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“Profess as Much as I”: Dignity as Authority in the Poetry of Sarah Fyge Egerton

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Seventeenth-century women’s poetry has been reduced to private or domestic experience for much of its critical history. Recent studies have reclaimed the poetry of writers such as Katherine Philips, Anne Killigrew, Aphra Behn, Mary Chudleigh, and Elizabeth Singer Rowe by locating it within political motivations and public lives, but these advances have come at a conceptual cost. By situating private poetry within public life, scholars have privileged the public sphere even as they insist upon the interpenetration of the public and the private, thereby missing an opportunity to address what the personal aspects of women’s poetry accomplish and why they matter. Major studies by Paula Backscheider and Susan Staves, for instance, rightly reestablish women poets in literary history, but they do not interpret what the personal accounts of those poets offer to that history. While women poets created and shared a critique of patriarchal power, they also used poetry to distinguish themselves as specific individuals and bring a value to their personal lives that was not contingent on general political struggles.

In the work of Sarah Fyge (Field) Egerton, personal experience provides a unique source of poetic authority. The private in her poetry does not represent what “women were restricted to,” a critical judgment that construes private life as too stifling and particular to have literary value. On the contrary, Egerton’s poetry valorizes private experience to build her authority as a poet from the dignity of ordinary life. Writing about herself, Egerton takes command of her private and public experiences by subsuming them within the personal, a category that develops as she claims ownership over both spheres of her life. This idea of having property in one’s own life and the literary authority it inspires are essential to the development of autobiographical writing in the eighteenth century.

Literary authority for seventeenth-century women poets usually depended on public communities and traditions: e.g., royalist sentiment and the Restoration.
tion court; Protestant virtues and practices; and allusions to classical poetry, especially references to the Muses. But Egerton derives her authority from other sources, redefining the “public domain of discourse” so that the private life of one fairly undistinguished woman becomes a topic worth noticing, reading about, and discussing. In some ways her practice fits Susan Lanser’s definition of discursive authority, “the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice.” However, rather than approaching “specific receiving communities” that could confer value upon it, Egerton’s poetry establishes its worth by resisting the traditions of women’s writing. It is doubtful that reading communities for her type of poetry had even developed yet, for her insistence on the dignity of personal life was itself an emergent cultural practice.

Even modern criticism generally seems unsure of how to read the personal elements of Egerton’s verse. Carol Barash, for instance, separates Egerton’s “assertion of female self-determination” in her pastoral, personal poetry from “the problem of female authority” at the end of her collection. But this false opposition between personal poetry and authority removes critical attention from the new structure of personal authority that Egerton uses to command respect throughout her work.

The idea of commanding respect is vital to interpreting Egerton’s predominantly autobiographical Poems on Several Occasions (1703). Her poems claim ownership over her ordinary life, transforming that life into an object she alone can adorn and distinguish through poetic representation. Unlike other seventeenth-century women poets, Egerton does not depend upon the details of friendship, praises of royalty and virtue, defenses of reason and the mind, or epistles to other scholars and writers as sources of poetic authority. Moreover, she eschews the religious verse and biblical meditations common in women’s devotional poetry. Instead, she generates poetic authority by representing her secular life as worthy of the attitudinal respect of readers. As opposed to respect derived from religious beliefs or jurisprudential arguments, attitudinal respect conveys dignity to someone in the very ordinary sense of thinking well of or looking up to her or him. Egerton’s poetic legacy lies in her unusually early attempt to command her readers’ respect by giving attention to the personal emotions and events of ordinary life that her contemporaries left unshared.

Of course, the inherent dignity that Egerton claims has a social history evident in the literature and politics of Dissent, which “gave rise to discourses of secularization by various means” and “the creation of a private sphere of uncontaminated conscience.” However, as a woman, Egerton could not participate readily in changing practices that revised ideas of the worth of ordinary life; moreover, she never uses Scripture or religion as a source of authority in the way that Anne Bradstreet, An Collins, and Rowe do. So even as she wrote during this historical reevaluation of ordinary and spiritual life, she could not or would not appeal to its new, privileged categories of worth. The authority
she draws from her personal dignity must derive from her poetry alone as she makes her own life and experience the standard of judgment.20

