

WELCOME to *Women's Works*, Volume Three

*I will not say that women are better than men, but I will say,
men are not so wise as I would wish them to be...*

—Ester Sowernam (1617), sig. D3r

QUEEN ELIZABETH died on March 24, 1603. King James died on March 17, 1625. In the interim, the people of a united Britain witnessed many romantic comedies and domestic tragedies, scripted by such wits as Shakespeare, Chapman, Jonson, Tourneur, Middleton, Webster, Fletcher, Beaumont, and Ford; whose comedies take as their central idea, “She is chaste: *I must have her*”; and in the tragedies, “She is not chaste: *she must die*.” The true tragedies of the age, however, were experienced by women, daily, at all ranks of society. Among the unfortunate well-born: Arbella Stuart, Mary Wroth, Elizabeth Brydges, Margaret Cunningham, and Cecily Boulstred (to name a few whose words and work are represented in Volume Three). At the bottom of the social pyramid, women led a hard-scrabble existence with no social safety net. Many even as children were put to hard labor, or prostitution. Dozens were put to death as adults for the crime of being poor, illiterate, angry, and superstitious. The “confessions” of hanged witches in particular provide a fascinating if pitiful glimpse into the daily lives of beggar-women in King James’s Britain. Lacking property, social rank, and a significant male Other, elderly hags and unwed mothers wandered from manor to manor looking for work, or to beg a penny, a crust of bread, a pottle of milk; sometimes returning curses for cruelty or indifference – until someone’s child took sick, or a dairy cow died, and then the local “witch” suddenly found herself before a hanging-judge, accused of killing by magic. Unfortunately, the most detailed record we have of their respective “confessions” is supplied by the very authorities who hanged the women, vetted their statements, and then authorized the trial-transcript for publication as a record of the defendants’ depravity, thereby to reassure citizens that the State was ever-vigilant in rooting out clandestine terror cells comprised of penniless she-devils.

These threads of British culture were of course woven into the social fabric long before the succession of King James. But one reason that Jacobean women idealized “Elizabeth our late Sovereigne – not onely the glory of our Sexe, but a patterne for the best men to imitate” – was that, in the days of Queen Bess, one could sustain the illusion of the nation being cared for by a strong and capable mother, with liberty for many and justice for most. The House of Stuart brought changes to England, including peace with Spain, global exploration, and expanded trade. But most change, for most citizens, was for the worse. The nation’s wealth became more tightly consolidated in the hands of the one percent who owned the Island’s real estate – and who steadfastly resisted taxation, most especially for government-spending that would assist the poor. To raise revenue, King James sold “patents” and monopolies on the manufacture, the import and export, of virtually all traded goods, and for many services; which further enriched the few at the expense of the commonalty. The wealthiest lords and ladies entertained themselves at sporting events, at cards, or at dinner, waited on by troops of servants; traveled from one manor to the next, collecting rents from hard-pressed tenants; enclosed their lands so that the poor could no longer forage for food and firewood; and prepared their outfits, silks, and jewels for the next lavish Court masque. Meantime, poverty swelled, disease and crime increased. Hope for the future languished. With the death of the beloved and popular Prince Henry in 1612, national optimism presciently collapsed.¹

The merchant class thrived well enough, thanks to increased trade, but in the latter years of James’s reign, even the merchants fell on hard times. Violence at sea (firefights with competing Dutch and Portuguese trading companies, and with Barbary pirates) brought a declining return on investments, not infrequently a complete loss. Plus, the commonwealth was overtaken by a crushing economic depression that left most citizens without ready cash for such luxuries as tobacco or cinnamon – and in Scotland, no money even for food. What merchants’ wives had to say of these developments is largely unrecorded: women of the virtuous middle class had no time for books other than the Bible, nor did much writing except in their household account books. The “middle” class is here represented by a few exceptional mothers who, before making their final exit, wrote books for their children, how-to manuals whereby to find “everlasting happiness without woe, want, or end” – but also, to set a maternal example, so that you will “remember to write a book unto *your* children, of the right and true way to happiness.”²

¹ *Elizabeth...to imitate*] Ed. DWF from Ester Sowernam, *Ester Hath Hanged Haman* (1617), 21.

² *everlasting...happiness*] Ed. DWF from Dorothy Leigh, *The Mother’s Blessing* (1616), 185, 16.

