

Book History, Women, and the Canon: Theorizing Feminist Bibliography

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In a recent article, Michelle Levy asks “Do Women Have a Book History?”² As Levy proceeds to emphasize a need for a more broad and detailed publishing history in English Romanticism, the implicit response to this question is *no* or rather *not yet*. Levy’s query is indicative of the key issue with women’s book history: despite significant work in the field, there is no narrative, no central theses or arguments that join together the diverse body of work on women’s work and labor. The phrase “women’s book history” or an equivalent is rare in journal articles and collections and absent in book-length works. There is also scant centralized vocabulary that aids database searches. As a consequence, when one asks *do women have a book history?* the complicated and vague answer must be, *what is women’s book history?* How is it defined? What are its primary functions, goals, and sites of inquiry? How much does it share with the political interventions of feminist recovery in terms of canon formation, redefining authorship and text, and preserving women from invisibility? And, what is its future?

This paper will outline the ways we can begin to answer these questions by revising book history’s historiography to accommodate feminist inquiry. As a way to take a measure of the field, I look at companions and readers that are designed as introductions to book history. These books act as a kind of canon, identifying which authors, articles, and discourses are deemed the most influential. Canon formation is natural outcome of creating anthologies, but book history has begun to perpetuate the problematic inequity through which discussions, authors, and values have been promoted. From this survey, I conclude that book history’s resistance to diversity is inherited from the identification of its origins in Anglo-American textual scholarship. The discussions of agency and textual authority from G. Thomas Tanselle, D.F. McKenzie, and Jerome McGann pull from a legacy of bibliography as empirical and scientific³ and consequently insulated from critiques of gender, race, postcolonialism, and sexuality.⁴ Book history’s provenance in this field has resulted in an analogous attitude about the separation of object-

oriented study from the “messiness” of critical theory, to quote Martha Nell Smith.⁵ In response, I make the case for a revision of this historiography I call *feminist bibliography* that expands our narrow citations in textual scholarship to the diverse work in bibliography and its related fields that has and continues to be done on minority authors. This revision urges us to embrace the capaciousness of McKenzie’s *sociology of the text*,⁶ by extending critical methodologies to the material book.⁷

I begin with the historiography of book history, or rather the specific history we tell about ourselves. This is a familiar move for a book historian—it is a field that is perpetually self-defining. It is almost obligatory to acknowledge the various nomenclature of the field and the complicated trajectory of its future studies. The problem, Leslie Howsam argues, is that “No term is quite right, not even *studies of book culture*, because the studies in which we are engaged tend to break down common definitions and shatter familiar images.”⁸ *Book history* is still the most common term, as Cambridge, Oxford, and Wiley-Blackwell all have companions under this moniker,⁹ and there are introductory books and readers from Toronto, Broadview, and Routledge.¹⁰ These readers and companions form what I call “mainstream” book history, that is the broad version of the field. Mainstream book history defines itself as an object-oriented field with its roots in textual studies. Almost every companion and reader marks the debates in textual scholarship between Tanselle, McGann, and McKenzie as an essential starting point for the field, usually paralleled with how historians such as Robert Darnton, Roger Chartier, and Lucien Febvre translated these ideas within a historical scope.¹¹ There is a phenomenon that while it is a story often told, it is often told in the same ways, citing the same handful of scholars. Limited references are necessitated by the broad scope of introductory texts and brief literature reviews that must acknowledge this history before moving forward to current practices. However, in our brevity we have privileged very limited discussions of intentionality, authority, and authorship, as I will show.

The story goes that Tanselle is the actor from the Greg-Bowers school of bibliography that grew from the mid-twentieth century and focused on authorial intent in textual studies. This

philosophy began to be opposed by another that argued that authority should not rest singularly with the author's intentions but plurally with those who produced the text printed onto the material object. McGann argued that the singular author was an anachronistic figure inherited from Romantic poets who imagined themselves as solitary geniuses. His "socialized concept of authorship and textual authority" was an attempt to correct these anachronistic definitions of authorship and restore authority to "the dynamic social relations which always exist in literary production."¹² McKenzie furthered the concept with *the sociology of the text*, which gave form and function to what would become book history. As the story continues, we leave Tanselle by the wayside and embrace the "new gods" as Peter Shillingsburg has called it, of the social text.¹³

