

Expanding the Canon of Early Modern Women's Writing

Expanding the Canon of Early Modern
Women's Writing

Edited by

Paul Salzman

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

Expanding the Canon of Early Modern Women's Writing, Edited by Paul Salzman

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2010 by Paul Salzman and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2322-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2322-7

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	viii
Introduction	1
Paul Salzman	
Prelude: Reassessments	
Chapter One.....	12
‘Some Things more Material to be Known’: Reading Some Books for the Recovery Project Elaine Hobby	
Section One: Genre	
Chapter Two	34
‘Fornication in my Owne Defence’: Rape, Theft and Assault Discourses in Margaret Cavendish’s <i>The Sociable Companions</i> Marion Wynne-Davies	
Chapter Three	49
Genre, Gender and Canonicity: Dorothy Osborne’s Letters to Sir William Temple Diana Barnes	
Chapter Four	66
Of ‘myne owne awtoryte’: On Amy Dudley’s Letters Catherine Padmore	
Chapter Five	84
‘Kicking at the prick’: Assertions of a Mother’s Rights in the Letters of Lady Elizabeth Hatton Emily Ross	

Chapter Six	96
Marriage, Family and Property in the Letters of Lady Mary Verney Nancy E. Wright	
Chapter Seven.....	113
The German Princess Revived: The Case of Mary Carleton Kate Lilley	
Chapter Eight.....	125
“Plaintes Full of Dissimulation”: The Casket Sonnets, Female Complaint and True Crime Rosalind Smith	
Chapter Nine.....	143
“Thinking of Someone”—On the Artistic Beauty of Ancient Chinese Poetess Liu Rushi’s Poetry Li Yikun	
Chapter Ten	150
The Amazons and Madeleine de Scudery’s Refashioning of Female Virtue Karen Green	
Chapter Eleven	168
Inscribing the <i>Carte de Tendre</i> : Mapping Epistolary Intimacy in Queen Anne’s Court Nicola Parsons	
Section Two: Religion	
Chapter Twelve	182
Crossing Boundaries: The Poetry of Meera and Molla Sudipta Banerjee	
Chapter Thirteen.....	196
Revisiting Women Writing in India in Hindi 1550-1750 Vandana Datta	

Chapter Fourteen	208
‘That I may fight my battellis to the end’: Elizabeth Melville’s Spiritual Verse and the Politics of Scottish Puritanism Sara Ross	
Chapter Fifteen	222
Between “Sygne” and “Substance”: Rhetorics of Figural ity in <i>The Examinations of Anne Askew</i> Patricia Pender	
Chapter Sixteen	234
Bad Catholics’: Anti-Popery in <i>This is a Short Relation</i> (Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, 1662) Catie Gill	
Contributors	248
Index	252

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

7.1 Title page, *The Case of Madam Mary Carleton* (London, 1661).

11.1 Facing page, Madeleine de Scudery, *Clelia, an excellent new romance*, (London, 1678), courtesy of the Huntington Library.

INTRODUCTION

PAUL SALZMAN

We have reached something of a tipping point in the study of early modern women's writing. We have gone from a time when, despite the notice that was taken of it by Virginia Woolf, many academics asked in all seriousness if there really was any writing by women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to a time when most have heard of, and probably even read, writers like Aemilia Lanyer, Mary Wroth or Aphra Behn. Some sense of the canonization of a particular group of early modern women writers can be gained by looking at their representation in the seventh edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. The *Norton* prints work by Queen Elizabeth, Isabella Whitney, Mary Sidney, Aemilia Lanyer, Mary Wroth, Elizabeth Cary, Katherine Philips, Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn, and Mary Astell. It also prints some extracts from Lucy Hutchinson, Anne Halkett and Anna Trapnel as part of a Civil War section. The representation of these writers in the *Norton* represents what we might call public recognition of the existence of early modern women's writing, but these writers are only the tip of the iceberg. One of the most exciting aspects of this field is that, the more scholars have looked, the more they have found, so that our horizons have expanded during this whole period of archival research.

This process can be traced back as far as the early eighteenth century when, as Margaret Ezell has argued, George Ballard, in his *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752), produced a canon of 'worthy' women writers and intellectuals.¹ Inspired by Ezell, there has been something of a reassessment of earlier representations of early modern women's writing, with Alexander Dyce's *Specimens of British Poetesses* (1825) a prominent example of how misleading it is to think of these writers as being wholly rediscovered in the twentieth century. But it is certainly true that there has been an incremental increase in the visibility of early modern women's writing from the at times half-hearted appreciation of Virginia Woolf for authors like Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn. Woolf helped to make such writers visible; scholars later in the twentieth century worked hard to make them accessible. This is evident in

pioneering and wide-ranging anthologies, such as Betty Travitsky's *The Paradise of Women* (1981), Katharina M. Wilson's 1987 *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, Angeline Goreau's *The Whole Duty of a Woman* (1985), the Germaine Greer et al. poetry collection *Kissing the Rod* of 1988, or the influential collection of autobiographical writing edited by Elspeth Graham and others, *Her Own Life* (1989).² This process of anthologising perhaps had its greatest impact in the teaching of early modern women's writing, given that it could be seen as a prelude to the gradual appearance of women writers in influential teaching collections like the Norton, but also notably the *Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse* (1992), edited by David Norbrook and H. R. Woudhuysen. What might now, in retrospect, be seen as the construction of a canon of early modern women's writing was dependent upon this anthologising process, with the result that, on the whole, it was represented for teaching purposes by poetry rather than prose. In a recent overview of this process, Alice Eardley has observed that what was canonised during this early process was a notion of women's poetry as representative of female experience, rather than as examples of literature that could attract a formalist analysis.³ Eardley offers a sobering account of how, during this period of apparent integration, women writers were on the whole associated with 'history' rather than 'literature', although she sees the potential for change in the future. Eardley also notes the shift from a concentration on women in print to the recognition, again championed by Margaret Ezell, that women played a significant role in the manuscript culture and circulation of texts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

