

Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens and Marysa Demoor (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. xii + 491 pp. £115.

The modern study of literary authorship has developed and diversified enormously since its inaugural moment in the late 1960s, when Roland Barthes published a brief, experimental provocation that he titled ‘The Death of the Author’ in an American avant-garde magazine, and when, two years later, Foucault offered an oblique response in a much longer and more rigorously worked-through but also provocative and provocatively titled essay, ‘What is an Author?’. Far from putting paid to the author, laying him or her to rest, as Barthes’s title proposes, and far from definitively answering the question that Foucault’s title poses, in the last half-century the two essays have generated countless scholarly books, chapters, articles, conference papers, student essays, and doctoral theses, as well as endless polemic and debate. In the literary theory chapter in *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen comments that these ‘anti-authorial pronouncements have had the ironic effect of keeping the question of the author at the centre of shifting theoretical debates’ (270), and as Mita Banerjee argues, ‘[t]he challenge for contemporary literary criticism’ therefore involves ‘reconciling the “death of the author” with her presence’ (314). The editors of the *Handbook* contend that it is difficult now ‘to imagine literary studies without a concept, or concepts, of authorship’ (7), and this volume is itself testament to the institutional, material, historical, sociological, conceptual, political, cultural, and indeed commercial diversity that the capacious field of what they tentatively term ‘authorship studies’ now encompasses (3).

Helpfully organised into three parts over twenty-seven chapters—arranged as ‘historical’, ‘systemic’, and ‘practical’ perspectives that inevitably overlap and interact—Berensmeyer, Buelens, and Demoor’s intellectually lively and deeply learned collection seeks to map what the editors call a ‘global cultural history of the conditions that [...] determined how writers become [...] authors’ (8). In order to do so, the book ranges over Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Classical, and ancient Jewish cultures in its consideration of the ways in which early configurations of authorship are established in relation to oral and written work; over later European debates concerning authorship during the gradual and overlapping, non-linear, centuries-long transformation of scribal and manuscript into print culture as the medieval period morphs into the early modern; over the development of copyright and the rise of the figure of the author as genius in the eighteenth century; over the commercialization of literature and the development of authorship as an established and financially viable profession over the following century and more; and over the decades-long transformation into the digital environment that we are now experiencing as twentieth-century print culture is overtaken by a ‘screen revolution’ that has itself been radically re-engineering both the concept and the varied practices of authorship (van der Weel, 219). As Sean Latham puts it in a perceptive chapter on

modernist conceptions of authorship, we are currently living in an age of ‘ubiquitous’ and ‘almost frictionless authorship’ (165)—an age in which, as Adriaan van der Weel provocatively remarks, authorship has been ‘effectively [set] adrift’ in an ‘inexorable hollowing out’ of existing concepts (220, 233). Cutting across and interacting with the chronological chapters are those that cover specific cultural constructions of authorship, including the ‘fluid and capacious’ nature of the long tradition of Chinese writing (Kang-I Sun Chang, 209), and subaltern, non-western, minority ethnic, and postcolonial configurations. Chapters in the book address the impact on author theory of current debates in bibliography and book history, media studies, gender and sexuality, and literary sociology, while others cover some of the institutional, economic, commercial, and political ramifications of literary authorship in the contexts of anonymity and attribution studies, copyright and plagiarism, publishing, and censorship. The *Handbook*, then, offers a superb survey of the varied contemporary critical and cultural debates over authorship, and of their implications and ramifications for literary studies, compellingly emphasizing the centrality of authorship to our understanding of and engagement in the literary field.

One feature of authorship that the volume underscores is the sheer diversity of *prestige* ascribed to the profession of authorship. On the one hand, there are figures like Samuel Johnson, who famously argued that individuals who ‘set up for authors’ are ‘drudges of the pen’ and ‘manufacturers of literature’ (qtd, 135); or like Virginia Woolf, who scathingly suggested that writers are workers who engage in ‘brain prostitution’ (qtd, 172). On the other hand, there is the starkly contrasting sense of the transcendence and timelessness of what, in her chapter on literary property rights in nineteenth-century culture, Alexis Easley refers to as ‘the Romantic author as a transformational genius’ (147). Echoing Barthes’s notion of the so-called ‘Author-God’, Kevin Dunn argues that the ‘logical end-point of a discussion of authorship’ is the invention of the author as a kind of universal transcendent genius (247), a pure point of origin and intentionality that is also defined as a source of absolute originality that ‘[n]o actual writer could ever hope to live’ up to, as Jack Lynch puts it in his account of the triumph of originality as a key aesthetic criterion in eighteenth-century culture (357).

