

Hello and welcome back to Day 4. I hope you're learning a lot about the variety of women's roles in Tudor England ranging from that of noble lady, to mystic and prophetess, to entrepreneur. Today we're going to look at a creative woman who is considered to be the first female professional writer in England.

A lot of times people want to talk about these women in terms of them being feminists or not. Like, "was Anne Boleyn a feminist?" That's such a difficult question because we are asking it from a post-Enlightenment, post-women's rights sort of perspective. These women had no context of even considering that women were constantly told that they were not the equal to men in every sense of the word. This wasn't a case of, "oh, I should have equal rights." This was a case of, "I am not an equal human being."

There were obviously people who took issue with that from time to time, but it would be like us thinking about whether chipmunks should have equal rights. Like, you probably shouldn't test cosmetics on them, but they aren't ... human? Would a chipmunk even think that? That's kind of what it would have been like for women, thinking about having equal rights.

But there were obviously women who pushed the envelope, and we've talked about some of them this week. They were able to claim a different sort of power than the hard political or military power that was the realm of men. They sometimes used this power to make critiques of the system, like Elizabeth Barton with her prophecies.

The woman we're talking about today is a poet, and the first woman professional writer in England. Also, on the website below I have links to some readings of her poems, and you really should check them out. They're fantastic to hear.

Isabella Whitney was from Cheshire, but lived a lot of her time in London and was born sometime around 1540. She was also the sister of a Geoffrey Whitney, who was also an

author, and wrote his most famous work in 1586. In fact, it's ironic that it's through Geoffrey that we know most of our information about Isabella.

She was pioneering not just because she was a woman, but also because at the time, literature was geared to devotional literature, and women were allowed to translate men's work, but she wrote poetry designed to please the public. In short, she wrote fun secular poems that were designed to entertain.

Like with Katherine Fenkyll, there isn't a lot that's known about her because she wasn't noble. In her poetry she described herself as a servant who was out of work - basically she was down on her luck, describing herself as "whole in body, and in mind, but very weak in purse." But she also wrote poetry that incorporated London, so she likely lived there. She says that she became a writer because she was out of work, and also since she's single. "Had I a husband, or a house, / and all that longs thereto / My self could frame about to rouse / as other women do: / But till some household cares me tie, / My books and pen I will apply."

She published two anthologies of poetry, *The Copy of a Letter lately written in meeter, by a yonge Gentilwoman: to her unconstant lover* (1566–67), and *A Sweet Nosgay* (1573), both published in London by the printer Richard Jones.

The first work is about love - specifically complaints about love. Two have a female speaker, and the other two a male. They seem to be complaints about infidelity, and a warning to women to resist men coming up and hitting on them in clubs - male flattery. One is titled "*Admonition by the Author, to All Young Gentlewomen and to All Other Maids in General to Beware of Men's Flattery.*"

"*The Copy of a Letter*" is a response by a young woman of spirit to a former lover who, she has learned, has married another woman - this reminds me of the Alanis Morissette song circa 1995 that was so popular. Her complaint may be imaginative rather than literal, for the statement by "The Printer to the Reader" says that *The Copy of a Letter* is "both false and also true." She writes simply, using simple language, and common sense, and realistic points of view.

In her Admonition, Whitney talks about unfaithful men as if it was a sport. She talks about the many betrayals of women by men in antiquity, “she likens an unlucky woman to an unwary fish caught on a hook.” Whitney's jocose tone renders these comments sporting rather than plaintive, and the reader senses that the situation is under control. All the pieces in the anthology express the hard-won wisdom that could be expected of a relatively free literary spirit.

She is most famous for *The Will and Testament* which is basically a will that she leaves to London. "*The Will and Testament*," written because Whitney must leave London as a result of being so down on her luck. She starts the statement that "the author (though loath to leave the city) upon her friends' procurement, is constrained to depart, wherefore she faineth as she would die and maketh her will and testament, as followeth."

This poem brings to life contemporary London.

There are "brave buildings rare," "boots, shoes or pantables," "handsome men," "proper girls," "coggers, and some honest men." It's vivid, and makes you feel like you're walking down the street.

The city, she writes in a preamble to her Will, "never yet, woldst credit geve" nor "help wold finde, / to ease me in distress," and yet, in the spirit of forgiveness and witty one-upmanship, she makes London her "sole executor." What is more, she makes London the unrivaled darling of her poem: she addresses the city as one might address a cruel beloved (thou "never yet ... hadst pitie," she writes); she blazons the city's noises, textures, and rhythms as one might blazon the beloved's eyes and lips.

Isabella Whitney is important not just because she wrote for money at a time when women did not do such things, but also because she talked about such intimate things, so straightforward, with such honesty, showing such intimate knowledge of the city, of life, of being such a free spirit, and this was not something that women did.

And though I nothing named have,  
to bury mee withall:  
Consider that above the ground,  
annoyance bee I shall.  
And let me have a shrowding Sheete  
to cover mee from shame:

And in oblvyon bury mee  
and never more mee name.

This closing paragraph from an article in *The Atlantic* seems to sum her up really well, “In a world that measured privilege by the power to withdraw from common public life, Whitney flaunted her immersion in the color and noise of urban commerce. In a world that measured womanhood by its powers of modulated restraint, Whitney practiced exorbitant indecorums. She wrote in her poetic “Will” an oppositional portrait of the system that ruthlessly preserved disparities of privilege and wellbeing. She invented a public self and a mode of public speaking-on-the-page that England would not see again for nearly a hundred years. To the city that rejected her, she wrote a knowing and exuberant love letter—a letter, and a love, that left that city considerably richer than she had found it.”

So read her stuff, check her out. She’s great.