

**‘If Eve did Erre, it was for Knowledge sake’:  
Women’s Education, and Educated Women, in England  
in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries**

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**W**hat did Eve, the Mother of Mankind, gain by disobeying that single prohibition, the divine command that neither she nor Adam should taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge? Æmilia Lanyer (1569–1645) was bold enough to ask this question, in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Was it worth while for a woman of her time to acquire learning, to get herself the kind of academic education that had always been reserved for men (and principally for the sons of the nobility)?

Æmilia, herself the daughter of a court musician, had by some lucky chance received an excellent private education as a child.<sup>1</sup> Yet the answer she finds to her own question is discouraging. Eve’s quest for knowledge, she claims,

[brought] us all in danger and disgrace.  
And . . . [laid] the fault on Patience backe,  
That we (poore women) must endure it all . . .<sup>2</sup>

Infamy and undeserved blame were the only ‘fruits’ attained by such a woman, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

The women of this period who did distinguish themselves as scholars or intellectuals formed a tiny, elite group. Emanating mainly from wealthy families of high social rank, or closely associated with such families, they

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<sup>1</sup> Susanne Woods discusses the education of Æmilia Lanyer in *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 7–15.

<sup>2</sup> Æmilia Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judeorum*, ed. Susanne Woods (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 85, lines 792–4.

had received, from private tutors within the confines of a household, the broad humanist education that was always available to the sons of noble families, who went on to study at schools and universities. All these women were privileged in having an unusually enlightened parent, guardian, or patron. Most were Protestant, and deeply immersed in religious studies; all, including Queen Elizabeth I, tended to be rebellious by nature, and all found themselves embroiled in religious controversy and reform. To generalize from the handful of individual histories I have touched on below, it would seem that the consequences of furnishing a young girl of this period with an academic education could reach far beyond her own life and career. The outcome was not always as gloomy as Æmilia Lanier implies, but the fact remains that in those times any woman who did acquire knowledge, even a woman of noble birth, would yet be severely restricted in the use of her learning, and would always be regarded with a measure of suspicion.

By the year 1600, England had been ruled for thirty-two years by a remarkable woman. The Queen was mistress of a dazzling array of ladylike accomplishments, ranging from music and dancing – which she loved, and in which she excelled – to fine needlework. In addition, Elizabeth I was one of the most scholarly rulers ever to occupy that throne.

The education of the young Princess Elizabeth, in the 1540s and '50s, had included history, geography, mathematics, the elements of architecture and astronomy, and four modern European languages (French, Italian, Spanish and Flemish) in addition to classical Greek and Latin. Her tutor, Roger Ascham, boasted of her fluency in various languages, in which 'she hath obeyed that excellencie of learning, to vnderstand, speake, & write, both wittely with head, and faire with hand, as scarce one or two rare wittes in both the Vniuersities haue in many yeares reached vnto'.<sup>3</sup> She also mastered the Welsh language of her Tudor ancestors, which she had probably learned from Mistress Blanche Parry, an erudite Welsh lady, cousin to Elizabeth's astrologer Dr John Dee. Mistress Parry had attended the Princess since her

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, in *English Works*, ed. W. A. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), p. 219.

infancy, and continued in her service for many years of her reign, supervising her Maids of Honour.<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth succeeded to the throne in her twenty-sixth year. So apt a scholar was this young woman that for some years after becoming Queen, she set aside time in her packed royal schedule to continue her studies. Ascham records that in 1563, four years into the new Queen's reign, 'After dinner I wente vp to read with the Queenes Maiestie. We red then together in the Greke tongue, as I well remember, that noble Oration of *Demosthenes* against *Æschines* . . .'.<sup>5</sup> He declares: 'Pointe forth six of the best giuen Ientlemen of this Court, and all they together . . . bestow not so many houres, dayly orderly, & constantly, for the increase of learning & knowledge, as doth the Queenes Maiestie her selfe.'<sup>6</sup>

The Queen favoured learning, enjoyed the company of intellectuals, was interested in all the arts, and personally encouraged many writers, artists and scientists.<sup>7</sup> But she was too shrewd to confront the solidly male establishment by upholding in public the right of women in general to have access to academic education, or even by asserting that they could benefit by it. Elizabeth preferred to hold herself apart from, and above, other women – to be regarded as a rarity, a phoenix. Roger Ascham described her mind as 'exempt from female weakness', adding that 'her perseverance [is] equal to that of a man.'<sup>8</sup> She would have had no quarrel with the implications of this claim. Despite Elizabeth's femininity, personal vanity and love of gallant compliments, despite the enjoyment she undoubtedly

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Jenkins, *Elizabeth the Great* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), pp. 21, 69; Janet Arnold (ed.), *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd: The Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes prepared in July 1600* (Leeds: W.S. Maney & Sons, 1988), p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, p. 177.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> A notoriously frugal sovereign, Elizabeth was not known for financial generosity even in her patronage of the arts. Thus when, in an extraordinary gesture, she ordered Lord Burghley, her treasurer, to pay Edmund Spenser an annual pension of fifty pounds in recognition of *The Faerie Queene*, Burghley famously exclaimed 'What! All this for a song?' (Thomas Birch, *Memoirs of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, from the year 1581 Till her Death*, 2 vols, London: A Millar, 1754, 1: xiii).

