



## “Trust Not A Man At The Fyrst Sight”: Tracing a Proto-Feminist Thought in Isabella Whitney’s Poetry

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### Abstract

This paper examines the poems in Isabella Whitney’s two poetry collections, *The Copy of a Letter* (1567) and *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573) to trace a pro-woman argument in her works. In her poems, Whitney’s themes and subject matter point out that she is a marginal woman poet of sixteenth-century England since she assumes the role of a counsellor for the inexperienced women who might be manipulated by men. Instead of writing in a low-key manner as expected from the woman writers of the sixteenth century, she adopts an assertive and critical style in her poetry. By articulating this pro-woman argument in her poems, Whitney attacks Ovidian tradition and she re-reads and sometimes rewrites the stories of the traditionally silenced female figures in myths and male texts. Whitney seeks solutions for women who are culturally and socially trapped in the patriarchal texts.

**Keywords:** Isabella Whitney, Ovid, Proto-Feminism, Revisionist Mythmaking, Renaissance Poetry.

### “Trust Not A Man At The Fyrst Sight”: Isabella Whitney’nin Şiirlerinde Öncü-feminist Düşüncenin İzini Sürmek

#### Öz

Bu makale, Isabella Whitney’in eserlerinde kadın yanlısı bir tartışmanın izini sürmek amacıyla, *The Copy of a Letter* (1567) ve *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573) adlı şiir koleksiyonlarındaki şiirleri incelemektedir. Whitney’in şiirlerinde işlediği temalar ve konular, onun on altıncı yüzyılın İngiltere’inde marjinal bir kadın şair olduğu gerçeğine işaret ediyor çünkü erkekler tarafından manipüle edilebilecek deneyimsiz kadınlar için bir danışman rolünü üstleniyor. On altıncı yüzyılın kadın yazarlarından beklendiği gibi sade ve çekingen bir şekilde yazmak yerine, şiirlerinde iddialı ve eleştirel bir tavır benimsiyor. Whitney, şiirlerinde bu kadın yanlısı argümanı dile getirerek, Ovid geleneğine saldırıyor ve mitlerde ve erkek metinlerinde geleneksel olarak susturulan kadın figürlerinin hikayelerini yeniden okuyup ve bazen de yeniden yazıyor. Whitney,

şiiirlerinde ataerkil metinlerde kültürel ve sosyal olarak kapana kısılmıř kadınlar için çözüm arıyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Isabella Whitney, Ovid, Öncü-Feminist, Revizyonist Mit Yaratımı, Rönesans Şiiri.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although Aphra Behn is granted the status of England's first professional woman writer, she is not the first woman who appeared in the printing world. Nearly a hundred years before the publication of Behn's first play, *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670), Isabella Whitney managed to challenge the male-dominated literary culture of the Mid-Tudor period with her first poetry collection. Whitney is regarded as England's first published woman writer with her collection *The Copy of a Letter* (1567) (Ellinghausen, 2005, p. 2). There were no records about how Whitney persuaded her publisher Richard Jones to print her verse but he "entered, edited, printed and sold all of Whitney's known works" (O'Callaghan, 2018, p. 16), including *The Copy of a Letter, A Sweet Nosgay, of Pleasant Posye* (1573) and her single poem "The Lamentacion of a Gentilwoman upon the death of her late deceased frend, William Gruffith Gent<sup>2</sup>". Apart from being the pioneer woman writer in terms of the publication history of women writers, she also challenged and disapproved of the patriarchal ideology which put limitations on women socially and economically though she was living during the time in which the patriarchy was the driving force of the century.

