

Voicing and the subject: early modern women's strategies within discourse domains

As Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen notes in her introduction to *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*,¹ the profession of literary studies now needs 'an approach focused on the functionality of literature', in terms of both writing and reading. My own version of this approach, not always explicitly stated, has been to study *discourse domains* in the sense of recent theorists of cultural semiotics such as the Australians Gunther Kress and Robert Hodge.² They define such a domain as a circulation of writing and oral exchange in and around a particular institution or set of connected institutions. In the context of my usual studies, for example, this could be all the speech and writing circulating through the state church and the two universities in Jacobean England, as a closely interlinked set of institutions. (They were one domain because the main mission of the universities was to train clergymen, and in some measure to continue supporting them with supervision and scholarly resources, during their careers.) Some of the genres in this discourse domain would be sermons, lectures, biblical commentaries, polemic treatises, academic dramas and pageants, memorial and epideictic verse, and bureaucratic documents. As with most discourse domains, some of the genres within it can be considered literary, some not.

Elizabeth Weston's discourse domains in Bohemia

To switch to a different but contemporaneous context, the neo-Latin poet Elizabeth Weston, who was an *émigrée* Englishwoman living in Prague at the court of Rudolf II in the early 17th century, took part in at least three discourse domains. The first was exchanges within the aristocratic household, such as letters, occasional poems, oral games, and other pastimes – she lived in one for a while as a poor kinswoman, through her relative Thomas Kelley's marriage to a niece of Heinrich von Písnitz, town chancellor of Most (or Brüx). The second domain that she took part in was court patronage with its genres of complimentary poems, dedications, financial documents, verse letters accompanying gifts or appealing for money, and so on. Weston, who surprised all acquaintances with her talent for poetry, was the step-daughter of the alchemist Edward Kelley. At the court of the alchemy-loving Rudolf, where Kelley had been

¹ *Met en zonder lauwerkrans* 1997, p.6-7, see also her contribution to the first part of this volume.

² For presentation of this concept see the introductory chapters of Kress/Hodge 1988 and Hodge 1990.

patronized by noblemen and courtiers as well as the emperor himself, she thus had a ready-made patronage network for her poetic appeals after her step-father died, leaving her and her mother destitute. And the third domain was that of genteel verse letters exchanged among university-educated scholars in various parts of Europe, including published books of friendship verse from such exchanges. Of course Weston was at best a marginal participant in the second and third of these discourse domains – she had barged into them. In the patronage and friendship verse, her oddity as a female poet – a *poetria* – is constantly noted in various men’s praises of her. These laudatory recognitions of exceptionality act as markers of the exotic, in the sense of present-day post-colonial theorizing about exoticism as a strategy for managing dominated groups, or interlopers into a power structure. Weston, for her part, was not pleased at having her book of published poems, the *Parthenicon* (Prague, ca. 1607-1609), take a usual generic form for that third discourse domain, namely as a collection of verse letters to and from her various correspondents: in a handwritten note in the British Library copy, she complains that verses other than her own were included.

A discourse domain is of course a perilous beast to study, and beastly complicated. One needs many resources from text linguistics, genre study, feminist and psychoanalytic theory, political history, and neo-Marxist study of ideology, to mention a few. But when we study the writings of any given woman from the early modern period, we usually discover something about her that throws light on whatever discourse domain she managed to speak within. For example, with professional women-in-waiting like the Englishwomen Margaret Tyler, Isabella Whitney, or Aemilia Lanyer, who served as readers, translators, or singers in the reading-and-sewing circle around a great lady at home, we can view their typical female scene as a ‘reading formation’ in the sense of the Marxist theorist Tony Bennett – a ‘formation’ that included not only the people in question but also the texts addressed to such circles and emerging from them, as well as the practices or habits involved in that circulation.³ One of these habits was, for instance, personalizing all reading, so that most texts coming into the circle were read aloud, somewhat as if they were letters addressed to the great lady. Such a ‘formation’ can be seen as one part of a given discourse domain.

In the case of Elizabeth Weston, as with most women of the time gaining a new voice, she needed particular strategies for bursting into the normally all-male discourse domains where she managed to speak. For patronage writing, one of her strategies was to adopt a kind of doubled persona: she often speaks as ‘I and my mother’, *ego cum matre*, or *socia cum genitrice*. Or sometimes the doubled image is evoked through grammatically more complex formations.

