Epilogue
Navigating the future of early modern women’s writing

Pedagogy, feminism, and literary theory

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Abstract
This essay explores the challenges of teaching premodern women’s text through the lens of literary theory and scholarship as it relates to pedagogical practice. It argues that while post-structuralist feminist theory is necessary to the study of premodern texts by women, it is often difficult to implement in the classroom, given the current academic and political climate. Using Elizabeth Cary’s *Tragedy of Mariam* as a case study, Dowd proposes that we can engage our students in more meaningful discussions about how and why the fact of female authorship matters by inviting them to consider the complex intersection between gender and form. The essay concludes by inviting a form of strategic advocacy for premodern women writers in the contemporary classroom.

Keywords: pedagogy; literary theory; early modern women’s writing; Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam*; literary form

As the essays in this volume have demonstrated, early modern conceptions and experience of time were intricately tied to gendered constructs, ideologies, and lived practices. Memory, reception, and commemoration are thus always in some sense gendered practices, as they are inextricable from the cultural modalities that inform the lives, beliefs, and imaginations of men and women both in the early modern period and in our own. The gendered nature of temporality takes on a distinct set of meanings in the classroom, especially for those of us who research and teach the works of early modern women. Indeed, the classroom is a space where the pressures of different temporalities are felt particularly acutely. For many
of us invested in the multivocality and complexities of the past, we strive to historicize literary and artistic artifacts, to engage our students in the fascinating and often strange past-ness of cultural production. But we also aim to make the past immediate, to interact with early modern women’s writing so that it becomes a vital, present-tense concern. And, through our efforts, we also frequently look to the future, hoping to guide students as they develop into the critical thinkers, creative artists, and knowledgeable citizens who will shape the world in the years ahead. Balancing these different temporal impulses is far from easy, but it is made especially difficult when the subject of our pedagogy—early modern women’s writing—is still often considered marginal within the academy. How we approach the teaching of these writings both now and in the future is thus both an intellectual and an urgently practical matter. This epilogue analyzes some of the underlying theoretical and structural dilemmas that condition our pedagogical approaches to early modern women’s writing in order to map out some possibilities for the road ahead.

I begin, then, with provocation in the form of a question: Should we teach early modern women writers as women writers? And, if so, why? Should women writers continue to be featured in separate classes, course units, or anthologies? If yes, then what is the pedagogical or scholarly or theoretical rationale for doing so? I frame this essay with these questions in order to engage and stimulate dialogue about how and why we teach texts written by early modern women at what I feel is a critical vantage point in the history of feminist pedagogy and the study of premodern women in particular. From my own perspective as a teacher and scholar of early modern English literature, the so-called and oft-cited ‘crisis in the humanities’ poses a unique set of challenges for those of us who study premodern women’s texts. In this chapter, I explore these difficulties through the lens of literary theory and scholarship as it relates to pedagogical practice. I argue that while post-structuralist feminist theory is necessary to the study of premodern texts by women, it is often acutely difficult to implement in the classroom, given the current academic and political climate. I then turn briefly to Elizabeth Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam, a frequently taught text that exemplifies many of the pedagogical difficulties faced by teachers of early modern women’s literature. I conclude, in a somewhat polemical vein, not by seeking a clear resolution to the problem I foreground, but by inviting a form of strategic advocacy for premodern women writers in the contemporary classroom.

Literary theory offers a useful starting point. One of the reasons that I (and perhaps others as well) resist the act of teaching women writers as
women writers—that is, of emphasizing gendered authorship explicitly in the pedagogical process—is that such an approach in many ways works against recent theoretical paradigms and scholarly trends. Since the rise of deconstruction and post-structuralist theories in the 1970s and 80s, literary scholars have learned to be wary of the author. We tend to shy away from granting the author any particular explanatory privilege or status, especially any having to do with intentionality. Such attitudes about authorship stem from the highly influential work of French post-structuralist theorists, most notably Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. In his foundational piece, ‘The Death of the Author,’ Barthes memorably argued that ‘[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing’.1 Furthermore, this shift in understanding the relationship between author and text fundamentally alters the temporality of authorship itself. In the more traditional understanding of the author, Barthes explains, the author ‘is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after’. By contrast, the modern author (whom Barthes refers to as a ‘scriptor’) ‘is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now’.2 For Barthes, the past-ness of the traditional author and the implicit causality of the author–text relationship pose untenable limits on interpretation. Instead, by shifting focus to the reader, Barthes sought to disburden the text from the oppressive force of intention.

