

# Writing Gender: Authorship and Authority\_\_\_\_\_

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The conversation about “gender, sex, and sexuality” in a historical and cultural context begins with the recognition of bodily difference. As feminist theorists have demonstrated, the dichotomy of male versus female defines, if not all, then certainly almost all societies. In the development of western culture, with which this essay will be concerned, we find a binary of difference, wherein the female body, perspective, and voice challenge a dominant patriarchal discourse. Most often, in the historical trajectory that we will consider, there is a claim to the right to speak by indirection rather than through direct discourse. Throughout the history of Western culture, women’s voices have been silent and silenced. We often find their exercise of power behind rather than beside men’s.

In the past half-century, the feminist reconsideration of women’s agency has produced various methods to recover and discover women’s deployment of power and voice in the western tradition. As this essay will show, tracking this history depends on the reliance upon experience or practice over theory, the paradoxical assertion of right through the acceptance of a position of weakness or secondary status, and the claim of the importance of prophecy. For women in the West, revelation almost always trumps philosophy, insofar as both formal learning and access to legal authority remained the domain of men. With this in mind, readers face two areas of subject exploration. These areas frequently intersect in the figures considered here. Literature, as an “art” of representation, allows us to see how language and the metaphorical—the indirect rather than the direct—serve women’s voices in creating alternate realities to the avenues of power open to them in the world. Religion—a term meant here to encompass all aspects of the sacred, non-rational, and spiritual—likewise offers this invitation. The following essay seeks to chart how these two areas of discourse provided ways for women to resist—even as they complied with—the regulations and

expectations imposed on them by Western culture. This reading of women's "experience" will offer insight into "gender, sex, and sexuality" by illuminating the assumptions about each of those categories that the array of moments highlighted here demanded.

Beginning with the ancients, the essay provides a brief overview of women in the Greco-Roman world. One could argue that the memory and legacy of the poet Sappho (sixth century BCE) has meant more than the actual woman herself or her literary output. One might say the same about the figure of the Virgin Mary, the subject of novelist Colm Tóibín's recent *Testament of Mary* that speaks from her perspective. Mary may have embodied the Word, in the understanding of Christ as *Logos* and the mystical idea of her womb giving voice. But apart from acquiescing, agreeing, indeed submitting, her mouth has been silent. Taking this pair, Sappho and the Virgin Mary, for cultural mythology, we have, on the one hand, the intellectually, artistically creative woman whose band of female apprentices/lovers pales in significance compared to her leap into death following a failed heterosexual love. On the other hand, we have the physically creative foremother, the sacred trope for all fecundity, whose virginity and holiness became both the bane and hope of later women.

Ancient Greece had many goddesses, creating myths of the jealous wife (Hera), dangerous power in desire (Aphrodite), virginity (Athena, Artemis), the fruits of the earth (Demeter), and the hearth (Hestia). Priestesses, and particularly Sibyls, suggest later examples for women's encounters with the holy as well as the literary arts. At the moment around the Common Era's dawn, we find the first tangible historical record of the public role of women in two Roman empresses. No Roman empress ever ruled alone, although several wielded tremendous influence as the power behind the throne. On the death of her husband, Emperor Caius Octavius "Augustus" (the venerable), Livia (58 BCE–29 CE) was given the title "Augusta." In his *Annals of Imperial Rome*, the historian Tacitus implies that she had a direct hand in the deaths of her stepchildren and possibly grandchildren, wishing to ensure her son's succession to the throne. Agrippina II (15–59 CE) married her uncle, the Emperor Claudius,

and assured that her own son, Nero, would succeed, perhaps by poisoning her husband. Agrippina sought to rule the empire through her son and found herself thwarted, first by his tutors and, ultimately, by Nero himself. We are limited to male historians, such as Tacitus, for knowledge of her tale, but Agrippina may have seduced her son in a final bid for power. He resisted and, after several failed attempts, finally succeeded in assassinating her. Agrippina could win power for Nero, but could not keep any for herself. This limitation led to her downfall.

