
Margaret J.M. Ezell. *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 182p.

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As a material form, the book is dead—or so the leadership of the libraries at the University of Kansas seems to believe. In a recent “Strategic Vision” statement, a task force declared that the University’s libraries should be restructured (physically and financially) as a high-tech “Portal of Choice.” Much to the alarm of many faculty members, the word “book” did not appear once in this report; campus bibliophiles felt themselves suddenly doomed to extinction, scholarly dinosaurs unable to survive in a brave new world of electronic information. Before the University of Kansas flushes all of our future acquisitions budgets down this new-fangled “Portal,” I hope that our librarians will rediscover the value of books by reading Margaret Ezell’s *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*. In witty, lucid prose, Ezell’s important and timely work forces us to question the nature of the relationship between intellectual culture and technological change.

Countering a tendency in earlier scholarship to regard the printed book as intrinsically imbued with qualities of closure and fixity, literary historians now recognize that the “meaning” of print has been negotiated within specific contexts. Ezell extends this revisionist history of the book by trenchantly questioning some of our most cherished assumptions. Persuasively arguing that our vested interest in the book as a form of cultural capital has effectively blinkered our examination of the history of print, Ezell reveals the extent to which practices of manuscript authorship coexisted with—and, in many locales, continued to dominate—the production of texts in early modern England. Analyzing a rich range of primary sources, Ezell scrutinizes and refutes common suppositions about the relationship between class, gender, ideology, and the technology of print. She demonstrates that whereas the English Civil War has often been viewed as the threshold of a new cultural era dominated by the printed book and commercial authorship, in fact the “social authorship” of manuscript transmission was not simply the refuge of culturally marginal figures such as women or reactionary aristocrats after the middle of the seventeenth century. As Ezell explains, print was neither used nor desired by many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers. She discusses the widespread production of manuscript “compilation volumes” during the early modern period; she explores cases of literary “piracy” and reveals that some writers, especially poets, would willingly present their works in print only to restore the scribal “authenticity” of a text previously published in a corrupt form; and she argues that rather than viewing Alexander Pope as a straightforward exemplar of

modern print authorship, we need to recognize that Pope's practices as a reader and writer were profoundly influenced by his ongoing participation in manuscript culture.

One of the great strengths of Ezell's methodology is her unwavering focus on what she terms "the lived, material conditions of reading and writing during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries" (20). She insists that psychological and social inhibitions were not the only, or the most important, impediments faced by an early modern author who might contemplate printing his or her texts. Rather than a democratic medium affording proprietary control, the technology of print was a minefield of obstacles for the would-be commercial author, especially if he lived in the provinces or colonies: Ezell chronicles how the Yorkshire antiquary Ralph Thoresby spent much time and money in London trying to see his diaries through the press despite devastating fires and an alcoholic bookseller who tended to disappear at crucial moments; and we learn that Cotton Mather's manuscript of *Batteries Upon the Kingdom of the Devil* was nearly seized by French pirates as the text was en route from America to London. Complementing Adrian Johns' recent work on the material conditions of publishing in early modern England, Ezell helpfully reminds us just how little "authorial control" a writer exerted over his or her text once it headed into the medium of print. And in her case study of the evolution of the multi-volume literary series, Ezell insists that we need to consider how a material form now associated with aesthetic value first arose out of purely commercial motives rather than any literary ideology.

In *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*, Margaret Ezell presents a complex, nuanced portrait of English reading and writing during the Restoration and early eighteenth century. By drawing attention to our own prejudices and dilemmas as postmodern scholars who suddenly find themselves careening down the information superhighway, Ezell points out the relevance of historical literary studies to an analysis of our own cultural moment. Ezell's deeply intelligent, challenging new book will thus interest not only early modern specialists, but a more general readership concerned with issues of authorial identity and technological change. ✨