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Strategies of Negotiation in English Renaissance Literature and Criticism

In the last ten years, English-language Renaissance studies have been transformed by the influence of a variety of methodologies which have qualified the totemic role of the autonomous, humanist subject whose birth is associated with the early modern era. Such approaches as new historicism and cultural materialism have attempted to reimmerge Renaissance literature in the complex and heterogeneous domain of social and historical practices, ideologies, reception and shared textuality which it self-consciously negotiates. The freely self-styling subject of the Renaissance is dispersed or divided in a wider context of cultural meanings, pressures and interactions, anxiously negotiating his or her relation to political and cultural authority. This vision has paralleled that of feminist critics, for whom the individualism and the literary autonomy of humanist and romantic critical assumptions cannot account for the socio-historical construction of gender and writing. Moreover, the new historicists' and cultural materialists' Foucauldian emphasis on the subversive movements and possibilities within Renaissance discourses of power is informed by some feminists' emphasis, to use Ann Rosalind Jones' phrase, on "certain potentially productive contradictions" (1) within early modern gender ideologies and their literary manifestations. The most important question confronting critics of early modern literature is that of ideological subversion and containment. In particular, the representation of women in the Renaissance is fraught with ambiguities as to how much freedom, if any at all, it was possible for women to possess in this time of transition.

Concerns with subversion, containment and cultural authority unite Ann Rosalind Jones's *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe, 1540-1620* (1990) and Pamela Joseph Benson's *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (1992). In the former, female writers of love lyric and in the latter, male composers of defenses of woman are, to greater and lesser degrees, in conflict with the codes of their genres. Subversion and contradiction are created by the force of cultural meanings which conflict with the formal and ideological demands of the literary modes, as well as with the needs of the

authors themselves. Thus, in Jones's book, female writers of love lyric are both impelled and legitimated by the humanist high valuation of eloquence, and they are constrained by early modern associations of female speech with wantonness, immodesty and promiscuity. They can counteract the latter by adopting desexualised speaking voices, or legitimate themselves by invoking powerful male patrons, friends or literary co-producers, or by other means. Yet there remains a transgressive "frisson" and contradiction in their using the voice of a female subject in a genre structured around male desire and female silence.

In *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, it is male authors who are anxiously enmeshed in a genre which threatens their own self-sovereignty. Benson shows how writers of female defenses in Renaissance Italy and England had to invent "diverse literary strategies for dealing with the new notion of women that they created" (7). This is a very different approach from those taken in the two canonical works on Renaissance feminism, Constance Jordan's *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (1990) and Linda Woodbridge's *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540-1620* (1984). Woodbridge looks at the formal structure and development of the controversy over women, rather than emphasising the motivation of its tropes.¹ Jordan is more concerned with the dimensions of philosophical and political theory engaged by the debate. In Benson's — as in Ann Jones's — book, there is a postmodern stress on authors' attempts to deal with contradiction. Benson shows that the persuasiveness of the arguments of female defenses was at odds with women's actual powerlessness in early modern society and that the arguments could suggest an alternative social and political logic which, in its potential undermining of male preeminence, had to be shortcircuited in order to maintain the status quo.

Both critics incorporate degrees of social history and reception theory in a cultural materialist approach. They study their authors as readers of culture and negotiators of viable authorial positions within it, reimmersing the texts in the rhetorical context in which they were composed.² Literary production is dynamic and conflictual, and these qualities at least partially derive from Renaissance rhetorical literature's dialogic and active function within the real world, which enhances its potential to disrupt cultural assumptions and to win authors prestige within societies simultaneously mobile and recalcitrant. The text

is worldly, and, in these books, functions as a means of social advancement and self-legitimation. Jones's and Benson's emphasis on their authors' strategic relation to particular cultural meanings and modes is suggestive of Stephen Greenblatt's use of negotiation as a model in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988). In particular, Jones's key motif of the language of love lyric as a currency, something that is both in circulation and that is connected to the material basis of economic exchange, recalls Greenblatt's notion of social transactions in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, for which he frequently employs a vocabulary of business deals and commodities. Yet Jones, through her emphasis on the inventive strategies of her female authors, describes a resistance to the dominant gender ideologies encoded in love lyric which is not present in Greenblatt's irreducibly pluralistic Renaissance, where meaning plays in the free market of cultural goods.

