

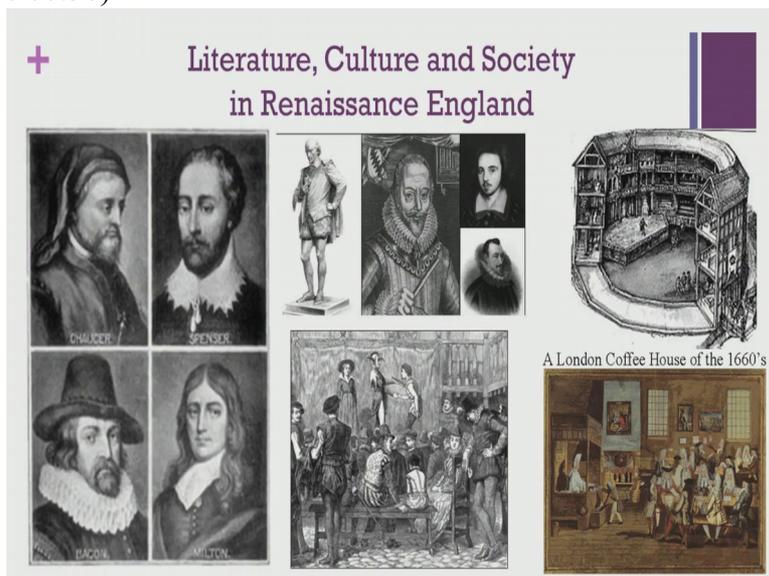
History of English Language and Literature
Professor Doctor Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
Lecture No 7c
Did Women Have a Renaissance?

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Hello everyone. Welcome to today's lecture titled Did Women Have a Renaissance? This is a special lecture as part of the NPTEL course History of English Language and Literature. We have been discussing extensively and vastly about the Renaissance writings and we have taken the look at

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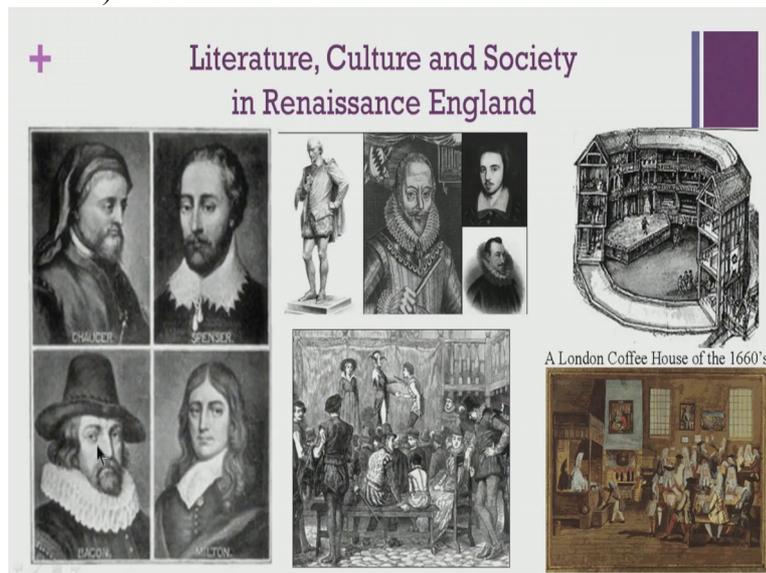
the literature, culture and society in Renaissance England. We also noted that this was the Golden Period which inaugurated a very different

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style of writing and very different cultural and, cultural and religious identity for Britain. We also noted that this was a significant, this was an era which marked a significant shift of tendencies in various things related to literature, writing about cultural society, religion. You talk about anything; this was perhaps a most decisive era for changing all of those things. But if we recall a discussion on Renaissance England, what are the major things that come to our mind? We think

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about whole lot of writers who were mostly men. We think about politicians, we think of the affairs of the state. We find that, we remember that it was mostly male space in spite of a female monarch ruling in between. There was also this socio-cultural spaces such as inns, taverns or theaters which are dominated by men as playwrights, as stage actors and even as audience. We also find the emergence of coffee houses also catering largely to a male public. So we begin to note that there is a conspicuous absence of women in throughout our discussion. We do not

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find any space being accorded by literary historians or theorists to the women writers especially during the canonical discussion of literary history which we had been having mostly in the previous sessions. So some earlier writers had begun to theorize this and give a proper reason for this, for the absence of these women from these literary and cultural landscapes.

It could be

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+ Possible reasons

- Low **literacy** rates
- Only available in **manuscript** – not published
- Circulated only within **familiar/familial circles**
- **Private, non-canonical forms** – eg: letters, diaries
- **A female author was more open to censure than her male counterpart**

because of the low literacy rates or maybe they did write but they were only available in manuscripts. They did not get their works published and hence it was not available for dissemination, for popular consumption. May be these manuscripts were circulated only within a certain familiar and perhaps even limited to a familial circle just meant for private consumption. And there is also a possibility that they only wrote non-canonical forms which excluded their writings from the canonical literary and critical surveys. May be they wrote only letters, diaries, private memoirs and journals. And also there was this possibility that female author on account of her gender was more open