Whitney's subject matters in her poetry and her unorthodox attitude towards the dominant ideology of the time pave the way for her status as a proto-feminist writer. In her poems, she warns women about the hypocritical and dishonest attitudes of men, and she advises women as a way of transmitting her experience as life lessons for inexperienced women. Moreover, she comments on how the male authors and their works, especially Ovid and his works, serve to the patriarchal ideology which victimises women in many aspects of their lives. Particularly, Whitney refers to the mythological male lovers in Ovid's *Heroides* which consists of fifteen epistolary letters written by females who are abandoned by their male lovers, and by which many male authors of the sixteenth century are inspired. Yet, Whitney challenges this male-dominated tradition and this time, she presents the female perspective in her poems by commenting on the immoral and dishonest behaviours of Ovidian heroes such as Aeneas, Theseus, and Jason. By showing these male lovers' unreliability and flawed nature, Whitney warns other women to prevent them from sharing the same destiny of the abandoned women of *the Heroides*. Furthermore, she attempts to revise and rewrite the female histories which are previously and traditionally shaped and transmitted by the male point of view. Especially, in her poem "A carefull complaynt by the unfortunate Auctor", it is seen that she brings forward a new interpretation to the story of Dido, who is abandoned by Aeneas, by rewriting the ending of the mythological story of Dido. I argue that this poem is written almost in the mode of revisionist mythmaking and while doing this, I will employ Alicia Ostriker's methodology in her article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking". By rejecting Virgil's and Ovid's versions of Dido's tragic story, Whitney opposes contributing to the portrayal of women dependent on male power. Thus, this article aims to explore Whitney's poems in her two collections to suggest that Whitney develops a pro-woman argument in her poetry. My emphasis will be on her act of publishing, her unconventional way of expressing her thoughts on the patriarchal ideology of the time, her references to the humanist texts, and her rewriting and reshaping of the Ovidian material.

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<sup>2</sup>This poem lacked authorial information and appeared in the miscellaneous poetry collection namely, *A Gorgious Gallery of Gallant Inventions* (1578) which was published by Richard Jones (Melnikoff, 2005, p.195). Though her authorship cannot be proven, the poem is attributed to Whitney as a result of the points discussed in the poem which recall Whitney's arguments in her previous works. For the further information, see Randall Martin's "Isabella Whitney's 'Lamentation upon the Death of William Gruffith'" (1997, pp. 1-15).

### Formation of the Proto-Feminist Thought in Early Modern England

Although feminism as a term began to be used in the late-nineteenth century to refer to women's movements of the age, the birth of feminism or more precisely the birth of modern feminism "is provisionally located in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, in particular her famous *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)" (Ferguson, 2004, p.7). However, as Sarah Gwyneth Ross rightly puts it, "Mary Wollstonecraft did not invent feminism" (2009, p.1). Starting from the fifteenth century and onward, the instances and the clues of feminist thought could be traced in the writings of certain women writers, and by building their arguments on these women writers' works, a large number of critics started to use the terms such as Renaissance feminism, seventeenth-century feminism or Rationalist feminism (Akkerman and Stuurman, 2005, p. 2). It should be noted that these 'feminisms' of the early periods of history significantly differ from the feminism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In early modern England, there were no political organizations or women's groups that advocated women's rights, as observed in the women's suffragette movement of the twentieth century. Yet, as stated earlier, a small group of women writers revealed their discontent about the misogynist attacks on their sex by expressing their thoughts in different literary genres and modes such as "histories, conduct books, treatises on government, letters, popular and courtly dialogues, and prose romances" (Jordan, 1990, p. 2). They refrained from making aggressive and harsh statements about their discontent. As a result, they preferred to write in a low-key manner and they wrote didactic works which defended and sometimes celebrated the nature of women (Jordan, 1990, p. 2). Although the feminist thought or movement manifests itself under different circumstances in different centuries, they share a fundamental point which is their struggle against the patriarchal oppression of women. Karen Offen (1988, p. 151) argues that

[f]eminism opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization, and control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism. Feminism is necessarily pro-woman.

