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# **A Changing Narrative for Englishwomen's Authorship During the Early Modern Period**

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**Abstract:** This thesis is a look into women's authorship in the English Early Modern period, specifically looking at the time period from 1543 until 1621. The main writers of focus are Catherine Parr, Mary Sidney, Lady Mary Wroth, and Aemilia Lanyer, with supplemental texts from the period used to frame the thesis argument. Modern research on this era is also used to supplement the work. Over the course of the period, the innovation of women's authorship led to two primary changes in the nature of women's authorship: more inclusive women's authorship and the expansion of topics that women wrote on. These changes eventually went on to influence women's writing in following literary periods.

## Introduction

When Catherine Parr served as the Queen of England and Ireland, as the last wife of Henry VIII from 1543 until 1547, England's Early Modern (or Renaissance) period was starting to see its roots in its rich literary history of women's authorship. As Parr became the first Englishwoman to publish under her own name with her devotional work *Prayers or Meditations* in 1545, she started a certain tradition of women's authorship—one that was in the public eye. Prior to 1545, recorded women's writing is mainly confined to a handful of original manuscript works—like in the cases of Marie de France and Julian of Norwich from centuries before this period—and there is a possibility of anonymous publications (or ones with “male” pen names), but Parr established a precedent for women of letters in England. Since Parr's publication of *Prayers or Meditations*, there was an increased interest in England for women's authorship, as this change in literary history led to the works of writers who followed her like Mary Sidney, Lady Mary Wroth, and Aemilia Lanyer.<sup>1</sup> These women mentioned were writing within a 75-year period that followed Parr's works, and although it was a short period, a number of changes and accomplishments were achieved by women writers during the Early Modern era. “The climate for female authors was certainly beginning to change, and the issue of the ‘woman that attempts the Pen’ became not only the subject of censure but also a topic of attention and debate” (Wilcox). As women writers were gaining recognition by their contemporaries within this period, they not only set a precedent for their time period, but also for the expansion of women's authorship beyond the period.

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<sup>1</sup> This list also includes writers like Isabella Whitney, Elizabeth Cary, and Margaret Roper, amongst several others.

However, there are a few limitations that are important to note. First of all, the vast majority of women (and men) writing during this period had some sort of connection to royalty or wealth, as it was extremely difficult for writers to live off of their income from writing alone. In many ways, this makes sense since as the wealthy—and especially the royals—were much more likely to be literate, educated, and would have been exposed to a wide range of studies. The limitations that stemmed from literacy rates would have also limited the widespread consumption of literature during this time. While men during this time period had a bit more access to an education—with about more than one-quarter of the male population being able to read and write (Cressy 4)—the story is a little bit different for women. According to David Cressy, about 10 percent of women from London during the 17th century were literate (quoted in Wilcox). While this statistic is general, literacy rates among royal and noble women were most likely different than the common woman. “Women in Tudor and Stuart England were not normally taught to write, although there may have been some intermittent provision for some of them to learn to read. The fully literate woman was a rarity” (Cressy 9). Overall, there is evidence that many women of higher privilege were granted educational opportunities in order to perform religious and domestic duties. In addition to the literacy of these women writers, royalty and wealth also would have allowed for these women to have avenues and finances for their publications, and their social statuses would have made their publications more “acceptable” if compared to a common woman’s. Even with increased publication (due to the expanded use of print materials), many of these women’s writings were not published in the times that they were written.

As many of us know, literacy—the ability to read and write in any language—is an important factor in the writing, publication, and consumption of literature. Additionally, literacy

rates throughout most of the world's nations have improved (some to near perfection) by our current time. England—a region with a less than 30 percent literacy rate in 1530—also saw this improvement throughout its time (Cressy 13). From the 16th century until the 18th century in England, there were several societal changes—for example, schooling rate increases, the Protestant Reformation, and the embracing of Renaissance-era ideals—that led to higher literacy rates 200 years later (Cressy 12). Traditionally, retroactive literacy rates are usually measured by the ability of someone to sign their name (Stephens 553-554). While English men would be expected to hold higher literacy rates than women of this period, due to educational opportunities and societal norms, there is evidence of literacy increases in women over this time period. For English men in 1700, roughly half of them were able to read and write. On the other hand, “Women were almost universally unable to sign their names in 1500, and by 1600 only some 10 percent could do so, the proportion rising to about 25 percent by 1714” (Stephens 555). Evidently, there are some wide discrepancies between the male and female population during these times, but this is not surprising due to the nature of their environment. However, this growth in literacy—for both of these genders mentioned—is quite significant, as the practice and consumption of literature increasingly became more available to a wider range of people. Additionally, for women, this meant greater availability to women for communicating their thoughts through the pen.

Another societal factor that led to increasingly-available literature in Early Modern England was the “advent of printing” (British Literature Survey). Until William Caxton brought printing to England in 1476, literature was virtually through manuscript only (Britannica), and this allowed for the greater mobilization of texts to reach a wider range of people. “Before the

invention of printing, the number of manuscript books in Europe could be counted in thousands. By 1500, after only 50 years of printing, there were more than 9,000,000 books” (Britannica). As demonstrated by this figure, printing brought a large amount of the growth of available literature. However, England was actually quite a bit behind the times for printing when compared to other parts of Europe, at least in terms of the late arrival of printing and the quantity of printers. Overall, England only had 5 printers in 1500, but Richard III and Henry VII accepted the wide (and relatively free) importation of books from other European regions. However, the free importation of books was ultimately prohibited by Henry VIII for a period of time (Britannica). Following administration changes, however, the printing and importation of books in England ultimately saw success, leading to a greater amount of available literature. Despite ebbs and flows in printing during the earlier part of the English Renaissance, this is another important factor that led to the presence of writers—including women—along with an increased interest in literacy and classical education. This also allowed for certain authors of nobility to be able to live off their publications and book sales alone.

In addition to the great expansions in literacy and printing that allowed women to gain some prominence as writers during the Early Modern period, it is interesting to look at *how* this mode of authorship change and grew from the beginning of the 15th century, with the introduction of print, until the end of the 17th century. Throughout the period of Early Modern English women’s writing, I will argue that due to Renaissance-era societal changes led to the innovation of women’s writing, leading to the linked phenomena of the growing inclusivity between these writers and the overall expansion of topics that these women could write about and publish. What is also important to note is that these changes may have been much more

evident in the time period (mid-17th century and later) that followed the Renaissance period. However, it is still evidenced through the growing inclusivity and thematic expansion between Parr's first publication and the end of the period that these changes occurred within women's authorship, and these matters are important in our overall understanding of this gendered mode of authorship.

## Literature Review

Overall, this thesis will highlight different works of a few major English women authors from 1543 until 1621. Mainly, I will be discussing these different works into a few key categories: devotional works, works of translation, and works of original fiction written for entertainment and discursive purposes. In the following section, I will review these writers and their works that will comprise the focus of the thesis.