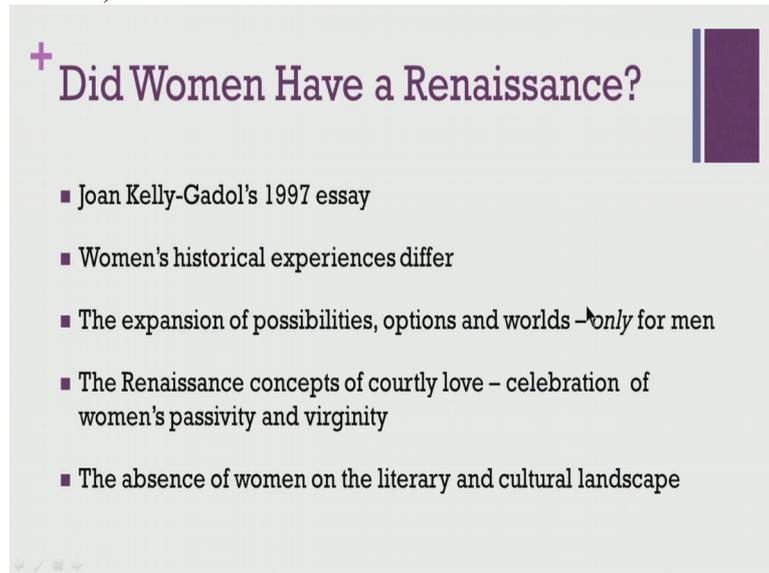
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to censorship and more open to, more prone to be a victim of lot of restrictions than her male counterpart.

So there could be these various reasons and this leads us to ask this question, did women actually have Renaissance in this age which was celebrated for its secularism, for its free expression, for its artistic excellence and all kinds of good things which were to mark the period. The title of this

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The slide features a title 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' in a purple serif font, preceded by a purple plus sign. To the right of the title is a vertical purple bar. Below the title is a list of five bullet points, each marked with a small purple square. The text is in a dark purple serif font. At the bottom left of the slide, there are small navigation icons.

- Joan Kelly-Gadol's 1997 essay
- Women's historical experiences differ
- The expansion of possibilities, options and worlds *→only* for men
- The Renaissance concepts of courtly love – celebration of women's passivity and virginity
- The absence of women on the literary and cultural landscape

lecture Did Women Have a Renaissance? is drawn from an essay with the same title by Joan Kelly Gadol which was published in 1997. This was a very influential research, this was a result of a very influential and significant research work in which Kelly Gadol argued that, argued that women's historical experiences differ radically from that of men. And she also argued of that the possibility, the expansion of possibilities of options in verse which were the hallmark of the Renaissance Period. These were open and available only for men. Women were completely excluded from this celebration of Renaissance which happened not just in Britain but also in other parts of Europe.

And for instance, if we talk about the Renaissance concept of courtly love it was much celebrated and also marks the inaugural moments in terms of literary and artistic expression. We note that in this, it was structured in such a way that it was only a celebration of women's passivity and virginity and it was always from the men's point of view excluding what kinds of

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emotions could have gone through the Renaissance

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+ Did Women Have a Renaissance?

- Joan Kelly-Gadol's 1997 essay
- Women's historical experiences differ
- The expansion of possibilities, options and worlds – *only* for men
- The Renaissance concepts of courtly love – celebration of women's passivity and virginity
- The absence of women on the literary and cultural landscape

women during that time.

And this absence of women on the literary and cultural landscape of Britain

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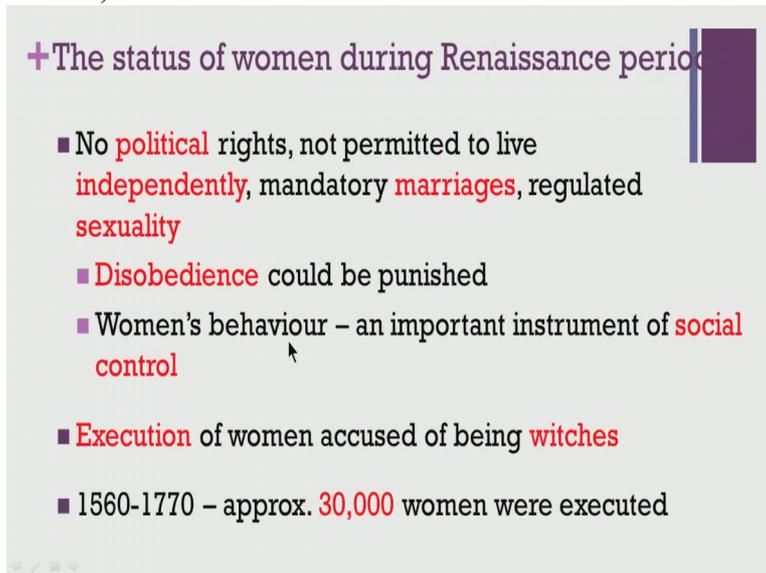
has been the interest of scholars, researchers and historians since

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then. It has led to the plethora of writings and the same, soon after we find a number of research works trying to unearth the forgotten and the lost narratives of the Renaissance time and also to foreground the woman's voices and the presence of women writers of those times.

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✦ The status of women during Renaissance period

- No **political** rights, not permitted to live **independently**, mandatory **marriages**, regulated **sexuality**
- **Disobedience** could be punished
- Women's behaviour – an important instrument of **social control**
- **Execution** of women accused of being **witches**
- 1560-1770 – approx. **30,000** women were executed

It is also important for us to know what the status of woman was during the Renaissance period. They obviously had no political rights and, this is in spite of a female monarch who ruled over them for quite some time. And they were not lived to, permitted to live independently.

The woman, a woman living on her own was quite a rare thing during those times. The marriages were considered as mandatory because the woman had to stay under either the control of her father or later under the control of her husband. The sexuality of women were also very heavily regulated and mediated. Any disobedience or any, any non-adherence to these principles could lead to severe kind of punishments including death. Woman's behavior during this time, we find being used as an important instrument of social control as well. It ceases to be a private matter and even the state and the society to a very large extent begins to interfere and take decisions on her behalf.

