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**Constructing a portrait of the early-modern woman
writer for eighteenth-century female readers:
George Ballard's
Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain (1752)***

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ABSTRACT

George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) is of special relevance to the study of early-modern women writers and their subsequent reception, since it contains details of the lives and writings of a considerable number of these women. This type of publication responded to the demand for educative works in general, and particularly to a growing female audience. Thus its chief goal was to provide readers with exemplary models of behaviour. Within the theoretical framework of women's studies and literary biography, the biographies of these women writers are analysed in order to determine whether their lives and careers as writers were in keeping with the didactic purpose of such texts, and the extent to which the fact of being women shaped their biographical portraits.

KEYWORDS: early-modern women writers; literary biography; women's studies; education; eighteenth century; George Ballard.

1. Introduction

One significant contribution to the vogue of biography in the eighteenth century is how George Ballard (c.1706-1755) presented his compilation of biographies to the public in its preface (1985:53).

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However, what made his work different and remarkable with respect to others was the subject, that is, distinguished learned women. In fact, as Ruth Perry maintains in her 1985 edition of Ballard's text, bearing in mind the way women were generally regarded at the time, this book is "a landmark in the history of feminism" (1985:13), owing chiefly to its vindication of women's achievements. Moreover, given the repetitive use that subsequent scholars and writers have made of the sometimes unique materials gathered by Ballard, Margaret Ezell describes his work as "a privileged text in the study of early women writers" (1996:81). Indeed, in *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain, Who Have Been Celebrated for Their Writings or Skill in the Learned Languages, Arts and Sciences*, published privately in 1752, Ballard justified his project by stating that his aim was to fill a gap in knowledge, since "very many ingenious women of this nation [...] are not only unknown to the public in general, but have been passed by in silence by our greatest biographers" (1985:53). Accordingly, he provided his audience with the biographies of 64 British women, arranged chronologically, each of whom had participated in the literary world, be it extensively or briefly. The time span covered is also broad, beginning with Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth century and ending with Constantia Grierson at the outset of the eighteenth century.

The construction of an image for the woman writer in early-modern Britain will be examined here by means of recent theoretical approaches based on the relevance of literary biography to women's studies, a particularly suitable method of exploring issues of female agency in the world of letters. Matters such as education, religion, domestic and family life, or public affairs, as well as literary aspects, such as styles, topics, or genres cultivated, are given by Ballard in the biographies. Furthermore, through an analysis of all such information a portrait of a lady emerges, one which, on an immediate level, is a reflection of the political, cultural, social and literary assumptions of these women's times. Yet, as frequently occurs in texts dealing with past events, on a secondary level, Ballard's biographies of worthy women operate as a displaced arena where eighteenth-century concerns are negotiated; this is particularly so with regard to issues of nationalism and religion, at a time when Britishness and its peculiarities were being vindicated, as opposed to those of other European countries, especially France (Colley 2003). Ballard himself, in the preface to the *Memoirs*, stressed

the secondary role of Britain regarding the compilation of the writings of learned women and the necessity of repairing this state of affairs: "When it is considered how much has been done on this subject by several learned foreigners, we may justly be surprised at this neglect among the writers of this nation" (*MSL* 53).¹ Ballard's special focus on British ladies is relevant, since, as Harriet Guest points out, "representations of learned women in particular are important to the sense of national identity that took shape in the mid-century" (2000:49). Thus, he seems particularly concerned with offering the readers a high number of learned women, so as to compete with other countries and indeed to outnumber them, especially so in this period, when the education of women was considered a sign of cultural progress (Guest 2000:57). Consequently, as will be discussed below, education, as a proof of British superiority, will be a crucial element in Ballard's descriptions, and in many cases the education of these learned women is dwelt upon in great detail.

Although the lives of writers have always been attractive to readers, literary biography has not enjoyed a positive reception within literary studies since the end of the nineteenth century, in that from this moment, first with positivism and then formalism, the text itself became the central focus of literary research; indeed, this has continued more recently with the controversial notion of the death of the author (Dosse 2007:83; Backscheider 2001:177-78). However, the study of literary biography can lead to interesting insights within the realm of women's studies, since it allows for an examination of the discourse of the biographies of women writers and of the extent to which this might have affected the way in which women's literary works were read and received (McDowell 1993; Backscheider 2001; Batchelor 2012). Interestingly, Mary Hays, who years later (1803) would publish a female biographical dictionary addressed specifically to women readers (2013:3-4), indicated in the preface to her biography of Charlotte Smith (1801) that she lamented the double-edged nature of women writers' biography. She believed that this was so because their lives were under much more severe scrutiny than those of their male counterparts, and also because women's lives became part of public opinion, even more than their

¹ This and all subsequent references to Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies* will be abbreviated to *MSL*.

works, which resulted in women's writings being read in the light of the biographies of their authors (Batchelor 2012:181-82).