According to some contemporaneous reports, English-speaking ladies of the Jacobean period, although deprived of equal access to the printing press, nonetheless wrote freely to please themselves and their lovers; so much so, that in 1616 (at the height of the Swetnam controversy), clergyman Robert Anton threw up his hands in despair, fearing that his countrywomen were out of control, both as writers and as readers:¹

I much wonder [at] this lusty time—
 That women can both sing and sigh in rhyme,
 Weep and dissemble both, in bawdy meter,
 Laugh in luxurious pamphlets, like a creature
 Whose very breath some Ovid did create
 With provocations and a longing sate
 After some stirring meats. Wives covet books
 Not penned by artists, but the fruits of cooks
 Prescribing lusty dishes to enflame
 Their lusty fighting brood unto their game.
 Confections with infections of their kind
 Both rots° their body and corrupts the mind. [...]

Rev. Anton may have constructed this dire report of female cultural depravity out of whole cloth, from his own paranoid imagination. At the very least, he was seeing something that we cannot: for what has actually come down to us from the Jacobean period – whether from a woman's pen, or in printed books that are known to have been read by women – is altogether chaste, modest, respectful, and dead-sober, containing no luxury for laughter from anyone.

What has survived is hit-or-miss, mostly a miss: Elizabeth Cary (for one) wrote at least three plays while young, plus many other “things for her private recreation, on several subjects and occasions, all in verse.” In her later years, she penned biographies of “Saint Agnes the Martyr, Mary Magdalene, and Saint Elizabeth of Portugal”; plus a “paper of controversy” that “was thought the best thing she ever writ”; plus fresh translations of the Epistles of Seneca, the Meditations of Blosius, all or part of the *Replique* of Cardinal Jacques Davy du Perron; and of *Le miroir du monde*, by Abraham Ortelius. What remains today of Cary's secular work is a rather dull prose history of the reign of Edward II; and one sad-funny play, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, which was printed in 1613 but “called in” soon afterward (“by her own procurement,” though not, we believe, voluntarily); whereupon her dedication, bearing the Cary surname and subscribed “E.C.,” was razored out or canceled. That was the end of Cary's publishing career until 1630 when – perhaps for a shilling or two to fend off hunger – she published, anonymously, Book One of her Perron.²

In 1621, Mary Sidney Wroth published her *Urania*, having high hopes for this, the first original novel in English by a woman author – and not by just any woman, but a Sidney. The volume also contains “Pamphilia to Amphilanthus,” the first complete sonnet-sequence by a woman writing in English. The author of *Urania* is identified on the engraved title page as “*the right honorable, the Lady MARY WROATH: Daughter to the right Noble Robert [Sidney] Earle of Leicester. And Neece to the ever famous, and renowned S^r. Phillips Sidney, knight. And to y^e most exelēt Lady Mary [Sidney,] Countesse of Pembroke, late deceased.*” Wroth dedicated the romance to her long-time best friend, Lady Susan (de Vere), first wife of Philip Herbert, earl of Montgomery, a favorite of King James; and Wroth was herself the partner of Lord Montgomery's elder brother, William Herbert, earl of Pembroke, a favorite of the Queen. These two sons of the “countess of Pembroke, late deceased,” were two of the most powerful men in the kingdom. One might suppose, therefore, that her social connections would have insulated Wroth from censure; and indeed, the first critical notice was favorable: Henry Peacham praised Wroth, in print, as an author who “seemeth, by her late-published *Urania*, an inheritrix of the divine wit of her immortal uncle.” But disaster ensued. As a *roman à clef* of the Jacobean Court, Wroth's novel painted an unflattering picture of the rich, powerful, and famous. Mary Wroth was accused of libel and denounced as a whore.³

¹ Ed. DWF from Robert Anton, “Venus,” *The Philosophers Satyrs* (1616), lines 253-64; *luxurious*] salacious.

² *things...in verse*] Cary, Anne, et al., *The Lady Falkland her Life* (see *Women's Works*, vol. 4, 203-13); *called in*] *ibid.* In the Eton Library and Bodleian Library copies, cancelling the dedication also sacrificed the dramatis personae, printed on the verso of the same leaf. Cary's anonymous translation of Perron was printed at Douay in 1630.

³ *seemeth...her immortal uncle*] Ed. DWF from Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622), 161-2.

