



---

Review: Moderation and Its Discontents: Recent Work on Renaissance Women

Author(s): Margaret W. Ferguson

Review by: Margaret W. Ferguson

Source: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Women's Agency: Empowerment and the Limits of Resistance (Summer, 1994), pp. 349-366

Published by: [Feminist Studies, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178156>

Accessed: 08-08-2015 22:02 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Feminist Studies, Inc.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Feminist Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## REVIEW ESSAY

### MODERATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS: RECENT WORK ON RENAISSANCE WOMEN

MARGARET W. FERGUSON

*Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing, 1649-1688.* By Elaine Hobby. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988.

*Women of the Renaissance.* By Margaret L. King. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

*Oppositional Voices: Women as Writers and Translators of Literature in the English Renaissance.* By Tina Krontiris. New York: Routledge, 1992.

*Writing Women in Jacobean England.* By Barbara Kiefer Lewalski. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Jacob Burckhardt's view that Renaissance women "stood on a footing of perfect equality" with Renaissance men has been repeatedly cited by feminists both as a prelude to the marshaling of rich historical evidence of women's inequality and as a polemical signal of the theoretical importance of gender difference in our constructions of the Renaissance or of any other historical period.<sup>1</sup> In striking contrast to Burckhardt, cast in the role of the grandly erroneous patriarch, Joan Kelly was until recently cast as the good mother or muse in the field of Renaissance (or early modern) feminist studies.<sup>2</sup> In her famous essay of 1977, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" she challenged Burckhardt, and his cultural authority, with an argument for the Renaissance as a period of economic and social decline for women relative both to Renaissance men and to medieval women. Recently, however, as all the books under review suggest, a significant trend in feminist scholarship has entailed a rejection both of Kelly's dark vision of the Renaissance and of Burckhardt's rosy one. For reasons worth pondering, this trend seems most evident in books that focus on middling and upper-class women whose ability to write gave

*Feminist Studies* 20, no. 2 (summer 1994). © 1994 by Feminist Studies, Inc.

them unusual access to the historical record. These books offer what we might call a "cautiously optimistic" assessment of Renaissance women's achievements while at the same time stressing the social obstacles they faced when they sought to raise their "oppositional voices."

The general approach illustrated in these four books, three of them exclusively focused on English women, has undeniable intellectual strengths. First, the books are enormously informative about early modern women and the contexts in which they sought to articulate "oppositional" views. Another strength is the general stress on the ways in which differences among Renaissance women—especially along lines of social status and religion—work to complicate the kinds of generalizations both Burckhardt and Kelly made on the basis of their observations about upper-class Italian women. Other aspects of the critical approach illustrated in these books, albeit often with different inflections, are, however, less easy to applaud. In what follows, I'll attempt to look at some of the costs as well as the benefits of an approach that might be provisionally characterized as a *via media* that greatly enriches our knowledge of certain Renaissance women while at the same time avoiding, for the most part, some hard theoretical and political questions about which Renaissance women's stories are being recovered now and why.

In the trend toward a *via media* I am hypothesizing here, the feminist critic performs a version of the act Elaine Hobby dramatizes in her book's title. The modern critic, like her Renaissance foremother, seeks to find or construct individual female "virtue" from what is taken to be an oppressive realm of historical "necessity." Hobby is the most explicit of the critics under review about the political implications of this kind of act: it can "turn constraints into permissions, into little pockets of liberty or autonomy," Hobby writes (p. 8); but she also notes that many women's resistance served only to make the individual's situation less stifling, while leaving the status quo intact. In all of these recent books, but in Hobby's most strongly, I hear a version of the barely articulated question that Robert Frost ascribes to the ovenbird—a question that seems to apply as much to some feminist critics' work in the academy at the present moment as it does to the situation of the Renaissance women who are being analyzed (and perhaps identified with) in these books. The question Frost's bird poses "in all but words/ Is what to make of a diminished thing,"

The "diminished thing," according to all these books, is what Renaissance (or for Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, Jacobean, and for Elaine Hobby, Restoration) society offered—ideologically, economically, and legally—to

women. All the authors accept as "received wisdom" the idea that the period they are dealing with was "regressive" for women compared with a period that had come before. Three of the four authors in question rely, broadly speaking, on the Marxist periodization that influenced Joan Kelly's "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" as well as Alice Clark's pioneering study, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (first published in 1919). Margaret L. King, Tina Krontiris, and Elaine Hobby all see increasing constraints on Renaissance women, compared with their medieval forebears, coming with the transition from feudalist to capitalist socioeconomic formations. Hobby superimposes on this broad narrative a more particular one concerning women's losses in the political transition from the Commonwealth to the Restoration periods. Although Lewalski's story also depends on positing a relative "decline" in women's social conditions for the period on which she is focusing, she is concerned not with the transition from medieval (feudal) to Renaissance (early capitalist) society but rather with the more local transition from Elizabeth's reign to that of James I in England. Hence, instead of citing Kelly or Clark for the notion of a decline in women's fortunes, Lewalski cites arguments by Gordon Schochet and Jonathan Goldberg about an intensification of "patriarchal ideology" under James I.

