflect the range of literary values that have determined the principles of selection used to compile canons since before the formation of university literature departments in the nineteenth century. To that end I have selected anthologies from across four centuries. The earliest is the list of poets included in Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81) and the latest is the 2005 *Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Because most of these anthologies were compiled before the formation of a modernist canon, I have lowered the standard of ranking of poets born after 1917. I also consulted two anthologies of specifically women poets (listed below) in efforts to balance their exclusion from earlier anthologies.

If a poet has appeared more than once in any of the volumes below, that value is indicated by an “x” beside their names and a numerical value, which indicates the number of appearances. When the author of a work (such as *Beowulf*) is unknown, I have listed the work with its approximate date of composition. Although the list of names is ordered chronologically

according to year, poets born within the same year are not ordered chronologically according to months within that year (i.g., a poet born in May 1665 might be listed before a poet born in January 1665). American poets born after 1640 (the beginning of American verse) and before 1840 are organized under a separate category. The American-born, English poet James Ralph (1705–1762) appears twice in the American and English categories. Because so many early American poets (e.g., Anne Bradstreet, Susanna Haswell Rowson) were born in England and settled in America, most English-born American poets have been placed in the American list.

The following is the list of anthologies, lists, and university curricula consulted to establish the hierarchy of value:

- 1779–81. *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, vols. I & II, Samuel Johnson.
1831. *Select Works of the British Poets, from Chaucer to Jonson, with Biographical Sketches* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green), ed., Robert Southey.
1900. *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch.
1946. *The College Survey of English Literature*, vols. I & II.
1971. *Stuart Plays*, rev. edition, eds., Arthur H. Nethercot, Charles R. Bakervill, and Virgil B. Heltzel.
1973. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, eds., Richard Ellman and Robert O’Clair.
1981. *Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, ed. Donald Davie.
1983. *Bibliography for English Undergraduate Concentrators*, General Editor: Kevin Van Anglen.
1992. *The Top 500 Best Poems*, ed. William Harmon.
1999. *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Christopher Ricks.
2000. *Early Modern Women’s Writing: An Anthology 1560–1700*, ed. Paul Salzman.
2001. *Women’s Writing 1778–1838: An Anthology*, ed., Fiona Robertson.
2004. *The Best Poems of the English Language*, ed. Harold Bloom.
2005. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (5th ed.), eds., Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy.

The Canons

The Cornerstone Canon (of 6 poets) is composed of the six greatest and most influential poets of the English tradition: Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, John Milton, William Wordsworth, and T. S. Eliot.

The Foundational Canon (of 44 poets) includes poets who have appeared more than 7 times (and any Modernist poet listed more than 6 times) in volumes above. This represents the most canonical and foundational poets of English verse.

The Golden Canon (of 88 poets) includes poets whose names appear five times or more.

The Silver Canon (of 189 poets) includes poets who have appeared more than twice in the above volumes.

The Master List (of 1,500+ poets) aspires to include anyone who has published English verse, including poets seldom or never anthologized. Of these I have added several from my own acquaintance and discovery—poets and versifiers, such as Joseph Hall, John Wilson, Taylor Francis, Christopher Harvey, Edward Johnson, Henoeh Clapham, Robert Wilde, William Chamberlayne, George Burder, Edmond Graile, Thomas Stanley, Samuel Slater, Vincent Alsop, Thomas Narjenn (attributed name Thomas Tanner), Samuel Woodford, Benjamin Keach, Richard Claridge, John Hoddesdon, Robert Fleming the Younger, Cotton Mather, Joseph Stennett, Ralph Erskine, Lady Mary Chudleigh, Joseph Hart, Richard Rogers, Zachary Boyd, John Flavel, and Thomas Marsland Hopkins (Gerard Manley Hopkins’s uncle). I also have added a few translators of poetry who deserve recognition—poets such as Henry Ainsworth and Anne Francis.

Acknowledgements

In making this list, I consulted several other important anthologies and curricula. Although only 16 of these were used to produce the hierarchy of value, many others provided a list of important yet obscure poets and versifiers. I am indebted to the collection in the English Literature departmental library at Harvard University, the Francis James Child Memorial Library, where I discovered many lesser-known and seldom anthologized poets. Special thanks to Patreon supporters, Danila and Cam, who notified me of omissions and duplicates.

