Introduction

> For it is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet.
>
> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

In 1621, the booksellers John Marriott and John Grismand published a prose romance entitled *The Countesse of Mountgomeries Urania*.[1] A handsome folio some 600 pages in length, *Urania* was the only work by its author, Lady Mary Wroth, to be print-published during her lifetime. Its elaborately decorated title page depicts a complex allegorical landscape, dense with literary allusions and foreshadowing many of the preoccupations subsequently explored in the *Urania* narrative itself. Its title, displayed in cartouche above a mysterious hilltop tower, intimates the author's links with one of the most prominent noble families of the Jacobean age. Both social and literary connections are also foregrounded in the description of the *Urania*'s distinguished author:

> Written by the right honorable the Lady Mary Wroath: Daughter to the right Noble Robert Earle of Leicester. And Neece to the ever famous, and renowned Sir Phillips [*sic*] Sidney knight. And to the most exelent Lady Mary Countesse of Pembroke late deceased.

Wroth's 'famous, and renowned' uncle had of course earned his fame not only as a courtier and a soldier but also as one of the most admired poets and patrons of the late sixteenth century. Her aunt, Mary Sidney – mother-in-law to the Countess of Montgomery named in the romance's title – was also known as a poet, translator, editor and literary patron. The *Urania*'s title page, in both words and image, makes powerful claims for Wroth's text to be read both as a continuation of her family's literary projects and as an informed contribution to the genre of prose romance.

[1] Mary Wroth, *The Countesse of Mountgomeries Urania* (1621).

The sheer length of the ensuing narrative also consolidates the message that the *Urania* is the work of a committed and ambitious writer of prose fiction.

But the Wroth of the *Urania* is more than just a prose writer. Pages 2–3 of the volume also include two sonnets, in mildly different formats: one voiced, one discovered, by the eponymous Urania. These sonnets are only the first of numerous poems in different genres – songs, lyrics, meditations, dialogues, verse letters, pastorals and a complaint, as well as sonnets – to be found interspersed within the *Urania* narrative. The volume concludes with a collection of 103 poems – songs and sonnets (including a crown of sonnets) – under the title *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. And the print-published *Urania* is by no means the only surviving witness to Wroth's poetic activities. Her own manuscript continuation of the *Urania* narrative, now held at the Newberry Library, Chicago, also includes numerous inset poems.[2] Her pastoral play, *Love's Victory*, extant in two manuscripts, is written in rhymed couplets, interspersed with sonnets, songs and other lyrics.[3] An autograph collection of her poetry, also entitled *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, overlaps substantially with the poems in the published *Urania*, including the crown of sonnets.[4]

As even this cursory account makes clear, Wroth took poetry seriously. Her long-standing commitment to verse production is indicated not only by the sheer quantity of her writings in numerous poetic genres but also by the care she took to present, correct, revise and rework her poetry. Her own surviving copy of the printed *Urania* includes numerous handwritten corrections and annotations in both the prose and the poetry sections; evidently, for Wroth, even the apparently definitive forms provided by print-publication did not terminate the creative process.[5] A comparison of the printed *Urania* with the poems in Wroth's autograph manuscript tells a comparable, though more complex, story of authorial revision, rearrangement and redeployment. Of the 117 poems in the autograph manuscript (which probably predates the publication of the *Urania*), 102 were included, in a partially reordered sequence, in the *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* section

[2] Newberry Library Case MS fY 1565.W 95.

[3] One MS of *Love's Victory* is privately owned; the other is now Huntington Library MS HM 600. The purpose, relationship and history of these manuscripts is discussed by Paul Salzman, *Reading Early Modern Women's Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 77–84.

[4] Folger MS V.a.104.

[5] Wroth's annotated copy of the *Urania* (now in private ownership) is reproduced in *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works, Part I: Printed Writings 1500–1640*, vol. 10, *Mary Wroth*, ed. by Josephine A. Roberts (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996).

of the printed volume, while nine were incorporated into the prose *Urania* narrative and six are extant only in the manuscript itself. Conversely, although all the poems in the printed *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* are included in the manuscript, the prose section of the *Urania* also incorporates forty-seven poems which are unattested elsewhere and were presumably written expressly for inclusion in the romance narrative. Many of the poems which appear in both volumes have undergone revision – usually minor, occasionally extensive – between manuscript and print. Furthermore, the poetic collections in both the printed *Urania* and the autograph manuscript are carefully subdivided into different – and still puzzling – numbered sequences. Wroth, it is clear, took trouble over her poetry, thought carefully about how it could be used and re-used in different contexts, and was painstakingly attentive to the details of her texts. As much as, if not more than, the family affiliations so proudly asserted on the title page of the *Urania*, this care and attention to text and context in the practice of prestigious genres underpins Wroth's claims to be read within, and accepted into, the highest traditions of English literary history.[6]