Jones, signalling her allegiance to the Marxist leanings of cultural studies, works from a Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony, of dominant groups' need to win consent from subordinated groups, rather than impose it. She takes up Stuart Hall's description of three possible "viewer" positions in relation to modern media messages and uses them to theorize female authors' relation to Renaissance ideology. *The Currency of Eros* is organised by pairing a series of eight poets according to similarities in their literary strategies and their social situations. The poets follow from one another in an order of increasing rebelliousness according to Hall's "obedient," "negotiated" and "oppositional" viewer positions. The authors are involved in a two-way process of reception of cultural messages and adaptation to or modification of their dictates. Jones thus takes account of the high valuation of the imitation of literary models in the Renaissance while emphasising women's difference, theorising a subtle mid-ground of responses that are neither totally rejecting of nor totally obeisant to dominant cultural meanings and modes.

At the most submissive end of the scale of negotiation are the English and French poets Isabella Whitney and Catherine des Roches. They both wrote for a living at a time when this was a breach of feminine decorum. Their dominant mode was one of obedience so as to ensure publication and establish an audience. Although they wrote for very different audiences, they had in common the technique of "bricolage," the intermixing of familiar cultural materials and discourses, of other voices, as a mode of self-protective camouflage. Through mixing they were able to appeal to the wide readership their published status required, and "construct newly active speaking positions" (37). Jones herself "intermixes" biography, sociology and cultural analysis into her literary criticism, creating a narrative structure that is as enthralling as its theoretical basis is supple. Thus we learn that Isabella Whitney was a London poet whose homely maxims and sturdy good sense leavened with classical allusion appealed to the "emerging class ideal" of "bourgeois prudence" (77). Yet her Protestant

1 Linda Woodbridge's book is not exclusively on Renaissance feminism, as Constance Jordan's is. Rather, she engages the many different literary manifestations of English Renaissance debate about the nature of women. Her analysis of "feminist" tracts (she is more loath to call these works feminist than is Constance Jordan) is part of a larger discussion of what she calls "the formal controversy," which includes attacks on women also. Moreover, in the second half of her book she discusses the representation of women in the theatre.

2 For other feminist studies of early modern literature which incorporate a cultural materialist as well as a rhetorical approach, see Bellin, Belsey, Jardine, Krontiris, and Lamb.

touting of wifely obedience did not prevent her from establishing subversive links with another "we," the female component of her audience, through subtle criticism of those very classical models. Des Roches, writing in Poitiers, made herself and her work a centre for men's practice of literary display and their burgeoning dreams of "coterie brilliance" (77). She conformed to the courtly preoccupation with female chastity by repeatedly referring to her own and thereby establishing a virtuous platform from which to prescribe the male lover's moral improvement in sexual tones which cannot be pinned down. She thus created "a new kind of poetry, a hybrid between conduct book prescription and erotic description" (65).

At the other, most oppositional end of the scale, in Veronica Franco the "ambiguous marginality" (178) of Venetian courtesanship facilitated an unheard-of explicitness about female eroticism as well as a frank transgression of gender roles via the appropriation of male discourses and subject positions. In Louise Labé, money and a secure social and cultural position at the heart of successful, commercial and relatively autonomous Lyons created a desire for equality that spilled over into androgynous representations of erotic mutuality between men and women. In Labé and Franco, poetry functions as performance and self-advertisement before male poets and patrons, and also as a challenging arrogation of the right to speak, to manipulate the discursive tools at hand according to their own desire. Throughout *The Currency of Eros*, Jones immerses her authors in the rhetorical culture they inhabited, underlining their conversational and performative roles within a shared textuality.

The Invention of the Renaissance Woman also charts the respective positions of its authors in relation to their audiences and the genre they were working in. It shows the development of a number of tropes of female independence from their various manifestations in Italian humanist defenses in the fifteenth century to their reappearance and reformulation in English popular defenses in the sixteenth century and in the epics of Ariosto and Spenser. In spite of their manifold differences in style, ideology and immediate aim, there are certain constants in these texts. Their authors always stop short of enunciating a practical project for women's acceding to social and political power, and find means to shortcircuit the most radical implications of their arguments. Benson describes two models of the new woman. The first is the "independent woman," who is considered to have the same kind of virtue as men: her biological difference does not prevent her from possessing a virtue that is, by definition, masculine. The second is the model of the "interdependent woman," which "transforms qualities usually considered liabilities into assets" (4), with feminine virtues being constructed as equal or, in some cases, superior to masculine virtues. This division has already been noted by Constance Jordan in *Renaissance Feminism*. Jordan, rather than restricting herself to the model of woman provided by defenses, opposes "individualist" and "relational" feminisms, and

