

## WELCOME to *Women's Works*

*Mulier in silentio discat cum omni subiectione. Docere autem mulieri non permitto neque dominari in virum sed esse in silentio. Adam enim primus formatus est deinde Eva; et Adam non est seductus mulier autem seducta in praevaricatione fuit. Salvabitur autem per filiorum generationem si permanserint in fide et dilectione et sanctificatione cum sobrietate.*

—Biblia Sacra Vulgata (late 4<sup>th</sup> century)

*Let a woman learn in silence, with al subjection. But to teach, I permit not vnto a woman, nor to haue dominion ouer the man: but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eue. And Adam was not seduced: but the woman being seduced was in prevarication. Yet shal she be sauued, by generation of children, if they continue in faith & loue and sanctification with sobrietie.*

—Rheims New Testament (1582)

*I said, he oughte to fynd no faute in poore women, excepte they had offended the lawe.*

—Anne Askew (1546)



NE lasting impression that students receive from their classroom curriculum – even at the university level, even in the twenty-first century – is that men produce culture, while women produce sons. History is the record of kings and warfare. The women who tidied up when the killing was done, or who penned competing narratives, receive at most a footnote. Heroic literature narrates what alpha males achieved on the battlefield or suffered at the hands of inscrutable gods. Women's heroic labors in the birthing chamber (more dangerous than military service), and their literature of the childbed, are by tradition excluded from the syllabus. The great epics were written by men – the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, to name a few – while women plied their needle and preserved their honor, or looked pretty and played the whore. To men are credited the most memorable lyrics, the wittiest satires, the grandest stageplays and 100 Great Books. Women's lot, it has been supposed, was not to write, but to be written *about*, to be celebrated in verse as the objects of male desire, or to be honored as the mother of a messiah or the consort of a king.

As a result of this pervasive gender bias in primary, secondary, and higher education, very few English-speaking women today know much about their own cultural past, and very few men know the first thing about history from women's point of view.

Late in the last century, a great and collaborative work of recovery was undertaken by literary scholars to exhume women poets, storytellers, and playwrights whose works of genius were lurking, dusty and undiscovered, in the archives of major research libraries. The first sizable collection to appear was Germaine Greer's *Kissing the Rod* (1988), which commenced with Jacobean religious doggerel and included nothing early than 1604. Since that time, scholars have uncovered dozens of writers whose lives and works are no less engaging, for their time, than those of Jane Austen or Dorothy Lessing or Toni Morrison. But their stories have not yet been adopted for the classroom, or for the book club, or for bedside reading. There are many reasons for that, none of them good ones.

The first (and, to a lay reader, most obvious) obstacle is academia's fetish for original spelling. Countless gleanings from early women's literary production now lie scattered across academic journals or upon university bookshelves, chiefly in "diplomatic" (exact) transcriptions. These texts have received all the benefits of scholarship except an actual readership. Who but a scholar reads the Bible or Shakespeare or *Frankenstein* in original typography? Yet early women writers have been reproduced since 1980 chiefly in critical old-spelling editions, either in journals or in books that cost more than \$100 per volume and are read by few: scholars for research purposes consult facsimiles of the original, available from such digital resources as *Early English Books* and *Perdita Manuscripts*, while undergraduate students and lay readers find the original printed texts inaccessible and largely unintelligible, and the original manuscripts illegible and unavailable. The message that students receive, when invited to read the Western canon in a modern edition and to view an early women writer in original orthography, is that the woman's text is a cultural fossil, a museum artifact of interest to pedants, but not quite the same thing as literature.

The opposite extreme, exhibited by editors of anthologies, has been to select a few token-hits of early women's writing, and to reissue them in a version ruthlessly "modernized," with altered syntax and word-substitutions; with a two-paragraph editorial introduction that typically compliments the writer and describes her work as "important"; when in fact the anthologized version has no more importance for study of language and literature than a SparkNotes paraphrase.