Virginia Woolf marvelled, in *A Room of One's Own*, at the 'perennial puzzle' of why 'no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet'.[7] Strictly speaking, Woolf's 'extraordinary literature' refers to the writings of the late sixteenth century – the reign of Queen Elizabeth, which ended nearly two decades before the publication of Wroth's skilful and highly literary *Urania* in 1621. Yet even within the Elizabethan period, counter-examples to the bleak picture painted by Woolf can be found in writers such as Isabella Whitney, whose poetry was published in two printed collections in 1567 and 1573, Jane Seager, who prepared ten sibylline poems for presentation to Queen Elizabeth in 1589, and Anne Lock, who concludes her translation *Of the Markes of the Children of God* (1590) with the poem 'The necessitie and benefite of affliction'.[8] The most eminent and productive of all Elizabethan female poets was Wroth's aunt, Mary Sidney, who paraphrased 107 of the Psalms in multiple versions (complementing

[6] The standard edition of Wroth's poems – *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. by Josephine A. Roberts (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) – is an eclectic version which conflates elements from both the manuscript and printed texts. An electronic parallel-text edition of both manuscript and print versions is now available at http://wroth.latrobe.edu.au; an edition of the Folger manuscript, prepared by Steven W. May and Ilona Bell, is in progress.

[7] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 39.

[8] Seager's autograph manuscript is now British Library Additional MS 10037.

the forty-three previously completed by her brother Philip), as well as translating Petrarch's *Trionfo della morte* and composing an elegy in memory of her brother. If we look beyond Sidney into the seventeenth century – or that portion of the seventeenth century which predates the career of Aphra Behn, identified by Woolf as the founding foremother of women's writing in English – we can find numerous other female poets, as well as Wroth, who challenge Woolf's image of the pre-Behnian literary landscape: Aemilia Lanyer, Anne Bradstreet, Hester Pulter, Katherine Philips and Lucy Hutchinson, to name only the most notable examples. All these women produced substantial corpora of poetry in genres which, collectively, range from the well-established to the innovative. The numerous dedicatory poems in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), for instance, demonstrate her range and facility in encomiastic verse, while her 'Description of Cooke-ham' ranks as one of the first country-house poems in English. The astonishingly versatile Katherine Philips composed songs, elegies, verse letters, encomia and dialogues, as well as poems on love, friendship, retirement, politics, philosophy and religion; she also translated French neoclassical drama into accomplished English couplets. Women poets such as Wroth, Lanyer and Philips did not merely make a few token contributions in marginal genres to the 'extraordinary literature' of the pre-Behnian era. Well-read in anglophone literature – and also, in some cases, in French, Italian and even Latin literature – all were committed, wide-ranging and aspirational writers. All deserve to be taken seriously, both as pioneering figures within English women's literary history and as creative readers of the (mainly male-authored) literary traditions of their day.

Producing Women's Poetry is a study of five women poets – Anne Southwell, Anne Bradstreet, Katherine Philips, Anne Finch and Mary Monck – who flourished between the early seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and whose work, like Wroth's, spans the boundary between manuscript and print. Like so much scholarship on early modern women's writing, *Producing Women's Poetry* can be construed as an extended footnote to Virginia Woolf – or, more precisely, as part of an increasingly complex critical response to Woolf's historiography of anglophone women's writing in *A Room of One's Own*. The ideologically and emotionally charged account of English women's writing which forms the centrepiece of *A Room of One's Own* presents a narrative in which women writers, however talented, are repeatedly frustrated by repressive relatives, social conventions or lack of educational opportunities. The many evocative vignettes of seventeenth-century women writers in *Room* include the 'harebrained' Margaret Cavendish, who 'should have been taught to look

at the stars' but remained 'untutored', lost her wits and became 'a bogey to frighten clever girls with'; the 'sensitive' Dorothy Osborne, who 'had the makings of a writer in her' but whose favoured genre, letters, 'did not count'; and Anne Finch, who was capable of 'pure poetry', but whose gifts were frustrated by anger, bitterness and melancholia.[9] Unquestionably the most memorable vignette in *A Room of One's Own* is the haunting word-picture of the gifted but cruelly thwarted Judith Shakespeare, whose ambition to become a playwright like her brother ends in pregnancy, despair and death. In a world where even such able and privileged women as Cavendish, Osborne and Finch (or, indeed, the fictional Judith Shakespeare) were unable to fulfil their literary potential, the failure of early modern women to contribute to the 'extraordinary literature' of the Elizabethan age scarcely requires further explanation; indeed, it may seem all but inevitable.