As mentioned before, the first English-language publication written by a woman under her own name was Catherine Parr's 1545 personal devotion book *Prayers or Meditations* (Mueller 369-370). As telling through her *Complete Works and Correspondence*—which includes this work, her anonymous work *Psalms or Prayers* (1543), *The Lamentation of a Sinner* (1547), along with personal letters shared between herself and her contemporaries—Parr had certain religious and domestic duties as the Queen of England. As these titles can allude to, all of Parr's major works are of a religious nature—some of them being personal books of devotion where she accounts her own religious experience, and some that detail pro-Protestant sentiments. Additionally, Parr also connects her religious experience with that of certain feminine duties of her time, such as wifely obedience (381). This was especially emphasized as she served as the last Queen to Henry VIII.

A grand literary figure that followed Parr was that of Mary Sidney. Often working alongside her brother Sir Philip Sidney until his death in 1586, Mary Sidney gained prominence within her immediate circle of writers and poets (including Philip, Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, and several others) at the Wilton House, which was an estate that she shared with her husband, Henry Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke. Several of her contemporaries "...likened Mary to Sappho, the pre-eminent women poet of antiquity" (Hamlin et. al. xvi). Some of Sidney's major works include *The Sidney Psalter*, in which she completed her brother's English poetry translations of the Psalms. As Philip had only completed 43 of the 150 Psalms at the time of his death, Mary continued and edited his work to complete the project (xiv). In addition to Mary Sidney's work on the Psalms, she also is known for her translations of Robert Garnier's closet drama *Marc-Antoine* and Petrarch's *The Triumph of Death* (xlii). Sidney went on to influence a myriad of other female English writers, such as Lady Mary Wroth (Sidney's niece) and Aemilia Lanyer (xvi), with Wroth praising Sidney in her own work *Urania*: "[Sidney is] Perfect in Poetry, and all other Princely virtues as any woman that ever lived" (quoted in Introduction by Hamlin xxx).

Later in the English Renaissance period came Lady Mary Wroth, who is known for her works such as the prose romance *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621), sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621), and pastoral drama *Love's Victory* (c. 1620). Unlike her aunt, Mary Sidney, Wroth's works were original works, and not translations. Additionally, unlike many of her predecessors, Wroth's writings were not of a typically religious nature, whereas she mainly wrote about love—heavily drawing from Greco-Roman mythology and stories. *Love's Victory* details a story of Roman goddess Venus sending her son, Cupid, to play tricks on a group of shepherds due to her perceived devotional negligence. This drama is also regarded as the first

pastoral drama, and the first dramatic comedy to be written by a woman (Cerasano/Wynne-Davies 92). Another “first” for Wroth came in the form of her *Urania*, which is the first prose romance to be written by an English woman (92). *Urania* is a long two-volume text that details romantic plots amongst a group of royal families. However, the two central characters are Queen Pamphilia and Emperor Amphilanthus (who are inspired by herself and her cousin, William Herbert).<sup>2</sup> Pamphilia and Amphilanthus also appears as the titular characters in the sonnet sequence that Wroth wrote for William Herbert, as an act of her love for him.

Aemilia Lanyer also continued Mary Sidney’s legacy of women’s authorship, especially as the Sidney Psalms were a source of inspiration for Lanyer. Lanyer was not a royal or noble herself, but had particular connections to royalty because her father, Baptiste Bassano, was a court musician (Grossman 1). Lanyer is known for her poetry book *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) which was the first poetry book to be published by an English woman alone. The book was written in an attempt for Lanyer to find a patron in order for her to continue her work as a poet, and also includes possibly the first country house poem “The Description of Cooke-ham.” The main poem—“Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum”—mainly focuses on religious topics such as Jesus’s crucifixion, the women who surrounded him during his death and resurrection, and the story of Eve in Genesis (“Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women”). While this is a largely religious text in many ways, Lanyer provides a significant proto-feminist framework in her dealings with Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup> William Herbert was the son of Mary Sidney and Henry Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke. The relationship between Herbert and Wroth stemmed from their unhappy marriages, and brought two illegitimate children. As first cousins, the relationship brought much controversy, leading to Wroth’s demise as a noble figure.

## More Inclusive Authorship

In our modern context, inclusivity takes on a much different and wider role than it did in the English Early Modern period. Today, from an institutional—governmental, educational, career-oriented—standpoint, inclusivity means that the institution includes people of all kinds based on gender, race, sexuality, economic status, amongst other criteria. However, inclusivity in the English Renaissance looked much different. As women were the property of their husbands and fathers in a certain legal and social sense, women in Tudor England could demonstrate their desire to stand separate from their husbands through literature. In England, women could not own property until the same terms as men until 1926, and did not fully have the right to vote until 1928 due to the Equal Franchise Act (UK Parliament). Since these major legal changes towards equality did not occur until 300 years after the Renaissance period, it is easy to imagine the stark differences between men and women during this time. At the same time, however, voting rights were not universally shared by all men, as it was primarily a right reserved for the societal elites. As for racial equality, England during this time was invested in the brutal African slave trade, allowing no legal or social rights to enslaved peoples until the Slavery Abolition Act is passed in the 1830s (Historic England). Diverse sexualities, as presumed, would have been out of the question, at least in public life, especially due to sodomy laws. Overall, in this historical time period, inclusivity is defined in more limited terms than they are now. However, within this limited context, there were different modes of expansion.

As mentioned before, Catherine Parr, last Queen to Henry VIII, was the first Englishwoman to publish—under her own name—her Christian devotional work *Prayers or Meditations* in 1545. While there were other women writing before her—through older

manuscripts, or not under their own name—Parr is recognized with this accomplishment. Parr was born in around 1512 into a noble family to her parents Sir Thomas Parr and Maude Green, who were manor lords. As mentioned prior, literate women during this time period were rare, but Parr did have a private tutor when she was a child. Some wealthy women of her time were given this privilege, as reading proved to be important to devotional and domestic tasks. It is also possible that her mother taught her how to write (Mueller 5-6). Starting at the young age of 17, Parr was married to Sir Edward Burgh until his death in 1533 (James 72-73). The following year, she married another noble John Neville (or Lord Latimer), who was from one of the most powerful Northern families. They were married until his death in 1543. However, during the later part of their marriage, they had moved to London where Parr spent a lot of time at the court as a noblewoman. Catherine's sister, Anne, also was a lady-in-waiting to Henry's queen (88). After Lord Latimer's death, Catherine took the opportunity to rekindle her old friendship with Mary I (as Catherine of Aragon was a friend of her mother's and also Parr's godmother) as a way to stay in London. As a member of Mary's household, Henry took notice (89). Due to Parr's newfound status of becoming the Queen in 1543 due to her marriage of Henry VII, Parr found herself in a position of power that she never had experienced before.

