A COMPANION TO

EARLY MODERN WOMEN'S WRITING

EDITED BY **ANITA PACHECO**

Blackwell Publishing

A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

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Blackwell
Publishing

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2002 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd
First published in paperback 2008 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2008

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-631-21702-2 (hbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4051-7611-8 (pbk : alk. paper)

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 11 on 13 pt Garamond 3
by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by T. J. International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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For my mother

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Introduction

Anita Pacheco

The study of early modern women's writing is a relatively new academic field, and its emergence has been characterized by a sustained and rigorous examination of the premises of feminist literary history. In the 1970s, as poststructuralism became a force to be reckoned with in the academy, the early work on women's writing by critics like Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar came under increasingly heavy fire. The charges levelled against them are by now familiar: in treating women writers as the coherent, controlling origins of textual meaning, these critics were peddling humanist conceptions of authorship and selfhood that were both outmoded and politically retrograde. How, it was asked, could academic feminism hope to profit from the adoption of a model of the author spawned by bourgeois patriarchy and instrumental in the creation of a male-dominated literary canon?

Poststructuralism, in accordance with Roland Barthes's claim that 'it is language that speaks, not the author' (Barthes 1977: 209), pronounced the author dead, and in so far as his demise signalled the weakening of an exclusionary canon, it could only be greeted with a sigh of relief by feminist critics. But the poststructuralist dismissal of authorial signature obviously posed problems for the study of women authors, which it seemed necessarily to discredit as an academic enterprise. Indeed, under the influence of poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, some French feminist theorists called into question the political usefulness of privileging women's writing as an object of study; for if all language was inevitably tainted by patriarchy, what mattered was not the biological sex of the author but whether or not a piece of writing contained traces of the 'feminine': the pre-oedipal realm of infancy, dominated by the mother and repressed upon the child's entry into the symbolic order.

For feminist critics committed to the recovery and study of women's writing, the indifference of some French feminist theorists to female authors seemed at the very

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least politically complacent. As Janet Todd put it in 1988 in her book *Feminist Literary History*:

> The long tradition of actual female writing which it has been the business of American historical feminist criticism to recover is ignored. . . . French-influenced critics . . . make no effort to remake or shake the canon, and it appears that theory can substitute for reading female writers of the past; 'reading woman' takes over from reading women. (Todd 1988: 78)

Underneath Todd's exasperation with French feminism lay two related assumptions: that women and other social groups traditionally excluded from or marginalized by literary studies deserve a voice, and that to kill off the author is to ensure their continued silence. Todd had no truck with the naive humanism of some of the pioneers of feminist literary history, but neither did she want the history of women's writing to be consigned to oblivion at the very moment that it was beginning to make itself known. Many feminist critics of women's writing shared Todd's desire to preserve the author without reverting to liberal humanist notions of the free and self-determining individual on which it had hitherto been based. While accepting the poststructuralist dictum that there is no nature outside culture, these critics argued as well that the cultures that create us are 'neither seamless wholes nor swallowed whole' (Jones 1990: 2); that the tensions and instabilities built into them create the conditions for social struggle and change; that within the limits set by the dominant groups, there is room for manoeuvre and resistance by subordinate groups. The female author, by this account, would be read not as an autonomous 'great writer' but as a product of history who was also an agent, capable of negotiating her marginal position and of intervening creatively in a masculine discursive system.

Yet poststructuralist thought also raised searching questions about the nature of historical enquiry. Suddenly, the past seemed a very distant land, the lives and experiences of its inhabitants available to us only in the form of representations that we inevitably interpret through the filter of our own values and preconceptions. In the face of such limitations, it seemed wise at least to acknowledge the 'interestedness' of the stories we construct about the past, and the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a widespread interrogation of the critical agendas and historiographical assumptions that had shaped the study of women's writing. Much of the early work in the field had been either ahistorical, looking at women writers almost entirely in terms of their gender and so effectively detaching them from their social and cultural contexts, or had adapted a traditional linear model of history to its feminist ends, locating in the history of women's writing a steady progression of feminist sensibilities. As a guiding principle of women's literary history, this evolutionary feminism now seems ill-suited to pre-1700 women writers, who either looked unappealing alongside their more 'enlightened' successors or were airbrushed into early but reassuringly recognizable versions of ourselves. The point here is not that there are no critical perspectives on

