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1

Criticize

Dare you but write, you are Minerva's bird,
The owl at which these bats and crows must wonder,
They'll criticize upon the smallest word:
This wanteth number, case, that tense and gender.
Then must you frame a pitiful epistle,
To pray him be a rose was born a thistle.

Could you, as did those Sibyls, prophesy,
Men will but count you witches for your skill,
Or be endowed with any quality,
They'll poison it with some depraving ill.
Envy is barren and yields nought but weeds
And fears lest better ground have better seeds.
—ANNE SOUTHWELL, "PRECEPT 4"¹

THE FIRST USE OF the English verb “criticize” was probably by a woman. In this witty, angry, and finely-crafted poem, Anne Southwell uses the term to describe how men censure women’s language use, excluding them from the sphere of literature. The *OED*’s first usage for “criticize” is Milton’s *Eikonoklastes* (1649), while Robert Burton used it in his 1621 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. It was not defined in dictionaries until the eighteenth century.² We do not know exactly when Southwell wrote this poem, which was only printed in the twentieth century, but it was probably in the early decades of the seventeenth century. And Southwell’s use is telling: she uses “criticize” to mean judgment of language and even specifically grammar—“this wanteth number, case, that tense and gender”—and also its broader, later sense of “censure” that could

even be moral and social—“men will but count you witches for your skill”. Criticism, then, is a means of exclusion, and specifically, of prohibiting women’s writing, and curtailing their place in society. Criticism is a tool of oppression: of educational exclusion (pointing out incorrect usage of number, case, tense, gender), of stigma and superstition (“count you witches”) and of insecurity (“Envy is barren and yields nought but weeds”). Yet it is also, this book argues, a place where women have shaped literary culture, innovated in style, and defined the terms in which poetry is read and valued.

Southwell’s vivid, angry poem motivates the questions that *Sex and Style* asks: what is criticism? Who gets to be a critic? Who gets to criticize? These are fundamental questions about authority, discernment, and taste, of which tastes prevail and are recorded in history. Moreover, this book argues that women like Anne Southwell did in fact write literary criticism. In poems, letters, commonplace books, prefaces, and many other forms that are not explicitly treatises on poetics, women were writing at the origins of literary criticism. As we will see, Southwell’s criticism in poetry and prose, which remained in manuscript until the twentieth century, explicitly engages with canonical forebears of literary criticism: Sidney, Daniel, Shakespeare. Southwell provides the central case study for this introductory chapter because she herself was an early user of the verbs “criticize” and “play the critic”, and because her work is critical in many senses. The place of women theorists like Southwell in the history of literary criticism has been obscured, and this exclusion is in fact one that motivates their writings, such as Southwell’s ferocious satire on envious and superstitious men. Here “criticism” comes also to mean critique, a protest against prevailing norms. *Sex and Style* is, too, then a work of criticism and critique, and offers the possibility of a new history of literary criticism—one with women’s voices throughout.³

The History of Literary Criticism: Where are all the Women?

I began thinking about the history of women critics as I was trying to become one. My own doctoral research was on seventeenth-century women poets, at an exciting time to be working in this field. With many discoveries and rediscoveries in archives had come a growing acceptance in both teaching and publishing that an all-male literary canon was both unethical in the present and inaccurate to the past. Digitization projects were making manuscripts and rare

books newly accessible, alongside a burgeoning in expertise in book and manuscript history that allowed deeper understanding of the place of handwritten works, in particular, in the literary marketplace. It felt as if premodern women's poetry was gathering the attention needed to change the canon. And yet, when I looked for scholarship on how women theorized the poetry that they were producing so prodigiously, I drew a blank.

I was not the only one. "Why Are There No Great Women Critics and What Difference Does It Make?" asked Susan S. Lanser and Evelyn Torton Beck in 1979, riffing on Linda Nochlin's famous 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?".⁴ As Lawrence Lipking noted, the standard *Critical Theory since Plato* "does not find room in its 1,249 double-columned, small-printed pages for a word by [. . .] any woman".⁵ He extrapolates elegantly from this absence: "Unlike Shakespeare's sister, Aristotle's sister has yet to break her silence."⁶ Lanser, Beck, and Lipking made these observations over thirty years ago, and yet they have remained curiously—and dispiritingly—relevant; there is still no acknowledged tradition of classical or early modern women literary critics. Even much more recent collections of early modern theory commonly fail to identify a single female critic.⁷ Anthologies which focus exclusively on women critics find little before 1800.⁸ We know that early modern women produced major literary works, but we do not know whether or how they theorized and criticized literature, and especially—the focus of this book—poetry. To explain this apparent absence, let us look to early modernity, the period in which these divisions between gender and criticism took root, and yet also a time when (I will argue) women were writing against these prohibitions.

Poetry itself has long been associated with women. Montaigne wrote that poetry is "a study fit for [women's] purpose", which seems promising. But he goes on to explain why: "being a wanton, amusing, subtle, disguised, and prattling art; all in delight, all in show, like to themselves".⁹ Whether this represents Montaigne's own views or a satirical reflection on those of his peers, his terms here are revealing: both women and poetry are associated with unregulated sexuality (wantonness); unregulated volubility (prattling), and also duplicity (subtle, disguised). George Puttenham's eccentric yet influential *Art of English Poesy* also imagines women both reading and writing literature. Puttenham professes to write for women, describing some of the techniques in his book as "pleasanter to bear in memory: specially for our ladies and pretty mistresses in court, for whose learning I write".¹⁰ Sasha Roberts argued that *The Arte of English Poesie* functions, not least, as "an exercise in the promotion of women's cultural capital": dedicated to Elizabeth, written for gentlewomen readers.¹¹

Yet Puttenham's terms, like Montaigne's, are painfully ambivalent.¹² While he claims to write "for" the learning of courtly ladies, he does not aspire too highly for them. In his chapter on "vices or deformities", Puttenham concedes that some stylistic lapses might be allowed "in the pretty poesies and devices of ladies, and gentlewomen makers, whom we would not have too precise poets least with their shrewd wits, when they were married they might become a little too fantastical wives".¹³ Women are, then, allowed to lapse from accepted stylistic ideals when they compose poetry because to write too well might compromise their wifely decorum.