While Eardley rightly notes some of the problems with the way women's writing was treated in anthologies, criticism and scholarship operated in a more complex way. It is now possible, I think, to distinguish between the criticism directed at a few writers who might now be seen as approaching a certain canonical status, and the scholarship that was undertaking further archival work and was also engaged in historicizing the material being uncovered. The treatment of Mary Wroth is exemplary here. Wroth moved from being an extremely obscure writer who was the subject of a pioneering PhD dissertation by Margaret Witten-Hannah at the University of Auckland in 1978, to a writer who gained a distinguished editor in Josephine A. Roberts, who began by publishing an edition of Wroth's poems in 1983, and then moved on to edit Wroth's long prose romance, *Urania*.⁴ While there was some initial interest in the autobiographical elements of Wroth's romance, her work was the subject, in the 1980s, of a considerable body of sophisticated criticism, including a notable collection of essays.⁵ Aphra Behn was the only other woman

writer who began to receive this kind of critical attention, with some impressive, theoretically informed criticism of her writing after the earlier almost obsessive interest in her biography. The fact that both Behn and Wroth initially attracted attention as subjects of biographical speculation, rather than as writers per se, underlines the special categorisation of early modern women's writing noted by Eardley and others. There were, therefore, by the mid 1980s, a tiny group of canonised writers who received a considerable degree of critical attention, and a large, growing body of early modern women's writing being re-discovered and considered within a number of frames of reference, most of them partaking of the turn to history within literary studies at the time – a turn that is still ongoing, especially in this field. There have been three ways in which early modern women's writing has been presented over the last twenty years. The most successful in terms of teaching and, to some degree, ongoing research has been the continued use of anthologies and collections of various genres. As well as *Her Own Life*, noted above, this has included S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies's 1996 collection of plays, *Renaissance Drama By Women*, and a number of significant poetry anthologies, including Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson's *Early Modern Women Poets* (2001).⁶ More general anthologies have underlined the fact that women wrote in a wide variety of genres, seen in earlier collections like those edited by Katharina Wilson or Betty Travitsky, noted above, and represented more recently in collections like *Lay By Your Needles Ladies Take the Pen*, which has extracts from fifty different sources; or with fewer examples, collections like my own *Early Modern Women's Writing* (2001), or Helen Ostovich and Elizabeth Sauer's *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print* (2004).⁷

Three major projects that were initiated during this period have had a profound impact on our knowledge of early modern women's writing. The Brown University Women Writers Project was initiated in 1988 and has placed on-line a large collection of writing by women, not just from the early modern period but through to 1830. It began as a set of 200 on-line texts which could be ordered as printouts, and progressed to encoded, searchable versions. As well as a selection of 100 Renaissance women's texts with contextual material and introductions, the Brown Project has made a substantial contribution to the general availability of full texts by early modern women, and acts as an important counter to the tendency to represent much of their work through extracts. In the early 1990s, the Brown Project joined with Oxford University Press in a short-lived venture to produce a series of scholarly but inexpensive editions. This excellent series unfortunately ended after fifteen volumes were published,

including especially valuable and influential editions of Aemilia Lanyer (now certainly edging into *a* canon, if not *the* canon), Rachel Speght, Arbella Stuart, and Jane Sharp's *Midwives Book*. The series that has in some ways filled the gap is Ashgate Press's 'The Early Modern Englishwoman'. This began as a large and still growing collection of facsimiles of printed texts, including, for example, the copy of Wroth's *Urania* that has some annotations by the author, but now includes a series of edited texts, from anthologies, such as *Autobiographical Writings by Early Quaker Women*, to works by individual authors, such as Lady Anne Halkett.⁸ The third project addresses the fact that the Brown texts are only derived from printed works: the Perdita Project began in 1997 as an on-line catalogue of women's manuscript writing, and then moved on to include on-line reproductions of a selection of those manuscripts. Like the Brown Project, the Perdita texts are available only on subscription, but taken together, Brown, Ashgate's Early Modern Englishwoman, and Perdita allow scholars access to a remarkable range of writing, transforming the field completely in a period of only twenty years.

How has this dramatic shift in visibility been reflected in scholarly work? It is, I think, worth noting that essay collections have been of vital importance to the conceptualisation of early modern women's writing as a discipline. Again this approach seems to have been established from the early 1980s, and in some ways it is a result of a strongly collegial approach to the field. This seems to have been fuelled by the fact that so much material was being newly uncovered, but also, I believe, by a sense that those working in the area could complement each other's interests in a productive way – those interests themselves reflecting an early and well-established interdisciplinary approach to much of this writing. This reflects the fact that so much of the writing was itself not able to be bundled into conventional literary genres. There were of course some important monographs in the field, perhaps most notably Elaine Beilin's *Redeeming Eve* (1987), which contained substantial critical treatment of a range of clearly literary writers, including Wroth, Lanyer and Carey, and Elaine Hobby's *Virtue of Necessity* (1988) which was focused on a narrower time period (1649-88) but included an enormous range of writing, including radical religious texts.⁹ But monographs were outnumbered, until very recently, by essay collections of considerable scope and, as I have already noted, often of an interdisciplinary nature. One early collection worth singling out here is *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (1986), because while all the essay authors are historians, it contains a checklist of women's published writings in the 17th century which spurred a lot of follow-up work from literary scholars, and an article by Sara Heller

