

0 Introduction

[A]s regards reason or sense, since it is the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts, I am inclined to believe that it exists whole and complete in each of us.

– René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*¹

To be a subject is to have access to signifying practice, to identify with the ‘I’ of utterance and the ‘I’ who speaks. The subject is held in place in a specific discourse, a specific knowledge, by the meanings available there. In so far as signifying practice always precedes the individual, is always learned, the subject is a subjected being, an effect of the meanings it seems to possess. Subjectivity is discursively produced and is constrained by the range of subject positions defined by the discourses in which the concrete individual participates ... [E]xisting discourses determine not only what can be said and understood, but the nature of subjectivity itself, what it is possible to be.

– Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*²

Identity for me is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the ‘other’; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process. Last, but not least, identity is made of successive identifications, that is to say unconscious internalized images that escape rational control.

This fundamental noncoincidence of identity with consciousness implies also that one entertains an imaginary relationship to one’s history, genealogy, and material conditions.

– Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*³

Who are we? How do we see ourselves, and how do we want to be seen? Do our ways of seeing ourselves stay the same, or do they change over time – be it in the course of individual lives, or in relation to history in a broader sense? Does it make sense to speak of the ‘self,’ or do we inevitably confront multiple ‘selves’? Or is there no such thing as the ‘self’ at all?

The conceptualisations of identity expressed in the epigraphs I have chosen for this introduction outline the paradigms that, broadly speaking, have determined the views of the self in modernity and postmodernity. René Descartes, writing in the 1630s, expresses a concept of the self based on the idea that a person is fundamentally an individual with a firm, essential selfhood, distinct from all others, and that inwardness, a sense of individual agency in shaping the self, and especially the capacity for reason constitute subjectivity. It is exemplary of the philosophical approach of modernity which, ‘traditionally, and residually in many of our contemporary discourses’ (Smith (1988) xxvii), has conceptualised the subject as the bearer of consciousness and as ‘the complex but

¹ In: *Descartes. Selected Philosophical Writings*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 20-56 (21).

² Belsey (1985) 5.

³ Braidotti (1994) 166.

nonetheless unified locus of the constitution of the phenomenal world' (Smith (1988) xxvii). Catherine Belsey's late twentieth-century account, by contrast, takes as its starting point the concept of discourse, i.e. the idea that symbolic systems and their linguistic and textual circulation govern the way our knowledge about ourselves and about the world is distributed. The subject, in this account, is not an independent entity with an intrinsic core of being, but its formation can take place only within the available discourses. There is no such thing as fully-fledged individuality that can be shaped at will, since a person's options for identity formation are opened up, but also always restricted, by the finite number of subject positions that exist in any given context. Rosi Braidotti takes this argument a step further: the subject, never complete in itself, is always constituted in relation to an 'other,' be it an abstract entity or another person, and embedded in a specific temporality. Hence it is unable to constitute and perceive itself by means of its own rationality alone.

With a fair share of oversimplification, these views of the self trace the philosophical trajectory from modernity to postmodernity, and it would certainly be a serious misconception to neglect their historical situatedness. Obviously, they cannot be applied to the early modern period in any straightforward sense without creating anachronisms. In fact, it is questionable whether the category of the self as we understand it can be used in any meaningful sense with reference to identity in the early modern period at all. Conversely, it seems problematic to analyse constitutions of the self in the postmodern context, where unified identity is understood as a fiction, i.e. as merely the concealment of difference.⁴

I will therefore use the idea of the self in a provisional sense which embraces the complexities of the concept and of the mindset of the period in question: at the same time as it is rooted in medieval understandings of the human person, the early modern period shows the first tentative stirrings of the characteristically modern veneration of the self – the 'idoll selfe' that I quote in the title of this study.⁵ Yet this development is accompanied by anxiety, ambiguity and hesitation; hence the question mark in my title. Shaped as we are, as twenty-first century readers and critics, by the modes of thinking of modernity and their postmodern critique, we cannot go behind these cultural and philosophical frameworks if we want to meaningfully address questions of identity and the self.

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⁴ In the poststructuralist understanding, 'where identity is posited, difference is not *aufgehoben*, but concealed' (Butler (1987) 183).

⁵ The quotation is taken from M. R., *The Mothers Counsell or, Live Within Compasse* (sig. C8r).

My study takes as its focal concern early modern women's ways of shaping and perceiving their selves in their writings. I use the generic term 'self-writings' to refer to texts that can be loosely grouped together because they share a fundamental preoccupation with the constitution of the authors' selves, either explicitly (as in autobiographies) or in a more implicit way (as in diaries, letters, mothers' advice books, etc.). As Carolyn Steedman points out, any study of self-writings is based on two underlying assumptions:

The first is that somehow, in some way, the production of written forms has something to do with the production of subjectivities; and the second that this process is a voluntary one, that there is an *urge* to tell the self, that it comes from within, and that the impulsion to do so, in spoken or written language, is part of the very process of self-construction. (Steedman (2000) 25; emphasis in the original)

Drawing on such broad categories of genre brings its own problems, of course – after all, any writing is inevitably concerned with the authorial self, in some way or other. Whilst the main focus of my study is on texts that display at least a conscious awareness, if not explicit textual exploration, of the writing self, I will from time to time refer to writings whose form and subject matter do not betray any such obvious relevance to the female author's identity formation. The very fact that these texts, too, lend themselves to consideration under the heading of 'writing the self' indicates that self-writings cannot be neatly categorised as a clearly identifiable genre, but invite coverage of a broad variety of texts that match only a loosely configured set of criteria.

Applying not too narrow designations of genre is of particular importance when working with early modern texts, which often do not fall squarely within the generic conventions commonly employed by modern literary criticism.⁶ For, as David Booy observes with reference to early modern practices of literary self-expression, '[a] substantial amount of personal disclosure occurs in texts that are primarily concerned with matters other than the writer's self, and where autobiographical information appears only intermittently or unintentionally' (Booy (2002) 1). I would go even further and argue that it is not only 'autobiographical information,' in the sense of details of memorable events or

⁶ As Elspeth Graham notes, '[t]he boundaries between fiction and autobiography, always uncertain, were ... especially unfixed in the early modern period' (Graham (1996) 212). Graham's definition of the broader category of 'self-writing' is worth quoting at length: "'Self-writing' perhaps more clearly represents the variety of strategies and forms that are used by writers seeking to articulate and assert themselves through that very writing of the self. As with fictional prose of the period, self-writing cannot be easily or clearly defined through reference to a coherent set of core characteristics. Many narratives of the self include within them letters, diary entries, poems, extracts from journals; many take the form of self-writing from a generally collective group of forms of self-articulation including the diary, journals and trial records. The exploration and exploitation of a variety of forms, rather than adherence to a recognised format for articulating the self, is the crucial characteristic of self-writing, and in particular of women's self-writing, of the period' (Graham (1996) 213).

personal living conditions, that seeps into the texts. Rather, various types of early modern writing – and writing in general, for that matter – are crucial for the constitution of the authors' identities. This seems particularly true for early modern women, who, as a result of their socio-cultural and economic marginalisation under patriarchy, were excluded from the powerful means of self-expression that men had access to, such as assuming roles of public influence or participating in the discourses of 'high' literature and art. Using the broad category of self-writings is therefore necessary both from a historical *and* a feminist angle; it establishes a perspective which 'rejects the strictly conventional generic distinctions, instead showing that the same mental procedures are at play in all forms of life-writing' (Järvelä (1996) 20).

However, speaking of women's marginal position in early modern society must not lead us to sweepingly conclude that all women were barred from the dominant culture to the same extent. Their positions are notoriously vexed; they are simultaneously *outside and* inside the shaping discourses of their time. What is more, differences *between* women make for unequal access to literary modes of self-expression. The authors whose self-writings I study are mostly members of the upper social strata, yet they do not belong to the very top of the social scale. Most of them come from titled families or are gentlewomen, as is the case with Lady Grace Mildmay, Elizabeth Joscelin, Lady Anne Clifford and most others. Martha Moulsworth, whose three husbands were all wealthy London craftsmen, was a member of the burgeoning urban middle class, while Isabella Whitney, who held a position as a servingmaid in a wealthy London household, had a lower-gentry background. None of the women writers I study – with the partial exception of Margaret Cavendish – acquired any degree of fame as an author in her lifetime. If their works were published and gained popularity in the succeeding decades, as happened with mothers' advices books in particular, the writers were praised not for their artistic merits, but rather for the feminine virtues that their texts were seen to attest to. In this sense they were subjected to the prevailing cultural constraints that confronted early modern women in general. It is certainly true that there were female poets – examples include Margaret More Roper, Mary Sidney Herbert or Mary Wroth – who were 'both celebrated and notorious' (Haselkorn and Travitsky (1990) 11) during their lifetimes and who 'altered the contours of both the possible and the forbidden for women and thereby influenced, though sometimes indirectly, the lives of lesser-known contemporary women' (Haselkorn and Travitsky (1990) 11). However, I will take a reverse approach, focusing on precisely the

latter group, the 'lesser-known contemporary women.'⁷ I am interested not so much in the ways in which the more famous female writers of the period influenced their largely unacknowledged sisters, but rather in the literary strategies employed by the latter in order to develop (written) senses of self in the face of often hostile material and ideological circumstances.

My perspective can perhaps best be explained with reference to the (often neglected) materialist aspects of Virginia Woolf's pragmatic feminism. At the beginning of her essay 'Women and Fiction' (1929), Woolf challenges the distinction between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' women that is an outgrowth of the class-ridden perceptions of early twentieth-century England:

The extraordinary woman depends on the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life – the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the household was her task – it is only when we can measure the way of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success and failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer. (Woolf (1966) 142)

By implication, studying 'ordinary' women (writers) has to come prior to and is potentially more insightful than an exclusive focus on a select number of 'extraordinary' female figures, who, by definition, cannot be representative. Pursuing the questions asked by Virginia Woolf and focusing on seemingly 'ordinary' women implies drawing attention to the tangible history of early modern women in less outstanding roles and positions, and I will show that the conditions of their writing are shaped not only by somewhat elusive and transcendent ideologies, but by very basic material circumstances.

The texts at the core of my study reflect the generic variety in which female literary identity formation occurred in the early modern period. Martha Moulsworth's autobiographical poem *Memorandum of Martha Moulsworth, Widow* (1632) and Lady Grace Mildmay's *Autobiography* (1617) resemble fairly closely what we as modern-day readers and critics understand by autobiography. In a similar way, the diaries of Lady Margaret Hoby (1599-1605) and Lady Anne Clifford (1603-1676), with their carefully dated, (almost) daily entries, correspond to present-day notions of diary writing. However, in the case of Lady Grace Mildmay, the impression of a recognisable genre is, in part,

⁷ I agree with Margaret Ezell, who argues that, in the attempt to establish a tradition of women's writing, we need to '[survey] the general pattern of women's participation in the intellectual life of the century' instead of focusing too much on 'the extraordinary individual' (Ezell (1987) 62). Similarly, Linda Woodbridge points out that '[w]hat is gained for women by a focus on [outstanding figures such as] Elizabeth [I] is lost in the neglect of ordinary women' (Woodbridge (1998) 53).

artificially generated: Linda Pollock, who edited Mildmay's various writings (autobiographical, spiritual and medical), rightly points out that her *Autobiography* is 'more a selection of reminiscences than a systematic retelling of her life,'⁸ composed as a prologue to her religious meditations; '[i]t thus consists of scenes from a life rather than a carefully structured narrative.'⁹ In order to make the heterogeneous material more accessible to readers, Pollock has rearranged it so as to form a more structured and roughly chronological narrative.¹⁰ Mildmay's authorial stance closely relates her text to the genre of the female advice book, which enjoyed great popularity throughout the early modern period.¹¹ Indeed, her *Autobiography* has close similarities with the mothers' manuals that I will study: Elizabeth Grymeston's *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives* (1604), Elizabeth Joscelyn's *The Mothers Legacie to her Vnborn Childe* (1624), Dorothy Leigh's *The Mothers Blessing* (1616), the anonymous M. R.'s *Mothers Counsell or, Live Within Compasse* (1630), and Elizabeth Richardson's *A Ladies Legacie to Her Daughters* (1645). Composed as collections of advice for the writers' children, these texts are concerned with the authors' constitution of self in a more indirect way. Their disconcerting reliance on and quotations from authoritative sources make it difficult to trace the writers' 'own' identities. Yet I would argue that, at a closer look, their writing strategies and especially the personal dedications that precede the actual manuals do allow for a reading that foregrounds authorial identity formation, at the same time as it questions its modern premises. In addition to the genres I have so far outlined, where the concern with the authorial self is not hard to detect, I will also treat issues of authorial selfhood in writings such as Isabella Whitney's poetry (1573), various prayer collections, the dramas of Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639) and Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), and miscellaneous other women's texts. In addition, I will intermittently draw upon male-authored writings of the period to substantiate and/or contrast my readings of the female-authored texts.

The tentativeness with which we need to approach early modern women's authorial expressions of identity, but also the unmistakable traces of self that are present in their writings make these texts particularly compelling sites on which to tease out the complex

⁸ Linda Pollock, introduction to Lady Grace Mildmay, *With Faith and Physic*. 1-3 (1).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Pollock has indicated the original folio pagination in the text in order to show how she has re-ordered the original sequence.

¹¹ The genre is related to the (slightly earlier) humanist tradition of advice books for princes (e.g. Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster* (1570), Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531)). However, the women's advice books are sufficiently distinct from the male variants for Anne Haselkorn and Betty Travitsky to argue that, '[i]f Renaissance women can be said to have developed a new genre, this innovation would be the mother's advice book, actually a variation on the more traditional advice book by a father' (Haselkorn and Travitsky (1990) 26).

dialectic of structure and agency on which identity relies.¹² The self is a product of its textual representations and is thus implicated in the constraints imposed by literary genres and the socio-cultural and material circumstances of its context of origin; but it is also consciously created by the writer by means of deliberate choice. This is another reason why I favour the term 'self-writings' to designate the texts I have studied:¹³ for, in addition to its appealing brevity, it emphasises the textual construction of the writers' identities – textual construction always encompassing elements of convention as well as individual creativity.

As my analyses of the texts focus on the authors' ways of identity formation, I will read their strategies in relation to early modern as well as contemporary conceptualisations of subjectivity and their respective contexts. To do so, I will first establish the historical and theoretical framework of the writings and of my own critical perspective. In order to adequately historicise the texts, they have to be read alongside the early modern discourses of gender, women's living conditions and the role of writing (1.1). Furthermore, in terms of methodology, a study of early modern women's writings is inevitably informed by the approaches to the Renaissance of the last decades as well as feminist (literary) criticism (1.2). Moreover, the insights of these forms of criticism need to be contrasted with early modern as well as present-day (i.e. twentieth- or twenty-first-century) perceptions of subjectivity and of writing (1.3). If, at first glance, my use of critical theory in my readings of the texts seems eclectic, this is because I find it dangerously one-sided to subscribe to any one theory as the universal grid to be imposed on all the texts alike. Instead, I regard theory as a methodological tool that can open up further dimensions of the texts and shed interesting light on them, especially in places where the texts provide clues and parallels that lend themselves to a theoretical approach. Ultimately, in literary studies, theory should not be an end in itself, but a function of the literary text.

Having outlined the theoretical and methodological framework of my study, I will analyse the women's writings with reference to the key concerns that I have singled out as the paradigmatic dimensions of early modern women's shaping of their selves. I have devised a thematic matrix that seems to me to encompass the most prominently recurring themes in their self-writings. First, I will look at the ways in which the authors express an awareness of the writing process as a form of 'writing the self,' i.e. the extent to which

¹² I will outline the structure/agency controversy in greater detail in the summary to this part of my study (1.4).

¹³ Alternatively, David Booy suggests 'writings about life-experience' or 'autobiographical expression' (Booy (2002) 3).

they experience writing as identity formation (2.1). This also poses the question of writerly creativity, as opposed to direct or indirect quotation and reliance on pre-existing sources and traditions or surrender to outwardly imposed constraints. I will then analyse how the self that is constituted in the writing process interacts with an other, or with others (2.2). All of the writers have a strong awareness of being related to others, or even passing on a personal legacy, especially when they link their writings with their roles as mothers. The issue of interpersonal interaction is closely connected with the demarcations of the private and/or public spaces occupied in the writing process (2.3). The different conceptualisations of the private sphere as opposed to the public realm in the early modern period render a clear pigeonholing of women's experiences problematic, as does the fact that women's access to the public sphere, however defined, was severely restricted in the first place. Women's ever-present sense of the precariousness of their position as writers becomes most poignantly apparent in their striking preoccupation with death (2.4). This prompts me to ask in how far the authors' self-abnegation in their texts, expressed as a fear of loss of self or even death, can be reconciled with the notion of identity formation through writing. Drawing together the main threads of my previous arguments, I will analyse and attempt to theorise the idea of the 'golden meane' (2.5), invoked explicitly in M. R.'s *Mothers Counsell*. I suggest that this motif can provide the vital cue to early modern women's constitution of self, linking it as it does to parallel discourses of moderation and balance at the time but reinterpreting these in a manner that can present a workable and innovative paradigm of subjectivity.

Significantly, in none of the thematic fields in which early modern women writers' identity formation takes place are ambiguities and tensions resolved. Rather, they are allowed to exist side by side. I try to capture this simultaneity by concluding each of my thematic readings by pointing out a constitutive dialectic. I understand the term as the co-existence of contradictory positions that are not reconciled – in the common, Hegelian sense – in terms of a synthesis, but that exist alongside each other, inform one another and are productive precisely because of their inherent ambiguities. This contested and precarious form of the 'golden meane' foreshadows and simultaneously calls in question the tenets of later developments in the history of thought, such as Enlightenment rationality and its civilising projects, but equally casts doubt on some cherished assumptions of postmodern and feminist thought. Pointing out these continuities and differences contributes to the ongoing critical process of demystifying the early modern period and redefining women's contributions to cultural production and their engagement with the

dominant patriarchal ideology. The acceptance and negotiation of irresolvable tensions, I will argue, guarantee a realistic, responsible self-perception. Early modern women's understandings and constructions of their selves make for an identity politics that is disturbing at the same time as it offers a workable, 'liveable' sense of self.

1 Analysing early modern women's self-writings: theory and methodology

1.1 Perceptions of gender and the realities of early modern women's lives

England in generall is said to be the Hell of Horses, the Purgatory of Seruants, and the Paradice of Weomen.
– Fynes Moryson, *Itinerary* (1617)¹⁴

[The ideal woman] was distinguished by what she did not do, or, equally important, by what men did to her: she was unseen, unheard, untouched, unknown – at the same time that she was obsessively observed. This must be what is meant by saying that women occupy a negative position in culture.
– Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Surprising Fame'¹⁵

To describe early modern England as 'the Paradice of Weomen,' as the travel writer Fynes Moryson does in the first epigraph I have chosen for this chapter, certainly does not do justice to the experiences of 'real' women in the seventeenth century, and will probably be classified immediately by any present-day reader as an example of the ideological constructs on which patriarchy is founded. By contrast, Ann Rosalind Jones's depiction of women's 'negative position in culture' exemplifies the accusing stance, often verging on self-pity, that feminist-informed analyses of women's position in Western societies and its history have frequently displayed. Significantly, while it is unquestionably true that oppression and confinement have been part of the female experience for centuries, Anthony Fletcher criticises the one-sidedness of much feminist historiography and widens the scope of his definition of patriarchy by drawing attention to its inherently ambivalent character:

The trouble with [1960s feminism] ... was that it tended to assume that patriarchy was and is immovable and monumental. ... The structures of domination which sustain patriarchy have never been inert, they have always been adaptable; they were never entirely solid, they always were and still are adjustable. Women have always been the agents of, and have often colluded in, patriarchy as well as resisting it; men have shown uncertainties and unease about implementing dominating or exclusive roles. (Fletcher (1995) xvi)

¹⁴ Fynes Moryson, *An itinerary vwritten by Fynes Moryson Gent*. London: Printed by Iohn Beale, 1617. Part III, Ch. III: 'Of the opinions of old Writers, and some Prouerbs which I obserued in firraigne parts by reading or discourse, to be vsed either of Trauellert themselues, or of diuers Nations and Prouinces.' *Early English Books Online*. 3 February 2005 <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>>; emphasis in the original.

¹⁵ Jones (1986) 79.

In my view it is crucial to start from this differentiated and multi-dimensional vantage point when depicting the conditions of women's lives in the early modern period; for to regard patriarchy as monolithic is to relegate individual experience to the margins.

This perspective has important implications for the methods by which women's history is approached. It is no longer central to try to answer Joan Kelly-Gadol's proverbial question: 'Did women have a Renaissance?' (1976).¹⁶ For one thing, the 'decentred' reading of the period I will argue for in the following chapter renders uncertain whether any individual or group of individuals experienced a 'Renaissance' at all, at least in the traditional sense of the term. Moreover, especially if we consider the broad range of varied individual experiences, historical evidence suggests that, besides inequality, 'there was also a shifting zone in which women found and used a multitude of strategies ... to make themselves active agents in history.'¹⁷ Women did not have to buy into patriarchal ideology wholesale, but could and did negotiate strategies of accommodation and (limited and small-scale) agency.¹⁸ In order to grasp their (self-)positioning in-between patriarchal structures and individual agency, it is necessary to analyse the ways in which gender was perceived at the time, as well as the material conditions and ideological construction of women's lives.

From one gender to two genders

To what extent the concept of gender in the early modern period significantly diverges from our own has been a subject of long-standing critical debate. To put it crudely, it is certainly safe to say that the female was consistently conceptualised as lack, compared

¹⁶ Kelly-Gadol answers this question in the negative: '[T]here was no "renaissance" for women – at least not during the Renaissance. There was, on the contrary, a marked restriction of the scope and powers of women. Moreover, this restriction is a consequence of the very developments for which the age is noted' (Kelly-Gadol (1983) 13; cf. Kelly-Gadol (1987)). My own standpoint is somewhat different – at least I disagree with the second part of Kelly-Gadol's argument. Whilst she is certainly right in pointing to the flipside of the famous developments of the period, more recent studies, including my own findings, suggest that seventeenth-century women did develop their own 'scope and powers' – although perhaps in ways that we would not expect.

¹⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, 'Women as Historical Actors,' in Davis and Farge (1993) 1-7 (4).

¹⁸ I agree with Bernard Capp, who notes that 'submission and defiance were not the only possible responses to male authority. "Accommodation" or "negotiation" offered an important and often preferable alternative. ... "Accommodation" here signifies women's ability to soften and sometimes bypass male authority without challenging it outright' (Capp (1996) 125).

with the male, normative model. It is this idea of the male-as-norm that determined early modern gender relations; the various theories that served to substantiate it are secondary because of their common overall effect of presenting femininity as deviant. Obviously, this perception is not restricted to the early modern period; it continues to determine structures of thought in Western patriarchal societies up to this day, at least at a residual, underlying level.¹⁹ Given the significant medical and scientific advances as well as the substantial changes in the general modes of thinking that have occurred since then, it is all the more surprising that the male-as-norm has remained firmly in place.

In the early modern period, the notion was substantiated with recourse to humoral theory, dating back to Greek antiquity, according to which men are predominantly composed of hot and dry humours, whereas women are moist and cold. This is the result of the less intense heat invested in the conception of women, and, by extension, a sign of female inferiority. The female, basically, is an imperfect version of the male, produced with insufficient energy and hence unfit to carry out the accomplishments that men are able to perform.

The so-called ‘one-sex model,’ advocated by Thomas Laqueur as the structuring device of early modern perceptions of gender, extends humoral theory to suggest that men and women possess essentially the same sexual organs, the difference being the male genitals having been pushed outward as a result of the greater heat involved in a man’s conception.²⁰ Anatomical difference was neutralised by means of thinking in analogies. At first glance, viewing male and female organs as inversions of one another suggests that gender is perceived as a fluid category, a continuum of characteristics which are more or less pronounced in the individual. However, the metaphorical horizon of this perception – the one sex that formed the standard anatomical version – was the male: ‘A whole world view makes the vagina look like a penis to Renaissance observers’ (Laqueur (1990) 82; cf. 110).

The one-sex model seems to have surface similarities to contemporary, postmodern accounts of gender, popularised by Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performance,²¹

¹⁹ For instance, feminist-informed linguistics has observed that, while words and expressions designating the male are perceived as ‘unmarked’ terms, as a rule, the female equivalents are perceived as ‘marked’; e.g. male/generic ‘dog’ versus female ‘bitch’ (cf. Angelika Linke, Markus Nussbaumer and Paul R. Portmann, *Studienbuch Linguistik*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 5th ed. 2004 (174)).

²⁰ It is important to be aware of the fact that, as Gail Kern Paster remarks, ‘the argument from heat ... , logically, is both prior to and separable from the argument over anatomy. The difference between the sexes in perfection – although it was signified by genital difference – was caused by difference in temperature’ (Paster (1998) 418). Whilst Laqueur combines both perceptions, it is not necessary (indeed, it might not even be historically accurate) to do so (cf. Paster (1998) 418f.).

²¹ Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies that Matter* (1993).

according to which gender is nothing more than ‘a cultural meaning that is ascribed to human bodies’ (Macey (2000) 52) which can therefore be exploited and subverted at will. Yet because of its unquestioning adherence to the male-as-norm, the early modern one-sex model is in fact a far cry from such perceptions. The 1990s’ fascination with the one-sex model may well have had less to do with its historical accuracy (which, in fact, has become highly contested among critics), but rather with the fact that it appeared to lend support to such fashionable perspectives. It seems to me that Janet Adelman has a point when she speculates that ‘[t]he aspect of the one-sex model that seems particularly sexy in contemporary discourse is the invertibility of male and female sexual organs ... This is what excites our imagination’ (Adelman (1999) 26).

To the extent that gender was perceived as unstable in the early modern period, it was a source of anxiety and deep-seated fears, relating to the general cultural preoccupation with the potential discrepancy between semblance and substance, appearance and reality. Far from indulging a playful experimentation with different genders, early modern culture relied on very firmly prescribed gender roles. Precisely because gender was not determined by biological difference, gender-specific roles and codes of conduct had to be emphasised. This prompted the emergence of conduct literature, which set up guidelines for ‘proper’ behaviour, in particular that of women. Conduct literature established the discourse of virtuous femininity, revolving around the essential feminine virtues of chastity, obedience, humility and silence. It thus asserted the age-old dichotomy of woman as either virgin or whore, epitomised by the stereotypical biblical figures of Mary and Eve. Women’s alleged proneness to evil combined with the unfixity of gender to imply that men had to be continually watchful so as not to be drawn into the female sphere of vice. In early modern thinking, a man who renounces masculine virtue and succumbs to vice becomes, at least metaphorically, a ‘woman,’ as Posthumus Leonatus suggests in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* (1609/10):

... Could I find out
The woman’s part in me – for there’s no motion
That tends to vice in man but I affirm
It is the woman’s part; ...
...
All faults that man can name, nay, that hell knows,
Why, hers in part or all, but rather all[.] (2.5.19ff.)

In reverse, the demands of virtuous femininity led to an ‘ideology of containment’ (Aughterson (1995) 68) – a woman could only adhere to the rules of ‘proper’ feminine conduct if she did not venture beyond the confines of her home and her family. However,

this is not to say that the ideal of virtuous femininity went uncontested. It must not be regarded as an all-embracing, monolithic ideology that every man and woman subscribed to. On the contrary, it makes sense to argue that the attempt to define and restrict acceptable femininity to an increasingly privatised notion of the household was in itself an indication that the rules of women's 'proper' comportment were not, in fact, as consensual as conduct literature is trying to suggest – rather, it 'reveals the fluidity of a patriarchal system which was under pressure' (Fletcher (1995) xix). The reasons for these insecurities are manifold:

Ideological incoherences in the period between 1540 and 1660 were generated and sustained by changes occurring in all sectors of the culture: vast economic changes including long-term inflation; colonial expansion newly dependent on credit and foreign trade; reduced agricultural production; demographic shifts precipitated by rural unemployment but eventually involving all classes and finally ensuring the economic and political centrality of London; religious upheaval and conflict; a rising and increasingly powerful populist voice; disputes over access to literacy and formal education further complicated by the shift from oral to print culture; and, inevitably, unstable gender roles. (McGrath (2002) 18f.)

On a philosophical level, gender became a problematic category because thinking in analogies was gradually being replaced, in the course of the seventeenth century, by modes of thought based on abstraction and antithesis, culminating in the splits between 'spirit' and 'matter,' 'soul' and 'body,' 'subject' and 'object' known as Cartesian dualism and associated with Enlightenment rationality.²² As a result, gender was eventually thought to reside in certain physiological features, i.e. associated with the body, so that the female was now clearly distinguished from the male. The emergent (Enlightenment) emphasis on reason as the source of self-evident truth, however, was distinctly gendered: 'The symbolic antithesis between femaleness and the activity of knowledge was retained ... [, for] the association between maleness and reason ... was already deeply established' (Fletcher (1995) 289f.). In fact, traditional (humoral) accounts of gender difference could easily be incorporated into the new intellectual parameters.²³ The underlying shift in the perception of gender thus went largely unnoticed. In practice, the dominant modes of patriarchy could remain in place, only with different grounds from which they derived their legitimacy and

²² For an outline of this shift and its philosophical underpinnings and implications, cf. Foucault (1970) 71.

²³ Gail Kern Paster outlines this connection as follows: 'The global implications of the contrast between male heat and female cold begin to register in direct symbolic linkages between temperature and states of consciousness. As with everything else in nature, states of consciousness and cognitive awareness were ranked in terms of cold/hot, moist/dry. Waking consciousness was thought to be a hotter and drier state than sleep; rationality was less cold and clammy than irrationality. ... Hence consciousness and rationality belonged associatively to maleness, sleep and irrationality to femaleness' (Paster (1998) 419). For an extensive, diachronic discussion of the association between maleness and reason in Western philosophy, cf. Lloyd (1993).

construed the female as ‘other,’ ‘through which Man discovers and enhances his own shape’ (Smith (1987) 39).

Obviously, the view of women as deviant from the male norm has manifest repercussions on women’s self-perceptions, and it is vital to be aware of this when analysing (early modern) women’s senses of self as expressed in their texts. It urges the question to what extent they saw themselves as falling short of the male ideal and accepted its premises, or whether they strove to establish alternative visions of their own.

Realities of women’s lives: marriage, the family, literacy, and the body

Obviously, gender is not a merely theoretical issue; the way in which it is perceived and lived has manifest material implications. Whilst it would be simplistic to equate biological destiny with lived reality, to deny the corporeal presence of gender and the forms in which it determines social expectations and personal experience would be equally reductive. For an appropriate understanding of early modern women’s perceptions of self, therefore, we need to reconstruct their living conditions from a historical angle.

Fundamentally, early modern patriarchy can be considered as a system of market relations initiated by paternal power and centring around the exchange of women through the politics of marriage.²⁴ Women, in this scheme, were possessions, traded as commodities and defined through their relations with men as they were transferred from the father’s household to that of the husband in order to increase both the material wealth and symbolic power of the males.

There was, however, as Margaret Ezell rightly points out, ‘a “recognisable” pattern of matriarchy’ (Ezell (1987) 33), for instance with regard to marriage arrangements; i.e. mothers, too, often had a say in negotiating their daughters’ marriages. Of course, one could argue that, in so doing, these women perpetuated the very structures that oppressed them, and Ezell is clearly aware of the fact that female participation as such did not significantly alter the character of marriage as a financial transaction (cf. Ezell (1987) 32).

²⁴ Lynda E. Boose cites the latter as the prime example of the commodification of women as being the backbone of patriarchy: ‘If paternal power did not oversee a marriage, then the purpose of marriage, the transfer of power from one male to another, would be undermined, ... [and thus] the ability of the entire system of social relations to reproduce itself’ (Boose (1989) 32).

Still, she cites extensive demographic and biographical evidence in order to prove her point, namely that the clichéd perception of early modern women being married off as young girls and subsequently producing an average of one child each year is simplistic and does not do justice to the varied experiences of ‘real’ women:

In view of the evidence found in letters and diaries in addition to statistical reconstruction of marriages and migration patterns, the current model of domestic patriarchy as a pervasive, restrictive blanket of strictly male control over women’s education and marriage seems to be overstated. (Ezell (1987) 34f.)

The conduct literature of the time, however, with its clear, prescriptive statements on virtuous female behaviour, paints a somewhat different picture:

[The man] then is more honourable and must have the pre-eminence, in which, the Woman is rightly called the glory of the Man, because she was made for him, and put in subjection to him. ...

I know not which live more unnatural lives,
Obeying husbands, or commanding wives.²⁵

All of them [women] are understood either married or to be married and their desires or [are?] subject to their husbands.²⁶

If ever thou purpose to be a good wife, and to live comfortably, set down this with thy self, *My husband is my superior, my better* ... It is laudable, commendable, a note of a virtuous woman, a dutiful wife, when she submits herself with quietness, cheerfully.²⁷

[A woman] is his [her husband’s] absent hands, eyes, ears, and mouth; his present and absent All. She frames her nature unto his howsoever.²⁸

[E]ven in those things wherein there is a common equity, there is not an equality, for the husband hath ever even in all things a superiority.²⁹

The ideals laid down in conduct literature were the theoretical yardstick by which early modern women had to measure their own behaviour and were measured by others. However, in order to reconcile these injunctions with the contradictory evidence about women’s ‘real’ experiences, we need to read conduct literature not as a truthful depiction of reality, but concede that it was written with didactic intentions, precisely because the

²⁵ John Swan, *Speculum Mundi or, A Glass representing the Face of the World; showing both that it did begin and must also end: the manner how, and time when, being largely examined*. Cambridge: by printers to the University, 1635; quoted in Keeble (1994) 8f.

²⁶ T[homas] E[dgar] (ed.), *The Lawes Resolution of Womens Rights or, The Lawes Provision for Woemen. A methodicall collection of such statutes and customes, with the cases, opinions, arguments and points of learning in the law, as doe properly concerne women*. London: by the assignes of John More, 1632 (4); quoted in Keeble (1994) 146.

²⁷ William Whatley, *A Bride-Blush, or Wedding Sermon: compendiously describing the duties of married persons*. London: for Nicholas Browne, 1617; quoted in Keeble (1994) 151f.; emphasis in the original.

²⁸ Sir Thomas Overbury, *A Wife ... whereunto are added Many Witty Characters* (1614); in W. J. Taylor (ed.), *The Overburian Characters*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1936; quoted in Keeble (1994) 165.

²⁹ William Gouge, *Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises*. London: for William Bladen, 1622; quoted in Keeble (1994) 155.

reality often diverged from the standards that patriarchy depended on to uphold male power.

In fact, a closer look at the various dimensions of women's lives reveals that their experiences were fundamentally ambiguous. For instance, female literacy rates increased as a result of the humanist emphasis on education and the Protestant idea of the 'priesthood of all believers,' which allocated to women the role of instructing their children and prompting all household members to lead godly lives.³⁰ For women this meant that literacy was generally justified, although not for the sake of intellectual independence and individual fulfilment, but primarily as a 'foundation for piety' (Travitsky (1981) 8). Accordingly, women's education, in spite of humanism's egalitarian and allegedly universalist stance, was firmly under male control. On the other hand, literacy provided women with the tools they needed to develop their own intellectual and creative potentials, even if these were initially confined to ideologically acceptable, appropriately 'feminine' fields, such as translation, religious writings or household manuals.

Perhaps surprisingly, given these restrictive ideologies, the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw the rule of two female monarchs, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I. Yet, again, a number of ambiguities accompanied their position: whilst especially Elizabeth I was politically highly successful and praised by male writers of poems and sermons, her reign was consistently construed as an exception instituted by divine will, and it thus failed to inaugurate an innovative model of politically powerful femininity. Moreover, her (self-)stylisation as 'Virgin Queene' implied that she had to deny her corporeality because of the culturally pervasive associations of the female body with sexual incontinence and uncleanness.

The deeply rooted fear of and invective against the female bodily reality in early modern culture makes it all the more significant to note that all-female spaces did exist, in which the body was not a site of taboo, but instead an integral part of women's shared experience. Women were often well-versed in medicine and herbology and acted as nurses or midwives in their communities. The surviving writings by women about motherhood suggest that this 'uniquely female experience ... had its own resonances, myths and spaces for women and a women's community' (Aughterson (1995) 105). The insight that exclusively female experiences provided a realm outside the patriarchal order must not, however, prompt us to idealise these spaces. It is important not to overlook the fact that even specifically female spheres were implicated in patriarchal structures, so that integral

³⁰ On women's roles in education, cf. Todd (1980), Charlton (1994, 2002), Smith (1996).

parts of the female culture also contributed, to some extent at least, to the dominant discourse of women's inferiority and inherent imperfection.³¹ For instance, a woman who possessed exceptional medical knowledge, often handed down via a non-literary, female line of tradition, could be venerated for her skill, but could just as easily be accused of practising witchcraft. In an equally equivocal fashion, women's contributions to medical literature can be read either as perpetuating or subverting dominant ideas of female behaviour, or as doing both at the same time (cf. Aughterson (1995) 104f.). For example, in her *Almanac* (1658), the midwife Sarah Jinner lists a number of 'things by nature cool, which move the terms'³² – apart from representing serious medical advice on menstruation, this passage might as well be read “‘against the grain” ... as [listing] potential abortifacients’ (Aughterson (1995) 105), and hence as an example of women taking control of their reproductive potential.

As the ambiguities surrounding patriarchal ideology and its conceptualisations of femininity reveal, women in early modern England can obviously not be treated as a single, homogeneous group of oppressed creatures. Rather, they actively engaged in, at the same time as they were shaped by, various competing discourses of what it meant to be a woman. We cannot neatly pigeonhole early modern women as conforming to patriarchal ideals, just as patriarchy itself has never gone uncontested. Although there are some general traits that tended to characterise female experiences, these cannot be interpreted in a deterministic fashion. Individual women with their particular fates and in their respective living conditions may have had perceptions of themselves and of the roles their society attributed to them that were widely divergent both from those of other women and from 'official' patriarchal ideology.

³¹ A prime example is the childbirth scenario and its accompanying rituals, which I will analyse in greater detail in 2.5.

³² Sarah Jinner, *Almanac*. First edition 1658; quoted in Aughterson (1995) 127.

1.2 Critical contexts

At the very least – since there are degrees of otherness – we should view the culture of the Renaissance as a half-alien culture, one which is not only distant but receding, becoming more alien every year. ...

The Renaissance continues to recede from us at an accelerating rate. However, ... the double process of the appropriation and the domestication of the Renaissance is as old as the movement itself.

– Peter Burke, *The European Renaissance*³³

Studying early modern women's texts requires a critical apparatus that differs from that applied to the canonical (male-authored) literature of the period. If we want to move beyond the male-as-norm, we need to take seriously the claims of both the Renaissance studies of the last decades and feminist criticism – and this means using a set of critical tools that is sufficiently differentiated to account for similarities as well as differences between historical periods, forms of literary expression, and gendered individual experiences.

Traditional and radical Renaissance

The 1980s and 1990s have seen substantial changes as to how the period between 1450 and 1650 is interpreted, positioned as a historical epoch and integrated into the story of how we, as (post-)modern individuals, have come to perceive ourselves and the world. At a very basic level, the issue is one of terminology: the traditional term 'Renaissance,' with its associations of a radical break with the medieval modes of thinking and the rebirth of the 'high' culture of classical antiquity, has largely been replaced with the more tentative 'early modern period,' suggesting interconnected and overlapping developments rather than clear-cut boundaries. The early modern period has thus come to designate an intermediary time span when the foundations of modernity can be seen to emerge, but are not yet extant in their fully-fledged forms. This approach is a direct reaction against the view put forward by Jacob Burckhardt in the nineteenth century, whose seminal work *The*

³³ Burke (1998) 4, 241.

Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860) presented the period as inaugurating a male-centred narrative of linear progression, geared towards an allegedly ever greater extent of individual and social liberation.

What the designation of the period as ‘early modern’ implies, ideally, is a more comprehensive and differentiated account of the seminal developments of the era. Historians have now largely moved away from the exclusive focus on the male, Western, upper- or middle-class individuals whom Burckhardt’s approach inevitably presented as normative. Peter Burke, one of the most prominent historians of this bent, demands that the early modern period be detached from the “‘grand narrative’ of the rise of modern Western civilisation, a triumphalist and elitist story which implicitly denigrated the achievements of other social groups and other cultures’ (Burke (1986) 9).³⁴ Instead, Burke suggests a ‘decentred’ reading of early modern culture: ‘It should be reframed, detached from the idea of modernity so dear to Burckhardt and studied in a “decentred” fashion’ (Burke (1986) 9). This move is crucial for my own object of study: obviously, only if the period is approached with the intention of ‘decentring’ is it possible to read women’s texts alongside men’s, because we are no longer forced to take the normative model of the male individual as our definitive starting point.

The critical approaches associated with the new historicism and its British equivalent, cultural materialism, contribute to this ‘decentring’: new historicist critics start from the premise that literature mirrors social, political and cultural reality, at the same time as it is itself instrumental in shaping that reality.³⁵ Conversely, the conditions of reality determine what is considered ‘literature’ – in the sense of ‘high art,’ i.e. canonised literature – in the first place. The consequences of this dialectical relationship between literature and culture are twofold. Firstly, it is indicative of the ways in which a society’s material power structures influence its literary and cultural practices.³⁶ Secondly, it calls into question the very notion of ‘literature’: if literary production shapes reality, in some way or other, then the distinctions between ‘high’ literature and ‘minor’ textual forms collapse, because they all contribute to and originate from the vast field of cultural production. Thus the new historicism’s most prominent and oft-quoted aim is to open the

³⁴ Burke’s most recent study (1998) is a practical example of such ‘decentring’: he examines the Renaissance in its European contexts and focuses especially on geographical and cultural areas that have traditionally been considered marginal to the developments of the age.

³⁵ This is the essence of Louis Adrian Montrose’s formulation of the chiasmic relationship between the ‘historicity of texts’ and the ‘textuality of history’ (cf. Montrose (1989) 20).

³⁶ The emphasis on the material conditions that shape cultural production is particular to cultural materialism, i.e. it is distinct from its American counterpart because of its explicitly political agenda. One of the most prominent examples of the cultural materialist approach in literary studies is Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield’s *Political Shakespeare* (1985).

traditional literary canon so as to include non-canonised texts, thereby effecting ‘a radical contextualising of literature which eliminates the old divisions between literature and its “background,” text and context’ (Dollimore (1985) 4).

It hardly needs to be explained why this approach should be fruitful for studying early modern women’s texts – in fact, only in the wake of the new historicist turn have their writings become a field of academic interest at all. As they often write in forms that have not traditionally been awarded the prestigious label of ‘literature’ – collections of prayers, commonplace books, letters, household manuals etc. – it is only from this integrative angle that women’s specific genres can be perceived as equally valid cultural productions as, for instance, poetry and drama.

At least that is the theory. In practice, the new historicism has largely foregrounded the traditional themes of monarchical power and authority, politics, history and (male) character formation.³⁷ If ‘lesser’ genres do enter the critical discourse at all, it is often only in the form of the proverbial opening anecdote, as a playful preliminary remark that eases entry into the ‘serious’ critical text (cf. Wilson (1995) 59). Moreover, the new historicist preoccupation with the workings of power has undesirable effects for the study of women’s writings. For Stephen Greenblatt, the new historicism’s founding figure and its best-known exponent to date, early modern literature is often a battleground for ideological conflict, and he singles out the theatre in particular as a site of struggle.³⁸ Significantly, Greenblatt denies the possibility for such cultural practices to effect any true subversion of the existing power structures. Although instances of rebellion and upheaval – instigated by usurpers, bastard brothers, socially disadvantaged groups or non-English rebels – abound in the drama of the time,³⁹ they do not, as one might expect, pose a real threat to the prevailing order. As long as theatrical performance does not dismantle the reassuring distinction between illusion and reality, it plays in the hands of power. As Greenblatt argues in his seminal essay ‘Invisible Bullets,’ power creates its own subversion in order to solidify itself: ‘Thus the subversiveness which is genuine and radical ... is at the same time contained by the power it would appear to threaten. Indeed the subversiveness is the very product of that power and furthers its ends’ (Greenblatt (1988) 23f.). In other words, disorder can and must be represented on the stage, but in such a way as to induce

³⁷ As Carol Thomas Neely remarks, ‘[o]nce again, a focus on power, politics, and history, and especially, the monarch, turns attention away from marriage, sexuality, women, and the masterless’ (Neely (1988) 12).

³⁸ Greenblatt here opposes the traditional view of the Renaissance as a period of order, in which every creature was regarded as having a fixed position in the cosmological framework of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ – a view that was put forward most famously in E. M. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943).

³⁹ Obviously, the primary point of reference is Shakespeare’s dramas.

momentary carnivalesque pleasure and/or anxiety and in turn to confirm the need for order to be upheld⁴⁰ – subversion inevitably brings its own containment in its wake. Oddly, with his emphasis on the containment of subversive potential through the mechanisms of power, Greenblatt to some extent disclaims the legitimacy of his own critical venture. For, why trace potential instances of subversion, if they ultimately channel back to the existing power and serve to consolidate it? Greenblatt seems to be aware of this deadlock and even draws attention to the unsatisfactory qualities of the concept of subversion:

‘[S]ubversive’ is for us a term used to designate those elements in Renaissance culture that contemporary authorities tried to contain or, when containment seemed impossible, to destroy and that now conform to our own sense of truth and reality. That is, we locate as ‘subversive’ in the past precisely those things that are *not* subversive to ourselves, that pose no threat to the order by which we live and allocate resources[.] (Greenblatt (1988) 28f.; emphasis in the original)

In a nutshell, what Greenblatt here suggests is that we cannot find out what would have had a ‘truly’ subversive impact in the past and what would not – in effect, the dominant power structures remain dominant. Obviously, this negation of the subversive potential of texts renders patriarchal structures self-evident and precludes options for the agency of marginalised groups, such as women. Carol Thomas Neely delivers the following devastating verdict:

[The new historicism has] the effect of putting woman in her customary place, of reproducing patriarchy – the same old master plot. In it, women continue to be marginalized, erased, displaced, allegorized, and their language and silence continue to serve the newly dominant ideology. The new approaches are not new enough. They have not taken seriously enough their own admonitions to historicize, intertextualize, decenter. They have not examined closely enough their own historicity, their own practices. (Neely (1988) 7f.)⁴¹

What is even more disturbing, they may not even wish to do so. For, inherent in the new historicist project is the concomitant realisation that complete historicisation is impossible. Whilst this is, without doubt, a crucial and valid point – after all, our perspective on the past is inevitably mediated by our own present – the conclusions drawn by some new

⁴⁰ In a Foucaultian vein, Greenblatt argues that power is relatively ineffective if it merely consists of physical force; rather, it has to rely on a surplus of ‘coercive belief’ (Greenblatt (1988) 23). The illusionary world presented by the theatre is part of this mechanism – ‘theatricality ... is one of power’s essential modes’ (Greenblatt (1988) 46).

⁴¹ In a similar fashion, Barbara Kiefer Lewalski argues that ‘early modern women’s voices, perspectives, and texts are seldom brought to bear upon questions that have become central for literary scholars of the period: the power of social and cultural institutions, the ideology of absolutism and patriarchy, the formation of subjectivity, the forms of authorial “self-fashioning,” the possibility and manifestations of resistance and subversion. It remains the case ... that the new Foucaultian Renaissance world picture tends to be as monolithic as the old one: hierarchical, patriarchal, absolutist, unsubvertible’ (Lewalski (1993) 2). On the debilitating implications of the new historicism for feminism, cf. also Bevington (1995).

historicist critics seem to me highly questionable. Informed by poststructuralist theories of discourse, they have taken to its extreme the critical vantage point that it is impossible to gain unmediated access to the past (cf. Kirk (1994)); it will always remain, to some extent, 'other,' remote, inaccessible:

To read the past, to read a text from the past, is thus always to make an interpretation which is in a sense an anachronism. Time travel is a fantasy. We cannot reproduce the conditions – the economy, the diseases, the manners, the language and the corresponding subjectivity – of another century. To do so would be, in any case, to eliminate the difference which makes the fantasy pleasurable: it would be to erase the recollection of the present, to cease to be, precisely, a traveller. Reading the past depends on this difference. The real anachronism, then, is of another kind. Here history as time travel gives way to history as costume drama, the reconstruction of the past as the present in fancy dress. The project is to explain away the surface strangeness of another century in order to release its profound continuity with the present. (Belsey (1985) 2)

Whilst I agree with Catherine Belsey on the point she makes regarding the insurmountable difference between present-day critical perspectives and the immediate experience of the past, I find it problematic to speak of this gap as a 'pleasurable fantasy.' Belsey's approach all too easily slides into a denial of the very real material conditions that informed people's lives in the period in question. As long as the study of the past remains within the conceptual framework of a 'pleasurable fantasy' and ultimately reveals nothing but a 'profound continuity with the present,' there is no need to question what exactly it is that makes for the 'strangeness' of the past and what it entailed. In effect, this approach denies the materiality of the past; it implies that certain ambiguities are cancelled out because of the desire for a homogeneous picture to emerge. In the early modern context, it is vital to acknowledge that the less-cherished aspects of modernity, too, are ultimately bound up with developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For, apart from inaugurating (male, Western, middle-class) individualism and changing the parameters of intellectual enquiry, the period also saw the rise of a fiercely competitive market economy, the early stages of consumer society, the beginnings of the colonialist project, and various forms of religious and ideological myopia. Lisa Jardine summarises this ambiguous heritage:

It was the Renaissance which opened ... international and cosmopolitan horizons, the Renaissance which kindled the desire to purchase the rare and the beautiful as a sign of individual (or family) success. The world we inhabit today, with its ruthless competitiveness, fierce consumerism, restless desire for ever wider horizons, for travel, discovery and innovation, a world hemmed in by the small-mindedness of petty nationalism and religious bigotry but refusing to bow to it, is a world which was made in the Renaissance. (Jardine (1997) 436)

The emergence of these phenomena and the anxieties that they evoked are particularly visible in writings by women. I would argue that this is because women, just as other groups marginalised on the basis of class or race, were usually on the receiving end of the often unsettling aspects of these developments and therefore did not have to – or were even unable to – delude themselves into ignoring their negative implications.

In order to take account of the tangible implications of the changes in the period and to adequately grasp their effects on women's lives, I find it necessary to introduce a political and material dimension into our critical approach towards the texts. In my view, Patricia Fumerton's suggestion to establish a 'new historicism of the everyday' (Fumerton (1999) 4) offers a valuable change of perspective that avoids some of the pitfalls of the new historicism popularised by Greenblatt and his followers. Fumerton argues for a more rigorous focus on the materiality of socio-cultural practices (cf. Fumerton (1999) 5), which would imply a 'social historicism' (Fumerton (1999) 3f.) that does not occlude the nitty-gritty of everyday living conditions. This approach can be particularly illuminating when dealing with early modern women's texts. Because women have had little access to the power structures of 'official authority, state ideology, and politics' (Fumerton (1999) 3) that much new historicist work has privileged, their experiences – mostly revolving around the family and the home – have largely been neglected. In contrast, 'the everyday tends to place upfront particular kinds of subjects: the common person, the marginalized, women' (Fumerton (1999) 5). In Fumerton's approach, the culture of the everyday is revalued and 'expand[ed] to include not only familiar things but also collective meanings, values, representations, and practices' (Fumerton (1999) 5). Experiences such as childbirth, interpersonal relationships or household management can then be studied in an integrated fashion, i.e. they do not merely function as slightly outlandish supplements to the issues that 'really' (i.e. conventionally, officially) matter. This allows us to show not only how the power structures operating in the larger society could impinge on women's experiences and their contexts, but also how women could use these experiences to negotiate for themselves positions within the existing structures that combined submission with reappropriation and independence. I will therefore read early modern women's texts not as sites of a possible subversion that ultimately meets with its inevitable containment, but look for spaces where patriarchal ideology is countered by – but not necessarily replaced with – (traces of) agency.

Feminisms

Since the emergence in the 1960s of the various women's rights movements commonly referred to as 'feminism,' the term has become an unspecific hold-all for a variety of perspectives critical of the existing patriarchal society, which all aim at changing the existing structures so as to improve the living conditions of women. In order to capture this variety and heterogeneity, I am deliberately speaking of 'feminisms' in the plural.

Although feminisms have only commanded a prominent cultural presence from the 1960s onwards, it is worthwhile to briefly look at their historical roots, which continue to shape feminist goals today. The two principal forerunners of contemporary feminist strands, labelled, respectively, eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment feminism' and nineteenth-century 'cultural feminism' (cf. Donovan (2001) 32ff., 47ff.), exemplify the opposite poles between which feminisms can subsequently be situated: women are either 'the same (as men) and therefore equal,' i.e. endowed with a common humanity and capacity for reason; or they are 'different but equal,' i.e. display a fundamentally different approach to human existence that presents a salutary alternative to the male.

These opposed starting points continue to form the dividing line between feminisms in their more recent guises. Looking at the trajectory of feminist thinking in the course of the twentieth century, the most straightforward categorisation of the barrage of theories and concepts it has come to comprise is Toril Moi's influential distinction between 'Anglo-American' and 'French' feminisms (cf. Moi (2002)). Anglo-American feminism has clear and straightforward political goals and agendas for changing the patriarchal order towards a more equal treatment and representation of women. In literary criticism, it is preoccupied with revealing the traditional (predominantly male) canon as being infiltrated with patriarchal thinking and aims to counter women's under-representation by recovering a lost female tradition.⁴² By contrast, French feminism is less concerned with promoting tangible social and political change within the existing system. Instead, heavily indebted as it is to psychoanalysis (especially Lacanian), it critiques the ways in which the phallogocentric order of Western patriarchal societies and its account of subject formation is in itself unable to represent women. This is mainly due to the Lacanian foregrounding of the phallus – all too easily conflated with its biological equivalent, the male penis – as the

⁴² One of the most prominent examples of this version of feminist literary criticism is Elaine Showalter, whose notion of 'feminist critique' is based on the principle of reading women's texts 'against the grain' (cf. Showalter (1986a) 248; cf. her study of women's literature up to 1900, *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), and her influential essay 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' (1986b)).

‘privileged signifier’ in Western culture. In order to counter the resulting, persistent association of women with lack, French feminism urges women to explore a different type of speech that encompasses their distinctive experiences and valorises the female body. Feminine difference hinges on the qualities of nurturing and relationality and hence requires a specific language.⁴³

Obviously, reading early modern women’s texts with reference to contemporary feminist thought cannot avoid producing anachronisms and will probably even make their writings seem conformist and backward. Indeed, seventeenth-century women did not generally engage in an equal rights discourse; equally rarely did they consciously generate alternative visions of themselves and their world at total odds with the structures of patriarchy. Paradoxically, as I will show, these women’s senses of self often seem at their most satisfactory when they engage with patriarchal discourse and situate themselves within it. This apparent contradiction points to some fundamental difficulties inherent in all feminist projects. Firstly, there is a danger of essentialising women, i.e. of seeing them as a homogeneous group of oppressed creatures, without taking notice of the often significantly divergent experiences of individual women. Secondly, if women are relegated to a specifically female sphere of expression that cannot be represented in the patriarchal symbolic, their ‘otherness’ with regard to the dominant culture is easily perpetuated. The effect of this strategy can even be the exact opposite of what was originally intended – again, the feminine is equated with the unrepresentable, with incomprehensibility. Women are thus ultimately *disempowered* because they stand for a fundamental difference that cannot be accommodated.⁴⁴

I personally support a materialist version of feminism⁴⁵ which attempts to evade these extremes, but also includes some elements of each of the feminist strands I have just outlined. Feminist theory is undoubtedly vital for a study of early modern women’s writings. For one thing, their texts are part of a still under-theorised female literary tradition. Even if it is an undue generalisation to derive universal statements about ‘women’s literature’ from individual texts, uncovering lost female voices is a worthwhile pursuit that contributes to the revaluation of women’s experiences as well as to the

⁴³ This is explored most famously in the writings of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray – cf. Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine*, developed in her essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1980).

⁴⁴ The attempt to theorise a truly feminine speech expressive of women’s corporeal experience is reflected in the style of some of the critics themselves, which often does not conform to the conventions of academic writing and has sometimes prevented them from being taken seriously (cf. Barry (2002) 130).

⁴⁵ Valerie Wayne describes the tenets of materialist feminism as follows: ‘While materialist feminism is not simply criticism about the physical matter associated with women’s bodies, for instance, it can apply to our bodies as sites for the inscriptions of ideology and power, since we cannot “know” them in any unmediated form and they, as we, are products of the cultural meanings ascribed to them’ (Wayne (1991) 8).

'decentring' of the early modern period. Furthermore, the question if, to what extent and in what ways women's writings differ from men's has to be addressed. In addition, we need a wider focus that acknowledges the material reality of gender – a dimension that has notoriously been neglected. Particularly, I take issue with postmodernist versions of feminism that conceptualise gender as the product of a sustained performance of gender roles. Even if this was not originally intended, such approaches all too easily suggest that gender and identity are infinitely malleable and can be subverted at will. In turn, they neglect the tangible conditions that restrict the ways in which gender can in fact be lived, as well as the responsibilities that each individual assumes with regard to these choices.

In short, I find it necessary to take the gendered body as a site of material experience as well as ideological inscription. This approach reduces, if not eliminates, the double danger of either identifying biological femaleness with a necessarily specific experience, or of neglecting the physical reality of gender in favour of its theoretical and linguistic representations. Thus, I will read early modern women's texts as both specifically feminine utterances and, at the same time, sites of inscription of patriarchal values. My focus will be on the interactions of and/or tensions between individual choice and possibly deviant experience on the one hand and socio-cultural construction on the other. Hence, on a meta-theoretical level, the texts that I study indicate the limits of presumably 'radical' feminist theory which fails to encompass and aptly describe those phenomena that do not wholly comply with its precepts.

1.3 Subjectivities and writing the self

[A]s for the matter of government, we women understand them not; yet, if we did, we are excluded from intermeddling therewith, and almost from being subjected thereto. We are not tied, nor bound to State or Crown; we are free, not sworn to allegiance, nor do we take the Oath of Supremacy. We are not made citizens of the commonwealth; we hold no offices, nor bear we any authority therein. We are counted neither useful in peace, nor serviceable in war. And if we be not citizens of the commonwealth, I know no reason why we should be subjects to the commonwealth. *And the truth is, we are no subjects*, unless it be to our husbands, and not always to them, for sometimes we usurp their authority, or else by flattery we get their good wills to govern. ... They seem to govern the world, but *we really govern the world*, in that we govern men: for what man is he that is not governed by a woman more or less?

– Margaret Cavendish, *CCXI Sociable Letters* (1664)⁴⁶

Margaret Cavendish's somewhat quaint and tangled account of early modern women's subjectivities indicates the varied and sometimes contradictory associations of the concept. Being one of the buzzwords of contemporary theory, subjectivity has become a fashionable umbrella term covering the various ways in which human beings perceive themselves – hence, by its very nature, subjectivity is historically and culturally specific. In making this statement, I am betraying my own situatedness in a particular cultural context: the idea that subjectivity is not a stable and unalterable given is a relatively recent one, associated with the break-up of epistemological certainty in the postmodern age. Concentrating on those theories which have been the most influential for questions of gender, I will trace the development that perceptions of subjectivity have taken from early modernity to postmodernity; a development that also explains why Margaret Cavendish can claim that women both are and are not subjects, hovering uneasily on the margins and in-between the power structures of seventeenth-century society.

Obviously, the idea of expressing subjective consciousness – the notion of 'writing the self' – is bound up with the perceptions of subjectivity current at any given time. The fixed and coherent subject of modernity assumes that it can represent itself mimetically in the text; conversely, its inherently fragmented and contradictory postmodern counterpart is 'textual' by its very nature, i.e. it is only created in and through the text. In order to grasp early modern women's understandings of their selves, we need to analyse concepts of subjectivity in their historical and sexual specificity and in relation to written (i.e. textual) self-expression.

⁴⁶ Margaret Cavendish, *CCXI Sociable Letters*. London: by William Wilson, 1664 (27); quoted in Keeble (1994) 194; emphasis added.

Early modern subjectivities – or, the complexities of the modern self

The range of materials ... begins to suggest the importance in English Renaissance culture of two fantasies: one, that selves are obscure, hidden, ineffable; the other, that they are fully manifest or capable of being made fully manifest. These seem to be contradictory notions, but again and again they are voiced together, so that they seem less self-canceling than symbiotically related or mutually constitutive.

– Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*⁴⁷

The early modern period saw the emergence of fundamental concepts of what it means to be human, to act as an individual self, that have subsequently been extremely influential in modernity and continue to shape our present understandings of subjectivity. Humanism, with its emphasis on the perfectability of the human being through learning and the exercise of the rational mind, paved the way for Enlightenment thought, epitomised by René Descartes (1596-1650) and his programmatic axiom: ‘I think therefore I am’ (cf. Burke (1997) 17).⁴⁸ The thinking, rational self came to be regarded as the very essence of true humanity, ‘[a]nd from the Cartesian axiom that mind “makes” self, that human beings “become” through their acts of imaginary representation, the Enlightenment concluded that the rationality, sobriety and all-embracing power of reason of the human mind determines human subjectivity as a whole.’⁴⁹ The modern notion of the self as ‘monolithic, stable and coherent in time’⁵⁰ implies that the individual is endowed with an almost transcendental quality, as the locus of agency and meaning and, by extension, that it can represent itself through the utterances it brings forth.

However, it would be simplistic to read early modern notions of subjectivity as part of a linear, progressive development towards the modern idea(l) of the unified subject. Rather, a number of qualifications are in order which put this view into perspective. Early modern subjectivity is frayed with numerous ruptures, as it finds itself at the point of intersection between two essentialist versions of the self – the medieval one, based on the metaphysical search of the soul for ever greater proximity to the divine, and the secular humanism of the Enlightenment (cf. Dollimore (1989) 155). The effect of this liminal status is a subjectivity in a state of transition and ontological uncertainty. Stephen

⁴⁷ Maus (1995) 28f.

⁴⁸ I am aware that this is an oversimplified account – for instance, the humanists also harboured a profound scepticism towards the alleged infallibility of reason. For a more differentiated and expansive reading, cf. Toulmin (1990), 5-44 (‘What Is the Problem about Modernity?’).

⁴⁹ Anja Müller, *Angela Carter: Identity Constructed/Deconstructed*. Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1997 (1).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Greenblatt's seminal observations in his influential study *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* point to the ambiguities that characterise early modern concepts of the self.⁵¹ On the one hand, the medieval connotations of selfhood as the site of ungodly hubris (cf. Sawday (1997) 30) are gradually being replaced by more positive valuations of the self, at least in the sense that it is an entity worthy of attention, with 'a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving' (Greenblatt (1980) 2). On the other hand, contrary to his initial expectations, Greenblatt is eventually brought to conclude that, in the early modern (male-authored) texts that he studied, 'the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society' (Greenblatt (1980) 256). His starting point is the 'change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities' (Greenblatt (1980) 1), his fundamental observation being that 'there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process' (Greenblatt (1980) 2). While this can be relatively easily incorporated into the Burckhardtian narrative of individualism – in fact, it is implied in the very idea of the individual who perceives himself as self-determined – Greenblatt points to a number of ambiguities that make self-fashioning 'not only complex but resolutely dialectical' (Greenblatt (1980) 1): in short, to the extent that it is up to the individual human person to shape himself, this is also a precarious task, as there is no safety net, such as a divinely ordained order, in which the individual is anchored.

Just as importantly, the emergent ideal of the modern unified subject has significant material dimensions. Rather than being the product of ideational shifts only, it is bound up with large-scale socio-economic changes, namely:

... the invention of private property and the destruction of group ownership; the elimination of the household as the basic unit of production and consumption; the growth of a money economy; the rise of a class of independent wage-laborers; the growing dominance of the profit motive and the psychological drive toward endless accumulation; the rise of modern industrial production; the growth of large urban centers; the suppression of magic and the 'irrational'; and the undermining of small, close-knit communities. (Mascuch (1997) 17)

As I have pointed out before, these developments had profoundly unsettling dimensions at the time and often triggered anxieties rather than feelings of liberation. Moreover, the ways in which a firm sense of self is aligned with material prosperity implies that the idea of

⁵¹ Greenblatt has recently been criticised for his exclusively male focus. It is certainly problematic to apply the characteristics of 'self-fashioning,' developed with reference to male examples, to women's texts in any straightforward manner; yet, as my analysis will show, Greenblatt's insights are far too valuable to be discarded wholesale.

stable and coherent subjectivity is the prerogative of the male members of the emerging bourgeois middle class. In the (proto-)capitalist context, only the individual who is able to engineer his personal success, to promote himself through economic activity, rather than staying trapped within the rigid boundaries of class or inherited title, can perceive himself as self-reliant.⁵² By implication, modern subjectivity, far from representing ‘human nature’ in general, is inherently class- and gender-distinctive.⁵³ However – and this is its crucial fallacy – it claims to be universal and is founded on the assumption that there is a core selfhood common to all human beings, by virtue of their being human alone.

Writing the modern self – and why women cannot write themselves

In order to counter the threatening dimensions that accompanied its emergence and to substantiate its self-perception as universal, the subject of modernity sees itself, in a quasi-metaphysical sense, as originator of meaning. This has manifest implications for the value accorded to the exercise of writing. Because the subject and his individual experiences are considered inherently meaningful, a new concept of the author gains prominence: he is no longer seen in the larger context of metaphysical search, as deriving his creative power from some divine force and ultimately giving voice to God’s word, but as having access to universal truths through the exercise of his own reason alone.⁵⁴ What is more, with the emergence of print and copyright regulations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, writing acquires a material dimension: authorship now equals ownership.⁵⁵

⁵² As Catherine Belsey observes, ‘[l]iberal humanism, locating agency and meaning in the unified human subject, becomes an orthodoxy at the moment when the bourgeoisie is installed as the ruling class’ (Belsey (1985) 33f.; cf. Hartsock (1996) 41). Greenblatt’s examples of (literary) self-fashioning in the early modern period betray a similar middle-class bias, which replaces earlier forms of legitimation through inherited titles and ties of feudal loyalty: ‘None of the figures inherits a title, an ancient family tradition or hierarchical status that might have rooted personal identity in the identity of a clan or caste. With the partial exception of Wyatt, all of these writers are middle-class’ (Greenblatt (1980) 9).

⁵³ Hence my exclusive usage of the male pronoun in the preceding passage. In the words of Josephine Donovan, ‘[t]he assertion of the primacy of human reason and of its rights to rule all other aspects of reality led to a certain conceit or arrogance, indeed to a kind of “species,” or male, chauvinism. For, inherent in the vaunting of human (male) reason is the idea that rational beings are the lords of creation and have the right to impose their “reason” on all who lack it – women, nonhuman creatures, and the earth itself’ (Donovan (2001) 19).

⁵⁴ Again, I have used the male pronoun deliberately in this passage: as will become clear in the course of my argument, women were largely excluded from the modern concept of authorship.

⁵⁵ This is one of the main arguments of Michel Foucault’s famous essay ‘What is an Author?’ (1969).

In this context, autobiography – understood as a ‘retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his [*sic*] own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality’ (Lejeune (1982) 193) – acquired its recognisable shape as a literary genre. Only from the early modern period onwards, in the context of the characteristic cultural turn to the human, did it make sense to represent and record an individual’s personal experience:

The autobiographical impulse, with all that it implies, and modernity are ... inextricably linked. Those central features of individualist thought – recognition of the individual as a source of meaning, the notion that the value of the individual lies in his or her own distinctiveness, particularity and uniqueness; the idea that the individual bears responsibility, if not for what happens to him or her in a life, then for the making sense of it, for the gathering of experience to the self in order for meaning to be made, in order to be one’s own person – are not only central to western democratic systems, but are intrinsic to autobiography as a genre. Autobiography and individualism both imply some sort of dialectic between the agency of the individual and awareness of the self, or self-consciousness. (Graham (1996) 197)⁵⁶

Clearly, the modern notion of authorship, just as the idea of unified subjectivity as a whole, is distinctly male. Only the subject who can lay claim on a coherent and self-reliant identity is able to express himself in writing. Under patriarchy, ‘the poet’s pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis’ (Gilbert and Gubar (1979) 4) – the pen as a phallic symbol comes to represent what women lack, the mode of self-expression that they are refused access to (cf. Stanton (1984) 15). Female silence is not simply a factual prohibition of speech, but a structural device of patriarchal culture. In it, women’s relation to the symbolic is doubly distorted: they have to contend with the inaccessibility of the phallus that constitutes all humans alike and the specific cultural assumptions about their sex, at the same time as they struggle to inscribe themselves into the dominant order. Since writing always entails an engagement with the symbolic order, an attempt to seize the phallus, women face a similar double distortion as regards their access to the written word. Conversely, women who do speak inevitably ‘threaten the system of differences which give meaning to patriarchy’ (Belsey (1985) 191).

The trajectory by which female speech becomes associated with transgression can be outlined with reference to early modern women. In their culture, the notion of the ideal female as chaste, silent and obedient was pervasive. The opposite extreme, outspoken and assertive women, was portrayed as sexually incontinent, by way of associating women’s interaction with the outside world via speech with the (metaphorical as well as literal) openness of their bodies (cf. Smith (1987) 37; Ezell (1987) 63f.). The ‘common equation

⁵⁶ On the modern individualist self, cf. also Heller, Sosna and Wellbery (1986), Gurevich (1995).

between speech and sexual promiscuity' (Aughterson (1995) 230) worked its way into the language and popular culture of the day: the stock figures of the shrew or the gossiping housewife were frequently utilised in drama and public festivals as well as in proverbial expressions (cf. Aughterson (1995) 230; Boose (1991)): unruly femininity always involved undue claims for speech. By implication, female speech – which, of course, includes writing, in the broadest sense of textual production – was sanctioned only within the context of a woman's religious and domestic duties. Obviously, writing for publication was beset by even greater taboo than writing for personal pleasure or domestic use, for to publish meant to venture into the wider social sphere and was thus inevitably regarded as verging on sexual promiscuity (cf. Pearson (1988) 13; cf. Ferguson (1996)).

Postmodernity: deconstructing the self

In the light of the restrictions that the (early) modern understanding of subjectivity imposed on women, the epistemological shifts associated with the 'postmodern condition'⁵⁷ appear to hold liberating potential for them. Since 'the individual's pretension to sovereignty, self-knowledge, and self-mastery' (Grosz (1990) 1) had been decentred already in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the thought of such diverse figures as Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, the Western concept of rational individualism has come under attack by various strands of theory, which, in spite of their diversity, share a fundamental distrust of Enlightenment humanism and what they regard as its universalist truth claims. They are part of a general theoretical and philosophical move to abandon the transcendental subject and to 'bring the subject back into the world.'⁵⁸ This move – bringing the subject back into the world – is effected from a variety of points of departure: for instance, in Michel Foucault's analysis of power, the subject is not the independent originator of meaning, but is constituted by the discursive structures that surround it. Discourse sanctions or curtails the possibilities for individual identity formation, and the notion of the subject implies not simply individuality, but also 'a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to' (Foucault (1994) 331). Similarly,

⁵⁷ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

⁵⁸ Paul Fletcher, personal conversation, 19 January 2004.

Louis Althusser conceives of subjectivity as the way in which individuals come to perceive themselves in line with the dominant ideology, i.e. how they are ‘interpellated’ by the structures of thought that render the existing material conditions apparently self-evident (cf. Althusser (1971), Macey (2000) 9ff., 203). To a similar effect, Lacanian psychoanalysis destroys the assumption of the subject as unified and self-determined. Instead, a constitutive split stands at the beginning of ego formation and posits lack as the definitive factor of subjectivity.⁵⁹ Derridean deconstruction takes this dismantling a step further, arguing that there is no such thing as fixed and complete meaning expressed in language and hence, as the subject constitutes itself linguistically, no stable and representable sense of self. By extension, the individual experiences fragmentation and hybridity as key constituents of selfhood. Julia Kristeva’s programmatic phrase of the *sujet en procès*⁶⁰ captures this instability: the subject is both ‘in process,’ i.e. in a stage of becoming, and ‘on trial,’ i.e. threatened and open to radical questioning. In relation to writing, this implies the deconstruction of the modern notion of authorship, inaugurated by Roland Barthes’s proverbial proclamation of the ‘Death of the Author’ (1968) and Michel Foucault’s essay ‘What is an Author?’ (1969). For Barthes, it is not individual writerly agency that creates a text; rather, the text is a ‘multi-dimensional space in which a variety of meanings, none of them original, blend and clash’ (Barthes (1977) 146), and it is therefore up to the reader to ‘make’ the meaning of the text. Similarly, for Foucault, the writing subject is ‘a complex and variable function of discourse’ (Foucault (1977) 138) and the text always contains meanings beyond what is explicitly being said, meanings that cannot be pinned down to the writer’s authorial agency.⁶¹

At first glance, then, postmodernity appears to present an alternative account of subjectivity that is liberating for women (and other marginalised groups, for that matter). Freed from the oppressive presence of the unified, self-determined (masculine) subject of modernity that had so far constituted the yardstick of full humanity, they are promised equality achieved via the levelling-out of the margins and the centre that is seen as the hallmark of the postmodern condition. However, the relationship between feminism and postmodernism is fraught with ruptures, because feminism’s stress on political agency fits uneasily with postmodernism’s (allegedly) apolitical stance.⁶² In the field of literary

⁵⁹ For an outline of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis, cf. Bowie (1987), Bowie (1991).

⁶⁰ Cf. Toril Moi, ‘Introduction.’ *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986 (13) (cf. Kristeva’s essay of the same title, ‘The subject in process’ (1998)).

⁶¹ For a deconstructive reading specifically of the autobiographical genre, cf. De Man (1979).

⁶² As Linda Hutcheon notes, ‘postmodernism is politically ambivalent for it is doubly coded – both complicitous with and contesting of the cultural dominants within which it operates; but on the other side,

criticism, the poststructuralist turn associated with the postmodern intellectual climate forces feminist critics to question the validity of their critical ventures: if the author is 'dead,' is it possible and meaningful at all to look for a distinctly feminine voice, and does it make sense to recover individual women writers? There is a fear that postmodernism deconstructs identity even before women have had the chance to develop and express an identity – in the sense of a unified sense of self – of their own: 'The denial of subjectivity and identity are pleasurable ... especially for those who have had the luxury of indulging in and benefiting from them. But for feminist criticism, this decentering is a decapitation' (Neely (1988) 13).

However, in my view, to regard feminism and postmodernism as the opposite poles of a binary on the grounds of their relation to political agency misses the crucial point: the question is whether – and if so, why – women should want this subjectivity in the first place; whether the (masculine) concept of subjectivity, based on dualism, separateness and exclusion, is really worth acquiring. Instead, a valid, workable and more rewarding feminist strategy could be, as Patricia Waugh points out, 'the production of alternative modes and models of subjectivity' (Waugh (1989) 20) based on relationship and inclusiveness and allowing for indeterminacy or even contradiction. Identity can thus be perceived as constantly being shaped by the individual at the same time as it is somewhat beyond her grasp; it is both determined by outside influences and a matter of individual choice. In this sense, postmodernity is not simply synonymous with the end of all meaning and the inevitable fragmentation of identity. Instead, the familiar categories – politics, gender, the self – still have meaning, but only within their specific contexts.⁶³ Rather than positing a unified, coherent subject, postmodernity calls for 'marked subjectivities' (Hartsock (1996) 51): it is impossible to 'see everything from nowhere' (the proverbial 'god-trick' of Enlightenment subjectivity) but one can 'see some things from somewhere' (Hartsock (1996) 50).⁶⁴ Hence there is a middle ground, so that neither feminism nor postmodernism have to be entirely abandoned. As Patricia Waugh points out, 'it is possible to experience oneself as a strong and coherent agent in the world, *at the same time* as

feminisms have distinct, unambiguous political agendas of resistance' (Hutcheon (1989) 142). For feminist critiques of Foucault in particular, cf. Diamond and Quinley (1988), Ramazanoglu (1993), Hekman (1996).

⁶³ Paul Fletcher, lecture series 'Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity' (Department of Religious Studies, Lancaster University), March 2002. Donna Haraway speaks of 'situated knowledges' as a more realistic and responsible alternative to universalism on the one hand and relativism on the other: 'I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims' (Haraway (1997) 63).

⁶⁴ In Nancy Hartsock's view, the 'attention to the epistemologies of situated knowledges can allow for the construction of important alternatives to the dead-end oppositions set up by postmodernism's rejection of the Enlightenment' (Hartsock (1996) 52). For another insightful reading of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism, cf. Weedon (1987).

understanding the extent to which identity and gender are socially constructed and represented' (Waugh (1989) 13; emphasis in the original).

This middle ground is at the core of my approach towards early modern women's texts. Clearly, in spite of the restrictions imposed on their writing, it hardly needs to be mentioned that it would be naive to assume that women under patriarchy simply did not write. The fact that few writings by women have, until recently, been known and critically considered is not only the result of patriarchal oppression, but also bears witness to the fact that writing was recognised by patriarchy as holding considerable power because it could be used to subversive ends. To what extent women could and did subvert, or at least establish a counter-discourse to, the dominant patriarchal order is a question on which contemporary (feminist) criticism has been notoriously divided. My own critical stance resembles the approach put forward by Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford: 'While ... women's experiences were shaped, framed and interpreted by the discourses which we will refer to as "dominant," nevertheless women had opportunities for agency and subversion. They constructed their own meanings and stories' (Mendelson and Crawford (1998) 17).

