

KATHRYN SUTHERLAND. ***Why Modern Manuscripts Matter***. Pp. xii + 273. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Hardback, £30.

The approach of *Why Modern Manuscripts Matter* is refreshingly anti-Romantic and anti-idealistic: in short, Manuscripts are Mess. Kathryn Sutherland considers the manuscript as ‘something outgrown, left behind and left over’ (2-3), a form of waste transfigured by heritage and culture – but not forever (even if it seems to be so) since ‘waste is “every object plus time”’ (50). Thus, she approaches the manuscript in terms of its doubled identity as always both object and vessel of meaning, thing and word, subject to a potential change of definition and subsequent re/de/valuing. As her rich and thoughtful introduction makes clear, there is a tangible, psychological temporality to manuscript objects – not just in the terms of the fetishization that we are familiar with, but as Winnicottian ‘transitional phenomena’ that make writing a ‘form of recuperation but one that anticipates its own relegation’ (11). This suggests an interesting theoretical counter-model to the essentially teleological approach of French Genetic critics centred on the distinctions between ‘pre-text’ and ‘après-texte’ (and one minor criticism is that more could perhaps have been made of this). The book as a whole, then, considers the various ways in which literary remains are given value or, in a sense, a life that exceeds them – with a particular focus on the novel as a genre ‘emerging with print and essentially dependent on print for its performance’ (15). This focus on the novel positions the study in an interesting way because, as Sutherland makes clear, this literary form is more resistant to reification, to the treatment of manuscript as ‘surrogate identity’ (15) than, say, the autograph poem.

*Why Modern Manuscripts Matter* is then structured around the various ways in which this literary detritus exceeds itself – acquiring agency beyond its immediate function – and (with a light nod at Thing Theory) how objects become things in and through their relationship to the subject who feels the need to invest them with human feeling. Chapter one explores contradictory impulses in acts

of manuscript collection with regard to the question of how to value such materials. This is a thoughtful and wide-ranging chapter. It poses the central question – ‘why might they matter and to whom?’ – for the reader today, considering the new lease of life offered by digitisation and 3D visualisation of manuscripts for exhibitions and heritage organisations as well as the laws around export of authorial manuscripts and copyright, and the value of archiving. Still, Sutherland reminds us that, for the living author, manuscripts remain a ‘burden’ (31) accumulating in garages, attics and garden sheds, no doubt creating domestic disharmony concerning their on-going existence.

Chapters two and three explore the relationship between handwriting and print from two directions: through Samuel Johnson as ‘the epitome of the writer in the great age of print’ and then the ‘autograph craze’ of the mid-nineteenth century (and on into collections of hair and pins). Johnson’s attempt to analyse Pope’s process in *The Iliad* stands as both an early example of draft analysis and appreciation of process, and its opposite, with the same materials viewed by others as ‘shameful witnesses of past failure’ or kept merely as ‘curiosities’ (69). The distinction between Johnson’s interest in the composition of other writers in terms of manuscript as witness / authentication and Boswell’s role of ‘rescuer’ (76) in relation to Johnson’s own mess is fascinating. The third chapter explores the breaking down of literary composition into mere scraps – autographs and cut-up pieces of an author’s writing – that rejects content in favour of valuing the ‘scriptural gesture alone’ (99).

The second half of the book turns from larger questions about the valuing of drafts and the changing status of materials over time to examine three canonical Romantic writers whose manuscripts present distinct challenges to the critic, but also at times to the authors themselves. Burney, perhaps the most revelatory author in the book, is revealed as a strange hoarder of her own textual self which ends up making her ‘the tyrannized creature of her paper world’ (16), but also creates a challenge for the textual critic as Sutherland herself confesses: ‘the manuscripts that have affected me most are

those I found hardest to recover as objects and turn to use' (22). Burney's extraordinary use of a symbolic system in relation to the potential future use of draft material and thus the contingency of any text (reminiscent of Emily Dickinson) emphasizes the way in which 'apparently finished works continued to haunt her, demanding to be unpicked and revised over many years' (112). Far more than Dickinson, however, Burney inhabits a state of literary recycling that controls her more and more the longer she lives. Sutherland works hard to normalise this – 'We rewrite ourselves constantly; that's just how it is' but Burney's practices are extreme (114). Tantalisingly, Sutherland points out that 'there has been no extended effort [. . .] to examine in detail how Burney built a novel from its earliest to its latest traces' but for a writer who describes her MSS in terms of 'Bags' we can see why (116-7).

Walter Scott created a complex sense of authorial origin and ownership for his works by adopting what Sutherland terms a 'flirtatious kind of anonymity' (139). This conferred value onto the thirteen novel manuscripts gifted to his original publisher (Constable) in terms of proof of authorship, in a way that became highly problematic in relation to copyright once both Scott and Constable were bankrupted and Scott had changed publishers. Sutherland here works at both ends of the material spectrum – exploring the implications and afterlives of compositional evidence of ownership but also relating Scott's own authorial myth concerning *Waverley* – of rediscovering it as an abandoned manuscript in his writing desk and so 'recovering the text's "pre-text"' (154). Finally, in the case of Jane Austen, the unpublished draft manuscripts of her juvenilia and major published novels with no surviving MSS make for a 'writer of two halves', 'a teenager writer and [. . .] an adult' (167). Nonetheless, Sutherland finds continuity in Austen's acts of fragmentation, literal and material for the manuscripts but structural and conceptual for the mature texts, where it is used to suggest 'unsatisfied longing' (168).

In the end, this book is really concerned not just with Why Manuscripts Matter but with the ways in which Modern Manuscripts *are* Matter. It proves most illuminating when it seeks to challenge our cultural assumptions and make real the strange paradox that is the literary draft: 'it is waste, and it is not waste' (50). At times we could perhaps have done with a little more dirtying of the hands – for example in relation to Burney's 'recycling' it would have been good to have a full analysis and visual engagement with the materials over time. Whichever way we read the title, however, it is clear that Kathryn Sutherland has been pondering an answer to the question for some time and deeply. Her invaluable study helps us all to understand both what manuscripts are and what we need them to be as 'tangible evidence of the ordinary extraordinariness that we all share' (99).

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