Even though Catherine had a lot of wealth from her own family and previous marriages, she now had the political power to break certain gender barriers. Being the last queen to Henry VIII and having lived through several different experiences, Parr's "...Biography looks like destiny in registering this first for Katherine Parr as a female author in English" (Mueller 1). As literary works from women of other countries, and as religious texts were newly being translated and published in England (2-3), there could have been a growing interest in women's authorship

around the time of Parr's time as queen, leading her to successfully write and publish her own works. Regardless of motive, in order for Parr to write, there were certain stipulations: "...the prolific body of recent scholarship on women's writing in early modern England has tended to emphasize a generic factor—the frequent choice of religious and devotional materials..." (2-3). As this was the fact of the matter, Parr wrote her anonymous *Psalms or Prayers* in 1543 and shared it with her circle of close female friends (and a handful of men) before it was published (13). As her works were well-received by her peers, it is important to note that the main reason Parr was able to accomplish this important first—besides the fact that she stayed within religious subjects—was due to her wealth and status.

Noble and successful men took note of Parr's capabilities, as shown through her personal letters to and from these men. Since the majority of English readership was male—and as men held a vast majority of the political and economic power in England—it was important that Parr was praised by her male contemporaries. For example, on September 30, 1545, playwright Nicholas Udall wrote to Parr, as a response to her writings: "...women, if they do so apply their minds, are no less apt, no less witty, no less able, no less industrious, no less active, no less fruitful and pithy in the acquiring or handling of all kinds of disciplines than men are..." (93). As shown by this letter, Parr's accomplishments did not go unnoticed, as even some men were very much in support of her publication. Since few women were literate in Early Modern England, it would make sense that women of wealth and status—ones who were educated in some shape or form—would be the first women to be writing and publishing. As a queen, Parr was a highly influential person within her scope, and it is not surprising that she would be granted the

“privilege” of publishing her own work over nearly any other Englishwoman of her time, even if it did require the support of her husband.

Even though English women’s authorship began with a queen, the membership of who was able to write and publish their own works began to expand slowly. Following Parr’s death in 1548, the first major female literary giant that we see in the English Early Modern period was Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke. As Sidney came from the noble Sidney family, she was given a much higher level of education than most women of her time. Although Mary Sidney did not have the educational privileges that her brother Philip did “...she was nevertheless educated, being fluent in French, Italian, and Latin. As her later writings demonstrate, she was also learned in classical and contemporary literature as well as the Bible...” (Hamlin xiv). By being able to read and write in numerous languages at a young age—and also considering her poetic talent—Sidney was presented with many opportunities to find success as a writer.

Her future as a writer was further solidified by her marriage at age 16 to Henry Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke. As the marriage brought a massive amount of wealth and a close alliance between her family and his, Sidney found herself in a unique opportunity, as Hamlin attests: “... [this] gave Mary the wealth and prestige that enabled her to become the first English woman to be widely celebrated as literary patron and writer” (xv). As many of her family members—brother and parents—died fairly young, Sidney was left with a lot of financial responsibility along with her husband. Overseeing several estates with Herbert, Sidney spent much of her time at the Wilton House, forming a circle of writers, like Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and Michael Drayton that she could act as patron to (xvii). When Philip died in 1586, however, she was able to develop her own craft by continuing his work on the Psalms, which was highly well-received

by her peers. Additionally, by writing on Christian matters, Sidney was able to create a new audience in a time of Reformation. As she continued throughout her career, she translated works like Robert Garnier's *Antonius* which eventually went on to inspire Samuel Daniel's *Cleopatra* (1594) (Prescott 219) and William Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1607) (. Outside of legendary writers like Shakespeare, "The Countess of Pembroke was a particularly powerful model for younger women poets, and both Aemilia Lanyer and Lady Mary Wroth acknowledged their debt to her" (xvii). As illustrated by Hamlin, Sidney paved the way for other women writers even if they did not share the wealth and power that she did.

In a similar vein to Catherine Parr, Mary Sidney also came from wealth and nobility, which combined with her early education, allowed her to assert herself as a professional writer. However, this change in women's authorship is remarkable as one did not have to be the literal Queen of England in order to be published and well-respected, even if this change did occur about 40 years later. At the same time, Sidney was an extremely well-known and influential noble, which still showed a sense of hierarchy within the women's authorship system. However, change has to start somewhere, even if it is through subtle leaps. Sidney went on to influence many female writers during her time—along with critics and writers to come in future centuries—but one of the most important forms of support came from the men within her Wilton Circle, who highly-cherished her work during their lifetimes (xvi-xvii, xxx). As Sidney gained this respect through both Christian texts and secular works, this opened the doors for women to follow her.

Within the same family as Mary Sidney, Lady Mary Wroth also was born into a life of nobility, and "...began life as one of the culturally elite Sidney family" (Cerasano/Wynne-Davies

91). Most likely due to familial influences coupled with wealth, “[Wroth] was often in the home of her namesake, Mary Sidney Herbert, where she had access to classical and humanist literature and the unpublished works of various Sidneys, including probably the *Old Arcadia*” (Bear). Needless to say, Wroth also grew up with an education of sorts—being surrounded by many grand pieces of literature, some written by her renowned relatives and some by philosophers and religious figures of the past. However, different from Sidney, Wroth’s personal life involved a great deal of scandal, which somewhat alienated her from her noble ties. At 17, Wroth (then Sidney) was married to Sir Robert Wroth. However, this was an unhappy marriage as Mary Wroth, in reality, had romantic feelings for her cousin William Herbert. In fact, it is assumed that he “...[was] probably the person in her life for whom Amphilanthus is a *persona*” (Bear), Amphilanthus being Wroth’s fictional persona’s love interest throughout some of her works.

Mary Wroth and William Herbert did have a long-lasting affair, probably bearing two children together, but this did not come without consequence. Wroth was dismissed from the court (under James I) due to these actions. “It is interesting to note that although Herbert remained a valued and respected adviser, she never returned to the social worth she had once valued so highly; she was merely able to visit her female friends relatives” (Cerasano/Wynne-Davies 91). Despite being casted off due to a gendered double standard, Wroth engaged in writing to a great degree after this incident, leading to her success as a literary patron and author of a few firsts—first pastoral drama written in English (*Love’s Victory*) and first romance prose written by an Englishwoman (*Urania*) (92). However, as a somewhat controversial figure within her immediate circle, she was no stranger to criticism, especially when it came to writing about people from her personal life. For example, the first part of *Urania* was “...withdrawn after a

complaint was made by Lord Denny who objected to the way he and his family were represented in the text—at one point he is called a ‘bla[d]der blowne with wind’” (92). It is quite interesting that *Urania* was pulled from further publication, especially considering that many texts that could be critical of people and institutions were allowed to remain on the shelves. Although this partially can be attributed to the time period’s reluctance for open criticism due to censorship, it is quite possible that Wroth was facing another gendered double standard within the literary community.

Overall, in terms of economic status and nobility, Mary Wroth did not expand upon the notion of inclusive authorship during the English Early Modern period, but as a controversial figure in both court and literary settings, Wroth did show that imperfect women can also prove themselves as literary figures. When compared to Sidney’s translations, Wroth’s publications of secular, original fiction works increased literary opportunities for women. Also, in a stark difference to Mary Sidney (whom did not largely appear to engage in scandal), Wroth showed a much more vulnerable and honest side to women’s literature, writing original works all based on her experience. Often writing in a *roman à clef* style, Wroth introduced the stories of her life into her works: “Yet her writing is not overtly personal, its autobiography is hidden beneath a skillful rendition of some of the most complex and self-aware Renaissance literary forms” (92).

