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**Shakespeare's Early Modern Female Readers and Annotators  
from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth century: An Overview**

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Abstract:

By way of introduction, this essay considers the question of women's literacy and suggests that quantitative studies have underestimated the number of women who were able to read and write during the early modern period. It then moves on to women collectors of Shakespearean editions, showing that throughout the period under study a substantial number of women owned collections that could easily compete with those of men. The next part of the presentation is devoted to case studies of early modern women who made their voices heard essentially through their annotations of Shakespeare's editions. So as to give an idea of the variety of responses to his works, the article focuses on personal or idiosyncratic readings of Shakespeare as well. Finally, the essay considers how female readers of Shakespeare expressed their tastes by their annotations and also through epistolary exchanges, thus shaping literary opinion in the eighteenth century in important ways. Their contributions to literary history helped change Shakespeare's reputation, turning him into a writer rated as highly as classical authors, which in turn guaranteed his cultural relevance in the present.

Keywords: Shakespeare, William, women readers, annotation, history of reading, reception studies, appropriation studies, feminist studies

**Introduction: the Question of Women's Literacy**

“From the most able, to him that can but spell: There you are number'd”, wrote John Heminges and Henry Condell – Shakespeare's fellow actors – in their preface “To the great Variety of Readers”, which appeared in the First Folio of Shakespeare's works (sig. A3<sup>r</sup>) published in 1623. Looking at the figures of literacy produced by historians, it is of course hard to believe that the claims of the First Folio's editors are anything other than wishful thinking.

Indeed, two-thirds of the male population and nine-tenths of the female population were still unable to sign their names at the time of the English Civil War (1642-1651). Furthermore, there were great gender inequalities, for at that time 90 per cent of women could not sign their names. Many women were taught to read printed texts, but had to leave school at an early age and teaching standards fluctuated a lot, especially for more modest women and the poor. There were also strong regional and social differences. At the outset of the seventeenth century, only 22 per cent of the men in London were unable to sign their names. In the same period, 70 per cent of London tradesmen could read and write compared to 50 per cent in the north of England. Thirty-four per cent of Essex husbandmen and 33 per cent of rural weavers were equally skilled.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, while there were always fluctuations and setbacks, historians point to the significant overall improvement of reading skills from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. If in 1600 70 per cent of men and 90 per cent of women had insufficient or non-existent reading skills, the figures had fallen respectively to 50 and 70 per cent by 1700.<sup>2</sup> By the middle of the eighteenth century about 60 per cent of men and 40 per cent of women were able to sign their marriage act and those figures continued their uneven but steady rise in the ensuing decades.

Moreover, these quantitative figures do not account for the training in both reading and writing that women, especially of the middling-sort, could get within family circles, where those skills could be taught, as many families considered that reading and writing were important to rise socially. This is certainly true for women at the latter end of the seventeenth century and even more so during the whole of the eighteenth century, when woman of artisan or merchant families gradually acquired what Susan Wiseman has called an “epistolary literacy”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, boys and girls were encouraged by their immediate kin to write letters, from the simplest to the most complex, in order to stay in touch with relatives.

This could lead in turn to consulting letter-writing manuals, and, more importantly, to get interested in reading, of classical authors, but of Shakespeare as well, whose works, in those

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<sup>1</sup> David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 171-172.

<sup>2</sup> Joad Raymond, “Introduction: The Origins of Popular Print Culture”, in *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture, Volume I: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660*, ed. by Joad Raymond, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 1-14; here p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, esp. p. 9; p. 76 et passim.

cases, were mined and copied avidly by women not only to improve their skills, but also as of a means of social ascent as well.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, this led to a fashion for letter-writing, which was picked up by literary authors, such as Samuel Richardson and others, in the eighteenth century, leading eventually to the creation of a new literary genre, the epistolary novel, which fed on female letters and influenced them greatly, giving women a new voice and an unprecedented freedom of expression.<sup>5</sup>

Such a fact is often overlooked by historians and one needs to bear in mind that what began as a simple but important activity among many families had a definite influence on the literacy levels of a great number of women. This is what the *quantitative* figures I cited earlier leave aside and that only *qualitative* studies of women's daily activities can reveal. While quantitative studies of female literacy cannot be cast aside, qualitative approaches add another dimension that needs to be borne in mind when approaching the complex question of literacy.

### **Early Modern Women Collectors of Shakespearean Editions**

While theatre people and Shakespeare editors were fairly obvious types of owners, early modern women go regularly unnoticed again. Perhaps because their numbers are so low in general statistical surveys of literacy in that period, women have not often been associated with book collecting. Nonetheless, they too had personal libraries that could sometimes contain a large number of playbooks. As early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, if not before, women assembled and used collections of Shakespeare's plays. Some even had a prominent role in the history of print Shakespeare.

In the 1627 catalogue of her London library, which comprised more than two hundred titles, Frances Egerton (née Stanley), Countess of Bridgewater (1583-1636), had seven volumes of "Diuers Playes" and an additional volume "attributed to and with plays by Shakespeare".<sup>6</sup> This volume, entitled "Diuers Playes by Shakespeare" seemingly dates back to 1602. Despite the fact that the volume has not survived (its plays being disbound and partly dispersed),

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 97; p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 76-77.

<sup>6</sup> This catalogue is now held by the Huntington Library, Ellesmere manuscript collection (EL 6495). See Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 202.



