Manuscript, women, and scribal culture

Fikkers, L.E.M.; Riach, H.A.; Pender, P.; Smith, R.

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Lotte Fikkers and Holly Riach
Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Abstract

Secular scribes played a vital role in the production of manuscripts, with early moderns making use of the services offered by professional scribes, scriveners, and secretaries. Scribes worked on a more informal level too, as family members, friends, servants, and neighbours penned texts at the request of their kith and kin. Women, too, contributed to this scribal culture, both as those requesting the use of a scribe and as those wielding the quill.

The definitions of "scribe" given in contemporary scholarship often prioritize the professional, thus excluding those working in an informal capacity from the conversation altogether. Creating a more inclusive definition, one which also recognizes the authorial license concomitant to scribal work, will allow these "amateur" scribes (who we might call "scribblers," perhaps) an identity through which they can enter into the contemporary scholarly discourse surrounding the role of the scribe in early modern England. As these amateurs were sometimes female, this expanded perspective will make it possible for scholars to gain a more rounded and complete understanding of manuscript culture.

Keywords

Manuscript production, Scribal culture, Scribes, Scriveners, Secretaries, Domestic papers, Letters, Wills

Introduction

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In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, people often took responsibility for texts which they had not physically penned themselves. A good proportion of people were literate readers only and could not themselves write. Others could write, but at times chose not to, for reasons as varied as seemliness, social custom, convenience, or lack of skill required for the task at hand. In all those cases people turned to quill wielders. Indeed, the market for professional scribes was thriving, and scribal culture continued to flourish throughout the early modern period. Women, in particular, frequently employed scribes (Daybell 2001).

Despite their importance to the early modern production of manuscript texts, and especially women's texts, relatively little is as yet known about the often anonymous men and women wielding the pen on behalf of somebody else. Offering a robust definition of the secular scribe proves difficult. One attempt sees scribes as people "who physically *write* or *copy* things for a living, at even the most humble, mechanical level" (Beal [1998] 2004, 1). Defining a scribe through their professional capacity is too limited, however, as it excludes the "amateurs" – sometimes women – working in a household setting, the scribblers (North 2015). Conversely, a more inclusive definition, such as "a person responsible for the writing of a manuscript text" (Beal [2008] 2013, 361), threatens to remove the distinction between "author" and "scribe." This entry proposes an alternative, more workable definition: a scribe is someone who is formally or informally requested by another to create the physical entity of a text. They could work on instruction, on commission, from dictation and/or from a source text, but crucially, a scribe in this sense has varying degrees of authorial agency, depending on the nature of the task at hand and their relationship to the person for whom they are writing. Defining the secular scribe in such a way allows us to recognize not only that a greater range of individuals contributed to this manuscript culture than previously thought but also that they contributed in ways not previously considered. This will, inevitably, mean a greater understanding of the place of women within this manuscript culture.

The Professional Scribe

The professional scribe performed a variety of tasks and is known by a range of different, often interchangeable, terms. One of them is the copyist. Copyists were available to perform a variety of copying tasks on commission. As a result, they moved in different fields and produced texts within a wide range of genres. The output of the anonymous copyist lovingly christened Feathery (*fl*. *c*.1625-1640) by Peter Beal includes legal treatises, religious discourse, and poetry, for instance (Beal [1998] 2004). Copyist Ralph Crane (*fl*.1589-1632), probably best known for his involvement in the production of Shakespeare's first folio, also

counted the royal court, the inns of court, and the literary world as his spheres of textual employment. Most professional copyists who have been identified are men; a possible exception is Aphra Behn (1640?-1689), who may have been part of a scriptorium (O'Donnell 1990). The term "copyist," however, is in itself misleading, as the copies these scribes produced were not necessarily faithful to the original text: copyists made interventions, especially when deemed necessary to aid the text's readability (Beal [1998] 2004; Bowles 2017; Bowles 2020). Of course, such interventions may not have been sanctioned by their employer, who may have wanted a copy, and yet received an edited version thereof.

