Women (Authors) on Top

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"A Lady Writing a Letter" by Jan Vermeer

1. Of the essays and books that have been particularly influential in the study of early modern women and women writers, two seem particularly relevant for the present review. The first is Natalie Zemon Davis's "Women on Top," which looks at the ways in which the carnivalesque trope of the "woman on top" worked less to empower women *per se* than to reaffirm the gendered and social status quo.1 Yet, as Davis argues, the very specter of women -- and men dressed as women -- rising up to mock their "betters" nonetheless afforded a critique of that status quo, giving women and the lower classes, even if they remained in many ways on the bottom, an experiential and imaginative step up.2 The second essay is Catherine Gallagher's "Embracing the Absolute," which seeks to explain why so many (proto)feminist seventeenth-century women writers were royalists: women, in other words, who identified with the top, whether they themselves were on it or not.3 Royalism, Gallagher argues, provided a model of absolutism that appealed to women seeking a place of empowered and absolute individuality from which to write. Among other things, the connection between what Gallagher calls "the *roi absolu* and the *moi absolu*" was the enabling logic of seventeenth-century female authorship.

2. All three of the essays discussed in this review are concerned with the figure of the woman on top, either in Davis's sense of its critical or leveling functions, or, as in Maureen Quilligan's essay, in its literal manifestation: a female monarch for whom the woman on top was more than a trope. Each essay is also concerned, like Gallagher's, with the relationship between political commitment, authority, social class, gender, and authorship. While the essays share with Gallagher's an interest in the political and economic forces that enabled female authorship, they present a broader range of women authors than those Gallagher considers: a queen (Quilligan's Catherine de Médicis); a sometime gentlewoman and working royalist (Margaret W. Ferguson's Aphra Behn); and a self-identified service class, satire-wielding would-be marketplace author (Jill P. Ingram's Isabella Whitney). They also offer a more complex sense of what political commitment, particularly "royalism," might mean for women authors, and a more politically diverse analysis of the kinds of "authority" authorship entailed.

3. It is worth pointing out these essays' overlap with -- and divergence from -- Gallagher's, since some parts of her argument, like the claim that authorship was the result of individual absolutist subjectivity, have been implicitly criticized in recent scholarship. Through close attention to what Jerome McGann has called "the textual presence and activities of many non-authorial agents,"[4] critics have shown that authorship was not solely or even primarily an individual enterprise; take, for example, the various familial, coterie, political, scribal, and printing forces that helped to bring Sir Phillip Sidney's works to a wider public readership, or Quilligan's working assumption that Catherine de Médicis was as much the author of Pierre Ronsard's *Mascarades et Bergeries* as Ronsard himself. While textual production should thus not too easily be equated with individuality and absolutist authority, an author's "royalism" should not be too easily equated with "absolutism." The examples Gallagher chooses from Margaret Cavendish's work, for example, all concern Cavendish's views on women and royal power, particularly her now famous (and oft-cited) claim that she would like to be considered "Margaret the First." Yet in the same text Cavendish expresses as much concern with women's relationship to property (particularly her own) and the role her husband's military reputation and the king's ingratitude played in the Cavendishes' social and economic decline, as she does with either female authorship or absolutism. Cavendish's royalism, in other words, was not absolutist: she believed that the nobility played as important a role in maintaining the Stuart monarchy as the king did, and, as such, was not only entitled to advise and criticize the king, but to benefit from the social and economic benefits that royalism conferred. While much new historicist work, through its focus on state power, and, in particular, on the crown's own rhetoric of royal absolutism, suggests otherwise, early modern England was not in practice an absolutist monarchy.[5] Theories of absolutism, including those of Filmer, Bodin, and James VI/I himself, were certainly part of the conversation, but while the royalism practiced or mediated by sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century women may well have played a role in their relationship both to authority and to authorship, it was not necessarily absolutist.

4. As Quilligan and Ferguson illustrate, for both Catherine de Médicis and Aphra Behn, the royalism central to their literary activities was one in which power was diversified, subject to mediation and criticism, and located in multiple sites. In her essay on Behn, a woman author almost uniformly identified as "royalist," Ferguson offers a similar critique of "the dominant critical view of Behn as a Stuart loyalist" on her way towards a brilliant reading of the working women represented in Behn's story "The Adventure of the Black Lady" (¶4). Although Behn was a royalist and worked for the king, she was frequently critical of him, particularly on the grounds of her often-long-awaited financial remuneration. Ferguson argues that the critical work of identifying "tensions" between Behn's royalism and "the liberal feminist strains in her thought" -- a move motivated by fixed ideas of what feminism should look like and the assurance that royalism could not be part of it -- works only through the omission of "significant parts of her political economic statement" (¶3). These political and economic views include not only Behn's own poetic "dunning" of Charles II in her poetry (¶5), but her literary representations of common or shifting women. Behn's royalism did not mean that she only valorized aristocratic or gentry women in her fiction; the woman on top (albeit of an ambiguous and shady socio-economy) in "The Adventure of the Black Lady" serves a critical, if not leveling, function in the story. Behn's "royalism" thus did not preclude a critical relationship, both in her own life and in her literary work, to the distribution of power and material rewards in a monarchy. While Gallagher's essay initiated much needed critical attention to the relationship between women's politics and their decision or ability to write, Ferguson's implicitly revisionary work reminds us that no identificatory rubric, whether "royalist" or "woman," is self-explanatory, transhistorical, or free from active and ongoing mediation. Rather than 'saving' an early modern woman writer from charges of royalism, moreover, Ferguson seeks to understand the role it played in her life and work. Her woman writer, that is, has political commitments neither subordinate to nor separable from her work as a woman who writes.