Lawrence Manley has been able to reconstruct it partially and argues that “here, more than twenty years in advance of the First Folio, is a ‘complete’ volume containing every one of Shakespeare’s plays that were in print by 1602, with the exception of the bad quarto of *Henry V* ... and the bad quarto of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*”.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, and as Lukas Erne has pointed out, Frances Egerton should go down in the history of print Shakespeare as the first person to produce a bound collection of Shakespeare’s works, before the 1619 Pavier Quartos (printed to form a nonce-collection) and before the First Folio itself.<sup>8</sup>

Other seventeenth-century women could also compete with men, as far as the sheer size of their libraries was concerned. Frances Wolfreston (1607-1677) had a collection of almost a thousand books, 48 per cent of them being in the field of literature. She owned numerous plays (ten Shakespeare quartos in particular), as well as verse and storybooks, but no folios, as far as we know. Elizabeth Puckering (1621/1622? – 1689), however, did own a Second Folio. She also had a respectable collection of poetry and drama and as a girl had often frequented the London theatres.<sup>9</sup> Puckering liked to mark her ownership with “Eliz” or “EP” in many of her books.<sup>10</sup>

As far as the eighteenth century is concerned, the collection owned by Mrs Montagu needs to be mentioned. Not so high on the establishment ladder, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (bap. 1689, d. 1762), was a prominent lady of letters. She collected early plays which she assembled in nonce volumes adding her initials (“M” or “Ma”) to them and often inscribing some short comment on the work at the beginning and end of each play.<sup>11</sup> The volumes now form the nucleus of the Bute Collection of English plays currently housed at the National Library of Scotland. It was through a series of family acquisitions that her collection continued to grow: first of all, thanks to her son-in-law, the third Earl of Bute (1713-1792), and then to her grandson, the first Marquis of Bute (1744-1814), who acquired the Shakespeare quartos and increased the collection substantially. The latter now totals 39 items (16 quartos printed before

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Manley, “Shakespeare and the Countess of Bridgewater: Playing, Patronage, and the Biography of Books”, Unpublished paper presented at the Shakespeare Association of America Conference, San Diego, April 2007, p. 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> For a full study of the influence of Shakespearean theatre on the free expression of women, especially at the Restoration, see Fiona Richie, *Women and Shakespeare: the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, esp. p. 175-179 et passim.

<sup>10</sup> David McKitterick, “Women and their Books in Seventeenth-Century England: The Case of Elizabeth Puckering”, *The Library* 1.4, 2000, p. 359-80; here p. 372; p. 374-377.

<sup>11</sup> Marion Linton, “The Bute Collection of English Plays”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 Dec. 1956, p. 772. *Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*. Online ed. (last accessed 27 November 2021).

the First Folio), while the Bute collection itself contains 1,266 English plays (with editions dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century).<sup>12</sup>

Yet it is unusual to find direct testimonies of women reading Shakespeare early in the seventeenth century. So, Lady Anne Merrick's (fl. 1638) letter of 21 January 1638 to one Mrs Lydall is especially precious and enlightening. Writing from her house near Silsoe in Bedfordshire, Merrick talks about her feelings of isolation: "howe lonelie and solitarie the countrie at this tyme is, soe tedious indeede to me". She wishes she could be in London to see plays both old and new. However, for lack of such opportunities, she adds, "I must content my selfe here with the studie of Shackspeare, and the historie of woemen, all my countrie librarie".<sup>13</sup>

If the study of print Shakespeare is seen as a worthy but restrictive activity compared to the prospect of attending live theatre, the letter strongly suggests that Shakespeare's works were available in print to some women, as early as the first half of the seventeenth century, even in a library which was clearly very limited.

### **Women Making their Voices Heard in Early Editions of Shakespeare**

As more and more women gained access to Shakespeare's editions, there is clear evidence that some of these female readers wished to make a stand.

This is very much the case in the opening pages of Folger Shakespeare Library Fo. 1 no. 23, as well as in the volume itself. The book contains several striking examples of female ownership. Mary Child, a mid-seventeenth-century annotator inscribed her name on different pages. On the last page of *Romeo and Juliet*, she stated firmly her right to the book: "Mary Child is the true posseseor of this booke" (sig. Gg1 r).

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<sup>12</sup> <http://shakespeare.nls.uk/collections> (last accessed 27 November 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Cited in: Sasha Roberts, "Engendering the Female Reader: Women's Recreational Reading of Shakespeare in Early Modern England", in *Reading Women Literacy, Authorship, and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, ed. by Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine E. Kelly, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, p. 36-54.

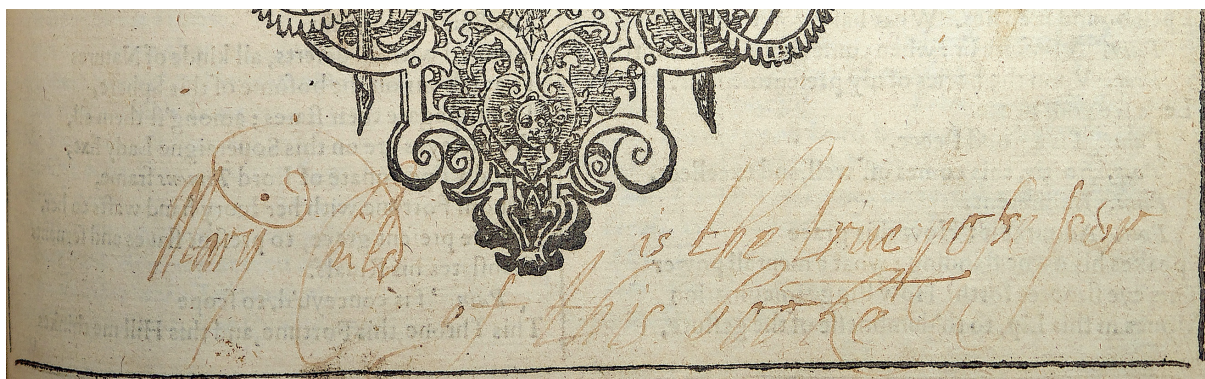


Figure 1: Mary Child's annotations on the last page of *Romeo and Juliet* in Folger Shakespeare Library Fo. 1 no. 23. By permission of Folger Shakespeare Library. Photo credit: J.-C. Mayer.