Montaigne's and Puttenham's statements also draw together the two interconnected strands of this book: women as theorists, and gendered theories of poetry. Most early modern rhetoricians do not consider the former: poetry is only "a study fit" for women insofar as men criticize both women and poetry for their wantonness and disguise. Puttenham's particular description of women's poetry as "pretty poesies and devices" is revealing. As Danielle Clarke points out, "[v]irtually all Puttenham's apostrophes to female readers occur in Book III, 'Of Ornament', which suggests their supplemental status".¹⁴ In one of his "senses of style", Jeff Dolven captures the double bind (multiple, even), in the relationship between gender and style:

[W]hat is the difference between style and substance? One answer, always at the ready, is that one is masculine and one is feminine. That is, style is feminine, ornamental, yielding, while substance is masculine, anchoring, authoritative. Unless, of course, style is the masculine signature inscribed by the stylus upon impressionable, feminine matter. Gender has its preferences with style, but they are not always predictable.¹⁵

By ventriloquizing the associations made by early modern theorists like Puttenham, Dolven shows up their misogyny by juxtaposing the multiple (and even contradictory) uses of poetics to exclude: femininity is insubstantial, except when it is useful substance for masculine impression. Definitions of style often reach for binaries and, as Dolven suggests, in these binaries the element of the pair coded as feminine is always downgraded.

If the feminine is coded as supplemental, then it can just as easily become either unnecessary detail or excess. Contemporary feminist critics have taken these negative associations and redefined them: both detail and excess have been reclaimed as vitally and, importantly, feminine stylistic traits. In the context of nineteenth-century women writers, Ellen Rooney, reflecting on the work of Naomi Schor, argues that "insistence on reading the detail—as

the particular, the ornamental, the marginal, the feminine, the contingent, the useless—undermines traditional hermeneutics”, while Karen Jackson Ford has championed excess as a strategic rejection of the decorum imposed on twentieth-century women writers.¹⁶ By exploring the early modern roots of such slights and prohibitions we can in fact locate the women writing against them. And indeed Margaret Cavendish was already embracing and reshaping the sexist charge that women’s style was decorative and excessive in the mid-seventeenth century:

Poetry, which is built upon fancy, women may claim, as a work belonging most properly to themselves: for I have observed, that their brains work usually in a fantastical motion: as in their several, and various dresses in their many and singular choices of clothes, and Ribbons; [...] in their wrought works, and divers sorts of stitches they employ their needle, and many curious things they make, as flowers, boxes, baskets [...]; besides all manner of meats to cure: and thus their thoughts are employed perpetually with fancies.¹⁷

We have seen how Puttenham defined women’s poetry as “pretty poesies and devices”, amidst many similar statements of dismissal or exclusion. With Cavendish, though, we see a woman theorist intervene in this debate about gender and poetics. Cavendish here seems perversely to embrace the idea of poetry as decorative and ornamental, yet uses these to forge a feminist poetics of craft, variety and imagination. She makes a powerful claim for individual agency too: while women might not choose to spend their days in needlework, poetry (she suggests) might be a sphere in which they can manifest autonomous “choice”, rejecting the “rule and method” from which their lack of education excludes them anyway. With her distinctive wit and faux modesty, Cavendish blends stereotypes of women’s nature as innate (“their brains work[...]”) and as social (needlework, cookery as feminine activities). She takes these connections between femininity and the domestic, ornamental or decorative, and attributes them instead to a potent feminine aesthetic. Cavendish engages a tradition of critical poetics that takes femininity as its conceptual engineering; in doing so, she practises a critical poetics.

In writings by Montaigne, Puttenham, and their peers, the literary sphere is feminized only for this feminization to be used against women, to exclude. These moments proliferate as you read, as each invitation twists into a prohibition. Dictionaries, and glossaries of hard words in English, were often addressed to women. Yet Juliet Fleming has shown that these works aimed not

to educate women, but instead to interpolate them as lawless language users who needed regulation.¹⁸ In her analysis of classical and early modern rhetoric, Patricia Parker makes this a question of *place* for women: “It was the public nature of rhetoric—talking outside their proper ‘province’ or place—which disqualified them.”¹⁹ As with dictionary-makers’ concern for women’s place within or outside regulated language use, Parker finds rhetorical works anxious about moveable, wandering, or errant women—women out of place. Parker’s brilliant analysis excavates the sexism embedded in the classical rhetorical tradition, and its inheritance by the English Renaissance. In several works, she finds classical and early modern rhetoric suffused with anxiety about the possibility of unregulated female speech. One of the key manifestations of this anxiety is the assertion of a “virile style”:

[. . .] it is precisely this influential Roman tradition that pervades early modern European praise of a stylistic (but also much more than stylistic) *virilitas*—not only on the Continent but in the articulation, in England, of a style that would have (as Ben Jonson put it) a “manly” strength and vigor, a reaction against an “effeminate” Ciceronianism that privileged words over deeds or things, and ultimately the “plain” style of a nascent early modern science described as a “*masculine* birth of time”²⁰

Ideas about linguistic order were harnessed to issues of social control, sexual regulation, and gender hierarchy, as for instance rhetorician Dudley Fenner demanded that metaphor be “shamefast, and as it were maidenly.”²¹ He explains that for a trope to be “maidenly”, means that it can be “led by the hand to another signification” rather than “driven by force”. Fenner’s explanation of his own metaphor suggests the violence which underpins such images of female identity for language use. Lorna Hutson has explored this area further in relation to English writers, especially Ben Jonson. In *Timber, or Discoveries*, Jonson paraphrased and amplified Quintilian’s famous analysis of virile and effeminate styles.²² In Katharine Craik’s words, “the ordered, masculine, temperate body signified excellence in verse, whereas the curious, effeminate, asymmetrical body betokens literary indecorum.”²³ Simply put, good style is sinewy, muscular, and virile, while bad style is soft, effeminate, or submissive. Lacking sinew, women do not—should not—write stylishly, let alone *about* style.

