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HOW ISABELLA WHITNEY READ "HER" CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides the first evidence that Isabella Whitney read and imitated Christine de Pizan's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* through Thomas Hoccleve's 1402 translation in his *Letter of Cupid,* first published in Chaucer's *Works* in 1532. *The Copy of a Letter* is the first example in print of an Englishwoman writer engaging with the work of this foundational early feminist author. Although Whitney may not have known she was reading Christine, she is especially attuned to the radical implications of this work. Whitney takes from *The Letter of Cupid* an ethos of female authorship, in which learned women act as cultural arbiters, and a template for how a woman author could engage in a humanist debate about the purpose of vernacular literature. One of the key differences from Christine's work is that Whitney is addressing new constituencies for secular vernacular literature and a new class of readers, made up of both women and men, who were outside the court and traditional humanist centres of learning. Whitney's imitation of Christine de Pizan in *The Copy of a Letter* adds to our understanding of the scope of her reading and her centrality to humanist culture, in all its diversity, in the mid-Tudor period.

KEYWORDS Christine de Pizan; Hoccleve; Chaucer; Querelle des femmes; The Copy of a Letter; Letter of Cupid

How Isabella Whitney read "Her" Christine de Pizan

Looking across Isabella Whitney's known printed works, *The Copy of a Letter* (c. 1567) and *A Sweet Nosgay* (c. 1573), what emerges is the extent of her reading and the questions it raises about how non-élite women participated in the literary culture of the mid-sixteenth century. When writing her own epistolary complaint, *The Copy of a Letter*, as is well known, Whitney read George Turberville's translation of Ovid's *Heroides* and for *A Sweet Nosgay*, she turned to Hugh Plat's *Flowers of Philosophy* (1572).[1] These are by no means the only works Whitney was reading when composing poetry. The

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mythological and historical figures cited in *The Copy of a Letter* derive from her reading of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, published in William Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer's *Works*, which was re-issued in 1561, Thomas Underdown's *The Excellent History of Theseus and Ariadne* (1566), and Thomas Peend's redaction of Ovid, *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis* (1566).[2] We can add to this list one text that has not been previously identified as part of Whitney's reading matter – Thomas Hoccleve's 1402 translation of Christine de Pizan's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* in his *Letter of Cupid*, first published in Thynne's edition of Chaucer. Whitney's treatment of the exemplars of male treachery in "I. W. to her vnconstant Louer" and her criticism of Ovid and men's duplicity in "The Admonition by the Auctor" are influenced by her reading of *Letter of Cupid*.

Identifying Whitney's reading of Hoccleve's translation is critical for understanding how Christine de Pizan's early feminist works were disseminated in England across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and how a mid-Tudor woman writer accessed and engaged in a creative dialogue with this distinctive strand of the literature of *querelle des femmes*. Of course, this type of literature was widely available and "provided *topoi* for most genres of early modern writing".[3] Hoccleve's translation of *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*, however, stands out within the wider corpus of *querelle des femmes* texts available to Whitney because it provided a model for defining an ethos of female authorship and a template for how a woman author could engage in a humanist debate about the purpose of vernacular literature. Whitney's social status as well as her gender meant that she approached these issues from a position outside the traditional humanist institutions. In class terms, she was not alone in this venture. In the 1560s and 1570s, as Danielle Clarke explains, "participation in poetic production moves down the social scale".[4] Questions of authorship, readership, and the nature of English poetry were explored and interrogated by a wide social range of writers and others involved in literary production. Humanist praxis was made available to "the unlearned reader" through guides to rhetoric and logic published in the mid-Tudor period, such as Thomas Wilson's *Rule of Reason* (1551), his *Art of Rhetoric* (1553) and Ralph Lever's *The Art of Reason* (1573), which were written in English and had a practical purpose in educating readers accessing learning through the printed book and not necessarily the grammar school or university.[5] Whitney is deeply engaged in these debates alongside her male contemporaries and her reading of Christine de Pizan through Hoccleve is part of this process of thinking about literary culture in England.

Whitney's career, as recent scholarship has shown, is illustrative of the democratization of humanism in the 1560s and 1570s.[6] In the case of *The Copy of a Letter*, Whitney is reading Christine through Hoccleve's translation alongside Turberville's translation of Ovid's *Heroides* and other texts, like that of Underdown and Peend, which are digesting classical texts for a

wider readership. Along with many of her contemporaries, she was also reading and listening to broadside ballads, many of which also popularized classical stories, invoking the fate of Dido or casting Helen as a negative exemplar.[7] This eclectic mix both speaks to her own situation as a non-élite woman writer and to the readers her works address, who were reading classical and continental texts in translation and in redactions alongside ballads. Her epistle, "The Auctor to the Reader", before *A Sweet Nosgay* is a sketch of this kind of non-élite humanist reader, who lacked the formal education and rhetorical training provided at grammar schools and universities. Instead, this self-taught reader devises her own humanist reading programme, reading "such Bookes, whereby I thought my selfe to edifye" – scriptures, histories, and the classics, "VIRGILL, OVID, MANTUAN", presumably in translation.[8] Reading is active and purposeful; it is about extracting ethical and political lessons for "our present time" (9), evident even in the failure of these books to restore her to moral health. Instead, this reader looks for intellectual sustenance in Hugh Plat's *Flowers of Philosophy*, a printed commonplace book, which digests classical moral philosophy into *sententiae* for readers, including women, without Latin, wanting humanist instruction.[9]