Elizabeth Brocket (fl. 1695-1712), whose husband's bookplate appears at the beginning of the same volume, made the same strong ownership claims. While her husband (William Brocket (1717-1791) had no doubt purchased the volume, she appears to have been the only one to truly engage with it. Elizabeth Brocket signed her name on three different dates (1695, 1702, 1712) on the page opposite her husband's bookplate (sixth front flyleaf recto), thus constantly reinstating her claim to and interest in the book. The phrase "Elizabeth Brockett Her Book" is traced in large characters several times on the same page as well.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For more examples of eighteenth-century women readers appropriating their Shakespearean editions, often within family circles, see Kitamura Sae, "A Shakespeare of one's own: female users of playbooks from the seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century", *Palgrave Communications* 3, 2017, p. 1-9, esp. p. 5-6.

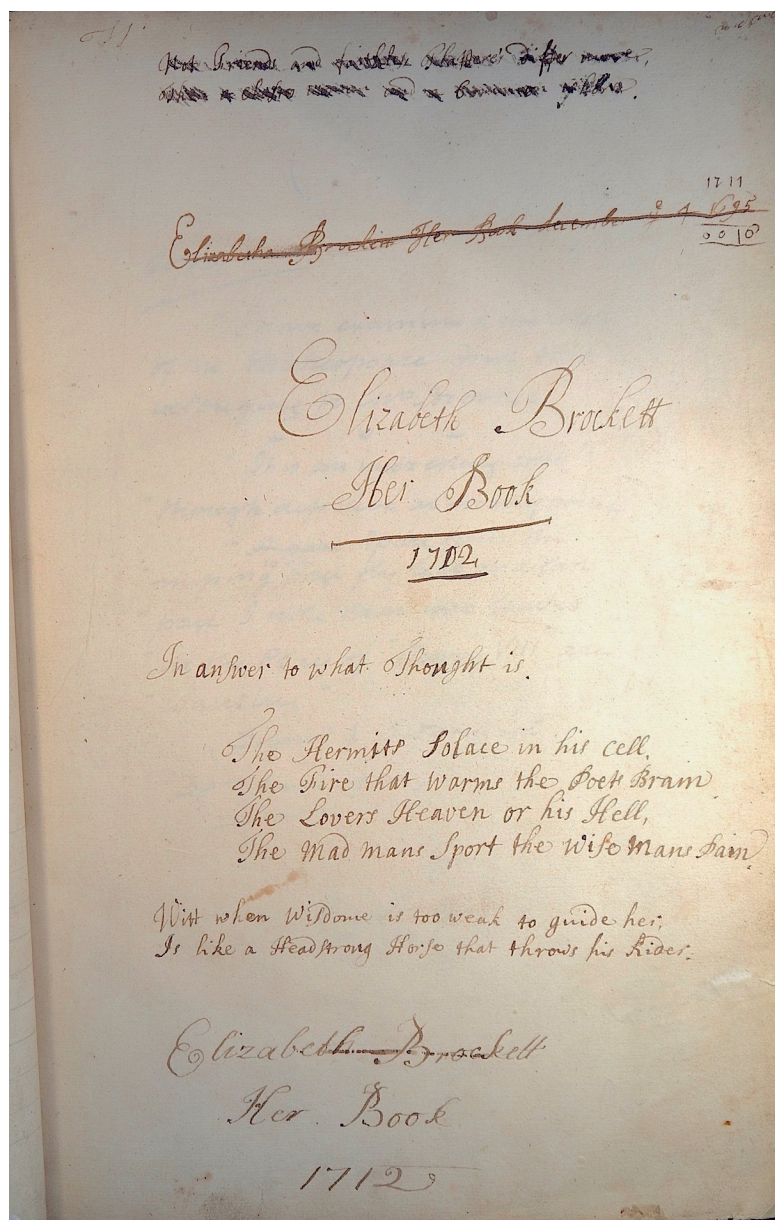


Figure 2: Elizabeth Brouckett's inscriptions on the sixth front flyleaf recto of Folger Shakespeare Library Fo. 1 no. 23. By permission of Folger Shakespeare Library. Photo credit: J.-C. Mayer.

Even more revealing of Brouckett's determination to appropriate the Folio as a female reader is a twenty-four-line poem – Lady Mary Chudleigh's "To the ladies", which appeared in *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703).<sup>15</sup> The transcription (which differs slightly from the printed version) appears before the Folio's paratext and occupies almost the whole of the verso of the fourth front flyleaf. The opposite page is blank, apart from Elizabeth Brouckett's very large

<sup>15</sup> Mary Lee Chudleigh, *Poems on several occasions. Together with the song of the three children paraphras'd*, London, Printed by W.B. for Bernard Lintott at the Middle Temple Gate in Fleetstreet, 1703. ESTC: T97275.



calligraphed signature. The manuscript lines begin with “Wife and Servant are the same, / And only differ in the Name”. They go on to emphasise the difficulty for a woman to express herself: “Like Mutes alone she Signs must make / And never any Freedom take. / But still be govern’d by a Nod”. The poem ends on lines that lend a noticeably militant and even polemic tone to the volume’s preliminaries: “Shun, O shun, that wretched State, / And all the fawning Flatterer’s Hate. / Value you selves [sic] and Men dispise, / You must be proud if you’d be wise”.

