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978-0-521-13012-7 - Religion, Reform, and Women's Writing in Early Modern England

Kimberly Anne Coles

Excerpt

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*Introduction*  
*Making sects: women as reformers, writers, and*  
*subjects in Reformation England*

I have no difficulty in stating the central premise of my argument. It is that over a relatively short time – certainly no more than a generation or so – women have moved from being the objects of . . . poems to being the authors of them. It is a momentous transit. It is also a disruptive one. It raises questions of identity, issues of poetic motive and ethical direction which can seem impossibly complex. What is more, such a transit – like the slow course of a star or the shifts in a constellation – is almost invisible to the naked eye. Critics may well miss it or map it inaccurately.

Eavan Boland, *Object lessons*

Our very reformation of Religion, seems to be begun and carried on by Women.

Bathsua Makin, *An essay to revive the ancient education of gentlewomen*

The sixteenth century saw the emergence of women in England as not just readers and writers, but as published authors.<sup>1</sup> Due to the important contributions of feminist scholars in the field of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary studies, we no longer ponder the ‘perennial puzzle’ described by Virginia Woolf. We now know that women were writing in the early modern period, and in numbers.<sup>2</sup> What has been less clear is how the literary products of these women should be mapped within their own historical context. The critical charting of women’s texts within sixteenth-century English culture itself has still operated on the (however tacit) assumption that their literary products were devalued in that particular context. This book posits a different view of English literary history: that rather than the standard narrative of women writers as marginal within the operations of sixteenth-century English culture, some women writers were instead central to the development of a Protestant literary tradition.

The three most widely circulated versified works – Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish tragedy*, Samuel Daniel’s *Delia*, and Shakespeare’s *Venus and*

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*Adonis* – probably sold fewer than 5,000 copies each by the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> A single prayer book composed by Katherine Parr sold about 19,000 copies.<sup>4</sup> This hardly tells the whole story, but it does indicate that male literary production was not the sole prevailing force of sixteenth-century English culture. My research tries to demonstrate the effect of women's work. As a radically interior faith that insisted on the primacy of the Word, Protestantism offered a revolutionary soteriology – elevating the individual's immediate engagement with God above any mediations of the Church itself – that reformed a social universe, authorising the religious utterances of women. My argument is that some of these writings were among the most important and influential works of sixteenth-century England. This reconstruction stands on a number of grounds: publication history and book circulation; the interaction of women's texts with other (usually male-authored) texts of the period; and the traceable influence of women's writing upon other contemporary literary works.

In post-Reformation English poetics, the idea of the religious female became an authorising figure and a literary tool – one that could be manipulated by men and women alike. While I take up the formative pressures of religious language upon early modern English poetics, I am more interested in the formative pressures exerted by religious women. The terms of religion both empowered and controlled the conditions of female authorship. This study therefore examines women as writers, and women as written, during the period surrounding the crucial shift to Protestantism in England. Focusing primarily upon the writing of Anne Askew, Katherine Parr, Mary Sidney Herbert, Anne Vaughan Lok, and Aemilia Lanyer, I consider each work in juxtaposition to other contemporary writings in order to analyse some of the tensions that act upon its composition and production. My objective has been to understand how the construction of the religious female, as an abstract idea, is formed in literature – and in the process engage the question of how these pressures begin to affect the formation of the category of literature itself.

## THE (RE)FORMATION OF WOMEN

*The first* and *The lattr examinacyon[s] of Anne Askewe* were printed in Wesel in 1546 and 1547, respectively.<sup>5</sup> The publication of two more editions in England by 1548 indicates the enormous success of the (by then combined) work.<sup>6</sup> Further, the fact that three of the five editions produced before 1560 are published without John Bale's voluminous commentary signals that it was Askew's testament itself that was of cultural interest, not

