From Paratext to Epitext: Mapping the Authorial Apparatus in Early Modern Women’s Writing

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Our focus on Early Modern Women’s Writing and the Apparatus of Authorship in this special issue of Parergon responds to emerging trends in early modern women’s studies that emphasize the importance of the material text to the literary, historical, and political analysis of women’s works in the long early modern period. Attention to the material contexts of women’s works is not new; it has, for instance, been a staple of the invaluable critical introductions to early modern women’s texts that have been produced in the past thirty years.¹ However, it is also the case that, until relatively recently, such scholarship has remained something of a specialist concern, standing in paratexual relationship to the text proper, as an introduction to the work that follows. This relationship has been reinforced in criticism that considers the literary interpretation of early modern women’s writing before, or outside of, its material and textual specificity.² If there has been something of a time lag in the material turn in early modern women’s studies, this might be attributed, as Sarah C. E. Ross suggests in her introduction, to the field’s initial focus


on the recovery of the historical woman writer and the assumption that gender provides the most pertinent interpretive crux to her text. While the past thirty years of scholarship has complicated this focus by incorporating analyses of rank, race, learning, sexuality, geographical location, and political and religious affiliation into the picture, the historical conditions that make a critical focus on gender valid and generative have by no means disappeared. The essays collected here share a continued focus on gender as a crucial feature of early modern women’s writing, but they explore this focus in ways that attempt to unhinge it from immutable or essential associations with the body of the woman writer and insist instead on gender’s shifting, contingent, productive, and performative relationships to the corpus of women’s writing as we inherit it.

As such, the collection aims provisionally to dissociate our understanding of gender from its more recent critical legacies, at least as these relate to readings of early modern women’s works, in order to explore what different understandings of its role emerge if the term is unshackled from its conventional associations. This is a strategic dissociation, designed to enrich and complicate our understanding of early modern gender regimes, rather than a post-political move designed to ignore or efface them. Such a move might seem to risk charges of anachronism or ahistoricism, by resisting accumulated assumptions about the operations of gender in the period. However, it does so deliberately, strategically, and provisionally, in the interests of producing more historically situated and locally embedded insights about gender’s fluctuating permutations from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The comparison of women’s paratexts from the remote ends of the early modern period, for instance, reveals major shifts in textual production and promotion, highlighting the need for further historicization of this authorial apparatus and its associations with gender before period-wide pronouncements can be properly attempted. Similarly, by eschewing fixed ideas about women’s relationships with genre and community, this collection resists viewing women’s engagement with forms and networks as necessarily innovative and successful; the seemingly derivative generic engagements and partially successful projections of community explored

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here provide salutary counterpoints to the field’s critical predilection for narratives of gendered rhetorical triumph. In exploring the reception of early modern women’s writing through its textual redactions, this volume also addresses the mechanisms through which women’s writing has been excluded or marginalized from canonical literary history. Again, however, the particularization of this process is key: as the essays in this volume reveal, gender operates in surprising and often conflicting ways across four centuries of scholarship on early modern women’s writing, and these shifts problematize sweeping ideas about the gender biases of our inherited literary histories. If the essays in this volume ask us to consider discrete material features of early modern women’s writing – the Reformation preface, the seventeenth-century letter – they also ask us to consider, again discretely, different historical periods in the reception of these texts, a history that is infinitely more instructive in its local specifics than its broad generalizations.

Accordingly, the essays assembled here approach gender and the early modern apparatus with a deliberate specificity, directing attention to local contexts of textual production and transmission. Micheline White, for instance, reconsiders assumptions that view Anne Lock’s dedication of her translation of the *Sermons of John Calvin* (1560) to the Duchess of Suffolk as ‘politically straightforward and unremarkable’ – the Duchess was a well-known patron of Reformist publications and had been named in the publications of earlier women writers Katherine Parr and Anne Askew. Unpicking the historical details of the case, however, White reveals that in the early, unstable years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign and in light of the queen’s anger at John Knox’s *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), Lock’s dedication was, in fact, ‘anything but a straightforward reformist project in 1560’. In White’s astute analysis, Lock’s address to the Duchess invokes an ‘alternative reception history for Calvin’; in the face of the Queen’s rejection of Calvin’s direct overtures, Lock attempts to harness the Duchess of Suffolk’s ‘exemplary piety’ as a different means of promoting Reformist texts in England. Unhinged from the assumption that Suffolk’s religion and gender make her a straightforward or obvious choice for Lock’s dedication, requiring little further comment, we can then consider Lock’s preface anew, as an epistle that knowingly and perhaps provocatively risks a new queen’s displeasure in presenting the translation of an unpopular author. Feeding this new understanding of Lock’s use of the dedication back into our current understandings of women’s prefatory rhetoric can only enhance our appreciation of the diverse functions this particular apparatus of authorship might serve. While it does not discount the idea that many more dedications by early modern women might have functioned in the ways we expect them...
to, White’s essay does disrupt the notion that they must have functioned this way. Her focus on gender in this instance challenges one enduring assumption about the place of the woman’s preface, and paves the way for future readings that might read against the gendered grain of early modern women’s negotiation with public authorship.

