

## Introduction

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### *The Other Voice*

Isabella Whitney (fl. 1567–1573) published her first of two poetry collections in 1567,<sup>1</sup> eight years into the long and influential reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The extraordinary forty-five-year reign of the “Virgin Queen” would be characterized by religious and political stability after a period of significant upheaval within England. That comparative stability may have supported what C. S. Lewis labeled the “golden age” of English poetry, embodied by poets and playwrights such as Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the economic energy within London, the center of the English book trade, fueled a “literary revolution” supported by wealth and the influx of educated men into the city.<sup>3</sup> Many of these men, and in fewer cases women, turned to literary activities. They developed an English style of poetry profoundly influenced by Continental forms and authors but also by central aesthetic, social, and political issues in England; the poetry in turn addressed many of these important issues during the period.

Isabella Whitney’s 1567 publication of her first poetry collection, *The Copy of a Letter, Lately Written in Meter, by a Young Gentlewoman to Her Unconstant Lover*, is important because Whitney is the first English woman to publish original, secular poetry under her own initials. The last four decades of feminist scholarship have shown that the production of original or translated texts by women was not that uncommon, whether in print or through the scribal circulation of texts. In

1. Betty S. Travitsky lists the dates for *The Copy of a Letter, Lately Written in Meter, by a Young Gentlewoman to Her Unconstant Lover* as 1566–1567 in “Isabella Whitney (fl. 1566–1573),” in ODNB, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/45498>. Travitsky may have indicated the range of dates because Richard Jones’s entry to license *The Copy of a Letter* is the 22nd of 140 entries in the *Registers of the Company of Stationers of London* covering July 22, 1566 to July 22, 1567; see Edward Arber, ed., *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640 A.D.*, vol. 1 (London, 1876), 329. There is no printed date on the frontispiece or inside of *The Copy of a Letter*. The *STC* also lists the date of *The Copy of a Letter* as “Ent. 1566–1567,” or entered in the Stationer’s Register between these years. In listing the date of publication as “[1567?],” the *STC* continued to record some uncertainty about the publication date (catalog no. 25439). Later scholars and editors have generally accepted a 1567 publication date: see, for example, Wendy Wall, “Isabella Whitney and the Female Legacy,” *ELH* 58, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 35–62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2873393>; and Danielle Clarke, ed., *Isabella Whitney, Mary Sidney, and Aemilia Lanyer: Renaissance Women Poets* (London: Penguin, 2000).

2. C. S. Lewis introduces the phrase in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

3. See Colin Burrow, “The Sixteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 23.

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fact, sixteen Englishwomen had their writings distributed through print during the sixteenth century,<sup>4</sup> though several other sixteenth-century women produced and/or circulated manuscript texts during the period. Many of these manuscript texts have now been made available through The Other Voice series.<sup>5</sup> Many sixteenth-century English women poets, translators, and authors of prose works produced religious writings, though notable writers such as Lady Mary Sidney, sister of Sir Philip Sidney, and Margaret Tyler produced secular works as well.

Whitney is significant for her combination of secular poetic subjects, her entrance into print, and her lower gentry, rather than noble, status. She writes about courtship rather than Christ while simultaneously highlighting the economic issues of her particular situation and her accompanying gender and class position. Whitney illustrates the contradictory class and social positions in which she found herself, contradictions that the title of this volume, *Isabella Whitney: Poems by a Sixteenth-Century Gentlewoman, Maid, and Servant*, emphasizes. A gentlewoman from the countryside, Whitney struggled significantly with financial resources in London and was in service either as a lady's maid or in a more menial servant role, as her younger sisters appeared to be. She underscores her "gentlewoman" status within her published writings while detailing lower-class "servant" tasks that she or her sisters performed within an employer's household. Her texts thus illustrate the fluidity of class, especially that of the sixteenth-century lower gentry. Further, Whitney's account of losing her position as a house maid or lady's maid suggests the ease of losing one's class status entirely. These distinct identities also show the complex layering of such categories, perhaps even more so for women in the period. Whitney was a "maid" in her occupation as well as a "maid" or unmarried woman in London. This social status made her more vulnerable in a city where she lacked the protections and supervisorial role of a male guardian—a husband, father, or brother. A "servant" might have received the protection of the head of the household, but this would seem to erase her filial connection to her "gentleman" father, thus resulting in another loss of class status. Whitney's writings layer and address the important issues of gender and authority, the meaning of the class category of gentry in a world marked by its declining wealth and power, and the fluid class status that affected almost all Londoners.