The mode of reading set out in the author's epistle before *A Sweet Nosgay* is both similar to and differs instructively from the type of humanist reading Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton described in their influential essay, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy". The university-educated Harvey was a professional reader, who read classical political history and theory within élite intellectual circles for "contemporary political requirements" in order to apply it to the practice of court politics.[10] This is just "one kind of purposeful reading", as Jardine and Grafton note; studying for action was practiced by other types of readers and in different situations. Of relevance here, is the recent attention to élite women's reading where this model of active, purposeful reading has proved a useful corrective to the assumption that early modern women characteristically read privately, sequestered within the domestic sphere. Julie Crawford's study of "How Margaret Hoby Read her de Mornay" demonstrates how an aristocratic woman actively applied her reading to religious politics within her sphere of influence in her household, neighbourhood and abroad, in London.[11] The evidence that we have for Whitney's reading, of course, differs from that of Harvey and Hoby. Whitney's personal books have not been preserved for posterity.[12] Nor do we have much of an historical record of her life. Evidence for her reading practices instead comes from Whitney's own reflections on the reading process and the way she imitates and so reads other texts through her own works. Felicity Sheehy notes how Whitney "ties her writing to the work of reading" and "models an active reading approach that she anticipates being reapplied by her own readers to her own poetry".[13] In this essay, I will concentrate on how Whitney reads Christine

de Pizan to model an ethos of female authorship that is dependent on the agency of self-taught women readers and a mode of imitation, inflected by the *querelle des femmes*, that is oriented towards critique.

The Transmission of Christine de Pizan's Epistre au Dieu d'Amours *in England*

I should start out by saying that when Whitney read Hoccleve's translation of *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*, it is highly unlikely that she knew she was reading Christine de Pizan or, indeed, that she knew the translator was Hoccleve. How she *did* read "her" Christine de Pizan, however, tells us much about the complex mediation of texts and authorship in the production of national literary cultures. Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid* was first published, as we have seen, in Thynne's edition of Chaucer's *Works*. Consequently, when Whitney read *Letter of Cupid,* she read it as the work of Chaucer, as did her contemporaries. *Letter of Cupid* does lend itself to a Chaucerian reading. It shares the *querelle des femmes* mode with Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and aspects of its frame, in which Cupid defends women against the slanderous literary misrepresentations perpetuated by male authors, mirrors the role of the God of Love in Chaucer's text, who, along with his queen, Alceste, takes the author to task for his negative portrayal of women in his *Troilus and Criseyde*.[14] Christine de Pizan's *Epistre* therefore was transmitted in English via Hoccleve and then via the "Chaucer" of Thynne's *Workes* through a process in which Christine was subsumed in Hoccleve's translation, Hoccleve's name lost in Thynne's edition of Chaucer, and the Chaucer who is canonized in this edition is a composite figure. The ensuing refractions and mediations multiply and disperse authorship. Rather than inhering in a singular, originary author, the mode of authorship that emerges is more dialogic, continually in conversation with other works and other authors.

What is also produced through this process of dialogue, translation, and imitation, is a corpus of vernacular literature that is accorded value because it is presented as distinctly English. The sixteenth century saw the "vernacularization" of English literary culture.[15] The Chaucer that Whitney read in Thynne's *Workes* was "the 'father' of English poetry", and an amalgam of other writers, in other words, "Chaucerian".[16] The Chaucer Whitney encountered in the *Workes* is a composite of other writers collected under his name in Thynne's edition, which includes the anonymous *Remedy of Love*, Sir Richard Roos's translation of Alain Chartier's *La Belle sans Mercy*, John Clanvowe's *The Book of Cupid*, and, as we have seen, Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid*. The French origins of many of these works point to the hybridity of this Chaucerian Englishness. Thynne's edition provided Whitney, and others, with a corpus of secular, vernacular literature, produced by "clerks", professional learned men, like Chaucer and Hoccleve,

who were instrumental in establishing an early English humanist literary culture.[17] When Whitney read and responded to the Chaucerian *Letter of Cupid* in her verse epistle and admonition, she was actively engaging with this vernacular early humanist literary culture. Hence, she read this text alongside other works, such as Turberville's Ovid and the Ovidian redactions of Underdown and Peend, which were Englishing classical and continental texts for a burgeoning print market and for a wide social range of readers, including women.