Mendelson on diaries which had a similar effect.¹⁰ While it is true to say that this collection, like a number of others, contributes to the idea of women's writing as historical evidence of female experience noted by Eardley, it also has the seeds of a more generically-focussed (and therefore more literary) approach. This is evident in two similarly titled collections which appeared in 1992 and which presented the work of predominantly younger literary scholars: *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740*, and *Women, Texts & Histories 1575-1760*.¹¹ Both titles underline the combination of history and writing (or more fashionably texts). They also exemplify how these essay collections bring together a diverse range of writing calling out for an equally diverse range of theoretical approaches. Accordingly both volumes feature sophisticated theoretical approaches to canonical authors (Behn, Wroth, Cavendish), but also new ways of approaching less familiar genres, such as writing by nuns, or prophecies. I could cite a number of other, similar essay collections all of which served to centralise an eclectic approach to the field.¹² A major institutional boost to the notion of interdisciplinarity in the field has been provided by the series of 'Attending to Early Modern Women' conferences, which began in 1990 and have been held seven times from then until 2009. The published proceedings have widened the influence of this formidable gathering, which explicitly endorses the necessity to take an approach to the field which will draw especially on history and literature, but which has reached out to many other disciplines. For example, in the first volume published, based on the proceedings of the 1990 conference, the tone was set by the opening group of essays by a literary scholar, an art historian, and, as respondent, a historian.¹³ This interdisciplinary dialogue continues throughout the volume, and the successive ones, reflecting an increasingly eclectic approach to the field.¹⁴

The present collection in many ways continues this tradition, but it is also intended to mark out some new areas that have become evident over the past decade. This collection is entitled *Expanding the Canon*, not simply because it moves beyond Anglophone examples to include women writing in China and India in the seventeenth century, but also because it represents critical strategies designed to open up the emergent canon of early modern women's writing to new approaches, especially those that have consolidated the integration of literary and intellectual history, with an emphasis on religion, legal issues, and questions of genre. There are, therefore, essays here which address familiar texts from an unusual perspective, as well as essays which more literally expand the canon by looking at little-known figures, whether non-Western writers like Mirabai or Liu Rushi, or European writers like Lady Mary Verney. While the

essays themselves are quite diverse in methodology, as they are in subject matter, there are some common themes that do, I believe, point to new directions being consolidated in this field as it pushes against the canonical boundaries that excluded early modern women.

There are many interconnections between these essays, but I have grouped them into two broad sections, plus an opening essay that raises questions about the nature of archival research in the field and how it should proceed. Three categories that seem especially illuminating in relation to notions of shifting the canon through both texts and methodologies are: religion, genre, and legal issues (or themes). While historians of the early modern period have engaged in a series of detailed debates over the exact nature of religious issues in the period, a process dating back to R.H. Tawney and beyond, literary scholars began this process rather later. Now the significance of religious issues for early modern writers is at the forefront of a great deal of criticism, not only that focussed on obvious figures like Milton, and the complex relationship between women writers and religious change is now being explored. While scholars like Elaine Hobby, Margaret Ezell and Nigel Smith have for some time looked at radical religious activity by women, especially in Interregnum groups like Quakers and Ranters, more recent treatments have explored what might be seen as more conventional or establishment religious work alongside writing that was of a radical cast. A good example is Erica Longfellow's finely honed analysis in *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (2004) of women ranging from Anne Southwell and Aemilia Lanyer to Anna Trapnel and Lucy Hutchinson.¹⁵ In the present volume, diversity of approach is present alongside diversity of material. So while Catie Gill and Patricia Pender offer new approaches to writers who have now become more widely known (the indomitable Quakers Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers, and the Protestant martyr Anne Askew), Sara Ross looks at Elizabeth Melville, who might best be described as a previously obscure writer emerging into prominence. If we think of Melville as a Scottish writer who is now more visible because scholars have begun to see the British archipelago as a 'field', just as early modern political historians have, then it is also worth considering a religious writer like Mirabai, who is located outside Western traditions altogether. The two essays devoted to Mirabai and the traditions of Indian religious women who form a context for her work are not intended to imply that 'early modern women' is a simple, universal term, but rather they allow us to consider what might be seen as a parallel historical tradition, that in many respects speaks back to the Anglophone canon, but can be seen as well as having some interesting

thematic connections, especially with the mystical tradition that lies behind writers like Evans and Cheevers.

Genre is, I admit, something of an arbitrary hold-all, which I treat here not as an absolute category for the essays grouped under this heading, but as a heuristic device which underlines how early modern women's writing needs to be approached as in many ways genre-challenging (if not genre-bending). Genre and conceptions of what genre might mean in the period and to the women under consideration here crosses over with the theme of law and legality in a number of essays, notably those by Marion Wynne-Davies, Emily Ross, Nancy Wright and Rosalind Smith. Again I think that these essays stretch both the canon and approaches to the canon, ranging as their subjects do from the Chinese lyric poet Liu Rushi, who will be unfamiliar to most readers, through to some new ways of understanding a genre/form like letter writing.

The collection begins with an essay by Elaine Hobby, a true pioneer in the field, who underlines the continuing vital importance played by archival research. While earlier archival work concentrated on locating women's writing, for Hobby, the archive is a necessary pre-requisite to understanding what has been discovered. Specifically, her example is the midwifery manual written by Jane Sharpe, and as Hobby indicates, far from being simply a manual, reading Sharpe's book properly requires an extensive knowledge of medical and social history and the way that women and men were positioned in relation to that history. Hobby's essay in a sense looks back at the way that archival research has been vital in establishing the range of early modern women's writing, and forward to a vision of an integrated, historicised approach to a body of writing that is now able to be placed in social, historical and literary contexts.

The first section of this volume looks at a range of writing including letters, autobiography, drama and poetry. Autobiography and letters were the two modes of writing in the early modern period that attracted the widest variety of women. They are, of course, capacious modes, ranging from a few letters (a mere two form the basis of Catherine Padmore's account of her imaginative recreation of the life of Amy Robsart) to the large correspondence of Dorothy Osborne when she was separated from William Temple, or from the didactic autobiographical narrative of Evans and Cheevers through to the complex intersection of fiction/fact and notions of identity in the 'German Princess' narratives discussed by Kate Lilley. Similarly, Nicola Parsons draws attention to what she terms 'the embodied space of letters' manifested in the relationship between Queen Anne and Sarah Churchill. Parsons' reassessment of the power relationship between these two women may be compared to Karen Green's

reassessment of the significance of the figure of the Amazon in the seventeenth century.