2. George Ballard and his *Memoirs*

Ballard was a tailor and an amateur antiquarian from Campden, Gloucestershire, who, in spite of his lack of a formal education, was in contact with other important English antiquarians, such as Thomas Hearne and Richard Graves. It was through them that he met Sarah Chapone and Mary Delaney, who along with other women from the bluestocking circle, such as Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vesey and Frances Boscawen, were well-known for organizing gatherings where mainly literary issues were discussed (Myers 1990:244). Moreover, as wealthy and well-connected women, they used their power and influence to aid other writers. Both Chapone and Delaney participated actively in Ballard's project and encouraged him, to the point that he dedicated the second part of his *Memoirs* to Mrs Delaney. But most importantly, Sarah Chapone introduced Ballard to Elizabeth Elstob, a notable Anglo-Saxon scholar and writer, who had the original idea of collecting the lives of learned women of the past and who had already gathered some information about women scholars from England and the Continent in a notebook (Perry 1985:21, 25; Clarke 2005:218). Ballard took up this project but restricted the scope solely to his own country, as he establishes in the very title of the text and justifies in the preface: "it is pretty certain that England has produced more women famous for literary accomplishments than any other nation in Europe" (*MSL* 53).

Ballard's text is also a part of the long tradition of female worthies, of the *querelle des femmes*, and of defences of women, intended to restore women to a significant role in history by means of exceptional and admirable examples (Spongberg 2005:115). The book was also part of the boom in the publishing of conduct books and didactic texts in this period, when female biographies were already functioning as such and were "central to the unofficial curriculum for middle-class women's education" (Wood 1998:124). He does not mention any specific readership in the preface, suggesting thus a general audience, although he does address his female readers in some of his biographical accounts, for example, in the biography of the poet Katherine Philips: "my female readers will

not be displeased with me [...]" (*MSL* 271).² In any case, Ballard's didactic rationale is clearly manifested from the very beginning, when he explains in the preface that one of his main purposes is "to inform us of those particulars in [the writers'] lives and manners which best deserve our imitation" (*MSL* 53). However, he does not select writers in general, but only learned women and writers, and includes a justification of this selection of the objects of his biographical venture, an almost compulsory feature of the genre (Dosse 2007:94; Backscheider 2001:39). Ballard, as already mentioned, declares that he desires "the preserving from the oblivion the memory" of those illustrious and learned ladies of the past and their commendable achievements (*MSL* 53).

As an antiquarian, Ballard's work lay mainly in collecting and gathering as much information as possible for each of the entries, including the use of sources such as manuscripts, archival records, letters, wills, sermons, elegies, and even inscriptions on tombstones and monuments. The result is sometimes quite a complete, cumulative biography, but on occasions the scarcity of materials is acknowledged by Ballard in the text, expressing himself in the first person, a technique that helps to persuade the reader of the accuracy of his sources and hence the veracity of his account (Ezell 1996:83). As for the method employed for presenting these materials, it is evident that Ballard was using the antiquarian system of extracting them from "real" historical sources, with items such as manuscripts, records, and architectural monuments thus used (Sweet 2004:xvi); however, the Enlightenment and the influence of the empirical method is also evident in the treatment of his sources in that he provides abundant bibliographical citations in his biographical entries.

The crucial role of Ballard's text and its subsequent reception has been noted by Margaret Ezell, who describes it as "the key source for information about women writers in the Renaissance and seventeenth century for almost all subsequent biographical dictionaries including women writers, [... and] for biographical notices in anthologies of women writers" (1993:78). Evidently, the use of these biographical materials, which involved the corporation

² In fact, the subscription list for Ballard's book included significantly 142 women among the 398 subscribers (Perry 1985:396-404).

of Ballard's own ideological point of view and didactic purpose, affected and sometimes shaped the way some of these women have subsequently been viewed. For example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century two biographical dictionaries compiled by two women writers were published: the six-volume *Female Biography* by Mary Hays (1803) and Mary Matilda Betham's *Biographical Dictionary of the Celebrated Women* (1804). In an analysis of the scope and content of the latter, the text has been described as a repetition of Ballard's traditional words and judgements (Bailey 2004:389-90). Similarly, in the case of Mary Hays's dictionary, it has been argued that as a consequence of her reliance on earlier sources, she abandoned her initial radical and liberal views and adopted a more conservative perspective and tone, more in accordance with a post-revolutionary atmosphere in Britain (Kelly 1993:234; Sponberg 2002:117).