4. The fifteen other published writers were Jane Anger; Anne Askew; Anne Bacon; Mary Basset; Anne Dowriche; Anne Locke; Frances Manners, Baroness Bergavenny; Queen Katherine Parr; Margaret Roper; Anne Seymour, Countess of Warwick; Jane Seymour; Margaret Seymour; Lady Mary Sidney; Margaret Tyler; and Anne Vavasour.

5. Examples of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English women writers whose works are now available in The Other Voice series include Mary Wroth, Jane Cavendish, and Elizabeth Brackley, *Women's Household Drama: Loves Victorie, A Pastorall, and The concealed Fansyes*, ed. Marta Straznicky and Sara Mueller (Toronto: Iter Press; Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2018); and Elizabeth Cooke Hoby Russell, *The Writings of an English Sappho*, ed. Patricia Phillippy (Toronto: Iter and the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2011).

Whitney's interest to early modern scholars and students extends significantly beyond the biographical, the cultural, and the sociological. She intervenes into and rewrites traditionally male literary genres and is an early Renaissance female voice within the *querelle des femmes*. Whitney appears, in collaboration with her publisher, Richard Jones, to address and encourage a female readership, imagining a distinct and gendered audience among a growing sixteenth-century readership. Her gendering of the complaint tradition also allowed her to develop a familial circle of readers that she deploys to protect herself from cultural restrictions against women appearing in print. In short, Whitney is a fascinating and original figure, historically and artistically.

### *The Disputed Biography of Isabella Whitney, Poet*

The main sources for Isabella Whitney's biography are all compromised to some degree by circumstantial evidence. We know that she had two works published by London publisher Richard Jones in 1567 and 1573, and her highly detailed account of London geography in the poem "The Manner of Her Will" suggests she knew London well. Her published poems imply that Whitney resided in London from approximately 1567, when her first publication appeared, to soon after 1573, when she declared her departure from London in her second, longer publication, *A Sweet Nosegay, or Pleasant Posy, Containing a Hundred and Ten Philosophical Flowers, etc.*

The narrator of her poems claims that she was in some kind of service in London around the times of these publications, but that some incident, seemingly a courtship gone wrong, resulted in her loss of the position. Isabella Whitney describes herself as a member of the gentry class in her poetry, though this was a fluid class position in the period, both because one's financial position could fluctuate and because one could occupy seemingly contradictory class positions simultaneously. In the case of Whitney's family, this included farming rented land, having daughters in service who seemed closer to the situation of servants than of young members of the gentry, and dedicatory letters addressed by Isabella and Geoffrey Whitney to established members of the sixteenth-century Cheshire gentry.

Most critics who have directly addressed the biographical questions surrounding Isabella Whitney have followed Henry Green's description of "poetess" Isabella Whitney as Geoffrey's sister.<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Whitney, who published *A Choice of Emblems* in 1586, is generally considered the Elizabethan period's premier emblemist.<sup>7</sup> Betty Travitsky resisted this familial association in her

6. Henry Green, Introduction to *Whitney's Choice of Emblems: A Fac-Simile Reprint* (London: Lovell Reeve, 1866), xliii.

7. Andrew King, "Geoffrey Whitney (1548?–1600/01)," in *ODNB*, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29320>.

1980 edition of “The ‘Wyll and Testament’ of Isabella Whitney,” the final poem of *A Sweet Nosegay*, because within the text Isabella Whitney describes herself as “London . . . bred” (ll. 25–26), while Geoffrey hailed from Cheshire.<sup>8</sup> But in a 1983 article, Robert J. Fehrenbach argued convincingly for Geoffrey and Isabella’s familial connection. Among Fehrenbach’s evidence were the parallel names of sisters and a brother that appeared in Isabella’s *A Sweet Nosegay* and Geoffrey Whitney’s 1600 will.<sup>9</sup> Although Geoffrey’s will does not mention a sister Isabella, Fehrenbach raised the possibility that, though Isabella may have died by 1600, she may also have married and be referred to as “Sister Eldershae” in his will; “Sister Eldershae” received the largest bequest of all of Geoffrey’s sisters, which would accord with her status as his oldest sister.<sup>10</sup> In the nineteenth century, James Hall had also speculated that Isabella could have been either the Sister Eldershae or Evans mentioned in Geoffrey’s will.<sup>11</sup> Most recently, Jessica Malay has pursued this line of inquiry, suggesting that “brother Eldershae” was Richard Eldershawe, a physician and Catholic recusant; in his *A Choice of Emblems*, Geoffrey dedicated an emblem to Eldershawe.<sup>12</sup>