Lewalski's version of the "regression" argument is problematic, because it assumes that the condition of women as a group can be inferred chiefly from a court-based ideology. Her too-brief discussion of this issue implies that a "culture dominated by a powerful Queen" (Elizabeth) was somehow more progressive for women in general (but according to what criteria?) than a culture whose "court ethos" was "shaped by the patriarchal ideology and homosexuality of James I" (p. 2). Krontiris and a number of other recent feminist scholars do not subscribe to Lewalski's view that Elizabeth's reign provided a more congenial environment for English women in general than James's reign did.<sup>3</sup> In any case, the position of a historical drama in which women are not only oppressed but *more* oppressed than they had been in the past (or than they would be at some future point) is an important but I think also a problematic inaugural move in each of these books about Renaissance women who struggle against oppression and who are depicted as succeeding, to some degree, in making something valuable—and usually verbal—from adversity. In so doing, the Renaissance women studied in these books find some measure of what each of these critics calls "autonomy."<sup>4</sup>

Although that conceptual stress on autonomy brings certain problems, as I suggest in more detail later, it also brings some important challenges

to "received wisdom" about the Renaissance period. One striking feature of these critics' approaches to Renaissance women is a sustained and productive attention to the cultural significance of women's religious beliefs, in all their variety, during the Renaissance era. Neither Burckhardt nor Kelly had much to say about women and religion—Kelly because like many left-wing feminists of the 1960s and 1970s she implicitly accepts a Marxist denigration of religion as an element of the "superstructure" and an instrument of ideological mystification; Burckhardt because his praise of the new Renaissance (elite male) "individuality" depends on attributing to the Renaissance mind a spirit of skeptical rationalism that dramatically contrasts with the kind of Christian belief he imputes to the "medieval mind." Humanism, which Burckhardt takes as the "advance guard" of Renaissance individualism, was in his view a fundamentally "pagan" and "worldly" intellectual movement.<sup>5</sup> Burckhardt suggests, however, that this is a "construction" of the period which serves the nineteenth-century academic interpreter's needs; the humanists, he writes, "display as a rule such a character that even their religion, which is sometimes professed very definitely, becomes a matter of indifference to us" (p. 479, my emphasis).

Burckhardt's remark points to the need to ask what psychic or social needs are perhaps being served when religion becomes a matter of great importance to modern feminist students of the period, but there is no doubt that much of the new feminist scholarship on the early modern period usefully challenges earlier approaches—idealist and historical materialist both—that saw religion as epiphenomenal or even antithetical to the real "Renaissance." Indeed, the books under review reinstate religion to suggest, provocatively, that if women did not have a Renaissance, they did at least have a Reformation. These critics further suggest that the two phenomena can no longer be treated as separate "moments" and/or as separate geographic locales (Italy as the home of the "Renaissance," Northern Europe as the home of the "Reformation") in standard history courses.

The implicit challenge both to Burckhardt's and Kelly's views of the importance of religion in our constructions of the so-called Renaissance also has interesting implications for the view, widely accepted in our school textbooks and in the advertising industry as well, that the Renaissance was an Age of Enlightenment to be contrasted to, and valued more positively than, a preceding "dark" age of dogmatic religious belief construed as somehow antithetical to "individuality." In *Women of the Renaissance*, for instance, the historian Margaret King sees the "heroines of the

Renaissance" as the "female worshippers of God" who "aroused awe for their heroic asceticism, their unstinting service, their other worldly visions, their inner power" (p. 129). And although her chapters focus mainly on women's secular writings, Krontiris frames her discussion by noting that "in the name of the word of God, women could and did claim their right to speak independently from men" (p. 10). Both in her introduction and in her chapters on such women writers as Aemilia Lanyer and Elizabeth Cary, Lewalski astutely analyzes the ideologically "destabilizing" potential in Christian and especially Protestant doctrines that stress the believer's "immediate relationship with God and primary responsibility to follow conscience in every action" (p. 8); and Hobby devotes two richly textured chapters, on women prophets and on women's religious poetry, meditations, and conversion narratives, respectively, to illustrating her argument that seventeenth-century English women used religion as a major justification for writing. Despite the "chastity, silence, and obedience" officially required of Christian women (in the influential writings of St. Paul, for instance, and in the many educational treatises and conduct books analyzed by Suzanne W. Hull and Ann Rosalind Jones among others),<sup>6</sup> some Renaissance women, Catholic and Protestant both, read Scripture in unconventional ways and found themselves "commanded by God to write" (Hobby, p. 9). What they wrote, as this set of modern critical studies amply shows—building in this respect on essays collected in Margaret Hannay's *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (1985)—frequently countered the authority of "various earthly patriarchs" who claimed to rule women in God's stead (Lewalski, p. 9).