With the strong showing of feminists in higher education in the 1990s, it was widely hoped that the canon could be split open – and it was. Today, all texts are fair game for study in the English classroom, from any era, any clime, and almost any venue, not excluding comic books, television screenplays, videogames, and pop music. That is as it should be: critical thinking is no less essential when one reads a Britney Spears lyric than when reading Shakespeare. But the expectation that early women’s literature would thereby find a permanent and valued place in academia’s ever-ballooning curriculum has all but evaporated. Scholarship continues to thrive well enough, but classroom study of early women writers is about where it stood one hundred years ago. The Oxford anthology of *Early Modern Women’s Writing* includes nothing earlier than 1560, while the Columbia anthology commences with the report of a speech by Elizabeth I in 1588. The *Meridian Anthology of Early Women Writers: British* contains nothing earlier than 1660. The more rangy *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* includes two lays of Marie de France in translation; a few brief extracts from Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Julian Barnes; and the “Ballad” of Anne Askew. The *Longman Anthology of Literature by Women* includes two lyrics from the Exeter Book; four letters (two from Queen Matilda, two from Margery Paston); plus brief extracts from Margery Kempe and the two Julians – all of these selections having been dumbed down with excessive and unnecessary “modernization.” That’s *it* – plus very little else from the reigns of Elizabeth, James, Charles, and the Interregnum. The implicit lesson: Although English literature begins with *Beowulf*, early women’s writing begins with Aphra Behn or Jane Austen.

Needless to say, much of women’s culture from the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Norman, late Medieval, and Reformation periods has been irretrievably lost. Few women were either permitted or able to record their words: denied formal schooling, deprived of tutoring, women endured illiteracy as one of many lifelong penalties imposed on them for the fault of having been born without a penis. As a result, women’s lore – spinning and sewing, horticulture and cooking, midwifery and holistic medicine, charms and incantations, songs and poems and stories – had to be transmitted orally; and the male clerics whom we may thank for preserving secular literature rarely deigned to record verse or prose that was obviously by, or for, the daughters of Eve. What has survived is very hit-or-miss, often no more than a rhymed couplet of women’s verse quoted in a sermon, or a posy scrawled on the flyleaf of a prayerbook.

That said, our grief for what has been lost may tempt us to overpraise what we do discover in ancient archives, or even to recuperate women’s literary remains in ways not justified by the available evidence. The well-known medieval lyric, “I am Rose” provides a case in point. This surprising poem, which survives in a unique copy in Cambridge University Library MS Hh.6.11 (c. 1280), is catalogued in the *Index of Middle English Verse* under the genres, “Women as speakers/narrators” and “Laments.” It has been reproduced in anthologies of Middle English poetry, republished on dozens of Websites, and even set to music. Scholarly transcriptions vary—

**I am Rose**

Ed. Carlton Brown (1943)

I am Rose wo is me  
 sutere kat ignete þe  
 þat i wacs þat weylawey  
 cherles hand me þristet ay

**I am Rose**

Ed. Rossill Robbins (1955)

I am Rose, wo is me,  
 Sutere þat I suete þe.  
 I wacs þat weylawey  
 cherles hand me þristet ay.

—as do modern paraphrases:

**I am Rose**

Ed. Brian Stone (1964)

I am Rose, woe is me  
 Though sweeter than the sweet I be.  
 I grow in grief and misery:  
 For hand of churl has done for me.

**I am Rose**

Ed. Gunnvör Silfrahárr (2003)

I am Rose, alas for me,  
 Sweeter than the sweet I be.  
 I wax in pain and misery:  
 A churlish hand has pluckèd me.

The poet has been tentatively identified in published scholarship as one “Rose *Souter*,” or perhaps the wife of a *cobbler* named Rose, who had a *suitor* among the clergy. But here is what MS Hh.6.11 actually says (at left), with a parallel text in conservatively normalized spelling and punctuation (at right):

I am rose wo is me  
 suture þat i snete þe  
 þat \<sup>i wacs</sup>/weylaway  
 cherles hand me þristet ay

I am rose: woe is me,  
 Sutere, that I snittè thee!  
 That I wax, welaway!  
 Churl's hand me thristeth aye.

