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## Introduction: Women's Works, 1625-1650

Nor were some of these inimitable Femals, onely fitting Consorts for subjects of Devotion, to *pray* with; nor onely pleasing Companions for Scenes of Recreation, to *play* with: But moving sociats for arguments of Communication, to *commerce* and *converse* with. ... These desired to doe well, and not to be applauded; to advance virtues, and not to have their names recorded: nor their amiable features with glorious *Frontispieces* impaled. To improve goodnesse by humility was their highest pitch of glory. This their sundry excellent fancies confirmed; their elegant labours discovered; whereof though many have suffered Oblivion through the injury of time, and want of that incomparable helpe of the *Presse*, the benefit whereof wee enjoy: yet shall wee find ... that many of these women, which for brevity sake wee have onley shadowed, have been *assistants* to the highest and most enlivened Composures that ever derived birth or breath from *Helicon*.

—Richard Brathwaite, *Ladies Love Lecture* (1641)

THE CAROLINE PERIOD, one might well suppose, was a glorious era for women's literature, in English; and in many respects, that's true, as the pages hereafter illustrate. But it was not true of printed books. By 1625, the stigma of publication had become so potent that very few women of the British Isles dared or even dreamed of letting their words appear in a bookshop. Those who tried, often failed. Grace Cary, having paid for a scribal copy of her Puritan screed, *England's Forewarning*, could find no support for her intended publication, even among friends. It was not that her text was illiterate, heretical, or even "wrong" – she tidily prophesied the beheading of King Charles five years before it happened – but her kin and co-religionists nonetheless persuaded her that the printed page was no place for a virtuous Christian widow to appear: it would be like singing the Psalms of David in a London whorehouse.

The prohibition was especially true of secular or fictional writing, by women. Lucy Hay, countess of Carlisle, was generally acknowledged, even by those who disliked her, to be the wittiest courtier of the Caroline era, being emulated by such Cavalier funnymen as Thomas Carew, Sir John Suckling, and Sir William Davenant. She published nothing. Her reputation was a target, by turns, of the Buckingham women, the French ambassador, Suckling, the Roundheads, and Sir Thomas Warburton; and yet she evidently had no inclination to ruin her name by becoming a self-published author. The one literary text that we know was ascribed to her (by gossip) was a hilarious satire entitled "The Character of a Lady." Everyone at Court was said to have read it, including the King and Queen. But the countess of Carlisle would "not own it" as hers. (Nor did anyone else own, or publish, "The Character of a Lady": the text has not survived.)

Elizabeth Egerton for twenty years spent her leisure hours writing both poetry and prose. By the time she died, she had produced "divine meditations upon every particular chapter in the Bible, written with her own hand." Her husband, John, earl of Bridgewater, was so proud of the achievement that he inscribed those very words on her monument. But what most pleased him was neither Elizabeth's scriptural exegesis, nor her wit, nor her prosody, nor her prose style; what most pleasures him is that his beloved wife kept her thoughts to herself: Not allowing other men's gaze to inspect her sheets, Elizabeth's manuscripts were "never (till since her death), seen by any eye but her own, and [by] her then-dear (but now-sorrowful) husband."

Cultural watchdogs of the Tudor and early Stuart eras freely tolerated printed devotional texts by godly women authors, from queens (Katherine Parr) to convicts (Anne Askew). But during the Caroline and Civil War years, those few women writers who submitted their sacred manuscripts to the press did so nervously, fearing censure as never before – prefacing their work, almost always, with a self-effacing disclaimer concerning its inferior value; a feminine convention that Anne Southwell refused to follow, preferring not to publish than to publish with a groveling preface:

Dare you but write, you are Minerva's bird,  
 The owl at which these bats and crows must wonder.  
 They'll criticize upon the smallest word:  
 This wanteth number, case; that, tense and gender.  
 Then must you frame a pitiful epistle  
 To pray him be a rose, was born a thistle.<sup>1</sup>

Women whose work was brought to press by others and not of their own volition, were excused from condemnation on that score, since publication under such circumstances constituted a violation of privacy over which she had no control.