Foucault would similarly contend in his essay ‘What Is an Author?’ that it is readers who construct authors: the author, he writes, ‘does not precede the works; he is […] an ideological product’.3 Foucault extended Barthes’ analysis of the temporal limitations of traditional understandings of authorship to emphasize the restrictive and disciplinary nature of what he referred to as the ‘author function’. When the author is imagined to come before the text, he asserts, the result is a reduction of imaginative and interpretive possibilities, an abatement of the risk and threat that literary discourse embodies. For Foucault, the author ‘allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one’s resources and riches but also with one’s discourses and

1 Barthes, ‘Death of the Author’, p. 147.
2 Ibid., p. 145.
3 Foucault, ‘What Is an Author?’, p. 221.
their significations’. Initially composed in the late 1960s, both Barthes’ and Foucault’s statements reject the implied tyranny of Western rationalism and instead plot a course to free texts from the ideological restraints of authorship, traditionally understood. In undermining the temporal causality of the author–text relationship, both theorists helped to loosen the interpretive grip of the author, opening up new, and often more progressive approaches to textual study. The disenfranchisement of the author was thus a crucial move in literary theory. It helped unsettle traditional canons of value, it paved the way for analysis of the nonauthorial figures (including the printers, publishers, scribes, and patrons) who helped bring texts into being, and it assisted in directing attention to the work of readers, including non-elite and female readers.

Neither Barthes nor Foucault were interested in women writers per se (as their consistent use of the masculine pronoun to describe the author attests), but their theoretical interventions created a space for the kinds of work many of us studying women's writing engage in today. Indeed, some of the most innovative and exciting recent scholarship on early modern women's writing insists on placing these writers within broader textual and cultural contexts that are not solely determined by authorial gender. Following Maureen Quilligan’s call in 1997 to ‘deghettoize’ writings by women by placing them in ‘local historical context’ together with male writers, scholars and teachers have emphasized the cultural, political, and literary embeddedness of early modern women rather than their status as a separate object of inquiry. Many scholars have, for instance, investigated women's literary networks, their mastery and adaptation of specific literary genres and rhetorical techniques, and their engagement with the work of their male contemporaries. In her study of Margaret Cavendish, Lara Dodds investigates the complex literary influences (both male and female) with which Cavendish engaged. As she persuasively argues, ‘As long as women’s writing is read primarily through a lens of biography or of gender, literary developments in individual women’s works will be interpreted in the context of personal experience rather than as responses or contributions to broader cultural, political, or literary trends’. In a similar vein, Julie Eckerle examines women’s life writings in terms of these texts’ ‘dynamic relationship’ with

4 Ibid., p. 221. See also pp. 211–16.
5 Quilligan, ‘Completing the Conversation’, p. 42. See also Nigel Smith’s suggestion that scholars consider how and where women's writing ‘engages first with the literary canon and aims to do something with it’ (‘Rod and the Canon’, p. 235.)
6 Dodds, Literary Invention of Margaret Cavendish, p. 6.
male-authored romance, and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann analyzes women's poetry in terms of its 'close engagement with [...] early modern] literary and intellectual culture', broadly conceived. These and other recent studies emphasize the necessity of situating women writers within wide-ranging socioliterary contexts, of taking seriously women's literary exchanges and interpellations rather than viewing them as isolated or singular.

Such developments have influenced pedagogical scholarship as well, in the form of anthologies designed for use in the undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Perhaps most notably, Betty Travitsky and Anne Lake Prescott's anthology, *Female and Male Voices in Early Modern England*, published in 2000, includes texts by both men and women in order to encourage student dialogue and analysis across gendered lines. The volume presents a series of excerpts from male and female writers, with each set of texts organized according to broader topical categories. So, in the section on 'Love and Sexuality', one set of texts pairs Katherine Philips with Richard Barnfield and William Shakespeare, while another in the section on 'Religion' pairs Jane Ward Lead with John Milton. As Travitsky and Prescott state in their introduction, their goal in organizing the volume this way is to 'achieve a doubled vision of the literary record' by including women writers while avoiding tokenism. As they postulate: 'if women's texts could be foregrounded without being ghettoized, readers would be more likely to take gender into account when reading the literature of the past'. Their anthology, like much recent work on early modern women's literary networks, highlights the scholarly and pedagogical value of *not* reading such writers exclusively as (or, in some cases, even primarily as) women writers. The process of seeking, as Travitsky and Prescott do, a 'doubled vision' of early modern women's writing, one that acknowledges the complex embeddedness of these works within literary history and culture is a crucial intervention and one that, I hope, will continue to shape the study of early modern women's writing in the years ahead.

However, despite anthologies such as Prescott and Travitsky's and several decades of progress made by feminist theorists, activists, and teachers, there still remains a degree of disconnect between theoretical and scholarly

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7 Eckerle, *Romancing the Self*, p. 2.
8 Scott-Baumann, *Forms of Engagement*, p. 3. See also Patricia Pender's discussion of women's adept deployment of the modesty topos in *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty*.
9 In addition, many of these critical studies take up either explicitly or implicitly Sasha Roberts's call for greater dialogue between feminist and formalist literary inquiry. See 'Feminist Criticism and the New Formalism' and 'Women's Literary Capital in Early Modern England'.
assessments of women’s writing and pedagogical objectives and actual practice in the classroom. Often early modern women writers are taught—when they are taught at all, a point to which I will return—in separate courses and units, or are taught within paradigms that specifically foreground gender, and frequently gendered authorship, as the primary focus of inquiry.\(^\text{11}\) This has certainly been true of my own experiences in the classroom and as a faculty member at two different public institutions. At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I regularly taught an undergraduate course on English Women Writers before 1800 and a graduate course on Early Modern Women’s Writing (both cross-listed with Women’s and Gender Studies). At the University of Alabama, where I now teach, I have discussed plans to offer graduate-level seminars focused on early modern women writers as part of the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies. And yet, when I teach courses such as these, I always return to questions of ghettoization and exclusion: given recent theoretical and scholarly insights into women, textual production, and cultural influence, might such courses actually do a disservice to premodern women’s writing?