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If we look at the number of women who were executed

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✦ The status of women during Renaissance period

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during this time of Renaissance accusing them of being witches, it is quite alarming. It is said that from, between the time 1560 and 1770, approximately 30000 women were executed. Many of them were burnt at stake accusing them

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of being witches. So this was the status of women in an age which was celebrating all kinds of free and secular thinking and rational spirit.

So did women actually have a Renaissance or not?

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+ Women and education

- Access to education - only for women from **noble** families
– but denied university education
- Education meant preparing for **gender roles**
- The three virtues of women – **chastity, silence and obedience**
- “All the advances of Renaissance Italy, its protocapitalist economy, its states, and its humanistic culture, worked to mould the noblewoman into an aesthetic object: decorous, chaste and doubly dependent – on her husband as well as the prince”

What kind of educational facilities did women have during this time? Some of them had access to education and those were the women who were mostly from noble families. But even when we talk about education, it is not in the way that a man had access to education. Women in general, irrespective of whether they hailed from a noble family or from a wealthy family, they were completely denied of any access to university education. The little education that they received especially through private, that little education that they received

mostly through private tutors, it was only meant for preparing them for gender roles, for being a good daughter, for being a virtuous wife or being a good, or for being a very pious, pristine woman who would also contribute to the growth of the nation.

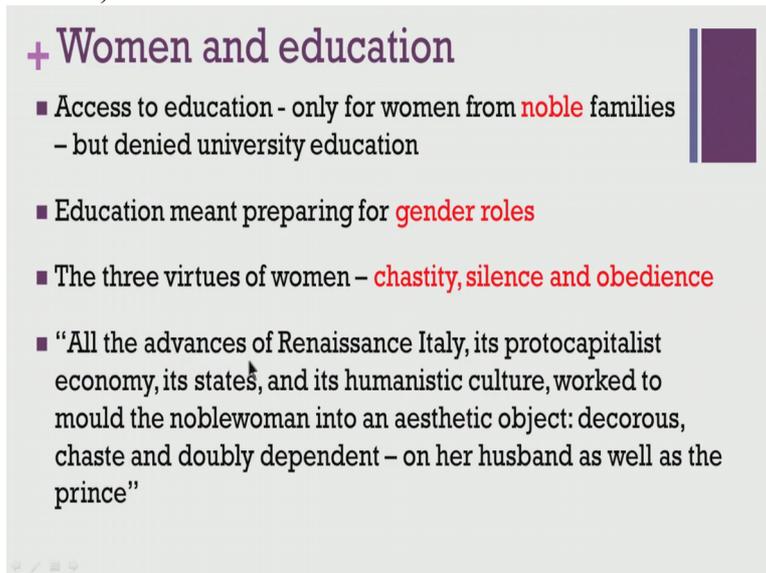
There were three virtues which were highlighted during this time and these were the virtues which they were supposed to build if they had received education, it was chastity, silence and obedience. Now we also begin to see that this is in stark contrast to the way

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the educated man was supposed to behave and he was behaving during that time. We do find that there were many articulations of men who were iconoclast, who were going against the grain of the times and also men getting into a lot of controversial political, religious and other kinds of discussion and other kinds of lifestyle during this period. Women were completely excluded from all of

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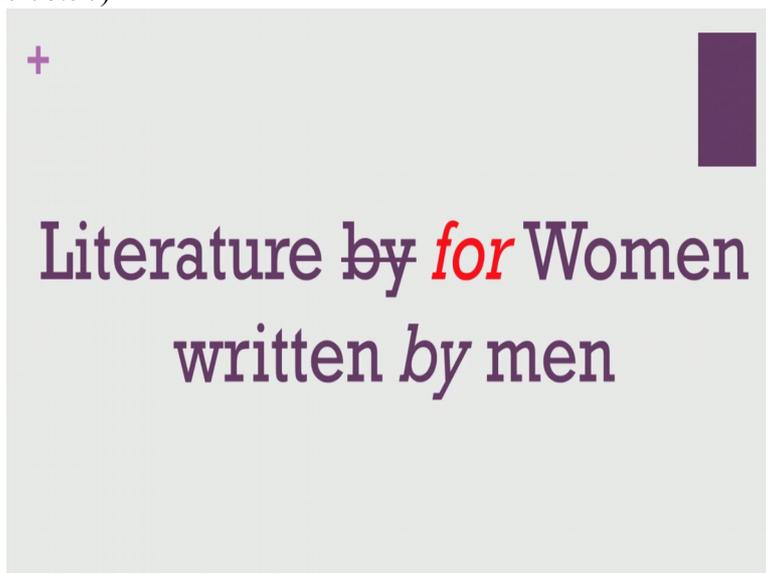
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these differing possibilities.

It is said about this period that all the advances of Renaissance Italy, its protocapitalistic economy, its states and its humanistic culture worked more than noble women into aesthetic object, decorous, chaste and doubly dependent on her husband as well as the Prince. So what about the women who were not part of the noble families? They only were used as workforce. They were just trained to do the domestic chores which would be useful for the family.

