

To booke and pen:

Women, education and literacy in Tudor and Stuart England

Jackie Eales



Queen Elizabeth I, circa 1560
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As a student in the early 1970s, I became acutely aware that formal provision for women's education was a relatively recent development. I was at Bedford College, which originated in 1849 as the first higher education institution for women in the UK. James Allen's, the school I had previously attended, had been founded in 1741 to teach poor boys 'to read and such' and poor girls 'to read and sew', with the implication that they would have had no use for writing. In the mid-eighteenth century education was still strongly class driven and vocational. The poor girls would have wielded their needles in domestic service, in the clothing trade or as housewives. Most likely, they would also have displayed their reading skills by sewing samplers containing the alphabet, an improving motto and a variety of stitches. They would also have been expected to read the Bible.

It was only when I began to teach an undergraduate course on Tudor and Stuart women in the 1990s that I began to think more systematically about the education and literacy of women. I was fascinated by my students' response to the subject, as they were astonished to discover just how modern the concept of a national curriculum is. They were also taken aback by the differences between the education of better-off boys and girls in the early modern period. They knew that girls had been excluded from the grammar schools, the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge and from training for the professions, at the Inns of Court as lawyers for example. They also knew that girls from the higher social classes would have been educated at home by parents, male tutors and female governesses. They were surprised, though, by the scarcity of any formal education for girls and by the reasoning of Tudor and Stuart educationalists that girls had less aptitude for learning than boys.

These discoveries led us into the debates about the development of women's education in the period. Traditionally, the nunneries were seen as centres of female learning outside the home and their closure at the Reformation under Henry VIII was thus seen as a great setback. Yet as long ago as 1922, Eileen Power had argued that only a small proportion of the children of the upper classes had ever been educated by nuns in England. In 1536 the largest such establishment was at St Mary's Winchester, where 26 daughters of 'lords, knights and gentlemen' were being taught in what Power described as 'a fashionable seminary for young ladies'. She argued that there was no evidence that nuns routinely ran day schools for poor children and that the education they did provide was very limited.¹

Very few formal girls' schools were in operation in England in the sixteenth century. Evidence for the existence of girls' schools becomes more plentiful by the reign of James I, when Ladies Hall at Deptford had been set up for the daughters of courtiers. By the mid-century girls' schools had been started in Stepney, Hackney and Putney, and most major cities such as York and Oxford had a girls' academy by the end of the century, but they were all intended for the daughters of the gentry, merchants and professional classes.² Schools for poorer boys



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and girls tended to rely on the support of individual teachers and patrons, and were often short-lived.

In his standard work on the Tudor and Stuart periods, David Cressy has argued that the level of women's literacy – the ability to both read and write – was undoubtedly very low before the Reformation. During the next two centuries it grew, but remained significantly below that of men. Using the evidence of signatures, he placed female literacy at only 1% in the reign of Henry VII, increasing to 5% at the accession of Elizabeth and reaching 10% at the start of the civil war. By the accession of George I the figure was 25%, whereas the figure for men was closer to 50%. Cressy attributed the increases in literacy amongst both men and women to what he called the 'push factors' of humanist and protestant ideologies, together with the 'pull' factors created by changing social and economic conditions.³ The growth of towns in the period provided jobs which required a degree of literacy, although women were

particularly drawn to the victualing and retail trades, where an ability to reckon would have been an asset.

The Renaissance and the Reformation have often been seen as driving forces for the spread of literacy in the sixteenth and later centuries. Yet the extent to which humanist learning influenced girl's education has been vigorously challenged, especially by Joan Kelly, who posed the famous question 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' in the 1970s. The answer from Kelly and others was that there is little evidence in England that women outside elite circles benefited from the advice of humanist educators, who remained stubbornly blinkered to the educational potential of most girls.⁴ The Spaniard, Juan Luis Vives, was one of the most influential authors on the subject in the early sixteenth century. His *Instruction of a Christian Woman* was published in Antwerp in 1523 and was the first printed handbook on female education. It went into nine English editions by 1600 and in it Vives famously argued that

women should not be allowed to teach, because they had 'weak discretion' and would mislead their pupils.