The section begins with a group of essays that mix this diverse concern with genre and a series of questions concerning legal issues, or changing functions of the law, in relation to early modern women. In Wynne-Davies's case this is based around rape within the writings of members of the Cavendish family, while for Emily Ross and Nancy Wright, the legal issues centre on what might loosely be called women's rights. So Ross argues that Lady Elizabeth Hatton's disputes with Edward Coke over their daughter's marriage involve her political, legal and personal rights, but as read through the rhetorical manoeuvres found in letters. Indeed Hatton can be compared as a letter writer with Osborne (who is artful and self-conscious), or Robsart (whose personality has to be projected back by a writer of fiction inspired by reading between the lines of brief letters). Nancy Wright's analysis of Mary Verney's experiences during the civil war uses Verney as an example which challenges the notion that early modern women were 'objects rather than subjects of property'. The interest of this group of essays in early modern women and legal issues contributes to a growing interest in this field, exemplified in general terms in recent work by Victoria Kahn and Lorna Hutson.¹⁶ Other essays in this section offer a more radical questioning of how we might approach certain genres, again with some oblique implications for approaches to legal issues in the case of Kate Lilley's essay on the 'German Princess' narratives and Rosalind Smith's assessment of Queen Mary's casket sonnets in relation to the genre of popular complaint.

Taken as a whole, these essays are intended to provoke further work in what is still an expanding and exciting field of research. This collection is intended to demonstrate the continuing dialogue and collaboration that has characterised academic work on early modern women writers, and it will, I hope, stimulate further work on the areas it has uncovered.

Notes

¹ See Margaret Ezell, *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); I have also discussed this issue in *Reading Early Modern Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27-36.

² Betty Travitsky, ed., *The Paradise of Women* (Westport: Greenwood, 1981); Katharina M. Wilson, ed., *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Athens Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Angeline Goreau, ed., *The Whole Duty of a Woman* (New York: Dial Press, 1985); Germaine Greer et al., eds., *Kissing the Rod* (London: Virago, 1988); Elspeth Graham et al., eds., *Her Own Life* (London: Routledge, 1989).

³ Alice Eardley, 'Recreating the Canon: Women Writers and Anthologies of Early Modern Verse', *Women's Writing* 14 (2007), 270-289.

⁴ See also May Nelson Paulissen's 1977 PhD on Wroth's poetry.

⁵ See Naomi J Miller and Gary Waller, eds., *Reading Mary Wroth: Representing Alternatives in Early Modern England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991)..

⁶ S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies, eds., *Renaissance Drama By Women* (London: Routledge, 1996); Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson, ed., *Early Modern Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), see also Marion Wynne-Davies, ed., *Women Poets of the Renaissance* (London: Dent, 1998); Diane Purkiss, ed., *Renaissance Women* (London: Pickering, 1994).

⁷ Suzanne Trill, et al., eds., *Lay By your needles ladies, take the pen: Writing women in England 1500-1700* (London: Arnold, 1997); Paul Salzman, ed., *Early Modern Women's Writing* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2000); Helen Ostovich and Elizabeth Sauer, eds., *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁸ David Booy, ed., *Autobiographical Writings by Early Quaker Women* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Suzanne Trill, ed., *Lady Anne Halkett: Selected Self Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁹ Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1649-1688* (London: Virago, 1988).

¹⁰ Mary Prior, ed., *Women in English Society 1500-1800* (London: Methuen, 1985).

¹¹ Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman, eds., *Women, Writing, History 1640-1740* (London: Batsford, 1992); Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss, eds., *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹² For example, Anne M. Haselkorn and Betty S. Travitsky, *The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print: Counterbalancing the Canon* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), which, as its subtitle suggests, posits a female counter canon, and has a section devoted to women and the Sidneian tradition; or Helen Wilcox, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain 1500-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), which in many ways sums up the state of the field and also has a number of essays by younger, as well as more established, scholars.

¹³ Betty S Travitsky and Adele Seeff, *Attending to Women in Early Modern England* (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1994); essays by Margaret P. Hannay, Nanette Salomon and Judith M. Bennett.

¹⁴ So, for example, the most recent volume, *Structures and Subjectivities*, ed. Jean Hartman and Adele Seef (Newark: Delaware University Press, 2007), which includes essays on music and economic history.

¹⁵ Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640-1674* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), of particular interest in Kahn's complex argument is her influential reading of two Margaret Cavendish narratives; Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion: Law and Mimesis*

in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and the interdisciplinary collection Nancy Wright, Margaret Ferguson and A.R. Buck, eds., *Women, Property, and the Letters of the Law in Early Modern England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

PRELUDE:
REASSESSMENTS

CHAPTER ONE

‘SOME THINGS MORE MATERIAL
TO BE KNOWN’:
READING SOME BOOKS
FOR THE RECOVERY PROJECT¹

ELAINE HOBBY

Thirty years ago, when I embarked on the research that became *Virtue of Necessity*, it was impossible to imagine that a time would come when we would be exploring how to expand the canon of early-modern women’s writing. Though I read avidly in anthologies like *Salt and Bitter and Good*, *The Female Spectator*, and *By a Woman Witt*, and gained a shadowy sense of the pioneering work of an earlier generation through the books of Myra Reynolds and Alice Clark, it was normal – though annoying – that most academics’ response to being told of my thesis topic was, ‘But were there any women writers then?’² Almost all of that investigation was conducted in the great research libraries in Britain and the USA, because most early-modern female-authored texts could not be accessed any other way. Neither I nor the people I talked with then could have foreseen that there would be so many women writers to find, or that some of them – Aphra Behn, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Wroth, Amelia Lanyer – would become an established part of what is taught and studied in university English departments across the world.³