The career of the Byzantine empress Theodora (c. 500–548) shows that Greek and Roman restrictions on women continued under Christianity. We rely on the male writer Procopius for the history of her rise from humble birth by cleverness and sexual license. When Emperor Justinian fell in love with her, she came to power. Procopius portrays her as a vengeful nymphomaniac, yet he also constructs Theodora as a successful collaborator in ruling with her husband. The couple even pretended to quarrel to confuse rival constituencies. While Procopius scripts Theodora as promiscuous before marriage, he paints her as a faithful wife to Justinian, even though she encouraged other wives' infidelities for political purposes. Theodora established a convent for former prostitutes, a "magdalen home" (the Christian term alluding to the supposed profession of Saint Mary Magdalene). Procopius finds Theodora's interference with the Christian Church to be scandalous. Her enemy Photius was dragged from the altar of the Church of Hagia Sophia, while the priests "stood to one side and suffered her to do as she willed" (Procopius 19).

In contrast, early Christianity is filled with stories of virtuous women. While some of these are literally urban legend, others stand out. The third-century Saint Perpetua, a Carthaginian patrician convert, kept a diary during her imprisonment. It depicts a young wife, daughter, and mother of a nursing infant who chose to die for her Christian faith. She describes the abuses inflicted on her physical body as warfare that transformed her into a man. Her martyrdom was the "hour of her glory," like Christ's ("Passion of Perpetua" 23). Her slave Felicity, "milk dripping from her breasts," dies with her

(“Passion of Perpetua” 23). Christianity became a means of rejecting traditional gender roles. The fourth-century Saint Pelagia of Antioch masqueraded as a eunuch monk in Jerusalem, in order to live out her vocation. Early Christian hagiography offered such types for devout women’s aspirations. These examples demonstrate the intersection of legal and gender transgression in the subversive Christianization of the Mediterranean world. But models of the new faith always engaged in some way the *mores* of the old. The Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, often cited as a religious text *manqué* for its struggle between heroic and quasi-Christian values, displays the noblewomen Wealhtheow and Freawaru presenting gold and bearing cups to victors. Some scholars have suggested that a “return” of “repressed” female power can be found in the monstrous representation of Grendel’s mother, who emerges from her primordial ooze to wreck the peace of human civilization in that story. Anxious examples abound in European mythology. The legend of Saint Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland may refer to banishment of the wisdom serpent, symbolizing pagan Irish female deities. In a positive light, the woman who headed a college at Kildare, the fifth–sixth century Saint Brigit, may have been considered an incarnation of the ancient Irish goddess Brigit.

Inversions of gender go hand-in-hand with the inversions of a new faith. Early English literature includes many retellings of Biblical tales, literally and figuratively “translating” them for a new audience of Germanic tribes living under a warrior code. In the Anglo-Saxon poem *Judith*, the Hebrew heroine is transformed into a vengeful soldier for Christ. “God gave Judith glory at war” (*Judith* 122). As in “The Dream of the Rood,” where a warrior Christ mounts the tree of victory, heroic culture could not abide humility in its saviors. Even women were towers of strength. For this reason, the age produced women of religious authority, from the seventh-century abbess Hilda of Whitby to Saint Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). The later German saint described herself as a feather on the breath of God, crediting her agency to God’s authority. Her letters chastised bishops, abbots, and even the pope. Hildegard claimed that she had been called by God to “cry out . . . and write” because she lived

in a womanish age (61). Hildegard sought not to assert a feminist utopia, but to suggest that the men of her time had failed to speak as they ought. Therefore, a woman would be used as God's instrument. This default empowered and justified her speech. Hildegard used the prophetic voice in her political writing and her visionary works, extensive theological *summae* that explain cosmology through word and image worthy of Jung's *Red Book*. She is known as the Sibyl of the Rhine, having written lavish songs for her community of nuns' devotional use. These works glorify the bodies of virgins. Scholars have noted homoeroticism in such woman-song, and have commented on Hildegard's Jeremiah-like laments for Richardis, a beloved companion who left to found another convent and died.

Hildegard's justification for speech would be at odds with modern feminism. She imagined gender complementarity, not "equality." Basing authority on her aristocratic birth as much as Divine inspiration, her views on class are not ours. She maintained that one would no more mix noble and common women in the convent than place horses and donkeys in the same stable. Hildegard's view of the material world's standards could subvert, as in her pedigreed permission to speak out with few repercussions. Still, Hildegard found herself subject to the authority of "Father" Church. Her convent was temporarily denied religious sacraments because of an irregular burial. No matter how powerful in mundane or spiritual terms, premodern women were subject to male control. Saint Paul's statement that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3.28) applied to heaven, not earth.