Relying on notebooks by James Hall, a nineteenth-century Nantwich historian, Averill Lukic’s 2005 article confirms the filial link between Isabella and Geoffrey.<sup>13</sup> Further, Lukic discovered the 1624 will of Brooke Whitney, which leaves “my sister Isabell” 10 shillings. Hall’s notebooks record a Wilkesley court roll from July 9, 1576 that fined Geoffrey Whitney for his two pregnant and unmarried daughters; one was named Isabella and the other Dorothea. Isabella gave birth to Elinor Lovekin in 1576; the father was listed as “John Lufkyn.”<sup>14</sup> Brooke Whitney’s will clearly suggests that Isabella Whitney lived to 1624. Admittedly, this makes her presence as a married woman in Geoffrey’s earlier will somewhat confounding. Could the pregnant, unmarried Isabella of 1576 have become the wife of the physician Richard Eldershawe? Or could she have acquired the name “Sister Eldershae” through marriage to another husband? How likely is it that a respected physician would marry a woman who had had a child out of wedlock?

8. Betty S. Travitsky, “The ‘Wyll and Testament’ of Isabella Whitney,” *English Literary Renaissance* 10, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 76–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1980.tb01411.x>.

9. Robert J. Fehrenbach, “Isabella Whitney, Sir Hugh Plat, Geoffrey Whitney, and ‘Sister Eldershae,’” *English Language Notes* 21 (1983): 7–11.

10. Fehrenbach, “Sister Eldershae,” 11.

11. See Averill Lukic, “Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney,” *Emblematika* 14 (2005): 403.

12. Jessica L. Malay, “Isabella Whitney, ‘Sister Eldershae,’ and Cheshire Recusancy,” *English Language Notes* 43, no. 2 (2005): 18–22.

13. Lukic discovered Hall’s notebooks in the Cheshire Record Office (ref. D4059/21 and D4059/22); they document many activities of the members of the Whitney family, including legal judgements made against them.

14. Hall, D4059/21, qtd. in Lukic, “Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney,” 397.

Was this region of the country more permissive about women's behavior than the majority of England?

While we do not have answers to questions raised by Malay's and Lukic's 2005 articles, other facts paint a clearer picture of the Whitney sisters in Cheshire. We know that two other sisters of Isabella, Dorothea and Margery, became pregnant outside of marriage. Dorothea was cited in a 1576 Wilkesley court record but appears to have married the father of her child.<sup>15</sup> Margery was mentioned in manorial court records as "gotten with child" in 1573,<sup>16</sup> but we lack records suggesting that Margery subsequently married. And we lack clear evidence about Isabella's history following the 1576 legal judgment against her father, other than that she apparently was still alive in 1624; Brooke Whitney's 1624 will establishes that Isabella Whitney survived into her seventies. While certain aspects of the historical record are now substantiated, many questions about Isabella Whitney's life remain unanswered, especially after her departure from London. The practice of women's identities becoming subsumed into a husband's family name complicates our ability to trace women's history, as marriage frequently obscures a woman's genealogical line. With Whitney, we have many unanswered questions about whether, or whom, she married.

