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Book Review

Pender, Patricia. *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 232 pp. \$85.00.

In *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty*, Patricia Pender challenges assumptions and attitudes about early modern women writers that accompanied their recovery and discovery in and after the 1980s. She argues that, for the most part, readers and critics have taken their protestations of modesty at their word, seeing them as victims of patriarchy and oppression who internalized familiar prescriptions about the importance of modesty as these were expressed in sermons, conduct books, and so on. Her subject, then, is two-fold. On the one hand, she reviews and critiques feminist and other late modern scholarship for reading literally what, she argues, are actually sophisticated expressions of the rhetoric of modesty. On the other hand she offers a reading of five women writers—Anne Askew, Katherine Parr, Mary Sidney, Aemilia Lanyer, and Anne Bradstreet—who were writing between the 1540s in England and 1650 in New England. While diverse in

status, interests, kinds of writing, and sense of audience or readership, all five were Protestant. There is a possible downside to her focus on only Protestant writers; modesty tropes are a feature in women's writing across the religious divide of early modern England. But the 1540s are a sensible starting point—so Nicholas Udall wrote to Katherine Parr in 1548 that “It is now no newes at al to see Quenes and Ladies of moste high estate and progenie, in stede of Courtely daliaunce, enbrace vertuous exercises of readyng and wrytyng, and wyth most earneste studie both erelye and late to applye theymselues to the acquirynge of knowelage aswel in al other liberall artes and dyscyplynes”

Pender follows a brief introductory overview with a chapter surveying some part of the cultural and historical background for what she calls a rhetoric of modesty. She begins with classical rhetorical theory, emphasizing Cicero, Quintilian, and the anonymous author of the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, and then turns to conduct manuals, in particular, Castiglione, and English handbooks by George Puttenham, Abraham Fraunce, and John Hopkins. She is less concerned here with rhetoric generally than with deployments of modesty figures, which could be used defensively, apologetically, and/or as a kind of dissimulation, and became increasingly prevalent in early modern writing, where they were often used with a knowing wink, as a kind of *sprezzatura*. She also argues that modesty rhetoric was “promoted as particularly appropriate and efficacious for women,” (20) although writers of both genders found modesty tropes extremely valuable, especially in prefaces and other paratexts, where they engaged in self-fashioning. There is a missing link, however. While unmentioned here, humanism was a major historical and cultural force in early modern Europe that was responsible for its discovery of the classics, its intense interest in rhetoric, and in some places a recognition that a liberal arts education was as valuable for

women as men—see Udall (my citation above) and Erasmus, e.g. At this period, moreover, to acquire literacy beyond the simplest level necessarily meant the acquisition of rhetoric (18). Though postmodern critics have tended to deny or ignore it, early modern women writers were familiar with rhetoric, which accounts for their “doubled discourse,” (93) seemingly self-effacing, yet subversive.

In the following chapters Pender turns to the second part of her subject, the skillful and various uses of modesty figures by five women writers, one who chose to be an “outsider” and was martyred for her religious beliefs, two who wrote from a privileged position, and two who were in some sense “outsiders” but wanted recognition from the communities they addressed. Anne Askew and Katherine Parr wrote at a parlous time, and their writing defies the narrow boundaries of “canonical literature.” Tackling the questions Askew’s writing raises head on, Pender explores various theoretical problems, including how to read writing when there is no original manuscript. Since John Bale, Askew’s editor and publisher (male), shaped her text, in what way did she achieve “authorial autonomy” (50)? Pender’s answer, in part, is that Bale’s publication is an example of collaboration (at times contested) between Askew’s testimony and his interpretation of it. Finally, Pender sees Askew as an early instance of the conscientious objector, her “modesty” belied by her provocative resistance, informed by her own careful reading of the Bible.

In the next chapter, Pender explores Katherine Parr’s subtle deployment of the “*sermo humilis*,” a style associated with both classical rhetoric and the Bible, in her life and her *Prayers or Medytacions* (1545). Humility is an appropriate stance for any Christian writer, aware of her or his position vis-à-vis God. Parr, who at least once found herself in a dangerous position, having offended her husband, Henry VIII, also found protection in the

modesty tropes and stances that she so effectively employed. Pender also argues that by degendering the human subject in her adaptation of an English translation of Thomas à Kempis, Parr was able to include a female readership.

Chapters three to five are concerned with literary and cultural issues at and after the end of the sixteenth century. In her third chapter Pender explores the complex roles of Mary Sidney, who was an editor, writer, and patron, and whom she characterizes as the material author, though not the writer, of her brother's *Psalms* (116). She continues her discussion of the collaborative nature of early modern publication, which became especially complex with the shift from coterie circulation to printed publication. And she emphasizes Mary Sidney's influential role in creating her brother's place in literary history, arguing that it has gone unrecognized.

In the last two chapters, Pender moves to issues arising from Lanyer's hopes for female patronage through publication that included a huge dedicatory apparatus (123) and Bradstreet's apparently pirated edition. Aemilia Lanyer used (overused) the inexpressibility tropes of modesty to try to place herself in a community with which she had a problematic relationship; her modesty, become hyperbole, reveals her ambition. On the other hand, Anne Bradstreet insisted that her brother-in-law published her poems without her permission, although the prefatory material contradicts this, and the title's reference to her as the "Tenth Muse" reflects ambitions that belie Bradstreet's pose as a reluctant author.

This is a provocative book, which will be of interest to a great many readers because of its alertness to current theoretical issues, its awareness of historical and cultural contexts, its interest in the material book, and its close reading of particular texts. Its focus on gendered discourse makes a significant contribution to feminist criticism. At the same time, it can be

read as a series of case studies chosen to reflect major issues that early modern women writers faced and set out to solve by subtle and diverse uses of the rhetoric of modesty.

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