While copyists moved across different sites of textual production, other scribes took on more specialized writing tasks. Scriveners were specialized in the production of legal instruments, such as contracts, deeds, and wills (although the term is often used as a synonym for a scribe with less specialized tasks). Men and women alike sought the expertise of scriveners (Wrightson 2011). Producing legal instruments was by and large a man's job, though there was no particular proscription against a woman's undertaking them (Bonfield 2012): the records of the Scriveners' Company note the first admittance of a woman in 1665, when Elizabeth Billingsley was registered as apprentice scrivener to Anne and James Windus (Steer 1973). Women are known to have worked as scriveners before this time, however. A well-known example is Margaret Spitlehouse, *née* Legge (d.1604), who, like her father, worked as a scrivener in Bury St Edmunds, where she contributed at least 8% of the total number of wills produced between 1579 and 1601 (Craig 1991). While the influence of scriveners on the legal instruments they produced is not to be underestimated (Spufford 1971), these documents can still reveal much about those who commissioned them (James 2016; Fikkers 2017; Price 2021).

Those in frequent need of a penman, or those who were able to afford it, could retain a private scribe: the secretary or amanuensis. Larger households would retain one or more secretaries or make use of secretariats. Recent scholarship has done extensive work charting Elizabeth I's secretariat and its influence on her letters (Bajetta, Coatalen, and Gibson 2014; Evans 2016; Andreani 2017). Although letters were their main output, secretaries were involved in the creation of other genres as well. John Rolleston (1597-1681), secretary to William Cavendish (bap.1593-d.1676), for instance, transcribed not only Cavendish's literary works but those of his daughters, both poets and playwrights, Elizabeth Brackley (1626-1663) and Jane Cavendish (1622-1669), and his wife, the writer Margaret Cavendish, *née* Lucas (1623?-1673), too (Hulse 1995; Fitzmaurice 2003; Edwards and Graham 2016; see Drama by Elizabeth Brackley/Jane Cavendish). While Rolleston mostly improved William's orthography, another of his secretaries, Robert Payne (1596-1651), made much more

substantial changes to his master's texts (Raylor 2000). The extent of their authorial licence and the exact tasks the secretary performed depended on ability and levels of trust, intimacy, and confidentiality between master and secretary.

The Amateur Scribe

Different to today's practice, professional secretaries in the early modern period were mostly men. Harold Love describes early modern women as being "disqualified" from taking on a scribal role due to "social custom and by lack of access to education" (1993, 99). However, the recent rise in scholarly interest on domestic papers has unearthed evidence that women could function as de facto secretaries within the household (Whittle and Griffiths 2012; Wiggins et al. 2013; see Manuscript and Women's Domestic Papers). Studies of Bess of Hardwick's letters show that alongside her employment of professional penmen, she also made use of female scribblers and family members (Wiggins 2017; see Manuscript and Women's Letters). Other examples include the household accounts of the Roberts family of Boarzell, Sussex, *c.*1568-1582, which were predominantly scribed by Margaret Roberts, and the correspondence between Dorothy Gamage and her husband, *c.*1580, which doubled "as shopping lists with detailed requests for household provisions," making them indicative of her "role in managing the household and estates during her husband's absence" (Daybell 2016, 63). In a more literary capacity, having become blind, John Milton relied on amanuenses, including his daughter Deborah (1652-1727), to physically write his texts (Parker 1958; see Fig. 1).

