

Review of *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 5: 1645–1714: The Later Seventeenth Century*, by Margaret J. M. Ezell

Karen Griscom

Community College of Rhode Island; Indiana University of Pennsylvania, karen.griscom@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo>



Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Griscom, Karen () "Review of *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 5: 1645–1714: The Later Seventeenth Century*, by Margaret J. M. Ezell," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*. Vol.14: Iss.1, Article 15.

<http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.14.1.1404>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol14/iss1/15>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usf.edu.

Review of *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 5: 1645–1714: The Later Seventeenth Century*, by Margaret J. M. Ezell

Abstract

A review of *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 5: 1645–1714: The Later Seventeenth Century* by Margaret J. M. Ezell.

Keywords

English literary history, women writers

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Margaret J. M. Ezell. *The Oxford English Literary History: Volume 5: 1645–1714: The Later Seventeenth Century*. Oxford University Press, 2017. 572 pp. ISBN: 9780192859129

Reviewed by Karen Griscom
Community College of Rhode Island, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Margaret J.M. Ezell's volume *1645–1714: The Later Seventeenth Century* for the *Oxford English Literary History* series is a superb work of scholarship. Central is the generative methodology of “re-visioning” women’s literary history that Ezell has undertaken in earlier works like *Writing Women’s Literary History*, with its expanded notions of authorship and texts, making this volume an essential, valued update to the twentieth-century *Oxford History of English Literature* volumes by Sutherland (1660–1700), Bush (1600–1660), and Dobrée (1700–1740). This volume re-visions “literary life” for twenty-first-century readers interested in the varieties of texts, producers, and audiences (xv). Ezell’s feminist, historically-grounded methodology produces a literary history that includes not just printed works but also manuscripts and soundscapes of the period, for Ezell notes how “oral and written culture are inextricably linked during this period as a social activity” (xxiv). While the earlier literary histories from Oxford University Press were organized around major figures and traditional genres, this volume explores the period’s remarkable variety of printed, handwritten, and performed texts. Moreover, it repositions well-known figures and texts in conversation with those lesser known through careful analysis of a variety of primary sources. Throughout, Ezell shows how authors, texts, and readers in the years 1645–1714 were notably impacted by the period’s political, religious, and social upheavals. What emerges is a fuller picture of English literary worlds.

The volume is organized chronologically and divided into five sections, covering 10–15 years each. Opening with a “thick description” (xvii) of the first year or two of the period (1645, 1659–1660, 1674–1675, 1685–1686, and 1700), each of the five sections contains four to five additional shorter chapters that elaborate topics introduced in the longer opening essay. The second chapter of each section, entitled “Laws Regulating Publication, Speech, and Performance,” covers the legal restrictions for that section’s period. These chapters unify the volume and illustrate the role politics, the court, religious debates, and social customs played in “what was and was not legal to read, write, perform, own, wear, hear, and say” (xix). These chapters also reveal the gap between law and practice. With 22 additional essays keyed to the Main Volume sections, the Companion Volume (available as a supplemental online resources) offers focused coverage of various

topics, such as news and journalism, the Popish Plot, recipe books and domestic writing, the Glorious Revolution, transnational prose fiction, and publishing. In “A Note on the Texts,” readers are guided toward options for reading: readers might start with the volume’s preface then proceed to each section’s opening essay for a broad overview of the period in its chronology, or they may explore chapters in the Main Volume and Companion Volume that treat a specific topic or genre. For example, readers interested in dramatic literature and performance can find a handful of focused essays from among the five sections of the Main Volume (2.iii, 3.iv, and 4.iv) and within the Companion Volume (1.iv, 3.i, and 5.ii). However, one of the strengths of the collection is the juxtaposition of diverse genres, modes, and topics throughout the chapters.

The first section, “Ending the War, Creating a Commonwealth, and Surviving the Interregnum, 1645–1658,” begins with an overview tracing the degree to which politics pervaded all varieties of texts and how deeply invested in the events of 1645 were those we recognize as “literary figures” (1). In addition to passages by poets engaged with the war’s physical battles, the opening essay details the “textual battlefield” of the pamphlet wars in 1645 (4). The fourth chapter, “Hearing, Speaking, Writing: Religious Discourse from the Pulpit, among the Congregations, and from the Prophets,” captures the inter-relatedness of oral, handwritten, and printed texts through diverse “new modes of religious discourse” made possible through the political and religious ruptures at mid-century (54). Among the multimodal texts described are the prophecies of Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel, preserved by “bystanders” who “took turns recording her verses,” which make up the 1654 *Cry of a Stone* (64). Trapnel’s voice in this turbulent context meets others from a range of positions, such as the royalist chaplain Jeremy Taylor who published several volumes in support of the Church of England. The final chapter, “Sociable Texts,” also considers texts’ diverse modes of circulation and reception, an interest shared by scholars of the book such as Roger Chartier in texts such as *Forms and Meanings*.

Section Two, “The Return of the King, Restoration, and Innovation, 1659–1673,” begins with the vicissitudes of 1659–1660, from Oliver Cromwell’s death to Charles II’s coronation, both of which made up the material of panegyrics, satires, sermons, letters, and other performances and texts Ezell describes. The themes restoration and innovation are persuasively illustrated in the section’s chapter on the reconstruction of theater culture after the Restoration, which includes absorbing discussion of playwrights’ adaptations of older plays, rival managers to Davenant and Killigrew, portraits of individual actors such as Nell Gwynn, and the role gossip and celebrity played in audience’s enthusiasm for the theater. The Companion Volume’s “Fictions and Romances, Foreign and Domestic” (2.iv) provides compelling additional examples of innovations through its treatment of

prose fiction transformations such as Margaret Cavendish's *CCXI Sociable Letters*, one of several epistolary experiments during this period between the vogue for continental romances of the 1650s (MV 1.v) and the "stories of passion" characteristic of the 1680s (MV 3.v).

