Subjectivity and Women's Poetry in Early Modern England

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LYNETTE McGRATH
West Chester University of Pennsylvania, USA

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SUBJECTIVITY AND WOMEN'S POETRY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Combining the approaches of historical scholarship and post-structural, feminist psychoanalytic theory to women's poetry in the late 16th and early 17th-century, *Subjectivity and Women's Poetry in Early Modern England* makes a unique contribution to the field. It is the first full-length study to apply post-Lacanian French psychoanalytic theory exclusively to early modern women's poetry.

The strength of this study is that it merges analysis of socio-political constructions affecting early modern women poets writing in England with the psychoanalytic insights, specific to women as subjects, of post-Lacanian theorists Luce Irigaray, Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Rosi Braidotti. McGrath employs these psychoanalytic theories of linguistic subjectivity to discuss its production in poetry written by English women in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Her study offers a way to understand the psychological and material conditions and theoretical strategies of women's writerly opportunities as they were formulated and validated in their own textual testimonies. Because the social and political construction of the female body materially supports the sense of subjectivity which does or does not ease the way to writing, and because the always gendered ideology of literacy most closely impinges on women's writing potential, two chapters accumulate and analyze evidence of women's participation in the cultural construction of their bodies and their reading and writing.

Intensive readings of Isabella Whitney, Elizabeth Cary, and Aemilia Lanyer demonstrate the different means by which these poets, contributing to and immersed in bodily language constructions pertinent to the female writer, inscribed themselves as subjects in their poetic texts. Moving beyond the re-discovery and descriptive analyses of early modern women's texts, McGrath here attains a new level of sophisticated theoretical analysis of Renaissance Englishwomen's poetry.

This book is for

Alison, Felicity, and Emily,

for Nathaniel,

for my parents,

for my students, and

for the women of the New York Society for the Study of Women in the Renaissance.

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Some details of chapter 4 are used in an essay on 'Isabella Whitney and the Ideologies of Writing and Publication' in *Options for Teaching Early Modern Women Writers*, ed. Margaret Hannay and Susanne Woods, New York: MLA, 2000.

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Chapter 1

The Subject in the Margin. Women and Poetry in Early Modern England

When she hath spacious ground to walk upon,
Why on the ridge should she desire to go?
– Elizabeth Cary, *Mariam*, III.iii.221–222

I believe a unitary self is unnecessary, impossible, and a dangerous illusion. Only multiple subjects can invent ways to struggle against domination that will not merely recreate it.
– Jane Flax, *Disputed Subjects*, 93

Beginning with the acknowledgment that is also a ritual for scholars of early modern women's writing, I invoke the presence of an early twentieth-century woman musing on her Renaissance foremothers. Lecturing at Newnham and Girton Colleges in 1928, Virginia Woolf asked the question that became a challenge to those who followed her.[1] Why, she wondered, did no woman write 'a word of that extraordinary literature [of the English Renaissance] when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet' (43)? Although, Woolf declared, the image of woman burns like a 'beacon in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time' (44–45), paradoxically 'in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband' (46). Because they were prevented from writing their own histories, Woolf believed, 'nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century' (47). A mere glimpse of these women, 'whisking away into the background' (47), was all she could catch.

Thirty to forty years later, Ruth Kelso, Ruth Hughey, Alice Clark and Pearl Hogrefe launched what has by now grown into a full-scale commitment to represent more clearly the situation of women in the early modern period. As a result, the female half of England's population in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has acquired many familiar features.[2] Yet, both because the early modern period cared very much less about markers of individual authorship than we do, and also because Woolf's intuition of the hostile response to women's writing was largely accurate, disproportionately few of the documents which have supplied the narrative details

of women's lives and social construction in early modern England have come to us endorsed by women themselves.

