

University of Toronto

Maria Hussain

Critical Essay

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The role of women in Isabella Whitney's "Admonition" and in Amelia Lanyer's "The Description of Cookham"

Women writers in the Early Modern era were overshadowed by their male counterparts and female writing was largely disregarded and considered unimportant. The patriarch society limited women's roles to childbearing and housewifery. Women were to be seen and not heard. When women did voice themselves, their opinions were shaped by men. Therefore, women faced many barriers to writing and works of only a handful of mostly elite female writers offer prove that women writers did exist in the early modern era. Virginia Woolf's assumption in "A Room of One's Own" that there were no women writers in the Renaissance period is not entirely unsubstantiated, since female voices were mostly silenced. However, the existence of the written works of the likes of Isabella Whitney and Amelia Lanyer dismantle Woolf's claims that female writers did not exist.

Female writers not only existed but they wrote in unconventional Renaissance style giving voice to the silenced females of the era. Isabella Whitney's "Admonition by the Author to all Young Gentlewomen and to all other Maids being in Love" challenges the norms of female and male roles in the early modern era and disregards the injunction of silencing female voices. I think Whitney's "Admonition" is a feminist poem at odds with the patriarch society demanding

women to be docile and obedient. In this poem Whitney advises young women to be “wise in their choices on love and in doing so advocates self-reliance” (Herrera p.5). Subverting the notions of Renaissance poetry where women often assumed the role of the muse, the lover, and the temptress (using examples of Eve in many instances) Whitney’s poetry empowers women to make their own choices without giving in to the pressures of the patriarch society. While Whitney’s poetry empowers women to be self-reliant and to not fall for men’s empty promises of love; Amelia Lanyer in “Cookeham” uses the country-house genre to recreate an all-female Eden where women can live outside the control of male dominion and patriarchal authority and thrive. If Whitney’s “Admonition” is advise meant to empower women to leave men behind and make their own choices in love and marriage, then Lanyer’s “Cookeham” reimagines a world where only women could live independently from male dominion. Hence, the gardens of Cookeham are depicted as a sanctuary where women can escape to, and explore female affection, intimacy and sexuality.

In her “Admonition” Whitney addresses young and naïve women who believe in the romantic notions of a fairy-tale love and hence, are “vulnerable to deceit as a group ‘that good advice do lack’ (Whitney 6)” (Herrera, p.6). Whitney asserts herself as a “friendly speaker who speaks not as a superior but as an equal, an equal who happens to have experience of male deception and can therefore offer good counsel to other young women like herself” (Herrera 6). In giving her advice Whitney uses the metaphor of fish as women in lines 89-128. By equating fish to women Whitney is highlighting the gullibility of young women. Whitney writes, “The little fish that careless is/ within the water clear, /How glad is he, when he doth see, /a bait for to appear (lines 89-92). Here Whitney is comparing the young women to the “little fish that is careless”. The young women are innocent like the small fishes swimming freely in the water

unaware that the worm they are excited to eat is a trap. “Within the clear water” is a metaphor of the young women’s trust that is yet unshattered like the clear and still waters they are swimming in. However, once the bait is let in, the water is not clear anymore, and this indicates that the young women’s trust is about to be broken by men. Therefore, Whitney is warning the young women that they are innocent and vulnerable and hence, inclined to trust men easily. The bait here, is a reference to the men’s promises to marriage and love. The promises that men make to young women are like bait that is only meant to catch the fish. The word ‘careless’ in line 86 does not refer to women as being foolish rather it means that women are carefree of deceit and manipulation before men try to court them. Whitney is setting women up to be the victims of men’s charms and tricks subverting the representation of women as temptresses in Renaissance poetry.

Whitney’s advice to these young women is to trust each other and to rely on the power of sisterhood. Her poem itself marks the power of female companionship by giving advise to young women. Whitney writes:

O lile fish, what hap hadst thou?
to have such spiteful fate,
To come into one's cruel hands
out of so happy state? ...
... Then hadst thou with thy prey mates
been playing in the streams (98-106).

The ‘happy state’ refers to the freedom that young women enjoy in the companionship of each other “playing in the streams” before they become victims to the “prey mates”. I think Whitney is implying that women are peaceful and content within their own female community and

friendship. The sense of female community and friendship is ruined by men who charm women with their false promises of love.

Although Isabella Whitney's poem subverts the notions of Renaissance poetry by asserting that men are the real vices and women are the victim, Whitney maintains heterosexual roles for men and women in her "Admonition." However, Amelia Lanyer in her poem, "The Description of Cookeham" uses the traditional devout women style of poetry to reimagine and refigure "traditional patriarchal structures, like the country-house, and forms a new Eden where women can be intimate, educated, and devout" (Hilderbrand, p.1). By using natural imagery of the elements of the garden and pathetic fallacy Amelia Lanyer explores female homoerotic desires in the safe-haven of the Cookeham garden.

Although Cookeham was a real place where Margret Clifford and her family resided and Lanyer also resided at Cookeham under the patronage of Margret Clifford, the garden of Cookeham that Lanyer reimagines in her poem is a more idealized paradise. Since Lanyer is reconstructing the gardens of Cookeham as garden of Eden she uses biblical language and metaphors throughout the poem. The poem starts with, "where I first obtained / Grace from that grace where perfect grace remained" (Lanyer 1-2). Hence Cookeham is introduced as the place where the mistress (Margret Clifford) gives the speaker patronage, shelter, and livelihood (Hilderbrand 13). However, following this rather passive introduction to Cookeham Lanyer shifts the focus to the female relationships within Cookeham. Line 3-4 read, "And where the muses gave their full consent, / I should have power the virtuous to content". The use of word 'consent' along with 'muse' and followed by 'content' have sexual connotations to them. The consent of the muse imply the consent of a female lover. The word 'muse' in the Oxford English Dictionary is defined as, "A person (often a female lover) or thing regarded as the source of an

artist's inspiration; the presiding spirit or force behind any person or creative act". Hence, not only is the content of Lanyer's poem a result of her mistress's consent for Lanyer to write about Cookeham but it also shows that in the garden of Cookeham women consented to be being content with each other physically and intellectually.

"The Description of Cookeham" creates a safe space for women in the early modern era that is free from the control of men. Although Isabella Whitney's "Admonition" and Amelia Lanyer's "The Description of Cookeham" explores the roles played by females in two completely different ways they are united in trying to create an environment that is free from the control of men.

Works Cited:

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