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Afterword

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It has been almost one hundred years since Alice Clark published her groundbreaking study, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919). Clark's analysis, which first documented the lives of early modern female laborers and the shift in their economic positions during the period, has been joined by an outpouring of historical and literary studies in the last several decades that have continued to investigate women's active participation in diverse sections of the labor market and analyze how that work was reimagined in various kinds of early modern texts. This same period has also witnessed a burgeoning critical interest in the recovery and analysis of early modern women's writing. However, despite the fact of *Working Life's* own female authorship, these two areas of study—early modern women's work and writing—have only rarely been brought to bear directly on each other.¹ The essays in this volume, however, consider both individually and collectively the rich benefits of reading these subjects in conjunction with each other, of thinking about the interrelationship

of women's writing and their work, broadly conceived. Work is, indeed, a productively capacious topic of inquiry, as the word "work" could signify a wide range of practices in the early modern period, ranging from the generic ("something that is or was done") to the surprisingly specific ("the operation of making a textile fabric").² The contributors to this special issue capitalize on the flexibility of work as an analytical category in order to explore an exciting diversity of women's texts and practices. As a result, these essays powerfully demonstrate the relational and contingent nature of "work" in the period and reveal the role of early modern women in constructing work as a social, historical, and literary activity.

One particularly striking and welcome feature of these essays is the ways in which they productively ruminate on questions of methodology and critical process. What does it mean to read for women's work? Where do we look? What counts as women's work and for whom are those definitions operative? The contributors to this special issue take up these and related questions as they interrogate how early modern women inscribe themselves and are in turn inscribed into narratives of labor. Across the fascinating range of materials and subjects addressed by the contributors, there is one analytical query that, to my mind, connects the entire issue: what is the nature of early modern women's participation in and production of discursive knowledge? This question guides the contributors' investigation of a range of materials and genres—including lyric poetry, domestic drama, midwifery manuals, prose translation, manuscript records, letters, and autobiography—and a variety of labors—including colonial botany, housework, medicine, and literary production. Through these analyses, two key points of intersection emerge. First, the essays emphasize the importance of women's participation in complex communal networks of exchange. Second, the contributors reveal the significant cultural work done by representational strategies, including genres,

tropes, and recurring figures. Examining these two themes in more detail can help us better situate the important contributions of this special issue and point the way to additional questions, problems, and directions for future scholarship.

Although most of the essays collected here focus their attention on a single figure or writer, they also make clear that a fuller understanding of these individuals requires a broader canvass, an attention to the networks and communities within which their work took shape and acquired meaning. Elizabeth Pentland, for instance, argues that a transnational literary community played a crucial role in the production and reception of Mary Sidney's prose translation of *A Discourse of Life and Death*. The political significance of Sidney's work is thus a dialogic, diachronic process in which her text, like those of Mornay and Aggas with which she was in direct conversation, accrued historical meaning across the period as it drew upon and became associated with key historical events, such as the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. Interpreting this process of historical aggregation, Pentland makes clear how Sidney's work "might have signified for its earliest readers" through a complex range of associations and, as a result, served as "a timely piece of political commentary." Rather than reading Sidney through the lens of exceptionalism (the "discourse of singularity" that Lara Dodds also associates with Cavendish criticism in her essay), Pentland demonstrates the continued importance of reading women's texts as embedded and relational, as part of literary and sociopolitical communities composed of both men and women.

Catherine Morphis, Jennifer Munroe, and Barbara Mujica each take up the subject of women working within medical and scientific communities. In these examples, women participate in and help establish a kind of counter-narrative to a dominant tradition of labor, be it midwifery, colonial botany, or nursing. As they narrate their labors through letters,

manuscript records, and published treatises, Ana de San Bartolomé, Mary Somerset, and Jane Sharp do not occupy absolutely marginal or alternative positions in the medical labor economy: they are in many ways taking up sanctioned positions within a patriarchal system of scientific practice. However, each of these women offers revealing commentary on the larger system of which they are a part, interrogating modes of knowledge-making and proffering experiential and observational advice not from a position of strict difference, but from one of complex interdependence. As Morphis demonstrates in her essay, for instance, Sharp offers her readers a new perspective on English midwifery based on her own experiences as a practitioner, but she does so not by directly flouting but by actively participating in a male-dominated world of academic medical publishing.

