

Gary Waller

The Female Baroque in Early Modern English Literary Culture

From Mary Sidney
to Aphra Behn

Amsterdam
University
Press

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The Female Baroque in
Early Modern English Literary Culture

Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World

Series editors: James Daybell (Chair), Victoria E. Burke, Svante Norrhem, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks

This series provides a forum for studies that investigate women, gender, and/or sexuality in the late medieval and early modern world. The editors invite proposals for book-length studies of an interdisciplinary nature, including, but not exclusively, from the fields of history, literature, art and architectural history, and visual and material culture. Consideration will be given to both monographs and collections of essays. Chronologically, we welcome studies that look at the period between 1400 and 1700, with a focus on any part of the world, as well as comparative and global works. We invite proposals including, but not limited to, the following broad themes: methodologies, theories and meanings of gender; gender, power and political culture; monarchs, courts and power; constructions of femininity and masculinity; gift-giving, diplomacy and the politics of exchange; gender and the politics of early modern archives; gender and architectural spaces (courts, salons, household); consumption and material culture; objects and gendered power; women's writing; gendered patronage and power; gendered activities, behaviours, rituals and fashions.

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For Katie

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Introduction and Acknowledgements

The initial phrase in my title is adapted from Julia Kristeva, whose complex insights and uncannily Baroque-like speculations have danced across most of my thinking and writing ever since, fascinated but at that point largely uncomprehending, I first heard her speak at a conference in the late 1970s. Thirty years later, comprehending a little more and with increased admiration, I encountered, first in French and then translated into English, the book she describes – again not a little Baroque – as a ‘novel’ based on the life of Saint Teresa, in which she remarks that the saint of Avila reveals that ‘the secrets of Baroque civilization are female’.¹ Throughout this study I approach, move away from, and variously return to Kristeva’s terminology. I have chosen ‘Female’ rather than ‘Feminine’ Baroque for my title because all my subjects were (by the admittedly unscientific and culturally problematic criteria of the time) perceived as women, and their struggles against the gender ideologies of their time were forced upon them by both phallogentric discourse and authority figures who were all (also problematically) assumed to be ‘male’. I have especially wanted to avoid the problematically reified concept of ‘Woman’, since I am concerned with real historical subjects who were – some very consciously, others implicitly – rebelling against what today we see as the ideological constructs of gender. Their varied frustrations and rebellions constitute an important dimension of their Baroque-ness, illustrating in multiple although often contradictory ways how marginal or dispossessed members of a society struggle to locate spaces of resistance within dominant or oppressive ideological structures.

The primary, though not exclusive ‘textual’ focus of this study is not art or music or architecture – cultural activities to which the label ‘Baroque’ is conventionally attached – but writing. The more prosaic descriptive phrase in my title points to an area of research to which I have been grateful to contribute for many years: the revival (or in some cases the discovery) of early modern women’s writings in English. My interests in what then were still termed ‘Renaissance women’ go far back, to the late 1960s, when as a

1 Kristeva, *Teresa*, p. 20.

student I met John Rathmell, the first modern editor of Mary (and Philip) Sidney's *Psalms*, who was the internal examiner of my Cambridge PhD. Later, despite some slight disapproval from senior colleagues, I taught a few poems by Mary Sidney and her niece Mary Wroth in 'Renaissance' literature courses, the texts for which had by long tradition been almost entirely written by men. The residual scepticism about what we eventually came to call 'early modern' women's writings was reflected in the response I received in the 1970s from a major academic publisher to my book proposal: that – this without their even viewing the manuscript – they did not see there would be an audience for a scholarly study of Renaissance women writers, especially, I suspected, one that used phrases like 'gender construction' and showed signs of responding positively to the emerging invasion of 'Theory', especially French feminist theorists like Kristeva. Much of this material had to wait until the eighties (and after) before it was published. *The Female Baroque* gratefully builds on the work by those who, in the past thirty and more years, have increasingly constituted a powerful community of scholars advocating for the study of early modern women's writings and their related cultural productivity. Their work has permanently altered how we picture the period and the perspectives we bring to our reading of it.