Yet *A Room of One's Own*, so compelling as polemic, is shaky as history. Over eighty years after it was first published, scholarly understanding of early modern English literature – by men as well as women – has changed considerably, and many of the assumptions, spoken and unspoken, on which Woolf's argument depends now seem at best tendentious, at worst misinformed and misplaced. In recent years, Margaret Ezell's critique of Woolf's 'myth of Judith Shakespeare' has been highly influential in challenging *A Room of One's Own*'s gloomy picture both of the conditions – social, familial, educational – experienced by would-be women writers in the early modern period and also of the extent of their achievements.[10] As Ezell points out, Woolf – writing in the early twentieth century, before the development of modern bibliographical resources and finding aids – simply knew much less about women's writing of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than scholars do today. In the decades since *A Room of One's Own* was published, the recovery of many more female writers from the early modern period has made women's literary history, pre-Aphra Behn, look very different than it did for Woolf in 1929. But simple ignorance, in Ezell's view, is only the most obviously problematic aspect of Woolf's literary historiography in *Room*. More insidious and far-reaching is one of the key assumptions underpinning Woolf's polemical argument: namely, her privileging of professionalism and concomitant depreciation of forms of early modern literary production which did not

[9] Woolf, *Room*, esp. at pp. 55–59.
[10] Margaret Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. Chapter 2.

offer opportunities for financial reward. Woolf's account of seventeenth-century women's writing, for instance, excluded or downplayed manuscript composition and circulation, which would have done little to help women writers to gain either public reputation or financial independence. Similarly devalued in *Room* were non-remunerative genres – such as letters – which did not belong to the traditional literary canon and would have done nothing to help the would-be woman writer achieve the goal regarded by Woolf as crucial to success: earning her living by her pen. Indeed, it is no coincidence that both Aphra Behn and Judith Shakespeare – Woolf's principal examples of realised and unrealised literary potential among early modern women – were both (actual or aspiring) dramatists. Playwriting, sexually compromising for women, was nonetheless the most viable means of earning one's living by imaginative writing in the seventeenth century. Only when female dramatists could be accepted and succeed in the commercial theatre could women's literary history, on the Woolfian model, properly begin.

Ezell's critique of *A Room of One's Own*, first published in 1993, is in its own way as much a product of its time as is *Room* itself. Its challenge to conventional generic hierarchies is strongly influenced by poststructuralist theory, which deconstructed the traditional distinction between 'literary' and 'non-literary' genres and encouraged the study of 'writing practices' rather than the traditional 'high' literary genres (some of which were, in fact, neither so 'traditional' nor so 'high' as was often supposed). Ezell, drawing on French feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, also argued that traditional generic hierarchies were based on unspoken but pervasive androcentric assumptions which mainstream Anglo-American feminism, such as Woolf's, had not merely failed to query but had in fact silently reproduced. Instead of such acquiescence in male-centric norms, Ezell advocated a more historically sensitive scholarly practice which would address the full range of written forms practised by early modern women. Her appeal both complemented and endorsed concurrent moves by critics such as Elaine Hobby and Wendy Wall to bring non-traditional genres, such as prophecies and mothers' legacies, within the purview of academic scholarship on women's writing.[11] In subsequent years, scholarship on 'non-literary' genres of early modern

[11] Elaine Hobby, '"Oh Oxford Thou Art Full of Filth": The Prophetical Writings of Hester Biddle, 1629(?)–1696', in *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Susan Sellers, Linda Hutcheon and Paul Perron (University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 157–69, and Wendy Wall, 'Isabella Whitney and the Female Legacy', *English Literary History*, 58.1 (1991), 35–62.

women's writing has continued to flourish; recent examples include studies by Alison Thorne on petitionary letters and Victoria Burke on arithmetical manuscripts.[12]