Complementary to the inheritance of Germanic heroic culture is the art of courtly love popularized by Provençal troubadours and trouvères. It is found in the Arthurian literature of Norman England. The Madonna-like lady might receive adoration from a knight who pledges his service to her, but whose "plaint" she cannot grant with carnal consummation. This literature depicts an incestuous culture where infatuations are inevitable but adultery's risk of bastard birth would undermine a dynastic system. Women's agency is commodified in sexual power to grant or deny favors, to maintain or destroy bloodlines. Women's bodies are volatile in the biologically

procreative world. As in the tales of the Roman empresses, woman's authority is defined by her individual relationships with particular men who authorize her body. The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman Marie de France is commonly regarded as the first "English" woman author, even though she composed in French. Her *lais* are moral tales of transgression and redemption plotted on a matrix of romantic love. In *Bisclavret*, a husband's body enacts a male menstruation by morphing monthly into a werewolf as a test of his wife's fidelity. Relying on his clothing to return to humanhood (clothes make the man), the wife's treachery ensures he will remain in his lower animal nature. But the true gentleman is inside of him: when he recognizes the hierarchy of rulers, his humanity is recovered—although not before he bites off his wife's nose. Her infidelity is marked on her body, and her future offspring lack noses as well. While the outcome may be a metaphor for inheritable venereal disease from infidelity, cutting off the nose was typical punishment in medieval Italy when adultery was charged. In the *lai Lanval*, male loyalty is rewarded and female treachery punished. The knight Lanval is granted the favors of a magical lady whose only rule is that their relationship remains secret. Meanwhile, the earthly queen attempts to seduce him. When he rejects her advances with a comparison to his lady, the queen accuses him of propositioning her. The queen's duplicity is revealed as his lady forgives his verbal transgression and transports both of them to the spirit realm. This woman writer's fantasy of female perfection includes both carnal consummation and personal agency.

The most canonical male author of medieval England presents a challenge to read the female body and a female character. With the rise of authorship (Geoffrey Chaucer [1343–1400] is our first "known" author mentioned here, save the ancient historians), the question of "authority" in reading emerges. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer sketches the character of the Wife of Bath, a laywoman who interprets the Bible through the lens of her experience. Critics debate whether she is a nightmare from clerical antifeminist literature or a sympathetic portrait. The body of her text and the text of her body present the challenge of secular modernity: who has the right to interpret? The prologue to her tale is longer than the tale itself.

It provides her autobiography (a fiction, since she is a character recalled by “Chaucer,” a character in the *Canterbury Tales*, scripted by Chaucer, the poet . . .). Alys of Bath recounts abuse by a clerical husband who tormented her by reading stories of wicked wives. After she tears a page from his book, he beats her. A happy marriage is restored with his agreement to return authority to her body and her property. Chaucer raises the subject of perspective here and in the formal tale, an Arthurian story of a rape. There, a fallen knight, a failure at courtly love, must learn what women want. When he discerns the answer is freedom of choice, he is granted the pleasure of a beautiful and loyal wife. While it might be easy to imagine Chaucer as a proto-feminist, this text is an intellectual reckoning of authority. The female body serves as a pawn in the struggle for the right to read: to interpret for oneself, the hallmark of modernity. In the patient Griselda of the Clerk’s Tale, the wife named “Constance” in the Man of Law’s Tale, and *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer deployed gender to explore changing dynamics of power in a world where authority could no longer be centralized in Church and state. Future texts embody the conclusion from the Clerk: Griselda is dead, and so is her patience. The world in which blind faith and blind obedience submitted to others’ readings of the text of one’s own life had ended.