The third section, "Reading and Writing for Profit and Delight, 1674–1684," includes a chapter on audience appetite for stories of foreign lands, from the New England colonies to Asia and Africa. Texts as diverse as performance accounts of Aphra Behn's *Abdelazor*, broadside ballads, John Ogliby's illustrated folio atlases of Africa and the Americas, and histories illustrate the array of literary treatments of the foreign audiences delighted in (3.vi). This section also includes a chapter on patronage, politics and criticism, which describes the networks of literary and political influence and the rivalries shaping key aesthetic treatises. Among these is a complex portrait of the controversial figure Charles Sackville, whose patronage and friendship touched the careers of Catherine Trotter, Susanna Centlivre, Aphra Behn, John Dryden, and William Killigrew (3.ii). In highlighting the complex networks around patronage and politics, this discussion is compatible with recent works on criticism like Michael Gavin's *The Invention of English Criticism, 1650–1760* (2015). The Companion Volume's chapter on literary criticism in the following decade offers a useful continuation of this chapter (4.iii) as does the Main Volume's fifth section chapter on the *Spectator* and *Tatler*.

Section Four, "The End of the Century, Scripting Transitions, 1685–1699," conveys the sense of energy and transformation that characterized the nearly fifteen years after the death of Charles II. Ezell demonstrates women's prominent role in the literary worlds of this period. The opening essay juxtaposes the death of Charles II with the deaths of three women writers whose passings were keenly felt in literary circles: Anne Killigrew, Mary Evelyn, and Anne Wharton. Known primarily through coterie networks, the literary tributes for them attest to manuscript circulation's far-reaching influence. The physical features, contents, circulation, and preservation of broadside ballads concern the third chapter in this section. Building on the work of scholars like Patricia Fumerton and Angela McShane, Ezell situates the form in its network of oral and written culture that announced transitions such as the death of Charles II, the coronation of James II and Mary of Modena, Monmouth's Rebellion or the executions that followed the Rye House Plot convictions.

Section Five, "Writing the New Britain, 1700–1714," indeed focuses on the new trends in English literary worlds. The chapter begins with the assertion that the court "was no longer the commanding stage for fashion or patronage" (409). The opening chapter describes the public suspicion of foreigners kindled by William III's frequent absences from England, in particular when the Duke of Gloucester

died. The chapter describes the literary production (and feuds) of some of the new arbiters of taste, the members of the Kit-Cat Club, emphasizing its firmly Whig affiliation. This chapter is productively paired with Companion Volume's essay "Shaping Public Opinion," which includes an excellent discussion of the sparring literary productions around 1665 prompted by Edmund Waller's "Instructions to a Painter" (2.ii). Another chapter in this final section traces the literary productions of poets like Mary Chudleigh, Elizabeth Singer Rowe, Anne Finch, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, and Alexander Pope, again punctuating political investments and innovations. Readers unfamiliar with the politics of this period will especially enjoy the Companion Volume essays on the Act of Union (5.i) and politics and periodical writing, which features discussions of authors such as Swift and Manley.

Of this book's many strengths, foremost is the extensive coverage of women authors and audiences. Sutherland, Bush, and Dobrée mention women's writing parenthetically at best and derisively at worst. By contrast, Ezell weaves the narratives of women's writing throughout this literary history. For example, readers encounter poet and translator Katherine Philips through numerous discussions. Ezell discusses her coterie manuscript writing (1.vi), her social networks (1.iv), her appearance in print publication, in her own volume of verse and others' (2.vi). Readers gain a sense of women's lives that we might not expect from previous literary histories. For example, Ann Fanshawe's letters reveal the challenges she faced fleeing England for exile and, later, show her among the crowd setting sail from the Hague to return to England (99, 114). Moreover, the lives of women preachers, hawkers, printers, and actresses are developed alongside poets and playwrights. Another strength of the volume is the coverage, which develops the continuities between the post-1660 years and the war years and Commonwealth era that preceded it, a strategy Mihoko Suzuki calls for in her 2020 discourse on periodization. Finally, the volume's discussion of the sounds of the literary worlds and the material qualities of texts brings the world of the late seventeenth century to life and attends to recent calls to attend to the aural elements of literature by scholars such as Katherine R. Larson in *The Matter of Song in Early Modern England*.

One obstacle for independent scholars and readers from less well-funded institutions will be the lack of access to the Companion Volume, which is only available in digital format through institutional subscription to Oxford UP's online platform. The Bibliography is made up of print sources and divided into two parts: "Pre-1750 Sources" and "Post-1750 Sources." However, a list of manuscript sources in the bibliography would have been a welcome addition. Manuscript sources are footnoted, instead. An abbreviated list of libraries, archives and frequently used collections such as John Evelyn's *Diary*, *The*

London Stage, or the National Library of Wales is provided at the front of the book.

1645–1714: The Later Seventeenth Century is a splendid achievement in its breadth and detail. Undergraduate and graduate students would gain much from reading it. Scholars of any period will appreciate the excellent citations and bibliography of secondary sources. All readers interested in women and literature will be impressed by the range of voices and detail given to develop the field's understanding of women authors and audiences in the late seventeenth century.