The issue with this narrative is that it overlooks two essential aspects to correctly contextualize this debate. Where book history's rehearsal of textual scholarship ends, usually with McKenzie, misses a considerable amount of work that has been done since then. These revisions include the influence of feminist theory, critical race studies, postcolonialism, and the birth of digital humanities and digital editing. They are correctives to a discourse that seems insulated from such considerations. In our version, this separation between critical theory and object-oriented study has become canon, encapsulated in this passage from Jonathan Rose, who argues:

It is perfectly legitimate to ask how literature has shaped history and made revolutions, how it has socially constructed race, class, gender, and so on. But we cannot begin to answer any of these questions until we know how books (not texts) have been created, reproduced, disseminated and read, preserved and suppressed.¹⁴

Rose advocates that the physical transmission of knowledge fundamentally matters and must be considered, a concept I whole-heartedly agree with. But arguing that issues such as race, class, and gender are secondary to the study of the book implies that there is such thing as objectivity, that it is possible to divorce ideology and identity from ourselves as well as those who created, reproduced, disseminated, read, preserved, and suppressed the objects we study. There is danger in this normative structuring of the field, as it works to obscure not only the complex cultural

production of materiality, but it allows current practitioners to escape self-analysis and critical reviews of methodologies. When our introductions, readers, and theoretical articles continue to cite this narrow slice of textual studies, these assumptions seem unquestioned, part of the canon.

Which brings me to my second critique, that Tanselle and McGann were arguing not just about authority and intentionality versus the social text but what the purpose and scope of bibliography truly was. This debate is much wider and more complicated than book history's version of it. By expanding citations to better account for this complexity, I offer a revision of both this narrative and mainstream book history. This revision is what I call *feminist bibliography*, an alternative to what has been a largely uncritiqued masculine bibliography. That is, we have built the vast majority of our bibliographic theories on the work of a single demographic—white, male authors. As this is the narrative we have absorbed into book history, I argue that book history's issues with diversity are born out of the limited selection of our foundational texts. In order to imagine a diverse book history, we must revise our foundation.

In my retelling of book history's origins, I begin in the same place as others—Tanselle, McGann, and McKenzie—but I take a step to the side and several steps forward. The first step is with D.C. Greetham, a contemporary of our core scholars. Greetham is interesting because he explored in how theory could change bibliographic studies. Working from a theoretical philosophy, Greetham is wary of bibliography's empirical history and sees the potential for theory to “[provide] a matrix for the plotting of the ‘certainties’, small or otherwise, since it delineates a schema for the measurement of editorial attitudes and ‘reflections.’”¹⁵ In other words, Greetham argues that theory can help inform the necessarily subjective parts of textual editing, where scholars are forced to make informed judgments. Tanselle argued that editorial theory would have to, at times, rely on the judgment of the editor;¹⁶ Greetham extends this to say that when human judgment intervenes, it is a point where “theoretical philosophy” can take over and critical theories hold weight.

This argument that the subjectivity of an editor, or the “attitudes” about editorial work, needs to be more fully explored has significant implications for book history and feminist

bibliographers. The separation that Greetham identified between empirical methods and judgment is less a gap and more of an uncovering of the inherent abstraction that governs editorial theory. I argue that the judgment of the scholar determines not just what decisions are made when no empirical method will suffice, but extends to the entirety of the editorial matrix, text, and author the scholar has chosen. Feminist bibliographers can intervene in two ways—in exploiting the need for scholarly judgment to break open bibliography’s empirical shell and by extending a limited view of judgment to a more accurate representation of how and why scholars make decisions about their subjects.

The subjectivity of scholarly judgment was something feminist editorial theory in the late 1980s and 1990s used to critique the ideologies inherent in what decisions are made outside, and within, the editorial matrix. Feminist bibliographers can expand these principles as we consider the importance of articulating a philosophy about this judgment. There will continue to be moments where editors are asked to judge between textual discrepancies and philosophies about what kind of texts one should produce. In these moments, gendered philosophies can and should intervene into the “male editorial tradition,” as Ann Thompson has argued in her approach to Shakespeare.¹⁷ Thompson elaborates:

Editors of Shakespearean texts have always had to choose between possible readings, and it is arguable that a feminist editor might make a different set of choices ... an awareness of gender issues can contribute to such a choice in the present and help explain the reasons behind editorial decisions made in the past.¹⁸

Thompson focuses on the subjective and notes how problematic editorial apparatuses could have framed the author, individual characters, or plays in patriarchal ideology.

