



**Introduction:  
The Manuscript Book in the Long  
Eighteenth Century**

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This special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Life* on the manuscript book is, first and foremost, a celebration of the sheer vitality, variety, and cultural significance of scribal book production in the transatlantic anglophone world of the long eighteenth century. As the eleven essays in this issue begin to demonstrate, manuscript books—from the blank paper-books or notebooks marketed by stationers, to the receipt books, commonplace books, poetry compilations, music books, technical manuals, commemorative collections, and albums created from them—were a common material manifestation of becoming educated, exploring the world, ordering knowledge, living a literary life, and fashioning the self during the long eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> They were often created with an intentionality, method, and craft that speak to a highly developed culture of making, copying, adapting, and ordering text in the age of commodified print. And perhaps more surprisingly, despite long-standing assumptions about manuscript

*Eighteenth-Century Life*

Volume 48, Number 1, January 2024 DOI 10.1215/00982601-10951278

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book-making as a practice of elite coteries or an outgrowth of privileged educational networks, in the eighteenth century many of these books were produced by obscure and marginalized individuals who have left little trace of themselves beyond the pages they painstakingly filled and decorated. Yet for all they have to teach us, what Margaret J. M. Ezell has called these “invisible books” have tended, because of their malleability and idiosyncrasy, to languish in scattered archives in the company of household papers and manuscript separates, resistant to categories applied to the printed book.<sup>2</sup>

The following essays, each based on archival study of one or more of these unique books (or, in a few cases, proto-books), theorize the expressive, sociable, meaning-making, aesthetic, and memorializing impulses that are manifested in their pages. The essays’ authors explore the principles that governed the production of manuscript books, whether practical or ideological, and how these reflect or diverge from those expressed in printed works of the day. They also gesture toward a history of reading and writing that challenges narratives about the derivative nature of non-elite writing, the emergence of individualistic and proprietary authorship, the transformation of the reader into a consumer, and the demise of commonplacing. In so doing, this volume contributes to a new focus, in the study of eighteenth-century literature and culture, on the medium of the manuscript. While attentiveness to manuscript books has already revised our histories of social authorship, women’s literary activity, textual embodiment, and media history, traditional book history, which tends to take the printed book as its object of study, still stands to gain much from a rich account of the many states and uses of the manuscript book in the period.

Until quite recently, scribal forms were considered culturally residual after the advent of printing in the fifteenth century, interesting to scholars of later periods primarily because of the light they shed on print.<sup>3</sup> With few exceptions, the big story of media for the eighteenth century was largely concerned with the expansion and significance of print culture.<sup>4</sup> Now that those voices arguing for a complex media interpenetration in the period have swelled to a chorus, it has become well accepted not only that scribal textual forms and practices continued to exist alongside those of print, but also that they constituted a veritable manuscript culture, central to the literary and intellectual history of the long eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

The essays that follow are organized into four thematic groups. The first, “Making Something New,” offers three case studies of how manu-

script books engage print. In each case, the forms and materials of the print medium are excerpted, copied, adapted, and repurposed to fashion texts that meet the social and professional needs of their makers. Whether the plaisterer-painter John Martin in Bénédicte Miyamoto and Faith D. Acker's study of his "Several Receipts for the Use of Mankind"; the excise-man and scribe John Cannon in Abigail Williams and Anna Marar's discussion of the work now known as *The Chronicles of John Cannon*; or the transatlantic émigré Azarias Williams in Betty A. Schellenberg's analysis of naming and owning in Williams's "A Selection of Modern Poems," these book-makers deploy print to authorize and narrativize their own claims to a coherent and improved self. A second cluster, "The Self and the Book," probes the relation between self-fashioning and the creation of certain types of manuscript books. Using John Locke's influential *New Method of Making Common-Place-Books* as her starting point, Julie Park argues that commonplacers in the long eighteenth century deployed graphic marks such as lines and grids to manage personal information; through such acts of "archival management," "graphic marks in themselves . . . constitute not just writing but also life writing." Glynis Ridley's essay offers a biographical analysis grounded in close reading of a mid-1820s poetry album, reconstructing a young Irish woman's traumatic life experience through the continuities and ruptures, and even the changing ink colors, of her book. Finally, Joanne E. Myers demonstrates that not all selves encountered in manuscript books are individualistic and autonomous, as evidenced by the "devotional authorship" practiced by Sister Cecily Joseph, prayer-book writer for the English Poor Clares Convent in Rouen.