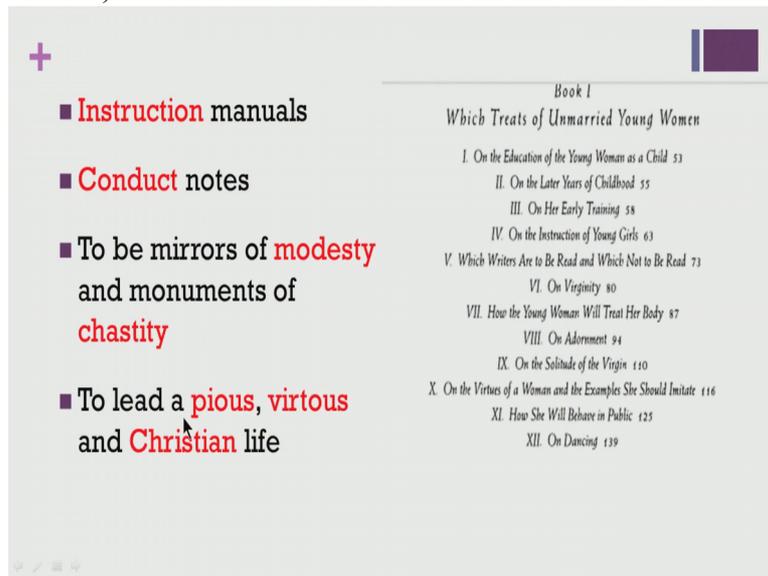
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**+ Literature ~~by~~ *for* Women
written *by* men**

What about literature that was available during that time? There was hardly any literature written by women. There was only the availability of literature for women and they were written by

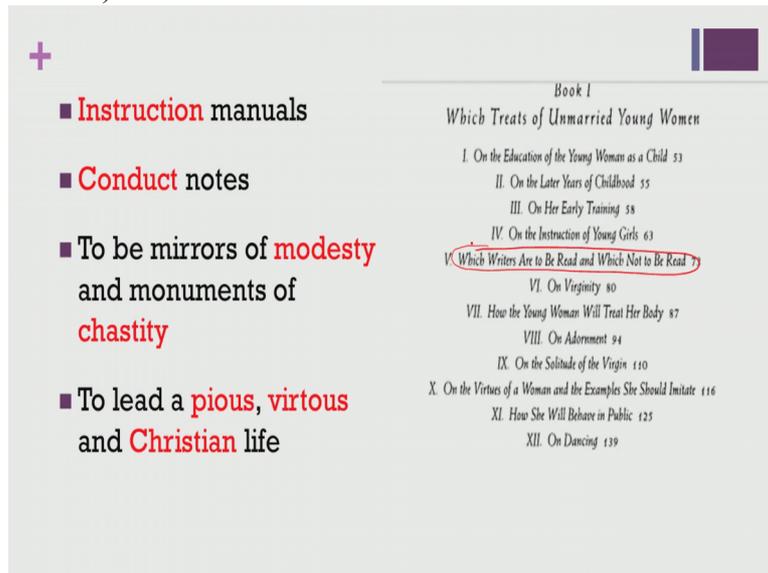
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men. For example there were a whole set of instruction manuals and conduct notes available for women which was also supposed to make them more pious, virtuous and enable to lead a Christian life. They were also taught to be mirrors of modesty and behave as monuments of chastity.

Here is an example from one of the instruction manual, one such instruction manual which was quite popular during those times. If you could see through the contents of this book which is titled, Which treats of unmarried young women. Here we find a lot of interesting instructions being given including which writers to be read and which not to be read. We also find

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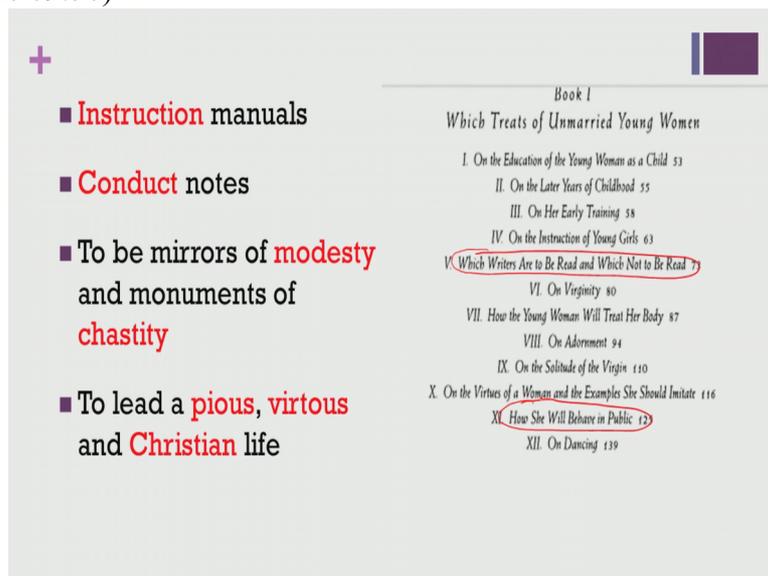
- **Instruction** manuals
- **Conduct** notes
- To be mirrors of **modesty** and monuments of **chastity**
- To lead a **pious, virtuous** and **Christian** life

Book I
Which Treats of Unmarried Young Women

- I. On the Education of the Young Woman as a Child 53
- II. On the Later Years of Childhood 55
- III. On Her Early Training 58
- IV. On the Instruction of Young Girls 63
- V. Which Writers Are to Be Read and Which Not to Be Read 71
- VI. On Virginity 80
- VII. How the Young Woman Will Treat Her Body 87
- VIII. On Adornment 94
- IX. On the Solitude of the Virgin 110
- X. On the Virtues of a Woman and the Examples She Should Imitate 116
- XI. How She Will Behave in Public 125
- XII. On Dancing 139

that there are lot of instructions being given on how a woman should behave in public.

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- **Instruction** manuals
- **Conduct** notes
- To be mirrors of **modesty** and monuments of **chastity**
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- XII. On Dancing 139

And even certain very common place things as dancing

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- **Instruction** manuals
- **Conduct** notes
- To be mirrors of **modesty** and monuments of **chastity**
- To lead a **pious, virtuous** and **Christian** life

Book I
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are seen on behavioral, seen as part of behavioral norms and moral codes. So this was a kind of very restrictive, stifling life that women in general led during the Renaissance times.