In 1624 (long before Wroth died), Thomas Heywood mentions in passing “the ingenious Lady, the late composer of our extant *Urania*.” He likens Wroth’s extant *Urania* to the lost Works of Arbella Stuart, who “had a great facility in poetry, and was elaborately conversant amongst the Muses.” But Arbella perished in 1615, in the Tower of London, for the offense of having married at age 35 without asking the King’s permission; her poetry, which was never printed, perished as well. After *Urania*, neither did Mary Wroth publish another word, though she wrote at least 240,000.¹

Women were not strictly forbidden to see their work through to the press. But the prevailing ideology did not provide much wiggle room concerning what kind of woman was permitted to take such liberties (chiefly, women of property). No less narrowly prescribed were the kinds of text deemed “appropriate to the sex” (chiefly, devotional meditations dedicated to children, or religious works translated from Latin, Spanish, French, German, or Italian). Mary Sidney Herbert’s *Discourse of Life and Death* (1592), a translation of Philippe du Mornay, was reprinted in 1606, 1607, and 1608. Anne Lok’s translation of Jean Taffin, *Of the Markes of the Children of God* (1590), was reprinted in 1608, 1609, and 1615. To these, Lady Elizabeth Russell added *A Way of Reconciliation of a Good and Learned Man; Touching the Trueth, Nature, and Substance of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Sacrament. Translated out of Latin by the Right Honorable Lady Elizabeth Russell, Dowager to the Right Honourable, the Lord Iohn Russell, Baron, and sonne and heire to Francis [Russell,] Earle of Bedford*.

Lady Elizabeth’s copytext was written by Rev. John Ponet (1516-1656), an Anglican bishop who wrote to make peace between warring Christians. His *Diallacticon* was not otherwise available in print (even in Latin); and he had given his blessing to the book-project. Even so, Elizabeth Russell in 1605 was nervous, fearing it could damage her name to appear in print. “To seek the atonement of men is to be commended,” she writes (in her Preface), “and it hath a sure promise of God: *Blessed be the peacemakers*. But I fear me, lest in greedily following the same, it happen to me which chanceth to them that part frays: while they seek others’ safety, they bear the blows themselves. And I, while I study to make enemies friends, perhaps shall have small thanks.” (Publish, and perish.) Russell dedicated the pamphlet to her daughter, with an apology: “Surely at the first I meant not to have set it abroad in print, but [for] myself only, to have some certainty to lean unto in a matter so full of controversy [...] but fearing lest after my death it should be printed according to the humors of other, and wrong of the dead (who in his lifetime *approved* my translation with his own allowance); therefore dreading, I say, wrong to *him* above any other respect, I have by anticipation prevented the worst.”²

But if the women of Jacobean Britain generally wrote less, and fared worse, than women of previous generations, rebellion was in the air. Reform came initially from an unlikely catalyst. In 1615, Joseph Swetnam published *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*, a compendium of chauvinist platitudes, bitterly expressed. Hugely controversial, Swetnam’s diatribe had an unlooked-for benefit. By stripping the polite and pious veneer from off conventional gender discourse, Swetnam’s *Arraignment* exposed the malice and insecurity that underlay a centuries-old system of masculine privilege. Joseph Swetnam was condemned or ridiculed in no fewer than six rebuttals. Whatever may have been said over the dinner table or in pillow-talk, no one in print came to the misogynist’s defense. The prose polemics were further augmented by *Swetnam the Woman-Hater*, a comedy performed by Queen Anna’s Men at the Red Bull Theater. In the penultimate scene, Swash the clown observes that Joseph Swetnam, as Misogynes,

put his book i’ the press, and published it,
And made a thousand men and wives fall out,
Till two or three good wenches, in mere spite,
Laid their heads together, and railed him out of th’land. (sig. K1v)

In the play’s Epilogue, the “Swetnam” character is hauled back onstage, wearing a *branks* (a scold’s muzzle), being led by women who intend to have him arraigned, sentenced, and punished. His muzzle removed, Swetnam falls to his knees, promising womankind: “Here, forever, I put off this shape [of

¹ *the ingenious...Muses*] Ed. DWF from T. Heywood, “Of Poetesses,” *Gynaikeion* (1624), 398; 240,000] Wroth’s lengthy draft of the *Second Part of Urania*, preserved today in the Newbury Library, was never completed.