<sup>8</sup> Ascham to J. Sturm, 5 April 1550, in *The Whole Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. J.A. Giles, 3 vols (London: John Russell Smith, 1864–5), 1: lxiii.

got from being flattered by handsome young men and courted by eager suitors, in her rôle as Head of State she never forgot that she represented a *male* establishment, and took pains to associate herself with it – to lead rather than to oppose it.<sup>9</sup> When Elizabeth referred to herself as a ruler in public utterances, gender had no relevance.<sup>10</sup>

Yet even though Elizabeth herself did not explicitly encourage such enterprises, a number of women who were her subjects distinguished themselves as scholars and intellectuals during the course of her reign.

During Elizabeth's reign – and before and after it – the education of a lord's son would begin at home with a private tutor. When he was old enough, he might be sent away to a public school which admitted only boys. From there he would go on to a university, also exclusively a male preserve. Sir Philip Sidney had such an upbringing.<sup>11</sup> Born in 1554, he came of a well-connected family. He was the eldest son of Sir Henry Sidney, a Lord Deputy of Ireland; his mother was a Dudley, a sister of the Queen's favourite, the Earl of Leicester. Up to the age of ten Philip was taught privately at the family home, Penshurst in Kent. He was then sent to Shrewsbury School, a public school that still flourishes (and began admitting girls in 2005), and from there he went to Christ Church, Oxford (which has been admitting women since 1982).

Philip Sidney's favourite childhood companion, his younger sister Mary, was tutored at home.<sup>12</sup> She studied French, Italian, Latin, Greek and

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<sup>9</sup> Allison Heisch, 'Queen Elizabeth and the Persistence of Patriarchy', *Feminist Review* 4 (1980): 45–54, has suggested that Elizabeth tended to assume the status of an 'honorary male', thus supporting the patriarchal system rather than subverting it (pp. 45, 53–4).

<sup>10</sup> Thus, on the rare occasions when the Queen chose to emphasize her femininity, it could generate the powerful rhetorical effect of the famous speech attributed to her, delivered (or proclaimed by heralds) in 1588, to the troops at Tilbury at the time of the Spanish Armada: 'I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King, and of a King of England too' (A.F. Pollard, *Tudor Tracts, 1532–1588*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1903, p. 496).

<sup>11</sup> On Philip Sidney's education, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney, Courtier Poet* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 1–43.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Henry and Lady Mary Sidney had four daughters, but Mary was the only one to survive to adulthood. On the Countess of Pembroke, see Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip's Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), John Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 173–204, and Michael G. Brennan, *Literary Patronage in the English Renaissance: The Pembroke Family* (London: Routledge, 1988).

Hebrew, receiving an education not much inferior to that given to her three brothers. In addition, she was instructed in music and needlework, in the management of servants, and in other skills required for the administration of the large household that a young woman of this class would expect to acquire through marriage.

In 1577, when she was sixteen, Mary Sidney became the third wife of the wealthy Earl of Pembroke, Henry Herbert. Her husband, who was over twenty years her senior, seems to have discouraged his lovely young wife from frequenting the Court in London, fearing perhaps that she might be exposed to temptation. For the first eleven years of their marriage the Countess remained resident at Wilton House, the country seat of the Herbert family, near Salisbury in Wiltshire, where she gave birth to four children.

As Countess of Pembroke, Mary Sidney Herbert encouraged the literary efforts of those within her own circle. She inspired and influenced the writings of her brothers Philip and Robert Sidney, of her children's tutor Samuel Daniel, and of her own son William. Her niece and namesake, the daughter of her brother Robert, spent much of her childhood in her aunt's household; the Countess also encouraged this younger Mary Sidney in her writing.<sup>13</sup> Other writers were attracted by the stimulating ambience surrounding the Countess, who achieved renown as a patron of literature. She is probably the 'Delia' of Samuel Daniel's sonnet sequence by that name, and many other contemporary works (including Edmund Spenser's *The Ruines of Time*) were dedicated to her. Michael Drayton and Sir John Davies were among the notable poets who benefited by her personal interest and support. The Countess was a skilful poetic craftsman herself: she wrote her own poetry and made translations.

