

Joseph P. Ward ed. 2008  
*Violence, Politics, and Gender in Early Modern  
England*  
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The crossroads between early modern cultural studies and women's writing has paved a fertile ground for a keener appreciation of the early modern period. Since in the 1980s Joan Kelly posed the question "Did women have a Renaissance?" (1984:19-50)<sup>1</sup> a number of significant questions have been tackled regarding women's participation in the literary culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. First among these concerns was the extent to which women benefited themselves from the winds of political, religious and social changes that blew in the seventeenth century and, very especially, in the Restoration period. The main contribution of historians such as Joan Kelly herself, Mary Prior (1985), Sara Mendelson (1987), Patricia Crawford (Mendelson & Crawford (1998) or Moira Ferguson (1985) was to trigger an academic interest in pre-nineteenth century women's lives which began to gravitate from a purely historical perspective towards a cultural and, then, a literary one, thus creating a sizeable community of scholars devoted to enlightening the textual production of English women in early modernity.

The work of editor, author and archivist Betty S. Travitsky represented a turning point in the study of sources from that period by inaugurating a prolific trend of compilations of early modern texts by women. Travitsky's *The Paradise of Women: Writings by*

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly challenged the excessively literary readings of early modern women's writing, inviting us to explore non-canonical and "para literary" texts by women authors.

*Englishwomen of the Renaissance* (1980) not only offered a wide and curious variety of literary pieces (from poems to journals and political pamphlets), but she quite literally paraded the sheer diversity of texts awaiting to be examined with a critical eye: the documents assembled formed an anthology of poorly studied items awaiting to be assessed by present-day scholars. From then on, several anthologies of women's writings in the early modern period have followed, usually including facsimiles, transcriptions, or editions; a number of these anthologies involve an edition of the text, some of the most representative being Elaine Hobby's *Virtue of Necessity: English Women Writing* (1990); Anita Pacheco's *Early Women Writers 1600-1720* (1997) and *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (2002); Betty Travitsky's *Female and Male Voices in Early Modern England: An Anthology of Renaissance Writing* (2000); and more recently, Helen Ostovich's *Reading Early Modern Women* (2004). All of these contributions share a willingness to map out the genres, topics, authors, characters and voices which formed the rich melting pot of writings by women from the late Elizabethan period till the early 1700s.

Several of such anthologies, together with their corresponding critical essays providing depth and scope to each department of women's writing, bring together a wide range of methodological and interdisciplinary frameworks from which to consider the connections between gender, writing and culture. Noteworthy examples of this include Clare Brant's and Diane Purkiss' (eds.), *Women, Texts and Histories, 1575-1760* (1992); Isobel Grundy and Susan Wiseman (eds.), *Women, Writing, History, 1640-1740* (1993), or Margaret P. Hannay (ed.), *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators and Writers of Religious Works* (1985). Whereas early critical works necessarily focus on introducing the texts and the authors, providing biographies and a historical background, these and other "second-generation" books on early modern women writers began to depart from the descriptive model to become actively involved in reinterpreting the early modern period in terms of a complete reading of its various voices. This entailed a change of direction as far as critical research and interpretation is concerned: women's voices were no longer seen as either subsumed by established canonical texts from the early modern period, or kept in isolation from the canon. These anthologies are usually divided into thematic areas, for instance, religious tracts, domestic manuals,

political pamphlets or personal letters. The current scholarly trend is to zoom in and devote every anthology to a single topic, like religion, politics or domesticity, paying attention to the analysis and specificity of the texts within their particular cultural environment.

One of the most fruitful loci of thematic study has been the connection between politics, religion and gender. Susan Wiseman's *Conspiracy and Virtue* (2006), Megan Matchinske's *Writing, Gender and State in Early Modern England* (1998), Jennifer Richards' and Alison Thorne's (eds.) *Rhetoric, Women and Politics in Early Modern England* (2007), Katharine Gillespie's *Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century* (2004) or Scott Paul Gordon's *The Power of the Passive Self in English Literature, 1640-1770* (2002) offer fresh insight into the complex interactions of power and the subversive discourses employed by women in the early modern period to bear or bypass patriarchal authority in political, domestic and religious spheres.

Joseph P. Ward, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of History at the University of Mississippi, inquires as well into the axis of gender and politics by paying special attention to the ways violence has meddled with these two. The essays in his collection *Violence, Politics, and Gender in Early Modern England* show that early modern claims of political authority were often expressed through violence: not only states and factions tested one another through warfare, but violence was also displayed in everyday encounters between those with and those without power. Besides, they share a broader historical milieu in which violence that either resulted from or expressed hostility toward the established gender system was a regular feature of political life. Through an analysis of a particular type of gendered violence, each of the essays delves into the nature of early modern authority. They focus on the experiences of the elite and the non-elite, of men and women, drawing upon canonical and non-canonical literary works as well as archival and manuscript sources.

Ward's purpose is to demonstrate the "tenuous nature of patriarchal authority in early modern England" (2). The word "tenuous" may strike the reader as an unfair adjective given the near unanimous scholarly consensus that early modern society exhibited a kind of patriarchy which was everything except tenuous or fragile. However, the solid arguments and documentary sources displayed in this collection make the convincing point that time and again,

early modern men and women demonstrated their compliance with a system that distributed the right to violence unequally among the sexes, but time and again, too, they demonstrated their lack of confidence in that system. Each chapter seems to subtly challenge the historiographical notion that the early modern period was, by definition, harshly patriarchal by testing the extent to which violence supported gender norms and by exploring the uneven implementation of patriarchal theory in early modern England. This defiance to the concept of patriarchy as a monolithic state of affairs in which only women were to become its victims is threaded through two major premises or sections in the book: the first, entitled “Venerable Patriarchs/Vulnerable Patriarchs,” addresses the instability of patriarchal power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its four contributions (by Paul S. Seaver, Cristine M. Varholy, Celia R. Daileader and Katharine Gillespie) shed some sober light onto the fact that if men were the natural leaders of society, in practice their authority faced several limits. In this regard, Seaver’s study of the Apprentice Riots prevalent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century London, as well as Daileader’s analysis of subversive rhetorical strategies in Shakespeare’s and Middleton’s *Lucrece* poems, make the convincing point that violence against men and women was exerted equally, although the strategies they deployed against it might be different. The book’s second section, “Gender and State Violence,” delves into the exercise of male authority by focusing on the gendered implications of state-sponsored discipline. Here, the essays by Muriel C. McClendon, Myron C. Noonkester, Shannon Miller, Melissa Mowry and Jennine Hurl-Eamon show that violence was a language states used to communicate their authority, so that in the diffuse power structure of early modern England, the right of men to use the so-called “appropriate” violence against women extended from the leaders of church and state all the way to the heads of individual households. The chapter by Muriel Noonkester illustrates wonderfully this point by exploring the dilemmas that early modern male magistrates faced when they tried to exercise violence without promoting it, while Shannon Miller’s contribution reads Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* against the intense violence directed towards the opponents of the Restoration Crown and, in particular, to the novel’s African protagonist.

Drawing on the sources and methods of literary criticism and social history, Ward's collection of essays shows how, in the words Frances Dolan uses in her Afterword, "different forms of violence meant different things at different moments for different people" (249). They take a generally supportive view of Lawrence Stone's argument that violence, or the threat it posed to individuals, helped to shape a myriad of social relations in the early modern period that may not always transpire in archival records (Stone 1983). And when read as a whole, Ward's *Violence, Politics and Gender in Early Modern England* invites us to reconsider the ways in which violence expressed the politics of gender in early modern England.

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## Reviews

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