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his notations.<sup>7</sup> The incorporation of her text into John Foxe's 1563 *Acts and Monuments* made subsequent editions of the work unnecessary, but its formidable influence is evident even in commercial practices of the time.<sup>8</sup> The presentation of Robert Crowley's *Confutation of . . . N[icholas] Shaxton* was clearly an attempt on the part of the publisher, John Day, to yoke Crowley's text to the popular success of the *Examinations*.<sup>9</sup> The woodcut used to highlight Askew's narrative in the *Acts and Monuments* was originally designed as a fold-out illustration to Crowley's *Confutation* (Shaxton had been arrested with Askew and John Lascelles, but recanted at their execution).<sup>10</sup> The title page refers to the 'burning of mestres Anne Askue lively set forth in the figure folowyng'. But in spite of her prominence at the beginning, she is mentioned only once in Crowley's pamphlet.<sup>11</sup> Crowley writes of a number of 'true disciples . . . clapped in the chaynes of the syx Articles and . . . broughte to the slaughter house' through the confession of Shaxton; he does not focus on Askew, or any martyr, in particular.<sup>12</sup> By fixing Askew as a selling point to the inexpensive octavo booklet, Day hoped to attract an already identified (and large) audience.

A book that has a sufficiently prominent reputation to merit its use as a marketing tool certainly qualifies as an influential text; such commercial impulses locate its significance in the culture in which it participated. But the popularity of Askew's testament also registers, on some level, the importance of the figure of the religious woman in the emergent discourse of English Protestantism. The place of women was determined in theory – and to a great extent in practice – by a universal belief in their inferior capacity and by reference to the specific commands for their subjection found in Genesis and the Epistles of St Paul. But moments of religious dissent frequently forced a reevaluation of this position. Anti-clerical movements in the Middle Ages often elevated the claims of both laymen and lay women within the Church. The Lollards, for example, encouraged reading of the Bible and recitation of scripture by women, and there is some evidence of female preaching.<sup>13</sup> Claire Cross even suggests that Lollardy survived in parts of East Anglia 'to merge with Lutheran ideas' due to the activities of women.<sup>14</sup> But Lollardy was never more than a minority movement; instead, this religious activity on the part of medieval women demonstrates the role that women could assume at times when orthodox church practice was under interrogation.<sup>15</sup> It also reveals (at least partially) the precedent for similar activity during the English Reformation.

Certainly reformers in England understood their project in the context of previous religious subversion – ranging from Lollardy to early

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Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Equally clear is the manipulation of the female figure on the part of reformers like Bale in this construction. In *Lost property*, Jennifer Summit suggests that the figure of the 'lost' woman writer is used by Bale to 'redefine the cultural value of books for a society that appeared to him to be bent on their destruction'.<sup>17</sup> In the wake of controversies concerning the translation and transmission of *The Book*, the destruction of monastic libraries, and the burning of heretical texts, Summit claims that the 'recovery' of the writings of women signalled (for Bale) a reconstitution of English literary history.<sup>18</sup> But Bale edited two other narratives of martyrs, *A brefe chronycle concernynge the examinacyon and death of . . . syr Johan Oldecastell* and *A treatyse made by John Lambert*, and notions of loss and recovery feature prominently in Bale's presentation of both of these works.<sup>19</sup> In the preface to his chronicle of the well-known Lollard martyr, Sir John Oldcastle, Bale writes of how he retrieves, and reclaims, Oldcastle's narrative from the 'brefe examinacyon' rendered by Tyndale, as well as the Latin *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*.<sup>20</sup> He frames this project as a restitution of the historical record, and advocates the undertaking of a full account: 'I wolde wyshe some lerned Englyshe mane . . . to set forth the Englyshe chronycles in theyr ryght shape.'<sup>21</sup> Certainly Bale is not talking about chronicle histories that trace monarchs and political measures – he is speaking specifically of religious history (and presaging the project of John Foxe whose martyrology he actively supported). But the figures of men in these 'chronycles' signal the '[d]estruction and loss [that] are elementary to Bale's model of . . . history' as much as those of women.<sup>22</sup>

The figure of the religious woman is used by Bale to imagine a history of opposition to religious orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup> What makes the figure particularly productive for Bale is not, or not simply, its utility in conflating different historical periods (the figures of men participate in this as well), but the crisis that is signalled by the participation of women in the struggle. The title page to Oldcastle's examination exhibits the knight in full armour, poised for battle. Oldcastle's martyrdom is equated with those who 'haue either dyed for theyr naturall contreye or daungered theyr lyues for a common welthe'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Bale fuses the figure of the soldier-in-arms with that of the militant Christian of the Pauline epistles. He similarly renders Askew as a soldier of God, but emphasises the irregularity of a woman's bodily service in the cause.<sup>25</sup> Bale links contemporary reform with early Christian history by yoking the figure of Askew to that of the Christian martyr Blandina (and, by extension, attaches his own writing practice to that of Eusebius of Caesarea, the first major historian of the Christian Church). But in the exhibition of women's suffering bodies, his

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stress is upon how '[t]he strength of God is . . . made perfyght by weaknesse'.<sup>26</sup> He claims that '[m]anye were conuerted by the sufferance of Blandina. A farre greater nombre by the burnynge of Anne Askewe.'<sup>27</sup> The figure of the female becomes, in Bale's text, the site of radical religious change.