After Sir Philip Sidney's tragic early death on the battlefield, in 1586, his sister Mary became his literary executor. She edited and published all his works in poetry and prose, and completed – but did not publish – the series of

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<sup>13</sup> On Lady Mary Sidney Wroth, see Josephine A. Roberts (introd.), *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, 2nd edn (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), pp. 3–40; see also Barbara K. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 244–5.

metrical paraphrases of the Psalms on which they had worked together before his death (over two-thirds of the Psalm versions were hers).

The Countess passed on to her sons, William, Earl of Pembroke, and Philip, Earl of Montgomery, her love of literature and her interest in writers. Like their mother, the sons were generous in extending patronage and financial support to a circle of talented poets. In 1623 John Heminge and Henry Condell dedicated to these two noblemen the First Folio of Shakespeare's collected works, as a gesture of gratitude, mentioning in their published dedication that the two brothers had 'prosequuted both [the plays], and their Author liuing, with . . . much favour'.<sup>14</sup>

After the Queen, the Countess of Pembroke was probably the best known of well-educated women of the time. Her life-history demonstrates prevailing attitudes towards educated women, and reveals certain assumptions about the rôle of women in that society in a more general sense.

The ideal of contemporary womanhood at this time is admirably summed up in a phrase coined by Suzanne Hull as the title of her survey of books of the period addressed to women: 'chaste, silent and obedient'.<sup>15</sup> Margaret Hannay adverts to this in her introduction to a collection of essays on 'Tudor women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works': '[T]he lives of these aristocratic women, although less restricted than those of women in the lower classes, were still tightly constrained by an emphasis on the virtues of chastity, silence and obedience'.<sup>16</sup> Mary Sidney's husband, much older than his wife, was obviously most concerned about the first of these qualities in the early years of their marriage, taking pains to keep his beautiful and cultured teenage bride out of the mainstream of social life at Court (which she had already tasted before marrying). The policy may have backfired. Since the Countess of Pembroke did not go to

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<sup>14</sup> *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* (London: Isaac Jaggard and Ed. Blount, 1623), sig. A2r.

<sup>15</sup> Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient: English Books for Women 1475–1640* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1982), p. vi.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret P. Hannay (ed.), *Silent But For the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985), p. 10.

the Court, the Court came to the Countess. The fame of her lively mind and special interest in literature spread, and writers began to find their way to her at rural Wilton House. Eventually this brilliant and attractive woman did re-appear at the Court in London, where she was welcomed back into the Queen's inner circle.

The oft-repeated admonition that a woman should remain 'silent' created problems of a different kind. Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia was the first woman to be granted a doctorate by the University of Padua, in 1677. Notwithstanding her own accomplishments in the art of rhetoric, she declared that 'the highest ornament of woman is silence'.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Becon, one of a long succession of male authors of 'conduct manuals' for women and girls, gave the following advice to the virtuous young woman: '[L]et her kepe silence. For there is nothinge that doth so much commend . . . [and] adourne . . . a maid, as silence'.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the obvious, that a girl should do as she is told without answering back, the injunction to be silent firmly discouraged any woman, educated or not, from articulating her personal viewpoint on almost any subject, and certainly from doing so in her own voice. This may explain why learned women of the time, including the Countess of Pembroke, opted so overwhelmingly for translation as their principal form of expression. The pious treatment of religious subjects was the single exception allowable to the preferred alternative of 'keeping silence'. Thus, women of scholarly bent might translate the devotional works or sermons of male clerics. Yet few women ventured to publish what they wrote, or even what they translated, unless it could be presented as an act of piety in the context of a religious debate. The translations of Mary Roper Clarke Bassett, granddaughter of Sir Thomas More (discussed below) are a case in point.

The effect of the third injunction, to be 'obedient', was that if she wished to say anything at all, a woman was obliged implicitly, if not explicitly, to defer to a man. She could validate herself only in terms of a relationship with a man – as the daughter, sister, wife, mother, or even as the passive

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<sup>17</sup> Cit. in Hannay (introd.), *Silent But For the Word*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Becon, *The Catechism*, in *Worckes of Thomas Becon* (London: John Day, 1564), fol. 536a [vere 532a].

'Muse' of a male poet. On her tombstone the Countess of Pembroke is commemorated as most of these: 'the subject of all Verse, / Sidney's Sister, Pembroke's Mother'.<sup>19</sup> The Countess had directed most of her creative energies towards encouraging the writing of others, mainly males, within her circle, and to completing, editing and publishing the work of her brother, even though the bulk of her own writings – including her metrical versions of the Psalms – circulated only in manuscript form, remaining unpublished for over two centuries after her death in 1621.<sup>20</sup>

Her niece, the younger Mary Sidney – who became Lady Mary Wroth – achieved notoriety by breaking all the rules her aunt had apparently so meticulously observed.<sup>21</sup> Mary Wroth was harshly castigated because the subject matter of her writing was secular. She was labelled 'unfeminine', and exhorted to follow 'the pious example of [her] vertuous and learned Aunt, who translated so many godly books . . .'.<sup>22</sup> When Mary Wroth's work *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* was actually published, she came under such harsh criticism that, humiliated and desperate, she sought to recall and destroy the printed copies, pleading that she had not intended that it be disseminated.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The epitaph, which appears in the British Library, Lansdowne MS 777, fol. 43v, is believed to have been composed by William Browne of Tavistock, although it was attributed at one time to Ben Jonson.