women's subordination in early modern women's texts, rather that readings of them need to be properly historicized. As Susanne Woods points out in her essay on Aemilia Lanyer in this volume, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) offers a 'woman-centred' rewriting of Christ's passion, but the text's 'proto-feminism' should be seen in relation to the Jacobean patronage system and Lanyer's plea for 'the attention and favours of higher-born patronesses'.

Feminist literary historians were increasingly criticized for offering insufficiently historicized readings of early women's texts, for trying to establish 'continuities and identities between past and present that bully the past and its literature out of their specificity and materiality' (Todd 1988: 97). This critique led to the questioning of many of the most well-established historical 'facts' of women's writing before 1700: that there were few women writing during this period; that those who did were 'rare and eccentric creatures' (Ezell 1993: 42), usually of aristocratic or at least upper-class birth; and that the scarcity of women writers in early modern Britain was due to the overwhelmingly oppressive power of patriarchal ideologies. Thanks to the research of scholars and literary historians like Margaret J. M. Ezell, Elaine Hobby, Hilary Hinds, Wendy Wall, Margaret Ferguson and many others, we have been able significantly to revise this reconstruction of the past, and to recognize the extent to which it derived from notions of literature as a commercial enterprise and of the author as a professional who wrote for profit in the medium of print – notions that are far more appropriate to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than to the sixteenth and seventeenth. This imposition of a modern conception of the author on to the early modern era obscured the characteristics of authorship in 'a pre-professional literary environment' where to publish was 'the exception for both men and women' (Ezell 1993: 34). Coupled with a narrow view of literature as the traditional canonical genres of poetry, drama and fiction, this preoccupation with publication and commercialism led feminist literary historians to overlook or ignore the significant numbers of women of different classes who were involved in coterie literature and manuscript circulation, and who wrote for an audience (though not for profit) in a wide variety of genres: letters, diaries, prophecies, advice books, religious treatises, as well as more traditional 'literary' genres.

In her essay in this volume on 'Women and Writing', Margaret J. M. Ezell delineates a vibrant pre-1700 literary culture that was based at least as much on social interaction as on solitary endeavour and that encompassed such disparate cultural practices as the reading and writing circles that formed an integral part of domestic life for elite women; the popular tradition of exchanging verses; the creation of commonplace books that often registered a plurality of hands and voices; and the political petitions and appeals compiled by Quaker women, as well as the professionalism that became more common in the latter half of the seventeenth century. This book aims to familiarize its readers with this lively, diverse and widespread female literary culture and to bring together the work of many of the literary critics and historians who have been instrumental in its recovery. It is designed to convey the remarkable

extent of women's textual production in early modern England, as well as the generic variety of their writings. It also seeks to situate those writings in their social and cultural contexts and in so doing to provide accounts from different historical perspectives of women's participation in and contributions to early modern culture and society. On this level, Part One of the book, 'Contexts', reveals a broad consensus among literary, social and cultural historians of early modern women. In her essay, Margaret Ezell observes that while early modern England was unquestionably a patriarchal and hierarchical society, 'the oft-cited injunction that women should be chaste, silent and obedient and confine their creative work to needles and threads . . . can no longer be taken as an accurate delineation of women's participation in early modern literary culture'. The gap Ezell notes between patriarchal decrees and actual practice appears in varying forms in each of the 'Context' chapters. Kenneth Charlton's chapter on 'Women and Education' contrasts the limited educational opportunities available even to elite women with the extensive role upper- and middle-class women played as educators within the family. Diane Willen, looking at Puritan women of elite and middling status in pre-revolutionary England, finds that their Protestant faith simultaneously reinforced oppressive constructions of femininity and legitimized their adoption of active spiritual roles within their communities. In his chapter on 'Women, Property and Law' Tim Stretton points out that a legal system that seriously disadvantaged women and restricted their access to property did not in fact prevent them either from going to law 'in their thousands' or from owning and controlling considerably more property than has hitherto been recognized. Sara H. Mendelson traces the long, demanding and highly resourceful working lives conducted by poor, middling and elite women in a society which denied all women a professional work identity.