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Mary Sidney (Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke)

- Sir Philip Sidney's sister
- Listed with Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare
- **Antonius**
- Translation of Petrarch's "Triumph of Death"
- Lyric translation of the **Psalms**



On this note as part of this lecture, we seek to engage with a few women who have markedly different from the others and who also managed to do some bit of writing and some kind of personal articulation during their lifetime. Most of these works were unearthed only at a later point of time. Only few of them have found their way into the canonical literary history, criticism and other kinds of institutional forms of literature.

Mary Sidney was perhaps the best known

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among them. We also spoke briefly about her in the context of Sir Philip Sidney who was her brother and her claim to fame also rests on account of her being born into a such privileged family. She also had access to a lot of learning, writing. She also was part of a family who was fairly forthcoming and progressive during those days and she is also listed as one of the canonical writers alongside Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare. But her case is only an exception

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- + Mary Sidney (Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke)
- Sir Philip Sidney's sister
- Listed with Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare
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- Lyric translation of the *Psalms*



we begin to note. Her most important work was *Antonius* and she also had translated Petrarch's *Triumph of Death* and, but she is best known for her lyric translation of *Book of Psalms*.

But in spite of the illustrious kind of

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productions that she had during her lifetime we do not find the literary critic or literary historian to put in much time to talk about her just like they did with the other male writers. After Mary Sidney we do not find many women writers of notable reputation who also were recorded in literary histories. So now we begin to take a look at these forgotten women who also had left a footprint of theirs during the Renaissance times.

The first and most important of them is

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+ Anne Askew (1521-1546)

- Poet, **Protestant** – condemned to as a **heretic**
 - Thrown out of home by her Catholic husband
- the earliest known female poet – to write in English
- The first Englishwoman to demand a **divorce** – unsuccessfully, though
- Preached her **faith** in London
- May 1546 – arrested and cruelly tortured in the Tower of London
 - Hips, joints, knees and ankles dislocated
- June 1546 – convicted of heresy and condemned to be **burned at the stake**
- **Private prayers** – conformed to the role of the virtuous and learned woman – but **NOT allowed to express their religious calling in more public forms**



Anne Askew who lived from 1521 to 1546 and at least in some of these cases the dates of their birth and their death; it is also matter of conjecture because the actual documents were

not available. And Askew was a poet and more importantly, she was a Protestant even before England had completely turned into a Protestant. She was therefore also condemned as a heretic and even before that, her marriage also was quite a, quite a struggle for her. She was thrown out of her home by her Catholic husband for practicing Protestant faith.

She incidentally is the earliest known female poet of England who wrote in English. She is also the first woman to have demanded divorce, though unsuccessfully. She was not granted because that was not the way of those times. She was very brave in the sense that she preached her faith in London and for this she got arrested in May 1546 and she was cruelly tortured in the Tower of London to such an extent that there are accounts which prove that her hips, joints, knees and ankles were dislocated and there was quite a strange thing during those times. Because on the one hand, women were exhorted as a weaker sex and on the other hand, they were being subjected to the kind of torture even men perhaps could not withstand. By June 1546 we find her getting convicted of heresy for practicing a Protestant faith and she is also condemned to be burnt in the stake. This is only perhaps an irony that at later point of time England again goes back in time and

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tries to prosecute the people who were practicing the Catholic faith and also completely excludes the Catholic from all kind of offices including the throne. The other interesting ironical fact is that women on one hand were encouraged to say their private prayers because

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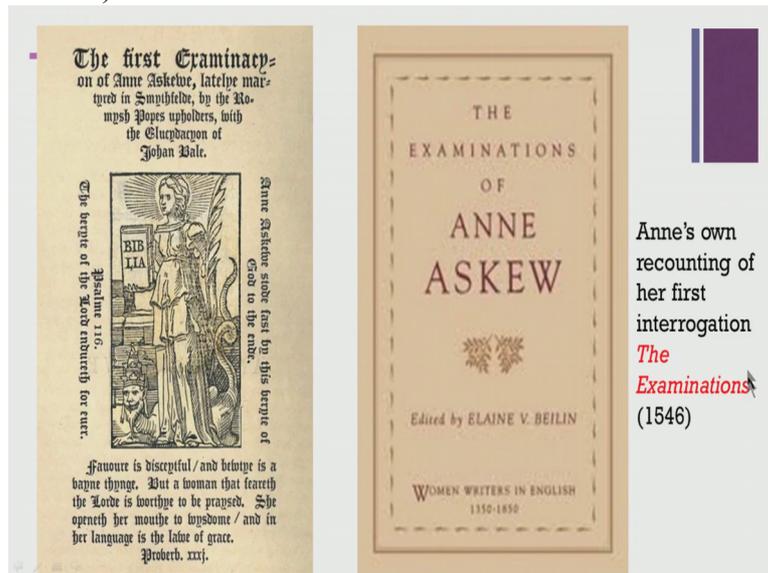
it let them to become astute, pious and Christian women but their role had to be conformed to the role of the virtuous and learned woman. They were not allowed to move even a little bit beyond. At the moment any one of them wanted to

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articulate their faith in public, it was seen as a taboo. It was even condemned as a heresy. So women in general were not allowed to respond to their religious calling in public at all and this was the case even during the high time of

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English Reformation. So her most important work is of very personal nature titled *The Examinations* and this was published in 1546. This is Anne's own recounting of her first interrogation which included a lot of mindless torture as well. Later in history, she is also, she has got known in history as a Protestant martyr and contemporary researchers have often unearthed a lot of writings about her and the Church is also credited a lot of importance to her on account of her martyrdom.

