Review Essay: Hanson, Elizabeth. *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England*

Louise Schleiner

*Washington State University*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, History Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Renaissance Studies Commons

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol19/iss1/16

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture series aims to present New Historicism study that is informed by psychoanalytical, feminist, Marxist, and post-structuralist work. In these two books—Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England, and Writing, Gender and State in Early Modern England: Identity Formation and the Female Subject—such perspectives are represented indirectly and in certain brief theoretical passages (e.g., Matchinske, 9-17 and attendant notes, drawing on Paul Smith’s Discerning the Subject), while the rest of the theoretical discussion is still Foucauldian. The two writers do engage profitably in the attempt lately noted as Michel Foucault’s own in his late interviews, to make self-reflexivity or subject and selfhood a fourth dimension added to his previous triad of cultural constructions, namely of knowledge, truth, and power (see Deborah Cook, The Subject Finds a Voice: Foucault’s Turn toward Subjectivity). The primary method is still thick description of sorts (now deployed in diachronic arguments spanning several decades of material), which generates much historical detail, sometimes at the price of wheel-spinning repetition and restating of what might have seemed obvious, but newly noted in the terms being considered.

Commentators have said before, for instance, that Anne Askew’s martyrdom was not pure religious commitment systematically punished, that she was instead caught in factional battling between Queen Katherine Parr and her prelate-rivals for the king’s policy consent. Matchinske states: “The debate over discursive interpretation operated within a multitude of cultural registers—religious, economic, punitive, personal—all of them, to some extent, contradictory. Accordingly, while Askew’s accounts of her trial are no doubt religiously inspired and thus instrumental [in the Reformed cause], her involvement need not have been motivated solely to that end. For Askew, . . . interpretive and performative power may have . . . fulfilled additional subjective desires” (34). Matchinske has reason for putting things this way: she wants to bring agentic subjectivity into Foucauldian study, to break out of the subversion-containment bind. “Resistance . . . is never pure,” she adds, “in terms either of its motivations or its outcomes. . . . This messiness is partly responsible for a general tendency to discount agency all together [sic]. Because resistance can never be traced back to a single source, because it never
succeeds in isolation or offers results that are absolute, mapping resistance in terms of straight lines, altruistic motives, or single-issue politics is impossible. ... Resistances are never simply 'contained'" (49-50).

Hanson also aims to “offer investigations toward a history of the subject” and to further Foucault’s project of “denaturalizing the relations between the subject and the world” prevailing in the West since the eighteenth century. She notes that while in common law nemo tenetur seipsum prodere originally meant that the crown could question someone only through a proper indictment, it gradually was expanded into a right not to incriminate oneself. This happened against the backdrop of Elizabethan judicial torture to get secrets: “discovery,” a practice that created “the subject” as a masculine place of hidden inwardness. As the example of Jesuit equivocation (mental reservation about one’s untrue statements) indicates, the Catholic threat to Elizabeth’s rule was a major spur to the use of interrogatory torture, and in turn to a sense of the subject as private and alarmingly unknowable. Hanson qualifies her appeal to Foucault’s account of a broad epistemic shift in the early seventeenth century by saying that it is not “the way things were” but “an heuristic device” showing that “epistemic formations are ... complex reweavings of conceptual resources rather than mental continents adrift from one another in time” (13). Yes, she maintains, there had been Augustinian inwardness for a thousand years, but it was not produced by the pressures of the bureaucratic state to construct and control the subject as male, private, secret, threatening to the state while at the same time being an agent of the state, paradoxically part of its own chain of command. Such is “the subject” of this book.

Hanson argues that “the epistemic anxiety driving discovery” of secrets, including judicial torture (not traditionally part of English jurisprudence), comes from a “play of differentiation and identification between hierarchically related men” (20): the discoverer and the discovered occupy reversible positions, existing as each other’s “confrère” to produce a self-reflexive subject inherently anxious about his or her own doubleness. Hanson’s Shakespeare chapter argues that Measure for Measure and Othello present wives’ bodies that “signify metadramatically” as vehicles through which relations between men construct this male “subject of the state” (53). Angelo is a dark shadow of the duke (“ourselves in Vienna”), Iago of Othello (“in following him I follow but myself”) (77). Women cannot be subjects in this construction: even though Desdemona began as a potential “soul to be known” (83) and Isabella with the potential to become a thawed, self-knowing female double of Angelo, they are instead sacrificed to “a sex-gender system that makes women a means through which men relate to one another”; and “the work the plays do
is to place the discovery of the subject” in this context (86). Thus Desdemona must die in baffled silence, and Isabella can have no voice in the end, being led off as the duke’s wife-trophy. He has made the same bargain Angelo attempted, her body for Claudio’s life.