The aim of these social and cultural historians is not to question the existence of patriarchal oppression but to capture something of the complexity of women's position in a society where practice did not always adhere to prescription, where there might be substantial variation in women's experiences of male domination, and where women were able both to resist social pressures and constraints and to make the most of the limited opportunities their society often unwittingly afforded them.

Part Two, 'Readings', presents critical introductions to ten major texts by early modern women in a variety of genres: poetry, prose romance, tragic drama, comedy, autobiography, prophecy, political polemic, and translation. Part Three, 'Genres', provides extended coverage of autobiography, defences of women, prophecy, poetry, prose fiction and drama. This section is designed to give readers a clear sense of the number and range of women who were writing in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The authors represented in Part Two are probably the best-known and most frequently studied figures in the field, and a significant number of them either belonged to the upper ranks of society or were royalists or both. While it is debatable whether any of them, with the exception of Aphra Behn, could be called 'canonical' writers, it is nonetheless important to supplement their texts with the work

of less familiar but equally significant writers and to avoid perpetuating a narrow and exclusionary 'canon' that silences other women authors of this period, many of whom came from lower social ranks or held radical political beliefs. Many also wrote in non-canonical genres, and it is hoped that the genre chapters will serve to underline the need for a broader understanding of what constitutes 'literature' in the early modern period. As Elaine Hobby points out in her chapter on 'Prophecy', there were over 300 women prophets in England during the seventeenth century, which arguably makes prophecy 'the single most important genre for women in the early modern period'. The broad generic categories covered in this section in fact encompass numerous sub-genres. Sheila Ottway's chapter on 'Autobiography', for example, looks in some detail at diaries and mothers' advice books, both popular forms of writing for women in this period. Mothers' advice books in particular have recently attracted considerable scholarly interest; they figure prominently not only in Sheila Ottway's essay but also in Diane Willen's chapter on religion, where they exemplify the capacity of Christianity to create a space for women to construct and affirm their identities, in this instance by taking on responsibility for the spiritual education of their families.

Translation is generally recognized as playing a vital role in the establishment of early modern female literary culture. While there is not a separate chapter devoted to translation in this volume, it is the central focus of Debra Rienstra's essay on Mary Sidney's *Psalmes* in Part Two, and its importance is registered by numerous other contributors, including Kenneth Charlton, Bronwen Price, Sophie Tomlinson and Paul Salzman. Women's extensive involvement in translation, especially of biblical and religious texts, is often explained on the grounds that a mode of writing that was at once devotional and second hand would have been a 'safe' literary venture for women. Both Debra Rienstra and Bronwen Price suggest that translation's appeal for early modern women may be more complicated than this view allows. Rienstra reminds us that in a period in which imitation was a central principle of poetic composition, translation was highly valued as a form of artistic endeavour. Both critics also stress that Sidney's *Psalmes* are notable not for their decorous self-effacement but for their startling technical virtuosity.

In Part Four, 'Issues and Debates', readers will find in-depth consideration of two of the major challenges facing the field of early modern women's writing: the canon and feminist historiography. As we have seen, the canon has always posed problems for the study of women writers, and in her essay 'The Work of Women in the Age of Electronic Reproduction', Melinda Alliker Rabb presents a thought-provoking review of the difficulties that trouble both integrationist and separatist approaches. More worryingly, she concludes that early modern women's writing remains a marginal academic field due to 'the powerfully restrictive intellectual systems that govern postmodern interpretive communities'. In Rabb's view, so entrenched are 'the fixed systems of valuation and comprehension' deriving from the conventions of print culture, that they continue to devalue the texts produced in the largely pre-professional literary world documented in this book. Rabb is nonetheless optimistic about the

future of the field. What we need are new ways of reading and responding to the written word, and these, she argues, may prove to be timely by-products of e-culture. Databases like *The Brown University Women Writers Project* and *The Perdita Project*, based at Nottingham Trent University, are already making early modern women's texts available in a form free of the interventions of anthology editors. Perhaps more importantly, the worldwide web may encourage modes of reading, writing and interpretation more akin to the practices of early modern manuscript culture.

