

author and authorship: The conception of an author in ordinary literary discourse might be summarized as follows: **Authors** are individuals who, by their intellectual and imaginative powers, purposefully create from their experience and reading a literary work which is distinctively their own. The work itself, as distinguished from the written or printed texts that instantiate the work, remains a product accredited to the author as its originator, even if he or she turns over the rights to publish and profit from the texts to someone else. And insofar as the literary work turns out to be great and original, the author who has composed that work is deservedly accorded high cultural status and achieves lasting fame.

Since the 1960s this way of conceiving an author has been put to radical question by a number of structural and poststructural theorists, who posit the human *subject* not as an originator and shaper of a work, but as a “space” in which conventions, codes, and circulating locutions precipitate into a particular text, or else as a “site” wherein they converge, and are recorded, the cultural constructs, discursive formations, and configurations of power prevalent in a given cultural era. The author is said to be the product rather than the producer of a text, or is redescribed as an “effect” or “function” engendered by the internal play of textual language. Famously, in 1968 Roland Barthes proclaimed and celebrated “The Death of the Author,” whom he described as a figure invented by critical discourse in order to set limits to the inherent free play of the meanings in reading a literary text. (See under *structuralist criticism* and *poststructuralism*.)

In an influential essay “What Is an Author?” written in 1969, Michel Foucault raised the question of the historical “coming into being of the notion of ‘author’”—that is, of the emergence and evolution of the “author function” within the discourse of our culture. The investigation would include such inquiries as “how the author became individualized,” “what status he has been given,” what “system of valorization” involves the author, and how the fundamental category of “‘the-man-and-his-work criticism’ began.” Foucault’s essay and example gave impetus to a number of studies which reject the notion that the prevailing concept of **authorship** (the set of attributes possessed by an author) is either natural or necessitated by the way things are. Instead, historicists conceive authorship to be a *cultural construct* that emerged and changed, in accordance with changing economic conditions, social circumstances, and institutional arrangements for the writing and distribution of books, over many centuries in the Western world. (See *new historicism*.)

Cultural historians have emphasized the important role, in constructing and reconstructing the concept of an author, of such historical developments as:

1. The shift from an oral to a literate culture. In the former, the identity of an author presumably was not inquired after, since the individual bard or minstrel improvised by reference to inherited subject matter, forms, and literary formulae. (See *oral poetry*.) In a culture where at least a substantial segment of the population can read, the production of enduring texts in the form of written scrolls and manuscripts generated increasing interest in the individual responsible for producing the work that was thus recorded. Many works in manuscript, however, circulated freely, and were often altered in transcriptions, with little regard to the intentions or formulations of the originator of the work.
2. The shift, in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, from a primarily manuscript culture to a primarily print culture. (See *book*.) The invention of printing greatly expedited the manufacture and dissemination of printed texts, and so multiplied the number of producers of literary works, and made financially important the specification of the identity and ability of an individual writer, in order to invite support for that individual by the contemporary system of aristocratic and noble patronage. Foucault, in addition, proposed the importance of a punitive function in fostering the concept of an author's responsibility in originating a work, which served the interests of the state in affixing on a particular individual the blame for transgressive or subversive ideas.
3. The emphasis in recent research on the difficulties in establishing, in various periods, just who was the originator of what parts of an existing literary text, which was often, in effect, the product of multiple collaborators, censors, editors, printers, and publishers, as well as of successive revisions by the reputed author. See *multiple authorship* under *textual criticism*.
4. The proliferation of middle-class readers in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the attendant explosion in the number of literary titles printed, and in the number of writers required to supply this market. Both Foucault and Barthes, in the essays cited above, emphasized that the modern figure of an author as an individual who is the intellectual owner of his or her literary product was the result of the *ideology* engendered by the emerging capitalist economy in this era. Other scholars have stressed the importance of the shift during the eighteenth century, first in England and then in other European countries, from a reliance by writers on literary patrons to that of support by payments from publishers and booksellers. A result of the booming literary market was the increasingly successful appeal by writers for copyright laws that would invest them, instead of the publisher, with the ownership of the works that they composed for public sale. These conditions of the literary marketplace fostered the claims by writers that they possessed originality, creativity, and genius, and so were able to produce literary works that were entirely new. They made such claims in order to establish their legal rights, as authors, to ownership of such productions as their "intellectual property," in addition to their rights (which they could sell to others) to the printed texts of their works as "material property." Historians of authorship point out that the most emphatic claims

about the genius, creativity, and originality of authors, which occurred in the *Romantic Period*, coincided with, and was interactive with, the success of authors in achieving some form of copyright protection of an author's proprietary rights to the literary work as the unique product of his or her native powers. (See Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright*, 1993; Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*, 1994; and the essays by various scholars in *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*, ed. Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi, 1994.)