² *Diallacticon*] Ponet’s original Latin text, under the title *Diallacticon viri boni et literati, ... et sanguinis Christi in eucharistia*, etc. was eventually published in 1688; *To seek...the worst*] Ed. DWF from Elizabeth Russell, “The Author to the Reader,” *Reconciliation* (1605), sig. A2v.

Misogynes,] / And with it, all my spleen and malice too, / And vow to let no time or act escape, / In which my service may be shown to you" (L1v).

Swetnam was not the only one who, presuming on masculine prerogative, skated too far upon cracking ice. King James made the same mistake. The entire economic system – whereby land, power, and revenue were concentrated in the hands of infinitely wealthy men – was by this time wearing thin. Those lords who owned the land, and who controlled both production and trade, were sucking income from the labor of everyone beneath them, while inflating the cost of goods – “some by bribery, some by simony, others by perjury, and a multitude by usury; some stealing on the sea, others begging by land portions from every poor man, not caring if the whole commonwealth be impoverished” (Dorothy Leigh [1616]). The economy was a mess. Suffering of the masses was made worse by plague and smallpox in the cities, rising prices, food shortage, displaced families, and famine. Religion had become a cause of pain rather than peace. Promised the comforts of Christian faith by her minister, Rev. William Livingston, Bessie Clarkson replied, “If it were come, it would kith, it would bud forth. Oft and many a time have you said comfort was coming, but I cannot find it [...] that cat that sits there is in better case nor I am. I shall beat down this carcase with beare-bread and water, but that doth not the turn.”

Following the death of Queen Anna in 1619, King James presided over a melancholy Court and an angry commons. He was hated by his subjects; he despised them in return. He was in ill health. The Crown was deeply in debt, and still racking up enormous deficits. His plan to escape bankruptcy – a marriage between Prince Charles and the Roman Catholic Infanta of Spain – was both unpopular and improbable. Desperate for money and hoping to win support for “the Spanish match,” James finally convened Parliament in January 1621, his first in seven years. But Britain was ready for change. Sir Edward Coke, Chief Justice and MP for the House of Commons, chaired a Committee of Grievances, a welcome move that unleashed a tidal wave of protest, most especially against monopolies sold by the Crown to restrict trade and profit the license-holder. The working poor and merchant class submitted their petitions against injustice faster than Parliament could read them: one petition, signed by “thousands of carpenters, smiths, plasterers, glaziers, painters, and other handicrafts men”; another in behalf of water-tankard bearers; another by brewers; another from wood-mongers; still others from the makers of felt, the makers of fustian, cloth-workers, hot-pressers, dyers, cutlers, clerks of the Custom House, wharf-keepers, and various other constituencies that had grown tired of legalized extortion. Among those who petitioned for relief or redress of grievance were many women, most of them widows who had been cheated of their jointure or property or had their children taken from them, and whose first appearance in the historical record was to join a groundswell of democratic protest against injustice.

As tensions rose between James and his Parliament, poets turned to satire, flyting the King, Buckingham, Bacon, and their crew, and complaining of a social system without either justice or compassion. Nearly everyone in England now agreed that Queen Elizabeth was a more effective sovereign than King James had been. In 1623 (while Charles was in Madrid wooing the Infanta), one unhappy poet placed in the hand of Elizabeth’s effigy in Westminster Abbey a verse petition addressed to “Saint Elizabeth,” begging her Majesty to look down from Heaven on her suffering commons; together with a second verse petition by the same anonymous poet, beseeching her Majesty to deliver it unto God, imploring Him to right England’s wrongs. “Saint Elizabeth” became one of the most widely circulated political poems of the Seventeenth Century. It eventually reached print in 1642, as an indictment of Charles I, on the eve of the English Civil War.

Enraged that he should be criticized by satirical poetasters, King James wrote a verse reply to one such “libel” (as he called it), in which he figures himself as the deputy of God, having a divine right to rule unchallenged. A self-styled “Wiper-Away of the People’s Tears,” James threatened to silence dissent by putting his weepy critics to death. This foolish piece of royal poesy was answered with an unsigned verse epistle “by a Lady,” advising the King to tamp down his rhetoric: “Condemn not, gracious King, our ‘plaints and tears— / We are no ‘babes’ (the times us witness bears).” But James was not prepared to listen to his Parliament or his people, much less to a lady poet.

DWF