I am aware of the limitations of the idea of subversion; yet for the purposes of this paper I will designate as subversive such strategies or modes of behaviour and expression that disrupt the dominant ideology, i.e. the discourses where power is situated. Because writing can be subversive in this sense, it had to be conceptualised in the early modern period as a fundamentally masculine activity. In certain contexts, however, women could be highly praised for being well-read – this is the case, for example, in Philip Stubbes's spiritual biography of his wife Katherine, which he wrote and published after her death: '[Y]ou could seldom or never have come into her house and have found her without a Bible or some other good book in her hands.'⁶⁵ Stubbes's depiction is clearly in line with the Protestant propagation of the individual's unmediated access to Scripture and the wife's responsibility for the spiritual education and well-being of her entire household. As Frances Teague observes, the early modern attitude towards reading implied that 'women [were welcomed] as readers, passive recipients of the phallogentric word. In the early modern period the process of reading was regarded as feminine; the characteristics for which a book could be praised were analogous to those for which a woman was praised' (Teague (1996) 372).⁶⁶ To align women with books is, of course, to condemn them to

⁶⁵ Philip Stubbes, *A crystal glass for Christian women* (1618); quoted in Aughterson (1995) 238.

⁶⁶ It is worth bearing in mind that, in early modern England, reading was taught prior to and hence separately from writing. This circumstance makes it difficult to assess female literacy rates according to modern standards, and it implies that there may have been a number of women who could read, but had not been taught to write.

passivity, since the book is that which *is written*, not the agent who writes and inscribes. Stubbes's account hints at this restriction – the 'other good book' he mentions would almost certainly have belonged to one of the few literary forms deemed suitable for women. Genres such as erotic poetry, drama or romance fiction were regarded as inappropriate, as their contents were assumed to be at odds with the 'chaste, silent and obedient' ideology (cf. Pearson (1996) 81).

However, as I have pointed out before, the rise of Protestantism led to an increase in female literacy in general – and the very ability to read and write could, of course, be detached from the religious context and be used to creative, unpredictable or even subversive ends. Women could, for example, provide alternative interpretations of misogynist texts, as a number of pamphlets from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries attest to.⁶⁷ For instance, revisionist readings of the Genesis account of the creation abound in all types of women's writings of the period. Rachel Speght, in her pamphlet *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617), reinterprets Eve's role in the Fall as follows:

Woman sinned, it is true, ... but so did the man too. And if Adam had not approved of that deed which Eve had done, and been willing to tread the steps which she had gone, he – being her head – would have reproved her and have made the commandment a bit to restrain him from breaking his maker's injunction.⁶⁸

Interestingly, Speght does not question male primacy as being the norm ('he – being her head'). In a similar way, seventeenth-century women writers often continue to subscribe to the notion of chastity as the principal feminine virtue, the ideal of virginity etc., at the same time as they fill these perceptions with new meanings. Whilst this observation should caution us against overly enthusiastic (feminist) readings of the texts and their subversive potential, it should also draw our attention to the impressive ingenuity with which these women reversed traditional interpretations. For example, Ester Sovernam,⁶⁹ in her pamphlet *Ester hath hang'd Haman* (1617), interprets the creation of Eve after Adam and from his rib not as a sign of inferiority, but turns the argument on its head, claiming that

⁶⁷ Admittedly, it is impossible to decide with any certainty whether these texts were actually written by women, or rather by men using female pseudonyms. The following example, Rachel Speght, however, has been clearly identified as a woman (cf. Shepherd (1985) 58).

⁶⁸ Rachel Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomus, The Cynical Bayter of, and fowl mouthed Barker against Evahs Sex Or an Apologeticall Answere to that Irreligious and Illiterate Pamphlet made by Jo. Sw. and by him Intituled, The Arraignment of Women*. London: Nicholas Okes for Thomas Archer, 1617; quoted in Shepherd (1985) 57-83 (66).

⁶⁹ 'Sovernam' is most probably a pseudonym, presumably chosen in response to the pamphlet by Joseph Swetnam that the full title of her treatise alludes to (*Ester hath hang'd Haman: or An Answere to a lewd Pamphlet, entituled The Arraignment of Women With the arraignment of lewd, idle forward and unconstant men, and Husbands*; cf. Woodbridge (1984) 93).

‘God intended to honour woman in a more excellent degree in that he created her out of a subject refined [i.e. the rib], as out of a quintessence.’⁷⁰

Women’s re-working of the predominant literary culture also occurred, in a less direct way, on the level of genre. Women did write drama (Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish) or secular poetry (Mary Wroth, Aemilia Lanyer), even though these were considered typically ‘masculine’ literary forms. However, they engaged especially in various forms of ‘private’ or ‘domestic’ writing, as Angeline Goreau explains:

It is not surprising that a good deal of the earliest writing by women should have taken the form of letters, diaries, or autobiographies. They are entirely private forms of writing, not destined for publication, and dealing only with what limited experience might come within the circumference of a lady.⁷¹

Mainly as a result of their alleged irrelevance to a wider literary audience, these early modern women’s texts have come to critical attention only in recent years. However, whilst a select few had always enjoyed some degree of literary fame, it is only for the last three decades or so that the focus has widened to include lesser known female authors and their writings, which often do not fit the categories that designate ‘literature’ in the canonical sense of the term. What is more, criticism of women’s writing has for a long time been centred predominantly around the concept of the individual female author. It has therefore aimed at detecting hitherto overlooked, ‘authentic’ female experiences in women’s texts, especially in autobiographies and other types of self-writings. This strategy, of course, entails the danger of sweepingly identifying the textual presentation of the self with an alleged core of selfhood – and hence the feminist project appears to collapse when confronted with the poststructuralist critique of the very concept of the self. As Mellinda Alliker Rabb observes:

⁷⁰ Ester Sowernam, *Ester hath hang’d Haman*. London: for Nicholas Bourne, 1617; in Shepherd (1985) 85-124 (93). A similar argument is put forward in the 1640 pamphlet *The Women’s Sharpe Revenge*: ‘Therefore I conclude that, as man was made of pollution, earth and slime, and woman was formed out of that earth when it was first refined; as man had his original in the rude wide field, and woman had her frame and composure in paradise: so much is the woman’s honour to be regarded and to be held in estimation amongst men’ (Mary Tattle-well and Joan Hit-him-home (pseud.), *The Women’s Sharpe Revenge: or An answer to Sir Seldom Sober that writ those railing Pamphlets called the Juniper and Crabtree lectures, etc. Being a sound Reply and a full confutation of those books: with an Apology in this case for the defence of us women*. London: I. O., 1640; in Shepherd (1985) 159-193).

⁷¹ Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980 (149); quoted in Ezell (1987) 63; cf. Crawford and Gowing (2000) 215. Goreau’s observation, however, must not be read in an exclusive fashion: ‘The assumption that the only resource that women have to draw on as writers is their private, domestic selves is distinctly post-Romantic, and tends to limit the scope of what women may write about’ (Clarke (2001) 4). In addition, even superficially ‘private’ genres could have a more complex status and at least subtly interfere with the public sphere, as I will show in a separate chapter (2.3).

Feminists have been caught between the need to privilege, as an evaluative category, an author's identity as a woman, and the need not to privilege that category because it essentializes and encourages merely biographical, or exclusively proto-feminist readings of a text. Identity politics and poststructuralism have exerted contradictory influences. (Rabb (2002) 341)

In order to escape this double bind, I would argue, again, for a middle ground that avoids both of these extremes. It is by no means impossible to detect traces of women's self-perception as unified agents, at the same time as their agency is always called into question by their implication in socio-political structures that deny agency, and by their anxieties of being unable to uphold a firm grasp on their selves. In this sense, the postmodern critique of the subject need not amount to non-committal relativism. In fact, it can be liberating, if it is understood as allowing for a dialectical vantage point that posits a *conditional* agency. If we draw on what Tracy Sedinger has termed an 'epistemology of circumstance' (Sedinger (1998) 120) – contingent, provisional and possibly ambivalent ways of writing and reading –, we are able to acknowledge the historical situatedness of early modern female writers as well as our own, at the same time as we do not have to completely discard the category of the subject.

In my view, this tentative approach also enables us to take a balanced view of the alleged parallels between early modern and postmodern culture. It has become a critical commonplace that people in the early modern period, in their awareness of the ways in which the self and its representations can be manipulated, were sensitive to the fictionality that inheres in coherent selfhood. Late twentieth-century critics have detected a foreshadowing of postmodern accounts of identity as *bricolage*, which can be fashioned at will and explored in a playful manner. In an often facile way, the early modern period is interpreted as a time that mirrors our own and that holds insights in store that can provide answers to our contemporary concerns. However, reading early modern culture for traces of the present clearly entails the danger that historical difference is erased in favour of an idealised focus on those aspects of the period that conform to our own fashionable and cherished assumptions about identity.⁷² To warn of this danger is not to completely disclaim the existence of any parallels between early modern and postmodern culture. It is hardly necessary to justify the obvious fact that, 'if the postmodern marks a crisis of modernity, the early modern marks the moment when we begin to see the issues of modernity develop' (Traub, Caplan and Callaghan (1996) 7) – but it is equally crucial to

⁷² Jonathan Goldberg warns that 'such a rewriting must not be a reinscription of the Renaissance or a discovery of some realm of freedom lost with the advent of modernity and its carceral regimes' (Goldberg (1994) 4).

point out that this is as far as we can go. I therefore agree with Jean Howard's slightly critical account of the affinities between early modern and postmodern culture that contemporary criticism claims to uncover:

The Renaissance is being appropriated ... as neither modern nor medieval, but as a boundary or liminal space between two more monolithic periods where one can see acted out a clash of paradigms and ideologies, a playfulness with signifying systems, a self-reflexivity, and a self-consciousness about the tenuous solidity of human identity which resonate with some of the dominant elements of postmodern culture. ... [There is a] sense of *exhilaration and fearfulness* of living inside a gap in history, when the paradigms that structured the past seem facile and new paradigms uncertain. (Howard (1986) 22; emphasis added)⁷³

The second element of Howard's argument will recur throughout my readings of early modern texts: there is a persistent note of *anxiety* in early modern accounts of self-fashioning. In contrast to the cherished tenets of postmodernism, early modern thinking does not abandon the ideal of coherent subjectivity and does not consciously embrace fragmentation, but strives to uphold if only a tenuous wholeness. I would argue that the reason for the stress on (constructing) coherence and unity that can be detected in most early modern (self-)writings lies in the precariousness and fragility that a self-reliant fashioning of identity inevitably entails. The possibility and, at the same time, the necessity to invent the self cause not only 'exhilaration,' but also 'fearfulness,' as Jean Howard points out – it is an inherently 'anxiety-inducing' task.⁷⁴ To read early modern subjectivity in the awareness of this scepticism may caution us against the oversimplifications of either tracing the modern subject in the early modern context, or sweepingly identifying early modern with postmodern culture. What is more, it allows for the simultaneity of traces of agency and constraint, depending on the particularities of the individual situation – the 'epistemology limited by circumstance' that Tracey Sedinger demands (Sedinger (1998) 120).

Also, conceptualising early modern subjectivity on these terms takes account of the fact that its underlying perception of 'selfhood' is fundamentally different from the (post-) modern one. The anxiety related to self-fashioning has certainly to do with the fact that the period inherited a concept of selfhood which had distinctly negative connotations. Deeply embedded in a religious framework, the self had to be mastered and curtailed in order to be instilled to virtue (cf. Ottway (2002) 231):

⁷³ Cf. also Howard (1991a).

⁷⁴ Anja Müller-Wood, personal conversation, 17 December 2002.

‘Selfhood’ in the mid-seventeenth century did not, in fact, suggest the modern idea of ipseity – the quality of having or possessing a ‘self.’ Rather it expressed the inability to govern the self. ‘Selfhood’ was the mark of Satan; it was a token of the spiritually unregenerate individual, in thrall to the flesh rather than the spirit. (Sawday (1997) 30)⁷⁵

As a result, the individual was perceived as being in constant danger of slipping back into the vice of ungodly self-centredness in its various guises: vanity, pride, ambition, etc. Unease towards, even fear of these flaws is particularly widespread in the early modern period, because they come as the negative flipsides of the person’s emerging self-consciousness. Whilst the individual’s efforts to fashion himself as a distinctive personality depend on the will to promote himself in social, political and economic terms, the character traits that self-promotion requires are decidedly ungodly: ruthlessness, fierce competitiveness, and the unwillingness to be satisfied with what one has achieved – in the words of John Donne, ‘every man alone thinkes he hath got / To be a Phoenix’ (216f.).⁷⁶ Also, there is a constant preoccupation with the potential mismatch between appearance and reality, which prompts the unsettling realisation that identity can be assumed, or at least manipulated, with the help of outward appearance. Stephen Greenblatt notices a pervasive ‘fetishism of dress’⁷⁷ in the period – clothes and the materials they are made of are consciously worn to express social rank, economic success etc., and are therefore prescribed by sumptuary laws.⁷⁸ Such regulations can be seen as an anguished counter-reaction to the more general preoccupation with semblance and substance, appearance and reality. Because the self is constantly jeopardised by its potentially over-ambitious drives and may differ in its outward appearance from its (alleged) inner core, identity is never a stable possession.

The ambiguities associated with selfhood in the early modern period therefore need to be read as part of the wider cultural context of humanist anthropology and its non-deterministic ontology of man: humans acquire their individual specificity not because they are endowed with a pre-determined set of traits, but they are responsible for the choice between and the realisation of the plethora of possibilities that constitutes them as

⁷⁵ In fact, it is only in 1649 that the noun ‘selfhood’ is first recorded (cf. Sawday (1997) 30).

⁷⁶ Also, excessive ambition is the prime characteristic of the Machiavel figure, on which the early modern period focused so much anxiety.

⁷⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, introduction to *The Norton Shakespeare*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York and London: Norton, 1997. 1-76 (57f.).

⁷⁸ Constance Jordan explains this phenomenon: ‘Differences of sex and gender were also marked by dress (a long gown signified that a person was either clerical or female and would behave in feminine ways), and were similarly controlled by law and custom. ... Dress had social importance partly because it determined behaviour, at least to some extent; women’s clothing inhibited the kind of physical activity characterized as masculine’ (Jordan (1990) 302).

individuals. Yet there is a mere trace of excited anticipation in the idea of every person's singularity; it is almost overpowered by the unsettling confrontation with the daunting task of having to shape the very underpinnings of what is about to emerge from what John Donne perceives as a world 'in peeces' (213). As a result, a fundamental dialectic summarises early modern perceptions and constructions of identity: agency in fashioning the self is always accompanied by anxiety as its corollary.

The (im)possibility of writing the self – early modern and postmodern, male and female

The ambiguities that beset the category of the subject can be traced with reference to the autobiographical genre, which, in the early modern period, developed towards what we understand by 'autobiography' today. It probably makes sense to choose a different term for early modern 'ego-documents' (Burke (1997) 22): 'Phrases such as "self-writing," "writings about life-experience," and "autobiographical expression," although not entirely satisfactory, do at least encompass the heterogeneity of seventeenth-century texts in which some form of self-revelation occurs' (Booy (2002) 3).⁷⁹ I personally favour 'self-writing,' both for its brevity and for its emphasis on the textual construction of self that is at the core of the autobiographical task. It is of significant advantage that this alternative genre designation hints at the fact that autobiography only ever confronts us with a *representation* of the self, not with an essential, trustworthy core of self. As George Gusdorf observes in his seminal essay 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' (1956), 'autobiographical selves are constructed through the process of writing and therefore cannot reproduce exactly the selves who lived.'⁸⁰ Or, in the words of Shari Benstock, 'autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction' (Benstock (1988) 11). In other words, the autobiographer makes us (and him-

⁷⁹ Henk Dragstra, Sheila Ottway and Helen Wilcox refer to a 'budding or perhaps embryonic autobiography, reflecting a nascent, incipient, or even ur-modernity of spirit' (Dragstra, Ottway and Wilcox (2000) 9). On early modern self-writings in general (i.e. independent of gender), cf. also Glaser (2001).

⁸⁰ This is Susan Stanford Friedman's paraphrase of Gusdorf's insight (Friedman (1988) 34); cf. Gusdorf, Georges. 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography' (1956). Trans. James Olney. In: *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. 28-48.

or herself) believe that the representation is the reality. To what extent this constructedness comes to the surface in the autobiographical text depends on the generic conventions of the historical period of its production and, by implication, on the concept of subjectivity that it is predicated on.

It is in line with the emerging modern notion of subjectivity as stable and coherent on the one hand and the accompanying fear of self-loss on the other that many early modern authors followed a fixed pattern in composing their autobiographies. Relying on a model 'had the advantage of imposing order on apparent chaos, turning random events into a story with a plot, with a beginning, middle and end' (Burke (1997) 23). This is true for many of the female authors who drew on and appropriated the conventions of established genres, such as advice books, prayers, etc. At the same time, 'imitation is also invention, and in this respect the British Renaissance can be seen as anticipating modern self-identity, which privileges autonomy and uniqueness' (Mascuch (2001) 133) – after all, there is always a degree of choice involved even in the decision to model the self according to a certain standard and in the actual implementation of that choice. As a result, there was a high level of awareness of the constructedness of the self as presented to the public gaze and of the extent to which it could be manipulated.⁸¹

The latter is also one of the features that recent (feminist) critics of women's autobiographies have singled out as typical of women's self-writings. In contrast to the generally accepted genre characteristics – presentation of a unified self, chronological progression and stress on individuality – female self-writings often appear fragmented, multi-dimensional, disjunctive and discontinuous (cf. Jelinek (1986) 88) and do not always display a chronological structure. Also, they tend to concentrate on the private rather than the public, are thus less achievement-oriented and deal with the individual as created through interaction with others (cf. Brodzki and Schenck (1988) 8).⁸²

It is clear from the very terminology used in the above-mentioned studies of female autobiographies that they emerged in close connection with postmodern/poststructuralist and feminist theories. We obviously need to be aware of the fact that early modern women

⁸¹ 'Giving a good impression of oneself' was one of the key tasks that a person should be able to master (at least in a courtly context), according to Baldesar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528). For instance, Frederico, one of the courtiers participating in the discussion, praises the advantages of masquerading, as it 'enables the courtier to choose the role at which he feels himself best, to bring out its most important elements with diligence and elegance' (119). As Sheila Ottway points out, the range of models that could be imitated multiplied in the early modern period, thus increasing the awareness of self-representation being a construct (cf. Ottway (1998) 80).

⁸² Apart from the studies cited here, some of the numerous recent works on female autobiographical writing are Miller (1991), Smith (1993), Gilmore (1994), Broughton and Anderson (1997), Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield (2000), Donnell and Polkey (2000). The number and range of publications in the field suggest some of the outstanding interest that the genre has recently attracted.

who recorded the stories of their lives could not take recourse to the theories which inform contemporary analyses of women's autobiographies and position female writing as speaking from the margins of the dominant discourse. Its alleged characteristics have mostly been derived from the analysis of twentieth-century texts, which were themselves quite obviously written from a theory-conscious perspective.⁸³ It will probably strike the reader of a number of early modern female autobiographies that many of these women wrote narratives that mirror the very traits that (feminist) critics have associated with *male* autobiography, such as linear chronology and coherent sequencing of events (cf. Smith (1987) 17). If this is the case, early modern women's texts do not only question the validity of theories of women's autobiographies when applied to historical periods remote from our own, but also the very foundation on which they rest, namely the notion of female difference. Obviously, we need to critically examine the standpoint from which we approach early modern women's self-writings. There is a danger to impose our own points of view on their texts, i.e. to read into them what we expect to read or how we think women ought to have perceived themselves.

In my view, the strategies for self-writing that result from women's status at the margins of the dominant culture hint at a complex dialectic between the self that is writing and the self being written about. Therefore, my analyses of their texts will be informed by the idea that women writers of autobiographies can also be regarded as being in a privileged position, compared with their male counterparts: in psychoanalytical terms, women have no phallus to lose; they do not face the daunting realisation that 'a coherent self is a fiction, that it must always involve being seen from a distance, through the perspective of the Other' (Anderson (2001) 72f.). As women have never imagined their selves as unified, the deconstruction of the subject does not confront them with the need to invent themselves out of a void, but merely proves what has been their experience all along.⁸⁴ In my following readings of their texts, I will extend this argument by looking at the implications of early modern women's experiences of discontinuous selfhood. Far from

⁸³ Prime examples of late twentieth-century female autobiographies in which fragmentation and hybridity are realised in literary forms and strategies are Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) or Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Women Warrior* (1976). In these texts, different perspectives shift and intersect; the depiction of 'real' events and emotions merge with dreams, myths, quotations from culturally pervasive narratives such as the Bible, etc.

⁸⁴ I agree with Lynette McGrath, who makes a similar point and hints at the fictionality of any coherent selfhood: 'Male language may have begun to create in the early modern period the illusion of a unitary monolithic subject as a tactic of discursive, capitalist and colonialist political power, but this subject was then, as it has been since, insecure because always in danger of falling into disunity, into a failure of coherent identity; in fact, into a condition which for women writing in early modern England – as probably always – is, though variously defined, a wholly familiar and therefore perhaps more expertly negotiated space' (McGrath (2002) 16).

simplistically equating fragmentation with pleasure, their writings indicate that to abandon the premise of the unified, independent self is also to accept the ways in which that self is implicated in the material conditions and power structures in which it operates.

1.4 Summary

You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it.

– Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*⁸⁵

Do we still want to be subjects? In my view, no. As subjects Europeans discovered and colonized foreign continents, Christians converted other peoples, men disciplined their wives, and husbands and wives disciplined their children. As subjects individuals have suppressed their own inclinations and needs, while generalities have excluded those elements which could not be incorporated. I believe that we can no longer want to be subjects.

– Ute Guzzoni, ‘Do we still want to be subjects?’⁸⁶

Nicole Ward Jouve’s statement echoes the central concern of much feminist criticism as to the status of (female) subjectivity in a postmodern/poststructuralist climate. From this point of view, to deconstruct the subject is suicidal for women because it forecloses possibilities of agency before they have even been opened up to them. However, as my preceding discussion has shown, this position appears simplistic, if not dangerously reductive: it takes as its premise the self as locus of agency, and hence a concept of subjectivity that embraces the troublesome categories of self-determination and coherence. To the extent that these categories are so dear to modernity, they are also inherently ‘masculine’ and thus intrinsically problematic for feminism. Moreover, as Ute Guzzoni points out, the modern brand of subjectivity ought to be rejected because it has a range of disturbing flip sides: ultimately, its universalising gestures are oppressive.

In order to avoid these pitfalls, the self can neither be assumed to be unified, nor should its inherent fragmentation be celebrated as liberating. Instead, my study is based on the idea of a self that accepts fragmentation as its very foundation. This presupposition automatically includes the awareness of the constructedness of selfhood and its dependence on socio-cultural, political, economic and interpersonal influences. In my readings of early modern women’s self-writings, I will trace in how far the writers’ senses of self are the result of their dual (and seemingly paradoxical) awareness of being part of constraining structures, but also being able to shape the ways in which these structures impact on their individual lives – a dual strategy that Lynette McGrath refers to as ‘struggle and accommodation’ (McGrath (2002) 6). In proposing this duality, I am

⁸⁵ Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991 (7); quoted in Anderson (2001) 88.

⁸⁶ Guzzoni (1996) 215.

indebted to the notion widespread in cultural criticism that individuals experience themselves as implicated in conditions that ‘both enable and constrain’ (Storey (1999) 159): ‘It is not enough to celebrate agency, nor is it enough to detail the structure(s) of power. We must always keep in mind the dialectical play between agency and structure’ (Storey (1999) 170).⁸⁷ For a study of early modern women’s writings, this implies that the female author be seen ‘as a product of history who [is] also an agent, capable of negotiating her marginal position and of intervening creatively in a masculine discursive system.’⁸⁸ Toni Bowers outlines the dialectic of determinism and self-determination as follows:

The point is not that they [women] act autonomously, choosing freely amongst a rich field of options, or that they fully control the effects they produce. But neither are they helpless. They exercise *some degree* of choice, and are *to some extent* complicit in its results ... [T]hose who conform – and not all do – do so in varying degrees and contexts ... Neither their conformity nor their resistance is an all-or-nothing matter. (Bowers (1996) 23; emphasis in the original)⁸⁹

In fact, I would go so far as to argue that only by taking into account both women’s complicity in and resistance to patriarchy can we conceptualise their ways of perceiving themselves in a sufficiently differentiated fashion – their identities are no either/or matters. This is liberating insofar as it allows for the simultaneous expression of seemingly contradictory positions, for ambiguities which we do not need to try to explain away. Bowers’s argument can be extended, in my view, to include the material conditions in which women lived, and the possible interconnections between material circumstances and self-perception. The self is always shaped by, but never wholly dependent on social and economic practices, and it is these very dimensions that make it possible as well as necessary for early modern women to find a workable compromise that negotiates structure and agency.

⁸⁷ Storey, in turn, draws on the social theory of Anthony Giddens: ‘The concept of structuration involves that of the *duality of structure*, which relates to the *fundamentally recursive character of social life, and expresses the mutual dependence of structure and agency*. By the duality of structure I mean that the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems. ... [S]tructure is both enabling and constraining’ (Giddens (1979) 69; emphasis in the original).

⁸⁸ Anita Pacheco, ‘Introduction.’ In Pacheco (2002) v-xx (xv).

⁸⁹ Toni Bowers’s critical frame of reference is writings by eighteenth-century mothers; yet I believe that her approach is equally fruitfully applicable to the study of women’s texts written about a century earlier.

2 Parameters of selfhood: textual analysis

2.1 Writing the self: identity through authorship

The self does not pre-exist the text but is constructed by it.

– Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*⁹⁰

God send thee too, to be a wits Camelion,
That any authours colour can put on.

– Elizabeth Grymeston, *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives*⁹¹

As Laura Marcus suggests in the first epigraph I have chosen for this chapter, authorial selfhood does not exist outside or prior to writing, but emerges alongside and as a product of the writing process (whereby the idea of a ‘product’ must not be taken to imply teleological fixity, but rather procedural open-endedness). It has been a critical commonplace since the emergence of poststructuralism, if not before, that language itself does not create fixed meanings, but only shifting and contingent ones. If this is the case, the writer’s identity – expressed in language – is no more stable than the constantly changing and infinitely adaptable ‘wits Camelion’ that Elizabeth Grymeston invokes as a metaphor for the authorial self. This instability links poststructural concepts of the self with female subjectivity in general, as women’s relationship to language in the patriarchal symbolic cannot by definition be clear-cut and straightforward. If writing is a form of constituting the self, this shiftiness obviously has profound implications for women’s self-perceptions. I will analyse how early modern women writers perceived themselves as authors, and in how far they conceptualised their writings as forms of ‘writing the self.’ To what extent were women aware of the instability of the (female) authorial position? Did they regard writing as a form of identity formation, or did they rather fear their selves might be undermined by their writing? And in what ways did they develop their own, workable and even creative responses to the relationship between writing and the self?

⁹⁰ Marcus (1994) 180.

⁹¹ Grymeston sig. A3v.

‘[N]one can take that measure of comfort in these meditations which I myself may do’: Lady Grace Mildmay’s religious self

In one highly significant passage of her *Autobiography*, Lady Grace Mildmay depicts her day-to-day activities. What appears, at first glance, to be the stereotypical pastimes of a housebound gentlewoman of her time – embroidery, drawing, light reading etc. – becomes, at a closer look, a telling account of how Mildmay is able to define herself through seemingly trivial, but in fact densely meaningful occupations:

Also every day I spent some time in works of mine own invention without sample of drawing or pattern before me, for carpet or cushion work and to draw flowers and fruits to their life with my plummet upon paper. All which variety of exercises did greatly recreate my mind, for I thought of nothing else but that I was a doing in every particular one of these said exercises. (35)

Far from dull and repetitive, Mildmay experiences these activities as essential expressions of her original creativity (‘without sample ... or pattern’) and, at the same time, vehicles for mental recreation (‘... did greatly recreate my mind’). By extension, her description of her creative pursuits can be taken as paradigmatic for her approach to her writing and for that of early modern women in general. I find it legitimate to make this trajectory because it is possible to read the diverse range of her creative pursuits as not just trivial pastimes, but as modes of expressing her experience that were shared by other women of her time. As Susan Frye rightly observes:

The fact that Mildmay records this activity [needlework] in her manuscript autobiography completes the implicit connection between drawing embroidered patterns, performing the needlework, and the activity of writing as related and integral ways to create both visual and written texts within the distinctly female experience. (Frye (1999) 227)

Just as needlework, writing, too, is a process of innovation in which the author brings forth something ‘of [her] own invention,’ something that has never been said before, at least not in quite the same way. Mildmay stretches the metaphor so far that she implicitly draws a parallel to the trope of the original, divine creation. As a writer, she brings things on the page ‘to their life.’ To write is to create, to give life.

However, in contrast to Mildmay’s bold association, the feminist critic Domna C. Stanton argues that the ‘naming’ (i.e., in the broadest sense, creating and giving meaning) involved in writing constitutes nothing more than an inescapable double bind that keeps women firmly within the patriarchal symbolic order; ‘[f]or either we name and become entrapped in the structures of the already named; or else we do not name and remain

trapped in passivity, powerlessness, and a perpetuation of the same' (Stanton (1986) 164). I disagree with Stanton's defeatist views: whilst she is certainly right in stating that, to some extent, writing always 'perpetuat[es] the same,' since it always moves within the constraints of language, this phenomenon is not specific to women, but constitutes a double bind that traps all language users, men and women alike. Instead, I would argue that some degree of 'naming' is possible despite these contingencies, because writing is also more than the mere copying of already existing texts and their underlying assumptions – there is always an element of individual agency and creativity, also for women, as Mildmay's *Autobiography* shows. Her sense of self that she establishes in her writing is heightened when she suggests that her creative interests allowed her to slip into a pleasurable state of absolute mental concentration. It is as if her creations were taking on a life of their own that claims the author's shaping presence at the exclusion of any distractions ('I thought of nothing else but that I was doing').

Yet the larger context of the passage is indicative of a less self-determined engagement with the self and the world, as it presents an identity that is firmly rooted in a religious context. From this angle, Mildmay's creative activities are not primarily expressions of her own individuality, but ultimately bring to the surface what God has already laid the foundations for. With a slightly self-denigrating tone, she notes that 'though I was but meanly furnished to be excellent in any of these exercises, yet they did me good in as much as I found in myself that God wrought with me in all' (35). Self-expression, for her, is rewarding only in so far as it involves the imitation of a divinely conceptualised, ideal self, not a self that has been fashioned according to a plan entirely of her own. In this sense her text supports one of the central characteristics of early modern self-fashioning that Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out: rather than expressing a completely self-reliant individualism, '[s]elf-fashioning ... involves submission to an absolute power or authority situated at least partially outside the self – God, a sacred book, an institution such as church, court, colonial or military administration' (Greenblatt (1980) 9). However, I find it important to emphasise that the element of submission does not contradict the idea of self-fashioning outright. Rather, both go hand in hand: self-fashioning is not a performance *ab initio*, but is predicated on submission as one of its necessary components. In Mildmay's case, the outside authority she submits herself to is the divine; throughout her *Autobiography* she emphasises the necessity to emulate Christ's example and to live according to the moral teachings outlined by her faith.

It is illuminating to read Mildmay's constitution of self in relation to medieval traditions of self-expression. As Sheila Ottway reminds us, 'the very word "identity" literally means "sameness": in the Middle Ages, identity consisted in similarity in terms of sameness, involving the adoption of certain roles' (Ottway (1998) 69).⁹² The link with medieval practices is supported by the fact that Mildmay lists Thomas à Kempis's early fifteenth-century treatise *De imitatio Christi* (*The Imitation of Christ*; trans. mid-fifteenth century) among the books that were crucial in her upbringing; a work that, as the title suggests, revolves around the idea of following Christ's example: 'Let the life of Jesus Christ ... be our first consideration. ... Whoever desires to understand and take delight in the words of Christ must strive to conform his whole life to him.'⁹³ Christ was perceived as the epitome of perfected humanity, which every person should strive to emulate. In addition, imitating Christ was an attractive concept for medieval and early modern women in particular, because the central values it asked for were submission, humility, silence and patient endurance of suffering – not entirely accidentally, the very principles that a virtuous woman was expected to adhere to, according to secular conduct and advice literature.⁹⁴ Women could thus use the attempt to emulate Christ's suffering as a means of gaining closeness to God, which could be self-affirming as such. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, it was a way of making sense of their roles and society's expectations and the various accidents of fate that they had to cope with in the course of their lives. The list of books that Mildmay's mother advised her to read are in line with these moral principles and prove their formative impact:

She thought it ever dangerous to suffer young people to read or study books wherein was good and evil mingled together, for that by nature we are inclined rather to learn and retain the evil than the good. The Bible, Musculus's *Common Places*, *The Imitation of Christ*, Mr Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* were the only books she laid before me, which gave me the first taste of Christ Jesus and his truth whereby I have found myself better established in the whole course of my life. (28)

However, it would be simplistic to take this statement merely as proof of Mildmay's submissive stance and her reliance on contemporary religious authorities. For, she seems to

⁹² For a comparison of medieval and modern 'individualism,' cf. Bynum (1982). Importantly, Bynum argues that the medieval individual 'did not "find himself" [*sic*] by casting off inhibiting patterns but by adopting appropriate ones' (Bynum (1982) 90).

⁹³ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*; in Janz (1999) 5-13 (5).

⁹⁴ The following passage from *The Imitation of Christ* could equally legitimately have appeared in a conduct book for women: 'It is easier to keep silence altogether than not to talk more than we should. It is easier to remain quietly at home than to keep due watch over ourselves in public. Therefore, whoever is resolved to live an inward and spiritual life must, with Jesus, withdraw from the crowd. No man can live in the public eye without risk to his soul ... No man can safely speak unless he who would gladly remain silent. No man can safely command, unless he who has learned to obey well' (quoted in Janz (1999) 6).

have derived from her readings of these works a clear sense of purpose for her own life and its particular circumstances. Her belief has apparently allowed her to perceive herself as standing on an unshakably firm (moral) ground, and she feels confident to claim a sense of self that is based on a fixed set of principles ('I have found myself better established ...').

For Mildmay – and, indeed, for the other writers of female advice books, as I will observe – it is possible to approach divine perfection through careful self-scrutiny and through monitoring the influences that she subjects herself to. This view lends security to her sense of self; although she ultimately has to submit herself to divine control, her ideal course of action is laid out in a reassuringly clear and straightforward fashion, because there is a perceived correspondence between the divine plan and her individual sense of purpose. Mildmay's repudiation of books 'wherein was good and evil mingled together' suggests a self-assured moral judgement based on clear-cut principles. With its unquestioning categorisation, it is a far cry from the circumstantial morality that had become a focus of anxiety in the early modern period. Proponents of the latter view claimed that the straightforward good/evil distinction does not hold in the face of the contingencies of circumstance and, above all, in the pursuit of individual ambition and power.⁹⁵ The most notorious representative, of course, is Niccolò Machiavelli, whose treatise *The Prince* (1513) renounces the idea of definitive moral principles that ought to be obeyed under any circumstances. The anxiety-inducing relativism that Machiavelli came to be associated with is embodied in his view of good and evil on the level of state politics. For Machiavelli, attaining and upholding power 'is a question of cruelty used well or badly. We can say that cruelty is used well (if it is permissible to talk in this way of what is evil) when it is employed once for all, and one's safety depends on it, and then it is not persisted in but as far as possible turned to the good of one's subjects' (65f.). In Machiavellian ethics, what is generally thought to be 'evil' can conceivably be used to positive ends. In a cultural context in which such ideas were felt (and feared) to become more and more widespread, Mildmay's emphasis on clear-cut moral principles can be read as a counter-reaction to the sense of uncertainty and the visions of general turmoil and disorder that were created by such modes of thinking.

Her firm sense of self also derives from her ability to combine the various and often highly divergent religious teachings of her time, in that she embraces an intricate mixture of traditional Catholic and progressive Protestant views (possibly an indication of her

⁹⁵ The theatre of the time provides numerous examples of this – cf. vice figures such as Richard III in Shakespeare's tragedy, or Bosola in John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*.

Anglican leanings (cf. Warnicke (1989) 56)).⁹⁶ On the one hand, Mildmay points out the possibility of gaining spiritual insights through private study of the Bible, which was, of course, one of the central tenets of Protestantism. She advises her family:

... first to begin with the scriptures to read them with all diligence and humility, as a disciple, continually every day in some measure until [you] have gone through the whole book of God from the first of Genesis unto the last of Revelation and then to begin again and so over and over without weariness. (23)

Her concluding stress on repetitive method, however, is reminiscent of the foregrounding of ritual and tradition in Catholicism. The reading matter recommended by Mildmay's mother that I have quoted above is indicative of a similar merging of different spiritual influences (cf. Ottway (1989) 151): whilst the pre-Reformation *Imitation of Christ* is firmly rooted in the late medieval (and hence Catholic) context, the fervently Protestant *Acts and Monuments* emphasise sacrifice for the cause of the reformed faith. Commonly known as the *Book of Martyrs* (Latin 1559, English 1563), the work comprises an extensive collection of biographies of Protestant martyrs with graphic descriptions of their sufferings. In total, it is a propagandistic piece of Protestant hagiography designed to depict the spiritual heritage and historical development of the English church and its resistance to papal power.⁹⁷ By implication, the setup of the *Acts and Monuments* suggests that individual lives as such and the achievements of particular individuals are worth remembering. However, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism cannot be identified with modern individualism in any straightforward sense. After all, it values the individual primarily as a representative of a religious truth, rather than an entity worthy of note in its own right.⁹⁸ More importantly, it is in Foxe's depictions of trials and torture that inwardness is foregrounded, constituting 'Protestant truth as a condition of the soul, a spiritual self-possession at total odds with the juridically imposed restraint of the body [in prison]' (Mueller (1997) 165). The overall message of the *Acts and Monuments* is thus related to and extends that of the *imitatio Christi*: suffering is inevitable, necessary and ultimately meaningful (and – another distinctly Protestant emphasis – has scriptural precedent) and should therefore be met with 'calm fortitude, even joy' (Knott (1993) 83). It effects not merely closeness to Christ, but also a distinctive and unmediated relationship with the self. In a somewhat modified sense, the same strategy can be traced in Mildmay's

⁹⁶ In this period, Catholic and Protestant or Anglican and Puritan cannot yet be treated as sharply distinct categories. Consequently, my principal focus will be on analysing the role of religion in individual women's lives, largely independent of doctrinal accuracy or strict adherence to one denomination or another.

⁹⁷ Cf. Warren W. Wooden, *John Foxe*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983 (17-40).

⁹⁸ It is debatable to what extent the connection between Protestantism and individualism is valid – cf. Hervieu-Léger (2001) 162ff.

writings. Her stance resembles the ‘ontology of self-presence in excruciating physical suffering’ (Mueller (1997) 180) that Janel M. Mueller detects in Foxe’s construction of Protestant identity – even if we can assume that Mildmay’s ‘suffering’ was psychological rather than physical (she lived in a presumably rather joyless marriage and faced financial strain and legal conflicts with her family).⁹⁹ Defining herself as part of a profoundly religious framework may have allowed her to come to terms with her own experiences of suffering and struggle, and in a distinctly inward-oriented fashion at that.¹⁰⁰ In turn, whilst Mildmay nowhere dwells on her negative experiences, her writing is proof of the religious and cultural trajectory by which ‘suffering ... , more importantly for women otherwise urged to silence, earns for the sufferer the moral right to testify and instruct’ (McGrath (2002) 159).

Mildmay’s self-affirmed stance is partly made possible because she combines two, at first glance highly divergent – to introduce a crudely simplifying equation, ‘modern’ and ‘medieval’ – approaches to her presentation of self: self-withdrawal in favour of a prescribed, schematic notion of identity versus a more individualist concept of selfhood which emphasises agency. Whilst the former is suggested by her attempt to emulate divine virtue and to lead a morally impeccable life, the latter can be discerned, for example, in her depiction of her reading practices. Though largely restricted to passages from the Bible,¹⁰¹ it appears to have also been a vehicle for a certain degree of independent thinking: ‘[T]he continual exercise in the word of God made a deep impression on my stony heart, with an aptness to incline unto the will of God and to delight in the meditation thereof upon every occasion of thought arising in my mind’ (35). God’s word triggers intellectual activity because it calls for ‘meditation.’ Admittedly, the resulting ‘aptness to incline unto the will of God’ seems to imply, yet again, the mere imitation of a preconceived self-image. However, far from preventing self-articulation, interaction with pre-existing categories allows Mildmay to assert herself in relation to a fixed set of ideas. By extension, written expression in general (ultimately the product of ‘thought arising in my mind’) is made possible through engagement with earlier texts and teachings and conventional religious

⁹⁹ Cf. my more extensive interpretation of Mildmay’s account of her marriage and the conflicts within her family (2.4).

¹⁰⁰ We do not detect in her close relationship with and willing submission to God what Camille Wells Slight observes in male writings of the period – he refers to John Donne and George Herbert –, namely ‘the sense of helplessness that results from incorporating an all-powerful other within the self’ (Slight (1998) 239). In spite of the sense of her own sinfulness that her belief inculcates in her, Mildmay presents her relationship with God in entirely positive terms.

¹⁰¹ Again, repetition is characteristic of her spiritual practises: ‘I did read a chapter in the book of Moses, another in one of the Prophets, one chapter in the Gospels and another in the Epistles to the end of the revelation and the whole Psalms appointed for the day, ending and beginning again and again and so proceeded in that course’ (34).

practice. Patricia Crawford is certainly justified in her claim that, '[d]enied many other avenues of self-expression, women could express themselves through their religious devotions' (Crawford (1993) 74).¹⁰² Felicity Nussbaum stresses the ambiguity that women's religious practices involved because, by their very nature, they 'position subjects between the conflicting ideologies of self-denial and self-knowledge' (Nussbaum (1989) 62). Nussbaum's reference to 'self-knowledge' is crucial, as it hints at the connections that exist between religious devotion, written self-expression and interiority. After all, the Christian emphasis on moral perfection requires subjective consciousness in order for individuals to monitor and possibly correct their actions.¹⁰³ In turn, awareness of self is the precondition of writing the self. As Mildmay's example suggests, early modern women's religious practices brought with them a kind of inwardness that was conducive to individual identity formation. The type of identity thus established – and this might be difficult to grasp from a twenty-first-century perspective – is shaped by a characteristic dialectic of individuality and religiously grounded, schematic renditions of selfhood. Mildmay exemplifies this dialectic in a paradigmatic fashion when she describes her own religious writings and the insights she has gained in the course of her meditations as being at least partly idiosyncratic, thus placing herself in a field of tension between authoritative doctrine and personally acquired faith: 'And though I think *none can take that measure of comfort in these meditations which I myself may do*, yet whosoever readeth them may make good use of them, especially seeing they shall find every point of doctrine confirmed and approved by the scriptures' (24; emphasis added). Personal reflection combines with official religious doctrine in a manner that is so dense that it is impossible to separate the two.

The tensions and intricacies of embracing received wisdom and deriving a sense of self-affirmation precisely through reliance on authorities *outside* the self is a recurrent paradigm in early modern self-writings, and it forms an underlying theme of my readings of these texts. They give a clear indication of the inappropriateness of our own views on individuality and personal (self-)worth with regard to early modern texts: principles that we value highly (at least in theory), such as the right of the individual to define his or her own moral standards, dependent on the particularities of circumstance and personal

¹⁰² Similarly, David Booy notes that '[s]ome women therefore achieved through their faith greater degrees of subjectivity and agency than was usually possible for women at that time' (Booy (2002) 301). However, Patricia Crawford also notes how ambiguous and potentially dangerous women's religious practices could be: women could easily be accused of aligning themselves with the devil, or of using their faith as a justification for social and/or political agitation (cf. Crawford (1993) 73).

¹⁰³ This connection is the subject of Michel Foucault's exploration of the 'hermeneutics of the self,' which I will draw upon in a later section of this chapter ('The ordered self'); cf. Bernauer (1990) 64.

preference, or our reluctance to make clear value judgements about worldviews that we do not share, are of little use in a different historical context. It seems that what we would find oppressive – taking on moral principles handed down by established authorities and writing oneself into these traditions – enabled early modern women to experience themselves as coherent agents in the world.

Thus, for one thing, writings such as Mildmay's exemplify the (already well-established) point that it is justified to call into question the Burckhardian idea of the Renaissance as the birth of the self-determined individual in the modern sense of the term. More importantly, they also put in perspective the postmodern fascination with the loss of a 'centred' perspective on moral and epistemological categories.¹⁰⁴ Self-determination in early modern accounts of identity does not take the form of wholesale unconnectedness, but rather becomes traceable in the processes of negotiating and appropriating the dominant ideology and pre-existing modes of thinking.

Originality and quotation: seventeenth-century mothers' manuals

The absence of individualism in the modern sense of the term is particularly obvious in the early seventeenth-century mothers' advice books. All the texts are deeply embedded in contemporary discourses of virtuous conduct, and it is therefore worthwhile looking at the historical origins and contemporary ramifications of the conduct book genre. The tradition of the conduct manual for women dates back to at least the sixteenth century, the most well-known and influential treatise probably being Juan Luis Vives's *Instruction of a Christian Woman* (Latin 1523, English 1540), originally addressed to Henry VIII's first wife, Catharine of Aragon, to be used for the education of her daughter Mary. Vives discusses the central themes of the 'chaste, silent and obedient' ideology, which were infinitely reiterated by contemporary and subsequent conduct book writers. Summarising feminine virtue in the most condensed possible manner, he bluntly states that '[a]s for a woman, she hath no charge to see to, but her honesty and chastity. Wherefore when she is informed of that, she is sufficiently appointed' (*Instruction* 34). A woman should avoid

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Linda Hutcheon, 'Decentering the Postmodern: the Ex-centric' (in Hutcheon (1988) 57-73).

male company ('Avoid all mankind away from her: nor let her not learn to delight among men' (*Instruction* 41)) and should therefore be brought up in an exclusively female environment, '[f]or naturally, our love continueth the longest towards them with whom we have passed our time in youth' (*Instruction* 41). Lady Grace Mildmay's account of her education is exemplary for this assumption: she names her mother and her governess – 'a gentlewoman (niece unto my father and) brought up by my mother from her childhood, whom afterwards she trusted to be governor over her own children' (25) – as those who had the most pervasive influence on her upbringing. Virtuous femininity, it seems, was not merely an oppressive ideological blanket forced upon women by misogynistic patriarchs, but a concept that was actively perpetuated and willingly adhered to by women themselves. Mildmay endeavours to be like her governess, who 'proved very religious, wise and chaste, and all good virtues were constantly settled in her' (25).

Within the framework of this set of virtues, female learning was clearly approved of by male humanist conduct book writers such as Vives, albeit with the sole aim of increasing virtue and achieving greater godliness, 'supposing that by that mean[s] they [women] should be more truly and surely chaste. ... For the study of learning is such a thing that it occupieth one's mind wholly and lifteth it up to the knowledge of most goodly matters' (*Instruction* 53). In his *Plan of Studies for Girls* (1523), Vives specifies what women's learning is to consist of: in a distinctly humanist fashion, he recommends activities such as Latin conversation and the study of (selected) classical authors. Of course, only few women were offered this type of education at all. If they did have access to the humanist canon, this entailed another problem: it is obvious that the choice of intellectual pursuits it recommended kept women's education firmly under male control – just as the authors whose works they were supposed to read were men, so were their teachers.

Still, the type of female education that Vives outlines was innovative and exceptional because, by and large, the most decisive element of most women's (intellectual) activities at the time was religion. Early- to mid-seventeenth-century writers of mothers' manuals concentrate on women's education in godliness (rather than humanist learning) and emphasise continual study of the scriptures, an ideal that is supported by their frequent quotations from the Bible (e.g. Leigh sigs. B8r ff., to give just one example). This is unsurprising, given the concern with religious matters in the context of the

upheavals of the Reformation period¹⁰⁵ and the centrality of the women's religious practices for their senses of self. Sylvia Brown's observation on Elizabeth Joscelyn's *Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe* applies equally to the other manuals of the period: 'Biblical language is woven into her text: not just quotations and near quotations, but biblical paraphrases, pastiches, and metaphors' (Brown (1999) 98). The abundant references to authoritative religious sources are indicative of the female authors' impressive erudition and memorisation skills, at the same time as they reveal the restrictions imposed on female learning in the period. Significantly, Vives explicitly excludes women from the most highly valued humanist discourse of rhetoric: as the art of skilful persuasion, it is a discourse that potentially wields power. Therefore, women's mastery of rhetoric was severely curtailed: 'As for eloquence, I [Vives] have no great care, nor a woman needeth it not, but she needeth goodness and wisdom' (*Instruction* 54). Again, this was a view that was perpetuated by women themselves. Elizabeth Joscelyn reiterates it when she criticises the fact that 'sometimes women haue greater portions of learninge then wisdom' (59f.) and excuses her style of writing with reference to her lack of '<eloquence> ^skill to write^' (32).¹⁰⁶

There are various similarities in terms of content between the mothers' advice books – apart from their recurrent stress on chastity, humility and godliness, the writers admonish their children to mistrust outward beauty, not to be led astray by Satan, to direct their earthly lives towards everlasting life in the hereafter, etc. These parallels are particularly striking because they often extend to quasi-identical wording. The authors obviously drew on a shared discursive matrix, centring around religious practice and piety, that provided a set of frequently recurring concerns expressed through an equally conventional range of images. As a result, they often interpret individual experiences – as is the case with Lady Grace Mildmay – within the frameworks provided by commonly assumed 'truths' and, above all, conventional religion.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the female writers of advice books influenced each other: as the 'mother' of the genre, Sylvia Brown posits Dorothy Leigh's *Mothers Blessing* as 'the most likely candidate' (Brown (1999) 3). In fact, the maternal speaking position as such was a literary trope that had existed considerably

¹⁰⁵ In some writings by women, especially mothers' advice books, the impact of large-scale religious struggle is quite pronounced: Dorothy Leigh displays Puritan leanings, Elizabeth Joscelyn shows similar affinities to Puritan tracts, while Elizabeth Grymeston's treatise hints at Catholic dissent (cf. Matchinske (2002)).

¹⁰⁶ For a more extensive discussion of women's attitudes to education, cf. 2.5.

¹⁰⁷ This was the usual strategy in early modern self-writings in general. Anne Ferry states, with reference to the autobiography of Thomas Whythorne (c. 1576): '[C]haracteristically he sees his experiences as fully representative of general truths preached in the Bible, in ancient authors, and in everyday proverbs' (Ferry (1983) 36). Large parts of the mothers' manuals attest to a similar sense of being embedded in a shared discursive environment.

earlier. The first known example is an anonymous poem entitled *The Northren Mothers Blessing*, dated on the title page ‘nine yeeres before the death of G. Chaucer,’ i.e. around 1390.¹⁰⁸ However, the *Northren Mothers Blessing* appears formulaic in places (cf. the recurrent ending of the stanzas: ‘My leue deere child’) and does not express any awareness of the unusualness of the female speaking position.¹⁰⁹ Whilst its existence points to the confident usage of the maternal as an authorising stance, the text is markedly different from its seventeenth-century successors, which are significantly more personal in their elaboration of the mother-child relationship and their preoccupation with the problematics of female authorship. The wide currency of Leigh’s manual in seventeenth-century English households (between 1616 and 1674, twenty-three editions were printed (cf. Brown (1999) 3)) is a plausible explanation for the similarities that exist between Leigh’s treatise and Joscelyn’s, as well as Elizabeth Richardson’s *Ladies Legacie to Her Daughters* (cf. Brown (1999) 3): ‘There are numerous similarities between the two legacies [Leigh’s and Joscelyn’s] which argue influence and perhaps emulation’ (Brown (1999) 99);¹¹⁰ the same goes for Richardson’s relationship with Leigh’s text.

In a sense, the connections between early modern women’s advice books make them a prime example of intertextuality. Although the term was coined in a very different literary context – in a study by Julia Kristeva on Michail Bakhtin’s work on dialogue and carnival (cf. Macey (2000) 203f.) – it can be fruitfully applied to the seventeenth-century manuals. Intertextuality recognises that ‘a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation’ (Macey (2000) 203). Rather, all texts are composed out of references to and quotations from other texts, with which they stand in a dialogical relationship (cf. Macey (2000) 203f.). Obviously, this perception calls into question the notions of authorial agency and creativity that seem indispensable for the idea of writing as enabling identity formation. We cannot speak of a writing *subject*, in the sense of an individual agent, if he or she merely produces ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’ (Barthes (1968) 146). Yet intertextuality can be a fruitful concept if applied to the various interdependencies I have outlined between the different mothers’ manuals as well

¹⁰⁸ *The Northren Mothers Blessing. The Way of Thrift. Written nine yeeres before the death of G. Chaucer.* London: Printed by Robert Robinson for Robert Dexter, 1597. Edinburgh: reprinted by James Ballantyne & Co., 1812.

¹⁰⁹ According to Martha Craig, *The Northren Mothers Blessing* was written by a middle-class woman and subsequently reproduced in a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry collections (cf. Craig (1997) 194). However, Craig does not give any evidence for her assumption that the author of the poem was female, and I have been unable to find any other information on the author’s identity. The text itself, it seems to me, is somewhat equivocal: its invocations of the maternal relationship are formulaic in places, but on the other hand it attributes strong authority to the figure of the mother.

¹¹⁰ Kristen Poole argues that the two women might, in fact, have been related (cf. Poole (1995) 83ff.).

as between the manuals and (male) conduct literature. It enables us to do justice to the complexities and ambiguities of the female writers' strategies, hovering as they do between authoritative sources, preconceived perceptions and individual creativity and desires. At a closer look, imitation and quotation do not rule out writerly creativity altogether. The mothers' manuals also display an impressive scope for creative intervention and reveal how women could draw on existing discourses in an idiosyncratic and often unconventional fashion.

Such appropriations also attest to their ability to reinterpret the patriarchal assumptions about them. For instance, women's devaluation of their own writing is a frequent and oft-quoted motif in almost all of their texts. Given the fact that women did, in effect, write and even publish, it is a matter of debate whether, or to what extent, these remarks can simply be taken to suggest that they had internalised the widespread cultural invective against female writing. After all, drawing attention to an alleged lack of skill can be a powerful self-authorising strategy, especially if her actual writing contradicts the author's professed dilettantism. Also, women could and did find alternative ways of giving themselves a public voice. In her *Mothers Counsell*, M. R. circumvents the general prohibition against women's speech by claiming that there are cases in which failure to speak can, in fact, be harmful: 'Forbearance of speech is most dangerous when necessitie requireth to speake' (sig. C5v). Although she does not specify the potential situations that she is alluding to, her statement is a far cry from Lady Grace Mildmay's advice to women 'to hear much and speak little' (26), or Elizabeth Joscelyn's admonition to her child, should it be a daughter, that 'thou art a mayd and such ought thy modesty to be that thou shouldst scars speak but when thou answerest' (534f.). R.'s point – to be confident enough to speak when necessary – qualifies the cultural invective against female speech by turning it on its head with recourse to a moral argument.¹¹¹

In a similar way, women could subvert the conventional apology for their boldness to write by self-consciously drawing attention to the formulaic character of such statements. An interesting case in point is Elizabeth Cary, who preceded her translation of *The reply of the most illustrious cardinal of Perron* (1630) with the following bold remark:

¹¹¹ Roxanne Harde links R.'s boldness with her anonymity: 'Perhaps because of her anonymity, M. R. is the least self-conscious of the mother's legacy writers. In her *Mothers Counsell* ... she neither apologizes nor justifies as she instructs her daughter in the authoritative and empowered voice of a Christian mother. ... Although her book shows thoroughgoing cultural inscriptions, as she exhorts her daughter to virtue, M. R.'s rhetorical strategies turn each patriarchal reference point into a place of potential empowerment for women' (Roxanne Harde, in Ostovich and Sauer (2004) 115).

I will not make vse of that worne-out forme of saying, I printed it against my will, mooued by the importunitie of Friends: I was mooued to it by my beleefe, that it might make those English that understand not French, whereof there are maine, euen in our universities, reade Perron.¹¹²

Cary is determined to replace the self-deprecating attitude characteristic of female authors with a decidedly professional and hence objective stance. Elizabeth Richardson, in the dedicatory chapter to her *Ladies Legacie to her Daughters*, employs a different, but equally effective strategy: she circumvents the restrictions imposed on female authorship by styling her subject matter as essentially feminine and, surprisingly, fit for only an elite of men: '[T]he matter is but deuotions and prayers, which surely concernes and belongs to women, as well as to the best learned men' (162) – as Sylvia Brown observes, Richardson thereby suggests that, '[a]t their best, men are like women!' (Brown (1999) vii). In a related fashion, Elizabeth Clinton claims the authority to write her *Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (1622), a treatise against the upper-class practise of wet-nursing, by paying lip-service to women's inferiority as writers, as compared to 'men of learning.' Yet, in effect, she establishes a considerably more powerful position for herself: 'I leave the larger, and learned discourse here of unto men of art, and learning: only I speake of so much as I reade, and know in my owne experience, which if any of my sexe, and condition do receave good by, I am glad' (sigs. C2r f.). Whilst Clinton apparently accepts male intellectual superiority, her own writing is based on her personal experience and thereby has the clear advantage of authenticity and immediacy. Anne Vaughan Locke, who in 1560 translated the sermons of John Calvin, employs a similar strategy of claiming (male) literary authority by seemingly granting superiority to the male author. She prefaces her translation with a sequence of poems entitled *A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner*, for which she gives the following justification: 'I have added this meditation folowyng unto the ende of this boke, not as parcel of maister Calvines worke, but for that it well agreeth with the same argument' (sig. Aa1r). Her clear assertion that she is not falsely claiming for herself, and hence usurping, the male author's literary genius defends her against any possible criticism to that effect. Yet her following observation that 'it well agreeth with the same [i.e. Calvin's] argument' is even bolder, in that Locke thereby assumes to have written a text that not simply imitates Calvin's or is dependent on it, but that independently displays the same degree of elaboration and hence can be read in combination with it, with both texts mutually informing each other.

¹¹² Jacques Davy, Cardinal du Perron, *The reply of the most illustrious cardinal of Perron*. Douai 1630; quoted in Bell, Parfitt and Shepherd (1990) 40.

However, it would certainly be inappropriate to read passages such as these, surprisingly self-assured though they may seem, as instances of a proto-feminist consciousness. This is particularly obvious as the majority of early modern women's texts display an authorial stance that is incompatible with modern feminism. For example, Elizabeth Richardson's so confident remark stands in an uneasy opposition to her all-out submission to divine authority, wishing that she 'may become thy [God's] bondswoman' (228). Such ambiguities suggest that what we need to look for in early modern women's self-writings is not so much expressions of sheer inventiveness and unrestrained creativity, but rather glimpses of idiosyncratic rewritings of the existing literary and intellectual paradigms, from speaking positions that are simultaneously *inside* and *outside* of patriarchal discourse.¹¹³ If nothing else, passages such as the ones I have quoted in this chapter prove that patriarchy was not so overarching an ideology as to preclude tentative negotiations of alternative possibilities. What is more, they attest to the need to 'decentre' the Renaissance: the new conceptualisations of the self that emerged at the time do not, as the traditional account suggests, necessarily amount to fully-fledged, individualist selfhood and entirely unconstrained originality. Selfhood and personal identity can be discerned also in fairly conventional treatments of religion and virtue.

'My name was Martha': self-assertion and submission in Martha Moulsworth's *Memorandum*

In spite of the ambiguities I have just outlined, it is obvious that women's writings in the early modern period provided opportunities for self-assertion. Martha Moulsworth's autobiographical poem *The Memorandum of Martha Moulsworth, Widow* is exemplary in

¹¹³ In an exemplary way, with reference to Elizabeth Grymeston's *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives*, Edith Snook outlines how early modern women's seemingly un-original texts can still be considered valuable for the study of women's writing: 'That Grymeston did not write an "original" work, but instead composed through citations, may provide an explanation for the relative dearth of scholarly attention to her book. Interest in "women's experience" has been the impetus for the recovery of early modern women's writing, and while it should never be an unproblematic category, Grymeston explicitly resists writing self-referentially about that experience. Because we have used originality to ascribe value to writing, *Miscellanea Meditations Memoratives* also does not fall into the category of literature that would be included in Norton anthologies. Yet, she has her own anthologizing impulse, similarly affixed to declarations of cultural value and suggesting a strategy by which an early modern woman could write authoritatively to her son' (Snook (2000) 172).

this respect. From the very beginning of the poem, Moulsworth boldly locates herself in a specific moment in time, with the repetition in the final line of the first stanza promoting her strong sense of self-presence:

The tenth day of the winter month Nouember
A day which I must duely still remember
did open first theis eis, and shewed this light
Now on thatt day, vppon thatt daie I write[.] (1ff.)

Moulsworth devotes the first ten lines of the *Memorandum* to elaborating the temporality of her writing, making it clear from the very start that nothing in the poem is random or haphazard, but that every minute detail is deeply meaningful in both form and content. Significantly, she styles herself as both object and subject of the writing process – she *herself* is writing about *her own* life, and she is aware of this duality; she expresses, in Sheila Ottway’s words, a ‘consubstantiality of self and text’ (Ottway (1998) 279). Moulsworth draws attention to the fact that the day of the poem’s composition coincides with her own birthday: ‘This season fitly, willinglie combines / the birth day of my selfe, & of theis lynes’ (5f.). In the process of writing, the self is ‘born’ in a double sense: its origins are established with temporal fixity (i.e. her literal, physical birthday is located in the past), and a written manifestation of that self is set up in the process of writing. In a sense, ‘[t]he language of the poem recreates her – the “birthday” of the lines also marks the birth of an inscribed personality’ (Wilcox (1997a) 27).

At first glance, this observation temptingly suggests approaching the *Memorandum* from a poststructuralist angle. Moulsworth’s temporal alignment of the self and the text – both, it seems, emerge from the impersonal spell of the seasons – implies that she as the writer does not command the text. As the oft-quoted slogan, ‘there is nothing outside of the text’,¹¹⁴ indicates, poststructuralists argue that the writer is always (metaphorically) written by the text – not vice versa – because the latter exceeds the writer’s subjective command. This is because the author is necessarily constrained by the language that is at his or her disposal.¹¹⁵ Linguistically constructed identity, in the sense of firm selfhood, is a fallacy, because the text cannot fix meaning – ‘there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring’ (Derrida (1991) 97). However, precisely by establishing a connection between the text and the self, Moulsworth’s perception of her self-constitution in her

¹¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; quoted in Barry (2002) 70.

¹¹⁵ Derrida outlines this poststructuralist argument as follows: ‘A written sign, in the usual sense of the word, is therefore a mark which remains, which is not exhausted in the present of its inscription, and which can give rise to an iteration both in the absence of and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it’ (Derrida (1991) 92).

autobiography actually belies this view, or at least clearly shows it to be inappropriate to the early modern context. Considering the textual evidence, it would be mistaken, if not naive, to suggest that she was prefiguring the poststructuralist critique of the authorial subject and its replacement with 'mere' language. To read the poem without acknowledging Moulsworth's display of authorial presence makes for a reductive reading, because she actively sets out to create an authorial persona who writes and, conversely, whom the poem is about. She assumes a self that pre-exists and exists alongside/outside of the text. To put it crudely, if November was not 'the birth day ... of theis lynes' (6), it would still be 'the birth day of my selfe' (6), only it would be a self that is not written about and constituted in literary form. This is not to imply that the self created through writing is no different from her 'actual' self – I would merely want to stress the fundamental point that Moulsworth is obviously convinced of the latter's existence. Whilst the idea of a 'real,' 'true' or 'authentic' self independent of its textual representation would be rejected from a poststructuralist angle, Moulsworth's sense of self is clearly based on this very premise, and we would do injustice to her if we were to deny this dimension.

The foundation of Moulsworth's belief is the fact that her self-determination is predicated on an overarching, ordering principle in which her text is embedded. Certainly, her opening stanza is surprisingly self-assured and original in its equation of the writing and the written self. At a closer look, however, Moulsworth's sense of self does not stem exclusively from her own ingenuity as a creator of a text about herself, but is part of a larger, religious scheme of significance. Similar to Lady Grace Mildmay, Moulsworth conceives of her self only in relation to divine authority. As her marginal reference to Acts 17:28 ('in him we live, and move, and have our being') indicates, the self is not only partially affected by this spiritual frame of reference, but wholly embraced by it. Moulsworth's bold emphasis on her act of positioning herself in time is thereby qualified, but at the same time secured: her self-affirmation is conditional, dependent on God's superordinate will, but also strikingly self-assured by its very confidence in the divine. Moulsworth's emphasis on the fact that the end of her life is beyond her control is the most obvious proof of this: through writing, she can, to some extent, create herself, but is not wholly responsible for the form that her life will take. Especially the exact point in time when it will end, 'he only knowes in whome we are, & liue' (10). As with Mildmay, Moulsworth's awareness of a larger authoritative power does not simply diminish or even destroy her authorial sense of self; rather, it is the very condition that makes possible and lends security to her self-constitution in the first place. For all her stress on writing her self,

Moulsworth perceives her life as ultimately geared towards a fulfilment that can only be gained in the hereafter, ‘ffor then shall all in glorious perfection / Like to th’immortall heauenlie Angells liue’ (100f.). This explicit self-perception in terms of the Christian teleology of salvation points to the discrepancy between early modern women’s writings of the self and modern notions of authorship.

Ann Sothwell’s early-sixteenth-century commonplace book *The workes of Lady Ann Sothwell* contains a passage that may serve to further illuminate this point:

[F]or mee I write but to my self & mee
what God’s good grace doth in my soule imprint
I bought it not for pelf, none buyes of thee
nor will I lett it at soe base a rent
as wealth or fame, which is but drosse & vapour
& scarce deserves the blotting of a paper.¹¹⁶

Similar to Moulsworth, Sothwell displays a strong sense of self (‘for mee I write’). Still, her writing is not directed exclusively ‘to my self & mee,’ but only engages with the self insofar as it expresses her relationship with God and his grace (cf. Clarke (2001) 11). This is the only reason why her poetry is worth more than ‘soe base a rent / as wealth or fame’; for her, it has little intrinsic value of its own, as a creative, textual artefact.

In a sense, then, writings such as Moulsworth’s and Sothwell’s point to the conceptual difficulty of grasping early modern accounts of identity formation. The texts are inevitably informed by what Derridean poststructuralism has critiqued as the ‘metaphysics of presence,’ the idea that there is a unified reality to be represented, a reality whose meaningfulness is secured by the existence of a ‘transcendental signifier.’¹¹⁷ Since the very idea of a transcendental guarantor of meaning has been called into question, it becomes difficult to account for the authors’ explicit grounding of their selves in a religious frame of reference.

Still, I would argue that our scepticism can be reconciled with the women’s religiously grounded selfhood – indeed, it is vital for us to accept the latter if we are to comprehend their senses of self in their historical and socio-cultural specificity. Moreover, the texts are by no means devoid of ambiguity; surprisingly, ambiguity is in fact created, in places, by the authors’ very references to the religious framework. The third stanza of

¹¹⁶ *The workes of Lady Ann Sothwell*. In: *The Sothwell-Sibthorpe Commonplace Book*. Ed. Jean Klene. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts of Studies* vol. 147. Tempe/AZ: Renaissance English Text Society, 1997, xi; quoted in Clarke (2001) 11.

¹¹⁷ According to Derrida, God is the ‘transcendental signifier’ in Western (Christian) culture, on which our signifying practices ultimately depend. Cf. Thomas Mautner (ed.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Penguin, 1996, 352.

Moulsworth's *Memorandum* is a case in point. Moulsworth clearly asserts her own identity, signified by her name: 'My Name was Martha' (17). Yet her bold expression of (self-)identity is somewhat undermined by the fact that she refers to herself in the past tense, thus already hinting at the possibility of the absence of her self (cf. Evans and Wiedemann (1993) 31). In spite of this poignancy, however, she also establishes her perspective as slightly detached, taking stock of the events of her life and reporting them in a matter-of-fact way. She thereby claims for herself an autonomous subject position that allows her to take charge of the narrative representation of her life (cf. Mascuch (1997) 21), and she obviously feels that she has come to a point at which she is mature enough to account for her life in its entirety.¹¹⁸ Both aspects of Moulsworth's self-presentation can be reconciled, again, if they are read in a religious context. Her elaboration on her namesake, the biblical Martha, is illuminating:

... Martha tooke much payne
 our Sauour christ hir guesse [*sic*] to entertayne
 God gyue me grace my Inward house to dight
 that he wth me may supp, & stay all night[.] (17ff.)

On the other hand, Moulsworth's appropriation of the Martha parable is exemplary of ambiguities on a larger plane. She reinterprets the biblical story to match the self-image she wants to present: the biblical Martha is criticised by Jesus for placing too much emphasis on the practicalities of his visit at the expense of preparing herself spiritually, as her sister Mary does.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, Moulsworth inverts the moral of the story by adding a spiritual dimension to the task of housekeeping, in that she 're-conceptualize[s] the role of hostess as one who puts her inward house in order and makes it ready to receive God' (Humphrey (1996) 64). It is vital for Moulsworth not to degrade the role of housekeeper, for after all, this is the primary task that the discourse of virtuous femininity attributed to women. The fact that this position has extremely positive connotations for her and is even endowed with spiritual, transcendental relevance serves a double purpose: not only does she present herself to her potential audience as a virtuous woman who knows her proper place; she also creates a supremely positive self-image, presumably for the sake of her own sense of self-worth – although we cannot possibly tell which impetus was predominant.

¹¹⁸ This would match the idea that one has the most level-headed and intense insights upon entering the last of the Ages of Man, at fifty-six (cf. Csicsila (1996) 33). For a more detailed discussion of Moulsworth's appropriation of the 'Ages of Man' concept, cf. 2.4.

¹¹⁹ As St Luke's gospel reads: 'But Martha was cumbered about much serving ... And Jesus ... said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her' (Luke 10:40-42). Significantly, this is the biblical reference Moulsworth cites in her marginal notes – she does not refer to St John's version of the story, according to which Jesus explicitly loves both sisters equally (cf. John 11).

As Mary Jane Humphrey notes, however, Moulsworth's appropriation of the biblical Martha is not straightforwardly reassuring; rather 'she infuses that name and role with a mixture of pride and doubt' (Humphrey (1996) 64). After all, she cannot be certain that she will be deemed worthy for God to enter her inner being, but can only pray, in the awareness of the ultimate futility of human endeavour (cf. Humphrey (1996) 64), 'that he wth me *may supp, & stay all night*' (20; emphasis added). In a way, Moulsworth even conflates the two biblical figures – she identifies with her namesake's practical tasks, but also embraces Mary's spiritual approach when she resolves 'my Inward house to dight' (19). This duality can be interpreted as mirroring, on the immediate content level, the dialectic of self-assertion and awareness of human precariousness in the face of the divine that characterises Moulsworth's attitude towards the end of her life. Rather than reading the explicit reference to her impending death as a threat to her identity, we can thus understand it as belonging to a historical context in which religion and divine salvation in the hereafter were just as important, if not more, than the individual's claim to selfhood. The unease that we may feel about a presentation of self that hovers uneasily between self-affirmation and humility in the face of the divine may therefore be an effect of historical distance, not a contradiction that was actually felt by a woman like Moulsworth herself. It may be hard for us, as twenty-first-century readers, to identify with the strongly religious components of early modern women's identity formation, yet precisely in order to avoid anachronistic readings, the dominant role that religion played in their lives cannot be overemphasised. In order to grasp its profound impact on people's everyday lives, which comes across in virtually all women's writings of the period, it is worth considering Debora Shuger's description of the structural significance of religion at the time:

Religion during this period supplies the primary language of analysis. It is the cultural matrix for explorations of virtually every topic: kingship, selfhood, rationality, language, marriage, ethics, and so forth. Such subjects are, again, not masked by religious discourse but articulated in it; they are considered *in relation to* God and the human soul. That is what it means to say that the English Renaissance was a religious culture, not simply a culture whose members generally were religious. (Shuger (1990) 6; emphasis in the original)

The way in which early modern women conceived of themselves 'in relation to God' and their (equally religiously conceptualised) souls has already surfaced in my analyses of Mildmay's *Autobiography* and the mothers' manuals, and it emerges as one of the recurrent paradigms of female self-perception throughout my study. In the case of Martha Moulsworth, apart from her frequent references to religious and Church dates and teachings, the very setup of the poem is deliberately developed in accordance with an

underlying religious framework; for instance, the structure of the poem is made to bear a special (numerological) relationship to Christian teachings (cf. Csicsila (1996)).

Moulsworth's gesture of exposing her name, which provided the starting point for my discussion of her appropriation of her religious beliefs, is illuminating in yet another respect. It is telling that she introduces herself by her first name only – under patriarchy, a woman's surname always defines her in relation to a male, i.e. father or husband. This is especially significant in Moulsworth's case, whose three marriages would have forced her to undergo three changes of surname. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, a woman's relationship to her name is therefore always distorted and less immediate than a man's:

For women in our culture a proper name is at best problematic; ... even as it inscribes her into the discourse of society by designating her role as her father's daughter, her patronymic effaces her matrilineage and thus erases her own position in the discourse of the future. Her 'proper' name, therefore, is always in a way *improper* because it is not, in the French sense, *propre*, her own, either to have or to give.¹²⁰

Moulsworth's exclusive self-definition via her first name can therefore be seen as her laying claim on an unmediated identity that is not contingent on her temporary and potentially changeable status relative to a male. In addition, it could be read as an attempt to create a matrilineage via the parallels that she draws to the biblical Martha. Helen Wilcox adds yet another dimension to Moulsworth's emphasis on her name, juxtaposing it with the frequent 'anonymity, whether enforced or chosen, of many women writers' (Wilcox (1997a) 27). Moulsworth, by contrast, clearly identifies herself with the authorial persona behind her poem, a persona that she presents as constant over time.

However, at a closer look, the interpretation in terms of matrilineage and female identity does not seem entirely appropriate to Moulsworth's presentation of self. Although she evades the patriarchal mechanisms of naming, she is adamant to present herself throughout her poem as 'her father's daughter,' thereby renouncing her matrilineage. Whilst she dwells on her father's influential role in her education and upbringing, her mother totally escapes mention.¹²¹ Moreover, for all her reinterpetive efforts, her references to her first name are couched in a religious tradition that is intrinsically patriarchal. Again, her identity as 'Martha' is not fashioned at will, but in relation to pre-existing discourses.

¹²⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Ceremonies of the Alphabet: Female Grandmatologies and the Female Autograph'; in Stanton (1987) 21-48 (24); emphasis in the original.

¹²¹ For a more detailed discussion of this striking omission, cf. 2.5.

The ambiguities that surround Moulsworth's self-naming might point to the general perspective I have suggested we adopt when reading early modern women's texts. There is no self-fashioning in the sense of an entirely self-reliant shaping of identity. Our perspective should shift away from condemning the acceptance of patriarchal values and celebrating transgression, from refuting containment and acclaiming subversion of the dominant discourse, to the choices that women could and did make from their speaking positions, *within* rather than in opposition to patriarchal discourse.

The ordered self

As my analyses of Mildmay's and Moulsworth's autobiographies and the mothers' advice books have suggested, we face a double-sided process when dealing with early modern female self-writings. To recognise the impact of women's Christian faith, with its emphasis on submission and self-abrogation, on their perceptions of self is not necessarily to undermine the sense of agency that they could and did derive from writing. Moreover, the texts need to be contextualised with regard to the religious traditions that their writers drew upon. One of the central tenets of Christianity in general and of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism in particular is the injunction to self-monitoring; it is grounded in a perception of the self as incapable of goodness and hence dependent on divine grace:

Both Luther and Calvin exhorted man to 'descend to loke into himselfe' where he would discover the misery of his fallen condition, which is the knowledge of himself necessary for repentance. In the contexts in which theologians used this argument it is altogether predictable that each self is representative of the universal human condition, an embodiment of each man's sinfulness and his need for salvation. (Ferry (1983) 40f.)¹²²

The Protestant urge to interrogate the self must therefore not simply be conflated with the emergence of modern-style individualism. First and foremost, Protestantism takes the

¹²² Ferry quotes from John Calvin, *The Instityion of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Thomas Norton. London 1574 (1). The (Protestant) idea that the innermost spheres of the self cannot be hidden from God is expressed in the Collect that opens the service of Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Anglican church: 'Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen' (*The Book of Common Prayer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (294)).

individual self to be representative of the human in general. Moreover, self-scrutiny is not primarily concerned with positive self-valuation and establishing the self as an independent category, but implies self-renunciation in the face of divine perfection and modelling the self in relation to a moral and ethical ideal.¹²³ However, I do see a connection between the religiously motivated preoccupation with the self and the modern veneration of the individual. It is particularly visible in the self-fashioning that was triggered by the characteristic spirituality of the emergent Protestant denominations. Although the self-writings of Protestant spiritual autobiographers – a tradition that the seventeenth-century women relate to – generally present a self that is shaped by the outward standards of sin versus virtue and in relation to biblical examples, their texts ultimately belie their professed self-derogation. Almost unwittingly, ‘the narratives actually convey vivid impressions of their authors, who are perforce at the heart of their texts ... [T]he writers claim that they, in themselves, are still contemptible, yet their texts construct them as central and their personal experience as important’ (Booy (2002) 300). The same is true for the authorial stance of the mothers’ manuals: with their belief in mastery of the self as the key to possible self-improvement, the writers also endow their selves – though often implicitly – with an indisputable value of their own.

