

Female Perspective: Women Writers in the English Renaissance

"...man is as the head, and the woman as the body... And as it is against the order of nature that the body should rule the head: so it is no less against the course of all good order that the woman should usurp authority to herself over her husband, her head."

Thomas Gataker, *Marriage Duties Briefly Couched Together*, 1620

"In this consolidation which we call wedlock is a locking together. It is true, that man and wife are one person; but understand in what manner. When a small brook or little rivulet incorporateth with Rhodanus [the Rhone], Humber, or Thames, the poor rivulet loseth her name; it is carried and recarried with the new associate; it beareth no sway; it possesseth nothing coverture. A woman as soon as she is married is called *covert*; in Latin *nupta*, that is, 'veiled'; as it were clouded and overshadowed; she hath lost her stream. I may more truly, far away, say to a married woman, her new self is her superior; her companion, her master.

Thomas Gataker, *The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights*, 1632

Oh, the heartbreakings
Of miserable maids, where love's enforc'd!
The best condition is but bad enough:
When women have their choices, commonly
They do but buy their thraldoms, and bring great portions
To men to keep 'em in subjection.
...No misery surmounts a woman's:
Men buy their slaves, but women buy their masters.

Isabella in *Women Beware Women* by Thomas Middleton, 1625

Women have a thousand ways to entice thee and ten thousand ways to deceive thee and all such fools as are suitors unto them: some they keep in hand with promises, and some they feed with flattery, and some they delay with dalliances, and some they please with kisses. They lay out the folds of their hair to entangle men into their love; betwixt their breasts is the vale of destruction; and in their beds there is hell, sorrow, and repentance ... For take away their painted clothes, and then they look ruggedly; their coifs and stomachers, and they are simple to behold; their hair untrussed, and they look wildly. And yet there are many which lays their nets to catch a pretty woman, but he which getteth such a prize gains nothing by his adventure but shame to the body and danger to the soul ... Many women are in shape Angels but in qualities Devils, painted coffins with rotten bones.

Joseph Swetman, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women*, 1615

Background Reading

- From "The Early Seventeenth Century" (Norton Anthology, pp. 1218-1219)
- "Politics of Gender" by Elaine Hobby, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell* (pp. 31-51)

Female Authors in the Norton Anthology

Anne Askew (547)

Tortured and burned at the stake for her religious views on the Eucharist (the Protestant / Catholic culture wars were often fatal if you were caught on a losing side).

Queen Elizabeth (593)

In her 45 year span as Queen of England, Elizabeth's patronage of the arts can't be overstated. She was not only a patron but a poetess and an accomplished orator.

Isabella Whitney (606)

In her mock last will and testament, Whitney levels some subtle but biting social commentary. She gives a voice to the poor and disenfranchised, and mocks the fact that, by Parliamentary decree, women were not allowed to write wills.

Mary Sidney Herbert (957)

The sister of Sir Philip Sidney, a literary member of that literary family. Very strong patron of the arts. Compiled Sidney's Arcadia, and wrote devotional poems.

Aemilia Lanyer

First Englishwoman to be known as a polemicist in the defense of women's interests and worth. Women had been roundly attacked and disparaged in a widely circulated and influential book by Joseph Swetman, The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women (1615).

Mary Wroth (1422 ff)

Sir Philip Sidney's niece, another literary member of that literary family. First Englishwoman to publish a sonnet sequence, but she also published other works, including her own prose romance, Urania (based on Sidney's characters in Arcadia), in which empowered women were rulers, counselors, scholars, storytellers, poets, and seers. She also published a pastoral tragicomedy that idealizes female friendship and political control.

Elizabeth Cary (1508)

First Englishwoman to publish a tragedy in which a queen/wife is subjected to domestic and political tyranny.

Martha Moulsworth (1552)

(Poet) A wife recounts her "fortunate" life (three dead husbands, the last her soulmate, and three dead children). Radical in that she urged better education for women, who she claimed might outwit men given the chance.

Rachel Speght (1556)

Polemicist who defends women, a soldier in the "gender wars." Her utopian work, "A Dream," is excerpted in our text.

Katherine Phillips (1679)

Well known published female poet influenced by John Donne. Exalts female friendship. Politically, a royalist.

Lucy Hutchinson (1726)

Very well educated for her time. Through her memoirs of her husband, who died in prison, she acts as a historian of the Revolution from the Puritan perspective. Her work, for political reasons, was suppressed until 1806.

Lady Anne Halkett (1730)

Wrote memoirs of the Revolutionary period from a Royalist perspective.

Anna Trapnel (1743)

Religious poet/prophet (in the tradition of the Fifth Monarchists, who believed the Second Coming of Christ was immanent). Her work is politically charged, and her “prophet” status allows her to venture beyond the ordinary gender boundaries.

Margaret Cavendish (1759)

*Extremely prolific writer who was able to publish in a variety of genres, including poems, stories, plays, essays, and memoirs. Radical, individualistic—trampled gender walls and made people mad. Her utopian work, *The Blazing World*, is excerpted in our text. In it, women are politically and socially empowered.*



Mary Wollstonecraft won't be born for another hundred years, in 1759. In 1786 she published *Thoughts on the Education of Girls*. In 1789 she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, a pamphlet supporting Richard Price in his views on the French Revolution, while also pointing out her views on the ills of society: its slave trade, game laws, and habits treating the poor. It's not until 1792 that she published her most important extremely influential book, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.