Non abs te posco munera larga mihi.
 Ne miseram vidua patiaris matre puellam
 Quod queror, indigni mole perire mali.
 [I do not ask you for large gifts for me.
 That you not suffer a girl impoverished through her widowed mother
 To perish of unworthy trouble, this is what I ask.]⁴

³ Cf. Bennett 1990, p.105.

⁴ From a poem to Adalbert Poppl von Lobkowitz, in Weston 1602, Sig. A_{4v}. I thank my husband Winfried Schleiner for help with this translation.

When I tried in a recent essay to explain how this device worked for her, I took a page from Mieke Bal's textual semiotics, namely the idea of a *focalizer subject*. That is, Weston's mother never gets to say anything in the poems, she is not a speaking subject, but nevertheless is often present as a focalizer subject. She is evoked as someone present, seeing and approving, though not speaking. As such she adds a third focus, a third perspective in the text, to those of speaker and implied reader or listener, supplying a touch of matronly respectability or chaperone effect. This device also gave the poetic speaker, as young woman, an odd aura of power, since she seemed able to stage-manage her own mother – to make her kneel when told to kneel, stand by when told to stand by, and so on. Such a technique is of course something happening at the surface of a text, at the level of what Janos Petöfi, in defining 'discourse', terms 'connexities' or the level of the 'co-textual'.⁵ At the same time it is contextual-impacting on the social and institutional 'context' of the patronage discourse domain, as an innovation. It creates a new possibility there.

A model of subjectivity and social text, as aid for studying women's claiming of a voice

This analysis of a Weston strategy relates to some work I am currently doing on theories of the human subject, the voicing of particular subjectivity, and the subject as always constituted by gender norms and other ideological elements. Let me suggest a model for identifying the ideological loading of a speaking or writing 'subject', that 'someone' specific whom we seem to hear, coming across to us, as the source of a given text or utterance, once it has been completed. Kristeva calls this someone, abstractly, the enunciative position behind a text. Or one might say the enunciative subject. This is not any of the portrayed speaking subjects inside a text, such as narrators, speakers, and focalizers. Rather it is the apparent agency of the place behind the text where the text seems to be coming from. Such an enunciative subject always includes elements of socially constructed gender, among other ideological traits defining him or her, and it will be useful to find ways to profile what these are in particular texts, as functional within their discourse surroundings. One must have a sufficiently nuanced model of the 'subject' for this to become possible.

Scholars of women writers are already starting to move in the direction of such analysis. In a set of conference papers from 1992 edited, in 1997, by Kate Chedgzoy and others, contributors sometimes discuss writings by Tudor and Stuart women in terms of 'subjects' or 'subject positions'. Bronwen Price for example writes about the gendering of the internal subject positions (meaning the speakers) in some love lyrics by Aphra Behn.

Price begins with a statement from a Behn preface: 'All I ask, is the Priviledge for my Masculine Part the Poet in me [...] to tread in the successful paths [of] my predecessors'.⁶ Price explores the workings of the varied speaking voices or portrayed

⁵ Cf. Sebeock et al. 1986.

⁶ Price 1997, p.129.