Marea Mitchell’s essay on Dorothy Stanley’s *Arcadia Modernized* (1729) explores the place of the woman’s preface from the far end of the early modern period. As an eighteenth-century writer producing a modernization of Sir Philip Sidney’s famous prose romance, Stanley crafts her preface to fulfil functions very different from those addressed by Anne Lock’s. While Lock’s preface appeals to an aristocratic patron, Stanley’s appeals to the general public and in particular to the list of subscribers who have undertaken to purchase her book. Where Lock’s preface examines the translation of volatile new religious works, Stanley’s examines the modernization of, by now, classic secular works. As part of the first wave of Elizabethan translations of Calvin into English, Lock’s text is designed to introduce a new vernacular text into an ongoing religious dialogue. As the most recent of a series of editions and extensions of Sidney’s *Arcadia*, Stanley’s text is designed to appeal to the tastes of her contemporary audience, and to compete for authority and accessibility with this back catalogue of *Arcadia* redactions. Mitchell’s analysis of Stanley’s subscription list, along with her book’s title pages and running heads, is in line with recent calls to expand scholarship on the early modern paratext beyond the place of the preface, and reveals textual, material, and commercial concerns simply unimaginable to the sixteenth-century Anne Lock.4

Differences in the paratextual apparatus adopted by each of these early modern women, writing at opposite ends of the period, are instructive. They remind us that the early modern period is a long one that straddles major shifts in book production, print technology, markets, and readership. Gender plays a key role in both of these essays, and this focus is honed by attention to the woman writer’s specific historical location and engagements with textual production. Patricia Pender’s essay in this volume offers an alternative view of gender and the early modern authorial apparatus when she examines the prefaces John Bale produced for *The Examinations of Anne Askew* (1546/7). Pender argues that male-authored paratexts to female-authored texts play an important if sometimes maligned role in the early modern women’s authorial apparatus, because they shape the ways that women’s texts were promoted.

and circulated to their earliest audiences. Bale’s prefaces, she suggests, worked to defend both Askew’s religious convictions and the gender transgression of her voicing them, more strenuously than Askew would have been able to do herself. In their different concerns, contexts, and approaches to gender, the essays by White, Mitchell, and Pender sketch several directions that the study of early modern women’s paratexts might fruitfully follow. Equally, however, the distances between these essays, both historical and theoretical, point to important gaps in our current understanding of how early modern women’s paratexts work, whether they were crafted by the woman writer herself or attached to her work by subsequent collaborators. The variety of paratexts available for consideration, the different ways these paratexts respond to shifts in religious, political, and book histories, and ongoing questions about whether women used these material spaces of the book in ways similar to or different from their male counterparts, suggest something of the potential scope of this emerging area of scholarship. They also remind us that gender analysis of even the most seemingly marginal authorial apparatus requires detailed historical and contextual calibration.