Richard Mulcaster expressed similar views in 1581, when he argued that girls' brains were not so full of weighty ideas and that they were intellectually less able than boys. Like Vives, he advised that girls should be taught to read so that they could learn about religion. This would make them good Christians and also help them to understand and accept their places in relation to individual men and the wider social hierarchy. This advice for the lower orders stands in stark contrast to the praise awarded to women in Tudor court circles, who did receive a humanist education and who were seen as exceptional pupils.⁵

Perhaps the most well known compliment is the comment by Elizabeth I's tutor, Roger Ascham, who described his royal student at the age of 16 in 1550, in a letter to a fellow scholar, as having a masculine approach to her studies – 'the constitution of her mind is exempt from female weakness and she is endued with a masculine power of application.'⁶

As Patricia Crawford has demonstrated, however, the figures are startlingly low. Between 1500 and 1700 less than 2% of all the books published in England were written by women. During one of the most prolific decades of English print culture – the 1640s – women produced only 112 original works in print.⁸

The first woman to go into print seems to have been Henry VII's mother, the formidable Lady Margaret Beaufort, who translated part of Thomas Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* from French into English in 1504. The translation of religious works was seen as a particularly suitable female intellectual pursuit, but Tudor women also published some vigorously original books as well. Anne Askew's highly personal account of her interrogation and torture before her execution as a heretic was smuggled out of the Tower of London and published in 1546 by the religious exile and future Elizabeth bishop, John Bale. Askew was one of only half a dozen or so women burnt as heretics in Henry VIII's reign, because she refused to accept the Roman Catholic theology of the mass.

weakness of women. Eve's defiance of God's command not to take the fruit from the tree of knowledge was seen not only as the origin of sin in man, but contemporaries also thought that it demonstrated women's inability to resist temptation and their weak judgement in comparison with men.

In print, the majority of early Stuart female authors confined themselves to more conventional topics, which were seen as suitable for women. This included books on raising children, which were laced with pious and religious advice. The turning point for female authors came during the civil wars in the mid-seventeenth century, when press censorship broke down and women joined in the religious and political debates of the times. One of the most famous was Anna Trapnel, the daughter of a shipwright and a member of the radical Fifth Monarchist sect, who used her publications describing her visions and prophecies to attack the Cromwellian regime in the 1650s. Quaker women were also very active in print and in 1667 Margaret Fell, the wife of the Quaker

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Other elite women also benefited from the 'new learning', including Margaret, the daughter of Thomas More, Lady Jane Grey and her sisters and the daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke. The household of Henry VIII's last queen, Katherine Parr, was also regarded as a seminary of female humanists. There is evidence that classical learning and the study of history and languages at court did influence the education of girls in some gentry families in the provinces. The learning of royal, aristocratic, and gentry women was not just decorative, it also allowed them to participate in patron/client relationships and gave them a measure of political and religious influence.

Elite women were actively involved in the translation and writing of literary texts and letters, which circulated in manuscript form and there are various projects to collate surviving manuscripts, such as the Perdita Project started at Nottingham Trent University in 1997.⁷ Tracking down women's manuscript writing is a painstaking task and one swifter way of testing whether these court ladies acted as role models for the education of girls is to calculate how many books by female authors were published during the period and to examine the sorts of topics they handled.

She had separated from her husband, a Lincolnshire farmer, over her religious beliefs, which marked her out as a trouble-maker.

In 1589 a pamphlet appeared by an author named Jane Anger, which defended women against the detractions of men. Yet nothing is known about the author and her surname looks suspiciously like a nom de plume that could easily have been adopted by a man out to make money from the lively contemporary debate about the moral and intellectual defects of women! The first identifiable woman to join this debate was Rachel Speght, the daughter of a London cleric, who published *A Mouzell for Melastomus* in 1617. The title of her book roughly equates to *A Muzzle for Black-Mouth* and it was a response to Joseph Swetnam's lively *Arraignment of lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women*, which had appeared two years earlier. Swetnam had attacked disorderly women and praised those who were 'wise, virtuous and honest', while Speght set out to defend women against his specious arguments. Both Anger and Speght had to contend with the widely held belief that the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve held wider truths about the

leader George Fox, published *Women's Speaking Justified*, in which she made the case for women preachers. After the Restoration women began to contribute to a wider range of printed subjects and Aphra Behn, the poet and playwright, became the first English woman to earn her living by writing. Appropriately, she was buried in Westminster Abbey when she died in 1689.