When Whitney read *Letter of Cupid*, she was also reading a text in the *querelle des femmes* tradition. In fact, Christine de Pizan's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* was a founding text in this debate and the earliest sustained defence that critiqued the literary representation of women. *Epistre* was the first missive in Christine's attack on the *Roman de la Rose* and, by association, a wider tradition of courtly chivalric literature that had dominated medieval literary culture. The self-reflexive literariness of *Epistre*, as Jennifer Summit notes in relation to Christine's other *querelle* text, *City of Ladies*, "enabled a new perspective on the nature of literary authorship and its social functions", which came from "a position of self-conscious alienation" from traditional literary communities.[18] These literary institutions are defined as bastions of an unthinking and moribund antifeminism. The *Epistre* takes its framing conceit from a medieval romance tradition in which the court of love was a rhetorical space where women were often judged negatively. Christine turns the tables. Her Cupid presents a letter to the assembled gods setting out the grievances of women who have been slandered by men, and the *Epistre* concludes with the god banishing the offenders from his court. Although the petition singles out Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* and Jean de Meun's continuation of *Le Roman de la Rose* for especial criticism, the complaint sets out a wider critique of a medieval clerkly literary culture. It is this clerkly culture of the church, universities, and courts that is responsible for generating anti-feminist texts. In setting itself in opposition to the clerks, *Epistre* demands new domains for literary culture in which women are valued participants and cultural arbiters.[19]

The *querelle* was ideally suited for this task. More generally, the dialogic, debate form of the *querelle des femmes* offered writers a formula for marking out their position in relation to philosophical and literary traditions. In the case of the woman writer, the genre opened a rhetorical space for women to stage their entry into humanist discussion on an equal footing with men and to claim and define authorial roles as female teachers and moral arbiters. This is the precedent that Christine de Pizan had set with *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* and an element of its attractiveness to later writers in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in England. Whitney, like others, was drawn to Hoccleve's translation of Christine because, as Critten notes, of "its capacity to participate in a particularly wide range of textual conversations" about literary culture.[20]

Pretexts: Reading The Letter of Cupid *in the Findern and Devonshire Manuscripts*

Earlier readings of *The Letter of Cupid*, which help to contextualize Whitney's engagement with this poem, can be found in the Findern (CUL Ms Ff.1.6) and Devonshire manuscripts (British Library Add. MS 17492). Both the Findern manuscript, compiled in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries by gentry families in neighbouring country houses in Derbyshire, and the Devonshire manuscript, produced within a court milieu in the 1530s and 1540s, provide evidence for the participation of women alongside men in games of courtly love as scribes, performers, critical readers, and authors.[21] Citations of *Letter of Cupid* in the Findern and Devonshire manuscripts and in Whitney's collection reveal how this poem had a specific attraction within a wider *querelle des femmes* tradition because of the way it established a model for debating women's place in a courtly love tradition, including the agency of women as authors and critical readers. What the transmission history of *Letter of Cupid* also illustrates is the persistence of these textual conversations across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; a reminder of how arbitrary divides between the medieval and early modern can obscure ongoing dialogues with Middle English and early Tudor texts that continued into the later sixteenth century. The way extracts are cited in the Findern and Devonshire manuscripts is part of this conversation and established a mode of dialogic intertextuality in which the rhetorical dynamics of *querelle des femmes* could be built into practices of literary imitation. This is how Whitney mobilized *Letter of Cupid* in her *The Copy of a Letter*.

In both the Findern and the Devonshire manuscripts, extracts from *Letter of Cupid* are copied alongside passages from other Middle English poems in the *fin' amors* tradition, most notably Roos' translation of Chartier's *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. Consciously or unconsciously, this pattern of copying restages the literary debate at the French court, presided over by Christine de Pizan, that followed the appearance of Chartier's poem at the French court in 1424. Known as the "Quarrel of Belle dame sans mercy", courtiers, female and male, wrote responses to Chartier's poem that argued either for or against the lady. Christine was central to this quarrel. Chartier's *Belle Dame* responds directly to her *Cent Ballades d'Amant et de Dame*, in which the Lady complains that she has been betrayed by her lovers' false promises of fidelity; a grievance that is also set out in Christine's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amors*. Kara Doyle has speculated that the context in which excerpts from Roos's translation of *La Belle Dame* are copied into the Findern manuscript suggests an effort to imitate this earlier poetic debate. I would want to emphasize that echoes of this earlier debate also crucially establishes what could be called a Christine tradition of *querelle des*

femmes that specifically addresses, in Doyle's words, the "epistemological problem faced by the female love object in *fin' amors* poetry" and, I would add, the difficulties faced by the woman reader and author in responding to this tradition.[22] The shaping of this tradition is very evident in the Devonshire manuscript in which three extracts from *Letter of Cupid* are copied towards the end of the miscellany by Thomas Howard, alongside other passages from Chaucer and other "Chaucerian" writers, to create a little anthology of *querelle des femmes* poetry. Like Whitney in the 1560s and 1570s, Howard is reading Thynne's 1532 edition very closely. His selection and ordering of extracts means that passages frame and contextualize each other in ways that mirror how *querelle des femmes* topics and texts were read and used in the Christine-Chartier debate and more broadly within courtly milieux. "Questions about women," Julie Campbell points out, "often arise in the context of discussing the *questioni d'amore*, the questions about love frequently used as commonplaces to spark discussion in medieval courtly circles and later in Renaissance literary circles".[23]