There are many answers to where we might go from here. Mine today uses Jane Sharp’s *The Midwives Book* (1671) to suggest that ‘non-literary’ texts such as this one have an important role to play in the canon’s expansion. Those wishing to read beyond the canon have at their disposal – if they have access to a library that subscribes to them – some remarkable resources that will help greatly with this. In the case of *The Midwives Book*, not only are there the facsimile editions produced by Garland in 1985, edited by Randolph Trumbach, and by Ashgate in 2002,

edited by Lisa Forman Cody, with the other texts chosen for those series, but also the copies available through Early English Books Online (EEBO) and Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO).⁴ Potentially the most exciting of these are EEBO and ECCO, which include fully searchable versions of many texts, making it possible quickly to discover, for instance, how often and with what meaning the word ‘we’ is used in the 1725 version of Sharp, or to skim the contexts in which Galen or Hippocrates are cited as authorities.⁵ Even though the full texts of most works on EEBO, including that of *The Midwives Book*, are not yet searchable, it is still easy, for instance, to establish a list of about thirty other health-related works published in 1671, and to browse them whilst sat in one place, not travelling between continents. Brief extracts from *The Midwives Book* are also included in key anthologies, such as Kate Aughterson’s *Renaissance Woman*, and it is not unusual to find quotations from it incorporated into discussions of other writings, such as in Lynette McGrath’s study of early poets, or Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth’s exploration of imagined female reading communities.⁶ Sharp’s work has achieved some significant presence, therefore, but in a way that is not satisfactory because her book, like other non-literary texts, tends to be read not as an object of primary interest, but as a provider of contextual information, and moulded to fit the case that is being made. More often than not, it is used in an argument that leads inexorably to the rise of man-midwifery, an important story, but not the only one worth telling.⁷ This essay will endeavour to show what can be achieved if the focus is shifted to *The Midwives Book* itself, aided by the resources now available to us.

First, though, a little orientation is necessary. When *The Midwives Book* appeared in 1671, it was the latest in a long line of popular English-language works on human reproduction. The earliest such book was *The Birth of Mankind*, in print from 1540 to 1654. Translated into English by Richard Jonas from a Latin version of a German original, and revised and expanded five years later by Thomas Raynalde, *The Birth of Mankind* initiated the convention whereby English midwifery manuals were at least as concerned to educate general readers about human sexuality as to address midwives’ actual practice.⁸ When books from French midwifery were translated into English in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century that balance shifted somewhat, as key works such as Jacques (or James) Guillemeau’s *Child-Birth or, the Happy Deliverie of Women* (1612) maintained their focus on midwives’ education in their English versions.⁹ From the mid-seventeenth century onwards the key works were those compiled and translated by Nicholas Culpeper, especially his version of Daniel Sennert’s *Practical Physick* (1662), and his *Directory for*

Midwives (1651, and many times reprinted), which combined an address to midwives with general information about reproduction as part of his campaign to educate the English and make them independent of the College of Physicians.¹⁰ Sharp drew on all of these works when compiling *The Midwives Book*, and in her discussion of anatomy she also made use of Helkiah Crooke's massive *Microcosmographia* (1615, and editions to 1651). Two other 'new' manuals appeared in the London bookmarket very soon after hers. James Wolveridge's publisher reissued his *Speculum Matricis* within weeks of the appearance of an advertisement for *The Midwives Book* in the *Term Catalogues* of the Stationers' Company in May 1671, and in July of that year William Sermon followed with his *The Ladies Companion*. Wolveridge's text draws substantially on Hippocratic tradition and on *The Birth of Mankind*, and has as one of its central concerns a desire to protect its author from being too closely associated with the 'Hybernian boggs' of Ireland, the country where he was living when he wrote it.¹¹ This is attempted through the frequent use of Latin in its marginalia, which is the language also of some of its extensive dedicatory material. Sermon, meanwhile, presented as his own book one that is mostly a verbatim repeat of Guillemeau's *Child-Birth*, varying from it mostly just to hand over to midwives some of the specialist handiwork that surgeon Guillemeau had made a man's preserve, and to delete entirely materials on the removal of dead births and retained placentas.¹² He inserts into Guillemeau's narrative, though, a substantial number of anecdotes and observations of his own, and repeatedly recommends that various medical disorders could best be treated by a packet of his own 'Cathartique and Diuretique Pills' (15, 36, 81, 203). In deciding to write *The Midwives Book* and address it to her 'Sisters', 'The Midwives of England' (5), Sharp was therefore entering a male-authored genre, and doing so in part, no doubt, because of the threat of the growth of the man-midwifery that she ridicules in her opening chapter (11-13).

It has for some years been fashionable, even necessary, to present academic research as being interdisciplinary: increasingly, that is what is funded.¹³ And the allure of the idea of truly interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary work that can draw on the insights, methods and debates of various academic traditions is indeed considerable. Not surprisingly, the reality is somewhat different: developing high-level expertise in a single discipline is challenging enough. Nonetheless, it is clearly the case both that feminist work of the kind that has led to the establishment of a canon of women's writing, with its heritage in cross-disciplinary Women's Studies, has its own long investment in breaking boundaries, and that 'non-literary' texts like Sharp's *The Midwives Book* have resonance

beyond English Literature. Most obviously, analysis of such a book needs to engage with research in the History of Medicine, sometimes even just to understand what the author is saying. For instance, in her prescriptions for the care of the new mother, Sharp directs:

Some women when they lie in are still [always] sleeping, some cannot sleep; if she cannot sleep let her drink barley water well boyled not straining it at all, but let her forbear it after the first week, lest it nourish too much, and stop the Liver. . . . Keep her not too hot, for that weakens nature, and dissolves her strength, nor too cold, for cold getting in will cause torments, hurt the Nerves, and make the womb swell. Let her diet be hot, and eat but little at once; some Nurses perswade them to eat apace because they have lost much blood, but they are simple that say so, for the blood voided doth not weaken but unburden nature, for if it had not come away, long diseases, or death would have succeeded. (175-76)