5. Indeed the ways in which a "woman who writes" became, in literary criticism, a "woman writer" is worthy of some attention. Not only is the "woman writer" the organizing rubric of the present forum, but certain presuppositions about what it meant to be a "woman writer" in the early modern period inform the essays under consideration in ways, as I will suggest, that impede rather than assist their readings. To a certain extent, late twentieth- (and some early twenty-first-) century feminist criticism of early modern women authors rendered its object of study its subject, presuming, to put it more baldly, that early modern women authors were themselves necessarily and primarily concerned with their status as early modern women authors.

The assumption that women writers saw both their gender and their status as women writers as central concerns of their writing has become almost axiomatic in the field: "Renaissance women writers may indeed have been striving to create their own distinctive literature from existing conditions"; "[Isabella] Whitney stands as a necessary aid to understanding the circumstances in early modern England that enabled women to achieve a poetic presence and enter into print"; Amelia Lanyer wrote in "anticipation of a greater voice for women"; Elizabeth Cary "designated woman's Christian heroism as an important subject for the woman writer"; and Margaret Cavendish wrote to find "a voice for women in print" (the list is extensive).6 While I am by no means suggesting that these women never engaged with questions of gender or of female authorship in their texts (or paratexts), the assumption that women wrote to carve out a space for the woman writer not only presumes that women who wrote were centrally, or even nominally, invested in such a phenomenon -- and thus that such a readily-identifiable phenomenon or category existed -- but also that their other motivations and intentions -- literary, sociopolitical, or otherwise -- are less interesting or relevant to feminist critical considerations of their work.

6. Often, as is the case with embarrassing or, to a modern feminist sensibility, reactionary motivations and interests, these other commitments and interests are explained away. (Many critics apologize for or rationalize their authors' royalism even as they valorize their criticism of patriarchy; both Cavendish and Behn have benefited from more than their fair share of this kind of criticism).7 Furthermore, in focusing too assiduously on women writers' presumed navigations of the phenomenon of the woman writer (its rarity, stigma, or promotion), scholars have also ignored other aspects of their work. To take an example, it is only recently that scholars have attempted to address Mary Wroth's factional and internationalist political commitments with the same kind of attention they have paid to her self-styling as a writer, or to the man who attacked her for being a woman writer. (This attack by Lord Edward Denny, in which Wroth is compared to a Hermaphrodite, is discussed in nearly every critical appraisal of Wroth's work, yet few attempts have been made to discern what other kinds of topical "heat" her romance occasioned).8

7. Many early modern women writers, moreover, whether concerned with their gender or authorship or not, had political or economic investments that, like royalism, may not easily accord with what Ferguson calls a "liberal feminist" politic. To take only one example, a fairly impressive number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women authors, including Mary Sidney, Anne Clifford, Mary Wroth, Aemilia Lanyer, and Margaret Cavendish benefited, either directly or indirectly, from enclosures, rack renting, or monopolies and other royal dispensations. The power of the woman writer may have been grounded in a royalist imaginary or in the literal resistance to

patriarchal injunctions, but it may also have been grounded in, or at least enabled by, the oppression of the poor.

8. Not only does the category of the "woman writer" presume its subject, but in privileging one identificatory rubric -- gender -- it also preconditions the process of scholarly analysis. In a recent essay, Wendy Wall asks the following question: "Do a 1630s petitioner to Parliament, a 1590s queen, and an urban Tudor serving woman have enough in common to allow us to generalize about them?"9 As Wall points out, if we question this category, and the idea that all women writers were proto-feminists (in our own model), "Women writers may no longer fit the pattern of heroic liberal subjects valiantly fighting patriarchy," but we may glean a "more historically accurate picture of the circumstances in which gender functions as a social force" (50). If we still consider gender, as Joan W. Scott put it in an equally influential essay some years ago, a "viable category of historical [and literary] analysis," then we must not presume a necessary relationship either between gender and resistance (women writers as protofeminists), or between gender and oppression (an over-emphasized connection Phyllis Rackin has recently criticized in her trenchant "Misogyny is Everywhere").10 We also must not presume the structural dominance of gender, a lesson gleaned not only from critical race studies - whose influence is felt in Ferguson's essay - but from an equally careful navigation of our own preoccupations with what gender was and how it worked.