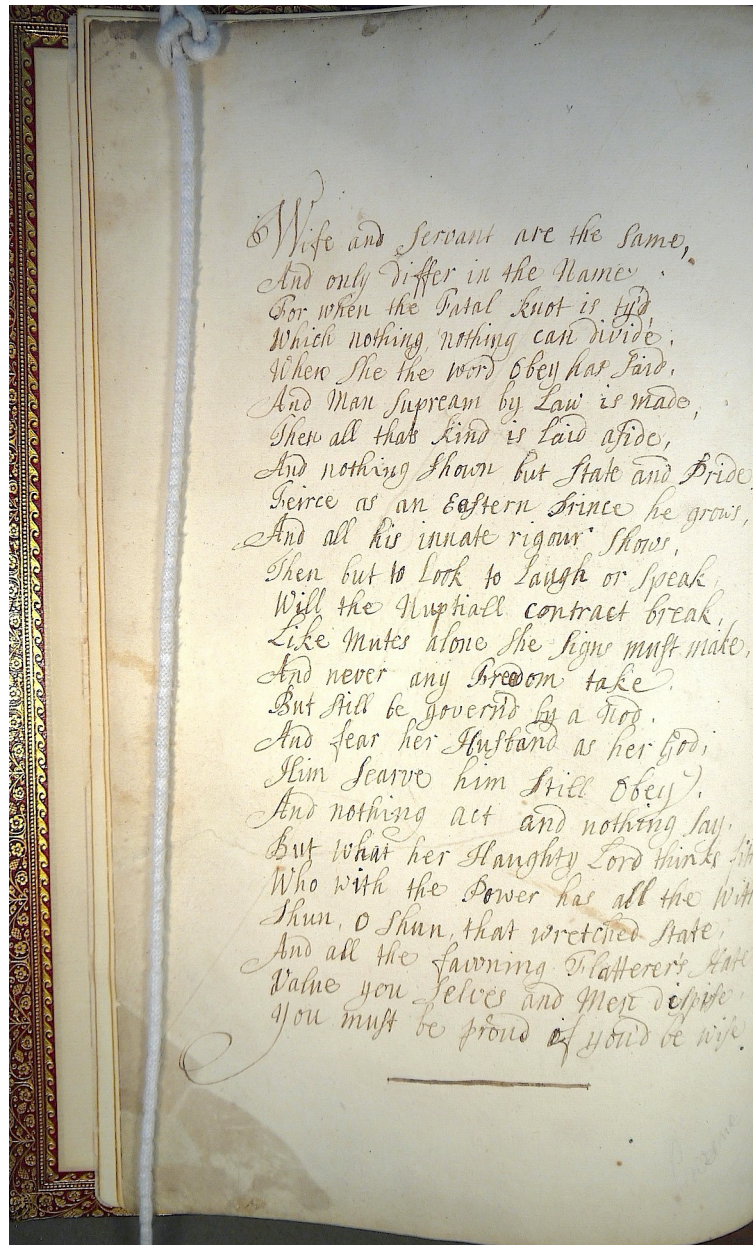


Figure 3: Elizabeth Brocket’s transcription of Lady Mary Chudleigh’s poem “To the ladies” (1703) on the verso of the fourth front flyleaf of Folger Shakespeare Library Fo. 1 no. 23. By permission of Folger Shakespeare Library. Photo credit: J.-C. Mayer.

It is obvious that “owning” a First Folio by annotating it in this fashion could be for an early woman, such as Elizabeth Brocket, a statement of intellectual independence and freedom in a volume bought by a man.

Other annotations were more closely connected to Shakespeare’s text. For instance, on a damaged back flyleaf of a 1640 edition of Shakespeare’s Poems one can just about make out parts of a draft love letter, probably inspired by Shakespeare’s volume of amatory poetry. The eighteenth-century hand is possibly that of a female reader, as the signature “Elizabeth Gyles her Boock” on the same page appears to indicate. “My Deerest Iuell [jewel]” seems to be the addressee and the letter mentions the desire to “write and loue more true” (FSL STC 22344 Copy 10).



