

# Introduction: Remix in Retrospect

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This special topics section of *Authorship* is the fruit of the symposium “Remix in Retrospect: Looking Back to See the Future of Authorship”, which took place at VU University Amsterdam on 21 October 2011.<sup>1</sup> The main question of the symposium was whether, and if so how, a diachronic approach to authorship is relevant to understanding practices from the past as well as present-day developments. The lively closing session on that day demonstrated that early modern specialists and digital scholars do indeed have a lot to talk about, and that sharing insights helps to see the continuity within practices of authorship as well as define the characteristics of a specific period. The papers presented here reflect the mix of perspectives as well as the common ground we uncovered, and will hopefully inspire future dialogues between scholars of different periods.

It has often been argued that authorship has changed under the influence of new technologies, more specifically with the introduction of digital media.<sup>2</sup> New media are seen to be instrumental in a creative turn, merging reading and writing. The possibility of publishing one’s work without a gatekeeper standing between the author and the reader has increased, and the boundaries between authors and readers are blurred (Van der Weel 2001; Chartier 2004: 144). Authors themselves may also keep modifying their texts now, adding new insights and re-writing their articles (Fitzpatrick 2011). However, it has been pointed out that the same merging of authors and readers and textual openness existed in early modern times as well. This ties in with the general notion that old media and practices are not superseded by new ones, but continue to exist, and that (rather than thinking in terms of revolutions), attention should be paid to long-term

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<sup>1</sup> The symposium was organised within the framework of the English-language interdisciplinary minor program ‘Re-Mix: Creativity, Participation and Ownership in a Digital Age’, which was hosted by the Department of Arts and Culture at VU University Amsterdam. The symposium was more specifically connected to the course ‘From Commonplace to Copy-Paste: Readers Using Texts’, focusing on a diachronic point of view. It was funded by the VU University Board. I should like to thank Yuri Cowan, editor of *Authorship*, for his patience and his invaluable comments.

<sup>2</sup> This is a brief summary of the overview of views on the impact of media on authorship and reading in Moser 2012.

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continuities as well as to variations (Fidler 1997: 24, 26-27, 54; Briggs and Burke 2003: 10-11, 19, 25, 28; Blair 2003:13; Duguid 2006: 495; Van der Weel 2007: 9; Finkelstein and McCleery 2008: 118-120; Loveman 2008: 6; Darnton 2009: xiv, 21-23; Baggerman 2011; Siemens 2010: xv; Van der Weel 2011: 1).

When it comes to drawing diachronic parallels, there have been two main views so far, depending on their valuation of print culture. On the one hand, scholars have signalled parallels between manuscript culture and digital textuality. Manuscripts and digital texts are both said to be malleable, fluid and open-ended, whereas printed texts are considered to be “fixed” and stable, with clearly defined borders. The internet, blurring the boundaries between the production, distribution and reception of texts and questioning the concept of copyright, seems to have brought us back to a situation that existed before the institutionalisation of the literary field and the codification of copyright in the eighteenth century (Marotti 1995; O’Connor 1997; Ezell 1999: 40; Rhodes and Sawday 2000:11-12; Marcus 2000:18; Van der Weel 2001:19; Heijting 2004:187 and 193; Chorney 2005:1; Fitzpatrick 2011).

On the other hand, these received assumptions about the fixity of print have been challenged and dismissed as a nineteenth-century idealization. Recent research in book history and textual history has demonstrated that printed texts were not altogether definitive, especially in the early ages of printing, and that printed texts were rewritten, cut up and reassembled no less than manuscript texts. Moreover, this textual mutability is not restricted to the products of the early printing press. Up until today, printed texts have been cut up and reassembled in this way (Johns 1998; McKenzie 1999; Blair 2003: 25-27; Smyth 2004; McKitterick 2006; Shillingsburg 2006: 25-39; Gerritsen 2006; Knight 2009; Darnton 2009: 31-32,141; Johns 2009:256; Dietz 2010; Fleming 2010).

However, once the analogies between early modern manuscript culture, print culture, and contemporary digital culture are noted, new questions arise about their nature and implications. To what extent, if at all, can the cutting and rewriting of early modern texts (in manuscript and print) be equated to the remixing of digital texts? What method is needed for a valid comparison between past and present? How may the knowledge of historical developments in manuscript and print culture feed the current debate on authorship, reading, copy-right, and creativity in the digital age? And how might a contemporary point of view help us understand and evaluate past practices?