Margo Hendricks also stresses the need for new ways of reading. Her chapter on 'Feminist Historiography' addresses a problem that has dogged feminist history, literary and otherwise, since its inception: the tendency to treat women of the past as if they belonged to a homogeneous subculture; as if they all shared precisely the same set of experiences regardless of other determinants of identity such as class, ethnicity and sexuality. This kind of historical writing works to privilege as 'normative' the experiences of the middle- and upper-class Englishwomen whose histories are most visible to us. While Hendricks acknowledges the progress feminist historians have made in recognizing and rejecting 'the universal woman model', she argues convincingly that there remain too many histories that portray early modern England as 'homogeneous and white' and that collapse women of different classes into the single category of 'Early Modern Woman'. She calls for more archival research in order to make visible the full range of women living in Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and urges that we read the archival records in ways that do not simply confirm our own preconceptions; that we ask not only what they reveal but also what they conceal and attempt to make sense of both.

It is hoped that this book will contribute to the development of a feminist historiography that is 'truly representative of "women's histories"' (Hendricks, this volume). Much more work needs to be done, of course, especially on the non-elite and non-European women who leave fewer traces in a historical record biased in favour of the gentry and aristocracy. But in the pages that follow readers will discover something of the diversity of women's lives and writings in early modern England. They will also encounter some of the opportunities for agency available to many women of the period. One of the major 'recurring themes' of the book is the enormous importance of religion in the lives of early modern women of different classes, for whom it offered not only spiritual consolation but also an entry into the public domain. Diane Willen's study of the Puritan community of Caroline England, Hilary Hinds's essay on *Anna Trapnel's Report and Plea* and Elaine Hobby's discussion of prophecy are just a few of the chapters that serve to remind us that in early modern England religion was a political issue. By serving God many Englishwomen adopted a political role as well; as Diane Willen succinctly puts it, 'godliness abetted politicization'. Numerous texts discussed in this volume register women's interventions in the political conflicts and debates of the period, often (though not always) from a religious perspective: from the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel to the royalist Margaret Cavendish to the High Church Tory Mary Astell.

This book also helps to illuminate the close connection between women's writing and their reading. The popularity of the commonplace book during this period illustrates the extent to which reading and writing were inseparable activities for the small portion of the population who could write as well as read; women and men copied out and collected passages from their reading and in doing so created books of their own. Patricia Brace reads the non-aristocratic Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosegay* as a poetic text rooted in this conception of reading as a kind of transformative gathering of textual fragments. Elaine Beilin reveals the intimate connection between the aristocratic Elizabeth Cary's reading and her writing by discussing *The Tragedy of Mariam* in relation to Lucy Cary's account, in *The Lady Falkland: Her Life* (1645), of her mother's extensive reading of history.

Much of women's reading and writing took place in social settings, and the contributors to this book offer us numerous glimpses of a range of early modern women in a variety of social literary environments: Mary Sidney reading and writing with her brother Philip before his death, and later circulating her translation of the *Psalmes* in manuscript among her Wilton coterie; Quaker women in the 1650s composing prophecies collectively, often from prison; upper-class women writing plays 'intended both for reading and performance within their families, or within circles defined by kinship and political alliances' (Tomlinson, this volume), to name but a few. These women, as Margaret Ezell emphasizes, did not seem to need 'a room of their own' in which to read and write and reflect, and this book reveals how fully they participated in their social and cultural world and the skill with which they located spaces in which their voices could be heard.

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