

From Genesitic Curiosity to Dangerous Gynocracy in Sixteenth-Century England

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The decade between 1550 and 1560 was a particular period in Western European history: many monarchies in the region were led by women, either as queens (Mary Tudor in England, Mary Stuart in Scotland) or regents (Catherine de' Medici in France, Joanna of Austria in Spain, Catherine of Austria in Portugal). To this list, one could add other female figures acting as kings, such as Mary of Hungary, also known as Mary of Austria, who was governor of the Spanish Netherlands from 1531 to 1555. This situation was unheard of; for some, it was even monstrous, unnatural, contumely to God. To all effects and purposes, gynocracy or gynecocracy, 'the rule by women', was as a sixteenth-century 'curiosity', an exceptional, singular, odd, novel situation.¹ This may explain why gynocracy gave rise to a heated discussion reaching back to the origins of mankind, i.e. the Book of Genesis, particularly with Eve's appetite for knowledge – another meaning of 'curious'² – which famously led to man's Fall. As this essay contends, in the eyes of many writers in the sixteenth century, the perils of gynocracy were linked with Genesitic curiosity, women's power with the pursuit of forbidden knowledge, original sin with death.

Women and Genesitic Curiosity

To underline the link between Eve and epistemology, on the one hand, and the link between the consequences of her action, i.e. her subjection to her husband, and sixteenth-century political theory, on the other, one must start from the beginning. In the beginning, 'the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be himself alone; I will make him a help meet for him' (Ge 2.18).³ A few

1 Sense 11.16.a of 'curious' in the *OED*.

2 Sense 1.5.a in the *OED*.

3 Unless noted otherwise, all Biblical quotes are from the Authorized Version (1611). Similarly, unless noted otherwise, all emphasis in Biblical quotes is mine.

verses later, man's 'help', Eve, is tempted by the serpent and she tastes of the fruit of the forbidden tree.

As recalled by Philip Almond, most early modern writers and theologians attributed the Fall to man's curiosity, among a host of other sins.⁴ In *The Historie of Adam* (1606), for instance, Henry Holland lists curiosity as the third sin committed by Adam and Eve: for 'they seeke after strange knowledge, not contented with Gods holy word'.⁵ A similar point was made by Elnathan Parr in *The Grounds of Divinitie* (1615) and Edward Leigh in *A Systeme or Bodie of Divinitie* (1654).⁶ Other writers, however, singled out woman's agency in the Fall. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1638), Robert Burton compares Adam's transgression with Pandora's box, linking the androcentric Biblical account with the gynocentric Greek myth.⁷ In *Hexapla in Genesin* (1633), Andrew Willet goes one step further, arguing that Eve's curiosity is the fruit of her desire, further linking this desire with her vain hunger for knowledge: 'The woman seeth the tree to be good for meat, there is her voluptuous desire: *pleasant to the eyes*, there is her curiosity: and to be desired for knowledge, there is the vanity of her minde'.⁸

This reading would have been influenced by several translations of Ge 3.6, in which what constitutes man's original sin is revealingly described as the linking of desire with knowledge. In the 1561 Geneva Bible, the verse is rendered thus: 'So the woman (seeing that the tree was good for meat, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and *a tree to be desired to get knowledge*) took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also to her husband with her, and he did eat'. In the 1611 Authorized Version: 'And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and *a tree to be desired to make one wise*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat'. Interestingly, other, earlier versions of this verse do not emphasize the idea of knowledge. The Vulgate, for instance, is descriptive: 'quod bonum esset lignum ad vescendum et pulchrum oculis aspectuque

4 Almond P.C., *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: 2008) 194.

5 Holland Henry, *The Historie of Adam, or the foure-fold state of man, vwell formed in his creation, deformed in his corruption, reformed in Grace, and perfected in glory* (London, T[homas] E[ast] for Thomas Man: 1606) 10.

6 Almond, *Adam and Eve* 194–195.

7 Burton Richard, *The Anatomy of Melancholy: What it Is, with All the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Seuerall Cures of it* (London, Henry Cripps: 1638) 1.1.2.

8 Willet Andrew, *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum: that is, a sixfold commentary upon the two first bookes of Moses, being Genesis and Exodus Wherein these translations are compared together* (London, John Haviland: 1633) 29. Emphasis in the original.

delectabile'. The Wycliffe Bible translates this nearly verbatim, speaking of a 'tree [which] was good, and sweet to eat, and fair to the eyes, and delightful in beholding'.