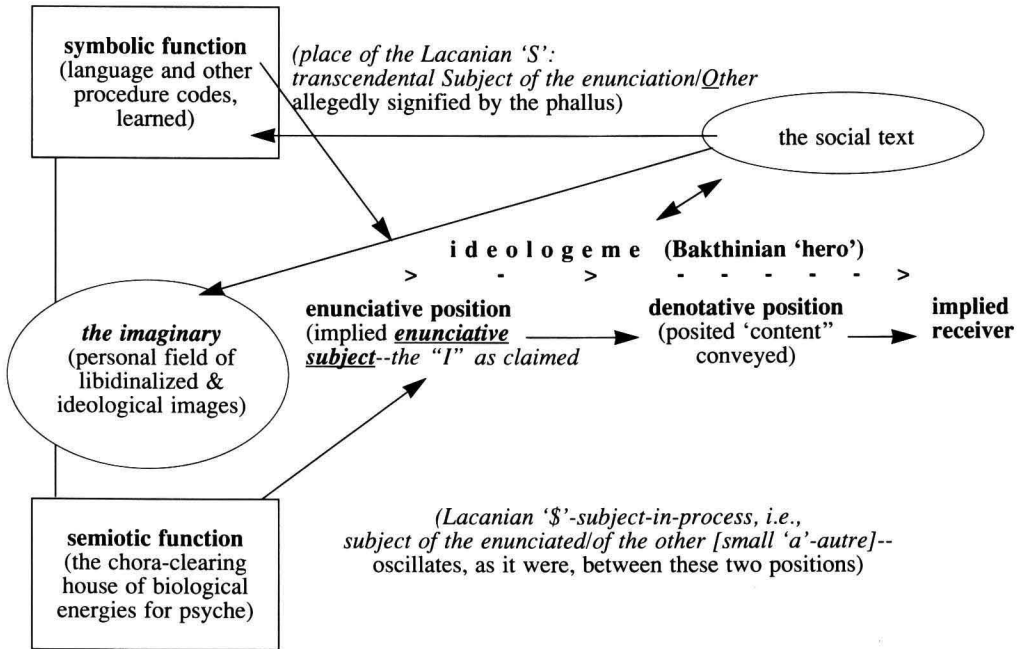
speakers, some male, some female, in several highly erotic lyrics by Behn, and then speculates about what perspective is represented in and behind the poet's usage of these voices. In one, while a woman explicitly speaks, her voice does nothing but portray her accepting the passive conventional role of the seduced woman swept away by pleasure. She is being presented ironically, from the enunciative subject's viewpoint, even though no voice speaks but hers (a technique well developed much later in dramatic monologues such as Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess', where the speaking duke, all unintentionally, shows himself to be a pathological dominator of his former wife). Another subjectivity is operative here, behind and beyond that of any of the discursive participants at the textual surface. A second lyric of Behn's shows a female speaker meditating on her lesbian attraction to a woman said to be like a 'lovely charming youth'. In yet another, a female omniscient narrator portrays a steamy sexual encounter of a man and woman, wherein the man after a while panics and cannot maintain his erection; the narrator then speaks in her own voice to say that she is the only person properly able to sympathize with the chagrined, disappointed woman. Price terms these various voices 'speaking subjects' and notes that, as much by their innuendoes and silences as by what they are given to say (about certain elements of the scenes), the lyrics 'require the reader to puzzle over various possible gender constructions' for their speakers, refusing to 'supply a stable meaning'.⁷ This analysis suggests that one might want to look behind the portrayed speakers' voices for ways to recognize and profile the overall enunciative position from which such a lyric has been written.

It will not be a matter of looking for that old chimaera, the 'author's intention', rather of studying how a particular text works for particular kinds of readers. Along with Michael Steppat of Bayreuth University, I am working on a model for treating enunciative subjects in just this way. It is part of a more extensive effort to study the textual markings of ideology in early modern English theatre. It draws initially from Mikhail Bakhtin and Emile Benveniste, more centrally from Julia Kristeva's revised Lacanian view of how texts and utterances are produced, and beyond that from certain feminist film theorists, as well as Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, and Mieke Bal. My space here is too limited for even mentioning what we take from each of them. But the outlines of our model of subject and utterance can be seen in the diagram. In this model, Kristeva has revamped Lacan's view of subject and utterance into a more nuanced and gender-neutral account.⁸ She has done away with the idea of a mythic feminine void pregnant with potential, out of which every utterance is phallicly thrust by the subject; she posits instead the gender-neutral 'semiotic function': this is the body's organizing site of biological energies, that makes them ready for psychic deployment through pulsations such as assertion-negation, tension-release, proprioception-rejection.⁹ The contrasting side of the inner dialectic by which we make language and other kinds of meaning is what Lacan had called the symbolic

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.149.

⁸ Jacques Lacan wrote about these matters in various, not always consistent ways. For a good account quoting and closely following Lacan's own texts and terms, see Bowie 1991.