Parker, Hutson, Fleming and others reveal a history of the sexualization of language, of supplemental, ornamental, even dangerous or deviant language being labelled as feminine. Does this explain the absence of women from the history of literary criticism? Certainly it played a part. Women perceived

themselves as barred from literary culture by the inherent sexualization of rhetoric—and its fundamentally misogynistic (as well as homophobic) implications—so aptly identified by Anne Southwell and Margaret Cavendish in the seventeenth century, and Patricia Parker and Lorna Hutson in the twentieth. Were there, then, in fact many women critics writing in places which have become less visible over time? If only we look in the right places we can find women writing criticism alongside the classically-derived poetic theory by men, and their distinctive—to us, deeply troubled and troubling—gender politics. Moreover, revelatory work in early modern trans studies helps us think beyond the assigned genders of authors, and to locate variously oppressive or liberating possibilities in the complex gendering of early modern poetics. As Joseph Gamble argues in defining a practice of trans philology, exploring the etymology and genealogy of words might take us both into their history and our own lived future. I hope that this book, in asking what poetics can tell us about premodern categorizations of gender, can similarly point in two directions. It seeks both to reveal the damaging, exclusive uses of language to define identity, and also to unearth a history of unrecognized potential, of meanings of words, in Gamble's terms, "that lie dormant in the language that sets the conditions of our possibility".²⁴

Yet gender politics are not the only cause and context for women's absence in the history of criticism. Questions around periodization, genre, and material form have also played a part. Scholars of women's writing have noted the poor fit of accepted period boundaries with writing by women, from Joan Kelly's famous question "Did women have a Renaissance?" to Michelle Dowd and Lara Dodds's argument that it is the "critical belatedness" of scholarship on early modern women's writing which has allowed women's writing to remain marginal to early modern studies more broadly.²⁵ Scholars of Premodern Critical Race Studies have articulated a similar yet different experience, also kept at a distance from the "mainstream" of early modern studies. PCRS work has often also been at the forefront of gender analysis, in the work of Kim F. Hall, Margo Hendricks, Sujata Iyengar, Joyce Green MacDonald, Urvashi Chakravarty, Bernadette Andrea and many other scholars.²⁶ The study of premodern women's writing as a subfield has much more work to do in integrating the concerns of gender and of race, while respecting the different trajectories of these fields and the fights for social justice they reflect in the present.

Models of periodization, then, based on a white, male canon, have been challenged by multiple scholarly movements which attend to writers marginalized by gender, race, sexuality, ability, politics, or class. The study of criticism faces the same challenge, not least given the technical training, institutional affiliation

and educational access often needed to write and publish a defence, art or treatise of “Poesy” in the early modern period. Existing collections and studies of early modern criticism are usually either labeled “Renaissance” or “Augustan”. This is a function of accepted period labels, and also points to an intriguing gap in the early- to mid-seventeenth century. Few stand-alone works of literary criticism were published between Samuel Daniel’s *Defence of Rhyme* in 1603 and Dryden’s Restoration works. Gavin Alexander refers to these years as a “pause for thought” and this absence remains unexplained.²⁷ But I will show that this period represents a transition rather than a lacuna in literary criticism. Writers like Donne, Herbert, Carew and Milton were commenting on the purpose and style of literature in their own poetry rather than in explicit works of criticism. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the early years of the seventeenth century which have been seen as a gap in male-authored criticism, were also a brief moment in which “women found themselves at the center of the nation’s new cultural enterprise.”²⁸ However temporary and circumscribed, Anne of Denmark’s reign saw a flourishing of women’s agency as writers, performers and patrons. Instead of accepting the narrative of the early- to mid-seventeenth century as a pause or silence in critical writings, then, this book will reveal the many writings by women, in print and (especially) manuscript, that can be read as critical.

Far from disappearing, writing about writing becomes paratextual in the mid-seventeenth century. Prefaces and poems-about-poems become even more central in defining the period’s debates than stand-alone essays. The civil war and Restoration also saw women formulating new concepts of literary purpose and practice in prefaces and other paratextual critical works, at the same time that male writers like Davenant and Cowley were doing so. In bringing together such writings by women as “criticism”, *Sex and Style* creates a new literary history as well as revealing the biases of existing seventeenth- and twenty-first century canons of criticism. The perceived gap or pause in criticism between Jonson and Dryden is in fact a plenitude. Women like Anne Southwell were both challenging the exclusions of criticism and writing criticism of their own. The landmark analyses by Parker and Hutson that I have discussed focused on the gendering of rhetoric by male writers, and its sexist underpinnings. Building on both their work, and a half-century of recovery of women writers, especially in manuscript, *Sex and Style* reveals and analyzes a little-known wealth of manuscript writings by women as criticism. The scholars writing foundational works in the field of early modern women’s writing several decades ago were also writing about how women placed themselves in the literary sphere: writing *by* women was often also *about* women writing.

Getting to the point of authorship was a major project for early modern women, and one on which they often commented. But as long as this remained of interest only to scholars of women's writing—crucial and major as that field is—these ideas and texts were not being read as theory, not being brought into dialogue with male theorists, not allowed a place within the history of literary criticism. The increasing understanding of women's works had, therefore, not yet managed to change that history, in the way it was dramatically changing histories of poetry. Placing these women critics alongside and in dialogue with those of their famous male peers, we can see that women were in fact at the vanguard of poetics, pioneering ideas like originality and techniques like feminine rhyme often ahead of their male peers.

Anne Southwell: "I play the critic"

Women poets were acutely aware of the prohibitions against them, as we can see from Southwell's account of the vitriol and abuse directed at women who "[d]are [. . .] but write". Her poem defies the injunctions it describes; it shows that women responded not with silence, but by developing potent voices, both as poets and as critics.