Chaucer’s representations must be compared to three extraordinary female contemporaries. In 1405, Christine de Pizan wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*, a corrective of the antifeminist literature. Three female guides read against the errors in the western tradition’s negative representations of women. Deploying the dream-vision formula, Christine de Pizan makes herself as student of these enlightened teachers. A far homelier and humbler text is *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c.1430s), often called the first autobiography by an Englishwoman. There, we hear Margery’s desperation to tell her story, for she is illiterate and depends on a clerical scribe willing to write it. Prone to postpartum psychoses, Margery experienced many disappointments in middle-class life and marriage. Aware of the special recognition brides of Christ had, Margery longs to be in relationship with God as His special spouse. Her husband frees

her, forgiving her marital debt (sexual intercourse) in exchange for payment of his literal debt. Prone to mad fits of weeping, Margery traveled on many religious pilgrimages. (This was how the fictional Wife of Bath occupied her time, and how people of that upwardly mobile merchant class practiced their increasingly international trade.) In Margery's text, we find audacious and skillful defenses of her right to speak publicly. Her female lay authority, willingness to challenge prelates, and determination to tell her story are extraordinary.

One of the few references we have to the English theologian Julian of Norwich (c.1342–c.1416) is found in Margery's book, where she mentions a visit to the holy hermit of that town. The thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, or rule for anchoresses, describes how a woman pursuing the eremitic (solitary) way should live. In the later Middle Ages, when some spiritual seekers were disenchanted with corruptions in monastic life or some circumstance prevented them from pursuing that path, they often opted for the "Desert Fathers" (and Mothers) model of the early Church. Julian of Norwich was one such person, whose enclosure (if one can call it that) came after a sudden illness. The little we know about the woman attached to the church of St. Julian's in Norwich comes from historical references to her presence there. We have two texts she wrote based on a religious vision she experienced while comatose. The first version recounts details with keen spiritual insight. The second version, probably composed two decades later, parses out the theological meanings of her "showings," as she calls them. Julian's hermitage was located in a busy market town where people like Margery sought her out. With one window to the world and one to the church, the anchoress' cell was a liminal space between this world and the next. Julian's texts are extraordinary because of her self-consciousness as a writer, but also for the sophistication of her theology. Informed by the best education available to women at that time (presumably from wealth and male relatives' belief that she should learn), Julian's thought weaves together the two major trajectories of late medieval Christianity. The philosophical approach of Scholasticism is wedded to the affective theology of

Divine Love in the deceptively simple conclusion that love is God's meaning. Much attention has been paid to Julian's use of maternal imagery in discussing God as mother. But Julian was not the first Christian writer to do so, and many of these voices (Saint Anselm, for instance) were male. Julian's uniqueness is in her deployment of maternal metaphors to suggest both the Creation (of everything) and the Redemption (Christ's passion) as literal "labors" of love. Biological parturition serves as the central trope for both physical and spiritual existence. Julian's scholarly abstraction is coupled with remarkably cogent and accessible counsel, sound advice from a spiritual director. In as radical a manner as Chaucer, Julian levels the hierarchical playing field, unifying the cosmos in a theology of "one-ing." Julian's refusal to attribute dichotomous thinking to the world God created is reflected in her theology, ethics, and indeed politics of gender. God is not only mother, but also father, spouse, friend, and every imaginable relationship. In reading Julian's texts, we may find it difficult to remember that a medieval Christian woman, socialized to articulate categories of difference, is speaking. She allows no separateness within her vision of unity.

Although a brilliant and iconoclastic theologian, the Blessed (not Sainted) Julian of Norwich has never been named a doctor of the Church, the title bestowed on the great teachers in the Roman Catholic tradition. The first women given such recognition were Saint Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) and Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), and these two not until 1970. Only two other women have been awarded the title: Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) in 1997 (for her theology of love and devotion that lends itself well to submission) and Saint Hildegard in 2012 (besides her prolific productivity, her thought is perhaps the most systematic of any medieval woman writing theology). One might argue that the sheer orthodoxy of Catherine's voice advanced her candidacy more than Julian's (Catherine did not learn to write until three years before her death; like Margery Kempe, she dictated most of her works). But however much Teresa may be called a "mystic"—consider the familiar statue by Bernini of her "ecstasy," her heart pierced with the arrow of Divine Love—she was, in fact, an extraordinary administrator. In the

highly policed world of sixteenth-century Spain, this granddaughter of a Jew who had suffered the Inquisition succeeded in reforming a religious order. All of the women considered here are extraordinary for their claim to the voice of experience to speak from authority. If Julian stands on the cusp between medieval and early modern, writing sophisticated theology through a human lens, Teresa moves forward in perfecting and differentiating new genres for women. Her autobiography recalls Augustine's *Confessions* (397) and is the first work since that ancient prototype to offer such a candid portrait of the self-inviting spiritual and psychological transformation. Teresa's *Interior Castle* provides a step-by-step guide to deepening one's relationship to God. Despite formulaic language of modesty befitting her time and place, there is no question that Teresa speaks authoritatively in both of these texts.