Current, over-conservative estimates of English women's writing literacy, as distinct from their reading literacy, which was always higher, suggest a rise from 2–6 per cent at the beginning of the sixteenth century to 25–30 per cent at the end of the seventeenth century. Though the percentages for women grew steadily closer to those for men throughout this period, there were always significantly fewer women than men able to write.[3] As Woolf perceived, however, lower levels of writing literacy do not alone account for the comparatively limited number of surviving manuscripts and published texts attributable to women. Even women who could write were often specifically discouraged from imaginative creation, and the achievements of those who resisted this negative pressure were, because of a general social distaste for all publication and a particular disapproval of women's publication, not usually considered sufficiently valuable either to be made public or preserved.[4]

Even so, as extended research interests have encouraged the search for evidence of women's reading and writing, that evidence has presented itself in surprising quantity and quality. We now know that many women *did* contribute to that 'extraordinary' literary output of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that some accomplished the feat most disapproved of for women, that is, the writing and publication of poetry, the 'songs and sonnets' that Woolf believed to be the peculiar province of men.[5] As knowledge of early modern women's writing has deepened, an important variant of Woolf's still resonant question has broached itself, not asking 'how and why women were silenced' (Ezell, *Writing*, 43), but how and why they wrote. The aspect of this question that has stimulated this study is how women in early modern England who wrote original poetic verse managed to achieve this sophisticated and prohibited literary goal, and more particularly, how they inscribed themselves as psychological subjects in their poetically imaginative writing. The last half-century's contributions from both historians and literary critics have made this modification of Woolf's original question meaningful and the discussion I offer here possible.

Although surviving texts from ethnically and racially marginalized women's groups in early modern England are few,[6] and the number of retrieved documents from women in the lower classes, though growing, is still small, the list of 'middling-sort' and aristocratic and gentlewomen's texts, representing all genres and all possible ranges of literacy and manifesting the subtle gradations of historical privilege inherent in documented and preserved public language, continues to increase. This list includes the dramatic and lyric poetry on which the second half of my study concentrates, but also prose romances, women's petitions to Parliament, anti-male broadsheets, public speeches by middling-sort women, letters from serving maids, diaries, medical handbooks, religious testimonies and travel journals.

The number and variety of women's texts now available establish an essential reading context for early modern women's writing. Prior to the recent intense critical interest, read in a context of male writing those women's texts that *were* known appeared exceptional, and seemed to owe both their origins and their survival to

alliance with systems of patriarchy. Because she was Queen of England, for example, Elizabeth Tudor could justifiably make an authorial appearance in public speeches and in some formal poetry. Lady Mary Sidney, as Philip Sidney's sister, could come into print by continuing her brother's projected translation of the Psalms. Margaret More Roper, as the daughter of an admired and devout father, could acquire a writerly foothold in letters addressed to Sir Thomas More and in scholarly translations begun under his direction. These women's texts once seemed merely to imitate male conventions and language or respond to male directives and to be sanctioned by the upper levels of the culture. Their writers' gender at first *appeared* not highly important as a category of analysis, but I emphasize the 'seeming' of these perceptions because recent readings of these apparently conforming women's texts have persuasively argued the centrality of their gendered strategies.[7]

So, although the collection of recovered women's writing is not vast, it is substantial; awareness of its existence has altered our reading of early modern England and all its texts, familiar or newly rediscovered, written by men or by women. Especially in the post-modern critical context which led scholars interested in gender to seek them out in the first place, the richly various and newly accessible women's texts in the early modern period demand that readers now think carefully about the particular psychological and social construction of female writers, who, contrary to the dominant ideological proscriptions of their time and some theoretical assumptions of our own, did in fact inscribe their texts inside a culture which also inscribed them. Readers with feminist sympathies like myself know that a writer's gender matters crucially, always coloring what a consciously partisan reader,[8] speaking on behalf of the woman writer, will discover in a text.

In adopting this point of view, I am not at odds with early modern readers. Gender as a category of writing, of what Michel Foucault calls the 'author-function'[9] ('What is an Author?'), and as a category of reading, or analysis,[10] has asserted its vital importance for readers of early modern England, at least in part because it was of such moment in the literary theories of what we call the English 'Renaissance' itself, and especially in theories of poetry. Philip Sidney's influential *Apology for Poetry* (1595), in particular, assigns the noble manifestations of poetry to men, not women; gendered language underlines this attribution throughout his text: 'Poetry is of all human learning the most ancient and of most fatherly antiquity' (120), 'not being an art of lies, but of true doctrine; not of effeminateness, but of notable stirring of courage, not of abusing man's wit but of strengthening man's wit' (130). It is '*his* sweet charming force' (my emphasis) that 'can do more hurt than any other army of words' (125). Hostile 'poet-whippers,' on the other hand, are like hypochondriacal 'good women, who are often sick, but in faith they cannot tell where' (120). Poetry is only corrupted by 'that honey-flowing matron Eloquence, appareled, or rather disguised, in a courtesan-like painted affectation' (138).