When the above-mentioned aspects of feminist thought, such as the rejection of women's subordination to men, the disapproval of the predetermined roles attributed to women by men, and disregarding male supremacy are taken into consideration, the traces of feminist thought can also be observed in the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century. In the early modern period, certain women writers expressed their discontent and disapproval of the male supremacy and misogynist prejudices about women in their works, either directly or indirectly. For instance, Margaret Tyler was the first Englishwoman who produced a romance in the late sixteenth century till the publication of Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* in 1621. She translated Diego Ortunez de Cala Horra's Spanish romance, *Mirror of Princely Deeds and Knighthood* in 1578 (Uman and Bistue, 2007, p. 298), and she published the work by adding a preface in which she commented on the ongoing prejudices and misogynist arguments of the Renaissance period concerning women writers. Joyce Boro (2014, p. 2) explicates that Tyler's preface "articulates a justification of women's authorship and [it] provides a rare glimpse of female authorial self-perception". Tyler, in her preface, underlines the fact that she hopes to be accepted by the reading public, although what she does is generally regarded as a manly profession. Yet, she also claims that "it is not necessary for every trumpeter or drumslare in the war to be a good fighter. [...] it is no sin to talk of Robinhood though you never shot in his bow" (2014, p. 49). Tyler argues that as a result of her sex, her efforts in translating a male text should not be judgmentally read. Clearly, she shows her reaction to the limitations put on women in the literary and printing world of early modern England. Another exemplary female figure is Rachel Speght, the poet of the early seventeenth century. She is the first Englishwoman writer to publish a defence of women under her name. Speght wrote

*"Trust Not A Man At The Fyrst Sight": Tracing a Proto-Feminist Thought in Isabella Whitney's Poetry* her defense *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617) to answer Joseph Swetnam's misogynist pamphlet *The Araignment of Lewde, Idle, Frowtard and Unconstant Women* (Nevitt, 2006, pp. 33-34). Although such female intervention into the male-dominated literature of the Renaissance was a rare occurrence, certain women revealed their discontent about the male prejudice and misogynist ideology. Hence, these women writers or thinkers who oppose the patriarchal limitations in the early modern period can be accepted as proto-feminists, and along with Margaret Tyler and Rachel Speght, Isabella Whitney can also be included in this group.

### **Whitney's Relation to the Early Feminist Thought**

It might be speculated that there are specific reasons which place Isabella Whitney and her poetry into the feminist discourse. Tjitske Akkerman and Siep Stuurman (2005, pp. 3-4) propose that the feminist discourse consists of three essential components which are listed as follows:

1. *Criticism of misogyny and male supremacy*
2. *The conviction that women's condition is not an immutable fact of nature and can be changed for the better*
3. *A sense of gender group identity, the conscious will to speak 'on behalf of women', or 'to defend the female sex', usually aiming to enlarge the sphere of action open to women*

In the light of these components, it can be asserted that it is possible to trace a proto-feminist thought in Whitney's poetry. In her two poetry collections, it is observed that she assumes the role of a trustworthy guide who can teach and instruct inexperienced women. Occasionally, Whitney warns her female readers about the dishonest and dangerous acts and tricks used by the male lovers to deviate women from the modest and honourable way of life. Most importantly, it is apparent that Whitney has *"the conscious will to speak on behalf of women"* (Akkerman, Stuurman, 2005, p. 3). Most of her poems aim to defend her sex by offering various exemplary situations about hypocritical male behaviours. For instance, in her poem *"The admonition by the Auctor, to all yong Gentilwomen: And to al other Maids being in Loue"*<sup>3</sup>, she identifies all of the inexperienced women who are in love as virgins struck by the arrows of Cupid, and Whitney (1990, p.10) suggests that she aims to *"geue good counsel"*. She continues to articulate why she adapts this role of an advisor as follows: *"To you I speake: for you be they,/ that good aduice do lacke:/ Of if I could good counsel geue/ my tongue should not be slacke?"* (p. 10) Whitney believes that women lack good advice and counsel in their lives and as a result of this lack which might lead women to err, she takes responsibility for taking care of *"all yong Gentilwomen and al other Maids being in Loue"* (p. 10). Thus, it is safe to claim that Whitney obliquely tries to project an alternative female community that celebrates solidarity among women.