9. While all three of the essays under consideration in this review begin, in some way, with a woman author -- and, as I will argue, with some of the attendant problems this category presents -- all three are equally attentive to questions of genre and to the complex fields of cultural production and socioeconomic possibility in which all writers work. In the rest of my comments, I proceed in something of a top down model, not of author but of subject, beginning with Quilligan's queen and ending with Ingram's working woman.

I. Maureen Quilligan, "When Women Ruled the World: The Glorious Sixteenth Century."

10. In her most recent book, *Incest and Agency in Elizabeth's England* (Pennsylvania, 2005), Maureen Quilligan argues that family rank and the endogamous (or incestuous) halt in the "traffic in women" served to empower elite women. As Quilligan acknowledges, her argument is indebted to that of Catherine Gallagher discussed above: just as royalism could empower women to write, so could family prestige. Endogamy, she argues, allowed women to consolidate power and property within an aristocratic kinship network as a way of gaining access to a public or authorial voice (27, 121). While Quilligan suggests that her argument can apply to non-aristocratic women as well -- indeed she argues that Isabella Whitney's "Wyll and

Testament," the subject of Jill P. Ingram's essay, helps to make her poetry "an inalienable possession of a proper inheritance" (122) -- her subjects are almost exclusively royal and aristocratic women. While access to power was in many ways a birthright for these women, Quilligan has worked hard to illustrate the ways in which gender was a key means by which both aristocratic and royal power were transferred, consolidated, and mediated. The present essay is no exception, but it returns to the comparative focus for which Quilligan, like Ferguson, has been justly renowned.11

11. Quilligan's essay seeks to place Catherine de Médicis' literary activities in a pan-European context and to see them in their proper historical relationship to both Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart. While the relationship between Elizabeth and her cousin Mary is well known, it is usually, as Quilligan points out, presented as a narrative of personal rivalry. Quilligan not only wants to replace this story with one in which the two participated in a drama "in which the political difficulties inherent in female rule are manifested" and shared, but to illuminate the equally important role played by Catherine de Médicis -- Mary's, and at two different historical moments, Elizabeth's potential, mother-in-law -- in this drama (¶3).

12. As Quilligan argues, both Elizabeth and Catherine proceeded politically with the knowledge that their shared royal prerogatives depended, at least to some extent, "on the achievements of each other" (¶4). In a familiar new historicist move, Quilligan suggests that this relationship was navigated through the arts, in this case a volume of poetry the French poet Pierre Ronsard sent to Elizabeth in 1565, the year after France and England signed the Treaty of Troyes. Comprised of dedicatory poems to both Elizabeth and Mary (among others), a royal masque featuring the Médicis children, and the texts of a range of courtly entertainments "commanded by the Queen in her effort to bring together the warring factions among the princes of France" (¶6), the volume is consistently celebratory of a Christian world "governée par Princesses" (¶9). For Quilligan, Ronsard's *Mascarades et Bergeries* carries Catherine's messages of peace to Elizabeth and serves as her "attempt to enlist her sister queen in a program of cultural exercise as a substitute for war" (¶10). Yet Quilligan's evidence for this claim seems to come from within the text itself; there is no discussion in her essay of Catherine's actual involvement in the circulation of the text, nor, for that matter, of the role of the publisher -- another "nonauthorial agent" -- nor indeed of the titular author himself; Quilligan assumes that Ronsard's text carries Catherine's message alone, and the details of its production and circulation are left out of the equation.

13. While Ronsard was certainly aligned with the French royal family, he also had a wide range of diplomatic and political investments and experiences - including three years spent in Britain - and was well on his way to becoming a notorious figure in the polemical wars of religion. Thus when Ronsard tells Elizabeth -- currently busily establishing Protestant rule in England -- that rule by women is "prudent," the

message may be one in which the "Gynococratie" is flattered as a transnational and even trans-religious phenomenon, but it may also carry Ronsard's own factional intentions or warnings. That is while Quilligan sees Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* as an important intertext whose premises Ronsard sought to deny with his flattery of women's rule, there were other contexts that mattered equally to the political intentions of Ronsard's text, not least the profound confessional differences between the two countries. (Quilligan further argues that Ronsard's text also works to erase the differences between Christians by calling Charles to a religious war "not against other Christians, but in defiance of the Muslim world," and by claiming that under Catherine's reign "cest motz Papaux & Hugunotz" are dead (¶20). Yet in the very act of mentioning these terms -- they are, quite literally, fighting words -- Ronsard animates their divisive and murderous potential).