3. The learned women

Alison Booth in her study of collective biographies maintains that this genre requires an additional rhetorical frame: "the definition of the category or principle of selection" (2004:10), which Ballard, like others presenting such compilations, reveals and explains in the preface. Firstly, he has decided to introduce the learned ladies in chronological order beginning "no earlier than the fourteenth century, because all that could well be collected of such as preceded that period has been already communicated to the world by Bishop Tanner" (*MSL* 54).³ His repertory thus runs from the fourteenth century and finishes in the year 1700, despite the fact that he has gathered "considerable collections" of "many other learned and ingenious women since the year 1700" (*MSL* 54).⁴ Ballard then moves on to explain another criterion of selection, or rather, of omission, this being the scarcity of materials gathered (*MSL* 54). However, such a principle is not always observed, considering the brevity of

³ Bishop Thomas Tanner was an antiquary and prelate, who had published *Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica* (1748), a collection of literary writers dating from before the seventeenth century, quoted by Ballard as one of his sources in some of the biographies.

⁴ This final date limit does not quite accommodate some of the final biographies, namely, Mary Astell, and especially, Constantia Grierson, whose literary career extended well into the eighteenth century.

some of the biographical accounts, consisting of one rather short paragraph, such as those of Lady Mary Howard, Catherine Tishem, Elizabeth Dancy, and Cecilia Heron.

In Ballard's "A Catalogue of Ladies famous for the Writings, or skill in the Learned Languages" (British Library Manuscript 4244, f.23r-v), it may be inferred that he had considered a larger venture, one which also included 34 new writers (Bigold 2013). Along with the chronological limit of 1700, other motives behind the absence of these women might have been lack of space and the difficulties experienced by Ballard in publishing the book (Perry 1985:40). Nevertheless, it is also important to emphasise Ballard's most significant contention in his *Memoirs*, which stemmed from a clear didactic purpose, that of offering a specific image of a woman writer to his readership, which, as will be analysed in this article, was decisive in the selection of which women were to be included.

4. The biographies

4.1. Education

As the central issue in the biographical compilation of learned ladies' portrayal, education is the axis around which the lives of these women are reconstructed. This aspect is related in the first instance to their family and social class. From the way that the ladies are identified in each entry, it can be observed that a large number of them are aristocrats and indeed appear with their title. Moreover, each biographical account usually starts by naming the lady's father and mother and their family lineage. The first paragraph of Lady Jane Gray's life well illustrates this:

Lady Jane Gray, the eldest daughter of Henry Gray, Marquis of Dorset and Duke of Suffolk, by Frances Brandon, eldest daughter of Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, by Mary, his wife, Queen Dowager to Louis XII of France and youngest daughter of king Henry VII. (MSL 128)

Parents from aristocratic and well-to-do families educated their children at home with tutors and instructors. Although women were not offered the same level of education as men, this text provides numerous instances of women who enjoyed a thorough and careful

education. The cases of three renowned households, the Mores, the Seymours and the Cookes, are notable in this regard.

As Ballard states in his biography of Thomas More's eldest daughter, the household of this illustrious sixteenth-century statesman and philosopher, was "reputed a little Academy" (*MSL* 86). More gave the same education to men and women and advocated as much (Smith 1996:22-23). Thus, his three daughters, Margaret Roper, Elizabeth Dancy, and Cecilia Heron, and even their kinswoman, Margaret Clement, were educated with extraordinary care, and some of the best intellectuals of that age, such as Dr. Clement, Mr. William Gonell, and Mr. Richard Hart, were procured as tutors (*MSL* 87). The importance accorded to the value of women's learning in the More household is illustrated by his own words in a Latin poem addressed to a friend, in which he advises him that when choosing a wife "to overlook wealth and beauty, and if he desires a happy life, to join himself with a woman of virtue and knowledge" (*MSL* 85).

Similarly, three other sisters, Lady Anne, Lady Margaret and Lady Jane Seymour – the only instance of more than one woman being included in the same entry – benefited from the presence of a preceptor at their home. Thanks to his tuition they were well-known as learned ladies in the sixteenth century (*MSL* 156). As Ballard himself declares, quoting the words of the scholar Dr. Wotton in *Reflections on Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694), "no age was so productive of learned women as the sixteenth century" (*MSL* 188), a claim which is underlined by the example of the daughters of another illustrious man of the age, Sir Anthony Cooke, himself tutor to King Edward VI, "who bestowed so liberal an education on his daughters that they became the wonders of the age and were sought in marriage" (*MSL* 189). Ballard includes the biographies of four daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke: Lady Burleigh, Lady Bacon, Lady Russel and Katherine Killigrew, but he also mentions in the entry on the latter one other possible daughter, Mrs. Rowlet (*MSL* 210). When the children of the household were boys and girls, girls on occasions would profit from the resident tutors and instructors whose main task was the education of the sons (Cliffe 1999:142-43), a situation which is also seen in the Honourable Dudleya North's biography (*MSL* 357). Thomas More's family might also be illustrative of this, in that they all lived together: his son and daughter-in-law, his three

daughters and their husbands, together with eleven grandchildren (MSL 86), all sharing the same education.