The Letter of Cupid structures the compilation of *fin' amors* poetry in the Devonshire manuscript and establishes an animated, critical mode of intertextuality designed to generate debate and stimulate acts of revision. Two excerpts from this poem frame the collection. The first disputes the misogynist portrayal of women as cruel and proud in the male courtly love tradition, "Woman's heart unto no cruelty/inclined is, but they be charitable,/piteous, devout, full of humility," the second passage takes men to task for slandering women, especially those they have deceitfully seduced, critiquing the double standard of courtly love:

> Is this affair avaunt? Is this honor?
> A man himself accuse thus and defame?
> Is it good to confess himself a traitor,
> And bring a woman to a slanderous name,
> And tell how he her body hath done shame?[24]

The urgent rhetorical questions posed by the poet insist that the reader use their judgement to assess the case, modelling the kind of prudent critical thinking that characterizes Christine's defence of women and is portrayed as woefully lacking in antifeminist discourse. After the passages from Roos's *Belle Dame sans Mercy*, Howard copies another passage from *Letter of Cupid*, which argues that Jason's betrayal of Medea was shameful, "How friendly was Medea to Jason/In conquering of the fleece of gold" (176f, 1-2), followed by an extract from Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite* (176 g), in which Anelida complains of the treacherous faithlessness of men. The process of selecting and copying passages from *The Letter of Cupid* in the Devonshire manuscript results in a revisionary reading of poems in the courtly tradition that accords with Christine's own critique in her writings.

Reading stimulates rewriting evident in the changes made to a passage selected from the Chaucerian *Remedy of Love*, which was also printed in Thynne's edition. The penultimate line in the original, which slandered women, "the cursydnesse yet and deceyte of women," is changed to "the faithfulness, yet, and praise of women" (176c).[25] In this new context, framed by passages from *Letter of Cupid*, this antifeminist text has been recast and turned to the praise of women.

Reading as rewriting in this instance enacts the kind of critical judgement Christine sought to stimulate in her readers and helps to fashion new poetic practices that can produce a reformed style of love poetry that departs from earlier conventions. The pro and contra structure evident in the selection and arrangement of extracts in the Devonshire manuscript, in which the literature of courtly love, with its negative portrayal of women, is framed by *querelle* passages from Hoccleve's *Letter*, encourages a critical dialogic reading that engages with the wider issues raised by de Pizan in *Epistre* about the antifeminism of traditional literary conventions. By extracting the attributes said to define this tradition, this practice of citation claims to identify the essence of this courtly love literature and, in doing so, establish a position outside this tradition for an avowedly oppositional counter poetics. Hence, the debate form organizing the copying results in a mode of intertextuality that proceeds by staging combative encounters between texts. As a result, there is an ethical imperative to this practice of textual engagement that encourages corrective rewriting and puts in place a model of imitation that relies on critique and is purposeful, personal, and performative.

Reading The Letter of Cupid *in* The Copy of a Letter

Like other readers of *Letter of Cupid* in the Findern and Devonshire manuscripts, Whitney turns to this text not only to insert herself into literary debates, but to define their terms. In doing so, she is also responding to the mode of critical dialogic reading and practice of intertextuality that *Letter of Cupid* encouraged as is evidenced in these manuscripts. One key difference between responses to *Letter of Cupid* in the Findern and Devonshire manuscripts and in *The Copy of a Letter* is a decisive shift in locale. Compilers of these manuscripts were largely engaging with an earlier courtly *fin' amors* tradition within comparatively exclusive manuscript networks constellating around country houses and royal courts. Whitney translates these courtly questions about love, women, and literary production into the idiom of the middling sort; rather than a courtly milieu, the addressees belong to wider, non-élite reading public, made up of women and men, who are reading for edification and recreation. Print culture conditions Whitney's use of the *querelle des femmes* mode for

defining the woman author. The space this author occupies contrasts with that of the women authors also framed by *querelle* devices in the Devonshire manuscript, such as Margaret Douglas and Mary Shelton, in that it is decisively non-courtly and instead looks to "the unlearned reader". A later comparison could be made with *Jane Anger Her Protection for Women* (1589) which similarly uses the *querelle* to construct a woman author – but in this case, of polemic. This example, in fact, serves to highlight the distinctive and perhaps unique feature of Whitney's use of the *querelle des femmes* mode to define the category of the woman author of popular love poetry.