After this transgression, God addresses both Adam and Eve, punishing them in turn. Again, Eve's desire comes into the picture, this time to dictate its subjection to her husband: 'thy desire shall be subject to thy husband, and *he shall rule over thee*' (Ge 3.16). In the verse immediately following, God berates Adam for listening to his wife: 'Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake' (17) and so on. In other words, in the Genesitic account of the beginning of mankind, mankind is punished for having gained the knowledge of good and evil; Eve's subordination to her husband is a punishment for her sin; and knowledge and curiosity are intimately linked with desire and subjection. This reading raises a number of issues.

First, theologians were divided on the question of whether Eve is *naturally*, or only momentarily subordinate. Luther and Calvin, for instance, seemed to hesitate between the two notions.⁹ *Genesis* does not say that women are inherently weaker than man, although the idea is present elsewhere in the Bible. Rather, God says Eve is subordinate *to her husband as a consequence of her transgression*. It does not suggest that her subjection should extend to fathers, brothers and kinsmen, for instance; nor does it suggest that she was subjected to Adam before the Fall. This distinction between natural or absolute, and historical or contextual subjection is of consequence for early modern writers who distinguished the body natural (the perishable flesh which is liable to 'desire') and the body politic (the eternal soul which 'rule[s]' over men).

Secondly, the question remains whether knowledge, and the pursuit thereof, is naturally sinful, or a remembrance of the original sin, or whether once acquired, knowledge should be *used* and even desired to improve man's fallen state. God punishes Adam and Eve for their transgression, but this does not necessarily mean that he condemns knowledge *per se*. This point will be important for humanists and reformists who called on the Church to educate its flock and clergy in order to avoid heresies which could imperil

9 Mattox M.L., "Luther on Eve, Women, and the Church", in Wengert T.J. (ed.), *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids – Cambridge: 2009) 260–263. See also Thompson J.L., *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors, and His Contemporaries* (Geneva: 1992) 108–128. Thompson also briefly lists the customary patristic readings of the reasons for the Fall, and Eve's role in it.

one's salvation.¹⁰ In other words, the thirst or desire for knowledge is not necessarily sinful.

Finally, an analysis of the Genesitic account should ask whether God had planned the Fall all along to underline the perils of rebellion and ill-gotten knowledge, stressing the virtues of obedience to authority, however tyrannous, whimsical or arbitrary. The notion that God had foreknowledge that Adam and Eve would be tempted even before He created Eve is suggested by theologians like St Augustine in his *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*. As noted by Angelamatilde Capodivacca, 'Although Eve had not yet been created when God gave the warning not to eat the forbidden fruit, He formulated this warning in the plural, anticipating Eve's fall':¹¹

[T]he conclusion of the commandment clearly shows it was not addressed just to one person; what he says, you see, is this: *but on the day you all take a bite from it, you all shall die the death* (Ge 2.17). He is already starting on the explanation of how the woman came to be made, and how she is said to have been made as a help for the man [...]¹²

Augustine goes on to suggest that the creation of woman was made to show how man must 'subject the soul's appetite or desire', i.e. woman, to 'the interior mind [...] manly reason'. The point is important for thinkers who claimed that, although gynocracy was unnatural, the situation may have been willed by God and that man owed obedience to divinely ordained rulers, good or evil. In an English context, the issue is compounded by the adoption of Calvinism in the second half of the sixteenth century, and its attendant belief in predestination.

Knox and the 'Monstrosity' of Gynocracy

This Biblical context and the issues it raises inform many of the early modern debates on the link between Eve's curiosity and the dangers of gynocracy. These discussions were not new. As recalled by Neil Kenny and others, for centuries 'woman' and 'curiosity' were virtually a pleonasm: 'not for nothing

10 The point is made, *inter alia*, by Augustine in his *On Christian Learning*.

11 Capodivacca A., *Curiosity and the Trials of the Imagination in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: 2007) 48.

12 Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill, O.P., ed. J.E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: 2002) 11 11, 15. Sixteenth-century translations used the pronoun *thou*.

is *curiositas* a feminine noun'.¹³ A Shakespearean-styled quip could posit that 'curiosity, thy name is woman'.