It is not only her subject matters in her poems that signal the feminist thought, but also Whitney's act of publishing stands as another significant factor contributing to her marginal status as a woman writer in the sixteenth century. As stated earlier, although there was no example before her, Whitney achieved publishing two poetry collections, and she became the first published English woman author of literary history. Her act of publishing can be accepted as an achievement because, in early modern England, women were excluded from the literary market, and they couldn't raise their voices in the public world. As Merry Wiesner (2000, p.152) summarises, in the sixteenth century, there were large numbers of conduct books that were written and published by mostly men to teach women

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<sup>3</sup>All the quotations of Isabella Whitney's poems in her collections are taken from Michael David Felker's PhD thesis in which he uses "the unique edition of The Copy of a letter in the Bodleian Library and the unique edition of A Sweet Nosgay in the British Library" (1990, p. cxix). While referring to the poems of Whitney, the page numbers of Felker's thesis are taken into consideration rather than the line numbers.

to be “chaste, silent and obedient”. These books were generally written on the subjects of marriage, and they aimed to reflect the model of the ideal Christian wife. Moreover, it was not supported by the ideology of the time that women should write or express their thoughts. Thus, as Dorothy Mermin (1990, p.336) argues, a female voice in literature was suppressed as a result of the dominant patriarchal culture since being a published author as a woman was regarded “as a kind of sexual self-display”. Although women were allowed to learn reading to observe proper Christian female behaviours, women’s ability to write was seen as a threat because by revealing their ideas, they could challenge the male discourse of the time. In this respect, being a woman writer in the sixteenth century was accepted as an anomaly. In Margaret W. Ferguson’s words (1998, p. 145), “the idea of the ‘woman writer’ is a veritable paradox or oxymoron, one eliciting attitudes of outrage and/or scorn”. Whitney is the leading example of this oxymoronic or paradoxical notion of the literary world of the sixteenth century. Instead of circulating her poems in manuscript and uttering her reluctance to be a published author as the majority of women writers preferred in early modern England (Mermin, 1990, p. 337), Whitney chose to raise her voice in public. As a result of her frontal challenge to the patriarchy, Isabella Whitney can be identified as an early feminist woman writer.

Another significant aspect of Whitney’s poetic identity is her references to the works of Virgil, Ovid, and Mantuan in her poetry. In her poem “The Auctor to the Reader”, which belongs to *A Sweet Nosegay*, Whitney (1990, p.33) writes that “I straight wart wery of those Bookes,/ and many other more/ As VIRGILL, OVID, MANTUAN/ which many wonders shoe” and she claims that she reads these books to “cheare [her] brused brayne” (p. 33). Her knowledge of Virgil, Mantuan, and Ovid was also unconventional for Whitney since these books were taught in humanist education, which was not accessible to women in the sixteenth century. Women were excluded from this high education because it was supported that “the highest achievement [for women] was to serve in the royal household with grace and skill both in domestic arrangements and in polite entertainment” (Friedman, 1985, pp. 60-61). Besides, there was patriarchal propaganda about women’s supposed inferiority concerning their learning skills compared to the males. For instance, Juan Luis Vives (2000), who was one of the influential humanists of the sixteenth century, published his *The Education of a Christian Woman* in which he reinforced the idea of the silent and obedient women and he claimed that the education of the domestic skills should be the primary concern of women’s learning and Vives revealed his ideas on this idea as follows:

I wish the woman to be totally given over to that part of philosophy that has assumed as its task the formation and improvement of morals. [...] [I]t is not fitting that a woman be in charge of schools or have dealings with or speak to men. [...] If she is a good woman, it is best that she stay at home and be unknown to others. [...] Since woman is a weak creature and of uncertain judgment and is easily deceived (as Eve, the first parent of mankind, demonstrated, whom the devil deluded with such a slight pretext), she should not teach, lest when she has convinced herself of some false opinion, she transmit it to her listeners in her role as a teacher and easily drag others into her error (p. 72).