<sup>20</sup> The full Sidney collection of psalm paraphrases was published for the first time in 1823, 'from a copy of the original manuscript, transcribed by John Davies, of Hereford', as *The Psalms of David* (London: Chiswick Press, by C. Whittingham, for Robert Triphook, 1823).

<sup>21</sup> However, Katherine Larson argues that in her psalm translations, the Countess seeks 'a transcendent space beyond the sphere normally reserved for the early modern woman . . .' ('Pleasurable Spaces: The Re-Writing of Women's Theological Experience in Mary Sidney's *Psalms*', 2005, *Frank Henderson's Page on Liturgy and Medieval Women*, 1–9 <<http://www.jfrankhenderson.com>>, p. 6). Perhaps even the Countess of Pembroke rebelled subconsciously against the restrictions imposed on a woman in relation to her writing.

<sup>22</sup> Lord Edward Denny to Lady Mary Wroth, 26 Feb. 1621/2, in *Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Roberts, 2nd edn, pp. 237–41.

<sup>23</sup> Lady Mary Wroth to George Villiers, Earl of Buckingham, 1621, in *Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Roberts, p. 236. See also Josephine A. Roberts (introd.), *The First Part of The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, Renaissance English Text Society, 7th ser., 17 (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995), pp. cvcvi, and *The Second Part of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, Renaissance Text Society, 7th ser., 24 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999).



Early in the sixteenth century Sir Thomas More had written: 'I do not see why learning . . . may not equally agree with both sexes.'<sup>24</sup> Sir Thomas had accordingly given his own daughters as good an education in classical literature, philosophy and science, as was available to any young man. His eldest daughter Margaret Roper made translations from Greek and Latin, and published her translation (from Latin) of a treatise on the Lord's Prayer composed by her father's close friend, Erasmus.<sup>25</sup> A devoted Catholic, Sir Thomas damned himself by remaining silent: he refused to swear to the Act of Succession (vesting the succession to the Crown in the children of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, whose marriage he did not recognize), or to take the Oath of Supremacy (acknowledging Henry VIII as the supreme head of the Church in England). He was accused of treason and imprisoned in 1534, and in the following year was beheaded. Margaret's devotion to the memory of her father was such that she recovered his severed head from the Tower Bridge, declaring that it should be buried together with her in her own grave.<sup>26</sup> She was prepared to risk imprisonment, and was in fact jailed, for attempting to publish her father's works posthumously. Margaret Roper kept her father's legacy alive by instructing her own children – both daughters and sons – with the same loving care and dedication that he had bestowed upon her education. Margaret Roper's daughter, Mary Roper Clark Bassett, translated into English (and published) her grandfather's Latin treatise on the Passion of Christ, written while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. She also 'verie handsomelie translated the Ecclesiasticall historie of Eusebius out of Greek into Latyn, and after into English'. However, this translation 'came not to print', and several other

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<sup>24</sup> More to William Gunnell, cit. in Cresacre More, *The Life of Sir Thomas More* (London: William Pickering, 1828), p. 142.

<sup>25</sup> E.M.G. Routh, *Sir Thomas More and Friends* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 133.

<sup>26</sup> Although there is still some uncertainty about Margaret Roper's final resting-place, archaeological excavation and research in recent decades suggest that her father's head may indeed have been buried with her corpse. The Roper family tomb in Canterbury contains an extra skull, separated by a grate from the bodies in it (H.O. Albin, 'Opening of the Roper Vault in St. Dunstan's Canterbury and Thoughts on the Burial of William and Margaret Roper', *Moreana* 63, 1979: 29–35).

translations Mary Roper made 'of her modestie [she] caused to be suppressed.'<sup>27</sup>

Sir Anthony Cooke of Gidea Hall was another well-known sixteenth-century figure who made it his business to educate his daughters in the same way as his sons. Himself a noted scholar and humanist, Sir Anthony was selected as one of the tutors to Henry VIII's only son, who became King Edward VI. The seventeenth-century biographer David Lloyd drew attention to the quality of the education Sir Anthony Cooke gave to his five daughters, whom he taught himself at home. Lloyd argued that Sir Anthony's purpose was to create 'complete women' by developing his daughters' understanding as well as enabling them to acquire knowledge. He records, however, that Sir Anthony took care that his daughters should also learn the 'traditional feminine virtues of submission, modesty and obedience.'<sup>28</sup> All five of the Cooke daughters became renowned for their learning. By touching upon the careers of the three eldest, I would like to point out, especially, how these highly intelligent and cultivated women influenced those closest to them, as had the Countess of Pembroke.