To a modern eye trained solely in literature, the instructions here might seem either arbitrary or perverse: what connection is there between a woman's sleeping patterns, temperature, diet and lochial bleeding? Some familiarity with medical history makes the answer obvious: sleep and diet are two of the six key factors – 'non-naturals' – that were thought to influence a person's health, and health was itself dependent on a balance between heat, cold, dryness and moistness created by the flowing of essential fluids – humours – in the body.¹⁴ Any patient, therefore, would be advised to pay attention to sleep and diet, and vomits, enemas and bleeding – whether natural, as here, or through blood-letting – would be employed to ensure a return to balance and so to health. The same conceptual model underlies, for instance, Sharp's succinct explanation that 'The wombs of Women should be alwaies kept temperate, that they exceed not in any preternatural [abnormal] quality' (231), and that 'all things that are cold, or else hot and dry, are enemies to womens milk' (260). Such advice, which defines foods as 'hot' or 'cold' on the basis on their believed effects on the eater's humoral balance, not because of their own physical temperature, is entirely consistent with humoral logics.

Adding texts like *The Midwives Book* to the expanded canon, therefore, would have the effect of prompting enquiry beyond the purely literary. Acquiring such knowledge in a schematic way is not, though, sufficient. Sharp's advice on care during lying-in, for instance, is taken from one of her major sources, Nicholas Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives*, but she does not follow him precisely.¹⁵ Whereas she presents being overly hot or cold as of equal significance – heat weakens, cold causes pain and swelling – Culpeper presents cold as the much greater danger, devoting twice as many words to it, and warning, 'Be she weak or strong, let no

cold Air come near her at first' (144). What such variations in advice often indicate is variety in the authors' understanding and beliefs: humoral medicine was not a single, fixed system, but a set of principles elaborated from the ancient works of the Hippocratic corpus as developed by Galen. People in the early-modern period disagreed with one another about how the body worked and how to make it healthy, just as people do today. To work in a properly interdisciplinary way with *The Midwives Book*, therefore, requires more than an outline grasp of that model. Even as fine a book as Gail Kern Paster's *Humoring the Body*, which makes use of humoral models to offer fascinating readings of Renaissance plays, is flawed in its founding assumption that the model is a single and undisputed system that can be used as a backdrop to uncover 'the historical particularity of early modern emotional experience'.¹⁶ Similarly, various critics have accepted as proven Adrian Wilson's speculations about the conventions surrounding childbirth and lying-in in the early-modern period, so believing that birthing chambers were stiflingly hot and airless, that women lay in after birth for a full month, and so on, despite evidence in *The Midwives Book* and elsewhere to the contrary.¹⁷ Aided in their interpretations by a basic medical history reference book such as W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter's *Companion Encyclopedia of the History or Medicine*, those with access to EEBO could read some of the other medical works published in 1671, such as the Paracelsian *A Treatise of Great Antidote of Van Helmont*, which promises to use an elixir, aided by 'strong Drink with their Meat', to cure melancholics and to relieve 'that sad unquoth restless Distemper called the *Vapors of the Mother*', or Joseph Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physick*, which outlines the astrological influences that it is essential to take into account when seeking to treat, for instance, madness in childbed.¹⁸ These authors would have disagreed strongly with some basic tenets of much-reprinted works such as the Countess of Kent's *Choice Manual*, advertised as being in its sixteenth edition when it appeared in 1671, or with John Archer's traditional humoral explanations of why mercury is an effective treatment for the pox.¹⁹ Modern readers of *The Midwives Book* need to know something of these disputes if they are to begin to understand where Sharp has positioned herself in the advice that she gives.

If humoral theory is one area of research in medical history that those working with *The Midwives Book* would need to come to understand if it were added to the canon, another is the ways in which medical historians have responded to Thomas Laqueur's assertion that early-modern thinking about anatomy was characterised by a 'one-sex model' in which women were seen as outside-in men.²⁰ But as Jane Sharp herself explains:

the parts in men and women are different in number, and likeness, substance, and proportion; the Cod [scrotum] of a man turned inside outward is like the womb, yet the difference is so great that they can never be the same. (67)

From *Making Sex*'s early review by Robert Nye and Katharine Park in *The New Republic*, which pinpoints key ways in which it misunderstands early-modern anatomy's use of analogical thinking and confuses what were actually competing models, medical historians have made very limited use of it.²¹ Apparently unaware of these debates in a sister discipline, literary criticism, by contrast, has tended to accept Laqueur's thesis as established fact, and proceeded to read early-modern texts in the light of that.²² A particularly unfortunate example of how secondhand understanding of disciplines beyond English has hampered otherwise good work on literary texts is Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth's brief reading of one of Sharp's source texts, *The Birth of Mankind*.²³ *The Birth of Mankind* reproduces illustrations from Vesalius's *De Fabrica*, including the famous one of an excised vagina and uterus that are depicted to look phallic. Describing this image, Raynalde precisely refuses to read the female sexual parts as an inversion of male ones, for instance by focusing attention solely on what he says is a heart-shaped womb (35). Elsewhere in his book, he also borrows Vesalius's images of a male upper torso whose skin has been stripped back so as to reveal the disposition of blood-vessels, explaining that

although these two first figures be made principally for the man, yet may they serve as well to express the woman, for the man and woman differ in nothing but in the privy parts. (221)

His position would seem to be clear: men's and women's skin and blood-vessels are essentially similar; the sexual parts differ. In her interpretation of Raynalde, though, Hellwarth is so blinkered by Laqueur's influential argument that she presents this quotation as saying exactly the opposite of what it does:

This quotation reveals a long-standing tradition of the elision of and an ignorance regarding female anatomy. ... This remark also helps buttress, along with the illustrations themselves, Laqueur's notion of the 'single sex' theory that he attributes to medieval and early modern medical theorists. (20).