Taken together, Julian and Teresa present us with a glimpse of a changing world where even a woman might speak boldly. Of course, this period coincides with the emergence of Reformation thought and changes in structures of power with respect to religion and the individual. While many examples could be provided, the story of Anabaptist martyr Janneken Munstorp (d. 1573) articulates these themes. Despite modest family and humble education, Janneken could read and write. She considered her personal study of the Bible to be both consolation and her way to Heaven. Pregnant when arrested as a heretic, she was spared until the birth of her child, whom she smuggled out of prison. Before being burned at the stake, she left her infant daughter a letter exhorting her to be true to her faith and proud of her parents, whom she compares to the prophets and apostles. Janneken urges her to "take up a book, and learn to seek there that which concerns your salvation" (985). She should "give diligence to learn to read and write" (Munstorp 986). Janneken bids her daughter to be an obedient child only "so far as is not contrary to God": to discern right and wrong for herself, not submit blindly to authority (987).

The career of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695), a nun in Mexico City, New Spain, illuminates some of the advantages and liabilities of learned women during the Catholic Counter-

Reformation. Although a girl of strong intellect, she was prevented from passing as a man to pursue university education. Self-taught, her poetry brought her recognition and patronage at the viceregal court. She chose the convent over marriage. There, she assembled one of the best collections of books and musical instruments in the New World. Sor Juana studied, wrote, and taught, directing musical and dramatic productions at the convent girls' school. With the help of the vicereine, Sor Juana's first book of poetry was published in Spain. She was called the "Tenth Muse of Mexico." Her poetry celebrates educated women, such as Saint Catherine of Alexandria (287–305) whose reason confounded male philosophers. Sor Juana wrote in the Villancico VI from "Santa Catarina" (1691), "gender is not of the essence / in matters of intelligence. . . . It is of service to the Church / that women argue, tutor, learn, / for He Who granted women reason / would not have them uninformed" (Juana 3–4, 61–64). Sor Juana's downfall came when a bishop published her letter disagreeing with a minor point of a Jesuit priest's sermon preached fifty years earlier. The same bishop later wrote a critique of Sor Juana's focus on secular learning, warning of vanity and pride. Her masterful *Response* cites historical precedents and argues that learning is part of her nature. Sor Juana found herself without patrons or protection. She surrendered her library and musical instruments to the archbishop, signed a confession of faith, and died of plague the following year. Despite the public gesture, one-hundred books and one-hundred-eighty-five bundles of letters were found in her rooms after her death. Even in New Spain during the Inquisition, resistance was possible.

This debate between sacred and secular also informs our reading as we consider the cultural history of religion and literature. As we continue to see, the two are not polar opposites as much as crossroads, intersecting yet faithful narratives. The most significant literary development of the succeeding eighteenth century was the so-called "rise" of the novel. The evolution of narrative from the epistolary form emphasizing private life and particular experience underscores the significance of the individual, lay, and indeed female reader and writer. To be the author of one's own text reaches

its climax in the masterful novels of Jane Austen. Although admired by a male audience, they are pedagogical guides for young women that teach negotiation of a perilous society and the longings for an inner life. The question of the “inner life” returns us to the discourse of religion. When the Wesleys and other second- or third-wave Protestant Reformers placed an emphasis upon revelation, they authorized the experience of laypeople regardless of class and re-affirmed the long tradition through which women could speak their truth. In 1859, novelist Mary Ann Evans (writing as “George Eliot”) would depict this phenomenon in *Adam Bede*. Set some half-century earlier, the novel’s humble Dinah Morris draws audiences for evangelical revivals with her gifted rhetoric. Methodism would ban women preachers. Samuel Johnson compared a woman’s preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs: neither is done well, but one is surprised to find them done at all. Yet the preaching that women could no longer practice publicly Eliot claimed elsewhere. The genre of the novel became a rhetorical space for Biblical reinterpretation. Eliot was a former Evangelical Christian, and her works exemplify the literary output of the Victorian approach to the Bible as literature. Sacred typology might offer a humanistic guide for living in a secularizing world.