links them to nineteenth and twentieth century forms of feminism, thereby putting Renaissance feminism in a broader philosophical context. Benson, however, keeps the two models in view throughout her book, making them central in a way which Jordan's less schematic study does not. Although Benson's apparently mutually exclusive models are often invoked at strategic points in the same text, broadly speaking, Italian defenses of women, with their emphasis on civic virtue and public activity, tended to put forward the former, where English texts, with their Protestant valuation of the private sphere, valued the latter model. Either way, each model produced its own strategies of defense against the notion that women could play political or public roles equal to men's. The independent woman might possess similar virtue to men but she did not have it to the same extent. Conversely, the superiority of the interdependent woman's nature was only appropriate to rule in Golden Ages less corrupt than the present day, and was thus held firmly at a distance.

Benson charts a certain expansion and contraction in the liberatory potential and intentions of the formal defense of women, from Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* in the mid-fifteenth century to the slyly reactionary defenses of women in Elizabethan England. Like Jones, she is concerned with the cultural pragmatics of literary communication, with contexts and reception, and she shows how, as the audiences changed, so did the strategies and stances of the defenses of women. While Boccaccio in *De Mulieribus Claris*, "the foundation text of Renaissance profeminism" (9), only supplies one biography of a contemporary heroic and high-achieving woman in his pantheon, he does pronounce his text open to additions and deletions. These were made in the ensuing defenses by Italian humanists, where there is a greater emphasis on the achievements of modern women, who are thereby written into history. Circulated in manuscript among the Northern Italian humanist elite in which women were frequently highly educated and patrons of the arts, the most successful of these defenses manage to display the virtue of women while containing them within the broad bounds of their traditional role. The later, printed books of Castiglione and Capella are more conservative; the erotic atmosphere with which they are infused is both a sign of this conservatism and of the wider, less educated audience for whom they were written. The English popular defenses, with two anomalous exceptions, seem to be prompted by "the desire to reform morals back to standards that have been abandoned ... rather than the humanist desire to rethink social structures and their components" (206).

Where Jones focuses on literary strategies of self-legitimation and resistance to dominant discourses and hegemonies, Benson focuses on strategies of self-defense — authorial negotiation with a literary genre as rearguard action, fighting its own most radical implications. As in Jones's book, it is the authors' relation to their audiences which makes their works into complex negotiations

that combine conciliation and ideological containment with destabilising countermovements. Defenses of women, as much as, if not more than, love lyric, engage issues of social status and legitimation in the Renaissance. Frequently writing to gain the favour of female patrons, these authors were rhetorically, personally and ideologically enmeshed in a paradoxical mechanism whereby female defense necessitated self-defense against a condition of symbolic and real subjugation to a woman. An author's defense of women might emerge out of "an animus against ... patriarchal forces that pushed him into a feminine position of retirement and weakness" (12), that is, an identification with women and a concomitant rethinking of gender roles. For example, Benson suggests that Boccaccio's defense emerges out of "patriarchal abuse" (12); his retreat from Florence at the time of writing after "difficulties with his brother over their patrimony" (12). Yet "the author of praise of women *must* undercut his own efforts to present women as self-sufficient if he is to succeed in promoting his own personal interest in fame and fortune" (13). Thus, defenses of woman's rule in Elizabethan England were both subservient and overbearing. They were high-faluting rhetorical toadyings to the queen in efforts to redeem the authors' tarnished reputations, and manifestoes of her weakness as a woman and her consequent need for the authors' services. Worldly power is always at stake in these texts, both in their explicit arguments and their subtexts.