The inclusion of non-literary works in the canon would, then, require us both to engage more fully than is usually the case with research in other disciplines, and to read these texts with the care and attention to detail that

we are accustomed to using when interpreting poetry, drama or fiction. Just as Sharp established, by reading for *The Midwives Book* in a wide range of medical materials, experts often disagree with one another, and it is unwise to base one's own practice on the views of those who are often 'at a stand, and are never likely to agree' (118; see also 59, 97, 105, 110, 164, 188, 201, 220, 239), however authoritative their assertions seem. To realize that there are disputes, of course, it is necessary to read at least as widely as Sharp did.

It is not only work in Medical History that the extra-disciplinary approach demanded by a text like *The Midwives Book* directs us to. Sharp's book both opens and closes by referring to God and his will and power (11, 300), and the force of a divine plan that forbids circumcision (31), makes a hymen (42), forbids sex during menstruation but ensures that it continues to be pleasurable during pregnancy (44, 51) is everywhere in its discussions, and becomes fundamental as practical preparation for labour is preceded by prayer (145). There is a danger that a literary critic uninformed about seventeenth-century religious disputes might read over the top of such features, or assume them to be merely passive repetitions of essentially empty beliefs. Such a reader would miss some of the most striking parts of *The Midwives Book*, though. For instance, when discussing how conception occurs, Sharp pauses to remark:

Some there are who hold conception to be a curse, because *God* laid it upon *Eve* for tasting the forbidden fruit, *I will greatly multiply thy conception* [Gen 3.16]: but forasmuch as encrease and multiply, was the blessing of *God* [Gen 1.28], it is not the conception, but the sorrow to bring forth that was laid as a curse. (75-76)

She is engaging very directly here in contemporary debates about women's supposedly inherent sinfulness, and knows where she stands.²⁴ When she returns to this same issue in her discussion of pain in childbirth, she again nods in the direction of the standard interpretation of the Bible story, before insisting that all women are different, and that the management of pain in labour is not only possible, but needs to be varied to suit their particular characteristics:

The accidents and hazards that women lye under when they bring their Children into the world are not few, hard labour attends most of them, it was that curse that *God* laid upon our sex to bring forth in sorrow, that is the general cause and common to all as we descended from the same great Mother *Eve*, who first tasted the forbidden fruit [Gen. 3.1-16]; but the particular causes are diverse according to several ages, and constitutions, and conformations, or infirmities. (129)

It is entirely consistent with this theological position that, as I have argued elsewhere, the Bible story from Exodus that Sharp opens her book with, that of the midwives of Egypt, is used by her to show that rebellious women are rewarded by God.²⁵ In her source text, Culpeper's *Directory*, by contrast, that same story is used to recommend that midwives be 'diligent' so as to deserve reward after death (sig. A4). Sharp's direct contemporary James Wolveridge, the author of *Speculum Matricis*, meanwhile, interprets the same biblical incident to explain why Irishwomen, unlike their English counterparts, have no need of midwives at all, 'being, more like the Hebrew women, than the native Ægyptians; delivered before the Midwives can come to them'.²⁶ *The Midwives Book* would bring to the canon, then, a need actively to engage with theological debates if its full range is to be understood.

Although including a work like *The Midwives Book* in the canon could and should stimulate work on the extra-disciplinary kinds that I have been sketching here – and indeed, would also need to be informed by work in Art History to read its illustrations²⁷ – at least as important would be the change brought about by using the traditional tools of literary criticism to analyse a non-literary text. Punning merrily, Sharp comments in the opening chapter to her book that

It is not hard words that perform the work, as if none understood the Art that cannot understand Greek. Words are but the shell, that we oftentimes break our Teeth with them to come at the kernel, I mean our brains to know what is the meaning of them; but to have the same in our mother tongue would save us a great deal of needless labour. (12-13)

The overt interest here in the way in which authors' lexical choices influence their relationship with readers might have been expected to foster close analysis of her use of language – to have stimulated the use of traditional literary critical skills. *The Midwives Book* has, however, only rarely received attention of that kind, and the analyses that have been made are hampered by a lack of familiarity with the midwifery book genre that Sharp's text belongs to.²⁸ Perhaps the clearest way of beginning to make such an exploration would be by noting that Sharp's playful linking of her activities as a writer to those of birthing – 'mother tongue' ('mother' can mean 'womb'), 'labour' – is by no means an original act on her part, but one that is present from the appearance of the first published English-language midwifery manual, *The Birth of Mankind*. The titlepage to the first edition (1540) refers to the 'Fruitful things' – discussions of fertility – that Richard Jonas has added to his Latin source, and in his dedication of the book to Queen Katherine Howard he asks her to accept the 'pains' he

has used (206) in his endeavours to enrich ‘our mother language’ so as to make it at least equal to the ‘mother tongue’ and ‘maternal language’ of other European nations (205). Thomas Raynalde, the physician who brought out the next, expanded edition of this work in 1545, incorporated some of Jonas’s dedication into his own prefatory ‘Prologue to the Women Readers’, referring to the ‘labour and pains’ (12, 15) and ‘pains’ he has taken to make this book available to women ‘in their maternal language’ (21), ‘in our mother and vulgar language’ (16), and hoping that they will ‘have the more or less courage to employ [their] labour in overlooking [i.e. reading through] and perusing of the same’ (11). *The Birth of Mankind* was to stay in print until 1654, and is the source both of the malpresentation figures in *The Midwives Book*, and of some of its discussion of how to deliver dead babies.²⁹ It seems reasonable to assume that finding this word-play with ‘labour pains’ and ‘mother tongue’ both here and, more briefly, in the dedicatory epistle to Culpeper’s *Directory for Midwives* (sig. A2^{r-v}), Sharp picked up the idea and expanded it into her own particular argument that the kind of ‘hard words’ that women cannot understand because they are excluded from ‘Universities, Schools of Learning’ are not appropriate to a book of this kind.³⁰