The eldest Cooke daughter, Mildred, married the most powerful man in Elizabethan England: William Cecil, Lord Burghley, the Queen's Treasurer, her chief minister, and her most trusted adviser. (She was his second wife.) Lady Burghley did not follow Thomas Becon's advice to keep silent, but spoke up and expressed strong views. She is said to have exercised considerable influence over her husband's political decisions. While keeping an eye on affairs of state, she also bore him five children and managed three huge households: Cecil House in London, Burghley House near Stamford in Lincolnshire, and Theobalds in Hertfordshire. In her

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<sup>27</sup> *The Lyfe of Syr Thomas More, Sometymes Lord Chancellor of England, by Ro: Ba: and Edited from MS. Lambeth 179, with Collations from Seven Manuscripts* (1599), ed. Elsie V. Hitchcock, Philip E. Hallett and Arthur W. Reed, EETS, old ser. 222 (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 149. See Eugenio Olivares Merino, 'Mary Roper Clarke Bassett and Meredith Hanmer's *Honorable Ladie of the Lande*', *Sederi* 17 (2007): 75–91, pp. 75, 76, 82.

<sup>28</sup> David Lloyd, 'Observations on the Life of Sir Anthony Cooke', in *The States-men and Favourites of England since the Reformation* (London: J.C. for Samuel Speed, 1665), pp. 199–204; cit. in Caroline Bowden, 'The Library of Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley', *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, 7th series, 6.1 (March 2005): 3–29, p. 4.

spare time Lady Burghley made translations, especially from religious works in Greek, though these were never published during her lifetime. She was a formidable classical scholar; Pauline Croft has argued convincingly that she had a hand in the revision of the Geneva Bible published in 1575.<sup>29</sup> Mildred Cecil corresponded with some of the leading statesmen and scholars of the age, and accumulated a valuable library in support of her interests. Eventually she began to distribute books from her collection to institutions she favoured. She gave away books in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and English, donating them to Westminster School and the library of Westminster Abbey, to Cambridge University and St. John's College, Cambridge, and to Christ Church and St. John's Colleges, Oxford. Some of these, inscribed in Latin or Greek in Mildred's own hand, can still be seen in those libraries, and more remain with her husband's library at Hatfield House.<sup>30</sup> Mildred's son Robert Cecil was the only one of her children to survive her. Devoted to his mother, he turned to her for guidance until the very end of her life.<sup>31</sup> Sir Robert Cecil began to play a significant political role in the last decade of Queen Elizabeth's reign, and stepped into his father's shoes as the Queen's chief minister in 1598. As Earl of Salisbury, Robert Cecil became a powerful figure in the government of Elizabeth's successor, James I, providing a vital continuity between the two regimes.

The scholarly influence of Mildred Cecil also touched a long line of young noblemen who were placed under her husband's authority during their minority, receiving their early education in the Burghley's London home, Cecil House on The Strand. Among those who lived and studied in this household were the Earl of Oxford, who married the Burghley's daughter Anne, and the Earl of Southampton, whom Lord Burghley tried (unsuccessfully) to marry off to his grand-daughter Elizabeth de Vere. The Earl of Southampton extended his patronage to John Florio, Shakespeare,

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<sup>29</sup> Pauline Croft, 'Mildred, Lady Burghley: The Matriarch', in *Patronage, Culture and Power: The Early Cecils, 1558–1612*, ed. Pauline Croft (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 283–300, pp. 283–4, 290.

<sup>30</sup> Bowden, 'The Library of Mildred Cooke Cecil', p. 12. Bowden is also the author of the entry for 'Cecil [*née* Cooke], Mildred, Lady Burghley (1526–1589)' in the *ODNB*.

<sup>31</sup> Bowden, 'The Library of Mildred Cooke Cecil', p. 6.

Marlowe, Barnabe Barnes and Thomas Nash, among a host of other literary figures.

After Mildred's death in 1589 Lord Burghley paid tribute, in a written memorial, to his wife's intellectual achievements as well as to the loving companionship of their forty-three years of marriage. Such was his sorrow at losing her that he would have retired then from public life, had not the Queen absolutely refused to consider his resignation.