Benson, like Jones, describes a group of authors' processes of modification, accommodation and contestation of the genre in which they are working. Where, for Jones, "a woman love poet is certain to disarticulate and remobilise the sexual economy of her culture" (7), for Benson's male writers, the choice of a defense of women as genre also "brings with it a significant ability to disrupt readers' comfortable certainties" (3). She claims that these works are "more subtle, more provocative, and less comfortably patriarchal than [various critics] ... have recognised" (4). At times, she seems to want to preserve the ideal Renaissance feminist author who is engaged in a genuine rethinking of gender categories and roles; the author whose "sensitive profeminist voice" (18) she detects in Boccaccio. Yet, finally, these texts' strategies of containment and recuperation outweigh their championing of the subversive forces of female liberation. Thus, the Italian humanists Sirozzi, Capella and Goggio show that a "separate but equal system of sexual difference, necessary for the generation of Castiglione's beloved court culture, was a mythical construct even at the time of its creation" (90), and Ariosto makes sure that his warrior maiden Bradamante "freely chooses not to be independent" (155), while defenses of Queen Elizabeth would mean, "paradoxically, [that] England's most independent woman becomes less independent if their texts are successful" (250).

In illustrating the shared textuality, the relative ubiquity of tropes of female defense in the Renaissance, Benson does suggest the potentially subversive force of an almost Derridean dissemination. She demonstrates very convincingly that

the epics of Ariosto and Spenser are written within the tradition of profeminism, rather than merely borrowing from it, and illustrates that Ariosto's influence on Spenser was closer than previously imagined. Spenser makes an almost point-for-point rebuttal of Ariosto's conception of the ideal woman of humanism and replaces it with a notion of the ideal Protestant queen, whose superiority is located not in her masculine abilities, but in her specifically feminine virtues. This is an important move on Benson's part, as it shows not only how deeply infused the Renaissance was with profeminist thought, but also what a coherent body of ready-made literary strategies, models and arguments existed by the time of Spenser.

She is both modifying and continuing the work begun by Linda Woodbridge in *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womanhood, 1540-1620*. Woodbridge brought together a number of largely neglected defenses of women and problematised notions that they reflected their authors' beliefs by showing that they were highly conventionalised rhetorical exercises; that they were, in fact, a literary genre with a built-in aesthetic component inherited from medieval debates. Benson suggests that the debate about women was more threatening to the men who engaged in it than Woodbridge implies. Yet, focussing in a more schematic way on literary strategy than Woodbridge, and also than Constance Jordan in *Renaissance Feminism*, Benson does not address the wider issues thrown up by the Renaissance debate over the nature and role of women. Jordan makes the important point that the issue of woman's role was central to men's questions in the Renaissance about political and personal sovereignty and authority. Woodbridge extends the import of the controversy over women by suggesting that its lasting effect may have been in providing a set of tropes which passed into the romance genre, "which continued for some two centuries to be associated with women" (117), and thence, possibly, into the novel, which was also strongly associated with women. In a sense, Benson is limited in what she can say that is new, as the groundwork has already been so excellently done by Woodbridge and Jordan. Her book does not provide a major addition to this field of scholarship in the way that the previous two works did. Yet her emphasis on the reception of these texts is new, and it suggests the possibility in the future of a more "woman-centered" approach to the Renaissance defense of women; the possibility of an investigation of its subversive potential when related to its female audiences.

For even though Benson's official conclusions come down firmly on the side of ideological containment, she maintains an argument in a minor key that at least partially validates the subversive qualities of female defenses. She implies that these texts had the potential to spark women's ambition and liberation, and were even products of it. There are numerous comments on female patrons, narratees and readers. In her chapter on Boccaccio, Benson posits a woman who, on reading his Proem to *De mulieribus claris*, "might be disposed to pay

more heed to novel tales of ability and ambition than to the conventional moralising that accompanies some, but not all, of them, and be moved to be ambitious to put her natural abilities to work to achieve secular glory. She might experience the text as distinctly profeminist" (17). The plurality of the texts was increased because they were commissioned by and laudatory of female patrons or the accomplished women of powerful families who patronised the arts. These factors would always allow for readings and effects which were not in line with their overall repressive structuration.