King defines the Renaissance broadly in both temporal and spatial terms. Her study surveys women's lives from 1350 through 1650 and takes its examples mainly from Italy, France, Germany, and England, with brief glances at saints from Spain (Teresa) and Sweden (Bridget). King organizes her book in three chapters. The first two examine women of various social classes in relation to two key institutions, the family and the church; the third, entitled "Women and High Culture," builds on King's own earlier work on "learned" women, creatures often regarded as belonging to a peculiar "third sex."<sup>7</sup>

King's specific discussions of women's lives and religious beliefs effectively challenge a standard view of a new Renaissance "self-hood" emerging suddenly from an "unselfconscious" Middle Ages. That view appears not only in older Burckhardtian celebrations of the Renaissance but also in many recent New Historicist accounts that look with a critical eye on

the (alleged) emergence of a "liberal humanist ideology"—with an accompanying new "subjectivity"—in the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, although King usefully complicates various theories that pit the Renaissance and its typical (elite male) modes of subjectivity against a "homogenized Age of Faith," she makes no effort to theorize her own views about periodization. I was often perplexed by her oscillations between stressing a fundamental continuity between medieval and Renaissance periods, on the one hand, and arguing, on the other, for the Renaissance as a period of "decline" for women (a view adapted from Kelly that requires some notion of—and explanation for—discontinuity between the periods). I also have questions about the way in which King valorizes religion as the prime, and sometimes the only, avenue through which both late medieval and Renaissance women could achieve "autonomy."

In the book's longest chapter, "Women and the Church," King argues that "from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries, women increasingly made their own way" despite the "ingrained anti-female bias" of the "official church"; through religion, women "'found their own space and boundaries of autonomy, however limited these were.' They explored new forms of aggregation for the purpose of living a holy life outside the framework of the monastic establishment. They thus created new opportunities for women to enjoy the same freedom of spiritual expression within a communal life as men had already claimed" (p. 103). And they did so against a pattern "of increased restriction of female piety and reclaustration of female communities" (p. 113). Here King seems to be arguing for an "increase" in women's spiritual autonomy as a correlate, of some kind, to a "pattern of increased restriction" on women dictated by a powerful institution. I wish King had dealt more clearly with the questions of causality lurking in this argument; and I would also like to know more about what it means to ascribe "autonomy" to women whose recorded words stress a notion of desirable female "selfhood" that differs in important ways from what modern liberal feminists usually mean by autonomy. One of King's most fascinating examples of a woman who resisted the Church's authority is Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake around 1310 along with copies of her heretical book. But there is an intriguing gap, it seems to me, between King's use of Porete to illustrate women's struggle for autonomy "in the Renaissance centuries" (p. 117) and Porete's own desire for a mystical union with the divine in which the soul becomes "a blank" and so purified that "it seems that nothing exists except God himself" (quoted by King, p. 116, from a translation of Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls*). King herself

comments that "the boundaries between self and God, in Porete's vision, are richly blurred"; and King also comments that Porete's notion of the "annihilation of the soul" in God was one of the ideas specifically condemned by the church officials. King does not, however, reflect on the blurring of historical difference—and the muting of political precision—that occurs when a modern critic presents Porete's words (and martyrdom) under the narrative rubric of a quest for greater "autonomy" for women. Because that term wasn't even used to describe an individual's "freedom" until the early nineteenth century, feminist scholars of the early modern period need to put more critical pressure on this concept than most of us (and here I include myself) have done to date.

King's first chapter contains fascinating anecdotes intermingled with sober statistics about women in the (sometimes overlapping) roles of mother, daughter, wife, widow, and worker. To offset the bleak picture she draws of the high rate of death by childbirth, for instance (some estimates have 10 percent of women dying during or as a result of the ordeal [p. 5]), King argues that the tradition of women's writing on motherhood—which she traces from Dhuoda's *Manual* of 841 to Elizabeth Joceline's *Legacie* of 1662—shows that (literate) medieval and Renaissance mothers "chose to fulfill the task of nurturing their children not at a minimum but to the maximum," exceeding "the expectations of their age" (pp. 22–23). I wish King had reflected more on the kind of "choice" she infers from this body of textual evidence, but I am grateful for her attention to a fascinating and neglected tradition of women's writing.