⁹ On these concepts see Kristeva 1980, as well as 1984.



order; Kristeva adopts this and terms it, however, the *thetic* or symbolic function, namely the individual's competence as a user of language and other codes learned from the surrounding society — including grammar, syntax, and strategies for innovation. Kristeva drew upon semiotics to recognize an enunciative position implied by each text or utterance as its origin place, behind which the dialectic of utterance production — the dialectic between the symbolic and the semiotic functions — has already happened, and from which the listener or reader hears an utterance or a text coming.

This is not the living, breathing writer or speaker as an intricately complex person, but rather the seeming someone from whom the particular text gives the impression of coming, *as it is heard or read*. I am using the term *enunciative subject* to mean the implied agent occupying the 'enunciative position' — the implied producer of some particular utterance as *evident* subject that has already emerged from the inner dialectic of the process of devising utterance (and thus fully deploys both the semiotic and the symbolic 'functions', which have interacted dialectically inside the person). We must remain aware that it was an internal dialectic that resulted in this *subject*, standing as it were with his or her feet in two spaces, that of the symbolic and that of the semiotic. In Kristeva's model, one can focus on the enunciative subject as definable by a reader or listener looking backward, back through the subject's own concrete utterance. It is a subject maintained in existence only as long as he or she has seemingly just finished speaking or writing, with the dialectic of his/her production already finished and in the past. Thus Kristeva provides a site in the modeling of meaning-circulation where we can recognize, can profile, the elements of ideology (including gender) that have operated within each utterance. This model can, with

further elaboration, prove useful for analyzing particular women's texts and their functioning within the discourse domains where women wrote and spoke, because it will help us to study how women overcame the psychic and social barriers that they were up against, in finding public voices.

To mention one example of how I have already worked with this concept in studying women writers (though it was not so carefully spelled out there) I argued in my book *Tudor and Stuart women writers* that Lady Mary Wroth, in her pastoral play *Love's victory*, manoeuvred her text into something being spoken by a quasi-male enunciative subject, one that Wroth constructed by setting up the male figure of 'Love', Eros, as a beneficent 'King of the mind,' to be the central agent of the action, then turning his agency over to a female enunciative subject instead, who is represented in the play by the nymph Sylvesta. That is, once Love has been posited as the tutelary god of the play and its celebration of erotic love as ultimate value, then the female leading character, Sylvesta, assumes his functions and enacts his agenda by stage-managing the love affairs of the other characters. Sylvesta is a figure of Wroth herself as active in the process of enunciating this particular text. (Of course, the enunciative subject of a text will not always be explicitly actorialized in this way.) If one sets out to recognize the enunciative subject behind the whole play, and analyzes the text in suitable ways so as to recognize its strategies with gender and other ideological elements, one can see that psychically, Wroth used this strategy for enabling herself to step into a position from which to write a play, a genre that in any discourse domain of the time called for a male enunciative subject. She sets up a 'king of the mind', then co-opts 'his' position and agency.

Conclusion

Habits of theoretical experimentation like mine may suggest part of an answer to one of the questions of our conference: should women be treated as a separate category of writers? In the sense of general study of discourse domains, I would say 'No', though in certain ways 'Yes'. That is, almost all the discourse domains in which early modern women took part involved male as well as female writers, indeed usually far more men than women, so of course the men must be studied along with the women, and vice versa. Even the domain of the 'great Lady's sewing circle' included some men, since patronized male writers would often be present in such a scene as performing *protégés*. But of course, when one asks how a particular woman could muster the psychic strength to speak, and what tactics she used to circumvent the bias heavily favouring male speakers that was installed at so many linguistic levels in the whole social text around her, then of course, one must look at strategies particular to the women. And sometimes scholars will use these as classifications for groups of women writers, as I once did in speaking about a group of English professional waiting women within the household sewing circle.

But certainly we can leave behind any notion that women writers are of interest only to a few specialist literary scholars concerned with feminist theory and bizarre instances. The women played active parts in the life and discourses of their cultures,

and there is much to be learned about how they did so, as writers of literary texts as well as other kinds of texts and oral inventions. I define prophetic and literary texts as those which are in the thick of the uptake and maintenance of value systems, in any given discourse domain. And women often had a hand in these. It has only been the 20th century practice of setting up male canons of semiotically dense texts that can sustain indefinite numbers of interpretations, for the purposes of a bourgeois educational system – only this practice has blocked our view of many fascinating women and their writings.

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