Clever Anne Bradstreet had it both ways. She is not the most talented poet represented in these pages, nor even a distant third. But she was certainly the most ambitious. Billing herself as THE TENTH MUSE of the Western world, and as the first female Muse of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Anne Bradstreet not only appeared in print, she *gloried* in it, presenting book-buyers with a grand field theory of the Puritan universe. In the first 179 of her 207 pages (not counting prefatory blurbs and eulogies), Bradstreet offers a compact course in physics, biology, theology, cosmology, and human history, all of it in rhymed iambic pentameter. The book's 1650 title page on both sides of the Atlantic invites shoppers to purchase:

A COMPLETE DISCOURSE AND DESCRIPTION OF THE

FOUR { ELEMENTS  
 CONSTITUTIONS  
 AGES of MAN  
 SEASONS of the YEAR

TOGETHER WITH AN EXACT EPITOME OF THE FOUR MONARCHIES, VIZ.

THE { ASSYRIAN  
 PERSIAN  
 GRECIAN  
 ROMAN

These poetical discourses by Anne Bradstreet are omitted from *Women's Works* because they are extremely tedious. Readers today prefer her more spirited work, and shorter. But the most charming sin, of this most righteous poet, is that she has been caught in a white lie: *The Tenth Muse* in its first publication was not brought to the press without her knowledge or consent, as she pretends: Anne Bradstreet was involved in every step of the book's production, including its original conception, its self-aggrandizing title, the congratulatory verses, and the page-one disclaimer by her accomplice, Nicholas Ward: "I fear the displeasure of no person in the publishing of these poems but the *author*" [he says] "without whose knowledge (and contrary to her expectation) I have presumed to bring to public view, what she resolved in such a manner should never see the Sun," etc. Resolving that her work should never see the Sun, and Boston, without also seeing London, Bradstreet dispatched a fair copy with Mr. Ward on his way to England so that *The Tenth Muse* might shine in the motherland, as in Massachusetts.

Anne Bradstreet's little fib about her first time may be amusing in the particular; but in the larger discourse of the period, it represents a catastrophe. All of the sacred and secular writings reproduced in this volume were penned at a time when even the best-educated woman was taught to disavow her own thoughts, and speech, and writing; or at least, to keep her written work out of circulation, so that

<sup>1</sup> Anne Southwell, "Precept IV," lines 439-44, B.L. Lans. 740, fols. 143-155, ed. DWF.

no one would see it and assume she was presenting herself thus to every Tom, Dick, and Harry who set foot in a bookshop. As a result, many women who may have written well, wrote nothing; and much of what was written has not survived.

The husband of a writerly wife sometimes acted as her literary executor. He served thus as a gatekeeper, much as editors or literary agents would do in later generations of book publication: the surviving husband decided what could or should be printed. The husband's decision, almost always, was to nix publication. John Egerton commissioned a fair copy of Elizabeth's poetry and prose. Henry Sibthorp did the same for his wife, Anne Southwell. And Roger Ley, for his wife Anna (and himself). But in each instance, the point of the exercise was to save the written word as an artifact, much as a widowed husband might preserve his beloved wife's needlework or homemade pottery. None of these husbands allowed his wife's poetry or prose to be printed; and for its preservation as a family heirloom, one or two manuscript copies was plenty.

One advantage of print over manuscript is that press-publication ensured survival, not only by the sheer number of copies produced, but by a 1610 agreement made between the Stationers' Company and Thomas Bodley, whereby one copy of each work printed (under license) was given to the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. How much great literature was lost to history in the early modern period because it was *not* printed can only be guessed at. The good news is that much *was* printed, despite the taboo against women's authorship – and much more writing by women has survived via goose-quill.