While concerted scholarship on early modern women’s paratexts is in some senses just beginning, work on gender, genre, and interpretive community in early modern women’s writing is comparatively well established. Essays in this volume by Victoria Burke, Johanna Harris, and Marie-Louise Coolahan contribute to this project in distinctive ways. In her consideration of the devotional manuscripts produced by three seventeenth-century women, Victoria Burke employs a conception of authorship that encompasses ‘active readers, collectors, and compilers’ in order to view the textual productions of Elizabeth Hastings, Lady Anne Halkett, and Alathea Bethell as ‘legitimate forms of writing’. Working against an earlier critical tradition that saw women’s contribution to such forms as derivative and passive, Burke views genres like religious collections and meditations as ways in which women entered into authorship through a process of repeated reading and selective transcription, producing in each instance a devout and distinctive memorial of faith. Despite the texts’ disclaimers about privacy and limited circulation, the volumes produced by Hastings, Halkett, and Bethell employ the apparatus of authorship in ways that invite a wider, if sometimes only posthumous, readership. For instance, Hastings had four manuscript copies of her ‘Collections’ transcribed in the same hand, replete with features, such as catchwords and wide margins for biblical references, which recall print conventions. As Burke suggests, such features indicate ‘the manuscripts’ attempts to be authoritative in their own right’. Building on Susan Felch’s analysis of ‘scriptural collage’ and Margaret Ezell’s theories
of ‘social authorship’, Burke’s essay presents new archival materials for the study of early modern women’s religious compilation, and articulates ways in which these compilations might be understood authorially, as ‘the necessary act of recompense’ each writer owes to God.5

Johanna Harris considers another genre that has been previously deemed a particularly appropriate vehicle for early modern women’s writing when she examines the siege letters of Lady Brilliana Harley. If Burke draws attention to the authorial agency involved in the purportedly passive production of scriptural compilation, Harris challenges the generic assumption that early modern women’s letters were generally private, personal, and familial. While women’s personal correspondence from the period is bountiful, and Harley herself produced a prodigious amount of it, Harris uncovers the polar extreme of this model of women’s epistolary exchange in the public letters Harley used to defend her household from royalist besiegement during the English Civil War. Presenting Harley as a deliberate, strategic, and rhetorically skilled letter writer, and uncovering the local historical conditions under which she conducted her ‘military resistance’, Harris extends our understanding of the public functions of women’s epistolary writing when she argues that Harley’s siege letters are best understood as ‘a militarized mode of Civil War combat’. In contrast, the letters of planter women in seventeenth-century Ireland that Marie-Louise Coolahan considers in this volume respond very differently to the threat of local violence and incipient warfare. Where Harley employs the rhetoric of epistolary convention in an attempt to stalemate her adversaries and safeguard her household almost single-handedly, the letters of the New English settlers Coolahan examines request reinforcement in the concrete form of familial migration, as is the case with Susan Montgomery’s exhortations that her relatives join her in Ulster, or in the more abstract form of the virtual literary relationship that Anne Southwell attempts to cement with Cicely, Lady Ridgeway. Differentiating carefully between models of ‘spatial’, ‘imagined’, and ‘intentional’ communities that have emerged in recent studies of the early modern period, Coolahan examines letters and, in the case of Southwell, elegy, as forms particularly conducive to women’s construction of ideal communities, and as a ‘spur to authorship’ in the face of geographical dispersal.

Gender, genre, and interpretive community emerge in this suite of essays as contingent but by no means coterminous concerns. Assessed on an individual basis, and alert to historical context, the relationship between gender and generic engagement becomes less predictable than is sometimes assumed, and subject to a number of local considerations – formal, material, and geopolitical. In unshackling gender from generic expectation, these essays contribute to an emerging shift in the scholarship of women’s engagement with genre; locating women’s texts within their specific networks necessarily militates against uniform constructions of gendered effects. If Burke’s analysis of three lesser-known seventeenth-century manuscripts confirms our common perception of women’s devotional compilation as avowedly unassuming, her essay also alerts us to the surprising ways these manuscripts might employ an authorial apparatus reminiscent of, or replacing, that of the more public medium of print. Harris’s account of Brilliana Harley’s epistolary combat presents this author, and women’s letters in general, in an exciting new light, one in which conventional ideas about gender appear as a strategic, and successful, conversational tactic – a ruse, in fact – rather than a constraint on the author’s rhetorical repertoire. Coolahan’s consideration of planter women’s beleaguered constructions of ideal community in seventeenth-century Ireland provides a poignant counterpoint to such stories of rhetorical triumph, suggesting that failures of communication might prove as fruitful for the study of early modern women’s writing as scenarios of success.