Discussions over the virtues and dangers of gynocracy had developed since the publication of Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames* and the so-called *querelle des femmes* in the fifteenth century.¹⁴ Typical views on women included those of Machiavelli who claimed in *The Discourses* (1531) that women were invariably the harbingers of chaos:

we see that women have been the cause of great dissensions and much ruin to states, and have caused great damage to those that govern them. We have seen, in the history of Rome, that the outrage committed upon Lucretia deprived the Tarquins of their throne, and the attempt upon Virginia caused the Decemvirs the loss of their authority. Thus, Aristotle mentions as one of the first causes of the ruin of tyrants the outrages committed by them upon the wives and daughters of others, either by violence or seduction; [...] absolute princes and rulers of republics [therefore] [...] should well reflect upon the disorders that may arise from such causes.¹⁵

What was new in the sixteenth century was the historical context mentioned earlier, one which explains why John Knox published his *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women* while in exile in Geneva in 1558. Knox's famous pamphlet seemed to illustrate common beliefs on the dangers of female rule. Speaking in 'most plain and few words', he began his 'First Blast' with the following declaration:

To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city, is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a

13 Happel, quoted by Kenny N., *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford: 2004) 384.

14 Levin C. – Sullivan P.A. (eds.), *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women* (Albany: 1995). On early modern discussions on gynocracy, see, among others, Jordan C., "Woman's Rule in Sixteenth-Century British Political Thought", *Renaissance Quarterly* 40, 3 (1987) 421–451; Jansen S.L., *The Monstrous Regiment of Women: Female Rulers in Early Modern Europe* (New York: 2002); Levin C. – Carney J.E. – Barrett-Graves D. (eds.), *High and Mighty Queens' of Early Modern England: Realities and Representations* (New York: 2003); Wanegffelen T., *Le Pouvoir contesté: souveraines d'Europe à la Renaissance* (Paris: 2008).

15 Book 3, chap. 26, quoted by Jankowski T.A., *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* (Urbana: 1992) 56.

thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, of all equity and justice.¹⁶

The pamphlet goes on to justify this opening salvo by developing each idea in succession. In the course of his pamphlet, Knox used arguments from Aristotle and Augustine. From the Greek philosopher he took the notion of natural order, 'an immutable order of ranks, excluding women from powerful stations'.¹⁷ Women being 'naturally' weak, like the blind, they ought not to rule, 'For who can deny but it repugneth to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to lead and conduct such as do see?'¹⁸ From the bishop of Hippo, Knox took Biblical proof, citing Ge 3, 1 Tim, and 1 Cor. For Augustine, 'the man rules and the woman obeys: the Fall recurs each time this hierarchy is overturned'.¹⁹ Further, Augustine underlines women's paradoxical nature, both curious and skeptical, interpreting Ge 3.4–5 as follows:

Then the serpent told the woman that she would not die. *God forbade it only because He knew that on the day you eat it your eyes will open and, then, you will be like gods*, having the knowledge of good and evil. How could the woman ever believe these words that told her that God had forbidden something good and useful unless she already had inherent in her mind that love for an independent authority and an arrogant presumption of herself – thus it was she who was to be condemned and punished through this temptation. Not being satisfied by the serpent's words, Eve examined the tree.²⁰

Albeit Knox's reasoning was mostly rooted in Biblical history, which was supposed to lend it an absolute, timeless authority, the English-language publication was aimed at two particular, pernicious and contemporary examples obtaining in the British Isles: that of Mary of Guise, the Scottish regent, and Mary I, the murderous English Queen who persecuted her subjects and concluded a dangerous alliance with Catholic Spain – a woman who behaved, in short, as a modern-day Jezabel. Similar remarks were made by

16 Knox John, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstruous Regiment of Women* (Geneva, [J. Poullain and A. Rebul]: 1558) 9^r. Spelling modernized.

17 Chavura S.A., *Tudor Protestant Political Thought 1547–1603* (Leiden – Boston: 2011) 64.

18 Knox, *First Blast* 9^r.

19 Augustine, *On Genesis* 11 11, 15.

20 *De Genesi ad Literam* XI 30, 11, quoted by Capodivacca, *Curiosity* 48.

Christopher Goodman in a pamphlet published in Geneva earlier the same year, sparking a series of misogynist treatises.²¹

Knox's pamphlet was ill-timed, however, as Mary died just a few months after the publication of *The First Blast*, to be succeeded by *another* woman, Elizabeth I. Understandably, the new queen was not amused by the fiery Scottish pamphleteer, and Knox was never to be pardoned. He did not set foot in England, his adoptive land, again.

