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978-0-521-05649-6 - Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England

Eve Rachele Sanders

Excerpt

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1 On his breast writ

Enter an Anticke habited in Parchment Indentures, Bills, Bonds, Waxe Seales, and Pen, and Inkhornes, on his breast writ, I am a Scrivener. Dances a straine, and stands right before him.

Enter dauncing another streine, on written o're his breast, I am a Knave. Stands as the other.

Enter a third with this word, I am a Prodigall.

Enter a fourth with this, I am a Beggar.

Enter a fifth with this, I am a Puritan.

Enter a sixth with this, I am a Whore.

Enter a seventh with money Bagges, and this Motto, I am an Usurer.

Enter an eighth with this, I am a Divell.¹

Following the Reformation, men and women were taught to learn and communicate in ways that fostered new differences between them. This book investigates how the acquisition of literacy contributed to the formation of gender identities in early modern England and how the public theatre intervened in that process. In the wake of humanist and religious reform, literacy spread through defined channels in ways that reinforced social distinctions.² Knowledge of reading and writing was not distributed uniformly between any groups in the population at large. In every country, literacy rates varied between cities and rural districts, between Protestants and Catholics, between native speakers of the dominant language and speakers of regional languages or dialects, between different social classes, between different occupations, between different ethnic groups, and between different regions. But the most “glaring” inequality was between men and women: “everywhere the male literacy rate is higher than the female, with a gap between the two as high as 25 or 30 percent.”³

Not only did men and women acquire literacy at different rates during this period; the specific practices of expression and interpretation in which each was instructed were designed to form them as male and female subjects: “The purpose of education was to train men and women to be appropriately different from one another.”⁴ Acts of reading and

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writing became sexualized, expressions of a woman's virtue (or shamelessness) and of a man's virility (or effeminacy), and they became sex-specific, indicators of the relative status of men and women, with different levels and forms of literacy assigned to each. Richard Mulcaster, headmaster of the Merchant Taylors' School, writes in *The Training up of Children* (1581) that separate programs of instruction were justified by differences in men's and women's roles: "Our owne traine is without restraint for either matter or maner, bycause our employment is so generall in all thinges: theirs is within limit, and so must their traine be."⁵ Like Shakespeare's Hamlet and Ophelia, both men and women in early modern England were literate; however, the languages and scripts they learned, the kinds of books to which they had access, and the reading habits they cultivated helped to engender new and profoundly different forms of subjectivity. It was not practical skills alone that were being taught. Sex-specific methods of reading and writing, humanists believed, would bring subjects to pattern themselves after humanist models of the gendered self. For Jacques Du Bosq, the explicit aim of his *Complete Woman* (1639) is to mold female readers into the perfect subject implied by the title of his treatise: "To enkindle within their hearts a longing to become like so goodly an Image, and by this meanes insensibly to oblige them to a change of life, and to reforme themselves according to this modell."⁶ The assumption was that individuals could be brought to internalize paradigms of exemplary masculinity or femininity by reading a book or copying an aphorism.⁷

The desire to imprint subjects through education with the models and values of humanist culture, to reform society by shaping the individual's inner being, led sixteenth-century pedagogues to develop techniques of self-formation that twentieth-century social theorists would later rediscover and highlight in formulations of the structural underpinnings of modern subjectivity. In his work on early modern court society, Norbert Elias describes the history of the modern subject as a process of interaction between the individual and society through which both are formed; the evolution of the individual involves autonomous action as well as social patterning. "What is shaped by society," Elias comments, "also shapes in its turn . . . [T]he individual is both coin and die at the same time."⁸ Echoing Elias as well as Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Montrose asserts that subjects exist in dynamic relation to the societies in which they live, that both structure and agency are critical to an understanding of the subject: "The possibilities for action are always socially and historically situated, always limited and limiting. Nevertheless, collective structures may enable as well as constrain individual agency; and they may be potentially enabling precisely when

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they are experienced by the subject as multiple, heterogeneous, and even contradictory in their imperatives.”⁹

