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Writing about Writing in Early Modern Writing-Books

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Writing about Writing in Early Modern Writing-Books

Abstract

Essay on 17th century writing manuals in the Kislak Center's collection.

Keywords

Writing, Cocker, Calligraphy

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Library and Information Science

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Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing

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Wednesday
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Writing about Writing in Early Modern Writing-Books

POSTED BY SIMRAN THADANI IN POSTS

≈ 1 COMMENT

Starting in the 1520s, European penmen began to put out printed pamphlets that taught people how to write speedily, legibly, and beautifully. Through these so-called “writing-books,” writing-masters demonstrated their calligraphic skills through elaborate samples in different scripts, and codified the rules of good writing too. Interestingly, this means that the explosion of (fast, multiplicative) print carried along the (slow, intensive) technique of writing by hand, rather than leaving it behind.



— *Arts glory, or, The pen-mans treasury* (London, 1669), plate [9]. [UPenn Furness Z43.A5 C63 1669](#).

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Welcome to Unique at Penn, part of the family of University of Pennsylvania Libraries blogs. Every week this space will feature descriptions and contextualization of items from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The site focuses on those materials held by Penn which are in some sense “unique” - drawn from both our special and circulating collections, whether a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript or a twentieth-century popular novel with generations of student notes penciled inside. See the About page for more on the blog and to contact the editor.

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The most prolific writing-master in early modern England was [Edward Cocker \(1631-1676\)](#), who issued no fewer than 16 writing-books. Cocker's endless productivity was matched only by his tireless self-promotion: the ubiquitous use of his signature on his calligraphic specimens, exuberant language encouraging would-be writers to attain excellence, grandiose claims to superiority on his title-pages, and frequent use of literary tropes like self-portraits and dedications, he sought actively to elevate himself from "teacher" or "scribe" to "Author."

Of course, writing-masters like Cocker were ultimately teaching a workaday, utilitarian skill, using commonplace building blocks (pen-strokes and individual letters). And legibility was the foremost requirement for good writing—after all, there were only so many ways to write an "a" before it was no longer recognizable as one!—so masters were quite constrained in terms of how much they could innovate, especially via books that were intended (at least in theory) to be used without a teacher's guidance. Yet handwriting was much revered at the period, and these printed calligraphic booklets have been much analyzed then and since. The ability to write could be traced back to Biblical times, and as such was considered a divine gift. Additionally, and more importantly, writing had a special hybrid status: it was considered both an art and a skill, both beautiful and useful, both natural and manmade. Take the full title of Cocker's *Arts Glory* (1669): the samples, we are told, are "adorned with many curious knots and flourishes, to render them pleasant as well as profitable." This characterization of the book as doubly beneficial was obviously intended to increase its sales appeal. As well, the title-page boasts that the work contains the "directions, theorems, and rare principles of art"—connecting "the authors knowledge" to art through science.

Let's now look to Penn's collections for a unique instance in which this duality comes to the surface. On the verso of the title-page of Penn's copy of *Arts Glory* ([Furness Z43.A5 C63 1669](#)) appears the following six-line homage to writing:

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- July 2017

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- June 2016

- May 2016

- March 2016

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- October 2014

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- June 2014

- May 2014

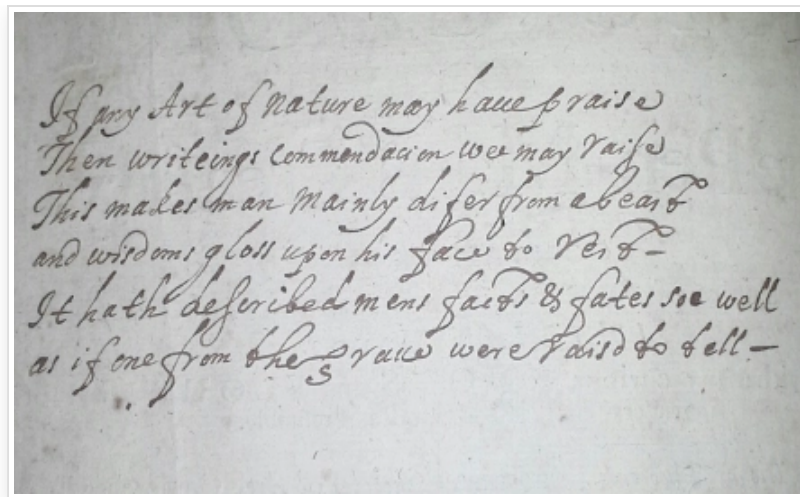
- April 2014

- February 2014

- January 2014

- December 2013

- November 2013



*“If any Art of Nature may haue praise
Then writeings commendacion wee may raise
This makes man Mainly difer from a beast
and wisdoms gloss upon his face to rest –
It hath described mens facts & fates soe well
as if one from the graue were raised to tell –”*