Another prominent feature of the authorship question that the *Handbook* powerfully points up is encapsulated in Antonio Loprieno’s suggestion, in his illuminating analysis of ancient Egyptian conceptions of the figure, that ‘[t]he study of Egyptian authorship remains the study of its elusiveness’ (40)—a seemingly transhistorical and transcultural condition that Betty Schellenberg alludes to in her discussion of the very different and far more richly documented debates about authorship in eighteenth-century England as consistently representing a ‘various, fragmented, and contested entity that eludes our categories’ (144), and that van der Weel also touches on in his comment on our own cultural moment that ‘[n]o criterion is going to stop the concept of authorship from being unstable’ (233). In fact, the elusiveness of authorship—a fundamental uncertainty about the nature and status of ‘the author’—is a key dimension in its

persistence in theoretical debates over the last half century, and it is a question that even threatens, indeed, to destabilize the very design of the *Handbook* itself, not least because (as has actually been the case at least since Barthes and Foucault), the ‘authorship question’ turns out to be both theoretical and historical, both conceptual and deeply practical, in ways that can never finally cohere. And yet, it is possible to argue (and perhaps imperative to do so) that this elusiveness of authorship is also a critical element in its beguiling, tantalizing, even seductive power and in our experience of reading literary texts, constituting as it does a kind of driving force for the literary work—whether we are thinking about the hermeneutic or interpretative dimension, about an affective or emotional response to the text, or in terms of the way that reading so often requires forms of identification that in turn demand an ultimately elusive author-figure as the repository or our needy readerly desires.

Perhaps the most persistent and distinctive sense of authorship that emerges from the collective endeavour of the *Handbook*, however, is one that is also most fully contested in certain configurations: precisely its collectivity. Again and again, in a *Handbook* on the historically and culturally varied conceptions, practices, institutions, and performances of authorship, we encounter what, in the opening chapter, on ancient Mesopotamian culture, Benjamin Foster describes as ‘an ongoing, contributive’ or collaborative enterprise in which ‘the author, or “first one”’ is ‘present only at the beginning’ (23) but is acutely aware of the importance of ‘succeeding generations’ for the value of the enterprise in which she is engaged. Foster’s analysis links neatly with the book’s final chapter, in which Jason Puskar considers contemporary ‘institutions’ of authorship, and argues that one of the great ironies of authorship is that ‘people may scribble away as long as they like’, but that they ‘remain writers, not authors, until institutions like publishers and book stores legitimize their work, and in the process, transform the nature of their own authority’ (430). As critics and theorists of British Romanticism such as Jack Stillinger and Jerome McGann have argued, the ‘myth of the solitary genius’—against which Barthes and Foucault in their different ways rebelled— is only one configuration of the role of the author (and only one dimension of Romanticism’s own sense of authorship, indeed). It is also a figuration that itself requires a whole series of institutional practices—of composition, publication, dissemination, and reception—in order to attain that status in the first place. This myth, indeed, generates its own forms of irony and paradox, for example, that a culture that ‘reveres and insists on authorship’ emerged from a tradition in which a single, solitary, autonomous, fully intending figure can never have existed (as Ruth Scodel remarks of the ancient Greek source for the anonymous collective oral tradition named ‘Homer’) (50). And yet it is nevertheless a myth that has had lasting power and influence, even to the present day, when, as Hans Bertens argues, ‘having it both ways’ by both attacking the ideology of authorship but at the same time reaping its rewards, both intellectually and in financial and social status, is ‘exactly what all postmodernist authors are after’ (193).

Berensmeyer, Buelens, and Demoor's *Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship* can be seen as marking an era in authorship studies. Almost exactly fifty years after those remarkable and problematic essays by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault succeeded in bringing the question of authorship to the centre of critical consideration while attempting finally to resolve and in effect marginalise or even indeed to eliminate it, the volume magnificently demonstrates the vitality and cultural-historical breadth of authorship as a question that touches on all aspects of literary criticism, whether theoretical, practical, or any point between. Learned, richly informed, and wide-ranging in scope and focus, the *Handbook* not only offers a comprehensive gathering of approaches to the question of authorship but also sets the agenda for future research and debate. As such, the book will undoubtedly be a key resource for literature students, critics, and scholars for many years to come.

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