Within English literary studies, this pedagogical dilemma, I argue, has a specific theoretical history: it is bound up with the conflicts between post-structuralist and feminist theory that came to a head in the 1980s. As many feminist scholars have noted, the death of the author in literary studies coincided with the rise of recovery projects seeking to highlight the work of women writers.\(^\text{12}\) The results were often not pretty. Just as women were coming into critical visibility as writers, they were pronounced dead and thus irrelevant by post-structuralism. As Toril Moi summarizes the situation: ‘Feminists who wanted to work on women writers at the same time as they were convinced that Barthes, Derrida and Foucault were right, began to wonder whether it really mattered whether the author was a woman’.\(^\text{13}\) Nancy K. Miller, along with many others, concluded that ‘the postmodernist decision that the Author is dead […] does not necessarily work for women

\(^{11}\) Of course, I am acutely aware of the structural limitations on English course offerings (which are rarely determined at the sole discretion of individual faculty) and, indeed, of the privilege of being able to teach such advanced or specialized courses as part of one’s teaching load. In the comments that follow, then, I in no way seek to lay blame on individual teachers for their choices in organizing their courses; instead, I am interested in exploring the structural and political dilemmas that put many teachers in awkward or intellectually counterproductive positions vis-à-vis their course material and delivery options.

\(^{12}\) For useful discussions of this problematic, see Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, and Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*.

and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them'.14 According to this and similar arguments, deconstructionist readings that focus on ‘the instability of meaning’ lay an unstable foundation for making more politicized, activist statements about identity or agency within patriarchal systems of power.15

Another part of the reason that the death of the author does not ‘work’ for women in this analysis is that the death of the (male) author had to be earned, and it was earned by decades of scholarship that did care intently about the (male) author, about authorial intent, and about close readings guided by the principle of a shaping authorial vision. As Laura Rosenthal has argued with regard to female dramatists in the Restoration, for instance, new readings of male playwrights (such as William Wycherley and William Congreve) in part derive and directly benefit from ‘extended investigations’ and ‘many years of interesting debates, discussions, and readings of Restoration drama’ that did not include the works of women, such as Aphra Behn.16 No similar critical history exists for women writers. As a result, critics invested in studying women’s writing are still playing a kind of scholarly ‘catchup’. To put it another way: the death of the male author could be afforded in a way that the death of the female author could not.

The impasse created by the clash of post-structuralism and feminism is hardly breaking news. But as Moi wrote as recently as 2008, the tensions between these positions are still vitally relevant to studies of women and aesthetics, and they have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. Certainly (as Moi claims) there is need for continued theorization of the concept of the ‘woman writer’ for literary scholars. But for the purposes of this essay I am interested in the pedagogical fallout of this impasse, the ways in which our political choices in the classroom are haunted by this old theoretical debate.

14 Miller, ‘Changing the Subject’, p. 106. By contrast, Cheryl Walker argues instead for a ‘new concept of authorship that does not naively assert that the writer is an originating genius, creating aesthetic objects outside of history, but does not diminish the importance of difference and agency in the responses of women writers to historical formations’. See ‘Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author’, p. 560. In a similar vein Felski asserts: ‘There is a need for feminism to rethink the relationship between discourse and subjectivity in such a way as to both acknowledge the structural determinants influencing communication and simultaneously account for the validity of women’s writing and speaking in the development of an oppositional feminist politics’ (Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, p. 55). For specific discussions of early modern women’s authorship, see Ross, ‘Early Modern Women and the Apparatus of Authorship’, and Wall, Imprint of Gender.
15 On this point see Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, pp. 44–48, esp. p. 45.
16 Rosenthal, ‘Introduction: Recovering from Recovery’, p. 8. On the difficulty of establishing a female literary tradition, see also Ezell, Writing Women’s Literary History; Salzman, Reading Early Modern Women’s Writing; and Staves, Literary History of Women’s Writing.
Or perhaps to put it more boldly: I am interested in the ways in which the current political climate (both within and outside the academy) keeps this double bind in play, rendering it continually challenging to resolve.

