

## *Introduction*

*Helen Wilcox*

But when some of those thoughts are sent out in words, they give the rest more liberty to place themselves in a more methodical order: marching more regularly with my pen on the ground of white paper. But my letters seem rather as a ragged rout than a well armed body. For the brain being quicker in creating than the hand in writing or the memory in retaining, many fancies are lost, by reason they oft-times outrun the pen. Where I, to keep speed in the race, write so fast as I stay not so long to write my letters plain: insomuch as some have taken my handwriting for some strange character.

(Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 'A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life')

Margaret Cavendish's account of the exhilarating process of writing, taken from her autobiography published in 1656, seems an appropriate passage with which to begin our consideration of women and literature in Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For her words express many of the paradoxes associated with women, writing and early modern history. Cavendish, literate and relatively leisured, was bursting with creative energy, as is suggested in her description of the quickness (literally, 'aliveness' as well as speed) of the brain, the impression of her thoughts queuing up to be 'sent out in words', and the image of the tumbling 'ragged rout' of letters on the page. But Cavendish's choice of metaphors is a vivid reminder of the gendered world in which such a woman lived and wrote. She wrote from a feminine perspective and achieved a freedom of style all her own; but in her description of the writing process her words become drilled, 'marching' as a masculine army, aspiring to become a 'well armed body' dominating the page. This is ironic, since as a writer she entered a world of genres and traditions, muses and authors, in which the woman was constructed as the inspiration rather than the creator, the subject of fascination rather than the

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speaking or controlling subject. The 'ground of white paper' (on which Cavendish radically hoped to place her own mark) was a prevailing Renaissance image of the woman herself, waiting in silent chastity to receive the imprint of the male.<sup>2</sup> Margaret Cavendish, author and female subject, was trapped between two worlds. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that she went on to create her own *New Blazing World*.<sup>3</sup>

Cavendish's account of imaginative composition, one of the earliest known detailed records of the writing process, highlights the complexities of creativity and constraint experienced by a woman writer in the early modern period. The passage goes on to consider the process of transferring imaginative 'fancies' (which 'run' so fast that they leave the pen behind) into written and readable form. This conversion from concept to text was no easy business, not only because the resultant hasty handwriting was so untidy as to risk being mistaken for, as Cavendish ruefully notes, 'some strange character'. It was also, more significantly, not straightforward for a woman to circulate or publish her own writings in the early modern era; to do so was a bold, much criticised and frequently isolated action. When Cavendish used her private means to publish 'A True Relation of my Birth, Breeding and Life' (from which the above extract is taken) as part of a collection called *Nature's Pictures Drawn by Fancy's Pencil to the Life* (London, 1656), she was the first British woman to publish her own secular autobiography. When the second edition of *Nature's Pictures* came out in 1671 (while Cavendish was still alive) her autobiography was, for reasons never explained, no longer included. Even those female 'fancies' that reached print could subsequently be 'lost'. To quote Cavendish's own words with poignant irony, the communal 'memory' often has difficulty in 'retaining' the output of the woman writer, as intervening literary history has undoubtedly shown.<sup>4</sup>

The interplay of imagination and language, and the tensions between expression and reception, all seen here in miniature in the extract from Cavendish's autobiography, have to be kept in mind as we attempt fully to appreciate the history of women and literature. As well as discovering, reading, analysing and enjoying the works of early modern British women writers, we need to become familiar with the religious, social and literary culture of which they were a part. That is why this book is entitled 'women and literature' and not simply 'women writers'. It is designed as an introduction to contexts as well as texts, so that the texts may be read and understood for all their richness. What could, and did,

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these women write? For whom did they write? What were their models and sources, if any? How did their writings change and develop during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? By what means were they enabled to write, or discouraged or deflected from their desire to express themselves? Is it a hopelessly anachronistic idea to think of writing in the early modern period as 'expressing oneself'? These are the kinds of questions that this book as a whole seeks to begin to answer.

