



Women Writers in the Renaissance Era: A Bourdieuan Approach to Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posy* (1573)

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a Bourdieuan reading of Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573) and offers some important insights regarding the social status of women in the patriarchal society of the Renaissance era. This study embodies two primary aims; firstly, to investigate women's social status based on Bourdieu's theory concerning cultural, social, and economic capital and secondly, to ascertain that both habitus and field have a central role in determining one's social position. The research data for this study are collected using Bourdieu's assumptions regarding women's perspectives in society that, to some extent, are in line with theories of Hélèn Cixous and Elaine Showalter concerning "écriture féminine". Taken together, this study confirms previous findings and contributes evidence that suggests whether or not women had experienced the renaissance of female consciousness in the sixteenth century.

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Introduction

Apart from the fact that the Renaissance era is characterized by sociocultural developments, women writers had been marginalized as if they were precluded from facing this new vista of rebirth and productivity in different aspects of social life. In *Women Writers in Renaissance England*, Martin claims that such writers did not have a stable social position and it was the spirit of the age that gave a high value to the writings of their male counterparts (280).

He also noted that, in the English Renaissance, there are several points that could be referred to as the chief reasons for inequalities between men and women, namely, economic and sociocultural leanings (281-3). Through scrutinizing the lives of women in that time, the researcher comes up with a great deal of information regarding the concept of social relations and the way it affected the position of women writers.

In a very similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), a notable sociologist, in *Sociology in Question* accentuates the formidable effects of sociocultural inclinations of a certain social setting, wherein all individuals have to take side with the confirmed norms being defined by the authorities (512). The sociocultural setting of the Renaissance era did tend to push women writers to margins; while their writings were set to be a great success in the realm of literary production, their oeuvre had always been overlooked.

In *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England*, Daybell asserts that the entire corpus of women writers, to some extent, underlines their dissatisfaction with widespread precepts regarding the role of such writers in that era (102-8). It should be noted that, women's education had a key role in achieving the required skills for establishing themselves as qualified authors besides their male counterparts (ibid.). Women's literacy was a polemic issue, by itself, since the only group who could enjoy the chance of being educated were

noblewomen. Hence, as Daybell puts it, a considerable number of middle class women remained uneducated save for those who could afford its expenses (130-9).

Nevertheless, according to Daybell, educated women had been precluded from being rhetoricians because in doing so, they would be accused of committing a kind of transgression – an orientation against the paraphernalia of the English Renaissance (ibid.). It should be noted that, writings by the Renaissance women encompassed a variety of different subject matters, but their main concern pivots around social commentary and the way they had been treated.

Women writers were always demanding parity with their male counterparts, as if they were after regaining their lost dignity. Moreover, with respect to Daybell's assumptions, after the death of queen Elizabeth (1558-1603), women's secular writings had not been published anymore because king James I (1603-1625) was a misogynist (ibid.). In what follows the researcher tries to shed more light on the gradual progression of Isabella Whitney, as a woman writer, in the Renaissance era.

Isabella Whitney (1566-73)

In *Women Writers in Renaissance England*, Martin claims that, the exact date of her birth is not known, and as a result Whitney did purport to be the first English woman writer (279-281). She grew up in London and most surely, she was educated but it cannot be determined whether she was taught at home or not since education for women seemed to be at odds with the norms of the society in the Sixteenth Century (ibid.). It should be noted, however, that Whitney was after achieving a stable position in a society where women, as members of a social circle, had the least chance to ask for their

rights for being independent not to mention demanding parity with men.

In her poem, *A Sweet Nosegay*, we have references to mythological characters such as Dido and Aeneas which indicates that Whitney did have a good knowledge of the literary works written by her predecessors. Before the composition of "*A Sweet Nosegay*", Whitney wrote a number of letters and each of them was dedicated to a particular character; for instance, in a number of her letters she gave advice to her siblings as well as her friends and the rest stands for providing the reader with extra details upon her desperate attempt to cope with this tight spot (ibid.).

Martin claims that Whitney was interested in composing secular poetry, for in this way she was able to let later generations know to what extent renaissance women, and most importantly women writers, had been deprived of their rights (281). Both *The Copy of a Letter* (1566-7) and *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573) are considered as her major volumes of poetry. In *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573) the persona acts as a mouthpiece for Isabella Whitney through which the social life and her decision on leaving London have been expounded upon in detail (ibid.).