British women of the Caroline and Civil War periods, as represented in *Women's Works*, speak from a wide range of ideological positions – from the Leveller women on the radical Left, to old-school aristocrats on the Right. In matters of religion, some are reformers; others, conformist; a few, sectarians. One or two are irreverent skeptics. They speak from all corners of the British diaspora: not just from London, but from Paris in the south; from the Netherlands, in the east; from Scotland, in the north; from Ireland, in the west; and from America, in the far west. All social classes are represented, from dirt-poor to filthy rich to chaste middle-class Puritan. These women cover many constituencies: workers (Mabel Swinnerton, Mary Frith, Anne Green); the trades (Mary Overton); the clergy (Anna Ley); the merchant class (Anne Stagg, Grace Cary, Marie Jackson Payler); landed gentry (Anne Southwell, Martha Moulsworth, Sibilla Dover, Hester Pulter, Mary Moore, "Eliza"); nobility (Anne Tuchet, Lucy Hay, Jane Cavendish, Elizabeth Egerton); and royalty (Queen Henriette Marie). Their tone ranges from high piety, to subtle irony, to defiant mockery, discord, and base outrage.

If there is a shared breath in all of these voices, it is the air of sedition that leaked from below in a culture whose system of privilege was erected upon the backs of the disenfranchised. Proto-feminism, a strong thread in the cord of 17th century resistance, finds various expression in women's correspondence, poetry, prophecy, and political action. Prior to the Caroline period, almost all of our extant women's literature was produced by women of privilege. But amidst stirrings of democratic unrest in the 17th century – as manifest, for example, in the defiance of the Leveller women, or the Women's Peace March of 1643 – vocal rebellion against subjection and objectification became a thinkable thought for all women, even for the *ladies*.

"Hang me, Ladies, at your door," is a misogynist lyric that made its first appearance about 1630, probably in a stage play. The tune became an instant hit as a drinking-song in bars and barracks and remained popular throughout the 17th century. When Richard Brome's comedy, *A Mad Couple, Well Matched* was performed in the late 1630s, the playwright assumes that his audience will recognize his allusion to it: Wat, who is sweet on Phoebe, seeks to kiss her hand. Phoebe calls him "pimp impudent," abuses him with insults, and strikes him. Whereupon Wat responds with a rape joke: "Be ruled by me! if I do not lay you down, and join with you presently in a course that shall content you, then—*Hang me lady at your door!*" (Brome, 1.1.107).

The enduring popularity of “Hang Me, Ladies,” is attested by the Restoration poet and playwright, Aphra Behn. In her *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678), Lodwick Nowell and Sir Credulous Easy comment on the intractability of the modern woman:

**Lodwick.** [T]o say truth, these women have so much contradiction in ’em, that ’tis ten to one but a man fails in the Art of Pleasing.

**Sir Credulous.** Why there’s it! Therefore, prithee, dear Lodwick, tell me a few of thy sister’s humors. And if I fail— then “Hang me Ladies at your door,” as the song says. (I.i, p.8)

One of our only two extant texts of “Hang Me” is supplied by the 1630s commonplace book of Tobias Alston, a Hertfordshire teenager. Alston is the same collector of verses to whom we are indebted for the countess of Hertford’s spirited “Reply” to Sir George Rodney (a lacerating verse epistle that occasioned Sir George’s broken heart, and nervous breakdown, and 1601 suicide).<sup>2</sup> Alston copies “Hang Me” into his commonplace book under the heading, “On the Dispraise of Woman.” True to form, he also records a woman-writer’s tart “Answer.”

The original tune figures women as lustful, coy, sometimes useful (for looks, sex, or entertainment); but none of whom is worth a man’s loyalty, the morning after:

**On the Dispraise of Women**  
[“Hang Me, Ladies”]

I am confirm’d a woman can  
Love this or that or any man.  
Today her love is melting hot—  
[Tomorrow swears she knows you not.]  
Let her but any object find,  
Then straight she’s of another mind.  
    Then hang me, ladies, at your door  
    If ere I dare upon you more!

And though I love the fair one – why?  
For nothing but to please mine eye!  
And for the fat and soft-skinned dame  
I’ll flatter to appease my flame.  
For her that’s musical I long  
When I am sad, to sing a song.  
    Then hang me, ladies, at your door  
    If e’er I dote upon you more.