Knox attempted to distance himself from his own work, repeatedly arguing that he was speaking of Mary and that he welcomed Elizabeth's accession as a sign of the workings of divine Providence. In point of fact, his private letters are 'free of gendered rhetoric', encouraging women to be critical and independent,²² and his pamphlet was in great part aimed at justifying rebellion against tyranny, rather than against female rulers *per se*.²³ But his insistence in *The First Blast* on women's *gender*, railing in his Preface against 'this monstiferous empire of women, (which amongst all enormities, that this day do abound upon the face of the whole earth, is most detestable and damnable)', precluded mitigating interpretations of his analysis in the eyes of the new queen.²⁴ Half-lucidly, he had foreseen such persecution, using the term 'curious' as one who is 'Unduly minute or inquisitive' (*OED*, sense 1.10.a) when he claimed that he would 'be called foolish, curious, spiteful, and a sower of sedition: and one day perchance (although now I be nameles) I may be attainted of treason'.²⁵

Knox's insistence on the 'monstrosity' of women's rule was perhaps his own, and what *he* viewed as monstrous was for others simply something odd, an exception – a curiosity in the *other* sense.²⁶ This is what other reformers on

21 Goodman Christopher, *How superior powers ought to be obeyd of their subiects and wherin they may lawfully by Gods Worde be disobeyed and resisted. Wherin also is declared the cause of all this present miserie in England, and the onely way to remedy the same* (Geneva, John Crispin: 1558).

22 Felch S.M., "The Rhetoric of Biblical Authority: John Knox and the Question of Women", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, 4 (1995) 805–822, and " 'Deir Sister': The Letters of John Knox to Anne Vaughan Lok", *Renaissance and Reformation* 19, 4 (1995) 47–68.

23 Dubois-Nayt A., "La tyrannie travestie, ou le genre au service du tyrannicide", *Cercles* 16, 2 (2006) 33–43, and "La différence des sexes': construction et fonction du 'genre' dans la pensée politique de John Knox", *Cités* 34, 2 (2008) 163–164, 168–169.

24 Knox, *First Blast* 5^r.

25 Knox, *First Blast* 7^v.

26 In the words of Constance Jordan, 'within certain limits what Knox terms monstrous exceptions to nature must be reclassified as simply uncommon; that is, twins are uncommon but not monsters', Jordan, "Woman's Rule" 438.

the Continent argued when they tried to distinguish themselves from Knox. As recalled by John Lee Thompson, Calvin, like Knox, ruled in favor of women's subordination. However, the Genevan preacher had a different strategy than that of Knox, distinguishing canon and civil interpretations of female rule:

[Calvin] tried to distance himself from Knox, first by dedicating the second edition of his commentary on Isaiah to Elizabeth, then by writing a conciliatory letter to her secretary, William Cecil. [...] In both letters, Calvin makes clear his belief that women's rule is contrary to the legitimate order of nature and is sent by God to punish the indolence of men; [...] but Calvin will not counsel revolt against a woman ruler any more than he would consider rebelling against a tyrant: 'Private persons have no right to do anything but to deplore [such rule]. Indeed, gynecocracy – like tyranny – is a bad arrangement which must be tolerated until God sees fit to overthrow it'. [...] For Calvin, female rule – whether that of Mary Tudor or Elizabeth – always remained a kind of tyranny and, as such, it was to be neither welcomed nor resisted; it was only to be endured.²⁷

Similarly, as made clear in his *Sermon on the Epistle of St Paul to the Ephesians* (on Eph. 5.21–5), Calvin argued that women ought to bear their subjection with equanimity rather than rebellion. Their subordination was the divine punishment for Eve's curiosity, something women were called on never to forget. According to Calvin:

there is no other shift but that women must stoop and understand that the ruin and confusion of mankind came in on their side, and through them we be all forlorn and accursed and banished the kingdom of heaven: when women do understand that all this came of Eve and of womankind (as St Paul telleth us in another place [1 Tim. 2.14]), there is none other way but for them to stoop and bear patiently the subjection that God hath laid upon them, which is nothing else but a warning to them to keep themselves lowly and mild.²⁸

27 Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah* 50, 52. Knox's book was published by Jean Crespin's press in Geneva, i.e. the same press which published Calvin's works. Chavura, *Tudor Protestant Political Thought* 64, and Pettegree A., *Marian Protestantism: Six Studies* (Aldershot: 1996) 145–146.

