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Review of May, S.W. (2023) English renaissance manuscript culture: the paper revolution

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English Renaissance Manuscript Culture: The Paper Revolution

English Renaissance Manuscript Culture: The Paper Revolution, by Steven W. May, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, 288 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780198878001

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suppose this is also connected to the point about Ondaatje's relationship with Rilke, and the drive to be both of and in the world and not of/in it (p. 19).

The character of Lecker's engagement with Ondaatje, which is also evident in several chapters, gives the reader a sense that Ondaatje is always a poet, even when masquerading as a novelist and a critic (his work on Leonard Cohen). Both *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Running in the Family* are emphasized for their poetic character. The notion that "unhappiness itself becomes a central creative force" (p. 18), "fear of wordlessness" (p. 26), and an obsession with the always-potential failure of words to go beyond the clinical are if anything stereotypical issues of poets. I am convinced that Justin M. Hewitson's point that Ondaatje's novels are open to philosophical critique is due to his poeticism and his obsession with Rilke. The essays that bring in the philosophical aspect tend to relate to continental philosophy, which I find a matter of course, as I used it much myself.

I also want to highlight two things for the reader of this volume, which I found valuable, but which I knew very little about: Ondaatje's relation to visual media such as film (Allan Hepburn, Bart Tesla, Lorraine York) and the pedagogical benefits of teaching Ondaatje (Elias Schwieler).

As a refugee and someone who has written extensively on war, I find, of course, the focus on war extremely important. When the contributor Martin Löschnigg speaks of war as a metaphor for the creative process I am reminded of the Heraclitan notion that war is everything's father. This feature, in all its complexity, indeed permeates Ondaatje's work. Of course, I find importance in Mrinalini Chakravorty's analysis of Ondaatje's beef with the hypocrisy of the West's human rights discourse and the obsession with nations and their borders extremely significant. I am writing this as yet another genocide is in the making, reminding me of the one I survived, which is probably one of the main reasons I was so strongly drawn to Ondaatje's work in the first place. Much scholarship has dealt with these issues and the contributors to this volume add new layers to that research.

Reference

Pearlman, Wendy. "Emotional Sensibility: Exploring the Methodological and Ethical Implications of Research Participants' Emotions." *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 4 (2023): 1241–54. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422001253>.

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English Renaissance Manuscript Culture: The Paper Revolution, by Steven W. May, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, 288 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780198878001

When paper began to be used as a writing surface in fourteenth-century England, it "spawned an entirely new scribal tradition" (p. 21). Made from hemp and recycled linen rags, paper had been invented in China by the second century BC, and having travelled Westward, it was introduced to England by foreign merchants, likely Italian wool traders. Paper's affordability,

in stark contrast to its costlier predecessor, parchment, placed the production and commissioning of written texts within the reach of a wider range of the population, inspired creativity by providing an expendable surface on which to draft literature, and facilitated the mass dissemination of text through the printing press. Thus, Steven May contends in Chapter 1, the paper revolution had begun.

This book charts the central role of paper in instigating a shift from the “bespoke” and professional Medieval culture of textual production (p. 128) to the proliferation of amateur scribal texts in early modern England, taking a surprisingly Anglo-centric approach to the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. While May’s most striking contribution emerges across the latter half of the book in a compelling reassessment of the scale of literary verse transmission in early modern England, Chapters 1–3 serve as a primer, considering the types, tools, and techniques of amateur textual production. These introductory chapters will be of use to those approaching archival material for the first time, but it is the book’s latter half that impresses, as May uses in-depth case studies to shed new light on some well-known manuscripts and the transmission histories of their oft-copied and unique verses.

