

Special Forum: Handwriting and Power in Early Stuart England Introduction

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Special Forum: Handwriting and Power in Early Stuart England

Introduction

Noah Millstone 

Early Stuart England was awash in handwriting. Handwriting was the medium of property records, law, account books, and scholarly note taking. A large share of government was conducted through handwritten policy briefs, registers, and circular letters. Equally, it was the medium of prisoners, beggars, petitioners, and village wits. Collectors compiled handwritten poems, prophecies, speeches, recipes, and anecdotes. The number of English people who knew how to operate a printing press was probably in the low hundreds, the number who could write at least a bit likely in the hundreds of thousands. Writing was accessible, widely understood, and practiced. It was the medium to hand.

Today, however, manuscripts are relatively inaccessible, which helps explain why they are frequently gestured at rather than read. One must often still go to a library or archive to read handwritten materials, whereas state papers and printed works are increasingly available from one's desk. Since the 2010s, however, significant efforts have been made to digitize manuscripts and, importantly, to build digital finding aides and collections of transcriptions to make research into manuscript sources more straightforward. Major digital resources such as Early Stuart Libels, the Catalogue of English Literary Manuscripts, and Gateway to Early Modern Manuscript Sermons have lowered the barriers to research. The authors of the three articles collected for this forum were all involved in the creation of another such resource, Manuscript Pamphleteering in Early Stuart England (<http://mpese.ac.uk>).

This concentrated attention has advanced knowledge of manuscript culture by leaps and bounds, but it has also revealed a number of unresolved questions or problems that this special forum on handwriting and power in early Stuart England seeks to address. First, scholars have tended to treat the production and circulation of political and literary manuscripts in isolation from other forms of handwriting, and as products of elite social milieux—universities, Inns of Court, gentry households, and elsewhere. This impression, generated primarily from studies of manuscript verse, has been increasingly challenged by approaches that place political and literary manuscript production within a larger world of text production, encompassing not only print material but also instrumental texts such as petitions, warrants, and

recognizances. Richard Bell's article, "Print Networks, Manuscript Pamphleteering, and the Development of Prison Politics in Seventeenth-Century London," demonstrates that early modern prisons were hothouses of text production.¹ Producing writs, forgeries, petitions, pamphlets, and much else was an essential part of the everyday life of the prison. The practices associated with these forms could then be mobilized for lobbying or publicity campaigns, building connections with wider worlds of political textual production. Bell's work offers a glimpse of both the place of written and printed matter in early modern England and the practices organized around their creation, use, and circulation.

A second problem relates to collection. Although much manuscript material survives in collections that were themselves assembled during the early modern period, very little is known about how such collections were used. Indeed, there are few dedicated studies of manuscript collection and its place in the wider world of early modern collecting. Sebastiaan Verweij's article, "Reading in Crisis: Francis Russell's Reading Records and the Beginnings of the Thirty Years' War," shows how Russell's reading and note taking served his political thinking and news gathering in the face of immediate political crisis, drawing from many different kinds of contemporary and historical texts in prose and verse including gossip, poetry, political pamphlets, history, speeches, sermons, prognostications, and much more.² Verweij's study opens a door to similar research, and remains to be done on, for example, the collections compiled by figures like Elias Ashmole, Sir Hans Sloane, Humfrey Wanley, and Richard Rawlinson.

A third problem, only glancingly reflected in my own article, "Sir Robert Cotton, Manuscript Pamphleteering, and the Making of Jacobean Kingship during the Short Peace, ca. 1609–1613," but nonetheless important, relates to the geographic horizons of manuscript production.³ Although the changing media mix in early modern societies has received a great deal of attention from historians of England, Scotland, and Spain, little work has been done across national or linguistic borders. Studies of manuscript cultures tend to be intensely local, focused on particular networks and particular collections; the explanations scholars invoke tend to be equally local, rooting manuscript practices in the specific social and cultural world from which they emerge. Certain aspects of early modern manuscript culture, however, appear to have popped up in different locations at similar times. Early seventeenth-century France, for example, had both collectors of state papers and manuscripts and active manuscript pamphleteers. The developing European turn in early modern British history promises to broaden our horizons; it may also mean taking lines of inquiry developed for specifically British contexts and seeing how they work elsewhere.

¹ Richard Bell, "Print Networks, Manuscript Pamphleteering, and the Development of Prison Politics in Seventeenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 62, no. 1 (2023) (this issue).

² Sebastiaan Verweij, "Reading in Crisis: Francis Russell's Reading Records and the Beginnings of the Thirty Years' War," *Journal of British Studies* 62, no. 1 (2023) (this issue).

³ Noah Millstone, "Sir Robert Cotton, Manuscript Pamphleteering, and the Making of Jacobean Kingship during the Short Peace, ca. 1609–1613," *Journal of British Studies* 62, no. 1 (2023) (this issue).