Vives also underlined that women should not read books that aimed to deviate them from the moral standards of the age, and according to him, Ovid’s works were examples of corruption and immorality (p. 77). Yet, in her above-mentioned poem, Whitney openly declared that she read all the books that were included in the humanist education although women were excluded from the opportunity of learning. By writing these authors’ names in capital letters, Whitney tries to draw attention to her “unconventional” knowledge of the humanist texts. Katherine Jo Smith (2016, pp. 42-43) comments on Whitney’s relation to these texts by stating that “Whitney points to her particular relationship to those classical texts of the humanist school curricula from which she is excluded. Throughout her work, there is a tension between acknowledging such texts [...] and the expectation that she must be doing

"Trust Not A Man At The Fyrst Sight": Tracing a Proto-Feminist Thought in Isabella Whitney's Poetry something different from [men], owing to her gender and the lack of formal education". It should also be highlighted that some exceptional women of the sixteenth century received the humanist education such as Thomas More's daughters. More educated his daughters on philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, logic, and rhetoric, but only upper-class women might have this privilege of education (Balmuth, 1988, p. 18). Hence, it is still a subject of ongoing debates about Whitney's knowledge of the humanist texts since it is known that Whitney is not a member of the upper class. In many of her poems, she states that she has to work to earn money. As Helen Wilcox (2010, p.22) puts it, "By the time her *Nosegay of poems* was published, however, she seems to have been suffering financial hardship, apparently having been forced to abandon her job as a domestic servant and to leave London". Considering her financial difficulties and the lack of formal education, it is quite unconventional for Whitney to access the humanist texts that she refers to in her poems. However, this unclarity cannot overshadow the fact that she uses of these texts, and she partially models her poetry on these sources. Once again, she shows, though not openly, her reaction to the misogynist attitude in the education system and Whitney does not refrain from revealing her relation to the humanist texts.

### Ovid's *Heroides* and Feminisation of Ovidian Tradition by Whitney

As mentioned earlier, Isabella Whitney's poems in her two collections are abundant in their references to Ovid's *the Heroides*. Ovid's work consists of "a number of elegiac poems in the form of letters written by various women of heroic legend to the men they love" (Farrell, 1998, p. 309). *The Heroides* was included in the humanist education in England, and it was first translated by George Turberville in 1567 (Smith, 2016, pp. 8-9). Its translation appeared in the same year of Whitney's publication of her first poetry collection, and probably, she was acquainted with the English translation of *the Heroides*. What is significant of Ovid's *Heroides* is that all of these fictional letters are written by women. In other words, women in *Heroides* assume the role of authors. Joseph Farrell (1998, p.311) argues that this aspect of Ovid's work has always been ignored because the idea of a woman writer "was not a very widespread phenomenon in ancient literary culture", though there were some women who wrote letters and poetry. However, it should be underlined that these female complaints were written by a male author [Ovid], and this suggests that these letters produced in complaint form fail to reflect the female experience wholly and truly. In addition, many male humanist writers were inspired by Ovid's work and they gave voices to females from a male perspective. In this respect, it is observed that Whitney feminises the Ovidian tradition by giving voice to the mythological female characters from a female perspective. Her use of the Ovidian tradition can be regarded as a feminist intervention since, in the sixteenth century, the rewritings or adaptations of *the Heroides* served to promote the patriarchal ideology of the time to show women's overall dependence on masculine authority. In this vein, Danielle Clarke (2000, p. 62) argues that *the Heroides* possesses

a primarily masculine self, whose values would be imbibed along with his style and explicitly articulated in opposition to a female 'other', whose stance of grief and lament contingent upon the absence and treachery of the male lover/husband serves finally to reinforce her dependence upon the male term. In other words, despite the apparent 'femininity' of Ovid's text, its ultimate function is to reinforce and underline patriarchal power through the assertion that what is at stake in women's abandonment by men is not only loss of status and virtue, but the loss of self. The Heroidean tradition also recognizes the necessity of male mediation if women's words are to be heard, acknowledging the erasure of both voice and self which is contingent upon the act of lamenting.