A key problem is that many of the political and structural forces that influence our pedagogical practices actively challenge or even foreclose the possibility of fully incorporating the teaching of women writers into other aspects of literary study. For women’s writing to become truly integral to literary studies writ large, it must be valued as such by all those who teach in literature departments, and this is simply not yet the case. Even though the canon debates are supposedly long over and post-structuralism’s heyday is well past, and despite the fact that current scholarship is integrating analyses of women’s writing into broader conversations in exciting ways, early modern women’s writing remains marginalized in the academy. I see such marginalization in the form of outright neglect and in more subtle forms of separation and differential treatment. It will come as no surprise to most readers of this volume that premodern women's writing is often simply missing from university curricula, often glaringly so. One of my recent PhD students, who completed her BA and MA at two different institutions before coming to UNCG, told me a few years ago that the first time she had read an early modern text by a female author was when she read *The Tragedy of Mariam* in my doctoral seminar on Renaissance drama. This was after years of undergraduate and masters-level coursework in Renaissance literature at two well-known institutions. At universities with fixed reading lists for doctoral and masters-level comprehensive exams, premodern women writers are often notably absent, an omission that not only devalues such writing, but puts structural barriers in the way of teaching it: why study early modern women writers if they won't be on the exam? Such practices within doctoral education also have effects that extend to the academic job market, which is in turn influenced by teaching demands and perceived pedagogical (as well as research) needs at institutions ranging from community colleges to top-ranked research universities. Of the 29 faculty positions listed under the categories ‘British Literature’ and either ‘Renaissance’ or ‘early modern’ in the 2016 *Job Information List* published by the Modern Language Association, only one job (a senior, tenured position) listed ‘women’s writing’ as a specifically desired area of research and teaching specialty. (And the findings from 2016 are representative of early modern jobs listed in *JIL* publications in recent years).17 So, the corollary to the relative lack of early modern women's

writing in much doctoral education in Renaissance studies is the relative lack of such writing as a significant part of Renaissance job descriptions. Why study early modern women writers if they won’t get you a job?

At the undergraduate level, the problem is often even more acute, especially given that there is frequently less room for customization within the undergraduate curriculum at many schools. At my current institution, the University of Alabama, the undergraduate catalog does not include a specific course on early women writers (British or American), instead listing only one general course on ‘Women in Literature’, which includes writings both by and about women. In addition, many standard descriptions of literature surveys in institutional bulletins make no mention of female authors (UNCG’s Undergraduate Bulletin describes the ‘Major British Authors’ course as a survey of ‘Major poets, dramatists, satirists read within the context of their times: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Swift, and others.’) Although many of us who teach early literatures ensure that women writers are included with those ‘others’ on our syllabi, the bulletin copy nevertheless performs important ideological work: it highlights a system of value from which women are excluded, rendering the teaching of women writers an ‘extra’ or a niche interest, rather than an essential part of a literature curriculum.

This brings me to the slightly subtler ways in which premodern women’s writing gets marginalized through differential treatment rather than pure exclusion. As Alice Eardley has recently argued about anthologies of early modern women’s poetry, women’s writing is often perceived as interesting for political rather than aesthetic reasons. Women’s writing, as she demonstrates, is often ‘divorced from a literary tradition’ and read instead in terms of what it can tell us about women’s historical circumstances, especially their resistance to gendered structures of power. Indeed, even excellent anthologies such as Travitsky and Prescott’s often privilege gender as an interpretive lens for students. As they assert in their introduction, one of their key goals for their anthology is to ‘encourage[e] students to be more aware of gender as a significant category of thought and perception’. Of course, this is a very admirable goal in its own right, but it also has the effect

20 Eardley, ‘Recreating the Canon’, p. 274.
21 Ibid., p. 281.
22 Travitsky and Prescott, eds., Female and Male Voices in Early Modern England, p. x.
of limiting the conversation about women writers to be always already about gender, an effect that is compounded over time through the repetitive assertions of such links between women’s writing and gendered politics in a great deal of pedagogical and scholarly research. In Linda Woodbridge’s wonderfully apt phrasing: men ‘inhabit literature-land; women inhabit history-land’.23 It is perhaps for this reason that women’s writing is still perceived to be a niche interest within the field of early modern literary studies. Women’s writing is largely understood to be ‘about’ women and gender in a way that men’s writing is not. As a result, it is fairly easy for scholars whose primary focus is not women or gender to simply opt out of discussions of women’s texts, since they are viewed as marginal to dominant literary conversations. (The proportion of female to male audience members at scholarly talks on early modern women or, indeed, at conferences such as Attending to Early Modern Women is one relatively clear manifestation of this tendency.) In post-structuralist terms, the author may very well be dead, but she is very much alive in the field of early modern women’s writing. As long as women writers are, in Moi’s words, ‘perceived as women who write’ and thus ‘perceived as Other in relation to a male norm’,24 then the figure of the female author remains central—often, as I am suggesting, problematically so—to our pedagogy and scholarship.