The *querelle* provided a useful format for authors staging their entry into print publics because it was so generative. Anti-feminist texts were answered by defences of women and vice versa, with both sides of the debate often inviting replies from other authors. This type of performativity is evident in the supposed origins of Christine's *Epistre* in an actual quarrel. There is an urgency to this mode of writing. It is in the moment as words are spoken and debated to the extent that it can be described as a speech genre.[26] When Whitney takes over the form via *The Letter of Cupid* in the 1560s, she decisively shifts the genre from courtly to prosaic speech, enhancing the association of the printed form with a popular orality. The framing of Whitney's *The Copy of a Letter* in the only extant edition captures the capacity of the *querelle* mode to stimulate textual production that is framed through dialogue. Whitney's "I. W. to her vnconstant Louer" and her "Admonition to all young Gentlewomen" are followed by a counter-response, "A Loveletter sent from a faithful lover to an unconstant Maiden". At some later point, either in the publishing history of *The Copy of a Letter* or in the process of compiling the Sammelband housing the only known edition of Whitney's text, another male complaint was added – "RW Against the wilful inconstancy of his dear foe, E. T".[27] These dialogic epistolary love complaints illustrate how readily *querelle* topoi generated responses and counterclaims.

Whitney uses *querelle* topoi differently to these male love complaints, not simply because they are used in the defence of women, but also because she is focused on defining the role of the woman author and reader within a popular vernacular lyric tradition. Christine de Pizan's example is key here. Even if Whitney did not know that Christine was behind the text, she does act as a critical reader of the *Letter of Cupid* in a manner that returns to the agenda set by *Epistre*. When Hoccleve Englished *Epistre*, he played a double game, importing the misogyny Christine complained of into his *Letter* by claiming women were guilty of the treachery Ovid and other writers imputed.[28] Hoccleve, following Christine, at first criticized Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*, within a section which set out the grievances of women against male authors:

The ladies euer complaine hem on clerkes
That they haue made bokes of hir diffame
In which they dispise women & her werkes
And speake of hem greate reprofe & shame
… … …
Ouide in his boke called Remedie
Of loue, great reprofe of women writeth
wherin I trowe he dyd great folie.[29]

Hoccleve then departs from Christine's text, and he does so in support of the clerks, a class of literary men that is roundly criticized in *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*. He therefore defends not only Ovid but other writers, revising Christine's text in their favour:

Parde this clerke, this subtill Ouide
And many an other disceiued haue be
Of women, as it is knowe full wide
What no men more, and that is great deintee
So excellent a clerke as was he
And other mo that couden full well preache
Betrapped wer, for aught [that] thei coud teache.
And trusteth well that it is no maruaile
For women knowen plainly her entent
Thei wist how loftlie thei coud assail
Hem, and what falshede thei in harte mente
And thus thei clerkes in her daunger hente
With o venime an other is destroyed
And thus these clerkes oft were anoied. (cccxxviii)

In these stanzas, women are depicted as dangerous seducers of men entrapping those excellent clerks, who then justifiably write, "preache," and "teache" of their falsehood. It is not surprising that Hoccleve seeks to defend the clerks against Christine's criticisms, since he was one of their class and he does so even as he uses Christine to present his own claim to poetic authority.

Whitney's reading of Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid* is highly selective. Those passages which are imitated either point to the hypocrisy and anti-feminism of classical constructions of male exemplarity built on the exploitation of women or criticize Ovid for providing men with a misogynist playbook. Her attraction to these passages, and how she frames them in her own writing, also illustrates her attentiveness to Christine's criticisms of clerks' perpetuation of misogynist cultural conventions through the literary and educational system. By defining a place for herself as a woman writer in opposition to traditional literary institutions, like Christine, Whitney is able to define alternative literary practices that take women authors and readers as their example. In doing so, Whitney goes beyond even Christine by moving literate activity outside the traditional male-dominated and élite

spaces of humanism – the university and the court – to the wider bookscapes emerging in the sixteenth century, which provided access to learning for those outside the élite.

"I. W. to her vnconstant Louer" draws on the defence of women tradition established by Christine to generate revisionary readings of foundational classical women's stories and to call out the unthinking misogyny of established literary traditions disseminated through print. Whitney shares two of her main examples of male treachery with the *Letter of Cupid* – Aeneas "who dyd poore DIDO leave" (34) and Medea. She is drawn to the same lines that Howard copied into the Devonshire manuscript. Whitney catalogues treacherous men beginning with Aeneas, then Theseus, before pausing on the example of Jason:

> For when he by MEDEAS arte,
> had got the Fleece of Gold
> And also had of her that time,
> Al kynd of things he wolde.
> He toke his Ship and fled away
> regarding not the vowes:
> That he dyd make so faithfully,
> unto his loving Spowes. (45-52)

After detailing his falsehood across a further four stanzas, Whitney concludes:

> For they, for their unfaithfulness,
> did get perpetual fame:
> Fame? whefore dyd I terme it so?
> I should have cald it shame. (69-72)

Behind these lines is the following stanza from *Letter of Cupid*, which Whitney has imitated and amplified in her own poem:

> How frendly was Medea to Jason
> In the conqueryng of the flece of gold
> How falsly quitte he her affeccion,
> By whom victorie he gate as he hath would
> How maie this man for shame be so bolde
> To falsen her, that fro his death and shame
> Him kepte, and gate him so great prise & name.[30]