Mangled by editors, this thirteenth-century Rose has indeed been *thrusted* aye and again: “Sutere” does not signify *sweeter*. Nor does it reference a *sutor*. Nor is it Rose’s surname or trade. Nor is *Rose* her Christian name. Nor is “I am rose” even a women’s poem. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, every undergraduate English major’s favorite reference work, clarifies the text’s meaning:

- *suter*, from Latin *sutor*, shoemaker, from Roman times a proverbial botcher; *MED*, *OED*, “a term of abuse” (as in: “horsoned *suters!*” [1478]; “called him *sowter*, and gave him opprobrious words” [1575]; “Creishie *soutter!* ... Minch moutter!” [1585]).
- *churl*, *OED* n.4 (f. 1275): “peasant, rustic, boor”; n.5, “base fellow, villein”)
- *snite*, *OED* v.2 (fr. 1100): “to clean or clear the nose from mucus, esp. by means of the thumb and finger only” (as in these wise proverbs: “Therfor sayth Salamon, *Whoso ouer-harde snythyth the noos, he draueth blode*” [1422]; “Pi[c]ke not youre nose., Snyff nor snitynge hyt” [1475]; “Even yet among the Persians it is held a shamefull thing...to snit the nose” [1632]).
- *thrist*, *OED* *thrust*, v.1 (fr. 1100): “to expel, eject”; v.6: “to enter, pierce, or penetrate some thing or...extend (a limb or member [or finger]) into some place” [such as a nose].
- *welaway*, *OED* intj.1 (fr. 888): “exclamation of sorrow or lamentation”
- *wax*, *OED* v.5 (fr. 971): “To rise, swell; to flow out in a flood”

Hence:

I am rose[-nosed]. Woe unto me, a botcher, that I picked thee!  
 Now I’ve got a gusher, welaway! My churlish hand has always gotta be poking!

This rose-red ditty, half as old as the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia, has an identifiable source. It translates a Latin riddle, preserved (in part) along with the English text, and preserved (in full) in a manuscript housed in the Bibliothèques d’Amiens Métropole (MS 460), where it is attributed to a monk:

*Heu, rosa! cur crevi? manus angit rustica!*  
*Heu, rosa! (Cur rosa sum? villani mulceo nasum.)*<sup>1</sup>  
 —Albertus, monachus Clarevallis (c. 1270-80)

*Woe, a rose! why am I blown? picked by a boorish hand!*  
*Woe, a rose! Why am I a “rose”? I fondle the nose of a villein [rustic].*  
 —Albert, a monk of Clairvaux, trans. DWF (2013)

The original author of “I am rose” is not an English-speaking woman of the British Isles, but a French monastic; and the “I” who speaks is not a courtly woman with a broken heart, but a bumpkin with a nosebleed. If “*Heu, rosa!*” has a place in our literary tradition, it is not as a precursor to Gertrude Stein’s 1939 lyric, “I am rose,” but to Janet Clinker’s 1787 praise of broad-shouldered Scottish hussies: “If a puir man want a perfect wife, let him wale [*choose*] a weel-blooded hissie, wi’ braid shouders and thick about the haunches, that ... snites the snotter frae their nose.”<sup>2</sup>

(*Moral*: When revising the canon to include Rose Souter or Marie de Meulan or W.S. or any other real or supposed author, we do well to establish a reliable text, and to have an accurate notion of what it means, and perhaps even to ask ourselves who wrote it, before foisting it on our colleagues and students.)

Every item in *Women’s Works* has been freshly and accurately edited from the earliest authoritative manuscripts, augmented with commentary that places the original work in its cultural and biographical context. The resulting collection, though hardly comprehensive, provides enough new material to keep thoughtful readers entertained and serious scholars occupied for quite some time. Not all of the texts selected for inclusion are known to have been written by women (a few were certainly written by men, either to or for women readers). And yet, one reason that

<sup>1</sup> *mulceo* ] to stroke, fondle; with phonological pun on *mulco*: to thrash, handle roughly.