Recognising what is not new in how Sharp uses literary devices such as these metaphorical games therefore needs to be paired with an understanding of what is particular to her book. To achieve that, it is necessary to analyse in some detail how her frequent echoes of the views of her sources – as in her use of Culpeper’s advice concerning lying-in quoted above – also include rewriting. A provocative example of what I have in mind here is the way in which she refigures Helkiah Crooke’s description of the labia minora – the ‘wings’. First, here is Crooke:

These *Nymphae*, beside the great pleasures women have by them in coition, do also defend the womb from outward injuries, being of that use to the orifice of the neck which the fore-skin is to the yard; for they do not only shut the cleft as it were with lips, but also immediately defend the orifice as well of the bladder as the womb from cold air and other hurtfull things. Moreover, they lead the urine through a long passage as it were betweene two wals, receiving it from the bottom of the cleft as out of a Tunnel: from whence it is that it runneth foorth in a broad stream with a hissing noise, not wetting the wings of the lap in the passage; and from these uses they have their name of *Nymphs*, because they join unto the passage of the urine and the necke of the womb; out of which, as out of Fountains (and the *Nymphs* are said to bee Presidents or Deities of the Fountains) water and humors do issue: and beside, because in them are the venereall delicacies, for the Poets say that the *Nymphs* lasciviously seek out *Satyres* among the Woods and Forests.³¹

In Sharp's rewriting, we find instead:

These wings besides the great pleasure they give women in Copulation, are to defend the Matrix from outward violence, and serve to the orifice of the neck of the womb as the foreskin doth to a mans Yard, for they shut the cleft with lips as it were, and preserve the womb from cold air and all injuries: and they direct the Urine through the large passage, as between two walls, receiving it from the bottom of the cleft like a Tunnel, and so it runs forth in a broad stream and a hissing noise, not so much as wetting the wings of the Lap as it goes along; and therefore these wings are called *Nymphs*, because they joyn to the passage of the Urine, and the neck of the womb, out of which as out of Fountains, whereof the *Nymphs* were called Goddesses, water and humours do flow, and besides in them is all the joy and delight of *Venus*. (p. 39)

The repetitions are obvious: Sharp follows the sequence of Crooke's description in considerable detail, and takes from him the explanation of how the labia's common name of 'nymphs' was derived from that of the goddesses who live near flowing waters. Most readers would also probably notice immediately that whereas Crooke's nymphs conform to the popular stereotype that linked female sexuality to excess and disorder, 'lasciviously seek[ing] out *Satyres* among the Woods and Forests', Sharp's are part of a self-sufficient erotic economy in which resides 'all the joy and delight of *Venus*'. A literary critical reading could also go further, noting how Crooke's dry, factual report that as urine flows through the labia minora, it does so 'not wetting the wings of the lap in the passage' becomes Sharp's upbeat, celebratory, 'not so much as wetting the wings of the Lap as it goes along'. Here, Sharp has shifted the rhythm of the line, turning Crooke's falling dactylic and trochaic

/ / / x x | / x x | / x x | / x
not wetting the wings of the lap in the passage

to the rising, anapestic and iambic rollick of

/ | x / | x / | x x / | x x / | x x / | x /
not so much as wet-ting the wings of the Lap as it goes along.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Sharp had a knowledge of poetic form that would have allowed her to name what she has done here: like the women whom she is addressing, she had no access to the 'Universities, Schools of learning' (12). Her commitment to her goals of writing 'as plainly and briefly as possibly I can' (13) and doing good to her 'own sex'

(13) can though be discerned in the ways in which she sets words to work.³²

Whilst a literary critic should be capable of using the traditional skills of the discipline to identify significant elements in the language of any writer, there are particular reasons why it should not be surprising that Jane Sharp is so interested in words. As Caroline Bicks has explored at length, long-established cultural fears about a midwife's power to determine the size of a baby's genitals and its facility with words by her cutting of the umbilical cord can be found shadowed in many literary works.³³ Another standard element in allusions to childbirth (again considered by Bicks) is anxiety over the activities of the gossips – the all-female neighbours and relatives – who attended the birth to support the mother. Sharp makes no mention of a need to restrict the activities of gossips, and this silence is an active choice, deleting from the recommendations that she borrows from Culpeper about the care that should be provided for the new mother his assertion that 'Gossips tales do Women little good' (146).³⁴ Indeed, everywhere in *The Midwives Book* there are examples of how Sharp's choices over what she does and does not say show scepticism about the wisdom of male authority, and are part of a conscious pro-woman pattern, ranging from her giving to the midwife the surgical instruments normally reserved for men's use (148-50), to her warning that surgeons cannot be trusted, when treating male venereal diseases, not to thrust a syringe in too far and 'undoe their Patient' (28). Such features are all the more striking in a social context where women were not only supposed to accept male authority, but also to preserve their 'modesty' in another sense by not speaking publicly about sexual matters. In her opening address to the reader, Sharp undertakes to write 'with as much modesty in words as the matter will bear' (13). It is fascinating to track her rewritings of her sources in this respect, and to note small adjustments such as her recommendation of 'marriage' in place of Sennert's 'venery' as a cure for greensickness (Sharp, 199; Sennert, 105), and her addition to Culpeper's and Sennert's lists of typical symptoms of early pregnancy 'She hath no great desire to copulation' (82; compare Culpeper, 11; Sennert, 155-56). In a similar way, she rewrites Sennert's lengthy description of the 'immoderate desire of Venery' that causes women suffering from 'womb frenzy' to 'speak their thoughts bawdily, and follow men, and sollicite them shamelessly' (115). Although, Sharp indicates, this condition can cause women to 'grow even mad with carnal desire, and entice men to lie with them', there is no bawdy talking (240). It is striking in this context to note that whereas Culpeper simply scolds what he interprets as 'coy' behaviour if a woman is reluctant to say when she