It is this tentative development towards modern individualism that is discernible in the mothers’ manuals – even though, in terms of genre, they were not explicitly written with the specific intent of expressing or taking stock of the writers’ selves, but primarily addressed to others and heavily dependent on the conduct book tradition. In all the texts, we can glimpse the female author’s sense of self-worth that she gained from writing. Ultimately, there is a degree of power to be gained from giving advice to posterity, especially as it transcends the boundaries of acceptable, feminine containment. Dorothy Leigh’s *Mothers Blessing* attests to this stance, even if only in a somewhat submerged and indirect way. Writing down what she perceives to be the most important moral guidelines that should shape her children’s lives enables Leigh to be ‘much at peace, quiet and contentment’ (sig. A3v), once she has acted on her strongly felt urge (‘paine’ (sig. A8r)) ‘[t]o write this little book to you’ (sig. A8r).

In the opening paragraph entitled ‘Counsell to my children,’ casting herself in the nurturing role of provider of ‘spirituall food of the soule’ (sig. A12r), Leigh tells a parable in which the bee functions as an analogy that exemplifies how her sons ought to receive her advice. The bee was a frequently utilised motif in early modern culture, charged with

¹²³ For the differences as well as connections between religious and modern, secular individualism, cf. Hervieu-Léger (2001) 162ff.

the symbolism of tireless activity as well as meaningful existence as part of an ordered, hierarchically structured community.¹²⁴ Leigh's bee parable expresses a pragmatic approach to life, according to which taking care of the self is the key to a fulfilling and successful life. The bee's typical behaviour in the course of the seasons attests to this:

But where she finds it [a nourishing flower], there she workes,
and gets the wholesome food,

...

And for *to serve her selfe* at need
when winter doth begin:
When storm and tempest is without,
then she doth find *within*.

A sweet and pleasant wholesome food,
a house to keepe her warm,
A place where softly she may rest,
and be kept from all harme. (sigs. A8r f.; emphasis added)

Significantly, the bee's search for 'wholsome food' directs her into the inward realm, a private and self-contained space that will 'ke[ep her] from all harme.' Admonishing her addressees '[t]o gather hony of each flower, / as doth the labourous Bee' (sig. A8r), Leigh aligns her advice with the 'wholsome food' that guarantees the bee's survival and spiritual well-being (cf. Poole (1995) 75). On a second level, the parable can be read as giving implicit clues about Leigh's own attitudes towards her writing. The purpose of writing is 'to serve her selfe' in a double sense: literally, the expression refers to the use that Leigh wishes her sons will make of her advice. Thus it also hints at the gratification that it offers to herself, because giving advice to her children responds to a deeply felt need: 'The first cause of writing, is a Motherly affection' (sig. A11r). It is Leigh's recurrent alignment of her identity as a mother with her writing and its content (cf. sigs. A11v ff. in particular) that legitimises the interpretive transition from addressee to author, i.e. that makes it possible to read her advice to her sons also as an expression of her attitudes towards herself. Deliberately staging a continuity between herself and her children ('seeing my selfe going out of the world, and you but comming in' (sig. A6v)), Leigh 'writes to what was once her own self' (Poole (1995) 75). Her writing is thus geared as much to her self, from which it emanates, as it is to her addressees. This move is only logical, given the continuity that she feels between herself and her children. In so doing, she displays a

¹²⁴ Cf. Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 (21ff.).

strong self-assurance, since reaching out to posterity necessarily entails a view of the self as worthy of being passed on.¹²⁵

Beyond this constitutive connection with her children, Leigh seems to be greatly preoccupied throughout her manual with the self as a category of its own. She advises her children to ‘have a continual care of your selves’ (sig. E3r) and emphasises the need to bestow order on the self; her wish is for her sons to ‘be masters of your selves’ (sig. F11v). By extension, writing down what she considers the most valuable guidelines for a successful and morally impeccable life can be interpreted as the result of her own self-mastery: we can assume that, before she addresses her children, Leigh has undergone a similarly radical process of self-scrutiny as she expects of her sons, so that she is able to present the ideal of an ordered self that is worthy of imitation. She deliberately presents herself as an individual who has already completed the journey towards self-mastery on which her children are about to embark. This is why she feels compelled to relate her experience to them, ‘lest for want of learning they should fall where I stumbled, and then I should think my selfe in the fault, who knew there were such downe-falls in the world, that they could hardly climbe the hill to heaven without helpe, and yet had not told them thereof’ (sig. A2v).

Especially from a present-day perspective sceptical of religious patterns of signification, it is possible to detect a tinge of self-satisfaction in Leigh’s stance – she presents herself as being ‘in the know,’ as the bearer of a moral impeccability and authority that can hardly be challenged. Styling her advice as emanating from the combined forces of motherly love and personal experience, she makes it unimpeachable. It cannot be questioned on any grounds, as the author’s position is always superior, ultimately because it is grounded in its relation to a transcendental sphere. Leigh thus writes herself into a position of power that is, in effect, a far cry from the overt submission to divine authority that characterises her self-presentation throughout her manual. At first glance, this duality leaves us to wonder how the two can be brought together; yet if we consider the way in which her personal belief in divine salvation allows her to command a degree of *power*, the contradiction can be resolved. Leigh’s stance is proof of the fact that women could and did use seemingly self-abnegating ideologies as vehicles for self-empowerment. Superficial self-denial is thereby turned into self-assertion; the former is needed only in order to hide

¹²⁵ This lends support to Harriet Blodgett’s view that a recurrent strategy in women’s writings is legitimising the preoccupation with the self in the guise of altruism. With reference to diary writing, she observes: ‘[D]iaristic ego usually retreats behind justifications that are entirely self-acceptable: utility and need – a memoir for posterity, a record for my children, a self-improving discipline to make me more acceptable to others’ (Blodgett (1989) 72).

actual female authority behind a veneer of virtuous submission. In that, Leigh's strategy can be interpreted as an instance of careful self-fashioning along the lines that are discernible in other early modern women's self-writings. It is a self-fashioning in the sense of a mastery of the self which carefully upholds a precarious balance between conventional submission and effective agency – in fact, which derives the latter from the former.

Leigh's stress on self-mastery entails another ambiguity for her presentation of self, because her emphasis on order necessarily hinges on the (real or imagined) threat of disorder. If the self needs to be under constant surveillance, to be ordered through adherence to a set of clearly defined moral principles, as Leigh claims, the implication is that the self is in fact precarious, that its carefully devised order might collapse. As the popularity of conduct and advice literature and the resulting didacticism in the early modern period in general suggest, the stress on order was partly a reaction to the insecurities that arose in connection with social and cultural changes, religious upheavals and a general sense of living at a time of unsettling epistemological shifts. In the face of these uncertainties, Leigh's affirmative presentation of her carefully monitored self in her writing, similar to Mildmay's and Moulsworth's, is predicated on the safety net of the larger order offered by her faith. Religion provides a stable grid against which the moral performance of the self can be measured, even '[w]hen storm and tempest is without' (sig. A8r), as the bee parable has it.

Thus Leigh's emphasis on divine grace provides her with an underlying sense of empowerment and allows her to claim authority. This effect can be taken to indicate that the order Leigh demands need not be restricted to a domestic and religious frame of reference; and, indeed, her bee parable also hints at a possible broader, secular conceptualisation.¹²⁶ This is significant insofar as it can be read as a hidden attempt on the author's part to surpass the acceptable feminine spheres that were the home and religion, a move made possible precisely because of the conventional associations of the bee motif as a socio-political symbol of order. Apart from 'serv[ing] her selfe' (sig. A8v), the bee works 'to doe her Country good' (sig. A8v): the individual's struggle for self-mastery is simultaneously the prerequisite for the community's well-being.

In order to grasp the implications of Leigh's appropriation of the motif, it is worthwhile to consider the way in which the bee, an animal that was known to live in a

¹²⁶ A similar use of the motif is made in Bernard de Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Public Benefits* (1714). Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. Cf. especially the didactic poem 'The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves turn'd Honest,' which states that '[t]hese Insects liv'd like Men, and all / Our Actions they perform'd in small' (Vol. 1, 17-37 (18)).

highly structured and hierarchically organised community, was frequently employed in the early modern period as a symbol of order. A typical example is the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1600), in which he draws on the bee hive as an analogy for an ideally ordered kingdom, in which the diverse roles of the specific individuals contribute to the functioning of the community as a whole:

... For so work the honey-bees,
Creatures that by a rule in nature teach
The act of order to a peopled kingdom.
They have a king, and officers of sorts,¹²⁷
...
... I this infer:
That many things, having full reference
To one consent, may work contrarily. (1.2.187-206)

Yet, to repeat, the early modern veneration for order that is expressed in passages such as this was offset by the concomitant fear of disorder. Obviously, all-encompassing order is nothing more than an ideal; explicitly formulating it only serves to hide its unattainability. Similar to Shakespeare's play, it is possible to detect a subdued sense of precariousness in Leigh's self-affirmed attitude, especially if one considers the effectively ambivalent character of the bee motif: as producers of honey and, on the symbolic level, models for order, bees are useful to humans; yet because of their stings, they are also associated with danger and aggression. Leigh shifts the point of the ambiguity away from the bee's potential danger to humans, but she also uses the motif as a double-sided image. In her parable, the 'labourous bee' (sig. A8r) is contrasted with 'the Bee that idle is' (sig. A8v):

And she [the idle bee] by no meanes can endure
the stormy winters blast.
She looketh out, and seeth death,
and finds no lesse within. (sig. A8v)

Again, the bee analogy is applied to the theme of selfhood ('within'), and the self appears as a threatened possession: it is always in danger of elimination ('death'). The 'idle' (i.e. not virtuous) bee is surrounded by loss and destruction (death 'out[side]' and 'within'). Ultimately, this explains why there is a constant need for (self-)surveillance ('she looketh ...'), even as the self is affirmed as valuable in itself. If (self-)surveillance fails, the inevitable result is individual and communal disorder. Again, the stress on order channels back to Leigh's own presentation of self. Her own identity is secure as long as the order on which it is built – the ideal of godliness, the belief in divine grace and eternal life in the

¹²⁷ What follows is a list of other types of bees and their imagined human counterparts.

hereafter – remains intact. As her sense of self derives from the ability to master her self so as to be able to relate to posterity, it is vital for her children to internalise the same principles, not only for their benefit, but also for Leigh’s own sense of self to be upheld. Again, the ordered self hinges on a secure outward framework. To the extent that this framework is Leigh’s own creation, it endows her with considerable power. She expresses the connection that Kate Lilley observes: ‘Self-government is a particularly rich trope for women, who are unlikely to govern anything else’ (Lilley (1992) 113).

In a way that is similar to Leigh’s strategies, M. R., in her *Mothers Counsell or, Live Within Compasse*, emphasises the need for constant self-scrutiny. In a particularly insightful passage, she equates the self with the text: ‘that text of thy selfe’ (sig. A7v). It is crucial to note that this analogy occurs in a distinctly negative context, as R. warns her daughter of the potentially detrimental influence of others: ‘Corrupt company is more infectious than corrupt aire; therefore let women be advised in their choise; for that text of thy selfe that could never bee expounded; thy companion shall as thy commentarie, lay open to the world’ (sig. A7v). According to R., it is crucial to retain command over a core of self that is inaccessible to others. She thus propagates a ‘consubstantiality of self and text’ (Ottway (1998) 279) that is very different from the kind of alignment that Martha Moulsworth establishes – far from being powerfully inscribed, the textual self is in danger of losing its ‘vertue’ (sig. A8r) because it can be unveiled and deciphered. For a woman, the inherently public nature of writing invites the association with unrestrained female sexuality – the very opposite of virtue. In the cultural perception of the time, ‘openness’ to the public via speech is metaphorically related to the abhorrent ‘openness’ of the female sexual body. On the immediate textual level, the person addressed is R.’s daughter, yet the passage has even more significant implications for the author’s own self. After all, we might infer, she creates a ‘text of [her] selfe’ in her writing and, because of its potentially public nature, she is most immediately threatened by ‘corrupt company.’ Apparently, allowing the self to enter the text is an inherently dangerous venture.

With this line of argument, R.’s text qualifies, if not contradicts, the universality of the claims of much contemporary (French) feminist theory, according to which women simply have to speak out if they are to express themselves in a genuine manner, unmediated by patriarchal constraints. Perhaps most famously, Hélène Cixous has theorised women’s speech as an authentic way of giving voice to the female body. According to Cixous, women have privileged access to the ‘voice,’ the medium expressing the maternal sphere prior to the Oedipal split. Cixous regards writing as ‘the extension of

[the] self-identical prolongation of the speech act' (Moi (2002) 112) that is feminine self-expression, a mode that she calls *écriture féminine*:

I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous (1980) 245; emphasis in the original)¹²⁸

Women who write in this manner overcome the binary oppositions that characterise the patriarchal symbolic and create texts that, in Cixous's words, 'work on the difference.'¹²⁹ In so doing, they are enabled 'to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter' (Cixous (1980) 258), thus creating an intensely sensual, 'self-seeking text' (Cixous (1980) 260).¹³⁰ Yet M. R.'s remark suggests the exact opposite of Cixous's celebration of feminine writing and forms a stark contrast to her quasi-utopian vision: for R., to 'put herself into the text' would not constitute a liberating move, but might pose a threat to her self – a harsh contrast to Cixous's deceptively positive reference to 'laughter.' This is not to say that R. was unable to express herself in writing or to find gratification in it – after all, she identifies her self with her literary production, setting up her text as her 'last Will and Testament' (sig. A4r) – yet she proposes a far less celebratory and, it seems to me, more realistic, version of feminine self-writing. R. suggests that, for women to survive in the patriarchal culture, affirming the self necessitates imposing restraints, whereas unrestrained self-exposure would be the opposite of virtuous self-mastery and hence invite patriarchal sanction.

What is more, my observations on Dorothy Leigh's and M. R.'s textual construction of their selves contradict the idea that the early modern period saw the emergence of the modern epistemic stance which perceives the subject 'as the origin of discourse and action' (Hanson (1998) 3). Obviously, this would mean that the individual was striving to shape the very conditions of his or her existence and be in a position to do so. R.'s text, by contrast, belies this view and suggests the exact opposite, presenting as it does the relationship between the self and the text – her forum for self-display – in negative terms. Far from opening up promising opportunities for self-development and individual freedom, R.'s perspective alludes to the unsettling and not at all liberating effects of self-writing.

¹²⁸ Cf. also Cixous's essay 'La Venue à L'Écriture'; in Cixous (1986) 7-69.

¹²⁹ Hélène Cixous, 'Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon.' *Revue des sciences humaines* 168 (1977): 479-493 (480); quoted in Moi (2002) 106.

¹³⁰ 'Write! And your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed' (Cixous (1980) 260).

The self does not generate meaning of itself, but is an element of discourse, i.e. it is produced and constrained by the meanings that have currency at the particular socio-cultural moment and plays little part in their formation. Therefore, being forced to present 'that text of thy selfe' to the public gaze constitutes a threat because it opens the self to 'corrupt company' (sig. A7v) so that it might be 'incorporated to their vice' (sig. A8r). This is where R.'s conceptualisation of the self links in with Dorothy Leigh's plea for self-mastery and the characteristic inwardness it requires. The self is secure only if it remains self-contained; opening oneself to the world entails danger to one's moral status and, ultimately, to identity itself. However, keeping the self safely contained is an inherently difficult task to achieve. The detrimental implications of failure, I would argue, explain why the struggle for self-mastery is pre-eminent in women's writing.

Their stress on self-scrutiny is reminiscent of what Michel Foucault refers to as the hermeneutics, or technologies, of the self and the power relations that underlie them. Obviously, as with all applications of contemporary theory, there is a danger of creating anachronisms when reading Foucault against early modern women's writings. However, the parallels that exist are too striking to be overlooked and call for the attempt to trace interconnections between Foucault's ideas and the women's texts. Apart from being a means of discovering the 'truth' about the self, self-scrutiny provides ways in which the individual can strive to form him- or herself as an 'ethical subject,' to use the Foucaultian terminology, 'and this requires him [*sic*] to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself' (Foucault (1986) 28). Foucault regards this (self-)disciplinary mechanism as a form of power exercised by the individual over his or her self: there is 'no forming of the ethical subject without "modes of subjectivation" and an "aesthetics" or "practices of the self" that support them' (Foucault (1986) 28). According to Foucault, in a line of tradition that spans from ancient Greece to Western Christianity, personal and sexual identity are formed via the 'care of the self,'¹³¹ meaning that 'the self is seen ... as an aesthetic and ethical object to be created and cultivated' (Macey (2000) 135). The hermeneutics of the self are based on a self-monitoring power that is internalised, that guarantees security and, because of this, reproduces itself.¹³² According to Foucault, because the subject has internalised the mechanisms of discipline, it does not recognise them as strategies of coercion: 'Discipline "makes" individuals; it is the specific technique

¹³¹ Cf. the subtitle of vol. 3 of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.

¹³² In its most visible fashion it culminates in the modern disciplinary societies, which are characterised by structures of (internalised) surveillance. In their fully-fledged, nineteenth-century form they are upheld by administrative apparatuses, institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons etc., and by the attempt on the part of the state to guarantee uniformity (cf. Foucault (1991) 293).

of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise' (Foucault (1991) 170). In this sense, the hermeneutics of the self entail more complex processes than a straightforward imposition of power from above. They are 'those forms of understanding which the subject creates about himself' (Foucault (1985) 367):

... techniques that permit individuals to affect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. (Foucault (1985) 367)

According to Foucault, the techniques of continual self-scrutiny are central to Western (Christian) thought and culture and constitute the subject in the process of establishing the 'truth' about him- or herself:

The task of testing oneself, examining oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises, makes the question of truth – the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing – central to the formation of the ethical subject. (Foucault (1988) 68)¹³³

However, I would like to argue that the very idea of a 'truth' about the self that can be unveiled and discovered comes under suspicion if approached from a feminist angle – to put it crudely, the women's texts I have studied reveal it to be a masculine fantasy. Their writings suggest that the female authors do not believe in any such truth being decipherable; if it can be traced at all, it remains unattainable. It seems to be only the (early) modern *male* subject that can conceptualise itself as being 'in possession of a vital truth about himself' (Hanson (1998) 4) and for whom, therefore, introspection and self-scrutiny entail an engagement with his 'conscience as a potentially secret site of truth' (Hanson (1998) 4). The women writers I have studied, by contrast, cannot create the fiction of 'truth.' They do not deceive themselves as to the extent to which the self is a threatened possession and shaped by the religious, social and material contexts in which they live. Hence they pursue an even more rigid regime of self-control so as to be able to claim a place within these contexts. Only the self that corresponds to the conventional demands of feminine virtue can command power *within* the patriarchal scheme, as the women's texts so clearly show.

¹³³ According to Foucault, this way of perceiving the self emerged in the second century AD and is one of the fundamentals of Western culture. James W. Bernauer outlines two processes that, according to Foucault, make up the Christian 'care of the self': '... the constitution of the self as a hermeneutical reality, namely, the recognition that there is a truth in the subject, that the soul is the place where this truth resides, and that true discourses can be articulated concerning it ... The purpose of the Christian hermeneutic of the self is to foster renunciation of the self who has been objectified' (Bernauer (1990) 164f.).

Because of this specific relationship with the self, the women's writings support the point that the early modern period is formative as regards the self under (inward) surveillance, yet they do so in a distinctive fashion. By way of contrast, it is worthwhile comparing their senses of self with that of Michel de Montaigne, who has often been taken to exemplify early modern self-awareness in its most distinct shape. His essay 'Of Conscience' (1573-1574) gives an illuminating insight, revealing how self-scrutiny is seen to work towards the constitution of the self: 'So marvelous is the power of conscience! It makes us betray, accuse, and fight ourselves, and, in the absence of an outside witness, it brings us forward against ourselves.'¹³⁴ The self is exposed to the warring forces of wilful impulses and the workings of conscience and is thus internally divided. And yet, for Montaigne, conscience works in an ultimately self-assuring fashion: 'As conscience fills us with fear, so also it fills us with assurance and confidence. And I can say that in many perils I have walked with a much firmer step by virtue of the secret knowledge I had of my own will and the innocence of my intentions.'¹³⁵

For women, however, the connection between self-scrutiny and self-assurance is not as straightforward. To the extent that they present themselves as self-assured, they obviously engage in and appropriate a 'masculine' discourse, so as to obtain a certain degree of tangible power. Most visibly, exhorting their children to self-scrutiny means that the writers of mothers' manuals inculcate a compulsive (self-)disciplinary practice in them – an indication of the considerable power that comes with motherhood. Yet as their self-assertion is a precarious balancing act, the women's resulting senses of self are markedly ambiguous. In contrast to Montaigne's exclusively secular focus, self-monitoring in the manuals is always framed with a religiously motivated perception of virtue, which forms the yardstick against which the principles of the individual conscience have to be measured. It is thus implicated in the teleological horizon of ultimate salvation. For instance, Elizabeth Grymeston urges her son to '[t]hinke, ô thinke, and bethinke thy selfe, from whence thou camest, where thou art, and whither thou goest' (sig. B3r). In a similar way, Elizabeth Joscelyn advises her child: 'At thy first wakinge in the morninge be carefull of thy selfe that thou harbor in thy brayn no vayn or vnprofitable but of all no vngodly fancy to hinder thy morning sacrifice but strayght frame thy selfe to meditate on the mercis of god' (114ff.). Dorothy Leigh goes even further, presenting a dualistic concept of the self whose virtuous side must be continually vigilant:

¹³⁴ 'Of Conscience' (1573-1574). Book II, 5. 264-266 (265).

¹³⁵ Ibid.

[T]herefore your resolution must bee, to deale with your stubborne and rebellious affections, as you will deale with a pampered wilde colt, and say unto them, By God's grace, I will not bee overmastered by you, I scorne to serve so beggarly and so base a slave as thou art, I will bridle thee, and thy headstrong, stout, proud, scornfull, and disobedient, untemperate, unholy, high-minded, forward, covetous, and idle disposition[.] (sig. G1r)

Leigh's animal imagery ('pampered white colt') highlights the need for self-surveillance; it suggests that self-surveillance is indispensable if humans are to uphold their very distinctive position in the creation. The self as it is presented in this instance is malleable; it can and should be ordered, mastered and fashioned in accordance with virtue. As I have pointed out before, this malleability must not tempt us to view the process as a self-reliant fashioning of identity, because to do so would be to lose sight of its strongly religious components. Successful self-mastery is, above all, dependent on divine grace, and eradicating vice is an act of deliberate choice that is, in turn, made possible by grace. This is what Elizabeth Grymeston suggests when she advises her son: 'And when you goe to bed, read over the carriage of your selfe that day. Reforme that is amisse; and give God thanks for that which is orderly: and so commit thy selfe to him that keepes thee' (sig. B2v). The self can be monitored and judged, but to the extent that it succeeds in achieving virtue, it is not solely the product of individual merit, but indicates the presence of divine grace.

It is therefore no contradiction that the authors' self-assertion relies heavily on traditional catalogues of virtue and the dominant (religious and patriarchal) discourses of the time. As Anne Ferry notes with regard to the idea of inwardness, '[e]ven as it was used in its most highly charged context in the sixteenth-century – the imperative to *know thy self* – the word did not stand for a modern conception of individuality or a unique inward experience' (Ferry (1983) 40; emphasis in the original). Ferry's observations are supported by the early modern women's texts. In spite of their intense relations to the self, their ways of taking 'care of the self' do not exemplify a conception of the individual as absolute, but attest to a sense of self as both enabled and constrained by discourse. After all, self-surveillance is geared towards the recognition that the self is not the originator of positive actions, but needs to be curtailed so as not to slide into arrogant monstrosity. In that, early modern women's senses of self are deeply informed by the medieval view of the self as the locus of amorality, wilfulness and evil. As M. R. admonishes her daughter, '[b]e nothing in thine owne eyes, that is, attribute nothing to thy selfe. ... [J]udge none frailer than thy selfe' (sig. B1v). The quest for self-knowledge is inevitably hampered because excessive self-valuation cuts across the desirably objective and detached stance towards the self:

‘There is nothing harder for a woman than to know her selfe; for blinded with beautie and self-love, they flatter themselves in all things’ (sig. B6r). ‘Self-love’ and knowledge of the self are engaged in a struggle for predominance; a conflict that is particularly vicious because the concepts are, in effect, mutually exclusive. Self-knowledge is possible only if the self is acknowledged as an entity in need of curtailment; it is inconceivable to know one’s self *and* to regard it as worthy of praise. As such, early modern women’s hermeneutics of the self are co-dependent on their persistent devaluation of selfhood.

In another respect, though, the mothers’ advice books relate more closely to the Foucaultian notion of the hermeneutics of the self, as their specific emphasis on continual self-scrutiny foreshadows the characteristically modern mechanisms of self-control. The manuals attest to the emergence of the kinds of phenomena that typify the workings of power intrinsic to modernity, power being understood as the modes of governing both the self and others.¹³⁶ In the case of the mothers’ manuals, achieving a morally flawless self is the prerequisite for and is co-dependent on the power it grants the authors over their addressees. It establishes what Foucault terms ‘power-knowledge-relations’ (Foucault (1991) 27), in the sense that:

... power produces knowledge ... ; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations[.] (Foucault (1991) 27).

In the case of the manuals, the mothers’ assumed knowledge of the right course of life places them in a position of power over their children. Clearly, this position makes for an assertive sense of self. To a certain extent, however, it also means that the women reproduce patriarchy by passing on the power it inflicts on them.¹³⁷ To put it bluntly, women are not simply ‘good,’ caring and nurturing by nature: instead, the evidence from

¹³⁶ Mitchell Dean elaborates the connections between self-mastery and power over others as follows: ‘Notions of morality and ethics generally rest on an idea of self-government. They presume some conception of an autonomous person capable of monitoring and regulating various aspects of their own conduct. ... Thus the notion of government extends to cover the way in which an individual questions his or her own conduct (or *problematizes* it) so that he or she may be better able to govern it. In other words government encompasses not only how we exercise authority over others, or how we govern abstract entities such as states and populations, but how we govern ourselves. ... Government concerns not only practices of government but also practices of the self’ (Dean (1999) 12; emphasis in the original).

¹³⁷ Foucault’s perception of power lends support to my argument that the mother-child bond establishes a power relationship, as the following passage suggests: ‘Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with regard to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations’ (Foucault (1981) 94).

mothers' manuals discloses 'the potentialities of *victim/executioner* which characterize each identity, each subject, each sex' (Kristeva (1986c) 210; emphasis in the original).

I would argue that it is precisely the dialectic of submission and self-assertion that allows the women, in effect, to experience a sense of self-worth and to exercise power in spite of their overt rejection of any such possibility. A related argument of Foucault's on the nature of power may help to grasp this point: according to Foucault, the disciplined manner of self-government that is the 'care of the self,' far from being merely restrictive, induces *pleasure*. In the case of early modern writers of mothers' manuals, pleasure stems from the fact that there is a degree of power to be gained from the firm conviction that the well-ordered self – achieved, paradoxically, through demeaning self-government – is morally impeccable and can hope for salvation, as well as inculcate the same strategies in others.

The self in the looking glass

The emergence of the modern hermeneutics of the self, the ambiguities that accrue to them, and the impossibility to neatly date a point of origin of the specifically modern brand of self-reflexivity can be traced in an exemplary way with reference to the image of the mirror, or looking glass, in early modern (women's) texts. The very frequency with which such imagery is invoked indicates that the writers were preoccupied with, or somehow allured by, the phenomenon of (self-)reflection. In an abundance of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writings, the word 'mirror' or 'looking glass' occurs as part of the title – some of the myriad examples include Thomas Salter's *A Mirrhor mete for all Mothers, Matrones and Maidens, intituled the Mirrhor of Modestie* (1579), Philip Stubbes's *A Christal Glasse, for Christian Women* (1591), Elizabeth I's translation of Marguerite of Navarre's *Le Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* ('The Mirror or Glass of the sinful soul' (1545)), or the fifth chapter of Elizabeth Grymeston's *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives*, which is entitled 'Speculum vitae. A sinners glasse' (sig. C4r).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*,¹³⁸ the words ‘mirror’ and ‘looking-glass’ have two distinct senses: on the one hand, they can be used to refer to ‘[t]hat which gives a faithful reflection or true description of anything’; on the other hand, they denote ‘[t]hat which reflects something to be avoided; a warning.’ The titles I have quoted provide examples of both usages. The issues at stake are always related to the wished-for achievement of virtue by the addressee, through emulating or refuting, respectively, the positive or negative examples that the author presents. In none of the texts, however, is the notion of the mirror used in a direct relation to the *writer’s* self. According to Deborah Shuger, this is because the early modern period did not conceive of the mirror as a tool for *self*-reflection: in the examples she refers to, it does not reflect the onlooker’s self, but makes him or her see ‘instead saints, skulls, friends, offspring, spouses, magistrates, Christ’ (Shuger (1999) 37), who provide possible (positive or negative) identifications. Shuger concludes from this observation that the early modern experience of the self is still deeply rooted in medieval concepts of mere imitation; it ‘lacks reflexivity, self-consciousness, and individuation, and hence differs fundamentally from what we think of as the modern self’ (Shuger (1999) 35).¹³⁹ Shuger emphatically stresses that, prior to the late seventeenth century, the mirror is not associated with self-scrutiny in the modern sense of the term (‘one cannot backdate this selfhood to the Renaissance’ (Shuger (1999) 36)).¹⁴⁰ However, as my analysis of early modern women’s strategies of self-mastery has shown, there are elements in their senses of self that foreshadow the modern hermeneutics of the self and make any neat chronological categorisation appear simplistic. For one thing, it is obvious that looking into the mirror is bound to trigger a preoccupation with the self of some kind or other; it was certainly ‘an intimate act, performed in privacy and on occasions apart’ (Ferry (1983) 50) also in the early seventeenth century. Instead, what is at issue is the nature and self-understanding of the self that is being scrutinised. It remains to be seen whether Shuger is right in stating that the types of self-scrutiny that were extant in the early modern period ‘are ethical rather than epistemic procedures, acts of conscience not self-consciousness’ (Shuger (1999) 34) – i.e. whether the self is acknowledged as a category of its own, or merely as a vehicle for ‘good’ or ‘bad’ actions and behaviours in relation to an outwardly imposed moral framework.

¹³⁸ Vol. IX. Eds. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd ed. 1989 (8, 839f.).

¹³⁹ For Shuger, this ‘suggests that early modern selfhood was not experienced reflexively but, as it were, relationally’ (Shuger (1999) 37). For a discussion of the relevance of relationality for early modern women’s self-writings, cf. 2.2.

¹⁴⁰ To be fair to Shuger, she derives her conclusions from an entirely different set of texts than the ones I am looking at: she is concerned with male humanist treatises such as Sir John Davies’s *Nosce teipsum*, Juan Luis Vives’s *De anima et vita* and Philip Melancthon’s *Liber de anima*.

The mirror features as an obviously ethical device in Alice Sutcliffe's prefatory poem 'To the Reader,' in which she outlines how she would like her *Meditations of Man's Mortalitie* (1634) to be received:

Would'st thou (fraile Reader) thy true Nature see?
Behold this Glasse of thy Mortality.
Digest the precepts of this pious Booke,
Thou canst not in a nobler Mirrour looke. (sig. a5v)

Getting to the core of one's 'true Nature' does not only involve inward-directed self-reflection, but works in terms of a contrast to and comparison with the examples presented in 'this pious Booke.' The setup of the *Meditations* is conducive to this strategy, contrasting as it does 'true Godlinesse' and 'the Peace of a good Conscience' (sig. a11v) with 'the deceivableness of Worldly Pleasures' that the 'weake Christian' (sig. a12r) cannot but succumb to. This is in line with Shuger's view, who suggests that the textual mirror is not designed to provide a reflection of the self, but to ultimately channel back to a higher ethical authority that is the yardstick of self-scrutiny: for the virtuous Christian on the last day, 'there will be GOD himselfe who will bee a Looking-Glasse to the eyes of his Elect' (sigs. F10v f.). Again, the self is perceived as part of a pre-existing (religious) framework.

However, there are instances of mirror imagery in the texts I have studied that contradict Shuger's view and rely less on the idea of pre-existing concepts of virtue and vice in comparison to which the writers assert themselves. The authors of the mothers' manuals assume that the mirror, to adapt Shuger's terminology, functions as both an 'ethical' and an 'epistemic' device. In Elizabeth Joscelyn's *Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*, the text itself – i.e. not an outwardly imposed frame of reference – is intended to work as a mirror in which the authorial persona will be allowed to observe and thus to judge her performance as a mother: 'I will make it my own lookinge glasse whearin to see when I am too seuear[,] when too remiss and in my childes fault thorough [*sic*] this glass discern mine own error' (115ff.). Joscelyn here creates a complex duality: her self-scrutiny is bound up with her addressee's development ('in my childes fault') and occurs directly through the text she composes ('thorough this glass'). These two components are, of course, interlinked, because her child's moral performance will be a direct function of the effectiveness of her text. Fundamentally, it is her *own* writing that functions as Joscelyn's mirror, i.e. the mirror is part of her self. Since the text mainly consists of references to her own experiences and the moral standards that she relates to her child, it works as a mirror in a self-referential fashion (partly filtered through an 'other,' her child). As she makes

clear throughout her treatise, what is good or bad mothering she is forced to work out in the very process of mothering itself; she will only be able to judge herself in an indirect way, namely with regard to the effects that her motherly advice will have on her child. Without inserting any explicit mimetic trajectory – i.e. without being able to compare herself with exemplary ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothers¹⁴¹ – she applies the reflected image directly to her self. The text is constructed as a mirror not only for her addressee, but for herself as an author and a mother. This also means that Joscelin partly constitutes her identity through her writing. By implication, the text as such is not exclusively addressed to her child, but also to herself, because it is a vehicle for her own identity formation. To the extent that the mirror prompts independent self-scrutiny, not on the terms of similarity or difference from a given example, but achieved via a radically self-reflexive approach, it functions as an ‘epistemic,’ not simply as an ‘ethical’ device.¹⁴² In this sense, women such as Joscelin use the mirror to establish self-knowledge, a knowledge that is always partial and constrained by its discursive environment. The mirror is a means of constituting the self, not merely interpreting or judging it according to an outward, predetermined standard. Whilst still dependent on a religious framework, Joscelin is forced to infer her moral standing without recourse to clearly set examples.

With a slightly different bent, M. R., in her *Mothers Counsell*, presents the mirror as part of the hermeneutics of the self that she advises her addressees to pursue. Observing oneself in the mirror is part of the exercise of deciphering the self: ‘Let every woman behold her selfe in a Looking-glasse, and if shee appeare beautifull, let her doe such things as become her beautie, but if shee seeme foule, then let her make good with good manners the beautie which her face lacketh’ (sigs. B4v f.).¹⁴³ Again, R. does not quote examples of virtuous or improper reactions of beautiful females to their mirror images, but prompts her daughter to examine her own attitudes according to an abstract catalogue of behaviour. Of course, whether ‘shee appeare beautifull,’ and what ‘such things as become her beautie’ consist of, is not entirely left open, as the wider context of the manual suggests. By no means have conventional expectations and religious injunctions become irrelevant; but I

¹⁴¹ This would be what Debora Shuger considers to be the typical (medieval and) early modern understanding of the mirror: it presents the onlooker with inward ‘exemplary images of good and evil’ (Shuger (1999) 34).

¹⁴² I understand the term ‘episteme,’ the Greek word for ‘knowledge,’ in Michel Foucault’s sense, as he introduces it as a critical term in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). It denotes ‘a structure defining the conditions that both make knowledge possible and restrict its scope’ (Macey (2000) 113), i.e. ‘the historical set of relations uniting the various discursive practices and discursive formations that generate ... forms of knowledge’ (Macey (2000) 113).

¹⁴³ M. R. later repeats this advice in a slightly amended fashion, directly addressing her daughter: ‘Behold thy selfe in a Looking-glasse, and if thou appeare beautifull, doe such things as becomes thy beautie; but if thou seeme foule, then performe with good manners the dutie which thy face wanteth’ (sig. C4v).

would argue that they are supplemented with a more active engagement with the self. The use of the mirror as a tool for objectifying the self and thus judging and shaping it from an observer's angle hints at the very reflexive self-consciousness whose existence Shuger denies. On the other hand, she is right to observe that the texts do not simply foreshadow 'the specular gaze or Cartesian subjectivity where the perceiving "I" separates from and beholds – as in a mirror – an objectified "me"' (Shuger (1999) 22). The self is objectified only in a partial sense: it also always engages with an 'other,' be it an existing moral framework or another person.

It might have been the power inherent in the emergent, detached subjectivity of modernity that continued to prompt the distinctly negative associations of the mirror as a tool of female vanity in the period and that made its appropriation as a motif problematic for female writers. A woman who is able to objectify her self might be tempted to attach a value to it that is exaggerated or conceited (i.e. not virtuous) by the standards of the day. This, in turn, goes against the conventional expectations associated with submissive femininity.¹⁴⁴ In order to curtail their distinct senses of self, patriarchy responds with apprehension to females who scrutinise themselves in the mirror, and it therefore needs to foreground the negative connotations of selfhood. Because of this association, early modern women's references to the mirror as a tool for self-scrutiny cannot simply be read in a straightforwardly positive way. Their self-reflection does not merely constitute an act of self-determination and opposition to patriarchy. Rather, the fact that the mirror also reveals their personal shortcomings plays in the hands of patriarchy, supporting and necessitating a presentation of the self as submissive.¹⁴⁵ M. R.'s persistent warnings of the excessive preoccupation with outward appearance and the over-valuation of the self are indicative of this.

And yet, in using the mirror as a tool for self-scrutiny, these female writers also act in defiance of patriarchy, evading and/or disrespecting the mechanisms of patriarchal control. For even if they cannot completely reinvent the concept, they boldly (re-)claim for themselves the motif of the mirror in spite of its negative connotations in patriarchal modes

¹⁴⁴ A stereotypical instance of female vanity expressed by the use of a mirror occurs in Edmund Spenser's *Fairie Queene* (1590-96): the character of Lucifera 'held a mirrhour bright, / Wherein her face she often vewed fayne, / And in her selfe-loved semblance took delight (Edmund Spenser, *The Fairie Queene* (1590-96), 1.4.10; quoted in Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 (124).

¹⁴⁵ Similarly, in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1595) the mirror appears as a tool that shows the self to be worthless. Having relinquished his royal authority to his rebel opponent Henry Bolingbroke, Richard examines himself in a mirror – 'the very book indeed / Where all my sins are writ' (4.1.264). Realising that '[a] brittle glory shineth in this face. / As brittle as the glory is the face' (4.1.277), he shatters the glass, thereby literalising the fragmentation of his identity that Bolingbroke's usurpation has effected.

of thought. To the extent that this is a subversive move, it should prompt us to question Luce Irigaray's identification of the mirror, or *speculum*,¹⁴⁶ with the male gaze, which turns the female into a mere function of the male onlooker's expectations. According to Irigaray, '[w]e [women] look at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves and in search of our own becoming. The mirror almost always serves to reduce us to a pure exteriority' (Irigaray (1993) 65; emphasis in the original). At first glance, Irigaray's observations seem to be applicable to the texts I have studied. Although it is geared towards self-scrutiny, the motif of the mirror occurs in distinctly negative contexts and serves, as in M. R.'s text, to curtail a self that has failed to obey the commands of virtue, or to make it aware of its shortcomings, as in Joscelin's. In this sense the image of the mirror expresses the negative connotations of the self as a site of potential unruliness and amorality. What is more, self-scrutiny always takes place within the framework of patriarchal, if not misogynist, assumptions about and codes of conduct for women – it does not work as a trigger for women's 'becoming.' Self-scrutiny cannot rid itself of the patriarchal ideals of virtuous femininity lurking in the background – note above all M. R.'s comment on female beauty, but also Joscelin's notions of what makes a 'good' mother. And yet this is only part of the picture. I would still consider women's self-monitoring as crucial to the writers' self-determined identity formation: for, to regard the self as an object worthy of study is in itself an act of self-valorisation, even if the categories for the resulting evaluation are implicated in patriarchal structures of thought. After all, what the women see in the mirror always has an element of innovation and is partly the product of what they want to see; it never simply reiterates the patriarchal bias wholesale.

The question remains why it was possible for early modern women to appropriate the motif of the mirror as a tool for self-reflection in a culture that had not yet wholly embraced the concept (for the proliferation of mirror imagery in titles such as the ones I have quoted above prove that Deborah Shuger's reading is by no means entirely beside the point; I would merely consider it to be incomplete). A possible clue may be found by looking at the underlying material dimension of the motif.¹⁴⁷ Lorna Weatherill links early

¹⁴⁶ Irigaray's *speculum* metaphorically combines the ocular gaze and the gynaecological instrument – both work to objectify women.

¹⁴⁷ As regards the reasons for the proliferation of mirror imagery in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Herbert Grabes goes so far as to prioritise the wider availability of mirrors over their implications for self-reflexivity: 'Diese gebrauchsbefindete Kontinuität [des Motivs der Selbstbetrachtung im Spiegel] führt einen allerdings auch dazu, eine besondere "Spiegelmode," wie sie vom Spätmittelalter bis ins 17. Jahrhundert hinein zu beobachten ist, zunächst nicht mit einer neuen, reflexiveren Bewußtseinslage, sondern mit einer kulturhistorischen Veränderung, nämlich der billigen Massenproduktion und der Qualitätsverbesserung von

modern women's ownership of mirrors to both the emerging 'modern' self-awareness and to feminine spirituality:

More women's households ... had looking glasses ... Mirrors, besides reflecting light and improving the appearance of a home, give an image of the viewer and indicate some degree of self-awareness. In one way this shows a concern for physical appearance, but it also shows an awareness of individuality and the distinctions between individuals: mirrors were not merely the tools of vanity. This is in keeping with the known concerns of women over their inner spiritual and emotional lives. (Weatherill (1986) 143f.)

Quite simply, the more widespread availability of mirrors triggered the preoccupation with what the mirror reflected back. Looking deeper, mirror imagery seems to be a gender-specific concern because of women's psychological disposition: a possible explanation for the distinctively feminine relationship to mirrors that women's writings suggest and that Weatherill relates to their specific inward lives may be found in the Lacanian concept of the mirror-stage. Admittedly, Lacan developed his theories in the mid-twentieth century and drew on a psychoanalytical tradition that is rooted in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century modes of thinking.¹⁴⁸ Still, because of the centrality and universality that Lacan accords to the mirror as a tool for identity formation, it makes sense to relate early modern women's uses of the motif to his ideas. For Lacan, the child's self-recognition in the mirror confronts him or her with an imaginary vision of wholeness. The desire to attain this illusory unity is constitutive of human subjectivity. Because the mirror is a constant reminder of the subject's lack, it inaugurates a profound alienation, summarised in the proverbial remark that 'I is an other' ('Je est un autre') (Macey (2000) 286). However, women's experience of the mirror-stage is not predicated exclusively on separation and alienation, as is suggested by Lacan's model, derived as it is from the alleged male 'norm.' Women's problematic position in the symbolic order implies an inherent instability, so that they are unable to uphold the fiction of wholeness that the mirror promises. Consequently, I would argue, they are more ready to employ it as an instrument that interacts or interferes with their (already fragmented) selves. Given that the illusion of wholeness is always shattered from the beginning, we might speculate that the mirror allows women access to

Glassspiegeln durch die Venetianer seit dem 14. Jahrhundert in Verbindung zu bringen' (Grabes (1973) 126). Similarly, Philippa Kelly links the material with the symbolic dimensions of mirroring when she observes that, '[i]n the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the concept of mirroring, developed from a burgeoning industry in glass mirror-making, was importantly linked to the complex realm of individuality through an abundance of artistic tropes' (Kelly (2002) 1).

¹⁴⁸ For example, Philippa Kelly points to the discrepancy between twentieth-century psychoanalysis and early modern culture when she interprets a scene from Milton's *Paradise Lost* as showing in the mirror 'a child enchanted by a new companion whose movements are so in tune with its own (*but not, however, the kind of modern Lacanian child who follows a trajectory toward individuation*)' (Kelly (2002) 11; emphasis added).

the self, rather than merely objectifying it. As is the case in the passages from Joscelyn's and R.'s texts I have quoted, analysing one's reflection in the mirror makes it possible to detect flaws and shortcomings and to try to eradicate them. The female writers' stance is thus one of simultaneous self-objectification, as an object to be scrutinised and acted upon, and subjective self-presence, because the observer is the same person as the observed. This suggests that the epistemological shift associated with René Descartes and Enlightenment rationality, which affected masculine subjectivity in such significant ways and ushered in 'modern' selfhood, cannot be applied to women's hermeneutics of the self in quite the same way. The characteristic self-objectification of the 'modern' (male) self is not carried through by women in a stringent fashion, but is constantly being undercut by the workings of emotions, other facets of the self, or the presence of an other.

Excess of textuality: the vagaries of Margaret Cavendish's writing/written self

It is illuminating to contrast my observations on women's constitution of self in early seventeenth-century texts with Margaret Cavendish's strategies of authorial self-construction in her various writings, especially in her autobiography *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life* (1656): its very title is suggestive of the idea that the individual can establish the 'truth' about him- or herself. In the texts I have studied so far, textuality is presented as ultimately constituting a danger to the self; it is a necessary condition of writing, but needs to be supplemented with a firm and unshakeable backup, usually in the form of religious belief and practices of radical self-curtailment.

At first glance, Margaret Cavendish appears to lay claim on a sense of self that is devoid of any such contingencies. With surprising self-confidence, she regards the process of writing as in itself bringing forth a hidden truth of self. Gaining access to that truth is perceived as an aim that necessitates and legitimises a degree of self-assertion that borders on the transgressive, as the closing paragraph of her autobiography reveals:

But I hope my readers will not think me vain for writing my life, since there have been many that have done the like, as Caesar, Ovid, and many more, both men and women, and I know no reason I may not do it as well as they: but I verily believe some censuring readers will scornfully say, why hath this Lady writ her own life? since none cares to know whose daughter she was or whose wife she is, or how she was bred, or

what fortunes she had, or how she lived, or what humour or disposition she was of. I answer that it is true, that 'tis no purpose to the readers, but it is to the authoress, because I write it for my own sake, not theirs. Neither did I intend this piece for to delight, but to divulge; not to please the fancy, but to tell the truth, lest after-ages should mistake, in not knowing I was daughter to one Master Lucas of St Johns near Colchester, in Essex, second wife to the Lord Marquis of Newcastle; for my Lord having had two wives, I might easily have been mistaken, especially if I should die and my Lord marry again. (178)

Cavendish initially displays an impressive degree of self-assertion, especially in her bold claim that 'I write it for my own sake, not theirs.' Expressing her desire to 'write her own life' is a surprisingly courageous venture in a culture that defines women via their relations to men and hence denies them a place in history. However, Cavendish's almost obsessive emphasis on the 'truth' contrasts with this confident stance and betrays an underlying fear of self-erasure, an anxiety that 'the self is ephemeral, that the self could die' (Sherman (1994) 203). This anxiety is confirmed at the end of the passage when she voices her concern that 'after-ages should mistake.' Again, we can assume, what is defended most vigorously – Cavendish's authorial self – is also what is most precarious.

My reading of her autobiography in terms of this constitutive dialectic is supported by Cavendish's statements on the significance of her individual life. She expresses what, at first glance, seems to be a striking sense of self-worth: 'I think it no crime to wish myself the exactest of Nature's works, my threat of life the longest, my chain of destiny the strongest, ... to be the highest on Fortune's wheel and to hold the wheel from turning, if I can' (176). Hers is a self that claims an authority beyond the powers of Nature and Providence – there is no trace of feminine submissiveness. Still, to read this passage as an expression of unfettered self-esteem is clearly reductive, since it has close affinities to the narcissistic solipsism that Cavendish recurrently claims for herself in her various works. It can be made out in the pervasive imagery of 'spinning from the self' (Sherman (1994) 193) in *A True Relation*, where the self is presented as a solitary genius whose fancies conjure up unique compositions: '[I]f the senses bring no work in, they will work of themselves, like silk-worms that spins [*sic*] out of their own bowels' (173). It goes without saying that Cavendish's stress on individuality and unashamed solitariness is surprisingly innovative and progressive in a seventeenth-century woman. It certainly allows her to occupy a powerful textual position – yet it is also deeply flawed and has a range of unsettling, if not detrimental implications, as I will show.

Perhaps the most striking instance of Cavendish's assertion of her (written) self occurs in her fantastical story *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*

(1668), where she sets herself up as the head of a fictional, alternative society: '[T]hough I cannot be Henry *the Fifth* or Charles *the Second*, yet I endeavour to be, Margaret *the First*' (sig. A4v; emphasis in the original). It is essential to note that 'in the fiction she appears as herself' (Sherman (1994) 191), i.e. the self who writes is the very same self that is being written about. Moreover, Cavendish constructs herself as the ruler of her imaginary empire. The fictional version she creates of herself through the character of the Duchess of Newcastle in the *Blazing World* is excessive in her ambition to attain power: '[N]either she her self, nor no Creature in the World was able to know either the height, depth, or breadth of her Ambition' (sig. N3r). Yet this self-presentation also points to a number of ambiguities which I take to be paradigmatic for Cavendish's sense of self. In spite of the outstandingly powerful position that she assigns to herself, she cannot but simultaneously set herself apart from everybody else (cf. Gallagher (1988) 27). Claiming sovereignty over her imaginative empire is possible only in combination with a gesture of solipsistic isolation and, even more importantly, renunciation of the material. In the *Blazing World*, the Duchess is persuaded by 'some Immaterial Spirits [who] came to visit her' (sig. N3v) to give up her plan to conquer one of the real, material worlds – an idea that, if implemented, would amount to usurping a male prerogative. Instead the spirits advise her to create an *immaterial* world entirely of her own invention:

Why should you desire to be Empress of a Material World, and be troubled with the cares that attend Government? when as by creating a World within your self, you may enjoy all both in whole and in parts, without controle or opposition; and may make what World you please, and alter it when you please, and enjoy as much pleasure and delight as a World can afford you? (sig. O1r)

Crucially – and this is what Cavendish fails to point out in her writing – this is a world restricted entirely to the imagination; any power that the Duchess can claim as 'Empress' of this world does not extend beyond the realm of fantasy. At first glance, it seems to be a viable alternative to (masculine) competitiveness and belligerence, a world in which 'all the people lived in a peaceful society, united Tranquility, and Religious Conformity' (sig. O3v). Its downside, however, is the radical solipsism it necessitates. Anybody who attempts to interfere with the Duchess's imaginary rule is invited to 'rather chuse to create another World' (sig. X4v). Engaging with others and establishing a truly influential position is thereby precluded.

The coach metaphor that Cavendish evokes in her *True Relation* with reference to her appearances in public ('I go sometimes abroad, seldom to visit, but only in my coach about the town or about some of the streets' (173)) visualises some of the implications of

this solipsistic strategy. Promenading in her coach, Cavendish can be seen, but not accessed properly; she can be part of public life at the same time as her self remains reassuringly remote (cf. Smith (1987) 98f.). Her strategy of simultaneous absence and presence is reminiscent of the practices of the contemporary Stuart kings, especially James I's self-display in London city pageants. According to Jonathan Goldberg, Elizabeth I, the king's predecessor, had used the pageants for interaction with her people – both staged and genuine. In contrast:

Whereas Elizabeth played at being part of the pageants, James played at being *apart*, separate ... As he arrived, like the sun giving life, like the groom entering the bride, like a king in court, the city sprang alive, acting in word and deed to show what the royal presence contains in itself and gives merely by being present and being seen. (Goldberg (1983) 31; emphasis added)

Goldberg's description of James I may equally be applied to the aristocratic spectacle Cavendish sets up: 'What he offered was not simply an image of his power, but the power of himself as image' (Goldberg (1983) 31). Crucially, the image that Cavendish primarily creates of herself is that of an eccentric. A number of historical records give evidence of the fact that she was notorious for her extravagant and showy appearance and behaviour. In his diary, Samuel Pepys writes in 1667 that 'all the town-talk is nowadays of her extravagancies'; 'the whole story of this Lady is a romance, and all she doth is romantic.'¹⁴⁹ Similarly, Dorothy Osborne, in one of her letters (1652-54) to her fiancé William Temple, even describes Cavendish's behaviour as hovering on the brink of madness, when she observes that 'there were many soberer people in Bedlam.'¹⁵⁰ In spite of the criticism she incurred, the way Cavendish staged herself in public can be conceived of as part of a larger strategy of self-fashioning, motivated by a very concrete and plain self-interest: '[A]lthough Cavendish liked to dress in eye-catching clothing of her own design, she was not simply a public fool: rather, she intended to be understood as a harmless eccentric so that she could protect herself from criticism' (Fitzmaurice (1990) 202). James Fitzmaurice's interpretation provides a possible psychological trajectory by which we can reconcile her apparently paradoxical personality traits. Being perceived as slightly deranged, she enjoyed a degree of freedom that would otherwise not have been

¹⁴⁹ In: Samuel Pepys, *Diary*. 11 vols. Eds. Robert Latham and William Matthews. London: Bell & Hyman, 1970-83. Vol. 8 (186, 163); quoted in Graham, Hinds, Hoby and Wilcox (1989) 87. It is perhaps useful to note that the term 'romance,' in the seventeenth century, triggered associations of 'fantasy, improbability, extravagance and naivety ... [and] suggest[ed] elements of love, adventure, the marvellous and the "mythic"' (J. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin, 4th ed. 1998 (758)).

¹⁵⁰ Dorothy Osborne, *Letters from Dorothy Osborne to William Temple*. Ed. G. C. Moore Smith. Oxford 1928 (41); quoted in Fitzmaurice (1990) 200.

available to her. Each of her eccentric gestures was ‘calculated to engage people while keeping them at a comfortable distance’ (Battigelli (1998) 7). However, what Cavendish clearly does *not* achieve is an authoritative position *within* the power structures of her society.¹⁵¹ In the case of James I, the male monarch, visually impressive self-display could work as a strategy of manifesting and solidifying authority, because it disguised real power in theatrical form. Yet it is doubtful whether Cavendish could make this mechanism work for herself to the same effect – after all, she did not command any tangible power. Firstly, as a woman, she merely copied a male form of discourse without being endowed with its material backup. Secondly, as a member of the aristocracy, she could only display the remnants of the power of a class that had been robbed of the economic basis without which social influence remains insubstantial.¹⁵² Cavendish’s claim to be ‘Margaret the First’ must not therefore be read as a plea for women’s access to the political sphere; in my view it is not even an instance of proto-feminist self-assertion. The underlying reason for her solipsistic fantasy lies in the fact that, in a society which defines the female as ‘other,’ in terms of lack, it is impossible for a woman to be a full subject (cf. Gallagher (1988) 27).¹⁵³ She can only be a metaphorical ‘monarch’ who is primarily an object of public display and relies on her simultaneous presence and remoteness in order to remain in her position. What is more, her apparently powerful self-positioning can only take place in the fictional realm, which doubles its solipsistic effect: ‘[R]estrictions on her worldly ambitions have directed her inward, toward the microcosm of the self’ (Gallagher (1988) 27), so that, as a ‘writing subject, [she] ... is [necessarily] isolated and complete unto herself’ (Gallagher (1988) 27). Laura J. Rosenthal interprets Cavendish’s writing strategies in similar terms: ‘Cavendish differs from the men of her class in her incapacity to share in their literary property; through originality, however, she can foil this economy by defining the subject

¹⁵¹ I therefore find it far too idealistic, if not naive, to read Cavendish’s writing only in terms of transgression. For example, Rebecca D’Monté argues that ‘Margaret Cavendish not only produces spectacles out of transgressed boundaries but specifically *because* they provide her with a way of transgressing those boundaries. Her unconventional calls for fame (in plays and other works), the frequent displays made of herself and her female characters, and the dramatic interplay between the chaste woman and her seductive staging, show us the unique ways in which Cavendish tried to reappropriate her own body ... Cavendish transforms female margins of text into spaces of potential power’ (D’Monté (2003) 121; emphasis in the original). I take issue with D’Monté’s argument because I cannot see in what form Cavendish’s ‘potential power’ could have manifested itself, given that her self-display ultimately isolated her from the mainstream of society.

¹⁵² In addition, we have to bear in mind that Cavendish is writing in the post-Civil War era. The experience that even royal power can be deposed and replaced by other mechanisms of rule implied that the society’s founding structures could no longer be taken for granted.

¹⁵³ Significantly, ‘women were excluded from all state offices except that of monarch’ (Gallagher (1988) 27). Female rule, if it did occur, was construed as an exception, i.e. it ultimately remained self-referential and failed to have any further-reaching effects (cf. the case of Elizabeth I).

position of ownership through purely internal and inherent, rather than inherited and acquired, qualities' (Rosenthal (1996) 68).

I find it important to stress the negative implications of Cavendish's exclusive inwardness, which the above-quoted passages merely hint at. Recognising her writing strategies as ultimately isolating sheds a less positive light on her self-presentation. Even though she frequently refers to 'the recursive pleasure of reading [her] own writing – "I delight my self with self"' (Lilley (2003) 27¹⁵⁴) – it is equally important to stress that there is a danger in her recourse to 'fancy': it cannot be sweepingly identified with an alternative counter-position to the masculine discourse of rationality of her time (embodied most clearly by contemporary Enlightenment thinkers such as René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes, whom she liked to associate herself with) but must be related to her own idiosyncratic versions of philosophical, scientific and socio-cultural discourse.¹⁵⁵ It can hardly be denied that, in her writings, Cavendish thereby provides alternative concepts to the masculine symbolic order – her fantastical counter-discourse to the scientific projects of her time in her *Poems and Fancies* (1653), or her explorations of cross-dressing and alternative gender identities in her closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), to name but a few. However, by writing in a deliberately idiosyncratic fashion ('I always took delight in ... singularity' (175)), she effectively isolates herself. In the *Blazing World* her 'singularity' is carried through to the extreme: in the dedicatory passage, addressed 'To all Noble and Worthy Ladies,' she declares that, 'though I have neither Power, Time nor Occasion, to be a great Conqueror, like Alexander, or Cesar; yet, rather than to be Mistress of a World, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made One of my own' (sig. A4v). Radical solipsism, based on her textual production, becomes Cavendish's way of asserting herself; what she cannot achieve or act out in the public arena she projects inward, into her self. Undoubtedly, there is a firm ground of self which her texts 'spin' from – but at the same time, for that self to be expressed, she has to accept her own 'eccentricity' (Gallagher (1988) 32). It is obvious that her deliberate project of creating herself is at the core of her writing – and this is also her problem, because it makes it all too seductive for readers and critics to take her texts as witnessing the birth of the modern

¹⁵⁴ Quoted from Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* (Letter 29). Ed. James Fitzmaurice. New York: Garland, 1997 (41).

¹⁵⁵ Cavendish seems to have been determined to secure for herself a place within the dominant masculine discourse: interestingly, during her years of exile on the continent, she had established correspondence with the (male) intellectual elite of her day (cf. Ottway (1998) 167), and she was the first woman to visit the Royal Society.

individual, complete unto itself and empowered by its interiority. Anna Battigelli's interpretation is exemplary for this move:

Prevented both by social conventions and by temperament from interacting fully with others in public, she turned to her writing. ... [W]hatever other selves existed – wife, stepmother, sister-in-law, sister, daughter – became of secondary interest to her compared to the writing self she invented within her text. ... As a writer, she identifies herself consistently throughout her work as an exile, transforming her comparative social isolation into a rhetorical stance, a position of advantage from which to address the world. (Battigelli (1998) 7)

To repeat – and this is where I think Battigelli's argument begs to be extended – Cavendish establishes her 'rhetorical stance' at the expense of real (i.e. material) power. Hers is a 'position of advantage' only within the immaterial realm of literary production. The same mechanism can be made out with regard to her presentation of self as exceptional, which occurs towards the end of her autobiography. In a manner that is at total odds with her otherwise professed 'bashfulness' and the submissive feminine stance that her culture expected of her, she boldly declares:

It is lawful for me to wish myself the best, and to do my honest endeavour thereunto. For I think it no crime to wish myself the exactest of Nature's works, my thread of life the longest, my chain of destiny the strongest, my mind the peaceablest, my life the pleasantest, my death the easiest, and the greatest saint in heaven; also to do my endeavour, so far as honour and honesty doth allow of, to be the highest on Fortune's wheel and to hold the wheel from turning, if I can. And if it be commendable to wish another's good, it were a sin not to wish my own[.] (176)

To read this passage as an expression of unfettered self-esteem is reductive, in my view, because it does not recognise the close affinities between Cavendish's striving 'to live by remembrance in after-ages' (177) and her narcissistic solipsism. The latter, as I have shown, threatens the very presence of her self. Writing exclusively for herself does not materialise, i.e. there is no true power to be gained. Just how immaterial and elusive Cavendish's fictional world turned out to be was probably proved best in the centuries to come – namely by the fact that it was her male contemporaries whose views on order, on the right form of government and on the direction and purpose of scientific progress ultimately prevailed.

Conclusion: the dialectics of the textual self

As my analysis of early modern women's textual constitution of self has so far shown, the authors write (about) themselves in the strong awareness of being both subject and object of their texts. Their self-presentation is deliberately constructed and thus the result of self-assured authorial agency, and at the same time held in check by various constraints – be it the authors' submission to divine or patriarchal authority, or the realisation that mere textuality does not make for a stable sense of self.

The duality involved in the process of writing the self finds a parallel in the ambiguity that is constitutive of the subject. According to Michel Foucault, the subject is the locus of individual identity, yet not in the sense of wholesale independence, as it cannot escape its subjection: 'There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to' (Foucault (1994) 331). In the same way, the female authors I have studied occupy a powerful position of agency at the same time as they are objectified by the text: the author is the originator of meaning, but also subjected by the meanings she creates. The form that this subjection may take varies – it can be submission to divine authority, the mechanisms of rigorous self-control, or the forces of textuality as such. What is common to all the strategies of writing the self I have analysed is their fundamental dialectic.

The use of the image of the chameleon in two of the texts might serve to illuminate this point. In the passage I have quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, Elizabeth Grymeston confidently introduces herself as 'a wits Camelion, / That any authours colour can put on' (sig. A3v), thereby emphasising the playfully creative inventiveness that characterises writing. In contrast, Elizabeth Joscelyn warns of the 'subtle sin that can steale the hart of man[,] it will alter shapes as oft as the chamelyon dothe colors' (297ff.). Joscelyn is more in tune than Grymeston with the conventional animal imagery and its gendering: '[T]here is [in the early modern period] a symbolic association in the caloric economy between woman and cold-blooded creatures – like the salamander or the chameleon – which changed with their environments' (Paster (1998) 438; emphasis added).¹⁵⁶ By referring to

¹⁵⁶ A related, equally negative connotation of the chameleon image is pointed out by Louis Montrose. He refers to a soliloquy by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, in *3 Henry VI*, in which he boasts that he can 'add colours to the chameleon, / Change shapes with Proteus for advantages, / And set the murderous Machiavel to school' (3.2.191ff.), a remark that expresses the early modern association of the chameleon and its

the shortcoming of inconstancy that, according to early modern gender stereotyping, is specifically female, Joscelin stresses the dangers that inhere in a selfhood that cannot be neatly pinned down once and for all, namely that the self might be overwhelmed with sin and hence disappear. Similar to this duality in the use of the chameleon image, writing the self is simultaneously liberating and threatening, as early modern women's writings reveal. In their texts, the self appears both assertive *and* precarious, and it is crucial to note this simultaneity. The two sides of the textual self must not be conflated, but they exist side by side; the security achieved in writing is more than a mere sham, but is also countered by a fundamental insecurity. In a nutshell, writing the self implies the self being written about.

changeability with the scheming of the ruthlessly ambitious Machiavellian politician (cf. Montrose (1996) 37).

2.2 Self and other: constitution of self through and against interaction with others¹⁵⁷

... all the delight a parent can take in a childe is Hony mingled wth gall ...

– Elizabeth Joscelin, *The Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*¹⁵⁸

Women's senses of self: between individualism and relationality

Margaret Cavendish's closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), a fantastical comedy about the fictional Lady Happy's attempt to create a women-only 'place for freedom, not to vex the senses but to please them' (220), contains a short play-within-the-play that disrupts the comical light-heartedness of the preceding parts. In eight subsequent scenes, the audience is presented with brief dialogue sequences dealing with the fates of a battered wife, a woman suffering from sickness in the early stages of pregnancy, a woman who has been impoverished because of her husband's gambling, a mother mourning the death of her child, a woman in labour, two elderly ladies bemoaning their children's misfortunes, and a woman dying in childbirth – a panoramic depiction of early modern women's lives at their most destitute and vulnerable. In a tone of ironic contempt that oscillates between the matter-of-fact and the polemical, the play-within-the-play deconstructs our well-tended assumptions about marriage based on romantic love, the bliss of motherhood, the sanctity of the mother-child bond, etc. The dialogues are at their most poignant in those scenes that deal with the experience of maternity. The despair of the mother who has lost her infant ('Who can have patience to lose their only Child? who can! Oh I shall run mad, for I have no patience' (230)) and the pain of the woman in labour ('Oh my back, my back will break, Oh! Oh! Oh!' (232)) are offset with an ironic counterpoint in the 'two Ancient Ladies'' complaint about the sorrows that having children brings about: 'Who would desire Children, since they come to such misfortunes?' (232). Far from being comforting and

¹⁵⁷ An earlier version of this chapter has appeared in *Early Modern Literary Studies* 10.3 (2005). <<http://www.shu.ac.uk/emls/10-3/tancbodi.htm>>.

¹⁵⁸ Joscelin 15f.

emotionally uplifting, Cavendish seems to suggest, motherhood and interpersonal relationships entail suffering, pain and distress.¹⁵⁹

In the light of these unsettling dimensions, it is important to note that the early modern self-writings I study all display an authorial stance that is predicated on relationships to an other, or to others. Twentieth-century philosophy and psychoanalysis have proclaimed the existence of an other as fundamental to identity formation. In Jacques Lacan's account of the constitution of the subject, it derives its (imaginary) coherence from the unified image that is reflected back to him in the mirror, i.e. from the place of the other (cf. Lacan (1977)). Thus, it is *in opposition* to the other that traditional psychoanalysis has conceptualised the self to emerge. Recent studies of women's (autobiographical) writings, by contrast, have claimed that women, in defiance of masculine individualism, are inclined towards a 'relational sense of self' (Friedman (1988) 42). Rather than experiencing themselves as completely self-reliant, they perceive themselves as fundamentally related to others and constitute their identities through interaction.¹⁶⁰ By contrast, the subject as a separate and unified agent is by definition masculine; '[t]he female lacks the operation of affirming its singular and universalizable link to the self' (Irigaray (1985a) 224). This pattern has been explored in particular by the strand of psychoanalysis commonly referred to as object-relations psychoanalysis, which starts from the premise that the subject is constituted not in isolation, but through interpersonal processes (cf. Macey (2000) 279).¹⁶¹ Susan Stanford Friedman interprets the tendency of women in particular to see themselves implicated in relationships as a result of their status under patriarchy. Fully-fledged individualism, she argues, can be realised only from a vantage-point of power and dominance, because it is predicated on a subject that detaches itself from others and depicts itself as a coherent and self-determined agent in the world: 'The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history

¹⁵⁹ In his *Instruction of a Christian Woman*, Juan Luis Vives points to the sorrow that having children potentially brings about when he admonishes women who are childless not to complain about their lot: 'O unkind woman, that dost not acknowledge how great a benefit thou hast had of God, that either did never bear children, or else lost them before the time of sorrow!' (*Instruction* 122) – a remark that is somewhat ironic, because childlessness and infants' deaths do not, of course, constitute particularly uplifting experiences.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. my earlier observations on women's use of mirror imagery and their reinterpretation of the Lacanian mirror (2.1).

¹⁶¹ Drawing on the findings of object-relations theory, Doreen Massey notes that 'the need for the security of boundaries, the requirement for such a defensive and counter-positional definition of identity, is culturally masculine' (Massey (1994) 5). Many object-relations psychoanalysts are in fact women – two of the main representatives of the discipline are Anna Freud and Melanie Klein. Nancy Chodorow's work, which I will discuss in this chapter, also belongs to this tradition.

the illusion of individualism' (Friedman (1988) 39). Conversely, although she does acknowledge the danger of 'autonomy denied' (Friedman (1988) 45) that identity formation in relationship implies, Friedman presents such a self-definition as a liberating alternative, a moment of female empowerment.

Yet, as I will show, the ambiguities and contradictions that abound in early modern women's self-writings qualify the celebratory stance taken by contemporary feminist critics such as Friedman, urging the question in how far a constitution of self that is based on relationship(s) can be substantial. If the self is bound up with an other – instead of setting itself apart from it – identity cannot be conceived of as a fixed and stable point of reference that is entirely under the individual's control:

This ... raises questions concerning the nature of 'authorship': a single hand writes, but the self who inscribes, who is, is herself enmeshed with other lives which give hers the meaning it has. And it is not just 'the author' who takes on an ontologically shaky character ... , for so too do 'selves' in general. (Stanley (1992) 14)

The unstable nature that Liz Stanley attributes to the (female) self is reminiscent of Stephen Greenblatt's now commonplace assumption that, in the early modern period, 'there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process' (Greenblatt (1980) 2). What is more, Greenblatt concedes that self-fashioning, far from constituting an autonomous act of unfettered individualism, is always dependent on an other. Yet in the male-authored texts he studies, the other is 'something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile' (Greenblatt (1980) 9). It embodies forces that are directly, unambiguously and unmistakably opposed to the integrity of the self – 'heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor' (Greenblatt (1980) 9) – and that are therefore easily identified as a threat to selfhood.

If we subscribe to Greenblatt's seminal observations, we need to examine whether the other plays a similar role in early modern women's self-writings. For one thing, the constellation is more complex in female self-writings in a very obvious sense, as self-fashioning usually takes place in relation to an other that the woman is close to – or so we would expect: sons, daughters, husbands, other family members or future generations in general are typical addressees. On the surface, identity formation based on personal relationships like these would suggest a positive sense of self, rooted in affection and intimacy. However, if we take positions such as those expressed in Cavendish's play-within-the-play as contrary evidence, we have to confront the possibility that there might be an element of threat to the self in these very relationships.

‘Permeable ego boundaries’: motherhood and the self

My principal focus in this chapter is on the specifically female genre of the mother’s manual, which, as the name implies, explicitly revolves around the relationship between mother and child. Significantly, the mother-child relationship is constitutive of the writing process not only on the private level of mutual love. Beyond that, the authors draw on the intimacy of the mother-child bond in order to defend themselves as writers in a culture that reacted to female authorship with apprehension – in short, motherhood is the legitimising precondition of their writing and is thus appropriated as a vehicle for self-constitution.

Lady Grace Mildmay, in the introductory part of her autobiographical writings,¹⁶² directly addresses her grandchildren, stating that what she is about to outline is ‘the best course to set ourselves in from the beginning unto the end of our lives’ (23). There is a considerable boldness about her claim to a position of providing guidelines as to how her family ought to live their lives, which is further enhanced by the fact that she creates an unquestioned sense of commonality between herself and the succeeding generations (‘ourselves,’ ‘our lives’). Her strong awareness of self is expressed even more clearly when she states how much she considers her advice to be part of her personal experience and character, which she believes will transcend the restricted period of her own lifespan: ‘All these things coming into my mind, I thought good to set them down unto my daughter and her children, as familiar talk and communication with them, *I being dead, as if I were alive*’ (24; emphasis added).

A similar claim is made by Elizabeth Grymeston in her address ‘To her loving sonne Bernye Grymeston,’ one of the opening sections of her *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives*. Similar to Mildmay, but in a more direct and pronounced fashion, she sets out the purpose of her writing:

My dearest sonne, there is nothing so strong as the force of love; there is no love so forcible as the love of an affectionate mother to hir naturall childe: there is no mother can either more affectionately shew hir nature, or more naturally manifest hir affection, than in advising hir children out of hir owne experience, to eschue evill, and encline them to do that which is good. (sig. A3r)

Grymeston appears strikingly ‘modern’ in her stress on the mother-child bond – in texts such as hers we detect expressions of maternal love that conform to our own (maybe

¹⁶² As I have explained elsewhere (2.1), Mildmay’s *Autobiography* has close affinities with female advice books, which is why I will study it alongside the mothers’ manuals in this chapter.

idealised) notions of motherlove. Maternal affection appeals to us as the strongest and most enduring form of love, and it is to this day largely perceived as ‘natural’ in a woman.

However, especially in the light of historical evidence, we have to be wary of subscribing to a sentimentalised rendition of the maternal experience. For one thing, the phenomenon as we understand it today emerged only in the eighteenth century. More importantly, the idealisation of motherhood occludes the material dimensions of maternity, be it the very real pain that comes with the downsides of motherhood – the physical dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, infant mortality, etc. –, or the various power struggles (between husbands and wives, mothers and children, mothers and the larger society) being fought beneath the surface. On the other hand, it would be equally inappropriate to accept the still-prevailing assumption, based on studies such as Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* and Philip Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood*, that family relationships before the eighteenth century were characterised by emotional coldness and detachment.¹⁶³ It appears simplistic in the light of recent studies of early modern personal writings such as diaries, memoirs, letters etc. to argue that parent-child relationships were usually ‘remote’ (Stone (1977) 105) and ‘normally extremely formal, while obedience was often enforced with brutality’ (Stone (1977) 112).¹⁶⁴ Stone’s neat juxtaposition of ‘the kin-oriented anonymity of the past and the affective individualism of the future’ (Stone (1977) 111) begs to be qualified in the face of such evidence, which paints a somewhat different picture and ‘supports the interpretation that most parents ... were acutely aware of and concerned for their children’ (Pollock (1987) 13). For even if, as I will argue, the female writers’ recourse to the intimate mother-child bond was also a tactic of legitimising publication rather than simply an expression of an authentic personal relationship, the mothers’ manuals still prove that the discourse of motherhood as

¹⁶³ Linda Pollock summarises this traditional view as follows: ‘It is claimed that before the eighteenth century parents subjected their children to a strict, often severe, disciplinary regime; relations between parents and children were formal and distant, and parents were purportedly unmoved at the death of any of their children. Instead of childhood being regarded as a special time of life, children were considered to be merely adults in miniature’ (Pollock (1987) 11).

¹⁶⁴ According to Anne Laurence, Stone’s misconceptions are the result of ‘the kinds of sources consulted. Conduct books, necessarily counsels of perfection, tend to emphasize discipline and, as many of them have a religious bent, the natural sinfulness of children. Evidence of parents’ own feelings, from diaries, letters and personal papers, suggests that the emotional content of family relationships changes little’ (Laurence (1994) 90; cf. Pollock (1987) 12ff.; cf. Olwen Hufton, ‘Women, Work and Family,’ in Davis and Farge (1993) 15-45). Similarly, David Booy argues that it is mistaken to assume that the seeming formality in family relations implies a lack of love and affection; to the contrary, he observes that ‘the concern with subordination and obedience in the conduct books has to be offset by their strong emphasis on the naturalness and importance of parental love’ (Booy (2002) 93). A very moving example of intimate bonding between mother and son are Lady Brilliana Harley’s *Letters*, written to her son Ned, which are replete with little personal jokes and allusions (*Letters of the Lady Brilliana Harley*. Ed. T. T. Lewis. London: Camden Society, 1854; in Travitsky (1981) 82f.).

establishing a unique interpersonal tie did exist at the time and was widely drawn upon. The notion of the nuclear family, based on emotional attachment and centring around the mother-child bond as its epitome, has its roots in the early modern period; it is an ideal that has left its traces in a great variety of early modern cultural contexts.¹⁶⁵

For example, one of the subplots of Thomas Middleton's city comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) movingly depicts the suffering of Sir Oliver and Lady Kix, who are still childless after several years of marriage, and for whom their childlessness entails a sense of failure that they react to with genuine despair.¹⁶⁶

Lady. ... Oh, oh, oh!
To be seven years a wife and not a child, oh, not a child!
Sir Oliver. Sweet wife, have patience.
Lady. Can any woman have a greater cut?
Sir Oliver. I know 'tis great, but what of that, wife?
...
I spare for nothing, wife; no, if the price [of an effective medicine]
Were forty marks a spoonful,
I'd give a thousand pounds to purchase fruitfulness. (2.1.140ff.)¹⁶⁷

In a touchingly detailed way, Sir Oliver fantasises about having a family, giving us a snapshot impression of the (early) modern nuclear family:

I hope to see thee, wench, within these few years,
Circled with children, pranking up a girl,
And putting jewels in their little ears. (3.3.106ff.)

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, the famous passage in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606) in which Lady Macbeth forswears any maternal feelings can be taken as evidence of the cultural presence of the discourse of motherhood *ex negativo*. Determined to

¹⁶⁵ In its most strongly idealised form, the nuclear family is a product of the nineteenth century. Deborah Shuger gives a convincing explanation for the early modern roots of the discourse of the nuclear family that situates it in relation to political and socio-economic changes: '[T]he loving parent and family emerge by the sixteenth century in response both to the increasingly mobile and competitive conditions of Renaissance society and to the rather arbitrary power of the state ... The Renaissance family, in these accounts, is not the domestic reflection of its monarchy, but the counterpart: a response to power politics and cultural complexity' (Shuger (1990) 235).