As Clarke points out, the laments of women characters in *the Heroides* signify that they cannot tolerate the male absence, and that's why they reveal their grief and sadness. To put it differently, they come to define their selves by building their identities on the presence of their lovers. When they are

left by the males, they also lose their identities. Taking into account this underlying ideology of Ovid's work, it can be put forward that Isabella Whitney offers an alternative approach to the male text. She feels responsible for warning women about the males' behaviours because she desires that women should not experience the same struggles and griefs of Ovid's heroines.

### Analysis of Whitney's Poems in *The Copy of a Letter and A Sweet Nosegay*

Whitney's *The Copy of a Letter* contains many poems that allude to the characters used in *the Heroides*. In the second poem of the collection "I. W. To her unconstant Louer", there is a female poetic persona who laments for her inconstant lover. It is revealed in the poem that the male lover abandons her, and upon this betrayal, she comments on the hypocritical nature of males. While doing this, Whitney, as the poetic persona of the poem, compares her situation with the female mythological characters who become the victims of their dishonest lovers. By addressing her lover, she refers to all the males. In the poem, she offers two alternatives to the male lovers and says: "Now chuse whether ye wyll be true,/ or be of SINONS trade" (p. 4). It is stated in this line that there are two kinds of men who are either honest or dishonest, and by referring to the figure of Sinon who "is an accomplished master of guile" (Jones, Jr., 1965, p. 122), she suggests that just as Sinon tricks the Trojans with the wooden horse, men are also prone to deceive women by lying. Ann Rosalind Jones (1990, p. 45) articulates that although "Sinon's treachery had nothing to do with love, Whitney seems to be implying that all's unfair in love and war as men wage them". Then, she begins to list the male characters in *the Heroides* "whose falsehood now is playne" (p. 4). First, she presents three exemplary male figures as follows:

As by ANEAS first of all,  
Who dyd poore DIDO leaue,  
Causing the Quene by his untrueth  
With Sword her hart to cleaue.  
Also I finde that THESEUS did,  
His faithfull loue forsake:  
Stealyng away within the night,  
Before she dyd awake.  
Iason that came of noble race,  
Two ladies did begile:  
I muse how he durst shew his face,  
To them that knew his wile. (pp. 4-5)

In these examples, it is observed that Dido, Arachne, and Medea are victimised by the unfaithful acts of their lovers. The poetic persona draws a parallelism between her and these women characters, and she shows that there is a shared destiny and experience among women. In the middle of her catalogue of bad examples, Whitney inserts her ideas about these unfaithful men who have been celebrated for centuries:

For they, for their unfaithfulness,  
did get perpetuall Fame:  
Fame? Wherefore dyd I terme it so?  
I should haue cald it shame. (p. 6)

Paul Marquis (1995, p. 318) comments on these lines by stating that Whitney draws attention to the fact that "historically the treacherous acts of men towards women have been immortalized in the great

“Trust Not A Man At The Fyrst Sight”: Tracing a Proto-Feminist Thought in Isabella Whitney’s Poetry narratives of western culture”. In this part of the poem, Whitney signifies that she refuses to contribute to the grand narratives in which females are pushed to the margins. She highlights that women suffer from the unfaithfulness of men, and all they have is pain while men get fame although they act shamefully. Whitney provides her interpretation of the acts of men regarding their lovers and according to her, they should be ashamed of their vile actions. From a different perspective, Ann Rosalind Jones (1990, p. 45) asserts that Whitney “deconstructs [...] classical heroes by applying a pro-woman rather than an epic criterion to their careers”. Instead of glorifying the immoral acts of male lovers, Whitney prefers to shed light on the consequences of their shameful actions on the side of women, and she shows her reaction to the undeserved fame of the mythological figures. In this respect, Whitney’s challenge of male supremacy complements her pro-woman argument in her poetry.