Mildred's sister Anne married Sir Nicholas Bacon, Keeper of the Queen's Great Seal and a member of Elizabeth's Privy Council.<sup>32</sup> Anne read Latin, Greek, Italian and French. She too made a name for herself as a translator, actively involving herself in the religious controversies of the day by publishing her translation from Italian of a collection of sermons by the Calvinist preacher, Bernardino Ochino. Lady Anne decided that the youngest of her six sons – evidently her favourite child – was too frail to be sent away to school with his brothers. She therefore kept him at home, and oversaw his education herself up to the age of 13, when presumably she felt that he was strong enough to proceed to Trinity College, Cambridge. That son was Francis Bacon, possessed of 'one of the greatest minds of the age'.<sup>33</sup> Taking as his motto a phrase he had coined, '*ipsa scientia potestas est*' ('Knowledge itself is power'), he wrote to his uncle, Lord Burghley, 'I have taken all knowledge to be my province'.<sup>34</sup> Francis Bacon's writings on the philosophy of science provide the foundation for modern scientific thinking, and he was also widely respected as a man of letters.

The third of the Cooke sisters, Elizabeth, married Sir Thomas Hoby, translator of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Hoby was a skilled musician; her love of music attracted to her home some of the

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<sup>32</sup> Biographical information on Anne and Elizabeth Cooke can be found in David Nash Ford, 'The Notable People of Berkshire' <<http://www.berkshirehistory.com/bios/>>, and in the *ODNB* entries by Lynne Magnusson, 'Bacon [*née* Cooke], Anne, Lady Bacon (c. 1528–1610)'; and Pamela Priestland, 'Russell [*née* Cooke], Elizabeth, Lady Russell [*other married name* Elizabeth Hoby, Lady Hoby] (1529–1609)'.

<sup>33</sup> S.T. Bindoff, *Tudor England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 299.

<sup>34</sup> *The Works of Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam*, ed. J. Spedding, R.L. Ellis and D.D. Heath, 14 vols (London: Longman, 1857–74), 13: 109.

<sup>35</sup> Sir Thomas Hoby (trans.), *The Courtier of Count Baldessar Castilio* (London: W. Seres, 1561).

leading musicians of the time – among them the great lutanist John Dowland, whose patron she became. Elizabeth was quite as learned as her two older sisters, translating works from Latin, Greek and French, and publishing a translation from French of a religious treatise. She too brought up a brilliant son, the scholar and diplomat Edward Hoby – and brought him up largely as a single mother, since when Thomas Hoby died his son Edward was six years old, and Elizabeth did not remarry until Edward was in his teens. She outlived two husbands to become a redoubtable dowager, calling frequently and imperiously on her connections with her two powerful brothers-in-law, Lord Burghley and Sir Nicholas Bacon. Her extensive correspondence with Lord Burghley, still extant, shows that even he found it difficult to deal with her if he could not, or did not, advance her protégés as she demanded.

Fathers as enlightened as Sir Henry Sidney, Sir Thomas More and Sir Anthony Cooke were very much the exception to the rule. The title of this essay includes a line from Æmilia Lanyer's poem *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*: 'If Eve did erre, it was for Knowledge' sake'. Unlike the other women discussed up to this point, Æmilia was of common birth, the daughter of a court musician. As a child, in circumstances yet unexplained, Æmilia was taken into a noble household, where she received at least the first part – the 'trivium' – of the 'seven liberal arts' that comprised the classical and humanist education available to the sons, but only rarely to the daughters, of noble families.<sup>37</sup>

Yet in the first decade of the seventeenth century, only a few years after Queen Elizabeth's death, Æmilia's example could not offer much hope to the woman who did manage to acquire some learning. The title-page of her collection of poems, published in 1611, announced that they were 'Written by Mistris *Æmilia Lanyer*, Wife to Captaine *Alfonso Lanyer* Servant to the Kings Majestie'. Her publisher found it necessary to assure Æmilia's readers that this lady had not breached the social requirement that obliged her to defer to her husband. Eve's quest for knowledge and even for recognition, tended to backfire upon her, as existing historical

<sup>36</sup> Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*, p. 86, line 797.

<sup>37</sup> Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet*, pp. 9–14.

evidence of views on the education of women during this period seems to show. Despite the shining example of Queen Elizabeth's intellectual attainments, at the time of the Queen's death in 1603, as Antonia Fraser comments, 'almost everyone of both sexes agreed that the female intelligence was less than that of a man'.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, one would hope that it would be possible for the female subjects of a Queen as shrewd and scholarly as Elizabeth to acquire *some* degree of learning, or at least of literacy, if they wished to do so. And by the end of her reign, literacy was indeed available to a growing number of women.

'I can write very like my lady . . . on a forgotten matter we can hardly make distinction of our hands', says the waiting-gentlewoman Maria in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.<sup>39</sup> So much so, that the steward Malvolio, to whom Maria directs her gulling letter, is unable to make the distinction between Maria's handwriting and that of their employer, the noble lady Olivia. Believing that he recognizes 'her very C's, her U's, and her T's' (as well as 'her great P's'), Malvolio convinces himself that his private erotic fantasies are about to be realized (II.v.88–9). This letter, he fondly believes, apparently inviting him to become Olivia's lover, even her husband, was written by Olivia in her own 'sweet Roman hand' (III.iv.28–9).