"Exceptional" women are important throughout King's study, but her final chapter focuses directly on women whose economic privilege and access to education enabled them to become, in King's phrase, "forgers" of the "cultural forms" of the Renaissance (p. 157). Christine de Pizan, author of the *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) becomes, along with Joan of Arc, a central figure in the revised Renaissance pantheon, and King's conclusion suggests why. Here she explicitly cites Kelly's vision of a "decline" in the fortunes of Renaissance women relative to those of men on each of the fronts the book has examined: family life, institutional religion, and "the world of learning" (p. 238). But in her final paragraph, King turns away from Kelly's gloomy assessment of the "dismal realities of women's lives in the Renaissance centuries" toward a more cheerful perspective provided not by Burckhardt but by the "splendid historian of Italian society, David Herlihy," who has argued that "woman's charismatic role, her astonishing success as intermediary with the divine, rooted in her female role as mother projected on a cosmic scale, gave her special

prominence precisely in the Renaissance centuries."<sup>9</sup> Although King doesn't mention one of the biggest problems with such a generalization about Renaissance women—namely, that it hardly applies at all to women in the Protestant countries where the Virgin Mary's intermediary role was under severe attack—King does wonder if Herlihy's argument neglects the large number of women victimized by Christianity by focusing on "figures of spiritual prominence." King ultimately finds Herlihy's argument (and emphasis) "persuasive," however, because he supports her own view that something "changed during the Renaissance in women's sense of themselves, even if very little changed or changed for the better in their social condition." That change, King insists, had its "roots" in the "spiritual experience of women, and it culminates in the consciousness put into words by the first feminists of the Renaissance. Not monsters, not defects in nature, but the intelligent seekers of a new way, these women wielded the picks of the understanding to build a better city for ladies" (pp. 238–39). The quoted passage has a somewhat strained note of idealization, I think—a note not unlike some of those in Christine de Pizan's own *Book of the City of Ladies*. King's allusion to Pizan makes this writer, who sought to praise female virtue, into a kind of Renaissance role model for modern feminist intellectuals.

The nature, degree, and effects of a critical identification with the objects (subjects) of one's inquiry are particularly vexing issues for the historians and literary scholars who study early modern women writers. Such women were—simply by virtue of their literacy—members of a tiny minority of the population, and it is risky to take their textual depictions of their experiences as representative of "female experience" in any general sense. Tina Krontiris's fascinating study of six Renaissance women writers making "room for self-expression" under adverse circumstances does tend at times to conflate "women" and "women writers."<sup>10</sup> When Krontiris does this, and also when she suggests that the women writers she studies, unlike royal women, were "typical of other women at that point of English culture" (p. 24), she assumes too easily, I think, that women's gender, irrespective of other social differences including access to literacy, allows us to constitute them as a social group and as our object of analysis. Her book, like the others under review, shows little awareness of the critiques of this epistemological construction of "women" as an object of analysis mounted by writers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Teresa de Lauretis, and Trinh T. Minh-ha.<sup>11</sup>

Although Krontiris does not engage with the kind of questions posed by recent postmodern and postcolonial feminist writing, she is very

acute on the important gaps that existed in Renaissance society (and by implication in our own) between ideologies oppressive to women, on the one hand, and women's actual behavior, on the other. Anticipating Lewalski's book, which deals with several of the same authors, Krontiris explores the ways in which (educated) women, from the middle and upper ranks of society, carved out "meaningful, productive, and creative roles" for themselves. The quoted phrase comes from an essay in which the historian Judith Brown disputes Joan Kelly's pessimistic views of Renaissance women's scope for achievement.<sup>12</sup> Like Brown and more recently, Ann Rosalind Jones, Krontiris is concerned to show women intentionally "negotiating" some power for themselves (at least in the realm of public discourse) against ideologies that are seen as constraining but not monolithic.<sup>13</sup> Intriguingly, Michel Foucault, one of the gurus of recent American New Historicist studies of English Renaissance court culture, is invoked here as an alternative to Joan Kelly and, by implication, I think, to Marx. "Resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real," Krontiris approvingly quotes Foucault as saying ("elsewhere" referring implicitly to a Marxist theoretical topography of different class-spaces); nor is resistance "inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. Resistance exists all the more by being in the same place as power" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, quoted in Krontiris, p. 4).

But what, in practical terms, does such a mode (or theory) of resistance amount to? Krontiris's smart and enlightening chapters—"Servant Girls Claiming Male Domain," which treats two little known writers of the 1560s and 1570s, Isabella Whitney and Margaret Tyler; "Noblewomen Dramatizing the Husband-Wife Conflict," which analyzes plays by Lady Mary Herbert and Elizabeth Cary, Lady Falkland; and "Women of the Jacobean Court Defending Their Sex," on writings by Aemilia Lanyer and Lady Mary Wroth—offer many examples of women writing against the grain of dominant ideologies about women's nature and the norms of behavior necessary to control that (erring) "nature." Whitney, for instance, "refutes Ovidian and other stereotypes of women as fickle and hysterical"; Herbert "indirectly counters the stereotype of woman as whore and seductress" in her translation of a play about Cleopatra (p. 141). But Krontiris herself, in her sober and thoughtful conclusion, suggests that such verbal opposition to cultural stereotypes constitutes a highly "circumscribed" resistance. Seldom do these women "attack basic assumptions in the ideologies that oppress them"; mostly, they employ strategies of "appropriation, accommodation, and modification" in order to justify their own authorship and (especially in the cases of middle-class

women writing for economic profit) to ingratiate themselves with their (various) readers. I sense a strange theoretical and political gap between Krontiris's introductory invocation of Foucault ("Resistance exists all the more [but more than what?] by being in the same place as power") and her concluding admission that the women she has so carefully analyzed "do not actually propose radical alternatives" to the status quo (p. 142). Implicitly judging her Renaissance subjects by modern feminist standards, she seems to find their voices wanting in some desired quantity of opposition. What to make of a diminished thing? she seems (almost) to ask in her conclusion. And her readers may be left wondering what to make of a (Foucauldian) theory of resistance which looks custom-made for modern first-world academics (resistance is not, he says, "inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power") but which seems nonetheless—on the evidence of Krontiris's conclusion—not quite sufficient to the demands of the day (theirs or ours).