14. Moreover, Quilligan's claim that "it was well known that Elizabeth disliked war and avoided military action" (¶10) -- much like her assumption that Catherine actually wanted to broker peace -- takes conventional and official diplomatic and governmental rhetoric at face value; international statesmen always, even as they wage war, claim to seek peace. As Satan says when his forces advance on the angels with their "devilish Enginrie, impal'd/On every side with shadowing Squadrons Deep/To hide the fraud": "[Let] those who hate us, [see] how we seek/Peace" (*Paradise Lost*, Book 6, 553-5; 560-1). "Manners, arms, and arts" may serve as a triumvirate of necessary aristocratic skills, but the central term is frequently couched between its gentler emissaries. Catherine certainly played a role in commissioning and circulating Ronsard's volume, and it was certainly used as a diplomatic tool. Yet the related claims that it carried Catherine's message of peace alone, and, moreover, that this message was somehow either genuine or enacted, flies in the face of what we know about the work of artists patronized by royals - they did more than simply serve or simply praise -- and what we know about the differences between rhetoric about peace and peace itself. This is not to say, as Quilligan is at pains to deny, that art is "frivolous" (¶10), but rather that its language is polysemic, and its relationship to (royal) power less uniform and transparent than multivocal.

15. In her reading of Ronsard's volume, Quilligan highlights how the *Bergerie*, a pastoral masque featuring the royal children (including the future king), both underscores the divine right of kings and stages the important role near relations play in maintaining royal power. The dynamics of the masque thus pique Quilligan's ongoing interest in the ways in which dynasties entrench power -- and, indeed, in the ways in which literary texts can both enact these dynastic entrenchments and carry their messages. Yet they also highlight the advisory and admonitory role of these same relations, and, I would argue, of the artists whom they patronized (Charles, after

all, was Ronsard's patron, not Catherine). At the end of the masque, two adult shepherds -- figures, as in English pastoral, of political critique -- offer epigrammatic advice to Charles: "Be partial to virtue, not royal pomp" (¶18), they say, words delivered by royalty, but written by a court poet with his own complex relationship to royal and "gynocratic" power.

16. Feminists have been among the most trenchant critics of new historicist arguments that not only see power as centered in or emanating from the state or regent, but as ultimately impervious to subversion. Yet the figure of the queen has been, for obvious reasons, particularly attractive to feminist scholars (some of the best books by feminist scholars written in the 1990s, including Susan Frye's, were about Elizabeth I. More recently, Anna of Denmark and Henrietta Maria, frequently dismissed as frivolous by earlier historians, have been the subjects of some exciting feminist scholarship by both established and younger scholars).12 In seeking to highlight royal women's cultural contributions, we need to be careful that we do not make them the ultimate "authors" of the texts produced under their patronage in a way that erases the contributions of other makers, or which celebrates their status as women on top without substantively engaging with or acknowledging the perhaps less celebration-worthy aspects of their activities. While Quilligan cites Ronsard's celebration of the "friendship forever eternal" between Catherine de Médicis and Elizabeth I, based, she argues, "on all they had in common, including a preference for peace" (¶23), she highlights one aspect of the rhetorical means by which these women "ruled the world." But in doing so she not only romanticizes those means, but ignores the complexity of Catherine's "authorship," erasing the contributions of her coproducers and narrowly conscribing the meanings and uses of the texts they produced. By both presupposing the nature of and working to valorize a woman (author) on top, Quilligan ultimately does disservice to the understudied and complex schema of French-English cultural relations her research so productively opens up.

II. Margaret W. Ferguson, "Conning the 'Overseers': Women's Illicit Work in Behn's 'The Adventure of the Black Lady'"

17. Ferguson begins her essay with the aforementioned reexamination of Behn's 'royalism,' but she also delineates its indebtedness to Natasha Korda's essay on Moll Frith, Women's Work and the 'All-Male Stage,' and to Jim Holstun's response to that essay in the previous issue of *Early Modern Culture*. Ferguson credits Holstun's notion of "rough urban commoning" as a mode of resistance to class encroachment with helping her to understand the nature and intentions of Behn's representations of ambiguously 'common' women's work, including her own (¶2). These representations, Ferguson suggests, lead us to complicate the dominant critical view of Behn as a Stuart loyalist who believed that any check on royal privilege would lead to a tyranny of the common people, but they also highlight the ways in which shady and illicit

forms of women's work could serve as indictments of political and economic inequities. As Ferguson argues, in her "depictions of herself as a servant pleading for money, [Behn] engages with issues of justice" (¶4). While she takes too little account of the conventional nature of Behn's complaint -- complaining about the "slenderness of their rewards" was an established part of the courtly negotiation for said rewards -- Ferguson nonetheless highlights the extent to which a self-consciousness about labor could lead to self consciousness about class injustice, and, in turn, to a "rough" -- or what Ferguson softens to a "smooth" -- "commoning" of the agents of its enforcement.