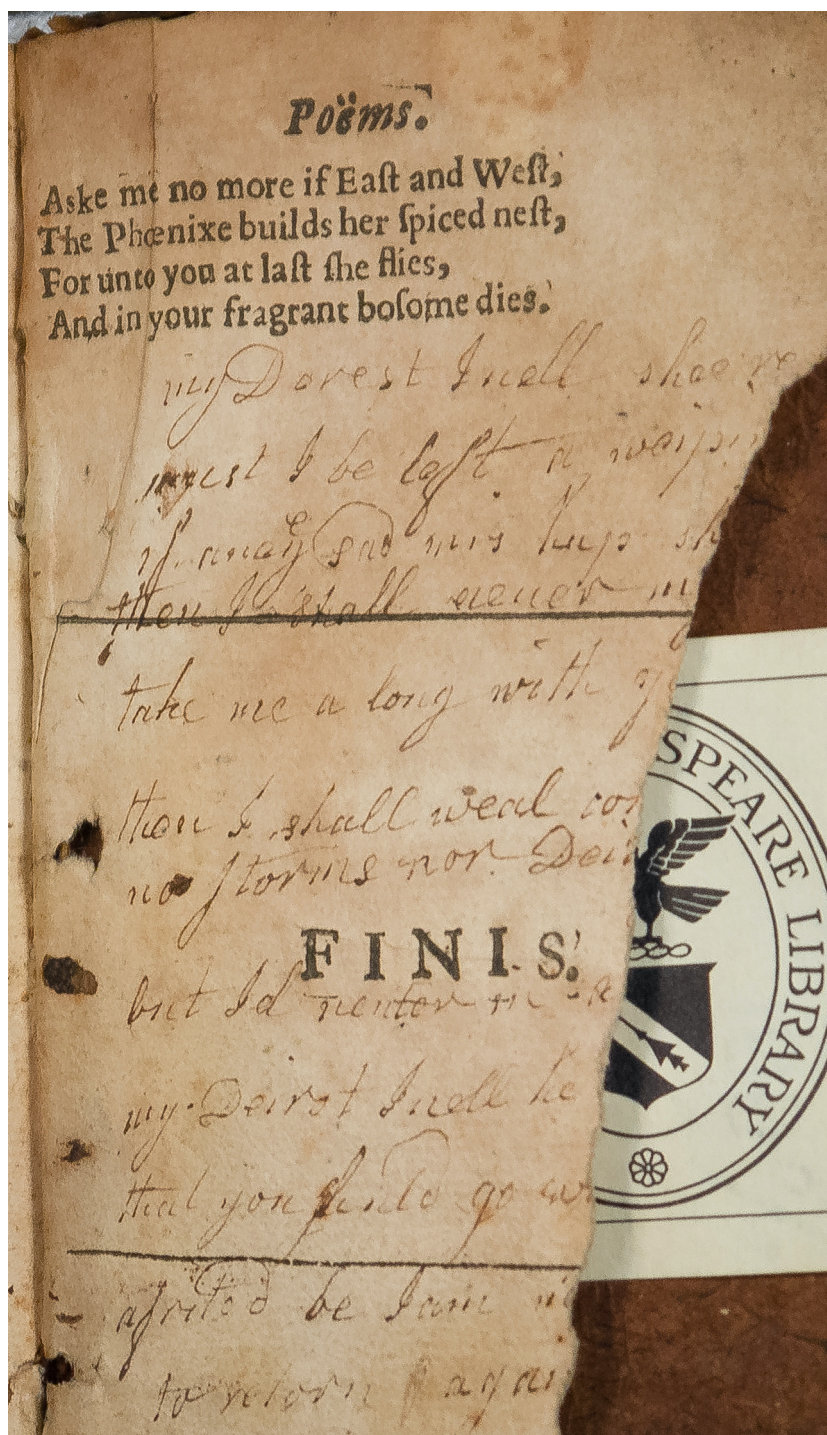


Figure 4: a love letter probably by one Elizabeth Gyles on the damaged back flyleaf of a 1640 edition of Shakespeare's Poems (FSL STC 22344 Copy 10). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Photo credit: J.-C. Mayer.

Let us turn now to case studies that confirm that reading is never a uniform process, but often reveals idiosyncratic traits, as well as a will to customise Shakespeare to one's own taste.

### Idiosyncratic and Isolated Readers: Customising Shakespeare

An eighteenth-century reader by the name of Mary Elmer is one of those annotators who certainly engaged with Shakespeare in a way which reflected her own opinions and sentiments. She overtly commented on two moments in *Antony and Cleopatra* in FSL Fo.2 no.57. This eighteenth-century female reader left the following note after Antony announces his wife Fulvia's death to Enobarbus: "See what joy tis to heare of his wifes death" (sig. yy5v).

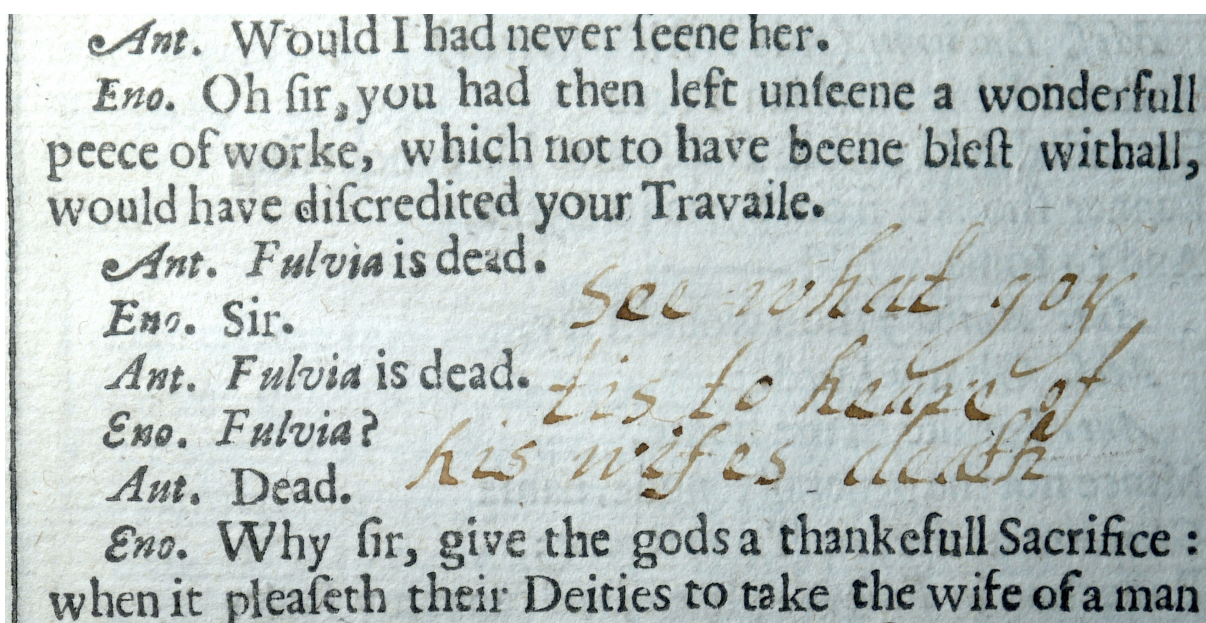


Figure 5: Mary Elmer's annotations on a scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* in FSL Fo.2 no.57 (sig. yy5v). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Photo credit: J.-C. Mayer.

A little later, she appears bemused by the nature of Antony and Cleopatra's love bond. She writes "Mary | Elmer | this loue is a strang[e] thing" opposite Cleopatra's perplexing lines in the folio: "Cut my Lace, Charmian come, / But let it be, I am quickly ill, and well, So Anthony loves" (sig. yy6 r).