To say that subjectivity is socially situated as Montrose does is not to say that it is conceived and imposed from above. It is to say that paradigms, practices, and forms of interiority evolve in societies, enmeshed in divisions between asymmetrically positioned groups, in short, through conflict and confrontation.¹⁰ The possibilities for action available to individuals, to differing degrees depending on their gender, class, ethnicity, and circumstances, include appropriating self-fashioning techniques for ends for which they were not originally intended. “The tactics of consumption,” Michel de Certeau observes, “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices.”¹¹ Reading and writing, two such everyday practices, could be used both for reinforcing conformity and for improvising disruption. The teaching of specific modes of expression and interpretation helped to create systematic differences between men and women but also created openings for inventive contestation.

The conceptual shift that I posit, this new linkage of gender and literacy, does not signal the end or beginning of a golden age. It does not fit neatly into any of the three accounts of the transition between medieval and early modern times that have dominated discussions of women’s relative status in the two periods: darkness to light (Jacob Burckhardt), light to darkness (Joan Kelly-Gadol), or uninterrupted darkness (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar).¹² For my purposes, a more precise formulation of what changed in the sixteenth century is that offered by Margaret Ferguson: “If women did not have a Renaissance, they did at least have a Reformation.”¹³ In contrast to “Renaissance,” a term with broad celebratory connotations, the term “Reformation” (like its analogue “Counter-Reformation”) calls to mind specific cultural and institutional changes, implemented differently depending on the country and region, and affecting both sexes and all classes; the term also leaves room for a critical consideration of the impact, positive and negative, uneven and contradictory, of those changes on groups and individuals. Differences between medieval and early modern society, as Tessa Watt cautions, resist simplification, for “the culture could absorb new beliefs while retaining old ones, could modify doctrines, could accommodate words and icons, ambiguities and contradictions.”¹⁴ Broad-based social transformation, in sixteenth-century England as in other places, occurred subtly and over time, through conflicts over resources and positions, countless localized skirmishes whose outcomes were uncertain and variable.

Didactic texts from this period, sermons, conduct manuals, and educational treatises, show how humanist efforts to institute dual programs of



Fig. 1. The English Gentleman. Richard Brathwait, *The English Gentleman* (1630; rpt. London, 1633).

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Fig. 2. The English Gentlewoman. Richard Brathwait, *The English Gentlewoman* (London, 1631).

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literacy instruction fit within a larger project of social regulation based upon partitioning all activities and domains according to sex. Like Thomas Hoby's translation of *The Courtier* (1561), which included two separate appendices at the back of the book, the first an exhaustive list of "the chiefe conditions and qualities in a courtier" and the second a somewhat shorter list of the "chief conditions and qualities in a wayting gentylwoman," Richard Brathwait's companion volumes *The English Gentleman* (1630) and *The English Gentlewoman* (1631) put in relief the discrepancy between male and female subjects.¹⁵ *The English Gentleman* begins with a page of eight tableau-like pictures (captioned in Latin) of the prototypical English gentleman, *The English Gentlewoman* with eight comparable images (captioned in English) of the English gentlewoman (figs. 1 and 2). Half of the small pictures of her show a female figure sitting in a chair alone in a windowless room; the others, except for a view of heaven, and a garden, also depict indoor scenes. Her surroundings are characterized largely by the drapes and tapestries that hang from the walls and ceiling. By contrast, the pictures of her male cohort include images of mountains, trees, sky, houses, digging implements, a ship, a horse, and a bird in flight. The use of these eight small pictures at the beginning of each book, complemented by similarities in their organization, sets up a parallel between the male and female subject in order to make disparities between them more conspicuously visible. While none of the illustrations of various masculine activities in *The English Gentleman* incorporate contemplation of a devotional text, the central panel of the title page to *The English Gentlewoman* depicts a woman standing with a small book in one hand and the message "Grace my guide, Glory my goale" coming from her mouth. A woman's grace and glory, the image indicates, proceed from her private meditational reading.¹⁶