¹⁶⁶ The fact that the Kixes are presented as comic characters does not, in my view, diminish the seriousness of the points that are made through them. Even though, superficially, their behaviour makes them the laughing stock of the other characters and the audience alike, their apparent sentimentalism has a much more serious dimension and even identificatory potential, namely the very real suffering of a couple who are unable to start a longed-for family. Rick Bowers's account of their distress acknowledges its ironic elements and comic effect, but also reads recognisably like the description of a modern-day couple: 'Lord and Lady Kix have everything: wealth, power, good looks, even a curiously co-dependent relationship. But they do not have a child, and Lady Kix's grief is unrestrained ... She is in obvious distress. They are in desperate straits. And Kix spares no expense in trying the most recent and most costly reproductive technologies ... And yet they wait together with all the emotional longing of the unfulfilled infertile couple. Their emotional highs, lows, and irrational blame-laying spices each scene in which they appear' (Bowers (2003) 13).

¹⁶⁷ Note also Sir Oliver Kix's strangely materialistic attitude when he suggests to 'purchase fruitfulness': obviously, the discourse of the nuclear family is intrinsically linked with the bourgeois economic ethic.

overcome her husband's reservations against murdering Duncan, the present King of Scotland, Lady Macbeth draws on the ideal of pure, natural and nurturing motherly love, only to deconstruct it in favour of its very opposite, murderous cruelty:

... I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I sworn
As you have done to this. (1.7.54ff.)¹⁶⁸

Lady Macbeth's outburst is all the more virulent if we read it against the centrality of the mother-infant bond in the early modern period as it is expressed by women themselves. Elizabeth Clinton's treatise against the upper-class practise of hiring a wetnurse, *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (1622), addressed to her daughter-in-law, is proof of the discursive presence of an essentialist view of motherhood. Clinton is at pains to stress that for a mother not to breastfeed her child borders on 'monstrous unnaturalnesse' (sig. C1v). Unwillingness to breastfeed implies a disruption of the mother-child bond on two levels: the mother who hires a wetnurse is 'so unnaturall to thrust away [her] ... owne children' (sig. D2r) and also contributes to 'that disorder of causing a poorer woman to banish her owne infant, for the entertaining of a richer womans child, as it were, bidding her unlove her owne to love [hers]' (sig. D2r). The biologically determined activity of breastfeeding renders the mother-child bond both profoundly natural and divinely ordained; just as breastfeeding is a natural activity, motherly love is an inseparable component of being female and having a child. This explains why Lady Macbeth equates her murderous energy with a reversal of her gender identity. The unnaturalness signified by a woman who does not hesitate to kill to satisfy her craving for power parallels her rejection of the maternal role:

... Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. ...
...
... Come to my woman's breast,
And take my milk for gall, your murd'ring ministers[.] (1.5.38ff.)

Whilst Lady Macbeth reverses the idea of breastfeeding as nurturance by turning it into destructiveness, a similar equation of murder and the denial of maternal milk is made by

¹⁶⁸ I agree with Janet Adelman, who reads Lady Macbeth as a figure of 'murderously disrupted nurturance' (Adelman (1987) 97) whose monstrosity is indicative of (male) 'fears of female coercion, female definition of the male' (Adelman (1987) 101).

James Guillimeau, a seventeenth-century physician and writer of medical handbooks. In his tract *The Nursing of Children* (1635) he claims that there is ‘no difference between a woman that refuses to nurse her owne childe, and one that kills her child, as soone as shee hath conceived’ (sig. Ii2). The anxieties associated with the breast can partly be explained with the historical fact that mother’s milk, coming either from the natural mother or a hired wetnurse, was essential for the infant’s very survival. In the absence of adequate substitutes, bottle-feeding was not an alternative option. The maternal breast was therefore a signifier of the power of the female body, a power that was beyond male control and that constituted a tangible and concrete threat to male selfhood.¹⁶⁹ In a reverse, compensatory move, the breast was consistently set up as a symbol of maternal affection. Breastfeeding is the primary means of transmitting motherlove and establishing the mother-child bond, as the male advice book writer William Gouge points out in his *Domesticall Duties* (1622): ‘Together with the milk that passeth some smacks of affection and disposition of the mother, which maketh mothers to love such children best as they have given suck unto; yea, and ofttimes such children as have sucked their mother’s breasts love their mothers best.’¹⁷⁰ Juan Luis Vives extends the argument when he observes that ‘I wot not how, but so it is, that we suck out of our mother’s teat, together with the milk, not only love, but also conditions and dispositions’ (*Instruction* 40). Similarly, James Guillimeau writes: ‘We may be assured, that the Milke (wherewith the child is nourish’d two yeares together) hath as much power to make the children like the Nurses, both in bodie and mind; as the seed of the Parents hath to make the children like them’ (*Nursing* sig. Ii4). The mother’s role – if she chooses to breastfeed – is therefore a very influential one, because apart from providing physical nurture, she is able to shape her child’s character via a largely involuntary, biological process. Vives’s and Guillimeau’s remarks already hint at the ambiguous implications of breastfeeding; for, if the child cannot but take on the traits of the woman who feeds it, its character might also potentially be spoilt. This possibility adds to the perception of the female body as a site of mystery with extremely powerful (because inexplicable) effects. Conversely, the anti-wetnursing discourse in the early seventeenth

¹⁶⁹ Naomi J. Miller summarises this connection as follows: ‘In the early modern period, both breast and uterus represented life-giving nurturance and reproduction as well as the potential disruption of patriarchal order. Beyond the purview of masculine control or regulation, the female reproductive organs could serve simultaneously to validate women’s caregiving roles and to undermine male social authority’ (Miller (2000) 5). For discussions of breastfeeding in the early modern period, cf. also Willis (1995), Miller (1997). In a reverse move, male doctors gradually began to take over the roles traditionally assumed by female midwives, a development which Doreen Evenden links with a set of changes in the period as diverse as the decline in church licensing of midwives, the invention of the forceps (administered by male doctors), and the increasing professionalisation of medicine in general (cf. Evenden (2000) 174ff.).

¹⁷⁰ William Gouge, *Domesticall Duties. Eight Treatises*. London: for William Bladen, 1622, VI.12; quoted in Keeble (1994) 214.

century that Clinton's treatise is part of can therefore be read as a counter-reaction to the patriarchal bias, as an assertion of power and identity of (middle- and upper-class) mothers. Most crucially, breastfeeding 'exclude[s] men from the child's formation' (Schwarz (1997) 153) in the literal sense of nurturance and in the metaphorical sense of identity formation.

However, one needs to further stress that this seeming empowerment has several disturbing flipsides. It relegates women to an idealised domestic sphere centring on motherhood, with the effect of barring them from the entire field of (publicly recognised) economic production (cf. Wall (2002) 135f.). Even more disastrous is the opposite (yet related) trajectory, by which the breastfeeding mother becomes a problematic symbol of mystery that feeds into the culture's deep-seated anxieties of female control (cf. Schwarz (1997) 153). The need to defend women from such allegations may explain Elizabeth Clinton's almost hyperbolic exuberance when she praises breastfeeding as being 'the part of a true mother, of an honest mother, of a just mother, of a syncere mother, of a mother worthy of love, of a mother deserving good report, of a vertuous mother, of a mother winning praise for it' (B4r).¹⁷¹ For Clinton, the implications of breastfeeding – the physically most concrete gesture of passing on a part of the self to an other – channel back to the woman herself: far from diminishing her sense of self, it turns her into an epitome of exemplary femininity. In a sense, then, the self is solidified through interaction with the other.

On the other hand, the emphasis on the naturalness of breastfeeding and the mother-child bond mitigates and occludes its unsettling conceptualisation of the mother in accordance with patriarchal demands of feminine virtue. Even more disturbingly, the displacement of a physiological process onto the moral platform of virtuous femininity hides the erotic (and hence, for patriarchy, diffusely threatening) potential of the breast. Moreover, modern psychoanalysis has observed unsettling implications of breastfeeding for the mother-child relationship. The child's dependence on the nurturing breast turns the latter into a site of maternal power that is highly ambivalent – after all, withdrawal of the breast is tantamount to the child's extinction. According to the early twentieth-century object relations psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, '[t]he child's libidinal fixation to the breast develops into feelings towards her [the mother] as a person. Thus feelings both of a

¹⁷¹ Cf. the statements in the early midwives' manual *The Birth of Mankynde* (1513; trans. 1540): '[T]he mothers mylk is more conuenient and agreeable to the Infante, then anye other womans, and more doth it noryshe it, for because that in the mothers belly it was wont to the same, as that with the which it is best acquaynted' (*The Birth of Mankynde, otherwise named the womans booke, by Thomas Raynalde, Phisition, 1565*; quoted in Schwarz (1997) 152).

destructive and of a loving nature are experienced towards one and the same object and this gives rise to deep and disturbing conflicts in the child's mind.'¹⁷² A parable that William Tyndale includes in his 'Exposition on Matthew' (1537) suggests that what psychoanalysis has theorised – the ambivalent and potentially destructive power of the mother, epitomised by the breast – was also a diffusely felt seventeenth-century anxiety:

A loving mother, to make her child to perceive and feel her kindness, to love her again and be thankful, letteth it hunger in a morning; and when it calleth for his breakfast, maketh as she heard not, till for pain and impatience it beginneth to cry agood: and then she stilleth it, and giveth it all it asketh, and more too, to please it; and when it is peaced and beginneth to eat, and rejoiceth and is glad and fain, she asketh, 'Who gave thee that, thy mother?' and it saith, 'Yea.' Then saith she, 'Am not I a good mother, that give thee all these things?' And it answereth, 'Yea.' And she asketh, 'Wilt thou love thy mother?' &c. And it saith, 'Yea.' And so cometh it to the knowledge of his mother's kindness, and is thankful.¹⁷³

The child's love towards the mother is plainly enforced through the arbitrary and manipulative withdrawal and subsequent provision of food. The mother's nurturing role casts her in a position of power over life and death. Needless to say, men, too, are initially dependent on the female. Again, we can conclude that the simple equation of breastfeeding with pure and comforting motherly love that occurs in seventeenth-century anti-wetnursing treatises is an ideological construct that is intended to counter patriarchal anxieties and that simultaneously conceals and affirms maternal power.

It is because of this complex implication in patriarchal discourse that I take issue with the feminist reappropriation of motherhood as synonymous with an essentially 'feminine,' nurturing identity, and hence as an alternative to the confrontational, competitive nature of the patriarchal order. Probably the most obvious instance of this reinterpretive venture is Hélène Cixous's vision of motherhood, in which she draws on breastfeeding as a metaphor for feminine self-expression: '[L]a femme n'est jamais loin de la «mère» (que j'entends hors-rôle, la «mère» comme non-nom, et comme source des biens). Toujours en elle subsiste au moins un peu du bon lait de mère. *Elle écrit à l'encre blanche*' (Cixous (1975) 173; emphasis added). The power structures that inevitably cut across the mother-child bond forbid this exclusively positive account. Even if one reads the absence of a truly nurturing, non-conflictual maternity as inevitable in the patriarchal

¹⁷² Melanie Klein, 'The Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States.' In: *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell. New York: Free Press, 1986 (141); quoted in Schwarz (1997) 153. For traces of this anxiety in the early modern period, cf. Adelman (1992).

¹⁷³ William Tyndale, 'Exposition on Matthew.' In: *Expositions and Notes on Sundry Portions of the Holy Scriptures*. Ed. Rev. Henry Walter. Cambridge: The Parker Society, 1849 (110f.); quoted in Shuger (1990) 249.

order, as Cixous does – ‘la mystification phallique a contaminé généralement les bons rapports’ (Cixous (1975) 173) – I would still argue that the maternal relationship has in itself scope for ambiguity, if not destructiveness; a dimension that a feminist reinterpretation cannot sensibly overlook.

Crucially, elements of power and threat do not only inform the mother-child relationship, but are implied in the maternal experience as concerns women themselves. Undertaking a similar move as Elizabeth Clinton and the male conduct book writers, Elizabeth Grymeston portrays motherlove as fundamentally natural and, as such, singularly powerful.¹⁷⁴ Presenting it as the most passionate and unconditional form that love can take, she states that the mother’s will has to succumb to the emotional intensity of her love:

[M]y mothers undeserved wrath [is] so virulent, as that I have neither power to resist it, nor patience to endure it, but must yeeld to this languishing consumption to which it hath brought me: I resolved to breake the barren soile of my fruitlesse braine, to dictate something for thy direction ... (sig. A3r)

Clearly, motherly love sets free huge energies and enables Grymeston to access her full intellectual potential and to express herself in writing (‘... to breake the barren soile of my fruitlesse braine’). Her presentation of self lends support to Betty Travitsky’s description of the early modern ‘new mother’ who was encouraged to be learned as well as pious, because she was responsible for her children’s religious instruction and early education. Juan Luis Vives’s seminal conduct book *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (1540) is proof of the new (humanist) concern for women’s learning and its implications for the education of daughters. A woman should:

... study and read holy and wise men’s books, and though she do it not for her own sake, at the least wise for her children, that she may teach them, and make them good. ... For that age can do nothing itself, but counterfeit and follow others, and ... taketh her first conditions and information of mind by such as she heareth or seeth by her mother. Therefore it lieth more in the mother than men ween to make the conditions of the children. (*Instruction* 124)

Vives emphatically acknowledges the superior power (‘... more in the mother’) that accrues to women’s ability to shape their children’s character and moral principles: ‘O mothers, what an occasion for you unto your children, to make them whether you will, good or bad!’ (*Instruction* 125). However, the former passage also reveals the restrictions imposed on female education. A woman is not supposed to learn for the sake of personal

¹⁷⁴ The conduct books of the time share in the discourse of motherly love being a natural phenomenon: for instance, in *The Ladies Calling* (1673), Richard Allestree states that ‘a mother is a title of so much tenderness ... that nature seems to have secured the love of mothers to their children’ (quoted in Shoemaker (1998) 123).

development or fulfilment ('she do it not for her own sake'), but her learning is intrinsically connected with her role as a mother. Betty Travitsky is aware of this 'integration of natural maternal feeling with the religious and intellectual development of women advanced through the theory of the new mother' (Travitsky (1980a) 40); yet, in my view, the positive conclusions she draws are far too idealistic: Travitsky claims that the mothers' manuals 'represent the essence of the thinking of the new mother, who was the most liberated female developed in the English Renaissance, in what was still a family-centered, religiously oriented time' (Travitsky (1980a) 41). For one thing, the categorisation of the early modern period as 'still family-centered, religiously oriented,' with its implication of progress with the advent of modernity and its failure to acknowledge the more sinister underbelly of the developments of the time, seems naively clear-cut. Moreover, Travitsky fails to account for the darker shades of the maternal experience that the manuals hint at. Elizabeth Grymeston, in the passage quoted above, feels she is led to act in a manner that transcends the bounds of reason and virtuous self-restraint (on the immediate textual level, she becomes aware that 'my love hath carried me beyond the list I resolved on' (sig. B1r)).¹⁷⁵ Motherhood endows her with almost supernatural power, in that it overcomes her human and physical shortcomings: '[M]y aking head and trembling hand have rather a will to offer, than abilitie to afford further discourse' (sig. B1r). Yet the flipside of this extraordinary empowerment is the fact that her son is enabled to gain unmediated access to his mother's self, to 'see the true portrature of [his] mothers minde' (sig. A3v). The irrationality of motherly love might cause the boundaries of personhood to become fluid, if not to collapse altogether.

Motherhood as a trope for the threat of loss of identity is one of the central themes of psychoanalysis – in its traditional strands, however, it is the child whose identity formation is potentially jeopardised. For Sigmund Freud, the fear of regressing into the antenatal union with the maternal body is paralleled in adult life by metaphorically related anxieties, such as the fear of being buried alive.¹⁷⁶ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the breaking out of the dyadic unity with the mother that characterises the pre-Oedipal stage is

¹⁷⁵ As Mary Luecke observes, '[m]aternal affection was especially feared as intemperate and potentially overwhelming. Many women internalized this anxiety about unbounded maternal affection' (Luecke (2000) 246).

¹⁷⁶ This leads Freud to refer to the maternal body as the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) – what was once familiar (prior to ego formation) is turned into something monstrous that threatens ego deletion: 'Es kommt oft vor, daß neurotische Männer erklären, das weibliche Genitale sei ihnen etwas Unheimliches. Dieses Unheimliche ist aber der Eingang zur alten Heimat des Menschenkinds, zur Örtlichkeit, in der jeder einmal und zuerst geweilt hat. ... Das ist mir bekannt, da war ich schon einmal, so darf die Deutung dafür das Genitale oder den Leib der Mutter einsetzen. Das Unheimliche ist also auch in diesem Falle das ehemals Heimische, Altvertraute. Die Vorsilbe "un" an diesem Worte ist aber die Marke der Verdrängung' (Freud (1947) 258f.).

crucial for the child's identity formation in the mirror phase; without accomplishing this separation successfully, individuation cannot take place (cf. Donovan (2001) 125ff.). However, it also inaugurates the subject's primary split, the destruction of the imaginary wholeness signified by the phallus. As a result, a fundamental ambiguity accrues to the maternal: on the one hand, the mother is always associated with the perfect symbiosis of the Oedipal stage, which the individuated subject can never fully regain once its split has been effected. On the other hand, because she embodies the very opposite of coherent identity and reminds the subject of its constitutive lack, the loss of the phallus, the mother is also perceived as the ultimate threat, the monstrous counter-force to subjectivity:

The maternal body functions as a duplicitously pivotal site ... At first a symbiotic organiser, the mother offers the fantasy of fusion or intact union. She seems to double the primordial mother by collapsing all distinctions between self and Other. She 'heals' the fragmented body, 'heals' the first loss marked by the navel and as such is the source of hope for ego stability and wholeness. As midwife of individuation, however, she is the source of disillusionment, forces upon the child a recognition of differentiation, loss, lack and so reaffirms the split she initially meant to deny. She wounds anew any sense of perfect and constant identity. (Bronfen (1992) 33)

The ambiguity associated with the maternal is bound up with the fact that patriarchy consistently aligns the female body with nature. Because individuation goes along with the entry into the symbolic order – i.e. culture – subjectivity is always predicated on the 'inadmissible urge to devour the mother, to destroy this original nature-body from which one must eternally separate and be separated but to which one must eternally return and refer back' (Irigaray (1985a) 40).

Moreover, as feminist-informed versions of psychoanalysis have made us aware, the threat to identity embodied by the mother works both ways. Elizabeth Grymeston's implied fusion of her self with her text and her son suggests that the mother, too, needs to fear the dissolution of her self in the interaction with her child. In the words of Julia Kristeva, pregnancy and motherhood entail 'the radical ordeal of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of an other, of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech' (Kristeva (1986c) 206). In short, maternity involves a 'fundamental challenge to identity ... accompanied by a fantasy of totality' (Kristeva (1986c) 206)¹⁷⁷ – a fantasy, one might add, that cannot be realised in practice.

¹⁷⁷ Elsewhere, Kristeva observes that, '[f]or a woman, the arrival of a child breaks the autoerotic circle of pregnancy (when her jouissance recalls the saint who becomes one with her god, inaccessible and yet consubstantial with her instinctual drive during her passion) and brings about what, for a woman, is the

The feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow has analysed the consequences of women's quest to live out this fantasy. Her contention is that women in particular strive to uphold the dyadic unity with their mothers even after the pre-Oedipal phase. As a result, their ego-boundaries are characteristically less well-defined than men's. Rather than perceiving themselves as clearly distinct from others, women 'come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries' (Chodorow (1978) 169). Women strive to repair the lost unity with the mother in their heterosexual relationships, but can never fully realise it. Consequently, they reproduce the same pattern of incomplete separation with their own children.¹⁷⁸ As a result, as the title of Chodorow's seminal work (1978) suggests, mothering reproduces itself: mothers bring up daughters who, in turn, have the capacity and desire to mother, due to their constitutive sense of connectedness:

Girls emerge ... with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own ... [G]irls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world. (Chodorow (1978) 167)

We obviously have to concede that Chodorow developed her ideas with reference to mid-twentieth-century, white, middle-class US society and in the context of second-wave feminism; her insights are not necessarily applicable wholesale to other historical and cultural settings.¹⁷⁹ Even so, her theory may still provide a useful cue to the differential treatment of daughters, as opposed to sons, by the writers of seventeenth-century mothers' manuals. For instance, Elizabeth Richardson addresses her *Ladies Legacie* exclusively to her daughters, fearing that 'this my endeavour may be contemptible to many, (because a womans) which makes me not to joyne my sons with you, lest being men, they misconstrue my well-meaning' (164). The fact that Richardson includes her daughters-in-law among her addressees ('to be mine also' (160)) suggests that the 'reproduction of mothering' is a structural device of patriarchal culture that is not restricted to biological mother-daughter relationships, but extends to the female perception of self in general.¹⁸⁰

difficult account of a relationship with an other: with an "object" and with love' (Kristeva (1980) 278f.; cf. Kristeva (1986b)).

¹⁷⁸ According to Chodorow, this pattern is particularly pronounced in the case of girls, but can be made out in the mother's attempts to uphold the pre-Oedipal bond with sons, too, albeit to a lesser extent (cf. Chodorow (1978) 206ff.).

¹⁷⁹ Chodorow has, in fact, been criticised for 'limit[ing] the concept of gender to family and household experience and, for the historian, leav[ing] no way to connect the concept (or the individual) to other social systems of economy, politics, or power' (Scott (1988) 38).

¹⁸⁰ The beginning of the late fourteenth-century treatise *The Northren Mothers Blessing* provides a similar example of mother-daughter continuity:

The prayers and meditations that Richardson leaves to her daughters thus create a specifically female line of continuity: ‘I present this little Booke unto you all, which being mine, I hope you will carefully receive it, as comming from my love and affection towards you, and that you will please for my sake, the more to imploy it to your good’ (162). In a similar way, M. R. addresses her *Mothers Counsell* first ‘to her dearest Daughter’ (sig. A4r), and goes on to include in her dedication ‘all the Women in the World’ (A4r). Elizabeth Joscelyn, in her *Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*, differentiates her advice in several instances according to whether the child she is expecting will be a son or a daughter. Having first expressed her wish for her child to ‘[take] a spirituall callinge’ (43), should it be a son, she then addresses a potential daughter in a tone of heightened emotional intimacy: ‘[I]f thou beest a daughter thou mayst pe^rhaps thinke I haue lost my labor but read on and thou shalt see my loue and care of thee and thy saluation is as great as if thou wert a son and my fear greater’ (54ff.). Her particular concern for the specificities of educating a daughter reverberates throughout her manual, for example when she warns her children of the sin of vanity: ‘[I]f thou bee a daughter I confesse thy task is harder because thou art weaker and thy temptations to this vice greater’ (245). Although Joscelyn clearly draws on widespread assumptions about women’s nature whose implications border on the misogynistic, she nevertheless creates a sense of female commonality and shared experience that is all the more striking since she does not even know whether her child will in fact be a daughter. The extent to which her advice reiterates patriarchal views of women does not constitute a contradiction, because female commonality is established precisely in the awareness (rather than in outright defiance) of patriarchal discourse.

However, as I have already suggested with my previous argument, the perceived psychological continuity between mother and child has a downside that is less reassuring. In Elizabeth Grymeston’s text, for instance, we can detect what Laura Marcus calls the ‘prevalent imagery of fragmented bodies and the anxiety about the borders and boundaries of self’ (Marcus (1994) 218). For just as the child experiences the mother as a threat to his

God wold that euery wife that wonnyth in this land
 Wold teach her daughter as ye shal vnderstand,
 As a good wife did of the North countré
 How her daughter should lere a good wife to bee.
 For lack of the moders teaching
 Makes the doughter of euill liuing,
 My leue dere child. (sig. E4)

(*The Northren Mothers Blessing. The Way of Thrift. Written nine yeeres before the death of G. Chaucer.* London: Printed by Robert Robinson for Robert Dexter, 1597. Edinburgh: reprinted by James Ballantyne & Co., 1812).

or her identity, the mother herself is made painfully aware of the precariousness of her own selfhood. This anxiety is certainly present in Grymeston's celebration of the boundlessness of maternal love, which conceals some more sinister aspects. For one thing, it is described in terms of illness ('languishing consumption' (sig. A3r)) and violence ('wrath' (sig. A3r)). Most importantly, Grymeston presents herself as being close to death, or even dead-in-living ('... as I am now a dead woman among the living' (sig. A3r)).¹⁸¹ Her maternity is thus predicated on her self-image as powerless ('I have neither power to resist it' (sig. A3r)) and intellectual incapacity ('my fruitless braine' (sig. A3r)), which, of course, is in tune with contemporary misogynistic prejudices against women's alleged inconstancy and intellectual deficiency. If it is only the ambiguous position of motherhood, based on patriarchal assumptions about women, that allows a woman to employ her intellectual faculties and to express herself, the exercise seems questionable in the first place.

Dorothy Leigh's dedicatory introduction to her *Mothers Blessing* suggests similar limitations: 'I could not chuse but seeke (according as I was by duty bound) to fulfill his [her late husband's] will in all things, desiring no greater comfort in the World, then to see you grow in godlinesse' (sig. A6v). The mother's independent self is almost subsumed involuntarily by her attachment to her children, whose well-being becomes the primary purpose of her own existence. Giving advice to her children to equip them for life and thus handing over a part of the self is not an option to be either accepted or rejected, but the effect of a double constraint: externally, the structures of personal relationships under patriarchy make the mother the mere executrix of her husband's will;¹⁸² internally, her own desires are geared solely towards her children's well-being. As Luce Irigaray has observed, the compensatory function of maternity in patriarchal culture, by which motherhood becomes a substitute for unrepresentable female desire,¹⁸³ for a woman involves the risk 'of limiting (herself and her desire) to the world of one child' (Irigaray (1985a) 229). Still, Dorothy Leigh presents her maternal role as a vehicle to transcend (self- and outwardly imposed) strictures: '... setting aside all feare, I have adventured to shew my imperfections to the view of the World, not regarding what censure shall for this bee laid upon me, so that heerein I may shew my selfe a loving Mother, and a dutifull Wife' (sig. A7v). I do not

¹⁸¹ I will deal with this strategy of self-presentation, which occurs in most of the texts I have studied, in greater detail in a separate chapter (2.4).

¹⁸² Leigh's declared aim to incite other women to 'bee carefull of their children' (sig. B5v) is similarly compromised: '... to encourage women (who, I feare, will blush at my boldnesse) not to bee ashamed to shew their infirmitie, but to give men the first and chiefe place' (sig. B5v).

¹⁸³ According to Irigaray, a woman's 'pleasure will find, in the child, compensations for and diversions from the frustrations that she too often encounters in sexual relationships per se. Thus maternity fills the gaps in a repressed female sexuality' (Irigaray (1985b) 27).

wish to completely disclaim the potential for self-liberation that Leigh may have experienced in writing her manual; yet it is disturbing to realise that she does not define herself as a human being worthy of note in her own right, but only claims a contingent subjectivity, derived from her position as a wife and mother; a subjectivity that is radically unstable at the same time as it is self-assured.¹⁸⁴

Interestingly, Juan Luis Vives, in his treatise *De anima et vita* (1538), expresses a clear awareness of the co-dependence of self and other that the women express as regards motherhood. Similar to the mothers' manuals, for Vives, parental love is rooted in the similarity and figurative continuity that exists between parents and children: 'From the love of ourselves arises love towards our children, as if towards a part of ourselves ... For likeness is the cause of love, as if toward another self.'¹⁸⁵ The conceptualisation of their children as a part of their selves, as we have seen, is a frequent trope in mothers' writings of the period. However, Vives's account is distinctive in that it mentions *self-love* as the trigger of love towards one's children; a dimension that is conspicuously absent from the women's texts I have studied (note that Vives is speaking of 'parents' in general rather than mothers!). To the contrary, instances of positive valuation of the self are comparatively rare in the manuals; self-derogation or self-abnegation are infinitely more frequent.¹⁸⁶ It is highly probable that early modern women did not subscribe to Vives's sugar-coated account of parental love because their own experiences of mothering were markedly ambiguous.¹⁸⁷

As Adrienne Rich points out in *Of Woman Born* (1977), the ambiguity of submission and empowerment inheres in motherhood in the patriarchal context. Although, as with Chodorow, we need to bear in mind that Rich's socio-cultural frame of reference is mid-twentieth-century, white, middle-class America, she voices a fundamental insight into the simultaneity of conformism and liberation, but also the destructive downside, that motherhood entails:

¹⁸⁴ The question arises to what extent Leigh's self-presentation as a submissive wife and mother is a merely perfunctory move that, in effect, legitimises an authority that she would otherwise not have been able to claim. I will discuss this possibility in more detail in 2.3.

¹⁸⁵ Juan Luis Vives, *De anima et vita*. Basel 1538. Reprint. Turin 1959; quoted in Shuger (1990) 237.

¹⁸⁶ Note that the women's claim to authority in presenting guidelines that have allowed them to lead godly lives and pursue the path to salvation is, at the same time, offset by their humility and self-abjection in the face of their sinfulness and dependence on God's grace.

¹⁸⁷ In addition, it is worthwhile to consider that motherhood also reveals how biology is made to play in the hands of patriarchy, a connection that is possible because '[m]aternity, unlike paternity, is not a discretionary matter, to be acknowledged or not, at will' (Jordan (1990) 29). A woman's sexual activity is thus always openly known through her body, making it a site that signifies either virtue or licentiousness. In spite of the empowerment that comes with motherhood, it thus also implies a fundamental and inescapable entrapment.

To have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness. But also, it can mean the experiencing of one's own body and emotions in a powerful way. ... Powerless women have always used mothering as a channel – narrow but deep – for their own human will to power, their need to return upon the world what it has visited on them. (Rich (1977) 37f.)

Essentialising motherhood as women's natural vocation may backfire, for it allows them to access emotional and physical experiences beyond the rational logic of the socio-symbolic order. Rich adds a further twist by suggesting that mothering as a strategy of empowerment implies turning oppression back on patriarchy itself, this time with women as perpetrators, who claim a position of power in relation to their children.¹⁸⁸ Dorothy Leigh's invocation of parental love suggests a destructive myopia that has potential implications beyond the private sphere. She criticises:

... the great care, labour, travaile, and continuall study, which Parents take to enrich their children, ... some by bribery, some by simony, others by perjurie, and a multitude by usurie, some stealing on the Sea, others begging by Land portions from every poore man, not caring if the whole Commonwealth be impoverished, so their children be enriched[.] (sigs. A10r f.)

Parental love is so excessive that it is a potential threat to the social order. Its extreme force corresponds to the sense of power that accrues to being a mother. The power of motherhood stems from the opportunities that it offers to women to transcend the boundaries of their sex, but also from the authors' presentation of self as being able to direct their children in what they are convinced is the right course of life. The writers of mothers' manuals are adamant to point out that their main aim is, in Dorothy Leigh's words, for their children '[to] find the right way to heaven' (sig. A2v). Or, as Elizabeth Richardson puts it, '[I] do now still travel in care for the new birth of your soules; to bring you to eternall life, which is my chiefest desire, and the height of my hopes' (164). Richardson's foregoing self-diminishing remarks ('I know you may have many better instructors then my self' (164)) conceal the fact that, in a society preoccupied with the need of the individual to secure salvation in the hereafter, claiming knowledge of how to achieve this goal holds considerable power over the very core of another person's identity. In an indirect way, Richardson thus even highlights her maternal power, because she sets it up to contrast with her alleged inadequacies. The obsession with the goal of attaining

¹⁸⁸ For Rich, this is a consequence of the oppressive structures that characterise motherhood under patriarchy: 'The mother-child relationship is the essential human relationship. In the creation of the patriarchal family, violence is done to this fundamental human unit. It is not simply that woman in her full meaning and capacity is domesticated and confined within strictly defined limits. Even safely caged in a single aspect of her being – the maternal – she remains an object of mistrust, suspicion, misogyny in both overt and insidious forms' (Rich (1977) 127).

salvation through proper moral conduct during one's life on earth could become a site of female authority in the period because it links in with the responsibilities that humanism and Protestant household doctrine allocated to women: '[O]ne of the mother's chief responsibilities was to instil proper faith in her children, a responsibility that grants the mother an enormous amount of power not just over the child's earthly life but over its eternal soul' (Staub (2000) 336).

To give a further example, Elizabeth Joscelyn, in her *Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*, at first glance derives a similar position of authority from her role as a mother (albeit one that is, as in the texts I have so far referred to, implicated in the patriarchal scheme). Her somewhat apologetic stance is overridden by her clear sense of feeling justified in what she is doing:

But when I could finde no other means to express my motherly zeale ... agayn I considered it was to my own not to the world and my loue to my own might excuse my errors ... [T]hus resolved I writ this ensuringe l^r to our little one to whom I could not finde a fitter hand to convey it then thine own [her husband's]: w^{ch} mayst wth authority see the performance of this my little legacy of w^{ch} my childe is the executor[.] (21ff.)

Again, the authority and sense of self-worth that come with leaving a legacy to posterity are qualified by several more disturbing features of Joscelyn's dedication. Her emphasis that she is writing not to a grown-up person, but to a child ('I encoraged my selfe wth theas reasons[.] first that I wrote to a childe and though I weare but a woman yet to a childes iudgement' (22ff.)), diminishes the validity of her statements. As she will only ever be exposed 'to a childes iudgement' (25), she can legitimately allow herself a certain margin of error and is permitted some lapses, we are led to conclude. Although this apparent reluctance to take herself seriously might very probably be a protective strategy of indirect self-authorisation, the fact that Joscelyn needs to take recourse to such a self-denigrating position should leave us with a sense of unease.

More poignantly, the *Legacy* reveals the very material basis for the fears and apprehensions associated with motherhood. Joscelyn displays a disturbing sense of foreboding when, in the address to her husband that precedes her actual advice book, she expresses her fear that she might die in childbirth and thus be barred from the maternal role of bringing up her child:

I no sooner conceyved a hope that I should bee made a mother by thee but wth it entered the consideration of a mothers duty and shortly after followed the apprehension of danger that might preuent me for [from] executing that care, I so exceedingly desired. I mean in religious trayninge our childe, and in truthe deathe appearinge in this shape was doubly terrible vnto mee. (1ff.)

Joscelin did in fact die, presumably of puerperal fever, a few days after giving birth. Her fate poignantly suggests the reality of the physical danger that being a mother entailed for early modern women, and it thus sheds yet a different light on their strategies of self-presentation in their manuals.¹⁸⁹ For, if motherhood ultimately threatens the self with physical extinction, the value of the empowerment it allows becomes dubious in the first place. While it cannot be denied that the self constituted through interaction with an other – the child – is in some ways empowered and thus more secure, at the same time it is also clearly more precarious.

Detaching the self: keeping the other at bay

Elizabeth Joscelin's sorrow about her possible inability to bring up her child hints at the fact that motherhood poses a threat to the mother's self because of her emotional attachment to the child. Therefore, at a time when infant mortality was relatively common, constituting the self on the basis of maternal love threatens to eliminate that self in yet another way, in a less immediate and perhaps surprising sense. Martha Moulsworth's *Memorandum* provides an interesting case in point. In connection with her three marriages, Moulsworth also mentions her children's deaths in infancy: 'I by the ffirst, & last [husband] some Issue had / butt roote, & ffruite is dead, wh^{ch} makes me sad' (71f.). It is striking, if not alienating, how tersely she almost rushes over the subject.¹⁹⁰ As Kevin Bowden observes, at this point 'her restraint almost seems heartless and cold' (Bowden (1996) 72), and the way she describes her affective reaction ('makes me sad' (71)) appears inappropriately casual, given the weightiness of the events she refers to. Historians such as Lawrence Stone have argued that 'the very high infant and child mortality rates ... made it

¹⁸⁹ It has been a matter of debate to what extent pregnancy and childbirth posed genuine risks for women; in purely numerical terms, they 'would run a cumulative risk of dying in childbirth of 6 to 7 per cent during their procreative careers' (Pollock (1990) 47). Rather, the female subculture seems to have exaggerated these risks, creating an aura of fear around childbearing (cf. Wall (1993) 285; cf. 2.4). For an extensive account of the facts and myths around childbirth from a historical perspective, cf. Wilson (1993).

¹⁹⁰ David Booy notes a similar apparent coldness in Katherine Philips's poem 'Orinda upon little Hector Philips' (1669), composed on the death of her baby son: the artfulness of the poem may raise 'interesting questions about the "truth" of what has been written' (Booy (2002) 128) – relying on an apparently artificial structure might simply have provided a means of coming to terms with the emotional turmoil of the experience.

a folly to invest too much emotional capital in such ephemeral beings' (Stone (1977) 105). As with family relations in general, more recent studies have contested this view, since a number of personal writings from the period reveal that parents were usually deeply touched by the death of a child (cf. Crawford and Gowing (2000) 63). If they seem less grief-stricken than we would expect, this may indicate not a lack of concern, but rather an attempt to grapple with their loss by cultivating 'the Christian virtue of resignation' (Sim (1996) xxvii) and accepting God's will uncomplainingly. Even so, a plethora of written sources, by both women and men, clearly attests to the emotional impact that losing a child almost invariably had. Alice Thornton, who, in 1660, lost her baby son, reports her reaction in very moving terms and also depicts her relationship with her surviving infant daughter as close and intimate:

After the death of my dear Willy Thornton [her son, who died two weeks after birth], I took the cross very sadly that he died so soon, and had many sad thoughts of God's afflicting hand on me, and one day was weeping much about it. My dear Naly [her daughter Katherine] came to me, then being about 4 years old, and looked very seriously on me, said, 'My dear mother, why do you mourn and weep so much for my brother Willy? Do you not think he is gone to heaven?'

I said, 'Yes, dear heart, I believe he is gone to heaven, but your father is so afflicted for his loss, ...'

... At which the child's speech, I did much condemn myself, being instructed by the mouth of one of my own children, and begged that the Lord would give me patience and satisfaction in his gracious goodness, which had put such words into the mouth of so young a child to reprove my immoderate sorrow for him, and begged her life might be spared to me in mercy.¹⁹¹

In the light of such evidence, it would certainly be simplistic to explain away Martha Moulsworth's apparent detachment with reference to the relative frequency of infants' deaths in the early modern period. Rather, it makes sense to accept the psychological commonplace that we tend to elaborate the least on matters that involve intense emotions.¹⁹² Moulsworth's seemingly equitable and unmoved stance could thus be a mere façade that masks her true feelings (cf. Ottway (2002) 245). Given the impression of wholeness and self-sufficiency produced by the poem as a whole, it seems almost as if she deliberately refuses to be too strongly dependent emotionally on an other. For the self to be secure, as a strategy of self-protection, it needs to retain a degree of self-reliance. Emotional attachment to a loved one must not transcend the boundaries of modesty; if it does build up into 'immoderate sorrow,' it can no longer meet with divine approval

¹⁹¹ Alice Thornton (1627-1707), *The Autobiography of Mrs Alice Thornton*. Ed. C. Jackson. Durham, London and Edinburgh: Surtees Society, 1875; quoted in Booy (2002) 278-281 (281).

¹⁹² As Harriet Blodgett observes with reference to the practice of diary writing, 'fear of reawakening anguish regularly inhibits expression of pain and grief' (Blodgett (1989) 56).

because this would show a reluctance to accept God's will, as Alice Thornton observes. The central feminine virtue of self-restraint is thereby affirmed, but in a way that digresses from the patriarchal script: self-restraint does not merely serve to mould women into 'chaste, silent and obedient' housewives, but is employed by the women themselves as a way of coming to terms with overwhelming emotions in an inward-directed manner that keeps their senses of self intact.

Moulsworth's depictions of her marriages and her relationships with her husbands support this reading. There are clear indications of the emotional intimacy she enjoyed, in particular with her third husband, Bevill Moulsworth: 'The third I tooke a louely man, & kind / such comliness in age we seldome ffind' (57f.). Their relationship seems to have been based on mutuality and companionship, as is suggested by her remark that 'third wife I was to him, as he to me / third husband was, in nomber we agree' (61f.), and he obviously allowed her a considerable degree of power within their household ('I had my will in house, in purse in Store / whatt would a women old or yong haue more?' (67f.)). The Moulsworths' marriage lends itself to being contextualised with reference to the discourse of companionate marriage based on 'mutuall love and agreement.'¹⁹³ In the seventeenth century, marriage increasingly becomes a matter of choice between two individuals and is conceptualised on the terms of 'romantic wedlock' (Comensoli (1996) 53).¹⁹⁴ This perception matches Moulsworth's affectionate portrayal of Bevill Moulsworth, which opens the only part of the poem that is highly charged with emotion and culminates in the passage quoted above about the death of her children; it thus stands in sharp contrast to the artful constructedness of the *Memorandum* as a whole. In very moving words, emphasised through inversion and repetition, Moulsworth voices the emotional distress that her husband's death has caused her: 'Two years Almost outwearinge since he died / And yett, & yett my tears ffor him nott dried' (69f.). However, it seems as though, whenever she allows herself to express emotional involvement, Moulsworth immediately shies away from it again by abruptly reverting to a stance of restrained detachment that comes as an almost shocking surprise to the reader. Her short emotional outburst is followed by an extensive and sober list of connections between the dates of her husbands' deaths and the church calendar: 'My husbands all on holly dayes did die / Such day, such

¹⁹³ William Perkins, *Christian Oeconomie or, a Short Survey of the Right Manner of Erecting and Ordering a Family, according to the Scriptures* (1609). London: 1618 (671); quoted in Comensoli (1996) 53.

¹⁹⁴ Edmund Spenser's remark in his *Amoretti* (1595) attests to this perception: 'Sweet be the bands, the which true loue doth tye, / without constraunt or dread of any ill' (Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti* (1595). In: *Spenser: Poetical Works*. Ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt. London: Oxford University Press, 1970 (573); quoted in Comensoli (1996) 53). However, 'companionate marriage' also meant that, while the wife was perceived as her husband's spiritual equal, at the same time she remained his social inferior (cf. Benson (1992) 171).

waie, they to the S^{ts} did hye' (73f.). As if to supplant her emotions with detailed factuality, she goes on to name the relevant saints and their respective achievements and virtues. In the context, her decidedly Christian readings of her husbands' deaths seem almost contrived in the way she attempts to sublimate the emotional turmoil of her life by placing it into 'a larger scheme of significance' (Evans and Wiedemann (1993) 15). In spite of its undisputable element of self-restraint, Moulsworth's coping strategy is not simply tantamount to repression, since it also allows her to derive some meaning from her husbands' deaths because they could hope – as can she – 'wth the S^{ts} eternally to dwell' (88). Again, it is crucial not to approach Moulsworth's Christian references from a present-day, secular perspective, but to concede that, by and large, people in the early modern period regarded their lives as part of a divinely ordained order and structured as a journey towards salvation. Ultimately, Moulsworth's firm belief in the reality of a blissful afterlife is the reason why she is capable of presenting herself as a well-balanced individual who does not complain about, let alone challenge, the conditions and events of her life on earth.¹⁹⁵ Her constitution of self in relation to others is thereby again qualified: the outstanding importance of her husbands for her sense of self is not an instance of self-assertion in its own right, but only in an indirect way, safely embedded in an overarching religious framework. Taken on its own, founding the self exclusively on its relation to an other would be self-destructive.

The poem ends on Moulsworth's fierce defence of her status as a widow at the time of writing, which, at first glance, appears somewhat subdued and contradictory in the light of her earlier enthusiasm for the joys of married life ('Three husbands me, and I have them enjoyed' (44)):

Butt in the Meane tyme this must be my care
of knittinge here a fourth knott to beware
...
... whie should I
then putt my Widowehood in Jeopardy?
The Virgins life is gold, as Clarks vs tell
The Widowes siluar, I loue siluer well. (103ff.)

Given the ambiguities that accrued to the status of widows in the early modern period,¹⁹⁶ Moulsworth's deliberate option for widowhood cannot simply be explained with reference

¹⁹⁵ Obviously, 'she does not need so much to impose an order on her biography as to discover and elucidate the order it already implies' (Evans and Wiedemann (1993) 15).

¹⁹⁶ These ambiguities were recognised at the time: widowhood entails 'the paradox that widows mourn their husbands when in reality widowhood is the gateway to freedom' (T. E., *The Lawes Resolutions of Women's Rights*. 1632 (231f.); quoted in Belsey (1985) 153).

to the benefits – read: (financial) independence – she might have gained. To remain a widow also means not to be exposed ever again to emotions as intense as those experienced through love and the death of a loved one. Since she has shown the constitution of self in relation to an other to be inherently precarious, Moulsworth chooses to construct a self-reliant identity, even if this strategy entails being satisfied with what seems like ‘second best’ (‘I loue siluer well’ (110)). It is gratifying precisely because it avoids emotional extremes.

Conclusion: the dialectics of self and other

Relations between self and other in early modern self-writings cannot be as neatly categorised as Stephen Greenblatt suggests in his account of early modern self-fashioning that I have quoted at the beginning of this chapter; in the case of women, they are somewhat more twisted. Female writers of mothers’ manuals and autobiographies do not primarily conceive of an ‘alien, strange or hostile’ other (Greenblatt (1980) 9), but take as their starting point an other that is very close to, if not part of, the self. Identity formation can therefore only take place by acknowledging the other through the categories of affection and love and simultaneously circumventing its destructive potential. The other might be ‘alien, strange or hostile,’ but it is also always tied to the self in multi-dimensional and highly ambiguous ways. Women’s self-writings are thus not simply and reassuringly preoccupied with ‘finding an identity through empathy and relation’ (Friedman (1988) 45) but also with warding off, or at least negotiating, the dangers that such identity formation entails.

A contrastive comparison with King James’ I *Basilikon Doron* may be illuminating in this respect. As the title of its popularised edition suggests (*The Father’s Blessing* (1616)¹⁹⁷), the treatise is addressed to the King’s son and gives an outline of what James I considered to be the basis of successful kingship. At first glance, his dedicatory introduction shows surprising parallels with the authorial stance taken by the writers of

¹⁹⁷ *The Father’s Blessing or the Second Counsel to His Son, Appropriated to the General from that Particular Example of Learning and Piety His Majesty, Composed for the Prince His Son*. London 1616 (cf. Gray (2001) 563, 586).

mothers' manuals. James, too, derives the rationale for his writing from the fact that 'I the author thereof, as your naturall Father, must be carefull for your godly and virtuous education, as my eldest Sonne, and the first fruits of Gods blessing towards mee in posteritie' (3). This speaking position is possible because of the specific associations of fatherhood at the time. As Debora Shuger has observed, 'fatherhood came to symbolize an ideal of domestic, political, and religious order' (Shuger (1990) 219) – albeit an order based not on command and obedience, but rather on qualities such as 'forgiveness, nurturing, and tenderness' (Shuger (1990) 220). Whilst these characteristics certainly have unambiguously 'maternal' connotations for us today, James I, in the seventeenth century, could quite naturally draw on a discourse of 'nurturing' fatherhood.

Again in a way that parallels the female authors, he substantiates his authority with reference to his eventual absence:

[F]or affirmation of the purpose I am speaking of to my Sonne, I bring my slefe [*sic*] in there, as speaking vpon my Testament: for in that sense, euery record in write of a mans opinion in anything (in respect that papers outliue their authors) is as it were a Testament of that mans will in that case: and in that sense it is, that in that place I call this Treatise a Testament. (10)

His repeated designation of his work as a 'treatise' and 'testament' – two obviously 'public' genres, the use of which wielded tangible power for men¹⁹⁸ – suggests, however, that James I's notion of fatherhood is not genuinely predicated on emotional attachment and intimacy, as is the case with the conceptualisations of motherhood I have studied. Behind his surface declarations is a clear focus on the predominantly functional principles of primogeniture, inheritance and royal duty. His self-portrayal as a caring father is immediately overruled by the reference to his royal status: 'as a King [I] must timously prouide for your training vp in all the points of a Kings Office' (3). I thus agree with critics who have persuasively argued that 'James's depiction of the king as a loving father naturalizes (or attempts to naturalize) the absolutist demand for obedience and subordination' (Shuger (1990) 228), rather than being truly concerned with establishing fatherhood as an emotional tie (cf. Goldberg (1986) 3ff., 18). His relationship with his son and successor is exclusively one-directional: as a father and monarch, James is the sole source of authority, of an authority that descends from above; there is no way in which the other he addresses could interfere with his own self. The metaphor of birthing that he

¹⁹⁸ In contrast, under the legal theory of coverture, a married woman's legal status was subsumed by that of her husband – at least in theory, if not always in practice (cf. Jean LeDrew Metcalfe, introduction to Elizabeth Jocelin, *The Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*, 3-27 (23f.)). Thomas Goad, the first editor of Jocelin's *Mothers Legacy*, alludes to this notion at the very outset of his 'Approbation': 'OVr lawes disable those, that are vnder *Couert-baron*, from disposing by Will and Testament any temporall estate' (1f.).

employs with regard to both his book and the prince, calling both ‘this birth of mine’ (11), is equally devoid of any element of threat to his own identity – inevitably so, because, as a man, he would not have any unmediated awareness of the dangers connected with giving birth, but could use the image in an exclusively metaphorical sense. His self-designation as his people’s ‘louing nourish-father’ suggests even more strongly that the maternal imagery he uses is, in effect, thoroughly affirmative of patriarchy: ‘[T]he appropriation of wholesome milk-filled breasts as a sign of male political power serves to remedy or, at least to conceal, some form of paternal or patriarchal failure, lack, instability, or illegitimacy. [It triggers] ... the redirection of mothers’ milk from the reformed maternal body to the idealized paternal body politic’ (Trubowitz (2000) 46). In male-authored texts such as *Basilikon Doron*, maternal imagery is used in a ‘sanitised’ fashion, with any elements of a potential threat to male subjectivity removed.¹⁹⁹ In addition, James displays a stereotypically masculine notion of subjectivity in that he perceives himself as the independent and self-determined originator of meaning and authority. As we can conclude from his self-stylisation in royal pageants and masques, he draws on the rhetoric of the gift (the Greek title *Basilikon Doron*, in fact, means ‘royal gift’) precisely in order to *prevent* interaction with others and to style his relationships in an exclusively one-directional fashion. Styling his book as containing the ‘viue Ideas of the authours minde’ (9) allows him to keep his self safely contained.

Looking for an explanation for these (seemingly clichéd) differences between the mothers’ manuals and James’s male-authored advice book leads us back to the psychological dimension of the maternal relationship with the child. The physical immediacy of the mother-child bond makes for an interaction between self and other that implies a constant merging of, or at least continual interference, between the two. Motherhood entails ‘perpetual Labor’ and ‘Travail’ and always involves potentially painful

¹⁹⁹ Allison P. Coudert gives a comprehensive account of the marginalisation of motherhood and the feminine that occurred in seventeenth-century culture and that *Basilikon Doron* exemplifies: ‘Literary scholars have recently called attention to how often mothers were left out in the seventeenth century. Louis Montrose has commented on the significant lack of mothers in Shakespeare. Mothers are significantly absent from male autobiographies as well. One would hardly know from reading the autobiographies of Baxter and Locke, for example, that they had been “of woman born.” Jonathan Goldberg notes the same omission of mothers in Stuart family portraits. Political imagery shows male rulers taking over female roles. King James I of England envisioned himself as the single parent of his realm, as “a loving nourish-father” who provided his subjects with “their own nourish milk.” Scientists were so entranced by this patriarchal rhetoric that they claimed to have made microscopic observations of spermatozoa containing perfect little embryos. In this sort of macho science, the female role in generation was reduced to that of a nest or warming oven in which the male-engendered embryo hatched’ (Coudert (1989) 71f.).

experiences. The mother-child bond creates a co-dependency that can be suffocating in its inescapability.²⁰⁰

Therefore, early modern women's self-writings prompt us to conclude that constituting the self through interaction with an other is a profoundly ambivalent strategy. It creates a connectedness that can be empowering; interacting with others and regarding the self as something that is worth being passed on clearly is a prime example of female agency and self-assertion. At the same time, however, this strategy does not automatically create an alternative female sphere of peaceful and non-competitive relationality. It belies those feminist strands that regard the allegedly feminine, caring and nurturing qualities as the possible basis for an alternative and peaceful social order which would guarantee harmony and make rivalry, tensions and conflicts miraculously disappear. I agree with Laura Marcus, who observes that 'arguing for a new valuation of self in relationship, embodied and empathetic consciousness, identity as likeness to an other rather than as the self-same' also works to *disempower* women, because it redefines them 'in terms of an exemplary altruism or lack of self-assertiveness' (Marcus (1994) 220). Moreover, this altruistic, nurturing stance is not even what early modern women's self-writings suggest to be women's usual, immediate relation to others. If it is presented as such, we must always suspect deliberate ideological construction. Rather, interpersonal relationships are inevitably underwritten by power. The other always also embodies a threat, because the very dependence on the other to back up and legitimise the self also makes it more contingent and therefore insecure and endangered.

The fact that the other is not completely outside the self – to the extent that women's more flexible ego boundaries imply what one might call an 'osmotic' relationship

²⁰⁰ This enduring emotional bond is the subject of the dedicatory poem, addressed to her mother, that opens Constantia Munda's *The Worming of a mad Dog* (1617), and it is described using metaphors that link emotional and physical involvement:

At first your pain in bearing me was such
A benefit beyond requital that 'twere much
To think what pangs of sorrow you sustained
In childbirth, when mine infancy obtained
The vital drawing in of air, so *your love*
Mingled with care hath shown itself above
The ordinary course of Nature. Seeing you still
Are in *perpetual Labor* with me even until
The second birth of education perfect me,
You Travail still though Church'd oft you be.

(Constantia Munda, *The Worming of a mad Dog; or, A Sop for Cerberus, the jailor of Hell. No Confutation but a sharp Redargution of the baiter of Women by Constantia Munda: 'dux femina facti'* (1617). In: Henderson and McManus (1985) 244-263 (245); emphasis added). The author's name is most probably a pseudonym – 'Constantia Munda' might not even have been a woman. If this was the case, my argument would be even stronger: the never-ending emotional ties that motherhood creates are so obvious that they are generally recognised, even by men.

with the other – also complicates the Lacanian scheme of identity formation as separation and the subsequent sense of lack. For Lacan, the wholeness that the subject strives for is ultimately unattainable and in the possession of the other; in the famous Lacanian formulation, a person’s desire is ‘the desire of the other’ (cf. Macey (2000) 285). If the other cannot be safely kept in check, apart from the self, as is suggested by the accounts of female experiences I have analysed, the constitutive split that occurs when the subject recognises the other is even more virulent, as it more immediately jeopardises the integrity of the self. For women, the key to presenting a convincing selfhood in spite of this is to rely neither completely on the self nor completely on the other, but to tease out options in-between the two extremes.

2.3 Private/public spaces: transgressing boundaries or, the impossibility of binarisms

'Tis not enough for one that is a wife
To keep her spotless from an act of ill,
But from suspicion she should free her life,
And bare her self of power as well as will.

'Tis not so glorious for her to be free,
As by her proper self restrained to be.

– Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1604/06)²⁰¹

Why should such privilege to men be given?
Or given to them, why barred from women then?
Are men than we in greater grace with Heaven?
Or cannot women hate as well as men?
I'll be the custom-breaker, and begin
To show my sex the way to freedom's door.

– Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1604/06)²⁰²

The epigraphs that I have chosen to open this chapter, taken from Elizabeth Cary's closet drama *The Tragedy of Mariam*, exemplify in a paradigmatic fashion the contradictory poles between which early modern female identities developed. The first passage, spoken by the Chorus which, in the play, functions as the voice of misogynistic convention, advises women to renounce freedom and power in favour of an exclusive inward-directedness that will guarantee their reputation as virtuous. In the second quote, by contrast, Salome, the most outspoken and, to use the fashionable term, 'transgressive' female character in the play, opposes male privilege (in the context of the plot, she is referring to the exclusively male right to obtain a divorce) and demands 'freedom' for women. My contention is that the opposition of restraint and confinement versus transgression and rebellion is related to the spatiality that structured female lives in the early modern period, but that it cannot be squarely mapped onto the distinction between the private and the public spheres.

The private/public binary is today commonly assumed as a given, as one of the structuring principles of human experience. The public is generally associated with affairs of state and community, whereas the private is largely equated with the domestic, the home. Yet the latter also has a second component, denoting inwardness, i.e. the

²⁰¹ III. Chorus 1ff.

²⁰² Liv. 45ff.

individual's interior realm of self that is inaccessible to other people. The definition of privacy given in the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates this duality: privacy is both '[t]he state or condition of being withdrawn from the society of others, or from public interest' and '[t]he state or condition of being alone, undisturbed, or free from public attention, as a matter of choice or right; freedom from interference or intrusion.'²⁰³ We are thus confronted with a three- (rather than two-) dimensional spatiality, with the public set against the private, which can in turn be differentiated as denoting the domestic or the inward.

Analysing the relevance of private and public spaces for early modern women's identity formation, I will ask to what extent domesticity and inwardness are aligned with one another and/or intersect in women's writings, and in how far women's relegation to the private sphere, so strongly associated with the sociology of modernity, can be said to apply to early modern women.²⁰⁴ Related to this is the question of bodily experience: as the materially accessible sign of individuality and every person's most visible realisation, the body is both inherently private and the individual's locus of connection to the public world. This complicates the issue for early modern women in particular, because the culture's unease towards the female body implies that their inwardness cannot easily include their corporeal experiences, because it potentially puts their virtuous reputation under threat. Conversely, the women's outward presentation of self has to be set up in such a way as to express chastity and continually ward off the danger of coming under suspicion for licentiousness. I will analyse in what ways these constraints allowed early modern women to perceive themselves in relation to inwardness, domesticity and the public world, and I will pursue the question in how far their experiences can be accounted for with the paradigms of the conventional private/public distinction.

²⁰³ Vol. XII. Eds. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd ed. 1989 (515ff.).

²⁰⁴ Doreen Massey summarises this structural alignment as follows: 'The limitation of women's mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination. Moreover the two things – the limitation on mobility in space, the attempted consignment/confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation on identity on the other – have been crucially related ... One of the most evident aspects of this joint control of spatiality and identity has been in the West related to the culturally specific distinction between public and private. The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity' (Massey (1994) 179).

‘Yet I my thoughts do far above these prize’: female inwardness

Lady Mary Wroth, one of the better-known female poets of the sixteenth century, was a gentlewoman whose extensive family connections to the court and the cultural elite of the day made the communal entertainments of country house life an integral component of the everyday life of herself and her household.²⁰⁵ And yet, in her ‘Sonnet 23’ Wroth presents herself as determined to avoid these distractions. Instead, she deliberately privileges her inward self over the continual hustle and bustle of her surroundings:

When every one to pleasing pastime hies,
Some hunt, some hawk, some play, while some delight
In sweet discourse, and music shows joy’s might,
Yet I my thoughts do far above these prize.

The joy which I take is that, free from eyes,
I sit and wonder at this daylike night,
So to dispose themselves as void of right,
And leave true pleasure for poor vanities.

When others hunt, my thoughts I have in dose,
If hawk, my mind at wished end doth fly,
Discourse, I with my spirit talk and cry,
While others, music choose as greatest grace.

‘O God,’ say I, ‘can these fond pleasures move?
Or music be but in sweet thoughts of love?’²⁰⁶

Wroth’s lyrical persona consistently replaces the extroverted, communal pastimes that are hunting, music, playing etc. with the entirely self-reliant and self-reflexive activities of the mind and her thoughts, which she finds infinitely more gratifying. In a strikingly similar way, about thirty years later, Margaret Cavendish characterises herself as being ‘addicted to contemplation’ (*A True Relation* 172) rather than sociable activities. Crucially, she explicitly aligns this personality trait with her fondness for writing:

For I being addicted from my childhood to contemplation rather than conversation, to solitariness rather than society, to melancholy rather than mirth, to write with the pen than to work with a needle, passing my time with harmless fancies, their company being pleasing, their conversation innocent ... (172)

²⁰⁵ Wroth had close connections to the Sidney family and their literary circles – her uncle was Sir Philip Sidney, and her aunt Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (cf. Wray (2004) 8).

²⁰⁶ Mary Wroth, ‘Sonnet 23,’ from *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621); in Salzman (2000) 134.

Solitariness is a powerful trigger for creativity, and Cavendish happily renounces human company in favour of the solipsistic pursuits of her own inventive mind. However, far from presenting herself as (masculine) authorial genius, she dubs her writing ‘harmless fancies.’ This seemingly good-natured, yet slightly self-diminishing remark gains an unsettling edge because it is concomitant with the underlying fear that her creativity might end, i.e. that the solitary self might run out of creative and original ideas: ‘[M]y only trouble is, lest my brain should grow barren, or that the root of my fancies should become insipid, withering into a dull stupidity for want of maturing subjects to write on’ (172). Just as Cavendish’s textually constructed self is highly unstable – which, of course, is a related issue – solitariness as a precondition for writing will potentially turn out to be detrimental for rather than conducive to her writerly creativity.

If there exists a specifically female predilection for solitariness in the early modern period – and the examples of Lady Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish suggest that it does, as do the other texts that I will discuss in this chapter – it is not a harmonious realm apart from the public, ‘masculine’ world, but beset by its own particular problematics. The writers’ senses of privacy are complicated even more by the perception that, in the early modern period, ‘the individual derived a sense of self largely from external matrices, among which the family and its place in society was paramount’ (Goldberg (1983) 86). This self-perception may force us to question the specifically modern alignment of the private sphere with a safe haven that provides a comforting retreat from and guards the individual against the threats and vagaries of the outside world. Rather, early modern states of privacy appear to reflect the structures of the public world by projecting them inward, thereby creating a continuity rather than a distinction between these spaces. What is more, women’s experiences of privacy disturb and force us to further interrogate the cherished feminist belief that has been the focus of my critique in the previous chapter, namely that it is relationships, not self-reliant interiority, which constitute female selfhood. As I have outlined in the preceding chapter, Nancy Chodorow’s claim that ‘the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world’ (Chodorow (1978) 169) has complex and potentially detrimental implications for early modern women’s senses of self. Wroth’s and Cavendish’s writings support the verdict that their implications in social structures, but also their senses of disconnectedness are by no means unproblematic, to say the least.

The questions and complexities that their statements open up can be specified with reference to Lady Grace Mildmay’s *Autobiography*. Similar to Wroth and Cavendish, Mildmay points out that solitariness had a special appeal for her:

My husband was much from me in all that time and I spent the best part of my youth in solitariness, shunning all opportunities to run into company lest I might be enticed and drawn away by some evil suggestions to stain mine unspotted garment and so be robbed of mine innocency. (34)

Mildmay creates a significant link between female solitariness and moral impeccability: only a woman who keeps to herself, i.e. who does not venture beyond the confines of her home, can be considered virtuous. The moralistic dimension she establishes, which commanded a widespread cultural presence in the early modern period and beyond, can be taken to suggest that Mildmay's self-presentation as solitary might be part of a deliberate construction of self, rather than a faithful account of reality. Admittedly, this is to a large extent mere speculation, but it is supported by Linda Pollock's reading:

It may well be that she [Mildmay] declined invitations to feasts, plays and card games, but, as a member of the gentry class, she was unlikely to be solitary. Hospitality to friends, kin and others was recognised as a necessary component of gentry conduct, and Apethorpe [the Mildmay family estate] would have received its share of visitors, including royal ones.²⁰⁷

We can resolve the apparent contradiction between the historical probability and Mildmay's own account if we consider the fact that her stress on her solitariness occurs in her autobiography, the deliberately 'public' and openly accessible account of her life. Hers is a 'privacy exhibited in public' (Fumerton (1991) 71); it is a form of self-perception that is not intended to be reserved exclusively for her own individual self, as her withdrawal is made an object of discussion in her writing. Thus Mildmay develops her argument by aligning solitariness with domesticity and, in turn, with spirituality and piety, openly placing herself in opposition to public opinion:

And some great personages, ladies of mine acquaintance, would persuade me to go with them to court, to feasts, marriages and plays, saying that it was [a] pity my youth should be swallowed up without all pleasure or delight in the world. Mine answer was that God had placed me in this house and if I found no comfort here, I would never seek it out of this house and this was my certain resolution. (34)

The equation of solitariness and virtue is paradigmatic for the broader cultural context of the time, in which a woman's all-out constraint to the confines of her home or, in a sense, even her body was part and parcel of the discursive construction of virtuous femininity. This is of particular relevance with regard to writing, for to write means to (potentially) expose parts of the self to the public eye. The alignment of solitariness with creativity that both Wroth and Cavendish express therefore has a disturbing dimension, because writing

²⁰⁷ Linda Pollock, introduction to Lady Grace Mildmay, *Autobiography*. In: *With Faith and Physic*. 4-22 (19f.).

inevitably threatens to disrupt the moral impeccability that solitariness is meant to ensure. Even if publication, or even private manuscript circulation, is not intended, to write (just as to speak) is to externalise (parts of) the self and hence to leave the secure boundaries of solitariness²⁰⁸ – a connection that Mildmay is strongly aware of when she reminds herself of her mother’s principles:

Also my mother advised me at all times if I were provoked to utter a speech, that I should consider so long as the word remaineth with me it is mine own, but when I have spoken the same the word is no more mine own but every man’s that heard it and all others to whom the same shall afterward be uttered, which course I have ever found and proved to be true ... And also she warned me in the fear of God, to shun the company of men and all superfluous talk or discourse with them whereby I might become impudent and shameless and in the end be drawn to follow and perform their lewd enticements. (29)

Mildmay expresses the straightforward connection between speech and sexual transgression that was at the root of the early modern invective against outspoken women: ‘superfluous talk’ equals ‘shameless[ness]’ equals ‘lewd enticements.’ Just as her words, once they have been freely uttered, are no longer hers only, her body – in more than a metaphorical sense – becomes potentially subject to public (male) availability (‘every man’s that heard it’).

And yet, if writing is a means of externalising the self, this also implies that the individual is, to some extent, in a position to control which aspects of her self she wants to see publicly accessible and represented. Writing allows others a degree of access to the self; but only to the self as it is constructed by the writer. Even if a self-presentation such as Mildmay’s is clearly dependent on the patriarchal ideology that expects ‘chaste, silent and obedient’ females, her deliberate portrayal of herself as a morally unimpeachable woman constitutes in itself a certain extent of self-determination, however limited.

The connections between Mildmay’s construction of self and the discourse of virtuous femininity of her time become obvious when one compares her statements with contemporary male-authored texts. Interestingly, Philip Stubbes, in his *Christal Glasse, for Christian Women* (1591), describes his deceased wife’s solitariness in terms almost identical to Mildmay’s:

²⁰⁸ In the early modern period, publication (in the modern sense of having one’s work printed and sold) was a relatively new, and hence rare, phenomenon. Other practices, such as manuscript circulation among family or friends, were common ways of reaching a literary audience; i.e. in spite of their relatively small scale, it would be anachronistic to regard the latter as entirely ‘private’ activities (cf. Ezell (1993) 53ff.). Therefore, I understand writing in general as ‘publicising’ the self, in the broad sense of potentially making the self publicly accessible.

And so solitarie was shee given, that shee woulde verie seldome, or never, and that not without great compulsion go abroade with any, either to banquet or feast, to gossip or make merie (as they tearme it) inso much, that shee hath beene accused to doo it in contempt or disdaine of others.²⁰⁹

The conduct books of the time reiterate the straightforward, threefold equation of chastity, silence and domesticity. Juan Luis Vives emphasises interiority and solitariness as the necessary complements of a woman's everyday household duties:

A virtuous wife when she hath rid her household charge and business, shall every day once, if she may, or at least on the holy days, get herself into some secret corner of her house, out of company, and there for a while lay apart out of her mind all care and thought of her house. There with quiet mind, gathering her wits and remembrance unto her, despise these worldly things as trifles, frail and unsure, and that shall soon vanish away. (*Instruction* 121)

However, Vives's account also suggests that women's inwardness can never be unproblematic, because their very roles as mothers and household mistresses diminish their opportunities for solitariness. This observation introduces a further complexity: apparently, exclusive domesticity does not suffice for a woman to be considered virtuous. After all – and this is an almost cynical twist – the tasks that patriarchy assigns to women, keeping the house, are ultimately just 'worldly things,' 'trifles, frail and unsure.' Vives's recommendation is significant also in another respect, namely because it highlights the impact of women's physical and material living conditions on their identity formation – it is also for very practical reasons that 'the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world' (Chodorow (1978) 169), i.e. that women develop a distinctive approach to solitariness that includes their relationships to others and material living conditions.

Nevertheless – maybe because of these contingencies – the conduct manuals of the period consistently construct the household as the site of self-contained femininity. According to John Dod and Robert Cleaver's treatise *A Godly Form of Householde Government* (1612), the husband's role is to interact with the world, while the wife has to withdraw herself to the point of self-sufficiency, as the authors elaborate with reference to various everyday contexts:

The dutie of the Husband is to get goods: and of the Wife to gather them together, and save them. The dutie of the Husband is to travel abroade, to seeke living: and the Wives dutie is to keepe the house. The dutie of the Husband is to get money and provision: and of the Wives, not vainely to spend it. The dutie of the Husband is to deale with many men: and of the Wives to talke with few. The dutie of the Husband is to be entermedling: and of the wife, to be solitary and withdrawne. The dutie of the man is, to be skilfull in talke: and of the wife, to boast of silence ... The dutie of the Husband is

²⁰⁹ In Trill, Chedgzoy and Osborne (1997) 57-62 (58).

to bee lorde of all: and of the wife, to give account of all: The dutie of the husband is, to dispath all things without dore: and of the wife, to oversee and give order for all things within the house.²¹⁰

In his treatise *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), Richard Brathwait implicitly links feminine seclusion with chastity: he demands of women that they '[a]t all times ... use a moderate restraint' (40; emphasis added) and do not venture beyond their homes: '[It is] a custome very irregular and vndecent, that *Women* should frequent places of *publike* resort, as Stage-plays, Wakes, solemne Feasts, and the like. It is *Occasion* that depraues vs; Company that corrupts vs' (50; emphasis in the original). Similarly, Heinrich Bullinger's *The Christen State of Matrimonye* (1541) creates a tangled web of connections between domesticity, virtuous reading matter, chastity and inwardness, urging women to:

... avoyd all dishonest lovers and occasyons of the same, as dishonest daunsynge, wanton communication, coommury wythe rybaldes and filthy speachese, teache them to averte thyr sight and sences from all such unconveniencs, let them avoid yollenes, be occupied wither doing some profitable thing for your family, or elles readynge some godly book, let them not reade bokes of fables, of fond lyght love, but call upon God to have pure hartes and chaste, that they might cleve only to thyr spouse.²¹¹

The list of examples of such conduct book injunctions could be extended indefinitely. With a certain range of variation in emphasis, the passages all reiterate the fundamental equation of domesticity and chastity. A particularly explicit example occurs in Henry Smith's manual *A Preparative for Marriage* (1591), where he draws on biblical precedents:

Lastly, we call the wife *housewife*, that is, not a street wife like Tamar (Gen. xxxviii.14); nor a field wife like Dinah (Gen. xxxiv.1), but a house wife, to show that a good wife keeps her house. And therefore Paul biddeth Titus to exhort women that they be chaste and keeping at home (Tit. ii.5); presently after *chaste* he saith *keeping at home*, as though *home* were chastity's keeper.²¹²

The biblical examples that precede the moral requirement 'that a good wife keeps her house' have the effect that the seemingly tentative formulation ('as though *home* were ...') is clearly understood in the affirmative – home *is* 'chastity's keeper.'

Female solitariness is thus constructed as a cultural trope that implies both women's relegation to the home and their literal silence. Hence women writers who draw on the motif, as Lady Grace Mildmay does, participate in and lend support to a patriarchal discourse. The socio-cultural invective against women writing can be traced in their

²¹⁰ John Dod and Robert Cleaver, *A Godly Form of Householde Government: For the Ordering of Private Families*. London, 1612; quoted in Shepard (2003) 76f.

²¹¹ Heinrich Bullinger, *The Christen State of Matrimonye* (1541); quoted in Sim (1996) 33.

²¹² Henry Smith, *A Preparative to Marriage*. London: for Thomas Man, 1591; quoted in Keeble (1994) 148f.; emphasis in the original.

apologetic authorial stance – as I have observed before, in the great majority of their texts we find evidence of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have theorised as the characteristically female ‘anxiety of authorship,’ the writers’ reluctance to express themselves in writing and their tendency to apologise for their alleged lack of skill and their boldness to write.²¹³ Their self-denigrating remarks almost always contain references to the public or the audience and their expected unfavourable judgements of the text. Elizabeth Joscelyn, for example, presents herself as hesitant and undecided: ‘I knew not what to doo[,] I thought of writinge but then my own weaknes appeared so manifestly that I was ashamed and durst not vndertake it’ (19ff).²¹⁴ In a similar fashion, Elizabeth Richardson perceives her writing as an activity that cannot but incur public criticism, at the same time as she expresses her deliberate disregard for such censure:

I have adventured to beare all censures, and desire their patience and pardon, whose exquisite judgements may finde many blameworthy faults, justly to condemne my boldnesse ... And therefore I hope herein, I neither wrong nor give offence to any, which I should be very loath to doe. (162)

It is a matter of debate whether the self-demeaning attitudes of female writers such as Joscelyn and Richardson can be taken to reflect their true perceptions of self. In any case, I would argue that the frequency with which such apologies occur points to the pervasiveness of feminine virtue being equated with silence or inwardness, which women had to adjust to and go along with. And yet, the very predictability of their self-deprecating remarks might also indicate that they were merely paying lip-service to a conventionally expected behaviour. After all, these women did decide to write and, some of them, even to publish. Paradoxically, presenting the self as solitary and self-contained can be a deliberate strategy of ‘going public,’ whilst, on the surface, adhering to an ideology that forbids this.

A striking example of this dual tactics is the legendary aristocratic matriarch Lady Anne Clifford. The owner of several inherited estates in the north of England, she was adamant to create around herself an impressive aura of long-standing wealth for the visiting public: as her biographer R. T. Spence relates, ‘[t]he public rooms would be ostentatious, with rich tapestries, ornamental plasterwork, oak wainscoting and many

²¹³ Cf. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) 45-92. Gilbert and Gubar coined the term in analogy to Harold Bloom’s notion of the ‘anxiety of influence’ experienced by (male) writers, who inevitably create models that their predecessors will have to measure themselves against – writing thereby becomes a metaphorical re-enactment of the Oedipal struggle with the father. Since women do not have literary foremothers, they can neither define themselves in accordance with, nor in opposition to any predecessors, and it is the resulting sense of lack which produces anxiety.

²¹⁴ As I have observed elsewhere (2.2), her decision to write in spite of her insecurities was predicated on knowing that she would only be exposed ‘to a childes iudgement’ (25), a remark that, in itself, qualifies the value she openly attaches to her writing.

family portraits not just to proclaim her own standing but to make her high-ranking visitors feel at home.’²¹⁵ However, this unashamed desire for public display contrasted sharply with Clifford’s personal appearance: she was habitually seen ‘wearing a black habit that went beyond the requirements of either widowhood or maturity and furnish[ed] her private rooms like a monastic cell’ (McBride (2001) 53). Consciously combining a veneer of feminine moderation and virtue with aristocratic display enabled her to superficially reconcile the conflicting demands of both discourses, whilst in effect claiming for herself a position of matriarchal authority. Referring to women of such public influence as Clifford could command, Helen Wilcox summarises their strategy as follows: ‘The consequence of visible function in the world of men (a definition, perhaps, of the “public”) was *reputation*, the morally charged meeting point of private self and public name’ (Wilcox (1992) 53; emphasis in the original). If this moral charge is not to be to the woman’s detriment, she has to construct a private self that is in keeping with the demands of feminine virtue. In reverse, this means that, as long as she upholds an impeccable reputation as virtuous, a woman will possibly be able to exert influence beyond the domestic sphere – especially if she has the necessary material backing, as the case of Anne Clifford suggests.

It is therefore not entirely surprising that the relegation of women to the home was not only welcomed because of its alleged silencing effects, but that it also betrays a number of ambiguities that reveal the sense of threat that patriarchy associates with female power. Although solitariness was generally considered essential for the individual’s spiritual well-being (cf. Warnicke (1993) 129), especially in Protestant thought, it was also perceived as threatening, precisely because it implied a withdrawal from outside control. This double-sidedness is particularly virulent in the case of women. The conduct book writer Matthew Griffith provides a striking example: at first, he seems to go along with the stereotypical alignment of female domesticity and virtue, stating that ‘[t]he good woman is called an housewife, ... because she is either at home or, if she go [*sic*] abroad, it is snail-like, with her house upon her head, and it is about household consideration.’²¹⁶ However, Griffith is well aware of the fact that a woman’s exclusive preoccupation with ‘household consideration’ entails a significant degree of power, enabling her ‘to make her husband’s house, his hell, by the strength of her will[, which is] as monstrous in nature, as to see one body having two heads.’²¹⁷ In a similar vein, Richard Brathwait expresses an almost

²¹⁵ Richard T. Spence, *Lady Anne Clifford: Countess of Pembroke, Dorset and Montgomery (1590-1676)*. Stroud/Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997 (218); quoted in McBride (2001) 53.