According to the information provided in these ladies' memoirs, it was considered, at least by a great part of the higher ranks of society, that educated women made better wives, and most importantly, better and more prepared mothers, given that they became agents in the education of others (Charlton 2002:17). This is noticeable in many of the biographical entries, in which the mother is the person in charge of the education of her daughters: Queen Mary (MSL 147), Margaret Cavendish (MSL 277), Lady Gethin (MSL 321), and Lady Halket (MSL 326). In some cases the portrayed woman herself is in charge of the education of her own children, such as Queen Catherine and her daughter Queen Mary (MSL 147), Margaret Roper and her daughter Mary Roper (MSL 167), Lady Bacon and her two sons, Anthony and Francis Bacon (MSL 195), and Elizabeth Burnet and her stepchildren (MSL 348). Cavendish's case, however, is slightly different and is the consequence of new tastes in society, since her education was based on fashionable accomplishments: needlework, dancing, music and French (MSL 277). This fact might also be among the causes of the negative critical reputation of Cavendish, which stressed her eccentricities and excess of imagination, and her lack of judgement (Salzman 2006:163-67).⁵

The great majority of the women portrayed in this text seem to have been educated at home under the supervision of their parents; yet girls could be sent to the royal court, "an old chivalric tradition," by which they learned "the appropriate mode of service to their elders, as well as acquire courtly manners and to participate in the religious pattern of the royal household" (Charlton 2002:9). Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle,

was made one of the maids of honour to Henrietta Maria, the Royal Consort to King Charles I. And when the Queen by her rebellious subjects was unhappily forced to leave England and go to her native country, she attended her thither. (MSL 277)

⁵ Emma Rees, however, views these features as a sort of strategy and claims that "far from being an impediment to her, the singularity in which she delighted proved [...] to be the very means by which she could make her voice and contentious opinions heard" (2003:2-3).

Years later, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, “was Maid of Honour to the Duchess of York, second wife to King James II” (MSL 371). Apart from the advantages of a better and more polished education, to live in the Court also increased the possibility of marrying another courtier, as both of these ladies did.

Just one of the learned ladies in the book attended a school, the poet Katherine Philips: “At eight years of age, she was removed to a school at Hackney and soon made great improvements under the care of Mrs. Salmon” (MSL 268).⁶ Interestingly, she did not belong to a wealthy aristocratic family but was the daughter of a merchant, and perhaps he could not afford a tutor at home.

Even though the greater part of the ladies in the *Memoirs* had an above-average education, according to what Ballard states in his text, they all devoted considerable time to learning and studying on their own, demonstrating an innate inclination for the improvement of their mind. Occasionally, as with Elizabeth Legge, they did so to the point of becoming blind, “which was thought to have been occasioned by much reading and writing by candlelight” (MSL 320). The most extreme case is that of the Honourable Mrs. Dudleya North, given that her “incessant as well as intense application to study at length brought her into a consumptive disorder, which put a period to her valuable life” (MSL 357). Thus, although Ballard without doubt promoted women’s learning, he also warns against the perils of excessive study, which was thought to cause mental and physical diseases and breakdowns (Pearson 1999:4).

Indeed, Ballard insists throughout his *Memoirs* on the necessity of women’s learning and in their right to it and capacity for it. A special case in point is the biography of Lady Pakington, which is almost entirely devoted to a vindication of this woman as the author of *The Whole Duty of a Man* (1658), a very influential devotional manual in the seventeenth century and still so in Ballard’s time (Perry 1985:32). Among the evidence he provides to support his thesis, Ballard declares that “this lady was every way accomplished in all kinds of literature and had the rare endowments of mind which were requisite for composing those admirable treatises,” adding that “That vulgar prejudice of the supposed incapacity of the female sex

⁶ It was a girls’ boarding school where she began to write poetry and where she met two members of her famous literary coterie (Salzman 2006:176-77).

is what these memoirs in general may possibly remove" (MSL 293-294). Similarly, in the life of Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, Ballard presents an analogous contention when he mentions the doubts of some scholars regarding her translations of psalms into English. He refutes such sceptical opinions by means of examples, including Lady Paula, Mrs. Anna Maria à Schurman, Mrs. Dudleya North, Mrs. Bland, and Mrs. Bury, who together were well skilled in numerous languages, including Hebrew, the original language of the Holy Scriptures (MSL 250-251).