28 Calvin John, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* [1577], trans. A. Golding (Edinburgh: 1973) 569.

Celebrating Eve

As noted by contemporaries who wrote books in *defence* of gynocracy, such as Laurence Humphrey, John Aylmer or Henry Howard, Knox's arguments were contradictory.²⁹ To take but one example, his argument of the 'immutable rank and order – man above woman – is immediately contradicted by his other belief in God's full control over all things'.³⁰ Others went further, defending Eve's transgression as a reason to celebrate *life*, rather than death, as in a 1591 sermon on Ge 2.18 ('The Creation of Eve') by bishop Lancelot Andrewes at St Paul's Cathedral:

But if any shall complain yet further of the woman's hurt and fault; let us know that this woman was made by the counsel of God, the means and occasion by which amends was made, and that with advantage for the evil, for all the evil which she had first done, for as she brought forth sin and death, so she was a means to bring forth a holy seed, which should bring eternal righteousness and life unto all, for as the Serpent should deceive the woman: So it was God's purpose, that the seed of woman should destroy the Serpent and his works; wherefore we must not so much with grief marvel that the woman's sin was made the occasion of all our misery, as with joy and comfort to wonder, that God made the seed of the woman to save us from sin, and to bring us to felicity.³¹

This benevolent interpretation of Genesis found additional support in readings which sought to contextualize the Biblical model. John Aylmer, in his

29 Caney A., "Let He Who Objects Produce Sound Evidence: Lord Henry Howard and the Sixteenth-Century Gynocracy Debate", *Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations* 97 (2004), and Shephard A., *Gender and Authority in Sixteenth-Century England: the Knox debate* (Keele: 1994).

30 Chavura, *Tudor Protestant Political Thought* 67. Knox is countered in this sense by Laurence Humphrey, who claimed: 'There is a fixed order, both a state of things and an ordering of kingdoms. Nor are states constituted first of all without laws, without leader, rashly and by chance; neither are kings or those who are in charge for them, thus constituted. But as once the kings of Judah, so now ours, are anointed by the command and will of God, whether they are good or bad or men or women. For there is no power but of God', Laurence Humphrey, *On the Preservation of Religion and its True Reformation* (1559), trans. J. Kemp, in Kemp J.K., *Laurence Humphrey, Elizabethan Puritan: His Life and Political Theories*, PhD thesis (West Virginia: 1978), quoted by Chavura 67.

31 Andrewes Lancelot, *Lancelot Andrewes: Selected Sermons and Lectures*, ed. P. McCullough (Oxford: 2005) 106–107 (18 October 1591), spelling modernized.

Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects (1559), helped read scripture as a topical, historical document, viewing women's subjection as a social construct, rather than an absolute necessity; the point was also developed by other writers such as Bruni da Pistoia in *Difese delle Donne* (Milan, 1559).³²

Among defenders of women, however, most continued to acknowledge the *doxa* of their relative weakness, due in part to what was still perceived as a constitutive weakness and tendency to be carried away by affection, rather than reason. To counter these failings, Sir Thomas Smith advocated the use of advisors in 1583: 'such personages [such as Queens should] never lack the counsel of such grave and discrete men as be able to supply all other defects'.³³ Ironically, however, such recommendations suggest only a partial understanding of the Genesitic model: Eve, being ignorant, could be deceived by the serpent who may well be considered as woman's first advisor. Incidentally, this prompted some writers to wonder whether the serpent was gendered, some suggesting that it was female, i.e. sweet-tongued, spreading false and dangerous rumours. In a painting by Johann Brabender in Münster, *Sündenfall vom Paradies des Doms* (1550), the serpent has exposed breasts; in the mid-fifteenth-century Bracacci Chapel in Florence, the serpent is distinctly feminine.³⁴ Others insisted on the serpent's masculinity, underlining the *sexual* interpretations of Eve's temptation by the beast, even claiming that Eve gave birth to his brood, Cain and Abel, partly explaining why one of the brothers turned out a fratricide.³⁵