I’ll give my fancy leave to range  
Through every face, to find a change:  
The black, the brown, the fair shall be  
But objects of variety.  
I’ll court you all, to serve my turn  
(But with such flames as shall not burn.)  
    Then hang me, ladies, at your door  
    If ere I dote upon you more.

<sup>2</sup> See “Frances Howard, countess of Hertford,” in *Women's Works*, vol. 2.

The Caroline song finds a modern descendant in a 1964 Top Forty hit by Roger Miller: “Dang me! Dang me! / They oughta take a rope and hang me, / High from the highest tree. / Woman, would you weep for me?”

*Absolutely not*, says at least one woman of the 1630s. Alston supplies no attribution for “The Answer” to “Hang Me, Ladies.” It may, possibly, be another by the countess of Hertford; but no matter who wrote it, she speaks for many in stating that women may change their love if they find the object of their affection unworthy; and she would gladly see any man hanged who loves a woman only as the object of his gaze, as entertainment for his ears, or for the gratification of his inconstant lust:

### The Answer

His wit’s infirm that thinks we can  
 “Love this or that or any man.”  
 This day the love that melts in heat  
 Tomorrow we would fain repeat,  
 Did we not, in that object, find  
 What tells us yesterday was blind.  
     Then hang that servant for a sign  
     That could so well his doom divine.

He that still loves and knows not why  
 But “fat” and “soft” and “fair to the eye”  
 May easily enjoy such dames—  
 If flattering will appease his flames.  
 And she whose music love can breed  
 Sure, for a song, may buy his creed.  
     Then hang that servant for a sign  
     That leaves the goddess, loves the shrine.

That fancy which takes “leave to range”  
 Finds little truth in often change—  
 Since all those various sweets which he  
 Makes objects for inconstancy  
 Are guarded forth, and want no charm  
     ’Gainst him that burns and’s scarce lukewarm.  
     Then hang him &c.

Sometimes, anger was set in stone. Sepulchral inscriptions were the venue in which survivors of the deceased took occasion to define the meaning of the life. It was not altogether uncommon for the husband of an unloved or rebellious wife, upon her decease, to inscribe her faults on her tombstone as a perpetual shame to her memory. (Epitaph-anthologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries supply many examples.) But that game could be played by widows, too, at least in those parishes where the sexton permitted freedom of speech in the cemetery. Alston in his commonplace book reports verses from a woman of Hertfordshire who, when given the opportunity to comment on her tyrannical husband, did so on his tombstone:



Women of the mid-seventeenth century were still taught from childhood to be chaste, silent, and obedient; first, in the father's household; later, in the husband's. But when Christian ideals collapsed into misery, as sometimes happened, women of the Caroline and Civil War periods (at first, as individuals; later, in organized groups) began to demand their rights – not *equal* rights (beyond hoping for), but the right to life, dignity, and the pursuit of happiness; plus, the right to petition parliament; the right to a living wage; the right to divorce an abusive husband; even the right to inherit and own property.

Scholars who work with archival collections are often struck by the discontent of married women in the 17th century. In correspondence especially, the rich and not-so-rich have much to say about their husbands; and much of what many wives write, is unhappy. Writing to her fiancé in 1653 – at a time when men were returning from the war and women were asserting their rights – the keen-eyed social critic Dorothy Osborne guesstimates that there is not one marriage in five where the husband and wife are not brawling (Osborne, Letter 38). But it is to be doubted that marriage for British women took a turn for the worse. Rather, women in bad marriages spoke up, protesting as never before against cruelty, abandonment, unfaithfulness, or simple old-fashioned domination. Just as Parliament demanded an end to the “personal rule” of Charles I – what the Commons called the “Eleven Years Tyranny” – British women of the Caroline period began to resist a husband's personal rule at home, especially when that “God-given” authority was flagrantly abused.

