Chapter 7
The City as Anthology: Experimenting With Literary Annotations Outside the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study based on two recent courses on media, material, and short literature taught at Bogazici University, in Istanbul, Turkey between 2018-2022. By introducing students to short literary genres such as aphorisms, maxims, epigrams, riddles, and dozens of other examples, students could turn their neighborhoods into anthologies by digitally mapping short literary forms in public locations. Rather than require students to buy readers, anthologies, or collections compiled by for-profit international publishers, students created, annotated, and edited their own collection of a particular short genre. The final evaluation emphasizes the importance of encouraging literary students to experiment with the categorization of literary objects rather than accept "literature" that has been judged, edited, collected, canonized by international publishing houses.

1. TEACHING SHORT LITERARY GENRES

This chapter outlines teaching an experimental type of literary criticism at the university undergraduate level. Interested readers would be university teachers of language, literature, cultural studies, gender studies, media studies, or even urban studies and geography. Between 2018 and 2022 at Boğaziçi University in İstanbul, Türkiye, I taught two English literature courses before and during the COVID-19 pandemic that focused on the material and medium of short literary genres. These courses introduced students to the creation, collection, and criticism of aphorisms, epigrams, idioms, jokes, quotations, proverbs, and maxims among many other short genres. In these courses, I offered a way for students to move beyond the following trends in the Western literary tradition that highlight and prioritize 1) the material of the book, 2) the "special" status of literature and great authors, and 3) the secondary state of short genres when compared with longer masterpieces of national or world literatures.

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These previously listed trends in the teaching of literature and criticism—emphasis on the book, specialness of writing and authors, and secondary status of short genres—are so ingrained in university culture that the literary critic Gary Saul Morson wrote in 2012 that, despite their popularity, short literary genres "rarely attract serious study" (Morson, 2011, p. 27). University literature departments teach courses on the novel, epic, short story, drama, and lyric poetry, among other genres. However, there are very few if any courses focused on short genres or particular examples of short genres. For example, in 2016, Ben Grant's *Aphorism and other Short Forms* offers an introduction to the aphorism that "come from my teaching at the University of Kent" and some lectures in "MA classes" (Grant, 2016, preface). The book is structured like an introductory reader, complete with central topics and a glossary. More recently, Andrew Hui's *A Theory of the Aphorism* (2019) also writes that "the aphorism has been curiously understudied," not to mention a lack of research or teaching on other short genres (Hui, 2019, p. 1). In writing about ancient short sayings, Hui describes authors as "teachers" like Confucius (p. 27) and Jesus (p. 65), who used these short forms as mnemonic devices and rhetorical tropes. However, almost ironically, Hui describes both the power of short genres, but also a lack of teaching or courses on short genres: "the first age creates aphorisms; the second age argues with and against them; the third age preserves them" (p. 8). We seem to be in an age of preservation.

In my experience as researcher and instructor of literature, I have found that in the age of preservation, teachers use extracts from longer texts to show a crucial point, borrow examples of a short genre for a quiz, exam, or writing assignment prompt, or even hang posters of quotes on the walls to influence the office's or department's atmosphere. Students are taught fragments from William Shakespeare, quotations from Oscar Wilde, or an aphorism or two from Friedrich Nietzsche in order to recognize the genre and apply a theoretical frame to interpret the fragment in relation to the larger work. Yet, the priority is almost always on the longer, book-length work from which one borrows the fragment. Short forms are preserved in anthologies for reference, not study.

This absence of teaching short literature reveals a problem of representation: even though short genres make up a large portion of both scientific and non-scientific knowledge, students are not taught how to recognize, analyze, or even employ them in their own writings. Morson has shown that every scientific discipline produces collections or anthologies of short literature and quotations or introductory readers of extracts of essential knowledge. From sociology, literary criticism, psychology, neuroscience, economics and many more disciplines, publishers extract fragments from scientific works, collect maxims or rules of the discipline, and present them to students as a "field" (Morson, 2011, pp. 24–25). If short genres are so important to the transmission of knowledge, why is there not more attention paid to this form of literature?

This rhetorical question becomes even more important when studied from the point of view of the publishing industry, which sells collections of quotations of political figures and movements, meditative thoughts devoted to religious and cultural practices, humorous or serious aphorisms, anthologies of literature based on a nation, period, or theme, and quotations from great historical figures (Morson, 2011, pp. 24–25). A generation ago, Leah Price even staked the future of literature departments on collections of literary works and anthologies that "stand even a chance at mass-market success." Price continues by writing that "the canon wars of the 1980s were fought over anthologies' tables of contents'" (Price, 2004, p. 2). In practical terms, high school and university education is entwined with the practice of fragmenting larger works, introducing, summarizing, and binding these smaller works together to teach students a "canon."