Clearly, an emergent Protestant community also understood Askew's sacrifice as both an index of her faith and an expression of the urgency of the cause for which she gave her life. Neither of the narratives of male martyrs that Bale edits experienced anything like the commercial success of Askew's *Examinations*; this difference suggests that Bale's assertion of the number of converts initiated by Askew's example was correct. Certainly, she became an important figure under Edwardian reform.<sup>28</sup> But the power of the figure of the religious woman (in this case, Askew) in the project of reform can also be perceived in Bale's editing practices upon it. The most notable distinction, in fact, between Askew's *Examinations* and Bale's other edited texts is the nature and extent of his intervention. The revision that his 'elucydacyon[s]' perform upon Askew's text is the subject of chapter 1. But briefly, Bale's extensive explication of her text rewrites Askew's narrative as an exposition of early Protestant doctrine. It is precisely because Askew does *not* use the learned terms of the current theological debates – formulated by university men – that Bale tries to argue her case for her. In other words, he tries to make her behave like a man in print – and a magisterial Protestant at that. But his appropriation of her meaning speaks volumes. In one sense, Bale is borrowing his authority from Askew's voice. In a larger sense, his editorial activities demonstrate that he understood the importance of female advocacy on the part of the Protestant cause.

The figure of the religious woman exerted a shaping force upon the controversies in the period leading up to actual reformation in England. For Bale, the figure functioned as a symbol of radical religious dissent and change. For the conservative opposition, it was a sign of religious and political instability. If the debate between the two dominant positions in the religious controversy centred on (in John King's phrase) 'the relative merits of internal and external authority', then the religious woman provided a flashpoint for both sides.<sup>29</sup> Stephen Gardiner, the conservative Bishop of Winchester, nicely identifies the spectre of religious and political unruliness that the female figure raised: 'For if it be perswaded the understanding of Gods law to be at larg in women and children, wherby they may have the rule of that, and then Gods law must be the rule of all, is not hereby the rule of al brought into there hands?'<sup>30</sup> But it is precisely this

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disruptive potential that makes the religious woman – and the religious woman writer – such a powerful figure in reform.

'Trulye I am constrayned & forced to speake & write', Katherine Parr claims in her *Lamentacion of a synner*, 'to mine own confusion and shame: but to the greate glorye, and prayse of god.'<sup>31</sup> The conviction that 'constrayn[s]' Parr to write that all souls dwell in the same fallen state (and are equal before God), and that every soul is individually accountable to God similarly compelled other women to bear witness to their faith. This assumption of authority was precisely what Gardiner perceived as fundamentally corrosive to the social order. However, the agency of women in the interpretation – and dissemination – of scriptural and religious meaning communicated to an emergent Protestant community the underlying religio-political goal of the Reformation: individual apprehension of 'Gods law'. Of course, the expression partly traded upon cultural notions of female inferiority – the egalitarian impulses of reform are conveyed through the vehicle of women *because* of their status. Nevertheless, the circumstance in which women became ideal figures of political and religious disruption opened space for the empowerment of women within the written culture of the Reformation.

One of the most productive features of feminist criticism of the past two decades has been the sustained attention on the cultural value of women's religious beliefs.<sup>32</sup> This recognition – that if women did not have a Renaissance, they at least had a Reformation – not only asserts the proper historical chronology for England (acknowledging that the Reformation affected England before and arguably more deeply than the Renaissance did) but also identifies religion itself as the most pervasive idiom of early modern England. The writing of both men and women at the time was principally concerned with the subject of religion – about 45 per cent of printed material from this period treats the topic in some form.<sup>33</sup> The rather common assertion, then, that women were 'proscribed from composition or publication in the genres considered to be serious', is simply wrong.<sup>34</sup> Rather, they were participants – insofar as woman wrote – in the most important cultural dialogue that was taking place.