The other chapters treat further problematics of “the discovering and discovered subject” (123). Chapter four on Thomas Harman’s and other cony-catching pamphlets portrays the scam-revealing commentators on shrewd thieves (from the displaced rural poor) as themselves professor–deceivers–plagiarists and self-professed wits making money from their exposés of canting rogues, sometimes while “folding their practices back into” an older ethos of country squires’ hospitality and neighborliness. This too creates a “discovering” male subject who is at the same time self-discovered. The final chapter on Bacon covers more familiar ground, the “discourse of discovery” (122), propounded by a discursive subject who however is seen not just as male conqueror of a female “nature.” Rather he is “a subject who marks a rupture with all previous discourse” and “makes a primary emptiness: he that knows least [and is therefore] fittest to ask questions’” (122; New Atlantis, 221).

Hanson makes a useful contribution to cultural materialist study by further naturalizing concepts about subjectivity drawn unobtrusively from cultural semiotics (as Catherine Belsey began doing a decade earlier in The Subject of Tragedy): (1) “the subject” is viewed as a “site” within particular discourses, to be characterized as such; (2) discourse phenomena are seen as gendered in certain ways (91 and elsewhere); (3) each text is considered to have its own “semiotics” (i.e., its particular semantic universe, 69, 74, and 82); (4) the Lacanian transcendental subject as psychic/linguistic element of a discourse formation’s “subject position” is noted as a linguistic place-marker in discourses (in the sense of the linguist Benveniste, 22); and (5) the subject position can also be described as an “enunciating subject” (124), which begins to enable analysis that is textually as well as culturally sophisticated.

Matchinske’s argument is somewhat less theorized and more linear and chronological than Hanson’s, focusing almost entirely on texts representing four women: Askew’s Examinacions of 1546, the account of the Catholic martyr Margaret Clitherow written by her confessor John Mush (1586), the pseudonymous reply (1617) to the woman-hater Joseph Swetnam by “Esther Sowernam,” and the prophetic writings of the “ever so mad” Lady Eleanor Davies before and during the Civil War. Matchinske like Hanson aims to trace “the intersections between subject and state,” but she will do so in terms of women’s subjectivity, charting “a discursive shift from early sixteenth-
century understandings of private conscience as individually generated and spiritually motivated, to civil-war perceptions of interiority as state-inscribed and gender inflected—a site of civil and sexual invigilation and control” (5).

The witty evasions and rhetorical coups of Askew in her *Examinations*, as she plays cat and mouse with the interrogators who try to trap her into posing the blasphemous “mouse” argument (that if the host is Christ, then a mouse eating it would also “receive” Him)—these Matchinske reads as Askew’s assertion of, in equal parts, agentive private female subjectivity, religious conviction, and a proud intellectuality of a gentlewoman separated from her provincial husband. (It may be worth noting that Askew in her second or Other *Examinacion* after torture, realizing she will be executed, is more blunt and fearlessly declarative than in her first one, though this point also could fit Matchinske’s argument.) Askew has defined this subject position by having her marriage annulled and coming to London to profess reformist biblical interpretation as a “gospeller” and an influential thinker in the queen’s circle. Matchinske stresses the very different tone and textual subjectivity in Askew’s own low-keyed, rhetorically shrewd account, as opposed to the monolithic railing rhetoric of the polemicist John Bale, who published her text with his commentary abroad. For all that, the Henrician ecclesiastical apparatus executed her; hers is not a subjectivity “formed” by the state in the way that later women’s inwardness will be: Askew and others experience it as of “private” origin.