As it turns out, this copy of *Arts Glory* once belonged to the calligraphy historian and collector Daniel Walter Kettle (1849?-1912?) [1]. In his privately-printed pamphlet, *Pens, Ink, and Paper: A Discourse upon the Calligraphic Art* (London, 1885), he notes that “In a copy of Cocker’s ‘Art’s Glory’ (1659) in my possession, occur the following lines in Manuscript upon the back of the Title, bearing upon this subject.” Despite the wrong date (“1659” instead of 1669), the idiosyncratic spellings (“writeings,” “difer”) are a strong indicator that Kettle was transcribing from what is now Penn’s copy.

The above verse makes clear the philosophical interdependency of art and nature, not only for writing-masters, and for readers and users of writing-books, but also for mankind in general. The claim that writing is the prime (“Main”) distinction between humans and animals might seem oversimplified, but the underlying idea is not. Writing, as “art,” gives “nature” (or creation) a way to

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record its knowledge and its history, and thus elevates writers beyond their basic nature (or character). Writing, being part of creation, is part of nature, but it is also the emblem of intelligence, record-keeping, civilization—the mark of what is more than just nature.

Such discourses on the origins, contributions, and importance of the art of writing are common, both in writing-books and in later commentaries on them. The connections are intricate and sometimes confusing; for instance, the late-seventeenth century writing-master John Ayres writes that “Nature” has made the letters of the most current English script so perfect as not “to require any Artificial daub, or Paint to set them off” [2]. Ironically, for Ayres, the English round hand, a most contrived and derived script—a script whose development took hundreds of years of mutation and experimentation—is not the most “artificial” but instead the most “natural,” because it requires no embellishment.

And yet Ayres—and Cocker himself—were fond of embellishing their specimens with elaborate marginal decorations such as figures or flourishes. This practice, which may have played a pedagogical role in helping beginners gain comfort and fluency with their pens, was nonetheless frowned upon by purists who preferred that writing remain “natural” rather than “artistic,” and advocated that writing-books stick to teaching writing rather than drawing and decoration. Flourishing was undeniably a form of artifice, as writing-masters claimed to have executed their dazzling ornamentation by “command of hand”—that is, free-hand, without resting their hands on the paper, or even without lifting their pens up between strokes. Cocker, however, was entirely unapologetic about his use of flourishing. In one short sestet in his *The Pens Triumph* (1658), he crows that

*“Some sordid Sotts
Cry downe rare Knotts
Whose envy makes them currish;
But Art shall shine,
And Envie pine,
And still my Pen shall flourish”*

Michael P. Williams

Molly Des Jardin

Richard Griscom

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— Edward Cocker, *The Pens Triumph* (London: Samuel Ayre, 1658), plate [4]. Image from British Library shelfmark C.70.aa.16. (via EEBO)

Both in its wording and its appearance, this ditty boldly dismisses the “Envie” of Cocker’s “currish” opponents, while at the same time elevating his own peripheral loops and swirls, his “rare Knotts,” to the level of “Art.” Both the verse and Cocker’s name are simplified almost to starkness: they are engraved in small size to resemble standardized roman letters, almost like our familiar Times New Roman. Even self-obsessed Cocker’s name, although framed within a wreath, is pushed off to one side. Clearly the message here is not about the skill of writing at all; the plate’s meaning resides in this verbal defense of flourishing, and in Cocker’s careful calligraphic constructions of cherubs, postilion, and bird. Even his roman text is not left unadorned, with thickets of little fleurons used as fillers to justify the lines. This inextricable blend of nature and art is but a small taste of the “Art of Nature” that the pen could produce: writing, the “Art” determined and destined to (in both senses of the word) “flourish.”

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[1] I am grateful to Professor Peter Stallybrass of the Penn English Department for this observation.

[2] John Ayres, *The New A-la-Mode Secretarie* (London: sold by Hen[ry] Hatley, Sam[uel] Crouch, and Ben[jamin] Alsop), 1682, "Preface," 1. [ESTC R5335]

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