While the documentary evidence confirms the filial link between Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney, their shared link to George Mainwaring helps us understand the social world of Cheshire. While Travitsky's *ODNB* entry on Isabella Whitney lists Coole Pilate as the location of the Whitney family home, Hall's recently discovered notebooks clearly place the Whitney family on the Combermere Estate in Ryles Green.<sup>17</sup> Both Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney dedicated some of their work to George Mainwaring—Geoffrey dedicated emblem 139 of his

15. Recent archival evidence discovered by Lukic interestingly complicates Elizabeth H. Hageman's argument in "Family Matters: Isabella and Geoffrey Whitney's Advice to Their Siblings—and Adriana's Plight in *The Comedy of Errors*," in *Renaissance Historicisms: Essays in Honor of Arthur F. Kinney*, ed. James M. Dutcher and Anne Lake Prescott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 173–92. While laying the groundwork for an argument that Isabella and Geoffrey Whitney and William Shakespeare were part of the same cultural field in which witty women could disrupt certain patriarchal traditions, Hageman argues that the dedication to M. D. [Mistress Dorothea] Colley in Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems* might have served as a rebuke to Isabella's unmarried state. Yet we now know that Dorothea found her way into marriage in the same way that Isabella may have, through an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Robert Colly was named as the father of Dorothea's infant in the 1576 Wilkesley court roll, and Geoffrey Whitney's dedication "To my sister M. D. Colley" shows that she married the child's father before Geoffrey published *A Choice of Emblems* in 1586. See Lukic, "Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney," 398; Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems, and Other Devices* (London, 1586), 93. Hageman references the emblem praising *uxoriae virtutes*, or the virtues of a wife ("Family Matters," 187). Because there is evidence that Isabella had married by 1586, I would argue that this emblem, "To my sister M. D. Colley," seems less likely to be a criticism of Isabella's marital status.

16. Hall, D4059/21, qtd. in Lukic, "Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney," 399.

17. Travitsky, "Isabella Whitney"; Lukic, "Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney," 396, 398.

1586 *A Choice of Emblems* to Mainwaring, while Isabella Whitney dedicated her 1573 *A Sweet Nosegay* to him—suggesting that the two families had some shared connection. The Mainwarings were a leading family in Ightfield, which was near Nantwich.<sup>18</sup> Royals Green, most likely the modernized version of “Ryles Green,” is approximately four miles from Ightfield. Whitney’s dedication of *A Sweet Nosegay* and Geoffrey’s dedication of an emblem to George Mainwaring may suggest a close friendship with George or an opportunity to associate oneself with a more highly positioned member of the gentry in the Whitney’s home region. Hall’s notebooks also offer an alternate reason for establishing a public connection to the Mainwaring family: a 1573 verdict from a Cheshire manorial court noted that “one Margery Whytney being gotten with child was kept in the house of Homfrey Maynwaringe contrary to ye payne in the Court.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly some connection with the one branch of the Mainwaring family existed, apparently through Margery’s pregnancy. Perhaps this signaled the kindness of Humphrey Mainwaring, or perhaps his culpability for Margery’s pregnancy. The 1573 date of this manorial court verdict suggests a range of reasons for Isabella to pen a dedication to the Ightfield Mainwarings’ heir in her miscellany printed that year.

While interesting documentary evidence has broadened, if not also complicated, the family history of the Whitneys, some critics have also challenged oft-cited “biographical” facts embedded within Isabella Whitney’s poems, such as her role in service. For instance, Laurie Ellinghausen cautions against accepting the idea that Whitney served as a maidservant. Instead, Ellinghausen argues that Whitney specifically “*chose* this persona as a means of expressing her tenuous relationship to her own literary property” through the anxieties around sexuality and property that “her status as a professional author raised.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, according to Ellinghausen, Whitney’s use within her poems of the status of a servant and lover was an artistic choice; she was constructing a narrator whose position could illustrate what it meant to write and publish as a woman. As with the documentary evidence suggesting that Whitney was unmarried and pregnant in 1576, and possibly married by 1600, aspects of Whitney’s life and literary choices both could be true. Whitney could explicitly mean to invoke the status of and associations with a maidservant and have actually worked in service in London, a common practice for women in the period.

Whitney’s poetry addresses numerous issues, including economic development in the second half of the sixteenth century, especially in England; the role of service and the significance of class hierarchy; the importance of gender roles; and

18. Michael Felker, “The Poems of Isabella Whitney: A Critical Edition” (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1990), 125.