A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posy (1573)

A Sweet Nosegay is comprised of three parts, namely, "a hundred and ten Philosophical Flowers", "Certain familiar Epistles and friendly Letters by the Author with Replies", and the poem ends with the description of her communication to London. Martin believes it should be emphasized that, there is also another section which could be regarded as a preamble to the whole work in which the author talks about her personal and educational background (283).

Whitney argues that she has read the scriptures as well as historical documents: "...sometime the scriptures I perused / but wanting a Divine: For to resolve me in such doubts / as past this head of mine / to understand: I laid them by / and histories 'gan read..." (10 – 15). The first part of the volume, entitled "Philosophical Flowers", includes a hundred and ten philosophical quotes that put forward a number of advices to her readers.

The main concern of Whitney is knowledge and the significance of being educated, because in this way everyone will come and ask you to opine on any problem he or she is dealing with: "in youth to thee such learning get / as it may make thee wise: / so people shall in elder years, / come seek thy sage advice" (*The 21 Flower*). There is no escaping the fact that, the author in "*A Farewell to the Reader*", reminds her readers: if "you tasted have, / and smelt of all my flowers" (1 – 2), then you have to "give others leave to wear them" (8) as well.

The second part in *A Sweet Nosegay* is dedicated to the letters written by the author for her siblings, family members, and friends; there are also some anonymous replies to her unbearable situation in that social setting. At the core of all these letters, lies her silent, unheard voice as a poet and her marginalized character as a woman which is conducive to her harsh complaints in regard to her current position in the then society.

In this connection, she argues that "...For now I will my writing clean forsake / till of my griefs, my stomach I discharge: / and till I row, in Lady Fortune's barge..." (10 – 13). The last part of "*A Sweet Nosegay*" elaborates on the author's departure from London; therefore, Whitney apostrophizes London and is critical of the prevailing

assumptions regarding the forgotten identity of women writers in a society which has laid its foundation based on patriarchal leanings. Accordingly, Whitney claims that "...now hath time me put in mind, / of thy great cruelness: / that never once a help would find, / to ease me in distress..." (17 – 20).

In "*The Manner of her Will*", the author tries to get her message across by pretending that "...yet am I in no angry mood, / but will, or ere I go / in perfect love and charity. My Testament here write: / and leave to thee such Treasury, / as I in it recite..." (27 – 32). As inferred from the above, the author reminds the readers not to undermine her work for she has put much of herself into it. Moreover, Whitney pronounces that a competent reader has the potential to identify the latent messages of her poem; in doing so, she asks her readers to tease out such notions and let others know about how her masterpiece could be widely acclaimed by others, as well.

Furthermore, in "*The Manner of her Will*" Whitney refuses to give in to the conventional attitudes held by others regarding the particular roles that women might have in the Sixteenth Century. Rather, Isabella Whitney is cautiously optimistic about her social status; since she argues that it is possible to get over this predicament by means of achieving a stable position among other famous literary figures of the Renaissance period.

In this vein, Whitney highlights that: "...Did write this will, with mine own hand / and it to London gave: / in witness of the standersby, / whose names if you will have. / paper, pen and Standish were: / at that same present by: / with time, who promised to reveal, / so fast as she could hie / the same: lest of my nearer kin, / for anything should vary: / so finally I make an end / no longer can I tarry" (317 – 328). Thus, in the light of these lines, the most compelling reason that is foregrounded here would be the author's earnest desire to establish her reputation through authorship.

After all, publishing literary materials, by a woman, is not only considered as a breakthrough in itself but also it paves the way for later progressions of the like. Therefore, in the remaining decades of her life, she tries to find a reliable solution in order to remove the deep rooted social barriers to women by means of publishing her works.

A Bourdieuan Approach to A Sweet Nosegay

As a structuralist critic, Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002), in *Distinction a Social Critic of the Judgement of Taste*, theorizes that the social status of an individual is defined in terms of social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital (75). He also introduces the concept of *Habitus* which is associated with the social norms by virtue of which social agents shape their identities in a particular Field or social setting; that is to say, *habitus* is considered as the "socialized body" since it "does not stand in opposition to society; it is one of its forms of existence." (29).

As a result, social agents seek ways to improve their social standing by virtue of attaining the foregoing capitals so that they can benefit from the advantages of living a better life. In doing so, a strong competition arises among different social groups for competition is always associated with marking the best-suited social group; culturally, economically, and socially. The given findings may help us to have a better prospect of both social and individual ties in regard with women's literacy in general, and women writers in particular.