Whitney's imitation of the *Letter of Cupid* is audible in the shared off-rhyme, *gold/would*, and most notably in the meditation on the nature of fame or name and shame as it applies differently to men and women. Examples of male treachery from *Letter of Cupid* are added to strengthen the critique of a literary culture that enables misogyny, which was present in Christine, but more qualified in Hoccleve.[31]

The *querelle des femmes*, along with the kind of love complaint based on Ovid's *Heroides*, was a "clerkly" humanist exercise located in the all-male learning environments of the grammar schools and university.[32] Christine's *querelle* texts, *Epistre* and *City of Ladies*, established an alternative site for women to display secular learning through this genre. Defences of women after Christine were attributed to women authors, addressed to women, and interpellated women authors and readers within the text. In doing so, the form made available a rhetorical model and humanist cultural role for the learned woman as a disputant authorized to speak in women's defence. This is the space Is. W. occupies and introduces into the form of the love complaint in *The Copy of a Letter*. Yet, just as importantly, it is also reconfigured so that it is no longer confined to learned women of the court but is open to the "unlearned" outside the élite. By incorporating the *querelle des femmes* into the Ovidian love complaint, "To her Unconstant Lover" introduces a critical counter-voice that interrogates the very form it inhabits. The female poet of this popular love complaint is a critical and significantly self-taught reader, well-versed in the classical tradition underpinning amatory verse, who demonstrates her ability to identify and correct the flawed and misogynistic principles of fame and honour on which is it established. In doing so, she models the type of logic that Wilson and Lever aimed to teach "the unlearned reader" in their humanist handbooks. In the words of Lever, logic "teacheth a way, howe to disprove, and discover an errour".[33]

The woman author of this epistle also rewrites the ethos and emotional script of the Ovidian female epistoler. When setting out her complaint, this woman writer is not overcome by her passions, she does not weep or despair, and her tears do not blot her ink. Instead, she seeks to persuade the reader of her constancy and judgement, asking her former lover to make a series of choices, in which he is guided by her revisionary reading of a faulty exemplary classical tradition. That said, reading the *Heroides* through the *Letter of Cupid* does not result in a seamless, coherent text, but rather an unstable revisionary text that turns back on itself. The stoicism of this woman lover, who concludes that if she "can not please your minde" (81), then "Wed whom you list, I am content" (83), is immediately called into question by the generic drive of the love complaint towards impassioned plea. Hence, she continues to press the lover's suit in the face of loss, confirming that she is "forsaken/And it may chance although not yet/you wish you had me taken" (86-8). The misogyny that is embedded in the classical stories this woman author has critiqued earlier in the poem, and which surfaces in Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid*, haunts the "good wishes" she offers her lover's new wife, which carry a ludic and disruptive sting in the tail: "I wish her vertues to be such,/she nede not be suspect" (95–6), and again "I rather wish her HELENS face,/then one of

HELENS trade" (97–8). Tonally, "To her Unconstant Lover" is an unsettling poem because it is attempting to rewrite the Ovidian complaint "logically" and critically through the *querelle des femmes* in ways that the genre itself resists.

Whitney's reading of *Letter of Cupid* in "The admonition by Auctor, to all yong Gentilwomen: And to al other Maids being in Love" is more diffuse. "The admonition" engages obliquely with the critique of clerkly culture that persists in *Letter of Cupid* despite Hoccleve's revision of Christine. *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* argued that clerks embedded misogyny within educational and other cultural institutions by teaching texts like Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* within schools to children, thus institutionalizing antifeminism. The criticism of Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* in *Letter of Cupid* is sandwiched between stanzas that describe this process of acculturation in misogyny

> The ladies euer compliane hem on clerkes
> That they haue made bookes of her disfame
> In which thy dispise women & her werkes
> And speake of hem great reprofe and shame
> And causelesse pene hem a wicked name
> Thus they dispised be on euery side
> Disclaundred an blowen on ful wyde.
> … … …
> And [this] boke scholers learned in [their] childehede
> For they of women beware should in age
> And to loue hem euer be in dred
> Sithe to disceiue is set al her corage
> They say of perel me[n] should cast theaduau[n]tage
> Namely of soche as men haue in bewrapped
> For many a man by women hath mishapped. (cccxxviib)

Whitney's "admonition" takes aim not so much at a clerkly culture, based in the grammar schools and universities, but at the type of humanist culture that had been democratized by print and was thus available to a wide range of (male) readers:

> Beware of fayre and painted talke,
> beware of flattering tonges:
> The Mermaides do pretend no good
> For all their pleasant Songs.
> Some use the teares of Crocodiles,
> contrary to their hart:
> And yf they cannot alwayes weepe,
> They wet their Cheekes by Art.
> Ovid in his Arte of Love,
> doth teach them this same knacke
> To wet their hand and touch their eies:
> so of as teares they lacke.