19. Hall, D4059/21, qtd. in Lukic, “Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney,” 399.

20. Laurie Ellinghausen, “Literary Property and the Single Woman in Isabella Whitney’s *A Sweet Nosegay*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 4 (emphasis in original).

women's potentially dangerous position within a highly prescribed and limiting patriarchy. Further, Whitney's focus on courtship within her poems should also be viewed in light of Queen Elizabeth's highly public and culturally compelling courtships in the 1560s and 1570s, a period during which Elizabeth evolved from a maiden queen to a virgin queen. Political, social, and cultural events that defined Elizabeth's reign provide a context for understanding aspects of Whitney's poetry.

### *England Enters a Period of Stability*

When Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558, she followed the five-year reign of her sister, Mary Tudor. Mary Tudor's reign was characterized by extreme persecution of Protestants, who previously had been allowed to practice their faith more and more over the preceding two decades. Mary and Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had turned the country to Protestantism following his 1534 Act of Succession, which declared him head of the Church of England. Under his son, King Edward VI, the country was turned more fully towards the Protestant faith, and many Catholic traditions were excised from religious practice. When, as a result of Edward VI's early death, Mary I ascended the throne in 1553, she entirely reversed this tide, returning England to the Catholicism it had practiced before her father's turn away from Rome. With many Protestants unwilling to revert to Catholic practice, which had been restricted for almost twenty years, Mary I instituted punishments for those adhering to their Protestant faith. These included executions of many unwilling to forsake their Protestant beliefs. While we do not know Isabella Whitney's birth date, her brother Geoffrey Whitney was most likely born between 1548 and 1552.<sup>21</sup> If she was close to him in age, as seems likely since she published her first poetry collection in 1567, both Isabella and Geoffrey would have lived through dramatic changes as the country under Mary Tudor was turned back to Catholicism.

At Elizabeth's accession to the throne in 1558, the Queen converted England back to Protestantism but instituted much more tolerance around religious faith than had her sister. The 1559 Act of Supremacy named Elizabeth the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, while the Act of Uniformity, passed that same year, made England's official religion Protestantism. Although the Act of Uniformity fined those who would not attend Church of England services, this was a significantly lesser punishment than Protestants experienced under Mary I. And though Catholics could be investigated and fined for their recusancy, or refusal to attend services of the Church of England, the private practice of Catholicism remained. In fact, recusancy was quite widespread in certain areas of England. While Elizabeth's approach to converting England back to Protestantism might have affected Isabella's future, it would also shape her brother's future career.

21. King, "Geoffrey Whitney."



Malay argues that Isabella Whitney married a Catholic recusant in Cheshire, suggesting that the tremendous changes to England's religious landscape shaped not only her early years, but her future married life as well. Whether the identification of Whitney as the wife of Richard Eldershawe is correct, Cheshire itself had many Catholic recusants, including many high-ranking members of the community. Geoffrey affiliated himself with highly placed Protestants, such as Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, to whom Geoffrey dedicated his 1586 *A Choice of Emblems*. And yet as Malay shows, local Cheshire residents to whom Geoffrey Whitney dedicated emblems included local Catholic recusants, many of whom were investigated for their religious beliefs in the late 1570s and 1580s.<sup>22</sup> The turbulent religious strife that marked Mary I's reign was significantly curtailed by a number of Elizabeth's actions. England's complex past around religious faith was stabilized under Elizabeth but certainly not resolved entirely, as we can see in Cheshire.

Religion was among the stabilizing changes that Elizabeth tried to institute during her reign—changes that affected the Whitney family. While still defending the faith of Protestantism, Elizabeth generally avoided war during her reign, though she often reluctantly agreed to campaigns in France and the Netherlands to support the Continental Protestant cause. That said, efforts to control Ireland through military excursions continued throughout her reign. Isabella might have been more aware of the 1585–1586 campaign in the Netherlands, as her brother's visit to Leiden during this period coincided with Robert Dudley's military campaign, part of Elizabeth's international support of Protestantism. Geoffrey met in 1586 with the Earl of Leicester, whose patronage he then successfully acquired. Leicester provided support for Geoffrey's search for governmental positions and encouraged him to publish his collection of emblems that promoted England's Protestant national identity. Geoffrey's emblem collection records England's historical transitions from a Catholic to a Protestant to a Catholic and finally back to a Protestant nation.<sup>23</sup>

The ecclesiastical and political stability Elizabeth worked to establish, partly through transitioning England back to Protestantism, was central to London's growing economic power within Europe, in part a consequence of England's increasing role in international trade. In turn, these economic conditions supported the rise of literary ambitions that produced great English poets, as well as generated a London audience of readers hungry for, and able to afford, newly published works. This economic context made Isabella Whitney's two published collections of poetry possible, as did the growing number of published poets and playwrights and increasingly popular genres such as the poetic miscellany. But one of the most important causes of the rise in the popularity of printed literary and non-literary texts was London's growth as a commercial center.