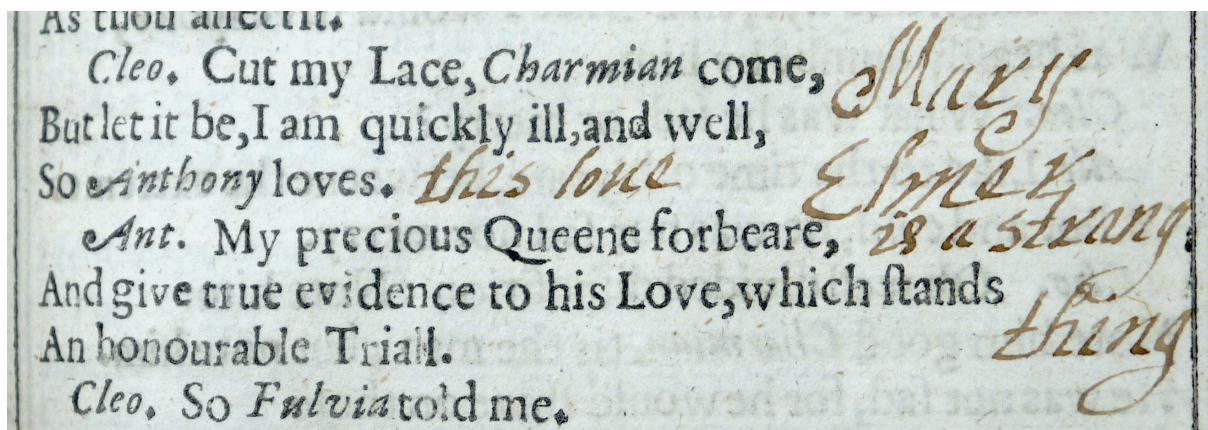


Figure 6: Mary Elmer's annotations on a scene in *Antony and Cleopatra* in FSL Fo.2 no.57 (sig. yy6 r). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Photo credit: J.-C. Mayer.

In some heavily marked early editions, readers seem to compete in their claims of ownership of the book and for their right to inscribe their names against Shakespeare's. This is very much the case of Folger Fo. 2 no. 32, in which a series of eighteenth-century readers have left traces. Page 38 of *Coriolanus* bears the inscription "Anne Clarke her hand and book the lord of heaven upon her" (dd1v). In Folger Fo.1 no.54, a late seventeenth-century reader by the name of Olivea Cotton has signed her name above Leonard Digges's epitaph to Shakespeare: "To the Memorie of the Deceased Author Maister W. Shakespeare".

As for male annotators of Shakespeare their relation to women could reveal itself as rather unsavoury through their notes; Alan B. Farmer finds the industrious and rather obsessive inscriber of the most annotated First Folio in the world rather misogynistic. This folio (MR774) is currently held by Meisei Library, Japan.<sup>16</sup> Not only does the inscriber's misogyny make him lose the point and humour of plays such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where he fails to see that the women are actually totally innocent, but he also fails to see that his biases lead him to produce a whole set of annotations which result in a deviation from the text. Indeed, he appears shockingly "keen to transform plot details into commonplaces on the deceit, unfaithfulness, and wickedness of women, wives, and whores".<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> A digital facsimile is available online at: <http://shakes.meisei-u.ac.jp/search.html> (last accessed 1 May 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Alan B. Farmer, "'Whoeres subtile shifts': Commonplacing Women in the Meisei Copy of the Shakespeare First Folio", Unpublished article presented at the Shakespeare Association of America Meeting, Vancouver, 2015, 13 p., here p. 9.

Unfortunately, and not to over-generalize, nor to condone those opinions of course, they do reflect a fair number of male comments made, especially in the late sixteenth century and during the first half of the seventeenth century. Typically, and with some exceptions, such comments often appear in the writings or annotated books of elite writers, some linked to the Inns of Court in London, from other male-dominated institutions, such as universities, or from clergymen.

They come from an age when female writings whether in manuscript or print had not risen yet to prominence, and when women had not quite become part of the job market, as they would far more in the eighteenth century, which, in some regards, could be seen as a turning point for women. With the advent of the industrial revolution (from roughly 1760 onwards) the situation changed and had profound consequences on the respective roles of women and men in the economy of the nation. Families needed some level of literacy to keep in touch with estranged relatives as population movements were greater. Furthermore, the industrial revolution created new jobs, for which literate people of all genders were needed.<sup>18</sup> Despite opposing voices, literate women were then seen more as additional contributors to the wealth of the country, which saw itself as prosperous and prestigious compared to other nations – as official discourses would have it.

### **Female readers of Shakespeare expressing their tastes and shaping literary opinion in the eighteenth century**

I now propose to turn to the field of social exchange through dialogue and correspondence, which I have already highlighted as important for women's self-expression, through the concept of "epistolary literacy", borrowed from Susan Whyman's work.<sup>19</sup> It is beyond the compass of this article to survey the extraordinary number of letters exchanged by eighteenth-century female readers interested in Shakespeare.

However, because she was not a "professional" Shakespearean editor but a patron of the arts who fostered and influenced social dialogue around Shakespeare's works through her

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<sup>18</sup> In that sense, Jacqueline Eales' point that "considerations of class make it imperative that the history of women is not analyzed in isolation, but in relation to the history of men" seems fair. (Jacqueline Eales, *Women in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*, London, University College London Press, 1998, p. 106).

<sup>19</sup> S. Whyman, *op.cit.*, p. 9-10.

famous literary circle and salon, we shall focus on some of the letters written by Elizabeth Montagu, née Robinson.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1718-1800), whom I have already mentioned for her substantial collection of early Shakespearean plays was, as I pointed out, a prominent lady of letters. Montagu was also the author of *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear, Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets. With Some Remarks upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire* (published 1769)<sup>20</sup>. As a reader of Shakespeare, her letters reveal how firmly she personally intended to defend Shakespeare against one whom she saw as his most condescending French critics: Voltaire, a man of letters, a philosopher and also, to some extent, a cultural ambassador of neoclassical values.