Conjugal correspondence is rarely printed even today, except for that of historical personages. But exceptions are found in *A Collection of Letters* (1610s-1650s), printed in 1659 from originals once owned by Sir Toby Matthew and published after his death by Rev. John Donne the younger. One of those letters may shed light on at least one very public and messy breakup, a marriage that at mid-century had been the talk of the Court. Rev. Donne politely suppresses the names of both the author and her recipient, in keeping with 17th-century notions of decorum; but everyone at Court, and observers of the rich and famous, took it for a letter of the late countess of Leicester to her husband, Robert, written about 1650-53 when their 40-year marriage famously imploded.<sup>5</sup> (Whoever the unhappy correspondents, we have no reason to doubt the letter's authenticity).<sup>6</sup>

### A Lady to her Husband

Sir,

I write not this out of any thoughts of returning. I have given over those hopes, together with that of all happiness in this world.

If I never, or not of late, showed any love to you, yet now I have – in freeing you from a woman whom you profess so much to *hate*. If you take anything ill in the manner of it, you may pardon my fears, who durst not tarry the being “carried away” I know not whither; and where “none of (my) friends should be suffered to come near” me (and that, when you were in such a fury and with so many threatenings).

Only I owed so much, to the love that had been between us, as to have taken my last leave of you; but yet I durst not tempt my resolution so far, it having so often deceived me, to both our hurts. And had it not been to both, mine own [hurt<sup>e</sup>] had been ventured, though yet I could not rest satisfied without this [letter<sup>e</sup>] to do it for me (neither desire I any answer). This is already too much trouble for you, save that it is the last – as this is, of my suits: that since there is not only either hope or desire in *you* (for me, my hopes had left, long since) of a good life between us, but fear of further mischief to us both, you will suffer me to *leave* you, in peace, and be

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Sidney, countess of Leicester, figures in *Women's Works* both as the sister of the immortal Lucy Hay and as a model for Jane Cavendish's fictional Tattiney of *The Concealed Fancies*.

<sup>6</sup> Other items in the printed collection include letters from Mary Sidney Herbert, Sir Francis Bacon, Lucy Russell, and Elizabeth Queen of Bohemia (1662).

satisfied with the injuries I have already sustained (except which, of yours, I have carried nothing with me). Add not to them, this: to think that I write now out of any "plot." If I may not have your *good word*; if my *discredit* be necessary for your *defense*, let me yet have your good *thoughts* who never deserved any other of you.

As for me, I have forgotten whatsoever ills<sup>o</sup> in you (and, with me, the greatest of them hath *left* you, because they were [directed<sup>o</sup>] but to me) as well I may – there being enough of good to preserve, in my memory; which I will ever do – protesting before God (who knows my heart) that I leave you, not without extremity of grief; a grief which makes me pay, with interest, the joy I once had to meet with you.

Farewell. I will ever pray for your happiness. And if the first of your "good" fortunes may be my death, I shall *only then* be happy, too.

"Togetherness" is a modern ideal that was not always possible in the 17th century, even for the leisured classes: For better or worse, husbands were often away from home for months at a time – if not in another woman's arms, then at sea, or on the battlefield, or in London or Amsterdam or Antwerp, conducting business. The wives typically remained at home, to keep the books, supervise the children, and collect the rents. Anna Ley, Hester Pulter, and Anne Bradstreet are among the married writers who complain of their isolation, having no adult companionship while their husbands are gone, except the servants. And from the servants and workers, of course, we hear nothing at all: God put them on earth, to serve.

Against these many unhappy women may be set the bliss of a few: Sibilla Dover ("To Her Mirth-Making Friend") reports life with her hubby, Robert Dover, to be jolly good. Elizabeth Egerton ("Prayers and Meditations") has only praise and boundless affection for husband John. Writing from her own blest experience of husband and wife, she concludes "there is no doubt, but where both these parties do perfectly agree, with passionate and sincere affection, but 'tis the happiest condition, a friendship never to be broke, as the words of matrimony say, till death them de-part." The Levellers, Mary and Richard Overton, soldiered together against tyranny with their secret printing press; and were parted only by prison, then by exile. Anne Southwell, after a miserable first union, found joy in her second marriage to Captain Henry Sibthorp; and he, with her (*The Works of Lady Anne Southwell*). Martha Moulsworth ("The Memorandum") adored all three of her husbands, especially the last, Bevil Moulsworth, for whom her paper is still sometimes blotted with her tears, two years after his death. And while Charles I and Henriette Marie got off to a quarrelsome start in their royal marriage, they worked it out: the queen in her Civil War letters, and the king in his replies, rival the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.

