

OPPOSITIONAL VOICES

Women as Writers and
Translators of Literature in
the English Renaissance



TINA KRONIRIS



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Literature in the English Renaissance

Tina Krontiris

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1992
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

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Set in 10/12pt Palatino by Selectmove

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Krontiris, Tina

Oppositional voices: women as writers and translators of literature in the English Renaissance.

1. English literature. Authors. Women, history, 1485–1603
I. Title
820.99287

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Krontiris, Tina

Oppositional voices: women as writers and translators of literature in the English Renaissance/Tina Krontiris.
p. cm.

Based on the author's Ph.D. thesis.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English literature – Early modern, 1500–1700 – History and criticism. 2. English literature – Women authors – History and criticism. 3. Women and literature – England – History – 16th century. 4. Women and literature – England – History – 17th century. 5. Women – England – History – Renaissance, 1450–1600. 6. Translating and interpreting – England – History. 7. Authorship – Sex differences.

I. Title.

PR113.K7 1992

820.9'9287'09031 – dc20 91–14010

ISBN 0-415-06329-9

To the memory of my brother,
Panagiotis Krontiris

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While I worked on this book and the Ph.D. thesis on which it is based, several people offered me moral and material support. I wish to thank them here. I acknowledge with great pleasure the encouragement and materials (books, papers, ideas) I received from Ann Rosalind Jones. If it were not too banal to speak of models nowadays, I would say that she is the model of sisterhood. I would also like to thank Jonathan Dollimore, who supervised the doctoral thesis; his comments on the various chapters were particularly useful. Not least, I must acknowledge the contribution of Betty Travitsky, who patiently answered many queries regarding primary material.

Several other people contributed in various ways. Jina Politi, Peter Stallybrass, Maria Mitchell, and Ania Loomba offered advice or ideas in the beginning stages of my research; my friends Kiki, Asha, Erwin, and (sometimes) Pantelis provided moral support; in Thessaloniki, Stavros Rammos taught me something about textual pleasure. The staff of the Sussex University Library, especially Jenny Marshman and the people in interlibrary loans, were very helpful. Mr James Lund of the University of London, International Hall, helped me with accommodation during my long visits to the British Museum.

English Literary Renaissance granted permission to reprint 'Breaking barriers of genre and gender,' which appeared in volume 18 (1988), and the University of Massachusetts Press similarly allowed me to make use of my essay 'Style and gender in Elizabeth Cary's *Edward II*,' originally published in *The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print*, ed. Anne Haselkorn

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and Betty Travitsky, 1990. I thank them kindly. Finally, I must acknowledge the financial support of the Greek State Scholarship Foundation between 1984 and 1987.

Tina Krontiris

1

CULTURE, CHANGE, AND WOMEN'S RESPONSES

When Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was published in 1929 virtually nothing was known about women writers of the early modern period in England. The general silence on early female literary activity led Woolf to suppose that there were no women who wrote in that period. Woolf had to invent the fictional figure of 'Shakespeare's Sister' in order to explain the historical conditions that obstructed women's creative energy. Since then, thanks to the painstaking work of feminist researchers and to theoretical developments in English and feminist studies, much light has been shed on the living conditions and literary products of early modern women.¹ Today we have a much clearer picture of what these women wrote and what sorts of themes and genres they dealt with. Now we also know more about the precise forms of oppression they were subjected to and why they were unable to write more in an age when, as Virginia Woolf put it, 'every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet.'² Yet it still remains to be seen how they were able to write at all in such an oppressive environment and what effect that environment had on what they finally produced. How is it that the same culture which produced a prohibitive ideology also produced the possibility of even a few women writing, publishing, and sometimes voicing criticism of their oppressors? My overall purpose here is to try to answer this question and to point out the types of ideas women writers contest.

One of the assumptions I work with in this book concerns the relation of theory to fact. I take theory to be not necessarily or not always consonant with actual human behaviour; what happens at the level of social practice is often at variance

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with specific theories or rules about what should happen. I also assume that ideology in general is not a set of ideas and values which are made by those in power and which remain there unalterable and eternal. Ideological and cultural formations are changing processes; and they are contradictory in character because they are determined by competing social groups of divergent interests.³ I accept, therefore, that there is a dialectical relationship between women and men in a culture where the imbalance of power is grossly in favour of the latter. In such a situation women are a subordinate group but they are also participants in social change. Change of any sort, that is, is not something that occurs outside the realm of women. Though within western society women have historically possessed much less cultural and political power than men have, they are not for that reason to be thought of as passive and obedient performers of rules dictated from above. The process of internalization may account for the actions of many women, but not of all women. Nor is resistance to be conceived solely in terms of a revolutionary movement. Resistance to oppression can take the form of dialectical relationships within systems of power. 'Resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real,' Foucault states; 'nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. Resistance exists all the more by being in the same place as power.'⁴