Success and failure as features of the afterlife of women’s writing is one focus of the essays presented here by Rosalind Smith, Paul Salzman, and Kate Lilley. Smith provides an extensive reception history of Mary Stuart’s casket sonnets, highlighting the crucial, idiosyncratic, and historically contingent roles that editorial interpretation has played in the construction of Mary’s corpus over time. As Smith demonstrates, radically different assumptions about gender have influenced the reception of the casket sonnets from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first century. In attending to the variety of ways in which gender has been deployed in the reception of a single sonnet sequence, Smith’s essay highlights the necessity of historicizing the ‘critical currencies’ that are applied to women’s writing, not only at the moment of inception, but in subsequent historical periods as well. Approaching Mary Wroth as a twenty-first-century digital editor, Paul Salzman also considers ways in which the reception of women’s writing – this time by editors – has influenced the body of work we inherit today. Salzman compares the apparatus of authorship produced in manuscript, early print, and modern versions of Wroth’s works with that of two of her male contemporaries, and suggests that modern editors of Wroth seem to have perceived their task as the ‘smoothing
out or solving of cruxes’ in a manner ‘that tends to reduce the complexity, ambiguity, and interpretive possibilities of a text’. Instead of cleaning up the ‘noise’ of a manuscript, a practice Stephen Orgel deems problematic when applied to canonical male writers, Salzman advocates closer attention to the material text’s texture; in this way, he argues, the imaginative editor might see the challenge of Wroth’s obscurity as ‘a network of interpretive pathways, rather than as a puzzle in need of a singular solution’.

Both Smith’s and Salzman’s essays are concerned with historicizing, through narratives of textual transmission, the ways in which early modern women’s texts have been circulated, read, and valued. As with the relation between gender and genre, the relation between women’s writing and its reception is revealed as highly contingent, dependent upon specific formal, material, and geopolitical concerns, and shifting in ways that problematize any fixed assumptions about the ways in which gender and authorship might function. These essays suggest that the ways in which we approach material texts are informed by our inheritance of histories of reading, through the processes of reception, redaction, editing, and transmission. Attending to these processes allows us to understand our own position as readers and critics of early modern women’s writing, as well as to recognize the ways in which our interpretations are compromised by and dependent upon reading practices in the past and present. Kate Lilley’s essay does precisely this. Tracing a ‘critical erotics’ of early modern women’s writing, Lilley examines developments in scholarship as part of the apparatus of authorship of the larger field, presenting the revisionist practices of feminist and queer literary histories as ones particularly amenable to what she calls ‘a reading backwards of reading backwards’. In her call for a ‘less generalized, more particularizing and detailed reading practice’, Lilley echoes one of the recurring notes struck by essays in this volume, and her assertion that early modern women’s writing ‘constitutes an ineluctably sexualized category’ adds an important erotic element to the gender considerations at stake in this discussion.

If the essays by White, Mitchell, and Pender included in this volume examine paratexts as part of early modern women’s authorial apparatus, the essays by Smith, Salzman, and Lilley consider what we might call its epitexts: the reviews, editions, and scholarly traditions that have influenced and continue to inform the reception of early modern women’s texts and their current incarnations. In this rubric, the essays by Burke, Harris, and Coolahan could be seen to explore intertexts: the networks of gender, genre, and community within which women wrote in their local historical contexts. Of course, this demarcation is not exclusive; Mitchell’s essay explores both paratexts and epitext; each of these essays engages with the epitexts of current
critical practice; and each is also concerned, to differing extents, with the intertexts of genre and interpretive community, be they early modern or late modern. The spatial demarcations of the material text that have proved so vital for the history of the book can in this way be extended to map the broader contours of the field of early modern women’s writing. The paratexts, intertexts, and epitexts of the authorial apparatus refer in this expanded sense not only to original instances of the transcription or printing of women’s works but also to their subsequent iterations and interpretations. If the field is made more diffuse, less bounded, and less familiar through this process, the need for particularized local readings of individual texts, genres, and critical traditions becomes equally apparent. Applying the ‘material turn’ liberally to early modern women’s writing means viewing not only the text but also its intertexts and epitexts in their discrete historical circumstances. If this enterprise seems colossal, it is also, ineluctably, collective and collaborative. Examining different aspects of the early modern authorial apparatus, across distinct forms and genres and from different historical periods, the essays collected here point to intriguing gaps in our understanding of the production, circulation, and reception of early modern women’s writing, gaps that we hope our readers will feel inspired to explore.

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