The first tool that this volume offers is a chronological table of Britain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, indicating some familiar landmarks of history such as the Reformation, the accession of queens and kings, and the English Civil War. What makes the chronology different, and of special relevance to this study, is that it also shows historical events of particular relevance to women, such as the execution of female martyrs, the women's petition to parliament, and the decree allowing women to act in public theatres. Alongside the historical events is a column giving some key publications by or about women during this period. In addition to showing at a glance just what (and how much!) was written, when, and by whom, the chronology also makes it possible for readers to look up texts mentioned during the course of this book, and to set them in their precise historical framework.

The main body of the book is divided into two sections. The first, 'Constructing Women', sets out some of the most important contexts for an understanding of women and their lives in early modern Britain. What were the influences and traditions, the philosophies and prejudices, that formed Renaissance ideas of woman? The first three chapters examine the role and nature of humanist education, religious contexts and the tradition of advice books for women. As these discussions make clear, the social construction of femininity was rarely a simple, and certainly not an exclusively male, activity; as the account of conduct books (chapter 3) shows, advice came from mothers as well as patriarchs. The other three chapters in the first section examine further questions of cultural formation: what did women read; how were they represented on the stage; and to what extent might women in themselves represent alternative modes of knowing, particularly when challenged with the rise of scientific thought?

The discussion of feminine knowledge and its exploration by the writer Margaret Cavendish (chapter 6) stands at the borderline of the two halves of the book and leads directly into the subject of the second section, 'Writing Women'. After an opening chapter that considers Renaissance concepts of the 'woman writer' (mirroring the enquiry into

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the Renaissance concept of woman, with which the first section begins), the second section then proceeds to examine groups of texts by early modern British women writers. Their writings are clustered by tradition, subject or genre: the chapters treat, in turn, courtly writing, poetry, autobiographical writing, prose and drama. The overall sequence of textual kinds makes chronological sense – there was a higher proportion of courtly texts in the earlier part of our period, and a greater flourishing of playwrights in the concluding decades – but within each chapter there is a wide-ranging consideration of the output of British women writers over two centuries.

The centuries in question were thrilling ones in terms of new achievements by women writers. They contain the publication date of the first autobiography (male or female) in English (Margery Kempe, 1501), the first English publication of a secular text translated by a woman (Margaret Tyler, 1578), the first original play known to have been written by a woman (Elizabeth Cary, 1613), the first secular autobiography to be published by a woman (Margaret Cavendish, 1656), the first woman to earn her living by writing (Sarah Jinner), and the first play scripted by a woman to be performed on a British stage (Katherine Philips, 1663). Such firsts, however, have always to be set against the backdrop of women's severely constrained social and legal position. In law, women had no status whatsoever but were only daughters, wives or widows of men; according to the church they were to be silent and listen to the advice of husbands or pastors; in religious and cultural patterns of thought, they were daughters of Eve with a continuing proneness to temptation and a disproportionate burden of guilt.<sup>5</sup>

As we approach these women and their texts from our late twentieth-century perspective, it is all too easy to simplify the lines of history and mutual identification. We need to remind ourselves, for example, of the pervasiveness of religion, as practice, as controversy, as restraint, as means of expression, as life's calling or as life's threat, for early modern women. We also need to avoid the assumption that patriarchal culture was upheld only by men; many of the tropes of misogynist thinking were deeply absorbed and reproduced by women themselves.<sup>6</sup> The distinction between men and women in the sphere of literature may also be misread; not all texts with a female name attached to them were necessarily by women, just as most 'women' on the stage were not, in fact, women at all. It is vitally important that we recognise these uncertainties and asymmetries if we are to read the early modern period accurately. Such instability is also to be found in the notion of 'Britain' in

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the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The discussions in this book make reference to women in the history and culture of Scotland, Ireland and Wales as well as England, even though the majority of the texts stem from England. But the very concept of Britain itself was problematic in this period; Wales was annexed to the English crown in 1536, and in 1541 Henry VIII was declared King of Ireland. The poetry of Mary Queen of Scots is appropriately studied here, as are the pronouncements of her son, James VI and I, who came from Scotland to the throne of England in 1603 and spoke out not only against witchcraft (in 1603) but also against women wearing men's apparel (in 1620). It may be anachronistic to refer to James as a homosexual, but his life, reigns and opinions form a vivid emblem of the unstable boundaries of gender and nationality in this period.