To find (the beginnings of) an answer to these questions, the conference ‘Remix in Retrospect’ brought together scholars of historical and contemporary authorship to discuss their views on the characteristics of authorship throughout the centuries. Six speakers were invited to discuss the changing roles of authors and readers in different stages of media history (from manuscript to print and digital textuality) and the implications of these changes for the creation of texts and the status of authorship: Adriaan van der Weel (Leiden University), Adam Smyth (Oxford University), Feike Dietz (Utrecht University), Kate Eichhorn (New School University, New York), Jenna Ng (University of York) and Jim Barrett (Umeå University). The abstracts of their papers are still available on the blog that went with the symposium: <http://remix-in-retrospect.blogspot.com/>. Five speakers (Smyth, Dietz, Eichhorn, Barrett and Ng) agreed

to have their papers published in this special topics section of *Authorship*. In my summary of the articles I shall focus on the methods they have chosen to approach the theme of the conference, rather than on their specific case studies. I shall then discuss how their findings may contribute to a diachronic overview of the impact of (new) media on authorship and text production.

Adam Smyth discusses the practice of cutting up texts. He starts with a brief reflection on “choice” versus “chance” in authorship, triggered by Tristan Tzara’s instructions for making a Dadaist poem. Smyth then offers six types of evidence that show that in the early modern period cutting up texts and reassembling them was an accepted practice as a way of engaging with texts. These examples include the commonplace book of Sir John Gibson and the series of gospel harmonies produced at Little Gidding. Smyth goes on to formulate four lessons to be learnt from this practice: first, that we should rethink the fixity and predominance of print, and pay more attention to the overlapping worlds of print and manuscript culture; second, that we should reconsider the nature of writing and words, and start to see words as “mobile things, which can be rearranged” and cutting as a form of writing, in terms of the “seizing, ordering and deploying of words”; third, that we should no longer consider the cutting of texts to be destructive, and start seeing it as an act of respect or even reverence; and fourth, that we should reconsider the ideal of the “the coherent, bound, unannotated, ‘complete’ printed book” and book history should widen its scope to include “other ways in which writing could be materialised”.

Feike Dietz links media literacy (defined as “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts”) to the formation of identity by showing how early modern Catholics developed a spiritual attitude through the process of reworking texts and images in manuscript and print. She argues that we should use a media-neutral definition of literacy to be able to pay attention to features that are present in modern as well as early modern media. These features are: first, hypertextuality, second, multimediality, third, the heterogeneity of sources, and fourth, questions of authority and ownership. She illustrates this with a discussion of a handwritten adaptation of the printed emblem book *Pia Desideria*. The anonymous composer (or composers) created a multimedial product by folding and stitching printed sheets with engravings and blank sheets with handwritten excerpts from biblical texts and texts by the Church Fathers, using the references in the original *Pia Desideria* as hyperlinks leading to new quotations from a variety of additional sources. Dietz concludes by proposing two hypotheses that deserve further research: first, that “‘modern’ print practices influenced the structure and layout of ‘traditional’ manuscripts”, and second, that “Catholic media culture [...] was a ‘participatory culture’, comparable to today’s interactive media culture”.

Kate Eichhorn positions the copy machine as a unique, new medium between the printing press on the one hand and social media on the other. She first distinguishes the copy machine from earlier printing methods by pointing out that the copy machine challenges the notions of copyright that were established in print culture, that it “[forces] the eye out of its print culture induced trance” by warping and pixilating type,

and that the products of the copymachine are considered to be disposable, ephemeral, lacking “the prestige associated with print”. Eichhorn then illustrates the impact of the copy machine on authorship with examples of works that are the result of collaborative authorship or self-publishing, often with “little or no immediate commercial appeal” and “challenging aesthetic and political norms”: experimental literature, fan fiction, and zines. Eichhorn then goes on to link copy machines to social media, because they share a number of characteristics: “user-generated content, validation of amateurs over and alongside professionals, and reliance on the feedback and even labor of readers/viewers”. She includes two final statements: that the copy machine has profoundly altered the “sanctity of print and all its related institutions, including copyright and authorship” and that the copy machine “prepared us in innumerable ways for our experience of authorship in the age of social media”.

