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*Female Voices, Women Writers, Godly Coalitions*

**Female Voices**

1620 was a difficult year for James I, King of England. The previous year, his son-in-law Prince Frederick V, Elector Palatine, had accepted the crown of the largely Protestant country Bohemia after it rebelled against its Catholic king, Ferdinand II. Ferdinand struck back by invading the Palatinate and Bohemia, forcing Frederick and his wife Elizabeth into exile in the Netherlands, but James angrily refused to support them. Not only did James disapprove of what he saw as his Protestant son-in-law's overthrow of a legitimate monarch, he was trying to cement his self-appointed role as Europe's peacemaker by arranging a Catholic match for his eldest son Charles to the Spanish Infanta. Popular opinion in England sided with Elizabeth and Frederick: most of James's Protestant subjects supported military intervention on Frederick's behalf and deplored the Spanish match. However, having dissolved Parliament in 1614 for its resistance to what he believed was his royal prerogative, James was reluctant to summon them again. A virtual torrent of criticism of King James and his policies appeared in sermons, plays, printed pamphlets, manuscript libels, and corantos (early newspapers) before proclamations were issued to silence "the excesse of lavish and licentious speech of matters of state."<sup>1</sup> One of the most strident attacks came from Puritan minister Thomas Scott, whose *Vox Populi or Newes from Spayne* (1620), a tongue-in-cheek ventriloquizing of Spanish ambassador Gondomar wickedly relishing his influence on England's court and monarch, ran to seven editions that year alone.<sup>2</sup> A few years later, writing from exile in the Netherlands, Scott defended the intervention of *Vox Populi* in the public sphere. "Was it not then a time to speake? Was there not a cause?" he repeats no fewer than six times in his subsequent pamphlet, *Vox Regis*.<sup>3</sup> The second phrase (*Was there not a cause?*) echoes the resolution of David, "inwardly moved by Gods Spirit," to fight with

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Goliath (1 Sam. 17.29 note i). But the first phrase (*Was it not then a time to speake?*) finds its inspiration in the voice of Esther, who in the eponymously named chapter of the Bible determines to intercede with her husband the king to save her people from destruction. Scott writes in his own defense:

Yea, when I heard a generall despaire close up the hearts of all men, that they should never see Parliament againe,. . . I could not chuse (the zeale of God, the love of my Countrey, dutie to my King and his Children, and indignation to behold the enemies of all these triumphing, presenting themselves to my consideration, as to a man distracted with sorrow and astonishment) but at length breake silence, with the resolution of *Hester, If I perish, I perish. For was there not a time to speake?*<sup>4</sup>

Cramming his motives into a lengthy parenthesis, Scott settles his periodic sentence and his distress in the simple, emphatic *plote* he finds in Esther's words.<sup>5</sup> In Scripture, Esther is encouraged by her kinsman Mordecai to act in her own self-interest as well as that of her people (Esther 4.13–14), but Scott emphasizes the moment when she chooses to risk her own life by resolving to confront the king despite his edict that no one should appear before him without being summoned.<sup>6</sup> As Susan Wiseman observes, for a contemporary reader “Esther would anticipate the emergence of a political point,” and Scott's political point is clear.<sup>7</sup> Emulating Esther, who puts her “life in danger” to facilitate the “deliverance of [God's] Church,”<sup>8</sup> Scott professes himself “ashamed” to have cherished his “personall liberty” above “the liberty of [his] conscience and of [his] Countrey” and resolves to follow Esther's example.<sup>9</sup> Dedicating himself to a “*Truth* [that] will have vent, or breake the Vessell that containes it,” Scott uses his freedom of speech to promote the freedom of the English people from tyranny and ill counsel.<sup>10</sup> That he does so by using the female voice as “a resource for political identity” is the subject of this book.<sup>11</sup>

Scott's reiteration of Esther's words is not easily accommodated within dominant interpretations of masculine uses of the female voice in early modern culture, however. Indeed, one might argue that the figure in the book of Esther that corresponds more closely with both early modern and current preoccupations is Queen Vashti, the disobedient wife whom the king divorces when she refuses to come at his command (Esther 1.12), serving as an object lesson for all wives who should learn (according to the king's decree) “that everie man shulde beare rule in his owne house” (Esther 1.22).<sup>12</sup> In his 1621 verse paraphrase of the Book of Esther, for

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example, Francis Quarles invokes “*scornfull*” Vashti to reinforce female obedience:

A womans Rule should be in such a fashion,  
 Onely to guide her houshold, and her Passion:  
 And her obedience never’s out of season,  
 So long as either Husband lasts, or Reason.<sup>13</sup>

The patriarchal sentiment is depressingly familiar to early modernists. Vashti’s repudiation of her husband and king’s authority aligns her with the scold, “an unruly woman – the woman who was exercising either her sexuality or her tongue under her own control rather than under the rule of a man.”<sup>14</sup> Repeatedly drawing attention to “the moral and legal injunctions against women’s speech,” scholars have emphasized patriarchal culture’s attempts to curtail “women’s verbal disorder and its destabilizing national, social and domestic effects.”<sup>15</sup> This recognition of the potential power of the female voice in early modern England has driven a critical literature devoted to investigating its repression.

