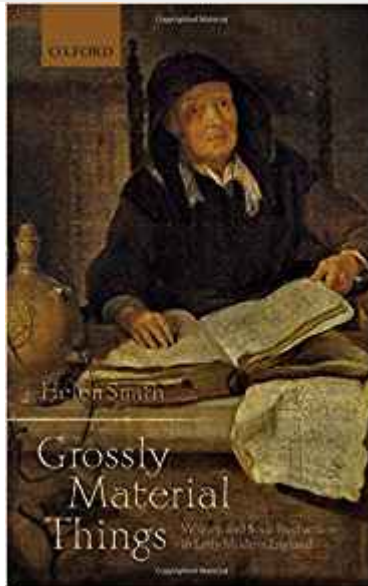


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"Grossly Material Things": Women and Book Production in Early Modern England



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Reviewed Work(s)

"Grossly Material Things": Women and Book Production in Early Modern England. By Helen Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Pp. 254. Cloth, £60.

Studies of print culture and book production in early modern England abound, and the involvement of women is one new facet of that study that has received focus only within the last decade. In "*Grossly Material Things*" Helen Smith contributes to this field by tracing the creation of texts and the roles of women at each stage of book production, trade, and reception for the time period of 1557 to 1640. This period begins with the incorporation of the Stationers' Company, whose records give much evidence of women who were active in printing and publishing. Smith argues that books of this period were collaborative efforts and therefore consisted of more gendered interaction than has previously been recognized. She is particularly interested in the gendered intersection of book culture, including copying, translating and editing—not just in texts traditionally associated with females. According to Smith, male-authored texts featured this female influence, even if not explicitly.

Smith divides her study into five chapters focused on five aspects of book production: composition, commission, business, the book trade, and reading. Smith's first two chapters present her more persuasive arguments about the co-creation of texts by men and women, as she demonstrates how women wielded their influence by editing and translating texts, and thereby engaging with male authors. These chapters are most effective because of their innovative use of an understudied aspect of books: their dedications. While dedications are not a new source, they are often overlooked in favor of the body of the text of the book; few scholars have based entire studies on dedications. Yet, Smith shows how dedicatory prefaces give evidence of women's textual composition and "composite" authorial practice, as well as of patronage by commissions and translations (13). Dedications often reveal a process of commission. Smith also argues against other scholars who have dismissed dedications as simply a standard literary topos without specific meaning. She is not as skeptical of dedications as Elizabeth Eisenstein, who argues that all too often prefaces are taken as evidence of readership, but really are not evidence of much, but Smith does believe that they had multiple purposes and should not always be read straightforwardly. [1] Smith views dedications as tools of rhetoric, or peritextual structures used to influence readers, and components of a complication patronage system that give us more evidence of women involved in literary activities.

The remaining three chapters on the book trade and on the reading of texts make useful conclusions and raise areas for future study of women and book production, though they tend to be heavy on theory. In these chapters, Smith argues that women were central to the book trade and that putting a woman's name on a title page was a deliberate, cognitive act. As for the Stationers' Company, women seem to have been involved as wives and widows, not as independent publishers. They also participated as businesswomen and apprentices, keeping account books and assisting with family print shops. Smith's study also differs from traditional histories of women's reading that focus on commonplace books and marginalia and from histories of women's writing and translation because she instead focuses on how women were imagined as readers and how women were understood to have read. She concludes that women's reading was a bodily practice in which women assimilated what they read both physically and mentally. Book production involved both books and bodies, and that production must be understood to be more sexed. In an arena where texts were mainly masculine, females were also formative helpmates and compilers.

There are few areas of Smith's study that deserve critique, but one area which could use refinement is where she notes that for this time period the book trade went from a patronage-based system to one predicated on a commercial-trade market. Yes, patrons were substantial in financial support of early books, but even as early as the late-fifteenth century, printers and patrons were aware of the commercial nature of printing books. Overall, however, Smith's study clearly does what it sets out to do. It shows the gendered interconnectedness of textual production and how we must accept the collaborative nature of production in order to advance our understanding of book culture, which, as some historians argue, could change our view of the economy as a whole.

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[1] See Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 33.



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