One response to such a line of inquiry—which I am stressing not because I have clear answers but rather because it seems important to pursue collectively—appears in the afterword to Barbara Lewalski's book. There, explaining her decision to avoid the term "feminist" to describe Jacobean women, she acknowledges a desire "to sidestep controversy as to what set of attitudes warrants that modern label" and, "more important, to focus attention on the stances possible at an earlier historical moment" (p. 314). Her first explanation effectively sidesteps any attempt to theorize the *relation* between present and past concerns in our scholarly work (the old but still important chestnut of the "hermeneutic circle"). The second explanation, which Lewalski feels is the more important one, raises for me the question of whether the literate and economically privileged women Lewalski and most literary feminist scholars perforce analyze (our preferred form of evidence being written words) really represent all the ideological stances possible in the Jacobean era? It seems politically problematic to define possibility on the basis of a historical record inherited through—and often constructed by—literate persons and elite institutions.

Lewalski does firmly state, in her introductory chapter, that the nine female subjects she has chosen to study—three royal women and six well-educated authors, four of them titled—are "hardly representative of women in other or even the same ranks of society" (p. 3). I wish she had integrated this perception into her concluding remark about not wanting to impose modern standards on to what was "possible" for women of an earlier period, for what one takes to be an era's horizons of possibility is

surely colored by one's claims for the "representativeness" of one's sample. How does one theorize the *gaps* in one's evidence? That question may well impinge on the way one counters the biases inherent in one's identification with subjects like oneself. If the privileged women Lewalski studies are admittedly not representative of women in other social ranks, her female subjects do seem to acquire some exemplary (ideological) status through the force of a narrative that repeatedly shows them succeeding in using their verbal and social skills to "empower" themselves and increase their "self-consciousness" (pp. 7-8).

The stories Lewalski tells about individual women are fascinating in their texture and learning. But in political terms, the stories cumulatively produce a strangely diminished result: an achievement of (an ideal of) "self-empowerment" that has no socially disruptive or even material effects. Countering what seem to be her own findings about a woman like Anne Clifford, who sought and "at long last obtained" certain legal titles to properties she believed belonged to her rather than to her uncle or her husbands (p. 126), Lewalski insists in both her introduction and her afterword that women's oppositional writing "*[o]bviously . . . did not and could not change their world*" (p. 11, my emphasis; cf. p. 315). Why, however, is this proposition so self-evident?

Lewalski's meticulously researched chapters give no answer to such a question, but they do answer many other questions that both specialist and nonspecialist readers might have about nine remarkable Jacobean women: Queen Anne, consort of James I; Princess Elizabeth, James's daughter; Arbella Stuart, whose royal blood made her a threat to both Elizabeth's and James's claims to the throne; Lucy, countess of Bedford, the "most powerful patroness of the Jacobean court" aside from the queen and a poet in her own right; Anne Clifford, who described herself as "sole Daughter and Heir" to her "Illustrious Father," George Clifford, earl of Cumberland, and who wrote a fascinating *Diary* detailing her efforts to secure her inheritance; Rachel Speght, a London middle-class woman who explicitly defended women against contemporary misogynist writings; Elizabeth Cary, author of the first play published by an English woman, *The Tragedie of Mariam* (1613) and perhaps—both Lewalski and Krontiris think definitely—the author of at least one text about Edward II published in 1680 long after Cary's death;<sup>14</sup> Aemilia Lanyer, the first English woman to publish what Lewalski sees as a "substantial volume of poems," the *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* of 1611;<sup>15</sup> and Mary Wroth, whom Lewalski characterizes as "the most prolific, most self-conscious, and most impressive female author of the Jacobean era" (p. 243).