22. Malay, "Cheshire Recusancy," 19–20.

23. King, "Geoffrey Whitney."



## *London as Political and Commercial Center*

When Isabella Whitney arrived in London from Cheshire sometime in the 1560s,<sup>24</sup> she joined a city undergoing an enormous economic and population expansion. In the course of the 1500s, London grew exponentially, simultaneously emerging as a major economic power. While precise population numbers are difficult to ascertain, estimates for London's population in 1500 range from 35,000 to just under 50,000. By 1600, the City of London and its suburbs were home to between 180,000 and 200,000 people. Roy Porter suggests that London's population was 85,000 in 1565, right around the time Isabella Whitney arrived in the county's political and commercial capital.<sup>25</sup> That London was the center of both England's political and economic power made it unique within Europe, where political power and economic power were often divided between two or more cities. While London would swell significantly in size by the end of the century, its growth was already palpable by the middle of the century, which led to growing concerns about the rising population. Much of that population growth was due to an influx of newcomers, most of them young men and women flowing into the city for its economic possibilities.

The City of London was geographically designed and structured to regulate its population. London's growth of three to four times its population between 1500 and 1600 underscored the need to control all of its inhabitants. The London Wall encircled the city proper, which excluded much of what we think of now as London. Tudor London incorporated St. Paul's on the eastern edge of the city and extended west to the Tower of London. Neither Fleet Street, Holborn, nor the entire Westminster area, including the Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, were part of the Tudor City of London. Many of the gates in and out of the city included prisons for felons, vagabonds, and those without financial resources. Inside the city walls, wards defined the distinctive character of the neighborhoods while also organizing the political and social structure of these units. Aldermen of the distinct wards maintained order, while wardens patrolled these areas to assure that inhabitants were either able to support themselves or were provided for by the wards' economic safety net. These wardens were also responsible for policing low-level crimes, such as prostitution or petty theft, fears of which rose with the population. Outside of the walls, the suburbs grew extensively, housing more and

24. Whitney describes herself as "London . . . bred" (ll. 25–26) in *A Sweet Nosegay*, but we know that her brother Geoffrey was in Cheshire in 1563, where he was "fined for taking part in unlawful games" (Lukic, "Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney," 401). While some critics have suggested that perhaps Whitney's parents resided in London at her birth, rental and court records show the family was at Ryles Green on the Combermere Estate in Cheshire by 1558 (Lukic, "Geoffrey and Isabella Whitney," 402).

25. Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 42. See also Burrow, "Sixteenth Century," 23.

more of the population of greater London “without the bars,” or beyond the wards. These areas were also outside of the jurisdiction of the city fathers and their efforts to regulate Londoners’ activities. Whitney’s poem “The Manner of Her Will” in *A Sweet Nosegay* shows Whitney’s extensive knowledge of the geography of London and her understanding of the distinct wards’ local commercial character.

Both of her miscellanies also record the dangers of lacking financial resources within the city. London was a place of great economic possibility, as testified to by the influx of men and women from the countryside and smaller towns. Whitney’s brother Geoffrey would overlap briefly with his sister, attending either Thavies’ or Furnivall’s Inn of Court between 1570 and 1574.<sup>26</sup> For young men with some education, usually a few years at university though not necessarily with a degree, the Inns of Court were the training grounds for future lawyers and other bureaucrats supporting a growing state apparatus. The city’s commercial power centered in many ways around a powerful guild system. It supported an apprenticeship system that trained young boys in trades to prepare them for guild membership. Alongside this production of labor and products, London was emerging as a major market for foreign goods and was supporting trading companies that could deliver significant profits. London benefited from the collapse and re-establishment of trading routes during the Renaissance, and England was beginning efforts to explore and control a recently discovered “new world” that ultimately would make England a major eighteenth-century colonial power.

