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Early Modern Digital Review

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earlymodernfemalebookownership.wordpress.com.

The *Early Modern Female Book Ownership* blog comprises posts of varying lengths recording the books owned and inscribed by women between 1500 and 1750. The vast majority are composed by the seven scholars responsible for the blog, but others are by named guest contributors. Despite the traditional definition of a blog as a website written in a conversational style, these entries are formally presented, well-articulated, scholarly, and a pleasure to read. They are also admirably informative.

The purpose of the blog is to present for the first time an easily accessible record of early modern books that bear the signatures of their female owners. The reasons for creating such a scholarly tool are five-fold. Many such inscriptions go unnoticed in library catalogues and, perhaps more surprisingly, in online catalogues such as the English Short Title Catalogue (estc.bl.uk). The copy of a work bearing an inscription is not necessarily the one chosen to be digitized in the Early English Books Online (eebo.chadwyck.com) collection. The Thomason Tracts collection (bl.uk/collection-guides/thomason-tractraps), while being rich in annotations, does not always comment on inscriptions. The Annotated Books Online database of early modern books with marginalia (annotatedbooksonline.com) includes names of owners and readers but does not focus specifically on female ones. Finally, many inscribed works are in the hands of private owners and are thus inaccessible to scholars.

The value and usefulness of this blog, however, go beyond any immediate and narrow bibliographical interest. Rather, the blog reflects the growing tendency of book historians concerned with the material aspects of early modern print production to team up with scholars in adjacent fields such as literary history, women's studies, cultural studies, and the history of reading. Its indisputable appeal to interdisciplinary research is indeed one of its major attributes. The editors themselves represent this merging of various fields of expertise since they include a book curator, a cultural historian, literary scholars, and a specialist in digital literary history. A similar heterogeneity is found among the guest contributors.

Female book ownership tells us something about the types of books that early modern women read, about the ways in which they presented themselves on the printed page, and about their handwriting. Regarding the first of these, for example, we can see that the range of subjects that interested female readers in the period was far wider than has often been claimed. Of the 109 works featured in the blog, only fifty are religious, thereby supporting arguments that women did not read (or for that matter write or translate) almost exclusively religious texts; only three or four focus on “women’s matters,” calling into question claims that female readers privileged domestic subjects in their reading; surprisingly, given the early modern designation of romance as a “female” genre, only Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* and Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery’s *Parthenissa* appear in the list. One must beware, of course, of drawing premature conclusions since the blog records only inscribed books and the corpus for the moment is relatively small, but one can hope that as it expands it will provide scholars with many valuable insights into the world of women, their books, their intellectual interests, and their reading habits.

In a more specific context, the blog can instruct us about the libraries to which some women had access. These were sometimes their own, as in the case of Maria Elisabeth de Wale, who we are told owned over six thousand volumes, or Mildred Cecil, some of whose books her husband distributed according to stipulations in her will, including the Casaubon edition of Aristotle’s works recorded here. Other libraries, both formal and informal, were housed in convents, as in the case of the books owned by the canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre in Liège and the Dutch translation of a text by Teresa of Avila bearing inscriptions by sisters of the Apostoline congregation in the Low Countries.

In terms of the interface design, where functionality and appearance are both important factors, the *Early Modern Female Book Ownership* blog is both user-friendly, being easy to navigate, and pleasing to the eye. Entry design is uniform throughout, which is essential: the title of the work with publication date is in large black font, followed by the date of creation, name of the editor, categories into which the work fits (for example, “16th century,” “bibles,” “drama,” “politics”), and a “Leave a comment” button, all in smaller red font. Depending on its length, each entry is divided into paragraphs that provide particulars about the work, a comment on the inscription, discussion of the material features of the book, and information about the owner when known. Interleaved between the paragraphs, or in some cases introducing the entry, are

high-quality photographs (mostly in colour) of those constituent parts of the work deemed appropriate (cover, spine, title page, individual pages), and of all the inscriptions (some owners inscribed their books in several places). Some entries also contain reproductions of portraits of authors or owners. Each closes with the name of the source that provided the information and whereabouts of the book (EEBO, library copy, book-seller, auctioneer, private owner), as well as a "Further Reading" list. The issue of feedback, an important factor in a blog where user engagement is expected and desired, is very well addressed: the above-mentioned "Leave a comment" button appears at the head of the entry; clicking on it brings up a box for the comment; the latter will then appear as a pingback, under which is a "Leave a Reply" box.

The blog is visually appealing in terms of having plenty of white space and only two colours for the font, red and black, but it is particularly attractive on account of the fact that each section ("Home," "About this blog," "Resources," "Finding aid") is introduced by a detail from the famous portrait *Elizabeth I When Princess*, executed by an unknown artist. Here are the famous hands of which she was so proud, holding a closed book but with one finger keeping the place as if she has been interrupted in her reading, a traditional pose for serious and scholarly young women. It is rather a shame that in a blog dedicated to books, the picture has been cropped in such a way that Elizabeth's little volume is foreshortened. This could perhaps be rectified. The picture nevertheless provides a dramatic opening for each section, with an expanse of the crimson and gold brocade of her dress.

