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Kenny, Neil. Born to Write: Literary Families and Social Hierarchy in Early Modern France

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Kenny, Neil.

Born to Write: Literary Families and Social Hierarchy in Early Modern France.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 432 + 15 ill. ISBN 978-0-1988-5239-1 (hardcover) \$85.

To the extent that New Historicism reintroduced biographical criticism into literary studies through the back door (readers of Stephen Greenblatt's *Self-Fashioning* often missed the infiltration), Neil Kenny fields a most interesting challenge. If we want to consider early modern literature in relation to lives, he contends, we should talk not about biography but about family history. That family dynasties dominated most early modern professions—from printer to tanner, blacksmith to painter—will surprise no scholar. Kenny asks, Why should writers prove any different? In answering that question, he has profoundly rewritten literary history by reorienting it around concepts such as heredity, inheritance, and birthright—all deeply familiar to the time but heretofore generally excluded from literary study.

Possessing a well located forebear facilitates one's entry into any profession, of course. But the phenomenon Kenny unearths extends far beyond circumstantial nepotism. Just how far risks confusion in the introduction devoted to a number of well-known features of early modern social history: the rise of the robe nobility, how it yoked its fate to the legal profession, and the ways in which high literacy emerged as a means of status acquisition that channeled family ascension. The importance of these factors has been extensively studied (regarding Montaigne, for example, in numerous essays by Jean Balsamo and an important biography by Philippe Desan). Many scholars have demonstrated literature's implication in the social structures of its time and how it served to reinforce social hierarchies—just as, Kenny later points out, did costume, heraldry, and forms of address.

The originality of Kenny's research lies in the contention that writers did not simply navigate an Old Régime landscape of venial office, endogamous marriage, and clientage networks *as individuals*. Instead, they addressed their writings on behalf of a family to readers as representatives of other families. According to Kenny's research, it was the family who often "wrote," as much as the individual. The centre of these family units was often a father-son dyad (or, in rarer cases, mother-daughter or father-daughter dyads). Thus,

four persons (two cross-generational dyads) comprised the heart of every basic literary relation. But out of this centre stretched webs that followed the manifold ramifications of the extended early modern family. Instead of writers addressing a public, as one envisions today, they addressed generationally extended families from their position within one such family.

If one attunes one's ear to early modern literature as a record of families hailing one another, different functions and features emerge. The exchange of respect supersedes more familiar artistic goals; common themes of education, marriage, and succession rise to the fore, and dedications become crucial rather than tangential. Yet most startling are the numerous examples Kenny provides of writings within a family—sharing genres, titles, and themes. He even demonstrates that the phenomenon tended to foster larger-scale projects and longer-format works than those undertaken by writers working in isolation.

Kenny suggests a conservative initial estimate of 22 percent of publications originating from families with more than one author. But Kenny tends to restrict this figure to blood relations; if one were to extend it to in-laws, Montaigne would qualify for Kenny's list. He and his brother-in-law Geoffroy de Pressac both presented their books to Henri III in 1580 after the siege at La Fère, explicitly calling attention to their family connection. Montaigne's legal mentor and distant cousin-in-law, Léonard d'Alesme, published works of jurisprudence. Though not himself an author, Montaigne's father kept a learned circle through which he acquired the manuscript that furnished the pretext for his son's first publication, a translation. Finally, Montaigne became related through his brother's marriage to the step-daughter of La Boétie (whose posthumous works Montaigne subsequently published). Montaigne foregrounded these last two affiliations through various paratextual epistles, and he addressed parts of La Boétie's and his own works to some of the same allied families (notably the Foix).

How many hidden in-law connections remain to be uncovered, especially among lesser-known writers? The full extent of early modern families' reach meant that Montaigne's declaration to write only for "relatives and friends" encompassed hundreds of readers in Bordeaux alone. Instead of seeming modest, was Montaigne merely stating the obvious? Did most works of the time similarly address readerships composed of "relatives and friends," friends being specific allied or targeted families? In any event, Kenny's estimates will surely need to be revised upwards.

Kenny does discuss Montaigne's relationship with literary executor and *fille d'alliance*, Marie de Gournay. Thanks to Alan Bray, we now know that the extension of the family through such covenant relationships proved far more widespread and significant than once thought. But much remains to be done in order to fully understand the early modern propensity to elevate relationships such as godparenthood and *nourri ensemble* arrangements as lineage-building complements to marriage. From the perspective that Kenny opens, these *alliances* clearly stand as parts of the extended family, and thus susceptible to being subsumed into the "family function" of literature (Kenny ingeniously proposes this term as an alternative to Foucault's famous "author function").

The perception of transmitted aptitude and the reality of bequeathed advantage combined to make works of literature effective means to steer family legacies—as "lineage-constructing discursive machinery," in one of Kenny's felicitous formulas (205). Kenny shows that, although notions of symbolic inheritance may have originated among the nobility, commoners could successfully draw upon the model in order to authorize and promote their own literary families. The tools for launching a literary family stretched from a library, including a collection of manuscripts (some original and some not), to printed works that served to advertise interfamilial connections (through dedicatory epistles) and justify patrimonial offices held in the family name through the prestige that accrued from being learned.

It is a testament to Kenny's probity that he includes a long chapter examining cases in which family literary strategies failed or backfired. But these exceptions tend to prove his rule: even dysfunctional families like the Vauquelins (or ones riven by confessional conflict like the Vigniers) grasped at conspicuous literary affiliation in hopes of remedying their fortunes. In one of the most intriguing propositions of his book, Kenny suggests that literary history owes its birth to early moderns' own interest in tracing literature's "family trees," most visible in the work of François de la Croix du Maine et Scévole de Sainte-Marthe.

Kenny's research demonstrates in great breadth and beyond a doubt that early modern literature constituted a family business. For scholars wishing to investigate an individual literary lineage in depth, Warren Boutcher has provided a perfectly matched methodology in his *School of Montaigne* (2017). Boutcher's approach examines how early modern actors mobilized literature both as writers and as readers in order to authorize their own interventions that

amplified social status through the exercise of discernment. Discernment comes into play in nearly every example in Kenny's book, for no social tool proves flawless or adapted to only one purpose. Rather, family affiliation worked as a multifaceted instrument that required different handling in different contexts, particularly when it involved a perceived aptitude for writing.

Nowhere does the labile nature of such claims appear more starkly than in Kenny's reading of Clément Marot and Matthieu Beroalde. Through their example, he evokes the upheavals experienced by French Protestants forced into exile. Legally deprived of patrimonial offices, inheritances, landed domains, and even reputational legacies back in France, these refugees were forced to reconfigure family heredity on symbolic grounds, often in terms of God the father, as opposed to their biological fathers, wherein election replaced inheritance. At the same time, the sudden loss of entitled privilege encouraged new egalitarian and merit-based attitudes toward social status.

Kenny discusses at length major examples from among the Marot, Beroalde, and Sainte-Marthe families, but dozens of other important cases receive close attention, such as the Haberts, Estiennes, Hotmans, and Des Roches, not to mention the royal Valois family (Louise de Savoie, Marguerite de Navarre, François I, Jeanne d'Albret, Catherine de Bourbon, and Marguerite de Valois). The work involved in tracking down and exhuming these affiliations merits considerable praise: the scope and complexity of the topic must have made this a difficult project to finish. However, the wealth of examples that Kenny presents makes a case far more compelling than what arguments from social history alone could have accomplished. With measured prose and in understated tones, Kenny has introduced to literary study a revolution of seismic proportions whose importance and consequences are difficult to overstate.

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