The threat of female insubordination – fueled by misogynist constructions of female speech as sexual incontinence, witchcraft, gossip, and civil disorder – led to a range of strategies for managing the female voice in early modern England. One of the most effective means of controlling the perceived dangers of female speech was simply either to suppress it or to represent it as meaningless noise. “She is a bee in a box, for she is ever buzzing,” writes Richard Brathwaite in his character of “A Shrowe”; her husband’s ears are “deafed with her incessant clamour” and “when shee comes in companie, all cry *God blesse them*, as if they heard thunder.”<sup>16</sup> Such a cruelly dismissive approach to the female voice seems relatively benign, however, when compared with more punitive ways of controlling women’s speech such as bridling, cucking, and burning at the stake. In literary texts, as Elizabeth Harvey argues, male ventriloquism offered a more insidious means of restricting and silencing female expression by reifying its associations with the grotesque body. Claiming that “woman’s voice or tongue . . . is seen to be imbricated with female sexuality, just as silence is ‘bound up’ with sexual continence,” Harvey contends that male authors such as Ovid, Erasmus, and Spenser create female voices imbued with “erotic passion, abandonment, desire that cannot be satisfied, rhetorical skill” to justify masculine control.<sup>17</sup> A man who represents himself as a woman does so to reinforce his privilege, she argues – as in *The Praise of*

*Folly*, for example, when Erasmus takes up the voice of the marginalized woman to foreground his own position as “male, educated, and knowledgeable.”<sup>18</sup> Thus Harvey finds in male ventriloquism “a powerful strategy of silencing, of speaking on behalf of another.”<sup>19</sup> The ventriloquism of the female voice becomes an instrument of its suppression.

By drawing attention to masculine restrictions on the female voice, scholarship has amply illuminated the difficulties early modern women faced in taking up positions as speakers or writers in their culture – difficulties of which Lady Anne Southwell reveals an acute awareness in her manuscript verse. “Could you, as did those Sybells, prophesye / men will but count you witches for your skill,” she writes.<sup>20</sup> Yet Southwell’s lament did not stop her from prophesying – from writing “by, or as by, divine inspiration” (OED 1a); indeed, she elsewhere aligns herself with the God that “enables” female biblical heroes such as Judith and Jael, confirming Michele Osherow’s argument that “Biblical stories featuring rhetorically powerful women complicated the cultural requirement for female silence and facilitated early modern women’s words.”<sup>21</sup> Scott’s *Esther* is another such example of a biblical woman who licenses women’s speech and action. It is worth asking, then, what exactly she is doing in this *male*-authored pamphlet, as Scott takes up her voice not to mock, diminish or eroticize it but rather to imitate its strength in challenging religious and political tyranny, using her to articulate his own *parrhesia* – the rhetorical figure for “boldness in speech” (OED).<sup>22</sup> What are the implications of this moment of rhetorical “cross-dressing” in the work of a man who made a career of ventriloquizing the voices of others?

For Scott, Christian humanist and learned preacher, religious teachings were reinforced by “humanist values of public interest, liberty and the resistance of tyranny.”<sup>23</sup> Educated both at the University of St. Andrews and at Cambridge, Scott was thoroughly versed in the principles and practice of rhetoric as well as the typology of Scripture.<sup>24</sup> In her study of masculine rhetorical education, Lynn Enterline has argued that the curriculum “installed a deep, foundational *indifference* to distinctions between person and text, real and fictional characters, male and female feelings and desires,” encouraging instead modes of “identification.”<sup>25</sup> Enterline’s study focuses largely on male identification with classical female figures such as Hecuba or Lucrece, who featured in the rhetorical handbooks of the Tudor schoolroom, but Scripture offered its own repertoire of female models for emulation and imitation. Scott’s identification of his own voice with *Esther*’s is a form of *ethopoeia*, as he strives to represent his own *ethos* (moral character) by aligning himself with a divinely authorized figure.