²¹⁶ Matthew Griffith, *Bethel* (1633), sig. T5; quoted in Orlin (1994) 103.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* sig. Y4r; quoted in Orlin (1994) 103.

obsessive fear of how a woman might be tempted to act in the absence of male control. He introduces the watchful eye of God as the ultimate instance of patriarchal surveillance, for whom the boundaries of the private or the inward are irrelevant: ‘Doe not say, the walls encompass mee, darkenesse o’er-shadowes mee, the Curtaine of night secures mee: These be the wordes of an *Adulteresse*: Therefore doe nothing *privately*, which you would not doe *publikely*. There is no retire from the eyes of God’ (49; emphasis in the original). This injunction amounts to a double confinement: to relegate women to the home is not enough; their inward selves, too, must be curtailed. Only domesticity coupled with submissiveness – meaning the refusal to claim an alternative inward realm set apart from public (male) scrutiny – is an indicator of feminine virtue, a virtue that is under constant threat of sliding into its opposite, lustful monstrosity. Effectively, for a virtuous woman who wants to keep her virtuous reputation intact, there can be no distinction between private and public, inward and outward. As Alexandra Bennett observes, with reference to Mariam in Elizabeth Cary’s tragedy: ‘Self-awareness is never enough to secure one’s place in the world – public representations of one’s self as a consistent entity conforming to extant standards are necessary’ (Bennett (2000) 303).²¹⁸

Interestingly, the devaluation of solitariness as potentially conducive to loss of virtue is also expressed by a female writer, namely M. R. in her *Mothers Counsell*: ‘That kind of fantasticke contemplation which tends to solitarinesse, is but a glorious title to proud idlenesse’ (sig. C6v). Being exclusively preoccupied with the self entails the danger of developing excessive pride: ‘Pride is always accompanied with Folly, Audacitie, Rashnesse, Impudency, and Solitarinesse: as if one would say that the proud woman is abandoned of all the world, ever attributing that to her selfe which is not, having much more boast than matter of worth’ (sig. C6v). The parallels between male-authored conduct books and M. R.’s text suggest that patriarchal discourse combines with religiously motivated self-abrogation to make women’s pursuit of solitariness an ambivalent exercise. The equivocal nature of female solitariness relates to and extends my earlier observations on self-scrutiny, which is naturally pursued in private. Far from constituting an exclusive preoccupation with the self, self-scrutiny always takes place within a religious frame of reference; i.e. whilst it is centrally concerned with the self, it requires the interaction of that self with a (divine) other and measures it with reference to a pre-existing and outwardly imposed yardstick. The preoccupation with the self that the women present as dangerous, however, is of a different type: it is a veneration of the self that is devoid of any such

²¹⁸ I will analyse the issue of outward appearance versus inward reality in a separate chapter (2.4).

religious standards; it is mere ‘fantasticke contemplation,’ exclusively concerned with the self. This association interlinks self-monitoring with the fear of excess – female inwardness is good only when it is balanced with a readily accessible, outward frame of reference.

My argument is further substantiated if one considers the gendering of spaces in the early modern period. Whilst engagement in the public realm, in the sense of official political, religious and institutional discourse, was clearly a male domain, its opposite, withdrawal into a private chamber, was equally associated with masculine subjectivity and clearly set apart from the more mundane preoccupations that determined women’s relegation to the home. Crucially, these two aspects of male selfhood were perceived as separate and hierarchically organised, with ‘the authentic self [being] ... the private one, the one that has to be deposed in order to create the public self’ (Huebert (1997) 27). Of course, tangible power and influence lay with the public self. Yet the veneration of private selfhood became increasingly pronounced in the early modern period, partly because socio-economic developments allowed withdrawal to become a more and more frequent habit, associated with prosperity: ‘In wealthier circles there was an increasing concern for privacy and houses were built with a number of small rooms, rather than a small number of communal ones, as was the case in the Middle Ages’ (Sim (1996) xx).²¹⁹

Viviana Comensoli explains this connection with reference to John Frankford, the cuckolded husband in Thomas Heywood’s domestic tragedy *A Woman Killed With Kindness* (1603/1607). Frankford, head of an affluent household, finds out that, in his absence, his wife Anne committed adultery with his friend and guest Wendoll. Before these events unfold – i.e. with his masculine identity still intact – in the private seclusion of his study, Frankford enumerates ‘the sources of his “content[ment]”’ (Comensoli (1996) 76): his gentlemanly status, his royal allegiances (‘Companion with a king’), his ‘possess[ions] of many fair revenues,’ the fact that he is ‘studied in all arts’ and, significantly, his ‘fair, ... chaste, and loving wife’ (iv.1-14). Comensoli reads this self-portrayal as signalling that ‘[t]he action of withdrawing to one’s private chamber is an indicator not only of status and civility but also of masculine privilege’ (Comensoli (1996)

²¹⁹ As Ronald Huebert observes, ‘[d]uring the Renaissance privacy was emerging as a category of experience in its own right. No longer merely an attribute attached to a certain kind of behaviour, privacy was beginning to require a vocabulary of its own’ (Huebert (1997) 29). Anne Ferry outlines the socio-economic conditions that enabled this development: ‘Social and architectural historians have collected evidence that the existence and use of such rooms [closets] was increasing in the sixteenth century, which in turn they interpret as a sign of growing interest among Englishmen in their own individuality, to be enjoyed in privacy and explored by introspection. This conclusion seems to be supported by the frequency with which writers used retirement to such rooms as a metaphor for self-examination’ (Ferry (1983) 47).

77): masculine subjectivity establishes itself through periodical seclusion from the world. Of course, this is a recurrent phenomenon in Western culture that dates back as far as St Augustine's *Confessions* (c. AD 398-400) (cf. Anderson (2001) 20), and it commands discursive presence throughout the early modern period. The widely popular courtesy book for middle-class gentlemen, *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo* (1581), gives the following extensive definition of solitariness:

[S]olitariness of place, is the chamber or privat dwelling which everie one chooseth of purpose to sequester him selfe from the companie and conversation of others. Here we have to consider that men settle themselves in this solitarinesse of place for divers respects, some to the intent to raise their thoughts from worldly vanities to the contemplation of God ... some to get with studie and speculation the fruit of learning, some to discourse with them selves publike or private affaires.²²⁰

At first glance, this description seems roughly compatible with the functions of female solitariness that I have outlined and would thus appear to render irrelevant the gendered component of interiority. Contemplation and spiritual exercise ranked high among the activities women pursued in solitude, as did private study and introspection. However, solitariness is portrayed as a necessary, balancing exercise in Guazzo's account. He leaves out the immediate connection with personal virtue and moral impeccability that is so crucial for women – no mention is made of the possible opposite, immoral excess. Moreover, solitariness channels back to the public sphere: it is a manifestation of the masculine privilege that enables men to exercise 'real' power in the world outside. They can transfer the privileged status they enjoy in the public realm onto the inward sphere and can construct their inner selves as a site that is emblematic of their unified and uncontested subjectivity – after all, solitariness is something men choose 'of purpose.' Michel de Montaigne gives an impressively self-confident account of the masculine association of solitariness with unhindered (self-)rule: he appreciates the seclusion of his library 'for being a little hard to reach and out of the way, for the benefit of the exercise as much as to keep the crowd away. There is my throne. I try to make my authority over it absolute, and to withdraw this one corner from all society, conjugal, filial, and civil.'²²¹ Montaigne's

²²⁰ M. Steeven Guazzo, *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo*. Trans. George Pettie and Bartholomew Young (1581, 1586). Ed. Edward Sullivan. 2 vols. New York: AMS Press, 1967, vol. 1 (48); quoted in Comensoli (1996) 77.

²²¹ 'Of three kinds of association' (1585-1588). Book III, 3. 621-630 (629); cf. Comensoli (1996) 77. Montaigne's invocation of inwardness as a site of absolute rule over a particular space that he owns is related to another cultural context which was also gendered male, namely the proto-colonial fascination with the discovery and subsequent rule of alien territories. The proliferation of writings about (real as well as imagined and/or utopian) voyages of discovery – the most prominent examples include Walter Raleigh's *The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guyana* (1596), Richard Hakluyt's *Voyages and Discoveries* (1589), Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1627) and Thomas More's *Utopia* (Latin 1516,

subjectivity is absolute because he is able to conceive of himself as unconnected to others. The self-rule he advocates is therefore substantially different from the feminine self-mastery I have theorised. Whilst the latter crucially depends on interaction – be it with religious belief or the divine as moral yardstick, or other human beings – Montaigne constitutes his selfhood at the exclusion of others. As I have argued before, this is a form of inwardness that was impossible for women to attain, for very obvious reasons: responsible as they were for the day-to-day functioning of the household, involving childcare, dealing with servants and various communal concerns, women could not simply ‘opt out’ of the communities they were part of. In sum, female inwardness cannot be perceived as a stance of absolute ipseity, but rather needs to be seen as a process of negotiation in which women were forced to reconcile, or at least strive to balance, the conflicting demands of the family, their household and community obligations, the (positive or negative) judgements of others, and the underlying expectations of feminine virtue. Their states of solitariness and inwardness are therefore always implicated in relations to others and hence, in the broadest sense of the term, to the public (or semi-public) sphere.

It seems that this is why early modern women are so obsessively concerned with upholding their reputation. The degree to which their access to the discourse of inwardness is predicated on their adherence to the principles of feminine virtue, especially whilst being in the public eye, can also be traced with reference to *A Woman Killed With Kindness*. As Viviana Comensoli observes, ‘[i]t is significant that the audience never views Anne in a space in which she is entirely alone’ (Comensoli (1996) 78). She appears on the stage only in the company of others, who are all associated, respectively, with the preservation or destruction of her virtue: her husband Frankford, who first praises her virtue and later rails against her betrayal, Wendoll, who seduces her, and the larger household community. Instead, it is Frankford who takes continual recourse to the idea of solitude, exchanging his ‘polluted bedchamber’ (xiii.14) for his ‘withdrawing chamber’ (xiii.9). Privacy is thus constructed as the privilege of the virtuous, who are, by definition, aligned with masculine perfection. In a culture that equates femaleness with potential monstrosity and lack of

English 1551) – attests to a form of masculine identity formation through the conquest and subsequent shaping of hitherto inaccessible spaces (cf. Wall 2002) 10). In this metaphorical horizon, the discovery of the self as an alien territory is obviously impossible for women. What is more, in male narratives of discovery, the unknown land is conceptualised as female; the feminine space becomes the objectified other in relation to which masculine identity formation takes place. The prototypical, oft-discussed example of this association is John Donne’s ‘Elegy XIX’ (‘Going to Bed’), where the sexual conquest of his mistress’s body is paralleled with that of an unknown land (*Donne. Poetical Works*. Ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 (106ff.)).

corporeal restraint, the virtuous woman is never more than an exception that proves the norm. Female (access to) inwardness is no matter of course; as a rule, a woman's virtuous reputation requires its public display.²²²

The early modern household

Female authors of early modern self-writings attempted to create connections and negotiate inconsistencies between the private sphere of personal inwardness and intimate relations on the one hand and the public realm of published writing on the other. In order to adequately grasp their strategies of self-constitution, it is necessary to provide a more differentiated historicisation of the private/public distinction. The traditional account, based on the work of historians such as Philippe Ariès, goes as follows:

[T]he entire history of private life comes down to a change in the forms of sociability: from the anonymous social life of the street, castle court, square, or village to a more restricted sociability centered on the family or even the individual. The problem then becomes: How did the transition take place from a form of sociability in which private and public are confounded to one in which they are distinct, and in which the private may even subsume or curtail the public?²²³

Clearly, the distinctions Ariès draws are far too neat. As my analysis of (both male and female) modes of inwardness has shown, it is especially inaccurate historically to regard the early modern period as a time when 'private and public [were] confounded into one.' For one thing, as I have explored in the preceding section of this chapter, there existed a recognisable discourse of solitariness in the early modern period. Moreover, whilst there are a number of phenomena which, to us, suggest a simple merging of the private and public spheres, historical evidence presents us with a picture that is infinitely more complex. As Amanda Vickery observes, the private/public distinction cannot be conceived of as a 'modern' phenomenon, since its origins reach significantly further back in time: 'The dialectical polarity between home and world is an ancient trope of western writing; the notion that women were uniquely fashioned for the private realm is at least as old as

²²² Lena Cowen Orlin comes to the same conclusion: 'Early modern English women were always suspect. For them, there was no way to be invisible in the Renaissance' (Orlin (1999) 200). Cf. Crane (2000).

²²³ Philippe Ariès, introduction to Chartier (1989) 1-11 (9).

Aristotle' (Vickery (1993) 383). However, it is still fair to argue that the idea of the home as a private haven that protects the individual from the dangers and demands of the outside world and provides emotional security is, essentially, a product of nineteenth-century middle-class culture, at least in its idealised versions. In the early modern period, the family and, by implication, the domestic sphere as a whole, were still, by modern standards, distinctly public units. This is particularly true for the upper and upper middle classes, because family relations constituted the focal point of genealogy and inheritance. In a society which relied on landed wealth and inherited title to confer rights and privileges, interpersonal relationships, sexual behaviour etc. were naturally implicated in larger (i.e. public) structures, even if these structures were undergoing significant changes in the period. In any case, it is misleading to speak of 'the family' in the modern sense of the term. As my choice of terminology in the preceding sections of this chapter has suggested, the social organisation was based on the household, which established a multi-layered set of relationships including the nuclear family, members of the extended family, as well as a number of dependants. The early seventeenth-century conduct book writer William Vaughan underscores this point when he identifies three types of family relationships: he speaks of a 'communion and fellowship of life' between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters or mistresses and servants.²²⁴ Significantly, as this extended notion of familial relations suggests, '[t]he household economy was part of public life itself' (Laurence (1994) 10). The political notion of the state as a body with the king as its head and his subjects fulfilling the functions of the various body parts could be directly applied to the family. By means of an oft-met analogy, the family was perceived as a 'little commonwealth,'²²⁵ headed by the husband who, very much as did the king on a larger scale, ruled over his wife, children and dependants. In reverse, the Stuart kings, especially James I, styled themselves as fathers to their subjects, thus establishing a distinct monarchical patriarchalism.²²⁶ In a sense, then, the household was the general paradigm with the help of which both interpersonal and socio-political relations were conceptualised.

²²⁴ William Vaughan, *The golden-grove, moralized in three bookes: necessary for all such, as would know how to governe themselves, their houses, or their countrey*. London: S. Trafford, 1600 (sigs. M7 f.); quoted in Warnicke (1993) 126. Note that Vaughan's title suggests the mutual dependence of the private and public spheres. J. A. Sharpe regards the 'emergence of a distinctive household ideology' (Sharpe (1997) 60) such as developed by Vaughan as 'one of the most far-reaching consequences of the English Reformation' (Sharpe (1997) 60).

²²⁵ For instance, John Dod and Robert Cleaver's popular domestic conduct book *A Godly Form of Household Government* (1598) begins with the programmatic statement: 'A household is as it were a little commonwealth' (sig. B1r); quoted in Orlin (2002) 373.

²²⁶ Cf. my analysis of his address to his son in *Basilikon Doron* (2.2).

At first glance, this appears to suggest that women, being ‘subjects’ to their husbands, were inevitably relegated to a marginal and oppressed position within the family. In reality, the idea(1) of the ‘little commonwealth’ rendered their position certainly not completely powerless, albeit inherently ambiguous. Admittedly, in terms of the ‘state’ analogy, women were mere subjects ruled over by their husbands; but there is ample evidence that wives held substantial power within the domestic sphere: ‘[Marriage] transformed the utterly dependent daughter into a wooed mistress and finally into mistress of her own home with command over servants and children’ (Findlay (1999) 130).²²⁷ Also, the affective bond between husband and wife naturally undermined her subordination. This is particularly obvious with regard to the ideal of ‘companionate marriage,’ which, by definition, causes the hierarchical and the emotional dimensions of marriage to compete. The Puritan celebration of marriage as ‘an hye, holy, and blessed order of life’²²⁸ was derived from the perception of the idealised companionship that man and woman had enjoyed in Paradise, i.e. prior to the Fall. Even before the proliferation of the religiously motivated praise of marriage instigated by Puritanism, the humanist philosopher Desiderius Erasmus had emphasised its benefits: ‘[It is] an especial sweetness to have one with whom ye may communicate the secret affections of your mind, with whom ye may speak even as it were with your own self.’²²⁹ Inevitably, mutual affection cut across women’s (legal and ideological) subordination to their husbands. Furthermore, in spite of their inferior status in relation to their husbands, women could, in turn, expect obedience and honour from their children and servants. As a result, they found themselves as bearers of multiple subject positions which, ‘offered to the same woman, cannot be held without contradiction’ (Belsey (1985) 155). One of the roots of these tensions lies in the fact that the assumed relationship of analogy between the family and the state was, above all, an ideological construct presented as rational truth. Its practical implementation was never straightforward, and the degree to which it was realised necessarily varied because ‘the essential difference between family and State ... creates many problems of analogy and hence some of the problems for official ideology in which the family and the State are

²²⁷ A similar point is made by Margaret Ezell, who claims that ‘[t]he patriarch’s wife, both in the family and in society, wielded considerable power, whether acknowledged in theory or not, but that power was to a large extent displayed on a private level’ (Ezell (1987) 163). In the light of evidence detailing the considerable power that, in some cases, women were able to exercise within the household, the view that ‘even the most private relations are influenced by the public sexual politics of male domination and women’s oppression’ (Laurence (1994) 10) needs to be qualified.

²²⁸ Thomas Becon, *The Golden Boke of Christen Matrimony* (1542). Vol. 2 of *The Worckes of Thomas Becon*. London: John Day, 1564 (1); quoted in Comensoli (1996) 18.

²²⁹ Erasmus, *A right frutefull Epystle ... in laude and prayse of matrimony*. Written 1497, published 1518 (sigs. Cvi-Cvii); quoted in Comensoli (1996) 18. Obviously, the merging of selves that Erasmus suggests was generally conceptualised in a distinctly one-way, hierarchical fashion, i.e. not devoid of male bias.

yoked together' (Callaghan (1989) 18). Affective relations intersected with structural ones, creating a complex web of hierarchies and analogies. What is more, the idea of the 'little commonwealth' not only imposed hierarchical structures on families and households, but also worked in reverse: because 'early modern people were accustomed to see social institutions in parallel ways, ... disorder in the family was of concern to both church and state' (Crawford (1993) 49) – hence the persistent preoccupation of (Puritan) conduct book writers with establishing guidelines for family politics that would guarantee order. Keeping all members of the household in their appropriate places had distinctly public implications. Add to this the socio-economic changes in the period (cf. Orlin (2002) 375ff.) and it is obvious that the household was a highly contested field of tensions and ideological fissures. Alison Findlay summarises the resulting ambiguities:

[The early modern household] is public and private, peopled by servants as well as kin; both material and ideological, a physical building and a model of the 'whole commonwealth.' It is a peculiarly female sphere and yet it is dominated by a male governor. For the people who inhabited it, the Renaissance household had a protean quality with the potential to nurture and to destroy. (Findlay (1999) 127)

If nothing else has so far been a matter of clear-cut facts, it is obvious that the private/public distinction, while clearly extant, cannot be conceived of as a neat juxtaposition in the early modern period. Rather than to work with a distinction that cannot entirely avoid anachronism, it is perhaps more fruitful to focus on the structures of *power* that shaped and cut across these spheres. This approach gains support from the theory of space developed by the social geographer Doreen Massey, who argues that, 'since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism,' the spatial should be seen as 'an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification' (Massey (1994) 3). If we pursue the question of power in early modern culture, a new set of complexities opens up: powerlessness was not restricted to women alone, but was the lot of large parts of the population (i.e. it affected lower class men, too) because political influence was distributed amongst an elite few. A second qualification implies that, just as women were never entirely confined to the domestic sphere, the home was not an exclusively female space. As Robert B. Shoemaker observes, '[w]omen may have dominated the "domestic" or "private" sphere, but men retained considerable emotional investment, authority, and physical presence in the home ... Similarly, even the ideology of domesticity allowed women some public activities' (Shoemaker (1998) 306). Anne Laurence supports Shoemaker's view, stating that '[t]he household was the locus of many men's lives as well as women's, and it was here that much economic activity took place:

the dichotomy of the family at home and its members at work outside did not really exist' (Laurence (1994) 8).

For instance, Lady Grace Mildmay's medical activities combine private study ('every day I spent some time in the herbal books of physic' (35)) and medical assistance to members of the surrounding communities ('ministering to one or other' (35)). What is more, they allowed her to exercise a degree of authority that unsettled any straightforward patriarchal hierarchy – above all, her medical knowledge would potentially have placed her husband in a position of dependence.²³⁰ While Mildmay's private and public activities can still relatively easily be understood as two different, yet related aspects of her medical interests, a more striking contrast appears in Lady Margaret Hoby's *Diary*. The almost monotonous accounts of her daily life circle around 'private payer' and self-examination, performed in her closet, 'wher I praied and Writt som thinge for mine owne priuat Conscience' (59). Yet, in places, Hoby's regular meditations are interrupted by diary entries on interactions with workmen, guests, visitations to the sick, and even a shopping trip to London in early 1601, during which she engaged in such distinctly public activities as visiting the Royal Exchange and going 'with my mother to se the glase house' (134), where Venetian glass was manufactured and sold. As these examples (and countless others) show, the boundaries between private and public, work and home, inwardness and the outside world in early modern, pre-industrial society were necessarily blurred and dependent on situational context, rendering inaccurate any straightforward gendering and placing both men and women in shifting positions of in-betweenness (cf. Vickery (1993) 411f.). Differences between men's and women's lives certainly existed, but they cannot simply be accounted for along the lines of the private/public distinction – rather, they need to include their relation to the distribution of power. By implication, the household, with its multiplicity of socio-economic and interpersonal dimensions, formed the crucial nexus between both spheres, functioning as threshold and point of overlap. At the same time as it restricted their range of influence, it offered opportunities for women to stretch or even circumvent the restrictions of 'chaste, silent and obedient' femininity²³¹ – in other words, it simultaneously made them subjects of patriarchal power and empowered them as independent agents.

²³⁰ As Wendy Wall notes, there were 'competing lines of allegiance and dependency at work in the home: While the husband was sovereign over the household, for instance, he found himself in the uncomfortable position of submitting to his wife's and servants' medical ministrations' (Wall (2002) 7).

²³¹ Jean Howard links the household economy to instances of proto-feminism in Renaissance culture, arguing that 'the contradictions surrounding women's position in the household expose fault lines in patriarchal culture which could be exploited in subsequent political struggles' (Howard (2000) 646).

This tension is played out in a remarkable way in Martha Moulsworth's *Memorandum*, where the duality of subjection to patriarchal imperatives and personal desires are played out in the author's representations of her corporeality. While most early modern female writers either display a predominantly negative perception of their bodies as sites of sinfulness and abjection or do not represent their corporeality at all, so as not to transgress the boundaries of virtuous feminine behaviour, Moulsworth appears to be surprisingly frank as regards her physical and sexual identity.²³² For instance, her various references to the spring urge connotations of sexual awakening. In her own experience, '[m]y springe was late, some thinke thatt sooner loue / butt backward springs doe oft the kindest proue' (51f.). In a similar way, she expects her husband's 'Bodie winteringe in the lodge of death / [to] ffeele A springe, wth budd of life, & Breath' (93f.). Having explained her youthful predilection for learning and the 'virgin Muses' (41), she states with unabashed self-confidence that 'I haue longe since Bid virgin life ffarewell' (42). Her sexual frankness is even heightened when she admits having 'enjoyde' (45) her three husbands. To a certain extent, these remarks can be interpreted as instances of a positive (re-)valuation of the female body; yet it goes without saying that it would be anachronistic to read Moulsworth as a harbinger of the sexual revolution *avant la lettre*. For one thing, the above quoted passages could, in the context of the poem, justifiably be taken as a mere statement of fact or an expression of platonic affection, respectively. Or Moulsworth might have deliberately used a comparatively neutral wording to conceal otherwise morally unacceptable remarks that express a frank and uninhibited relationship with her body. In any case, she is able to make such references only because, at the same time, she also firmly situates herself within the patriarchal household economy; her corporeality figures only in relation to her husbands. At the end of her poem, she is adamant to point out that she is comfortable with her current status as a widow (cf. 107ff.). Moreover, she subsequently refers to her husbands in terms of conventional religion – their deaths on appropriate days of the church calendar (73ff.) and hope for a blissful afterlife (95f.) –, which suggests that she had to counter-balance and conceal her more transgressive utterances, deliberately positioning herself within the orbit of laudable feminine virtue.

Moulsworth's tenuous position in-between patriarchal household structures and her own confident self-perception exemplifies the ambiguities that characterise female self-writings: the *Memorandum* is an exercise in introspection; albeit one that, by virtue of

²³² A literary forerunner, though in a male-authored text, is Alison of Bath in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387), who has become a prototype of female outspokenness on sexual matters, and to whom one critic has explicitly compared Moulsworth (cf. Hirshfeld (1996) 48ff.).

being written down, implies a potential public audience. This ambiguity should again make us aware of the fact that female inwardness cannot be conceptualised as a self-contained realm apart, but that it needs to negotiate the ever-present threat of lack of virtue that accompanies the venture into the public sphere. It therefore comes as no surprise that female writers have to conceive of solitude and inwardness in ways that differ from masculine expressions of subjectivity, at the same time as they imitate some of their motifs. The emphasis on their enjoyment of these states of being can thus not simply be regarded as an attempt to copy and usurp the male privilege of unified selfhood. Female inwardness is always inwardness embattled, a relation to the private self that is necessarily impinged on by the public gaze and its (internalised) demands for feminine virtue, which – to complicate the matter – women have, to some degree, internalised. The publicly displayed self needs to be presented in a way that conforms to the demands of feminine virtue. Especially for women, it is vital to present a self-image in which outward appearance matches interior reality. If the former is to correspond to the demands of virtuous femininity, the inward self needs to be constructed so as to embody the same principles. In this context Moulsworth's poem is particularly interesting because it so clearly exposes the faultlines in any such construction of identity. Her attempt to present a coherent and impeccable public self is undercut by various counter-currents that urge for expression and produce ambiguities. In my view, these tensions prove more than the private/public duality to be an anachronistic notion in the seventeenth century: they are evidence of the fact that a strict congruence of inner and outer self is an impossibility. It has no reality beyond the realm of wishful thinking, and where it does appear in the text, it is the result of a deliberate construction of self. Rather than subscribing outright to the fantasy of coherence, Moulsworth shows that balancing the demands of both inward and outward is the key to a workable sense of self.

‘[B]ethinke thy self’: inwardness, conscience and the wider community

Women's ambiguous position as participants of both private and public cultures whilst being ideologically constructed as having exclusively domestic roles dovetails with their notoriously problematic position as authors. Since writing implies acting in the public

sphere, at least potentially, a writing woman is always in a morally dubious position. At first glance, this should be less so with regard to self-writings. The genre's characteristics as fundamentally 'private' would naturally align them with inwardness and its potential for virtue. However, this association is unsettled because, as I have pointed out, such a neat generic categorisation is inappropriate, at least with regard to early modern texts. In spite of their avowedly private guise, a number of self-writings were written with the deliberate intent of addressing a public audience, or publication was instigated by others after the author's death. This ambiguity is particularly visible in mothers' manuals, and it is the result of the distinctly public dimensions allocated to motherhood in the early modern period: 'Until the eighteenth-century emergence of the full-time housewife/mother as the crucial – though invisible and supposedly non-productive – facilitator of a newly reduced notion of productive labor (i.e., capital-based, wage-earning, male), the separation of motherhood and public life was never as complete as it would be subsequently' (Bowers (1996) 19f.). Dorothy Leigh's dedication of her *Mothers Blessing* exemplifies this characteristic move across the private/public threshold. She is surprisingly bold in declaring her intentions to see her work impact beyond its immediate addressees, her sons:

But when I had written these things unto you, and had (as I thought) something fulfilled your Fathers request, yet I could not see to what purpose it should tend, unlesse it were sent abroad to you: for should it be left with the eldest, it is likely the youngest should have but little part in it. Wherefore setting aside all feare, I have adventured to shew my imperfections to the view of the world, not regarding what censure shall for this bee laid upon mee[.] (sig. A7v)

Leigh's self-denigrating remarks ('feare,' 'censure') are presumably merely perfunctory, in that they serve her overall goal of rendering publication morally acceptable for her as a woman. By extension, this also suggests that invoking the intimate mother-child relationship as a motif might be part of the same strategy of gaining access to the public sphere by taking deliberate recourse to the private realm of the family. This would mean that Leigh's authorial stance is, essentially, a *constructed* one, and it urges the question to what extent we can speak of 'inwardness' at all with regard to her writing. What she presents is what Katharine Eisaman Maus, with reference to the early modern theatre, has called '[an] inwardness displayed: an inwardness, in other words, that has already ceased to exist' (Maus (1995) 32).²³³ Still, we must not completely abandon the category, for the simple reason that Leigh – like her female contemporaries – consistently draws on the

²³³ Katharine Eisaman Maus has traced this phenomenon in her study of *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*; I suggest it applies equally to other early modern cultural forms, such as mothers' manuals.

motif of inwardness in order to substantiate her impetus to write. Rather than presenting the author's personal 'core' of self, then, writings such as hers allow us to analyse the *discourse* of inwardness and its uses in early modern England.

In sum, self-writings, in spite of – or because of? – their ostensibly 'private' character, present us with a fundamental ambiguity. Especially mothers' manuals are informed by a constitutive duality: at their heart is what we assume to be the most private and intimate relationship, that between mother and child, suggesting an intimacy that is at odds with any form of publication. As Adrienne Rich observes – with regard to twentieth-century Western societies, admittedly – '[m]otherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place' (Rich (1977) 274). Is the public character of the manuals therefore primarily a sign of a historio-cultural gap that makes it difficult for us to grasp their authorial setup, or do they display a strategic use, to public effect, of concepts that are by nature private? Conversely, with the self-stylisation of their texts as private, did the writers even contribute to the domestic confinement of women commonly associated with modernity?

The issue is complicated further by the fact that there exists a literary forerunner to the seventeenth-century mothers' manuals which, surprisingly, was written by a male author: Nicholas Breton's *The Mother's Blessing* (1602). Breton styles his book as a mother's advice to her son. Strikingly, nowhere does he refer to the unusualness of his speaking position, nor to the gender problematics that his assumption of a female voice entails. Equally paradoxically, after the enthusiastic opening ('My sonne, my sonne, my best beloued sonne, / Hear my deare son, what careful charge I leaue' (1f.)) and apart from a couple of intermittent insertions of the formulaic address 'my sonne,' he makes little mention of the maternal perspective. This might suggest that a few key words sufficed for the genre of the mother's advice book to be recognised, i.e. that 'the Jacobean readership was ready to accept the female, maternal, literary voice' (Poole (1995) 70). Obviously, the maternal is a considerably powerful speaking position that can be used as a 'strategy for entering the discourse of advice' (Poole (1995) 70) and thereby claiming a position of power. In a sense, however, Breton's failure to openly address, let alone explore the implications of the authorial persona he assumes can also be seen as containing and disempowering the maternal within patriarchal discourse. I am somewhat more pessimistic than Catharine Gray, who argues that:

[T]he ventriloquism can work in reverse: Breton speaks in the voice of a woman, and as such, is gradually erased from the tract and replaced by the persona of public

maternal concern. ... Breton, perhaps unwittingly, opens a space for a gendered authorial presence within the public sphere. (Gray (2001) 568).

Gray's observation is not entirely beside the point, but only if it is applied to the female-authored manuals – after all, there the authors' self-presentation as giving advice does function as the crucial legitimising stance of their manuals; it automatically implies a wider audience and connects the women with the world beyond their immediate family circles.²³⁴ The writers of mothers' manuals clearly express an awareness of the wider authoritative effects that their advice might have. In contrast, Breton's text, I would argue, is obviously unable to establish a recognisable and authoritative 'persona of public maternal concern.' For one thing, his treatise fails to invest the maternal with a specific meaning and voice. What is more, the 'genuine' mothers' manuals display a recurrent preoccupation with the problematics of the female/maternal voice, and the writers' strategies of self-authorisation are complex and sometimes contradictory.

Their unstable position in-between the public and the private spheres can most fruitfully be grasped with reference to the overarching idea of order that is explored in their texts. As I have noted in a different context,²³⁵ a recurrent trajectory by which the inner self is linked to the public world is the association of the tightly monitored and hence ordered self with the good of the community at large. Arnold Stein identifies this connection as one of the characteristics of seventeenth-century Protestantism:

In the seventeenth century, Protestant meditation was an individual and inward act characteristically given a public hearing. While the process of meditation expressed the movement of a single guiding religious conscience, it could in printed or spoken words draw an audience to participate in a course of mental and spiritual experience which moved them as individuals, with their own souls to save, but also as members of a community. (Stein (1986) 15)

For example, M. R. links personal flaws with the misfortune of the state as a whole when she observes that '[i]mmoderate wealth causeth pride, pride bringeth hatred, hatred worketh rebellion, rebellion maketh an alteration and changeth Kingdomes, even in women's dissensions' (sig. C6v). In a hasty chain of association, she almost unnoticeably shifts from individual vice to turmoil on the level of the state. Again, analogy is the crucial trajectory by which disorder can take root, from which women are not exempt ('... even in women's dissensions'). In a similar way, the need for order and the concurrent fear of

²³⁴ As Kristen Poole observes, '[t]he phenomenon of the female voice offering advice in a public forum invites us to reconsider not only our traditional notions of Jacobean patriarchy, according to which women silently, obediently, and unquestioningly acquiesced to the directives of the head of the family/state, but to rethink the very assumption that a clear distinction between the public (male) and private (female) spheres was popularly understood and accepted' (Poole (1995) 70).

²³⁵ Cf. 2.1.

disorder on the personal and communal levels is a repeated motif in Lady Grace Mildmay's *Autobiography*. The final part, 'Virtuous Principles,' summarises the codes of conduct and the moral guidelines she has recurrently invoked in her writing. She sets up a catalogue of rules for wives, husbands, children, servants and masters, preceded by a summary definition of what she considers to be the prerequisites of order:

A private household of family (*which may resemble a whole commonwealth*), consisting of the master and mistress, the husband and the wife, children and servants, all of one mind in love, fear and obedience, being all well chosen, instructed and governed with true judgment. That house may be called the house of God. But if the master and the family be careless of their own duties to God and one towards another and in the education of their children ... there is nothing to be looked for but confusion. (47; emphasis in the original)

The idea of the family as a 'commonwealth' ultimately stems from the desire to keep in check disorderly forces – unruly wives, rebellious servants etc., all of whom represent a potential threat to the functioning of the community.²³⁶ As with the concept of the household as such, the idea(l) of order (predicated on the concomitant power structures) thus cuts across the private/public divide, because it is the decisive structuring device of the self, the home, and the wider society.

The longing for order became increasingly pronounced in the mid-seventeenth century, as socio-economic changes joined with the religious and political conflicts in connection with the rise of Puritanism and in the wake of the Civil War to unsettle the very foundations of English society. The need to counter the resulting sense of profound uncertainty with a compensatory veneration of order is particularly virulent in Margaret Cavendish's autobiography *A True Relation of her Birth, Breeding and Life*. Cavendish's personal experience may explain this preoccupation: in 1643, as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Henrietta Maria, she accompanied the queen into exile to France, where Cavendish met her husband, also a royalist exile. Following their marriage in 1645, the couple lived in the Netherlands for almost twelve years, unable to return to England until the re-establishment of the monarchy in the Glorious Revolution of 1660. Throughout her autobiography, written during her years of emigration, Cavendish recurrently invokes the impact of the Civil War, which 'came like a whirlwind' (163) and effected her family's ruin and exile. The traditional sense of being part of a divinely ordained and ultimately meaningful order is gradually getting lost and is being replaced with 'unnatural' turmoil

²³⁶ In this section in particular, Mildmay appears highly conformist, demanding of wives to 'submit themselves unto their husbands as unto the lord' (44) and to 'array themselves in comely apparel with shamefastness and modesty' (45).

(160): Cavendish seems to appeal in vain to the ideal of an order in which everybody lives ‘to the height of [their] estate, but not beyond it’ (156). The anguished realisation that the reassuring illusion of the ‘great chain of being’ is no longer a viable concept might be the underlying reason for her obsession with fabricating the ‘truth’ about herself in her autobiography. To put it bluntly, if nothing is ordered in the outside world, at least the inner self ought to be straightforward and comprehensible. Cavendish’s move to set her ordered self against the disorder outside suggests an intrinsic connection between private self and public order. In reverse, only if the individual selves are mastered can the community at large function on equally well-defined terms. The struggle for self-mastery thus links inwardness with the outside world, the private with the public sphere. Yet creating an ordered self, i.e. a coherent and stable identity based on a firm sense of virtue, also induces a profound sense of uncertainty, even anxiety, as disorder – both inward and outward – is always lurking behind (the façade of) order.

Dorothy Leigh, in her *Mothers Blessing*, stresses the need for order when she exhorts her sons to ‘be masters of your selves’ (sig. F11v), drawing on the analogy of the well-kept garden to prove her point. Before analysing Leigh’s appropriation of garden imagery, it is illuminating to look at the stereotypical implications of the motif in early modern culture. Perhaps most famously, the image occurs in the gardeners’ scene in William Shakespeare’s history play *Richard II* (1595). In a country torn apart by monarchical tyranny and rebellion, the head gardener bemoans the fact that the king ‘had not so trimmed and dressed his land / As we this garden’ (3.4.57f.). Disorder in the highest ranks of the nation breeds turmoil in the lower strata, as the attitude of the head gardener’s helpmate suggests – another example of the characteristic early modern thinking in analogies:

Why should we, in the compass of a pale,
 Keep law and form and due proportion,
 Showing as in a model our firm estate,
 When our sea-walled garden [i.e. England], the whole land,
 Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,
 Her fruit trees all unpruned, her hedges ruined,
 Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
 Swarming with caterpillars? (3.4.41ff.)

Against this vision of disorder, the gardener himself presents the ideal of a well-ordered state: ‘All must be even in our government’ (3.4.37). In a strikingly similar fashion, Elizabeth I uses the garden topos with reference to her conflict with her Scottish cousin and rival Mary Stuart. In her poem ‘The Doubt of Future Foes’ (c. 1570), she compares the

threat embodied by Mary with unruly growth in a garden, which needs to be eliminated with ‘rusty svvorde.’²³⁷ The goal of successful rule is for ‘peace to growe’; in Elizabeth’s poem the state features as a metaphorical garden ‘in which the ruler attempts to cultivate peace by controlling disruptive forces of nature and rival gardens’ (Summit (2002) 102). As in *Richard II*, garden imagery is used allegorically and applied to the political realm, as the speaking persona presents herself as a monarch who has to ward off the potential threats to her rule embodied by her ‘future foes.’²³⁸

In a similar vein, Dorothy Leigh uses the garden topos to stress the individual’s need to bestow order on the self, through rigorous discipline and self-scrutiny:

Moreover, as a garden, if it be twentie yeeres kept with digging, watering, and weeding, and then bee let but two yeeres alone, it will become unprofitable, savage, and of no respect; even soo, if thou dost in thy youth, or many yeeres use private prayer, and hearing of the Word preached, and publike prayer and fasting, & all good means to keepe thy earthly body in subiection; yet if thou becommest negligent and carelesse but a while, it will soone become savage and wilde, and consequently an unprofitable member of Christ his Church, or rather manifest thy selfe to bee no member, as the earth will bee no garden; and therefore you must have a continual care of your selves. (sigs. E2v f.)

The self-scrutiny that Leigh advocates occurs in a strictly religious context. Yet it is not only concerned with the self as such, but is intended to further the profitable functioning of ‘Christ his Church’; i.e. it has a distinctly ‘public,’ communal aim. The underlying strategy that connects the self with the community at large is one based on analogy, with the well-tended self as its starting point and as the prerequisite for the orderliness of the church as a whole. At the root of the analogy is also a distinctly personal dimension: ordering the self ought to be aimed at promoting the ultimate goal of attaining salvation and eternal life in the hereafter. In characteristically Protestant fashion, Leigh conceptualises inwardness as a refuge for individual conscience, a space that no-one else except the particular person can have access to and that forms the very core of personhood: ‘[T]his is the greatest comfort that all good Christians have, that no man can bar them from private conference with God’ (sig. F2v).²³⁹

²³⁷ Quoted in George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, facs. repr. ed. Baxter Hathaway. Kent/OH: Kent State University Press, 1970 (255f.); quoted in Summit (2002) 86f.

²³⁸ With a similar charge of meaning, gardening metaphors frequently occur in humanist educational treatises, symbolising the goal of the educational programme as framing the students ‘in accordance with the hierarchical order of the prevailing cultural code’ (Crane (1993) 57).

²³⁹ As the context of Leigh’s appeal to individual conscience suggests, the Protestant stress on inwardness was reinforced by and fed into the experience of persecution and martyrdom for the reformed faith: ‘This is the most excellent virtue and happinesse, that belongeth to private prayer, no man by any meanes can deprive a man of it. Some have had their Bibles taken away, that they could not reade: Preachers have been banished, that could not heare: they have been separated from company, that they could not have publike prayer, yet

The function of the emphasis on intimate interaction with God in women's self-writings seems not to have been a merely didactic one, but apparently had a firm basis in the realities of their lives. Lady Margaret Hoby's diary entries, for example, almost invariably begin with 'After priuat praier ...' and end on '... [I] praied priuately, and so went to bed.' Hoby's diary supports the impression that regular 'priuat praier' functioned as a structuring device for women's lives. Although the very repetitiveness of the practice might lead us to interpret it as merely a ritualised exercise, I would argue that it enabled early modern women such as Hoby to develop a characteristic subjectivity. As Joanna Moody speculates, '[t]he diary was intended as a vehicle for self-assessment, and as a help to Lady Hoby's memory of God's goodness to her.'²⁴⁰ The actual form that women's engagement with the self tended to take might not be entirely comprehensible for us, shaped as it was by the (largely religious) preoccupations of the time. And yet, the fact alone that they obviously regarded the self as an entity worthy of being constantly supervised and interacted with is significant in itself.²⁴¹

As Dorothy Leigh makes very clear, 'private prayer' is primarily the locus of the individual's interaction with God. By implication, she sees self-scrutiny not as the prerequisite for an identity that is self-reliant *ab initio*, but as crucial to the salvation that will ultimately be effected by God:

Then take heede you doe not barre your selves from it [private conference with God], since none else can doe it, and you know not what need you shal have of it, nor what accident may happen to you in your lives, nor what need you shall have of it in the houre of death. Therefore if you would alwaies have it, you must alwaies use it, and then you shall see what profit will come by it, and then you will bee humbly, faithfully, & familiarly acquainted with God. (sigs. F2v f.)

Observing 'private conference with God' (sig. F2v) is one of the most important admonitions that recur in all the mothers' manuals I have studied. Crucially, setting oneself apart from the world – establishing inwardness – is the precondition for successful self-scrutiny: 'Shut thy selfe from the world, and shut the world from thee' (sig. G5v).

private prayer went with them: thereby they talked to God, and made all their miseries knowne unto him, and craved his assistance in all their troubles' (sigs. F2r f.). The primacy that was accorded to inwardness as a potential site of resistance to outward authority was drawn upon by all the parties involved in the religious struggles of the Reformation. It was based on the assumption that utterances that are made purely internally do not differ in their ontological status from spoken (i.e. externalised) ones, i.e. internal adherence to a particular faith was as valuable as and could potentially overrule its public profession (cf. Hanson (1998) 6).

²⁴⁰ Joanna Moody, introduction to Lady Margaret Hoby, *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady*. xv-lii (li). Moody rightly observes that, to the reader, '[t]he repetitive effect becomes cumulatively engaging and we are drawn in to her mind and world' (ibid. xv).

²⁴¹ Harriet Blodgett observes with regard to diary writing: '[A]ny personal diary enhances one's sense of selfhood. ... The diary, by its nature as a genre of personal record, by the opportunity it offers the diarist to record what is important to her, and by the daily time that it claims for itself, counters the patriarchal attack on female self-worth' (Blodgett (1989) 4f.).

Solitariness is not an aim in itself, but implies the individual's primary relationship with God: '[I]t may bee thou hast some thing to say to mee [God], that thou wouldest not have the world to heare' (sig. G5v). In this sense, the self-scrutiny advocated in the mothers' manuals is not simply tantamount to modern, solipsistic self-reflexivity, but must be conceptualised as relational, including as it does the crucial interaction with the divine. It is an inwardness that is never exclusively private, because it always includes an other. Of course, this links in with my earlier observation that women's identities are formed in relation to others – husbands, families and especially their children –, making their engagement with their selves complex and multi-faceted.

In addition, early modern women's inwardness is relational in a second respect: as I have suggested before, apart from being central to the formation of the self, inwardness and self-scrutiny have palpable repercussions on the wider community – from Dorothy Leigh's decidedly religious point of view, only the well-tended self will be a morally unimpeachable 'member of Christ his Church' (sig. E3r). In that sense, the self and the public are intrinsically connected, as is implied in Leigh's bee parable.²⁴² The bee's tireless gathering of flowers has the dual purpose:

... to doe *her Country* good,
 And for to serve *her selfe* at need
 when winter doth begin[.] (sig. A8v; emphasis added)

On the one hand, the bee is preoccupied with her self-preservation. On the other hand, Leigh positions the self as both the basis for communal well-being and as a safe haven where one can find shelter from the turmoil of the outside world (cf. sig. A8v). Leigh here seems to foreshadow the characteristically modern stress on inwardness as a site of security and spiritual and emotional nourishment. At a closer look, however, her statements in the manual serve a distinctly public agenda that becomes clear only if one interprets her authorial stance in relation to the socio-political conditions of her time.²⁴³ According to Catharine Gray, Leigh is able to venture into the public sphere only because of the cracks and fissures in the patriarchal ideology (cf. Gray (2001) 566ff.). Her writing proves that '[t]he contradiction between the woman's two positions as both superior and inferior, ruler and ruled, creates a gap in which female self-determination can develop' (Findlay (1999) 131). Leigh's account of her initial incentive to write her manual is a

²⁴² Cf. my earlier analysis of the passage (2.1).

²⁴³ As Catharine Gray has pointed out, Leigh's text, far from being exclusively concerned with private matters, is in fact engaged 'in projects of religious and social reform' (Gray (2001) 565). Gray interprets the *Mothers Blessing* as 'a critical answer' (Gray (2001) 564) to James I's *Basilikon Doron*, re-published in the same year as Leigh's book in its popularised version, *The Fathers Blessing*.

prominent example of the incipient agency made possible for women by the inconsistencies within patriarchal ideology:

My Children, God having taken your Father out of this vale of tears, to his everlasting mercy in CHRIST, my selfe not onely knowing what a care he had in his life time, that you should be brought up godlily, but also at his death being charged in his will by the love and duty which I bare him, to see you well instructed and brought up in knowledge, I could not chuse but seeke (according as I was by duty bound) to fulfill his will in all things[.] (sigs. A6r f.)

Leigh's entry into the public sphere of writing (and publication) is contingent on the simultaneous absence and presence of her husband: she invokes his (male) authority as the legitimising precondition of her writing, but can subsequently express herself without male censure, since her husband is dead. She is able to forego all criticism for her 'unfeminine' behaviour by grounding her actions in wifely subservience ('according as I was by duty bound'). Of course, this move constitutes her writing as a function of male authority. Yet it can also be regarded as a merely perfunctory remark that ultimately allows her to express herself without incurring censure – it is a strategy of appropriating rather than succumbing to patriarchal power, especially because her husband 'disappears entirely after the prefatorial material, so that Leigh's tract does not so much supplement as usurp the father's will' (Gray (2001) 571). On the surface level, she proves the point made in various marriage manuals of her time, namely that 'marriage for a woman involves dissolution of her own identity, as she is subsumed in her husband's; it is not that she has no identity, but that his replaces hers' (Hinds (1996) 29f.). However, in effect, Leigh reverses the terms of this replacement by claiming her husband's authority, thereby creating a forum in which she can voice her social and political agenda.²⁴⁴ She clearly draws on the discourses of wifely duty and motherly care to legitimise what she feels are her duties towards her sons and her community; her obligation being, as her bee parable has it, 'to doe her Country good' (sig. A8v). Because of her simultaneous stress on her role as a mother, Catharine Gray has described this strategy as Leigh assuming a 'political maternity' (Gray (2001) 573), signifying 'an overflow of the domestic into the public' (Gray (2001) 573). Again, the boundaries between the two spheres are blurred; both are a function of Leigh's claim to power and authority and are successfully appropriated to serve her self-authorisation.

²⁴⁴ The latter is closely linked with Leigh's Puritan leanings. Seventeenth-century Puritanism offered opportunities for women to claim some degree of influence beyond the domestic, because they 'found in godliness an ideology of sorts which inherently mixed public and private: they could be saints and affect the state in that capacity long before they were to become citizens' (Willen (2002) 36). Catharine Gray cites biographical information that aligns Leigh with 'a community of Puritans who became increasingly radical as the religio-political situation polarised' (Gray (2001) 570) in the pre-Civil-War period.

Leigh's reinterpretation of the Christian account of salvation is exemplary of the intellectual trajectory by which she replaces the conventional patriarchal narrative with an equally authoritative, female-centred vision, and is therefore worth quoting at length:

I presumed that there was no woman so senselesse, as not to looke what a blessing God hath sent to us women through that gracious Virgin, by whom it pleased GOD to take away the shame, which EVE our Grandmother had brought to us: For before, men might say, The woman beguiled me, and I did eate the poisoned fruit of disobedience, and I dye. But now man may say, if he say truly, The woman brought me a Saviour, and I feede of him by faith and live. Here is this great and wofull shame taken from women by God, working in a woman: man can claime no part in it: the shame is taken from our posterity for ever: *The seede of the woman hath taken downe the Serpents head*; and now whosoever can take hold of the seed of the woman by faith, shall surely live for ever. And therefore all generations shal say, that she was blessed, who broght us a Saviour, the fruit of obedience, that whosoever feedeth of, shall live forever and except they feed of the seed of the woman, they have no life. (sigs. C3r f.; emphasis in the original)

Implicitly, Leigh aligns herself with Mary: just as Mary's redemptive motherhood secured human salvation, Leigh's own *Mothers Blessing* is an instance of God 'working in a woman' (sig. C3r). What is true for humanity as a whole goes for Leigh's audience in particular: 'except they feed of the seed of the woman' – i.e. unless they faithfully consider her advice – 'they have no life' (sig. C3v). Maternity is thereby constructed as a speaking position that, by its very nature, extends into the public sphere, because it has a (religious) agenda to promote that affects every single individual and the Christian community as a whole. Leigh even voices propositions that have potentially highly subversive implications, for instance when she suggests that servants should be taught to read:

If God shall at any time give you or any of you a servant or servants, you shall aske them, if they can reade. If they cannot, you shall at my request teach them, or cause them to be taught, till they can reade the tenne Commaundements of almightie God: And then you shall perswade them to practise by themselves, and to spend al their idle time in reading, that so they may come better to know the will of God written in his Word. (sigs. D2v f.)

To boldly adopt the (male) language of the Bible (specifically, the Ten Commandments ('you shall ...')) and thus to position herself as lawgiver ('at my request') is possible for Leigh because her unconventional ideas are expressed from the vantage point of the maternal speaking position and couched in orthodox Protestant doctrine, according to which every individual is capable of and should be allowed personal engagement with God's word. On the explicit textual level, only reading for religious purposes is mentioned; but, of course, the ability to read cannot be so closely restricted. Leigh is cunning in the authorial strategies by which she succeeds in portraying her 'political maternity' not as

transgressive, but as fundamentally in keeping with virtuous femininity. Again, she blurs the distinction between the private and the public spheres: she conceals her public concerns by veiling them in the imagery of interiority and domesticity. She repeatedly urges her addressees to '[I]ive godlily and patiently in your house ... [and to p]ray often privately, faithfully, and zealously unto God' (sig. D4v), at the same time as she styles herself as sinful and hence submissive to (male) divine authority: '[T]hough I bee most unworthy in my selfe, yet by thy [God's] promises in Christ, which shall never faile, I pray thee accept mee' (sig. D9r). Apparently, it is not so much the designation of an action as public or private that matters, but the overarching order that the self is subjected to.

A similar self-authorising trajectory, leading from inwardness to public responsibility, can be traced in the dedicatory address that precedes Rachel Speght's *Mortality's Memorandum, with a Dream Prefixed, imaginary in manner, real in matter* (1621). In her opening declaration, Speght boldly states: 'Amongst diversitie of motives to induce the divulging of that to publique view, which was devoted to private Contemplation, none is worthy to precede desire of common benefit' (sig. A2r). It is particularly significant that Speght had before incurred scathing invective against the publication of her anti-misogynist pamphlet *A Muzzle for Melastomus* (1617). In spite of this devastating criticism, she now feels compelled to publicise the insights she has gained from her 'private contemplation.' The *Mortalities Memorandum* is an example of both inwardness made public and authorial self-rehabilitation, and it thereby reveals that 'common benefit' is in fact likely to be a subordinate motif, compared with the author's personal desire to gain favourable public opinion:

I know these populous times affoord plentie of forward Writers, and criticall Readers; My selfe hath made the number one too many by one, and having bin toucht with the censures of the other, by occasion of my mouzeling Melastomus, I am now, as by a strong motive induced (for my rights sake) to produce and divulge this of-spring of my indeavour to prove them further futurely who have formerly deprived me of my due[.] (sig. A2v)

Hidden behind the female writer's concern for 'common benefit' is the strong authorial persona of a woman who is soberly aware of 'Censure ... [being] inevitable to a publique act' (sig. A2v). Her legitimising argument includes maternal imagery ('this of-spring of my indeavour'). In the same way as biological motherhood can be used for the female writer's self-authorisation, its metaphorical representation alone works as a route of access to the public audience. Writing – and going public with what one has written – is an act of self-assertion precisely because it combines the private and the public: spaces that are both

beset with considerable ambiguity for women, but that can therefore be appropriated as loci of female agency and power.

Conclusion: the dialectics of the private/public self

As the various intersections between the private experience of self and the larger public sphere suggest, early modern women's self-writings need to be read in distinctly public contexts, together with and in spite of their stress on inwardness, self-scrutiny and intimate relationships. At first glance, this may sound questionable from a present-day perspective which has internalised the hardly penetrable distinction, if not binary opposition, between the private and the public realms. The early modern complexities are due to women's unstable positions in relation to power. Perhaps most obviously, this indeterminacy and in-betweenness is apparent in the mothers' manuals. To a certain degree, the texts place their authors in positions of considerable power, as they are able to style themselves as arbiters on their children's ultimate salvation. Yet, with the partial exception of Lady Grace Mildmay, whose financial politics in fact secured her daughter's inheritance, and Lady Anne Clifford, who was in a similar position due to her possession of lands, the female authors' high degree of symbolic power lacks any material counterpart or backup, so that it cannot be tangibly enforced.

Again, it is illuminating to compare the women's writings with James I's *Basilikon Doron*. Although James I also refers to the emotional component of the father-son relationship in his dedication, this seems to be a merely additional feature, one that does not need to be elaborated and invested with meaning because he in fact holds the relevant material power of kingship. It is not his fatherhood that authorises his treatise, but he explains to his son that '*as a King* [I] must timously provide for your trayning vp in all the points of a Kings Office' (3; emphasis in the original). In contrast, women's venture into the sphere of public (religious, political, social or literary) discourse is transgressive in itself and therefore must be mitigated by recourse to one of the few legitimate forms of female self-expression, namely private and intimate motherly love. As a result, the negotiation and representation of this inward experience is at the root of the women's authorial positions. It is this dual, mutual dependency that proves the private/public

distinction to be an inadequate categorisation. As I have argued throughout this chapter, women's positions within the complex framework mapped out by the private, the domestic, the public and personal inwardness are more complex than any straightforward binarisms are able to suggest – be it those of private versus public, inward versus outward or personal versus communal. Instead, female writers engaged in highly intricate processes of negotiation, striving to secure for themselves spaces that would allow both inward integrity and some degree of influence. As my various examples of such attempts have shown, clear-cut boundaries did not present valuable options, because their very distinctness prevents an authentic articulation of female experiences.

2.4 Feminine concerns: self-annihilation, self-abnegation, (fear of) self-loss, and death

Give me a girl (if one I needs must meet)
Or in her nuptial, or her winding sheet;
I know but two good hours that women have,
One in the bed, another in the grave.
Thus of the whole sex all I would desire,
Is to enjoy their ashes, or their fire.

– William Cartwright, *The Works* (1651)²⁴⁵

[S]elf-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self. ... [A]ny achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss.

– Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*²⁴⁶

To write means to disappear in a certain sense.

– Michel Deguy, *Figurations*²⁴⁷

Enacting a dialectic that parallels the dimensions of identity formation I have analysed in the preceding chapters, early modern women's self-assertion is always countered by its structural opposite, self-annihilation or the threat of self-loss. A surprising variety of early modern texts display a consistent preoccupation with, or even anxiety about, 'losing' the self, i.e. (literally or figuratively) being reduced to 'nothingness.' Probably one of the best-known instances of this anxiety occurs in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (1595), where the fear of self-erasure is linked with the anguished realisation that life is a matter of staged performance of self. King Richard, aware that the victory of his rebel opponent Henry Bolingbroke is imminent, laments:

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented. ...
...
... But whate'er I be,
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
With being nothing. (5.5.31ff.)

The existential anxiety of 'being nothing' is a key issue especially in women's writings of

²⁴⁵ William Cartwright, *The Works* (1651). In: *The Plays and Poems*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951 (471); quoted in Keeble (1994) 238f.

²⁴⁶ Greenblatt (1980) 9.

²⁴⁷ Michel Deguy, *Figurations*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969 (122); quoted in Bronfen (1992) 141.

the period.²⁴⁸ It is striking to note that in the great majority of the texts I have studied, in spite of their significant generic, stylistic and thematic differences, the female author at least mentions her own death, or even constructs the very act of writing as predicated on her impending absence.

Perhaps surprisingly, feminist critics have read death as a trope in women's writing as a specifically female strategy of self-affirmation. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, who has theorised the topic from a psychoanalytical perspective and with regard to various forms of artistic expression, death can be used to 'signify a moment of control and power ... [in which] the woman's self-disintegration also becomes an act of self-assertion' (Bronfen (1992) 141). It allows the writing woman to use 'death as a conscious act of setting a mark, as a form of writing her body, a materialisation of the sign, where the sheer material factualness of the dying and dead body lends certainty, authority and realness to this attempt at self-textualisation' (Bronfen (1992) 141). Bronfen stresses the fact that the dead body hints at the materiality, or physicality, of dying; it is perhaps the most 'real' form that a textual rendition of the self may take. And yet, her reading of self-staged female death seems to me to overlook the central and obvious dilemma that the phenomenon entails. How is it possible that death, the most complete and irreversible form of disappearance of the self, constitutes at the same time the ultimate act of self-assertion? Or, to put it more bluntly, if a woman writes her own death, does she not effectively kill herself off as an agent?

These questions are particularly problematic because, in writing her own death, the woman writer submits herself to the patriarchal symbolic order that structurally aligns femininity with death. Both death and the feminine are 'other' – they can be equated, or are conflated, as the polar opposite of the self-present (masculine) subject. The alignment of femininity and death is epitomised in the Freudian designation of female sexuality, notorious in feminist critiques of traditional psychoanalysis, as a 'dark continent,' unknown and unknowable (cf. Macey (2000) 145) and therefore threatening to the (male) subject's rational grasp on himself and the world.²⁴⁹ In a cultural universe that identifies

²⁴⁸ In fact, it makes sense to argue that Richard's fragmented identity on the brink of self-loss is in itself a gendered, feminine experience (cf. Findlay (1999) 180); I will discuss this reading in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

²⁴⁹ Elisabeth Bronfen observes that 'the fear of death translates into a fear of Woman, who, for man, is death. She is constructed as the place of mystery, of not knowing, Freud's "dark continent," as the site of silence but also of the horrifying void that "castrates" the living man's sense of wholeness and stability. She is desirable because distant, absent or not quite there, a dream, a phantom, a mediatrix, a muse. Woman and death are considered to be the two "unrepresentable" things and yet they are ubiquitously present "allegorically" in western representations as precisely such a limit and excess' (Bronfen (1992) 205). Bronfen later expands on the position of women as 'other' in patriarchal culture: 'Woman is constructed as Other than man; as that

femininity with death and conceptualises both as absence of self, the female author who writes her own death engages in a double denial of selfhood.

This duplicated self-erasure is at the core of my reservations against reading women's self-staged deaths as instances of self-assertion. As I attempt to show in my following analyses of early modern women's texts, their own representations of death – the death of the writing self, fictive or real, or of an invented female character (though, of course, the boundaries between these categories are often blurred) – require a differentiated point of view that can embrace the possibility of a dialectic of self-affirmation and self-erasure.

Materiality and absence: Isabella Whitney's 'Manner of her Will, and what she left to London'

The genre of the will or legacy most obviously embodies the simultaneity of absence and presence of self. Composing their will, individuals consciously preview their own death and at the same time strive to make themselves remembered and to pre-determine the future beyond this event. In Wendy Wall's words, the will 'is a strangely performative and self-constituting gesture dependent on the erasure of the subject at the very moment of powerful self-assertion' (Wall (1993) 286). This tension is particularly apparent in Isabella Whitney's poem 'The manner of her Will, and what she left to London: and to those in it: at her departing.' It forms the final section of her collection of poems *A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posy* (1573), a versification of Hugh Plat's *Flowers of Philosophy* (1572).²⁵⁰

which is not the centre of a social or representational system. Hers is a position of non-coherence, of the void or an empty space between signifiers precisely because she is constructed as the vanishing point and the condition of western culture's fictions of itself; as the object and foundation of representation; as the telos and origin of man's desire to represent his culture; as the object and sign of his exchange with life and death, of his socio-economic exchanges and of his creativity' (Bronfen (1992) 403).

²⁵⁰ Interestingly, although Whitney engages in the 'feminine' literary activity that was translation, she redefines the terms of her task: '[T]he ideologically more predictable gendered turn would have been a woman's translation of male poetry into prose. Whitney's role in relation to Plat is as a kind of translator of his morally serious work, but the highly unusual switch from male prose to female poetry suggests that Whitney is challenging and out-writing Plat in an "anything you can do I can do better" move' (McGrath (2002) 150; emphasis in the original). The fact that Whitney turns Plat's work into verse is a singularly bold move in a culture that associates the genre of poetry with masculine subjectivity. Whitney had previously published a volume of poetry, consisting of four poems, two of which were acknowledged on the title page as *The Copy of a letter, lately written in meeter, by a yonge Gentilwoman: to her unconstant Lover and An Admonition to al yong Gentilwomen, and to all other Mayds in general to beware of mennes flattery* (1567).

Crucially, Whitney composed her *Sweet Nosegay* when she was forced to leave London because she had run into financial difficulties after losing her position as a servingmaid in an upper-class household.²⁵¹ The collection opens on a tone of loss and abjection: Whitney describes herself as ‘harvestless’ (‘The Author to the Reader’ 1) (i.e. ‘diffusely – biologically, psychologically, creatively, or materially – unproductive’ (McGrath (2002) 154)), ‘serviceless’ (ibid. 2) and ‘subject unto sickness’ (ibid. 3). From the very beginning, and in spite of her seemingly equitable overall stance, her speaking position is thereby framed with the spectre of death:

I'll neither shun, nor seek for death,
yet oft the same do crave.
By reason of my luckless life,
believe me this is true[.] (‘The Author to the Reader’ 43ff.)

Similar moments of emphasis on her impoverished state recur throughout the *Nosegay*, culminating in Whitney’s plea for the ability to stoically endure suffering with the proverbial patience of the biblical Iob, who incurred God’s anger for his excessive grief over the death of his wife and children and eventually resolved to accept his lot with equanimity:

Wherefore (my God) give me that gift,
As he did JOB until:
That I may take with quietness,
whatsoever is his will:
Then shall my luckless life soon end,
Or froward Fortune shall amend. (‘IS. W. to C. B. in bewailing her mishaps’ 19ff.)

In the face of this life-renouncing stance, it is all the more surprising that the title of the ‘Manner of her Will’ expresses such an extraordinary degree of self-confidence, suggested by Whitney’s intention to leave something of her self not merely to members of her close family circle, as might conventionally be expected, but to the whole city of London. The

In Lynette McGrath’s words, this makes ‘Isabella Whitney’s publishing career ... intriguing and revealing, not only for its novelty, but also because it does not, on the one hand, manifest the usual single-item published poem typical of many early modern women poets or, on the other hand, conform to an independent, individualist model of authorship’ (McGrath (2002) 124).

²⁵¹ As Ann Rosalind Jones observes, working as a servant for a wealthy city family was by no means unusual for young women in Whitney’s position: ‘In domestic employment, a frequently followed path led girls in their teens from gentry families in the countryside to large London households, via the “putting-out system” through which their parents hoped they would find long-term husbands as well as short-term employment in the city’ (Jones (1999) 21). Whitney probably alludes to this circumstance when, in a letter to her brother that is part of the *Nosegay*’s section entitled ‘Certain familiar Epistles and friendly Letters by the Author: with Replies,’ she dedicates her works:

Unto a virtuous Lady, which
till death I honor will:
The loss I had of service hers,
I languish for it still. (29ff.)

poem begins with her bold presentation of self: ‘I whole in body, and in mind’ (1)²⁵² – after this opening, the qualification ‘but very weak in purse’ (2) has merely a petty ring to it. The fact that she is in a financially insecure position retreats behind her pronounced sense of authorial presence. Symbolical self-stylisation is more powerful than its material underpinnings – or so we are made to believe. Yet the remark about her empty purse is in fact very crucial, because Whitney thereby heightens the paradox of her position: it is her very *lack* of possessions that enables her to bequeath her imaginary ‘wealth’ to the city.²⁵³ For Lynette McGrath, this paradox can be resolved if we read Whitney’s ‘conjunction and disjunction of pain and pleasure, sickness and health, sanity ... and insanity ... , economic and social subjugation and authoritative writing ... [as] precisely the manifestations of the split subjectivity that breaks through to speech beyond the patriarchal codes’ (McGrath (2002) 155). In a sense, Whitney’s position may be read as liberating, in that it enables her to express a poetic perception unattached to the material, structural constraints of her society. However, I take issue with the neutral wording of McGrath’s account of Whitney’s ‘split subjectivity.’ After all, the strategies by which she succeeds, at least partially, to turn this split, this lack, into poetic abundance are twisted and highly ambivalent.

Admittedly, the first impression that her ‘Will’ conveys to the reader is one of self-assurance. Whilst she positions herself in a religious framework and submits herself to divine authority (cf. 5ff.), her invocations of religious commonplaces, such as the Day of Judgement (12), seem merely perfunctory in the light of the clear assertion of her authorial identity that closes the introductory part of the poem:

Thus have you heard touching my soul,
and body what I mean:
I trust you all will witness bear,
I have a steadfast brain. (17ff.)

Whitney presents herself as whole and coherent – both her soul and her body are represented in the writing process – and lends authority to her writing by virtue of her ‘steadfast brain’ (20) (her ‘bruised brain’ (‘The Author to the Reader’ 26) from the beginning of the *Nosegay* seems all but forgotten). What follows is a fictive journey through London, during which she describes the city’s various areas, sights and buildings

²⁵² If not otherwise indicated, quotations from Whitney’s poems are taken from her ‘Manner of her Will.’

²⁵³ In Wendy Wall’s words, Whitney ‘writes of her alienation from a position of power by simultaneously bewailing her loss of worldly goods and exercising control over the “common wealth.” ... The text, then, revolves around the disjunction between the speaker’s status as “whole in body, and in minde” ... and the imagined vacancy that gives her cause to speak’ (Wall (1993) 300).

and its people and gives a panoramic depiction of the budding consumerism of the late sixteenth century.²⁵⁴ Her hasty progression through the city, rushing from one place and trade to the other, makes us assume that this is a disorderly community that obeys only to the fickle demands of the market (cf. Clarke (2001) 203). It is a culture driven by the proliferation of (real or imagined) needs that creates the desires by which its economy is upheld; a self-perpetuating mechanism that Whitney recognises when she remarks that ‘I by the stocks have left a boy, / will ask you what you lack’ (67f.). She shows remarkable insight into the circular economy of consumption: it is dependent on creating artificial desires whose fulfilment requires the production of goods; it involves fierce competitiveness and gives considerable power to the customer over the success or failure of a business (‘As if on th’one side [of the street] you should miss / the other serves you for’t’ (59f.)). The market thus produces an underlying violence, which is implicit in Whitney’s remark that ‘[f]irst for their food, I butchers leave, / that every day shall kill’ (33f.). On the surface, however, we get an impression of effortless prosperity and bustling activity.

As Wendy Wall observes, Whitney’s systematic progression through the various parts of the city is reminiscent of a blazon, the anatomising of the female body in Petrarchan sonnets:²⁵⁵ ‘Praising her piece by piece, fragmenting her wholeness, the sonnet’s speaker reduces the challenge embodied in the beautiful woman he longs to possess’ (McGrath (2002) 188). This is true for Whitney’s relationship with London insofar as her style of writing suggests ‘the controlling and constructive power implicit in the dominating gaze’ (McGrath (2002) 147). In a sense, her poem writes London into being and hence controls the city by listing its features in a detailed and exhaustive manner. Wall claims that, ‘[b]y blazoning the city of London, Whitney replicates the oppositional subject/object relationship constructed by the Petrarchan poet’s gaze on his mistress’s inaccessible body’ (Wall (1993) 303). However, this is a statement that, I think, needs to be qualified: Whitney’s attitude towards London is clearly more complex than the mono-directional one implied by the (male) observer’s gaze. In contrast to the admired woman in Petrarchan sonnets, the city is by no means static and immobile, but changes and

²⁵⁴ Danielle Clarke gives the following summary of the social and economic changes in early modern London: ‘At the time that Whitney was writing, London was in the process of radical and rapid change. Not only had it grown enormously, it was also witnessing the establishment of trade as the primary source of its wealth, and a consequent alteration from the older feudal hierarchy to a capitalist individualism where each person was only as valuable as the market for their services’ (Clarke (2001) 201).

²⁵⁵ In Wall’s view, ‘London becomes the erotic “other” on display, as it is dissected, anatomized, and described’ (Wall (1993) 302). Similarly, Lynette McGrath comments on Whitney’s ‘repeating allusions to and puns on sight’ (McGrath (2002) 147).

alters its shape through forces intrinsic to itself. Thus there is a constitutive duality in Whitney's speaking position: on the one hand, she constructs for herself an authorising position, styling herself as the person who calls into being the places and people she describes. The first lines of the main part of the poem are exemplary:

I first of all to London leave
because I there was bred:
Brave buildings rare, of churches store,
and Paul's to the head. (25ff.)

The fact that she grew up in London ('I there was bred' (26))²⁵⁶ suggests that, in writing the poem, she reverses her relationship with the city. While it was the city which, metaphorically speaking, nourished her in the past, it is now Whitney herself who is in a position to fictionally create and sustain London – note the anaphorically recurring formula 'I leave' The poem implies that she is performing an act of creation through her detailed, almost affectionate descriptions. On the other hand, she is herself constituted through her interaction with the city; she is 'both potential receiver and giver, both potential object and subject' (McGrath (2002) 154). Binary oppositions between 'self' and 'other' do not exist. The idea of ownership works both ways – just as Whitney 'creates' London in her fictional world, she is herself a product of the city and, in a sense, 'owned' by it. The self-designation of her authorial role as merely describing a status quo ('... there it is: I little brought / but nothing from thee took' (131f.)) encompasses both sides of this relationship. Whitney's alleged passivity is belied by her pervasive gesture of authorial creation, but also supported by the strange lack of interaction between herself and the city that the remark suggests. The latter is mirrored by her recurrent emphasis on her impending absence, unavoidable because of the threat of debt and poverty. I agree with Lynette McGrath, who observes that:

Her very condition, it seems, has driven her to write, to claim the right to write. Her loss of identity as a serving maid in a London household, and her ensuing misfortunes, are the very circumstances which have forced her inscription of herself as the subject who writes of these experiences. (McGrath (2002) 155)

Writing out of deprivation, Whitney expresses a different, far less secure perception of self than that of the life-giving creatrix of the city. Phrases such as '... that they may remember me' (139), 'when I am gone ... for me to pray' (135f.) are interspersed throughout the poem, but are easily overlooked in favour of its overall stance of powerful creativity. Yet,

²⁵⁶ In all likelihood, Whitney is faithful to historical evidence: she was probably born in Cheshire, but raised in the Smithfield district of London (cf. Nick Broyles et al., introduction to *A Sweet Nosegay*).

at a closer look, it is these very phrases that threaten to unbalance Whitney's confident authorial position. My cautious reading of these insertions is supported by the instructions she addresses to the inhabitants of the city with regard to her burial. In the closing passage that curiously merges her farewell to London with her death – even if the latter may just be a metaphorical trope – Whitney appears to renounce her assertive self-presentation as the city's creatrix:

And let me have a shrouding sheet
to cover me from shame:
And in oblivion bury me
and never more me name.
Ringings nor other ceremonies,
use you not for cost:
Nor at my burial, make no feast,
your money were but lost.
Rejoice in God that I am gone,
out of this vale so vile. (267ff.)

Having accomplished her powerful act of creation, the creative self vanishes. Whitney reverts back to a position of humility, qualifying her fictive creation by absenting herself from 'this vale so vile' (276) that is the world in the here-and-now. Crucially, her impending death is related to the loss of honour that she has incurred by venturing into the distinctly public and morally dubious city landscape ('... a shrouding sheet / to cover me from shame' (267f.)). In the early modern context, a woman who moved freely in the public, urban space would inevitably put her reputation under threat, because only her allocation to a patriarchal household would guarantee her virtue, epitomised by her chastity. Also, due to their alleged uncontrollable carnality, women as consumers were a focus for the anxiety of 'the unravelling of the social order under the onslaught of capitalism' (Moran (2002) 126) in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. What Jean Howard observes with regard to London's theatregoing women goes for their presence in the urban landscape in general: '[I]n that public space such women have become unanchored from the structures of surveillance and control "normal" to the culture and useful in securing the boundary between "good women" and "whores"' (Howard (1991b) 71f.). In Whitney's 'Will,' too, being outspoken and assertive comes at a cost, we are forced to conclude. What seems like a life- and self-affirming stance, her claim for a position of creative authorial control, is punctuated by her erasure of self. The generic designation of her poem as a will is ideally suited to this dialectical stance. Laying down a will implies relinquishing authority at the same time as making it manifest, because its

actual implementation is left to others. Whitney seems to be aware of this when she eventually submits her writerly authority to the city of London:

[Rejoice] ... that of each thing, left such store,
as may your wants exile.
I make thee sole executor, because
I loved thee best. (277ff.)

Certainly, Whitney stages herself in a powerful way, as a person who guarantees plenty, creates as she sees fit ('I make thee ...' (279)) and bestows love. Mirroring the authorial stance taken by the writers of mothers' manuals, she positions London in the role of the child who depends on the mother for its identity and sense of wholeness. However, it is this self-stylisation as maternal that turns her interaction with her fictional 'child,' the city, into an ultimately self-undermining strategy. As I have outlined in a different context, the maternal speaking position always entails a threat to the mother's identity.²⁵⁷ To put it crudely, the child's identity formation requires the elimination of the mother's self. Whitney's self-assured, creative stance can therefore only be read *in connection* with (rather than in opposition to) the tone of abjection that characterises large parts of her self-presentation in the *Nosegay*. Julia Kristeva describes abjection as 'establish[ing] bodily boundaries by facilitating the introduction of a distinction between the inner and the outer, and then between the ego and the non-ego' (Macey (2000) 1) – in the case of Whitney's 'Manner of her Will,' between the author and the city of London. However, this trajectory also works in reverse: 'The process that establishes boundaries also implies the threat that boundaries can be breached, ... and that the subject can be absorbed back into a suffocating relationship with an archaic image of the mother' (Macey (2000) 1). In Kristeva's own words, 'what is *abject* ... draws me toward a place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva (1982) 2; emphasis in the original). The potential breakdown of meaning in Whitney's 'Will' is betrayed by the simultaneous presence and absence of the authorial I, a paradox that cannot be accounted for with recourse to rational logic. At the same time, however, Whitney uses this very paradox to counter the threat of loss of meaning. By integrating the absence of self into the very setup of her 'Will,' she bestows and establishes her identity at the same time as she acknowledges its erasure. It is plausible that it is her sense of abjection by which her creative subjectivity in relation to London is made possible in the first place – she is able to style herself as London's creatrix *because* (not although) she is about to leave the city.

²⁵⁷ Cf. my discussion of self-constitution in relation to an other (2.2).

Whilst it is certainly fair to argue that Whitney derives a considerable sense of empowerment from her fictional bequest to London, there are indications that she does not find her strategy of self-assertion through self-deletion entirely satisfactory. The dangers of her tactics become apparent if one takes a closer look at the material dimensions of her 'Will.' In the final section of the poem, she criticises the citizens of London for their failure to provide for her sustenance while she was living among them:

And tell them further, if they would,
my presence still have had:
They should have sought to mend my luck;
Which ever was too bad. (304ff.)

Whitney thereby privileges the material aspects of her situation over the merely symbolic value that is conferred by authorial agency through absence. In a sense, she reverses the creatively independent stance towards the material that her depiction of London was based on. Her construction of the city in exclusively material terms comes back to haunt her: in a society that is based on the possession and exchange of goods according to the rules of the free market, a single woman, herself a 'good' within the patriarchal economy,²⁵⁸ is threatened with destitution and, in its most extreme form, annihilation. As Alison Findlay observes, Whitney shows 'remarkable insight into how money, goods and identities are constructed in relation to each other ... The profusion of goods constructs the women [of London] in terms of "lack"' (Findlay (1999) 111f.). If identity is based on the possession of 'French ruffs, high pearls, gorgets and sleeves' (26) and other consumer goods, a woman whose material situation denies her access to these luxuries simply *has no* identity.²⁵⁹

The close relation between identity and the material in the early modern period is strongly supported by historical evidence: as the research of social historians has shown, recognising the importance of the material and the everyday is an oft-met feature of early modern women's wills; specific instructions about items of clothing, jewellery and other possessions are frequent. Natalie Zemon Davis, in her study of seventeenth-century

²⁵⁸ Luce Irigaray in particular has argued that, under patriarchy, women are commodities, i.e. goods that are exchanged among men (cf. Irigaray (1985b) 196f.).