*Twelfth Night* was probably first presented on the London stage in January 1601/2. My point in quoting from this delightful dramatic fiction is that at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare found it unnecessary to explain to his audience why a maidservant should not only be able to compose this riddling epistle, but also to write it in a hand as elegant as that of her noble mistress. Both mistress and maid evidently wrote in the 'Roman' or italic hand that had become fashionable, especially for the use of women, by that time. Martin Billingsley, a professional penman, recommended that women be taught to write in the italic hand because '[italic] is conceived to be the easiest hand . . . and to be taught in the shortest time: Therefore it is usually taught to women for as much as

<sup>38</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Woman's Lot in Seventeenth-century England* (London: Phoenix Press, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night: Or, What You Will*, ed. J.M. Lothian and T.W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975), II.iii.160–2.

they (having not the patience to take any great paines . . . ) must be taught that which they may instantly learn . . . because their minds are (upon light occasion) easily drawne from the first resolution.<sup>40</sup>

The education of any girl of that period, from the lowest to almost the highest rank of society, would emphasize the practical matters that were regarded as belonging to a woman's sphere: housekeeping, spinning, sewing, brewing, cooking, bringing up children, attending to basic medical problems, and – in a middle- or upper-class home – supervising servants. Even Lord Burghley's daughters and grand-daughters were instructed in these matters as well as in the more theoretical disciplines of languages and music. Because religion was so important an element in the education and upbringing of children, that alone provided the most cogent argument for teaching young girls something more than these basics, in the expectation that as wives and mothers they would be charged with raising children and managing households. Thomas Becon himself advocated that girls should attend schools, to be taught by virtuous women. The curriculum he recommended included Bible-readings, because, Becon demanded rhetorically: 'Can that woman gouern her house godly, whiche knoweth not one poynt of godlynes?'<sup>41</sup>

By the end of the sixteenth century, many girls in London were able to read, even if they could not write. Either they were taught at home by their mothers or by some literate member of the family, or they could attend an elementary or 'dame' school in the neighbourhood where both boys and girls would learn to read and write in English, to 'reckon' and to cast accounts. The teacher might be a priest, or an older woman who might (or might not) have achieved a little more than basic literacy and numeracy.<sup>42</sup>

At that time writing was not taught together with reading, as it is now, and it was not nearly as widespread a skill.<sup>43</sup> Partly, the acquisition of writing would depend on the needs of a person's occupation. In a noble household like that

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<sup>40</sup> Martin Billingsley, *The Pens Excellencie* (London: J. Beale, for George Humble, 1618), p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Becon, *The Catechism*, fol. 537b, cit. in Alison Sim, *The Tudor Housewife* (Stroud, Glos.: Sutton Publishing, 1996), p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Sim, *The Tudor Housewife*, pp. 29–43.

<sup>43</sup> Hull, *Chaste, Silent & Obedient*, p. 4.

depicted in *Twelfth Night*, a waiting-gentlewoman like Maria might well have been no less literate than a steward like Malvolio, who took responsibility for the administration of the estate and far exceeded the waiting-woman in status. But writing would still have been regarded as an unnecessary accomplishment for, say, a laundress or a lace-maker early in the seventeenth century. A survey of records of the ecclesiastical courts over the period 1580 to 1640 suggests that about 90% of women in London were then unable to write, even if they could read.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond basic literacy, attitudes towards academic education for women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not encouraging. The Spanish priest Juan-Luis Vives, confessor to Katherine of Aragon (Henry VIII's first Queen) and tutor to her daughter the Princess Mary, wrote an influential book on the education of women. Titled in English *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, it was translated from the original Latin into other European languages, and circulated widely.<sup>45</sup> Vives did in fact favour education for women, but took a very narrow view of what they should be taught, what they could be allowed to read, and what kind of activities were permissible. Princess Mary's education, under the influence of her devoutly Catholic mother, was restricted by the convictions of Father Vives that only serious moral writings were fit for a young girl's perusal, while music, dancing and attending tournaments were totally disallowed.<sup>46</sup>

Elizabeth's successor, James I – though himself a learned man – took a dim view of academic education for women. His Majesty explicitly prohibited his own daughter (also a Princess Elizabeth) from learning Latin, declaring ‘To make women learned and foxes tame has the same

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<sup>44</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> The Latin edition of this treatise first appeared in 1523. It was translated into Dutch, French, German, Italian and Spanish as well as English (there were several English versions). A facsimile of a 1529 English edition is reproduced in Diane Bornstein (ed.), *Distaves and Dames: Renaissance Treatises for and about Women* (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles, 1978). See Valerie Wayne, ‘Some Sad Sentences: Vives' Instruction of a Christian Woman’, in Hannay (ed.), *Silent But For the Word*, pp. 15–29. Wayne sets out the provenance of the work in detail in notes 1, 3 and 4 to her essay (pp. 258–9).