In her ground-breaking and now classic essay, 'Did women have a Renaissance?'⁵ the late Joan Kelly-Gadol answers the question of her title with an unequivocal no. Using mainly material on courtly love from medieval to Renaissance times, Kelly-Gadol argues that as Europe moved from a feudal to an early modern state, women faced new restrictions and stricter codes of subordination. Her view gained wide acceptance, especially on account of its challenge of a common periodization for men and women. Many scholars, especially within feminism, confirmed her view that the period of 'rebirth' meant something very different for each of the two sexes. Today, however, historians and researchers hesitate to accept the view of a complete Dark Ages for Renaissance women and to embrace unqualifyingly Kelly-Gadol's generalizations, as more and more diversified evidence turns up. Margaret Ferguson and the other editors of *Rewriting the Renaissance* seem to voice this recent tendency when they state that 'it is still too early for

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a definitive answer to Joan Kelly-Gadol's famous question.⁶ While still steering a course directly opposite to Burckhardt's classic assertion that Renaissance women 'stood on a footing of perfect equality with men,'⁷ recent historians and researchers increasingly draw our attention to facts about Renaissance women's behaviour in real life and the discrepancy between the private and the public image. Mary Ellen Lamb, for example, examines the translations and correspondence of the Cooke sisters and notes a great difference in the way they appear in their sealed letters and in the prefaces and dedications that accompany their published translations.⁸ Judith Brown studies records on the working women in Tuscany and concludes that a large number of women of that area participated in the labour force despite guild regulations against it. On the basis of the information she has uncovered, Brown challenges the generalization of a direct relation between a decline in women's economic status and the development of capitalism made by earlier studies of women's labour, including Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. Brown correctly states:

Surely the importance of ideology cannot be denied. Renaissance women had to contend with it. But if the rules that constrained their behaviour closed off many options, they still left others open, and . . . women were very inventive in carving out for themselves meaningful, productive, and creative roles. We need, therefore, to look not only at the rules of society but also at how men and women understood them, and often circumvented them.⁹

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY DEFINITIONS OF FEMININITY

The beginning of the sixteenth century witnessed great changes in the political, socio-economic, and religious structures. The umbrella term 'Renaissance,' commonly used for the years roughly between 1500 and 1640 in England, belies these changes; for this reason historians today tend to employ the more accurate term, 'early modern period.' In this book I shall use both terms. In so far as it is a study of women's writing (that is, of an intellectual activity), the word 'Renaissance' produces ironic reverberations because the so-called 'rebirth' in thought and

learning does not apply equally to the female half of the population. I use the term 'early modern period' at other times precisely to focus on those changes which affected – differently – the everyday lives of men and women.

In England, as in the rest of Europe, the king consolidates his power and the court becomes a centre for political and cultural activity. In the course of the sixteenth century, courtiership becomes a new profession, and competition for the monarch's favour becomes the norm at court. In the social sphere there is an unprecedented degree of class mobility, both downward and upward, resulting in the expansion of the middle class. Between the two extremes of the highest and the lowest ranks there is a group of craftsmen, tradespeople, and professional men that is getting larger and larger as England's economic position improves and trade becomes a promising enterprise. New opportunities come up, mainly for men. Largely, women are forced out of the business sector and become confined to the private sphere of the home.¹⁰

In the area of religion, the Reformation is gradually gaining ground as a new major movement. Seeking to increase its ranks, it appeals for support to both men and women. Protestant reformers stress the democratic principle of the religious change in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers: not only men but women and the low born, in spiritual equality, will be given the right to read and interpret the scriptures. Many of these promises will later be retracted, but meanwhile they work their way, and literacy is encouraged. In the intellectual sphere, humanism brings in the influence of classical thought (Greek and Roman) and emphasizes man's control over his actions and behaviour. A number of liberal early humanists (including More, Vives, Elyot, and Hyrde) attempt to elevate woman and retrieve her from the low status into which she was cast by medieval Christian doctrine. In the family scene there is no great change, though here we must speak more cautiously. Lawrence Stone has claimed a major shift from an open lineage to a nuclear-type family for the late sixteenth century, but more recent historians argue convincingly that by the sixteenth century the English family is already nuclear in structure (consisting of the couple and their children), at least for the majority of the population.¹¹ Nevertheless, the movements outlined above do not leave the family unaffected. The roles of

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the husband and the wife are redefined and new ideals and purposes are set for the marriage.