²⁵⁹ It is striking to note how completely early feminist criticism of Whitney has overlooked this deeply unsettling dimension of her 'Will,' relishing instead in its energetic invocations of 'real life' in early modern London. Betty Travitsky's evaluation in her introduction to her edition of Whitney's poem is exemplary of this monocular enthusiasm: 'The "Wyll" is the most enduring of Isabella Whitney's writings, and its vivid survey of an obviously beloved and well-known London is generally quite polished. Despite the references to God in the opening and closing lines, its tone is Bohemian rather than pious. Its exuberant word play, unusual tone, facile technique, and informative descriptions of London give the poem its lasting interest' (Travitsky (1980b) 82). Travitsky is certainly right in praising Whitney's artistic merit and readable style; yet her comment overlooks the deeply unsettling implications of Whitney's speaking position in relation to the city.

women's wills, concludes that 'by these elaborate gifts from the body, women expressed their individuality as they left the world – and demonstrated as well their neighborhood matronage' (Davis (1986) 62). The diaries of Lady Anne Clifford provide interesting examples of this intention: Clifford frequently mentions the clothes and jewellery she was wearing at the particular moment she is writing about – 'my Black Taffety Night Gown & a Yellow Taffety Waist Coat' (41), 'the Pearls & Diamonds left me by my Mother' (41), to give but a few examples – thus creating a very vivid and realistic picture of the day-to-day circumstances of her life and ostentatiously displaying her wealth to those who might read her diary in future. Together with the descriptions of her various country houses and estates and their day-to-day running that make up the bulk of her writing, and in the near absence of self-reflection in the modern sense, it is these material possessions that seem to be indispensable for her sense of self. Commanding power over goods and lands confers identity.²⁶⁰ Conversely, a woman in Whitney's position, who can only fictionally (i.e. using the transient means of language) invoke such goods, is able to establish only a distorted and unstable sense of self.

It is true, having her work printed hints at a sense of personal ownership of her works and an awareness of the possibility that writing might be a way of making a living.²⁶¹ This monetary dimension supports Lynette McGrath's observation that Whitney, who actively pursued the publication of her poems, understood how 'the power of immaterial language contains the potential for material production and material recompense' (McGrath (2002) 147). However, it also implies her recognition of the opposite possibility, namely that her poems might fail to arouse public interest and hence may not provide a means for her to support herself. After all, Whitney's dedicatory poems to her brothers and the family friend and potential patron George Mainwaring are, above all, 'request[s] for ... material help' (McGrath (2002) 147). Moreover, in Whitney's late sixteenth-century context, the affirmation of self that publication entails would have been countered by the negative connotations of printing. Associated with social inferiority – in contrast to writing poetry for a courtly patron – print conferred a double stigma on women,

²⁶⁰ Another impressive example of the links between material bequests, relationships to others and female sense of self is the will of the London midwife Elizabeth Whipp (1645-46). Whipp is particularly concerned for the welfare of her orphaned grandchildren and also establishes relationships to other female family members through the carefully considered and deliberate bequest of goods and valuables (cf. Doreen Evenden, in Ostovich and Sauer (2004) 43ff.).

²⁶¹ For a detailed analysis of Whitney's possible role in the emergent print culture, cf. McGrath (2002) 123ff. McGrath points out the ambiguities that Whitney's position is fraught with: '[I]t might seem that Isabella was strongly controlled in her poetic enterprise by her printer and perhaps by her brother, and that she performed as a kind of objectified writing machine at their behest. ... Though Whitney was brought into print by the hovering presence of her printer, we may well ask in what way her text writes itself out of his control and allows the inscription of a woman's subjectivity' (McGrath (2002) 131).

for whom it added to the dubiousness of venturing into the public sphere in the first place.²⁶² Contrasting her own choice with her sister's more conventional role as a wife and mother, Whitney's wording is revealing: 'I know you housewifery intend, / though I to writing fall' ('To her Sister Mistress A. B.' 33). The obvious allusion to the biblical Fall shows writing to be uniquely detrimental for women. It simultaneously makes them responsible for the sins and imperfections of humankind and establishes their sexuality as monstrous, an association that has lived on to this day in the phrase 'a fallen woman' (cf. McGrath (2002) 156). With its threat to her moral integrity, the materiality of the writing process expressed by print culture opens up possibilities for identity formation at the same time as it renders the female writer's identity highly precarious.

Whitney's stress on the material conditions of writing is even more pronounced (and all the more paradoxical) in the following part of her address to her sister, where she conceptualises writing as an activity that a woman can engage in only when it is detached from the everyday, down-to-earth materiality of her life. In an interesting way, Whitney here seems to both foreshadow and contradict Virginia Woolf's seminal observations in her famous essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Whitney stresses, as does Woolf, the need for the woman writer's intellectual capacities not to be smothered by her everyday chores; yet she replaces Woolf's demand for material security ('a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (Woolf (1969) 6)) with a renunciation of the material. Whilst her 'Will' suggests that lack of material possessions equals lack of identity, Whitney here declares:

Had I a husband, or a house,
and all that 'longs thereto
Myself could frame about to rouse,
as other women do:
But till some household cares me tie,
My books and Pen I will apply. ('To her Sister Mistris A.B.' 37ff.)

Lynette McGrath speculates that Whitney's use of the connective 'or,' rather than 'and' ('... a husband, *or* a house' (37; emphasis added)), might indicate that 'one of the two acquisitions might be detached from the other, and still represent the material difference to her life that she wishes for' (McGrath (2002) 146). Whether she did in fact conceptualise

²⁶² As Wendy Wall observes, 'writers both male and female risked estrangement from the social sources of power when they chose to publish. Because print publication was rhetorically scripted as a lower-class activity, writers of both genders had to counter the force of this stigma. This is not to say that gender was not an issue. In a world in which privilege was attached to coterie circulation and published words were associated with promiscuity, the female writer could become a "fallen" woman in a double sense: branded as a harlot or a member of the nonelite' (Wall (1993) 281).

the security provided by a household as a desirable condition or not, she expresses an unmistakable awareness of the importance of the material for her writing – even if not in the sense that we would expect. Apparently, only a woman who *lacks* the material backup of a house is able to write, but is therefore also in an extraordinarily precarious position. We can resolve this tension if we focus on the activity of writing and its implications. Firstly, it entails financial precariousness for the writing woman; secondly, it places her under suspicion because it threatens to break up the social unit of the household and hence triggers the same anxieties that the burgeoning proto-consumerist culture elicits. Thus, for a woman, writing always equals self-cancellation, as it causes the elimination of either her physical and material or her social identity. Either way, writing is an inherently dangerous and necessarily detrimental activity.

On a more general level, this observation shows Whitney's self-contradictory subject position to be doubly entwined with the material. The emergent consumer culture of the city offers ways of asserting identity, also for women – for example, it allows them to make money using their 'bookes and Pen' – but also threatens this identity with deletion. In a sense, then, Whitney simultaneously renounces and affirms the importance of the material and participates in the discourse of early modern London's 'culture of display ... [, which] heightened anxiety about the power of things not only to communicate status but to *confer* status on their owners' (Friedman (2000) 232; emphasis in the original). This culture enables Whitney to write, but also puts constraints on her literary activities.

Whitney's place in a materialist culture which defines identity via the possession of goods also relates to early modern women's ambiguous position with regard to power and authority. Alison Findlay observes that they were 'attuned to the idea of transience since their ownership of a building or estate, or place in office, was only a temporary position, an accident of fate rather than a natural possession of authority' (Findlay (1999) 191).²⁶³ This transience multiplies with regard to the proto-capitalist consumer culture, as the consumption of goods, based on buying and selling and the unpredictable fluctuations of the marketplace, is in itself an insubstantial enterprise. Naturally, the emergence of proto-consumerism in early modern society, particularly in London, was met with anxiety and insecurity by people of either sex. Yet Whitney's poem suggests that the threat to identity posed by the vagaries of the marketplace positioned women in a doubly unstable fashion,

²⁶³ Examples are Lady Anne Clifford and Queen Elizabeth I: only the non-existence of a male heir allowed for their ascent to a position of power within the patriarchal ranks of the aristocracy, respectively the monarchy.

because it jeopardised both the material conditions and the immaterial underpinnings of their identities.

In the prefatory section to her *Sweet Nosegay*, addressing her friend T. B., Whitney is convinced ‘that thy Fame, forever flourish shall, / If IS. her Pen, may promise ought at all’ (55f.).²⁶⁴ Her ‘Will’ suggests very poignantly that what might work when she is writing about somebody other than herself (someone male!) – namely that ‘the poet’s pen can immortalize its subject’ (McGrath (2002) 148) – does not produce the same effect for Whitney herself. On a merely symbolic level, it might be possible for ‘[t]he ultimate and permanent absence of death ... [to] be eased, if not erased, by the poet’s power’ (McGrath (2002) 148). Yet Whitney can only bequeath something of herself to London because she does not even pretend to ‘erase’ the ‘absence of death.’ The ‘right to poetic and printed subjectivity’ (McGrath (2002) 163) that she thereby claims certainly constitutes an assertive act of leaving something of herself to London, but it cannot, I think, be conceptualised as an ‘escape from the control of patriarchal language’ (McGrath (2002) 163). What ‘survives’ at the end of the poem is the immortalised male friend and the consumerist, fiercely market-driven city.

Whitney’s poem thus replicates the conventional gendering of the patriarchal economy: women fall prey to the power of the material, i.e. they cannot escape their alignment with this allegedly ‘baser’ sphere, whereas men can transcend the merely material. Strikingly similar assumptions can be detected in other women’s writings of the period; they are often even the subject of the writers’ metacritical remarks, or that of their (male) editors. In one of the dedicatory poems to Alice Sutcliffe’s *Meditations of Man’s Mortalitie*, ‘An Encomium upon the Authoress and Booke,’ signed by a certain Fra. Lenton, the latter explicitly denies Sutcliffe any lasting relevance as a person. Any claims to ‘immortality’ accrue solely to her work:

But thinke not ...
...
... that I meane, to keepe her name alive
When she is gone; and pass’d to greater blisse,
For ne’re knew her, when I framed this.
Onely I read her lines, which forc’t me praise
The Picture of her minde ... (sigs. a10v f.)

The female author’s work survives in spite of her eventual death – or even *because* of it. Yet it is only her writing that is praiseworthy; one might infer that looking at the ‘real’

²⁶⁴ Section ‘A Reply to the same’ [‘In answer to comfort her, by showing his haps to be harder,’ by T. B.]. The initials ‘T. B.’ have been identified as Thomas Berrie (cf. McGrath (2002) 124).

person behind the work might spoil the impression of the text as ‘the pious practice of a wife’ (sig. a9r). The author’s living persona is immobilised as ‘[t]he Picture of her minde’ (sig. a11r), a gesture that reduces her work to yet another exemplary account of feminine virtue and submissiveness. Similarly, Elizabeth Clinton’s *The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery* is predicated on the disappearance of her authorial persona that closes her dedication: ‘Go then Great booke of Nursing plead the Cause. / Teach High’st, low’st, all, it’s Gods and Natures lawes’ (sig. A4v). In spite of Clinton’s otherwise self-assured stance, she retreats behind her writing and its content. Again, it is the book – detached from its writer – that can rightfully and realistically claim didactic influence. In short, the female author vanishes in favour of her book.

Although these dedications may be read as creating a positive image of the female writers, stressing their virtue and skill in producing their books, they also exemplify the downside of the (physical and, in the poststructuralist sense, metaphorical) ‘death of the author.’ The woman writer who ‘dies,’ i.e. disappears, literally or metaphorically, is effectively robbed of any material, this-worldly power. She can become part of the public culture only on condition of adhering to patriarchal standards of feminine virtue, and only as an object of admiration. For the text to survive in generations to come, her agency needs to be cancelled out.

‘[D]eathe appearinge in this shape’: self-annihilation and self-affirmation in mothers’ manuals

This book by any yet unread,
I leave for you when I am dead,
That being gone, here you may find
What was your living mother’s mind.

– Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*²⁶⁵

Similar to Whitney’s poetry, in the female advice books as well as in the explicitly autobiographical writings of the seventeenth century, the author’s death – either perceived

²⁶⁵ Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*. Ed. Jeannine Hensley. Cambridge/MA: Belknap, 1967 (240).

as impending, or as inevitable at some point in the future – figures as a primary motivation for writing. If death is conceptualised as ‘the possibility of an absolute alterity,’²⁶⁶ the desire (independent of gender) to objectify the self by transforming it into an ‘other’ that can be written *about* has close affinities to death. Elisabeth Bronfen’s observations on autobiography apply to self-writings in general:

In autobiography the self desires a ‘literary’ alterity, ‘one which repeats the self within a text at once parallel to and radically different from the consciousness.’ While the literal attainment of alterity implies death, autobiography figurally attains alterity because it marks the self’s ‘attempt to know itself as other,’ so that by implication ‘the self undertakes a relationship with death whenever it performs autobiography.’ (Bronfen (1992) 142)²⁶⁷

Self-writing, turning the self into a text, implies a ‘distancing from self’ (Marcus (1994) 209) that is analogous to death because death, literally, implies a similar detachment from life and from lived experience (cf. Marcus (1994) 209). The recognition of alterity achieved by writing the self gains added poignancy in relation to the ‘death of the subject’ associated with the postmodern condition. However, as the example of Isabella Whitney has shown, references to the author’s death in early modern women’s self-writings have a very immediate, tangible dimension. In a socio-cultural context in which death was a constantly visible fact of life – especially for women, who would be involved in caring for sick or dying family members and were themselves likely to encounter potentially life-threatening situations during pregnancy and childbirth – presenting the self as death-prone cannot be accounted for as a merely speculative, theoretical move, but springs from the recognition that death is something that is unavoidably to be reckoned with in lived experience. Reading early modern women’s references to their own death, then, demands an approach that firmly links considerations of subjectivity with their material dimensions.

Probably the most striking degree of preoccupation with death occurs in the mothers’ manuals, in the authors’ self-characterisation as already dead, or at least close to death. The conscious setup of the manuals as ‘wills,’ ‘testaments’ or ‘legacies’ that is expressed in their titles can provide the vital clue to the interconnections – between private and public, self and other – in-between which they are situated, but also to the instabilities that this designation entails. The latter is apparent especially if one considers the socio-economic changes in the period, which, on the whole, turned the will into an exclusively market-oriented genre, ‘the formalized [instrument] of commerce, banking and trade, in

²⁶⁶ Michael Ryan, ‘Narcissus Autobiographer.’ *English Literary History* 43 (1976): 184-208 (204f.); quoted in Bronfen (1992) 142.

²⁶⁷ The quotations are taken from Ryan, ‘Narcissus Autobiographer’ (204f.).

other words, [a device] for the transmission of business capital.’²⁶⁸ By consciously using the genre to a somewhat different effect – to interact with posterity on the basis of emotional intimacy and perceived closeness, thus interpreting the will in a metaphorical fashion – female writers of wills and testaments offered alternatives to the purely economic implications of the genre. This tendency is even apparent in ‘genuine,’ non-literary wills, which also had a symbolic dimension: ‘Rather than providing for children or distributing largesse, women made wills out of a need to thank and acknowledge small favours, out of a sense of personal attachment to material goods, in order to help out family and friends in need and from a sense of personal integrity’ (Erickson (1993) 209).²⁶⁹ ‘Metaphorical’ wills – i.e. texts which are set up as testaments, but make immaterial bequests in the form of advice, received wisdom etc. – more obviously turn the will into a ‘relational’ genre. This reappropriation reveals the author’s awareness of her self-positioning at the point of intersection between the private self and the outside world because, for all her stress on inwardness, a potential audience is always implied. Crucially, this audience is positioned in the future; although the author addresses specific contemporaries she is close to, the ultimate purpose of the text is to achieve an effect that lasts beyond the writer’s lifetime and is of public relevance. However, this form of writing renders the female author’s position an inherently precarious one, because her eventual death is always also implied, by virtue of the very genre she has chosen. Wendy Wall notes the three-dimensional setup of the will: ‘[I]t is a peculiar document: it is written in the present tense and includes its imagined enactment in the future, but it is authorized by a past voice’ (Wall (1993) 285). The genre thus allowed women to transcend the present in both directions – towards the past by taking stock of their lives, and towards the future by leaving their material goods and/or advice to future generations. Wall goes on to state that ‘[i]t is because of the strange time frame involved in the concept of the will, that the writer is able to express, sanctify and preserve his or her immediate desires’ (Wall (1993) 285). Wall captures the inherent paradox of this speaking position by referring to the women’s ‘riven subjectivity.’ Drawing on Catherine Belsey’s argument that early modern women could only have access to a

²⁶⁸ Susan Mosher Stuard, ‘Did Women Lose Status in Late Medieval and Early Modern Times?’ In: *Restoring Women to History: Materials for Western Civilization*. Ed. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Susan Mosher Stuard. Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education and the Lilly Endowment, n. p., n. d. (180); quoted in Jordan (1990) 16.

²⁶⁹ Elsewhere, Erickson speaks of the ‘personalism’ that characterises early modern women’s wills (Erickson (1993) 228). In Ralph Houlbrooke’s view, this is true for the development of the genre in general: ‘As the will became less important as a vehicle for spiritual and other-worldly concerns, it became a more significant means of expressing earthly affections and attachments’ (Houlbrooke (1998) 135).

‘discontinuous identity’ (Wall (1993) 287),²⁷⁰ Wall argues that they used the genre of the legacy in order to create ‘a carefully formed *re-presentation* of that problematic position, a crafted self-portrait through which [they] ... rhetorically recast their riven subjectivity’ (Wall (1993) 287; emphasis in the original). In the following, I will pursue the question in how far Wall is justified in stating that the writers of mothers’ manuals, by styling themselves as dead, ‘expose the absent/present subjectivity of all women by taking it to an extreme’ (Wall (1993) 287), and to what extent it entitled them to a position of (public) authority that they would otherwise not have been able to claim. However, I think we should have no illusions about the fact that, if this is the case, their authority is highly ambivalent. There is a subdued poignancy in Valerie Wayne’s observation that ‘[t]he mother’s text ... became a substitute not for her material but her spiritual presence. It was a sign of her disembodied spirit. And that is the larger reason why its publication was likely to be acceptable – because it marked her absence’ (Wayne (1996) 70). Again, we need to address the question in how far absence and authority can be reconciled.

In the address to her sons that opens her *Mothers Blessing*, Dorothy Leigh explicitly stresses the fact that she feels (or imagines?) her life to be drawing to a close. The natural sequence of generations, which makes it the parents’ duty to pass on advice to their children, legitimises her writing: ‘And seeing my selfe going out of the world, and you but comming in, I know not how to performe this duty so well, as to leave you these few lines’ (sig. A6v). In a sense, Leigh’s writing is predicated on death in a double sense, for she greatly emphasises the fact that it is only her husband’s previous death that has opened to her the role of advisor in the first place (cf. sigs. A6r f.). However, as I have pointed out before,²⁷¹ fulfilling her late husband’s will might be a merely strategic move towards humility because, effectively, Leigh devises a will of her own – the double death (her husband’s death in the past and her own at some point in the future) that legitimises her legacy allows her to usurp her husband’s authority and to claim it as her own. In Wendy

²⁷⁰ According to Catherine Belsey, women ‘speak with equal conviction from incompatible subject-positions, displaying a discontinuity of being ... While the autonomous subject was in the making, women had no single or stable place from which to define themselves as independent beings. In this sense they both were and were not subjects’ (Belsey (1985) 149f.). Naomi J. Miller’s depiction of Barbara Sidney’s unstable position in the Sidney household, which could equally be applied to women such as Lady Grace Mildmay, Lady Margaret Hoby and numerous others, exemplifies women’s ‘discontinuous identity’: ‘Wielding both authority and responsibility, even if not at her choice, [she] found herself mediating between the roles of obedient wife and estate manager, nurturing mother and governing parent’ (Miller (1996) 25). More generally, Jacqueline Rose argues that ‘it remains the case that – without reifying the idea of a pure fragmentation which would be as futile as it would be psychically unmanageable for the subject – only the concept of a subjectivity at odds with itself gives back to women the right to an impasse at the point of sexual identity, with no nostalgia whatsoever for its possible or future integration into a norm’ (Rose (1986) 15).

²⁷¹ Cf. my discussion of Leigh’s text in relation to the private and public spheres (2.3).

Wall's view, '[her] words comprise a self-constituting gesture based on self-annihilation as she constructs an identity precisely through the erasure of her body' (Wall (1993) 289). But she does more than that: as she takes over her husband's extended authority beyond his death, she also claims an identity that confers 'real' (masculine) power, whilst paying lip-service to the patriarchal order that 'give[s] men the first and chiefe place' (sig. B5v). Not only does she circumvent the restrictions imposed on women's writing, but also 'the patriarchal law of primogeniture' (Brown (1998) 8) that presents as normative the passing of a legacy from father to son.

However, these tactics are not simply and straightforwardly empowering. For, throughout the *Mothers Blessing*, instances of confident self-assertion alternate with or are undercut by moments of self-abnegation. As I have observed above, the motherlove that lent authority to Leigh's writing also threatens self-loss, as she tells her children to 'know therefore, that it was the motherly affection that I bare unto you all, which made me now (as it often hath done heretofore) forget my selfe in regard of you' (sigs. A11v f.). Together with death, motherhood is a trope that allows Leigh to evade judgement for her boldness of venturing into the public sphere of the written word. It is crucial to note that both – motherhood and death – cannot be conceived of as independent of one another, for two reasons: early modern women literally experienced birth and death as closely related events, because both a woman's death in childbirth and infants' deaths were relatively common occurrences (cf. Phillippy (2000) 321).²⁷² Moreover, the alignment of motherhood and death urges a psychoanalytical reading. Julia Kristeva expresses this duality when she refers to the mother's position as '*master* of a process that is prior to the social-symbolic-linguistic contract' (Kristeva (1980) 238; emphasis in the original). Her mastery consists in her ability to both enable and constrain the child's identity formation, i.e. its entry into the socio-symbolic contract. The mother thus embodies 'the risk of losing identity at the same time as we ward it off' (Kristeva (1980) 238). Therefore, if the purpose of the maternal advice book is to facilitate the child's choice of the 'right' course of life,

²⁷² Interestingly, the close connection between birth and death and women's pivotal role in this scenario was also acknowledged by (some) male writers. Cf. the following poem by William Muggins:

Againe bethinke you, at that instant hower,
The little difference, was twixt life and death:
When as the infant, with his naked power,
Laboured for life, to have his rightfull birth,
And with the sickly, Mother gaspt for breath,
The one nere death, as nigh to death the other,
Sore to the babe, worse Travell for the Mother.

(William Muggins, *London's Mourning Garment, or Funerall Teares: Worne and Shed for the Death of her Wealthy Citizens, and other her Inhabitants*. London: Ralph Blower, 1603 (sig. B3v); quoted in Phillippy (2002) 111).

the mother needs to be erased; otherwise the child's individuality cannot be established. The maternal as a self-authorising stance is thus ultimately geared towards the mother's death.²⁷³ In the words of Elizabeth Bronfen:

Owing to this ambivalence inherent in her function, she serves cultural discourses as privileged trope for the hesitation between confirmation and denial, between desire for a constant intact union, for perfection and identity and the acknowledgement of difference, of imperfection, misrecognition and insufficiency.

Furthermore, the renunciation of the maternal body grounds language acquisition and moral development in the sense that the erasure of the mother allows for a recognition of difference, of the split between self and the unconscious, of social laws and symbols; in short it engenders a recognition of Otherness. (Bronfen (1992) 33)

In this sense, in order to ward off the threat of loss of identity associated with the maternal, the mother needs to be erased – needless to say, this lends great poignancy to the notion of maternity as self-authorisation. In effect, it is accompanied by its dialectical counterpart, the threat of self-deletion.

For Dorothy Leigh, however, religion offers a counterpoint to the danger of self-loss. She conceptualises loss of self in her religious (and distinctly Puritan) framework; it is ultimately equated with ungodliness and enslavement by the devil. Leigh admonishes her children to '[t]ake heed therefore, for as an usurping Tyrant, who having gotten once possession of a kingdom, will ever after lay claim to it, and will use all the means he can to get it again ... [s]o will the Divell' (sig. M7v). She presents the self as the ultimate good of the human being: '[T]hou hadst nothing to loose but thy selfe' (sig. M7r). Yet as it is implicated in the greater scheme of salvation versus rejection, this is not the autonomous, self-reliant personal core that is the self in modernity. Rather, anything that is good and virtuous about the self belongs to the realm of the divine; it is not the result of purely human endeavour:

When thou locest the favour of God, and becomest a bondslave of the divel, thou locest all the blessings, which God in mercy hath made for thee, and bestowed on thee. But they did not then fall to the divell, but did fall to the Lord, whose they were; for they were not thine before, but the Lords, and therefore thou couldest not lose them, nor forfet them to the divel: yet thou hast lost them from thy selfe, & they fell to the Lord, who lent them thee so long as thou didst serve him[.] (sig. M6v)

Bearing in mind that the bulk of Leigh's advice to her sons consists of instructions on how to lead a godly life, it seems to be religion, again, which allows her to value her self in spite of the ever-present threat of its dissolution. Crucially, it is one of the foundations of

²⁷³ As Catherine Belsey notes, 'mothers unsettle the discourse to the point where the price of coherence is their repeated elimination' (Belsey (1985) 155).

the socio-symbolic order – i.e. not an alternative, ‘feminine’ strategy – that enables her to counter the threat of self-loss. Self-affirmation takes place with the help of, *within* the dominant discourse (in this case, religion), not against it.

In a similar way as Leigh, Elizabeth Grymeston, in her *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives*, legitimises her writing by the impending loss of the self through death. She presents herself as already absent whilst performing the act of writing: ‘I am now a dead woman among the living’ (sig. A3r). Paradoxically, it is her *absence* which allows her to use her manual as a forum for genuine self-representation, to leave to her son ‘the true portrature of thy mothers minde’ (sig. A3v). Also, the (assumed) imminence of her death lends a heightened authority to her advice: her example is infinitely more insightful ‘since death hath overshadowed me, and ... there is no pleading after sentence; ... since my affecting what I should have desired is turned into a feeling of that I lost’ (sig. C2r).

Grymeston further parallels Leigh in that she expresses her fear of being ‘exiled from hir-selfe’ (sig. B3r) as a result of sin. Grymeston’s treatment of the subject of sin suggests a temptingly simple equation: if ‘our sinnes ... divide us from eternall blisse’ (sig. B3r) and, at the same time, cause alienation from the self (‘exiled from hir-selfe’ (sig. B3r)), then presence of self means presence of God and his saving grace. Again, self-scrutiny is vital to counter the threat of self-loss (cf. sig. B3r) that is succumbing to sin. The degree to which Grymeston’s sense of self is dependent on the Christian concept of salvation becomes most strikingly apparent when she maps the process of writing – which implies a creation of self – onto the crucifixion, stating that Christ’s ‘wounds [be] our letters, his lashes our commaes, his nailes our full-points, his open side our booke’ (sig. D3r). It is certainly crucial to note that Grymeston draws on the analogy of the *crucifixion*, i.e. the moment of the dissolution of Christ’s self, expressed symbolically with the conventional iconography of his suffering. Obviously, Christ’s fate provided a possible site of identification for early modern women, faced as they were with the fear of death and the concomitant precariousness of their identities.²⁷⁴ Edith Snook reads this alignment as a strategy of asserting independence on Grymeston’s part, who thereby establishes an equation of the body and the text that overrules the patriarchal master texts of her culture:

As the body becomes word, the wounds transfigure into letters and the open side to a book, other texts – the literal letters and books – are abandoned. ... The text of Christ’s body also remains corporeal in order to supersede all texts that are merely language.

²⁷⁴ For instance, Lady Frances Abergavenny prays to ‘thine anointed sonne Jesus Christ, who beholding mine agonies and bitter paines, became an intercessor to thee for me’ (‘Another praier and thanks-giuing to be said of euerie faithfull woman in child-bed, after the time of hir deliuerance, used of the virtuous Ladie, Frances Aburgauenne’; in *The Fift Lampe of Virginitie* 121f.).

This makes reading an experience of the body, at once material and spiritual, literal and figurative, present and beyond. The viscerality of a mother's spiritual instruction finds an analogy in Christ because he, too, instructs through his body. (Snook (2000) 170)

Snook's interpretation temptingly suggests that Grymeston's corporeal self-expression would come close to Hélène Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, the specifically female mode of 'writing the body.' In a sense, Grymeston does rewrite the dissolution of self that the crucifixion implies, turning it into an enabling event that triggers writing. However, whilst I do not wish to completely deny the validity of this association, I find that it is strongly qualified by the fact that Grymeston aligns writing, first and foremost, not with her *own* body, but with Christ's. The identification with Christ is the mediating trajectory that is necessary for her mode of self-expression. It is therefore genuinely 'feminine' only in a restricted sense. Moreover, Grymeston's references to her own corporeality relate exclusively to her death, i.e. she inscribes her body into her text only to state the former's imminent disappearance. As happens in Leigh's manual, what Grymeston asserts most strongly are the pillars of conventional faith, as she counter-balances the awareness of the potential dissolution of her self with a firm conviction of the salvation, redemption and eternal life in the hereafter effected by Christ.

Elizabeth Joscelyn's *Mothers Legacy* presents us with a slightly modified and even more poignant situation: Joscelyn uses similar strategies of self-stylisation as death-prone and heightens their impact to the utmost, as she links her own dissolution with the coming-into-being of her addressee, her child that has not yet been born. There is a realistic basis for her fear of death, even if it can only be made out in retrospect: Joscelyn did die shortly after the birth of her daughter Theodora, presumably of puerperal fever. Maybe some of the contemporary and later critical attention that her manual has received stems from this somewhat chilling and gruesome coincidence.²⁷⁵ However, Joscelyn's recourse to her possible death in childbirth also has a strong symbolic component. Historical evidence illustrates this point: while pregnancy undeniably posed considerable risks for early modern women, recent demographic research has shown that the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth were very probably exaggerated in the popular imagination.²⁷⁶ Wendy Wall's observation that 'the possibility of death in childbirth was a real, ever-present danger for

²⁷⁵ The book's appeal is revealed by its extraordinary publication history: on top of seven reprints of the first edition after its initial publication, the book did not go out of print until 1894 (cf. Jean LeDrew Metcalfe, introduction to Elizabeth Joscelyn, *The Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*. 3-27 (12)). The nineteenth-century introductions to the manual attest to the interest that Joscelyn's fate continued to evoke (printed in Metcalfe's edition of *The Mothers Legacy* (119-132)).

²⁷⁶ Adrian Wilson refers to the belief among social historians in women's continual anxiety about childbearing as the 'fear thesis.' Its premise is that 'fear was collective; the popular ritual of childbirth, though devised and maintained by women themselves, only made matters worse for them' (Wilson (1993) 2).

women of all ranks in the culture' (Wall (1993) 284) needs to be qualified in the light of this evidence. It makes sense to consider the *relative* perception of the danger of death in childbirth: women's fears were probably so great because the death rate was high enough for everyone to know of such cases, a circumstance that was exacerbated by the fact that birth was a public event, so that many women would have watched a friend or relative die in childbirth (cf. Sim (1996) 21f.) – independent of its actual likelihood, death in childbirth was a danger that loomed large in women's consciousness: '[C]onceiving, carrying the child to term, and successfully giving birth to a healthy infant without impairing the well-being of the mother were viewed as stages on a hazardous journey, fraught with obstacles and dangers from beginning to end' (Pollock (1990) 41). Horror stories of childbirth were exchanged between women attending the childbeds of other women, thus 'equitably distributing one woman's terror to her female acquaintance (cf. Crawford (1990) 22). Rather than being a realistic assessment of danger, fear of death in childbirth can be more accurately conceived of as an indication of a general cultural anxiety in connection with the 'liminal period' of pregnancy (Wall (1993) 285) – at least in the imagination, '[p]regnancy presented ... a demarcated and culturally acknowledged time of jeopardy that made it natural for women to be both the authors of and the audience for articulations of wisdom and counsel' (Wall (1993) 285).²⁷⁷

The liminal experience of childbirth creates a sense of commonality between women, its existential precariousness triggering exceptional authority. Having said that, I find it crucial to emphasise that both poles of this dialectic weigh equally – to push the dimension of female authority is to neglect the very real danger and pain that the situation entailed. This duality is very obvious in the case of Elizabeth Joscelin, who uses her imminent labour and assumed closeness to death as an authorising factor. It is worth quoting in their entirety the first lines of her address to her husband that precedes her *Legacy*:

I no sooner conceyved a hope that I should bee made a mother by thee but ... shortly after followed the apprehension of danger that might preuent me for [from] executinge that care, I so exceedingly desired. I mean in religious traininge our childe, and in

²⁷⁷ An example of such woman-to-woman counsel is the letter written in the 1630s by Lucy, Countess of Bedford, to Jane, Lady Cornwallis. The Countess is trying to reassure Lady Cornwallis, who apparently suffered extreme anxiety about her pregnancy and upcoming labour: '[I]t troubles me more to hear how apprehensive you are of a danger itt hath pleased God to carry you so often safely through, and so I doubt not will againe, though you may do yourselfe and yours much harme by those doubtings and ill companions for all persons and worst for us splenetick creatures. Therefore, dear Cornwallis, lett nott this melancholy prevale with you to the begetting or nourishing of those mistrusts (wich) will turne more to your hurt than that you fere, which I hope will passe with safety and end to your comfort' (*The Private Correspondence of Jane, Lady Cornwallis*, London 1633-1644 (85); quoted in Sim (1996) 18).

truthe deathe appearinge in this shape was doubly terrible vnto mee[,] first in respect of the paynfullnes of that kinde of death an[d] next the losse my littell one should haue in wantinge mee but I thanke god theas fears wear cured wth the remembrance that all things worke together for the best to those that loue god [a]nd a certain assurance that hee will giue mee patience accordinge to my payn. (1ff.)²⁷⁸

Placing Joscelyn's speaking position in the wider cultural context that associates femininity with death foregrounds its ambiguous implications. Such contextualisation also highlights the inherent problematics of motherhood, summarised in Julia Kristeva's perception that there is no 'unambiguously affirmative' stance towards maternity because of the 'close relationship between the maternal, the poetic and death' (Meaney (1993) 79). Analysing the women's options for self-representation, Elizabeth Bronfen observes that, in patriarchal literary discourse, 'death in childbirth is such a poetic theme. For here the explicitly sanctioned feminine form of authorship, the creation of a child, falls together with the actual death of the feminine body' (Bronfen (1992) 404). While I find Bronfen's nonchalant and neutral wording slightly unsettling because it covers over the poignancy of her statement, Wendy Wall's reinterpretation of the trope is even more disturbing as she exclusively stresses its potentially disruptive implications for patriarchy: 'The specter of death and the gravity of maternity join to produce a powerful counterforce to the culture's exhortations to silence' (Wall (1993) 284). Whether this counter-position is truly empowering certainly needs to be questioned. In Joscelyn's case, her recurrent emphasis on her future 'payn' belies her professed certainty that 'all things worke together for the best to those that loue god' (10f.). Throughout her *Legacy*, she voices her anxiety that 'death <would> ^might^ depriue me of time If I should neglect the present' (18f.). She seems to be writing to her child under the clearly felt pressure that she might not be able to do so for much longer. This lends a sense of urgency to her writing, which heightens the impact of her admonitions; yet it also creates a self whose claim to authority is effortful.

In a more immediate sense, Joscelyn's case clearly shows that a speaking position close to death is in fact detrimental to the female writer's authority. Her text was edited posthumously by the Anglican clergyman Thomas Goad, who was also responsible for

²⁷⁸ Interestingly, Philip Stubbes recalls a strikingly similar reaction to pregnancy in his wife Katherine: 'Thus this godly woman held on her course three or foure yeares after shee was married: at which time it pleased God, that she conceyved with a man childe: after which conception she would say to her husband, and many other good neighbours and friends, not once, nor twice, but manie times, that she should never beare more children, that, that child woulde bee her death, and that shee shoulde live but to bring that childe into the worlde. Which thing (no doubt) was revealed unto her by the Spirite of God, for according to her prophecie, so it came to passe' (Philip Stubbes, *A Christal Glasse, for Christian Women* (1595); in Trill, Chedgzoy and Osborne (1997) 57-62 (59)).

assigning *The Mothers Legacy* its title.²⁷⁹ As Joscelin's modern editor Jean LeDrew Metcalfe notes, '[n]aming the work as he did, Goad reinforced the identification of the mother's advice book as legacy, and thereby influenced the historical and critical reception of Joscelin's writing.'²⁸⁰ Goad's 'Approbation' to the *Legacy* is indicative of the manipulative strategies that his assignment entailed, but he cleverly conceals this interference by setting up Joscelin as the ideal of a virtuous woman and seemingly granting her authority:

This truly rich bequeather, taking that care for the prouiding an euerlasting portion for her hoped issue, which too many parents bend wholly vpon earthly inheritance, by her death already hath giuen vnto her Testament that life and strength, whereof the Scripture speaketh, *A Testament is of force after death*[.] (12ff.)

Contrary to his own claims, Goad effectively disempowers Joscelin by relegating her personal impact to the merely ideational. Rather than allowing her legacy to prove its 'life and strength,' Goad modifies Joscelin's manuscript to fit his 'own ideological commitments,'²⁸¹ but he can do so only because Joscelin's authorial presence has been eliminated, or at least rendered mute, by her death. Under Goad's invasive influence, death, far from being empowering, becomes a moment of self-erasure for Joscelin that conveniently reduces her to the aestheticised epitome of virtuous femininity. As Goad notes, relishing in Joscelin's fading away with an abject fascination that is almost Victorian, 'the course of her life was a perpetuall meditation of death, amounting almost to a propheticall sense of her dissolution' (94ff.). Joscelin's own premonition of her impending absence materialises through Goad's affirmation of her death, robbing her text of its author and making it manipulable. In so doing, Goad also fails to account for the poignancy of Joscelin's speaking position, her fear of death. In fact, his description of her personality even seems to belittle her 'meditation of death' (95), as it occurred 'when she had not finished the 27. yeere of her age, nor was oppressed by any disease, or danger, other than the common lot of child-birth' (97ff.). With an almost cynical sleight of hand, Goad overlooks the fact that it was precisely the 'common lot of child-birth' that made women experience existential anxieties.

In my view it is not too far-fetched to argue that women's immediate confrontation with death in their everyday corporeal experiences makes for a different, more urgent preoccupation with self-loss. Other sources about pregnancy and childbirth in the period

²⁷⁹ For more detailed information on Goad and the changes he made to Joscelin's text, cf. Jean Le Drew Metcalfe, introduction to Elizabeth Joscelin, *The Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe*. 3-27 (19ff.).

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 23.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* 24.

lend indirect support to this gender-differential perception. For instance, James Guillimeau gives the following advice about ‘[t]he meanes to Deliver a woman, when her child is dead in her wombe’ (*Child-birth* 138); his sobriety and detachment seem highly inappropriate to the subject matter in question:

This manner of drawing the dead child out of the mothers womb [using a crochet], is safer, and speedier, then that which is used by turning and putting backe the childs head, to finde his feet, and so pull him out thereby. For whensoever the childs head is much entred within the *pubis*, it is impossible to thrust him upward and turne him without much indangering the Mother, and causing great contusion in the wombe, from whence proceeds divers accidents, and sometime death, as I have seene it often happen. (*Child-birth* 139)

The illustration that accompanies this passage in the book – a drawing of the crude metal instrument to be used – makes Guillimeau’s verdict about the practice seem ironic, if not outright cynical. Indeed, the overall tone of the book displays a ‘general lack of focus ... on women’s physical welfare’ (McGrath (2002) 42).²⁸² Contrasting Guillimeau’s detached, matter-of-fact approach with a woman’s text on the same subject brings to light the extent of the differences between men’s (professional) perceptions of birthing and women’s own. For instance, the ‘Praier in long and dangerous trauell of child, to be used either of the woman hir selfe, or by the women about hir in hir behalfe’ that is printed in the sixteenth-century prayer collection *The Fift Lampe of Virginitie* (1582) (112-116) shows very poignantly that early modern women did not simply toy with the idea of styling themselves as dead, but that they experienced genuine anxiety in the life-threatening situations that potentially accompanied childbirth. The female speaker poignantly exclaims:

Oh Lord, spare me, oh deare God, haue mercie vpon me, and my babe! Shall I be the grave of my child: Shall I giue death the fruit of my bodie, for the sins of my soule; and my first, (second, or third) borne, for the transgressions of my youth: Alas shall that perish in the wombe, which is conceived by thee; or shall it die in the birth, and not be borne, which thou hast so mightilie fashioned. (115f.)

Other prayers in the collection equally unmistakably express the existential angst that women experienced during difficult labours and that extended to pregnancy and childbirth in general. Lady Frances Abergavennie is quoted with the following remarks: ‘Now feele I as it were a cruelle and sharpe conflict betwixt death and life’;²⁸³ ‘my agonies abounding,

²⁸² According to Lynette McGrath, this is because in texts such as Guillimeau’s, ‘although their audience is purportedly women, there is the curious effect of these writers, too, speaking across their female audience to some unnamed (male) reader, who might be expected to supervise the enactment of their advice’ (McGrath (2002) 42).

²⁸³ ‘Another godlie and earnest praier to be said of euerie Christian and faithful woman, in the time of hir trauell or child-birth, vsed of the virtuous Ladie, Frances Aburgavennie.’ In: *The Fift Lampe of Virginitie* 106-107.

death himselfe seemed to me to knocke at the gates of my bodie.’²⁸⁴ Conversely, while the ‘[n]umerous celebratory comments in women’s diaries and letters, affirming the potential of maternity, [which] testify to their joy in giving birth and to their sense of pride and deliverance in having survived this painful and rigorous feat’ (McGrath (2002) 52f.), they can only be adequately grasped in the light of their foregone anxieties. Women’s positive (re-)interpretations of childbirth – above all the religious valorisation in terms of redemption (‘... throwes in childe-bed, by which our soule is brought out of a loathsome body into eternall felicitie’ (Grymeston sig. D2v)) – can be read as an attempt to invest these existentially threatening experiences with superior meaning.²⁸⁵ It is impossible to decide with any certainty to what extent they express genuine personal conviction rather than ideological conditioning.

To return to Joscelin’s *Legacy*, the poignancy that characterises her presentation of self harks back to the more fundamental questions I have posed at the beginning of this chapter: in how far can a sense of self that is always already threatened by self-loss be conceived of in positive terms? And how, in a masculine symbolic order that does not represent women’s immediate fears of death, can their writing of these anxieties contribute to a representable subjectivity? Moreover, if ‘authorship ... requires the death of the feminine, and all the values belonging to this cultural paradigm’ (Bronfen (1992) 404), how can women’s self-stylisation as already dead or death-prone be viewed in terms of a positive sense of self?

‘I have my portion in eternal bliss’: negotiating symbolic power

Obviously, it is highly problematic to (re-)interpret death as the ultimate form of women’s self-assertion; yet this seems to be a recurrent critical pattern. It is a welcome coincidence for deconstructive feminism that the genre of the mother’s legacy lends itself so easily to a reading as ‘an autobiography of a lost self’ (Feroi (1994) 91) – as if, because these women

²⁸⁴ ‘Another praier and thanks-giuing to be said of euerie faithfull woman in child-bed, after the time of his deliuerance, used of the vertuous Ladie, Frances Aburgauennie.’ In: *The Fift Lampe of Virginitie* 121-122.

²⁸⁵ Furthermore, being in constant danger of dying in childbirth, women were perceived as being ‘forced to nearer communion with God’ (Richard Sibbes, *The hidden life*. 1639 (128); quoted in Crawford (1993) 73). It is questionable, however, in how far this closeness to God could be empowering, since godliness in a woman also reinforced the traditional ‘chaste, silent and obedient’ ideology.

were preoccupied with the threat of self-loss to the point of erasing their own subjectivity, there was no need to tackle the idea of a unified subjectivity that introduces the troublesome categories of authenticity, truth and the validity of individual experience. However, to me this neglect seems a simplistic move, turning the annihilation of the self in the text into a self-fulfilling critical prophesy. What is more, it even plays in the hands of the still widespread patriarchal perception of femininity as lack. I agree with Sylvia Brown, who argues that '[i]n the case of the mothers' legacies, deconstruction is a "false friend," falsely congenial to the extraordinary circumstances of female authors who write under, and out of, the threat of death' (Brown (1998) 13). Not to acknowledge the writing subject as an agent who expresses her lived experience is to neglect the material groundings that underlie her writing. Wendy Wall's celebratory interpretation of the implications of the genre can be taken as exemplary for this move:

[A]s women began to take control of their own textual presentations, they found that the legacy's enabling vantage point outweighed its morbid associations. Not merely a technique manipulated by husbands, it became a more general script for empowerment. By evoking the horizon of death, the Renaissance woman writer had a chance to undertake what was considered an exceptional feat: to take control of the frighteningly precarious circumstances of her life, to articulate her beliefs and desires, to display her mastery of moral precepts and knowledge, and to claim the power to show publicly, in Grymeston's words, 'the true portraiture of [her] mother's minde.' ... The legacy was transformed, it seems, into a more general permission to speak. (Wall (1993) 293)

It is certainly true that early modern women appropriated (real or imagined) closeness to death in the genre of the legacy as a 'permission to speak.' In the sense that it allowed them to address a wider (public) audience, their strategy did constitute a moment of empowerment. Yet I do not agree with the all too positive conclusion that Wall draws, namely that women were thereby enabled 'to take control of the frighteningly precarious circumstances of [their lives].' Tellingly, she does not elaborate how this seizing of control made itself manifest, i.e. what concrete and tangible effects it could have had. Wall even claims that '[d]ying mothers, like confessing witches, were on the social margins, and thus they could speak from the privileged position associated with demonic power or imminent spirituality' (Wall (1993) 291). Clearly, speaking from the margins comes at a cost – and this is what Wall's neutral wording fails to point out.²⁸⁶ Especially the comparison she draws between dying mothers and witches is disturbing, inevitably conjuring up as it does the cruel medieval and early modern practices of burning or drowning alleged witches. To

²⁸⁶ To be fair to Wall, she does mention that 'the price a woman paid for the authority of authorship was a large one: her life' (Wall (1993) 293) but, in my view, she fails to explore the implications of this statement in a sufficient way.

focus on the obvious material dimensions of dying women's speaking positions is not to deny the power of language in principle, but qualifies its empowering force as a tool for self-assertion. Women who were able to use the legacy as a form of self-empowerment commanded an authority that was restricted to the performance of merely symbolic acts. Of course, the effectiveness of this sort of empowerment needs to be questioned. My contention is that, especially in the case of women, truly effective power can only be achieved if the performative is linked with the material.

This insight appears to contradict Stephen Greenblatt's influential argument, developed with reference to Shakespeare's history plays, that 'theatricality ... is one of power's essential modes' (Greenblatt (1988) 46). Admittedly, Greenblatt's statement refers to the field of (early modern) state politics rather than personal identity. Still, it can also be applied to power on the level of relations on a small-scale, individual basis. The women's texts show that for them to lay claim on a power that is merely theatrical, i.e. the effect of a careful staging of the self, can be superficially impressive, but is ultimately hollow, because they lack the natural authority and the necessary material backing of that power.

In her analysis of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Alison Findlay describes this effect with regard to the relationship of women to ('official,' monarchical) power – a connection that might, at first glance, seem surprising, given the play's almost exclusively male cast. After his deposition by Henry Bolingbroke, Richard tries desperately to cling to the symbolic vestiges of his royal power – his divine right and royal ancestry, his crown and sceptre. It is only when he allows his grip on these symbols to falter – in the crucial scene of the play (4.1) he stages his own dethronisation and subjection to his rebel opponent – that Richard eventually has to relinquish his authority to Bolingbroke. The discrepancy between material and symbolic power on which the play hinges places Richard in a 'feminine' position, mirroring that of the female rulers of Shakespeare's own time:

The split between nominal right and material force in the play relates directly to the position of a queen. A queen's right to rule was in her name, her connection back to a paternal ancestor ... However elaborate a queen's use of rhetoric and symbolism, nothing could replace the automatic male authority to command. (Findlay (1999) 180).

As a result, women had to look elsewhere for strategies of self-affirmation – strategies which frequently involve theatrical or symbolic forms of power and take them to their extremes. An interesting case in point is the exiled and imprisoned Scottish Queen Mary Stuart. In her 'Sonnet written at Fotheringay Castle' (1587), awaiting her execution, she presents herself as already dead and displaces her lasting importance onto the hereafter:

Alas what am I? What use has my life?
 I am but a body whose heart's torn away,
 A vain shadow, an object of misery
 Who has nothing left but death-in-life.
 O my enemies, set your envy all aside;
 I've borne too long the burden of my pain
 To see your anger swiftly satisfied.
 And you, my friends who have loved me so true,
 Remember, lacking health and heart and peace,
 There is nothing worthwhile I can do;
 Ask only that my misery should cease
 And that, being punished in a world like this,
 I have my portion in eternal bliss. (109)

Crucially, Mary Stuart draws on the rhetoric of martyrdom, presenting herself as abject ('a body whose heart's torn away') and ridden with pain. Presumably, she was well aware of the mechanism by which martyrdom creates a posthumous significance that far exceeds the martyr's influence during his or her lifetime. Staging herself as a martyr for her Catholic faith, Mary Stuart recognises that her loss of worldly power as Scottish Queen marks the beginning of her symbolic power as the quasi-metaphysical opponent of Elizabeth I:

I guide the hours and guide the day
 Because my course is true and right
 And thus I quit my own sad stay
 That here I may increase my light. (89)

The degree to which Mary Stuart identifies her status with martyrdom for the Christian cause is even more obvious in a quatrain that she wrote into the margins of her Book of Hours (1579) (cf. Hopkins (2002) 45):

With feigned good will my friends change toward me,
 All the good they do me is to wish me dead,
 As if, while I lay dying helplessly,
 They cast lots for my garments round my bed. (91)

The motif of casting dice for her garments obviously alludes to the biblical account of Christ's passion, according to which Roman soldiers dived for his legendary seamless robe; a parallel that is even clearer in the original, French version of the poem, which does not contain the reference to her 'bed' ('Dessus mes vêtements ils ont jeté le sort' (90); cf. Hopkins (2002) 45). There is a considerable boldness about Mary Stuart's claim to emulate with her own fate the redemptive suffering of Christ. In Lisa Hopkins's view, this stance is predicated on her sovereign position – otherwise she would not have aligned herself with the divine without taking recourse to an intermediary (such as the Virgin Mary (cf. Hopkins (2002) 44)) or casting herself in a submissive position. However, to register this

self-confidence must not lead us to overlook the implications of the particular moment in Christ's life that Mary Stuart chooses to compare herself with. Similar to Elizabeth Grymeston, she parallels her own deserted state with that of Christ at the moment of his crucifixion. Thus, at the same time as she is claiming a superior, transcendent status, she relinquishes it, casting herself as abject ('I lay dying helplessly'). It is a peculiarly self-diminishing trajectory that simultaneously establishes and cancels out her subjectivity. And yet, considering the enduring impact of the symbolism of the suffering Christ – it extends beyond Mary Stuart's individual, worldly lifetime – allows for another reading to emerge. She seems to have a clear sense of the power that accrues to suffering and symbol: the pressurised and persecuted Queen styles herself as a figure who is able to command a mixture of identification and awe. Her personal motto – 'En ma fin est mon commencement' ('In my end is my beginning') (84) – expresses this awareness. Hers is a power that transcends the merely material and inscribes itself in the transcendental yet enduring sphere of 'eternal bliss.'

Yet looking at Mary Stuart's personal fate – her eventual execution after years of banishment and imprisonment – forbids us to see her self-stylisation as an act of empowerment, at least not on the immediate level of her personal life; it should caution us against the danger of severing the link between textual representation and material experience.²⁸⁷ Whilst I do acknowledge that it might have been possible for a woman like Mary Stuart to derive an alternative identity from staged self-annihilation, I think that Alison Findlay's reading of such feminine strategies as 'a way of turning subordination into affirmation, by theatricalizing [women's] subjection instead of internalizing it' (Findlay (1999) 193) is couched in far too neutral terms. It is true that their 'enforced passivity leads to an alternative form of selfhood' (Findlay (1999) 195), but in the case of Mary Stuart, this selfhood is unsettlingly insubstantial and elusive. Again, an affirmation of self that revolves around death is in itself highly questionable, to say the least.

The profoundly unsettling implications of female self-abnegation (and the ways in which it ultimately channels back to patriarchy) can perhaps most drastically be observed in a male-authored text, Thomas Heywood's domestic drama *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. As a punishment for having committed adultery with her husband's guest Wendoll, Anne Frankford is banished by her husband from her house and her children. In

²⁸⁷ This is not to say that writing could or should simply mirror lived experience. However, I support the feminist view that we can only find 'validation for women's experience ... by using autobiographical texts as reference for life' (Anderson (2001) 86).

order to repent for her sin, she resolves to starve herself to death, because she has come to regard her own life as worthless:

So to my deathbed, for from this sad hour
I never will nor eat, nor drink, nor taste
Of any cates that may preserve my life.
I never will nor smile, nor sleep, nor rest,
But when my tears have washed my black soul white,
Sweet Savior, to Thy hands I yield my sprite. (xvi.105ff.)

In a positive sense, Anne's self-recrimination can be read as an act of defying her husband's authority by deliberately exaggerating her punishment.²⁸⁸ As a form of self-inflicted death, female food refusal has been read as a strategy of self-determination and agency, because renouncing food entails 'an individual's valuation of self over and above public values' (Gutierrez (2003) 2).²⁸⁹ Allegedly, by refusing to adjust to the conventional behaviour of the surrounding society, the woman consciously sets herself apart and claims a subject position of her own making. However, the fact that neither John Frankford nor the other characters in the play are aware of these wider implications of Anne's decision (cf. Gutierrez (2003) 49f.) qualifies the subversiveness of her actions. Moreover, a positive reading of female food rejection all too easily occludes the fact that this strategy has a cruel downside – quite simply, the woman's self-inflicted destruction of her body to the point of death. At first glance, we may be tricked into neglecting this all too obvious corporeal dimension. For instance, Anne experiences her own self-destruction as positively cathartic; with a gesture that combines her utmost self-denigration with conscious self-stylisation, she re-establishes her personal integrity in death:

... But let me go
Perfect and undeformed to my tomb.
...
... as an abject, this one suit I crave,
This granted I am ready for my grave. (xiii.95ff.)

Her self-inflicted death restores Anne to virtue and allows her to occupy the subject positions of wife and mother that were hers initially. Yet it is crucial to note that she is thereby transformed – or rather, even transforms herself – into a clichéd epitome of

²⁸⁸ As one interpretive possibility, Nancy Gutierrez cites this 'alternative reading, in which Anne takes her fate into her own hands, contravening her husband's mild sentence through a kind of self-slaughter' (Gutierrez (2003) 36). In the socio-religious conditions of the time, Anne's decision can be read as an indication of Protestant individualism: 'Anne implicitly reproaches her husband's leniency and takes issue with his association with divine justice. ... Anne rids herself of her devil, the individual Christian finds her own way to God without the help of the institutional church, and the community's presence affirms her individual effort. This exercise of self-autonomy inverts the play's overtly political meaning, modelling Anne as an example of Puritan resistance' (Gutierrez (2003) 49).

²⁸⁹ Cf. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's reading of female anorexia (Gilbert and Gubar (1979) 53-59; 85f.).

feminine virtue, defined by the standards of patriarchy. The uncontrollable corporeal excess that her adultery has represented is safely contained as she is turned into a monument of exemplary femininity, immortalised in her husband's eulogy at her deathbed:

My wife, the mother to my pretty babes,
Both those lost names I do restore thee back,
And with this kiss I wed thee once again.
Though thou art wounded in thy honoured name,
And with that grief upon thy deathbed liest
Honest in heart, upon my soul, thou diest. (xvii.115ff.)

What this overwhelming praise suggests, however, is that it is not so much Anne's own selfhood that is 'restore[d] ... back,' but rather her husband's sense of unified subjectivity, which was destroyed by the blow to his masculinity – the threat of castration – that Anne's adultery entailed. Anne herself is reconstructed entirely by Frankford's power and on his terms: note the proliferation of first-person pronouns in his speech that is fundamentally about Anne ('*I* do restore thee,' '*I* wed thee,' 'upon *my* soul' (emphasis added)). At the end of the play, then, Anne's own power, similar to that claimed by Mary Stuart, is merely theatrical; there is no truly authoritative speaking position that corresponds to her elevation to saint-like status. What is more, an exclusive focus on the dimensions of empowerment and self-determination conferred by her self-starvation takes no account of the emotional pain that her punishment inflicts on her. Because of her sin, she is barred from performing her maternal duty to love and instruct her children, and this is a possibility that is never returned to her. With a self-abnegating gesture that reverts that of the advice-giving in the mothers' manuals, Anne indirectly lends proof to the fact that it is female virtue, measured against the standards established by patriarchy, which gives authority to a woman:

Oh, never teach them [her children], when they come to speak,
To name the name of mother. Chide their tongue
If they by chance light on that hated word.
Tell them 'tis naught, for when that word they name,
Poor pretty souls, they harp on their own shame. (xvi.89ff.)

The play here attests to the more general paradigm of gender perceptions in early modern culture (and in Western patriarchal societies in general): a woman who 'wants it all,' who claims both to be a mother and to experience her body in a pleasurable way, can only be integrated into the socio-symbolic order as a dead woman. It is impossible for a woman to achieve wholeness – as Luce Irigaray notes, '[o]ur tradition ... rarely shows us a fulfilled woman' (Irigaray (1993) 63). The phallogocentric order, based as it is on binary divisions, oppositions and difference, categorises women in relation to the exclusionary poles of

virgin, whore and mother; there is no inclusive option that could promise female fulfilment. The case of the young, widowed Duchess in John Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) who refuses to '[b]e cased up, like a holy relic' (3.2.140) and insists that 'I have youth, and a little beauty' (3.2.140f.) may further exemplify this point. The Duchess demands a subjectivity that integrates her roles of mother and sexual being and her need for love, a desire that she wishes to fulfil in her illicit relationship with her courtier Antonio:

... This is flesh and blood, sir;
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man.
I do here put off all vain ceremony,
And only do appear to you a young widow
That claims you for her husband, and like a widow
I use but half a blush in't. (1.1.443ff.)

A woman like the Duchess, who demands wholeness and self-fulfilment, is excessive; she needs to be eliminated if the existing order is not to collapse. When the Duchess does not comply with the marriage schemes proposed by her brothers and instead pursues her relationship with Antonio, both of her children are murdered, she herself is branded as an adulteress and is eventually executed. Being turned into an object of men's decisions about her, she is reduced to the status of 'the figure cut in alabaster' that she refused to be identified with, just as Anne Frankford is acknowledged by her husband and preserved as the epitome of (internal and external) beauty only once she has ceased to be a living person.

'Be and Seem': semblance versus substance

The symbolic connection between a woman's death and her beauty is particularly striking in a female-authored play, Elizabeth Cary's closet drama *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Throughout the play, the protagonist's outstanding beauty is abundantly commented on, both by the other characters and by herself. However, her beauty soon turns into a liability: when her husband Herod is presumed dead, Mariam renews her decision to remain chaste and faithful in her love for Herod, although she had forsworn her love for him on learning

that he was responsible for the execution of her two brothers. But Herod's death proves to have been a mere rumour. On his return, he is given false information about Mariam's allegedly unchaste behaviour in his absence and her plan to poison him. In spite of her pleading innocent, Herod has her executed. Throughout the play, the question of Mariam's (lack of) chastity is consistently tied up with her physical attractiveness. As Herod remarks:

If she had been like an Egyptian black,
And not so fair, she had been longer lived.
Her overflow of beauty turned back,
And drowned the spring from whence it was derived.
Her heavenly beauty 'twas that made me think
That it with chastity could never dwell,
But now I see that heav'n in her did link
A spirit and a person to excel. (V.i.239ff.)

Significantly, Herod can only have this conclusive insight *after* Mariam's death. In a patriarchal culture that cannot conceive of female beauty other than as a sign of lack of virtue, Mariam can be acknowledged as both beautiful *and* chaste only once she has been rendered literally powerless. For her power is not merely sexual, but also expressly political: Herod derives his claims to the Judaeian throne via Mariam's line (cf. I.ii.59ff.), i.e. it is vital for him to be able to rely on her chastity. Executing Mariam on the grounds of her alleged promiscuity is therefore a kind of exorcism that allows him to cling to his belief in Mariam's purity and thus to preserve his own legitimacy. Yet it is not only his monarchical power that is at stake; like John Frankford, Herod also needs to eliminate Mariam in order to preserve his own masculine, unified subjectivity, at least in his imagination.²⁹⁰ As long as Mariam lives, her uncontrollable femininity embodies the threat for him to be 'pull[ed] ... piecemeal' (IV.iv.86). Indeed, throughout acts IV and V, Herod displays a fickleness and indecision that verges on the ridiculous and becomes tangled up in oxymoronic declarations, such as his paradoxical statement that '[e]ven for love of thee [Mariam] / I do profoundly hate thee' (IV.iv.42f.).²⁹¹ It therefore comes as no surprise that, after he has ordered Mariam's death, Herod rails against his own brutality (especially as he learns that it was based on false accusations and erroneous judgement) and fantasises about finding 'a trick to make her breathe again' (V.i.89). The dead Mariam, immobilised and

²⁹⁰ Tellingly, Herod is content for his wife to *appear* chaste: 'I'm glad that she for innocent *is known*' (IV.vii.56; emphasis added). What matters for him is not so much Mariam's personality in itself, but the ways in which it reflects on his own subjectivity (cf. Clarke (2001) 105).

²⁹¹ Herod is described as the archetypal tyrant figure, naturally unstable and continually struggling to maintain his usurped authority (cf. Clarke (2001) 102) – cf. other (better-known) dramatic characters of the period, such as Macbeth or Richard III.

static, can be used in ways that the living person could not: her dead body is a pliable object of her husband's will and is appropriated to substantiate his claims to full subjectivity. In a symbolic order that conceives of the female only negatively, as the visible symptom of (male) lack, the woman's 'exclusion is a precondition for man's sense of eternal existence ... to come into being' (Bronfen (1992) 212).²⁹² It is significant that Herod wishes for Mariam's (corporeal) 'wholeness' only after it has ceased to be a realistic possibility. Once the threat of her potentially 'unchaste' femininity has been eliminated, she can function as the guarantor of his own selfhood. Because Mariam's status is contingent on Herod's desire for clear-cut identity, I take issue with more positive readings of Mariam's death, such as the following:

By losing her head, she [Mariam] has won freedom from the discretion and will of her husband and is no longer subject to his government. Beyond death and representation, it is impossible to know what direction her 'body' may take. Herod's macabre idea of putting the two back together is a desperate attempt to recreate her as a 'willing heart' who will obey the schemes of his own invention. Cary's play conceals Mariam safely in the realm of death, beyond appropriation and misrepresentation ... [I]t demonstrates the skill of women dramatists in re-presenting death as a feminine form which exceeds the cultural models designed to reinforce a violent hierarchy of sexual difference. (Findlay (2000) 511)

In my view, Mariam's death reinforces the society's 'hierarchy of sexual difference' rather than dismantling it, as Alison Findlay claims. The dead Mariam is in fact 'appropriat[ed] and misrepresent[ed],' as she is literally rendered mute and turned into a mere stand-in for Herod's clear-cut masculinity. In fantasising about putting Mariam's head and body back together, Herod is drawing on the tangled meanings that were associated with the figure of the headless woman in the early modern period:

The image of the headless woman, sharply evoked in the blunt report that Mariam's 'body is divided from her head,' encourages this response [that Mariam may have escaped to 'live' somewhere else], for the headless woman appears frequently in early modern iconographic depictions which testify to its ambiguous power. All body, all sexuality, no longer directed by even the minimal rationality contained in a woman's mind, the headless woman is an object of fear, a figure of chaos. But, paradoxically, it may also be an image of ultimate, restrained female virtue exactly because it is separated from the misdirection and deception contained in women's minds. (McGrath (2002) 200f.)

²⁹² Elisabeth Bronfen elaborates this connection: 'Woman as object of desire is a symptom for man's yearning for full identity, for ego coherence and for narcissistic pleasure along with the failure necessarily built into this undertaking. She is man's symptom because he projects his lack on to her, and by virtue of this projection both articulates and disavows it. If woman in her idealised form, absent, elevated and inaccessible, stands in for male lack – occults a knowledge of the split in the self and masks a knowledge that all sexual relations as self-realizations are lacking – her defamed or denigrated aspect articulates precisely this split' (Bronfen (1992) 212).

Paradoxically, the headless woman signifies both unbridled sexuality and virtuous purity, i.e. both what patriarchy fears about women and what it ultimately regards as impossible for them to attain. Herod's wish to manipulate Mariam's severed corpse is thus, again, an attempt to eliminate these contradictions, to exercise his patriarchal control over her and render her a mere object.²⁹³ What the death of the female protagonist suggests is that the dilemma of a woman's subjectivity can be resolved only 'by [her] going to her death, becoming a symbol instead of a subject' (Purkiss (1994) xx). This process is enforced by the 'aura of sanctification' (Ferguson (1991) 245) that Cary creates around Mariam's death. Her execution is presented as an allegory of the crucifixion: like the biblical Jesus, Mariam interacts with a number of bystanders on the way to her execution; the messenger who reports her death speculates that she could be revived 'three days hence' (V.i.77); his story features a Pilate figure who assumes responsibility for Mariam's death and intends to hang himself (V.i.103ff.). In addition, through Cary's emphasis on the fact that Mariam is beheaded, she is placed in a framework of allusions to such prominent victims of execution as Mary Queen of Scots, John the Baptist and Anne Boleyn (cf. Ferguson (1991) 245). And yet, Mariam's inscription in this network of overdetermined and hence powerful symbols comes at a cost. At the moment of her death, she loses her (ever unstable) position as a speaking subject and becomes an other-worldly incarnation of feminine virtue.²⁹⁴ Instead of speaking herself, she is merely spoken *about* by the male messenger who reports her death: 'Her look did seem to keep the world in awe, / Yet mildly did her face this fortune bear' (V.i.27f.). As she is being turned into nothing more than a symbol of suffering borne gracefully, Mariam's subjectivity is effectively cancelled out.

The loss of self that Cary's female protagonist experiences is intricately bound up in the play's symbolic economy with issues of semblance and substance, appearance and reality. On the negative side of this opposition, Salome, Herod's sister, is depicted by her husband Constabarus, whom she is planning to divorce, as the prototype of a threatening femininity that deceptively lures men into destruction:

She merely is a painted sepulchre,
That is both fair and vilely foul at once:
Though on her outside graces garnish her,

²⁹³ It is true, Herod's impossible wish to undo Mariam's execution also diminishes his power, proving it to be less than absolute (cf. Raber (2001) 185). However, this curtailment does not have any positive or reassuring effects as regards Mariam's position.

²⁹⁴ Mariam's presentation as the epitome of feminine virtue in the fifth act, after her death, is even more clearly revealed as a deliberate construction if one considers her final appearance prior to her execution. She is engaged in fierce verbal fighting with Doris, Herod's first wife, and with her last words she spells a curse on Doris: 'I hope the world shall see / This curse of thine shall be returned on thee!' (IV.viii.100f.); Mariam appears as the stereotypical, mean and vindictive scold.

Her mind is filled with worse than rotten bones,
And ever ready lifted is her hand,
To aim destruction at a husband's throat. (II.iv.41ff.)

By contrast, Mariam is consistently construed as a noble and notable exception. In a play whose action hinges on the false assumption of Herod's death and in which dissembling and intrigue thrive, she is determined for her outward appearance to match her inward reality: 'I cannot frame disguise, nor never taught / My face a look dissenting from my thought' (IV.iii.58f.). Perversely, this refusal to pretend is also her downfall: for '[i]n order to articulate virtue, Mariam must constantly breach the law of wifely silence' (Purkiss (1994) xix). In the words of Sohemus, one of the more sympathetic male characters in the play, '[u]nbridled speech is Mariam's worst disgrace / And will endanger her without desert' (III.iii.65f.). Her 'disgrace' is 'without desert' because integrity is the chief value she is striving for. For instance, on Herod's return, she is unable to express the joy that is expected of her, confessing instead that 'I suit my garment to my mind, / And there no cheerful colours can I find' (IV.iii.5f.); a statement which triggers Herod's distrust and ultimately prompts him to have Mariam executed. Patriarchy's equation of chastity and silence demands of women an exercise that comes close to squaring the circle; they are 'damned if they do, damned if they don't' disguise their genuine selves.²⁹⁵ This is true in yet another respect, for Mariam's 'sense of individual interiority, ... her sense of a constant self' (Raber (2001) 161) revolves around chastity, the prime moral imperative that patriarchy offers to women. Although her vow of genuineness has effects that run counter to her husband's wishes, it does not constitute a moment of fully-fledged self-determination. Karen Raber phrases this dependence in the harshest possible way: 'Without Herod, Mariam has neither husband nor monarch, a fact which relegates her "self" to an abyss where meaningful identity disappears' (Raber (1995) 331). What the play reveals by having both Herod and Mariam depend on each other for their (flawed) senses of self is that the oppressive structures of patriarchy create power structures that are so invasive as to forego any 'true' selfhood, for both men and women.

²⁹⁵ A very similar double bind is experienced by Cordelia, the king's youngest daughter in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1604/05). Lear, having decided to retire from his royal role and to divide his realm among his three daughters, stages a love test to decide on which daughter 'we our largest bounty may extend' (1.1.50). In contrast to her sisters, Regan and Goneril, who are determined to surpass each other in their wordy expressions of filial affection, Cordelia realises that her love cannot be expressed in mere words: 'What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent' (1.1.60). Ironically, although her genuineness also means that she conforms to the traditional expectations of virtuous femininity, it does not register with Lear, who interprets her silence as a denial of affection, and hence as an act of open rebellion and disobedience. By implication, in a moral economy that equals silence with virtue, Lear commits an error of judgement by preferring his other daughters over Cordelia; the turmoil that ensues can be read as a result of his inevitably misguided judgement (cf. Jardine (1989) 109).

It is therefore only logical that, in defiance of her claims to integrity and straightforwardness, Mariam's presentation of self is riddled with unexpected paradoxes. Her soliloquy that opens the play is exemplary for this self-contradictory stance. On learning about Herod's assumed death, she acknowledges that '[o]ft have I wished that I from him were free, / ... Oft have I wished his carcass dead to see' (I.i.16ff.), but she realises soon after that 'the love I bore him then, / ... Doth to my heart begin to creep again' (I.i.71f.). Shortly before her execution, Mariam blames her downfall on her own failure to carry through her vow to be internally consistent:

Had not my self against my self conspired,
 No plot, no adversary from without,
 Could Herod's love from Mariam have retired,
 Or from his heart have thrust my semblance out. (IV.viii.9ff.)

This insight reveals that her strategy, though apparently morally impeccable, was bound to fail: Mariam being true to herself would have disruptive political implications for the household economy and is hence an unsustainable endeavour. In effect, by claiming exclusive loyalty to herself, Mariam subverts the patriarchal script, because she 'refuses to construct herself as her husband's extension, asserting an identity independent, even contrary, to his' (Findlay (1999) 155). Having said that, although it is possible to regard Mariam's principles as a way of 'self-realization' (Findlay (1999) 155) in opposition to patriarchal demands, they are ultimately self-destructive.²⁹⁶ In my view, to read Mariam's refusal to comply with the politics of patriarchy as indicating an alternative mode of subjectivity is an anachronistic move, an all too sweeping application of feminist/poststructuralist theories of subversion to Cary's dramatic character. A prime example of the latter critical stance, which also exemplifies its inherent problematics, is Lynette McGrath's celebration of Mariam's 'nomadic' subjectivity:²⁹⁷

I see her unsettling the binary choices imposed on women. She refuses objectification and dies for it. She risks and loses her security for the sake of a brief freedom. Because she is embodied and vocal, the ideal image projected onto her by Herod is dismantled and flawed. The woman in the center of the imagined stage of this play is fallible and un-ideal. But loss of her ideal status does not therefore rob her of subjectivity. On the contrary, the static ideal object is replaced by a fully embodied, mobile and flawed

²⁹⁶ Danielle Clarke observes that 'Mariam's problem is that she occupies no stable position outside marriage from which to challenge [Herod's] authority, and that any challenge exerted *within* marriage undermines her virtue' (Clarke (2001) 100; emphasis in the original).

²⁹⁷ Lynette McGrath takes up Rosi Braidotti's idea of 'nomadic' (female) subjectivity. Braidotti defines nomadism as the 'vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity; molecularisation of the self' (Braidotti (1994) 16). For Braidotti, '[t]he nomadic subject is a myth ... that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges' (Braidotti (1994) 4).

subject. Her mobility and her insistent embodiment, preventing her ideality, ensure her subjectivity. (McGrath (2002) 191)

It is true, at no point in the play does Mariam correspond entirely to Herod's idealised projection. Also, I do not wish to disclaim the proposition that an 'unideal,' fragmented subjectivity is a more satisfying and realistic identity politics than any claim to unity and coherence could be. However, my struggle with reading Mariam as an example of 'nomadic and flawed' subjectivity is that it contradicts the Mariam of the play. Crucially, the latter *rejects* rather than embraces her unstable subjectivity and *suffers* from the fact that 'my self against my self conspired' (IV.viii.9). This is not to say that she does not positively display a 'nomadic' form of subjectivity and that this is all she can attain; yet it is certainly not what she aims for. With her transitory, unstable status, Mariam becomes the repressed that haunts the play's unconscious – 'if wishes could revive' (V.i.77) Herod would make her 'alive' (V.i.78) – but her enduring presence comes only at the cost of her literal and corporeal erasure and painful self-division.

Interestingly, Elizabeth Cary had carved on her daughter's wedding ring the very motto that the play suggests is impossible for a woman to live up to: 'Be and Seem' (cf. Lewalski (1993) 184). According to the patriarchal logic of the play, for a woman to both 'be' and 'seem' is a contradiction in terms. Her subjectivity is necessarily self-contradictory and unstable. If she refuses to accept this, as Mariam does, she wants more than she can realistically achieve, and her 'excess' means that she cannot escape her elimination. Since Cary was obviously aware of this deadlock – at least this is what her play suggests – it seems to me that her inscription epitomises the divide that separates present-day (poststructuralist-informed) feminist identity politics from early modern women's senses of self. It lends support to my argument that early modern women (writers) did not regard an unstable and transitory subjectivity as an ideal, but rather as an inevitable condition of existence that one should strive to overcome. The attempt to 'be and seem' implies the desire – wished for though unattainable – for a subject position that can be pinned down, and hence be accounted for within (though not necessarily in accordance with) the structures of patriarchy.

Cary's inscription on her daughter's wedding ring and the fate of her dramatic heroine suggest that the early modern anxieties that accompanied the threat of self-loss focus on the potential discrepancy between 'being' and 'seeming.' The instances of such fears in Cary's writing as well as in the mothers' manuals have to be seen in relation to the fact that semblance and substance, appearance and reality are common preoccupations in

early modern culture (cf. Hamlin (2003) 4). Invocations of theatre imagery as a metaphor for human existence are indicative of the prevalence of this theme. Elizabeth Grymeston's observation, addressed to her son, that '[y]ou live on the stage of the earth' (sig. C2r) is reminiscent of probably the most famous instance of the theatre metaphor in early modern literature, namely Jaques's oft-quoted speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1599/1600) ('All the world's a stage ...' (2.7.138ff.)). Perceiving human life as a role play means that identity cannot be neatly categorised and defined; it can be assumed in a fairly short-term and transitory fashion but does not correspond to a true and realistic 'core' of self. Rather – and this is also what makes the metaphor so attractive to contemporary (postmodern) identity politics – there may not even be a firm kernel of selfhood behind the role(s) an individual assumes.

If taken as constitutive of selfhood, theatricality therefore has a distinctly threatening flipside, closely linked as it is with potential self-loss. These negative dimensions are hinted at in Ben Jonson's dictum: 'I have considered our whole life is like a Play: Wherein every man forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, wee so insist on imitating others, as wee cannot (where it is necessary) returne to our selves, ... [we] make the habit of another nature, as it is never forgotten.'²⁹⁸ It is important to note, in my view, that Jonson's point of departure is the very notion of a personal core: if our failure to 'return to ourselves' is the result of identity formation gone awry, it also implies that there is, theoretically, a stable and genuine, 'true' self; yet the latter can all too easily be replaced or concealed by mere acquired 'habit' that has nothing to do with the self it purports to represent. It is at this point that early modern and postmodern perceptions of identity are fundamentally at odds. The allusions to the fragmentation of the self in the early modern period hint at a distinctly felt 'anxiety about dissimulation – the practice of pretending to be what one is not' (Ottway (1998) 80).²⁹⁹ What is not questioned, however, is the fact that there is a core of self, which can hence get lost. In that, the early modern mode of thinking is a far cry from the postmodern fantasy of a playful experimentation

²⁹⁸ Ben Jonson, *Discoveries 1641; Conversations 1619*. Bodley Head Quartos, Edinburgh University Press, 1966 (44); quoted in Dollimore (1989) 176.