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+ Isabel Whitney

- **Secular** poetry – the first **professional** woman poet in England
- Did **not** hail from a **noble** family
- Middle class, meagre finances – left Cheshire for London
- *A Sweet Nosegay, Cop of a Letter* – talk about multiple-relationships across time
- Bold women-lovers – unlike the usual courteous, obedient, weak women
- **"Wyll and Testament"**

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Isabella Whitney was another female writer of those times. She wrote mostly secular poetry and she is also considered as the first professional woman poet in England. She incidentally did not hail from a noble family and in spite of that she managed to get a little bit of education. She belonged to the middle class and she lived on meager finances and she is said

to have left Cheshire for London in search of better, better fortunes. Her important works include *A Sweet Nosegay* and *Cop of a Letter*. In this she talks about multiple relationships across time. They were defying the conventions

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of those times in terms of gender, in terms of structure of relationships, in terms of emotions etc.

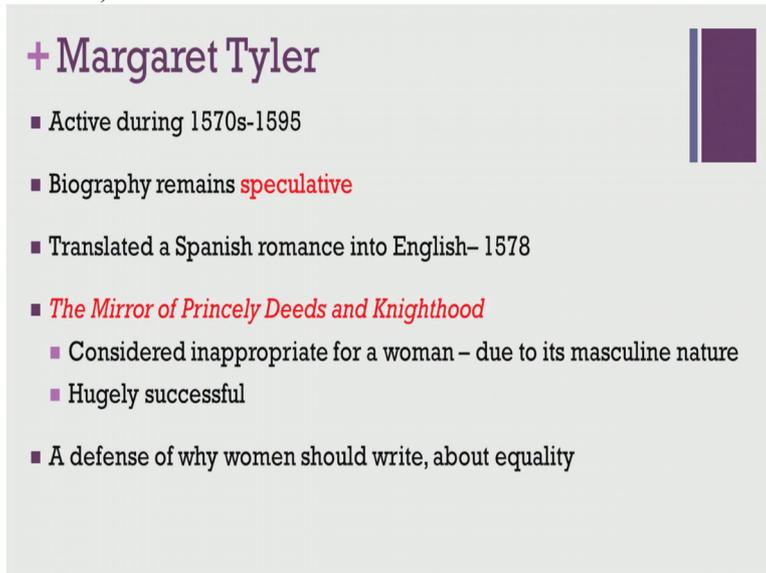
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+ Isabel Whitney

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- *A Sweet Nosegay, Cop of a Letter* – talk about multiple-relationships across time
- Bold women-lovers – unlike the usual courteous, obedient, weak women
- “Wyll and Testament”

She, in her work she also characterizes a very bold woman, characters as lovers. They were all so quite unlike the usual courtiers, obedient and weak women of those times, who were also said to be the more accepted form of woman characters during those times. Another important poem of hers which is more significant even in the contemporary is Will and Testament which is also analyzed for historical curiosity in the contemporary.

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A presentation slide with a light grey background and a purple vertical bar on the right. The title '+ Margaret Tyler' is in purple. Below it is a bulleted list of facts about her.

- Active during 1570s-1595
- Biography remains **speculative**
- Translated a Spanish romance into English- 1578
- ***The Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood***
 - Considered inappropriate for a woman – due to its masculine nature
 - Hugely successful
- A defense of why women should write, about equality

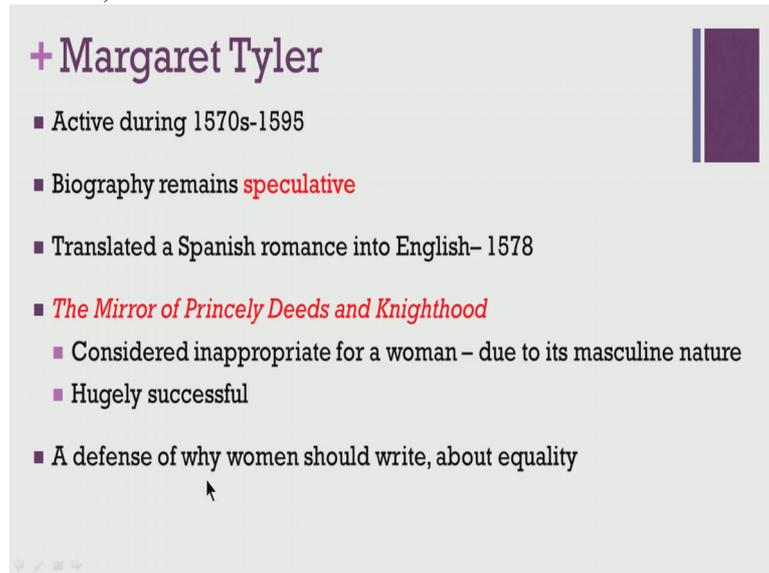
We know very little about Margaret Tyler except that her active years were from 1570 till 1595. Her actual date of birth or death remains unknown and her claim to fame was primarily the translation of a Spanish romance into England in 1578. It was titled The Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood. This work was considered quite inappropriate for a woman to undertake during that time. It was mostly because of its masculine nature. And it was considered that women were not supposed to engage in themes that were masculine or to employ the treatments which were more suited for a male

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audience or for a male writer. But nevertheless the translation was hugely successful. It is said that she was even commissioned for a, for the translation of the sequel of this particular work but she could not undertake it due to ill-health or reasons

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- Active during 1570s-1595
- Biography remains **speculative**
- Translated a Spanish romance into English- 1578
- *The Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood*
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hitherto unknown.