In the classroom, students are often encouraged to approach men’s and women’s writing through different interpretive frameworks; texts by women writers are expected to represent gendered discourse or the history of women more broadly, or they are presented as notable exceptions to the male literary status quo. The implication, held especially, I think, by many of our colleagues who do not regularly teach women authors, is that women’s writing is first and foremost about gender and gender politics rather than aesthetics. (A few years ago, I spent a good part of the first day of my seminar on premodern women’s writing engaging students in a discussion of why the official bulletin title for this particular course—‘Feminist Theory and Women Writers’—is in fact a kind of non sequitur.) When limits are placed on the kinds of analysis our students might engage in vis-à-vis premodern women’s writing, it becomes difficult to argue for the centrality of women’s writing to studies of literature and the humanities more broadly.

The current state of the humanities within the academy and public culture makes such an argument more urgent than ever. Given the challenges facing institutions of higher learning in general, and liberal science and,
especially, humanities disciplines in particular, those wishing to make a case for literary studies have sought out what they feel to be the most rhetorically persuasive arguments. We are thus reminded that reading and critical thinking are all vital to twenty-first-century American culture and even to the future economic prospects of undergraduate students.\textsuperscript{25}

To be sure, such dialogue and public engagement is essential for those of us who teach in humanistic disciplines, and there is a real need for both practical and ideological arguments in support of humanistic study. But what gives me pause is that the cornerstone of many of these arguments is what I would describe as a nostalgic and conservative return to the glory days of the traditional literary canon. When push comes to shove and the significance of literary study needs to be foregrounded for the purposes of public discussion, canonical white male authors are often put prominently on display. For those of us who work in earlier literature periods, that means Shakespeare. A lot of Shakespeare.

In a much-discussed column published in the \textit{New York Times} in February of 2015, titled grandly enough ‘College, Poetry and Purpose’, Frank Bruni lauded his college Shakespeare professor, Anne Hall, whose passionate teaching of \textit{King Lear} provided him with what he called a ‘transformative educational experience’.\textsuperscript{26} Bruni clearly seeks to highlight the significance of humanities instruction to student learning and development. But in his subsequent interview with his former teacher, he cites her ‘lament about changes in the humanities’ and the current state of literary instruction today. He writes:

\begin{quote}
She expressed regret about how little an English department’s offerings today resemble those from the past. ‘There’s a lot of capitalizing on what is fashionable’, she said. Survey courses have fallen out of favor, as have courses devoted to any one of the ‘dead white men’, she said. ‘Chaucer has become Chaucer and [...]’ she said. ‘Chaucer and Women in the Middle Ages. Chaucer and Animals in the Middle Ages. Shakespeare has become Shakespeare and Film, which in my cranky opinion becomes Film, not Shakespeare.’
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{25} Several recent mainstream media articles articulate such arguments. See for example Solberg, ‘Former Twitter CEO Talks Importance of Liberal Arts’, Waller, ‘Hunting for Soft Skills, Companies Scoop up English Majors’ and the editors’ of \textit{Scientific American}’s piece ‘STEM Education Is Vital—But Not at the Expense of the Humanities’. By contrast, Adam Gopnik sets aside the utilitarian arguments for humanities and literary study by asserting instead that ‘English departments democratize the practice of reading’. See ‘Why Teach English?’\textsuperscript{26} Bruni, ‘College, Poetry and Purpose’.
Bruni then turns to the current course offerings in English at the University of Pennsylvania, where Hall teaches, to seek out evidence of such so-called ‘fashionable’ courses, which he finds in titles such as ‘Pulp Fictions: Popular Romance from Chaucer to Tarantino’, ‘Sex and the City: Women, Novels and Urban Life’, and ‘Global Feminisms’. Not surprisingly, all the courses he cites by name feature literature by women or other marginalized groups. Of fundamental concern, Bruni claims is what he (following Hall) describes as ‘an intellectual vogue and academic sensibility that place no one masterpiece, master, perspective or even manner of speech above others.’ There are many, many critiques to be made of Bruni’s argument (as the lengthy comment section on the Times website attests), but for my purposes in this essay I am primarily interested in the striking reentrenchment of literary conservatism, of a ‘great books’ mentality, that the column breezily affirms. The turn to Shakespeare here is also a return to the promise of a false universalism. When the discipline of literary studies is perceived as threatened, many seem to fall back on traditional symbols of literary value. When times get tough, it becomes time to return to what really matters: Chaucer and Shakespeare, not film, feminism, or female novelists. The ultimate goal of a liberal arts education, in Hall’s words, is to learn what it means to be ‘fully human’. Reading Shakespeare will help us do this; presumably reading Mary Wroth or Elizabeth Cary will not.

Let me be clear: I have no quibble with Shakespeare per se; I teach him regularly and find his works valuable for approaching a range of crucial interpretive questions, including many that challenge the very idea of traditional literary value. But how might those of us who also value the works of premodern women authors approach such writing in the classroom?

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27 Another recent incident at Penn raised similar questions about literary value vis-à-vis women writers. In December of 2016, students at the university removed a portrait of Shakespeare from the English Department building and replaced it with a photograph of Audre Lorde, an incident that generated heated criticism from those who felt the move denigrated Shakespeare, including many who claimed they had never heard of Lorde. See Jaschik, ‘Making a Point’.