Chapters 1–2 offer an overview of the rise of the amateur scribe and their writing contexts, from the manifold material tools required for writing to the various scripts on offer to the early modern quill wielder. Scribes were at liberty “to personalize their handwriting” (p. 48), but their use of variant letter forms could breed confusion for would-be transcribers. Both professional and amateur scribes alike were liable to make errors in transcription, but an amateur was more likely to “corrupt” a text (p. 52) simply by virtue of their handwriting. This is undoubtedly true. Yet it is puzzling that May then proceeds to assert that it was “[c]arelessness” (p. 56), or the illegibility of amateur handwriting, rather than creativity that produced the majority of variants found in oft-copied poems with such confidence. Many examples of scribes who remained faithful to their copy texts or tweaked them in order to correct perceived errors are given, but only one instance of a scribe who made consistent use of their poetic license while transcribing verse (National Art Library (V&A) MS Dyce 44). There are, however, a plethora of other such “creative” scribes who spring to mind: censored versions of some of the more salacious verse of the period—the expurgated copy of “O loue whoes powre and might” found in Huntington MS HM 904, the miscellany compiled by Constance Aston Fowler (ca. 1621–64), for instance—suggest that scribes had to get creative if a copy text was not deemed appropriate for faithful reproduction; the altered verses copied into British Library Add. MS 17492, the Devonshire manuscript, suggest too that some compilers were more interested in preserving creative renderings of well-known texts (and perhaps the social environments through which they were reworked) than recording authoritative versions.

As May goes on to show, the increased capabilities of the amateur scribe enabled private letter writing to flourish by the late fourteenth century. Thanks to paper too, letters no longer had to be crammed onto *schedula* or *cedula* (i.e., minute parchment strips), and so their physical size and the scope of their contents gradually expanded. Equally, many differing groups, from students to the alchemically-minded nobility, not to mention those more middling folk in between, began to produce “personal notebooks” in greater abundance (p. 72). A survey of these notebooks can be found in Chapter 3, an invaluable bibliography of primary sources for anyone stepping into the archive in pursuit of (literary) manuscript collections.

Chapter 4 challenges the long-held assumption that elite coteries attempted to restrict the wider circulation of their texts and puts forth the notion of a “national network” (p. 108), which enabled the transmission of text throughout England. Stemmatic analysis in Chapter 5 points to high manuscript loss rates which skew our analysis of the extant poetic evidence in such networks. A case study of the unique manuscript poems in

Huntington MS HM 198.2, most of which are interspersed between poems surviving in multiple copies, suggests that these unique witnesses may have enjoyed wider circulation than the number of their extant copies suggests. Of course, a multitude of manuscripts perished as a result of events such as the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536–40) and the Great Fire of London (1666). Others vanished due to the mismanagement of various public records; Ambassador Gondomar took one English Privy Council register to Spain, where it still remains in the Biblioteca Nacional de España (MS 3821; p. 151) and others, dated ca. 1582–6, are still missing. May argues, however, that it was the disposable nature of paper and those manuscripts produced or owned by the underclasses (bereft of the muniment rooms found in the multi-generational, noble houses of the upper classes) which account for the majority of loss in the period.

Three methods for reconstructing verse transmission networks are given in Chapter 6: “Compilers’ Testimony”, “Textual Criticism and Biographical Research”, and “Connections Revealed by Handwriting”. Using the second, May reconsiders the production contexts of George Puttenham’s (1529–90/1) *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), a book which he suggests has been “profoundly misinterpreted largely because of our faith in the concept of restrictive coteries” (p. 190). Indeed, in Chapter 7, May reassesses a number of manuscripts which were previously thought to have been produced within the “[royal] court—Inns of Court—universities triad” (p. 196) to show that there are risks involved in deducing a manuscript’s production contexts from the texts included in the volume.

May opens his monograph with reflections on his own archival experience, and while he might make it look easy, his assertion that “[a]rchival scholarship makes no great demands on one’s intellect” (p. 1) runs the risk of downplaying the importance of recent developments in the field which ask us to read archival sources against the grain or which present innovative and interdisciplinary methods for examining archival materials. Nonetheless, May does ask us to re-think how we interpret the extant archive of early modern manuscript verse in view of significant loss rates. Those of the underclasses and those far removed from the central spheres of textual production, he argues, were able to engage in verse transmission alongside their upper-class and triad-based contemporaries via national transmission networks. Indeed, one might argue that, as women for instance were largely excluded from the triad institutions, moving away from triad-centric thinking might allow for the role of women in transmitting verse to be further recognised. The affordability of paper undoubtedly enabled a thriving amateur scribal culture in early modern England, but it is precisely paper’s expendability which makes its trail so difficult for the archival scholar to follow.

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