Lewalski devotes her formidable powers as a literary historian and critic to these particular women because they were "actively involved in cultural production in Jacobean England" and because their "lives and texts illuminate and contextualize one another, inviting the perceptions of common patterns" (p. 2). One of these patterns, which Lewalski somewhat surprisingly writes that she was "somewhat surprised to discover," is "the strong resistance mounted in all these women's texts to the patriarchal construct of women as chaste, silent, and obedient, and their overt rewriting of women's status and roles" (p. 2).<sup>16</sup>

Lewalski's book, which will be important for scholars of the English Renaissance whatever their methodological and ideological leanings, elegantly synthesizes what previous literary historians and, more recently, a number of feminist scholars have unearthed. The book also offers many original insights as it weaves a contextual net around the writings it examines, exploring historical links among these privileged women as well as some of their shared concerns. In so doing, however, the book neglects the substantial political and religious differences among the women it constructs, on the basis of their shared gender, as oppositional voices. The book's tendency to homogenize its Jacobean female subjects under the banner of "opposition" to "patriarchy" perhaps reflects some problems in Lewalski's stated polemical aim of reducing what she sees as a "balkanization" of modern literary studies or, more locally, the subfield of English Renaissance studies. In her view, the recent scholarship on Renaissance women writers is insufficiently appreciated both by "traditional scholars" and by "newer scholars of early modern culture in their analyses of class, race, gender, and power relations" (i.e., many male "New Historicists"). To remedy this neglect, Lewalski adopts a rhetoric of judicious moderation that seems implicitly directed toward an audience of academic men. And in truth, Lewalski's rhetorical stance concedes a great deal—some feminists will feel it's the whole shop—to traditional belletristic managers. The three women writers studied in the final section of the book, who "claim the major genres" and express their visions in "complex literary terms," produce works of "considerable aesthetic interest," Lewalski remarks in her introduction (p. 6). She reiterates the point a few pages later ("Cary, Lanyer, and especially Wroth are writers of considerable merit," p. 10); and she returns almost uncannily to the same phrase in her afterword, which refers to the scholarly labors that will enable us "to assess and properly value . . . [the] often considerable aesthetic merit" of these Jacobean women's writings (p. 309). The adjective "considerable," expressing an apparently "moderate" judgment of achievement,

seems to take much more than it gives; the rhetorical reservation points, I think, to the book's unwillingness to historicize, or examine the ideological dimensions of, such notions as "major" genres or "personal autonomy." The latter notion underpins the book's dominant narrative, which begins to look like a version of America's favorite Horatio Alger story, but this time for women.

Each chapter shows an oppressed (but articulate and educated) woman using her social and/or verbal skills to allow the "emergence of a female self able to resist existing social norms and to struggle for . . . [certain] rights" (p. 151). In the case of Lady Anne Clifford, who saw herself, Lewalski wittily suggests, as a "kind of female David taking on the Goliath of the patriarchal power structure," the struggle is for "the rights of a daughter to certain patriarchal titles, privileges, and property, and to preserve the interests of a female line" (p. 151). But Lewalski's own phrasing suggests that the David and Goliath analogy is inaccurate here, or at least inadequate—and perhaps symptomatically so—to any serious struggle against what Lewalski calls "the patriarchal power structure." Lady Anne Clifford, seeking not to critique that Goliath structure but rather to have a bigger piece of its pie, is, at any rate, a sobering figure for modern feminists thinking about the possible institutional and political consequences of their own research on and writing about women. When the women in question, whether from past cultures or from contemporary ones, start looking a lot like versions of middle-class North American female professors or their students and when their "politics," as Lewalski's use of that term in her afterword suggests, involves a "challenge to patriarchal ideology" that does not "change the external circumstances of Jacobean women's lives, or even [usually?] of their own lives" but is rather an affair of words, "consciousness" (p. 315), and the *imagining* of a better world (p. 11, my emphasis), then we need to ask what possibly self-justifying cultural work our feminist "recovery" research is performing. Those of us who are professional teachers of language may be particularly inclined to overestimate the importance of verbal opposition and changes that take place (only) in articulate minds and the texts they produce. This is a difficult and uncomfortable kind of question to raise, especially because it may easily lead to conclusions that challenge our notions of education as a progressive force that gives individuals valuable power to "negotiate" some personally beneficial if not material or structural changes in the status quo.<sup>17</sup>

The status quo itself changes, of course, often in ways over which we as individuals have little control, although the question of what is possible

for us to do is always open and pressing. In the most politically self-reflective of the books under review, Elaine Hobby writes that the election and subsequent policies of a Conservative government in England significantly influenced her work on English women's writing in the later seventeenth century; her book covers the years between 1649 and 1688—between, that is, the blow to the English monarchy constituted by the beheading of Charles I and the blow to the Stuart male line constituted by the so-called Glorious Revolution. Thatcher's government, and its complex effects on British intellectual culture in general and the women's liberation movement in particular, specifically shaped certain *changes* in Hobby's scholarly aims and perspectives on her material. All of the books under review are the fruit of many years of labor, but Hobby's is unusual in directly acknowledging that the author's initial scholarly motive—the important but theoretically limited one of simply finding out about "forgotten women writers"—eventually metamorphosed into a concern "with the problem of what happens to subordinate groups living under reactionary regimes; and what happens to radicals when they lose their vision, their sense of purpose" (p. 205). The basic narrative her book traces, and indeed her decision to study women's writing during the Revolution and its aftermath—seen by royalists as the "restoration" but by radicals as a "reactionary regime"—show that she is consciously exploring parallels between women's problems in twentieth- and seventeenth-century British society. After a period of radical experimentation that involves significant gains for "women's autonomy," a repressive regime forces women back into sexually subordinate and "private" or "domestic" roles. The 1650s are implicitly allied to the 1960s, in Hobby's account, and the "Restoration" era to Thatcher's regime in general and, in particular, to a development in the British women's movement that Hobby finds particularly troubling. This is the tendency toward "essentialist" feminism, toward seeing men as inherently violent, women as inherently peace loving and nurturing. Such an ideological position was widespread among feminist peace activists in the England of the 1980s, and Hobby sees disturbing parallels between that essentialist view and the "retreat into virtue"—the resigned acceptance of "traditional" female roles—she finds in many texts by women written after 1660.