18. Behn's depictions of the activities of the "gentlewoman" landlady in "The Adventure of the Black Lady" -- a character whom Ferguson initially posits as a figure for the author herself -- highlight the illicit forms of women's work that not only indict a social, economic, and political order which offers them no better options, but which themselves serve as a form of political resistance or social leveling (¶7, ¶8). While Ferguson seems partly motivated to save Behn from charges of rigid royalism, snobbery, and "classism," she insists that she is not suggesting that Behn was "a radical or republican in disguise" (¶9). Rather, she wants to argue that Behn's story, in both exposing and covering over the landlady's "participation in types of work considered common in the most derogatory senses of that word" (¶9), provides insight into Behn's own vexed sense of herself as a court-dependent working woman of ambiguous status and often critical opinions. Although she doesn't quite follow through on her promise to connect her reading of the story back to her initial discussion of Behn's career as a 'royalist' writer and spy, the two readings in the essay -- the first of Behn's literary "dunnings" of the king, and the second of her short novel -- are highly suggestive in this regard.

19. In her reading of (the underexamined) "The Adventure of the Black Lady," Ferguson illustrates how the labor of the landlady both manipulates and saves the pregnant black-haired woman, Bellamora, and cons the overseers who seek to track her down. Ferguson pays wonderful attention to the language and symbolism Behn uses in her story, from the missing "trunk" that represents both the pregnant woman's body and her worldly possessions, to the newly littered "black cat" the landlady shows to the overseers as the source of the rumors they heard about a would-be bastard-producing "Black-hair'd" lady under her care. Yet she is equally attentive to the means by which the landlady simultaneously "appears to satisfy some key laws of capitalist social reproduction" (¶11) by marrying the pregnant woman off, and to undermine them by trafficking with criminals and conning a group the narrator calls "Vermin" (the Overseers of the Poor) (¶14). Ferguson includes something -- to me -- of a digressive rumination on the ways in which the displaced pregnancy of the black lady -- we hear nothing of an actual birth in the story -- engages with rumors about the birth of the king's heir, and, moreover, with Behn's own suspiciously fulsome public

praise of that birth (mediated in her private commonplace book by mockery of and suspicion about the royal line) (¶13). The real interest in the piece, as I suspect it is for Ferguson, lies in the landlady herself, described as "an ancient Gentlewoman who was fallen a little to decay" (¶15), and whose agency and wealth depend not on her goodness or gentle status, but on their opposites: unstable social status and illicit labor.

20. Officially a letter of lodgings "for the *best* part of her Livelihood" (¶15, emphasis mine), the landlady is nonetheless intimate, much like the speaker in Isabella Whitney's "Wyll," with the shadier neighborhoods and economies of London (¶17). As Ferguson argues, the landlady "uses her cunning and conning powers . . . in two (interrelated) profit-making schemes that are outside the law and that escape official notice": she works as a marriage broker fixing past indiscretions, and as a fence for stolen goods, arranging, through her acquaintanceship "with the neat practices of [her] fine City," for the return of Bellamora's missing trunk (¶16, ¶17). Ferguson ends her reading by questioning whether the landlady's actions in the story cast her as a "conservative" -- which, in an uncharacteristic moment of imprecision, she seems to collapse with "royalist" -- or a critical agent (¶18). While the landlady returns Bellamora to the father of her child "so that the intergenerational transfer of 'gentlemen's' property can continue to function" (¶18), she also, by virtue not only of her "shady work" but of her derogatory "commoning" of the overseers, forces us to question the putative distinctions between legal and illegal transfers of property, and thus to question the systems of social reproduction and power that toss some unlucky women to the wolves.

21. I wish that Ferguson had returned to the question of Behn's own shifting status at the end of her essay, connecting Behn's complex representation of her working landlady with her own sense of herself as a worker who both served the state -- the overseers of writers, as it were -- and criticized its dispensations. Given her focus on labor, Ferguson is particularly self-conscious in her essay about her own labor as a writer. Rather than "commoning" the critics rigidly assured of Behn's royalism, or indeed the Harold Blooms of the world who punish primarily female and working class authors with inferior ratings (see Ferguson's note 23), Ferguson instead actively engages with immediate and future interlocutors. That is, while she credits Korda and Holstun with pushing her work in new directions -- and thus nods to the communal usefulness of dialogic and readily-available forums like *Early Modern Culture* -- she also credits the work of her student, Jessica Jordan, whose seminar paper clearly both benefited from Ferguson's teaching and contributed to Ferguson's thinking in her own essay (see note 19). Indeed, the acknowledgement of others' work -- particularly that of students -- simultaneously acknowledges the power differentials and inequalities in the public presentation of the intellectual knowledge produced, at least in part, by the

collective labor that occurs in classes (students don't have forums in which to point out our indebtedness, whether licit or not, to them), and seeks to bridge them through dialogue and recognition. In acknowledging both other scholars and the often unremarked upon labor on which our own work relies, Ferguson draws attention to the different grids of power in which women write.