Southwell imagines hostile readers criticizing women's use of the fundamental components of composition: number, case, tense, and gender. Her use of "criticize" here, then, suggests her knowledge of both grammatical intricacies and the work of philological "critics" in analysing these. While little is known of Southwell's own education, her writings show an extraordinary breadth and depth of knowledge across a range of spheres. Southwell's poem is in the genre of Decalogue poetry, specifically on the fourth commandment, the injunction to keep the Sabbath day, "Precept 4". In this poem, Southwell refers to the seven liberal arts, invoking the "four springs", the quadrivial arts of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, which are in turn graced by the trivium of "rhetoric", "grammar" and "logic" (ll. 309–314). Her title of "Precept" means "Commandment" but it was also used to describe rhetorical rules and she plays with this dual category: biblical injunction as rhetorical manual.

Southwell's poem is also a work of textual criticism in another sense: her interpretation of Ovid. She adopts a striking image for her representation of writing women, in the form of the owl of Minerva:

Dare you but write, you are Minerva's bird,
The owl at which these bats and crows must wonder [. . .]

Minerva had long been associated with an owl, and both goddess and bird broadly associated with wisdom. Southwell's image, though, engages more specifically with Ovid's retelling in *Metamorphoses* 2. Her reference to the envious "wonder" of "bats and crows" recalls Ovid's crow complaining he had been usurped by the owl in Minerva's favor. In evoking Ovid for her image of the abuse of female writers, Southwell also evokes a story of sexual scandal and exclusion. Ovid's owl has a dark back-story; she is Nyctimene, a princess who is raped by her father, the king of Lesbos. Fleeing in shame, like so many other survivors of sexual aggression in the *Metamorphoses*, Nyctimene is transformed. She is offered a partial, and still stigmatized, new identity; Minerva turns her into the owl, daring only to show her face in darkness. Southwell situates her reader in Ovid's intensely-charged world of transformations, using myth to evoke the conditions which generate women's silence: sexual violence, shame, social isolation.

As well as characterizing the attacks on women writers, Southwell derivatively suggests one way to deflect these: adding a "pitiful epistle". Both women and men poets of the seventeenth century frequently added epistles before their text, either by themselves or by others. Dedicating the work to a patron or would-be patron whose connection to the text, however, tenuous, might protect it from censure. Such epistles and prefaces are one of this book's key repositories for poetic criticism, showing that early women's criticism is often found in unexpected yet conspicuous places: it hides in plain sight. Southwell here seems to scorn such defensive epistles, in lines which may daringly refer to King James as the Scottish thistle who becomes an English monarch, a pseudo-Tudor rose.²⁹

And Southwell herself also knew when to "frame an epistle", not only as a preface (as she gestures to in "Precept 4"), but as a critical form itself. Several of Southwell's letters are themselves works of criticism.³⁰ While her "Precept 4" poem has one of the earliest uses of the verb "criticize", one of her letters also has an early usage of the term "critic":

Thrice honored Lord

Will you vouchsafe a pardon if I play the critic with this one word in
your letter?³¹

What might seem a brisk, even rebuking start to the letter, gives way to an elegant gesture of flattery in Southwell's own erudite and playfully philological style:

Wherein you say you are deprived of all. Is the sun bereft of his beams because a cloud interposeth betwixt him and our watery balls? Could a banished philosopher say unto himself, *Omnia mea mecum porto?* (p. 5–6)

Writing to her friend Lord Falkland who is about to leave Ireland, Southwell playfully rebukes and corrects his use of the word “deprived” in a flattering and affectionate quibble. He seems to have said that he will be deprived of her company when he leaves. She counters that their friendship will remain an objective truth, despite distance. The sun is not less bright because a cloud obscures it from our eyes, a philosopher might be banished, but would still say (in Ciceronian allusion) “all that is mine I carry with me”. Here Southwell uses the phrase “play the critic” in the sense more of philologist, an attentive correspondent but also one who claims authority over the interpretation of language. In this letter, too, which includes Latin quotations, references to unusual imported dance practices, and words such as “aequipollent”, to be a critic implies deep learning and verbal dexterity. Women act as critics in ways which expand our sense of what criticism is.

Anne Southwell’s critical writings often feel unusual: her range of genres, the abrasive, learned, witty texture of her writings, and her early coinages of the terms for criticism themselves. Yet even in their seeming extraordinariness, her writings may well be representative of the wealth of critical writings by women that has remained outside the reach of histories of literary criticism, despite their clear common ground with the most influential male early modern theorists. While Patricia Parker focuses on women theorists being out of place metaphorically, this book will reveal how women’s critical writings have been out of place because of the genres they write in, and often also the material form their works take. Southwell’s work brings together many of the places in which we find criticism by women: manuscripts, miscellanies, letters, poems, and paratexts. It was not only women who chose to write critically in these modes; men did so too, as well as in stand-alone treatises and defences. But as women did not usually write in the more familiar critical genres, it is in the neglected places of manuscript compilations and printed paratexts that we must look to find women critics. Reading across these forms of women’s critical writing yields multiple insights and surprises, which can be captured in six key provocations.

Sex and Style: Six Provocations

The language of style has always been gendered

Original ideas. Muscular prose. Heroic couplets. Virtuoso performance. Smooth lines. Feminine rhyme. What do the words we use to describe poetry tell us about our literary history? How do these terms make that history? How is the story of style also one of bodies? Principles which still dominate our language of literary value, such as originality, are often seen as developed by a lineage of male poets, from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Milton and on into modernity.

Women's style has been read through their bodies

While key tenets of poetic practice are often seen to have originated in men's writing, women's writing is frequently read through culturally-informed (or misinformed) ideas about their bodies. When Abraham Cowley writes in praise of his peer, Katherine Philips, he does so by projecting her style onto her body:

I must admire to see thy well-knit sense,
Thy numbers gentle, and thy fancies high,
Those as thy forehead smooth, these sparkling as thine eye.³²

While Cowley's terms are strongly positive, the ineluctable connection between style and body meant that women poets were read as women, more than as stylists or critics. Moreover, Philips's poetry could be praised through comparison with her body because she was young, and died young. As women were defined through their bodies, they could only write smooth or sparkling verses while their bodies were perceived as such—not a problem faced by poets famed for their late style, a phenomenon largely reserved for male poets, for instance.