Hobby's book surveys a quite astonishing range of materials by both female and male writers who treat the culturally contested issue of the relations between the sexes and the roles "proper" to each of them. Beginning with a chapter on women's prophecies (she notes that over one-half of the texts published by women in this period were prophecies—and of

ten, especially in the revolutionary years, overtly political ones), Hobby analyzes women's religious writings, their autobiographies and biographies of husbands, their "skills books" (on housewifery, medicine, and midwifery), and their education. In addition, there are three central chapters on "romantic love" as that phenomenon was represented in prose fiction, plays, and poetry, respectively. The book is a valuable survey but it is also a sustained argument that I found sometimes persuasive and sometimes reductive. Hobby summarizes the general argument at the beginning of her chapter on romantic love in prose fiction.

During the 1640's and 1650's, large numbers of women challenged the orthodoxy that they should be passive and silent. They petitioned parliament, agitated for social reforms, and travelled the country spreading their message. Even those who stayed home found a new voice, and were able to publish texts making a case for some kind of female autonomy. With the Restoration in 1660, all this began to change. One sign of this development was the appearance of a series of mock "Women's Complaints," all of which shared a central feature: women's only dissatisfaction, according to these scurrilous (male) pamphleteers, was that they were sexually frustrated. (P. 85)

Women writers too participated in creating a post-Restoration "diminishment" in women's opportunities to "negotiate some space and autonomy" (p. 27). Hobby is interestingly ambiguous, however, on the question of the women writers' degree of agency in creating—or is it simply representing?—the new social and ideological regime of the Restoration. Aphra Behn's novellas for instance, "map out . . . a bleak world" in which "the options open to her heroines are shown to be few indeed" (p. 96). The phrases "map out" and "shown to be" highlight the problem. Is Behn depicting "the facts," or is she constraining her women readers' "choices"—or, more likely, is she doing some complex mixture of the two, seeking to negotiate her own living by making a "virtue" of what is seen (by some) to be a necessity? Hobby tackles many rhetorically and politically difficult issues in her book, and I am persuaded by many of the specific arguments she advances (on the feminist dimensions of women's prophecies, for instance) in support of her underlying thesis about the Restoration's repressive effects on women and, correlatively but not identically, on ideologies of gender. I am not persuaded, however, that Hobby's reliance on an a-historical notion of woman's quest for "autonomy" proves adequate—at the end of the day—to the complexity of her material or to the questions she wants to ask of it. Unlike Frost's ovenbird, she is not asking her questions about a process of "diminishment" in "all but words"; but some of the words that organize her inquiry, especially "autonomy," seem too ideologically freighted and blunt to do justice to the problems at stake in her book. If ideology involves making what is socially constructed seem ob-

vious or natural, then autonomy is a notion overdue for a demystifying wash. The search for autonomy, on the part of modern American critics of the Renaissance, begins to look disturbingly similar to Burckhardt's idealist search for a peculiar Renaissance quality of self-conscious individuality.

Believing, as Joan Kelly did, that students of past societies "only come up with answers to questions we think to ask" (p. 204), Hobby ends her book with some questions she now thinks she should have asked but didn't—questions, for instance, about "race." Her questions about the lacunae and distortions in her own work seem prescient from the perspective of the 1990s, when changes in the demography of the North American and British academies, among other factors, are enabling innovative research into "race" in the Renaissance.<sup>18</sup> Hobby doesn't push her discussion of "race" toward as broad a geographical reconception of her topic as it now seems to invite, in the wake of recent scholarly studies of Europe's imperial ventures; if we extend our notions of what counts as "literacy" (and "major genres"), we may hear from more Renaissance women—and men of color in "feminized subject positions"—than we might have dreamed we could a few years ago. Nonetheless, the kind of question Hobby asks—and the courage she displays in entitling her conclusion "Beginning Again"—make her intellectual example an appropriate place to finish this review. For the questions Hobby asks of her own research are precisely the kind of questions I think feminists in my field, and perhaps in others, should be trying to pose in critical terms honed by debate and fired by our different interpretations of how recent historical events impinge on our research agendas. From the vantage point of 1994, I can see fairly clearly that the emphasis on individual women's "autonomy"—defined mainly as an issue of voice and thought in the books under review—is in part a reaction to a sense of despair about the possibilities of collective feminist action under the conservative economic and political policies of the 1980s in both Britain and the United States. The "moderate" and basically liberal critical perspective I have been tracing here does seem to me in need of ideological critique, despite the valuable research that accompanies it. When, however, these critics themselves signal some uneasiness or discontent with their own critical formulations, or with their Renaissance "subjects," the moments are worth probing. In them, we can perhaps best glimpse potentially powerful counterarguments to my analogy between despairing feminist critics and Frost's ovenbird. He sang in sad acknowledgment of a diminution that he—and Frost—see as natural, inevitable. We who have words need not accept him as a model.