But 'despite the groundbreaking work on early modern women writers produced in the past few years', Barbara Bowen observes, 'women's writing still tends to be read as if it were less complex, smaller, than it is'.<sup>35</sup> Bowen goes on to say that 'a more useful sense . . . of the writings' – useful in both political and cultural terms – 'might follow from an expansion of the literary claims we are willing to make for them'.<sup>36</sup> I take Bowen to mean that we should extend our critical reach not only concerning the

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negotiation of cultural material *within* women's texts, but also regarding the cultural reception *of* women's texts. We speak of women's works as 'celebrated' rather than as influential (the underpinning assumption is that they are not). These articulations do not admit that the terms that directed social relationships might have been within the province of women's (at least partial) control. In fact, Gardiner's remark that 'the rule of all' could be 'brought into [the] hands' of women through the disruption of traditional religious belief, while tinged with paranoia, demonstrates his keen political awareness. Religion vitally – perhaps principally – informed both how individuals understood themselves and how they understood themselves in relation to their society. The extent to which women formulated the terms of the new religion therefore determined their influence upon the ideas that shaped cultural production.

Critical convention has it that women (with the notable exception of Queen Elizabeth) occupied a marginal position in key developments concerning early modern religious, political, and poetic reform. It has become clear to us that women appropriated the terms of religion for their own use; in fact, in the struggle against oppression, the terms of religion, properly negotiated, were among the most effective tools that women could employ. We also now acknowledge that in the course of the disruption in religious doctrine and practice, the participation of women in the project of reform threw the instabilities of the socially constructed category of 'woman' into sharp relief.<sup>37</sup> This recognition, however, has not led to a full appreciation of the extent to which women articulated the terms of emergent Protestantism for the larger English culture. The circulation of works by women examined here, as well as the manifest influence of these works upon the literary production of male thinkers and poets in the period, indicates that at a time of religious crisis, the voices of authority that emerge are not necessarily the ones that we would expect. This book argues that certain early modern women writers were far more fundamental to the development of Protestant consciousness, and later artistic identity, than has been previously acknowledged.

## REPRESENTATION AND REFORM

It is my contention that the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century produced a period of heightened cultural agency for women. In making this declaration, I am speaking only of the tiny minority of literate women whose education was sufficient to take advantage of such an instance.<sup>38</sup> I am neither minimising the obstacles to the participation of women in

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literary culture at this time, nor am I extracting women's cultural predicament from its material conditions. But (and it has been said before) evidence of early modern women's social experience is often not legible in the objects of literary study – the social practices most representative of female experience were usually rendered in terms that are no longer visible at all.<sup>39</sup> For those few women whose education allowed them to engage literary systems of representation, the status of the figure of the religious female in early Reformation discourse enabled them to interrupt and redirect existing patterns. The dominant ideology that they disrupted was almost exclusively religious: the texts that I explore do not represent a common female experience, nor do they offer (with the exception of Lanyer's *Salve Deus*) a serious critique of patriarchy. But if the majority of these works are not particularly oppositional (at least in relation to patriarchal design), they *are* culturally influential. The writing examined here negotiated key points of contest and controversy during a time of overwhelming religious change: it conveyed central tenets of emergent Protestantism to a reading public that only imperfectly understood the principles of the new religion; it mediated a changing national faith by situating it in familiar terms; it helped to establish the early vernacular forms of the Anglican Church; and when the tenets of English Protestant culture came into conflict with developing notions of English poetics, it opened channels through which devotional language flowed into lyric verse.

Feminist critics have appreciated for some time that religious idiom was potentially empowering for women of the early modern period. But this awareness has been countered by the assumption that sociolinguistic codes effectively thwarted the production of the female voice in public discourse.<sup>40</sup> However, as Elizabeth Hanson rightly observes, disrupting existing systems of language and representation is primarily a writer's problem and a writer's task – one that only comes into play once the far more pervasive problem of educational training (particularly for women) has been overcome.<sup>41</sup> Hanson follows this observation with two questions that, in many ways, describe the principal focus of my research: if the problems confronting a woman writing in this period are not simply 'continuous with those facing the generality of women . . . what exactly is the relation between the global oppression of women and the unusual position of the writing woman? Or to come at the problem somewhat differently, how do we *construct* the task of writing in the effort to reveal the operation of the sex/gender system upon it?'<sup>42</sup> I have been suggesting that the effect of the gender system upon the religious woman writer in



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this period is somewhat ironic: while Bale reinforces gendered assumptions, those very assumptions cause him to read 'woman' as a powerful sign in religious transition.<sup>43</sup> Thus the linguistic encoding of gender difference stood mostly firm; but the manner in which the figure of 'woman' was produced and deployed in the course of reform allowed women writers partial control over the terms of religious difference – and these were arguably as central to the operations of early modern culture and individual identity.