Women weaponized the language used against them

Yet women writers frequently took such exclusionary and stereotyping language and transformed it into a distinctive strand of women's poetics. Margaret Cavendish transformed the language used to depict women writers as anomalous into a gendered principle of originality; Aphra Behn and Anne Wharton transformed gendered slurs on the softness of women's bodies, morals, and poems, into a claim for a uniquely feminine poetic affect.

Women theorized literature as much as men did

Women theorized literature in a variety of genres and material forms. In fact, men wrote in those forms too, but their works have often been extracted and canonized in ways that make their criticism speak as if they had written standalone treatises. One example of a genre of criticism that appears throughout the seventeenth century is letters. From epistolary artefacts that were actually sent to fictional letters written-for-publication, this sociable form is a rich seam of women's critical writing that has not hitherto been recognized as dialogue with men's theoretical writings. It is a realm of firsts (however cautious we may wish to be about identifying such milestones while further texts are still coming to light): Anne Southwell's letter to her friend Lady Ridgeway may be one of the first critical discussions of Shakespeare and Marlowe. Margaret Cavendish's collection of *Sociable Letters* (1664) includes what is arguably "the first critical essay ever to be published on Shakespeare".³³ These are not just firsts for women, but milestones in the history of literary criticism.

*Women engaged in debates we see as key
to seventeenth-century poetics*

In a letter to her friend Charles Cotterell, Katherine Philips discussed a translation of Pierre Corneille's *La Mort de Pompée* by a group of her contemporaries: "the expressions are some of them great and noble, and the verses smooth; yet there is room in several places for an ordinary critic to show his skill." Her use of "an ordinary critic" seems to suggest any old critic. By suggesting that anyone can be a critic she takes down this role from a position of inaccessibility. And it is a critic who shows *her* skill (not his) discussing this play, as Philips herself goes on to analyse features including its rhymes ("frequently very bad"), its texture ("flat or rough"), the nature of the work as a paraphrase rather than a translation (given "the great liberty they have taken in adding, omitting and altering the original").³⁴ Philips's critical faculties may have been sharpened by her own current project: she was also translating the same play, and her version of *Pompey* would be performed in Dublin in 1663. While Cavendish often defines a poetics that is specifically feminine, Philips's technical concerns are exactly those of male poets and critics in the period: of accuracy, decorum, and form.

Practice is theory

Gavin Alexander has argued for the inextricability of literature and criticism in the early modern period: “where we now tend to see the scholarly study of literature and literary theory as inhabiting a different world from the writing of literature, and expect there to be little communication between the two, Renaissance literary criticism is usually the work of writers of literature, and is aimed at readers and authors alike: it shows how to write, and how writing ought to be read.”³⁵ Women’s style, including their adherences and deviations from certain tastes and norms, processes of composition and correction, prefaces, dedications, and expressions of intent to circulate their works or (more often) not do so, might be drawn together as a form of poetic knowledge. This is a poetic knowledge which challenges contemporary and historical male-authored theories of literature, which have come to be seen as the sole originators of our own in the present.

Anne Southwell’s Defence of Poetry: “give me your hand”

As we have seen, Southwell’s poetry is profoundly critical, and this book will argue throughout for poetry as a locus of women’s theory. If we continue to look beyond print and beyond the obvious theoretical genres (treatise, manual) we find a vibrant body of critical writings by women in prose, such as this eloquent vindication of poetry, also by Anne Southwell:

How falls it out (noble lady) that you are become a sworn enemy to poetry? It being so abstruse an art, as it is, that I may say, the other arts are but bases and pedestals, unto the which this is the capital. The mere herald of all ideas; the world’s true vocal harmony, of which all other arts are but parts, or rather, may I justly say, it is the silk thread that strings your chain of pearl; which being broken, your jewels fall into the rushes; and the more you seek for it, the more it falls into the dust of oblivion.³⁶

The images for poetry here range from architectural, decorative, and musical to biblical. The common image of jewels or pearls is nuanced by the idea of poetry as the thread joining the gems, rather than the gems themselves. The description of the “dust of oblivion” might seem particularly loaded in the work of a woman whose works, largely in manuscript, have been barely known until the last few decades, resting not exactly in dust, but in the Folger’s collections. The range of arts invoked, though (jewels, buildings, song)

defies straightforward gendered categorization. Southwell's critical prose engages with that of her male peers, those we are used to identifying as the origins of criticism: Puttenham, Sidney, Daniel.

This passage appeared neither in print, nor in a manuscript treatise but in a letter. It opens "To my worthy muse, the Lady Ridgeway. that doth these lines infuse". Southwell's letter is a defence of verse, addressed to her friend Lady Ridgeway who has apparently claimed the superiority of prose, for various reasons including its prior existence. Southwell disputes this idea of authority by precedence, arguing that primacy does not equal correctness: "You say, you affect prose as your ancestors did; error is not to be affected for antiquity" (fol. 3r). And here we can see a twofold move characteristic of much of the criticism by women that this book will uncover: Southwell looks both backwards and forwards. Her arguments engage with Biblical and medieval as well as sixteenth-century critical modes, drawing on grammar as a divine model and God as the ultimate poet. Yet her assertion that "error is not to be affected for antiquity" is also a bold rejection of precedent as the ultimate form of authority. Instead, she implies, we have to look forward and anticipate—or even forge—alternative models of writing. In Chapter 2 we will see how seventeenth-century women poets rejected earlier stereotypes of "feminine rhyme", instead using it to create a resistant poetics. In Chapter 3 we will see how Margaret Cavendish pioneered an idea of originality as newness rather than recourse to a past "origin".