Notes and Latin Abbreviations

Where the poet has published under a pseudonym, the birth-name is followed by a “/” and the pseudonym (for example, “Hugh MacDiarmid/Christopher Murray Grieve”).

Some dates are preceded by “c.” or “fl.”

c. is an abbreviation of “circa,” indicating that scholars do not know exactly when a poet was born or a work was composed or published.

fl. is an abbreviation of “flourished,” indicating a date or period during which a person was known to have been alive or active.

Adam Walker, Cambridge, MA; June 2024

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Cornerstone Canon

This canon of 6 poets is the only list within this guide that is compiled upon my own judgment. The six poets I have chosen, I believe fulfill, in different ways, the criteria for greatness: (1) scope of influence, (2) literary merit, (3) a just representation of human life, (4) literary achievement, (5) personal resonance, and (6) the test of time.

Although in the making of this list I did not have recourse to other critics or anthologies, this list is fairly representative and, excepting the last two poets perhaps, represent an agreement among readers, critics, and scholars.

The list is ordered chronologically.

1. Geoffrey Chaucer (1340s-1400)
2. Edmund Spenser (1552/1553-1599)
3. William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
4. John Milton (1608-1674)
5. William Wordsworth (1770-1850)
6. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Foundations Canon

The Foundational Canon includes poets who have appeared more than 7 times (and any Modernist poet listed more than 6 times) in the 16 volumes below. This list of 44 poets and poems represents some of the most important and anthologized poets in the traditions of English-language poets since the medieval period.

The following is the list of anthologies, lists, and university curricula consulted to establish the rankings:

- 1779–81. *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, Samuel Johnson.
1831. *Select Works of the British Poets, from Chaucer to Jonson, with Biographical Sketches* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green), ed., Robert Southey.
1900. *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch.
1946. *The College Survey of English Literature*, vols. I & II.
1971. *Stuart Plays*, rev. edition, eds., Arthur H. Nethercot, Charles R. Bakervill, and Virgil B. Heltzel.
1973. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, eds., Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair.
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1999. *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Christopher Ricks.
2000. *Early Modern Women's Writing: An Anthology 1560–1700*, ed. Paul Salzman.
2001. *Women's Writing 1778–1838: An Anthology*, ed., Fiona Robertson.
2004. *The Best Poems of the English Language*, ed. Harold Bloom.
2005. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (5th ed.), eds., Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy.

List

1. *Beowulf* (copied c.1000)
2. Geoffrey Chaucer (1340s-1400)
3. John Skelton (c. 1463-1529)
4. Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542)
5. Edmund Spenser (1552/1553-1599)
6. Sir Walter Raleigh (c.1552-1618)
7. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)
8. Robert Southwell (c. 1561 - 1595)
9. Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

10. William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
11. Samuel Daniel (1562–1619)
12. Michael Drayton (1563-1631)
13. Thomas Campion (1567-1620)
14. John Donne (1571/2 – 1631)
15. Ben Jonson (1572-1637)
16. Robert Herrick (1591-1674)
17. George Herbert (1593-1633)
18. Thomas Carew (c.1595-1640)
19. John Milton (1608-1674)
20. Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)
21. John Dryden (1631–1700)
22. Alexander Pope (1688–1744)
23. Thomas Gray (1716–1771)
24. William Collins (1721–1759)
25. William Blake (1757–1827)
26. Robert Burns (1759–1796)
27. William Wordsworth (1770-1850)
28. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)
29. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)
30. John Clare (1793-1864)
31. John Keats (1795–1821)
32. Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)
33. Walt Whitman (1819–1892)
34. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882)
35. Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)
36. Christina Rossetti (1830–1894)
37. Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)
38. A.E. Housman (1859–1936)
39. Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936)
40. W. B. Yeats (1865–1939)
41. Walter de la Mare (1873–1956)
42. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)
43. Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)
44. W. H. Auden (1907–1973)