III. Jill P. Ingram, "A Case for Credit: Isabella Whitney's "Wyll and Testament" and the Mock Testament Tradition"

22. Ingram's essay is all about giving -- and getting -- credit where credit is due. In highlighting the mock testament tradition in which Isabella Whitney composed her "Wyll" -- a satirical tradition associated with outsiders, and invested in exposing vice, "burlesqu[ing] legal authority," and indicting economic inequalities -- Ingram argues that Whitney both dramatizes the "ambitious female writer's plight as an 'outsider'" and calls "for the opening of credit networks to the city's marginalized figures" (¶1). Writing satirical poetry, in other words, is a form of urban commoning, an argument that goes some distance beyond previous arguments that see Whitney's writing as a plea or advertisement for service.

23. Ingram is by no means the first critic to draw attention to Whitney's economic disadvantage, or to the fact that, "denied credit, room or board," and being "very weake in Purse," Whitney imagines her writing as a way to obtain some form of social credit. Indeed, perhaps because of her perceived lower class status -- which Ingram, like some others, sees rightly as a rhetorical position rather than a fact -- Whitney was a favored author with many of the (frequently materialist) feminists responsible for recovering lost women writers of the Renaissance in the late 1980s -- it was Betty Travitsky who first brought Whitney to public notice in *ELR* in 1980 -- and 1990s. In *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe, 1540-1620* (Indiana, 1990) -- a book whose central argument about the ways in which women, like men, used texts as a kind of currency clearly influenced Ingram's thinking -- Ann Rosalind Jones argues that Whitney "wrote to and for women as a group," seeking the support of a coterie network of women (37). In *Oppositional Voices: Women as Writers and Translators of Literature in the English Renaissance* (Routledge, 1992), Tina Krontiris groups Whitney with Margaret Tyler in a chapter entitled "Servant Girls Claiming Male Domain," and in *Tudor and Stuart Women Writers* (Indiana, 1994), Louise Schleiner discusses Whitney in a chapter which argues for "Women's Household Circles as a Gendered Reading Formation." Schleiner agrees with Jones that women were Whitney's targeted readers, but she specifies particular ones: the lady whose service Whitney lost, "and those who might have influence with her" (14), a reading which renders Whitney's poetry utterly transparent to a biography that is, interestingly enough, based entirely on Whitney's own poetic fiction.

24. The two critics whose work Ingram engages with most directly are Wendy Wall and Lorna Hutson. Both in her 1991 *ELH* article, "Isabella Whitney and the Female Legacy" and in *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Cornell, 1993), Wall argues that as a volume, the *Nosgay* (in which "Wyll" is the final poem) "replicates private textual circulation" and "identifies itself as located squarely within a network of social relationships" (*Imprint*, 297, 298). Yet whereas Wall suggests that the volume is concerned with the dangers of circulation, Ingram, as we will see, focuses on the benefits, or at least the potential benefits, of circulation. Ingram's second point of engagement with Wall is with the question of genre. Wall located Whitney's "Wyll" in the female legacy tradition, arguing that this genre "allowed women writers to come forth as authors within a culture that denied them public expression" (*Imprint*, 300). While Wall suggests that Whitney "draws on the debate about the rights and restrictions of female testators as a means of articulating her ambiguous relationship to the forms of public writing" (307) -- again, the woman writer as a defining goal -- she says nothing about the literary genre Ingram draws our attention to, one in which the female testator is empowered to be a critic as well as a public voice.

25. Ingram is most concerned, however, with Lorna Hutson, the critic whose claim that Whitney "wished to use print to initiate a credit relation, that is, to find herself employment" shifted the location of Whitney's work away from the coterie, family, or household to that of the marketplace.13 According to Hutson, Whitney saw the marketplace as the venue in which she had to speak: "Whitney confesses, with astonishing candor, the rhetorical trick of mobilizing credit in print; for all the circulation of epistolary credit in her fiction, London offers no sanctuary to the author who cannot incur a friendly debt, being 'so weake/ that none mee credit dare,' unless, of course, as she goes on to say, 'these Bookes' that she is presently in the process of writing came to be bought by actual and potential 'friends'" (sig E6r, *Usurer's Daughter*,128). Hutson argues that this awareness of -- and indeed the desire to influence the nature of -- "the newly emerging social uses of the printed book" could "perfectly well be adapted to women's needs." Yet, much like her feminist peers, she sees the primary "newly emerging social uses of the printed book" as "the initiation of a credit relation through indication of readiness for service" (129). Hutson thus places Whitney firmly back into her old biography and the 'residual' dynamic of service rather than the capitalist equations of print she initially highlights.