It should be noted, however, that in the Renaissance era "people believed that women ... were inferior to men..." and

“education was considered to be wasted on women, except in the upper class...” but “In spite of these attitudes, there were some women whose accomplishments in literature, art, and politics were extraordinary.” (Huntley 5). In this regard, a “Bourdieuian analysis of women’s political representation demonstrates ... how education is a significant place in the transmission of power and its reproduction in other social spheres.” (Bourdieu 2007: 111).

In this light, it might be claimed that women and men differ not only in their physical attributes but also in the way they interact through language, culture, and the like. In “Does Gender Fit? Bourdieu, Feminism, and Conception of Social Order”, McCall asserts that feminist perspectives on social and cultural reproductions could be defined in terms of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework that “narratives and political practices are embedded in social relations.” (837). Relatively speaking, in the very book *In Other Words: Essays a Reflexive Society*, Bourdieu introduces “constructivist structuralism” or “structuralist constructivism” that marks the relation between “objective representations” of social practices and the “subjective meanings” of a social agent’s habitus (192).

Therefore, any feminist perspective is concerned with female’s body and language; that is to say, women’s social position or, to be more precise, their social participation (social capital), cultural leanings (cultural capital), and financial progress (economic capital) are defined by virtue of social standards (field) concerning their lifestyle, values, and particular dispositions (habitus). In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu argues that the practice of habitus might be clarified through “body” and “linguistic presentations” on the account of the fact that they are the most visible daily practices (86 – 87).

In a very similar vein, Judith Butler, in his essay “Performativity’s Social Magic”, draws our attention to the habitus of the body that is generated by the “tacit normativity that governs the social game in which the embodied subject acts” (115). In other words, Butler suggests that body habitus is both subjective and objective, that is to say:

“...a social agent insofar as it is necessarily embodied, and the body is itself the site of incorporated history, is not set over and against an `objective` domain but has that very `objectivity` incorporated as the formative condition of its very being.” (Butler 109 – 110).

The above mentioned assumptions indicate that gender, biologically and socially, is the manifestation of the desired habitus of the social setting. This is certainly true in the case of Isabella Whitney as a female poet in the Renaissance era; since she attempts to revivify her broken identity in a society where the issues of masculinity and femininity have been polarized to the extent that everything is controlled under the rule of patriarchy. Putting the point another way, women’s discourse, in patriarchal societies, is suppressed by men’s discourse and this suppression gives way to the passivity of women in the then society.

Thus, in a society where women have to think, talk, and behave in a certain manner, then, their “...daily practice is a result of the dialogue between field and habitus which is intertwined with capital.” (Bourdieu 1984: 102). The evidence presented thus far supports the idea that the practice of capital (i.e., cultural, economic, and social) “are weighted and appropriated differently between females and males...”

(McNay 85 – 90) because any social setting has its own priorities.

These findings may help us to understand that Isabella Whitney seeks ways to challenge her male counterparts for “woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history —by her own movement.” (Cixous 875). In this regard, Whitney tries to express her identity and, in a sense, she becomes a voice to represent the unheard voices of the Renaissance women.

Similarly, Hélèn Cixous, a notable feminist critic, in her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, sheds light on a much debated issue regarding “écriture féminine” or “women’s writing”. In doing so, Cixous goes on to expound on the fact that “the future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to ... confuse the biological and the cultural.” (875). As discussed above, these assumptions, too, confirm the association between the cultural capital and body habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 90) and further supports what Whitney claims with respect to the effects of the past:

“... sometime the scriptures I perused,
but wanting a Divine:

For to resolve me in such doubts,
as past this head of mine

To understand: I laid them by, and Histories ‘gan read:
wherein I found follies erst,
in people did exceed.” (9 – 16).

It can, therefore, be assumed that Whitney longs for communicating with other women not to mention expressing her feminine identity insofar as she strives to enliven her broken feminine self in a patriarchal society. In so doing, Whitney points out that:

“... now I have a Nosegay got,
that would be passing rare:

If that to sort the same aright, were lotted to my share.

But in a bundle as they be, (good reader) them accept: It
is the giver: not the gift, thou oughtest to respect,
And for thy health, nor for thy eye, did I this posy frame:
Because myself did safety find,
by smelling to the same...” (93 – 104).