## NOTES

I warmly thank David Kastan and David Simpson for helping me write this essay.

1. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (1860; New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1935), pt. 4, chap. 6, p. 389. For an excellent discussion of the now-common gesture of citing Burckhardt in feminist criticism of the Renaissance, see Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari's introduction to *Refiguring Woman: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6-7. The tradition of using Burckhardt as a negative example starts with Joan Kelly's "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 161; and continues in studies such as Betty Travitsky's edited collection, *The Paradise of Women: Writings by English Women of the Renaissance* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Constance Jordan's *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990); and one of the books currently under review: Tina Krontiris's *Oppositional Voices*.
2. For a discussion of the different connotations of these two period designations, still often used confusingly as (near) synonyms, see the introduction to *Rewriting the Renaissance*, xvii.
3. See Krontiris, 15, for the argument that Elizabeth's own position was too ideologically precarious for her to encourage her female subjects to undertake "what were considered male pursuits." See also Alison Heisch, "Queen Elizabeth and the Persistence of Patriarchy," *Feminist Review* 4 (1980): 45-75. On the other hand, some critics offer partial support for Lewalski's view by suggesting that the "confusion of gender" caused by Elizabeth's presence on the throne created some cultural space for an increase in "female speech," whether by elite women or by the dubiously "female" characters in the Elizabethan drama. See, for example, Leah Marcus, "Shakespeare's Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I, and the Political Uses of Androgyny," in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 135-44.
4. See, for example, Hobby, 8; Lewalski, 5; and King, 238.
5. See especially Burckhardt, pt. 6, chap. 3, p. 479.
6. See Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475-1640* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1982); and Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), chap. 1.
7. See King's bibliography for her other writings on this topic, including her influential essay, "Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance," in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 66-90.
8. For a cogent critique of the idea of a "homogenous Age of Faith" preceding what is taken to be an era of new Renaissance individualism, see David Aers, "A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernism," in *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 177-202.
9. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 238, summarizing David Herlihy's "Did Women Have a Renaissance? A Reconsideration," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s., 13 (1985): 1-22.
10. See, for instance, the opening of chap. 2: "In the middle decades of the sixteenth century prospects for women were not good" (27). The paragraph goes on to define "prospects" in terms of opportunities for education and "women's literary activity."
11. See, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha's discussion of her multiple and fractured identities as a woman of color who is also a writer, a person who pursues a "luxury activity" by virtue of her "literary/literacy" skills, in her *Woman, Native, Other: Writing: Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 6, 8.
12. The quoted phrase is from Krontiris (9), citing Judith Brown's critical response to Joan Kelly,

"A Woman's Place Was in the Home: Women's Work in Renaissance Tuscany," in *Rewriting the Renaissance*, 22.

13. The verb "negotiate" in recent critical discourse deserves an analysis of its own: for ideologically important uses of it, see Jones; and Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

14. For a survey of the debates on this authorship question—and my reasons for disagreeing with Lewalski, Krontiris, and some other recent feminists who feel certain that Cary was the author of one or both of the two texts on Edward II published in 1680—see the introduction to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 12-17.

15. The value judgment here is debatable, because Krontiris and Jones have both argued for the cultural importance of Isabella Whitney's two volumes of poetry published, respectively, in 1567 and 1573.

16. The remark is surprising to me because so many previous feminist scholars writing on many of the figures Lewalski analyzes have also found—and focused on—these women's "opposition" or "resistance" to patriarchal norms. Many of Lewalski's views on Elizabeth Cary, Aemilia Lanier, Mary Wroth, and Rachel Speght are, for instance, anticipated in Elaine Beilin's *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Lewalski's notes and bibliography are rich with references to other scholars, including many who have arrived at conclusions about individual women writers similar to hers. I am tempted, therefore, to interpret her expression of surprise to a desire to persuade the nonfeminist members of her implied audience that she has approached her material "objectively," without feminist preconceptions.

17. For a survey of recent debates on the idea that education serves as an instrument of "social reproduction," and does so at a level beyond that of individual agency or "free will," see my "Teaching and/as Reproduction," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 1 (winter 1987): 213-22.

18. See, for instance, Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (London: Routledge, 1989); Margo Hendricks and Pat Parker, eds. *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Kim F. Hall, *Acknowledging Things of Darkness: Race, Gender, and Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).