The juxtaposing of women and men, poetry and politics, texts and contexts and many other binaries in the following chapters is intended ultimately to blur the distinctions between these sometimes overstressed opposites. It is also our hope that this book as a whole will enable readers to experience something of the unique excitement, controversy and creativity of early modern women and their era. Readers who are led to explore the original works themselves, and/or more detailed critical or historical studies of the period, are advised to consult the reading list that follows on from the final chapter. The scholarship and insights of all those who have contributed to this book have been inspired by the work of the many other critics mentioned or noted in the chapters, but particularly those whose writings or editions appear in the list. One of the most refreshing features of the study of early modern British literature in the last two decades has been painstaking rediscovery and re-presentation of women's writing and of ideas concerning women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This book is a tribute to that work, as well as an introduction to its significance.

Readers of this book will encounter many memorable early modern women and their even more distinctive works in the pages that follow. May it be said of these writing women, as Margaret Cavendish wrote of her own 'fancies', that 'it is as great a grief to leave their society, as a joy to be in their company'.<sup>7</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby and Helen Wilcox, eds., *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 94.
2. See, for example, *Othello* iv.ii.72–3: ‘Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write “whore” upon?’ For a fine discussion of gendered metaphors for writing, see Susan Gubar, ‘“The Blank Page” and the Issues of Female Creativity’, anthologised in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (London: Virago, 1986), pp. 292–313. See also pp. 84–5 below.
3. In 1666 Cavendish published *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, which included her vision of a ‘New Blazing World’. This text is now available in Kate Lilley, ed., *The Blazing World and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994).
4. See Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women’s Writing* (London: Women’s Press, 1984).
5. See in particular the first three chapters of this volume.
6. See, for example, the discussion of the complexities of Aphra Behn’s position at the end of Margaret W. Ferguson’s chapter, ‘Renaissance concepts of the “woman writer”’.
7. Graham, *et al.*, eds., *Her Own Life*, p. 94.

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PART I

*Constructing women in early modern Britain*

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## CHAPTER I

*Humanist education and the Renaissance concept  
of woman**Hilda L. Smith*

Women, or ‘woman’ to use language more familiar to sixteenth and seventeenth century authors, composed a group that early modern writers felt obliged both to define and to advise. Women existed more clearly as a category in the minds of Renaissance authors than as disparate individuals. This chapter will focus on understanding what the category ‘woman’ meant during the Renaissance, and what values and social realities placed women there. What qualities most defined them? What realities clearly constrained them? Which social classes mattered (and which did not) in developing this concept of woman? Such questions emerge from issues embedded within ‘woman’ as Renaissance concept, and they aid us in understanding major early modern texts which treat women.

Sixteenth-century humanism, whose authors produced the most important Renaissance works on women, was an educational and philosophical movement that criticised the limited academic universe of late medieval scholasticism. Humanism, originating in fourteenth-century Italy, spread throughout the educated classes of early sixteenth-century England and continued its influence into the seventeenth as well. This chapter will focus on the broad outlines of Renaissance humanism, its treatment of women, and its growth and ultimate decline. Sixteenth-century humanism, as exemplified in the works of Thomas More, Thomas Elyot and Juan Luis Vives, offered an educational and linguistic programme for those who wished to pursue the ‘New Learning’. Humanists claimed that medieval scholasticism, which involved a series of dialogues concerning philosophic and scientific concepts, was an overly structured intellectual exercise, far removed from the actual texts on which such exercises were based. Humanism’s new learning was grounded in a critique of scholasticism, and favoured precise knowledge of classical languages, heightened emphasis on the study of Greek, and a return to an earlier, and more accurate, version of the Scriptures



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stripped of commentary by the church fathers. Personal ethics, spirituality and civic responsibility were the lessons to be gleaned from authenticated Scriptures and the best of ancient thinkers. Insisting on a solid knowledge of classical languages and a serious university education, humanists applied the principles learned from such education to the public and private duties of individuals.