Historicist scholars of authorship have succeeded in demonstrating that there has been a sustained interplay between the economic circumstances and institutional arrangements for producing and marketing literary texts and details in the conception of authorship, or in ideas associated with authorship. The radical further claim, however, that the modern figure and functions assigned to an author are in their essentials a recent formation, resulting from the distinctive conditions of the literary marketplace after the seventeenth century, does not jibe with historical evidence. Some two thousand years ago, for example, the Roman poet Horace wrote his verse-epistle, the *Ars Poetica*, at a time when books consisted of texts copied by hand in rolls of papyrus. (See the entry *book*.) Horace adverts to a number of individuals from Homer to his friend Virgil who, he makes clear, as individuals who conceived and brought their works into being, are responsible for having achieved their content, form, and quality. A competent literary author—Horace refers to him variously as *scriptor* (writer), *poeta* (maker), and *carminis auctor* (originator of a poem)—must possess a natural talent or genius (*ingenium*) as well as an acquired art, and purposefully designs and orders his *poema* in such a way as to evoke the emotions of his audience. The bookseller, Horace indicates, advertises his commodities locally and also ships them abroad. And if a published work succeeds in instructing and giving pleasure to a great many readers, it is a book that not only “makes money for the bookseller,” but also “crosses the sea and spreads to a distant age the fame of its author.” Clearly, Horace distinguishes between material and authorial, or intellectual, ownership, in that the author, even if he has no proprietary interest in a published book, retains the sole responsibility and credit for having accomplished the work that the text incorporates. (See M. H. Abrams, “What Is a Humanistic Criticism?” in *The Emperor Redressed: Critiquing Critical Theory*, ed. Dwight Eddins, 1995.)

Another revealing instance is provided by the publication of the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays in 1623. As writings intended for the commercial theater, Shakespeare's plays were a collaborative enterprise in which textual changes and insertions could be made by various hands at all stages of production; the resulting products were not Shakespeare's property, but that of his theatrical company. Furthermore, as Stephen Greenblatt remarks in the Introduction to *The Norton Shakespeare* (1997), there is no evidence that Shakespeare himself wanted to have his plays printed, or that he took any “interest in asserting authorial rights over a script,” or that he had any legal standing from which to claim such rights. Nonetheless, as Greenblatt points out, seven years after Shakespeare's death his

friends and fellow actors Heminges and Condell were confident that they could sell their expensive *folio* collection of his plays by virtue of the fact, as they claimed in a preface, that their printed texts were exactly “as he conceived them” and represented what he himself had “thought” and “uttered.” The identity of the conceiver of the plays, serving to attest to the authenticity of the printed versions, is graphically represented by an engraved portrait of Shakespeare by Martin Droeshout in the front matter. The First Folio also included a poem by Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s friend and dramatic rival, “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author Mr. William Shakespeare.” In it Jonson appraised Shakespeare as the equal of the Greek tragic dramatists Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles; lauded him as not only “The applause! delight! the wonder of our stage!” but also as an individual who, by the products of his innate abilities (“nature”) even more than his “art,” was “not of an age, but for all time!”; and asserted that his “well-turned” lines reflect the “mind, and manners” of the poet who had fathered them. It would seem that, in broad outline, the figure and functions of Horace’s “auctor” and of Jonson’s “author” were essentially what they are at the present time, in ordinary critical discourse.

See the entry *sociology of literature*. In addition to the items listed above, refer to Frederick G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Rome* (1951); A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (1984); Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (1993). Roger Chartier, in “Figures of the Author,” *The Order of Books* (1994), describes the diverse functions assigned to an individual author, from the late Middle Ages through the eighteenth century. For references to *author and authorship* in other entries, see pages 221, 281, 348.