The central purpose of life, as constructed for all women of the British Isles, was still marriage and childbirth. For most, there was no choice to be had. The nunneries were no longer in business; the schools and universities did not admit women; and careers for single women were not yet available, except that of domestic servant and/or sex worker. It was the father's responsibility to find for each of his daughters a suitable match, and to provide her with a marriage portion. What both father and husband expected from the bride, thereafter, was cooperation, and fecundity: it was her biblical responsibility to provide sex, and babies. In 1630, one especially virtuous instance is noted in a goodwife of Scotland, as documented in British Library MS Harleian 980 (original spelling):

A weaver in Scotland had by one woman 62 children, all living till they wer baptized, of which ther war but fower daughters onely, who lived till they wer women, and forty-six sonns, all attaining to man's estate. During the time of this fruitfulness in the woman, her husband at her importunity absented himself from her for the space of 5 years together, serving as a soldier under the command of Captain Selby, in the Low Countries. After his return home, his wife was again delivered of three children at a birth, and so in her due time continued in such births till through bearing she became impotent. The certainty of this relation I had from Joh. Delavall, of Northumb' Esqr. who, anno 1630, rid about 30 miles beyond Edinburrgh to see this fruitful couple, who wer both then living. Her stature and features he described

to me then more fully. Ther was not any of the children then abiding with ther parents, Sir John Bowes and three other men of qualitie having taken at severall times ten of ther children a peace from them and brought them up. The rest were disposed of by other English and Scottish gent, amongst which three or four of them are now alive, and abiding at Newcastle, 1630.

Men with many offspring and the wealth to support them considered themselves enviable; while those who lacked the necessary income to support a large family dispatched their superfluous children as domestic help (free labor) to the homes of wealthier families; until which exodus, it was the wife's job, invariably, not only to produce children, but to raise them.

Such congratulatory epitaphs as this one have power to amuse only insofar as one neglects to consider either the backstory, or the woman's part:

Here lieth the body of  
NICHOLAS HOOKS  
Of Conway, gentleman:  
Who was the one-and-fortieth child of his father, William Hooks;  
by Alice, his wife;  
And the father of seven-and-twenty children.  
He died the 20th day of March 1637.<sup>7</sup>

It is possible that William Hooks, like the weaver of Scotland, begot all of his brood upon the o'erteeming loins of just one woman ("Alice, his wife," the same gal he was married to when he begot baby Nicholas); although that is not implied by the syntax. It's possible that Nicholas fathered all 27 of his own children by one woman, and possible that all 68 children of father and son were "legitimate." But it is far more likely that multiple women contributed to the proud and prolific Messrs. Hooks.

Aristocratic girls, who were married young, often against their will, faced their first birthing with fear. The death rate, among teen brides, was appalling. Thousands of others were permanently injured with vaginal fistula, then banished by their husbands to bear their shame alone while they found themselves another bedpartner, who did not stink. Partly in response to these familiar horrors, the age at which marriage was consummated, in England, gradually drifted upward in the 17th century, from 14 to 16 (or later). But mortality in childbirth remained high, for both the mother and the infant. John Egerton was unusual, in his resolve never to remarry. Widows were expected to wait one full year. Widowers often remarried within weeks or months. If a man were wealthy enough (and perverse enough to seek a succession of teen brides), he could run through four or five wives in a lifetime.

Motherhood was not every woman's high desire. Jane Cavendish, viewing the bond of marriage as bondage, and having financial independence, remained single until late in life, refusing all suitors. "Eliza" (surname unknown) resolved from adolescence that her only Babes would be the poems she wrote for the Lord. Her parents determined otherwise, and married her against her will. But she kept producing holy Babes. Childless after years of marriage, she wrote "To One That Bragged of her Children" (possibly her sister), that her friend's babes of flesh "delight in nought but sin; / My Babes' work is to praise Heaven's King. / Thine bring forth sorrow, pain, and fear; / Mine banish, *from* me, dreadful care.

