

Early Modern Literary Studies

Helen Smith, *Grossly Material Things: Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 272pp. ISBN 978 0 1996 5158 0.

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Helen Smith's *Grossly Material Things* is a fascinating, insightful, superbly researched book on the contributions women made to manuscript and book production in the Early Modern period. Anyone interested in the history of reading or of the book will learn a great deal from her investigation of what she calls 'the traces of women's labour' (p. 4); such labour often has been neglected by scholars. The great strength of her work is to refocus our attention on the web of gendered relations in writing, translating, patronizing, publishing and reading in this period.

Smith's book is divided into five chapters and an epilogue. In the first chapter, she finds new evidence of the roles women played in the composition of texts, and argues that the editing, translation and copying practices she identifies as 'cross-sex collaboration' (p. 19) are themselves creative. In turn she discusses the scribal work of women, both inside and outside family structures; the act of translation as a 'skilled, and frequently a collaborative, venture' (p. 32); the role women played in the transmission of texts (in many cases after the death of a male author); and the voices of women in texts authored by men. She deftly describes how crucial women's contributions were to a variety of genres, whether directly as in the translation of a religious text, or more subtly in the way female voices were incorporated into a male-authored pamphlet. As for the role many widows played in the posthumous publication of their spouses' work, she rightly points out that there was 'a close link between the hands that tidied the corpse and the hands that tidied the corpus' (p. 43).

The second chapter is devoted to patronage. Early Modern women were commissioning texts, sponsoring individual printers, and supporting the publication of individual works. Smith cites a plethora of previous research that has been done in this area; she also argues that much of this work has taken too narrow a view of patronage. For

example, she finds claims that many female patrons were at the center of large literary coteries overstated. She also shows that '[w]omen's ongoing interest in, and association with, the trade in printed books challenges the narrative which sets a democratic, public, and (by implication) male, marketplace of print against an aristocratic, manuscript-based, and (by implication) female tradition of patronage' (p. 86).

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the multitudinous ways women participated more directly in the print trade, both within the Stationers' Company and outside it. These two chapters are high points of *Grossly Material Things*. While men certainly dominated the production and trade in books, as chapter 3 demonstrates a number of women worked with their husbands in running a printing business. At the same time they themselves 'owned businesses, managed apprentices, and ensured the safe transmission of copy' (p. 96). Women were also involved in the day-to-day life of the Company: they came there to conduct business (like assigning copies), to donate items (such as tablecloths) and, of course, to clean the place (on page 128 Smith notes that in 1559 one unidentified woman was paid 'for Skowrynge the vessell and Dressynge the howse'). In the first part of Chapter 4 Smith describes women working in London outside the jurisdiction of the Stationers' Company, in particular wandering booksellers and illegal printers, and then takes readers outside London to show how women were part of provincial book trade practices. We will probably never know much more about many of these women than what is presented here; nevertheless the labours of Jane Cavey (bookbinder in Oxford c. 1595), Elizabeth Sturton (chapwoman in Cumbria c. 1622) and Jonet Kene (printer in Edinburgh c. 1633) should be remembered alongside the work of more familiar stationers such as John Day, George Bishop, and William Ponsonby. In short the evidence in these two chapters reinforces Smith's argument that the print trade was in fact not the homo-social world it often has often been made out to be.

Throughout the first four chapters Smith applies a light but effective theoretical touch. The whole work is grounded in the sociological approaches of thinkers such as Arjun Appadurai and Bruno Latour, and the periodic insights she draws from their work illuminate her arguments but never threaten to overwhelm them, or the reader. The one place where theory does play a more than ancillary role is in Chapter 5, where Smith turns to 'representations of women caught in the act of reading' (p. 178). Here she herself reads such representations primarily through the sociological lens of Michel de Certeau, and argues that reading was an embodied act; she also asserts that for women in Early Modern England reading was a more active than passive activity. While I was not completely won over by this whole chapter, I did find her discussion on the physiologies of reading particularly astute.

In Early Modern England women wrote, co-wrote, translated, co-translated, published, and co-published. They sponsored writers and they sponsored printers. Women sold books and they also read them. In other words, as Helen Smith shows, they can be found at all points on the social web of book and manuscript production in this period. Her epilogue ends with a clarion call I think all future scholars should heed: ‘Women, and the material traces of their social and cultural labour, shaped the pages of numerous books which circulate beneath the name of a male author; our interpretive practice must now begin to take women's formative presence into account’. (p. 217).