In the following sections, I argue that Egerton claims the personal as a category of self-ownership worthy of a respect similar to that granted private property. By placing herself at the center of her poetry, Egerton extends to autobiographical literature the argument of John Locke that “Every Man has Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself.”21 In pursuit of such personal poetic property, she sets her work against public poetic traditions, “inclosing it from the Common,” but she creates literary authority not from the mere act of separation but by asserting that it is the dignity of ordinary life that secures this separation.22 The dignity of her poetic labor, akin to “the Work of [a man’s] hands . . . [that is] properly his,” suffuses her collection, even appearing in poems, such as “The Liberty” and “To the Queen,” that clearly address public figures and issues of her time.23 In these cases, Egerton’s presence dominates the poetry as she subordinates the authority of politics to her own authorizing voice. Similarly, Egerton emphasizes her own experience in order to write against the conventions of retirement or pastoral poetry and secular love poetry. The way she forces public and generic authority to give way to personal dignity prefigures the later eighteenth-century practice of autobiographical life-writing, which in the seventeenth century was usually dismissed as vanity when not contextualized within an author’s spiritual life. Egerton’s investment in personal dignity suggests how private experience could appear alongside political expression to bolster the literary authority of both women and men.

* * *

Modern anthologies often conceal Egerton’s insistence on personal dignity by presenting poems that reflect the radical, anti-patriarchal, and public ambitions that contemporary critics have charted throughout early women’s writing.24 “The Liberty,” for example, demonstrates Egerton’s anger at the powers that govern women:

* * *

Egerton disregards cultural expectations in order to contest male privilege and challenge the restrictions that dominate other women.26 She launches a diatribe against the disciplining structures of “The Devil Censure” that stresses the importance of freedom, much as writings by women such as Mary Astell and Chudleigh do (19).

However, Margaret Ezell’s warning against “evaluating [the woman author’s] responses as if she were our contemporary” suggests that more inter-
pretations are available for early women’s poetry than readings that politicize
women’s experiences in general.27 “The Liberty,” for instance, can also be read
as a powerful reaction against associating with “the nice Order of my Sex” (21). Egerton separates herself from those women who “must not speak” (or
presumably write poetry) by refusing to be “nice,” which denotes refinement
and fastidiousness but also could suggest silliness, ignorance, and wantonness
(20).28 Her ironic use of “nice” corresponds to a feeling that public activities
leave her cruelly “chain’d” to other women (21). To be “like my self” and take
“an uncheck’d freedom,” she must rebel against enslavement by women and
their customs and use poetry to claim ownership over her body, mind, and
voice (21). Dismissive of other women, Egerton achieves liberty for herself, not
her sex.

Unlike women who confuse their reputations with their souls’ purity, she
recognizes that her sinfulness or virtue depends on her own actions, not social
rumors: “I’ll blush at Sin, and not what some call Shame, / Secure my Virtue,
slight precarious Fame” (21). By reflecting upon her own “impressions and
ideas” of sin and virtue, rather than letting society transform them into “Shame”
and “Fame,” she claims them as “objects of concern” worth sharing with the
reader.29 She stresses the dignity of her opinions by setting them against social
habits that degrade other women—“I’ll never to the Idol Custom bow, / Unless
it suits with my own Humour too”—quite literally owning her “Humour” and
making custom subservient to its authority (20). For Egerton, the dignity of this
ownership derives not from publicly acknowledged rights to property but from
the self-reflection that lays personal claim to the usual topics of gossip.

Egerton sallies forth against the public, but what she seems to want more
than anything is to control the life she claims to own. She locates her self-writ-
ing in the specificity of that life by emphasizing her “Closet,” a metonym for
her private space, and the irritation she feels at keeping house rather than read-
ning and writing:

My Closet not with Books, but Sweat-meats cram’d
A little China, to advance the Show,
My Prayer Book, and seven Champions, or so.
My Pen if ever us’d imploy’d must be,
In lofty Themes of useful Houswifery
Transcribing old Receipts of Cookery. (20)

Egerton desires freedom from this closet of recipes, rote religion, and romances
so that she can create her own library and literary output. This catalog of
“Houswifery” and women’s reading may not be unique to Egerton, but her
“Pen,” which six lines further becomes her “daring Pen,” belongs solely to her
and represents her own response to the restrictions of her closet. Moreover, the
nominal pun in “My daring Pen, will bolder Sallies make” pointedly recalls the
underlying autobiographical significance of her verse (20–21). The “Closet not [filled] with Books” reminds readers that they hold one specific book, *Poems on Several Occasions*, which draws attention to Egerton as the particular poet who has escaped her domestic closet.