In advocating verse over prose, Southwell adopts a similar defence to that of Samuel Daniel, who had defended English over continental systems of versification in 1603. Daniel cautioned against giving too much authority to historical models: "we should not so soon yield our consents captive to the authority of antiquity".³⁷ And Southwell offers her own, rather different, narrative of precedents:

Therefore (noble and witty lady) give me your hand, I will lead you up the stream of all mankind. Your great-great-grandfather had a father, and so the last, or rather the first father, was God; whose never enough to be admired creation, was poetically confined to four general genuses: earth, air, water and fire. The effects which give life unto his verse, were: hot, cold, moist and dry; which produce choler, melancholy, blood and phlegm. By these just proportions, all things are propagated. Now being thus poetically composed, how can you be at unity with yourself, and at odds with your own composition?³⁸

With a physically evocative rhetorical device, Southwell takes her interlocutor through the stages of her argument by imagining literally leading her by the “hand”. The lineage is father to father, yet Southwell clearly sees herself and her female correspondent intervening in this patrilineal descent of authors and creators. Here again, Southwell forges a critical poetics which is Sidneian yet also Biblical, and revisionist.

There is a lovely flourish with the logic of her conclusion: God wrote you like a poem, so how can you oppose the conditions of your own creation? Like Sidney and Puttenham, Southwell refutes the idea of literature as *blasphemous* because an act of creation with the retort that literature is *godly*, because an act of creation.³⁹ Her use of biblical precedent goes much further, however, than the argument that God is a creator and we should create in his image. She creates an analogy between the writer’s materials and God’s: God “was poetically confined to four general genuses, earth, air, water and fire”. Here the word “genus”, an overarching class or kind of thing, might also suggest the specifically literary “genus” or “kind” (what we now call “genre”). The four basic qualities hot, cold, moist, and dry “give life to his verse” and produce the four humours. Tetracolon (patterning in fours) is indeed one of Southwell’s favourite techniques in what is a highly structured piece of prose. She writes that “By these just proportions, all things are propagated” and connects pattern, structure, proportionality, and decorum, saying: “All exorbitant things are monstrous, but bring them again to their orbicular form and motion, and they will retain their former beauties [. . .]” (p. 5). By pairing it with “orbicular” (round, circular), Southwell draws attention to the etymological meaning of “exorbitant”, diverging from an orbit or track, and metaphorically a rule.

Samuel Daniel had characterized the imagination as “an unformed chaos without fashion” which with the transformative power of divine poetry, could “be wrought into an *orb* of order and form” (my italics).⁴⁰ Both Southwell and Daniel use the image of the orb or orbit to argue that it is not just the fundamental creativity of poetry that makes it divine, but its technical elements: Daniel sees rhyme as coming from “the divine power of the spirit” to create poetry with the “closes” required by nature, “that desires a certainty, and comports not with that which is infinite”.⁴¹ Southwell takes the cosmological image further than Sidney and Daniel in her version of the analogy of God’s creation for poetic creation. Her “exorbitant” and “orbicular” evoke the perfectly circular (pre-Kepler) orbit. To be “exorbitant” is therefore to be irregular, out of proportion, “monstrous”. As we will see in Chapter 4, irregularity was often used to stigmatize feminine or effeminate identities and writing styles (while,

conversely, by the twentieth century it was often used as a term of aesthetic adventurousness, and instead used to praise rule-breaking male poets). Here Southwell describes not prosodic rule-breaking, but the distortion of poetry by erotic subject matter, especially in recent epyllia (she mentions *Venus and Adonis* and *Hero and Leander*, as we will see later). But the idea of poetry having an innate, cosmological, or natural proportion also draws on recent arguments about meter. In a poem in her Lansdowne manuscript Southwell asserts that rhyme can “from an ingot form a curious Jewel” (p. 152). Rhyme can be shaping and purifying. Southwell’s own rhetorical patterning, too—especially tricolon and tetracolon—testifies to the importance she places on other kinds of ordering. This is elegant, densely rhetorical, and etymological, critical prose.

As she champions poetry over prose, Southwell develops Sidney’s ideas and images:

Poesy seems to do more for nature, then she is able to do for herself, wherein, it doth but lay down a pattern what man should be; and shows, that imagination goes before reality. (p. 4)

For Southwell, poetry is both a way of creating an ideal, better than nature (doing “more for nature, then she is able to do for herself”), just as in the *Defence of Poesy*, Sidney had famously argued that nature’s “world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden”.⁴² Southwell argues that poetry can inspire mankind to virtue and also dwells on it as a form of creation with biblical poetry as the authorizing precedent:

[. . .] will you behold poesy in perfect beauty. Then see the kingly prophet, that sweet singer of Israel, explicating the glory of our God, his power in creating, his mercy in redeeming, his wisdom in preserving; making these three, as it were the comma, colon, and period to every stanza. Who would not say, the musical spheres did yield a cadency to his song, and in admiration cry out; O never enough to be admired, divine poesy. (p. 5)

Sidney and many others had called upon the poetic origins of the psalms to defend their art.⁴³ Puttenham had also laid out the different functions of the comma, colon, and period, but does not use them metaphorically as Southwell does; indeed, this harnessing of grammar to God is one of the most striking features of her writing.⁴⁴

As well as laying out an underlying framework for a virtuous poetics, Southwell evaluates contemporary poems. Guessing that Lady Ridgeway has been put off poetry by “wanton” contemporary poems, she writes a critique of erotic

epyllia, alluding to Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*:

I will take upon me to know what hath so distasted your palate against this banquet of souls, divine poesy. Some wanton Venus or Adonis hath been cast before your chaste ears, whose evil attire, disgracing this beautiful nymph, hath unworthied her in your opinion [. . .]. To hear a Hero and Leander or some such other busy nothing, might be a means to scandalize this art. (p. 5)

Southwell rejects the erotic here. Elsewhere she satirizes the clichés of Cupid, suggesting “a forceful anti-Petrarchanism that is centred on the female subject”, as Danielle Clarke and Marie-Louise Coolahan argue.⁴⁵ And yet, Southwell also absorbs and adapts the very poems she criticizes—specifically, *Venus and Adonis*—in her own devotional poetry.⁴⁶ Southwell's comments are relatively rare, amongst both male and female critics, for evaluating named works—here *Hero and Leander* and *Venus and Adonis*.⁴⁷ Southwell shares strands of her argument with writers like Puttenham, Sidney, and Daniel, yet the letter to Lady Ridgeway has its own distinctive texture: the evocative phrases “busy nothing” and “banquet of souls” are unusual, if not unprecedented. While the letter to Ridgeway delineates Southwell's theory of a virtuous poetics, we see a different kind of critical writing in her poetry itself. Indeed, the poetry in both Southwell's manuscript collections demonstrates a quite different tone: a technical and specific critical language, by turns witty, abrasive, and optimistic. Southwell's corpus reveals the multiplicity of early modern criticism by women. She engages with the major debates of the day yet her arguments are her own: distinctively gesturing towards modernity and change, questioning past rules and precedents. Hers is a critical poetics; it is both poetry and criticism.