²⁹⁹ Katharine Eisaman Maus explains the larger context of this preoccupation: 'For the English Renaissance, it is a commonplace that spectacle depends upon, sometimes betrays, but never fully manifests a truth that remains shrouded, indiscernible, or ambiguous. The period's social and religious upheavals arguably provoke a keen, apparently nearly universal suspicion of "appearances." Whatever the origins of this distrust, it produces a distinctive way of thinking about human subjectivity that emphasizes the disparity between what a person is and what he or she seems to be to other people' (Maus (1995) 210).

with diverse and contradictory identities that do not refer back to any unshakeable foundation.³⁰⁰

As I have shown before, the writers of mothers' manuals appear to be determined to keep these anxieties at bay by drawing up a straightforward equation between genuineness and virtue. M. R., in her *Mothers Counsell*, exemplifies this with regard to women's attempts to alter their natural appearance with the help of 'artificiall painting' (sig. C2r).³⁰¹

A painted womans face is a liver smeared with carrion, her beauty baits of dead wormes, her lookes nets, and her words inticing charmes.

An unconstant faire woman may bee likened to Prasiteles Picture which hee made of Flora, before which if one stood directly, it seemed to weepe; if on the left side, it seemed to laugh; if on the right side; to sleepe. (sig. C2v)³⁰²

A woman's presentation of self in a fashion that does not correspond to reality and is therefore misleading amounts to abject monstrosity ('liver smeared with carrion,' 'dead wormes'). What is more, the potential mismatch between appearance and reality has a distinctly religious dimension; it is concomitant with the need for continual self-monitoring (cf. Graham (1996) 214). If to 'be and seem' is the standard according to which one should lead one's life, separating the two is tantamount to sin. Sin, as we have seen, in turn equals loss of self – as Elizabeth Grymeston's manual has it: 'Be thou thy selfe, though changeling I offend' (E4r). The very nature of sin is dissimulation and deceitful appearance, as Elizabeth Joscelyn points out: 'I know it is the most dangerous[,] subtle sin that can steale the hart of man[,] it will alter shapes as oft as the chamelyon dothe colors[,] it will fit it selfe to all dispositions and w^{ch} is most strange it will so disguise it selfe that he must be cunnige whoo discerns it from humility' (296ff.). Sin is so dangerous mainly because of its capacity for disguise. As a consequence, there is an underlying fear that all might not be as it seems and, if this is the case, that the self might be under threat.

Lady Grace Mildmay, in her *Autobiography*, draws up a simple equation between outward appearance and inward reality which, in its very simplicity, betrays this anxiety.

³⁰⁰ Zygmunt Bauman outlines this contrast as follows: 'If since the time of "disembeddedment," and throughout the modern era of "life projects," the "problem of identity" was the question of how to *build* one's identity, how to build it consistently and how to give it a universally recognizable form – today the problem of identity arises mostly from the difficulty of holding to any identity for long, from the virtual impossibility of finding such a form of identity-expression as stands a good chance of lifelong recognition, and the resulting need to embrace any identity too tightly, in order to be able to abandon it at short notice if need be' (Bauman (1997) 123; emphasis in the original).

³⁰¹ R. here expresses the most recognisable and commonly known element of Puritanism, the rejection of any kind of adornment; be it in strictly religious contexts, such as church buildings and rituals, or in secular life – for instance, women were forbidden to use make-up or any other form of bodily embellishment.

³⁰² The idea that one and the same thing might seem to be two distinct entities, depending on the onlooker's perspective, was hugely fascinating for early modern people – hence the popularity of anamorphic pictures at the time.

Recounting the education that she received from her parents, Mildmay recalls her father's emphasis on his daughters' impeccable comportment and its justification:

[H]e liked a woman well graced with a constant and settled countenance and good behaviour throughout her whole parts, which presenteth unto all men a good hope of an established mind and virtuous disposition to be in her. The sight whereof will drive away a wicked and evil disposed man from her company and give her honourable and good respect in the eyes of all good men and move all to be well-wishing unto her. (27)

A similarly straightforward equation of outward appearance and inward reality, this time in an indirect fashion, is drawn up by Mildmay's mother. With an argument that parallels M. R.'s Puritan injunctions against adornment, she privileges inward godliness over a beautiful appearance:

[S]he said that she could give me [Mildmay herself] jewels and pearl and costly apparel. But she would not until I were furnished with virtue in my mind and decked inwardly and willed me first to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness thereof and all those things should be given unto me. (28)

Devoting attention to outward appearance is not an end in itself, but is permissible only as an expression of inward virtue. The opposite possibility – that a woman's appearance might suggest perfection, but fail to be backed up by any moral substance – is conspicuously absent. Within a religious framework in which deceit equals sin equals loss of self, it is vital that there is no gap between appearance and reality if the self is to be secure.

By implication, where early modern women rely on a picture of overall coherence, this is in order to portray themselves as both stable in themselves and virtuous to the judgement of others. Yet, as I have observed above, the desire for stability is countered by the inherently unstable subjectivity that patriarchy offers to women. I will now turn to the autobiographies of Martha Moulsworth and Lady Grace Mildmay to show how these conflicting impulses can be negotiated, both with recourse and in opposition to the threat of self-annihilation.

‘Women’s time’: Martha Moulsworth’s struggle for closure

In her *Memorandum*, Martha Moulsworth enters into a complicated and multi-dimensional relationship with potential self-loss in connection with the confident assertion of self that opens her poem. Having set herself up as an object to be analysed autobiographically (‘the birth day of my selfe, & of theis lynnes’ (6)), she draws upon the image of the clock in order to express the temporality and hence transience of her human existence: ‘The tyme the clocke, the yearly stroke is one / thatt clocke by ffiftie fiue retourns hath gonn’ (7f.) (i.e. she is now fifty-six years old).³⁰³ The age of fifty-six was highly symbolic in early modern thinking: as Joseph Csicsila explains, multiples of seven were generally considered as marking the ‘boundaries between the different Ages of Man’ (Csicsila (1996) 32).³⁰⁴ On top of that, ‘[n]ot only was fifty-six conventionally thought to be the beginning of old age and the last division point ... in the Ages of Man, but it also ... was the age at which one possessed one’s strongest insights’ (Csicsila (1996) 33). This would suggest that writing towards the end of her life, at an age that was highly charged symbolically, allowed Moulsworth to assume an authoritative speaking position. This reading is supported by the fact that the fifty-five past years of her life correspond to the fifty-five couplets of her poem. Assuming that this parallel is no mere coincidence, we get the impression of an ordered and coherent self. The elaborate structuring of the poem suggests that Moulsworth draws on the early modern poetic tradition for which ‘[n]umerology was more than a means of interpreting the universe and the Bible; it was a principle of artistic composition’ (Rivers (1994) 173). In so doing, she also appropriates, if not usurps, male poetic discourse, since writing verse was generally associated with masculine creativity.

On top of that, the idea of the Ages of Man was also distinctly gendered, i.e. it had a strongly masculine bias³⁰⁵ – maybe this is why Moulsworth supplements the concept with

³⁰³ We can assume that Moulsworth was writing at a point in her life when she would have been aware that it was probably drawing to a close – the average life expectancy in early modern England was about 40 years (cf. Michael Maurer, *Kleine Geschichte Englands*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997 (160)).

³⁰⁴ Csicsila argues that ‘the concept of the Ages of Man [was] a widely recognized and much-discussed notion during and preceding the Elizabethan period’ (Csicsila (1996) 32), dating back to Greek antiquity. Division points were commonly assumed to be at 7, 14, 21, 28, 49 and 56; i.e. multiples of seven marked the boundaries between the different ages (cf. Csicsila (1996) 32; cf. Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 (141)). Probably the most famous reference to the Ages of Man occurs in Jaques’s speech in *As You Like It* (1599/1600): ‘And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages’ (2.7.141f.) – this is followed by a list of the various ages and their characteristic features (with a distinctly male bias, however): infant, schoolboy, lover, soldier, justice, ‘pantaloon’ (a foolish old man), and, lastly, ‘second childishness and mere oblivion.’

³⁰⁵ As Alexandra Shepard explains, ‘[t]he differences between the ages of man were central to humoral theory, which approached the life course as a series of temperamental shifts. Although medical writers

a different account of the passage of her life. The ambiguities that attach to her reference to the clock as a metaphor for her life cycle attest to this attempt. On one level, Moulsworth uses the image of the clock in a manner that appropriates ‘clock time,’ the organising principle of the project of modernity. Measuring time according to the rational mechanism of the clock implies:

... the creation of an independent machine time, i.e. the transformation of the multiplicity of times into an objectified, measurable quantity that could be used as a social tool, [which] is (together with the linear-perspective vision) a Western praxis which is a powerful externaliser: it separates subject from object, and it makes the Westerner see nature as ‘other.’ (Järvelä (1996) 67)³⁰⁶

By implication, women – whom patriarchy aligns with ‘nature’ – are excluded from the modern perception of time. Yet Moulsworth’s notion of cyclical time (‘ffiftie fiue returns’ (8)) qualifies the objectifying move of conventional clock time and supplements it with a different perception of time. In that it is reminiscent of Julia Kristeva’s idea of a specific ‘women’s time,’ developed in her essay of the same title. Kristeva juxtaposes two distinct types of time: on the one hand, the ‘time of history’ (Kristeva (1986c) 192) that characterises Western modernity, i.e. conventional chronological time, ‘time as project, teleology, linear and progressive unfolding – time as departure, progression and arrival’ (Kristeva (1986c) 192). This type of time is the organising principle of the socio-symbolic contract, i.e. it shapes the dominant perception of time in our culture. On the other hand, ‘women’s time’ is perceived not in terms of a straightforward chronology, but as ‘the *space* generating and forming the human species’ (Kristeva (1986c) 190; emphasis in the original).³⁰⁷ It stems from the experiences of reproduction and the maternal; according to Kristeva, ‘female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time’ (Kristeva (1986c) 191; emphasis in the original). Moulsworth explicitly situates her writing within a cyclical framework when she remarks in her marginal notes that ‘my muse is a tell clocke,

occasionally applied such divisions to both sexes, the various stages of the life course were usually conceptualized in terms that were male specific, particularly as the attributes of each stage were closely related to the normative male sex role expected of it’ (Shepard (2003) 54). The well-known passage from *As You Like It* quoted above lends support to Shepard’s point.

³⁰⁶ Lorna Weatherill summarises the implications of measuring time with clocks and links it with the socio-economic transitions in the early modern period: ‘Clock ownership has broad social and economic significance, for it can be taken as an indicator of people’s desire and ability to synchronize their behaviour with that of others, as an enhanced consciousness of the passage of clock time, and possibly as a tendency away from task orientation in work. The supply of clocks also increased, as did their accuracy, in the late seventeenth century’ (Weatherill (1986) 143).

³⁰⁷ Note that, for Kristeva, femininity does not stand for biological sex, but for a mode of expressing the marginalised that (in theory) is open to both sexes – hence her ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’ (Kristeva (1986a)) discusses male modernist writers.

& echoeth euerie stroke wth a coupled ryme so many tymes viz 55' (7ff.). This suggests a cyclical perception of time through her stress on the 'retourns' of the clock; yet Moulsworth simultaneously recalls the stringent logic of counting that is characteristic of the symbolic order: as Sheila Ottway observes, Moulsworth's reference to the 'tell clocke' would have been associated with the contemporary practice of 'tolling ... a funeral bell as many times as the dead person's year of age' (Ottway (1998) 285) – another indication of Moulsworth's ambiguous hovering between rivalling concepts.

Surprisingly, her implicit awareness of the transience of her life does not lend a morbid note to the poem; to the contrary, she appears to display a striking equanimity towards death. Within the psychoanalytic framework outlined by Kristeva, this stance is possible because of the breakup of the usual chronological order, which 'women's time' suspends. If the life course is not perceived in terms of an inevitable progression from birth to death, death loses some of its threatening dimensions because there is no unsubvertible finality about it. Kristeva aligns 'women's time' with the maternal *chora*, the sphere of reproduction and non-linearity, described as 'a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated' (Kristeva (1986a) 93). The *chora* is not represented in the symbolic order; it is associated with the pre-linguistic, semiotic level and runs counter to the very foundations of the symbolic, namely rationality, language and linear chronology. Here, the teleological forward-directedness of conventional time does not apply.

However, the *chora* is not an entirely positive concept. In the same way that maternity is fundamentally ambiguous, it both makes possible and undermines identity: 'To the extent that it is a space that allows the child to separate itself from the mother, the *chora* is the subject's point of origin; to the extent that it is a receptacle that threatens the child with enclosure, it is also the site of the subject's negation' (Macey (2000) 61). Moulsworth's invocation of 'women's time' may therefore not simply be read as an alternative to or subversion of the Law of the Father, because the maternal does not necessarily represent a liberating counter-position to the patriarchal order. By implication, the non-chronology of 'women's time' threatens to destabilise the subject's sense of self. It is because of this double-sidedness of 'women's time,' I would argue, that Moulsworth supplements it with more conventional perceptions of temporality in the poem. The *Memorandum* more or less follows a chronological sequence of events; moreover, its fifty-six couplets correspond to the fifty-six years of Moulsworth's life; periods of marriage alternate with the socially expected periods of mourning, to name but a few examples.

Paradoxically, it seems to be these conventional features that allow Moulsworth to create a confident and convincing (re-)presentation of her self. Certainly, there are visible disruptions effected by ‘women’s time’ and the author’s submerged hints at pain and suffering – in particular, her references to her children’s deaths (71f.) and to the sense of loss that she experienced at the death of her last husband. In spite of this, the general impression her poem conveys is precisely one of coherence, of a self at ease with itself who has come to accept the events of her life as they have occurred. The strikingly elaborate stylistic features I have mentioned, especially the ‘various devices of parallelism and numerological significance’ (Clarke (2001) 6) in the poem, contribute to this convincing overall impression. Moulsworth is careful to balance the negative and positive experiences in her life.³⁰⁸ It is impossible to tell which side she feels more strongly about, as she has a compensatory positive image inevitably follow a negative one, for example when she convinces the reader (and herself?) that ‘dead Winters cold’ will eventually be defeated by ‘a lyvelie Springe’ (92). Similarly, her apparently revolutionary and transgressive claim for female education (29ff.) is countered, and thus alleviated, by her somewhat wry comment that ‘I of Lattin haue no cause to boast / ffor want of vse, I longe agoe itt lost’ (38f.). Equally equivocally, Moulsworth’s final affirmation of her widowhood can be read as the logical conclusion to the sequence of her marriages and allows her poem to end on a note of closure:³⁰⁹

Butt in the Meane tyme this must be my care
of knittinge here a fourth knott to beware.
A threefold cord though hardlie yet is broken
Another Auncient storie doth betoken
thatt seldome comes A Better; whie should I
then putt my Widowehood in Jeopardy?
the Virgins life is gold, as Clarks vs tell
the Widowes siluar, I loue siluar well. (103ff.)

Moulsworth’s common-sensical remark that ‘seldome comes A Better’ suggests a general contentment with the way her life has turned out; she has had her share of happiness, and to demand more would be excessive – or so she is trying to make us believe. For, the sense of closure that these lines convey is less convincing if one looks at the implications and associations of widowhood in early modern England. Rather than simply constituting a bold declaration of independence, Moulsworth’s final lines oscillate between self-assertion and conformity, contentment and defeat. Historically, a widow occupied an essentially

³⁰⁸ I have already outlined the balancing act Moulsworth undertakes with regard to her sexual life (cf. 2.3).

³⁰⁹ I will analyse Moulsworth’s final preference for widowhood from a slightly different angle in 2.5.

precarious, in-between position: ‘the law regarded [a woman] as either a *feme sole* (alone) or a *feme covert* (under the cover or protection of her husband or father)’ (Cope (1995) 189). A widow, by consequence, did not fit properly into either of these categories, being now a *feme sole*, but also having been married before. The uneasiness that early modern society felt about widowhood manifested itself in the ‘abundance of myths’ (Cope (1995) 189) that circulated around it. On the one hand, the stereotypical ‘forlorn’ or ‘poor’ widow was expected to soon remarry so as to escape financial hardship (cf. Cope (1995) 191). On the other hand, a wealthy widow in particular commanded a degree of independence that few women in other positions enjoyed. Self-reliant financially, she did not need to attract a male suitor to support her. Inevitably, her relative self-sufficiency made her suspect in the eyes of society – a woman who was both financially independent and sexually experienced posed an obvious, albeit diffuse threat to the patriarchal order: ‘Coupled as the threatening sexuality of widowhood was with some real power due to fiscal independence ... , the widow is the paramount emblem of all that men cannot deal with in women’ (Jardine (1989) 128f.; cf. Foyster (1999)).³¹⁰ The anxieties that society projected onto widows were kept at bay by being translated, for example, into ‘[s]tories of widows who contributed to their own undoing by unwise remarriages[,] illustrat[ing] the commonplace that the loss of a husband meant that a woman’s “head is cut off, her intellectual part is gone”’ (Cope (1995) 193).³¹¹ There was, however, a more positive, religiously inflected stereotype, namely that of the ‘reverend widow’ (cf. Cope (1995) 194). Much like a virtuous woman in general, a ‘reverend widow’ would display the virtues of modesty and devoutness. Significantly, she would remain a widow rather than remarry. As Esther S. Cope notes, in contemporary discourse the most influential prototype that provided the moral yardstick for widows was St Jerome’s portrayal of widowhood. In his teaching, widowhood was

³¹⁰ Patriarchy’s inability to govern widows is expressed in Francesco Barbaro’s *De re uxoria* (1416): ‘We can scarce with great ingeny [*sic*], elaborate industry, and singular care reduce widows, formed both to their own and other humors, to our own customs’ (Francesco Barbaro, *Directions for Love and Marriage. In two books. Written originally by Franciscus Barbarus a Venetian senator. And now translated into English by a person of quality*. London, 1677 (sig. Cv); quoted in Jordan (1990) 46). The phenomenon is dramatised in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*: the young, widowed Duchess is consistently portrayed by her male relatives as sexually incontinent; their efforts to control her are tinged with anxiety (cf. 1.1.283ff.).

³¹¹ The quotation is taken from I. L., *The Lawes resolutions of women’s rights: or The Lawes Provision for Woemen*. London 1632. Interestingly, the author of the *Lawes resolutions*, far from being the mouthpiece of patriarchal ideology, lets his argument slide into the satirical, as the wider context of the above quoted remark suggests: ‘A woman hath understanding, and speech, firme memorie, love naturall, and kindnesse, desire of glorie and reputation, with the accomplishment of many meritorious virtues: But alas, when she hath lost her husband, her head is cut off, her intellectual part is gone, the verie faculties of her soule are, I will not say, cleane taken away, but they are all benumbed, dimmed and dazled, so that she cannot thinke or remember when to take rest or refection for her weake bodie. ... Why mourne you so, you that be widdowes? Consider how long you have been in subjection under the predominance of parents, of your husbands, now you may be free in liberties, and free *proprii iuris* at your owne law’ (quoted in Erickson (1993) 153).

described as ‘the second degree of chastity’ (Cope (1995) 196), virginity being the first – widowhood could thus be allocated a place in the prevailing ‘chaste, silent and obedient’ ideology.

Considering the mixed messages that early modern society conveyed to women about their status as widows, Moulsworth’s conscious decision not to remarry is unmistakably ambivalent. She seems to be aware of the dominant discourse of virginity which had for centuries presented virginity as ‘gold’ (109), i.e. as the preferable state of living. Her depiction of widowhood as the second best choice (‘silver’ (110)) is clearly reminiscent of St Jerome’s teachings,³¹² but also indicates a certain self-assurance and boldness: she has arrived at a stage in her life where she does not need to strive for perfection, but is satisfied with a more modest degree of virtue, and she does not feel it necessary to further justify her choice. Her soberly realistic remark that ‘seldome comes A Better’ (107) need not be taken to indicate a defeatist stance, but supports this sense of self-assured equilibrium. Although her age may well have contributed to her decision not to remarry – social pressures towards remarriage were probably not as strong for older women than for younger ones – Moulsworth presents her widowhood as a matter of deliberate choice. There is certainly a strong element of self-assertion and a sense that, now that she has had a taste of self-determination and knows how to have her ‘will in house, in purse in Store’ (67), she is reluctant to (presumably) have some of these liberties taken away from her again. Her somewhat ironic and thus extremely confident comment on her widowhood suggests that she is playing with ‘the [male] cultural fantasy of marrying a widow.’³¹³ Because of her financial independence, she is in a position to choose to respond to the demands of ‘chaste, silent and obedient’ femininity in a not entirely conventional fashion.

Paradoxically, the apparent closure and equilibrium on which the poem ends opens up a set of questions which all revolve around the distinction between absence versus presence of the self. Does Moulsworth lure us into believing that she is herself ‘present’ in her poem, with her personal convictions and desires, whilst she is really just cleverly juggling a variety of competing discourses? Or, whether or not this closure is the result of a deliberate poetic strategy, are we simply conditioned to read her poem on these terms, because this is what we expect from a ‘proper’ autobiography? After all:

³¹² The fact that she attributes her notion of the ‘widow’s silver’ (110) to ‘clerks’ (109) supports the link with St Jerome, for she would probably have encountered his teachings via the church, in sermons etc. (cf. Cope (1995) 196).

³¹³ Alison Findlay, personal conversation, 3 October 2002.

[I]n the autobiographical mode the 'I' that speaks typically becomes a kind of *de facto* third-person pronoun, supposedly having full objective possession of that which it views. ... The force of such a guaranteeing 'subject' cannot be underestimated; and thus autobiography itself cannot be underestimated as a privileged form of ideological text wherein the demand that we should consist as coherent and recognizable 'subjects' in relation to a particular knowledge appears to be rationalized. (Smith (1988) 105f.)

Is the notion of the autobiographical subject as a coherent entity merely an ideological fiction and, if so, does this mean that Moulsworth's 'true' self in fact disappears in the elaborate structuring of her poem? Or has there never been a 'true' self in the first place? Whilst this is ultimately a question of personal conviction, I find it important to focus on the overall impression created by the *Memorandum* – namely the sense of stability it conveys in spite of its underlying ambiguities. Perhaps its most disturbing effect, at least from a feminist perspective, is the fact that Moulsworth's alternative, 'feminine' perceptions – above all her cyclical notion of time – seem significantly less central to this stability than the more conventional features of her poem: stylistic elaboration and, on the level of content, reliance on divine authority and negotiation, if not acceptance, of the demands of patriarchy. However, I fully agree with Danielle Clarke, who states that '[w]e should not shy away from the fact that many texts accept the patriarchal dictates of their culture, for it is from these that women could derive power and authority, however limited' (Clarke (2001) 266). I would therefore argue for a dialectical view that can account for this apparent discrepancy: self-affirmation is dependent on potential self-annihilation in the form of submission to outward dictates, and vice versa. Both must be balanced in order to ward off the threat of self-erasure, and this balancing act requires the simultaneous rejection and acceptance of patriarchal dictates.

'[A]s if I were alive': mysticism, salvation and self-preservation in Lady Grace Mildmay's *Autobiography*

In her *Autobiography*, Lady Grace Mildmay displays a self-assured authorial stance which, in its overall effect, is similar to Moulsworth's stable sense of self. As I have observed before, Mildmay obviously has a clear sense of self-worth and feels the need to pass on something of her self to posterity: 'All these things coming into my mind, I thought good

to set them down unto my daughter and her children, as familiar talk and communication with them, *I being dead, as if I were alive*' (24; emphasis added). Her written self is explicitly designed to replace and metaphorically 'keep alive' her living persona after her death.

On the other hand, Mildmay recurrently emphasises the fact that she is aware of being a transient creature whose life on earth will eventually be ended by her 'happy end and blessed departure out of this changeable world to eternal bliss in the everlasting kingdom of heaven' (42). This conviction is the point of convergence which links the seemingly contradictory discourses of individual value and submissive, pious devotion that compete throughout her *Autobiography*. The inevitability of her own eventual death allows her to claim a selfhood that will endure beyond her death, and it places her self within the secure framework of 'a larger scheme of significance' (Evans and Wiedemann (1993) 15). It seems paradoxical that, although tensions and contradictions abound in the text, they come to the surface only at second sight; the general impression Mildmay conveys is one of stability. For instance, she claims having had 'most experience of mine own weakness, ignorance and unworthiness' (25); yet she also stresses that she is able to find in her spiritual exercises 'the consolation of my soul, the joy of my heart and the stability of my mind' (25). In Alison Findlay's view, it is possible to resolve this apparent contradiction by reading female spirituality as subversive in its very recourse to the central Christian symbolism of the cross. Women were able to appropriate the feminised figure of the suffering Christ as symbolic of their own dissatisfaction and pain.³¹⁴ The Christ they identified with is 'silent except when induced to speak, and modest and taciturn when he does; he is gentle, mild, peaceable, and submissive to higher male authorities' (Mueller (1998) 112). Women's alignment with this feminised Christ figure is one of the ways in which they could make sense of the conditions of their existence with the help of religious belief. Of course, reading this strategy as an instance of positive self-valuation must not tempt us to lose sight of the fact that the vision of Christ as endowed with feminine attributes also affirms patriarchal power structures. Still, it holds obvious identificatory potential for women; an apparent paradox that allows for two interpretations: women were either not aware of its debilitating implications or used it deliberately to appropriate certain

³¹⁴ Alison Findlay, personal conversation, 3 October 2002. Luce Irigaray has interpreted women's affinity with Christ in a similar fashion and extends it to read Christ as symbolic of a redeemed female corporeality: '[O]ne man, at least, has understood [woman] so well that he died in the most awful suffering. That most female of men, the Son. And she never ceases to look upon his nakedness, open for all to see, upon the gashes in his virgin flesh, at the wounds from the nails that pierce his body as he hangs there, in his passion and abandonment. And she is overwhelmed with love of him/herself. In his crucifixion he opens up a path of redemption to her in her fallen state' (Irigaray (1985a) 199f.).

elements of patriarchal discourse so as to meet their own needs. I find the latter possibility highly probable; after all, their writings suggest that women like Mildmay were able to experience themselves in a positive way, as part of a divine scheme of significance in which salvation and perfection in the hereafter determine human existence. This becomes even clearer if we extend our focus to Mildmay's explicitly religious texts. As Sheila Ottway observes, especially her meditations can also be understood as self-writings (cf. Ottway (1998) 164), because they are fundamentally concerned with her view of her life as a pilgrimage, culminating in salvation (cf. Ottway (1998) 164). Again, her spiritual engagement with God and Jesus is not simply tantamount to a willing submission to the patriarchal symbolic order, revolving around (the male) God as 'transcendental signifier.' Rather, Mildmay's spirituality can be understood in relation to the tradition of female mysticism that dates back to the Middle Ages and that was geared towards achieving a state of union with the divine.³¹⁵ Medieval mysticism as a specifically feminine form of spirituality has been explained with reference to women's privileged access to the corporeal (i.e. non-rational) dimensions of existence:

Women very likely achieved ecstasy as much through the body as through the mind ... Women were able to achieve total union with God more directly and more frequently than men because they were more involved with life's corporeal dimension: with birth and death, with nurturing, care, and compassion; with milk, blood, and tears. (Schulte van Kessel (1993) 159)

Elements of unmediated corporeality are clearly present in Mildmay's accounts of her spirituality. Her addresses to God/Jesus are couched in male terms ('my dear friend and my dear brother. My dear husband, my dear master, doctor and teacher. My saviour, my redeemer, my God and my Lord' (75)) and, interestingly, her spiritual relationship with Jesus has strong physical, if not quasi-sexual overtones, as when she declares: 'Oh let my welbeloved kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, let him indue me with his love, and with the savour of his good ointments. ... And let my sanctified soul continually and wholly love and be in love with him' (75). An even stronger erotic component can be detected when she presents herself as 'the spouse of Christ' (79): 'My beloved is as a bundle of

³¹⁵ The fifteenth-century *Book of Margery Kempe* (1436), the first (surviving) female spiritual (auto)biography, is exemplary for the characteristic connection of female mysticism and physicality. Significantly, Kempe's exceptional spirituality is sparked off by 'the labour she had in childing, and the sickness going before' (23) and is persistently associated throughout her book with corporeal experiences. As I have explained elsewhere (2.3), women's perceptions of their bodies were often characterised by a sense of abjection; it is in line with this observation that Margery Kempe's spiritual progress is paralleled by an almost perverse fascination with the abject: 'Now began she to love what she had most hated beforetime, for there was nothing more loathsome or more abominable to her, while she was in those years of worldly prosperity, than to see or behold a leper, whom now, through Our Lord's mercy, she desired to embrace and kiss for the love of Jesus, when she had time and place convenient' (260).

myrrh unto me, he shall lie between my breasts. ... His lips are like lilies, dropping down pure myrrh. His mouth is as sweet things and he is wholly delectable. ... In my bed let me seek my wellbeloved' (79). Whilst this quasi-sexual form of devotion is likely to be alienating to us, one might argue that it provides Mildmay with an outlet for eroticism and sexual frankness that she lacks in 'real' life – even though it is displaced onto a spiritual other and even partly derived from a biblical source, the *Song of Solomon* which uses similar imagery. The picture becomes more complex because Mildmay also perceives the divine as endowed with maternal qualities, a connection that she makes explicit when she compares Christ to 'a mother [who] stayeth up her infant from falling when it beginneth to go' (78). In a similar way, the fifteenth-century mystic Dame Julian of Norwich states that 'Jesus is our true Mother, feeding us, not with milk, but with himself: opening his side unto us, and challenging all our love' (163). At first glance, Mildmay's spiritual relationship with the divine seems to entail a paradox, because it is both maternal and sexual, i.e. it combines the two female qualities that patriarchy deems irreconcilable. The fact that Mildmay is able to blend these two poles can be read as a strategy through which she transgresses the binarisms of the patriarchal symbolic. In (re-)conceptualising Christ/God as a sexual *and* maternal figure, the self that Mildmay develops in her meditations comprises dimensions that are absent from the conditions of her life under patriarchy, or at least cannot be fully integrated. Thus she creates 'a world that belonged only to her and her spiritual lover, a world that no one else could enter or understand fully' (Warnicke (1989) 68). Her sense of complete union with Jesus/God is suggestive of Luce Irigaray's evaluation of female mysticism.³¹⁶ Mysticism holds a particular appeal for women because:

[I]t is precisely an experience of the loss of subjecthood, of the disappearance of the subject/object opposition. ... The mystic's soul is transformed into a fluid stream dissolving all difference ... [and thus] eludes the specular rationality of patriarchal logic. (Moi (2002) 135)

In their mystical experiences, women like Mildmay succeed to overcome the split and subsequent sense of lack that characterises human subjectivity in general and the female experience in particular. The 'loss of subjecthood' that mysticism entails is easier to acknowledge for women, I would argue, because they do not expect 'full,' uncontested subjectivity. Mildmay's recurrent emphasis on her own sinfulness is intrinsic to this

³¹⁶ In a sense, Mildmay occupies the female subject position that is opened up, according to Irigaray, if 'we [are] capable of imagining [the divine] as a woman ... [and] dimly see it as the perfection of our subjectivity ... , [w]hich assumes respect for ... the nocturnal-internal dimension of motherhood' (Irigaray (1993) 63).

mystical streak, since her self-inflicted abjection parallels Christ's passion and thus contributes to her closeness with him.

Of course, Mildmay's mysticism is clearly at odds with her somewhat restrained stance in her *Autobiography*, but this is not surprising: we can suspect that her mystical experiences did not necessarily hold transgressive implications for her in any explicit sense. Rather, I take these traces to be a supplementary and conciliatory as well as creative dimension of her religious life. On the level of visible practice, she presumably approached her religion from a conventional angle, observing regular prayer and attending communal worship. 'Conventional' and 'feminine' religious practice thus combine to form each other's necessary counterparts. Because of this duality, Mildmay's religious experiences also qualify Irigaray's idea of female mysticism. The mystical approach is not sufficient on its own, or might even be dangerous, because the very immediacy of corporeal experience that it implies is not just liberating, but also threatening for female selfhood. After all, the body also always hints at the existential dangers of pregnancy, childbirth, etc. Moreover, alongside its positive dimensions, allowing the self to merge with an other – in this case, Christ and/or God – has unsettling implications, namely the fears of self-loss and annihilation.

As her *Autobiography* suggests, fulfilled selfhood for Mildmay does not come primarily with the temporary dissolution of her subjectivity, but just as crucially depends on her self-inscription into the patriarchal order. From the overall sense of equilibrium she creates in her *Autobiography*, Mildmay derives a conviction of her own virtue and its value for posterity as well as a self-image as worthy of being loved by her God. However, this remarkable self-confidence is offset by a view of the self as submissive to a larger order – the patriarchal household and the religious paradigm of human sinfulness. This dialectic of confidence and submission confirms that Mildmay's self-assertive attitude does not derive primarily from her experiences of a mystical merging with the divine, but rather from the position that she negotiates for herself within the patriarchal scheme. The fact that any 'real' and tangible power that she can command is derived from her engagement with patriarchal society as household mistress casts doubt on the subversive and liberating force that feminist critics such as Irigaray have attributed to mysticism. The extent to which a feminised religion is conducive to self-affirmation is the result of its interaction with and counter-balancing of the dominant patriarchal discourse, rather than a force of its own.

This balancing act can be traced throughout Mildmay's *Autobiography*. On the level of lived experience, she is apparently able to draw the most strength from her belief that

her life is part of a divinely ordained order, in which personal fate, however distressing at the time, will ultimately prove meaningful, even if its meaning may not always be immediately recognisable for humans.³¹⁷ In my view this is why texts such as Mildmay's can be difficult to grasp for present-day readers. We simply cannot tell whether her self-portrayal is genuine, or whether she deliberately constructs a picture of herself that matches contemporary ideals of virtuous and submissive femininity. It is almost impossible to read her autobiographical writings 'against the grain,' i.e. to detect a hidden subtext in which hints at oppression or dissatisfaction with the structures in which she lives come to the surface. One of the rare instances where this does happen, in a strikingly understated and hardly detectable way, is when Mildmay reveals an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with her solitariness. Her emphatic statement that 'God had placed me in this house and if I found no comfort here, I would not seek it out of this house and this was my certain resolution' (34) might suggest that what she describes is in fact an enforced solitude, necessitated by her husband's frequent absences from the provincial family seat. The very determined-mindedness that the remark attests to could indicate that Mildmay had to purposefully cite a higher authority in order to substantiate and give meaning to her confinement. Historical evidence further suggests that her marriage was not entirely satisfying: at first, Anthony Mildmay seems to have been reluctant to marry Grace and was absent from the family home for lengthy periods of time throughout their marriage. Yet in her text, these hints can only be made out in an indirect way:³¹⁸ Mildmay does mention 'bitter words' and 'anger' (41) – which, according to Linda Pollock, were very much part of Anthony Mildmay's character³¹⁹ – but only to put these faults into perspective by describing him as a virtuous, God-fearing person who 'would often confess his own errors and defects which he found in himself betwixt him and God, ... which was an assured token of his election and that he was a blessed man unto whom the Lord imputed not his sin' (41). In her 'Meditation upon the Corpse [of her Husband],' a posthumous eulogy on Anthony Mildmay, which Linda Pollock has added to her edition of Mildmay's autobiographical writings, she describes him in highly positive terms, as a man who was 'charitable and of a compassionate mind,' 'of a free heart and a good nature,' 'faithful in

³¹⁷ In Patricia Crawford's words, '[t]he practice of piety ... could also impose an order upon the fortuitous incidents which made up female lives. A concept of "Providence" helped women to make sense of the accidents in their personal lives' (Crawford (1993) 83).

³¹⁸ Maybe what Harriet Blodgett has observed with regard to diary writing goes for Mildmay's autobiographical account as well: 'Women of the past wrote alone and kept taboo subjects hidden even from themselves' (Blodgett (1989) 40).

³¹⁹ Cf. Linda Pollock, introduction to Lady Grace Mildmay, *Autobiography*. In: *With Faith and Physic*. 4-22 (10).

all things' (41). Whilst this positive description is in accordance with the conventions of the genre, it can also be taken as another example of selective memory in Mildmay's writing. Apart from presenting Anthony Mildmay as a model husband, her eulogy serves a distinct purpose with regard to her view of her own self, for she can project onto him her own virtues as his wife. God's grace towards him manifests itself in her being 'his faithful wife' (41): '[God] hath ever preserved mine integrity and faithfulness unto this man all my life I lived with him' (42).

Interestingly, this appeal to a divine scheme of significance has a dual effect. Firstly, it provides a frame of reference according to which Mildmay can make sense of her life, since acceptance of her lot means that God 'received me graciously and preserved me in safety and diverted and prospered me in all my ways' (34). Moreover, ostensibly subordinating herself to God's will enables her to explore a (limited) range of possibilities for personal fulfilment which are socially acceptable only if accompanied by a general attitude of submissiveness. A significant part of her everyday pursuits is reading, and although her reading matter is largely restricted to passages from the Bible,³²⁰ it appears to be a vehicle for a certain degree of independent thinking: '[T]he continual exercise in the word of God made a deep impression in my stony heart, with an aptness to incline unto the will of God and to delight in the meditation thereof upon every occasion of thought arising in my mind' (35).

In addition, Mildmay's self-positioning in a meaningful, overarching order ultimately geared towards the hereafter is not only an idealistic strategy of preserving the self in the face of its inevitable dissolution through death, but has a straightforward material component. Of course, her situation was markedly different from that of women like Isabella Whitney who, living in proto-capitalist London, was far more immediately confronted with the material (or lack of it) and its implications for identity formation. As a member of the land-owning gentry, Mildmay's grasp on material possessions was comparatively firm, especially because land was still, in the seventeenth century, not merely a financial resource, but its possession was also endowed with considerable symbolic significance. During a large part of her life, Mildmay had to deal with extended legal struggles over her own and her husband's inheritances,³²¹ and she was adamant to

³²⁰ 'First, in divinity every day as my leisure would give me leave and the grace of God permit and draw me. I did read a chapter in the books of Moses, another in one of the Prophets, one chapter in the Gospels and another in the Epistles to the end of the Revelation and the whole Psalms appointed for the day, ending and beginning again and so proceeded in that course' (34).

³²¹ For the complex reasons behind these legal conflicts, cf. Linda Pollock, introduction to Lady Grace Mildmay, *Autobiography*. In: *With Faith and Physic*. 4-22 (12ff.).

secure her daughter's share of their lands. The connections that existed between landed wealth and identity among the land-owning gentry imply that Mildmay's emphasis on her ability to provide for her daughter is significant on a level which exceeds the merely material: 'Land was the social and economic basis for the ruling status of the gentry and peerage. It conferred not merely wealth but also stability and continuity.'³²² Mildmay's power to bequeath her lands belies her attitude in her spiritual meditations, where she remarks that 'I have given *my mind* unto my offspring as my chief and only gift unto them' (71; emphasis added). In her socio-economic context, leaving material possessions, in a more tangible sense than just writing a (metaphorical) legacy, can be read as a means of passing on a part of the self – especially in Mildmay's case, where the lands in question had been part of her dowry. Crucially, making a material bequest is an act of literal and metaphorical self-preservation that can take place only after the (physical) disappearance of the self. In that, it is a form of self-assertion that is also counterpointed by the very real threat of (self-)loss. After all, as Mildmay repeatedly stresses, losing her lands would have had disastrous consequences for her own financial security, to the point where she would have had to sacrifice it for her daughter and husband. It would have meant 'to dispossess myself for her sake and his own of so great a portion whereby I might have put myself into great want and disgrace in mine age' (35). Curiously intermingling the material dimension of property and the immaterial one of personal identity, Mildmay reports: 'I gave [my daughter] all my present possession of mine own inheritance, being the flower and best part of my whole portion, my husband having his life in it also' (35). Her reference to her husband calls for particular attention: whilst, on a surface level, it relates to his material well-being, the implication is that Mildmay also controls his life in a more comprehensive sense. The stable self that she is striving to present in her autobiography is based on and interlinked with the immaterial value attached to socio-economic stability for the family's identity. Given the central importance of landed wealth for Mildmay's understanding of her self, it comes as no surprise that she interprets the legal conflict and her party's eventual victory in terms of divine grace and preordained election:

This hath been a great part of the pilgrimage of my life, wherein God hath been ever with me, ... setting himself as it were in person against all mine opposites in their strong and strange opposition ... There was never anything more blessed unto me in my life than mine affliction and trials which were never greater than God enabled me to bear. I ever received them as the messengers and tokens of love of God unto me[.] (38f.)

³²² Ibid. 12.

In view of the fact that her ‘affliction and trials’ had a manifestly material component, it is striking to observe how Mildmay combines them with religious discourse. Perceiving her life in terms of a ‘pilgrimage,’ she draws upon medieval belief, which associated pilgrimage with the individual’s quest for moral perfection and unmediated insight into the divine sphere.³²³ What is more, the idea of pilgrimage implies arriving at a final goal – as a metaphor for the course of life, this suggests the acceptance of death and, in a religious frame of reference, the hope for a blissful and redemptive hereafter. In Mildmay’s case, it seems as though she is indeed able to derive a sense of purpose from a concept of self that includes her own death and derives its ultimate authority from it. One might speculate that it is this sense of security that makes possible her determined, down-to-earth approach to financial matters in connection with her daughter’s inheritance. It even prompts her to circumvent gender barriers and to ‘act as a financially independent individual, in spite of her legally dependent status as a married woman’ (Ottway (1998) 153). With a fair share of level-headed pragmatism, Mildmay remembers that ‘our daughter was to be given in marriage and her father had no portion to give her. Whereupon I gave her all my present possession of mine own inheritance’ (35).³²⁴ To a large extent, then, Mildmay’s sense of self-worth in the here-and-now derives from the protective role she assumes towards her daughter and grandchildren, backed up by her material power and balanced with a religious frame of reference. In a sense, death legitimises her authority, because it is the prerequisite for her conviction that she will leave something to posterity, in the double sense that combines the financial with the ideational. It is this intrinsic connection, I believe, that makes Mildmay’s presentation of self seem unimpeachable; much more so than, for example, Isabella Whitney’s which has opened this chapter. Having a firm material grounding – not being a mere object of patriarchal and/or market transactions – is crucial for a firm sense of self. The equilibrium that characterises Mildmay’s *Autobiography* is achieved through her simultaneous inscription into patriarchal discourse and acceptance of its premises, and her personal ways of exerting (material) influence.³²⁵

With this simultaneity, her *Autobiography* parallels Martha Moulsworth’s *Memorandum*; that is, her strategies of identity formation are by no means wholly

³²³ Cf. Horst Daemmrich und Ingrid Daemmrich, *Themen und Motive der Literatur. Ein Handbuch*. Tübingen: Francke, 2nd ed. 1995 (372ff.).

³²⁴ Mildmay’s self-confident stance with regard to her daughter’s inheritance is particularly surprising if one considers that a woman’s dowry legally became part of her husband’s possessions once she got married (cf. Booy (2002) 31).

³²⁵ Mildmay’s presentation of self thereby gains an affirmative edge, as Sheila Ottway rightly observes: ‘Even though Grace Mildmay places herself in a position of seemingly female subjugation in her autobiography, there are glimmerings of self-affirmation in her narrative of the major events of her life, perhaps most conspicuously in her account of her involvement in the financial affairs of her family’ (Ottway (1998) 165f.).

idiosyncratic. Moreover, there are a number of striking similarities between the thematic features of Mildmay's writings and Elizabeth Richardson's *A Ladies Legacie to her Daughters*. Born into a high-ranking aristocratic family and married for the first time to John Ashburnham, a hereditary landowner, Richardson was left financially destitute when her first husband bankrupted his estates and eventually died in the Fleet debtors' prison (cf. Brown (1999) 145). Only her marriage to Sir Thomas Richardson in 1626 brought about a turn of her fortune and provided her with financial security. Because of the Richardsons' close connections to the royal court, the family experienced financial hardship and were threatened with losing their inherited lands in the Commonwealth period (cf. Brown (1999) 149). It is this oscillation between social and financial security, even prosperity, and the threat of destitution that both necessitates and enables Richardson's written assertion of 'her identity, her connections to both the living and the dead, as well as her role as maker' (Brown (1999) 147). She self-confidently envisages an audience for her writings that extends beyond her immediate family: 'I shall be very glad and joyfull if my children, grand-children, kindred, friends, or any good Christian that shall peruse them, may make a good and right use of them to God's glory' (188). The boldness of her claim does not only lie in her belief that her work will be of public interest, but also in her conviction that her writing can be used 'to God's glory.' As concerns her own relationship with the divine, she expresses a desire to be mystically united with God: 'O God, knit my soule unto thee, and create a new and upright heart within me, and sanctifie me throughout, in soule, body and spirit, that I may give up my selfe a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto thee, and may be preserved from all sin and evil' (173). However, her desire to 'give up [her] selfe' indicates that 'Richardson does *not* see herself released from obedience into some kind of ungendered experience of spiritual freedom' (Brown (1999) 147; emphasis in the original):³²⁶ Against her professed awareness of her influence over her children and subsequent generations, she casts God in the powerful role of a 'super-husband' who wields authority over both her material and spiritual existence: 'I humbly commend and commit my selfe, my children and grandchildren, with all belonging to mee, and all things that any way concerneth me, to thy most gracious protection, direction, and disposing, now and ever' (199). Taking this (wifely) subjection to an extreme, she declares her wish to 'become thy bondswoman' (228):³²⁷ presenting herself in the terms of utmost abjection,

³²⁶ Sylvia Brown is referring to the fact that Richardson, after the death of her second husband in 1635, realised 'that widowhood entails "freedom from the bond of marriage," a freedom which she can now use to concentrate exclusively on her spiritual life' (Brown (1999) 147).

³²⁷ As Brown observes, Richardson's 'love and obedience to her husband are to be replaced by a far more rigorous (although self-imposed) regime under a divine spouse: "Now deare God, make me to change and far

she declares that ‘of my selfe, alas, I confesse that I am poor, wretched, miserable, and wholly corrupt both in soule and body, the chiefe of all sinners, guilty of the breach of all thy commandements, and to whom there is nothing due, but shame and utter confusion for ever’ (172).³²⁸ In sum, Richardson’s interaction with God as expressed in the prayers that make up her advice book is characterised by submissiveness and self-derogation; yet this also means that the self is grounded, even if only as an entity perceived in negative terms, in relation to the divine. This, in turn, allows a limited but remarkable degree of self-expression.

A similar strategy is at work in Lady Anne Clifford’s diary. In a manner that parallels the self-restraint and quiet contentment of Lady Grace Mildmay, Clifford uses her diary as a forum where she can make sense of her life within the parameters of an inherently meaningful divine order. This is particularly apparent in the last part of her diary (‘The Last Months 1676’ (229-270)). Unable to leave her bedroom, Clifford uncomplainingly accepts the various ailments of old age, as she stoically concludes each of her entries with the sober remark: ‘I went not out of the house nor out of my chamber today.’ Taking stock of her life by way of reminiscences about the past, interspersed with the daily events at the time of writing, Clifford repeatedly stresses that she ‘was guided by a great Providence of God for the good of mee & mine’ (240). This calmly satisfied stance is particularly surprising in relation to the actual events that she reports. Throughout her long life, Clifford witnessed the deaths of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and endured two loveless and troublesome marriages as well as continual struggles over her inheritance. It seems to me that the latter experience is the decisive factor that contributed most strongly to her ability to face the events of her life with equanimity. Clifford had effectively been tricked out of her father’s inheritance; her male relatives refused to accept that he had ‘a little before his death ... expressed with much affection to my Mother and me, and a great Beliefe that hee had that his Brother’s sonne would dye without issue male, and thereby all his Landes would come to be myne’ (14). In effect, her father’s lands thus had to pass through the male line before Clifford herself could successfully make any claims to her inheritance. Throughout her diaries, she displays

exceed the fervent affection and carefull observance I have lived in towards my husband, into a holy feare, with devout and sincere love of thy Majesty and service, and due watchfulnesse over my selfe, that I displease not thee my God in any thing” (229) (cf. heading: ‘A sorrowful widowes prayer and petition unto the gracious protector and defender of widowes, and father of the fatherlesse, which I composed shortly after the death of my dear husband: And this may also serve any other upon the like occasion’ (228f.)).

³²⁸ Helen Wilcox has made out a similar strategy in the anonymous *Eliza’s Babes* (1652), a collection of prayers: “[T]o be “bounded” in the God who himself is boundless, while being set free from all other limitations, suggests a stunning image of the creative space for female self-representation that devotional experience offered’ (Wilcox (1997b) 23).

a dogged determination to obtain the lands she considers to be rightfully hers, which led her to oppose even the king's recommendations: 'King James desired & urged mee to submit to the Award which hee would make concerning my Lands of Inheritance, but I absolutely denyed to do so' (240). Finally, in 1643, when the last of her male relatives on her father's side died without an heir, she was able to claim her lands. In the following years, she administered her estates and managed her dependants with a skill and commitment that established her as a powerful matriarchal figure.³²⁹ It is significant, in my view, that Clifford derived both her tangible influence during her lifetime and her confident sense of self from her material power, entrusted to her, as she believed, by divine Providence. In the very act of asserting independence, she thus sticks with the power structures of patriarchy: 'While the diary vigorously asserts her right to Westmoreland [one of her inherited estates] even before the king, her resistance is never phrased as a rejection of the system itself; she cannot, in effect, subvert the very authority on which she bases her claim' (Walker (1996) 44). Again, it is her access to and simultaneous appropriation of patriarchal power – landed wealth and traditional religion – that are at the roots of convincingly self-assured identity.

Obviously, in Clifford's writings as well as in those by Lady Grace Mildmay and Elizabeth Richardson, the question arises in what way the contradictory attitudes to the self – submissiveness towards God versus self-assertion towards the world – can be reconciled. Rather than seeing these dimensions as two oppositional poles, I would in fact argue that both go together and can even be seen as co-dependent. The case of Elizabeth Richardson proves this in an exemplary way: her self-abnegation in the face of the divine allows her to establish herself as a virtuous person whose moral principles defy any criticism. It is because of her pious submission that she can command authority towards the addressees of her manual, as her advice is lent credibility through her personal example. In the more tangible realm of family politics, this authority allowed Richardson to exert real influence, such as when she decided to contribute financially to the recovery of her son's estate after the Royalist defeat that inaugurated the Commonwealth period (cf. Brown (1999) 149). In Clifford's case, too, power derives from the dialectical interplay between (self-)enforced submission and hidden, yet bold claims to a place within the tangible loci of authority.

³²⁹ Her strong-mindedness led one critic to call her a 'proud Northern lady' (cf. Martin Holmes, *Proud Northern Lady. Lady Anne Clifford, 1590-1676*. London and Chichester: Phillimore & Co, 1975).

Conclusion: the dialectics of the absent/present female self

As my analyses of early modern women's self-writings have shown, the authors are clearly aware of the potential dissolution of the self that threatens women in particular, because of their unstable position in relation to material and ideological power. Attempts to counter the anxieties produced by this recognition are not exclusively based on constructing an independent and stable sense of self, but are possible only with recourse to a wider frame of reference. Securing the self via the religious sphere and inscribing themselves into patriarchal power structures – material and discursive – obviously provided a workable strategy for early modern women and allowed them to reconcile conflicting demands.

With their acknowledgement that the self is, in fact, a threatened possession, early modern women's writings shed interesting light on the (Western, Enlightenment) discourse of the unified, coherent, individualist self, as well as its postmodern critique. It is obvious that notions such as self-loss have a particular appeal in the postmodern climate, in which incoherence and fragmentation are widely regarded as the intrinsic correlatives of subjectivity. However, this is not to say that early modern women were postmodernists *avant la lettre*. The fragility of the self is clearly not an idea that postmodernity has recovered from early modern thinking; neither is it a new, late twentieth-century insight. Rather, it is one of the underlying structural constants that form a necessary part of subjectivity in Western culture. As Jonathan Dollimore argues: 'What we might call now the neurosis, anxiety and alienation of the subject in crisis is not so much the consequence of its recent breakdown, but the very stuff of the subject's creation, and of the culture ... which it sustains' (Dollimore (1998) 92). Dollimore reads the recognition of mutability and self-loss as the underlying, *enabling* force in Western culture, generating 'a kind of negative, forward-directed energy' (Dollimore (1998) 92).

However, as I have shown, women have a necessarily different relationship with death and the threat of self-loss.³³⁰ For one thing, their corporeally more immediate experience of death forbids them to regard death as a merely symbolic force that enables individuation. Conversely, at the same time their confrontation with death is also less agonised; the texts I have studied strongly suggest that women seem to have been more honest and less anxious about potential self-loss. I would like to clarify this point by suggesting a feminist reinterpretation of the Lacanian phallus. According to Lacan, the

³³⁰ Dollimore is aware of the gendered nature of his observations – in fact, he devotes an entire section of his introduction to 'Sexual/gender differences' (Dollimore (1998) xxiii-xxvii).

phallus is the 'privileged signifier' in Western culture (cf. Macey (2000) 296). It functions as the symbol of lack, a stand-in for the sense of power and wholeness that the subject cannot fully attain, i.e. it must not simply be conflated with its biological equivalent, the male penis. At first glance, then, Lacanian psychoanalysis would promise an approach to the constitution of subjectivity that abandons the binary division of gender – both males and females are fundamentally creatures of lack. Yet Lacan's notion of the phallus as the 'privileged signifier' is also the problem of his theory. By an involuntary trajectory, the phallus is in fact associated with the penis, which, '[b]y its presence or absence, ... becomes the defining characteristic of both sexes' (Grosz (1990) 116). Consequently, '[t]he man's lack of wholeness is "projected onto woman's lack of phallus, lack of maleness. Woman is then the figuration of a phallic 'lack'; she is a hole'" (Donovan (2001) 126).³³¹ However, women's doubly distorted access to the phallus, the symbol of wholeness and coherence, need not be conceptualised in terms of lack, in the negative sense of preventing a secure sense of self. Instead, lack seems to be incorporated in women's perception of self in a way that accepts incompleteness as a given of human existence and negotiates strategies to work around it – both inside and outside the structures of patriarchy. Women's preoccupation with death and self-loss is both a realistic anxiety and a strategy to supplant the potential loss of self with an enduring authority.

³³¹ The quotations are taken from Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction. Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982 (22).

2.5 The search for the ‘golden meane’: re-thinking marginality and power

[T]he debate about agency and subjectivity is no longer usefully kept going by embracing either extreme of the spectrum from total self-empowerment to total determination but must engage more and more with the difficult and perhaps even indecisive registers of the middle range.

– David Simpson, *Subject to History*³³²

We always walke as on a bridge of glasse,
And oft it crakes as over it we passe.

– Alice Sutcliffe, *Meditations of Man’s Mortalitie* (1634)³³³

The ‘golden meane’: cultural paradigm and feminine reinterpretation

M. R.’s *Mothers Counsell*, as its subtitle – *Live Within Compasse* – indicates, is organised around the symbol of the compass. The advice and admonitions R. directs at her daughter are structured around the central idea that a person’s behaviour can be either ‘within Compasse’ or ‘out of Compasse,’ i.e. in accordance with or in opposition to the socio-culturally acknowledged virtues and moral principles. The use of the compass as a title motif is based on the now obsolete, figurative usage of the word, as denoting ‘measure, proper proportion, regularity.’ By implication, the expressions ‘within’ or ‘out of compass’ meant, in early modern English, ‘within or beyond the bounds of moderation’ respectively.³³⁴ The book’s title page shows a pictorial version of such a morally charged compass. In the centre of the emblem, a mother is handing a book to her daughter; together with their quiet poise and unobtrusive demeanour that is expressed in the picture, they embody the ‘modesty’ that is inscribed as a motto over their heads. The first of two concentric circles around this image is divided into four sections, designating four principles of virtue: ‘Chastitie,’ ‘Temperance,’ ‘Beautie’ and ‘Humilitie.’ The second circle names the favourable effect of each of these virtuous qualities: ‘Chastity of body is the key to Relig[ion],’ ‘Temperance is the mother of [Virtue³³⁵],’ ‘Beauty is a woman’s golden Crowne,’ ‘Humilitie is a womans best Armor.’ Listed outside the circle in the

³³² David Simpson ‘Introduction: The Moment of Materialism.’ In: *Subject to History. Ideology, Class, Gender*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991. 1-33 (4).

³³³ Sig. I10v.

³³⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Vol. III. Eds. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd ed. 1989 (594ff.).

³³⁵ Roxanne Harde fills in this word, which is cut off from the original title page (in Ostovich and Sauer (2004) 115).

corners of the page, 'out of compasse,' are the corresponding vices that result if the virtues are disregarded: 'Wantonnesse,' 'Madnesse,' 'Odiousnesse' and 'Pride.'³³⁶

Given the association of the compass with balance and virtuous moderation, it comes as no surprise that a repeated motif in the *Mothers Counsell* is the idea of the 'golden meane.' Developing her thoughts on female beauty, the author abstracts a general theory of the 'golden meane' as the central prerequisite for a satisfied life:

Let no woman strive to excell in beautie, but *hold the golden meane*, which is the true mediocritie and best part of any action, and must be used in all things: it containeth the full effects of prudence touching government, and tranquillitie concerning the soule. ... To live on the mountains, and have too much heat, is to be Sunne-burnt; to live in the valley and have too little, is barren; *to hold the meane* is ever most fruitfull. (sig. B8r; emphasis added)

The search for the 'golden meane' is paradigmatic for early modern women's constitution of self. However, contrary to the conventional associations of the motif, the women do not create a perfectly balanced, stable identity. Theirs is a precarious 'meane,' predicated on ambiguities and conflicting impulses, as the various levels of identity formation that I have investigated in the preceding chapters have shown: the endeavour to write the self is co-dependent on the self being written about, beyond the author's control; relationships to an other enable identity formation but also threaten it; the interior self is predicated on its public display; the necessary condition of affirming identity is the fear of self-loss. These contradictions need to be held in check and create a delicately negotiated balance. The 'golden meane' is 'golden' only insofar as it enables a tentative and contested selfhood; it is not a comfortable position that promises coherence. The texts are riddled with ambiguities, and the authors employ various strategies to create a liveable sense of self in spite of tensions and apparent contradictions. This suggests that they constitute their identities in the process of struggling to deliberately forge a synthesis out of conflicting demands and impulses. The discrepancy between the desire for clear-cut selfhood and its unattainability, due to women's marginal status, creates a fragile stability. It is constantly being undercut by tensions, contradictions and ambiguities, but at the same time held in place precisely because it is perpetually being questioned. The result is a construction of self via a contested form of the 'golden meane.' By contrast, if the women resort to any form of excess – be it overly strong assertion of self against the dominant patriarchal structures and their conceptualisations of femininity, or extreme submission to these demands to the point of self-annihilation, or retreat into the purely subjective – they

³³⁶ For a picture of the title page, cf. Wall (1993) 292, Shepard (2003) 33, Ostovich and Sauer (2004) 114.

jeopardise their identities and possibilities of agency, because they ultimately reaffirm their marginality.

However, the ‘golden meane’ is not a specifically feminine ideal in the early modern period, but one of the most pervasive injunctions in the culture. This might suggest that for women to strive for the ‘golden meane’ is an inherently conservative venture. Indeed, the pursuit of the ‘golden meane’ is part of a general cultural preoccupation with moderation and avoidance of excess that establishes a set of ideals in support of the dominant culture. The ‘golden meane’ has its roots in the hermeneutics of the self that pervaded Western, Christian culture throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Consequently, the need to create and uphold balance so as not to fall prey to extremes is an oft-met feature in a variety of early modern discourses and is prominent in various areas of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought. To give but a few examples, Galenic medical theory viewed health as the state in which the four humours are in perfect balance;³³⁷ humanist educational theory sought to situate knowledge acquisition in-between the aristocratic notion of natural, inherited gifts and the implications of the market-driven accumulation of capital (cf. Crane (1993) 55); the scientific culture developed by Francis Bacon engaged in the project of replacing Scholastic disputation with the discursive negotiation of a philosophical and scientific compromise (cf. Gaukroger (2001) 10f.); and Elizabeth I’s re-introduction of Protestantism is generally considered as a successful attempt to secure a peaceful Reformation in England via the proverbial Anglican compromise.³³⁸

Most prominently, moderation and avoidance of excess were the key principles that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conduct manuals advocated as the cornerstones of civility (cf. Gaukroger (2001) 12f.). References to the ‘golden meane’ recur in Baldesar Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (1528): for instance, the courtier and diplomat Federico Fregoso states that ‘[t]herefore in our way of life and our dealings with others the safest

³³⁷ According to the Galenic theory of the humours, the four different humours should ideally exist in equal parts in a human being. In a healthy body the humours would be in equilibrium, while disease is the result of imbalance. Hence ‘[t]he goal of medical treatment was to restore the equilibrium by determining which humour was over-abundant or deficient’ (Pollock (1993) 94) – to give a fairly straightforward example, an excess of blood could be cured by bloodletting. Conversely, to preserve health, it was advised to pursue ‘moderation in all things’ (Pollock (1993) 94), with the aim of ‘maintenance of equilibrium over and against the dangers of excess’ (Breitenberg (1996) 53). Lady Grace Mildmay’s medical writings give evidence of this belief. She claims that ‘[i]t is [a] dangerous thing to wear and distract the humours in the body by extreme purges or extreme cordials ... making the one humour the stronger by the want of the other when the one humour doth not bear any equal part with the other’ (110).

³³⁸ ‘Elizabeth sought a “middle way” between the religious extremes that not only wrecked England but were erupting in wars of religion on the continent. Her pursuit of moderation was intended to provide England the peace necessary for development after the Edwardian and Marian upheavals’ (Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996 (326)).

thing is to observe the *golden mean*' (150; emphasis added). Similarly, Ottavio Fregoso remarks that 'one must know and govern oneself with the prudence that should accompany all the virtues, which, being the *happy mean*, are *midway between* the two extremes, which are the vices' (313f.; emphasis added). To summarise the key ideas of the conduct book tradition, 'civility and good sense dictate that one should pursue a *via media*, some form of middle position which both parties to a dispute could accept' (Gaukroger (2001) 11). As these examples suggest, the ideal of moderation is the crucial nexus that connects and integrates traditional religious (i.e. Christian) thought and the newly emerging, secular discourses of rational method and logical debate. Yet balance and moderation in the seventeenth-century conduct books also feature a gendered dimension, which establishes these ideals as one of the cornerstones of patriarchal ideology. Alexandra Shepard's observation on father-son advice literature indicates this:

[A]ll father-son advice, in common with other didactic texts concerning youth, predominantly emphasized the ideal of *balance* as young men assumed manhood. Balance was required both externally, in terms of handling social and political interaction, and internally, in terms of directing the potentially chaotic natural impulses associated with youth, with frequent warnings that the former was predicated on the latter. (Shepard (2003) 30; emphasis in the original)

Superficially similar to the emphasis of the female advice books of the period, these treatises present self-conquest and self-command (cf. Shepard (2003) 30) as the core of ideal manhood. As with the female advice books I have studied, the ordered self is presented as the prerequisite of order on a larger plane. However, there is also a decisive difference between the advice books directed at men, compared to those written for a female audience. Women did – in fact, had to – interpret the motif in specific, gender-distinctive ways. Their texts suggest that there is no such thing as a 'happy mean' as proposed by Castiglione's courtier: for women, there are more disturbing dimensions to the struggle for balance. This is most obvious if one contrasts M. R.'s *Mothers Counsell* with its earlier, male-authored counterpart, the anonymous tract *Keepe within Compasse; or, The Worthy Legacy of a Wise Father to his Beloved Sonne* (1619).³³⁹ Both the *Mothers Counsell* and *Keepe within Compasse* exhort their respective addressees to 'piety and temperance' (Shepard (2003) 32), to be achieved through careful self-monitoring. Yet the focal point of the moderation advocated by the respective treatises is distinctly gendered. To some degree, it is possible to detect in the *Mothers Counsell* a specifically feminine

³³⁹ The full title of the manual reads *Keepe within Compasse; or, The Worthy Legacy of a Wise Father to his Beloved Sonne, teaching him how to liue richly in this world and eternally happy in the world to come*. The author has not been identified with certainty, but he might be a certain John Trundle (cf. *Early English Books Online*, 11 February 2005 <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>>).

and, as I see it, somewhat more problematic version of the ‘golden meane.’ Here, moderation is equated with chastity and hence with a patriarchal imperative that makes for a reduced and restricted feminine selfhood. The respective title pages of the *Compassse* manuals are indicative of this differentiation: whilst M. R.’s advice book – addressed, significantly, to her own daughter as well as to ‘all the Women in the World’ (sig. A4r) – postulates ‘Chastitie,’ ‘Temperance,’ ‘Beautie’ and ‘Humilitie’ as essential for a life ‘within compasse,’ the father-son equivalent is divided into sections on appropriate ‘religion,’ ‘conuersation,’ ‘apparell’ and ‘dyet’ – a much broader range of activities that suggest the different (public) fields for which men had to be prepared. As Alexandra Shepard argues, this is because the goals of self-government and the achievement of a balanced identity were fundamentally different for men and women: ‘The dividend of manhood ... was freedom from youthful subordination acquired through the exertion of self-government, not least because men’s capacity for self-control was the justification for their control over others (particularly women)’ (Shepard (2003) 32f.). Balanced masculine selfhood is vital as one of the decisive underpinnings of patriarchy and hence a central achievement for male individuals; significantly, it is an achievement by which *power* can be gained. Because of that, it cannot allow for ambiguities and contradictions, but must eradicate any imbalance, as this might present a potential threat to patriarchal power and its monolithic and unshakable appearance.

By contrast, feminine moderation occurs exclusively in the guise of chastity. It is entirely in tune with conventional conduct literature addressed to women that the section of M. R.’s pamphlet that centres on ‘temperance’ conceptualises the latter as ‘an enemy to lust’ (sig. B1v), a virtue that ‘calleth a womun backe from all grosse affects and carnall appetites’ (sig. B1v). Moreover, following the patriarchal power structures in which the injunction to chastity was embedded, female moderation can be plainly enforced. A woman’s lack of moderation can, if necessary, be remedied through patriarchal sanction in the form of punishment and control exerted by her husband, father or other men. In reverse, for women themselves to pursue the ‘golden meane’ implies their outward adherence to patriarchal norms. This makes the concept an inherently problematic one, as it suggests that there is no place ‘outside’ the patriarchal order.

On the other hand, the motif clearly gives women some leeway for self-expression. I would situate its potential for an alternative form of subjectivity at this very point: it is precisely women’s independence from the pressure to uphold the fiction of a coherent, unified and powerful subjectivity, implied in the usage of the motif of the ‘golden meane,’

that enables them to develop distinctive perceptions of self despite the constraints they are exposed to. In this sense, we can take M. R.'s compass of virtues and her injunction to pursue the 'golden meane' as paradigmatic for (early modern) women's subjectivities: while they adhere to the patriarchal imperatives of 'Chastitie,' 'Temperance,' 'Beautie' and 'Humilitie,' they simultaneously use these constraints as enabling conditions and supplement them with strategies that promise agency. The point in the following chapter is to investigate in what ways early modern women encountered and appropriated the discourse of the 'golden meane' in their writings and, conversely, how failure to engage with it worked to their detriment.

'[A] well ballancet[h] ship': the debate about female education

Women's struggle for balance can be traced in an exemplary fashion in their comments on female education. The theme is particularly topical in the early modern context because of the emphasis that sixteenth-century humanism had placed on education and the importance that was accorded to it for the formation of a balanced individual. Having said that, in spite of its allegedly universalist agenda, humanism had not brought about equal educational opportunities for men and women alike. Apart from the obviously discriminatory factor that certain subjects were deemed unsuitable for women, the education of (upper-class) females – that is, of the minority who were educated on terms similar to those of male academia at all – was exclusively in the hands of male teachers, and the recommended curriculum featured male authors and a restricted set of genres and texts that were considered appropriate for women. Juan Luis Vives's remark in his *Plan of Studies for Girls* (1523) is telling as concerns the degree of male control that was thereby ensured. In his chapter on the teaching of writing, he declares the sole purpose of women's writing to be 'that she may write down with her fingers anything that the tutor may dictate' (*Plan* 141) and hence become a passive receptacle for male learning. Even if Jacob Burckhardt's claim that '[t]he education of the women in the upper classes was essentially the same as that of the men' (Burckhardt (1960) 280) may not be altogether misguided as regards the content of their learning, it seems that the conclusion he draws is grossly beside the point in the light of statements such as Vives's. Burckhardt emphasises the crucial connection

between education and subjectivity which, in the traditional account, was at the core of the humanist veneration for learning. According to Burkhardt, '[t]he educated woman of that time strove, exactly like the man, after a characteristic and complete individuality' (Burckhardt (1960) 281). What cannot be accepted about Burckhardt's verdict is the alleged aim of a 'characteristic and complete individuality' shared by both men and women. It is obvious that the education of women, to the extent that it was nothing more than a reduced version of its male equivalent, modified so as to accord with the principles of feminine virtue, *denied* women access to the 'complete individuality' that came to make up the self-perception of the masculine subject. Individuality, in the modern sense, implies self-presence, in order that the person is able to express himself in language. Although the existing educational opportunities forbade the development of a genuinely feminine subjectivity, there was still a visible and persistent urge among early modern women to have a share of the male privilege that was education. I will analyse a number of examples of the female critique of contemporary educational politics; they reveal the women's dissatisfaction as well as their strategies to counter their sense of intellectual deprivation with complementary tactics.³⁴⁰

My first example is a short passage from Lady Grace Mildmay's *Autobiography*. As I have outlined in the preceding chapter, Mildmay's firm rootedness in her religious beliefs allows her to present an overall homogeneous personality at ease with herself. Yet I would argue that her brief reference, inserted as if in passing, about her lack of formal education disrupts this apparent homogeneity. Mildmay concludes the introductory part of her *Autobiography* '[h]eartily praying every faithful reader thereof to accept my good meaning therein and give a patient, mild answer with meekness, not looking for eloquence, exact method or learning which could not proceed from me who have not been trained up in university learning' (25). Even if it is not made explicit, one may speculate that there is in the passage an underlying tinge of regret about not having had the chance to acquire 'university learning.' However – and this is a significant qualification – we must be wary of imposing an anachronistic feminist consciousness on Mildmay, which would presumably mirror our own concerns rather than faithfully correspond to her actual attitudes. For, crucially, her observations do not prompt her to openly question the social structures that are responsible for her missed educational opportunities. We cannot tell

³⁴⁰ The examples I will quote are counter-evidence to Anne M. Haselkorn and Betty Travitsky's observation that 'we do not find a large number of women enacting or expressing a consciousness of this contradiction [between the new educational opportunities and women's oppression], much less a resentment of it' (Haselkorn and Travitsky (1990) 25).

whether Mildmay lacked the political insight to perceive them as a socio-culturally imposed disadvantage, or whether she did not dare to utter unveiled criticism in a potentially public arena.³⁴¹ Either way, if she was indeed dissatisfied with not having had access to university education, this feeling is submerged in her general self-presentation as a virtuous woman who counter-balances the lack of appreciation accorded to her own writing as a work of art with her right to provide guidance to subsequent generations. What is more, she seems to have been able to explore her creative and intellectual potential by shifting it to the culturally acknowledged, acceptably ‘feminine’ fields of music or embroidery and immersing herself in medical care for her household and the wider community. Tellingly, her depictions of her everyday activities reveal a pervasive dialectic of submissiveness countered with incipient independence:

Also every day I spent some time in playing on my lute and setting songs of five parts thereunto and practised my voice in singing of psalms ... Also every day I spent some time in the herbal and books of physic and in ministering to one or other by the directions of the best physicians of mine acquaintance[.] (35)

Her creative pursuits are both innovative – she writes her own ‘songs of five parts’ to the music she plays on her lute – and reliant on tradition, as when she recites psalms. Similarly combining independent learning and imitation, she teaches herself with ‘the herbal books of physic’ and offers medical care to her dependants, but also acts on the directions of ‘the best [male] physicians of mine acquaintance.’³⁴² Her medical services ‘enhanced her already privileged status within the community and may also have bestowed on her a form of public power,’³⁴³ i.e. it allowed her to transcend the spatial restrictions imposed on women, but also made her contribute to the patriarchal, feudal hierarchy. Her involvement with ‘male’ medicine and her reliance on the capital provided by her estates to fund her medical activities support the view that Mildmay’s actions played in the hands of patriarchal power. Indeed, the picture we get of her in her *Autobiography* and her other

³⁴¹ Linda Pollock makes several highly significant points with regard to this problem. In her epilogue to Mildmay’s writings, she argues that there might well be ‘a disjuncture between the existence of structural disadvantage and the perception of it. ... If certain structures were not perceived to be “oppressive,” can we label them as such? ... [B]y concentrating on structures that we, as twentieth-century historians, have deemed oppressive, we risk overlooking those that early modern women themselves lamented. Giving women a history of their own is not enough; allowing them minds of their own undistorted by our ideological agendas is as important’ (Linda Pollock, epilogue to Lady Grace Mildmay, *With Faith and Physic*. 143-150 (144)).

³⁴² In the sixteenth century, medical practice was not yet entirely the domain of qualified doctors. Although a 1512 act had restricted medical practice to Oxford and Cambridge graduates, the law was amended in 1542 to exempt from these restrictions ‘divers honest persons, as well men as women, whom God hath endowed with the knowledge of the nature kind and operation of certain herbs, roots and waters, and the using and ministering to them to such as be pained with customable disease’ (quoted in Sim (1996) 86). Obviously, this allowed women some leeway to apply their own medical knowledge, independent of male authority.

³⁴³ Linda Pollock, introduction to Lady Grace Mildmay, ‘Extracts from Medical Papers.’ In: *With Faith and Physic*. 92-109 (108).

writings destroys most of the cherished assumptions of twentieth-century feminism about the female 'sisterhood' and women's subversion of patriarchy:

There is little evidence ... of female bonding or solidarity. ... She mentions no close women friends and was embroiled in legal disputes with her mother and sister. There is no evidence that she participated in traditional social gatherings such as those at childbirths where female ties would be strengthened.³⁴⁴

Clearly, Mildmay's immediate subordination under male authority, be it God's ('and ever God gave a blessing thereonto' (35)) or that of allegedly more experienced, professional men, qualifies her self-determination, to some extent at least. Yet to read her account simply as an example of a gentlewoman's stereotypical and conformist leisure activities and generally expected skills is simplistic, in my view. It is equally undisputable that her medical activities in particular 'supplied a creative and intellectually challenging outlet for [her] ... energy and talents,'³⁴⁵ allowing her as it did to enter into correspondence and exchange experiences with other (male!) practitioners. Whether medicine was a genuine passion for Mildmay, or whether she merely resorted to this field in order 'to satisfy an intellectual curiosity for which she could perhaps find no other fulfilment' (Ottway (1998) 163) is a question that we cannot answer with any certainty and that, I would argue, even misses the crucial point.³⁴⁶ Whatever her initial motivation, her medical knowledge as well as her musical and artistic interests probably functioned as vehicles for her urge to create something of herself, within a sanctioned arena, especially as she admits to her desire to produce 'works of mine own invention without sample of drawing or pattern before me' (35). Even if she did so by simultaneously drawing on existing (male) precedents, her emergent creativity proves wrong Adrienne Rich's radical claim that 'women who strive to emulate the art of men are merely reasserting old stereotypes and perpetuating their subjection by a patriarchal culture.'³⁴⁷ In my view, the fact that Mildmay's creative pursuits extended only to socially acceptable fields need not be regarded as a restriction that suffocated her individual self-expression. Her own account strongly suggests that she derived genuine satisfaction from it.

³⁴⁴ Linda Pollock, epilogue to Lady Grace Mildmay, *With Faith and Physic*. 143-150 (143).

³⁴⁵ Linda Pollock, introduction to Lady Grace Mildmay, 'Extracts from Medical Papers.' In: *With Faith and Physic*. 92-109 (108).

³⁴⁶ Sheila Ottway observes, with regard to Mildmay's extensive medical writings: 'Although Mildmay's medical writings are impersonal, their sheer quantity and detail suggest that she showed remarkable independence in her desire to educate herself in medicine and to provide medical care for others. The existence of these writings should warn us against drawing overhasty conclusions from Grace Mildmay's self-writings about her apparent endorsement of contemporary patriarchal attitudes concerning the desirability of women's confinement to domesticity' (Ottway (1998) 164).

³⁴⁷ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.' In: *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. New York: Norton, 1975. 90-98; quoted in Niland (1996) 80.

With a similar turn of phrase as Mildmay, Isabella Whitney mentions her lack of formal education and her merely shallow acquaintance with the male-biased educational canon of her time. In a nonchalant tone that appears free of regrets about missed opportunities, she declares that:

[I] [h]ad leisure good, (though learning lacked)
some study to apply:
To read such Books, whereby I thought
myself to edify. ('The Author to the Reader' 5ff.)³⁴⁸

Whilst Whitney acknowledges freely that she 'learning lacked' and initially expects to be 'edif[ied]' by her reading matter, she is soon disillusioned with her task. She utters surprisingly bold criticism of prestigious elements of the conventional literary canon: the Bible she finds unable 'to resolve me in such doubts, / as past this head of mine / To understand' (11ff.); writings on history disappoint her because:

... I found that follies erst,
in people did exceed.
The which I see doth not decrease,
in this our present time
More pity it is we follow them,
in every wicked crime. (15ff.)