Throughout her works, Wroth did not hide scandalous aspects of her personal life, like her affair, but concealed them partially by creating characters based on herself. Due to Wroth’s openness and vulnerability—although she did not change the economic scope of authorship—women’s authorship altered, and allowed more honesty.

Finally, as a contrast to the women mentioned prior, Aemilia Lanyer came from a bit more humble origins, although loosely connected to royalty. Born in 1569, her father, Baptist Bassano, was a “Christianized Venetian Jew” who was also a court musician for Elizabeth I, and her mother was Margaret Johnson. As Judaism was outlawed in England during these times, Bassano and his family most likely adopted Christianity in order to remain homogenous within English society. In 1592, Aemilia married Alfonso Lanyer, who was also a musician (Grossman 1). In her time period, Lanyer would have been considered middle-class, or a part of the professional class. Additionally, she was a first-generation immigrant in England (as her father emigrated from Italy), and it is very likely that she was raised Jewish (even if it was more or less in private, as cultural heritage and practice had to be concealed in an age of religious persecution). While Lanyer’s religious beliefs are great source of debate, it is safe to say that she is “possibly newly-Christianized.”<sup>3</sup> Due to these certain societal factors, Lanyer probably did not have it as easy as the Anglo-dominate noblewomen writers that came before her. As a middle-class, daughter of an immigrant, and possibly non-Christian in her time, Lanyer’s publication of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) was a remarkable feat, and this effort led to an expanded definition of English women’s authorship. If Lanyer were to be writing 30 years before she did, it is highly likely that publication of her work would not even be considered, especially when combined with the then-radical feminist ideas that are displayed through *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*.

Additionally, Lanyer’s economic status is further evidenced by her need for a patron. The first handful of poems in the volume are addressed to noblewoman and female literary patrons of

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<sup>3</sup> In the 13th century, Jewish people had officially been expelled in England. During the Early Modern period, Judaism could not be practiced in public in any form.

her time, including Lady Arabella Stuart, Lucy Russell, and Margaret Clifford. As Lanyer may have not been fully able to support herself on a writer's income alone, this was an attempt to find patronage in order to assert herself as a full-time professional author. As literary patronage can take on many forms, even just moral support, it is implied that Lanyer was looking for financial support (Grossman 6). As a contrast, writers like Mary Sidney and Mary Wroth did not have this issue, coming from wealthy noble families, and were able to write without financial concerns. In fact, they were both patrons themselves, and had the means to support male writers. It is unclear whether or not Lanyer found a patron from this effort, but it was not likely, as *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is the only known work of hers. There is also some evidence that *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* was not wildly popular in her time, with only nine copies surviving today. It was not until the 20th century that Early Modern scholars revived the study of the work, placing her within the canon of Early Modern female writers (1). Lanyer's work alone, however, indicates that women of non-noble or royal families could pursue literature and publish their own work.

On another interesting note about patronage, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* concludes with a poem called "The Description of Cooke-ham" (or Cookham), which is the first country house poem written in English. As a general overview, country house poems are poems in which writers compliment the beauty of a wealthy patron's country estate and their families home-lives. The overarching goal in writing a country house poem is to obtain patronage. In "The Description of Cooke-ham," Lanyer begins by reflecting on what she had learned and experienced from her time spent at Cookham, which was the estate that Lady Clifford lived in at the time. "Farewell (sweet *Cooke-ham*) where I first obtain'd / Grace from that Grace where permit Grace remain'd; / And where the Muses gaue their full consent, / I should haue powre the

virtuous to content...” (Lanyer 1-4). As Lanyer describes the inspiration for writing and Christian virtue that she gained from being at Cookham, she is asking Lady Clifford for patronage. However, this is not enough, and Lanyer continues to describe the physical beauty of the country house. For example, she writes: “The Trees with leaues, with fruits, with flowers clad, / Embrac’d each other, seeming to be glad, / Turning themselues to beauteous Canopies” (23-25). As she describes the pleasant nature of the home, Lady Clifford could be able to see that as form of recognition for her work as a noblewoman, estate-keeper, and literary patron.

Another interesting aspect of Lanyer’s dedications in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is that she solely is seeking female patronage. “...Lanyer does not simply write in search of patronage—she specifically writes in search of patronesses” (Stapleton). This was, very much, a pointed effort by Lanyer to create a female literary community and readership, especially as she only addresses female patrons and touches on women’s issues throughout the entire body of work. By reaching out to women who she saw as powerful and influential, Lanyer is aiming to increase the scope of women’s authorship. Drawing inspiration from past writers like Mary Sidney, Lanyer wants to make a community of patronage of her own (Stapleton). Even though Lanyer’s efforts with “The Description of Cooke-ham” and her other dedicatory poems are entirely a female-based effort, her country house poem also influenced male writers, like Ben Jonson, to write in a similar manner.

In Jonson’s country house poem “To Penhurst” (1616), he also attempts to gain literary patronage, but from the Sidney family—especially highlighting Mary Wroth’s work as a patron. Penhurst is the country estate in which Wroth spent most of her childhood, as it was owned by

the Sidney and Herbert families (Lamb). Around 1605, Wroth was dedicated in a number of Jonson's play productions, and this led to her breakthrough into the literary scene, outside of her familial connections. "These literary contacts developed into a friendship; Ben Jonson dedicated his play *The Alchemist* (1610) to Mary Wroth, as well as addressing to her two epigrams made him 'a better lover, and much better Poet...'" (Lamb). Due to this new friendship and Wroth's family wealth, Jonson wrote "To Penhurst" to Wroth, Robert Sidney (her father), and to the Sidney's in general. Along with rich descriptions of the home and family's beauty, Jonson points directly to the rich literary history of the Sidney family: "Each bank doth yield thee conies; and the tops, / Fertile of wood, Ashore and Sidney's copse, / To crown thy open table, doth provide / The purpled pheasant with the speckled side..." (Jonson 25-28). Drawing inspiration from Lanyer, Jonson also aims to gain patronage through the art of the country poem. As Lanyer's open dedications to literary patrons led to these types of poems in other writers, it is important to note the class-based divide that writing (as a profession) can bring. Not only did Lanyer try to increase the societal circumstance for women's authorship, but she also influenced the economic nature of authorship—female and male—by writing these dedicatory poems. This, in turn, would lead to future possibilities for writers, as authorship could be viewed as a profession. However, Lanyer's contribution was mostly significant for the networking of women in the literary scene.

### **The Expansion of Topics within Early Modern Women's Writing**

On another note, the themes and topics that women were "allowed" to write about throughout the time period changed to a larger degree as more women published their own work. As mentioned before, the advent of English women's authorship—as least in terms of publication and our knowledge of the matter—began with Catherine Parr's *Prayers or Meditations* in 1545.