Sex and Style

This book is structured around five key gendered terms describing poetic style: Original; Feminine; Irregular; Smooth, and Soft. Each of these terms has a complex history in the early modern period, both in terms of its meaning for poetic practice, and of its freighting with gendered and sexualized connotations. With one of these terms as its starting point, each chapter will show how certain labels and styles were used to exclude women. It will also show how women were in fact forging or challenging these ideals alongside their male peers. In this way, *Sex and Style* draws on the technique of cultural inquiry

via the keyword. Raymond Williams's field-changing work opened up keyword study as an historical technique of socio-political analysis, or what Roland Greene has called "critical semantics".⁴⁸ Early modern scholars including Patricia Akhimie, Nandini Das, Kim F. Hall, and Jeffrey Masten have developed strands of this approach in their transformative approaches to gender, sexuality, and race.⁴⁹ Masten described the technique of his groundbreaking book, *Queer Philologies*, as both "a philological approach to studying what seems nonnormative" and also "philology made queer—the study of language not just for a historical answer that it might provide about sexuality in this era, but a study that analytically doubles back and studies itself, highlighting philology's own normalizing categories and oversights".⁵⁰ *Sex and Style* seeks to "study itself" in this way too, questioning the category of criticism even as I seek to write a new history of criticism.

My approach brings keyword analysis to a body of texts that has been recovered by generations of scholars of early modern women's writing. Indeed the two impulses are connected, as reading women's prefaces, poems, and letters as criticism opens up debates about the purpose, nature, and function of poetry and of criticism itself that remain urgent today: Who gets to speak? Whose words shape literary history? Whose words are read through their bodies? Like Masten's "doubling back", I also show how the histories of critical terms unfold in ways that move far beyond a specific term, or a identifiable style behind it. Having started with a single adjective for style (or two), each chapter has expanded to draw in that words' synonyms, antonyms, and words that are not strictly either. So the chapter on "feminine" is also about "masculine", "sweet", "weak", "strong", "foreign", and "excessive"; "original" is also about "singular", "exceptional", "copy" and "changeable"; that on "irregular" is also about "regular", "loose", and "correct", and that on "smooth/soft" encompasses "rough", "hard", "loose", "tender" and "constant".

Chapter 2: Feminine, explores the widely used label for rhyme on an unstressed syllable: "feminine rhyme". "Feminine rhyme" is a striking example of how the gendered terms and taxonomies we use affect our interpretation of literature and how embedded this language is in its historical and ideological contexts. Is it a coincidence that Anne Southwell uses the striking feminine rhyme pair "wonder" and "gender" in the stanzas on femininity and poetics quoted at the opening of this book? While there has been excellent recent work on the use of feminine rhyme by male writers there has been almost none on how women themselves used this gendered feature.⁵¹ Modern critics are often embarrassed by the sexism of the terms masculine and feminine rhyme but their

history demands further scrutiny. I show that as the term “feminine rhyme” entered English usage at the end of the sixteenth century it was immediately adopted for poetry about fraught or problematic gender by Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, Mary Wroth, and Edward Denny. Moreover, this chapter argues that women used feminine rhyme to forge a distinctive style: virtuosic, resistant, witty, philosophical. It analyses the prominent use of feminine rhyme by Anne Southwell and Hester Pulter and closes with the poet Katherine Philips who theorized feminine rhyme in her letters.

Chapter 3: Original, argues that women were original before men were. Women writers were seen as exceptional, often described by terms such as matchless, peerless, anomalous. This was often a rhetoric of exclusion, defining women as original in the senses both of without precedent *and* without successor. Shocked by Margaret Cavendish’s irreligious and bold poetry, Walter Charleton sardonically hoped that Margaret Cavendish would be an “original” who was “secure from being copied”.⁵² Charleton casts her as original not in the sense of being the head of a new tradition, but in the sense of anomalous. Women writers themselves appropriated this language of modest anomalousness into one of originality. The ideas of Cavendish, Anne Bradstreet, and Lucy Hutchinson changed the course of literary history. Margaret Cavendish argues explicitly for her own originality: “where if any do write after the same manner in what language soever, that they will remember my work is the original of their discourse”.⁵³ While Cavendish was the century’s foremost theorist of originality, other women writers developed its usage in less obviously literary ways. “Original” was one of Lucy Hutchinson’s favorite words. She uses it 24 times in her authoritative translation of Lucretius’s radical Latin poem *De rerum natura*, to refer to original texts and, most of all, the origins of the world. In this sense, it is for her an existential word: she uses it to define her writing identity and women’s desire for access to knowledge. Hutchinson’s frequent and multivalent usages suggest that women claimed proximity to the divine as a form of intellectual, moral, and poetic originality in this period. Women poets took a term used to exclude them and made it into one of the most important poetic principles of the early modern period—and the present, as we will see throughout this study.

Chapter 4: Irregular explores the heroic couplet and the irregular ode, two forms that rose to prominence in the seventeenth century, one defined by its regularity and the other by its irregularity, and both of whose labels suggest their complex ideological freight. This chapter first shows how couplets, odes, regularity and irregularity were gendered in the period. Secondly, it argues that

modern critics have been more likely to read women's poetic irregularities as errors, and men's as intentional, masking women poets' aesthetic innovation. In the mid-seventeenth century, Lucy Hutchinson produced the first full translation of Lucretius's famously difficult Latin poem, *De rerum natura*. Two hundred years later, scholar Hugh Munro suggested that Hutchinson has been distracted by her children and miscounted "the syllables of her translation."⁵⁴ Munro read Hutchinson's metrically deviant lines as error rather than intention, and this assumption is echoed in interpretations of early modern women's poetry, from the seventeenth century, to Victorian readers like Munro, and right up to the present.