This appeal to personal life characterizes Egerton’s poetry and also changes the way that she responds to issues such as public censure, a salient problem for women of her time. In contrast to works by Astell and Judith Drake that advise women to dismiss those who “censure without Authority” and “retire from the world,”³⁰ Egerton rejects the power of “dreaded Censure” to affect her actions or force her to go anywhere (20). In her depiction, censure becomes a matter of personal emotion that cannot harm her unless she chooses to let it: “[Censure] has no Terror, if we did not fear” (20). By dismissing censure’s authority, she suggests that liberty is gained by controlling the passions that she, not society, owns.³¹

Moreover, Egerton chooses not to valorize general rationality as the means to this control, thus distinguishing herself from women poets such as Killigrew and Chudleigh.³² Her authority arises not from universal reason but from a personal choice to fear censure no longer.³³ She represents censure as an effect of unregulated imagination, a “Bug-bear” that frights “timorous Infants,” in order to take away its respectability and power to control her (20).³⁴ She dignifies her subjectivity by stating that her boldness—“This Courage speaks me, Brave”—carries more weight than the fanciful authority of public opinion’s “dull fulsome Rules” (20–21). In this reading, “The Liberty” recounts Egerton’s struggle to claim an individual authority by transforming social censure and custom into personal feeling and choice.

We can understand “The Liberty” as a reflection of Egerton’s personal concerns and experiences without rejecting interpretations that see it as authorizing women’s desire for freedom in general. Poetic authority comes from many sources and is always a complex issue, and Egerton’s personal dignity remains an important and especially “difficult invocation” of authority that deserves further study.³⁵ But when we ignore how Egerton develops poetic authority from her life, we overlook how “The Liberty” incorporates a sense of self-ownership that reappears in her more obviously private or personal poems. In these poems, just as in “The Liberty,” Egerton grants her life a dignity from which she claims the authority to speak and write, especially when it means turning away from common traditions of women’s writing.

* * *

The theme of retirement appears frequently in Egerton’s poems, a result of her experience of being sent into the country by her father, but she diverges from traditions of women’s private retirement that separate it entirely from the life left behind. Anne Finch, for example, in “The Petition for an Absolute Retreat,” imagines retirement as a chance to experience nature as it “did in Eden grow” and describes it as paradisiacal when matched with “a Partner suited to my
mind.” Finch’s power to choose her own partner hints at a desire to make her “female subjectivity . . . absolute,” but to gain this control she must disentangle herself from her former life, as she makes clear with her invocation of the Edenic ideal. “To the Honorable The Lady Worsley at Long-Leate” also makes friendship a necessary quality of retirement; in it, Finch opposes the “real splendours of our fam’d Long-leate” to “some lonely and obscure recesse / The sunn’d retreat of solitary peace.” Although she shares the pleasures of a country estate, retirement is still represented as an escape from a broader social existence; it essentially splits the poet’s life into two disconnected parts. In “Ardelia’s Answer to Ephelia,” retreat makes possible the friendship that urban activities crowd out, and Finch values her “absolute retreat” for its absence of public, city life and its inclusion of only her closest friends.

Egerton also uses retirement poetry to express control over her own life; however, she never endorses the estrangement from public, urban life for which Finch values retirement. Instead, she treats her past as something owned that can be brought with her. Egerton’s imagery of solitude in “The Retreat” begins with memories of the tempting pleasures of city living:

Adieu to all the splendid Gallantry,
Complaisant Pleasures, modish Gaiety;
Airy Delights, imaginary Joys,
Fashions, Entertainments, Wit and Noise. (31)

She promises that, “No, not the softest Sigh shall sound retreat,” but the breath followed by lengthy alliteration lingers over the regret that she professes not to feel (31). Although she does spend time contemplating the private subjectivity of “philosophers of old” who subdue their passions “in Solitude” (32), she nevertheless cannot forget “all the Follies of my former State, / All that’s Gentle, or Popular, or Great” (31). Regretting her past actions is not the same as expelling them; by alluding to them repeatedly, she actually focuses attention on how much they affect her, even in retirement. This continued self-reflection points to feelings of ownership over a past that she chooses not to reject. By bringing her former errors into her verse, she imparts the dignity of poetic expression to that past.

“The Retreat” also subtly alludes to the negative representation of seclusion in “On my leaving London, June the 29th,” in which Egerton becomes “to all the busy World as lost” (24). There, city culture held “all my Joys, and all my Treasure” but has been forbidden her by “My cruel Fate, [that] doth act the Tyrant’s part” (24, 23). In both poems, the pleasures of the city, not private contemplation, occupy Egerton’s retirement. She remains subjected to the public life from which she retreated, and its resurgence disrupts any attempt to build subjectivity privately. She also breaks from the language of religious retreat implied by Finch’s allusion to Eden and made explicit in a retirement poem such as “Come,
my Beloved, let us go forth into the fields, let us lodge in the villages” by Elizabeth Singer, later Rowe. What instead appears in Egerton’s work is personal life, replete with memories of public amusements. Her poetry mediates between the privacy of the mind and the public delights of the world, expressing how both together constitute the personal life worth dignifying in publication.