Jim Barrett focuses on the paradox between technology and creativity, represented by the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. According to Barrett, digital artifacts dissolve this paradox because in these cases, technical skills are used to produce new meanings and narratives. He uses the concepts of “remix in composition” (sampling, quoting, referencing and appropriation) and “remix in reception” (sequencing, linking and the manipulation of virtual objects) to illustrate how producers and users of digital artifacts construct these art works, reusing existing material and changing narratives and points of view over and over again through assembly and interaction. Barrett attaches five characteristics to the digital artefacts he discusses: “a. they are simulative; b. they demand technical awareness; c. they lack a single originating author; d. they subvert the original story; [and] e. they feature changing perspective/s that are constructed both with and against design”. Finally, Barrett prefers to see authorship as a process rather than as a point of origin in these cases; the art work is never completed, but a continuous performance, as long as the viewer/user/reader provides new input.

Jenna Ng argues that remix as an authoring strategy is not just a literacy act, but also a performative act. She demonstrates this by discussing the possibilities for remix in live blogs. She starts by describing three characteristics of a live blog: it has a specific narrative or theme; it engages the same time-spaces of reader, correspondent and event; and it creates a social co-presence, a sense of connection between the participants. Ng then discusses what remix strategies might be employed to manipulate these characteristics and create new meanings. Remix of the narrative occurs when the account of the event is juxtaposed with other media elements commenting on it and subverting or ironising the main message. Remix of the time-space occurs when real-time postings come from different locations, “surprising the reader and taking her into (contextually) unexpected places”. When it comes to the social presence, “remix [...] lies in circulating and re-presenting others’ content”, thus “authoring and producing integral paths of a more extensive global dialogue”. Ng concludes by stressing that a distinction between “first-order expression” (something genuinely new, a whole) and “second-order expression” (fragmentary reactions) is not useful when speaking of authorship in

a Web 2.0 context. According to Ng, authorship here consists in the (performative) act of circulating information, in addition to the “social glue”.

Even though the articles use different approaches, and even when they deal with different periods, media and countries, they have a number of key concepts in common, often phrased in remarkably similar words. The paradoxes between technology and human influence, chance and choice, reproduction and creativity are addressed in all articles. The concepts of originality and inspiration are toned down in favour of concepts like invention and performance. I have chosen a few statements about remix and authorship that can be distilled from these papers and I shall illustrate each statement with references to the papers themselves.

Remixed artefacts are often multimedial: they combine manuscript and print, or print and digital texts, and they mix images, texts, audio, video and other media components. Early modern artefacts such as the commonplace book of Sir John Gibson discussed by Smyth and the adaptation of the emblem book discussed by Dietz combine manuscript and print and include texts as well as images. *Patchwork Girl*, discussed by Barrett, is a hypertext which refers both to print and electronic media, and includes visual elements and textual elements. *Last Meal Requested* uses audio, video and photo material. Live blogs as discussed by Ng may contain photographs, videos, print text, tweets and hyperlinks, audio, and (sometimes) email and text messages from readers. All these authors emphasize that the mixing of media adds to the meaning of the art work, helps shape the narrative, and challenges the user to refine his or her literacy skills, all by juxtaposing and reinforcing messages and changing points of view. Within this multimedia context, print seems to take a special place: it seems to serve as a repoussoir both for manuscript and digital media and it influences both. While Smyth (9) states that “the coherent, bound, unannotated, ‘complete’ printed book was *not yet* the dominant medium for conveying text” in the seventeenth century, Eichhorn (6 and 9) claims that this is *no longer* the case today. On the one hand, print is presented as a new technique, refashioning (but not obliterating) the older technique of the manuscript and stimulating media mixture. Both the handwritten emblem book discussed by Dietz and the cut-and-pasted Gospel Harmonies discussed by Smyth imitate the looks and layout of a printed text (Dietz 6, 10, 12; Smyth 4-6). It is interesting to note that both Dietz and Smyth suggest that the actions of the persons rewriting and cutting texts might be explained in terms of their background in print culture (Dietz 14; Smyth 7). On the other hand, print is presented as a traditional method, preceding newer methods of text production such as cutting and pasting, copy machines and digital media. Just like the early modern practice of cutting and reassembling printed fragments was “a response to the culture and technology of the printing press”, “a new-found-out-way, [...] a new kind of printing” (Smyth 4-6), xerography, according to McLuhan, “reverses the characteristics of the printing press”, the latter being an “old technology” (Eichhorn: 2-3). Print keeps having an impact though, even in digital artifacts: Barrett points out that according to Katherine Hayles, Shelley Jackson’s hypertext *Patchwork Girl* is “at once highly original and intensely parasitic on its print predecessors”, because it weaves together quotations from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and other works (Barrett 4).