These economic forces and opportunities led to the rise of a vibrant proto-capitalist city. London was in many ways organized around its markets, and the buying and selling of goods is centrally featured in Whitney’s “The Manner of Her Will.” This poem is as much a tribute to London’s vibrant commercial exchange as it is an account of the challenges of financially surviving there, which Whitney ultimately concludes that she cannot do. In large part, the economic opportunities London could provide to inhabitants and immigrants alike were within the domain of men: apprenticeships, membership in a guild, participation in trading companies, and training in the Inns of Court. With her 1567 and 1573 publications, Whitney does find some measure of success in the emerging print market, but on a financial level this success is rather limited, despite her appeal to a growing readership, including a readership of women.

### *London as Print Center and Center of Artistic Patronage*

London was growing not just in terms of its economic influence across both England and the Continent; it was also growing in terms of its prestige and its status as a world-class city. The growing wealth within the capital was fueled by the trade activities of an increasingly affluent and powerful merchant class. The

26. King, “Geoffrey Whitney.”

city imported more than just luxury items; it was also importing culture, art, architecture, and literature. This rise in sophistication was supported and driven by London's thriving printing and bookselling culture.

As Porter has written, "London was the cradle of printing."<sup>27</sup> The flourishing economic situation combined with a Reformation investment in reading pious materials. This focus on reading the Bible likely propelled high levels of literacy; depending on class status, literacy rates were somewhere between 50 and 75 percent among seventeenth-century Englishmen.<sup>28</sup> The Company of Stationers was incorporated in 1557, and there were many printers centered around St. Paul's Cathedral, Paternoster Row, and Fleet Street, with their numbers continuing to rise significantly throughout the sixteenth century. Richard Jones, who printed both of Isabella Whitney's miscellanies, was on Fleet Street, near St. Paul's during the 1560s and early 1570s.<sup>29</sup> By the 1580s and 1590s, this infrastructure would be a major force supporting the "golden age" of English poetry and drama. It paired with a patronage system through which writers searched for financial support and political protection from the many nobles jockeying for position within Elizabeth's court. With no modern, author-centered copyright provisions, publishers profited from the texts they produced and sold. Authors received an initial sum for the text itself, so a highly popular text would not provide authors with additional income, though it could create demand for future works. This relationship between printers, authors, and the buying public encouraged authors to be highly productive, or to make efforts to attain financial support from patrons—often both. Writers were not immune from debtor's prison, suggesting that while many writers could support themselves, financial success for the growing ranks of writers was by no means a sure thing. The period is also marked, though perhaps more so in the 1580s and 1590s, by the rise of a kind of author that had not previously existed: this author would, in the words of Richard Helgerson, "self-crown" himself as a writer of significance.<sup>30</sup>

Patronage by a wealthy noble or member of the gentry was a central component of literary production in London. These patrons' support was a significant

27. Porter, *London*, 60.

28. Porter, *London*, 60.

29. H. G. Aldis, et al., *A Dictionary of Printers and Booksellers in England, Scotland and Ireland, and of Foreign Printers of English Books, 1557–1640* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1968), 159.

30. Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Lindsay Ann Reid argues that Whitney explicitly positions herself within a "neo-Ovidian career trajectory" through her two publications that parallel the Virgilian career path a writer like Spenser had constructed for himself, and which Helgerson, in *Self-Crowned Laureates*, identifies within writers such as Spenser, Jonson, and Milton who published a few decades later. Lindsay Ann Reid, "The Brief Ovidian Career of Isabella Whitney: From Heroidean to Tristian Complaint," in *Early Modern Women's Complaint: Gender, Form, and Politics*, ed. Sarah C. E. Ross and Rosalind Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 91.

aspect of the financial rewards that authors pursued. Some acquisition of literary patronage may have happened through personal contacts, but many connections were the result of speculative efforts made by authors; within prefatory material to a published, or even a manuscript, text, authors declared their appreciation for a high-placed member of society. Authors did this hoping for future financial or other support. While the significant number of publishers in London, higher than in any other city in England, was central in the rise of literature in the second half of the sixteenth century, so too was the consolidation of political power that drew most of the important members of the nobility to London. And just as the economic growth of London was enabled by the city's role as the political center for the country, so the intersection of political and economic power drove the growth of a national poetry and a national theater.