Male learning, Whitney seems to suggest, has failed to take humankind forward, as there is no such thing as genuine historical progress. She is obviously dissatisfied with the dominant intellectual culture, to the point where she is 'weary of those Books, / and many other [*sic*] mor[e]' (21). We can assume that this is also the reason why she is able to confess her lack of education without any tangible discontent. Conversely, it means that access to masculine culture does not guarantee a fulfilled female identity, but might even add to her sense of deprivation. However, Whitney's bold and self-assured stance is severely qualified by the following lines of the poem. As she decides to go on a stroll through the city, she is warned of the dangers that she may encounter (31ff.). The passage culminates in her self-renouncing statement that 'I'll neither shun, nor seek for death, / yet oft the same do crave' (43f.): quite clearly, her audacious expression of her views does not, in turn, make for a secure sense of self. Again, it seems, a woman cannot criticise the existing power structures with impunity, as the assertive sense of self that Whitney expresses through her critique is offset with the motif of self-annihilation.

This is a significant point also with respect to Martha Moulsworth's straightforward expression of her discontent with patriarchal culture. In her *Memorandum*, she voices a

³⁴⁸ All quotations from Whitney in the following passage are taken from this section.

plea for female education that is far more pronounced than Mildmay's passing remark or even Whitney's criticism. Moulsworth opens her chronological account of her life by presenting herself as part of the male academic tradition when she elaborates on the education that she received from her father, Robert Dorsett:

By him I was brought vpp in godlie pietie
In modest chearefullnes, & sad sobrietie
Not onlie so, Beyond my sex & kind
he did wth learninge Lattin decke [my] mind[.] (27ff.)

It was clearly highly unusual for a woman in the late sixteenth century to be taught Latin, the key component of humanist education for men.³⁴⁹ Moulsworth is certainly aware of the fact that her education bordered on the transgressive ('Beyond my sex & kind' (29)) and construes herself as an exception; but at the same time she neutralises this threat by mentioning her 'godlie pietie' (27), 'modest[y]' (28) and 'sobrietie' (28) – all of these being traits that are clearly in tune with the contemporary ideals of virtuous femininity. What is more, she immediately undercuts her self-assured stance with a poignant qualification (cf. Evans (1995) 151): 'Butt I of Lattin haue no cause to boast / ffor want of vse, I longe agoe itt lost' (37ff.). Again, ambiguity is the organising principle of her presentation of self: she is and is not a woman of learning '[b]eyond [her] sex and kind' (29). Her self-description establishes a dialectical simultaneity that is 'too complex to be reduced to simple either/or polarities' (Evans (1997) 180).³⁵⁰

The extent to which Moulsworth's balanced, straightforwardly coherent identity is artificially invented, in the attempt to reconcile her conflicting experiences with the demands that her society directed at her, is highlighted by a closer look at historical records. Her father, Robert Dorsett, died in 1580, when Martha was less than three years old – hence it is most unlikely for him to have had the direct impact on her education that he is credited with in her poem (cf. Evans (1995) 152). Why, then, did Moulsworth so bluntly disregard the historical facts? Quite possibly, she may have taken this degree of

³⁴⁹ Exceptions include Elizabeth I and Elizabeth Cary. Interestingly, in Cary's biography *The Lady Falkland: Her Life* (1645), written by her daughter, the passage that is concerned with her education is entirely free of any explicit awareness of her extraordinariness as regards her gender. Cary's autodidacticism is described in neutral terms, as if her learning had been a matter of course: '[A]fter of herself, without a teacher, whilst | she was a child, she learnt french, spanish, Itallian, which she allways vnderstood very perfectly, she learnt Latin in the same manner (without being taught) and vnderstood it perfectly when she was young, and translated the Epistles of Seneca out of it into English' (106).

³⁵⁰ Robert C. Evans elaborates this point, emphasising the impression of balance that Moulsworth's poetical strategies create: 'Practically every detail exemplifies this balance, often quite subtly. Moulsworth expresses a wide variety of emotions, including deference and defiance, weariness and strength, frustration and joy, pride and humility, stubbornness and submission, ambition and contentment, sexual pleasure and deep religious faith' (Evans (1997) 178).

poetic liberty because it fits the picture she creates of herself as an equal participant in male culture: 'The father whom Moulsworth loved so much seems to have been partly a creation of her own imagination, her invention; he was partly a mythical being invested with a great deal of psychic importance for her' (Evans (1995) 52). She depends on his imaginary presence because he legitimises her own participation in patriarchal culture.³⁵¹ In psychoanalytic terms, the identification with the father makes possible her entry into the patriarchal symbolic order. Conversely, it necessitates the all-out denial of the maternal: tellingly, Moulsworth does not mention her mother at all in her poem.

As this omission might indicate, Moulsworth's transition to the patriarchal symbolic is not quite as straightforward as it might seem. In the following passage of the poem, she explicitly expresses her concern with women's place in patriarchal society:

... the muses ffemalls are
and therefore of Vs ffemales take some care
Two Vniuersities we haue of men
o thatt we had but one of women then
O then thatt would in witt, and tongs surpasse
All art of men thatt is, or euer was[.] (31ff.)

Moulsworth's plea for women's education has attracted considerable attention and has been hailed as attesting to a proto-feminist consciousness.³⁵² Clearly, her demand for equal access to educational opportunities was revolutionary at the time, especially with its explicit move beyond the primary educational site for women, the home, into the exclusively male domain of the universities. Her distinct sense of self-worth comes across in a particularly pronounced fashion when she boldly asserts not only women's equality, but even their superiority in the academic realm ('... in witt, and tongs surpasse' (35)).

And yet, reading her strongly opinionated claims as instances of proto-feminism falls short of recognising yet another set of ambiguities that they entail. Ambiguities appear, for a start, if we consider the muses that Moulsworth invokes and their connotations in early modern culture, derived from classical mythology. Conventionally, the muses were somewhat equivocal figures, offering artistic inspiration, tinged with

³⁵¹ Alternatively, a more positive (if perhaps slightly far-fetched) reading is possible. Moulsworth's deliberate neglect of historical truth could be regarded as another instance of 'women's time,' as a denial of linear chronology and single, identifiable events in favour of her emotions and the timeless, large-scale impact that her father had on her identity.

³⁵² For example, Bebe Barefoot claims that '[h]er radical wish for a women's university is the first hint of her budding feminism and move toward a new identity. Indeed, she has much more in common with modern feminists than with Renaissance women' (Barefoot (1996) 76).

sexual lure, but also threatening destruction.³⁵³ Moulsworth, by contrast, presents them as a kind of female support group ('Vs ffemales' (32)) who provide 'sustaining companionship among and nurturing models for women' (Teague (1995) 175), so that 'women, divine and mortal, [could come] ... together in mutuality to enjoy models for accomplishment and support for education' (Teague (1995) 178). Moulsworth thereby reinterprets the figures of the muses, endowing them with a distinctly feminine significance that stretches beyond their traditionally passive role as the source of inspiration for the male artistic genius (cf. Wilcox (1997a) 27). As Moulsworth portrays it, for the female writer, the presence of the muses is a way of escaping her 'anxiety of authorship.' However, in contrast to this positive reading, the associations derived from the description of the muses in mythology could easily be used to present them as the monstrous 'other' of 'chaste, silent and obedient' femininity. Given the general unease towards female literacy, the muses as a support group for writing women ultimately constitute a threat to the patriarchal order, with its dependence on virtuous females: 'Those who are hostile toward women of learning associate the muse of poetry with ambiguous gender identity. A woman who invokes the muse is, at best, a slut, and at worst, a lesbian rapist' (Teague (1995) 176). Frances Teague is probably not overstating her case: Ben Jonson, in 'An Epigram on the Court Pucell,' says that a female poet must 'publicly enact a "tribadic lust," by forcibly raping her female muse and [thereby] moving outside the control of heterosexuality' (McGrath (2002) 4). By referring to the muses, Moulsworth places herself in an insecure position socially, because she puts her own reputation under threat. After all, for a woman to write is to deviate from the patriarchal, heterosexual norm; it is 'sexually suspect, for to write [is] to find support from women, not men' (Teague (1995) 179).

However, Moulsworth qualifies her surprisingly progressive stance when she contrasts her unusual plea with the futility of female education in the face of a social reality that values very different qualities in women. She soberly and somewhat ironically remarks that 'Lattin is nott the most marketable mariadge mettall' (38ff.) – in her own case, she 'longe agoe itt lost' (38) when she got married and had to concentrate on her domestic duties. She is clearly aware of the property-related implications of marriage in her days when she comments wryly on the economic transactions which dominated her own (as it did most middle- and upper-class) marriages: 'Had I no other portion [than

³⁵³ Cf. Jean-Jacques Seigneuret (ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*. 2 vols. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988 (112ff.). However, a reinterpretation of the muses similar to Moulsworth's occurs in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, when she presents them in one of her dedicatory poems as 'sacred sisters ... / Whose godly labours doe avoyde the baite / Of worldly pleasures' (49).

command of Latin] to my dowre, / I might haue stood a virgin to this houre' (39f.). Strikingly, her remarks appear free of regret; although there is a sense of stoical acceptance or even resignation, she counters this with her dry humour and ironic sarcasm. She is obviously aware of the financial precariousness of spinsterhood, but it seems that it was not only out of necessity and social pressure that she embraced married life. When she states: 'I haue long since Bid virgin life ffarewell' (42), she conveys a sense of frank (sexual) enjoyment (cf. Evans and Wiedemann (1993) 23). As I have observed before, there are obvious sexual overtones in her emphasis on the joys of married life, which are surprising given the demonisation of female sexuality that prevailed in early modern culture.³⁵⁴

This presents us with yet another instance of ambiguity in Moulsworth's account of her life. On the one hand, social pressures to marry put an end to her personal development through education, i.e. she had to succumb to the constraints of the patriarchal expectations that confined a married woman to the home. On the other hand, it was through marriage that she could, presumably, explore another facet of her self, namely experience her own corporeality as something that involves pleasure and enjoyment. The general impression of calm equilibrium that the *Memorandum* conveys suggests that Moulsworth was able to construct a sense of coherent selfhood in spite of the disappointments and constraints she presumably encountered. I therefore do not find Joanne M. Gaudio's argument entirely plausible, when she claims that Moulsworth's closing remarks on her widowhood express a 'final preference for the life of celibacy and intellectual pursuit that marked her youth' (Gaudio (1996) 39), as she 'return[s] to the subject of virginity which in the beginning she linked so tightly to her intellectual pursuits' (Gaudio (1996) 39).³⁵⁵ Gaudio's view is especially unconvincing if one notes that Moulsworth never presents herself as inferior or submissive in relation to her husbands, i.e. her married status does not go along with a loss of self-determination. Rather, she occupies a position of control throughout the poem, 'mak[ing] herself the centre through whom a number of men are peripherally given a role' (Wilcox (1997a) 28). Her first and second husbands are mentioned only with reference to the length of their union with her – merely for the sake of chronological accuracy, one is led to assume. By contrast, her third husband, Bevill Moulsworth, clearly her favourite, is described in terms of genuine affection ('a louely man, & kind' (57)). The further

³⁵⁴ Cf. my previous treatment of this passage (2.3).

³⁵⁵ Also, if we accept the view that Moulsworth ultimately opts for celibacy with the intention of realigning herself with her past as a single woman and embracing male education, we automatically deny the seriousness of her implicit revaluations of the female body.

information she gives about him, however, is exclusively concerned with the positive effects of the marriage on herself – the fact that she was able to live ‘an easie darlings life’ (66) and enjoyed considerable financial independence and possibilities for decision-making. Admittedly, it might seem far-fetched or even inaccurate to argue for the relative insignificance of men for Moulsworth’s presentation of self, especially because, at least in her imagination, her father seems to have been so fundamental for her education and upbringing. Yet, in this case, too, her emphasis rests more on the effects that the education he provided for her had on herself and on the extent to which she herself decided to make use of her learning. My point is corroborated by the fact that she does not mention any paternal influence on her marital choices, but claims personal autonomy in these decisions (‘I did nott bind my selfe’ (50), ‘I tooke’ (57)). Again, it does not matter so much what degree of truth value reasonably attaches to such a statement; what is crucial is the fact that Moulsworth *presents* her marriages as independent of patriarchal schemes. As she views herself and/or wants herself to be viewed, she has never been an object of trade between or the property of men, but has always been a self-determined individual who has made her own life choices.³⁵⁶ Conversely, she is able to present herself in such a way because her poem also allows for a reading in accordance with patriarchal norms. She does not express open rebellion with regard to her marriages, but there are submerged hints at her sense of independence.

A similar negotiation and rewriting of the patriarchal imperatives that determine and constrain women’s access to learning – and, by implication, their self-determination – occurs in Rachel Speght’s *Mortalities Memorandum*. In the dream vision in which she describes her struggle to attain the ‘golden meane,’ the female narrator falls asleep and, in her dream, meets various allegorical figures. Her encounter with the figure of Knowledge triggers a fervent plea for women’s equal access to learning:

... wherefore shall
 A woman have her intellect in vaine,
 Or not endeavour *Knowledge* to attaine.
 ...
 All parts and faculties were made for use;
 The God of *Knowledge* nothing gave in vaine. (B2r; emphasis in the original)

Her claim is substantiated with reference to the inborn faculties that both men and women are endowed with. In a sense, then, for women *not* to use their natural intellect would

³⁵⁶ This lends support to Natalie Zemon Davis’s observation that, in the early modern politics of marriage, ‘a strategy for at least a thread of female autonomy may have been built precisely around this sense of being given away ... [W]omen sometimes turned the cultural formation around, and gave themselves away’ (Davis (1986) 61).

amount to disregard for God's will. Moreover – and this is what makes its pursuit acceptable for women, too – knowledge is conducive to virtue and can thus be integrated in a religious framework. Its right use enables a person to live according to the prime Christian virtues outlined in 1 Corinthians:

True *Knowledge* is the Window of the soule,
Through which her objects she doth speculate;
It is the mother of *faith, hope, and love*;
Without it who can vertue estimate? (sig. B3v; second emphasis added)³⁵⁷

As we shall see, the alignment of knowledge with virtue is essential for women. It is only 'true' knowledge that allows Speght to remain virtuous according to patriarchal standards; conversely, a woman who strives to acquire knowledge needs to be especially vigilant so as not to put her reputation under threat. This connection has obvious roots in the biblical Fall story, according to which Eve's quest for (divine) knowledge triggered mankind's Fall from grace and recognition of gender difference and sexuality.³⁵⁸ As a result, a woman who has acquired knowledge is all too easily associated with monstrous and threatening femininity. Presumably, it is in order to counter these widespread assumptions that Speght creates a thoroughly positive picture of the pursuit of knowledge. She even presents unsatisfiable yearning not in terms of transgression; rather, '[it is] a lawfull avarice, / To covet *Knowledge* daily more and more' (sig. B3v; emphasis in the original). The quest for knowledge is a legitimate pursuit even if it goes beyond the restraints of virtuous moderation – a statement that is particularly surprising given the general mistrust of excess in early modern culture that Speght has previously invoked. However, the fact that she nevertheless refers to her yearning for knowledge as 'avarice' hints at its negative connotations. Significantly, the poem's female narrator eventually fails to live up to her own precepts. Without giving any reasons, she explains that, in the end, she renounced her initial desire for learning:

This counsell [to covet knowledge] I did willingly obey,
Till some occurrence called me away.
And made me rest content with that I had,
Which was but little, as effect doth show;

³⁵⁷ As is suggested by her quotation, Speght describes knowledge as prerequisite for the cardinal Christian virtues of faith, hope and love ('And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity' (1 Corinthians 13:13); some translations read 'love' instead of 'charity'). Such knowledge is presented as even more favourable for women to attain, because it is conducive to virtue.

³⁵⁸ The Genesis account of the Fall reads as follows: 'And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die [by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree]: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. ... And the eyes of them both [Adam and Eve] were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons' (Genesis 3:4-7).

And quenched hope for gaining any more,
For I my time must other-ways bestow. (sigs. B3v f.)

With a disappointingly self-denigrating tone, Speght admits to having acquired only a small degree of learning and being unlikely to gain more, because of her (rather vague and unspecified) other obligations ('some occurrence'). It is impossible to speculate which particular activities or commitments (if any) she is referring to; I would therefore suggest we read her remark as the necessary structural complement to her rather bold preceding argument. On the one hand, her learning enables her to cunningly 'defeat the vicious but untenable arguments of her opponent' (Phillippy (2002) 231), i.e. of those who oppose female learning on principle. On the other hand, she can do so only by immediately renouncing the tools of her critique. In theory, striving for knowledge is acceptable; in reality, though, a woman is unlikely to consistently engage in this quest and instead is better advised to stay on the 'safe side,' marked by unambiguous virtue. Speght's concluding remarks at the end of the stanza show a tinge of regression: 'I therefore to that place return'd againe, / From whence I came, and where I must remaine' (sig. 4Br). Her foregoing exploration of knowledge does nothing but channel back to the conventional gendering of learning. However, the fact that Speght did write and publish and thereby participated in the learned discourse of the day proves that she herself did not always stay on that 'safe side.' As with Moulsworth, there is a characteristic simultaneity of self-assertion and submission in her argument.

The problematic relationship between knowledge and virtue and the ways in which it enables and restricts women's access to learning is also an issue in Elizabeth Joscelyn's *Mothers Legacy*. Joscelyn voices her views on women's education in a way that is so tangled and self-contradictory that it is hard to overlook her unease. Outlining the education she deems fit for her child, should it be a daughter, she states that:

I desire her bringinge vp may bee learninge the Bible as my sisters doo[,] good huswifery, writing, and good work[,] other learninge a woman needs not though I admire it in those whom god hath blesst wth discretion[,] yet I desire it not much in my own hauinge seen that sometimes women haue greater portions of learninge then wisdom w^{ch} is <n> of no better vse to them then A Maynsayle to [a] fly boat w^{ch} runs it < > vnder water, but wheare learning and wisdom meet in a virtuous disposed woman she is the fittest closet for all good^nes^[,] she is like a well ballancet[h] ship that may bear all her sayle[,] she is? indeed I should shame my selfe if I should go about to prayse her more[.] (54ff.)

Joscelyn hovers uneasily between praising female education and denigrating it as being of secondary importance in comparison with virtue. Her expressed admiration for learned women betrays her own renunciation of learning ('I desire it not much in my own' (58f.))

as being presumably not entirely genuine. Her closing remark, condemning excessive praise of learned women, ends the subject with an abruptness that smacks of self-curtailment. It prompts the question what exactly it is that she feels she would need to be ashamed of – is she embarrassed about her own lack of learning, or is there something ‘shameful’ about a learned woman as such?

It is illuminating to look at a similar simultaneity of praise and rejection of female learning in male-authored texts. Richard Mulcaster, in his advice book *Positions Concerning the Training up of Children* (1581), refers to women who write, stating that ‘[their] excellencie is so geason [uncommon, amazing], as they be rather wonders to gaze at, then presidentes to follow.’³⁵⁹ Again, the learned woman can be integrated in the patriarchal social order only if she is treated as an exception – and as an exception which should not trigger emulation, but from which a truly virtuous woman should strive to set herself apart. Elizabeth Joscelyn, however, employs a strategy that enables her to conceive of learned women in a more comprehensive way. In stating that learning ought to go along with virtue, she combines the progressive demand for women’s education with the patriarchal expectations of feminine virtue, rather than having the one exclude the other. This alignment opens up the opportunity for female learning in the first place, because it allows the woman who pursues knowledge to move partially within the patriarchal order, even if only on its fringes. The simultaneity of learning and virtue is most clearly expressed when Joscelyn draws on the associations of early modern ship imagery. Ships could denote either a state of balance on calm seas, or being at the mercy of storms and tempests; in both cases, obviously, they were used as an analogy for human existence. Joscelyn draws on the image of the ‘well ballancet[h] ship’ (64ff.) as a symbol for the simultaneity of learning and wisdom that she advocates for women. She portrays the learned *and* virtuous woman as an ideal figure who has managed to negotiate the conflicting demands of her intellectual interests and patriarchal constraints. Interestingly, the ship motif has a parallel in the writings of the sixteenth-century humanist Roger Ascham. In *The Schoolmaster* (1570), a treatise on ‘the good bringing-up both of [one’s] own and other men’s children’ (‘A Preface to the Reader’ 11), ship imagery is used to promote the very same combination of virtues that Joscelyn recommends:

The greatest ship indeed commonly carrieth the greatest burden, but yet always with the greatest jeopardy, not only for the persons and goods committed unto it, but even for the ship itself, except it be governed with greater wisdom.

³⁵⁹ Richard Mulcaster, *Positions Concerning the Training up of Children*. London 1581 (168); quoted in Beilin (1987) 11.

But nobility governed by learning and wisdom is indeed most like a fair ship, having tide and wind at will, under the rule of a skillful master, when contrariwise a ship carried, yea, with the highest tide and greatest wind, lacking a skillful master, most commonly doth either sink itself upon sands or break itself upon rocks. ... Therefore, ye great and noble men's children, if ye will have rightfully that praise and enjoy surely that place which your fathers have, and elders had and left unto you, ye must keep it as they gat it, and that is by the only way of virtue, wisdom, and worthiness. (40f.)

For Ascham, the balance achieved through 'wisdom and learning' is intended to serve the preservation of patriarchal power ('that place which your fathers have' (41)). This association is indirectly confirmed by Mark Breitenberg's observation that, in the early modern imagination, the converse fear of death through shipwreck can be linked to the anxieties at the root of masculine identity:

[T]he imagery depend[s] upon an *a priori* fear of disempowerment and loss of identity that derives from two forms of male dependence – erotic and matrimonial – on women. ... The prevalence of figuring ocean travel in terms of a feminized danger of death by drowning may also be explained by the fact that the exploration and dominion of the seas was one of the most significant instances of masculine prerogative in the Renaissance. (Breitenberg (1996) 194)³⁶⁰

Ship-imagery, in male-authored texts, is used to express fears of the collapse of patriarchal power, of emasculation and loss of control. Ascham's emphasis on the masterful ability to symbolically keep the 'ship' that is human life in balance and to prevent 'shipwreck' must be read in this cultural context. His emphasis is only logical, as his manual is specifically composed to give advice for the upbringing of 'young gentlemen' (41), the male offspring of the ruling classes. In spite of the surface similarities, his argument is therefore in sharp contrast to the effects of balance for women that Joscelyn outlines. For Joscelyn, a woman needs to negotiate extremes not in order to preserve a position of power that is rightfully hers, but to conform to the patriarchal ideal of feminine virtue. While Ascham's 'young gentlemen' are being educated for public roles, Joscelyn's virtuous woman is characteristically self-enclosed ('the fittest closet for all goodnes'). The spatial dimension of her ideal feeds into the conventional alignment of feminine virtue with domesticity. The virtuous woman is like a 'closet,' she is self-contained and keeps her 'learning and wisdom' within the confines of her own subjective realm. Kim Walker reads the image of the closet as paradigmatic for women's access to learning in the period:

³⁶⁰ Breitenberg refers to Joseph Swetnam's identification of male desire as a 'dangerous Sea' in *The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615) and Alexander Niccholes' linkage of marriage and 'shipwrecke' (*A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving. And the greatest mystery therein contained. How to choose a good wife from a bad...* London 1615) (cf. Breitenberg (1996) 194).

The spatial isolation of the closet is frequently called on by women writing in even the most marginal and ostensibly private genres. Her writing figuratively bounded by the confines of this retired chamber, the woman herself may become an enclosure, implicitly bounded and sealed, for knowledge. (Walker (1996) 26)

At first glance, this confinement is clearly debilitating for women, insofar as it restricts them in a double sense, both in terms of geographical space and literary genre. Yet it simultaneously opens up a specific sphere that is reserved for knowledge. In a sense, of course, enclosure and learning are a contradiction in terms: learning, even if it takes place in the restricted space of the closet, opens up the woman's inward self to the outside world, at least on the intellectual level. Hence even if enclosure may not seem to be a particularly liberating tactic and has potentially oppressive implications, it still has some value simply by virtue of constituting a workable alternative. I would suggest we read this simultaneity as another instance of at least partially successful negotiation: if learning potentially places women in a morally ambiguous position, their response can neither be to uncritically accept this danger, nor to radically oppose it. For women, to pursue learning but to restrict it to the confined closet space is a strategy to circumvent sanction by struggling to combine transgression and subordination. Moreover, what links the passages from Joscelin and Ascham's treatises, in spite of their difference of emphasis, is their foregrounding of order as the prerequisite for fulfilling human existence. Apparently, the need to bestow order both on the self and the community at large is a concern for early modern writers independent of gender. It is also an idea through which women in particular can derive a certain degree of power because, in spite of their marginal position, it enables them to claim a degree of self-assertion, coupled with the adherence to (conventional) virtue. Since there is no 'natural' right to power for women under patriarchy, self-mastery is its necessary prerequisite.

In reverse, failure to master the self results in destructive disequilibrium. Rachel Speght draws on this connection in her *Mortalities Memorandum*. Speght, too, uses the image of the ship as a metaphor for human existence, yet with a very different slant than the uses of the image I have analysed so far: she does not present a 'well ballancet[h] ship,' but creates a picture of extreme *imbalance*, with the ship being at the mercy of the uncontrollable forces of nature:

Mans life on earth is like a Ship at Sea,
Tost on the waves of troubles to and fro,
Assayl'd by pirates, crost by blustering windes,
Where rockes of ruine menace overthrow.

Where stormes molest, and hunger pincheth sore,
Where *Death* doth lurke at every Cabbin dore. (sig. D3r; emphasis in the original)

Speght's image of the ship in the storm expresses the widespread early modern anxiety of disorder, which threatens instability both from the outside ('waves,' 'pirates,' 'rockes,' 'stormes') and inside ('hunger'). Alice Sutcliffe, in her *Meditations on Man's Mortalitie*, uses the ship motif to a very similar effect, to express the need to uphold balance and equilibrium so as to escape danger. She urges her fictional addressee to:

... prove the Pilot of thy owne Ship, which now lyeth floating on the Seas of this troublesome World, ballanc'd onely with cares, and disquieting pleasures of this life, and how thou sayl'st with a full course, towards the haven of endlesse Happiness; yet one blast of unprepared death will turne thy sayles, and plunge thee irrecoverably into that bottomlesse Gulfe. (sigs. B6v f.)

If we contrast these disturbing visions with Joscelyn's ideal of the 'well-ballancet[h] ship,' we can assume that early modern women deliberately posit strategies of negotiation and compromise in the attempt to counter the threat of destructive imbalance. The avoidance of extremes allows them not only to (outwardly) conform to the imperatives of patriarchy while not entirely conforming to its precepts, but also to establish for themselves positions of self-assurance. The self that the female authors portray is in need of monitoring so that it becomes immune to 'unprepared death.' Overcoming the threat of disorder and destruction makes for a relatively secure self; yet it is also a self that is never entirely at ease with itself. It requires an astonishing degree of self-determination ('prove the Pilot of thy owne Ship') and demands energy and willpower. The quest for balance cannot yield unimpeachable results, but is always, to some extent, precarious and threatened by *imbalance*.

This insight is a sobering reminder that it would be simplistic to identify the 'golden meane' with the ideal of an unproblematic balance or to understand it as a reassuring 'middle way' which, once it has been achieved, guarantees a secure sense of self. The cornerstone of the women's subjectivity is contradiction and ambiguity. In that, their senses of self offer a generally valid paradigm of subjectivity: early modern women's speaking positions reveal with particular clarity the ambivalent condition that any subject finds itself in. Clearly, the pervasive 'chaste, silent and obedient' ideology and the patriarchal power structures restrict their speech. In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler argues that '[o]ne speaks a language that is never fully one's own' (Butler (1997) 140), a condition that Butler refers to as 'foreclosure': the subject is always constrained by the ideological context, which provides the language that is at his or her disposal. While this

could be seen as a fairly commonplace assumption, Butler reinterprets the constraints that this condition implies by pointing to their enabling dimensions: 'If the subject is produced in speech through a set of foreclosures, then this founding and formative limitation sets the scene for the agency of the subject. Agency becomes possible on the condition of such a foreclosure' (Butler (1997) 139). The agency that can be discerned in early modern women's writings is tentative and small-scale; it is often ambiguous and equivocal, predicated on the acceptance of contradiction and imperfection and ultimately based on the dominant discourses in which the women find themselves. Ramona Wray reads Elizabeth Joscelyn's contradictory statements on learned women – their association with both virtue and shame – as emblematic of such ambiguities:

Joscelyn presents us with the phenomenon of an educated woman in the same moment as she opposes women who have benefited from education, with the very existence of her narrative working against her own ostensible views. In short, the legacy that Joscelyn furnishes is a vexed and uneven gift, one that simultaneously celebrates female production and publication and moves repressively against women's authorial activities. ... These discontinuities are typical of the genre of the mother's advice book; they also point to the unstable locations of seventeenth-century women themselves, as they looked to define themselves in relation to embattled ideological polarities. (Wray (2004) 52).

Clearly, there is no fixed and stable speaking position for early modern women, and their striving for the 'golden meane' has to be understood in the light of this premise. The 'golden meane' is precarious; as Alice Sutcliffe remarks in the second epigraph I have chosen for this chapter, it is as delicate and fragile as a 'bridge of glasse.'

Extremes and excess

The precariousness of balanced selfhood is suggested by a significant stanza in Rachel Speght's *Mortalities Memorandum*. In her dream vision that precedes the title poem, Speght presents herself as ignorant and disorientated, a condition that she endows with a moral dimension: 'I know not what is bad or good' (A4v). She expresses her wish to attain the 'golden meane,' but presents it as an ideal that is constantly being threatened by the shortcomings of her human nature:

And sometimes when I seeke the *golden meane*,
My weaknesse makes me faile of mine intent,
Then suddenly I fall into *extremes*,
Nor can I see a mischiefe to prevent;

But feele the paine when I the perill finde,
Because my maladie doth make me blinde. (sig. B1r; emphasis added)

Apparently, the speaker lacks the strength and determination that are necessary to achieve and consistently uphold balance. She succumbs to the opposite of the ‘golden meane,’ to ‘extremes’; according to Speght, the inability to avoid those entails ‘paine’ and ‘peril.’ Significantly, as the larger context of the above-quoted verses suggests, the suffering caused by such ‘extremes’ does not merely affect the speaker herself, but also those she engages with, because her failure to consciously shape and regulate her actions in accordance with the ‘golden meane’ ‘has reduced her to a brutish reliance on instinct, and to solipsism’ (Lewalski (1993) 171). This is most brutally obvious when Speght concludes that ‘I measure all mens feet by mine owne shooe’ (sig. B1r). While mastery of the self is beneficial both for the individual and for the community at large, the failure of both to interact – as is implied in such solipsistic self-reliance – is equally detrimental to both.

As Speght suggests, any form of excess is destructive. In early modern culture, one example of such ‘extremes’ is all-female settings and relationships, a phenomenon that is decidedly ‘out of compasse’ under patriarchy because it creates spaces beyond the range of male control. In the following, I will look at the cultural meanings of these spaces, especially as they are developed in women’s writings. Whilst they promise to offer alternatives to the dominant structures of patriarchy by virtue of being exclusively female, their very exclusiveness signifies a form of excess and therefore has distinctly negative implications.

For us today, the existence of female-only settings has, of course, a feminist ring to it, reminiscent as it is of the 1960s/70s calls for a universal female ‘sisterhood’ (cf. Macey (2000) 124ff.). However, to speak of (proto-)feminism in the early modern period establishes a notoriously difficult assumption, because what we would consider to be ‘feminist’ standpoints cannot neatly be paralleled with similar early modern discourses on the position of women.³⁶¹ Precisely because of the difficulties surrounding early modern

³⁶¹ The danger of anachronism is particularly obvious with regard to the Renaissance debate about women, the so-called *querelle des femmes* (or, to use Linda Woodbridge’s term, the ‘formal controversy’ (cf. Woodbridge (1984)), which produced ‘a series of pro-feminist and anti-feminist texts, mostly arguing about the same key passages in authoritative texts, classical and scriptural’ (Clarke (2001) 49). The fact that a number of these treatises, even some in defense of women, were written by men using female pseudonyms

forerunners of feminism, I find it illuminating to use early modern writings concerned with the roles of women as a testing ground for our own dearly-held feminist beliefs – one of them being the idea that, of necessity, relationships between women and female-only spaces present counter-discourses to the oppressive binarisms of patriarchal culture.

The inappropriateness of this position in the early modern context can be made out in an exemplary fashion in Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*. In the absence of King Herod, the patriarchal head of the family and the state, who is alleged to have died on a journey to Rome, the Judaeen court is decidedly female-dominated. As she presumes that she is free from patriarchal control, Salome, Mariam's sister-in-law, expresses her dissatisfaction with women's inequality as regards the politics of marriage. She vows to separate from her second husband Constabarus, whom she has fallen out of love with. Renouncing the patriarchal imperatives of virtuous femininity – 'shame is gone and honour wiped away' (I.iv.33) – she questions the divorce laws of her time:

Why should such privilege to men be given?
Or given to them, why barred from women then?
Are men than we in greater grace with Heaven?
Or cannot women hate as well as men?
I'll be the custom-breaker, and begin
To show my sex the way to freedom's door. (I.iv.45ff.)

The principles Salome puts forward are appealing in their common-sensical simplicity – speaking about her wish to marry Silleus, whom she has madly fallen in love with, she reasons straightforwardly: 'He loves, I love. What then can be the cause / Keeps me from being the Arabian's wife?' (I.iv.37f.). Constabarus is adamant to preserve Salome's reputation, taking on what is, in fact, a feminine speaking position: 'I blush for you, that have your blushing lost' (I.vi.4). This curious role reversal culminates in Salome's violent outburst: in an act of defiance whose boldness verges on outright rebellion and is thus decidedly 'unfeminine,' she tells Constabarus that '[t]hy love and admonitions I defy. / Thou shalt no longer call me wife' (I.vi.42f.).³⁶² She fiercely defends her independence, taking it to a solipsistic extreme when she declares: 'My will shall be to me instead of law' (I.vi.80). And yet, in spite of her liberationist rhetoric, Salome is shown in the play to be far less than a feminist 'custom-breaker.' The fact that she had left her first husband Josephus because of a similarly unrestrained but short-lived infatuation with Constabarus as she now displays for Silleus lends a disturbing fickleness to her character. Moreover, it

suggests that the texts were vehicles for playful intellectual competition rather than expressions of ideological commitment to a 'feminist' cause.

³⁶² Her behaviour makes Salome the embodiment of a monstrosity which, in essence, amounts to her rejection of femininity. As Constabarus remarks: 'Are Hebrew women now transformed to men?' (I.vi.47).

is her – not the superficially much more conventional and submissive Mariam – who cunningly employs and thus plays along with the intrigues and plots that sustain the patriarchal sexual economy. Salome is at the centre of the mutual slugging-off that the women in the play engage in and that renders any idea of a peaceful, cooperative sisterhood a mere fantasy. The women use their reproductive potential, their only road of access to a relatively secure and powerful position within the system, as a means of gaining superiority over each other, thus replicating the power structures of heredity and primogeniture by which patriarchy is sustained and perpetuating its sexual binarisms. For instance, Doris, Herod's first wife, whom he divorced in favour of Mariam but has children with, declares that 'I do hope this boy of mine / Shall one day come to be the death of thine [Mariam's son]' (IV.viii.99f.). Similarly, Mariam assaults Salome on the grounds of her race and its relevance to orderly and flawless patriarchal succession:

My birth thy baser birth so far excelled,
I had to both of you [Salome and Alexandra] the princess been.
Thou parti-Jew, and parti-Edomite,
Thou mongrel, issued from rejected race! (I.iii.27ff.)

In Herod's absence, the 'exciting ... possibilit[ies] and ideas of female autonomy' (Findlay (2000) 508) that could have been opened up by the temporary vacuum at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy are overruled by the women's 'aggressive competition' (Findlay (2000) 508) and mutual distrust. Under patriarchy, all-female relationships prove to be just as destructive as the more visibly oppressive gender-differential ones.³⁶³

What is more, Salome's unabashed licentiousness, far from prompting changes in the sexual relations of her society, reasserts misogynistic prejudice, because it confirms the image of women as 'creatures made to be the human curse' (IV.vi.37). At best, women are 'foolish, forward, wanton, vain' (IV.vi.55) and, at worst, 'adulterous, murderous, cunning, proud' (IV.vi.56), as Constabarus conjectures in his violent invective against women that follows his discovery of Salome's betrayal. The play's obvious alignment of Salome with monstrous femininity poses the question why it is not her who is exorcised at the end, but Mariam, although the latter overtly embraces virtue by clinging fiercely to her marital vows and professing her honesty. This seeming contradiction can be untangled with regard

³⁶³ Naomi J. Miller points out the destructive nature of the female-female relationships in *The Tragedy of Mariam*: 'Instead of representing relations between women in a patriarchal society as supportive or empowering, Cary demonstrates the mutually destructive potential of female homosocial bonds in the face of masculine oppression. Although Cary's female characters exhibit the ability to speak out strongly against male tyranny when heard in isolation from each other, their collective jostling for position in a society governed by male subjects leaves them little room to stand together, so that finally their alternatives seem limited to drowning out each other's voices or subsiding into silence' (Miller (1996) 209).

to the issue that focuses the decisive difference between both characters, namely their attitudes to speech. Martha Slowe argues that, ‘while Mariam who is chaste arouses suspicions by her open speech, Salome, who takes sexual and discursive liberties, preserves her reputation by guarding her speech and appearing to confine it to patriarchal limits.’³⁶⁴ Although it might seem mistaken to state that Salome ‘guard[s] her speech,’ given the highly transgressive nature of her utterances, there is a sense in which Slowe has a point. For all her ‘unfeminine’ verbal outbursts, at least Salome falls squarely within the stereotypes that patriarchy outlines for women, embodying as she does the proverbial female scold. Even though her behaviour serves to ostracise her, she is content to embody monstrosity and destructiveness, a clichéd version of femininity that is immediately graspable thanks to its very simplicity. By contrast, Mariam is unable to uphold her firm moral standards in the face of a patriarchal economy that functions on very different terms. Her refusal to ‘frame disguise’ (IV.iii.58) as regards her feelings for Herod is constantly being undercut by far less straightforward emotions, as when, at the beginning of the play, she states that: ‘Now do I find by self experience taught, / One object yields both grief and joy’ (I.i.9f.). Mariam cannot be accommodated within the conventional expectations directed at women – while her claims for truthfulness border on the transgressive, as they conform to a ‘masculine’ code of honour (cf. Habermann (2003) 143), her failure to live up to her own principles is unavoidable. It is the perverse logic of the patriarchal economy with its need for clear-cut identities that she needs to be eliminated if the existing order is not to collapse. *The Tragedy of Mariam* shows that excess – for the failure to live in accordance with the ‘golden meane’ is what both Mariam and Salome stand for, albeit in different ways – makes it impossible for women to occupy a place within the patriarchal order. They can either speak in a transgressive fashion, but only from the margins, as is the case with Salome, or their speech unearths the contradictions within patriarchal discourse, so that they have to be made to disappear altogether, as happens to Mariam, who is beheaded at the end of the play.

A similar opposition can be found in early modern women’s writings which more explicitly feature all-female settings. The socio-cultural context of early modern women-only spaces is illuminating: they revolve around specifically female experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth and the following period of lying-in.³⁶⁵ As the examples of Lady

³⁶⁴ Martha Slowe, ‘Speech Crimes in *The Tragedy of Mariam*’ (unpublished paper for the 1990 Shakespeare Association of America seminar on Renaissance Women); quoted in Ferguson (1991) 243.

³⁶⁵ In the words of Patricia Crawford, ‘[c]hildbirth was the female rite of passage *par excellence*’ (Crawford (1990) 21). Helen Wilcox points to the ‘inherent paradox in this female experience: it is intensely individual and physically specific, but at the same time so communal ... that it is hardly accurate to term it “private”’

Grace Mildmay and Lady Margaret Hoby show, women were often well-versed in medicine and acted as nurses or midwives in their communities. The surviving writings by women about maternity suggest that this ‘uniquely female experience ... had its own resonances, myths and spaces for women and a women’s community’ (Aughterson (1995) 105). In contrast to our present-day understanding of motherhood as a private and personal experience involving only the woman or the heterosexual couple (that is, mostly including the male partner, but excluding the wider community), childbirth in the early modern period must be imagined as a communal event, where the female relatives and friends of the woman in labour would gather in her chamber and be present throughout the birth and subsequent lying-in.

In order to comprehend the significance and also the ambiguous nature of this setting, it is important to be aware that, to some extent, women-only spaces provided a realm outside the patriarchal order, simply by virtue of being exclusively female. A number of critics have gone so far as to interpret the early modern rituals of birthing and lying-in as instigating ‘a period of temporary female empowerment’ (Booy (2002) 95) that verged on the carnivalesque (cf. Bowers (2003) 9). This affinity is quite clearly alluded to in the advice book *The Woman’s Advocate*: ‘Tis a time of freedom, when women ... have a privilege to talk petty treason.’³⁶⁶ The reference to treason is significant in that it points to the fact that, within the framework of the ‘little commonwealth’ analogy, wifely disobedience could only be perceived in terms of rebellion against the husband-ruler.³⁶⁷ Alison Findlay outlines the implications of this perception:

The legal classification of domestic crimes reinforced the parallels between ‘private household’ and state. The master of a household who killed his wife, children or servants was charged with murder, but subordinates who perpetrated the same crime on their governor were presented for petty treason, equating their domestic insurrection with rebellion against the monarch. (Findlay (1999) 128)

The seemingly overblown anxieties associated with the all-female childbirth scenario are more easily understandable if one takes note of two prevailing juridico-medical assumptions of the time: for one thing, a woman in the throes of labour was considered likely to reveal the truth about the father of her child, i.e. the testimony of the female birth attendants would potentially be vital in legally asserting paternity (cf. Bicks (2000) 49).

(Wilcox (1992) 57). Again, this indicates our own historical distance as well as the complexities of the private/public distinction that I have explored in 2.3.

³⁶⁶ *The Woman’s Advocate*. London 1683.

³⁶⁷ Caroline Bicks explains why husbands would feel their power to be acutely diminished during their wives’ lying-in: ‘Women usually gave birth in cordoned off spaces within their homes, often near or in their marital beds, the symbolic locus of control for the husband over his wife: in it, he hoped to deflower his bride and generate his heirs’ (Bicks (2003) 10).

Legitimacy and birthright, the cornerstones of patriarchy, were thus perceived to be partly in the hands of women. Also, midwives were thought to be able to manipulate a male newborn's sexual prowess in adult life by the way they cut his umbilical cord: its length was assumed to reflect the length of the man's penis and tongue in later life (cf. Bicks (2000) 53, Evenden (2000) 84). Obviously, this showed masculine identity to be even more strongly dependent on women. Because of the resulting anxieties, the female-only space that was childbirth was regarded with apprehension and, in the attempt to counter patriarchy's unease, was eventually curtailed.³⁶⁸ This suggests that the temporal abolishment of conventional hierarchies in all-female settings must not prompt us to idealise these experiences as, exclusively, instances of liberation from the prevailing patriarchal order. Also, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that childbirth posed considerable risks due to poor hygienic conditions and lack of medical knowledge and was therefore mystified and beset with anxiety for women themselves.³⁶⁹

As is suggested by the beliefs outlined above, even specifically female spheres were implicated in patriarchal structures, so that integral parts of the female-only culture, to some extent, played in the hands of the dominant discourse of women's inferiority. For example, religious customs after childbirth can either be seen, if we emphasise their 'feminist,' 'transgressive' content, as 'rituals celebrated by women for women, thereby establishing an equation between childbirth, maternity and a women's subculture' (Aughterson (1995) 10) – or, if we stress their 'conservative' functions, as 'purification rituals to cleanse the woman's material body after the filth of childbirth' (Aughterson (1995) 10), which perpetuated the notion of female uncleanness and inherent imperfection.³⁷⁰ Again, the female-only space of childbirth is not automatically free from patriarchal constraints.

A very vivid dramatic realisation of the lying-in period that points to these ambiguities can be found in a male-authored text, Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613). In one scene, just after Master Allwitt's wife has given birth, her female friends and relatives gather in her lying-in chamber to discuss the foregoing successful delivery and gossip about various saucy incidents in the community. The scene realistically

³⁶⁸ This is one explanation for the shift of influence from midwives to (male) doctors that began in the early modern period: 'The debate between the confident professional doctors and the midwives contributed to a devaluing of women's traditional skills. Doctors also sought to replace women's authority in matters maternal with their own methods grounded in "scientific" knowledge' (Crawford (1990) 13).

³⁶⁹ Cf. my previous analysis of the theme in the context of women's attitudes towards death (2.4).

³⁷⁰ The lying-in period after childbirth would be concluded with the ritual of 'churcing' – a special service held as the mother was brought to church for the first time after the birth to be blessed by the priest. In addition, importantly for the general perception of female corporeality, in the popular imagination (if not among church officials) the custom was associated with ritual purification.

portrays the exclusive presence of women – men appear only as bystanders, if at all. Allwit's comment catches the exclusively female spirit of the occasion:

... I am tied to nothing
In this business, ...
...
Here's running to and fro, nurse upon nurse,
Three charwomen, besides maids and neighbor's children. (II.ii.4f.)

Allwit's statement barely conceals the unease that early modern patriarchy felt towards women-only spaces. In the play, paternity is a notoriously vague and unclear matter: Mistress Allwit already has two children by Sir Walter Whorehound, a wealthy landowner – designated as 'his bastards [by Mistress Allwit]' (10) in the *Dramatis Personae* – and the Allwits are described as being 'kept' by Sir Walter (8). While Allwit professes to be happy with this arrangement (cf. I.ii.12-57), it effectively disempowers him as patriarchal household head. One of his servants refuses to refer to Allwit as his 'master' and rebuffs him with the remark that 'you are but our mistress's husband' (I.ii.67). Whether Mistress Allwit's newborn child is in fact her husband's or Sir Walter's is left somewhat unclear, which adds an air of conspiratorial exclusiveness to the gossips' gathering. This sense is heightened when Lady Kix, after berating her husband for his infertility ('thou desertless slave' (II.ii.173)) rushes off to 'the gossiping of Master Allwit's child' (II.ii.174), leaving the audience to wonder whether Sir Oliver's reproductive failure is likely to be made an object of ridicule in the women's banter that is going on behind closed doors.

In order to ward off the diffuse threat that the female-only assembly constitutes, the event is described in the play in such a way as to present the women in a derogatory fashion, in terms of grotesque monstrosity. The scene verges on the orgiastic, with the women indulging in all kinds of physical pleasures (drinking, (over-)eating and bold sexual punning).³⁷¹ Allwit's comment describes their behaviour as destructive of the social order, as their overindulgence threatens the economic well-being of the patriarchal household:

Had this been all my cost now I had been beggared. These women have no consciences at sweetmeats, where e'er they come; see and they have not culled out all the long plums too. They have left nothing here but short wriggletail comfits, not worth mouthing. No mar'l I heard a citizen complain once that his wife's belly only broke his back. (III.ii.70ff.)

The gossips' meeting is as destructive as (and intricately linked with) female sexuality (note the *double entendre* on 'his wife's belly') – both threaten to incapacitate patriarchal

³⁷¹ As Richard Bowers observes, '[a]lone among themselves they do as they please, their overindulgence and recklessness registering itself as a measure of carnival protest, as an exercise (albeit circumscribed within patriarchy) of gender freedom' (Bowers (2003) 9).

rule. Because it triggers patriarchal opposition, the setting thereby fosters the indictment of the female body as the locus of unrestrained monstrosity and uncleanness. Again, the potentially liberating all-female environment ultimately serves to confirm conventional stereotyping (of course, it is unsurprising in a male-authored text that this should be so). The containment of the feminine is necessary because it poses a threat to patriarchal masculinity.

In an even more obvious fashion, Margaret Cavendish's closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure*, a literary rendition of an all-female setting from a woman's perspective, portrays this space apart as a temporary release that ultimately channels back to and reasserts patriarchy. Displaying a strikingly self-confident conviction of female superiority, the protagonist Lady Happy, the founder of the convent, states that 'those women, where Fortune, Nature and the gods are joined to make them happy, were mad to live with Men, who make the female sex their slaves; but I will not be so inslaved, but will live retired from their company' (220). She describes her women-only 'Pleasure's Convent' (221) as a place where the inhabitants can enjoy 'all the delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful' (220) and relish in its sensory abundance:

For every Sense shall pleasure take,
And all our Lives shall merry make:
Our Minds in full delight shall joy,
Not vex'd with every idle Toy:
...
Variety each sense shall feed,
And Change in them new Appetites breed.
Thus will in *Pleasure's Convent* I
Live with delight, and with it die. (220ff.; emphasis in the original)

Lady Happy's vision is reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's libidinal 'economy of abundance' (Irigaray (1985b) 197), a feminine mode of (self-)experience that authenticates the non-binary pleasures of constant self-touching that Irigaray considers to be congenial to women. For Irigaray, female fulfilment can be achieved if women are enabled to perceive their bodies in non-binary terms, as 'that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched' (Irigaray (1985b) 26; emphasis in the original). In the safety of the convent, the female inhabitants are enabled to undermine the strictures of the patriarchal sexual economy and its notions of appropriateness and feminine virtue. What is more, they are even empowered to subvert the heterosexual norm: '[S]ome of [the] Ladies do accoutre

Themselves in Masculine-Habits and act Lovers-parts' (229). Elsewhere, Cavendish declares her playful nonchalance as regards gender as a category in her fictional characters:

I know there are many Scholastical and Pedantical persons that will condemn my writings, because I do not keep strictly to the Masculine and Feminine Genders, as they call them, as for example a Lock and a Key ... but I know no reason but that I may as well make them Hees for my use, as others did Shees, or Shees as others did Hees[.]³⁷²

Indeed, in the *Convent of Pleasure*, cross-dressing, expressly forbidden for early modern women, allows tentative explorations of otherwise illicit same-sex love, even if only in the doubly fictional context of the play-within-the-play that the women perform in the convent. Their mutual affection is experienced as 'more virtuous, innocent and harmless' (234) than heterosexual love and allows them to 'please our selves, as harmless Lovers use to do' (234).

However, the play also shows the limitations of Cavendish's carefree gender blurring in her fiction. It suggests that female fulfilment can only be actualised in a separate realm that is hermetically sealed from the surrounding conventional society – in the 'Convent of Pleasure,' 'the Walls are a Yard-thick' (227) (note that a seventeenth-century readership would have recognised the distinctively phallic symbolism of this description: 'yard' was a common colloquialism for an erect penis). As the female convent cannot be accommodated within patriarchal society, it is constantly threatened by the violent intrusion of the very forces it is at pains to exclude. Inevitably, the convent's deceptive harmony is destroyed when Lady Happy's real-world suitor, disguised as a Princess, enters the women's community. His intrusion goes initially undetected, but gradually destroys the sisterhood, so that, on his discovery, the women 'all skip from each other, as afraid of each other' (243). In sharp contrast to their previous expressions of non-combative same-sex love, the Prince's heterosexual approaches smack of violent coupling rather than affectionate mutuality: when his true identity is revealed, he asks his Ambassador to 'go from me to the Councillors of this State, and inform them of my being here, as also the reason, and that I ask their leave I may marry this Lady; *otherwise, tell them I will have her by force of Arms*' (243f.; emphasis added). Even more disturbingly, the discovery of his true sexual identity reveals the tentative explorations of same-sex affection between women to have been an illusion, since it was in fact a heterosexual couple – the Prince and Lady Happy – who kissed. Madam Mediator, one of the female

³⁷² Margaret Cavendish, 'To the Readers.' *Playes Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*. London: by A. Warren for John Martyn, James Allestry, and Tho. Dicas, 1662 (no sig.); quoted in Masten (1997) 156.

inhabitants of the convent, makes a somewhat wry comment that reveals the community's questioning of heteronormativity to have been an illusion from the start: '[O]nly once I saw him kiss the Lady *Happy*; and you know Womens Kisses are unnatural, and me-thought they kissed with more alacrity than Women use, a kind of Titillation, and more Vigorous' (244). In the end, the potentially subversive possibilities of the 'convent of pleasure' are contained by the play's all too conventional ending in heterosexual marriage. The stage directions for the final scene create a sugar-coated picture of marital bliss that stands in harsh contrast to the sense of adventure and female self-confidence that opened the play:

Enter the Prince as Bridegroom, and the Lady *Happy* as Bride, hand in hand under a Canopy born over their heads by Men; the Magistrates march before, then the Hoboys; and then the Bridal Guests, as coming from the Church, where they were Married. All the Company bids them joy, they thank them. (245)

The reductive closure that is thereby effected glosses over the unsettling implications of the Prince's brutal strategies of courtship and renders the transgressive potential of the preceding scenes an insubstantial outgrowth of a woman's fantasy. This reading gains support in an unusually literal sense: in some copies of Cavendish's 1668 *Plays*, the last two scenes – those after the revelation of the Prince(ss) as male, from which the above-quoted stage directions are taken – are headed 'Written by my Lord Duke' (244), i.e. it was probably her husband who completed the play. Tanya Wood has argued that this attribution is probably correct, since the scene's 'bawdy humor and wordplay are more characteristic of him than of Cavendish.'³⁷³ Of course, we can only guess what Cavendish's motivation for this move might have been or even question whether the attribution is correct;³⁷⁴ yet one cannot help drawing parallels between her professed resignation of her own authorship to her husband and the course of action in the play. Just as Lady *Happy* finally succumbs to the Prince's sexual advances, thereby giving up her own project, the alternative 'Pleasure's Convent,' Cavendish relinquishes her authorial voice as it is replaced by her husband's. The anti-marriage argument that was opened up in the play-within-the-play thus comes full circle: 'Newcastle's last words turn the Convent into a bawdy joke and firmly contain its previously wayward heroine within the bonds of matrimony. Like most of the text, the Duke's scenes suggest that marriage silences and disempowers women.'³⁷⁵

³⁷³ Tanya Wood, in Ostovich and Sauer (2004) 435; cf. Tomlinson (1992) 157.

³⁷⁴ Tanya Wood quotes the different explanations that critics have brought forward: Cavendish might have lost interest in the play's denouement after the discovery of the Prince(ss) as a man; she might have had to give in to her husband's demand to have the text end as he saw fit; or – probably the most intriguing possibility – she might have written the final scenes herself, but used her husband's name in order not to incur criticism for her bawdy humour (cf. Tanya Wood, in Ostovich and Sauer (2004) 435).

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

The point I am making here is that all-female spaces, despite being a frequently recurring motif in seventeenth-century women's writings, cannot unquestioningly be taken as instances of subversion, but reveal an intricate and often disturbing implication in, or even play in the hands of, patriarchy. In both male- and female-authored texts, women-only spheres are portrayed as dysfunctional, and the excess they entail is associated with women's lack of chastity. I therefore do not agree with Rebecca D'Monté and Nicole Pohl's explanation for the proliferation of women-only settings in the period. D'Monté and Pohl seek to illuminate the phenomenon with reference to what they call the 'gendered spheres' model: 'The establishment of female communities in fiction and reality was a clear attempt to blur the boundaries between the public and the private, between market and domestic economy and between prescriptive and essentialist gender paradigms' (D'Monté and Pohl (2000) 7). In D'Monté and Pohl's account, female-only societies provide alternative visions that oppose the emergent structural binarisms of modernity. Of course, these alternatives are indeed opened up, which might in itself be considered a valuable move. However, what might appear to be a progressive, 'feminist' stance to us may, at a closer look, stand in a more complex relation to the dominant ideology. To read instances of women's solidarity and female-female desire as expressions of a feminist consciousness or postmodern gender-bending *avant la lettre* verges on ahistorical wishful thinking and disregards the ambiguities that these visions entail. After all, as my reading of *The Convent of Pleasure* suggests, exclusively female communities do not necessarily abandon patriarchy's oppositions, but are inevitably predicated on them. To argue this is not to present patriarchy as monolithic and unsubvertible; yet in the historical context, women who pursue radical alternatives to the patriarchal order perpetuate that very same order rather than dismantling it.

The 'golden mean': precariousness and affirmation

If it is the case that radical alternatives to the dominant discourse ultimately reaffirm women's marginal status, they cannot account for women's senses of self as they experienced and lived them. Consequently, if we want to adequately grasp their understandings of self, we have to abandon the notion of women as being at the margins of

the patriarchal order, the perennial exception to the patriarchal norm. Alternatively, their position can be contextualised more fruitfully if we turn the idea of marginality on its head: women's exceptional or marginal case can, in fact, be regarded as disclosing the nature of that which is seen as the 'universal,' the norm.³⁷⁶ If we take early modern women's writings seriously, as writings from the margins of the dominant discourse, their ways of identity formation need not be read as exceptions to a dominant and normative model, but can in fact open up a different, even generally applicable, paradigm of subjectivity. The strategies by which they achieve this subjectivity are intrinsically dialectical: the women writers accept patriarchal constraints but simultaneously express themselves creatively; or, conversely, they transgress patriarchal discourse but simultaneously neutralise that transgression. To repeat the central argument of my foregoing readings, early modern women engage in delicate balancing acts. Struggling for compromise and negotiating conflicting desires is the crucial trajectory of their identity formation. In pursuing this strategy, they were clearly aware of the cultural assumption that the self can be fashioned, i.e. that identity is, to some extent, the product of conscious efforts on the part of the individual to forge it. If identity was a given, fixed once and for all, it would be pointless to even strive to attain any kind of 'golden mean.' On the other hand, self-fashioning, for women in particular, does not mean a freely creative shaping of identity, but is co-dependent on a firm set of moral principles as well as outward constraints (cf. Greenblatt (1980) 1ff.). Thus, in order to live with these conflicting demands and to achieve a liveable sense of self, it is necessary to exercise a rigid regime of self-mastery so as not to unsettle the perennially precarious equilibrium on which workable selfhood relies. Moderation seems to be the key to upholding this delicate balance – 'Never wish impossible wishes' (sig. C4v), as M. R. admonishes her daughter.

If this balance is unsettled, the results are devastating. In M. R.'s manual, the types of behaviour that she considers to be 'out of compass' and hence detrimental to a woman's moral impeccability are consistently aligned with lack of modesty and restraint. For instance, 'wantonnesse,' the moral and structural opposite of chastity, is described in

³⁷⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, in the concluding chapter to his *Repetition* (1843), develops helpful thoughts on the relationship between the exceptional and the universal. According to Kierkegaard, '[t]he vigorous and determined exception, who although he is in conflict with the universal still is an offshoot of it, sustains himself. The relation is as follows. The exception also thinks the universal in that he [*sic*] thinks himself through; he works for the universal in that he works himself through; he explains the universal in that he explains himself. Consequently, the exception explains the universal and himself ... [H]e discloses everything far more clearly than the universal itself' (Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition. A Venture in Experimenting Psychology by Constantin Constantinus*. In: *Fear and Trembling. / Repetition. (Kierkegaard's Writings VI)*. Eds. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. 125-231 (227)). With thanks to Paul Fletcher for pointing out this link to me.

terms of all-devouring monstrosity: ‘Wantonnesse when it turnes to lust, in a womans bosome, is a desire against reason, a furious and unbridled appetite, which killeth all good motions in her minde, and leaveth no place for virtue’ (sig. A6v). Straying from the ‘golden meane’ – that is, succumbing to passion – is not merely a temporary and reversible aberration, but destroys virtue altogether. Surpassing the bounds of virtue ultimately leads to self-destruction, clearly conceptualised as an outgrowth of excess: ‘Wantonnesse maketh a woman covet beyond her power, to act beyond her nature, and to die before her time’ (sig. A7r). As such, it results from the failure to carry through the radical self-scrutiny and to achieve the self-mastery that I have singled out as the foundations of early modern women’s senses of self. It is significant that the alternative to immoderate passion and lack of virtue is not perfection. For instance, M. R.’s comments on the state of the human body suggest that illness is not necessarily negative; rather, it is an indispensable complement to health, required in order to secure balance: ‘Grieve not to groane under the hand of sicknesse; for as sometimes it purgeth the body from intemperate humors, so doth it oftentimes the Soule from more dangerous securitie, and the rather, since there is no perfect health in this world, but a newtralitye betweene sicknesse and health’ (sig. B1r). Apparently, perfection – in this case, incessant, uninterrupted health – would be an equally unnatural move beyond the bounds of moderate equilibrium.

Yet especially if one considers the tangible, physical implications of R.’s illness/health motif, it is surprising that she seems to content herself with a mere ‘newtralitye betweene sicknesse and health’ with such ease. Again, this presents us with the problem of genuineness and believability, an issue that is complicated further by our historical distance. Together with her above-quoted injunction to ‘never wish impossible wishes’ (sig. C4v), R.’s attitude smacks of a self-curtailment that seems unlikely to be entirely truthful. This observation prompts a number of questions: first, is the negative impression of self-curtailment simply a product of our own, historically contingent perspective that values potentially endless possibilities for self-fulfilment? Or are we confronted with a deliberate attempt on R.’s part to present as positive something that she in fact perceived very differently? Is the ‘golden meane’ an ideal that women actively supported, or is it rather ‘second best,’ a way of making sense of dissatisfying conditions which helped women come to terms with disappointments and despair?

Elizabeth Grymeston, in her *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives*, devotes a whole chapter to the quest for balance: one of her opening paragraphs is entitled ‘A short line how to *levell* your life’ (sig. B2r; emphasis added). As one of the prerequisites of

moral impeccability, Grymeston presents the ability to weigh positive and negative attitudes and behaviours. Her balancing impulse is even mirrored in her sentence structure:

Where thou owest, pay duetie: where thou findest, returne curtesie: where thou art knowen, deserve love. Desire the best: disdain none, but evill companie. Grieve, but be not angrie at discourtesies. Redresse, but revenge no wrongs. Yet so remember pitie, as you forget not decencie. (sig. B2r)

Again, what Grymeston here suggests is that true satisfaction can be gained only through a careful balancing act, by avoiding extremes. If successful, this negotiation allows ‘that grace may descend’ (sig. B2r), i.e. it guarantees salvation and bliss in the hereafter. To pursue the ‘golden meane’ is rewarding in a fundamental sense, because it means to live according to God’s will.

As the passage from Grymeston’s manual suggests, balance, moderation and negotiation of ambiguities appear both on the level of the content and message of the women’s writings and sometimes also feature stylistically in their texts. Most obviously, balance is the structuring principle of Martha Moulsworth’s *Memorandum*. In various instances, she directly juxtaposes contrasting images, or uses the same word twice, but in a diametrically opposed sense. This strategy is particularly striking in her hidden references to her sexual life. Justifying her option for married life, she displays a somewhat equivocal attitude towards virginity: ‘Butt though the virgin Muses I loue well / I haue longe since Bid virgin life ffarewell’ (41f.). Moulsworth thus simultaneously acknowledges the religio-cultural ideal of virginity (‘... I loue well’) at the same time as she boldly asserts that her own preferences lie elsewhere. In a similarly equivocal fashion, she summarily describes her three marriages:

[T]hree husbands me, & I haue them enioyde
Nor I by them, nor they by me annoyed
all louely, lovinge all, some more, some lesse
though gonn their loue, & memorie I blesse. (45ff.)

Again, she creates an overall impression of balanced equilibrium, which is achieved by elaborate poetic techniques: the chiasmic patterns (‘me, & I haue them’ (45), ‘Nor I by them, nor they by me’ (46), ‘All lovely, loving all’ (47)) do not create a sense of opposition or contradiction, but rather one of mutuality and harmony.³⁷⁷ Enjoyment, with its potentially sexual overtones, is counter-balanced with the more unambiguous word field love/loving/lovely and the pious allusion to blessing. In a similar way, Moulsworth tones

³⁷⁷ Matthew Steggle interprets this technique as ‘reflect[ing] the reciprocity of these marriages, enacting the equality of the relationship in the enfoldings of the [rhetorical] figure’ (Steggle (1996) 28).

down the possible sexual connotations of the spring motif with regard to her married life when she states that '[m]y springe was late, some thinke that sooner loue / butt backward springs doe oft the kindest proue' (51f.). Her closing remarks, in which she declares her preference for widowhood rather than remarriage ('the Virgins life is gold, as Clarks vs tell / the Widowes siluar, I loue siluar well' (109f.)), can be interpreted as part of the same pattern, as a means of 'having it both ways.' For, in a sense, Moulsworth's widowhood in the final years of her life comprises the best of both worlds: she has previously experienced love and sexual fulfilment and is now supplied with the financial security necessary for a worry-free existence.

However, the fact that balance in the *Memorandum* is achieved via adequate poetic devices and carefully worked-out stylistics urges the question whether the sense of equilibrium in the poem corresponds to Moulsworth's true state of mind, or whether it is the result of a deliberate rhetorical setup. After all, the contradictions that characterise her statements are merely concealed or rhetorically glossed over; they cannot be entirely cancelled out. At the same time this question is somewhat beside the point, because by their very nature, self-writings cannot be approached with the categories of 'truth' versus 'falsehood' – we cannot possibly decide whether the historical Martha Moulsworth really held an attitude of calm equanimity towards her life. What her poem does show, however, is that apparent balance in women's texts cannot necessarily be equated with self-restraint; rather, it is a means of expressing the simultaneity of conformist and dissident attitudes. In Moulsworth's poem, the existence of desires that threaten to disrupt, but that ultimately uphold the precarious 'meane' is clearly voiced – there is self-restraint, but there is also self-expression.

Conclusion: dialectics as balance

My foregoing observations have shown why it is possible for early modern women themselves to present the 'golden meane' as a goal worth pursuing, and in what ways they reinterpret the idea of moderation so as to meet their specific needs and desires. Above all, it is the need to reconcile conflicting demands while recognising the impossibility to balance out ambiguities altogether that makes the concept attractive to, if not vital for

women. Because of this characteristic stance, their writings present an alternative to the modern veneration of the coherent self. The female authors acknowledge the contingencies and imperfections of their self-experience, and they do not deceive themselves as to the impossibility of attaining a unified speaking position. The result is a selfhood that struggles to integrate, or at least negotiate, submissive and assertive versions of subjectivity. Lynette McGrath outlines the effects of this balancing act:

Women in early modern England ... seem to have resided in a bodily space where they functioned at one and the same time as both object and subject. Out of this variable, flexible position, they did not achieve – and, as women, could not be expected to achieve – the dubiously attainable Kantian ideal of a transcendental subjectivity. ... They achieved, rather, in common I believe with almost all women and perhaps most men at all stages of history, a kind of limited and divided linguistic power and consciousness of bodily identity which makes possible an effective and interesting, though by no means total, range of textual authority and subjectivity. (McGrath (2002) 48)

It is only the combination of various forms of self-constitution – be they self-affirming or self-undermining – that forms women’s precarious ‘golden mean.’ Indeed, as I have recurrently pointed out in my readings, early modern women’s texts abound with ambiguity and equivocation. Apparently, for women to pin down their views in a neat and categorical fashion is ineffective, if not dangerous, whereas evoking both sides of an argument or both alternatives of a choice at the same time and arriving at a concluding but contested compromise is more gratifying. At first glance, this might seem paradoxical and could be interpreted as a defeatist surrender to a toned-down mediocrity: after all, ‘[s]trengthening connections, making compromises, passively accepting one’s lot in life – these were the words of advice that seventeenth-century English women were asked to follow in everything from conduct books to plays’ (Matchinske (2002) 348). However, balancing ambiguities is helpful precisely because it allows for existing complexities not to be glossed over, but to be acknowledged. Of course, this strategy renders the women’s identities unavoidably incoherent and unstable. On the other hand, at the same time as their perceptions of self are riddled with ambiguities, they are not entirely devoid of a firm framework in which they are embedded, because ‘[e]arly modern equivocation was never an open-ended, “anything goes” endeavor’ (Matchinske (2002) 352).³⁷⁸ Megan Matchinske designates this strategy as ‘survivalist’ (Matchinske (2002) 336, 353): it allows women to ‘maintain dialogue’ (Matchinske (2002) 353), to contribute to and actively engage in the

³⁷⁸ Analysing the elements of Catholic dissent in Elizabeth Grymeson’s *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives*, she concludes that ‘[e]quivocation [i.e. ambiguities, simultaneity, balance] as survivalist strategy focuses on keeping the conversation going and being adaptable as to how best to maintain dialogue in the face of certain disagreement’ (Matchinske (2002) 353).

various discourses that were current at their time and that directly impacted on their lives and their senses of self. The 'golden meane' thus has several dimensions for them: it includes the simultaneity of reason and emotional intuition, mind and body, ideological construction and material reality. Again, each of these levels is characterised by a fundamental dialectic: tensions and contradictions exist side by side and create a precarious subjectivity. It is this form of the 'golden meane' that constituted a workable compromise for women as they struggled to reconcile the conflicting demands of patriarchy and self-determination. Ultimately, it allowed them to reinterpret their marginality as a contested, but nevertheless workable form of agency.

3 'Her idoll selfe'? – Conclusions

One chooses dialectics only when one has no other expedient. ... Dialectics can be only a last-ditch weapon in the hands of those who have no other weapon left.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (1889)³⁷⁹

For Friedrich Nietzsche, dialectic is a last resort, a desperate and futile attempt on the part of the downtrodden to delude themselves as to the powerlessness of their situation. Dialectics, for Nietzsche, is a gesture of weakness that is used by those who are not powerful enough to take a strong, uncompromising position. In the light of his devastating verdict, it seems problematic, if not outright destructive, to point to dialectics as the underlying trait that characterises early modern women's approaches to the various dimensions in relation to which they constitute their identities.

Nevertheless, early modern women's self-writings counterpoint Nietzsche's position. The authors' presentations of self suggest that, instead of being liberating, their seemingly clear-cut stances are likely to slide into excess precisely because they cannot be accommodated within the existing socio-cultural structures. For the women writers I have studied, to take such extreme positions, even if they seem to present a strong alternative to patriarchal discourse, has effects that are in direct opposition to female empowerment: excess equals all-out exclusion from the socio-cultural mainstream and is therefore debilitating. Instead, these women exhibit a dialectical stance precisely in order to claim at least a limited extent of power. Accepting contradictions and balancing adherence to patriarchal norms with individual self-assertion is a far more effective strategy for them than radical opposition, because it allows them a degree of independent agency within the existing structures. Thus the women's self-writings question the very validity of the notion of transgression and, in places, even that of a specifically feminine authorial stance. They suggest that an expression of self that consciously and radically sets itself apart from the dominant patriarchal discourse is not liberating at all, but rather has the opposite effect, namely loss of selfhood. Early modern women's writings may therefore ask us to rethink our own theoretical vantage point, forcing us to critically ask ourselves whether it makes sense for women to write themselves out of the dominant patriarchal discourse. Since this

³⁷⁹ Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968; quoted in Lovibond (1993) 398.

is where agency is situated, for women to refuse outright to inscribe themselves into patriarchal discourse means that they also reject the opportunity to take a stand and to assume agency and responsibility within it.

What I have so far outlined as being the overall message of the women's texts may sound unsettlingly close to an unprincipled, calculating pragmatism – yet I am not suggesting that an alternative feminine writing and sense of self are altogether pointless concepts. As numerous passages indicate, it is by no means impossible for women to express themselves creatively, in ways that do not conform to what is conventionally expected of them. Hence specifically feminine identities do provide counter-positions to the patriarchal symbolic order and question its predominance. The examples of early modern women's self-writings reveal, however, that it is vital for this questioning to take place partly from *within* the existing symbolic order. Mere ex-centricity may be momentarily liberating, but remains ultimately ineffectual.

In displaying this pragmatism of compromise, early modern women's writings shed interesting light on the position of the early modern period vis-à-vis modernity on the one hand and postmodernity on the other. Modernity is generally said to have been characterised by a set of constitutive binarisms – the dualities of mind versus body, nature versus culture, self versus other, presence versus absence, reason versus emotion, etc.³⁸⁰ Postmodernity, by contrast, is believed to do away with any such restrictive categorisations and, instead, to celebrate fragmentation, eclecticism and incoherence. The early modern period is assumed to stand in a complex relationship to both of these modes of thought – in the traditional interpretation, it foreshadows and leads on to the paradigms of modernity and, according to more recent accounts, it mirrors the features of postmodernity that modernity has suppressed and that are emblematic for periods of epistemological change.

My analyses of early modern women's self-writings have shown that the positions taken by their authors fail to fall squarely within either of these readings. Most importantly for the question of identity formation, whilst the texts point towards modern notions of the individual self and its relation to the world, they clearly deconstruct the validity of binarisms. I am aware that this may sound like an all too comprehensive or even clichéd statement, but the textual evidence lends support to the argument that women were probably more aware than their male contemporaries of the contradictions inherent in the

³⁸⁰ Stephen Toulmin differentiates on this point, arguing that these binarisms emerged with the scientific positivism of the seventeenth century and had not yet been endorsed by sixteenth-century humanists (cf. Toulmin (1992) 42ff.). For the purposes of my argument, I largely draw on what Toulmin refers to as the 'standard account' of modernity (Toulmin (1992) 13ff.), as outlined above.

emergent project of modernity. As the pervasive ambiguities in their writings indicate, they do not attempt to cancel out obvious tensions, but strive to uphold a dialectical simultaneity of opposed concepts, without necessarily forging a synthesis. For instance, they allow free expression of intimate feelings to coexist with self-restraint and strict curtailment, self-assertion with submission, and transgressive desire with conventional adherence to patriarchal imperatives. As a result, we do not encounter, in spite of their recurrent emphasis on rational self-control, the ‘anxiety of reason’ (Cascardi (1992) 31) that Anthony Cascardi points out as being one of the central preoccupations of the modern individual. Because the women do not idolise reason as the epitome of ‘true’ humanity and do not display a fetishistic preoccupation with the boundaries of the self, they do not have to rigidly suppress the various ‘others’ that their selves relate to; be it other people, their own emotions and desires or the divine. Although they do recognise the destructive potential of these forces in relation to self-controlled reason and do not hide the fact that self-government is always embattled, they strive to negotiate standpoints that combine these various and contradictory facets of human experience. The female authors’ self-fashioning can obviously not be conceptualised in terms of the modern grand narrative of individual emancipation.

At the same time, their writings also call into question the fashionable critical argument according to which early modern thought and self-perception foreshadow postmodern accounts of identity. In contrast to the proverbial fragmentation of selfhood that is characteristic of postmodernity, early modern narratives of the self (independent of gender, for that matter) display a persistent *anxiety* about fragmentation. Apart from hinting at the fundamental anachronism that is unavoidably implied in the attempt to trace the postmodern in the early modern, the women’s stances are also proof of the fact that much postmodernist theory is part of the very same patriarchal master discourse that its critique of Enlightenment humanism and rationalism claims to deconstruct. The reduction of identity to mere textual play is a way of coming to terms with the realisation that fully-fledged, independent selfhood has never been more than an ideological construct: ‘[V]ersions of Postmodernism which simply celebrate radical fragmentation can be seen to be a collective psychological response to the recognition that the ideal autonomy of Enlightenment cannot be possessed’ (Waugh (1992) 191). Since women are unable to deceive themselves as to the illusionary quality of a coherent and unified sense of self (‘women have, in practice, always experienced themselves in a “postmodern” fashion – decentred, lacking agency, defined through others’ (Waugh (1992) 198)), they do not need

to create around themselves a myth of wholeness. There is no need for them to cling to an imaginary phallus that they have never possessed in the first place, not even as an illusion. However, neither does it follow that they celebrate incoherence. The early modern women's texts I have studied reveal very clearly that the inability to uphold balance and create synthesis is threatening because it hints at the inescapability of the material underpinnings of personal identity. (Early modern) women's often more poignantly immediate experience of their bodies forbids them to neglect the undeniable material components of the self – the ever-present closeness of birth and death, their dependence on their corporeality and sexuality and their implications in patriarchal constraints. Conversely, this also means that the women are strongly aware of the fact that, in spite of the ambiguities and tensions that characterise their senses of self, some degree of agency and self-assertion can be achieved *within* the patriarchal system through gaining access to the material preconditions of power. The individual self can thereby be played off against, or even counter, outward constraints.

To take up, again, on the thread that has structured my study and opened my concluding remarks, a variety of recurrent themes prove early modern women's perceptions of self to be thoroughly dialectical. Whilst the authors assume the existence of a creative self that brings forward the text of its own accord, the same self is simultaneously dependent on mitigating authorities and ultimately threatened by the very textuality it has constructed. Relationships to others are constitutive of selfhood, but also threaten to undermine it. The private and public spheres are vaguely recognised to be distinct, but constantly merge into each other and position the self somewhere in-between, both public and private, and struggling to create and uphold a continuity between the inward self and its outward display. At the same time as they boldly claim to write with the intent to counter posterity's potential oblivion, the women are also threatened by the self-loss that, in turn, they employ as a contested authorising strategy. In short, ambiguities and simultaneities of apparent opposites are fundamental, but they are not indulged in or even celebrated. The writers' shared aim is to negotiate the tensions that result from conflicting impulses and ideas, to attempt to reconcile them or, where this is impossible, to live with them and find a workable compromise in some shape or form. What seems to be an irresolvable contradiction in the women's texts is actually a sometimes painful, yet also liveable and satisfying strategy: incoherence abounds and is sometimes even acknowledged openly; yet the authors are also at pains to create a sense of wholeness, however provisional. I would suggest that this authorial stance points to a gender-specific

dimension of early modern women's writings: because they write out of a position of severely restricted power, the women are less anxious to accept textual ambiguity and tension; they do not feel pressurised to establish a wholly detached and unified selfhood. Empowering subjectivity, for them, is naturally in-between; their 'idoll selfe' is both cherished and precarious. Hence the 'golden meane' is not just a clichéd trope, but is essentially, existentially enacted.

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