Alternative editorial narratives can exploit the concept of the social text to interrogate gendered ideologies and perceptions. We see such arguments from Brenda R. Silver and Katie King. Working on Virginia Woolf, Silver studies how feminist editing has revealed to what extent we as editors construct the author, and how unstable our stable text is when we lay bare these ideologies. For her part, King argues that bibliography’s shift from “the world in the text to

the text in the world” allows feminist recovery to “[open] up enormous questions which explicitly challenge assumptions about literary value and implicitly challenge assumptions about the nature and ontology of the text.”¹⁹ These questions are indeed “enormous” when one explicitly challenges literary values and, implicitly, scholarly judgment. King’s construction of an alternative, feminine apparatus for approaching literary texts sits in the gap of empirical and abstract, taking a critical philosophy and from it imagining a systemic approach.

In sum, Thompson, Silver, and King represent the ways that feminist theories have exposed the ideologies that govern seemingly neutral textual theories. By representing their work as interventionist, they have also uncovered the ways that editing is “a social act with political implications,” as Morris Eaves has characterized it.²⁰ Diverse theories of textual studies intervene politically, as one cannot have an editorial theory without values and scholarly judgment informing its approach. We can see this in other similarly alternative theoretical approaches, as with Gerald MacLean’s construction of a Marxist editorial approach. As he says, taken collectively, these discourses explore “the extent to which those cultural conditions [of textual production] are crosshatched by the complex articulation of class, gender, sexuality, and national or racial identity.”²¹

In light of this discourse, it is easy to see to what extent the book history has been dependent on normative assumptions for its methods and philosophical approaches. A feminist historiography necessitates that book historians articulate a transparent response to issues of diversity as much as they have carefully constructed philosophies of textual authority. One such articulation could be borrowed from Thompson, who states “we cannot stand outside the ideological baggage we carry, though we can at least attempt to be aware of the preconceptions and prejudices that may affect our interpretations.”²² In other words, we do not need to wholly abandon the important and influential work of McKenzie or McGann, but we can actively seek to create a more inclusive bibliographic framework by embracing the generosity of their philosophies and pursuing them in the name of diversity.

Thompson's philosophy would also ask us to look inward, consider the subjective place from which scholarly judgment arises, and understand the limits of our own perspectives lest we actively normalize voices that do not fit narratives or methods. And this is another important point for a feminist studies, which has at times privileged the work of early "proto-feminists" over more conventional or conservative women writers.²³ Our task would need to be actively embracing difference. Martha Nell Smith argues that we can create a philosophy of "principled flexibility" where "an author's work does not need to be normalized; diverging views of identity should not be excised."²⁴ Feminist bibliographers can use these philosophies of diversity, of accepting differences without abandoning method, to urge appropriate critiques and questions in book history. Anthologies naturally seek cohesion with head notes, sections, and editorial apparatuses. A feminist rereading could include critiques of mainstream methods as well as an embracing of the odd to avoid bringing order to authors and genres to which order is not native. Rather than excluding what does not fit or is not easily categorized, book history readers and companions can champion the individual and the unique just as they appreciate such characteristics in physical objects.

Based on this philosophy, a feminist retelling of bibliography's origins thus far would be to interrogate the foundation of the social text and to exploit scholarly judgment to counter empirical holdovers from textual scholarship. It is the social text and its implications that created book history, and thus to critique textual sociology is to rebuild the field from its origins. This critique could incorporate a vast array of feminist editors (only briefly sampled here) that make visible the ways in which traditional narratives rely on masculine normativity. Feminist bibliographers can begin with Tanselle, McGann, and McKenzie as essential aspects of the discourse. But it is also necessary to use Greetham, who was a member of this small group of editorial theorists, as a means of widening the scope to include important alternative editorial theories. Greetham's work is a bridge to an important conversation about how a social textual editorial practice developed in the last twenty years and can be used as a signpost to a more

nuanced understanding of an important moment in bibliography. It is not only that the conversation has developed, but that it was never completely isolated even in its infancy.

I will end with one last gesture to feminist book history. Especially for work in the late Early Modern period and eighteenth century, there is significant potential in articulating the intersection of gender and book history. Feminist scholars have long found the methods of book history useful to their work, even if their contributions have not been as commonly anthologized. To cherry pick a couple examples, the work of my fellow-panelist Leah Orr on the dubiousness of some of Aphra Behn's authorship demonstrates how much there is still left to learn when we apply bibliographic scrutiny to our key figures.²⁵ Another is the work of Helen Smith, who has recently discussed how women's miscellany and commonplace books defy categorization and call into question our current methods in descriptive and enumerative bibliography.²⁶ These studies and those of many others including Janine Barchas, Maureen Bell, and Lisa Maruca promise that there is much still to be learned in feminist book history.²⁷ I will add that it should also be within our purview to more assertively argue that this work is not niche, but essential to our basic definitions of the field. As we continue to complete recovery work and push at restricting boundaries, our goal should also be to create a narrative of book history as a feminist space to secure the longevity of this relatively new discourse. A book history that does not account for the contributions of minority authors is a book history that is simply not tenable.