This work—along with *Psalms or Prayers* (1543) and *The Lamentation of a Sinner* (1547)—are all religious texts of slightly different content matter. The main source of literary inspiration behind these texts is Thomas à Kempis's *De Imitatione Christi* (or *The Imitation of Christ*), which was first translated into English by William Atkynson around 1503 or 1504 (Mueller 2). *The Imitation of Christ* was originally written in Latin in the 15th century, and also serves as a book of personal devotion. At its time, it was the most widely-read Christian text except for the Bible (Benham). Throughout the text, Kempis speaks about his personal relationship to God in an intuitive manner, reflecting upon his own spiritual journey, Christian values, and the importance of the Eucharist. However, he is addressing his readers—giving them lessons of sorts for Christian worship. For example, he says, “Seek a suitable time for thy meditation, and think frequently of the mercies of God to thee. Leave curious questions. Study such matters as bring thee sorrow for sin rather than amusement” (Kempis XX). In a way that is different from the Bible (although Kempis often quotes the Bible throughout *The Imitation of Christ*), Kempis provides somewhat of a direct framework for how a Christian should act—giving certain instructions or suggestions to Christians—when compared to the moral story-telling of the Bible. In many ways, this could be very appealing to readers, especially literal-minded ones, who wanted to know more about how they can be good Christians, whereas the Bible can be a bit more ambiguous in terms of overall morals and messages. Kempis's influence also extended to Parr, as she also writes in a very direct and literal manner.

However, Parr differs a bit from male writers like Kempis due to her womanly status. While Parr speaks a great deal about her own relationship with God and Christianity, she also provides instruction for how specifically Christian woman should behave. In *The Lamentation of*

*a Sinner*, Parr provides clear and defined instructions. “If they be women married, they learn of Saint Paul, to be obedient to their husbands, and to keep silence in congregation, and to learn of their husbands, at home” (Parr 481). This section in the text also mentions the wearing of modest clothing, delicacy in eating and drinking, and the importance of maintaining a home (481-482). Parr—someone who could have been somewhat of an empowering figure for women in her time, as an English queen—writes about specific strict gender roles and Christian duties for women, but these ideas were not uncommon of her time, and were very much embraced. Initially, Parr’s works were only accessible by women and some men in her immediate circle (Mueller 13), but eventually these works were published in general circulation with Henry VIII’s permission (31). As a queen—a spokesperson for the English government—it was important that she spread certain values, like Christianity and female domestic life, to her readers, even if it was a limited amount of readers due to literacy rates.

However, Parr did recognize that she was not a perfect Christian, mentioning in *Psalms or Prayers* (which was published anonymously) of her faults as a Christian woman. As the most-married queen in English history—marrying twice before Henry VIII, and once more after his death in 1547—it is fair to say that Parr had a “lived” love-life. Even if all of her marriages ended in the death of her husband, or her own death, she had many experiences with different relationships, and uses the “1st Psalm” in *Psalms or Prayers* to be quite candid about her imperfect love-life. “...but as a woman that breaketh her fidelity and promise unto her husband, even so, O Lord God, I have broken my promise unto Thee” (Parr 219-220). As she reflects upon her past and mistakes, she begs forgiveness from God. As a reader of this text, seeing the Queen as an imperfect person makes her relatable as a person. This does also indicate that she is much

more dimensional than what her writings set out to do, as they are primarily viewed as female instruction for Christian practice.

In addition to spreading womanly virtues and personal reflection through her texts, it was also important for Parr to emphasize the masculinity of Henry VIII, which was also embedded in a male-dominated interpretation of Christianity. For example, in her poem “*Precatio pro Rege*” (or “Prayer for the King”) which is included in the final part of *Psalms or Prayers*, she takes a moment to remind her readers of her devotion to her husband and the soldiers who fight on behalf of her kingdom. “So strength him, that he may vanquish and overcome all his and our foes, and be dread and feared of all the enemies of his realm. Amen” (363-364). By using a male-Christian perspective on how masculinity can be displayed, she writes on the physical strength and feared leadership of strong men, specifically the strength that kings and soldiers could possess. Overall, throughout her works, Parr gives certain strict roles for Christian women while men are allowed to be a bit more versatile. However, this was a very widespread interpretation of the Bible during this time period. Additionally, for Parr, specifically, the fact that her husband was the very man who would have to approve of her publishing her works may have also contributed to Parr’s overt praise of the “King” and his soldiers.

Through different modes, Parr aimed to write about the weaknesses of women, and men’s resemblance to God in an attempt to appease Henry VIII in religious matters. Throughout a majority his life, Henry was a strict Catholic, but later on, asserted England as an Anglican nation with him acting as the figurehead. Despite turning England into a Protestant nation, Henry often disagreed with the full extent of Martin Luther’s teachings in the Reformation, and saw Anglicanism as a balanced between Lutheranism and Catholicism. Henry’s marriages and

divorces also did not personally align him with Catholic rules and ideology. Parr, on the other hand, believed greatly in Protestant ideology which caused officials to cast a warrant for her arrest, in attempt to “turn Henry against her” (Mueller 24). Parr did, however, narrowly escape persecution for these “heretical” beliefs. Due to this, it is quite possible that Parr focused on the inferiority of women and resilience of men in a Christian context (even if she did not personally fully believe it) in order to win Henry over with her writings.

The last thing to be said about Parr’s remarkable accomplishment in being the first English woman to be published under her own name is that the topic and theme of Christianity was instrumental in allowing her to do so. “The fact that all her works are religious in nature compels recognition of the importance of devotion as an incentive for female authorship in early modern England” (Mueller 3-4). In England, the ideals of earlier forms of Catholicism and Renaissance-era social changes were not often compatible—possibly with the Protestant Reformation, a somewhat socially-progressive form of Christianity during this time period, being a middle ground between these two former ideologies. As many English Renaissance-era thinkers, like St. Thomas More in *Utopia* (1516), advocated for gender equality in under certain conditions, like educational opportunity (136-138), there was a growing sense of acceptance of the emergence of female voices, even if these changes were small. However, these early women writers had to find topics that were deemed “acceptable” for them to write about, with Christian virtues being of these topics.

Similar to Parr, Mary Sidney began her writing in the Christian tradition. After marrying Henry Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke in 1577, Sidney found herself to be quite a wealthy 16-year-old, overlooking a lot of properties owned by Herbert, including the “Wilton House” where

she acted as a patron of sorts to writers like her brother, Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, amongst others (Hamlin xvii). At the same time, being around this community of writers inspired Mary Sidney to complete her own work. When Philip Sidney died in 1586 from an infected battle wound in the Battle of Zutphen (a Protestant-led battle against the Spanish), he had left his poetic translations of the Biblical Psalms unfinished.