In her work she has also included a defense of why women should write and also about gender equality. And since her biography remains mostly speculative, it is also difficult to understand how she managed to learn Spanish because it was not taught formally during those times.

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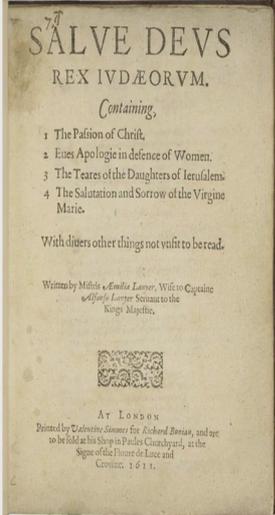


Only people from prosperous merchant families, they sought to learn Spanish because there was an ongoing trade with Spain during that time. So there is also the speculation that she belonged to a fairly well-to-do family where Spanish was also taught as one of the languages. Emilia Lanyer was another female

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+ Emilia Lanyer

- Asserted herself as a professional poet
- Single volume of poems – *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611)
- Earliest feminist works of British literature
- Her ideas of the genealogy of women
- Her early bid for patronage failed



poet who also asserted herself as a professional writer. Her single volume of poems was published in 1611 and her work is considered as the earliest feminist work of British literature. She had very radical ideas about producing a genealogy of women. Nevertheless during an age when

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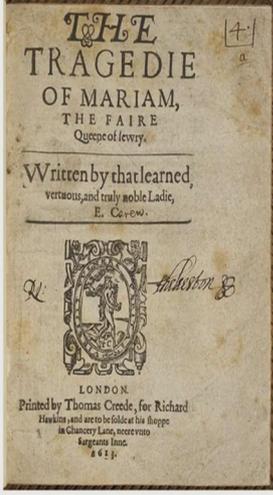
patrons were flourishing and no male writer had to struggle to get the patronage of nobles or other wealthy landlords, she had to struggle a lot. In fact many of her earlier bids for patronage failed and it was only much later that she managed to secure some kind of financial security.

Notably and quite predictably, there were a lot of women writers who hailed from noble families and who had a privileged access to education. Elizabeth

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Elizabeth Cary, Viscountess Falkland (1585-1639)

- Poet, translator, dramatist – a precocious child, many languages
- **Noble** birth – private instructors
- Poems – lost over time; But, evident in her plays
- **The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry** (1613) – the first English play to be written by a woman
- Discussed divorce, female agency, critique of patriarchal tyranny



Cary, Viscountess of Falkland was one of those. She was a poet, translator, dramatist many rolled into one. She was also a precocious child during her childhood. She knew many languages and displayed a lot of learning even from a very young age. She is said to have written her first poem even when she was a child. May be there were a lot of private instructors were employed; teach her art, literature and things which were important during those times. Her poems were largely lost over times. They were not preserved. But her inclination towards poetry is evident in most of her plays, the most important of which include *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry*, it was performed in 1630. This incidentally was also first English play to be written by a woman.

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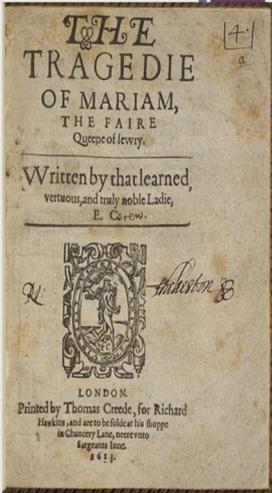


In her work, she discusses a lot of taboo subjects including divorce, female agency and she is also a

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✦ Elizabeth Cary, Viscountess Falkland (1585-1639)

- Poet, translator, dramatist – a precocious child, many languages
- **Noble** birth – private instructors
- Poems – lost over time; But, evident in her plays
- **The Tragedy of Mariam, the Fair Queen of Jewry** (1613) – the first English play to be written by a woman
- Discussed divorce, female agency, critique of patriarchal tyranny

The image shows the title page of the play 'The Tragedie of Mariam, the Faire Queene of Iewry'. The text is in a formal, early modern font. It includes the author's name 'Written by that learned, vertuous, and truly noble Ladie, E. Cary.' and the publisher information 'Printed by Thomas Creede, for Richard Hawkins, and are to be sold at his shoppe in Chancery Lane, neere unto Suttens Gate Lane. 1613.' There is a decorative woodcut emblem in the center.

vehement critic of patriarch tyranny.

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- *The History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II* – a **political** fable on historical events
- Centred on King Charles' attempts to dissolve the Parliament – in response to the demand to impeach the Duke of Buckingham
- Critiqued the idea of **favouritism** – how it can lead to disastrous outcomes

She also wrote a political fable on historical events. Writing about politics was not much encouraged for women and this, in that sense she makes a very unconventional entry into these, these hitherto untreaded areas. The work was titled *The History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II*. In this she also had commented on King Charles' attempt to dissolve the Parliament especially in response to the demand to impeach the Duke of Buckingham. So we also find her giving a sort of political commentary though it was mostly seen as the male space then. She also had critiqued the idea of favoritism and also displayed from many of her works how this could lead to disastrous outcomes for the nation.