Most importantly, some women included in the book themselves addressed the issue of women's education and Ballard accordingly takes advantage of this to incorporate into his text some of their assumptions and ideas on what was a hot topic of the age. Lady Damaris Masham published the treatise *Occasional Thoughts and Reference to a Virtuous or Christian Life* (1705), in which regarding women's instruction, she

thought a reformation highly necessary and very justly reprehends and reproaches persons of quality for so scandalously permitting their daughters to pass that part of their youth in which the mind is most ductile and susceptible of good impressions in a ridiculous circle of diversions which is generally thought the proper business of young ladies. (MSL 334)

She also encourages her own sex to practice extensive learning so as to educate their own children properly (MSL 336). In this particular aspect, Ballard mentions the influence of Locke's recommendations in Lady Masham's text (MSL 336). In fact, she owed much to this philosopher in many of her skills, as a consequence of a long and lasting friendship with him which began in epistolary form and ended in far more intimate circumstances: Locke would eventually move to the Masham's house, where she cared for him during his fatal illness (MSL 337).

Mary Astell – who curiously had a controversial disagreement with Lady Masham and Locke (Springborg 2002:17) –, offers a new agenda, in that she proposes the segregation of women from men, and their affiliation with other women in her well-known treatise *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest* (1694). As Ballard explains in his entry for Astell, after having observed and lamented the loss of education in those of her own sex, Astell designed "a sort of college for the education and

improvement of the female sex, and as a retreat for these ladies, who nauseated with the parade of the world, might here find a happy recess from the noise and hurry of it" (MSL 382-383). Moreover, this venture seemed so reasonable to one great lady that she was inclined to donate ten thousand pounds for the "noble design" (MSL 383).⁷

As selected members in a compilation of learned ladies, these women are obviously the quintessence of female knowledge in their age. With few exceptions, they all are well skilled in the basics of a classical education, that is, what Ballard calls learned languages. While this practice was more general during the sixteenth century, as shown by the biographies of the women of the More, Seymour and Cook families, in the seventeenth century the study of the French language became more fashionable, since vernacular translations rendered the classical languages unnecessary (Charlton 2002:13). Be that as it may, until the eighteenth century a classical education was considered indispensable for society's leaders, namely, the men from the upper classes. As women belonging to aristocratic families, the majority of the ladies portrayed here also engaged in the study of such disciplines and the lack of such knowledge was deemed a weakness. As noted above, Cavendish's case is a telling instance of this weakness:

Her mother was remarkably careful in the education of this and her other daughters, giving them all the polite accomplishments in which young ladies are generally instructed [...], it is to be lamented she had not the advantage of an acquaintance with the learned languages, which would have extended her knowledge, refined her genius and have been of infinite service to her in the many compositions and productions of her pen. (MSL 277)⁸

Along with a classical learning, these ladies were usually also versed in a variety of other fields. In the sixteenth century, Margaret Roper

⁷ Mary Astell dedicated the second part of her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697) to Ann of Denmark, the Princess of Wales and later Queen of Great Britain, in the hope that she would offer a significant amount of money to create such a place. The Princess, despite being initially inclined to support Astell's project, was advised not to do so by her counsellor, Bishop Gilbert Burnet, because the language used by Astell might suggest a Catholic nunnery, and she abandoned the idea of providing financial support for such a singular and exceptional residence for women (Astell 2002:127, n1).

⁸ Cavendish admitted her deficient education in her autobiography, *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life* (1656): "they [her skills] were rather for formalitie than benefit" (Bowerbank & Mendelson 2000:43).

“became a perfect mistress of the Greek and Latin tongues, and well acquainted with philosophy, astronomy, physick, arithmetic, logic, rhetoric and music” (*MSL* 87). A century later, Ballard, quoting one of his sources, explains about Anne Baynard:

As for learning, whether it be to know and understand natural causes and events, to know the courses of the sun, moon, and stars, the verities of the mathematics, the study of philosophy, the writings of the ancients, and that in their own proper language without the help of an interpreter: these and the like are the most noble accomplishments of a human soul, and accordingly do bring great delight and satisfaction along with them. These things she was not only conversant in, but mistress of, to a degree that very few of her sex ever arrive at. (*MSL* 313)

4.2. *Family*

Notwithstanding Ballard’s emphasis on these ladies’ education, their biographies also express the duties that, as daughters, wives and mothers, these women had to fulfil. Thus, many of them, along with much reading and studying, were also well skilled in more domestic tasks, such as needlework. This is even the case with Mary, Queen of Scotland, who “would be employed amongst her women in needle work” (*MSL* 171). Women were conceived of as inferior to men and had to comply with men’s authority. A significant and quite well-known instance of daughters’ obeisance to their parents is the case of Lady Jane Gray, since “by the infinite ambition of her father-in-law and the stupendous folly of her own father, she was violently pushed upon the precipice which proved fatal to her” (*MSL* 131).⁹

After being under the authority of their father, women usually married, and would thus become, in accordance with the legal principle of *coverture*, a kind of property of their husbands (Stretton 2002:41-44). According to Ballard’s *Memoirs*, these ladies dutifully performed their obligations as wives. Katherine Parr, King Henry VIII’s sixth wife, perceiving the disposition and character of her