The nineteenth century witnessed an abundance of female writers claiming the pen in multiple genres. Abolitionist rhetoric and early feminist prose argued from religious imperatives. While intellectual novelists like Eliot wrote secular scripture and elite poets flourished in classical forms, “lady” hymn writers and other devout women produced volumes of works. The blind Fanny Crosby wrote some eight thousand hymns. Whether relying on philosophy, the muse, or the spirit, female authors wrote experience into their texts. When Crosby pleads that God not “pass [her] by,” we hear the voice of a faithful Christian woman and a person with a disability. This century of “subjectivity” would establish the place of the first-person voice for men as well as women. The period literature displays sophisticated engagement with theological questions about woman’s place. Florence Nightingale’s 1852 *Cassandra* focuses on how women’s time is considered to be dispensable. The title

refers to the mythic female seer, tragic in that her prophecies are not believed. Nightingale laments what the world has lost by the expectations placed upon women. She asserts that Christ raised women to be ministers of God in moral activity. Had Christ been a woman, she says, he would have been dismissed as a “great complainer” (Nightingale 14). The “next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ,” but the world first has to be made ready (Nightingale 14). Nightingale observes that if women were to ask “Who is my mother? And who are my brethren?” (Matthew 12.48) as Christ did, making relationship ties secondary to vocation, they would be accused of destroying the family. In her extraordinary 1857 *Aurora Leigh*, a novel in verse about the development of a female artist, Elizabeth Barrett Browning argues for woman’s vocation. The poet must “choose to walk at all risks” (Barrett Browning 2.120). A would-be suitor—a philanthropist cousin looking for a helpmate in a wife—denigrates women’s particularity as evidence of incompetence in repairing the world. Unlike Christ, he argues, women fail to see the big picture. The title character affirms that “every single creature, female as the male, / Stands single in responsible act and thought” (Barrett Browning 2.472–473). Woman has a vocation to fulfill. These voices recall Mary Wollstonecraft’s extraordinary 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that blames poor education for the wrongs of women, that their observed nature is the result of socialization not essence. She anticipates twentieth-century feminist Simone de Beauvoir’s famous declaration that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.

Many other nineteenth-century women engaged theology. The poet Christina Rossetti’s 1862 “Goblin Market” tells a moral tale of Christ-like sacrifice by one “sister” for another who has “fallen.” Rossetti’s typological tropes transform woman into a literal savior, a Eucharistic feast to consume for redemption in vicarious suffering. Rossetti, a devout Anglican, was active in the “magdalen home” movement to rehabilitate former prostitutes. This literature had a redemptive purpose of its own for both the “fallen” and the “saved,” offering hope to society’s pariahs and meaning to middle-class rescuers. The poet inverts gender in her Renaissance-

inspired sonnet sequence, “Monna Innominata.” There, a female sonneteer acknowledges that, like Dante (with Beatrice) or Petrarch (with Laura), the female poet might use a male body as a vector for transcendence to the Divine. Rossetti is keenly aware of the silence of the woman of the Renaissance sonnet tradition. She prefaces her poem with an explanatory paragraph imagining had “such a lady spoken for herself” (Rossetti 558). Despite these subversive gestures, Rossetti’s poetics, and indeed her life, were often defined by the claim of the “Lowest Place,” a title of one of her poems. That humility is necessary in the imitation of Christ is an argument deployed by women throughout Christian history. Inhabiting the inferior place made them holier than men could be. The quintessential girl-saint of Divine Love, the idealized and infantilized Thérèse of Lisieux, thought so. She wrote that, longing for intimacy with God, she wished she could be priest, or even pope. But as just the little girl that she was, Thérèse affirmed she was closer to God than any male clerics could be. Thus religious thought that subjugates women has also been used for resistance and affirmation. Katharine Bradley (1848–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913), an aunt and niece who wrote under the pen name “Michael Field,” were lesbian lovers and literary collaborators. Their partnership was transformed upon conversion to Roman Catholicism. “New Women” of the *fin de siècle* who had studied at Cambridge, they were inspired by Sappho’s *poësis*. They went on to create a trinity of their own with a beloved Chow dog standing in for the male Christ. The passion and death of Whym Chow enabled Field to re-imagine their human suffering and partnership beyond the grave. Lesbian writers would invigorate twentieth-century literature about Christianity, from Radclyffe Hall’s extraordinary novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) (which, like Eliot’s works, rewrites Biblical typology) to Jeanette Winterson’s 1985 *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (depicting a young lesbian coming of age in an Evangelical home). Some literature emerged directly out of the modernist canon, such as Vita Sackville-West’s *The Eagle and the Dove*, a study of Teresa of Ávila and Thérèse of Lisieux that suggests the former was a lesbian.