28 Although space does not permit a full discussion here, a similar argument could be made about the relative treatment of noncanonical male-authored Renaissance drama in both scholarly publications and the classroom. That is, even if we take Shakespeare out of the conversation entirely, there remains a tendency to privilege canonical over noncanonical works (the plays of Jonson and Marlowe over those of Heywood or Dekker, for instance). To take one specific example: in a recent issue of Shakespeare Quarterly devoted to the topic of ‘Not Shakespeare’ (ed. Engle), a title that already defines its content in relation to what is both excluded and implicitly privileged, only one essay (on Henry Porter’s The Two Angry Women of Abington) deals substantively with a noncanonical play and author. None of the essays considers works by female playwrights.
so as to articulate more fully how the study of works by women is essential
to our understanding of the premodern past in broad terms (regardless of
whether we wish to claim that reading such works will help make us ‘fully
human’)? What strategies might we engage in to help avoid the logic of
exceptionalism that often frames discussions of premodern women’s texts?
I wish to turn briefly to Cary’s closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, in
order to sketch out how some of these problems play out in the classroom
and what some potential strategies for addressing them might look like. I
have selected *Mariam* as a point of focus for several reasons: it is frequently
taught, it is available in several modern editions and anthologies, and it
also exemplifies some of the dilemmas facing teachers because as a closet
drama it sits uneasily between the fields of Renaissance drama (which is
often presumed to be and taught as exclusively male-authored) and early
modern women’s writing (which is often associated primarily with the
genres of poetry and prose, at least until the Restoration).

Within the field of early modern drama studies, certainly, *The Tragedy of
Mariam* is somewhat of an odd bedfellow. On the one hand, the play
has become part of the canonical repertoire, being regularly taught in
undergraduate and graduate surveys of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.
On the other hand, scholars have often posited an uneasy or oppositional
relationship between Cary’s play and others from the period, a tendency
demonstrated by the binary frameworks that dominate much of the critical
discussion: male vs. female, stage vs. closet, public vs. private, theatrical
vs. untheatrical. In the case of *Mariam*, much of this uneasiness is directly
related to the question of female authorship. In her recent essay on future
directions in scholarship on Renaissance drama (an essay that makes no
mention of Cary or any other female dramatist), Tiffany Stern highlights
the dominant trend in drama criticism toward decentering the author. She
notes that ‘the study of Renaissance drama has moved away from being
comfortably authorcentric’ and concludes confidently that ‘the field will
undoubtedly find further and different ways to reconsider context and deau-
thor texts’.29 The post-structuralist death of the author figures as almost a
given here; instead of remaining ‘comfortably authorcentric’, drama scholars,
Stern asserts, will continue to focus on performance history, print history
and the new bibliography, and the often-fragmented nature of the textual
archive. *Mariam*, however, does not fit well into this scholarly overview.
Cary’s play instead offers a potent example of what I described earlier as
the death of the (female) author not yet being ‘earned’ in critical discourse.

While Stern's remarks accurately reflect the current state of scholarship on male-authored Renaissance drama, they are not particularly useful for assessing criticism on female-authored plays such as Mariam. Indeed, the fact of Mariam's female authorship continues to figure centrally in analyses of the play; criticism on Cary's tragedy, in other words, remains to a large degree 'comfortably authorcentric', despite Stern's claims. Furthermore, when Mariam is incorporated into broader discussions of Renaissance drama, it is often included precisely because it is different from other plays; it is an exception.

Such critical tendencies are readily apparent in the treatment of Cary's play in many popular anthologies and editions. First, several anthologies of Renaissance drama simply exclude Mariam entirely. Others that include the play frequently go to great lengths to emphasize both its female authorship and its distinction from other plays of the period. For instance, in his introduction to Mariam in English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology—one of the most popular of these anthologies, and the one I use in many of my own undergraduate and graduate classes—David Bevington brings female authorship to the fore as a defining feature of the play. The first sentence of his introduction reads: 'The Tragedy of Mariam occupies a unique position in this anthology in several respects.' The first and most significant of these unique features concerns authorship; the second sentence of the introduction reads: 'It is the only play written by a woman'. Where The Tragedy of Mariam is concerned, then, the author is definitely not dead. Not coincidently, Bevington also relies heavily on Cary's biography as an interpretive rubric for understanding the play. He notes that 'Like Cary, Mariam was unhappily married to a powerful and unpredictable man [...] and suggests that Cary 'seems to have identified' with the emotions Mariam expresses in the tragedy. As Ramona Wray writes in her introduction to the Arden edition of the play, such a biographical focus has long dominated discussions of Cary's works. As she notes, such readings are problematic at best, in part because they are 'one-dimensional' and, as a result, have