While women were a part of the intellectual and social changes tied to the spread of humanist ideas, they were always on the periphery. In theory, humanism was an education that had as much to offer women as men, but in practice it was situated in universities, from which women were excluded, and applied to the governance of families and to public office, positions outside their responsibility. Although women were placed on the periphery by Renaissance authors, they were not totally excluded from the humanist programme. Humanism, especially the Northern Humanism associated with Erasmus and More, embraced Christian values on the grounds that humanist scholarship promoted a more informed and serious brand of Christianity. Thus the traditional emphasis on female piety blended well with the emphasis on Christian beliefs and biblical truths, and women's learning was encouraged by Vives and More but never at the same level or for the same purposes as that of gentlemen.<sup>1</sup>

Humanist authors offered an educational continuum that allowed men of the middling classes to progress through boarding school and university to professional positions where they could either preach or teach the new learning. Boys were introduced to its principles through properly trained schoolmasters and clerics; humanist education created better public and private men through learning and concepts of civic virtue. Their training urged Renaissance gentlemen to apply the moral, political and rhetorical lessons gained from the ancients and the Christian insights elicited from Scripture to the governance of their families, their local magisterial and judicial responsibilities and their service to a prince.<sup>2</sup>

The humanist educational programme continued into the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and underlay the educational revolution of 1580–1640 that provided a classical and civic education for greater numbers of men from a wider class spectrum. The massive increase in grammar schools and numbers of students from commoner families at Oxford and Cambridge fostered an education that offered males advice about their duties to God and country. Much of their curriculum echoed the new learning of the early sixteenth century. Thus

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through the 1630s that tie between education and public duty favoured by the earlier humanists flourished, and women continued to be omitted. Renaissance humanism was then closely tied to a gentleman's (or socially mobile commoner's) career because education framed his values and directed his actions as head of a family, holder of a local political or legal office, or member of the royal government. However, what relevance did such an education, especially in its applied setting, hold for women? Was there anything that could truly be termed a Renaissance notion of woman? Or did Renaissance thinkers simply create a pastiche of ideas, symbols and values gleaned from ancient and scriptural texts concerning women's nature? In other words, was there anything original in what English humanist authors wrote about women?<sup>3</sup>

Humanist texts such as Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516, Latin; 1551, English), Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1531, Italian; 1561, English), Thomas Elyot's *The Governour* (1531), and Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1560, Italian; 1640, English) provided political guidance to educated men. Although Castiglione's programme for proper behaviour at court and Machiavelli's guide for a prince were Italian works, they were highly influential in the development of civic virtue in sixteenth-century England. Each of these authors counselled the ruler and governing classes on practical and ethical questions. It is, above all, this utilitarian nature of humanist writings, and their limited audience, that excluded women from an educational programme for which they were otherwise entirely eligible. Most humanists admitted that women had the ability to learn; it was simply a question of what they would do with such learning and whether it might interfere with their more important responsibilities as wives and mothers.<sup>4</sup>

Humanism flourished within England from 1515 to 1550 and continued to have significant influence into the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and beyond. For women, the most important humanist works appearing during that period were Juan Luis Vives's *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1529), as well as his *Plan of Study for Girls* (1523); Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* (1570); Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* (1540); and John Aylmer's defence of Elizabeth's rule, *A Harbour for Faithful and True Subjects* (1559), against John Knox's attack on women rulers, *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* (1558). Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's work *A Treatise of the Nobility of Womankind* (1542) was translated into English and formed a model, along with Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* (1359; first English translation, 1963), for those works that presented linguistic and histori-