Conduct manuals such as these present only one side of the story. They relay rules for expression and behavior, many of which helped to institutionalize female subordination as religious principle and state policy, that were codified by humanists and enforced by teachers, preachers, and other authorities. Acceptance of such dicta, however, was by no means automatic. One minister who would have given husbands complete mastery over their wives, denying women all property rights upon marriage, met with opposition from parishioners. In his edition of marriage sermons, *Of Domesticall Duties*, William Gouge recalled that "when these Domesticall Duties were first uttered out of the pulpit, much exception was taken against the application of a wives subjection to the restraining of her from disposing the common goods of the family without, or against her husband's consent."¹⁷ While the sermon collec-

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tion does, in that passage, record an instance of disagreement, tensions raised in the aside are quickly neutralized in service of the overarching orthodox message of its minister-author.

For critical analysis of how humanist prescriptions might have provoked resistance as well as compliance, we need to turn from didactic treatises to a more familiar set of texts: the surviving body of plays written for performance in the English public theatre. As Valerie Wayne observes, Desdemona pointedly contradicts conduct manual directives when she advises Emilia to disregard her husband's truisms about women's proper place.¹⁸ The social friction written into dramatic texts is partly a matter of genre. Crossing uncrossable boundaries is a requisite skill in a playwright. It is what accounts for the intensity of that moment in *M. Butterfly* when Song Liling, the beautiful opera singer, stands undressed, buttocks to the audience, and forces René Gallimard to see her maleness. Tudor-Stuart dramatists revelled in enacting their own manipulations of gender for theatrical effect. The finale of Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* in which the title character, the so-called silent woman, lifts off her wig to reveal the man underneath has a similar shock value. Performed in a theatre in which actors were by definition male, the play does not trick the audience about the sex of the actor, only about that of the character. However, Jonson's rough unmasking of theatrical convention to make a misogynist joke (a silent woman is a man in drag) is also a vivid demonstration of the artificiality of gender. For an early modern audience, unsettling set paradigms about men's and women's relation to literacy could be equally daring. A play such as George Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* overturns the received notion of writing as a male prerogative by staging the spectacle of a woman using a pen. In *Richard III*, the dissonance between the humanist teaching of writing to cultivate exemplary masculinity and a character's use of the skill to destroy and deceive likewise heightens the drama.

This book explores how the diffusion of literacy, fueled by economic and political as well as evangelical imperatives, affected the self-conceptions and social relations of both sexes. It is an inquiry, set largely within the parameters of the English public theatre, into the pressures that humanism brought to bear on men and women as literate subjects and into the resistances that they offered in return. By portraying readers and writers of both sexes on stage, the theatre engaged the complex social implications of humanist pedagogy in plays ranging from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Thomas Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon*. Paradigms lifted from the pages of humanist-inspired treatises were presented to large audiences. They were also analyzed, their contradictions exposed and their social consequences enacted. What Jean Howard has said of

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Thomas Heywood's *Wise Woman of Hogsdon*, a play which ends with the resolution of gender and class conflict, is true of the theatre as an institution: "It has recorded traces of that struggle."¹⁹ By staging the construction of gender identities through dissimilar literacies, the theatre provided an arena in which the inscription of male and female selves could be publicly scrutinized.

A Mad World, My Masters by Thomas Middleton is a case in point of a contemporary play that opened to analysis conduct manual truisms about gender and literacy. The view that women's reading needed to be restricted to devotional works was reiterated by authors ranging chronologically from the 1530s to the 1630s, from Juan Luis Vives to Richard Brathwait. In *The Mirror of Modesty* (1579), Thomas Salter repeats the dictum:

I would not have a Maiden altogether forbidden, or restrained from reading, for so much as the same is not onely profitable to wise and vertuous women, but also a riche and precious Jewell, but I would have her if she reade, to reade no other bookes but suche as bee written by godlie Fathers, to our instruction and soules healthe, and not suche lascivious Songes, filthie Ballades, and undecent bookes as be moste commonly now a daies sette to sale.²⁰