The low proportion of printed works written by women in the Tudor and Stuart periods reinforces Joan Kelly's contention that a formal, humanist education was largely restricted to elite families in the period. So we should undoubtedly look to religion as an alternative 'push' factor in the increase in female literacy at this time. The Reformation, along with the advent of the printing press, provided unprecedented access to the Bible in English, along with a wide variety of other religious reading materials. These included simple catechisms, prayer books and pious guidebooks, which were published in their hundreds of thousands.⁹

The majority of girls continued to be educated within the home and my own research shows that clerical homes in particular became a driving force



Margaret Dutchess of Newcastle.

Published June 1. 1800 by W. Richardson N^o 31 Strand

for spreading girls' education outside elite circles. Adam Martindale, the Lancashire dissenting cleric, described his daughter Elizabeth, who was born in 1647, as being 'bred at home, to her booke and pen'. The clear inference here is that she belonged to a social class where she was expected to be able to write. The Reformation had, of course,

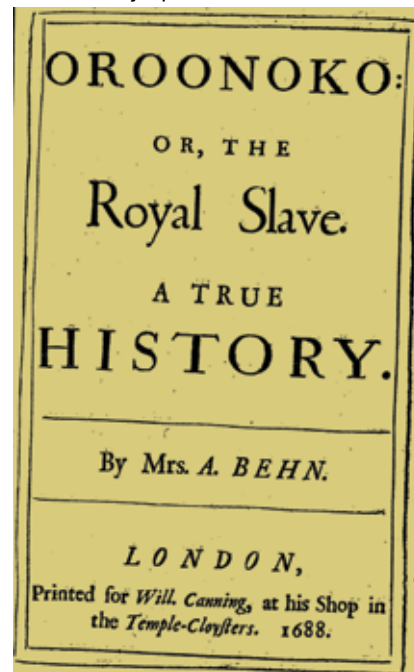
created an entirely new social group in England – the wives and daughters of the clergy. Clerical marriage had been legalised during the reign of Edward VI, but parishioners were slow to accept it. At first, Protestant ministers' wives were regarded by Roman Catholics as 'whores' and their children were derided as bastards. By the early seventeenth

century though, the English clergy were on the offensive and they began to portray their female relatives as paragons of religious piety. Literacy was one of the weapons in this campaign, as women in clerical households, including servants, were expected to be able to read the Bible in order to be good Christians. Wives and daughters, in particular,

Sketch of Aphra Behn by George Scharf from a portrait believed to be lost.



Title page of the first edition of *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn (1688).



in Newcastle in the 1680s. Both women were educated as teenagers, though, by their clerical uncles, and in the case of Astell, her intellectual formation can be traced firmly to the reading regime provided by her uncle. Elstob was less fortunate, because her uncle, a prebendary at Canterbury cathedral, tried unsuccessfully to prevent her from learning French, on the grounds that 'one tongue was enough for any woman'. She and her childhood friend yearned for the chance to learn classical languages like their brothers. Elstob was rescued when her brother became a vicar in a London parish, where he introduced her to his intellectual circle and taught her Latin and Old English. Her subsequent publications on Old English were supported by some of the most notable patrons in government circles, including Queen Anne and her 'premier' minister Robert Harley, the Earl of Oxford.¹²

Astell and Elstob's respective contributions to political debate and antiquarianism demonstrate some of the developments which had taken place in women's education since the reign of Henry VII. They also point forwards to the salons of the 'blue-stockings', whose meetings in fashionable London homes in the 1750s encouraged women to participate in intellectual discussion in mixed social gatherings of men and women.¹³

By 1700 female authors continued to write about appropriate subjects such as religion and advice for children, but they had also entered more contentious debates about the nature of women, politics, education, and moral and scientific philosophy. Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle,

were also encouraged to develop their religious faith by taking notes during sermons, keeping religious diaries, and writing out biblical texts and prayers for future reference.¹⁰

