

A GROUP OF THEIR OWN

College Writing Courses and
American Women Writers, 1880–1940



KATHERINE H. ADAMS

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STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS
ALBANY

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For information, address
State University of New York Press,
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production and book design, Laurie Searl
Marketing, Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adams, Katherine H., 1954—

A group of their own : college writing courses and American women writers.

1880–1940 / Katherine H. Adams

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7914-4935-1 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-4936-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Women authors, American—Education. 2. American literature—Women authors—History and criticism. 3. English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching—United States—History. 4. Creative writing (Higher education)—United States—History. 5. Authorship—Social aspects—United States. 6. Women—Education (Higher)—United States—History. 7. Women and literature—United States—History. I. Title.

PS151 .A34 2001

810.9'9287'09034—dc21

00-045055

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

for

PEGGY McCORMACK

and

MARY SUE MORROW

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A sabbatical semester provided by the Grants and Leaves Committee of Loyola University enabled me to begin work on this project. My colleagues Mary McCay, Peggy McCormack, Melanie McKay, and Nancy Anderson graciously answered my many questions about American literature, American history, and feminist theory. Alice Templeton helped me to revise and edit the manuscript. And, as always when I write, Loyola University's interlibrary loan officer, Pat Doran, provided me with every book and article I needed. I appreciate their assistance as well as the daily support of my husband, Vick Adams. I also very much appreciate and wish to acknowledge the positive spirit and fine judgment of SUNY Press's director, Priscilla Ross, and production editor Laurie Searl.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of what literary scholars assume about women's entrance into professional writing at the beginning of the twentieth century comes not from history but from the fictionalized example powerfully rendered in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929. Woolf's characterization of Judith Shakespeare, situated in the Renaissance but applied to women's situations from that time forward, focuses on a group that even a very gifted woman could not join, a public door she could not enter beyond which men learned their craft and performed. Shakespeare's hypothetical sister is described as an outsider, unable to study acting or to learn playwriting:

She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager—a fat, loose-lipped man—guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting—no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted—you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. (83)

Woolf emphatically concludes that such a gifted woman, barred from the world of art, would have “dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to” (85).

Although Woolf's title focuses on women's need of a secure living and a separate space for work, this characterization of Judith Shakespeare clearly also concerns women's separation from professional training and interaction with colleagues. For young men of the 1920s, Woolf asserts, college provided the best locus for studying the craft of writing. Since few women could venture there, however, they did not learn their craft as well, and thus they rarely created truly artistic renderings of their frustrations and dreams. Woolf substantiates her belief “that poetical genius bloweth where it listeth, and equally in poor and rich, holds little truth” by examining the lives of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron,

Shelley, and other famous writers: nine of twelve were university men, and they all had groups of colleagues available to them—for criticism, support, and entrance into professional publication (186). In discussing Oxbridge, her combination of Cambridge and Oxford, Woolf mentions professors that her fictional “Mary” cannot talk to, libraries she cannot use, seminar rooms she cannot enter, community dinners she cannot attend. Woolf even considers “the admirable smoke and drink and the deep armchairs and the pleasant carpets . . . the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space” (39). This passage may seem to concern nonessentials of the better funded men’s college, the accouterments of a club, but instead it describes a rare and important privilege, a site where men could comfortably share their work, respond to their reading, and seek literary advice.

Women’s isolation from such groups of writers, Woolf contends, also leads to isolation from the larger community of readers. Although all artists have a difficult time establishing themselves with an appreciative audience, the general public believed that the woman writer, not supported by a creative tradition or part of any influential network, had no right to even make the attempt:

The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What’s the good of your writing? (91)

This sarcastic “What’s the good of your writing?” stemmed from two sets of doors that constrained women: the doors of their homes, behind which their lives should occur, and the doors to public sites, like the theatre or the college, behind which experience and training were available only to men. Judith was meant to stay within the doors of her home as the wife of a wool-stapler and never to seek entrance to school or theatre doors.