Whitney continues her criticism of male treachery in her poem, “The admonition by the Auctor, to all yong Gentilwomen: And to al other Maids being in Loue”. The female poetic persona, this time, touches upon the source from which men learn the tricks and tactics to cheat women. Her warnings are addressed to the young maidens who are in love:

Beware of fayre and painted talke,  
 Beware of flattering tonges:  
 The Mermaides do pretend no good  
 For all their pleasant Songs.  
 Some use the teares of Crocodiles,  
 Contrary to their hart:  
 And yf they cannot always weepe,  
 They wet their Cheekes by Art. (p. 10)

It can be propounded that the poem includes a didactic tone, and Whitney tries to prove that men are capable of using any tactics in a romantic relationship. In other words, men hide their true nature behind the facade of a caring and emotional lover. Yet, for Whitney, it is nothing more than art. Also, she speculates that they learn to use these treacherous tactics from Ovid’s other work, *the Art of Love*: “Ouid, within his Arte of loue,/ doth teach them this same knacke” (p. 11). Apart from *the Heroides*, Ovid also advises men about being hypocritical in the *Ars Amatoria* and “Whitney exposes the amoral behaviour which Ovid himself has promoted” (Smith, 2016, p. 57). Her reference to Ovid’s other work once again proves that Whitney is familiar with the humanist texts, although it is not possible for the majority of women who lived in Renaissance England. Moreover, Whitney sheds light on the fact that male dishonesty and unfaithfulness are supported by male writers such as Ovid, and this kind of male solidarity becomes problematic for women since they become the victims of this misogynist ideology. To protect the inexperienced women from the male dishonesty, Whitney suggests that “trust not a man at the first sight,/ but trye him well before” (p. 11). At the end of the poem, Whitney reveals that why she adopts this kind of attitude, and she says that “and I who was deceiued late,/ by ones unfaithfull teares/ Trust now for to beware” (p. 16). Whitney combines the experiences of her own and the women characters in Ovid’s works, and by adding this semi-autobiographical tone to the poem, she desires to persuade her female readers to believe in her.

In her second collection, *A Sweet Nosegay*, it is seen that Whitney focuses on her economic condition and she reflects on her hardships in finding a suitable job for her. Although the poetic persona of *A Copy of a Letter* transmits her experiences about inconstant lovers in almost every poem, Whitney’s agenda changes in her second work. This time, as Laurie Ellinghausen (2005, p. 2) states,

"[t]he speaker of *Nosgay* longs not for a lover, but for the employment of a mistress". In her poem, "To her Sister Misteris A. B.", Whitney touches upon her only way of earning money as follows:

Had I a Husband, or a house,  
 And all that longes therto  
 My selfe could frame about to rouse,  
 As other women doo:  
 But til some household cares mee tye,  
 My books and Pen I wyll apply. (p. 80)

These lines shed light on Whitney's conflict and economic difficulties when she loses her job. She reveals that since she does not have a husband or a house where she can work, the only way to survive is to write. It is derived from Whitney's words that she temporarily applies her books and pen to earn money. In other words, she sees the act of writing as a temporary profession for herself. Yet, her lines can also be accepted as a declaration for her act of writing which obliquely signal Whitney's non-conformist attitude towards patriarchal limitations on women. As Kim Walker states, "[women's act of] writing for financial gain could be read as a form of prostitution" in Renaissance England (qtd. in Ellinghausen, 2005, p. 3), but Whitney does not refrain from owning the title of a writer which is another critical aspect of Whitney's pro-woman argument in her poems.

Apart from the economic difficulties, in *A Sweet Nosegay*, Isabella Whitney again uses the Herodian materials to comment on the dishonest behaviours of men though it is not abundant in examples as can be seen in her previous collection. It is observed in *A Sweet Nosegay* that Whitney chooses only Dido, the queen of Carthage from *the Heroides* to set an example for the disloyal men's acts. In her poem, "A carefull complaynt by the unfortunate Auctor", Whitney draws how Dido is left by Aeneas: "that Lorde AENEAS hight:/ [...] from Carthage tooke his flight./ And fowly brake his oth,/ and promise made before" (pp. 81-82). Until the middle of the poem, it is seen that she retells Virgil's and Ovid's versions of the story of Dido and Aeneas. Yet, Whitney brings a new interpretation to the classical story and she offers a new ending for the Queen of Carthage:

O DIDO thou hadst liu'de,  
 a happye Woman styll.  
 If fickle fancie had not thrald  
 thy wits: to retchlesse wyll.  
 [...]  
 So might thy cares in tyme,  
 be banisht out of thought:  
 His absence might well salue the sore,  
 that earst his presence wrought. (p. 82)

It is derived from these lines that Whitney attempts to rewrite the Dido myth. In Ovid's *the Heroides*, Dido's letter ends with her suicide: "SYCHAEUS' DIDO won't be inscribed on my marble tomb,/ when I'm cremated; my epitaph will be merely this:/ AENEAS PROVIDED HER REASON FOR DYING AND THE SWORD;/ DIDO'S OWN HAND STRUCK THE FATAL BLOW" (Ovid, 2017, p. 82). Yet, in Whitney's version, Dido does not kill herself as a result of her grief. Whitney claims that Dido might forget Aeneas' disloyalty in time, and his absence might be her salvation. Her reinterpretation of Dido's story holds a significant place in Whitney's collection. I argue that Whitney's offering of a new ending for Dido is almost in the mode of revisionist mythmaking. As Alicia Ostriker (1982, p.72)

“Trust Not A Man At The Fyrst Sight”: Tracing a Proto-Feminist Thought in Isabella Whitney’s Poetry explains, “[mythical] figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible”. In the light of Ostriker’s explanation of the process of the mythmaking, it can be stated that Whitney alters Dido’s story, which is previously accepted and defined by male culture. Most importantly, Whitney challenges the male texts by rewriting and revisioning the old male-oriented stories in which women are victimised for the sake of male fantasy. Ostriker (1982, p. 73) continues to comment on the effects of mythmaking as follows:

But in them the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. [...] [T]hey are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival.

By building upon Ostriker’s argument, I suggest that Isabella Whitney deconstructs the female image of collective male fantasy to correct the false representations of women in male texts. As discussed earlier, in *the Heroïdes*, women are presented as weak female figures who cannot tolerate the absence of their lovers. In most cases, women become the victim of male treachery, and the male absence paves the way for tragic consequences, as can be seen in Dido’s story. Yet, Whitney refuses to contribute to the dominant patriarchal culture in *the Heroïdes*, and this time, she presents an alternative version in which she opposes to “gender stereotype embodied in myth” (Ostriker, 1982, p. 73), and in her poem, the male absence does not allude to the death of a female but a solution to overcome the extreme grief caused by males. Additionally, her rejection of portraying a female figure of male fantasy and her rewriting of Dido’s story from a female perspective are other important implications of Whitney’s feminist thought. In line with Tjitske Akkerman and Siep Stuurman’s (2005) listing of three essential criteria of the feminist discourse, by setting Dido’s story in a different light as an example for women, Whitney shows that “women’s condition is not an immutable fact of nature and can be changed for the better” (p. 3). Whitney emphasises that women have the potential for improving their conditions by freeing themselves from the expectations and impositions of the patriarchal ideology.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I argue that Isabella Whitney is an early feminist woman writer of Renaissance England. Whitney’s act of publishing her two poetry collections *The Copy of a Letter* and *A Sweet Nosegay* is one of the implications of her feminist agenda. Although the patriarchal ideology of the time supports the women’s silence in the public sphere, Whitney manages to raise her voice by refusing to be pushed to the margins. Moreover, it is observed that Whitney develops a pro-woman argument in her poetry by criticising the misogynist attitude towards women and male supremacy in the male authors’ texts. Whitney assumes the role of a good counsellor, and she defends and gives advice to the inexperienced women for the dishonest behaviours of men by revising the Ovidian materials. Although the female figures in Ovid’s works are shown as the victims, and they are presented as the ones whose existence depends on the male presence, Whitney opposes this male-centered discourse in her poems, and she accuses Ovid of teaching and supporting dishonest behaviours for men. In so doing, Whitney rereads the Ovidian materials to rewrite and revise the condition of women in male texts. Bearing all of these crucial points regarding Whitney and her poetry in mind, Isabella Whitney proves to be an early example of feminist thought who gives place to a pro-woman argument in her poems.

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**Article Information**

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