In the literary codes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (as, indeed, before and after),[11] though the muse of poetry may be female, its proper practitioners and expert disciplinarians are male.[12] In fact, although the lurking classical female muse

encourages Sidney at one rhetorically useful moment early in his defense to conflate poetry with its female nurse-muse (96), generously and bountifully feeding the suckling male poet with inspiration, the proper poet transforms this inspirational manna away from 'effeminateness,' to the stronger 'man's wit' and thus finally to 'tougher knowledges.' It is the inaccurate, derisory characterizations, produced by the mistaken *enemies* of poetry (from whom Sidney would rescue a nobler, male-infused version), that depict poetry as female – 'the mother of lies,' 'the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires, with a siren's sweetness drawing the mind to the serpent's tale of sinful fancy' (123).

Passing from theory to the practices of reading and writing further confirms the exile of the socially-approved woman from the world of poetry.[13] Juan Luis Vives (1529) forbids women from reading 'songs' and certainly from writing them, and proffers instead as acceptable reading matter the writing samples of 'wise and sad men' (Bk. 1, ch. 5). George Puttenham (1589) worries about the 'poesies and devises of Ladies and Gentlewomen-makers, whom we would not have too precise poets lest with their shrewd wits, when they were married they might become a little too fantastical wives' (*The Art of English Poesie*). On the same grounds, Sir John Harington was amazed that Philip's sister Mary Sidney could have written her poetic *Psalms* because it 'was more then a woman's skill to expresse the sence so right as she hath done in her vearse' (I, 173) and Mary Sidney's niece, Mary Wroth, was publicly chastised as an androgynous 'hermaphrodite'[14] for writing an unfeminine secular sonnet sequence.

Indeed, a woman writing poetry, says Ben Jonson, must, like her classical Sapphic forerunner, publicly enact a 'tribadic lust,' by forcibly raping the female muse and moving outside the control of heterosexuality ('An Epigram on the Court Pucell'). Even if they remain lovers of men, says Thomas Salter, women who learn to be 'connyng and skillful writers of Ditties, Sonnetes, Epigrams, and Ballades' will be 'subtile and shamelesse Lovers' (sig. C1v). Thomas Heywood associates women poets with witchcraft (*Nine Books of Various History*, bk 8). Translation might be acceptable for women; original imaginative writing was reserved for men.[15] 'I like not a female Poetesse at any hand,' says Thomas Powell flatly in 1631. Even so-called 'feminine' rhymes, with their final unstressed syllables, are regarded by Samuel Daniel (1602) as 'fittest' for unserious 'Ditties,' while serious poetry like his own 'Poem of the Civill Warres' employs masculine rhyme (43).

I wish, then, to address the conundrum that lies at the root of all studies of early modern Englishwomen's writing. In a culture so vehemently antagonistic to women's writing, which constructed a woman writing as a social and sexual threat, what made it possible for women to write at all?[16] This book undertakes to answer a more specific version of this question: in a literary culture which emphatically gendered 'poetics' as the domain of men and declared it taboo for women, what social and psychological processes structured some women's writerly subjectivity in such a way as to let them invade even this specially prohibited and heavily guarded territory?

My study focuses on three women, Isabella Whitney, Elizabeth Cary and Aemilia Lanyer, who stepped over the boundaries of gendered and generic constraint that sought to exile them from poetic practice. It also offers a way to understand the psychological and material conditions and theoretical strategies of their out-of-character writerly opportunities as they were validated in their own, and other women's, textual testimonies. Because the social and political construction of the female body tangibly supports the sense of self which does or does not ease the way to writing, and because the always gendered ideology of literacy most closely impinges on women's writing potential, the second and third chapters of this study examine the textual construction of women's bodies and of their literacy from the middle of the sixteenth to the end of the seventeenth century. Some of the texts I refer to precede the publication dates of Whitney, Cary and Lanyer, and some follow. I am not arguing, however, immediate causal influence from the socio-psychological constructions of women's bodies and literacy to the poems of these three, but rather am establishing an ideological and textual atmosphere in which Whitney, Cary and Lanyer, in their different ways, participated. In these chapters, I build what I consider to be an essential backdrop from women's own textual contributions to a process of self-imaging.