The message is not that women should be restricted from print culture wholesale; rather, it is that their access to different books should be supervised in order to shield them from potentially corrupting influences. In *A Mad World, My Masters*, Middleton enacts a husband's attempt to limit his wife's reading on precisely those terms. Unwittingly, however, Master Harebrain looks to a prostitute (disguised as a sober maid) for help in securing his wife's chastity. He tells her to read Mistress Harebrain a religious tract, *A Book of Christian Exercise Appertaining to Resolution*, procured for that purpose:

I have convey'd away all her wanton pamphlets, as *Hero and Leander*, *Venus and Adonis*; oh, two luscious mary-bone pies for a young married wife! Here, here, prithee take the *Resolution*, and read to her a little . . . Terrify her, terrify her; go, read to her the horrible punishments for itching wantonness, the pains allotted for adultery; tell her her thoughts, her very dreams are answerable.²¹

That a husband could mold his wife's character by regulating her reading is an unquestioned commonplace in contemporary conduct manuals. In the context of that discourse, the idea that "her very dreams are answerable" is far from extreme. Yet in Middleton's play, such precepts are the stuff of comedy. The limitations inherent in the humanist program for shaping selves through literate practices are only too apparent in this spectacle of a husband instructing a prostitute to read *A Book of Christian Exercise* to his wife with the admonition, "terrify her, terrify her."

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In 1508, a new schoolhouse was under construction in London. This was St. Paul's school, the model academy that came to symbolize the aspirations of English humanists for secondary instruction. John Colet was its founder, William Lily its headmaster, and Erasmus the author of its primary textbooks. Like the royal and aristocratic benefactors of higher education that Virginia Woolf imagined pouring huge sacks of gold into the earth, Colet spent thousands of pounds, nearly his entire patrimony, on establishing the grammar school. His money, however, was not the largesse of a prince or noble but the earnings of a prosperous London merchant; Colet's father had been a member of the leading city company, the Mercers. Colet took measures to annul the rights of the cathedral chapter, which had operated the school for centuries, and placed St. Paul's instead under the jurisdiction of the Mercers' Company. He also chose the textbooks and designed the curriculum. At Erasmus' direction, a picture of God the Father was displayed in the schoolroom with the dictate, "Hear ye Him." Colet himself also hung a picture of Christ teaching over the master's chair.

Colet's choice of pictures, as Joan Simon comments, amounted to "a manifesto."²² On a doctrinal level, placing Christ at the center of the classroom signified a rejection of the cult of the saints, customarily affiliated with community institutions such as schools, in favor of the worship of a single omnipotent God. But that shift in iconography had a crucial gender dimension as well. The promotion of Christ as teacher was unmistakably a demotion of Anne and Mary from that same role. During the late Middle Ages, a time of increased book ownership on the part of laywomen, images of women learning and teaching became common features of Christian art. In some cases, Mary's reading appears to abstract her from the domestic sphere: she reads while midwives prepare for her delivery (East Germany or Bohemia, 1406); she reads after giving birth while Joseph cradles the baby in his arms (Northern France, early fifteenth century); she reads perched atop a donkey as Joseph carries the baby during their flight into Egypt (Netherlands, c. 1475).²³ In addition to scenes of private reading, images proliferated of Anne teaching Mary to read, Mary teaching Jesus, and, in some instances, Anne teaching Jesus.²⁴ An English manuscript dating from about 1300 depicts Anne sheltering the child Mary, who holds an alphabet psalter, within an ermine lined cloak (fig. 3). A second English manuscript from the fourteenth century shows Anne, her head resting on her daughter's, teaching the child to read; Anne encircles Mary with one arm and with the other points to a text of Psalm 24 (fig. 4). Such images

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Fig. 3. Saint Anne teaching Mary to read. MS. Douce 231, fol. 3r. (England, c. 1300). From a psalter that belonged to the Countess of Leicester.