For Munroe, Somerset's engagement with colonial botany draws our attention to new ways of conceptualizing scientific labor in the period but also to the problematic complicity of women within colonialist and patriarchal practices. Munroe argues that Somerset's work and writing challenge us to rethink the definition of colonial botany itself: Somerset did not herself travel abroad, but she did collect and catalog botanical specimens and engage in rigorous cross-referencing of her plant collections. Women such as Somerset were thus vital, if unacknowledged, participants in what Munroe refers to as "networks of collaborative labor." At the same time, such networks often situate women within oppressive, even violent colonial economies. Perhaps one of the uncomfortable but important conclusions of Munroe's essay, then, is that one significant form of authority for women in the period was the power that they exerted over subordinates; as Frances Dolan has argued in the context of early modern marital relationships, the assumption that "wives, mothers, and mistresses should wield authority over their subordinates reminds us of the complexity of women's status in

households.”³ The analysis of early modern women’s participation in shared communities of work and writing thus necessitates an unflinching assessment of women’s complicity in complex hierarchies of power, such as the dominant colonialist project that Munroe describes. Such evidence may be unpleasant to our contemporary political sensibilities, but it nevertheless reminds us that “agency” need not be reducible to “positive influence” in order for it to be discursively and historically significant.⁴ Through the examples of Somerset—and, we might add, Sharp and Ana de San Bartolomé—we can see that female authority often derives much of its force in the period through its collusion with rather than its overt rejection of patriarchal structures of meaning.

Like that of Somerset, Ana de San Bartolomé’s labor comes into view if we look not at dominant medical practices but more informal and marginal activities. As Mujica argues: “in spite of their marginalization, early modern women played a significant role as healers in homes, communities, hospitals and convents.” And although Ana de San Bartolomé was exceptional in many ways (perhaps most notably because she was literate and left behind numerous letters and autobiographies), Mujica makes clear how her medical labor was part of a vital community practice within an early modern Spanish convent. Ana de San Bartolomé’s exceptionalism thus in this instance points to a commonality: the widespread participation of Spanish nuns in the making and dissemination of medical knowledge. Mujica’s research further demonstrates that women’s medical expertise was often produced discursively and rhetorically through their acts of writing. Ana’s frequent references to miracles in her narrative, for instance, help “establish her authority” and “emphasize her humility.” It is through the work of narration that Ana de San Bartolomé can bring into being new

knowledge and new perspectives—counter-narratives that exist within dominant practice but that might not be highlighted in traditional medical accounts of the period.

This brings me to the second major point of intersection between the essays in this issue: an emphasis on the work performed by representation and discourse. Morphis's account of Sharp, for example, focuses not only on the labor Sharp describes in her treatise but also on the labor enacted by and through her discursive tropes and metaphors. Attending to "the figurative and rhetorical components of medical language" enables Morphis to trace the productive formal operations of Sharp's text that make possible a conjunction between experiential and ideological meaning-making practices. Sharp may allude to medical labors that precede her text, but those labors can only be fully realized through the structures and rhetorical forms that constitute the text itself.

In her essay, Ann Christiansen turns attention to housewifery but approaches that subject explicitly through the lens of discursive representations available in such popular early modern English texts as domestic drama and city comedy. Indeed, Christiansen sets before her readers a striking paradox of sorts: although recent scholarship together with many early modern texts emphasize the value and importance of women's housework to domestic economy, it is nevertheless true that housewifery was frequently *understood as* marginal, or as a detraction from the "real" work performed by men. As she writes: "Even though people *experienced* housewifery's equality with business, in supporting a household's survival and prosperity, that mutual interdependence did not prohibit a growing *perception* of housewifery's dependent position." Literary representation in this case exists in compelling contradistinction to historical "facts" or even to historical analysis more generally. But the instability of housework as a category of labor laden with contradictory sociocultural

meanings in the period acts not as a barrier to analysis but as an invitation to explore domestic work through the multiple, contested discursive sites in which it is produced. It is precisely in the gaps between perception and reality (in Christiansen's phrasing) that we can see writers grappling with the inconsistent ideological emplacement of women within the early modern domestic and commercial economy.