Still more clearly a product of its time was Ezell's insistence – *pace* Woolf – that writings which did not pass beyond manuscript into print should not be dismissed as inconsequential and irrelevant for that reason alone. In arguing for the reappraisal of women's manuscript writings of the early modern period, Ezell was both responding and contributing to a full-scale scholarly re-evaluation of the role of early modern manuscript circulation which began in the 1980s and culminated in a number of landmark publications in the early 1990s. Research by scholars such as Peter Beal, Mary Hobbs, Harold Love, Arthur Marotti and H. R. Woudhuysen, as well as Ezell, persuasively demonstrated the extent and continuing cultural significance of manuscript transmission as much as 250 years after the introduction of printing into England.[13] Such research was critical both in reorientating scholarly perceptions of the entire writing culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and also in encouraging new ways of thinking about early modern textuality. Against this background, the preference of so many early modern women writers for manuscript, rather than print, circulation of their works no longer looked as anomalous as it had to Woolf. When so many eminent male authors of the same period, whose role in the literary canon was unquestioned, could be shown also to have favoured manuscript and shunned print, there could be no defensible grounds for disregarding women writers who had made similar choices. Ezell's argument that scholarship on early modern women's writing should take account of manuscript as well as printed texts was thus consonant with wider trends in literary studies, and has been highly influential on subsequent research. Essays and articles on early modern women's manuscript writings have proliferated in recent years,

[12] Alison Thorne, 'Women's Petitionary Letters and Early Seventeenth-Century Treason Trials', *Women's Writing*, 13.1 (2006), 23–43, and Victoria E. Burke, '"The art of Numbering well": Late Seventeenth-Century Arithmetic Manuscripts Compiled by Quaker Girls', in *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices, 1580–1730*, ed. by James Daybell and Peter Hinds (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 246–65.

[13] Important publications include Peter Beal, 'Notions in Garrison: The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book', in *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts: Papers of the Renaissance English Text Society, 1985–1991*, ed. by W. Speed Hill (Binghamton, NY: Renaissance English Text Society, 1993), pp. 131–47; Mary Hobbs, *Early Seventeenth-Century Verse Miscellany Manuscripts* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992); Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Arthur Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); and H. R. Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts, 1558–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

while the Perdita Project, which catalogues women's manuscript compilations produced between 1500 and 1700, has helped to bring the extent of surviving manuscript material to scholarly notice.[14] Manuscript texts are now routinely addressed even in studies of early modern women's writing which do not assume an explicitly manuscript-related remit. Such work on women's writing in manuscript has also been complemented by a more sharply focused scholarly interest in the involvement of women in print culture, both as print-published authors and as participants in the early modern book trade.[15]

Two decades after the publication of *Writing Women's Literary History*, scholarship on early modern women's writing now looks very different. Ezell's criticisms of *A Room of One's Own*, once iconoclastic, are now as much part of the scholarly landscape as is *Room* itself. My own research on early modern women's writing is firmly post-Ezellian; the present book, as will be apparent, is to a great extent premised on arguments first fully articulated in *Writing Women's Literary History*. Yet there are obvious dangers when any critique of old assumptions becomes the new scholarly orthodoxy, not least that some of the genuine insights of the old assumptions may be overlooked. Amid all the recent interest in early modern women's writing both in manuscript and in a more diverse range of genres, we may be at risk of forgetting that, in some respects at least, Virginia Woolf was right. While her claim that women made *no* contribution to the 'extraordinary literature' of the Elizabethan period is demonstrably incorrect, we should not fail to remember that, relative to men's, women's contribution to early modern literature in English was modest. Even when manuscript as well as print, or a wider range of contemporary genres, is taken into account, it remains the case that comparatively few sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women are known to have produced any kind of writing at all. The qualification 'are known to' is essential, since survival rates for women's writing (especially in manuscript) are likely to have been

[14] The Perdita Project catalogue can be found at http://warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/html. Essay collections specialising in early modern women's manuscripts include George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker, eds., *Women's Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England, 1550–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Victoria E. Burke and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Writing* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