While the market for patrons and for publication was growing alongside many of London's and England's other markets, publication itself was seen as problematic for men, and even more so for women. Whereas scribal circulation of literary works, especially the popular Petrarchan-style poetry imported from Italy and the Continent, was a frequent activity among the elite, the associations with entering into print were much thornier to navigate. While this new market included the publication of religious texts, literary texts, and polemical treatises of a religious and social nature, printing one's works was seen as a bit *déclassé*. This explains why the highly popular and influential miscellany published by Richard Tottle in 1557 included poets of noble status, primarily Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, and Sir Thomas Wyatt, who had been dead for a decade or more. Posthumous publication was one way to manage this stigma of print, which was driven by concern that anyone, regardless of station, could enter this new, growing industry. Nor was this concern unfounded, as many educated, and even uneducated but literate, young men flocked to London to enter into publication or join the growing market around playwriting and playacting. Obviously the stigma around print gradually waned, and Tottle's miscellany, or *Songs and Sonnets*, had much to do with this transformation. Wendy Wall argues that Tottle's publication "changed the literary landscape" by making "English" poetry a marker of national significance; it was important for readers to have access to the best writers. Consequently, publication needed to replace the coterie circulation of texts so that such writers would be available to a broader public.<sup>31</sup> By the time Spenser published *The Shepheardes Calender* in 1579, more than a decade before his 1590 *Faerie Queene*, the stigma of print—at least for male writers—had been either significantly diminished or erased. Whitney's two texts are published during this period of transition. Further, her entrance into print is complicated by the implications of women in the public print sphere.

31. Wendy Wall, "Authorship and the Material Conditions of Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 73.

A comparison of Geoffrey and Isabella's distinct engagement of patronage brings these social and gendered implications into focus. Lynn McGrath helpfully contrasts the level of success Isabella had in acquiring patronage from higher status individuals compared to her brother Geoffrey. Isabella dedicated *A Sweet Nosegay* to George Mainwaring, a well-positioned gentleman from Cheshire, perhaps connected to her younger sister Margery. In contrast, Geoffrey successfully received patronage from Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester; he dedicated his *A Choice of Emblems* to Leicester and subsequently received his support for political positions. Leicester's national reputation and close relationship with Queen Elizabeth stand in significant contrast to the circle Isabella constructs within *A Sweet Nosegay*. Her text engages countrymen like Mainwaring, her own two brothers, three sisters, and two cousins, and a Thomas Berrye, about whom we have no biographical information. As McGrath pithily summarizes, Mainwaring was obviously "small potatoes" compared to Leicester.<sup>32</sup> The intimacy of Isabella Whitney's largely familial and local circle contrasts with what Andrew King describes as the "militant expansionist Protestantism" defining Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblems*.<sup>33</sup> The publication of letters amidst Whitney's collection of poetry, as Ellinghausen has argued, "imitates manuscript circulation more closely," a practice much less fraught for women than publication.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Ellinghausen observes, this turn to the familial circle does not successfully yield either political or financial support, the goal of patronage.

### *Women in Service in Sixteenth-Century England*

Most of the biographical information that survives about Isabella Whitney is embedded in her poetry published in 1567 and 1573. In these two poems, the narrator states that she was working as a maidservant in London and, as a result of slander, lost that position to become, as she says in the prefatory poem to *A Sweet Nosegay*, "harvestless, / and serviceless."<sup>35</sup> Ellinghausen suggests that Whitney "chose this persona" of a maidservant to construct a particular image of her authorship as labor; Ellinghausen challenges the assumptions that Whitney was necessarily giving us key biographical facts about her life.<sup>36</sup> Either way, the conditions for maidservants in London become important for understanding the

32. Lynette F. McGrath, "Isabella Whitney and the Ideologies of Writing and Publication," in *Teaching Tudor and Stuart Women Writers*, eds. Susanne Woods and Margaret P. Hannay (New York: Modern Language Association, 2000), 286.

33. King, "Geoffrey Whitney."

34. Ellinghausen, "Literary Property," 8.

35. Isabella Whitney, "The Author to the Reader," in *A Sweet Nosegay* (London, 1573), l. 1. This is the text upon which the present edition is based.

36. Ellinghausen, "Literary Property," 4.