A letter to her sister, Sarah Robinson Scott, dated 18 November 1755, shows how much she disagreed with Voltaire on the subject of Shakespeare. It also discloses her intentions to alter tastes significantly: “I read what the saucy Frenchman calls les farces monstreuses of Shakespear, I could burn him and his tragedy. Foolish coxcomb! rules can no more make a poet, than receipts a cook. There must be taste, there must be skill”.<sup>21</sup>

Yet changing tastes was an arduous task even for someone as influential as her. In 1765 Mr. Johnson’s Preface to his Edition of Shakespear’s Plays was published and Elizabeth Montagu made her differences with Samuel Johnson’s interpretations known to the poet and writer Elizabeth Carter, who was a member of her circle. On 17 October 1765 she wrote to Carter: “Mr Johnson asserts that Shakespears genius lay wholly to Comedy. Let ye Merry Wives of Windsor & Mackbeth [sic] scold that out”.<sup>22</sup> Be that as it may, a few days later, she confided to her sister her uncertainties, doubting that she could make a change:

I don’t know whether after Mr Johnson people will desire any more criticisms on Shakespear. I understand he was only to write notes upon him, & these merely to rectify ye errors of the copies, but alas his Preface is so ingenious it terrifys me.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> London, printed for J. Dodsley, Pall-Mall; Mess. Baker and Leigh, York-Street, Covent-Garden; J. Walter, Charing-Cross; T. Cadell, in the Strand; and J. Wilkie, No 71. St. Paul’s Church-Yard, 1769. ESTC: T33417.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Montagu, ed., *The Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu: With Some of the Letters of Her Correspondents*, 3 vols, Boston, Wells and Lilly, 1825, vol. 3, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Huntington Library, MO 3157, p. 3

<sup>23</sup> 26 and 27 October 1765, Sandford, Berkshire, Elizabeth Montagu, to Sarah Robinson Scott, Huntington Library, Mo 5830, p. 5.

She also had to face the objections of another friend, George Lyttelton, first Baron Lyttelton (1709 – 1773), an eminent politician and, like herself, a patron of literature. That same month of October, Lyttelton stated his admiration for Shakespeare’s works but underlined their flaws as well:

His writings are like some streets in London, where some of the Buildings are fine, but all of different Heights and discordant Architecture: whereas a good French Play is constructed on one uniform Plan; and the Eye of the Critick is charm’d by the Result of the whole.

Using another salient architectural image, Lyttelton insisted that Shakespeare’s plays were like “some high Towers, that strike one with awe and veneration, but patchd up with mud Walls, and preposterously adorn’d with rude Gothic Figures, without symmetry, without Taste, without Elegance, without Judgement”.<sup>24</sup>

These were strong words, but in her reply, Elizabeth Montagu used a horticultural image and, although Shakespeare’s style had recurrently been called “natural” in the past, Montagu shifted the critical paradigm to insist on the fertile ground on which the playwright’s works had grown, sometimes wildly: “Shakespears lot fell into so luxurious a soil it produced the finest flowers & the rankest weeds”.<sup>25</sup> This rich “soil” could excuse Shakespeare’s alleged shortcomings and, in time, it could be the soil for more nationalistic ideas such as the defence of England’s cultural and geographic territories. The “pride” that Montagu used in her response to Lyttelton was not entirely devoid of national pride:

From want of skill in gardening he suffer’d them all to grow & flourish together. This garden will never be deserted, because it is enrich’d with all the pride & excellence of nature, her most beautifull & most vigorous productions, at the same time, it can never be seen without regret & indignation at the neglect & ignorance of the Owner.<sup>26</sup>

A few years later, with the War of American Independence serving as a backdrop, the cultural battle around Shakespeare raged between British and French taste. By that time,

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<sup>24</sup> 13 October, 1765, Hagley, Worcester, George Lyttelton, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron to Elizabeth (Robinson) Montagu, Huntington Library, MO 1336, Box 56, p. 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Montagu to George Lyttelton (20 October 1765), Huntington Library, MO 1444, box 56, p. 4.

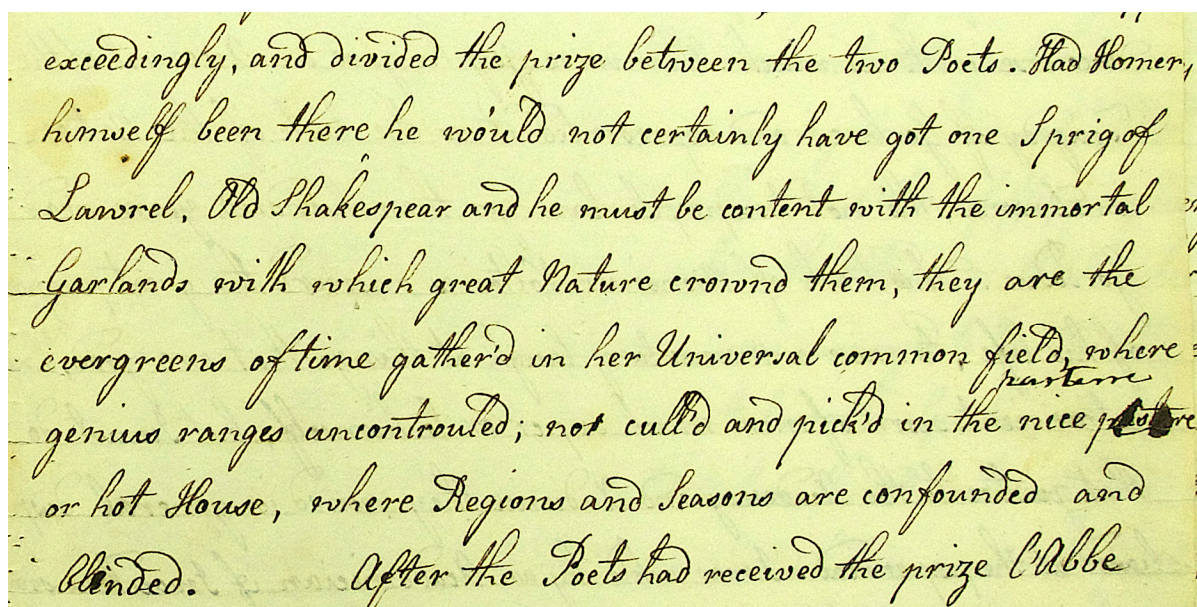
<sup>26</sup> 20 October 1765, Sandleford, Berkshire, Elizabeth Montagu to George Lyttelton, Huntington Library, MO 1444, box 56, p. 4-5.