> Why have ye such deceit in store?
> have you such craft wile?
> Lesse craft then this god knows wold soone
> us simple soules begile. (13-28)

These lines echo the opening of *Letter of Cupid*, when the women in Hoccleve's translation point the finger specifically at the men of "Albion," because they are so full "of gile," and "dissimule and faine". Englishmen can cry to order, "With standing dropes in [their] eyen twayne/Whan that [their] hertes feleth no distresse/To blinden women with [their] doublenesse," and use "wordes spoken be so sighingly/With so pitous chere and countenaunce" that make all believe they "meaneth trewly" (cccxxvib). The author laments, "O faithful womman, ful of innocence,/Thou art disceived by fals apparence!" (cccxxvii)

Although the woman author in Whitney's "admonition" reveals how this predatory behaviour is perpetuated through the reading habits of men, and the wider enabling antifeminist literary institutions, her primary focus is on how to educate young women to become better critical readers of men and, by association, the classical tradition underpinning literary culture, by practising logic. Taking the proverb, "try before you trust" as her starting point, the woman author sets out a revisionary reading of classical women – Scilla, Oenone, and Demophoon – to argue that they could have been better advised in their choices. By contrast, "Hero did trie Leanders truth" (73) and, even though both met a tragic end, at least it was not through his betrayal. Once again, the logic of this revisionary reading, as in "To her Unconstant Lover", is unsettling, in part, because it comes up against the limits of the Ovidian text and the ideologies encoded by a wider classical tradition as it was received in Tudor England, resulting in a contradictory text. "The Admonition" ends with a proverbial tale about a little fish who fortuitously warned by his fellows avoids the hook in the bait that seemed to be his destiny, and "once warned doth beware" (122). This is a very prosaic version of the type of moralized redactions of Ovid and other classical texts that were produced, in part, to provide readers with a body of didactic vernacular literature. Thomas Peend's *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis* is an example of this type of literature. The volume provided "a morall in English verse," a critical analysis of Ovid's poem that read the text allegorically. The nymph, Salmacis, for example, was emblematic of lust and the "mad desyres of women/theyr rage in folysh fyts". Peend then proceeded to list other classical female examples of foolish lust.[34] Melnikoff has noted how "Peend's exemplars – Medea, Phillis, Dido, Scylla, Hero, Thisbe, Ariadne – are each reinvoked and recast in Whitney's poems in *Copy*".[35] The revisionary reading in "The admonition" rejects the characteristic antifeminism of this tradition's moralized interpretations and instead

concentrates on producing a didactic reading that assumes female readers possess reason and judgement and hence are capable of "suspecting styll that pricke" (118) once warned. "The admonition" aims to school women readers in sexual as textual politics. The mode of active reading that Whitney's revisionary poem encourages can push logic in a sceptical direction through the repeated injunction to test and question rather than accept. Sheehy has argued that this scepticism extends to the readings provided in Whitney's poem resulting in a deconstructive indeterminacy that "immerses her readers in the work of interpretation itself".[36] Such indeterminacy also results from the ideological contradictions that emerge through Whitney's revisionary reading and mode of imitation which brings other disruptive critical voices into play.

The type of woman author fashioned in "The admonition" – and in "To her unconstant Lover" – resembles the authorial identity produced by Christine de Pizan in her *Epistre*, that of "a female teacher and arbiter of a new class of courtly literati by embodying prudence as the virtue of good governance".[37] One of the differences is that Whitney is addressing new constituencies for secular vernacular literature and a new class of readers, made up of both women and men, who were outside the court and traditional humanist centres of learning, and instead frequented the bookshops of early modern London. Her response to *Letter of Cupid* in *The Copy of a Letter* adds to our understanding of the scope of Whitney's reading and her centrality to humanist culture, in all its diversity, in the mid-Tudor period.[38] Whitney's revisionary reading of an array of contemporary texts, alongside *Letter of Cupid*, also asks us to think about the ways in which women writers could act as types of literary critics, evaluating and critiquing the texts and literary conventions they read and imitated. As recent studies, including this article, have shown, Whitney's reading is a rich topic for study that takes us from the bookscapes of early modern London, mid-Tudor humanism, and the vernacularization of literary culture to questions of women's authorship and how to theorize women's reading practices.

Notes

1. See Lindsay A. Reid, "Isabella Whitney and George Turberville: Mid-Tudor Heroidean Poetry and Questions of Precedence," this issue, 11–30.
2. For Whitney's reading of contemporary literature, see Kirk Melnikoff, "Isabella Whitney among the stalls of Richard Jones", in *Women's Labour and the History of the Book in Early Modern England*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 145–62.
3. Julie B. Campbell, *Literary Circles and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Ashgate, c. 2006), p. 1.