⁹ As the great-granddaughter of Henry VII, and by means of her family’s scheming, Lady Jane Grey was proclaimed Queen after the death of her cousin, Edward VI, and reigned for nine days. However, the half-sisters of the deceased King recovered their right to succession and Lady Jane was imprisoned and sentenced to death (*MSL* 131-32).

husband, always acted with great humility and submission, acknowledging the inferiority of women with respect to men (*MSL* 115). Katherine Philips “proved a most excellent wife, not only by a strict observance of all conjugal duties, but in being highly serviceable to him [her husband] in affairs in which few wives are supposed capable of serving their husbands” and she also extricated him from certain financial difficulties (*MSL* 269). In the case of Margaret Cavendish, she equally “proved a most agreeable companion to the Marquis” and helped him to solve the pressing financial necessities caused by their exile (*MSL* 278). Finally, as mothers, as has been already noted, they also complied with what was expected from them, particularly in taking good care of the education of their children and thus providing society with excellent citizens.

4.3. *Religion*

Along with education and their family, religion was crucial in early-modern women’s lives. It was Christianity which provided the specific ideological basis for a patriarchal system, which in turn justified female subordination (Trill 1996:31-32). In his *Memoirs*, Ballard is particularly concerned with emphasising the ladies’ observation of their religious responsibilities and duties. They are all educated and learned women, but what really matters is their piety and virtue. Anne Killigrew, for instance, was eminent in the arts of poetry and painting, but “[t]hose engaging and polite accomplishments were the least of her perfections, for she crowned all with exemplary piety towards God and in due observance of the duties of religion” (*MSL* 304-305). These religious practices are described in more specific terms in some cases; thus, Margaret, Countess of Richmond and Derby’s piety “was so great that she would be at her devotion soon after five o’clock in the morning, and with the most ardent zeal went through all the religious offices,” which were “so long and frequent as occasioned her bodily indispositions” (*MSL* 65); Lady Halket “allotted five hours a day for devotion: from five to seven in the morning, from one in the afternoon to two, from six to seven, and from nine to ten” (*MSL* 327). This is a pattern which Ballard repeats with few alterations in almost every entry, constantly vindicating Protestantism against any heterodox practice. Ballard’s fervour in his apology of the Church of

England drives him to qualify any deviation from this faith as an error, as occurs in Susanna Hopton's entry, and it is not here the fault of the woman herself, but a consequence of the malicious scheme of a Romish priest (*MSL* 339). When the lady fortunately returns to the true faith, she is accordingly praised and described as an example of proper behaviour.

Indeed, Ballard is particularly harsh when condemning Catholicism, especially Catholic priests, who were eager to lead some of these ladies down the wrong religious path. Both Anne Askew and Lady Jane Gray were examined by Romish priests concerning their faith and on such topics of transubstantiation, reading the Scriptures, and masses, which are fully described in Ballard's text, using one of his most influential sources, John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church* (1563), known as *The Book of Martyrs*,¹⁰ a popular anti-Catholic compilation of persecutions against Protestants (Perry 1985:27). These persecutions acquire virulent and bloody traits during the life of Queen Mary I, given that her reign was marked by "so vast an effusion of Christian blood which was poured forth like water in most parts of the kingdom by that barbarous persecution of Protestants" (*MSL* 153).

As Ruth Perry explains, even though some of Ballard's friends warned him about the lies and partiality in Foxe's text, he knew the book almost by heart and its influence is more than obvious in his *Memoirs* (1985:27). Furthermore, the model of woman offered in Foxe's text, of someone patient and suffering, uncomplainingly enduring her lot and tenaciously defending her faith, is at the core of most of the biographies in Ballard's text. Indeed, this theme is granted a significant space in the deathbed scenes of a large number of ladies, who face the final moments of their worldly life not only with resignation and patience – e.g. Anne, Countess of Pembroke (*MSL* 288), Susanna Hopton (*MSL* 344) –, but with hope and happiness – e.g. Lady Gethin (*MSL* 322), Lady Masham (*MSL* 337). In this regard, the minute details with which the illness and death of Mary Astell are described, symbolizing Christian fortitude and acceptance, deserve further attention. She suffered breast cancer and

¹⁰ In Anne Askew's biography, Ballard clearly acknowledges that he has extracted most of the information from this source (*MSL* 103).

had one of her breasts removed, undergoing the operation “without the least struggling or resistance or even so much as giving a groan or a sigh, and showed the like patience and resignation throughout the whole cure” (MSL 391-92). She did not recover properly and while confined to bed, Astell

ordered her coffin and shroud to be made and brought to her bedside and there to remain in her view as a constant memento to her of her approaching fate, that her mind might not deviate or stray one moment from God, its most proper object. (MSL 392)