Anne Southwell, mother of two, having been there and done that, makes clear (even to her own daughters) that she considers motherhood over-rated. She, too, would rather be writing than mothering – and that includes the grandchildren.

The pain and "great torture of childbirth" is the constant theme of Elizabeth Egerton's Prayers and Meditations; and yet she would not do without: her children, those who survived infancy, were her the

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Carver, *The New Universal Traveller* (London, 1779), 482; from a floorstone epitaph monument in Aberconway Church, Conway, Carnavonshire; ed. DWF.

loves of her life. The *sorrow, pain, and fear* that “Eliza” dreaded were for Elizabeth Egerton God’s just punishment for Eve’s sin in the Garden, and the necessary price a woman must pay, for the joy of children, while it lasted.

Marie Payler, Lady Carey tried with each passing child to strike a happy balance between joy and grief: she was joyful in pregnancy, joyful in childbirth, joyful in delivery, and nursing, and nurturing. And when the Lord took her joys away from her, one by one, she rejoiced in their souls’ behalf, assured that God had taken them to enjoy bliss in Heaven, despite her own sorrow at their departure. Her joy could not be shaken. She had only one question. In her final poem “Upon the Sight of my Abortive Birth, the 31st of December 1657,” Marie writes: “What birth is this! A poor despisèd creature, /A little embryo, void of life and feature. / Seven times I went my time ... / I only now desire, of my sweet God, / The reason *why*...”

*Women’s Works*, volume 4, closes with the death and resurrection of Anne Green. Dependent for her employment on the Reads of Duns Tew, Oxfordshire, and “being about 22 years of age, of a middle stature, strong, fleshy, and of an indifferent good feature,” Anne Green was made pregnant by Master Read, a youth “of a forward growth.” She continued to work, and to work hard. Overexerting herself while turning malt, she fled from the malt-floor with cramps and suffered a miscarriage in a latrine, which she concealed from view. When her offense was discovered, the lord of the manor, Sir Thomas Read, had her arrested for infanticide – not because he grieved for that lump of bastard flesh found in the corner of an outhouse, but because the foul wench had defiled his grandson; and as a Puritan Justice of the Peace and former High Sheriff of Oxfordshire, Sir Thomas had the power to ensure a conviction. Green was tried and condemned to death. Arrangements were made for her corpse to be donated to science, at Oxford University. And on 14 December 1650, she was duly hanged, her body being carted away in a coffin to be dissected that same day for an anatomy lecture. But the indomitable spirit of Anne Green proved too strong for the hangman’s noose: in the anatomy theater, laid out before dozens of astonished medical students, she recovered her breath; and not only spoke, but lived many years after, eventually producing three children within the bonds of holy matrimony and thereby evading further violence from State or Church.

Anne Green’s story figures forth women’s literary production of the 17th century. For women, there was no Revolution, only more of the same. Charles I, then Parliament, then Cromwell, asserted absolute rule over women’s lives, and thoughts, and bodies. Thousands of women during the War went hungry, or were raped, or widowed, or died of disease while the boys went at it. Hundreds more during the Interregnum were put to death for crimes real or imagined, as the oppression of landowners gave way to the tyranny of a Christian military dictatorship. Two aptly named parliaments – “the Rump” (1649-1653) and “the Saints” (1653), followed by the “Protectorate” of Sir Oliver (1654-1658), crushed the Levellers, persecuted nonconformists, and did as little as possible to improve the rights of women. But the seeds of creative resistance having been planted, during those nine years a quickening took place; and with the Restoration of Charles II, the voices of women – Katherine Philips, Lucy Hutchinson, Aphra Behn, “Ephelia,” Anne Wharton, Anne Killigrew, among them – brought to an oppressive and stifling culture, new vitality and fresh breath.

DWF and TB