Lara Dodds adds to the housewife discussed in Christiansen's essay the figure of the bawd, another strategic representation of women's labor that performs vital social and literary work. For Dodds, these figures serve as "crucially shaping metaphor[s]" that both enable Margaret Cavendish's philosophical inquiries and "articulate the complexities of her situation as a writer." Women's labor in this case figuratively tropes literary style. These material images index dilative formal qualities such as excess and inappropriateness, but in doing so they also demarcate literary invention and creativity. As is true of the figure of the housewife Christiansen examines in her essay, the bawd and the housewife in Dodds account become productive analytical categories not because they are affiliated with concrete and stable systems of meaning, but because of their inherent instability. Dodds' discussion of Cavendish also raises important questions about the work that we as scholars of early modern do when we examine women's texts: what aesthetic judgments do we or should we make? What critical methodologies do we employ? What is the relationship between formal analysis and historical recovery, and how might we continue to rethink and refine that relationship? Dodds notes that scholars have given scant attention to the formal elements of Cavendish's writing, and the same might be said of much criticism on early modern women writers more generally, although there has certainly been more analysis of such matters as genre, form, and style in recent years. As Dodds argues, however, attention to aesthetics—and even to moments of

stylistic awkwardness or embarrassment, what she refers to as “vices of style”—is necessary to our continued investigations of women’s texts as fully situated, sociocultural documents. Women’s texts work through formal means; as a result, an analysis of form must be a part of the work we perform as scholars of early modern women’s writing.

The essays in this volume exemplify the kind of historical and literary inquiry crucial to our continued scholarly engagement with early modern women. Collectively, these essays help develop and enhance our understanding of both women’s work and women’s writing by analyzing these categories in conjunction. In doing so, they suggest the value of attending to collectivities without neglecting individuals and of tracing the work of discursive representation without losing sight of historical situatedness. They also remind us just how important it is to continue analyzing women’s embeddedness within dominant cultural forms of signification—be it labor practices, literary modes, or patriarchal structures of power—rather than considering only their subversion of such forms. As we continue to query, recover, and investigate women’s participation within early modern economies of writing and labor, we would also do well to follow the lead of the essays collected here and keep the methodological difficulties that accompany our own work as scholars continually in view. For it is in the faultlines, in the spaces of contradiction, and in the messiness of our engagement with the past that we are likely to gain the greatest insights about work, writing, and the women who performed both.

¹ Susan Frye’s *Pens and Needles: Women’s Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) is one important exception; see also my *Women’s Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2009). Clark herself does not discuss women’s writing as labor in *Working Life* (London, Routledge, 1919; 3rd ed., 1992).

² For the broad range of practices that the word “work” could signify in the early modern period, see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “work,” *n.*, esp. 1.1 and 16. Furthermore, as sociologists and historians have demonstrated, the “enigmatic essence of work” ultimately means that, “the difference between work and non-work seldom lies within the actual activity itself and more generally inheres in the social context that supports the activity.” See Keith Grint, *The Sociology of Work: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 3, 11. See also Richard H. Hall, *Sociology of Work: Perspectives, Analyses, and Issues* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994) and Keith Thomas, ed., *The Oxford Book of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³ Frances E. Dolan, *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 106.

⁴ In *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Erica Longfellow makes a similar point regarding our analysis of women’s writing that does not necessarily conform to contemporary feminist expectations. As she notes, “We have yet to decide between the goals of historicizing our own feminism and recovering the history of early modern women, or to grapple with the fact that these goals may be mutually exclusive” (4-5). See also Kathryn Schwarz, who argues that “women pose a threat” not only when they “challenge expectations of femininity” but when they “take those expectations as a mandate for purposeful acts” (*What You Will: Gender, Contract, and Shakespearean Social Space* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011], 2).