26. Ingram's main focus is on the same lines that interest Hutson: those in which Whitney refers to the "Bookebinders by Paulles" (¶11). Unlike Hutson, though, Ingram is committed to keeping Whitney's poem in the marketplace. Up until this point in the essay, Ingram has been keenly sensitive to genre and thus to the "antic" and mocking persona it affords the poem's speaker. Yet when she reaches the

Bookbinders, Ingram argues, the speaker "sounds sincere" (¶11), imaging a perfect market economy in which she leaves money to the bookbinder and friends to buy her printer's books. While Ingram argues that Whitney is "subverting -- or at least sidestepping -- a traditional call for patronage," she renders her not only sincere, but something of a self-interested capitalist: "The speaker's fantasy of perfect supply and demand in the center of the poem reflects her desire to be safe from the law's proscriptions [against beggars]" (¶12). The "credit lines" Ingram argues Whitney hoped to open to the city's poor at the beginning of the essay have been replaced by a speaker "primarily concerned with her own gain." Unlike the legacy, which was, in Wall's reading, "a cultural script for empowerment" predicated on sacrifice for a younger generation, Whitney's mock testament speaker is wholly concerned with "assertive self-interest" (¶14), an argument that seems to contradict Ingram's earlier claims about the socially-critical motivations of both the genre and Whitney herself.

27. Interestingly, Ingram revisits the subject of satire (two other discussions occur in paragraphs 17 and 28) when she discusses the relationship between satire and the carnivalesque, a phenomenon, (as Davis points out in "Women on Top") that "allowed for a revisionary impulse while admitting an ultimate return to authority" (¶22). Bewilderingly, and, as it turns out, temporarily, Ingram stops at containment: "In wanting access to the very channels she targets," she argues, "Whitney is not necessarily calling for their dismantling; instead she asserts a parallel channel of cultural capital, by way of her poem" (¶22). While Ingram proceeds to reemphasize the mock testament's "harsh critique of the status quo and of the exclusionary 'authority' of those refusing to extend credit" (¶23), she is pulled up short, I suggest, by her subfield. To be specific, Ingram argues that Whitney's use of the mock testament highlights a crux for ambitious female writers. Given that it was, Ingram asserts, unacceptable for a woman writer to be ambitious, Whitney writes "as one who has not been able to achieve her professional goals, because that is the most acceptable way to appear ambitious -- as one who has failed" (¶23). What I find fascinating here is that the official story of the woman writer -- that is, one who not only sees herself as such but must struggle against injunction and acknowledge her inferiority -- literally gets in the way of a much more compelling argument about how genre can overrule a (putatively powerful) dictate of social silencing, and, indeed, help to effect literary change.

28. Ingram follows her claims about women writers' necessary denial of ambition with a nod to the equally axiomatic claims -- citing the usual suspects (Gouge and Brathwaite) -- that women were not meant to speak in public (¶24-5). It is almost as though Ingram feels she must acknowledge these sociohistorical 'truths' about early modern women -- that they were necessarily always concerned with being chaste, silent and obedient (¶13) and thus with being labeled scolds (¶22); that women writers

were always conscious of being women writers and that such an identification merited some active forms and protestations of self-abnegation (¶23); that women were not meant to speak in public (¶24-5) -- even as they get in the way of her compelling argument about how Whitney refunctions a satirical genre for the "credit age" (¶27). The fact that Ingram ends her discussion with the claim that Whitney "asserts a normative ideal" by presenting her speaker "as an actor in a neighborly moral community where loans and debts are necessary tools for healthy participation in the marketplace" is indebted, I would argue, as much to preconceptions about women writers as to the evidence Ingram works with (¶27). In Ingram's final reading, Whitney's satire works in the "sincere" service of a "workable capitalist society": "Her critique, less than assailing a failed system, more urgently asks of London's citizens a certain civic responsibility," including the opening of channels of credit to people like the poem's speaker. I want to insist that my criticism is not with Ingram's claim that Whitney wanted her piece of the pie -- I do not see the (sole) goal of feminist criticism as creating a phalanx of rebellious or "commoning" foremothers -- but rather with some of the scholarly means by which Ingram makes her way towards that argument. Whitney makes no mention of scolds in her poem, so why should we presume that their specter necessarily haunts her text? Why does satire turn to sincerity when it meets the -- for us -- serious matter of the woman writer?

29. Ingram's essay is bursting with ideas (some of them, as I suggest above, a bit contradictory), and the two pictures it half-paints of Whitney -- as "commoning" satirist and marketplace ideologue -- are indebted to a necessary and careful attention to the genre Whitney chose to write in. Indeed, what I have been suggesting here is that some scholarly assumptions about the role gender played in Whitney's writing -- assumptions that by no means originated with Ingram herself -- do disservice to Ingram's groundbreaking insights about the role genre played. The female mock testator has, I would argue, a different and more useful purchase in understanding Whitney's "Wyll" than the struggling woman writer, a figure whom we may recognize, but who may nonetheless impede our ability to see the writer beneath her clothes.

