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Marie-Claude Felton, *Maîtres de leurs ouvrages: l'édition à compte d'auteur à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014. xxii + 306 pp. Illustrations, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$115 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7294-1081-6.

Review by Oded Rabinovitch, Tel Aviv University.

Historians of the book have been aware for a long time that early modern authors sometimes chose to self-publish their works rather than sell the manuscript, or better, the manuscript and a privilege, to a book seller.[1] In the eighteenth century, the practice could lead to legal disputes. Parisian author Luneau de Boisjermain had to contend with the forces of order, which broke into his house on August 31, 1768, in order to impound copies of his works. The ensuing *affaire* revolved around the fact that selling the books one had written violated the rights of printers and booksellers, protected by the *Code de la librairie et imprimerie de Paris*. Luneau's case was the first time that the booksellers failed in their efforts to stop an author from usurping their role of publisher and bookseller, and Luneau was even awarded damages by Antoine de Sartine, the *lieutenant général de police*. This was a harbinger of things to come. In 1777, less than a decade after the Luneau de Boisjermain *affaire* and the public stir it created, the legal situation completely changed. Decrees promulgated in 1777 and 1778 redefined the rights of authors in their works. Now authors could sell their own books and turn a profit by exploiting the privileges, which formerly had to be ceded to a bookseller, in their own name.

The consequences of this shift, as well as its importance for the emergence of the “modern author,” stand at the center of Marie-Claude Felton's thoughtful and meticulously researched book. Felton traces in detail the number of Parisian authors who chose to self-publish their works between 1750 and 1791, which indeed rose dramatically after 1777, as well as the social and professional composition of this group of authors, the subject and design of their books, and their place in the literary economy of the late eighteenth century. She convincingly shows that authors who self-published were not marginal *Rousseau des ruisseaux* filled with resentment towards the institutions of the ancien regime, memorably portrayed by Robert Darnton.[2] Felton presents a much more positive take. Many of these authors were office-holders or army commanders, and some enjoyed pensions and connections to the institutions of the literary world. Self-publishing was a respectable choice for bringing one's work to the public, not necessarily leading to the loss of face associated today with vanity presses. By cultivating the ownership of their works, these authors, Felton claims, in fact represent the figure of the modern author: “On peut en effet voir surgir la figure d'un auteur pleinement conscient de la valeur de ses écrits, qui considère l'écriture comme une activité professionnelle et qui, en ce sens, devient véritablement ‘moderne’” (p. 17).

Felton's study is the first sustained and comprehensive discussion of self-publishing in the eighteenth century, establishing the contours of the phenomenon. It is based on a detailed survey of self-published authors active in Paris between 1750 and 1791, drawing on two main sources, the catalog of the BNF, used to trace books published in Paris “Chez l'auteur,” and the *Catalogue hebdomadaire*, a weekly publication running announcements on new books between 1763 and 1789. Complementing these sources with less systematic documents, Felton identifies 441 authors who self-published at least one work which was not completely engraved (and therefore published under different regulations). The quantification is simple yet highly effective. It is a “horse and buggy” counting, not relying on statistical inference or treatment that might deter readers, and is done with some dexterity. For example, Felton has to deal with the tricky question of how to classify

professionally authors identified, as was a certain Jean-Henri Marchand, as “avocat, censeur royal, poète, polygraphe et coiffeur.” The author solves this problem by first creating a classification based on the first profession mentioned, and then complementing the figures by the relative frequency of each profession mentioned, thereby creating a check on the first criterion. One can sometimes quibble with details (how one would treat the category of “abbé” as part of a professional classification), but overall, such methods allow Felton to generate for the first time an overall picture of Parisian self-publishing in the period.

Chapters one and two sketch the contours of the world of self-publishing. Chapter one treats the discourses and legal regulations governing the relations among authors, money, and literary property as they evolved from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries. Chapter two portrays the authors and their books. It shows that self-published books treated topics similar to those that went through the more usual process of publishing by a printer and bookseller. A significant number of the self-published books treated scientific or artistic topics, and were probably published as a demonstration of their authors’ expertise. The analysis of the careers and professions of the authors shows that many of them belonged to the generation of the *Encyclopédie*, and as mentioned, a significant number held offices or army positions. In comparison with authors in general, there were fewer clergy and more artisans. Women were represented in this group. Twelve female authors (or 2.7 percent) self-published their works, a similar, if slightly higher percentage than the presence of female authors attested in other sources (pp. 70-71). This finding shows that women had legal ways of publishing their works even before the Revolution, and contributes to the discussion of the place of female authors in the literary field.[3] More than half of the self-published authors did not go back to publishing through a printer once they self-published, showing that they considered self-publishing a satisfying means for bringing their works to the public. Ultimately, self-published authors were a heterogeneous group, quite far from the image of the marginalized author.

