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MICHELLE LEVY. *Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain*. Edinburgh Critical Studies in Romanticism. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. Pp. 310. \$110.00 (eBook PDF).

In *Family Authorship and Romantic Print Culture* (2008), Michelle Levy explored family authorship as a significant Romantic cultural formation “on the cusp between a vanishing manuscript culture and the dominance of print” (2). Levy’s major new book deepens her inquiry into literary sociability, collaborative authorship, and the interfusion of professional and domestic, but print’s dominance is interrogated and manuscript (or “script”) is full of vitality. *Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain*, the first full-length study of its kind, challenges two assumptions: that an author’s primary aim is publication for the mass reading public; and that manuscripts’ main usefulness for scholars is to chart the progress toward an authorized published text.

According to the standard narrative, publication gives the literary text a qualitatively higher status than manuscript circulation among family or friends, with notable exceptions—the usual reading texts of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1805) and Shelley’s “The Mask of Anarchy” (1819) are edited from manuscripts. Levy dismantles the crude but tenacious equation of print with settled achievement and script with contingency or failure by evaluating what Romantic literary manuscript culture looks like when conventional publication is not the yardstick. Levy draws on early modern scholarship on scribal publication and textual theory that queries the knowability or stability of the author’s intentions to argue that Romantic writers operated along a “script-print continuum” (37) and used various script and print forms purposefully to engage with different audiences including the confidential. Since Levy’s approach is informed by digital humanities and a view of the

Romantic period and the present as “multimedia worlds” (252) primary evidence is drawn from digital and print editions and original manuscripts in US and UK archives.

Levy’s ambitious aim is to “reconfigure our understanding of the period’s literary culture” through a “capacious account of how handwritten literary documents were shared, copied, read and valued” (15). More Romantic literary manuscripts survive than from earlier periods, which complicates the tricky decisions about coverage, selection, and method involved when a monograph breaks new ground in a wide field. Levy understandably focuses on canonical authors, albeit with strong representation of women who are relatively recent arrivals in the expanded Romantic canon, such as Anna Barbauld. Across six chapters, Levy mixes traditional literary techniques—close reading, textual collation, author case studies—with quantitative methods, such as distant reading and tables and graphs of bibliographic information. Explicit theoretical framing, careful rationalization, clear signposting, and lucid prose help this hybrid approach to achieve an impressive coherence.

In chapter 1, Levy debunks authorial intentionality and replaces the typical view of script and print as “distinct and dichotomous spheres” (59) with a more messy and conflicted but nuanced model of “entangled fields” (37) with “fluid, contingent, and permeable boundaries” (23), illustrated by Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* and Dorothy Wordsworth’s heterogeneous notebooks. In chapter 2, Levy turns to manuscript culture’s reception in literary reviews. Whereas the *Edinburgh Review* policed entry to print, and was hostile to poetry, memoirs, and travel-writings with sociable origins, the *Annual Review*’s critical ethos was more tolerant and inclusive.

The book’s core comprises case studies of three established print authors who used script to control—or attempt to—their work’s circulation to specific audiences throughout their writing lives; Levy proposes that their engagements with print were fraught with hazard and compromise. In chapter 3, Levy’s account of Barbauld’s poetry treats her career-making

if slender *Poems* (1773) as a watershed, uncovering Barbauld's strategic use of print but also her "life-long preference for more mediated, socially oriented forms of publication" especially for personally or politically sensitive works (129). In chapter 4, Levy reads Byron as a manuscript poet, quantifying his output (numbers and types of poems published or not) as the basis for analyzing three key moments: the four early verse collections; the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; and his later use of manuscript to circulate risky "intimate, confidential and satirical poems" (143). In chapter 5, Levy turns from the age's celebrity poet to Jane Austen's fiction. Levy here revisits earlier work to argue that Austen's surviving confidential and working manuscripts show how much she cut—exaggeration, satire, imagination, passion, topicality—to adapt her work for print's public realm. Together, these studies of very different Romantic authors rewrite the stereotypical linear narrative of the writer graduating from addressing private audiences in manuscript to public audiences in print. Scrutinizing the "contact zone between the confidential and the public" (207) recuperates manuscript as a less policed and comparatively experimental creative space.

In chapter 6 Levy surveys script's eclectic cultural afterlife to the present day, exploring the drivers behind manuscripts' preservation and growing commercial and biographical valuation, and assessing how major modern scholarly editions have been "successful in excavating and theorizing" literary manuscripts (242) despite material and conceptual limitations. Levy's commentary on manuscripts' digital remediation finds a positive alliance between "dynamic, unsettled, loose" working manuscripts and the digital environment (252). An afterword suggestively reads Blake's illuminated printing as an experimental response to script's dynamic entanglement with print.

Levy is an accomplished, versatile, and usually subtle critic when closely reading individual writers' charged simultaneous negotiations across script and print; the section "Dorothy Wordsworth's Consciousness of Print" (45–57) is particularly fine. Occasionally,

literariness is sacrificed to the quantitative. Why Barbauld's "A Thought of Death" attracted such extensive and "circuitous" (130) transatlantic transmission remains obscure because the poem itself is not discussed or even quoted. Graphs and distant readings elicit statements of the obvious as well as original insights. Comparative strategies (Smith/Wordsworth; *Edinburgh Review/Annual Review*) can reinstate binary thinking and the "conceptual separation of print and script" (8) which Levy aims to overcome. The clear and explicit argumentation—mostly a strength—can become overinsistent. Charles Lamb's footnote exclaiming at the much-revised manuscript of the perfect "Lycidas" in the *London Magazine* version of Elia's "Oxford in the Vacation" is used a little heavy-handedly throughout to represent the pro-print faction; Lamb, connoisseur of contingency and prolific author of album poetry, the consummate Romantic manuscript genre, makes an awkward ally with the *Edinburgh Review*.

Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain is an assured, sophisticated, yet accessible contribution to recent studies of Romantic Britain's complex media ecology. It will be essential reading for students of Romantic book history, literary and media studies, textual scholarship, and digital humanities. Levy modestly says the book takes "one step" toward understanding literary manuscripts' important role within the Romantic media landscape (265); where she leads, many will surely want to follow—whether in studies of authors, coteries, genres, or the amateur writers suggested by the delightful cover image of a Regency young woman writing in the family library.

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