Having only completed 43 verse translations of the Psalms, Mary continued his legacy by writing the remaining 107 Psalms, and she also revised many of Philip's before manuscript copies were made much later for Elizabeth I in 1599 (Hamlin xiv). Initially, Sidney mainly gained recognition in her "Circle" at Wilton House with "Thomas Heywood, Francis Meres, and Michael Drayton [likening] Mary to Sappho, the pre-eminent woman poet of antiquity" (xvi). Coincidentally, Sidney used sapphic meter in Psalm 125: "As Zion standeth very firmly steadfast, / Never once shaking: so on high Jehovah / Who his hope buildeth, very firmly steadfast / Ever abideth" (Sidney 1-4). In its essence, Psalm 125 compares believers of the Lord to the strength of Mount Zion, mentioning that good will come to those who practice good, and the Lord will banish those who are evil. As Mary was influenced by the Geneva Bible in her verse translations (Hamlin xix), here are the same lines from Psalm 125, as above: "They that trust in the Lord, shalbe as mount Zion, which can not be remooued, but remaineth for euer" (*Geneva Bible 1560*, Psalms 125.1). To compare these two versions of the same Psalm, the Geneva Bible is much more forceful and literal in its wording while Sidney aimed to provide rhyme and meter—more poetic qualities—to the lines in order for them to be sung and memorized.

Even though the Sidney's versions and Biblical versions of the Psalms have their own strengths, Reformers like Martin Luther, wanted to make the Psalms more "song-like" which

would hopefully contribute to a Christian's memory of them (Hamlin xi). This was very consistent with the Reformation's teachings with Protestantism, as the ultimate goal was for individuals to be able to navigate their personal relationship with God, on their own terms and ability. In England, the Sidney's contributed greatly to the groundwork on this effort. Men within her Wilton Circle—namely John Donne in his poem “Upon the Translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sidney, and the Countess of Pembroke, His Sister”—also praised Sidney for her efforts, and for introducing the Psalms into English verse. “They show us islanders our Joy, our King ; / They tell us why, and teach us how to sing” (Donne 21-22). As the Sidney's emphasized the need for singable, easy-to-memorize Psalms through their Psalter, many people took note—leading to more translations to come.

Even if Mary first came to recognition within her Circle as a writer by completing the Psalms, she did not stay in the Christian tradition of writing too much longer, as she went on to translate and publish secular works. One of her well-known translations was that of French playwright Robert Garnier's *Antonius* (1578). The historical closet drama focuses primarily on the final days of Mark Antony, the relationship between him and Cleopatra, and his war with Octavius Caesar. The drama's focuses on Roman history and romance showed how Sidney broke from the expectation that women write about Christian devotion when translating this text in 1592. In this work, she wrote about politics, love (even if toxic), and death. Cleopatra, whose life in Alexandria is the focus of Acts 2 and 5, provides Sidney an opportunity to write about powerful women in history—and a non-Christian one at that. In many ways, real life Cleopatra was a very capable ruler for Egypt, aiding crises like famine, and bringing relative peace to the region during the early part of her reign. Additionally, she was also very capable in military

endeavors, seeking territorial expansion (Roller 103-106). Despite this, Cleopatra is often portrayed as a seductress, and *Antonius* is no exception.

For example, in Act 2, Cleopatra and Eras (one of her maids) have a conversation about how Cleopatra's beauty causes weaknesses in men, including Antony (Sidney 429-456). From her character's introduction, Cleopatra is already made out to be a seductress of sorts. In Act 3, the character Lucil endorses the idea that female beauty can cause male weakness when he says the following lines to Antony: "Enchanting pleasure Venus sweete delights / Weaken our bodies, ouer-cloud our sprights, / Trouble our reason, from our hearts out chase..." (1171-1173). Even though this idea of female beauty is frowned upon by modern feminist standards, Sidney cannot be really blamed for this idea since it is a translation. The power that derived from female beauty was also a common trope of the period that implied the women's capabilities outside of her beauty. Additionally, both Antony and Cleopatra are made out to be somewhat feeble-minded characters due their love for one another with Cleopatra expressing her wish to die for Antony to Eras and Charmain (649-652), and Antony expressing to Lucil about how thoughts of Cleopatra are the mainstay of his mind (910-912). Even though this assertion does not do much in the sake of gender equality, Garnier and Sidney were both willing to show these weaknesses in both genders.

Another well-known translation of Mary Sidney's that is not particularly religious is her translation of Italian poet Petrarch's "Triumph of Death," which she translated around 1600. An interesting note about her translation is that it "...matches Petrarch's *terza rima* line-for-line" (Alexander), which is evident of Sidney's intent to be faithful to the original text which primarily focuses on death and love. With violent and frightening imagery that could have

possibly been a bit taboo for a woman to be writing about in Sidney's time (as it was a darker subject than say, love), she again expanded her scope of theme. In the poem, a woman in black tells the dreamer (narrator) of a field of corpses: "There saw I, whom their times did happy call, / Popes, emperors, and kings, but strangely grown / All naked now, all needy, beggars all" (Sidney 79-81). Even though Sidney's writing is a translation of Petrarch's, it still shows that Sidney was not afraid to break certain boundaries for what women could be writing about—including violence and death.

As mentioned before, Sidney went on to influence a later generation of female writers, like Aemilia Lanyer and Lady Mary Wroth. As for Lanyer, the main text that she is known for is her poetry book *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611). When Lanyer wrote the text, she was aiming to find a patron to support her poetry career—writing poems to women like Lucy Russell, (Countess of Bedford), Lady Anne Clifford, and Margaret Clifford (Countess of Cumberland). However, the main titular poem of the book—"Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" (or "Hail God, King of the Jews")<sup>4</sup>—channels the story of Jesus's crucifixion, and the women who were present for Jesus in the moments leading to his death. Also included is "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women," in which Lanyer aims to subvert the idea that Eve, alone, introduced original sin into the world, as Adam should also receive blame.

Although at its very basis, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* could be considered a religious text, Lanyer takes the opportunity to interlace Christianity with proto-feminist ideas. While in the Book of Genesis, Eve is depicted as first eating the forbidden fruit and bringing original sin to the Earth, Lanyer makes the argument that more blame should be placed on Adam: "But surely

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<sup>4</sup> "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" is a poem within the larger collection of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*.

*Adam* cannot be excus'd, / Her fault, though great, yet he was most too blame... (Lanyer 17-18). Lanyer's reasoning for this notion is because Adam is written in the Bible to be much stronger than Eve, and also the originator of Eve (17-23). If Adam did not prevent this original sin through his supposed strength, then more blame should be placed on him instead of mostly being placed on Eve. Throughout Christian history, Eve's actions in Genesis have given women a bad reputation—showing narratives of women's feeble-mindedness, vanity, and sexuality. Lanyer, however, is trying to subvert this idea by explaining the challenges that women face in a Christian context. "And then to lay the fault on Patience backe, / That we (poore women) must endure it all; / We know right well he did discretion lacke, / Beeing not perswaded thereunto at all..." (33-36). By relating the story of Adam and Eve to her then-modern world, Lanyer aims to show the differences in perception around women and men within the realm of Christianity.