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Yet unlike the female voices identified by Harvey who are “spoken through by others” only to be discredited, Esther’s voice speaks, in a sense, *through* Thomas Scott.<sup>26</sup> Steven Connor notes that in premodern experience, “the body is seen as both open to and in complex interchange with manifold external influences, agencies and energies, natural, divine and demonic.”<sup>27</sup> Scott’s voicing of Esther’s words suggests a kind of openness, in this case to divine precedent; at the moment of enunciation, the polemicist repeats her words according to a model of typological, composite identity formation identified by Adam Smyth as a “culture of precedent in which earlier Biblical figures or narratives were recapitulated in the present.” Seventeenth-century writers such as Scott who “understood their lives and conditions through Old Testament narratives of the Israelites, particularly in times of crisis” could incorporate both male and female biblical voices by deploying a very different kind of ventriloquism from the appropriation imagined by Harvey.<sup>28</sup> Like all early modern people, Scott experienced politics and religion as inextricable, and the implications of Esther’s position are political as well as religious. In the same pamphlet in which he aligns himself with Esther, for example, Scott describes the ideal political State using religious language from 1 Corinthians 7.4: “Princes are married to the common-wealth; & the wife hath power of the husbands body, as the *husband* of hers. The Common-wealth then hath power of the Prince in this point.”<sup>29</sup> This vision of the ideal relation between monarch and people as an equal and reciprocal marriage may also illuminate his identification with Esther, wife and representative of her oppressed people, for it implicitly gives her the right to have “power of the Prince.”<sup>30</sup> For Scott, Esther is not only a good counsellor to a ruler misled by a corrupt favorite, she is the successful champion of her people’s religious and political liberty.

### Women Writers

Katharine Craik recycles Elizabeth Harvey’s critical paradigm of male ventriloquism as a commonplace when she refers to “the well-documented early modern literary phenomenon of allowing female speech primarily as a means of silencing it.”<sup>31</sup> Such an approach, however, fails to take into account the works of early modern women writers whose voices were far from silenced. Elizabeth Harvey, for example, contends that “ventriloquizations of women in the Renaissance achieved the power they did partly because so few women actually wrote and spoke”<sup>32</sup> – an uncanny echo of Virginia Woolf’s lament that “no woman wrote a word of that

extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Harvey’s account of male ventriloquism as containment would make actual early modern women’s speech and writing impossible.<sup>34</sup> “The representations of feminine speech . . . fostered a vision that tended to reinforce women’s silence or to marginalize their voices when they did speak or write,” she writes.<sup>35</sup> Her view is reiterated by Josephine A. Roberts, who finds that “ventriloquized voices narrow the horizon of expectation for the reading public and reduce the range of authorial roles, before self-evident women’s voices can fashion their own discourse.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Marcy North notes that anonymous complaints that purport to be female-authored “license the expression of desire or the story of a transgression, its relationship to women’s shame.”<sup>37</sup> While compelling, such arguments fail to account for the self-assurance of those early seventeenth-century women who did turn to writing.

Woolf’s powerful myth of the tragic, silenced figure of Judith Shakespeare has been thoroughly debunked by Margaret Ezell’s *Writing Women’s Literary History*, a work that has had a profound impact on the field.<sup>38</sup> Building on French feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous, Ezell challenged the primacy of print, proposing instead “a new concept of women’s literature” that welcomed “manuscript and coterie authorship and non-traditional literary forms as part of the female tradition,” allowing the canon of early modern women’s writing to “speak with many voices.”<sup>39</sup> Since her clarion call, scholars have recovered a multiplicity of women’s voices in all genres and material formats, in both manuscript and print. Far from silenced, early modern women produced an extraordinary range of texts. In the past twenty-five years, this inclusive approach has reaped an abundant harvest, producing extraordinary discoveries visible in resources ranging from the database of Perdita manuscripts to the Pulter Project and Women’s Early Modern Letters Online (WEMLO).<sup>40</sup> This proliferation bears witness to the failure of previous models that focused on – in Ezell’s words – “the means of repression, not the modes of production.”<sup>41</sup> And Ezell’s own investigation of generative modes of writing by women such as scribal circulation remains foundational. Yet her legacy has had some unintended consequences; as Gillian Wright observes, “there are obvious dangers when any critique of old assumptions becomes the new scholarly orthodoxy.”<sup>42</sup> And, although the Ezellian orthodoxy is beginning to be challenged by individual scholars, its assumptions remain remarkably entrenched in the study of early modern women’s writing.