Shakespeare had gained much ground. Indeed, in 1776 the first complete translation into French of Shakespeare's works by Pierre Le Tourneur was published.<sup>27</sup>

To counter what he perceived as an assault on French culture and values, Voltaire asked his friend Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, who was secretary of the Académie française, to read out a letter of protest. The letter, in which Voltaire underlined Shakespeare's deficiencies was read out on 25 August 1776 at the Académie in the presence of the British ambassador and Elizabeth Montagu.

In early September, Montagu described the incident with biting irony in a letter to an important member of her circle, Elizabeth Vesey:

Had Homer himself been there he would not certainly have got one Sprig of Lawrel. Old Shakespear and he must be content with the immortal Garlands with which great Nature crowns them, they are the evergreens of time, gather'd in her Universal common field, where genius ranges uncontrouled; not cull'd and pick'd in the nice parterre or hot House, where Regions and Seasons are confounded and blended.<sup>28</sup>



exceedingly, and divided the prize between the two Poets. Had Homer, himself been there he would not certainly have got one Sprig of Lawrel, Old Shakespear and he must be content with the immortal Garlands with which great Nature crown them, they are the evergreens of time gather'd in her Universal common field, where genius ranges uncontrouled; not cull'd and pick'd in the nice parterre or hot House, where Regions and Seasons are confounded and blended. After the Poets had received the prize Abbe

<sup>27</sup> Pierre-Prime-Félicien Le Tourneur, *Shakespeare traduit de l'anglois, dédié au roi*, Paris, Vve Duchesne, 1776-1783, 20 vols. Digital facsimile available at <http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb313600666> (last accessed 25 November 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Letter dated 7 September 1776, Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Vesey, Huntington Library, Mo 6486, Box 83, p. 3-4.

Figure 7: letter from Elizabeth Montagu to Elizabeth Vesey, dated 7 September 1776, Huntington Library MS Mo 6486, Box 83, p 3-4. By permission of the Huntington Library. Photo credit: J.-C. Mayer.

These few lines are striking as they show how much Shakespeare's reputation had changed since the Restoration. "Old Shakespear" was now rated as highly as classical authors and guaranteed relevance in the present, like other "evergreens of time", who spoke to the universal community of readers, the "Universal common field". Montagu's letter describes the change of paradigm beautifully (and in no uncertain terms). In this way, she helped sway literary opinion, like a great many women of her time.

### Conclusion

In this short overview, I have tried to show that far more women could actually read during the early modern period, despite the misleading traditional figures on female literacy. Not only did they read, but they were also true bibliophiles, which may surprise some, as the passion for book collecting is all too often – and quite incorrectly – associated with men only. Women collected early Shakespeare editions, as well as other books. There is also a good chance that even more of these female collectors will be discovered by scholars of early modern bibliography.

Furthermore, this essay has argued that female annotators did not slavishly mark early Shakespeare editions, nor did they necessarily emulate men or follow fashionable literary trends. Importantly, many were making their voices heard.

That women shaped the appreciation of Shakespeare is now obvious. The real question is: to what extent did they sway opinion? This is difficult to establish, but not impossible, especially if one focuses more on female writing circles in which Shakespeare was the subject of a number of epistolary exchanges.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This is also the aim of several online projects, whose focus remains, regrettably, on famous and aristocratic women only: "Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present": <http://orlando.cambridge.org/> (last accessed 19 July 2022); "Perdita: Frames-Based Version": <https://web.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/html/> (last accessed 19 July 2022); "Perdita Manuscripts, 1500-1700": <https://www.amdigital.co.uk/primary-sources/perdita-manuscripts-1500-1700> (last accessed 19 July 2022);



Nevertheless, one may ask, where is the continent of letters produced by literate middling-class women? Indeed, as James Daybell usefully reminds us “letters represent the most common extant type of early modern women’s writing”.<sup>30</sup> Surely, some of these middle-class women must also have mentioned Shakespeare, especially in the latter half of the eighteenth century when these women were socially on the rise. Yet none of their letters have been studied comprehensively.<sup>31</sup> This, no doubt, is the “New Frontier” for a fuller, fairer and more democratic appreciation of the whole literary female discussion around Shakespeare. However, it is a subject fit for another essay or publication, as these considerations naturally far exceed the scope of this overview.

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“Women’s Early Modern Letters Online [WEMLO]”: <http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/> (last accessed 19 July 2022); “Women Writers Online” project: <https://wwp.northeastern.edu/wwo/> (last accessed 19 July 2022).

<sup>30</sup> James Daybell, “Letters”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women’s Writing*, edited by Laura Lunger Knoppers, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 181-193, at p. 190.

<sup>31</sup> The only few and fairly limited works interested in non-aristocratic women are: Margaret J. M. Ezell, *The Patriarch’s Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family*, New ed., Chapel Hill and London, The University of North Carolina Press, 2009 [1987] and her article, “The Laughing Tortoise: Speculations on Manuscript Sources and Women’s Book History”, *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2008, p. 331-55; James Daybell, *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, esp.175-199; S. Whyman, *op. cit.*, passim.