Lacking this part of the story, we may, like Woolf, too easily underestimate women's capacity to influence their own cultural roles. Persuaded by the message of the dominant culture, we may find ourselves accepting as determinative the depictions of early modern women as silent, closeted, private persons confined to the boundaried mental and physical spaces of the home. But wishful male prescriptions of women's seclusion, and some women's idealized representations of their conformity to these prescriptions, other women rewrote resistingly and obliquely in poetic codes, as well as more directly in journals and diaries.

To name only a few rewriters of the dominant formulation, Mary Boyle Rich, Lady Grace Mildmay, Anne Halkett and Alice Thornton tell alternative stories of women moving frequently and independently out of their domestic spaces for a variety of purposes, including caring for the health of others, visiting family or attending to economic or business concerns. Many women poets, including Whitney, Cary and Lanyer, as well as others like Mary Wroth, Anne Bradstreet and Katherine Philips, in flights of narrative, dramatic and poetic imagination, journeyed far from their domestic hearths. It is surely not mere coincidence that among the women who wrote poetry in this period, a substantial number also separated themselves, or were separated by circumstance, physically as well as imaginatively, from a conventional domestic environment.

In the second half of this study, I read the poetic texts of three women in order to understand how some women in early modern England both fashioned themselves and were fashioned by their culture as writing subjects – finding their textual power, out of the norm, in the 'literary' forms of poetry and poetic drama. Their strategies are different, not the same, a point that suggests genuine subjectivity, not a dictated re-creation or simplified imitation of permissible roles or sanctioned models. Assuming

that the process of writing itself partially constructs 'author function,' I offer a view of what that variable function looks like in the three different cases of Isabella Whitney, Elizabeth Cary and Aemilia Lanyer, where it is specifically represented as female and poetic at the turning point from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, at the moment of mixed transition and opportunity from oral to print culture, from manuscript to published circulation.

Concerned as I am with the practice of poetry, my attention in this volume is directed to the educationally or socially advantaged women whose circumstances made it possible to write in this genre. Where social position or educational accomplishment provided this incentive, it did not, however, as Margaret Ezell puts it, 'pull whatever fangs these ladies might have dared to show' (*Writing*, 50). Nor did their rank or learning ensure their co-option by patriarchal values. Women in other situations surely found different ways to constitute themselves as subjects of their experience,[17] but for those women who were able to engage in the complex processes of poetic writing, the oblique and formalized practice of poetry was a peculiarly effective means to subjective inscription and of resistance to obliterating objectification.

Women in early modern England, as in other historical moments, were surely neither helpless victims of patriarchal ideology nor exceptional victors over its authority. Like men, who were largely responsible for the design of power, women were required to respond to the demands of power, but they were also able to find a space, insecure though it may have been, within which to encode their resistance to the power that coerced them. In searching for and defining this subjective space as it manifests itself in poetry, I endorse Judith Newton's view that women's history can more profitably be seen as a process of resistant struggle and creative accommodation to social conditions and cultural forms than as a tragic story of inevitable suffering ('Making – and Remaking – History'). This complex process of struggle and accommodation is textually confirmed by early modern women in the two modes examined in the following chapters:

1 in women's own comments on their position within two worlds of male-directed discourse having specific and powerful impact on women's writing subjectivity: literacy, and representations of the female body; and
2 in the poetic texts themselves, including those examined closely here: Isabella Whitney's poetic collections, Elizabeth Cary's *Mariam*, and Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum.*

At this point I need to acknowledge that my approach to early modern women is attended by my own cultural preconceptions. The questions I ask about these women come out of the curiosity I feel about the similarities and differences that exist between them and me. There are, I assume, certain culturally determined responses that many women, regarded as a group or class, are likely to share with each other within a single cultural moment and perhaps even from one historical moment to

another. If, as Robert Weimann suggests, a text is a product of its culture and therefore mimetic, it is also a producer of subsequent cultures and therefore affective. When I approach an early modern woman's text, therefore, I do so along the path where that text, acting as producer, has written into my culture familiar signposts pointing to women's ways of perceiving that will help me read the earlier text. I also need to record the recognized differences with all the sympathetic interpretive skills I have at hand, for, of course, the whole 'value of studying the past is (not only) to find someone or something with which to identify' (Ezell, *Writing*, 27).