We saw in the previous chapter how metrical irregularities in women's poems were often seen as accidental and rough, disrupting the reader's experience. **Chapter 5: Smooth/Soft** explores a related story of gendered style: the rise of smoothness. I will argue that smoothness, a term and feature which had previously been seen as feminine, becomes a masculine poetic attribute in the Restoration. The chapter reveals how women challenged this narrative in two key ways. First, Anne Southwell and Lucy Hutchinson write devastating critiques of smoothness, condemning it as the style adopted by poets and politicians to conceal their political crimes. The chapter then moves to the 1680s, a decade when Edmund Waller's smoothness was highly praised as an ideal. It shows that as smooth was co-opted by male royalist poets, "soft" and "tender" became the terms used for women poets. These terms shifted the grounds of description from style to body, and were built on a misogynistic tradition of depicting the female body as inherently soft, malleable, and fickle. In a cluster of poems by Anne Wharton and Aphra Behn, several of which remain unpublished, I show how these writers claimed and redefined a poetics of softness. Building on work by Jenny C. Mann on sixteenth-century softness, I show that the idea developed a different yet connected politics of style and gender in the Restoration, and as used by women themselves.⁵⁵ This chapter reveals both a misogynistic tradition of associating women with bodily softness and moral inconstancy and a radical counter-tradition of women embracing softness as a mark of their superior moral and poetic capabilities. In both the roughness of Southwell and Hutchinson, and the softness of Wharton and Behn, we find women challenging the famously dominant smoothness of male, royalist poets such as Edmund Waller and, in doing so, writing a different literary history.

This book shows how different English criticism looks when we reintegrate women at its origins. The last half century has seen the canon of early modern English poetry expand from Sidney, Donne, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden

to include Mary Sidney, Wroth, Philips, Cavendish, and Hutchinson. *Sex and Style* reveals that our canon of theory now needs to feature Southwell, Cavendish, and Wharton, and many other women, virtuosic theorists of originality, irregularity, rhyme, smoothness, and softness.

Throughout her devotional poetry, Anne Southwell demonstrates what we might think of as a profoundly textual imagination: she repeatedly represents the divine through images of writing, from the grammatical and rhetorical, to the physical and material. Across her various letters and poems, she imagines that God's power, mercy, and wisdom are a comma, colon, and period; that the devout person is graced with rhetoric; that his thoughts are a grammar; that his reason possesses all the art of logic, that his deeds and moods are tropes and figures. She forges "a purposeful female aesthetic that takes its cue from the divine."⁵⁶ Compared to poets of either sex, Southwell deploys textual metaphors densely and extensively. She brings to the surface the rhetorical or poetic meanings of words with other primary meanings: precept, colour, congruity. Her writings demonstrate an immersion in the technical elements of rhetorical and literary composition, metaphors from which suffuse and structure her imagining of the world. While the letter to Lady Ridgeway is a persuasive refutation of attacks on poetry as a virtuous art, "Precept 4" plays both sides of the argument.

We may have to look in unexpected places for criticism by early modern women, but we will usually find male critics writing in these modes too. As I have suggested, the first half of the seventeenth century was a transitional period for the genres of literary theory more widely. Between the defences and manuals of the sixteenth century and the major essays of the Restoration (Puttenham's and Sidney's among the former, Dryden's and Atterbury's the latter), criticism took place in all sorts of genres. The relative paucity of stand-alone critical essays by women has allowed them to be absent from histories and anthologies of criticism, yet this shows not that they were outside the critical tradition but in fact that they were within it. Like their male peers, women "played the critic" (in Southwell's phrase) in prefaces (Margaret Cavendish), dedications (Aemilia Lanyer), letters (Katherine Philips), elegies (Aphra Behn), panegyrics (Anne Wharton), commonplace books and miscellanies (Anne Southwell, Lucy Hutchinson), in manuscript and print. In many instances, these are responsive forms (letters, prefaces, commonplace books), with a real or imagined interlocutor providing a sort of wager, a spur to speak about things which are, in Patricia Parker's terms, outside women's proper

province. Southwell would not have been surprised by Parker's conclusions both that women were excluded from rhetoric and that rhetoric was gendered so as to devalue the feminine. But her writing proves that such an awareness provoked rather than muffled her critical voice, and that its serenity, fury, wit, abrasiveness, and technical texture show deep engagement with her peers and predecessors and demonstrate her own vigorous model of criticism. Women's own use of the term "criticism", its origins and its derivatives, reveals their alertness to the use of criticism to censure and silence, yet also their part in its history. While the term itself may have changed in meaning, women's use of it draws us to moments of profound engagement with the history of criticism, and women's place at its origins.

Alternative Chapter List: Keywords and Writers⁵⁷

Chapter 2. Feminine

Feminine (rhyme)

Masculine

Sweet

Weak

Strong

Foreign

Excessive

*

Philip Sidney

Samuel Daniel

John Harington

Edmund Spenser

Mary Wroth

Edward Denny

Hester Pulter

Anne Southwell

Katherine Philips

Chapter 3. Original

Original

Singular

Matchless

Exceptional

Copy
Changeable

*

Margaret Cavendish
Walter Charleton
Anne Bradstreet
Lucy Hutchinson
Ben Jonson
Ovid
Katherine Philips
“Philo-Philippa”

Chapter 4. Irregular

Irregular
Regular
Loose
Correct
Incorrect
Liberty
Lawless
*

Lucy Hutchinson
Lucretius
Katherine Philips
Abraham Cowley
John Milton

Chapter 5. Smooth/Soft

Smooth
Rough
Hard
Soft
Loose
Tender
Constant
Ease

*

Anne Southwell

Lucy Hutchinson

Edmund Waller

Anne Wharton

Aphra Behn

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester

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