It is important to note that, when Ballard published his *Memoirs*, Britain was a confessional state, with Protestantism operating as a unifying bond against an essentially Catholic Europe (Colley 2003:18). However, the religious issue was anything but resolved during the eighteenth century, and indeed Catholicism was not the only threat. After the Toleration Act of 1689, in which some dissenter’s practices were tolerated, Ballard and many Britons were concerned about its potentially dangerous consequences. Again, in Mary Astell’s biography, Ballard expresses his anxiety about “the pernicious artifices of the sectaries” while commenting on one of Astell’s treatises, *Moderation Truly Stated; or a Review of a Late Pamphlet Entitled Moderation a Vertue, or, the Occasional Conformist Justify’d from the Imputation of Hypocrisy* (1704), in which she refutes “the doctrines of some, who pretending to be true sons thereof, were then introducing dangerous positions and tenets derogatory to the honour of our blessed Saviour, as lessening his divinity, etc.” (MSL 385).

4.4. Writings

From the very beginning, as the title of Ballard’s text clearly states, these *Memoirs* concentrate mainly on women celebrated for their writings together with their knowledge. Consequently, in nearly all cases their writings are recorded in the biographical entries. Given the enormous importance of religion and devotional practices in women’s lives, the majority of their compositions deal with this topic, which offered them “not only spiritual consolation but also an entry into the public domain” (Pacheco 2002:xix) in an accepted manner. Additionally, translation was the genre which women cultivated the most, on the one hand because it was a “safe” literary

venture for them, in that they were translating biblical and holy texts, and on the other because they were using translation to vernaculars as a service to their fellow citizens, especially women, who were not acquainted with the learned languages. The daughters of Thomas More (Margaret Roper, Elizabeth Dancy, Cecilia Heron) wrote translations, as did many other ladies, particularly during the sixteenth century: Margaret, Countess of Richmond and Derby; Mary, Countess of Arundel; Lady Joanna Lumley; Lady Mary Howard; the Seymour sisters; Lady Burleigh; Lady Bacon; Lady Russel and Queen Elizabeth; and later on, Mary, Countess of Pembroke, and Anne Wharton, among others.

The religious topic was also cultivated in many other compositions by these women, such as psalms, prayers, meditations, or proverbs. A telling instance is Lady Halket, of whom Ballard offers a catalogue of her writings, which encompasses 21 books and 30 shorter works, containing mainly meditations and reflections on the Scriptures (*MSL* 328-31). Nevertheless, when dealing with early-modern women's writings, there is a considerable overlap with diverse other genres of writing (Salzman 2006:17); in the case of Halket, the meditations also refer to public and private affairs which might have affected her life, such as the "return of the King, May 1660" (*MSL* 328), an important event for her, given that she was "a very great royalist and a great sufferer upon that account" (*MSL* 327). Thus, devotional writings and autobiography are intermingled in her writing.

Most autobiographical texts by women were not intended for publication, as with diaries, the writing of which was quite an extended practice as a means of self-examination among women "so that the errors of every day past might be avoided in those that were to follow" (*MSL* 349). Anne, Countess of Pembroke wrote some "abstracts of occurrences in her own life [...] in three volumes of the larger size" (*MSL* 288) and similarly, Elizabeth Bury "left behind her a large diary, which has been abridged and published by her beloved and mournful consort" (*MSL* 368). Notwithstanding their personal and private nature, it was a customary practice to publish the diaries of illustrious and learned women after their death with a didactic purpose. Similarly, personal writings such as letters were also widely published, as Ballard's biographies clearly show. The difference between public and private literary forms was not seen as

conspicuous at that time as it is nowadays, since it is a concept “based on a nineteenth-century commercial literary environment” (Ezell 1996:34). The most common practice was to circulate letters as a public form of address and even to entertain guests by reading aloud someone else’s letters, and in many cases to publish them afterwards.

In the seventeenth century a significant number of women emerged from radical religious movements and expressed their anxiety by means of prophetic and visionary texts (Salzman 2006:109). Also on religious matters, but far more radical in nature, were prophecies by women, and these too are present in Ballard’s text. Such works were composed in a specific context and dealt with specific issues, and as Ballard notes, Lady Eleanor Davies, the only representative of this genre, was almost wholly forgotten by the time the *Memoirs* were published (*MSL* 257). The controversial characteristics of prophecies and visions meant that they were subject to diverse opinions, from severe censure to high commendation, which is also reflected in Ballard’s entry here (*MSL* 262).

Regarding more traditional literary genres, poetry is undoubtedly the most cultivated among these learned ladies. From Mary, Queen of Scotland, and Queen Elizabeth, to Anne, Countess of Winchelsea, and Constantia Grierson, a great number of women wrote poems, usually along with other compositions in prose. Among the most reputed early-modern female poets is Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, who composed devotional poetry and whose talent led her to translate many psalms into English (*MSL* 250).