As a result of this isolation and restriction, most women confined their literary efforts to letters or short poems shared among friends. When they tried to create professional products, Woolf argues, their lack of training generally rendered them unable to move beyond plainly stated anger or fear. As Woolf moves along imagined library shelves, she finds very few products by women and almost none that mine the potential of Judith Shakespeare and so many of her sisters.

Twenty years later, in 1949, this depiction of the hypothetical Judith was given a powerful theoretical overlay in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.

De Beauvoir asserts that as men envisioned themselves as the powerful Subject, they did so by casting woman as the Other—the dependent, the inessential, the care-giver, the object: “[S]he is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty” (295). As a result of these narrow definitions and expectations, de Beauvoir contends, women did not become the authors whose works shaped an era, or even the audience of such works; they lived within a dominant culture not of their own mental creation:

Women do not set themselves up as Subject and hence erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own; they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship. Men have shaped for their own exaltation great virile figures: Hercules, Prometheus, Parsifal; woman has only a secondary part to play in the destiny of these heroes. . . . Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth. (150–51)

In a social system defined by Self/Other, women’s writing would be no essential act, but perhaps a mode of self-expression or a means of wiling away the time. Even within these limited genres and purposes, de Beauvoir argues echoing Woolf, women’s efforts suffered because of their lack of training in writing and lack of experience with disciplined work:

Even if she begins fairly early, she seldom envisages art as serious work; accustomed to idleness, having never felt in her mode of life the austere necessity of discipline, she will not be capable of sustained and persistent effort, she will never succeed in gaining a solid technique. (739)

Both *A Room of One’s Own* and *The Second Sex* describe a European intellectual life from which women were kept separate, as untrained and unworthy. This influential description and analysis, from 1929 and 1949, would certainly also apply to American cultural life of the nineteenth century. In America as in Europe, that century ended as it began, with Writer firmly inscribed as a role of Man. In nineteenth-century America, the Man/Writer had the cultural role of telling meaningful stories—about life and death, man and nature, the struggle to build America, the role of the individual—to other male intellectuals, an audience located entirely, as in a Venn diagram, within the larger circle of Man. Among authors in this category, however different their goals and allegiances, were Howells, Norris, Twain, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, and Cooper. Similarly, influential newspaper editors

such as Amos Kendall and Horace Greeley aimed their political and business news at an audience of men; infrequent gossip and feature columns would suffice for the few women readers. The culturally influential Writer, and even the intellectual Reader, were thus key roles of a striving male Self.

At this time, within the circle of Woman defined as Other was a smaller circle representative of another category of writer that I will discuss as Non-Writer. She could only function within the appropriate roles for women, thus as a moral beacon, as a representative of the home, as a mother. Her audience would be other literate middle-class wives and mothers, and her messages would be meant not to form a culture, but to help women adjust to and excel at their established domestic roles within a society defined by men (Coultrap-McQuin 15–16). Since both “writer” and “author” seemed to be terms appropriate only for men, representatives of this group, including Lydia Maria Child, Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, were frequently identified by less respectful names: bluestockings, poetizers, authorlings, or a “d—d mob of scribbling women.” At newspapers by the end of the century, a few women worked part-time as women’s page or society editors, but they were kept separated from the real, hard-bitten “newspapermen.” The very limited identity available to female poets, novelists, and journalists—that of Non-Writers—did allow them to write but severely constrained their opportunities, subject matter, and audience. Although women’s writing proliferated in nineteenth-century America, it existed within narrow definitions, with strict penalties for treacheries against the Non-Writer code.

However applicable Woolf and de Beauvoir’s depictions may be to nineteenth-century America and however compelling a portrait they create by which to measure recent gains and goals, they do not accurately depict intellectual life of 1929 or 1949 in the United States. The difference for American writers was college education. For ironically although Virginia Woolf advocates a room of one’s own, what American women did was to leave their private spaces and move into dorms and classrooms—in much greater numbers and much larger percentages than in England and France. In England from 1925–1926, only seven in every 10,000 male and female high school or academy students, or .0007 percent, attended college (Mowat 210). The 8,376 women then enrolled constituted only 29 percent of the very small student group. In the United States in 1929, however, where the number of colleges and universities was then 1,377, a larger percentage of college-age people attended college, 6.6 percent of that population in comparison to .0007 percent in England. Although this trend had at first primarily involved white middle-class women from the Northeast, the large number of schools functioning