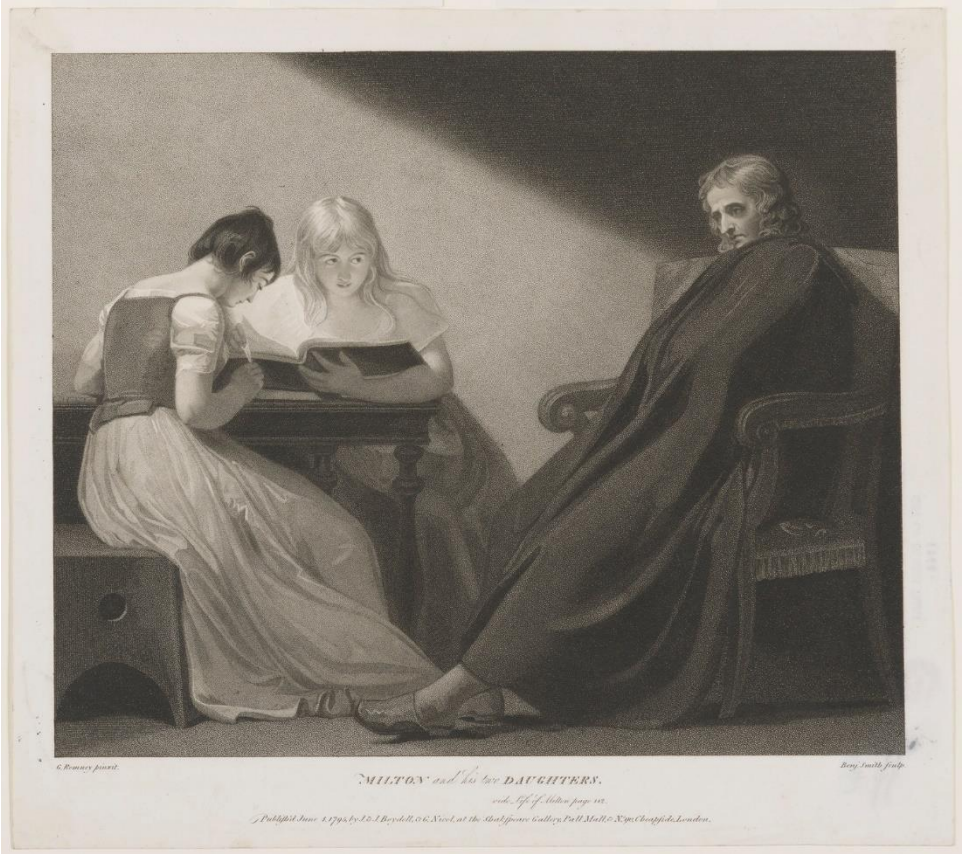

Figure 1: This is an image of John Milton with two of his daughters, Deborah holding the quill and Mary holding the book. (Benjamin Smith, 1795, *Milton and his two daughters.* D38839, © National Portrait Gallery, London).

Whilst writing for practical reasons such as correspondence and household management, the amateur scribbler could also fulfil a social function, transcribing literature for communal entertainment or recording information for or about the social group of which they are a part. For instance, Constance Aston Fowler (1621-1664), an upper gentry, recusant Catholic woman, acted as a literary scribbler for her coterie from her family home in Colton, Staffordshire (see Manuscript Exchange of Poetry and Sociability; Manuscript and Catholic Women's Writing). With her brother Herbert Aston (bap.1614-1688/9) accompanying their father on an ambassadorial trip to Spain during the years 1635-1638, and her new friend and confidante Katherine Thimelby (later Katherine Aston) (1617/18-1658) living a fair distance away at the Thimelby's Irnham estate in Lincolnshire (Hackett [2014] 2016), Fowler's scribbling connected her family and friends to each other whilst they were apart. From extant letters, it becomes clear that Fowler was entrusted with sending news and poetry from home to Herbert, with the expectation that he would send things home in return, although Fowler frequently chastises him for not fulfilling his obligation (Aston Papers 1613-1703). Writing to Herbert that the poems he sent her were "much comended by All" (Aston Papers 1613-1703, 23r), Fowler demonstrates her role in sharing his work with her family (Pipitone 2019). In

Fowler's miscellany, partly compiled during the period of Herbert's absence, she transcribed the poetic adaptations and compositions of her family and friends (Huntington Library HM MS 904; see Manuscript and Miscellanies). The inclusion of poems such as "To the Lady Mary Aston" and "To My Honer'd Sister GA," composed by Aston, suggests that Fowler's miscellany was communal, and thus she functioned as a "non-professional scrivener, ready to copy out the poetic outputs of her literary community" (Chowdhury 2020, 350).

Like the professional scribe, Fowler also held scribal agency, making textual interventions where she saw fit to aid the reading experience of her family. This is demonstrated in her transcription of the poem beginning "O love whose powre and might," as some of its more erotic and inappropriate lines are absent. The form in which she acquired the poem is not known, but this censoring could be an example of Fowler "exercising agency as an editor," tailoring the poem to the domestic environment, as opposed to the male-dominated urban environments in which this kind of poem might usually be expected to circulate (Hackett 2012, 1097).