To return to Hanson's question, and to pose it slightly differently, how does one discover the activity of the gender system upon the composition, production, and reception of women's (religious) texts? Feminist criticism of the past few years has been particularly engaged with this question, and has sought to explore the issue of 'the relationship of woman and printed text in a historicism which offers a multidimensional approach'.<sup>44</sup> An enquiry of this kind must examine how gender operates both within and around texts: it must try to discern when (and whether) gendered encoding is consciously engaged within texts themselves; when the figure of the religious woman is deployed as a marketing device both within texts and in extra-textual apparatus; when it functions as a signifier between texts; and when the market of the book trade itself responds to these signs in its operations.<sup>45</sup> In trying to look at all of these issues, I have paid close attention to the production of texts in both compositional and material terms, and to their circulation within the marketplace. I have tried to account for the agency of editors and printers as well as authors in the mediation of cultural discourse. I have used straight publication numbers as well as stylistic patterns and verbal echoes in my attempt to demonstrate cultural influence.<sup>46</sup> But for the most part I reconstitute the materials from which these texts – by both men and women – are derived.

The practice of intertextuality – of reconstructing source material, of noticing how this material is redeployed within texts, and of understanding how a field of signs is activated among texts – is hardly new in feminist studies. The method has been refreshed by scholars such as Danielle Clarke who have insisted that women's writing be considered in the context of a cultural circulation of ideas – and that further, we understand 'woman' as one of these circulated, refractory ideas and not as a signature tied to a biological agent.<sup>47</sup> One of the benefits of such an intertextual approach is that it registers female voice in terms of representation. It recognises gender in women's texts – as in men's – as constructed. In scrutinising the exchange of signs between the texts of men and women, it captures a moment of gender construction. While a good deal of critical

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work has been done on how women were represented – in literature, conduct books, and on the English stage – there has been less analysis applied to how they represented themselves.<sup>48</sup> Clarke suggests that this circumstance occurs because ‘the particular investments and aims of feminist criticism are such that there is little interest in assuming the reversibility or flexibility of [the] paradigm’ that the gender of a text does not necessarily correspond to the author’s biological sex.<sup>49</sup> Gynocriticism initiated a tendency to read women’s texts for gender-inflected markings that affirm personal biography and biology, and while this strategy has proved its value in both critical and political terms, it has also proved hard to overthrow.<sup>50</sup> This is especially the case when dealing with texts that appear particularly amenable to gynocritical readings – when the sex of the author coheres with the speaker’s gender. But in falling susceptible to such readings, we ignore the extent to which gender is performed within the text – part of a rhetorical strategy – for purposes other than self-expression.

A gynocritical reading strategy often overlooks the situation of the sign of ‘woman’ in material circulation – and how it might assist the commercial production and/or dissemination of women’s texts.<sup>51</sup> John Day’s use of the image of Askew’s execution in advertising a book that does not really address her martyrdom is a case in point: it signals a cultural environment in which ‘woman’ has become a promotional device.<sup>52</sup> I am, of course, arguing that the milieu was ideologically and historically specific: not the sign of ‘woman’ absent the modifier; and not the ‘religious woman’ absent the cultural disruption that the Reformation caused. But I am further arguing that women who produce this figure within their texts frequently do so self-consciously, and with an eye toward the readership that will receive them. They deploy the figure in the service of their political intentions or their commercial objectives. Which is to say that it cannot be read as authentic – as a reliable index of ‘real’ expression. Its constructed nature must always be understood in terms of the cultural economy in which it was developed and circulated.

Figures are instances of representation. Insofar as one describes a figure, one is speaking of the already represented – of a moment of representation that relates to a larger sociolinguistic field that may not be straightforward. A figure might operate as part of a previously formulated category, but figures are not categories. A category organises its constituents: it provides a set of instructions that enable us to construe its members. Categories, then, activate networks of meaning, but they are not themselves embedded within texts. This means that the figure of the religious woman in early Reformation discourse accrues its power through the meanings that the