by 1929, both state and private, helped to extend it to African American women, women from lower income families, and women in all states. Because of the varied sorts of opportunities, the percentage of women students was much greater in 1929 than in England, 40 percent of the student population instead of 29 percent, and so were the numbers: of approximately 1,100,000 American college students, more than 40 percent, or 440,000, were women (*Historical Statistics* 383). Even by 1949, the year that *The Second Sex* was published, only 20 percent of French college students, or 26,400 students, were women. The percentage of women students there did not reach forty until 1967 (Duchen 154).

At schools across the United States, especially after 1880, large numbers of female college students entered into the habits and environments of “learned discourse,” a privilege reserved in England, in Woolf’s depiction, for just a few affluent men. In the college setting, as Woolf would have predicted, they encountered a redefining opportunity, described vividly by Lucy Martin Donnelly, a teacher at Bryn Mawr, in 1908:

A strange passion for a lady! To forswear gardens and parlors for mere grassy quads and academic porticoes; to exchange silks for the never-changing fashion of a scholar’s rusty serge, and trinkets for goose-quills and inkpots; to prefer the bookish scent of libraries to roses, perhaps; to devote her days to learned discourse, and her evenings to the solitary meditation recommended the student; this, in a word, is the discipline to which the Lady Collegiate vows herself. (537)

This new “discipline”—of classes, extracurricular activities, and dorm life—did seem in the first years to be a “strange passion for a lady” and many families, such as Eleanor Roosevelt’s, thought the experience too extreme and unnatural for their daughters. But after 1900, as numbers grew, as families had a wider choice of public and private institutions, and as education and home economics departments provided more comfortable settings for some women, college attendance became more acceptable as an appropriate training for motherhood—and for careers.

As American women went to private and state universities in ever increasing numbers, adopting more freely the role of “Lady Collegiate,” many began participating there in an innovative writing curriculum that did not exist in Europe at all. In late nineteenth-century America, following the Morrill Act and a reexamination of the university’s role in an industrializing nation, pressure was placed on even liberal arts departments to offer practical specialties. With new departments of education taking over the role of training teachers,

English departments looked at advanced curricula in writing as another form of specialization and career training that could bolster their student numbers and funding. Older professors and younger hires began offering courses in poetry, fiction, drama, pageants, advertisements, newspaper articles, and magazine features as well as on English and American literature. In the new writing courses, teachers often used a workshop format to imitate a newspaper office or a publishing house, and they focused on training professional novelists, poets, and journalists as well as extending general reading and writing skills. In the literature classes, before the creation of large college libraries for research and before the critical apparatus of New Criticism, teachers often allowed students to experiment with the genres studied in class, thus to write fiction and poetry as well as analytical essays. In all of these classes, at least in part because of the development of new male college specialties, such as business and engineering, women often made up the majority of students, even in universities in which they were a small minority of the total student population. While taking literature and writing classes, women also participated in college magazines and newspaper offices, literary clubs, and theatre groups. At women's colleges, these activities might not be geared to enabling women to become professionals; at coeducational schools, women's participation might be accepted with great reluctance. But in these classes and organizations, along with serious prejudices against them, women such as Elizabeth Bishop, Ruby Black, Pearl Buck, Emma Bugbee, Fanny Butcher, Willa Cather, Jessie Fauset, Zona Gale, Mildred Gilman, Zora Neale Hurston, Mary McCarthy, Marianne Moore, Pauli Murray, Elizabeth Spencer, Milicent Shinn, Ruth Suckow, Dorothy Thompson, Eudora Welty, Margaret Walker, and Leane Zugsmith found a place to learn fundamentals of technique and enter professional groups. In journals, letters, college papers, school magazine articles, yearbook entries, and then later in their published novels, newspaper stories, and autobiographies, hundreds of American women analyzed the impact of these college experiences on their writing skills and on their paradigm of professional life.