End Notes

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- ¹ My thanks to Margaret J. M. Ezell, Maureen Bell, Leslie Howsam, and Michelle Levy for their help with this line of inquiry. I was first inspired to articulate a feminist bibliography from Levy's article (cited below) and Howsam's essay "In My View: Women and Book History." *SHARP News*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1998, pp. 1–2.
- ² Michelle Levy, "Do Women Have a Book History?" *Studies in Romanticism* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 297–317.
- ³ See Fredson Bowers, *Principles of Bibliographic Description*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949.
- ⁴ There are a few exceptions to this characterization, including D. C. Greetham, *Theories of the Text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Feminist editing, a notable subfield of textual scholarship, features prominently in this paper as an alternative narrative as well.
- ⁵ Martha Nell Smith, "The Human Touch Software of the Highest Order: Revisiting Editing as Interpretation." *Textual Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2007). Pg. 4.
- ⁶ D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- ⁷ Helen Smith, "Rethinking the Miscellany." In "*She Wrote It, But ...*": *Erasures, Recoveries and the Futures of Women's Book History*. College Station, Texas, 2016.
- ⁸ Howsam, *Old Books and New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pg. 6.
- ⁹ Michael F. Suarez and H.R. Woudhuysen, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; Leslie Howsam, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, eds. *A Companion to the History of the Book*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- ¹⁰ Howsam, *Old Books*; Michelle Levy and Tom Mole, eds. *The Broadview Reader in Book History*. New York: Broadview, 2014; David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery. *Introduction to Book History*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2012; David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, eds. *The Book History Reader*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2006.
- ¹¹ There are book historians who have intervened in this area, with Darnton and Chartier. They include Howsam and Levy, cited in footnote 1, and significant work from Maureen Bell. The longer version of this paper tackles a parallel revision of book history on the historical side.
- ¹² Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Pg. 8.
- ¹³ Peter Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pgs. 26–27.
- ¹⁴ Jonathan Rose, "The Horizon of a New Discipline: Inventing Book Studies." *Publishing Research Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2003): 11–19. Pg. 13.
- ¹⁵ D. C. Greetham, "Textual and Literary Theory: Redrawing the Matrix." *Studies in Bibliography* 42 (1989): 1–24. Pg. 3.
- ¹⁶ See G. Thomas Tanselle, *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.
- ¹⁷ Ann Thompson, "Feminist Theory and the Editing of Shakespeare: The Taming of the Shrew Revisited." In *The Margins of the Text*, edited by D.C. Greetham, 83–104. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. Pg. 85.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, 88.
- ¹⁹ Katie King, "Bibliography and a Feminist Apparatus of Literary Production." *Text* 5 (1991): 91–103. Pgs. 91; 96.

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- ²⁰ Morris Eaves “‘Why Don’t They Leave It Alone?’: Speculations on the Authority of the Audience in Editorial Theory.” In *Cultural Artifacts and the Production of Meaning: The Page, the Images, and the Body*, edited by Margaret J.M. Ezell and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, 85–100. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Pg. 91.
- ²¹ Gerald MacLean, “What’s Class Got to Do with It?” In *The Margins of the Text*, edited by D.C. Greetham, 25–43. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. Pg. 35.
- ²² Thompson, 89.
- ²³ See Margaret Ezell, *Writing Women’s Literary History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- ²⁴ Martha Nell Smith, 2; 14.
- ²⁵ Leah Orr, “Attribution Problems in the Fiction of Aphra Behn.” *The Modern Language Review* 108, no. 1 (January 2013): 30–51.
- ²⁶ Smith, “Rethinking the Miscellany.” See also “*Grossly Material Things*”: *Women and Book Production in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- ²⁷ Maruca, Barchas, and Maureen Bell in “Women and the Production of Texts: The Impact of the History of the Book.” In *The Book Trade in Early Modern England: Practices, Perceptions, Connections*, edited by John Hinks and Victoria Gardiner, 107–31. London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2014.