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30 Nigel Smith has referred to his tendency to take the biological gender of the author as a primary analytical point of departure as the 'persistent return in scholarship [...] to the matter of being an early modern woman.' See 'Rod and the Canon', p. 235.
31 The most notable of these is the Blackwell anthology, Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments, edited by Arthur Kinney, neither the first nor the second edition of which includes the play. The play is also omitted from the ninth edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature (ed. Greenblatt et al.; some earlier editions included excerpts from the play).
32 Bevington, introduction to The Tragedy of Mariam, p. 617.
bypassed ‘the representational complexities inherent in the biographical impulse as a literary form’, among other things.\(^3^3\)

Bevington’s introduction is also at pains to emphasize the ways in which Cary’s play, as a closet drama, deviates from the commercial dramatic tradition: it was written to be read not performed (a point that recent scholarship has hotly questioned); it features a chorus and long speeches (which he describes as ‘sententious’); and it excludes ‘all violence from the stage’.\(^3^4\)

Not surprisingly, with differentiation comes value judgment: *Mariam* is described as a ‘severely regular classical drama’ (elsewhere he uses the phrase ‘rigorously classical’ and ‘studiously classical’), and Cary’s particular brand of classicism is further contrasted with that found in plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*: these male-authored plays are described as combining classical elements with ‘dramatic forms that are distinctively English and popular’.\(^3^5\) And given what we know (or have been taught to know) about the development of English Renaissance drama as a popular art form, this comparison effectively devalues Cary’s tragedy as an oddity, a curiosity that just doesn’t quite fit the literary tradition. The last line of Bevington’s introduction reads: ‘*Mariam* is an instructive and powerful example of the road not taken.’\(^3^6\)

Bringing *Mariam* into the classroom, then, often means dealing with preexisting narratives about the text’s status—as an exception, as necessarily about the fact of its female authorship—narratives that condition how we and our students might approach the play. Indeed—and I think Bevington’s introduction is one good example of this—compelling narratives about women’s writing can take on a life of their own, sometimes superseding the texts those women actually wrote. The results of this disconnect are often striking: because *Mariam* is a closet drama, Bevington can claim that there is no violence on the stage. But how, then, do we account for the fight scene between Constabarus and Silleus in Act 2? If our students are similarly encouraged to buy into the logic of *Mariam*’s exceptionalism, then they may

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34 Bevington, introduction to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, p. 615. See also Bevington’s reflective discussion on editing *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, in which he explicitly acknowledges that he included *Mariam* in the volume because it is a closet drama in a ‘severely classical’ form and because it was ‘written by a woman’ (‘Recent Trends in Editing’, p. 97).

35 Bevington, introduction to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, p. 620.

36 Ibid., p. 620.
find themselves working through an unnecessarily narrow interpretive framework. *Mariam* is important, we are told, because it was written by a female author and because it is a closet drama, two presumptions that tend to guide analysis in certain ways: gender issues and the character of Mariam become *necessarily central* to critical response, and, because closet drama is devalued in comparison with commercial drama, the formal features of the play often become embarrassing anomalies to be explained away. The effect is frequently a forced separation between questions of gender and those of form.

I would suggest, however, that it is precisely in the intersection of gender and form that we can engage our students in more meaningful discussions about how and why the fact of female authorship matters. Rather than approaching a text like *Mariam* from the point of view of a preexisting male narrative of dramatic value, we might instead ask students to use the text at hand to rethink that narrative itself, a process that could include a reflection on the dramaturgical choices made by male playwrights as well as female ones. How does reading *Mariam* change our understanding of drama as a literary genre? What does the choice of closet drama allow Cary to stage (or not to stage), and in what ways are those dramaturgical elements gendered (or not)? What, to borrow from Caroline Levine, are the ‘affordances’ of form for Cary, the potential (and potentially political) ‘uses or actions latent in’ the ‘materials and designs’ that distinguish closet drama as a mode?

Asking such questions in the classroom can enable students to explore how literary form and gendered positioning can come together in productive and complex ways. To be sure, closet drama was a form highly associated with female authorship in Renaissance England, due to the fact that no women wrote for the professional stage in the period and, thus, the only female-authored dramatic texts that survive are closet dramas. But the form was certainly not exclusively or even primarily female-identified, and value-laden descriptions of closet drama as ‘rigorously classical’ do not do justice to the formal vitality and structural nuance of a play such as *Mariam*. As Wray points out, ‘[d]espite its provenance [...] closet drama is not hermetically sealed as a theatrical statement’. Instead of assuming that the

37 Wray notes that ‘[b]esides biographical readings’ the main trend in criticism on *Mariam* has been ‘to explore its gendered representations’. Introduction to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, p. 32. On this trend, see also Shannon, ‘The Tragedie of Mariam’.
39 Wray, introduction to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, p. 55. On closet drama, see also Straznicky, ‘Closet Drama’.
category of ‘closet drama’ is static, therefore, we might encourage students to reflect on the multiple dramatic modes the play puts on display, how such dramatic choices are (and are not) influenced by gendered contexts, and how, as a result, the play helps to define the meaning and significance of theatricality itself.