Again, later in "The tears of the daughters of Jerusalem," Lanyer aims to strengthen her defense of women by showing the resilience of the women in Jesus's life. Lanyer makes an excellent point in mentioning that the only people present at Jesus's death were women, including his mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary (the mother of James and Joseph). It is possible that there were other women present in this moment. "Thrice happy women that obtaind such grace / From his whose worth the world could not containe... Your cries enforced mercie, grace, and loue / From him, whom greatest Princes could not mooue" (2-3, 8-9). While Jesus's disciples and male followers abandoned Jesus at the time of his death, women were the ones who proved their true faith in Christ, showing the upmost loyalty to him and his cause. In many ways, Lanyer is aiming to cast a poor shadow on these men—showing that they are the true weak-minded ones (at least in the case of Christian faith). "Yet these poore women, by their piteous

cries / Did mooue their Lord, their Louer, and their King, / To take compassion, turns about, and speake / To them whose hearts were ready now to breake” (14-17). As these women were able to “move” Jesus emotionally in this moment, Lanyer aims to show us Jesus’s grand appreciation for these women, seeing their virtue and their commitment to God. The same cannot be exactly said about the men in his life. By using the framework of Christianity, an acceptable topic for women writers, Lanyer aimed to bring about a sense of dignity and strength in women that often went unrecognized in her time.

Finally, another writer that can be said to have introduced more secular themes into women’s English Early Modern literature is Lady Mary Wroth. Of all of her major works—*Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621), *Urania* (1621), and *Love’s Victory* (c. 1620)—Wroth does not focus on Christianity throughout these texts, instead drawing more inspiration from Ancient Greco-Roman sources, her wide net of family and friends, and from her personal love life. *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, Wroth’s sonnet sequence about her secret and unattainable romantic relationship with her cousin William Herbert (Larsen 128), draws inspiration from her uncle Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* (c. 1580), which plays on the idea of an absent “muse,” like in Petrarch’s work. With both Wroth and Sidney drawing from Petrarch’s musings of love (Larson 128), Wroth expressed her feelings for the absent Herbert, starting in the 1st Sonnet. “In sleepe, a Chariot drawne by wing’d Desire, / I saw; where sate bright *Venus* Queen of Loue...I waking hop’d as dreames it would depart, / Yet since, O me, a Lover I haue beene” (Wroth 5-6, 13-14). By dreaming (much like Petrarch) about a divine message about her love for Herbert, Wroth upon awakening accepts her fate as a hopeless lover. Additionally, Wroth is not afraid to be candid about the emotional torment that she experiences when she is parted from Herbert. In

Sonnet 11, Wroth asks Amphilanthus: “You endlesse torments that my rest opresse, / How long will you weight in my sad paine?” (1-2). By being vulnerable about these emotions, Wroth is showing us that women, and even noble ones like herself, cannot be the perfect and reserved beings that men of their time made them out to be, as they also act out of passion too.

As a companion text to *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, *Urania* also draws on many similar themes as the sonnet sequence, telling love stories throughout. With *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, Wroth once again drew inspiration from Philip Sidney, mirroring the epic romance of the *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1593). By finding thematic inspiration through the works of men, Wroth showed that women could also write within this genre. Again, female characters are encouraged to show their true desires. Urania, an orphan who falls in love with prince Parfelius in Book 1, reflects: “...Passion, O passion! yet thou rulest Me. Ignorant creature to loue a stranger, and a Prince, what hope haft thou, that because thou are not knowne, thou shouldst be knowne to loue in the best place?” (27). In this passage, not only does Wroth aim to show the range of emotion experienced by women, she also creates an interesting character—an orphan of presumed-humble origins. By drawing upon ideas of psychological equality between men and women and the importance of displaying different kinds of women, Wroth expanded the narrative and range of female literary subjects. Additionally, as *Urania* was the first “long fiction work” (Bear) published by an Englishwoman, this was revolutionary in itself. As a large secular work that was intended for full-scale publication, Wroth also subverted commonly-held notions of women’s authorship, even if this social change was not well-received due to the scandal that the text brought.

Lastly, Wroth once again focused on love—albeit in a much more comedic way—in her dramatic comedy *Love's Victory*, which also draws on Roman mythology. In the play, Wroth again allows a female character—Venus—to be the central figure in her story, and allows Venus to have grand authority over her subjects, manipulating these characters to her own benefit. At the beginning of the play, when Venus feels that her subjects are not showing her enough respect and praise, she sends Cupid mess with the love lives of a group of shepherds and shepherdesses by causing different forms of heartache and relationship drama as a form of payback for the lack of their devotion. Venus immediately asserts herself as an authority figure in Act 1, Scene 1: “Then let us grow our greatness to respect, / Make them acknowledge that our heavenly power / Cannot their strength, but even themselves, devour...” (97). As a goddess, has every ability within her power to manipulate her human subjects, and while she can be quite cruel throughout the play, Wroth takes a moment to highlight cleverness and leadership in women. While Venus, canonically, has a lot of power and strength in non-traditional ways, people can be quick to dismiss her due to her patronage of love. However, Wroth aims to show the strength of love in a metaphorical way through a strong female leader and goddess.

Overall, throughout the time period, these writers expanded their scope of topics and themes. In the early part of the English Renaissance, women were not writing and publishing under their own name, and it was not until the second half of this period that women could even take to the pen. However, this came at a certain expense. In the early stages of female authorship in the Renaissance, pro-Christian and devotional texts were the dominant subject with Catherine Parr beginning this tradition. Additionally, there were also other texts that were religious in nature that expanded onto other subjects like feminism. Lastly, due to the efforts of the women

discussed, subjects like love, death, politics, and history all entered into the realm of what could be included in women's authorship within this time period.

## **Reconciling Authors and Themes**

One could assume that the changes in women's authorship, in terms of theme and topic, would come from a talented, intelligent, powerful noblewoman like Mary Sidney. However, it is actually the efforts of scandal, humility, and imperfection that led to more radicalized and controversial subjects being written about within the English Early Modern women's canon. This initial assumption could be based on the fact that a highly-respected noblewoman would have a lot more leeway and authority to write on more controversial subjects—like love scandals and feminism—due to their social and economic status. However, this is not what comparison of women writers shows. Undoubtedly, did Sidney open up a particular pathway for other women writers in her time, as she was the one of the first non-royal women to be writing (through translation) about secular topics. However, these topics—death, dreams, love, and history—were not typically considered controversial at face value. The only area Sidney might have delved into are subtle political commentaries in *Antonius*, using ancient history to convey a message about the then-current political climate. As England faced realities and possibilities of civil and foreign wars, weaknesses in political leadership, and lacking national unity, Sidney provides this commentary throughout *Antonius* (219). Whether or not this was intentional, as it was Garnier's original work (217), Sidney's translation brings a new political context to England and its people in contrast to Garnier's original French context.