I attempt, then, to bring together theoretical and empirical modes of literary and cultural analysis and to broaden my analysis to the surrounding structures of the culture, and particularly to set English culture – too often, in my view, trying to exist in anticipatory Brexit-like isolation – in a broader European context. Chapter One surveys what seem to me to be the most pertinent current theories of Baroque culture. I draw on a variety of philosophers, historians and theorists, but most particularly José Antonio Maravall. I advance a schema of recurring Baroque characteristics that are most applicable to writing – *fictionalising*, *hyperbole*, *melancholy*, *kitsch*, and *plateauing*. Some of these concepts will seem unfamiliar to scholars used to considering the Baroque as primarily concerned with music, painting, or sculpture, or seeing it inextricably connected with the Counter-Reformation. They are meant to point not so much at the surface characteristics of the period's culture and more to underlying ideological trends. I also ask how we can speak of the 'English' Baroque, since it has long seemed an alien concept to the residual tradition of English literary and cultural history.

In Chapter Two I focus on the chief contribution of this study, the notion of the Female Baroque, in which the influence of Kristeva and other feminist historians and theorists leads me to examine the distinctive contribution of women writers and artists, thus pointing to a recurring gap in previous scholarship on the Baroque, which has been focused primarily – though

certainly not irrelevantly – on the objectification of ‘Woman’. Along with the historical realities of patriarchal exploitation of early modern women, I explore the emergent energies of women’s writings, speculating – with what I hope are sufficient material examples given the increasing number of women writers whose work in recent years has come to light or simply been accorded greater attention – on the question of whether there were distinctive ‘female’ experiences articulated in or behind early modern discourse. Kristeva’s emphasis on ‘intimate revolt’ and her famous distinction between the ‘semiotic’ and the ‘symbolic’ are frequently in the vicinity of that discussion.

After the two predominantly theoretical accounts of the Female Baroque, the third chapter starts with the seemingly natural association of the Baroque with the Counter-Reformation and looks at two English Catholic women writers, Gertrude More and Mary Ward, both of whom were exiled in Catholic Europe during the early seventeenth century. While More and Ward have attracted some attention within the history of religious devotion, until very recently neither has been widely viewed in broader cultural, let alone specifically ‘literary’ contexts. I then move in Chapter Four to a topic that much traditional scholarship on the Baroque may see as paradoxical: the notion of the Protestant Baroque. I introduce the concept of ‘emergent’ or ‘partial’ Baroque characteristics in the writings of two Protestant poets, Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, and Aemilia Lanyer. This is followed by a discussion of the Protestant women of Little Gidding, the women of the ‘Arminian nunnery’ whose ‘storying’ and remarkable creation of biblical harmonies show how the broader cultural dynamics of the age could permeate even a seemingly marginal group of remarkable women who have only recently attracted attention outside the history of devotion. I then look across the Atlantic to examine the English equivalent to the colonial Baroque so prominent in discussions of Spanish and Portuguese Atlantic culture, and question the extent to which New England – looking briefly at Anne Bradstreet and more thoroughly at Anne Hutchinson – can be set within the scope of not just colonial but specifically Protestant colonial Baroque.

I turn in Chapter Five to what I term Court Baroque, focusing on the explosion of cultural activities in the Jacobean and Caroline courts before, during, and after the Civil War, looking specifically at the place of women writers and performers. My discussion is centred on James I’s and Charles I’s Catholic queens and the court activities over which they presided before the displacement of the English court during the Commonwealth, and then, following the Restoration, when the English courts of Charles II and James II came under the influence of more prominent manifestations of continental

Baroque culture. I examine a number of entertainments, poems, plays, stories, and treatises produced in and in relation to the Court; I also look at some of those produced on its fringes, in 'little courts' like the Sidneys' Penshurst or the Cavendish residences, both in the English 'country' and in exile in Antwerp, which were separate from but deeply influenced by the metropolitan court culture. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of Hester Pulter, whose writings exemplify aspects of the court Baroque even in an isolated country home in a period of increasing suspicion regarding the morals of the royal court.