In remix, origin and single authorship are irrelevant; collaborative authorship dominates; readers become authors. All these authors agree that concepts like a single origin or single authorship are not useful when discussing the practice of remix and they point towards collaborative authorship instead. Again, a specific role is assigned to print culture. Eichhorn, for instance, associates the use of the author's name to legitimize a work with print-based economies (7-8). Smyth (7) argues that the image of the "single, lonely author" with "a pen hovering over a blank page" belongs to a "post-Romantic model of creativity". Ng uses a similar image to describe an author "in the analogue and Web 1.0 age": "one person picking up a pen and scratching out some words on a piece of paper, or punching out letters on a typewriter, or using a word processor on a computer" (Ng 9). The papers differ when it comes to defining the starting point of collaborative authorship. Both Ng and Barrett associate "a multitude of authors" (Ng 10) first and foremost with Web 2.0, although Barrett does briefly refer to previous instances of collaborative authorship when saying that it is "something that has not been practiced widely in Western literature for several centuries", but now returns in digital artefacts (Barrett 10). According to Eichhorn the copy machine was the first of "a myriad of new media" in changing the concept of authorship as it had been established in print culture, triggering collaborative authorship and "polyvocal" works (Eichhorn 5, 6-8). The early modern scholars, finally, show that collaborative authorship goes back even further in time, and that print promoted it rather than prevented it. Dietz argues that the early modern Catholic culture was a participatory culture, in which consumers could become producers reworking printed texts (Dietz 13-14), and Smyth describes how the Anglican community at Little Gidding participated in the process of cutting up printed bibles and composing gospel harmonies, working together in the Concordance room (Smyth 4-5).

In remix, the process of gathering, selecting, reassembling and re-presenting existing materials is a creative act in itself. While Barrett (2) refers to the author of digital artefacts as "instigator or arranger", Smyth (7) invites us to "think of invention in its Renaissance, and classical sense: *inventio*, a gathering, an ordering, a laying out of pre-existing parts". Likewise, Eichhorn (3, 7) points out that authors used copy machines to collect and assemble materials for "novel-length cut-ups", and Ng (10) writes that "Digital authorship today is thus no longer confined to producing one's own creative work, but also includes re-presenting other people's content." With remix, the knowledge, skills and tools of the producer (arranger, collector, re-presenter) become more important (Barrett 2, 11; Dietz: 2, 13). In order to be able to participate in the interactive play *Façade* and produce remixes of the narrative, the reader needs "a technical knowledge of coding" (Barrett 9). Early modern Catholics needed "a trained, literate eye" (Dietz 8) and the composer of the *Pia Desideria* adaptation had to be capable of "mixing visual and textual elements, writing, stitching and folding by hand, collecting several printed products, and using printed products both as an integral part [...] and as a model of a new composition" (Dietz 11). Finally, the creative process is triggered by the materiality of the text. While Barrett (9) states that "material possibilities become the means to the creative act, not the inspiration derived from a

chain of higher causality”, Smyth (8) writes that “early modern books were material forms that invited their physical remaking”. And while Barrett (4) outlines a creative blend where “objects are as meaningful as words”, Smyth (6) wonders “what happens to a word when it is treated as a physical object?”

Just like a work in remix has multiple authors, it also is a combination of elements from different sources (Barrett 5). Dietz demonstrates this “heterogeneity of sources” by pointing out that the composer of the *Pia Desideria* adaptation used the references in the original book leading to other sources (or “hypertexts”), which he or she then used to select new text fragments to include in the adaptation (Dietz 11-12). In a similar vein, Shelley Jackson includes quotations from *Frankenstein* and “hand-drawn dismembered woman’s body parts” in *Patchwork Girl: A Modern Monster* (1995) (Barrett 4), and a live blog involves the “re-presentation of other people’s information, connecting to links and data” (Ng:10).