To facilitate searches, users are offered three tools: a finding aid, a list of categories (or subjects), and a search engine. The first constitutes a list of the works and inscriptions entered in the blog and is intended to help users find blog posts quickly. Frankly, I found it far easier to use in its spreadsheet form. The list already requires a long trawl through the entries, which are in neither alphabetical nor chronological order. The second tool, the list of categories, is also very long and not always 100 percent reliable. Clicking on "French," for example, brings up only one work out of the four entered; if the category actually designates books *in* French, then it should be renamed "French language" (ditto for Swedish and Dutch). Under "women writers," only five of the eight appear; absent are Teresa of Avila, Dorothy Leigh, and Katherine Philips. Swedish has only one entry yet constitutes a whole category; Latin has two (Bartolo de Sassoferrato and Ovid), and Italian, one (Minadoi), but they

do not qualify. Rather surprising until recently was the omission of “classics” as a category, especially as neither Greek nor Latin features as a language (only Dutch, French, and Swedish do). The addition of “classics” is therefore more than welcome, although it needs adjusting since only Juvenal, Persius, and Aristotle appear. What happened to Lucian, Xenophon, and Ovid, all recorded in the blog? The inclusion of Greek and Latin as language categories would complete the improvement. At present, “Latin” in the search box calls up only three works in that language but, inexplicably, others in French, Dutch, and even English. More surprising than the rather short shrift given the classics is the absence of translation as a category, especially as it accounts for more entries than many of the others in the list (seventeen in fact) and very often afforded female readers access to works they could not read in the original. It deserves a place.

The third tool is the search engine. It is more useful than the category list and more reliable, but it, too, needs some tweaking. Testing it by entering an owner’s name works extremely well in the majority of cases, although the absence of authority files can result in failing to turn up names that commonly have variant spellings. The surname Sassoferato, mentioned above, is a case in point, often being spelled Saxoferato. More problematic, however, is the engine’s occasional failure to pick up a name associated with a range of books mentioned within a main entry. Mary Wood is an example. Only the two main entries come up, Beaumont and Fletcher’s *A King and No King* and Gascoigne’s *Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, yet the editor mentions ten other works bearing her signature; they, their authors, and Wood’s ownership are all ignored by the search engine. Mary Smith, who owned a copy of the Geneva Bible, comes up only third when searched. Henry Smith (not a relative) comes up first. The same happens to the Bible-owning Ann Kent, who is preceded by Elizabeth Grey, Countess of Kent as author, then as dedicatee of Minadoi’s *Historia della guerra*. The keyword “Dictionary” brings up a whole slew of entries whose “further reading” lists contain references to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, but James Howell’s *Lexicon Tetraglotten* ranks only fifth. Finally, to return to the subjects of “French” and “translation” mentioned with regard to the category list, my quests via the search engine fared no better. A search for the former brings up only Calvin’s *The forme of prayers*; “French works” brings up only Howell’s *Lexicon Tetraglotten*, presumably because the title includes the word “French”; “French authors” brings up “nothing found,” despite there being

four. As for “translation,” again, only nine of the seventeen come up, to which is added a tenth work that is not a translation but is described as such: Boyle’s *Parthenissa*. Perhaps one should not expect the search engine in a blog to be as rigorously designed as in a database; however, I do feel that this one needs a little improvement in the area of the keyword full-text function and the ranking of search results.

Two other small queries may be raised. The first concerns the title that, at least for the moment, is a little misleading in that it suggests a world of female book ownership lying both within and beyond England’s shores. However, the entries are overwhelmingly English, which is not surprising since most of the editors are English literature specialists. They record only one Swedish and four Dutch female book owners. In her “Welcome” to the blog in December 2018, Martine van Elk pointed out the domination of English examples and appealed for submissions from other countries. One hopes the editors will now actually reach out to scholars in France, Italy, Germany, Spain, and so on, in order to provide a transnational view of female book ownership. The second, smaller query concerns the timeframe for the entries set up by the editors. The blog concerns “books owned by women between 1500 and 1750” (“About this blog”). However, four entries are dated post-1750, while the list of categories by century includes one entitled “19th century.” Perhaps the *terminus post quem* should be 1800, often used to mark the end of the so-called early modern period.

The *Early Modern Female Book Ownership* blog constitutes a significant, original, and welcome contribution to the field of women’s studies, book history, reading history, and literary and cultural studies. While the specific field of female book ownership is a relatively new one, interest in provenance generally has grown in recent years, alongside an increasing understanding of just who read books in the early modern world. The editors of this blog are thus to be commended for their pursuit of knowing, and making known, some of the works that graced the bookshelves of ladies’ closets and libraries.

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