Matchinske reads Margaret Clitherow—pressed to death for harboring priests and refusing to enter a plea to the charges against her—as representing another step on the way to a later mode of subjectivity, because her case is part of the fear of Catholics in the 1580s, and this time the charge is not heresy but treason. One might have expected some treatment of the Edmund Campion mission here, but Matchinske is out to talk about the secretive Catholic household as a breeder of special female subjectivity, where wives were oddly freer than husbands because the latter were forced by fines and other punishments to be conforming. Clitherow “speaks” only at second hand through the priest who writes of her sayings and actions, yet like Askew, in her “active voicelessness” (70), she shows a sense of humor or at least irony before her torment began: according to John Mush, “her hat before she died she sent to her husband, in sign of her loving duty to him as her head” (“Life,” 432). Matchinske tries a bold experiment in imaginative reconstruction of a voice: in an imaginary anecdote, she portrays herself finding a fictive letter in Yorkshire dialect from Clitherow to her daughter, a nun in Flanders, interleaved in a water-marked Psalter. The letter is moving and well done,
and I for one like this kind of innovative tactic for “hearing” a vanished woman’s voice. (We might wish, though, that this section had been clearly marked off, with its own subtitle, and perhaps the whole of it, not just the putative letter, in a different typeface; readers often skim scholarly books glancingly, which may mean that soon we will read in student essays of an extant letter from Margaret Clitherow to her daughter.)

Matchinske’s studies of “Ester Sowernam” (along with two further texts involving mentions of women as “neither maid, wife, nor widow” in Shakespeare and the anonymous Swetnam the Woman Hater play of 1620) and of Lady Eleanor Davies (wife of the poet John) may not offer such moving details. But Matchinske marshals good evidence for her thesis about a major shift in English womanly identity through the reigns of James and Charles: domestically defined women of the “middling ranks” (as polemically celebrated by Sowernam) become upholders of their husbands’ reputations and morality, and indeed take on the role of confessor in the household shrine to which they become confined, through making a tradeoff that Matchinske laments. For financial security through better-defined marriage arrangements, the adamantly chaste woman is encoded as victim and paragon “without agency,” sexuality, or pleasure (110). The final chapter sees Lady Eleanor Davies’s prophetic writing as a kind of cas limite for this new wifely subjectivity, tested in the furnace of the parliamentary wars. Study of Davies sharpens our perception of its character by revealing a woman who in a sense seemed to defy its defined subject position by alienating both first and second husbands and constantly threatening prominent men with her (usually accurate) prophecies of their deaths. Theorizing the womanly subject position of moralist and Davies’s extreme of it in terms of Foucault’s “dividing practices” or partage (a regulatory split between affirmation of the private and of the national is internalized), Matchinske studies Davies’s syntactically bizarre and self-celebrating prose tellingly, to say that in Davies “contradictory female subject and state regulation is [sic] literalized in an unavoidable doubling of expectations and requirements: her writings construct a subject status that can never be fulfilled” (132). Study of Sowernam and Davies reveals “a culture that is beginning to recognize women as moral guardians and educators,” specifically “within the secure confines of a patriarchal household” (153). This is not a radical thesis, but it is pursued here quite originally to illuminate the legal dimensions of the Swetnam controversy and the unique subjectivity of Davies’s writings. There were many other women writers of the time whose evident subjectivity would not fit so well into Matchinske’s straight line of development from Askew to Sowernam, but she says as much in her
conclusion and calls for more studies of female “state and subject” for the period.

The two books, appearing in 1998, do not represent engagement with much material published after 1993, so presumably they have been waiting awhile to appear. Still, each presents a thesis well worth considering, and they complement each other admirably. Hanson argues for a central strain of early modern English male subjectivity, emerging from increasingly bureaucratic state formation that requires a new kind of interiority—through-secrecy in men who become at once agents and potential torture victims of the state. Matchinske tracks a strain of emerging female subjectivity from the Reformation to the Civil War.

Louise Schleiner
Washington State University


Women in Early Modern England fills an important void in early modern studies today by providing a closely researched, extensive history of early modern English women. Rather than presenting a single overarching argument, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford seek to explain what women’s experience of life and the world was in early modern England. As a whole, the book stands as a convincing argument that women’s experiences were different enough from men’s that they need to be studied and understood in more depth; and this book makes an important and ambitious contribution to that study. Mendelson and Crawford begin by arguing for a history of women rather than woman, “not as a simple linear description of female behavior, but as an intricate process of interactions” (2). They explain these processes of interactions by organizing the book around intersecting categories based primarily on life stages and social status. While their work is aimed at scholars of history, literary scholars will find it useful and illuminating, and a pleasure to read as well. The abundance of detailed explanation and information makes this an invaluable addition to the study of early modern women.

After explaining some of the basic contexts for understanding discourses about women in early modern England, Mendelson and Crawford follow with chapters on life stages, female culture, work and economics, and