In tentatively marking out a space for women in the debate about female virtue, Benson inadvertently suggests the need for further assessments of women's agency and effects in the formal debate, not only as readers, but as writers. Studies of female writers of the Renaissance have tended to concentrate on their engagement in literary discourses marginal to the public sphere and to political debate, such as translation, religious tracts, or writings about their families. It is Ann Jones's achievement to have "put women into circulation as agents as well as objects of exchange" (10) in the "masculine" symbolic economy of early modern Europe, emphasising their dialogic, innovative and at times openly oppositional stances in relation to the patriarchal presuppositions of love lyric and the violence of prejudice against female speech in spheres deemed to be public. In *The Currency of Eros*, the "new category of half-private, half-public physical sites [which] made upward mobility available to men and women; the humanist academies and urban salons" (6-7) are intermediary sites where ambitious and socially privileged women can negotiate public eminence for themselves. This important critical reclamation of female poets from the Renaissance, rather than portraying women's literary production as "a tragic and timeless story of individual suffering" (Newton 125; Jones 9) sets out the prohibitiveness of Renaissance gender ideologies only to throw into relief the daringness and invention, the strong residue of creative resistance, in women's writing. Jones shows how they mediate contradiction and at times triumph over it. She also manages to show a certain unity of purpose in women writers of love lyric in the Renaissance, where previously they have been studied in isolation from one another as "one-offs" or, at best, as merely national and therefore — relatively speaking — local manifestations.³ Yet even as they participate in the opportunistic self-fashioning of the European Renaissance,

3 While French women poets of the Renaissance (e.g., Louise Labé; Pernette du Guillet) have been studied side by side owing to their mutual participation in *l'école Lyonnaise* a grouping of writers in Lyons who were active in the 1530s and 1540s, Ann Jones is the first critic, to my knowledge, to engage in broader-based comparative studies of women poets in Renaissance Europe. This work is of particular importance precisely because of the fragmentary nature of archives relating to women writers in the Renaissance. Equally, because of their isolation from other female writers, it becomes important to see whether they write with a common voice or not. Ann Jones' book, in a qualified fashion, suggests they do.

these women are not displaying the metaphysical freedoms in relation to gender and authority which historians such as Jacob Burckhardt, and also feminist critics of a later era, often identified with the early modern period. Nor are the poets totally excluded from the openings which the period allowed. Jones qualifies Joan Kelly's resounding answer of "no" to the question "Did women have a Renaissance?" just as Benson qualifies the related notion that Renaissance feminism was a non-subversive, purely formal cultural manifestation. The model of literature as negotiation and strategy within specific material circumstances and cultural constraints is peculiarly apt for the mobile social world and self-legitimising rhetorical culture of the Renaissance. Both critics are in the best tradition of recent Renaissance scholarship in their attempts to register the forms that the various pressures of the social and historical urgings of early modern Europe take. However, where Pamela Benson's contribution to the field of the Renaissance defense of women is somewhat limited, Ann Jones's study engages a radically new synthesis of theoretical tools and empirical materials.

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BENZI ZHANG

Paradox of Chinese Boxes: Textual Heterarchy in Postmodern Fiction

The "Chinese box" strategy is almost as ancient as the story-telling art. It is employed in almost all generic forms — epics, plays, poems, short stories, prose works, and novels across divergent historical periods and cultural realms. It is so widespread among the narrative literature of all cultures and periods as to approach universality. While this ubiquity alone would justify critical interest, its pervasiveness and recurrence also present a formidable challenge for discussion. One of the difficulties inherent in the current discussion of the Chinese box strategy has to do with typology. Traditionally Chinese box narratives can be categorized into three types according to their formal structures. The first type includes the stories within a story. Unambiguous examples of this type are *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Decameron*, and the *Canterbury Tales*, in which several inner stories are linked together by means of an outer story. Each time a new story is introduced, a new set of conventions is outlined and a new story realm is instantiated. In other words, the outer narrative only serves to motivate a series of inner stories. Obviously this multi-storied narrative differs from the second type — the single-storied frame narratives, such as *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Heart of Darkness*, in which the different fictional worlds are presented not so much as separate and discrete stories with separate motifs, but as alternative perspectives of causality and morality on a single story. Usually, the first-introduced outer narrative is only a fragment, whereas the second-introduced inner narrative is fully developed and, therefore, unfolded dramatically before the reader. The third type of Chinese box narrative reverses the emphasis: the outer story becomes the main one, and the inner or inserted story is a fragment. *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are two famous examples of this type. In the case of *mise en abyme*, the containing and contained narratives share the same identity.

Apparently, this typology bespeaks a certain subservience to the logic of rigid formal classification. But this ordering is useful as a fulcrum by which to open a new conceptual box to contain a broader discussion of Chinese box narratives