<sup>46</sup> Wayne, ‘Some Sad Sentences’, *passim*.



effect: to make them more cunning'.<sup>47</sup> King James was not alone in holding that view. Towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, the chief contribution made by the Earl of Cumberland to the education of his gifted daughter Lady Anne Clifford, had likewise been to forbid that she be taught either Latin or Greek – or, apparently, any language other than English.<sup>48</sup> Lady Anne's tutor, appointed by her mother, was the poet Samuel Daniel, who had already schooled the two sons of the Countess of Pembroke.

Two generations later, the poet John Milton – despite holding advanced views on many other subjects – retained prejudices very similar to those shared by King James and the Earl of Cumberland with regard to the education of *his* three daughters. After losing the last vestige of his sight in 1652, Milton constantly required the assistance of readers and amanuenses. Obviously it was useful to have such skills at hand in his household, so he made sure that all three of his daughters learned to read and write. At least two of these girls were called upon frequently, often daily, to read to their exacting father in Latin and Greek, and possibly in other languages as well – John Aubrey, Milton's first biographer, also mentions Italian and French.<sup>49</sup> Milton insisted that anyone who read to him should use strictly the correct accents and pronunciations.<sup>50</sup> Milton's nephew Edward Philips, who had lived in the Milton household and had been educated by Milton himself, recorded that despite the apparent facility and correctness with which his cousins had been trained to read to their father in foreign languages, Milton's daughters 'understood what they read in no other language but English; and their father used often to say in their hearing, "one tongue was enough for a woman"'.<sup>51</sup> Such a situation, as Philips commented, 'must needs [have

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<sup>47</sup> Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel*, p. 148.

<sup>48</sup> George C. Williamson, *Lady Anne Clifford . . . Her Life, Letters and Work* (Kendal: Titus Wilson & Son, 1922), p. 66.

<sup>49</sup> John Aubrey, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (1949; rpt Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 1999), pp. 201–02.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Ellwood, *The History of the Life of Thomas Ellwood*, ed. C.G. Crump (London: Macmillan, 1900), p. 90.

<sup>51</sup> J. Milton French, *The Life Records of John Milton*, 5 vols (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1949–58), 5: 109.

been] a trial of patience' for these girls.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising to hear from contemporary sources that the two older Milton daughters came to dislike their father intensely, and that the youngest – from Philips's account the most promising of the three, in terms of scholarly potential – ran away from home at the age of sixteen, and never came back.

The influence of an educated woman, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, could extend far beyond her own immediate family. But too often the story was simply one of wasted potential. Sadly, the acquisition of knowledge did not empower a woman in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Rather, it defined more sharply and firmly the limits within which society could constrain her.

At the root of the problem was a generally dismissive attitude, inculcated into and shared by both women and men, towards the minds of women. Deep-seated prejudices, rationalized from the Biblical account of Eve's disobedience, suggested that by acquiring knowledge, women threatened the social structure in some way. It was unthinkable that a woman, made bold by learning, should question her traditional subservience to men. Æmilia Lanyer spoke out passionately against the patent injustice of men's assumed right to dominate women –

[W]hy should you disdain  
Our being your equals, free from tyranny?

she demanded.<sup>53</sup> But hers was a voice crying in the wilderness, for her writings, privately published, went largely unread.

In a dedication to the pious Countess of Warwick in 1590, the devotional poet Anne Vaughan Locke expressed her own sense, as a devout and learned woman, of the restrictions that society so arbitrarily laid upon women. Using the metaphor of the rebuilding of Jerusalem for her translation of a Protestant tract from French to English, Anne Locke wrote:

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<sup>52</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judeorum*, p. 87, lines 829–30.

Euerie one in his calling is bound to doo somewhat to the furtherance of the holie building; *but because great things by reason of my sex I may not doo* . . . I have, according to my duetic, brought my poore basket of stones to the strengthening of the walles of that Jerusalem, whereof (by grace) wee are all both Citizens and members.<sup>54</sup>

Many years would pass, many battles would have to be fought (and some are not yet over), to win for women like Anne Locke the privilege of contributing to the building process something more than that 'poore basket of stones'; to set women free actually to attempt the 'great things' they were then, and are now, capable of achieving.

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<sup>54</sup> Anne Locke (trans.), *Of the Markes of the Children of God, and of their comforts in affliction* (1590), by Jean Taffin, in *The Collected Works of Anne Vaughan Locke*, ed. Susan M. Felch, Renaissance English Text Society, 7th ser., 21 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), p. 77. Locke belonged to the merchant class, but she had an enduring connection with the Cooke sisters, participating in nonconformist Protestant publishing and politics. See Felch's introduction, pp. xxix–xxxvi.