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† **Lady Mary Wroth** (1587-1651/3)

- Belongs to a distinguished literary family – includes Sir Philip Sidney, Mary Sidney etc
 - **Privileged** upbringing and education
- *The Countesse of Mountgomeries Urania* – the first extant prose romance by an English woman – 1621
 - Controversial themes – gender
 - “Acting against the accepted ideals of the established patriarchy, calling her own moral character into question”

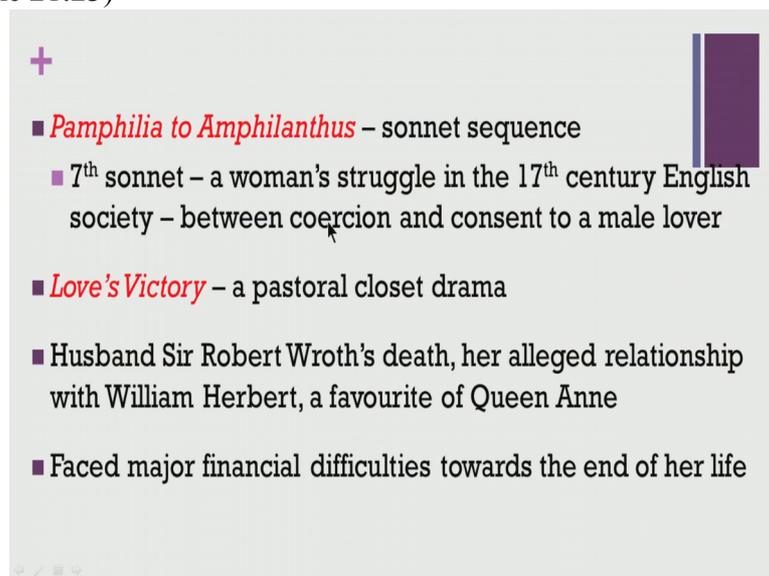


Lady Mary Wroth also belonged to a very privileged and distinguished literary family and Sir Philip Sidney, Mary Sidney etc were part of this family and in that sense she also had a very

privileged upbringing and education. Her most important work is *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*. This is also the first extant prose romance by an English woman. It also dealt with controversial themes such as gender. It is very interesting to know that even the mention of gender or any kind of gender equality was considered very controversial and the woman was always condemned for articulating these sort of common place ideas. It was said about her that by acting against the accepted ideals of established patriarchy she was calling her own moral character into question.

It is quite interesting to note that even during the Renaissance times when a man spoke about equality or when a man spoke about access to education, it was seen as a very secular and perhaps the most appropriate thing to do. But a similar kind of articulation from a woman only led to, only led to subjecting her own character questionable.

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- *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* – sonnet sequence
 - 7th sonnet – a woman's struggle in the 17th century English society – between coercion and consent to a male lover
- *Love's Victory* – a pastoral closet drama
- Husband Sir Robert Wroth's death, her alleged relationship with William Herbert, a favourite of Queen Anne
- Faced major financial difficulties towards the end of her life

The other important work of hers was *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. It was a sonnet sequence and in that sense she wrote a very different kind of sonnet. Especially the seventh sonnet is of supreme importance. It records the struggle of a woman in the seventeenth century England and here she also tries to draw attention to the struggle between coercion and consent to a male lover. So in that sense it is also a love sonnet written from the point of view of a woman whereas most of the sonnets were composed from the point of view of a Renaissance man who was pursuing a woman. Her pastoral closet drama was titled *Love's Victory*. Her personal life was also quite a struggle. Her husband Sir Robert Wroth dies quite early leaving her to a lot of misfortunes and after that there were these alleged relationship, there was this

alleged relationship that she had with William Herbert who is also a favorite of Queen Anne and this is said to have led to a lot of personal animosity and lot of struggles for her. And it is said she faced major financial difficulties towards the end of her life and she also died in obscurity.

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+ Women's voices in the city

- Anne Askew to Mary Wroth – about **five** generations
- A **female monarch** – did not change the ground rules much
- **Christine di Pizan's** vision of women building their city in *The Book of the City of Ladies* - a wish fulfilment?



Summing up the availability and the possibility of women's voices in the city during the Renaissance times, it is very important and alarming also to note that when we survey a few writings from Anne Askew to Mary Wroth, that is about five generations of writers during the Renaissance time, we have only a handful of women writers to talk about where as there are hundreds of male writers, male artists, male politicians and all kinds of eminent personalities

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that have traversed through the Renaissance times only in England.

And this is quite an alarming kind of paucity but this is even more interesting that in spite of female monarch ruling over England at least for a brief time, this does not change the ground rules much for the ordinary people.

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+ Women's voices in the city

- Anne Askew to Mary Wroth – about **five** generations
- A **female monarch** – did not change the ground rules much
- **Christine di Pizan's** vision of women building their city in *The Book of the City of Ladies* - a wish fulfilment?



The image shows the cover of the book 'The Book of the City of Ladies' by Christine de Pizan. The cover features a medieval-style illustration of a woman in a blue dress and a man in a red and white robe. The title 'THE BOOK OF THE CITY OF LADIES' is written in red and black text, with the author's name 'Christine de Pizan' below it.

And

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one of the French women writers that we took a look at during the, during our discussion of the Medieval times, it is important to recall her at this

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+ Women's voices in the city

- Anne Askew to Mary Wroth – about **five** generations
- A **female monarch** – did not change the ground rules much
- **Christine di Pizan's** vision of women building their city in *The Book of the City of Ladies* - a wish fulfilment?



point. Christine de Pizan in her work, The Book of the City of Ladies, she shared a vision of the women building their city. So this was a celebrated work in France and also the translations were hugely popular even in, even in England. So the Renaissance times at least partially perhaps they began to see a wish fulfillment of de Pizan who dreamt of a time when women will begin to build

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a city in terms of its literature, its culture and its general value system. So with this positive note we try to wind up this lecture also drawing attention to various possibilities that exist when we begin to look outside conventional pre-histories and conventional literary critical practices. Thank you for listening and we look forward to seeing you in the next session.