* * *

30. If Davis's "woman on top" was in many ways a "woman" in dress rather than body -- a kind of cultural placeholder -- the "woman writer" serves a similarly representative function in our literary critical world order, less descriptive than projected, a phantasm of a collective invention. While it is certainly important to acknowledge the extent to which women who wrote considered not only their gender but their relationship to other women who wrote, and, indeed, to the diverse discourses which attached, in some form or another, to their writing, this context has been extensively -- as I have argued, too extensively and too programmatically --

blueprinted. To begin with a woman author, indeed, to place women authors at the center, or top, of our feminist literary critical practice is laudable; to begin with a set of working assumptions about what it meant to be a woman author is, however, less so. As Davis's work reminds us, the woman on top does not necessarily affirm "women." We need to continue to explore new ways of understanding early modern female writers without assuming that the fact of women writing itself was necessarily at the center of their concerns, even if it has often heretofore been at the center of ours.

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Notes

1 Chapter five, "Women On Top," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford UP, 1965), 124-151.

2The trope served to "widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and, second to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest" (ibid,131).

3 Catherine Gallagher, "Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England," *Genders* 1 (Spring 1988): 24-39. "It is an odd but indisputable fact that the seventeenth-century women whom we think of as the forerunners and founders of feminism were, almost without exception, Tories. Since seventeenth-century Tory ideology is often associated with the radical patriarchalism of Robert Filmer, a patriarchalism equating the family and the kingdom and asserting the divinely granted absolute power of the father-king, historians have been understandably puzzled by the fact that Tory ladies and gentlewomen wrote the earliest extended criticisms of the absolute subordination of women in marriage and the earliest systematic assertions of women's rational and moral equality with men" (24). In looking particularly at Margaret Cavendish and Mary Astell, Gallagher argues that "Toryism and feminism converge because the ideology of absolutist monarchy

provides, in particular historical situations, a transition to an ideology of the absolute self" (25).

4 Jerome McGann, "The Socialization of Texts," *The Book of History Reader*. Ed. David Kinkelstein and Alistair McCleery (Routledge, 2002): 39-4, 42.

5 I am thinking here of Jonathan Goldberg's extremely smart and influential *James I and the politics of literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and their contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), but also of a more general tendency to see royal power as a comprehensively authorizing force in the production of early modern literature.

6 The first and third quotations are from Elaine Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton, 1987), 153 and 164. The second quotation is from Lynette McGrath's *Subjectivity and Women's Poetry in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, 2002), 123. The comment on Lanyer is from Susanne Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (Oxford UP, 1999), viiii. My intention here is not to single out specific authors or essays -- the work of many of the authors I've cited was groundbreaking scholarship -- but rather to point to the presuppositions and thus the limitations of such theses *as the end point of analysis*.

7 In her discussion of Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's *A Pastorall*, for example Alison Findlay argues that "the heroines' proto-feminist ideals cannot easily be reconciled with [. . .] absolutism," "'Upon the World's Stage': the Civil War and Interregnum," *Women and Dramatic Production 1550-1700*, ed. Alison Findlay and Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, with Gweno Williams (Essex: Pearson Education, 2000), 68-94, 79. See also my brief discussion in "Convents and Pleasures: Margaret Cavendish and the Drama of Property," *Renaissance Drama* Vol. 32 (2003), n.112.

8 The romance was widely recognized for its controversial topicality. In his poem "A Remedy of Love," Sir Aston Cokayne asserted that "The Lady Wrothe's Urania is repleat/With elegancies, but too full of heat" (1662; cited by Josephine Roberts, "An Unpublished Literary Quarrel Concerning the Suppression of Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621)," *Notes and Queries* n.s. 24 (1977): 532-35, 534.

9 See "Circulating Texts in Early Modern England," in *Teaching Tudor and Stuart Women Writers*, ed. Susanne Woods and Margaret P. Hannay (New York: The Modern Language Association, 2000), 35-51, 49.

10 See Phyllis Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan (Blackwell, 2000), 42-56. She revisits her argument in *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford UP, 2005).

11 Indeed I took a comparative graduate class with Professor Quilligan at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1990s called "When Women Ruled the World," a class famous not only for its professor's brilliance (and truly prodigious coffee consumption), but for her statement, still cited by many of fellow students, that we should all be able to read Ronsard in the original; "After all, everyone knows a little French."

12 Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: the competition for representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Carole Levin, *The heart and stomach of a king: Elizabeth I and the politics of sex and power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994). On Anne of Denmark see Leeds Barroll, *Anna of Denmark, Queen of England: a cultural biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) and on Henrietta Maria, see Sophie Tomlinson's "She That Plays the King: Henrietta Maria and the Threat of the Actress in Caroline Culture," *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, ed. Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (London: Routledge, 1992) and the work of Melinda J. Gough. The topic continues to attract considerable feminist scholarly attention: see, for example, Carole Levin, Jo Eldridge Carney and Debra Barrett-Graves, eds. "*High and Mighty Queens" of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations* (Palgrave, 2003).

13 *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (Routledge, 1994), s122.