Chapters three to six follow the process of publishing and the problems self-published authors had to overcome. Chapter three covers the relations between the would-be author, the authorities, and the printer, in particular, obtaining permissions and privileges, choosing a printer, soliciting subscribers and controlling the publishing process. Success in this process, Felton argues, depended on a range of factors, not least the relation between the author (interested in the quality and exactitude of the work he or she was financing) and the printer (interested in saving time and resources). Chapter four is a careful study in the material bibliography of self-published books. It shows that authors were very much invested in the form, and not only the text, of the work they were publishing. While the final form of self-published books was close to the form of other books, Felton recovers the care and attention self-published authors devoted to the typography, paper, formatting and illustrations in the books. Chapter five traces the role of publicity in self-publishing books. Authors advertised widely, published prospectuses, and offered commercial promotions for their works, such as significant discounts to buyers for a limited duration. Chapter six deals with book selling. Self-published authors who sold their books themselves had to rearrange their homes and daily habits, making themselves available to buyers, to sell the books through correspondence, and often to strike deals with booksellers who would also sell their works. Felton argues that authors, especially if they did not depend on income from the sale of books in the short run, could sometimes turn a nice profit by self-publishing. Overall, these chapters demonstrate that such authors had to embrace commercial concerns and treat their books as commodities, subject to the fluctuations of supply and demand and competing for readers’ resources and interest.

This is a thorough and carefully-constructed book, and it makes significant contributions to our understanding of publishing practices and the myriad issues relating to changing conceptions of literary property. It will probably remain the definitive treatment of self-publishing and of the population of self-publishing authors in late eighteenth-century Paris for a long time. It is especially compelling in the way it integrates the commercial concerns of authors and printers into a framework that revolves around legal changes, a combination that is particularly salient in the history of French authorship.[4]

The issue of the “modernity” of late-eighteenth century authorship remains somewhat slippery, perhaps because of the difficulties in defining literary modernity. Geoffrey Turnovsky has recently

argued for understanding much of the ancien regime debate over the rights of authors as rhetorical posturing related to struggles over positions in the literary field, and not actually related to attempts to “live by the pen.”[5] Felton is certainly right to insist that many authors embraced the literary market, but the extent to which “consciousness of the value of one's works” and a “professional” engagement with literature can serve as the ultimate markers for this form of modernity is unclear. In fact, much of Felton's own evidence shows that self-published authors were mostly engaged in other professions, and that their authorship depended on non-literary sources of income. Does this mean that the efforts these authors undertook in order to shape and control their work should not be seen as signs of “modernity”? It seems to me that the question needs to be elaborated with a clearer set of criteria. Without them, even the question of “marginality” may remain somewhat undecided. While Felton shows how “normal” self-publishing authors were, it is not easy to find the names of central figures in the list of authors and self-published works included as an appendix to the book, in spite of the significant number of self-published authors that Felton has traced. It is possible to examine the question from an opposite angle, and ask how many central figures in the world of letters relied on self-publishing. From this perspective, it can appear slightly marginal. Out of the forty members of the French Academy in January 1789, only two (Jean-François de la Harpe and Michel-Jean Sedaine) self-published, and both did so only for a single play. The Academy might be an imperfect choice for comparison, but it serves as an illustration of other ways to assess the “marginality” of the authors.[6] Finally, “modernity” might not ultimately fit a practice of publishing that went into decline in the nineteenth century, hand in hand with the “consecration of the writer.” Thanks to Felton's work, it now becomes possible to extend the chronological boundaries of the question and study this apparently fruitful direction.

The book is aimed first and foremost at historians of the book and scholars of authorship, but it contains many points of interest to any historian of the eighteenth century. Since Felton compares the self-published authors to authors in general, the book provides an illuminating and up-to-date picture of publishing practices in the later eighteenth century, of considerable interest to historians of the Enlightenment or of ideas. Further, as Felton notes, self-publishing is re-emerging in a different form in the age of the internet. Academic writers, who have assumed increasing responsibility for the production of their works in recent years (whether online or in print), could find much food for thought in a comparison with the late eighteenth century.

NOTES

[1] Roger Chartier, “Des livres par milliers,” *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* 32 (1977): 533.

[2] For an overview, see the articles in Haydn T. Mason, ed., *The Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998). In addition, the work of Véronique Sarrazin has focused on the difficulties self-publishing authors faced (discussed in Felton, p. 12).

[3] E.g. Carla Hesse, “Enlightenment Epistemology and the Laws of Authorship in Revolutionary France, 1777-1793,” *Representations* 30 (1990): 109-137; Gregory S. Brown, “The Self-Fashionings of Olympe de Gouges, 1784-1789,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2001): 383-401.

[4] David Saunders, *Authorship and Copyright* (London: Routledge, 1992), Chapter three.

[5] Geoffrey Turnovsky, *The Literary Market: Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

[6] Two prominent reasons are the different generational composition of the Academy in comparison to the self-published authors, and the history of the Academies during the Revolution, which would lead to shifts in the careers of future members, who might have come from the crowd of self-published authors. The list of Academicians consulted is based on: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/les-immortels/les-quarante-aujourd'hui> [consulted September 21, 2014].

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