Let me give one quick example of how thinking about Mariam as the result of generic choice might shape a pedagogical approach to the play. Cary could certainly have written this story as a prose narrative, an approach she took with her account of Edward II. What, we might ask students, can drama (and specifically closet drama) do that a prose narrative cannot? One answer is that unlike a prose history, drama—whether closet or stage—calls into being an imaginative divide between the narrative space of the current action before the reader/spectator and those actors and actions that occupy a different spatial (and often temporal) realm, beyond the immediate ‘scene’ of the drama. As a result, a dramatist can strategically place certain events or conversations ‘onstage’ to amplify their significance or, by contrast, remove them from the current ‘scene’ of action. We can explore this process in part by inviting students to compare Cary’s treatment of her subject to that of her prose source, Thomas Lodge’s translation of Flavius Josephus’s The Antiquities of the Jewes (1602). Cary creates several episodes that are absent from Lodge, including the dramatic confrontation between Mariam and Doris in Act 4 in which they quarrel over familial legitimacy. Significantly, Cary locates this scene after Herod’s surprising return to Jerusalem earlier in the act. In electing to dramatize this scene and position it where she does, Cary both highlights competing familial claims (a theme central to the play) and amplifies the force of those disagreements; the multivocality of the onstage dialogue stands in marked contrast both to Herod’s prolonged absence from the stage and to his desire for sociopolitical conformity throughout the play.

Generic choice thus affects Mariam’s approach to a range of topics, including but not limited to gender. At the same time, it remains true that the sociohistorical positioning of Cary as a woman in English Renaissance society affects the literary influences that shape her writing and her own treatment of dramatic form. However, the results of these processes are far from predetermined or stable; they are not dictated by the ‘fact’ of female

40 As Alison Findlay has argued, ‘Women who composed plays in preference to prose or poetry, and in spite of having no immediate public venue in which to perform before 1660, did so with a keen awareness that drama constitutes a more immediate expression of spatial practice than any other form of literature’ (Playing Spaces, p. 3).

41 For more extensive analysis of Cary’s treatment of dramatic space in Mariam, see my essay ‘Dramaturgy and the Politics of Space’.
authorship or by preconceived notions of closet drama. We could thus read *Mariam* and similar texts not as exceptions to some ‘rule’ but as part of a broader literary-historical picture that might in fact change the ‘rules’ that we have learned and transform our understanding of literary influence, thereby expanding the range of interpretive contexts available for us and our students.\(^{42}\) Just as our understanding of Renaissance drama is incomplete without understanding print culture and conditions of performance, it is also incomplete without understanding private closet drama, its formal mechanisms, and the sociohistorical positions of the women and men who produced it. If women’s writing is understood as crucial to comprehending the past—and not just women’s past, but the past *period*—then it is no longer an exception that can be safely ignored.

My own view, then, is that we must continue to take a both/and strategy in our approach to women’s writing in the classroom. While we can and should continue to engage current theoretical and scholarly paradigms that position women’s writing within a complex, cross-gendered socioliterary network, the fact that literature by women continues to be situated within ideological structures of power that render it marginal or a ‘niche’ interest demands that we keep questions of gendered authorship prominently in play, at least strategically. One tactic is simply to engage our students in the problem of teaching early women’s writing—the problems of exclusionism, and tokenism—by making those topics the subject of discussion and analysis. But to return to the specific question I raised earlier about the use-value of separate courses on women writers, I would emphasize a few specific benefits of such courses that are worth the risks of ghettoization that they bring, at least at the moment. One is access: despite the publication of good anthologies and stand-alone texts in recent years, women’s writings are still much more difficult to access than men’s from the period, which poses a specific disadvantage in the classroom. Separate courses on women writers thus help maintain both access and visibility. Similarly, such courses have a political payoff, in that they grant substance or heft to women’s writing that mark it as worthy of extensive and detailed consideration. Finally, by focusing exclusively on women writers, such courses make it possible for gender to come off the table, as it were: since the back-and-forth comparison between male and female writers is less likely to be a feature of such courses, students can instead engage in more wide-ranging discussions, in which

\(^{42}\) We might think here of the way in which scholarship by Natasha Korda and others has completely altered the previously accepted ‘fact’ of the all-male stage in Renaissance England (see Korda, *Labors Lost*).
gender becomes *one of many* topics of literary analysis rather than the sole focus. The reality remains that courses and units focused exclusively on women writers are still needed because these writers have not yet been as well integrated into the broader literary curriculum as we might have hoped. Women writers are still largely perceived as women first and writers second, a perception that directly affects pedagogical decisions about whether such writers get taught in the first place and, if they *are* taught, how they are presented to students. The ongoing challenge, then, is to articulate to our colleagues and the broader public how and why an analysis of women’s writing and artistic production is crucial to our understanding of the early modern past, writ large. Foucault famously concludes his essay ‘What Is an Author?’ with the question: ‘what difference does it make who is speaking?43 If we apply this question to the teaching of premodern women’s writing in our current moment, the answer seems clear, if not entirely reassuring: it makes all the difference in the world.

**Works cited**


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43 Foucault, ‘What Is an Author?’, p. 222.


About the author

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