Although far from complete, the above essay endeavors to recount this history with some representative figures that elucidate a particular arc of consciousness with respect to gender in the Western context that readers of this guide will be familiar with. Besides many individual voices we have not discussed, this essay has not attempted a cross-cultural perspective, and its focus on religious/literary discourse has engaged only Christian figures. Within the Western tradition, we cannot neglect certain “internal others,” namely Jews, who despite French emancipation and American affirmation at the end of the eighteenth century (and similar British and German gestures in the nineteenth) remained on the margins of Western culture. Movements toward full participation in the societies in which Jews lived transformed traditional Judaism and changed Western culture. Becoming part of modern life also freed Jews to help make modernity. From the extraordinary memoir of merchant Glückel of Hameln (1646–1724) to the literary output of nineteenth-century writers, such as Grace Aguilar or Amy Levy, from salon ladies to the extraordinary Lily Montagu (1873–1963) who preached, led a congregation, and co-founded the British movement of Liberal Judaism, Jewish women in the West have made outstanding contributions that mobilized the gender-inflected advancements in the world they inhabited. The twentieth-century lineage from Regina Jonas (1902–1944), the first woman ordained as a rabbi who ministered in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, moves to the subject that concludes this essay. Jewish women were leaders in Second-Wave feminism, feminist literary criticism, and the transformation of the culture of the last third of the twentieth century.

This shift was the realization of the social message of the voices considered here: the right of woman to voice and agency, the rejection of an essentializing view of a limited “nature” of woman, and the recovery/rediscovery of women’s voices throughout history that makes the study we present here possible. The revision of the canon of what we read and value was based on the Second-Wave feminist belief that the “personal is the political,” that experience has intellectual value and practical purpose. This revolution promoted

exchange between the academic work of the ivory tower and grassroots activism. As in abolitionism and nineteenth-century feminism, religious women raised their voices, from radical Christians, like Mary Daly and Rosemary Ruether, to many Jewish women who applied their hope for *tikkun olam*, repair of the world, to feminist change. This sea change, in turn, informed religious practice, status, and agendas, as most western religious denominations moved toward full participation by women in all areas of spiritual life and teaching authority. It also led to expansion beyond feminist questions to encompass questions of sexualities, from the gay and lesbian to the bi, trans, and queer. Today, policy think-tanks for reproductive rights are affiliated with religious denominations. First-rate scholars of gender and identity write on religion, as Judith Butler has recently done. We have come full-circle from a historical moment where religious discourse served as an indirect avenue to power for those who are disenfranchised. Instead, the formerly disenfranchised—women, homosexuals, and others—play leadership roles in religious institutions and secular scholarly institutes. And it has ceased to be a novelty to examine a work of literature that interrogates both religion and gender/sex/sexuality.

This essay has sought to introduce the experience of gender, sex, and sexuality in Western culture through the experience of voice, using the lens of religion to discuss historically how we have read and why we have written. In a cultural moment that affirms “spiritual, but not religious” identities, we remain devout in reading, and speaking, the self. Whether we blog, tweet, or use no social media, we cannot deny the twenty-first century desire to tell our stories. In reviewing the historical context of this deeply human longing, our own age supersedes “chick-lit” ghettoization of disclosure and confidence. Yet the past shows how thoroughly the experience of gender has inflected our ability, indeed our will, to read as well as write our selves.