This experience of college, both in the course work and extracurricular opportunities, caused the numbers of women in the United States who worked for at least part of their adult lives as professional writers to increase dramatically. After 1890, in fact, women entered writing careers at a much faster rate than they chose any other career that had not begun to assume a "women-only" definition. Although the way was certainly hard for those who made the commitment, by Woolf's publication year of 1929 more than 40 percent of American literary authors and 25 percent of the journalists and editors were women. According to literary critic Elizabeth Ammons, this trend involved

black as well as white writers: "From the 1890s to the 1920s, African American women published fiction at an unprecedented rate" while also working as reporters and editors at magazines, such as *Colored American Magazine* and the *Crisis* (22). By de Beauvoir's publication year of 1949, one-third of editors and reporters were women (Newcomer 179). Half of the Pulitzer Prizes given for fiction between the award's inauguration in 1918 and World War II went to women. The large number of black and white writers began not only to address the traditional audience of middle-class women in more varied and challenging manners, but also to write for women of all classes as well as for audiences of men and women. They moved out from manners and childrearing into news and editorial writing, magazine feature writing, textbook writing, scholarship, historical studies, poetry, and fiction, making a Male/Writer definition no longer really possible and the male grip on culture formation harder to maintain. As Ammons asserted in her study of works written by American women between 1892 and 1929, this early-twentieth-century group was the first to "invade the territory of high art traditionally posted in western culture as the exclusive property of privileged white men" (5).

What enabled this change, beginning well before 1929, was not just the training secured in college but the encounter there with a model for professional endeavor, a working routine and support mechanism that these women carried with them from college into careers. Immediately after graduating, they began participating in clubs, workshops, political parties, and government agencies where they could continue working within groups as they had done in college. Although they might not be wanted in existing groups where men had dominated, and forming new ones could be an all-consuming endeavor, these women proceeded doggedly, creating a pattern of collaboration as well as possibilities for women writers that had never existed before. With the support of this lifelong commitment to the group, many women faced the realities awaiting them—claims made by parents, husbands, social and racial conventions, editors, the public, the bank account, and the work itself—and entered the previously closed circle of Writer.

As these women, with group support behind them, became influential at newspapers and at publishing houses, they did not just conform to what they found there but, working from the security of their own group structures, they introduced new subjects and prose styles to American writing. And so ultimately their model of collaboration, so carefully nurtured in college and after, created not just the possibility of career but a redefinition of writing itself. Writer could no longer be situated within the circle of Man, and thus the writing produced could no longer be simply the topics, logic, and style that a man

might produce for an all-male audience. Along with women's substantial number of varied publications before World War II came influential new styles of journalism and fiction that redefined these genres for both women and men.

The elements of women's experience discussed here—their education, their incorporation of a learning model into their working lives, and the texts they produced—have been central to a theoretical debate in recent decades. In 1975, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which appeared in a special issue of *L'Arc* devoted to Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous recognized that the domination of man as Self and the designation of woman as Other had occurred through writing and that “woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (276). Of the resulting *écriture féminine*, she refuses to provide a limiting definition since “this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded” (287). By moving beyond traditional modes of performance, she asserts, these products can “surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (287). Many other feminist theorists who question Cixous's emphasis on the individual body and voice, such as Toril Moi, Ann Rosalind Jones, and Domna C. Stanton, have also recognized the relationship between limitations placed on women's prose and the restrictiveness of dominant social codes. At the same time, writing teachers have speculated on the types of instruction that will help young women find their own voices and influence others. Cynthia L. Caywood and Gillian R. Overing, in their collection on writing and gender, claim that the “less-structured, less rigidly hierarchical” collaborative-workshop model of learning is “compatible with feminism, if not feminist in and of itself” (198); Frances Maher discusses it as the best pedagogy for “voicing and exploring the hitherto unexpressed perspectives of women and others” (30); Patricia Bizzell claims that such curricular reform will “promote more equitable relations” (486); Pamela Annas calls the collaborative classroom a “nurturing but rigorous/tough space” (14; Ashton-Jones 7–11). Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford in *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, as well as Ann Ruggles Gere in *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, view this writing model as involving women in the best traditions of literary and corporate authoring, territories once limited to men.

