Isabella Whitney is considered the first female poet to have had secular poetry published in England, with two miscellanies (collections) published in 1567 and 1573, respectively. Dr Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier, professor of English literature at Hildesheim University, Germany, explores how Whitney presents herself as a respectable female poet in a male-dominated era by ‘appropriating’ the city of London, irrevocably weaving herself into its history and simultaneously transgressing gender roles and poetics.

THE FIRST SECULAR FEMALE POET

Whitney was born in Cheshire to a prominent gentry family. She was educated at home before arriving in London and had several siblings, who she addressed in some of her poems. Brusberg-Kiermeier suggests that by presenting such figures in her work, in addition to a few male friends, Whitney presents herself as a respectable female literary figure with an undoubted air of professionalism about herself.

The researcher draws attention to the fact that men had found it far easier to become a published writer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than women did. She also points out that only 1% of published writing of the latter century had actually been penned by women, despite their growing levels of literacy during the time.

Whitney emerged as a writer caught in the middle of a literary ‘gender war’. Most miscellanies were written by men and for men at the time, so Whitney’s arrival in the sixteenth-century literary scene made her stand out from her competitors, while also appealing to a broader urban readership. As per her memoirs, Whitney had not been married nor did she have children during her published writing career. It isn’t too far-fetched to believe that the lack of a dowry may have influenced her desire to become a published author in lieu of having a wealthy husband.

Despite the absence of a husband, Whitney’s works suggest that she was not without the ‘protection’ and ‘connection’ of male company. For instance, her work A Sweet Nosegay was dedicated to George Mainwaring, while its subtitle, Philosophical Flowers, according to Brusberg-Kiermeier, explicitly refers to a ‘male model’. In many ways, Whitney’s literary work is progressive in that it eschews the expectations of a ‘chaste single woman’ in favour of a new literary and independent direction.

APPROPRIATING LONDON

Brusberg-Kiermeier notes the connection between the wealth of European merchants and the early modern literary circle to which Whitney assimilated herself. Several notable figures in printing had jobs in commerce. The inventor of the printing press Johannes Gutenberg – for instance – was a goldsmith. Whitney’s poem Wyll and Testament sees her lay claim to commercial London as her personal property, while also portraying it as a ‘lover whom she has to leave’.

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Whitney’s focus on the commercial spaces of London, such as the bustling Cheapside marketplace, are written with profound love and care, perhaps in lieu of her having her own children to bequeath. As Brusberg-Kiermeier writes – ‘London receives the will, is to be the sole executor, and provides the complete inheritance.’ Through her poetry, Whitney weaves herself into London at a time when literary women were scarce. By repeatedly focusing on the profession of the bookbinders, Whitney desires to emphasise her literary professionalism.

It’s not just the ‘splendours’ of London that fascinated Whitney. According to Brusberg-Kiermeier, she also finds room to examine the ‘horrors’ of the city, particularly the areas that comprised institutional punishment. Whitney mentions several prisons in her works, including Bridewell, Fleet, Ludgate, and Newgate, the former of which was believed to be a corrective facility for women with ‘disorderly behaviour’.

In her poems, Whitney describes the splendours and horrors of London.
Whitney's poetry is not merely a romantic picture postcard of London but a genuine love letter – accepting it all as it appeared to her.

The early modern scientific method in terms of geography was to collect items that represented a location so that knowledge about that location could be assimilated and further understood. In some ways then, Whitney's poetry serves as a mapping of London, an undoubted chronicle of what it was like during her time, which should now be seen as an essential piece of English literature, especially considering the limited role that women played in the field during the early modern era.

Whitney's simultaneous vocation as a household servant meant that she was well-placed to study the streets and their many shops while purchasing goods for her employers. Whitney's poems transgress the very nature of poetry into something resembling an actual historical document, with an impressive air of accuracy.

Through Wyl and Testament, Whitney metaphorically lays claim to the ownership of London in sum, but what she actually claims ownership of, according to Brusberg-Kiermeier, are the 'paper, pen, and inkpot' – a rarity for a woman of her time. Women of the sixteenth century were expected to own little other than their 'thread and needle', the English alphabet itself being supposedly not of use to women for activities other than stitching their embroidery patterns – and definitely not for writing an A–Z of their hometown.

Isabella Whitney managed to extend those expectations into a position of genuine literary admiration, without having to resort to the previously accepted conventions of either religious publications or writing translated texts. Whitney simply refused to be 'a good Christian wife' as the codes and conventions of sixteenth-century England suggested. Instead, she transgressed the political and poetic expectations of her time, made a proto-feminist statement on the role of women in early modern literature, and developed a devotional readership that continues to blossom to this day. She has also written on William Shakespeare and Aemilia Lanyer, Victorian literature, the 'paper, pen, and inkpot' – a rarity for her employers. Whitney's poems transgress both poetry and politics.

References