Such women not only had a place as very visible role models in the congregation, they also had a practical influence as well. Some clergy wives provided Bibles for their servants and ensured that they could read them. Wealthier wives, like Margaret the wife of the famed Restoration dissenter Richard Baxter, paid for teachers for local poor children. The wives and daughters of the poorer parish clergy might have to contribute to the family income and teaching was regarded as a highly suitable occupation for them. Theodosia Alleine, the daughter of one dissenting minister and wife to another, was a particularly hard-working example. She recorded that,

when she was first married in 1655, 'I being always bred to work, undertook to teach a school, and had many tablers and scholars, our family being seldom less than twenty, and many times thirty'. Her school also contained fifty or sixty children (most probably both boys and girls) from the town of Taunton where her husband was an assistant to the vicar. Amongst the young people living with them at any one time were five or six young gentlewomen, who were under her own tuition and her husband's 'domestick over-sight'.¹¹

The educational advantages provided by the clerical household are reflected in the intellectual achievements of two women from very similar backgrounds at the end of the seventeenth century. Mary Astell, the Tory political philosopher and Elizabeth Elstob, the first English female Anglo-Saxon scholar, were both born into merchant families

was probably the first writer of either sex to attribute the intellectual differences between men and women to nurture and not nature when she wrote in *The World's Olio* (1653) that 'in Nature we have as clear an understanding as men'.

It was not just women in wealthier circles who had reaped educational benefits. As Cressy's figures at the start of this article suggest, women's literacy rates had increased significantly during the Tudor and Stuart periods. While the 'push' factor of protestant evangelism helped to create this situation, the 'pull' factors of economic and social advantage were also important, as both men and women found that literacy skills were increasingly an asset in the workplace. Furthermore, Cressy's estimates should be regarded as conservative, because the evidence provided by signatures is not particularly secure. Signatures do not provide a complete snapshot of an individual's educational attainment. Some of those who could sign their names might not have been able to read or write at all, while others might have had only limited skills of literacy. Nor does a signature tell us how many men and women could read, but not write. This dark figure probably included a considerable proportion of the poorer population.

At all social levels the education of girls was still conducted largely in the home and above all it was the creation of thousands of clerical households from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, which helped to disseminate educational theories and opportunities to local communities. Perhaps the early modern clerical home deserves to be recognised as the greatest powerhouse of female education and literacy in the period. The protestant clergy had a vested interest in educating their daughters so that they could *both* read and write, and also in marrying women who were literate. This enabled them to argue that their wives and daughters were demonstrably respectable and pious members of society, not whores and bastards, and that they were exemplary role models for other women in the parish. In turn, some clergy wives provided a teacher, or even taught poor boys and girls themselves. The encouragement of female literacy in clerical households became so well established that in later centuries it produced some of our greatest of English authors including, of course, Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters. I am not a great fan of counterfactual history, but it is safe to say that without the Reformation and the revival of clerical marriage, the rise in female literacy noted by Cressy would surely have run a much slower course.



Further Reading

Dorothy Gardiner's *English Girlhood at School: A Study of Women's Education through twelve centuries* (Oxford, 1929) provides a solid introduction to the development of schools and education for girls, although her conclusions are a little dated now. Her work can be supplemented by Kenneth Charlton, *Women, Religion and Education in Early Modern England* (London, 1999), which emphasises the religious training given to girls of all social classes in the period and Rosemary O'Day, *Education and Society, 1500-1800* (London, 1982), which examines the development of schools and expands on some of the economic and social factors that encouraged literacy raised in this article. Susan Whyman takes some of the issues discussed here into the eighteenth century in *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009). Gemma Allen's new book *The Cooke Sisters: Education, Piety and Politics in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2013) investigates newer approaches to women's humanist education and the ways in which it enabled the celebrated Cooke sisters to have a political and religious influence. For all of the women mentioned in this article see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* www.oxforddnb.com which can be accessed via local libraries. My broader views on these women can be found in Jacqueline Eales, *Women in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (London, 1998).

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Jackie Eales is President of the Historical Association (2011-14) and Professor of Early Modern History at Canterbury Christ Church University. She works on the English Civil Wars, and Tudor and Stuart Women. Her books include *Puritans and Roundheads: The Harleys of Brampton Bryan and the Outbreak of the English Civil War*, and *Women in Early Modern England, 1500-1700*.