One consequence of Ezell’s influence is that a well-founded suspicion of masculinist literary canons and hierarchies of value has led to widespread

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resistance among scholars in the field to the idea of imposing any framework on women's writing. Partly under the influence of cultural materialism, the field has followed a nonhierarchical approach that has led to the recovery of a widely dispersed mass of disparate material including paratexts, translations, letters, devotional treatises, calligraphy, textiles, and diaries as well as more traditional literary genres. Indeed, in a recognition of the collaborative nature of cultural production, women's contributions to textual culture have recently been expanded to include printing, book ownership, and rag-picking.<sup>43</sup> Ezell herself encouraged this approach, suggesting that "the multiplicity of voices in the choir may raise the whole issue of the need to establish a traditional restricted 'canon' at all."<sup>44</sup> The result has been an extraordinary proliferation – a lush, tangled garden – of materials. And for many of these early modern women's texts, a sensitive, microhistorical approach is often best suited to recovering their full meanings.<sup>45</sup> In their *History of British Women's Writing 1500–1610*, Caroline Bicks and Jennifer Summit emphasize their "focus on the diverse practices of women's writing in order to discern a broad but obscure landscape of female literacy and literary practice" to attend to "the multiple textual forms and writing practices that persisted in the shadows of traditional literary authorship."<sup>46</sup> Yet their embedded metaphors hint at the problem: the "obscure" landscape of texts by women remains in the "shadows" of recognized cultural production. In this sense, both early modern women's writing and its critics have continued to be largely invisible to the larger public; as Nigel Smith has provocatively claimed, no matter how full or diverse the archive, "no one out there in high-street land would bother to read" it.<sup>47</sup> Anthologies excoriated by Ezell such as the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* have long been out of print. And paradoxically, even as the archive of early women's writing has ballooned, it has slipped out of the mainstream, becoming largely inaccessible to the educated general reader. For example, the eighth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (published in 2006) allowed more space to early modern women writers than any time in its history (at 20.83 percent), but – even as the archive has expanded – the ninth and tenth editions (2012 and 2018) give women writers 2 percent less space.<sup>48</sup> More importantly, as Diane Purkiss observes, even in such anthologies women writers are "represented by a small, apologetic handful of works" that are highly excerpted and included only to "directly address the problem of women's position in society."<sup>49</sup> Even for specialists in the field of early modern studies, argue Lara Dodds and Michelle M. Dowd, the study of women's writing remains a "niche interest," its investment in a biological author

signaling a “critical belatedness” that contributes to its “continued marginalization.”<sup>50</sup> As a result, many scholars of early women’s writing doing important work in the field – much of it situating women writers in relation to larger contemporary political and religious discourses – labor away in relative obscurity. Ezell herself points out that even cutting-edge digital editions of early modern women authors tend to disappear into the ether or become “dead links” in an unfortunate metaphorization of the problem.<sup>51</sup>

Those who are keen to reach a wider audience and raise the profile of early women’s writing tend to take one of two approaches. The first aims to reintegrate women’s writing into the traditional canon by tapping into literary formalism: Smith, for example, suggests that women’s writing must “drive hard at the master languages of the period if it is to prevail,” and Wright argues that “we need to take as much account of form, ideas, imagery and genre – the traditional stuff of literary criticism – as we do of materiality.”<sup>52</sup> The difficulty here, of course, is that this tactic risks feeding back into traditional aesthetic hierarchies of value and ignoring the vast archive of women’s writing that does not fit into them. The second approach – and one equally likely to exclude – is to seek a larger narrative to account for the burgeoning of women’s writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Noting that the “discipline is crying out for a narrative” while insisting that “the formation of such grand narratives is to be resisted,” Elizabeth Clarke observes nevertheless that the “absence of any literary-historical explanation for the emergence of women’s authorship . . . leaves us at the mercy of the kind of thinking that drives canon formation: an ahistorical, mystical assertion of the literary genius at work.”<sup>53</sup> Conscious of the problem, Patricia Phillippy promises to construct such a narrative by presenting “a history that respects and acknowledges the multiplicity of women’s writing while at the same time seeking grounds in the subject to support a unified narrative and to work against the unfeatured accretion of names and titles that can easily result in a disjointed account of unrelated textual events.”<sup>54</sup> Yet the elaborate table she includes to unify the excellent essays on individual writers in her volume paradoxically highlights their diversity and does not fully succeed in yoking them to the overarching themes and debates she proposes as organizing principles. The very multiplicity of the archive of early modern women’s writing has diminished its impact on mainstream literary narratives.