<sup>2</sup> Janet [i.e., Humphrey] Clinker, *The History of the Haverel Wives* (1787), ed. 1903, 54-55.

the clergy so bitterly condemned women's speech, so often, is precisely because their female contemporaries had so much to say: Volume one presents a smorgasbord of narrative verse, elegy, riddle, fable, romance, satire, song, correspondence, essay, medical handbook, court testimony, autobiography, and occasional verse. And each succeeding volume is as rich as and varied as Volume one. Clearly, if women of medieval Britain did not produce epic battles or epic poems, neither did they remain silent for the first thousand years of our literary history.

Most of the poetry in these pages and much of the prose was first composed to be read aloud for an intimate audience. Various helps are therefore here supplied, so that extracts from *Women's Works* can be heard with pleasure, whether in the classroom or the family room. Spelling and punctuation have been normalized (without paraphrase or word-substitutions).<sup>1</sup> Parallel translations are supplied for texts originally written in Welsh, Old English, or Anglo-Norman French. Difficult words are glossed at the bottom of the page, not banished to a glossary at the rear. Accent marks are added to assist metrical fluency: an acute accent indicates a stressed syllable (*cóntent*, *contént*), while a grave (back-slashed) accent indicates an unstressed syllable (*blessèd*, *learnèd* [2 syllables.]; *blessed*, *learned* [1 syllable]); *demand* is pronounced as in modern English while medieval *demandé* is pronounced as in French, three syllables with the last being accented; etc. (No musical settings are supplied for the song lyrics: readers may wish to invent their own.) With a bit of rehearsal, there is no text in *Women's Works* that resists delivery by anyone with a high school education and a sense of play.

A quarter-century in development, *Women's Works* has reached print none too soon, appearing at a moment when "the English major" is in decline across America and throughout the United Kingdom. To sustain enrollments (or perhaps to commit disciplinary *seppuku*), departments of English have beefed up their course-offerings in media studies and journalism but without making many new hires in literatures earlier than the nineteenth century. And since graduate students generally gravitate to those fields where they find job openings, doomsayers predict that "English literature," a generation from now, may be a thing of the past in more ways than one, with English departments having been converted to writing programs, and Literature reduced to a discipline for specialists. Such jeremiads sound far-fetched until one considers a recent study by the Jenkins Group, which indicates that eighty percent of U.S. families no longer buy or read books; and that 42% of American college graduates never read another complete book after the bachelor's degree. If current trends continue, students may soon be paying \$60,000 a year in tuition and fees but without reading any text earlier than their own birth date, or longer than a tweet. (The editors of *Women's Works* are less pessimistic. Most of the texts included here had their first trial run among students at Vassar College, where the readings met with passionate enthusiasm. The death of Literature has been predicted many times, most often from the culture police who hold to the Great required Books school of thought. But great literature, including the women's texts contained herein, will never lack for readers so long as there remain teachers and students with a passion for learning, and who love the English language.)

Readers who have gotten thus far will recall that *Women's Works* opens with an epigraph quoting holy Scripture, one of several passages where the Word enjoins feminine silence. Translated by scholars at the English College (Douai), the Rheims New Testament (1582) was the first Bible in vernacular English that "popish" laymen were permitted to read, without sin. For added clarity, or perhaps just to express their solidarity with St. Paul, the English College attached a lengthy footnote to the apostle's dictum, with a dire warning: "Women are much given to reading, disputing, chatting, and jangling of the holy Scriptures, yea, and to teach also, if they might be permitted; but Saint Paul utterly forbiddeth it ... [T]he woman taught but once: that was when, after her reasoning with Satan, she persuaded her husband to transgression; and so she undid all mankind; and in the ecclesiastical writers we find that women have been great promoters of every sort of heresy" (1 Timothy 2:11-14 [1582] fn.).

The hope of the editors is that women readers will find in these pages much to dispute, chat, and jangle about; and that *Women's Works* will be blessed with readers who (like those early women readers and writers) become teachers of reason, and great promoters of every sort of heresy against the status quo.

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial interpolations, emendations and substantive variants are recorded in the Textual Notes (pp. 389-407) and signaled in the edited text by brackets or a degree symbol: [*interpolation*], *emendation*°.