Katherine Phillips, the celebrated “Orinda,” composed several poems which were published without her knowledge or consent, an event which “proved so oppressive to her great modesty that it gave her a sever fit of illness” (*MSL* 269). Yet, as Elaine Hobby explains, Phillips constructed and refined through her correspondence a new persona, “Orinda,” which permitted her “to write and gain public acclaim while disavowing any desire to do either” (1998:76). Phillip’s letters have been read as a reflection of her personal feelings and ideas, when at that time letter-writing was regulated by conventions, which required that women should deny any interest in taking up the pen and, obviously, in publishing any of their writings (Hobby 1998:75-76). Ironically, this self-effacing image was to be a key factor

in the publication of her poems in several anthologies and collections over the following centuries. Ballard also offers a kind of critical reception of Philips's poetry in the voice of an anonymous author, who praises her for "her solid, masculine thoughts, in no feminine expression" (*MSL* 274), clearly considering the masculine style as the highest standard possible (Ezell 1996:75).

Another poet, Anne Killigrew, who interestingly wrote some verses in praise of Philips (*MSL* 309), excelled in "the purity and chastity of her compositions" (*MSL* 304) which were published soon after her death (*MSL* 308). In the case of Anne Finch, because her poems had not yet been published and as they were thus known to very few people, Ballard included a number of extracts (*MSL* 371-72).

As for drama, there are five playwrights in Ballard's *Memoirs*: Mary Sidney, Katherine Philips, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Chudleigh and Anne Finch. Their plays do not receive commentaries in general, yet in Cavendish's case, Ballard offers a catalogue of her plays (*MSL* 280-81) and the opinions of two scholars about her dramatic compositions:

Mr. Giles Jacob says she was the most voluminous dramatic writer of our female poets and that she had a great deal of wit and a more than ordinary propensity to dramatic poetry. And Mr. Langbain tells us that all the language and plots of her plays were her own, which is a commendation preferable to fame built on other people's foundation, and will very well atone for some faults in her numerous productions. (*MSL* 278)

Considering this catalogue of women dramatists, Margaret Ezell correctly notes that there are no commercial playwrights, such as Aphra Behn, Mary Pix or Susannah Centlivre, who would fall within Ballard's time frame (1996:85). In the area of prose fiction the prospect is even less encouraging, since, with the exception of Margaret Cavendish's narratives in *Nature's Picture, drawn by Fancie's Pencil, to the Life* (1656), there are no fiction writers represented in the book. This is a consequence of what Paul Salzman notes about prose fiction, namely that there are far fewer works by women than in other early-modern forms of writing, and a greater disparity in the number of male compared to female writers (2002:303). Nevertheless, Ballard could have included Lady Mary Wroth or Aphra Behn as writers of prose fiction.

5. Conclusion

As Margaret Ezell (1996:86-87) and Ruth Perry (1985:12) have noted, Ballard was interested in portraying in his *Memoirs* a specific type of woman: a learned lady and a writer, but also an observant Protestant and a self-sacrificing mother, wife and daughter. By means of this portrait, Ballard's role model was inspired by and closely connected to one of the greatest and lasting literary creation of the eighteenth century, the patient and selfless heroine of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (Ezell 1996:87), which was published a few years before Ballard's text, in 1748. Thus, the *Memoirs* fit perfectly into the context and times of its compilation. As is frequently the case, financial pressures cannot be underestimated, and this, combined with echoes of the literary heroine of the moment, suggests a necessity to comply with readers' tastes, which would in turn lead to more sales. In light of these questions, it is indeed easier to determine the reasons behind some of the compiler's decisions, namely, the omission of those women's biographies which were not consistent with a model of woman characterised particularly for her modesty. Thus, women who wrote for money were conspicuously overlooked. Additionally, as has been noted above, Ballard wanted to construct and convey a confident image of Britain at a difficult moment – one in which the country was practically always at war – by means of the women he described: a nation capable of surpassing others in the number of learned women, when they were increasingly viewed as those in charge of polishing and refining society.

Similarly to earlier female biographies, including hagiographies, catalogues and defences of women, in which women usually had to endure and overcome painful circumstances and were eulogised and admired precisely for their fortitude, the ladies examined in this collection are, on one level, chosen to inspire empathy with their situation as sufferers and accordingly, to facilitate the creation, using the term coined by Benedict Anderson (2006), of imagined communities of women, encompassing women from the past and the present – the portrayed ladies and the readers –, who share comparable circumstances derived from a gendered system of power (Kucich 2000:26). Yet on another level, motivated by the examples of the learned ladies of the past, eighteenth-century women would be allowed to take a more activist role in resisting men's authority, taking books and reading them, or even taking the pen and writing.

Thus women could step out of the reduced province imposed by their sex. However, according to Ballard and the eighteenth-century social conventions he reflects, which obviously did not welcome self-sufficient and independent women, with a considerable number of restrictions applied.

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