Both humanists and reformers adopted the idea that marriage is not simply for procreation and the avoidance of sin and fornication but also for mutual comfort and companionship. Both aimed to elevate the role of marriage, defending it against celibacy, which was now cast as inferior. The advantages of marriage were elaborated on and married life was praised. In his *Book of Matrimony* (1560), for example, Thomas Becon presents marriage as an ideal, a means to domestic bliss.¹² The elevation of marriage went hand in hand with the elevation of motherhood. Both humanists and reformers joined voices in praising the new mother. Motherhood was now seen partly as a way of saving woman from her original sin, and partly also as an important means in securing the Reformation. Both humanists and reformers, however, charged the husband with the responsibility of supervising the religious and moral conduct of his wife and children. It is in fact this stress on the responsibility of the husband which distinguishes the patriarchy of the post-Reformation period from earlier patriarchies.¹³

Related to these changes, as well as to notions of womanhood inherited from the Middle Ages, are the new requirements for feminine conduct propagated in the course of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The woman is seen increasingly as a means of guaranteeing family property and honour. Accordingly, female passive qualities are emphasized, especially that of chastity. In the many male-written manuals and conduct books, women are repeatedly warned about the dangers of sexual transgression. Sexual purity is linked to a woman's speech. The quality of silence is not as universally required as chastity, but it is one of the principal virtues in dominant discourse. One English writer declares:

A womans Tongue that is as swift as thought,
Is ever bad, and she herself starke Nought:
But shee that seldome speakes and mildly then,
Is rare Pearl amongst all other Women.
Maides must be seene, not heard, or selde or never,
O may I such one wed, if I, wed ever.¹⁴

Altogether, woman was seen in terms of her function as a wife and mother, not as a human being with needs and desires of

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her own. Voicing opinion in public or participating in male activities was usually forbidden. The early humanists, whose views shall be discussed more extensively later, argued in favour of female education, but even they confined women to private roles. Louis Vives, author of the influential treatise *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (translated by Hyrde in 1529), states on the pursuits of a woman:

the study of wysedome: the which dothe instruct their maners and enfurme theyr lyvyng and teacheth them the waye of good and holy lyfe. As for eloquence I have no great care, nor a woman nedeth it nat: but she nedeth goodness and wysedome.¹⁵

In his treatise Vives makes it quite clear that the purpose of all instruction for a woman is to make her a virtuous and wise wife, not a competitor in her husband's public world. Sir Thomas More himself, arguably the most liberal of the early humanists, disapproves of a woman writing for public consumption. In one of his letters to his daughter Margaret he characteristically states:

Content with the profit and the pleasure of your conscience, in your modesty you do not seek for the praise of the public, nor value it overmuch even if you receive it, but because of the great love you bear us, you regard us – your husband and myself – as a sufficiently large circle of readers for all that you write.¹⁶

In the later part of the Renaissance there appears to be a tightening in the prescriptions. An emergent current of Puritan patriarchalism is partly responsible for this. According to patriarchalist theory, all governing authority is paternal. Both in the commonwealth and the family (the one being analogous to the other) the king/father rules over his subjects.¹⁷ Even queens come under attack from hard-core patriarchalists like John Knox.¹⁸ The tightening of the restrictions has probably something to do also with a reaction to an increase in women's actual opportunities, a topic I discuss later on. Whatever the reasons, later theorists on women's conduct are quite emphatic and restrictive in specifying the requirements for proper feminine conduct. The link between speech and chastity is reinforced. Richard Brathwait, in *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), states:

'What is spoken of Maids may be properly applied to all women: they should be seene and not heard.'¹⁹ The requirements are particularly severe for the wife. Thus Robert Snausel in *A Looking Glasse for Married Folkes* (1631) stresses the threat of a woman's speech to the marriage, and Gervase Markham in *The English Huswife* (1615) goes so far as to forbid her to speak even on matters of faith. The wife's inferiority and subordination to the husband is also stressed. Some theorists and moralists, like William Gouge, require the wife to show outward signs of her husband's superiority (for example, bowing in his presence).²⁰ Most theorists either take it for granted or specify that one of the wife's duties is to accept her husband's superiority and her own inferiority. The woman instructs her daughters and female servants, but the man is the ultimate authority, the owner, the instructor.²¹ One of the husband's duties, derived from Christian doctrine, is to rule. (God conferred upon man, in the figure of Adam, the headship in marriage because man surpasses the woman in strength of body and mind and is thus better suited for the government of wife and household.) 'He may rule with kindness or severity but there must be no question that he rules.'²² Although many writers on marital conduct urged the husbands to reason with their wives and not to abuse them, they simultaneously forbade the wife to question her husband's authority. If he did abuse her, she ought to forbear. The consolation that some theorists offered was that if she was not rewarded on earth, she would be rewarded in heaven and that heavenly reward would be greater in proportion to her earthly suffering.²³ The patient Griselda, the personification of ideal subservience in women, was frequently proffered as a model. The woman was to derive gratification from the performance of her wifely duty alone.²⁴