The third group of essays, "Scripting Communities," explores how the material forms of manuscript books may embody and even determine the textual productions of the communities in which they are embedded. Here Ashley Cataldo examines how the "oblong book," a small, rectangular-shaped notebook folded and bound along its short edge, appears to "script" its most common uses for the music notation, instruction in penmanship, and sermon note-taking central to specific communities in the American colonies. Leith Davis in turn discusses the ten-volume "Lyon in Mourning" into which the Reverend Robert Forbes collated oral, scripted, printed, and even artifactual records to create a handwritten, "multimedia" history of Jacobite suffering and loss in the aftermath of the 1745 Rising, thereby preserving and strengthening a diverse social network while at the same time enacting an identity for himself as reader/writer and witness. The

fourth and final section of this collection, “The Immaterial Manuscript Book,” turns to those paradoxical cases where the manuscript book no longer exists, or had only a brief, abortive existence, or has been made and remade according to the needs of its would-be creators. The lost manuscript book of Phillis Wheatley Peters’s second volume of poems and letters, in the first case, is painstakingly reconstructed by Michelle Levy, who in the process argues that the poet’s active writing hand was the means by which she claimed ownership of her writings and her career. Next, Alexis Chema uses William Wordsworth’s failed attempt at keeping a commonplace book to consider his developing poetics of the commonplace and its uneasy relation to the often-exclusionary world of the printed book. And finally, the research collaborators working on the Ballitore Collection now housed at the University of California, Santa Barbara, investigate their archive’s history of creating print and digital forms from continual assemblage, disassemblage, and reassemblage. Their essay calls for and models digital humanities methodologies sensitive to the role collaboration has long played in archival “transitions into and out of bookishness.”

While these four groupings identify major themes of eighteenth-century manuscript studies—the intermediality of manuscript and print; book-making as producing or authoring the self; the affordances of the material medium; and the book as idea—overlapping lines of inquiry lead out into other possible issues. Across this special issue, conversations emerge about the manuscript practices of geographically or socially peripheral figures, intersections between individual creators and social networks, implications for cataloging and classification, and innovative research and editorial methods in areas like digital and textual scholarship, bibliography, and biographical criticism. A brief afterword by Margaret J. M. Ezell assesses where these explorations of the nature and importance of the manuscript book in the long eighteenth century might lead.

## Notes

As editors of this special issue on “The Manuscript Book” we wish to thank our assistant Sara Penn for her patient attention to the many details involved in bringing the collection together for submission. We are grateful also to Cedric D. Reverand II, Michael Edson, and the rest of the *Eighteenth-Century Life* team for their firm and expert editorial shaping of the issue. Simon Fraser University, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Humanities

Division at the University of Chicago provided welcome funding support. And last but not least, we thank our contributors: their vision and enthusiasm for research on the manuscript book in the eighteenth century are what made this volume possible.

1. Although most eighteenth-century manuscript books were created from blank paper-books, the early practice of creating bound books out of various manuscript separates is still in evidence.

2. Margaret J. M. Ezell, “Invisible Books,” in *Producing the Eighteenth-Century Book: Writers and Publishers in England, 1650–1800*, ed. Pat Rogers and Laura Runge (Newark: Univ. of Delaware, 2009), 53–69.

3. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, in “An Unacknowledged Revolution Revisited,” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 87–105, a retrospective on her landmark *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1990), makes an instructive point: “All along, my concern has been to understand the difference between print and manuscript so as to comprehend the nature of the fifteenth-century change” (91).

4. For early exceptions to this generalization, see Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1999); François Moureau, *De bonne main: la communication manuscrite au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Universitas, 1993); and *Women’s Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England, 1550–1800*, ed. George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2002).

5. See, for example, David Allan, *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2010); Betty A. Schellenberg, *Literary Cotereries and the Making of Modern Print Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2016); Aileen Douglas, *Work in Hand: Script, Print, and Writing, 1690–1840* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2017); *After Print: Eighteenth-Century Manuscript Cultures*, ed. Rachael Scarborough King (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia, 2020); Michelle Levy, *Literary Manuscript Culture in Romantic Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ., 2020); and Levy and Schellenberg, *How and Why to Do Things with Eighteenth-Century Manuscripts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2021).