As scholars add to the picture of women's creativity begun by Woolf and de Beauvoir and as they investigate new models of instruction, they should also look carefully at the experiences of the first generations of women who sought collaborative training and then began professional careers writing poetry and prose. From 1880 to 1940, American women came to college to learn to be writers, they took advantage there of every opportunity to form groups of colleagues, and they continued to rely on this model after they left college, creat-

ing new types of personal/professional groups. And, from this home base, they crafted very influential texts that helped shape their era. The real choices made by the generations of women who shattered the definitions of Writer/Non-Writer, both in their college classes and then in their careers, can enable us to truly examine *écriture féminine* and the learning environment needed to nurture it: these writers reveal to us not new theoretical possibilities but specific models of work that nurture creativity and transform lives.

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CHAPTER ONE

BEFORE 1880, THROUGH EXCUSES ONLY

She is in the swim, but not of it.

—*Journalist* magazine

In 1890, only 4 percent of American journalists were women, and percentages in other writing fields were even lower. Those few who made a serious commitment to writing found their course severely constrained—by their education, family responsibilities, social codes, and isolation from other writers. Because of these limited freedoms and connections, American women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote by relying on some form of justification or rationalization, which varied with the decades, and they usually wrote professionally for only part of their adulthood. Cast in the insubstantial role of Non-Writer, a subset of the care-giving Woman, these writers were meant to address only women readers on narrowly defined women's topics such as home-making while the genres and pronouncements of male Writers were shaping American intellectual culture. Although their choices were few, for women working within a patriarchal system without supportive networks or groups, these excuses and restrictive definitions did provide some space for writing.

DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

In the colonial period, women's labor was frequently needed, in towns and certainly on the frontier, and it provided their means of securing a living when

left without father or husband. Some better educated single women and widows worked in journalism—writing, editing, printing, and distributing newspapers while also taking on contract printing jobs. Elizabeth Glover of Cambridge, whose husband, the Reverend Jose Glover, died on the boat to America, operated the first printing press in North America (Marzolf 2). She supported her five children by printing colonial pamphlets and bulletins until she married Harvard's president, Henry Dunster, in 1641. The first reason or justification that could propel American women to authorship was this necessity to earn a living when left without a male provider, an acceptable excuse that enabled a few white middle-class women to write and publish both political and literary pieces.

Ann Smith Franklin, widow of Benjamin Franklin's brother James who had been publisher of Boston's *New England Courant*, inherited his printing business in 1735 when his death left her without other means of supporting her children, and she ran the newspaper for thirteen years aided by her daughters Elizabeth and Mary. In 1736, she also became official printer for the Rhode Island General Assembly, issuing 500 copies of its *Acts and Laws* in 1745, a folio volume of more than 300 pages. She also printed almanacs, religious tracts, and local literary efforts, along with her own almanacs published under her husband's pseudonym of "Poor Robin." She continued working with her son James Jr., who finished his apprenticeship with Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia and returned to Newport in 1748. In 1762, when her son died, she took over his newspaper, the *Newport Mercury*, and assumed sole control of the printing business, running both until her death the following year.

Anne Catherine Hoof Green, who bore fourteen children, took over her husband Jonas's newspaper and printing business at his death in 1767, aided by two of her sons. She continued his *Maryland Gazette*, the only newspaper in Maryland, without a break and regained her husband's contract as official colony printer. An important chronicle of pre-Revolutionary fervor, her paper published news of colonial reaction to the Townsend Act and accounts of the Boston Tea Party as well as John Dickinson's *Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer*, a series of tracts against British taxation policy that stirred opposition to Parliament, both in the colonies and in England.

Clementina Rind, whose husband had been Jonas Green's partner on the *Maryland Gazette*, took over his *Virginia Gazette* at his death in 1773. She expanded his regular fare of reports on foreign and domestic politics, shipping news, and advertisements by including essays and poems from local contributors and from London newspapers and magazines. To improve her region, she also published news of scientific developments, philanthropic efforts, and plans

for improving education, especially at the College of William and Mary. To attract and keep a female audience, she regularly included poems concerning women, news with a women's slant, and vignettes of European high society and of home life in other colonies. In 1774, she purchased a new set of types from London and began to serve, until her death later that year, as the official Virginia colony printer (James I 662–63; II 80–81; III 161–62).