Such were the theories propounded. What was the relation of these theories to what was happening in the actual lives of women? It is hard to say with certainty. Available documentary evidence (wills, diaries, etc.) has not been systematically read from the women's point of view and sometimes historians base their claims, unproblematically, on literary evidence. But many agree on the discrepancy between theory and practice in this matter. Keith Wrightson thinks that the husband-wife and father-daughter relations were not as authoritarian as moralistic advice leads us to believe, and that in *private* life

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there existed a companionate ethos, 'side by side with, and often overshadowing, theoretical adherence to the doctrine of male authority and *public* [sic] female subordination.'²⁵ Keith Thomas also agrees that in actual life Renaissance women's independence was greater than theory allowed, 'and part of the evidence lies in the very frequency with which that independence was denounced.'²⁶ Often conservative formulations reflect the patriarchy's fears and anxieties about losing control over women and they are therefore reactions to, rather than indications of, developing tendencies in the culture. The language in which some of the prohibitions are couched suggests as much. When Powell in *Tom of All Trades* (1631) tells the parents, 'in stead of reading Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, let them read the grounds of good huswifery,'²⁷ his advice can only make sense if young girls were actually reading the romance he mentions. Likewise, when Gouge forbids young married couples to use pet names, like 'duck,' 'chick,' and 'pigsnie,' on account that they might induce great familiarity between the partners and hence undermine the husband's authority, we can infer that enough people were in the habit of calling each other by such names to necessitate a warning against their use. It would be more illuminating and useful, therefore, if we paid attention also to other aspects of the system and the processes that allowed women room for self-expression. Since this is a study of female assertiveness in the literary field, I shall take some of the major events and ideologies outlined above in order to show how various contradictions and deflections in change created opportunities for women in the intellectual and public spheres.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF IDEOLOGY AND THE PARADOXES OF CHANGE

From its very beginnings the Reformation incorporated a fundamental contradiction: it granted woman relative autonomy in spiritual matters but simultaneously endorsed her overall subordination to the husband. Through its doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, it recognized women's right to read and interpret the scriptures, and even to disagree with men in their interpretations. Neither sex nor social rank was to be a barrier in the communication with God. Women

could congregate, debate the scriptures, and even preach. The democratic principle was to apply also to matters of morality. In the case of adultery, for example, the man would be punished as severely as the woman. At the same time, however, the Reformation supported male authority and advocated female subordination. William Tyndale, for example, wrote that the woman had to accept orders from her husband as though they were from God.²⁸ This was the conservative element which eventually led to a retraction of the original position. Conservative reformers began to fear that they were losing control over women and that loss of control would be interpreted by their opponents as a failure of masculine strength. 'They'll say we are being ruled by women,' wrote a pastor to Calvin.²⁹ Conservatives reacted by tightening the strings. They persecuted women dissident preachers even within the communities which had encouraged freedom in thought and action³⁰ and emphasized the woman's duty to obey her husband and accept him as spiritual leader. Thomas Becon, one of the conservative reformers, said that women should keep silent in church and ask religious guidance only from their husbands at home, while Hugh Latimer, a conservative preacher, warned husbands to keep constant vigilance over their wives, who, like Eve, might use their feminine wiles to usurp authority in the family.³¹

But once the change had started in a certain direction its course could not be easily reversed. Once the statement of spiritual equality had been broadcast, it could be deployed as a strategy of legitimation. Furthermore, women could benefit from that faction of the Reformation which sought to teach them literacy rather than to take their Bibles away altogether. Indeed, Thomas Becon, the same Protestant enthusiast who advocated woman's silence in church and subordination to the husband at home, was also in favour of female education as a means to fighting idolatry. He proposed a comprehensive and radical plan which involved a secondary school system for girls, comparable, though not equal, to the grammar school for boys: 'If it be thought convenient, as it is most convenient, that schools should be erected and set up for the right education and upbringing of the youth of the male kind, why should it not also be thought convenient that schools be built for the godly institution and virtuous bringing up of the youth of the