Moreover, as many have observed, the field of early modern women’s writing is founded on biological sex as a primary and defining principle of inclusion, despite theoretical concerns about essentialism, authorial



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identity and agency, and despite emerging awareness of the complexities of cross-gender identification, anonymity, and attribution that problematize female authorship. While Ezell challenged so many prior assumptions, she did not attempt to dislodge the basic idea that the “female tradition” consisted of “a self-consciousness of oneself as a woman writer and a conscious concern with the condition and roles of women in society.”<sup>55</sup> Less than a decade later, however, Danielle Clarke raised concerns about the “unproblematic inscription of an ontologically stable female subject, defined primarily in terms of sex, and only secondarily by class, religion or political allegiance.”<sup>56</sup> Here, Clarke addresses two related and equally troubling issues. On one hand, she articulates the current concern with intersectionality – with the principle that, as Merry Wiesner-Hanks puts it, “no one identity – race, class, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation and so on – should be considered apart from other identities but is always materialized in terms of and by means of them.”<sup>57</sup> Though intersectional theory originated in Kimberle Crenshaw’s important work on the double oppression suffered by black women as gendered and raced subjects, it has had a significant impact on other fields, including the study of early modern women’s writing.<sup>58</sup> Many scholars have recognized that women writers often aligned themselves more clearly with their religious, or political identities than with their identities as women.<sup>59</sup> If so, our own focus on the woman author’s gender may merely superimpose our own concerns on historical subjects and obfuscate or reduce the complexity of their identities. Articulating her frustration with the problem, Elizabeth Scott-Baumann writes: “If our own century is to do justice to this heterogeneous body of ‘early modern women’s writing,’ maybe we need to move on from the category altogether?”<sup>60</sup> On the other hand – and more fundamentally – Clarke’s observation points to the problem of attaching female voice to body and opens up the idea of biological authorship on which anthologies of women writers are based. If “woman” is merely a rhetorical invention or a cultural construction, do we reify that construction by making it an organizing principle? Anita Pacheco sums up the issues: “in treating women writers as the coherent, controlling origins of textual meaning . . . critics were peddling human conceptions of authorship and selfhood that were both outmoded and politically retrograde.”<sup>61</sup> This has led some commentators to reject the idea of the early modern “woman writer” – and the field devoted to studying her – altogether. Noting that the “breezy confidence” in the idea of the woman writer seemed to have disappeared, Andrew Dickson wonders whether “the discussion has anywhere left to go, if indeed it is able to support its own assumptions.”<sup>62</sup>

Yet even if women's identities are multiple, intersecting and far more complex than their identities as women, gender remains a discursive and political formation in early modern culture that can be considered as separate from – though intersecting with – biological authorship. “There is much to be learned . . . from an investigation of the representation of women's speech by men,” Clarke writes, “and from the recognition that women writers too produce culturally determined *representations* of their own speech rather than acting (or speaking) purely as autonomous agents in their own right.” Building on Clarke's useful suggestion that we attend to “narratives of gender across the divide of sex,”<sup>63</sup> this study equally takes up Wiseman's observation that because “women were useful in thinking about politics . . . men *and* women used female, as well as male, examples to make political points.”<sup>64</sup> Thomas Scott ventriloquizes Esther's voice not because he seeks to silence, usurp, or eroticize it, nor because, as Lawrence Liping argues, “when a man is abandoned, in fact, he feels like a woman.”<sup>65</sup> Nor does he invoke Esther primarily as a figure for supplication or petition, as women's Civil War petitions often did.<sup>66</sup> On the contrary, he taps into her voice to convey his own principled resistance to tyranny and arguably to invoke “the courage of the reformed church.”<sup>67</sup> In Scott's polemic, sexual difference is subordinated to religious and political cross-gender identification – a sign not of appropriation but of alliance. Here, too, theories of intersectionality may be useful. Building on Crenshaw's own claim that intersectionality within identity-based groups allows for potential coalitions (race-based groups, for example, can be understood as a coalition between men and women of color), Anna Carastathis notes that complex identities offer potential points of connection with others. She argues that “conceptualizing identities as coalitions – as internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences and dissonances and by internal as well as external relations of power – enables us to form effective political alliances that cross existing identity categories and to pursue a liberatory politics of interconnection.” Though her focus is on international feminist coalitions of the past thirty years, Carastathis's interest in “movements [that] are premised on finding the interconnections of struggles by forming relationships of accountability and compassion across lines of difference and dominance” may be surprisingly relevant in the early modern context.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, it is worth returning to one of Ezell's foundational insights into a “literary world before 1700, one in which men and women participated together.”<sup>69</sup>