Despite Sidney's possible political beliefs being represented through older stories, her social stance did not enable her to write about virtually any subject she pleased. After all, she

was really one of the first, if not the first, woman to be considered “of letters” in England. Having to start somewhere, she rose to prominence with translations, mostly staying away from controversial subjects. However, due to Sidney’s ability to inspire other women and open literary doors, other women were able to write about more expansive and potentially dangerous topics due to gradual changes within the scope of women’s authorship. Most of these introductions of new topics for women were largely linked to the personal life experiences of particular writers.

As for a middle-class person like Aemilia Lanyer, she wrote about subjects that reflected her own experience as a newly-Christianized person and as a woman aiming to break into the literary world. As mentioned earlier, Lanyer used *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* as a way to speak about proto-feminist and women’s issues. It is quite significant that a woman of more humble origins than the noble writers who came before her set out to bring these subjects into Early Modern women’s authorship. However, this can be linked to her immediate social status to an extent. Throughout *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Lanyer displays her need for financial security as a writer, asking for the help of noblewomen. In a comparison to someone like Sidney, Lanyer’s ability to practice as a writer is limited by her financial resources, and her future possibility of income on writing is based on the approval of the women she is writing to. If a noblewoman is championed as a woman of letters—like in Mary Sidney’s case—there is less likely to be contention over that woman’s talents or abilities due to assumptions of greater access to literacy and a well-versed personal education, even if that person did not go to a university. As Sidney was well-received by both genders—even working closely with men in her Wilton Circle, receiving praise and dedication from them—there was less questioning of her ability to create great literary works. This was not the case with Lanyer.

As someone like Sidney would have felt a greater sense of equality between herself and her male counterparts—based on her own experience—she would have been a bit less likely to share her experiences with gender inequality, at least in an outward way. As noblewomen did not have to concern themselves as much with the trials of common women, gender equality was most likely not a constant thought or passion of theirs (with some exceptions). As Lanyer would have had to work a bit harder to find success as a professional writer—finding patronage, making her name known on a larger scale, and not having the immense privileges that noblewomen had—it is evident that her passion for gender equality could have stemmed from these goals. It is no secret that male writers, along with noblewomen, had more access to a successful writing career. As Lanyer most likely had observed these trends that surrounded her, her own personal struggle was reflected in her work. However, this did not come without consequence, as there is some evidence that *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* was not a particularly popular text in her time (Grossman 1). As her views on women's issues, especially tied in with Christianity, would have been largely considered radical in her time, Lanyer did not see immediate success as a writer. If the same work was written by a noblewoman, there might have been a different narrative for *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, but this is mere speculation. Overall, as Lanyer's life experiences and personal beliefs are represented throughout the text, readers now are granted with the opportunity to see what could be included in Early Modern women's authorship, but for Lanyer, this came with a price as the risky topics she elaborated on were unpopular during her time.

As for Mary Wroth's particular case, despite being a noblewoman, she was largely outcasted from the royal and noble social circle that she enjoyed during the vast majority of her young life. It was not until long after her romantic affair with William Herbert, and subsequent

exclusion from the court that Wroth began publishing her own work. Due to this personal banishment, however, Wroth may have had a new-found perspective on her life's course (Cerasano/Wynne-Davies 91). Growing up around literature and writers (Bear), Wroth channeled much of her energy into writing and publishing her own personal experiences of being an outcast in love into works of fiction after her falling out with the court. While maintaining wealth from family and marriage, coupled with a sense of freedom from some of the social restraints of noblewomen's life in the court, Wroth found herself in a powerful position to speak her truth about her own love life and about the affairs of the nobles she was surrounded by. In a comparison with her aunt, Mary Sidney, there seems to be a little more controversy that surrounded Wroth's life with Sidney appearing to have little or no scandal.

Two things can be said about Mary Sidney's writings when compared to Wroth's, despite their noble statuses: 1) Sidney was key for the development of female writers, primarily engaging in the translation of works, and somewhat avoiding her life's circumstances. This in turn, led to a sense of growing respect for women writers that would have allowed for a more personally-candid writer like Wroth to be publishing her works a few decades after Sidney; and 2) Sidney, having mostly appeared to avoid personal scandal or public harm, did not engage much in writing her love affairs, like Wroth did. As Sidney did not appear to have these experiences, there was simply less of a need for her to be writing about these subjects. As it seemed, there was more personal drama in Wroth's life, which could have caused her to be more reflective of her personal experiences through her work. As most of her work is of a *roman à clef* nature, Wroth parallels fictional characters and events with herself and real-life contemporaries.

As both of these writers wrote about what was important to them and their circumstances, and this is reflected in the thematic differences between their works.

With the exception of Catherine Parr, who did reflect on a particular aspect of her life through religious devotion in connection to her royal status (and publishing nearly 50 years before Sidney), Mary Sidney was crucial in paving the way for following female Early Modern writers by mostly avoiding overt personal details through the translation of works written by men. As certain secular themes were present, they were not couched in controversy or disapproval by the readers of her time. In turn, this allowed for different voices and perspectives to be shared throughout England. While it was a slow and gradual process in many ways, these efforts can be said to allowed for the greater expansion of unique, inclusive perspectives and written candor in the generations and centuries to come. Without the inception and initial progress for women's writing within this over 70-year period, the overall scope of English-language writings by women may have looked quite a bit different, even now.

## **Conclusion**

As shown through the expansion of then-inclusive women's authorship and the expansion of themes and topics written by women during the English Renaissance period, a lot can be said to have changed for the very nature of women's authorship during this time. As the tradition began with a queen, writing on very appropriate subjects like personal Christian devotion, it is shown that this scope altered in quite drastic ways with the end of the period bringing fictional works about love affairs and proto-feminist arguments being discussed by a middle-class woman. As for inclusive authorship, it was quite a slow progression. With the majority of female writers of this time coming from royalty or nobility (mostly due to accessibility in literacy and

education), we did observe a bit more inclusivity with the life experiences of Aemilia Lanyer and other lesser-known writers of her social status. As for thematic progression, Christian devotion and domestic topics were very much present throughout this period, but with a little bit of leeway and bravery, secular themes and topics—love, death, and politics—were introduced into the canon little-by-little by Mary Sidney and Mary Wroth.

Without the efforts of all of these writers, one can wonder when women's authorship in the English language would have begun, but the fact that the tradition began in the Early Modern, or Renaissance, period of England is very much consistent with the growing cause for gender equality-based philosophies and liberalized ideas that were character of the time period. For these reasons, the inception and expansion of women's authorship were consistent with and appropriate for the Renaissance time period, as women gained more respect for their work and contributions to literature. Growing literacy rates and the growing forum of book publication also contributed to this mode. While the writers written about through this report are as not highly-studied as women writers in the time periods that followed them—Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft, for a few examples—it is imperative that we pay tribute to them, and not neglect the change that they were able to bring for later women writers and the study of women's authorship. Although the experiences of these women—many of them coming from noble and highly-privileged backgrounds, and writing about subjects that are a bit out of touch with our current reality in 2021—may seem like “ancient history,” there is a lot of respect and discourse that can be taken from their efforts in the context of women's authorship then and now.

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