More generally, views such as those of Sir Thomas Smith emphasized the need to provide a decent education and a sense of history to women of the elite, and Aylmer found solace in the idea that in England any monarch's potential shortcomings could be compensated by Parliament's sound counsel.³⁶ In 1559, Queen Elizabeth seemed to be a case in point. She had Roger Ascham as her tutor, who claimed the princess was very knowledgeable in Latin, developing a beautiful style, notably in her translations, for instance of Plutarch's essay on curiosity – skills which would turn to her advantage when she ascended the throne – and her early years suggested a certain deference to Parliamentary

32 Jordan, "Woman's Rule" 438, 421–451.

33 Smith Sir Thomas, *De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England* [1583], eds. Alston L. – Maitland F.W. (Cambridge: 1906), quoted by Jordan, "Woman's Rule" 441.

34 Charlesworth J.H., *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized* (New Haven: 2010) 50.

35 Almond, *Adam and Eve* 173–175.

36 Aylmer John, *Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subjects* (London, John Day: 1559) sig. H2v–H3r.

procedures.³⁷ Others criticized her choice of advisors who eventually served as proxies to stamp out any criticism against the regime.

Curiosity, Gynocracy and Dynastic Change

The representation of female kingship was fraught with peril in early modern England. While Elizabethan censorship limited direct criticism of female rule and several writers sought to justify it, most pamphlets continued to link contemporary wars and chaos to the 'unnatural' nature of gynocracy, claiming such troubles descended from the Biblical curse for which Eve's curiosity was the prime culprit. The death of Elizabeth in 1603 radically changed the prevailing atmosphere. The Virgin Queen was succeeded by an experienced, mature male heir, allowing English subjects to look forward to a return to a stable, long-term, male-led monarchy, one which no longer elicited the 'curiosity of nations'.³⁸

The dynastic change was also felt in the drama of the time, as evidenced by Shakespeare's early Jacobean productions. In the first decade of James I's reign, female kingship was represented onstage in a manner which, far from extolling the virtues of female rule, suggested either their weakness or wickedness with a series of memorably dangerous queens, such as Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* (c. 1606), Regan and Goneril in *King Lear* (c. 1606), or the Queen in *Cymbeline* (c. 1609). In these plays, the dramatist depicts the evil queens' malice using the *topos* of women as 'leaking vessels', actually materializing their malevolence with liquids: poison in *Cymbeline* (1.6 *et al.*), the unending effort to washing off blood in *Macbeth* (5.1), and a combination of the two motifs in *King Lear*, as Goneril stabs herself after having poisoned her sister Regan (5.3). These common *modi operandi* are in keeping with a Genesitic reading of

37 Levin C., "We princes, I tell you, are set on stages": Elizabeth I and Dramatic Self-Representation", in Cerasano S.P. – Wynne-Davies M. (eds.), *Readings in Renaissance Women's Drama: Criticism, History, and Performance, 1594–1998* (New York: 1998) 121. Similarly, women could be patrons of the arts. 'Mary Wroth, Lucy Russell (the Countess of Bedford), Mary Herbert (the Countess of Pembroke), Elizabeth Cary, and Dorothy Shirley are but a few of the well-known examples of Renaissance women who were responsible for creating "a significant index of the importance of women for the drama"'. Choudhury M., "Review of: *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama* by Theodora Jankowski", *The Drama Review* 38, 2 (1994) 188.

38 Shakespeare William, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes, Arden Shakespeare (London: 1997) 5.2.4. The line is spoken by Edmund, the Duke of Gloucester's bastard son, as he complains about the consequences of his illegitimate birth.

women's nature which claimed that women had achieved their aims serpent-like, by indirect means, convincing or coaxing men to perform treasonous acts, or furnishing them with equally devious, or 'curious', means to do away with (male or female) rivals.

These plays seemingly presented female rule as a monstrous 'curiosity'. In doing so, and in line with the works of Knox or Goodman on the right to rebel against tyranny, they also subtly contributed to questioning the prevailing system of government, which might have potentially paved the ground for the later demise of the monarchy and the Civil War. This critical perspective on history was further questioned by the spectacular increase in the number of women 'prophets' and 'curious' women in the decades preceding the Civil War – two phenomena challenging the hitherto male-dominated fields of religious prophecy and scientific research. Despite a return to patriarchy and gender orthodoxy with the advent of the Stuart monarchy, the *gynocratic* curiosity of sixteenth-century English history may thus have paved the way to the development of women's *epistemological* curiosity in the seventeenth century.

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