In Chapter Six, to illustrate a major courtly Baroque writer, I turn to Lady Mary Wroth's prose romance, *The Countess of Montgomeries Urania*, and its associated poetry collection, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Wroth obsessively pursues multiple narratives, crossing back and forth over the barriers between fiction and history, and establishes the contours of a female Baroque subject, who has to both be subjected to and attempt to transcend enculturation by the dominant male discourses. In Chapter Seven, I turn to two women writers whose work marks a transition from the Baroque to the Enlightenment. Margaret Cavendish figures prominently in two diverging intellectual worlds. Her life and writings unquestionably contain multiple rich, if often contradictory, aspects we can certainly usefully describe as Baroque. However, especially in her later writings, she developed an eager if ambivalent relationship with the new empirical science and 'natural philosophy', the dynamics of which point us beyond the Baroque to the Enlightenment. Along with Cavendish, viewed (as she would wish) as a 'she-scientist', I consider Aphra Behn's groundbreaking writings, frequently described by Restoration scholars as demonstrably Baroque but, as with Cavendish, moving into a new cultural paradigm. Thus, just as at the beginning of the period the Baroque spasmodically surfaces in the predominantly Renaissance work of Pembroke and Lanyer, so in the late seventeenth century, some of its characteristics blaze spectacularly even as they are challenged by Enlightenment culture. As Behn's dedication to *The Fair Jilt* puts it, 'this is reality, and matter of fact, and acted in this our latter age'.² A brief Postscript concludes the study.

Throughout I have used Kristeva's far-ranging discussions of language and the 'writing woman' as central to my analysis of the Female Baroque. Teresa of Avila represents, Kristeva argued, 'multiple facets, plural transitions'; like the era itself, Teresa was 'inconstant, mobile, playful, reinvented on the go'; she affirms the 'triumph of the as-if, celebration of the inconstancy

2 Behn, *Oroonoko and Other Writings*, p. 74.

of objective reality'. Teresa is, Kristeva affirms, 'in a word, Baroque'.³ The great precedent of Teresa as *the* Female Baroque was not simply to 'feel rapture' but to tell it and write it down.⁴ In the Baroque, women were able, to a greater or lesser extent, not only to accept (however necessarily) their assigned places within a residual masculinist discourse, but to discover and to give voice to counter-dominant surges and explorations of 'intimate revolt'.⁵ They discovered ways by which the residual patriarchal realm might be undermined, and by which both women's voices and what lies behind or accompanies those voices, might be opened up.⁶ The Female Baroque, I argue, is where we can discover emergent counter-discourses in which, in different ways, women writers were challenged to find devious, subversive, and oppositional spaces for themselves.

Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic therefore informs my discussion throughout. The semiotic, Kristeva argues, is found in the rhythms of art, music, poetry, and prophetic discourse, or as Freud insisted, in dreams or *aporias* in ordinary language, in bodily drives, erotic desires, even seemingly random or irrational noises uttered in melancholia or hyperbole, disruptions of sense, syntax, or grammar emerging from a variety of psychic spaces which often threaten to emerge and engulf the speaking subject. It is the semiotic dimension of female speech that Kristeva singles out as the distinctive feature that makes Teresa the epitome of the female Baroque and which in varying forms and to varying extents, I have tried to locate in the texts I have examined. Ranging from pre-linguistic emotional traces to linguistic representations, and thence connecting to broader ideologies, we can therefore attempt to interpret traces that may lie quietly below the surface or might threaten to emerge, even endanger, the surface rationality of everyday existence.⁷

In looking for examples where the Baroque speaks through the surface narratives and reaches back deeply into the unconscious at points of seeming inaccessibility, I have focused on that most distinctive Baroque figure, the 'writing woman'. Placing women writers inside the challenges of their historical moment, showing them trying to give voice to desires that transgress the residual class and gender norms provided by society, family, and despite the felt inadequacy of available language, we can see signs of