It is somewhat surprising that what Whitney accounts for in the foregoing lines corroborate the ideas of Bourdieu, Cixous, and Elaine Showalter since they hold that culture has a pivotal role in regard with gender politics. Whitney experiences freedom, autonomy, and independence while she valorizes her oeuvre: “... But sure I think they kept me free, / because to them I smelt.” (111– 112); thus, Isabella Whitney has got over the limits of social capital and body habitus in the male-oriented society of the Renaissance era.

What is surprising is that Whitney’s freedom is revealed in both her personality as a social agent (social capital) and her writing style (female habitus). As regards the writing style, again Whitney is concerned with foregrounding her sociobiological position through frequent use of the pronoun “I” that embodies the ideals of a female writer concerning the reception of her oeuvre in a patriarchal setting:

“... if that thy complexion, with them do not agree:

refer them to some friend of thine, till thou their virtue see
And this I pray thee, whether thou infected wast afore:

Or whether with thy nature strong, they can agree no
more.

That thou my Nosegay not misuse, But leave it to the rest:
A number may such pleasure find,

to bear it in their breast..." (125 – 136).

To be more precise, the repetition of the pronoun "I" in Whitney's oeuvre could be regarded as a kind of reaction to the writing style that is structured by a "sexual opposition, which has always worked for man's profit to the point of reducing writing, too, to his laws." (Cixous 883). Moreover, in "Castration or Decapitation?", Cixous believes that "everything that's organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us...it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to man/woman opposition..." (44). Likewise, Showalter's assumptions, in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", are, to some extent, reminiscent of Bourdieuan analysis of women's sociobiological position in that "sex differences in language use can be theorized in terms of biology, socialization, or culture." (Bourdieu 1990: 190).

Showalter further elaborates on the fact that "a theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman's body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur." (197). In general, it would be plausible to consider Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosegay* as a corroborative evidence on the basis of which she could express her feminine self or identity in a society that leaves, nearly, no room for women's involvement in sociological grounds. As explained above, then, it is clear that works of art "are not of single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice." (Woolf 2441).

Broadly speaking, women as the "degraded, oppressed, and politically marginalized" figures, attempt to strengthen their social status for "women's status as human beings was the grounding, or justification, for their entitlement to equal civil and political rights alongside men." (Wollstonecraft 1463). In a nutshell, Isabella Whitney, according to a Bourdieuan methodology, socializes her habitus in a way that is in line with the cultural leanings of the Renaissance society because "Bourdieu's habitus is increasingly the subject of cultural production." (Adkins 8) but there is always an inclination towards "...discriminatory acts, excluding women, without even thinking about it, from positions of authority..." (Bourdieu 1977: 283).

At this point in time, it might be maintained that, as a female writer, Whitney has experienced the renaissance of her feminine soul by leaving her oeuvre to later generations, so that they will valorize both her social position, as a female writer, and her poems, that shed a new light on feminine consciousness.

Conclusion

The present study was designed to determine whether or not women had experienced renaissance in the Sixteenth Century. The most obvious finding to emerge from this article is that Isabella Whitney did transcend the prevailing confines and limits regarding her social position so that she could give voice to the forgotten, unheard voices of all renaissance women which is, in effect, conducive to regaining her female consciousness in a patriarchal society.

Nonetheless, the patriarchal predilections of the Renaissance period accentuated the fact that motherhood might be considered as a distinctive role for women. Nevertheless, some women did reject this idea one and all, and tried to express their identities by publishing their written materials, which were hidden from the public gaze. A

Bourdieuan reading of women's social perspective, as the principal framework of this study, tends to claim that social agents, in a particular social setting, can achieve the social status they long for based on the sociocultural leanings of their society.

In general, therefore, it seems that the patriarchal society of the Renaissance period, in the researcher's standpoint, is considered as the main barrier for women writers; hence, women writers tried to add up to the mentality of their readers not to mention being known as reputed female writers in a patriarchal society. Accordingly, Isabella Whitney's *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573) serves as a good case in point, in that the author addresses her readers not to disregard reading her oeuvre since, in doing so, the author will experience a permanent reputation through authorship and it might be maintained that Whitney, to some extent, won the day in that her oeuvre has been read by later generations.

Therefore, any competent reader realizes that women writers, in the Renaissance period, gradually triumphed over the difficulties they had encountered for publishing their works, and the way they came to terms with the process of regaining their lost dignities in different aspects of social life. On that account, it would be plausible to declare that, in the Sixteenth Century, women writers had not been completely marginalized. However, a future study investigating the process of giving voice to female's silence in later literary epochs, specially, from the Renaissance period onwards would be worthwhile.

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