None of this means that I essentialize women, or that I assume that all women's experiences are the same, or that there is an ontologically identified entity, 'woman,' that can be precisely defined. On the contrary, I am suspicious of such doctrines and I approach the 'reality of women's experience' warily.[18] I agree with Denise Riley that in studying the past, 'both a concentration on and a refusal of the identity of "women" are essential' to feminist reading (1). I choose not to search for an illusory 'authentic' women's voice and self, but still, like Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss, accept the need to 'explore the ways in which women's writings generate and negotiate speaking-positions in discourse' (3). For, as Rosi Braidotti points out, 'although the subject "woman" is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all' (4), one must still *speak* as a woman. To focus on the embodied, speaking, historically situated woman is, in fact, a 'radical rejection of essentialism' (Braidotti, 4).

Furthermore, although indebted to their invaluable work, I am not myself a material, descriptive historian; I rely heavily on informed interpretation and theory as modes of access to textual culture. My method is eclectic, combining feminist, new historicist, psychoanalytic and deconstructionist analyses. I accept that the cultural and linguistic constructions that control what we believe about ourselves are inextricably tied to what we are able to do. I think that the construction of texts through writing and reading is also the most powerful means of constructing events.[19] This being the case, the examination of women's own texts becomes all the more crucial. In this study I privilege texts by women because they enact a particular form of gendered textual negotiation with their culture and with the possibility of linguistic subjectivity; these texts sometimes agree with, but often illuminatingly alter, the partial view of women's cultural potential and positionality inscribed in desirous, angry or authoritarian male constructions. I therefore accept for their strategic usefulness, and with some qualifications, the three conditions listed by Margaret Miles as necessary, not, I would emphasize, for a 'perfect' or 'complete,' but for an adequate, cultural representation of women: 1) 'adequate representation of women must be [I would prefer to say include and privilege] self-representation'; 2) this 'work of self-representation must occur ... in the institutions and arenas in which the discourse that both reflects and shapes society takes place'; and 3) the adequate representation of women requires 'a collective voice' (170–171) – not always in harmony, but still engaged in productive conversation.

In this work, therefore: 1) I have relied heavily on what early modern women's texts have to say about the circumstances that affected their writing; 2) I have allowed

this material to form a backdrop against which I place for examination a set of socially institutionalized, because published, examples of women's poetry; and 3) I have been interested in what perhaps can be styled a 'collective voice,' which states the same recurring concerns and offers alternative modes of self-representation arising out of women's frequently congenial, though sometimes disputatious communities. As that anomalous creation, a feminist literary scholar trained in androcentric Australian and American universities in the second half of the twentieth century, I am enthralled by the problem of women's linguistic agency – both my own problem and the problem of other women. But perhaps it is not a problem at all – rather an invitation to understand how women speak through ideological and linguistic systems that seem to prohibit their speech, but do not, in the end, succeed in doing so.

The Subject

The early modern period in England expended much energy both in defining gender ideology and sexual difference[20] and in projecting oppositional and hierarchical difference onto oversimplified gender difference. In this period women were inscribed by the dominant discourse as not only marginal to social and political power but as specifically marginal to the production of public discourse itself. Women's historically restricted access to language in its publicly influential conventions has been seen, especially by recent feminist psychoanalytic theorists, as requiring the invention by women of a different, uniquely female language in which to formulate their own desire. Far from acknowledging this need, Renaissance gender ideology disparagingly equated the eloquent woman with a whore; the woman whose voice was available to a public audience was also seen as a woman whose body was publicly accessible. A popular translation of an Italian text (1615) announces that 'A Maide that hath a lewd tongue in her head, / Worse then if she were found with a Man in bed' (Varchi, 205).

Female 'sexual and corporeal metaphors' were frequently 'embedded in the presentation of texts for the public audience' (Wall, 41) in a process which commodified both texts and women (48). On the one hand, women's sexual desire was seen as voracious and associated with the desire for language and, on the other, women's expressed desire for language was often reconstructed in male formulations as unreasonable sexual desire.[21] A metaphoric conjunction theoretically elaborated in our own time by Luce Irigaray as an indicator of women's power, but deeply entrenched in the ideology of the early modern period as a sign of their fearsome asocial nature, supplied women with two mouths – both hungry. Social and legal prohibitions and ideological formulations were devised to control both: 'Women writers had to stay the threat of a double 'fall' (both sexual and social) when they chose to wander transgressively into the literary marketplace' (Wall 339).

Stephanie Jed goes so far as to argue that the whole humanist project of reviving and interpreting the texts of classical Greece and Rome may be analogized to the