[15] Pioneering studies of women in the book trade include Maureen Bell, 'Seditious Sisterhood: Women Publishers of Opposition Literature at the Restoration', in *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. by Kate Chedgzoy, Melanie Hansen and Suzanne Trill (Keele University Press, 1996), pp. 185–95, and Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). On women and print culture see, for instance, Catharine Gray, *Women Writers and Public Debate in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

lower than for men's, which was in general more highly valued and thus more apt to be preserved either in print or within family or institutional collections.[16] Yet differential survival rates, however significant, are not by themselves enough to explain the disparity between what we know of women's and men's literary activities in the early modern period. Furthermore, scholarly interest in women's exploration of non-literary genres, however valuable both in itself and as a corrective to the preconceptions of *Room*, should not be allowed to obscure the corollary – acknowledged by Ezell as much as Woolf – that of those early modern women who did write, only a relatively small proportion engaged in the literary genres which their own culture held in highest regard.[17] We also need to remember that, of those few early modern women who did attempt to write in recognisably literary forms, even fewer produced a body of work which rivalled in quantity, let alone quality, the writings of their male contemporaries. Much though Woolf may have overstated the contrast between women's and men's literary production in the early modern period, she did not altogether misrepresent it. If we are to understand the full range of women's writing during the early modern period, then the difficulties they faced in their engagement with 'high' literary genres, as well as the opportunities afforded by other, less conventional forms, need to be taken into account.

In other respects, too, the reorientation of scholarship on early modern women's writing since the early 1990s has had unintended and unwanted consequences. One such consequence stems from the emphasis in recent scholarship on the material and paratextual aspects of women's writing. It is now common for studies of texts by early modern women to stress material factors such as the physical construction and organisation of manuscripts and printed books, or the creation of the female author in prefatory, marginal or appended paratexts. This emphasis on productionist and presentational issues is an appropriate and valuable corrective to the tendency in many previous studies to address women's writing in

[16] The exclusion of women from most early modern institutions provides another reason why women's writing survives relatively infrequently in institutional collections. Convents, the one early modern institution fully open to women, were of course outlawed in England after the dissolution of the monasteries. On the preservation of writings by English nuns in continental houses, see Heather Wolfe, 'Reading Bells and Loose Papers: Reading and Writing Practices of the English Benedictine Nuns of Cambrai and Paris', in Burke and Gibson, eds., *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Writing*, pp. 135–56.

[17] For empirical confirmation of this insight, see Patricia Crawford, 'Women's Published Writings, 1600–1700', in *Women in English Society, 1500–1800*, ed. by Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 211–82, and the Perdita catalogue under 'genres' (for manuscripts).

over-idealised terms, without reference to the material factors which not only helped bring such texts into existence but also made significant contributions to the meanings these texts produced. As the title of the present book suggests, my own approach to women's writing is strongly productionist, and attention to the material aspects of textual construction is foundational to my own attempts to understand and contextualise early modern women's poetry. Yet I also recognise the danger that such attention to the material aspects of women's writing may, under certain circumstances, serve to distract from, rather than illuminate, the writing itself. It is not unknown to find studies of early modern women's writing which devote so much care to describing the physical make-up of a manuscript or printed book that the contents of the text itself are scarcely addressed. It is similarly possible to find studies which focus on reconstructing a woman writer's biography, friendships or textual relationships – those aspects of her life which helped to make her works possible – while saying little about the works themselves. It is arguable that a greater emphasis on material and biographical factors is a necessary first stage in the recovery of many previously unknown texts by early modern women which, unlike the work of their better-known male contemporaries, cannot silently benefit from the accumulated scholarly wisdom of the past four to five hundred years. Even if this is so, however, then – after several decades of intensive primary research – the time has surely now come to move on. This is not to say that material and biographical factors are not (or are no longer) important for understanding early modern women's writing; it is a key premise of this book that they are. My point is rather that research on early modern women's writing has now reached a point of maturity where material and biographical considerations, while still important, need not be emphasised at the expense of other aspects of literary scholarship. Productionist factors are of enormous value in helping to make sense of early modern women's writing, but it is the writing itself which is, or should be, our chief concern. If we are to do justice to early modern women's writing we need to take as much account of form, ideas, imagery and genre – the traditional stuff of literary criticism – as we do of materiality. To do otherwise is to risk yet another unintended consequence: namely, reinforcing old-fashioned stereotypes which see early modern women's writing as valuable only as cultural history, incapable of sustaining formal or substantive analysis. It is hard to imagine any but the most eccentric scholars of early modern women's writing wanting to do this.

My own aim in *Producing Women's Poetry* has been to construct an account of five early modern women poets which, while informed by a