For these white women who had the requisite literacy skills, writing provided a means of supporting themselves and arranging careers for sons and unmarried daughters. Shielded by this justification, they could aggressively seek private and governmental contracts for printing books and pamphlets, purchase new equipment, and run newspapers that combined political news, essays on women's issues, and literary works. Since most colonies had only one newspaper and few printing presses and since the husband had already assumed the role of printer, they might not be competing with any established businessmen and thus their efforts might appear all the more acceptable to men. But, although ambition during a family crisis was generally deemed appropriate, ongoing careers were not; women were expected to turn their operations over to adult sons or to discontinue working if they married.

Because journalism and printing could offer immediate and ongoing income, very few women ventured into other genres to earn a living. Those few who chose scholarship and textbook publishing encountered great difficulties in entering these male-dominated domains. Hannah Adams, born in Massachusetts in 1755, was perhaps the first American woman to make scholarly writing her profession, "as the last resort, to attend to my manuscript, with the faint hope that it might be printed, and afford me some little advantage," she wrote in her autobiography, a step she took after her father's bookstore failed and she had tried to support her family by weaving bobbin lace and tutoring college students (*Memoirs* 12). With poverty providing the exigency, she could pursue the love of research and writing that had begun in her childhood. Even with her acceptable justification well known, however, she encountered great difficulties when her works challenged the money-making projects of established male authors. Her second book, *A Summary History of New-England* (1799), embroiled her in a ten-year controversy when her abridgment intended for the schools, and thus as a moneymaker, conflicted with the Reverend Jedidah Morse and Elijah Parish's attempt to reach the same readers. Morse moved quickly to forestall her, an act that he defended in several derogatory tracts concerning her ambitions and writing skills. In response, she wrote an account of the conflict and sent it to many influential people, a few of whom, such as politician Josiah Quincy, offered her financial

help. In reviews of the two books published in the *Monthly Anthology* in July 1805, Reverend William Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson's father, praised her work for being more clear and correct and even accused Morse and Parish of copying some of her information.

Reviewing this case in a 1993 article, literary scholar Michael W. Vella criticized Adams for the contrasting tones that she adopted, but he did not consider the connection between her public declarations and a woman writer's need to position herself as a Non-Writer seeking income during a crisis. In Adams's letters to politicians and lawyers concerning this case, Vella finds "a false self-effacement, a posturing of a helpless female, something of a martyr." To provide an example, he notes her tabulation of the difficulties she faced: "my being entirely destitute of pecuniary recourse, my retired situation, ignorance of the world, incapability of conducting business myself, and the want of friends who were able and willing to assist me." Vella judges such declarations as hypocritical since Adams pursued her rights as an author aggressively and could speak persuasively, as she did privately to her lawyers about injustices wrought against women: "To the curiosity of the idle, and the envy of the malicious their sex affords a peculiar excitement; arraigned not merely as writers, but as women, their characters, their conduct, even their personal endowments become the objects of severe inquisition" (30–32). Adams's "posturing," which Vella labels as a "fundamental ambiguity" in her character, was perhaps her only means of negotiating her way through a world in which frank public declarations of her strengths and rights would have left her without the support she needed, support that would only be accorded to the meek female Non-Writer. After succeeding at her quest to gain recognition for her talents and financial needs, Adams next published *The Truth and Excellence of the Christian Religion Exhibited* (1804) and then *History of the Jews* (1812), choosing the latter subject because fewer of her contemporaries had written on Judaism and thus it offered the chance for greater profit with less opposition.

During the colonial period, women also wrote poetry and fiction although generally as a private commitment and not as a means of earning a living. Since poetry could offer little hope of profit, it seemed especially immodest and unwomanly to seek its publication beyond broadsheets aimed for ladies' clubs or recital hours. Anne Bradstreet's brother-in-law secretly published her poetry in London in 1650 under the immodest title of *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, surprising and shaming her, as she recorded in a poem printed in a second edition of her work, *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning, Full of Delight* (1678):