Fowler's miscellany also includes the hands of male scribes. The presence of a male scribe alongside women's writing is not a rare occurrence; consider the role of the Cavendish secretaries, outlined above, or Fowler's near contemporary Lady Anne Southwell (bap.1574-1636), whose hand appears in a miscellany, which includes "The workes of the Lady Ann Sothwell" among other copied verse, alongside the hands of her second husband, Henry Sibthorpe (married 1626), and her household servants (Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V.b.198) (Klene 1997). While illiteracy, disability, and social attitudes might all play a part in an individual's choosing to utilize a scribe, such employment was not always motivated by necessity. Social messages could be conveyed in deciding whether or not to use a scribe. In Fowler's miscellany, the hand of a scribe, recently identified as William Smith (1594-1658), a Jesuit missionary active throughout the recusancy period, is responsible for copying recusant verse and is extant in two other manuscripts (Bodleian MS Eng. poet. b. 5 and Trinity College Dublin MS 1194). The owner of the Bodleian manuscript has been identified as Thomas Fairfax, the father of a recusant family from Warwickshire (McKay 1970; Hackett [2014] 2016). Previously in her miscellany, Fowler had copied a religious poem and attributed it to M. W. S., and this same poem also appears in the Trinity College manuscript in Smith's hand, suggesting that the verse was "either composed by him, or supplied by him, or both" (Hackett [2014] 2016, 103). Smith's hand then could carry a socioreligious function, with his role in Fowler's manuscript as that of a "spiritual advisor and friend" (Brown [2014] 2016, 116).

When women wrote through the pen of another scribe it can be difficult to recover their voices. In Folger MS V.b.198, a scribe penned a heavily adapted version of Ralegh's "The Lie." This version is not extant elsewhere, making it unique to this manuscript (Klene 1997). Whilst the text bears Anne Southwell's signature and editorial marks, it is because it is not solely written in her hand that it is difficult to gauge the extent to which Southwell participated in its composition and the methods through which it was copied (for the general debate on Southwell's agency in her miscellany, see Burke 2009 and Longfellow [2004] 2016). Similarly, Fowler's agency as a compiler and her potential relationship with Smith is yet to be illuminated (Pipitone 2019). More work must be done to disentangle the voices of Fowler and Southwell from their scribes, and perhaps conversely Deborah Milton's from her father's, to better understand the relationships between scribes and those for whom they are writing.

Conclusion

Men and women alike used scribes, for a variety of reasons. Whether formally or informally employed, scribes held varying degrees of authorial agency: authorial licence was inherent to scribal work. This agency ranged from merely correcting obvious mistakes and changing orthography, to rearranging, adding, and adjusting lines of poetry or preparing a letter from scratch. Women took on all these scribal functions, even if they often did so in a more informal capacity than the professional scribes who were mostly, though certainly not exclusively, men. This gives us all the more reason to analyse the amateur scribbler alongside the professional scribe. By presenting an alternative definition of "scribe," as proposed in this entry, women such as Constance Aston Fowler, Margaret Roberts, and Deborah Milton are given an identity through which they can enter into contemporary scholarly discourse surrounding the role of the scribe in early modern England. Further investigation, however, into the relationships between scribes and those for whom they are writing is required, particularly in the pursuit of recovering more female voices.

It is also possible, of course, that some of the professional scribes who as yet remain anonymous, including Feathery, are women. If a text is written in secretary hand, it is easy to assume it must have been penned by a man, as this script is thought to be only "very rarely" used by women (Beal [2008] 2013, 374): such assumptions are by their very nature self-perpetuating. While italic may have been the script of choice for most women, some, like the calligrapher Esther Inglis (*c*.1570-1624), could and did write in secretary hand as well (Wolfe 2009; see Manuscript and Women's Handwriting). We must avoid automatically attaching unknown variables (such as the unknown identity of a scribe) to what we consider to be stable

givens (secretary script is mostly used by men rather than women), as our givens may not be as stable as we thought (Olson 2019). This is particularly necessary in order to gauge the full extent of women's role in scribal culture.

Cross-references

Aphra Behn, Margaret Cavendish, Drama by Elizabeth Brackley/Jane Cavendish, Elizabeth I Queen of England and Ireland, Esther Inglis, Letters, Manuscript and Catholic Women's Writing, Manuscript and Miscellanies, Manuscript and Women's Domestic Papers, Manuscript and Women's Handwriting, Manuscript Exchange of Poetry and Sociability, Anne Southwell, Elizabeth Talbot ("Bess of Hardwick")

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