4. Danielle Clarke, "Mid-Tudor Poetry," in *Sixteenth-Century British Poetry*, ed. Catherine Bates and Patrick Cheney, *Oxford History of Poetry in English*, Vol. 4 (Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 423.
5. Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 26–35; Wolfgang Müller, "Directions for English: Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetoric*, George Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*, and the Search for Vernacular Eloquence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature, 1485–1603*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 307–9.
6. Mary Ellen Lamb, "Isabella Whitney and Reading Humanism," in*Women's Bookscapes in Early Modern Britain: Reading, Ownership, and Circulation*, eds. Leah Knight, Micheline White, and Elizabeth Sauer (University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 43–58.
7. See for example the ballads collected in *Handful of Pleasant Delights*.
8. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosegay*, in *Isabella Whitney, Mary Sidney, and Aemilia Lanyer: Renaissance Women Poets*, ed. Danielle Clarke (Penguin, 2000), pp. 4–5. All subsequent references will be to this edition and are included in the body of the text.
9. Angus Vine, *Miscellaneous Order: Manuscript Culture and the Early Modern Organization of Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 165–70.
10. Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy," *Past & Present*, 129 (1990): 52–3.
11. Julie Crawford, *Mediatrix: Women, Politics, and Literary Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 99.
12. See Ben Wilkinson-Turnbull, "The Reading, Reception, and Collecting of Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosgay*, c.1573-1871," this issue, 101–124.
13. Felicity Sheehy, "Reading Isabella Whitney Reading," *Studies in Philology*, 118 (2021): 493, 498.
14. Ray Critten, "Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England and France: the Transmission and Reception of Christine de De Pizan's *Epistre au dieu d'Amours* and Thomas Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid*," *Studies in Philology*, 112 (2015): 687–88.Christine's's *Epistre* and her other defence of women, *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, were written around the turn of the fourteenth century, over a decade after Chaucer's *Legend* and at a time when she was in close dialogue with Henry IV's court. Although resemblances can be discerned, there is no direct evidence that Christine read Chaucer's poem.
15. Müller, "Directions for English," 307–9.
16. Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and his Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 3.
17. David R. Carlson, "Chaucer, Humanism, and Printing: Conditions of Authorship in Fifteenth-Century England," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 64 (1995): 274–88.
18. Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380–1589* (The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 64, 66.
19. Summit, *Lost Property*, 64–70.
20. Critten, "Imagining," 690.
21. On the Findern manuscript see: Kate Harris, "The Origins and Make-up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6," *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 8 (1983): 299–333; Kara Doyle, "Thisbe out of Context: Chaucer's Female Readers and the Findern Manuscript," *Chaucer*

Review, 40 (2006): 231–61. Important studies of the Devonshire manuscript include Elizabeth Heale's, "Women and Courtly Love Lyric: The Devonshire MS (BL Additional 17492)," *Modern Language Review*, 90 (1995): 296–313; "Desiring Women Writing: Female Voices and Courtly 'Balets' in some early Tudor Manuscript Albums," *Early Modern Women's Manuscript Writing: Selected Papers from the Trinity Trent Colloquium*, ed. Jonathan Gibson and Victoria Burke (Routledge, 2004), pp. 9–30; and Christopher Shirley, "The Devonshire Manuscript: Reading Gender in the Henrician Court," *English Literary Renaissance* 45 (2015): 32–59.

22. Doyle, "Thisbe," 241.
23. Julie Campbell, *Literary Circles and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Ashgate, 2006), p. 9.
24. Lady Mary Douglas and others, *The Devonshire Manuscript: A Women's Book of Courtly Poetry*, ed. and intro by Elizabeth Heale, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series*, 19 (Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012), pp. 248–9. All subsequent references are to this edition and are included in the body of the text.
25. Heale, "Introduction," *Devonshire*, 27.
26. On speech genres, both oral and written, see M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, transl. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60–102.
27. On the complicated publishing history of *The Copy of a Letter*, see O'Callaghan, "'My Printer must, haue somewhat to his share': Isabella Whitney, Richard Jones, and Crafting Books," *Women's Writing*, 26 (2019): 15–34.
28. See Jonathan Stavsky, "Hoccleve's Take on Chaucer and Christine de De Pizan: Gender, Authorship, and Intertextuality in the *Epistre au dieu d'Amours*, the *Letter of Cupid*, and the *Series*," *Philological Quarterly*, 93 (2014): 435–60.
29. 'The Letter of Cupid', *The Woorkes of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1561), fol. cccxxviib.
30. *Letter of Cupid*, cccxxviii.
31. For De Pizan's critique and Hoccleve's revision, see Stavsky, "Hoccleve's Take," 435, 441–2.
32. Diane Purkiss, "Material Girls: The Seventeenth-Century Woman Debate," in *Women, Texts, and Histories 1575-1760*, ed. Purkiss and Clare Brant (ÍRoutledge, 1992), pp. 79–100.
33. Cited in Crane, *Framing Authority*, 31.
34. Thomas Peend, *The Pleasant Fable of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis* (1565), B3r.
35. Melnikoff, "Isabella Whitney," 145–62.
36. Sheehy, "Reading Isabella," 519–20.
37. Summit, *Lost Property*, 103.
38. See Clarke, "Mid-Tudor Poetry," 434–38.

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