3 Kristeva, *Teresa*, pp. 9, 561, 563, 113.

4 Kristeva, *Teresa*, p. 67.

5 Kristeva, 'New Forms of Revolt', pp. 1–19.

6 Kristeva, 'Women's Time', pp. 13–35.

7 Kristeva, *Beginning*, p. 6.

how a new subjective space is being built. Such analysis allows us to see the exclusivity of patriarchal discourse being undermined, even partly or potentially, by what Kristeva calls a woman's body's 'greedy void' with its 'insatiable cry for more'.⁸

I have read my chosen women writers through a taxonomy of fictionalising, hyperbole, melancholy, and kitsch, but throughout, I have argued that what I call 'plateauing' – adapting the term from the visionary Anglo-American anthropologist Gregory Bateson – is a particularly distinctive Baroque trait that applies with special force to the women of the era. Characteristically, the Baroque falls short of and implicitly challenges residual beliefs in what Gregory Bateson terms traditional Western culture's 'orgasmic culmination toward an excess of the idealised apex'; for the Baroque, the residual but increasingly problematic promise of transcendence is challenged, even replaced, by *plateauing*, seen or at least sensed in a widespread melancholy that the 'idealised apex' may be a delusion.⁹ Typically, Baroque surfaces are deceptive masquerades, pointing only to ambiguous hinterlands, not to a reassuring transcendent world but to a world of further recessive spaces. Even a rapture seemingly achieved lasts only briefly, as a Catholic mystic like More or a Protestant visionary like Anne Hutchinson acknowledges. Viewed as a cultural phenomenon, the excitement of the Baroque is 'forever wanting' and always 'a bit further on' so that by its very nature consummation or finality continually escapes.¹⁰ Plateauing is an intensely felt present absence grounded in an insurmountable lack, caused by the reluctant and sometimes despairing bewilderment before the disjunction of self and world, between hyperbole and melancholic actuality, and increasingly revealing a cosmos that is gradually being dismantled. Behind the absolutist facade of the Baroque is a major cosmological and theological crisis, a conflict between the gradual fading of the metaphysical world on which the traditional world depended and what Kristeva terms humanity's incredible need to believe.¹¹

My debts to the community of scholars working on both early modern women and on the mysteries of Baroque culture (and the difficulties of pinning down that elusive term) have accumulated for many years in writing, at conferences, in classrooms, and many conversations; such colleagues, fellow scholars, and friends include, though certainly are not limited to, the following: Bill Baskin, Ilona Bell, Diane Bornstein, Bradley Brookshire,

8 Kristeva, *Teresa*, pp. 95, 350, 401.

9 Bateson, *Ecology of Mind*, p. 113.

10 Kristeva, *Teresa*, pp. 350, 401.

11 Kristeva, *Incredible Need*.

Andrew Brown, Andrea Clough, Craig Dionne, Susan Donahue, Alison Findlay, Mary Ellen Lamb, Arthur Marotti, Margaret McLaren, Naomi Miller, Susan Morrison, Michele Osherow, Paul Salzman, Anne Shaver, Rob Stillman, and Susanne Woods. A few of these were once students of mine; other students from whose insights I have especially benefited include Leyla Gentil, Sadie Kalinowska-Werter, Kimberly Love, Gayle MacDonald, Maeve O'Neill, Susan Rudy, Stacia Vigneri, and especially Emma Steen, as well as the members of a 'Renaissance in England' class at Purchase College, who worked through Wroth and Cavendish (along with Philip Sidney and Spenser) with me in Spring 2018. Two students, Emma Steen and another who preferred to remain anonymous, provided me with important suggestions for some specific references in the book.

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The cover illustration, 'Self-portrait as the allegory of Painting (*La Pittura*)', 1638–39 (oil on canvas) is reproduced by permission of Bridgeman Images.

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Cambridge, England

Rye Brook, New York

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