Reassembling and remixing existing material can be done out of admiration for the original material. Smyth (7-8) explains that the Gospels were cut up out of devotion and Eichhorn (7) sees fan fiction as the result of “the writer’s passion for another writer’s text”. Another reason to remix might be social or political – according to Eichhorn, remix “has a special appeal to groups who are suspicious of property but also intent on circulating ideas outside established economies of print” (Eichhorn 4). Whatever the reason for remix, it always involves reinterpretation: meaning is added; the course of events is changed; and narratives are re-shaped and subverted, whether the narrative is the story of a married couple in a digital art work, the story of Christ in printed gospels, the story of an ‘embattled’ life in a Royalist autobiography, the coherence of a religious emblem book, or the live blog of a cricket match (Barrett 1, 5, 8, 11; Smyth 3-4, 6; Dietz 12; Ng 2, 4-5). Finally, in remix, the creative process or performance is more important than the final product. Both Ng and Barrett speak of remix as “a performative act” (Ng 3, 5) or “a form of authorship that is orchestrating performance” (Barrett 10, 6). The works are open ended, never finished, reworkable. Barrett (10) writes that “digital works continue to change after creation”. The same goes for printed books, however: Smyth speaks of “the messy, always-unfinished world of early modern print” (9), where a book was seen as “a reworkable thing” (5), something “impermanent, non-monumental” (8).

All this demonstrates once more that – in spite of obvious technological differences – there are indeed strong parallels between early modern practices and contemporary ones when it comes to authorship and remixing. Finally, we are left with the question what these parallels teach us about the past, the present and (if possible) the future. It is interesting to note that the early modern scholars tend to focus on the parallels between past and present, whereas the digital scholars tend to emphasize the differences between past and present, steering clear of easy parallels (Ng 6), and are not afraid to look into the future.

The early modern specialists suggest that a diachronic approach may help us understand past and present practices: “Seventeenth-century media literacies resemble present literacies, or – the other way round – our ‘new’ literacies are continuous with

literacies of past centuries. Such a diachronic and media-neutral approach to media literacy enables us to understand the shaping, improvement and spread of literacies in a longitudinal perspective” (Dietz 14). Smyth explicitly asks, “In these examples of cutting, what is the relationship between the early modern and the contemporary? What significance might we attach to the fact that a similar compositional method (the cutting up of an existing text) is used to register a similar relationship (of respect and even reverence) between author and text? What implications does this diachronic approach to authorship suggest about the act of cutting?” (Smyth 8). In his case, the diachronic approach teaches us not to think of cutting as destructive, whether it was done in the seventeenth century or today. An interesting perspective offered by the early modern papers is the issue of religion. Remixing in the early modern period was often connected to a religious practice, as is demonstrated by Smyth (for Protestants) and Dietz (for Catholics). It would be worthwhile to follow this religious trail and investigate this practice of remixing texts and images in various religions (up until today). Another interesting perspective is offered by their take on the impact of the printing press. The early modern papers demonstrate that print culture and remix are all but irreconcilable: on the contrary, print invites interaction with text in a very tactile way.

The digital scholars on the other hand seem most invested with the narrative of a break, distancing themselves from the printing press and pointing at new media (whether it is xerography or Web 2.0) as the beginning of a new attitude towards authorship. Yet, they also provide the most audacious vistas of the future. According to Eichhorn, the copy machine prepared us for the concept of authorship associated with social media by changing “how texts could be experienced and by whom” (Eichhorn 9). Ng refers to the future in similar wordings at the end of her article: “As technologies develop, our concepts of authorship will surely continue to evolve in tandem, paving the way for more interesting ways of creating and producing content, and for more diverse ways in which voices can be heard and heeded” (Ng 11-12). Barrett, finally, grants a special role to the cybernetic: “In the world to come the role of the avatar and the ability to enact stories will result from the cybernetic, not as fictions but as experiences, which contribute to identities and positions within culture and society” (Barrett 12).

This glimpse into the future finally brings us back to the title of the symposium and to its original question. Is it possible to see the future of authorship by looking at the past? Does a diachronic approach to authorship help to understand practices from the past as well as present-day developments? Judging from the articles in this section, I would agree. Knowing about modern concepts such as collaborative authorship, hypertextuality and fanfiction helps to understand early modern practices of cutting, pasting and rewriting texts. Knowing about Renaissance concepts such as *inventio* and emblematics helps to understand modern practices of creating new narratives by reusing existing material and assembling texts and images. If anything, I have come to understand that special attention should be paid to the impact of the printing press in the eighteenth and nineteenth century when discussing changing concepts of authorship. I am aware of the fact that a large part of this introduction has been devoted to drawing parallels between past and present practices of authorship, instead of



highlighting the differences. This seems inherent to the search for a common language to be able to discuss long-term developments. The intention of this special topics section is to provide inspiration for scholars of different periods, genres, and literatures to develop and define that common language and to build on this discussion of the relationship of remix to authorship over time.

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