

Michelle Levy, *Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. 310. £80. ISBN 9781474457064.

In her accomplished and engaging study, Michelle Levy offers a welcome re-evaluation of manuscript culture in the Romantic period, an era often characterised by the rapid expansion of print. Levy successfully challenges the conventional opposition between print and script, which often elevates the codex over manuscript, a position already held by Romantic periodicals such as the *Edinburgh Review*, which constructed print as a public, fixed, and durable medium. Levy's attention to Romantic-era scribal culture also participates in debates concerning print: 'Examining literary manuscripts can unsettle our notions of print by reminding us that print, particularly in the age of moving type, was itself a fluid and dynamic medium' (58). The study convincingly argues that manuscript practices were still highly prevalent in the late eighteenth century, and that print and manuscript were deeply intertwined media, coexisting in reciprocal and complementary ways, with texts frequently circulating in print and script simultaneously. Levy, moreover, reassesses authors' motivations for keeping their writing in manuscript circulation only, not as a sign of failure, but as a deliberate choice. While scribal publication was often deeply personal, it was not necessarily private: as Levy demonstrates in her discussion of Dorothy Wordsworth's journals, the myth of privacy is the result of subsequent modern editing, when the notebooks clearly anticipate a future audience, even an appearance in print, most notably in the numerous revisions Wordsworth made.

Focusing on Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Lord Byron, Jane Austen, and William Blake, alongside shorter considerations of Charlotte Smith and Dorothy Wordsworth, Levy documents Romantic writers' continued use of manuscript circulation even after successful print publication. This sheds new light on canonical authors whose careers seem firmly entrenched in the world of print and whose relationships to print were sometimes fraught. Addressing confidential readers, scribal publication in some cases appears as a response to the political and formal pressures and restrictions of print. The study is particularly successful in demonstrating how writers 'worked with in a multimodal world' (251). Barbauld used both print and manuscript circulation throughout her career to forward her political ideals, thereby challenging the belief that she stopped writing after the negative reception of *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. Levy traces Byron's continued reliance on a coterie of readers and his 'ongoing struggle to transition from narrower to wider audiences without compromising his poetic candour' (20). The draft known as Manuscript M, for instance, contains notes and annotations which did not appear in its printed version, demonstrating that Byron composed with both confidential readers and future publication in mind. Austen, whose 'lifelong practices of domestic manuscript production' (183) greatly shaped the production of her printed works, similarly laboured, Levy argues, to write for a public audience. Austen, like Barbauld and Byron, continued to engage with confidential manuscript culture, a medium that registers her critique of print norms, late in her career.

One of the study's great strengths is its reconstruction of the sociability that underwrites manuscript practices. Community is indeed at the heart of scribal practices, which participates in our reassessment of authorship in the Romantic period and of the myth of the solitary genius. Levy shows how women writers in particular privileged manuscript circulation as an instrument of sociability rather than out of concerns about entering the public realm of print. Often collaborative endeavours, as in the case of Austen's juvenilia, manuscript circulation implied one or more circles of readers and thus a clear sense of an audience. Authors could not fully control scribal networks, as Barbauld's 'A Thought on Death', which mysteriously found its way in print in the United States without the poet's knowledge, illustrates. This example also highlights the vitality of manuscript culture in the Romantic period, as texts were often

disseminated far beyond their initial readership, through ‘messy and unpredictable journeys’ (129).

Levy finally addresses the status manuscripts, as artefacts of cultural and national importance, acquired during the period, which witnessed a renewed interest in handwriting. This leads her to consider the different technologies that have helped remediate manuscripts from the nineteenth century to the present day, with a particular emphasis on the different editorial approaches modern scholarship has adopted and how these ground-breaking critical editions have changed our understanding of Romantic literary textuality. Levy then examines recent digital projects, which have attempted to remedy the stability inherent in print, endeavouring to preserve the hybridity and dynamic nature of manuscripts. Levy, who acknowledges her indebtedness to both fields, offers an elegant example of the ways in which traditional textual scholarship and digital humanities can be fruitfully combined.

The volume’s coda on William Blake, offers a final vivid example of an attempt to collapse the division between print and script, a division which Levy continuously interrogates and deconstructs in nuanced and highly informed chapters. This rich and engaging study represents an important contribution to the revival of Romantic manuscript studies.

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