Egerton’s desire to live in the world makes it difficult to accommodate her poems to the authority of country retirement, which reaches back to classical traditions. In fact, even in the poem that comes closest to outright praise of country life, “On my leaving S—y,” Egerton cannot escape from her previous life:

You, who safe Harbour kindly did receive,  
My Shipwrack’d Vessel and gave means to live:  
With Gilded Stern and Gaudy sails I mov’d,  
Fraught with this Wish, be Great and be Belov’d.  
Young and unskill’d in this unlucky Sea,  
For want of Ballast, Storms did ruin me. (66)

The gild and gaud recall descriptions of urban excitement from other poems, and the imagery of the shipwreck alludes to former pleasures, perhaps her illicit passions for a lover and for writing, that have ruined her. Nevertheless, Egerton blames her youth and inexperience, not the corruption of public life, for leaving her vulnerable to the “rude spiteful Pop’ler breath” (66). The answer, then, is to improve how she manages herself, and she uses her time at S—y to reimagine her place in the world: “‘Tis true, thou couldst not fit [my tatter’d Bark] out again, / With Masts and Tackling for the mighty Main; / But as a Pleasure-Boat in thy smooth Streams” (67). Her extended metaphor comparing her life to a ship veils the true source of change in the poem: Egerton herself. In the smooth waters of S—y, her “dearest soft Retreat,” Egerton sails peacefully as she reequips her vessel for a public world that she intends to reenter, albeit with a new moderation (66).

Egerton reinforces her personal agency even as she dreams of being a passive boat safe in harbor: “And if I please at each bless’d Shade she Lands” (67; emphasis mine). Throughout the poem, her “Shipwrack’d Vessel,” “Pageant Bark,” and “Pleasure-Boat” have been equivalents for herself, but at this point she identifies with a separate, active “I” that pilots these physical metaphors in order to “Land” them (66–67). Instead of condemning the causes of her shipwreck, “the persuit of Passion and Renown,” in general, she reminds herself of her specific “former daring Follies,” evidence of the particularity of a situation now dignified as something over which she accepts ownership (67). Egerton’s retreat, full of the past and its rough seas, is a far cry from the calm, philosophical retreats of poems such as Mary Molineux’s “Solitude” (1702), in which “Tu-mults and noise may not intrude, / To interrupt the soul.”

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Contrasting Egerton’s sentiments with those in Chudleigh’s “On the Death of his Highness the Duke of Glocester” also shows how distinctive her desire for self-authorization is. In retirement, Chudleigh pursues the pleasure of reading and thinking in a pastoral retreat, which is authorized by her rationality. She aligns her grief with royal grief, which lends it the dignity of a grieving queen/mother and a grieving nation, until Britannia, with the neoclassical authority of a Muse, alleviates her sorrow. But Egerton’s poem of retreat references violent storms indicative of personal, not national, pain and regret. Self-reflection gives her a renewed understanding of the dignity her life deserves even as she acknowledges her mistakes. Therefore, it makes sense that when “the Fates again do summon [her], / To the loath’d Ocean Popularity,” she returns to a public life that she professes to despise (67). For although she now wishes that she “not be known” and expresses some fear at the prospect of returning to the world (67), her poems of retirement are ambivalent about the value of isolation. Repeated nautical metaphors emphasize the continuity between her life in the city and that in S—y, and the change she undergoes makes her a better pilot in the dangerous waters of publicity. With this control over herself, Egerton summons the authority to steer clear of future shipwrecks, to “bolder Sallies make” (21).

The strong, autobiographical voice of Egerton’s retirement poems exceeds the generic constraints of country retirement by resisting the language of physical, mental, and spiritual solitude. Self-writing and poetic convention conflict as Egerton holds onto the actions that shipwrecked her in the first place. But the novelty of the poetry lies not only in how it breaks from poetic traditions but also in how it dignifies a woman’s ownership over her rather ordinary life. Egerton shares with authors such as Finch, Rowe, and Chudleigh a concern for female subjectivity, but unlike them she authorizes her retirement poetry through the public but personal experiences that she should abandon, at least according to generic norms. In this way Egerton subordinates traditional country retirement to an urban, social self. For her, personal dignity gains authority when it is embedded in the world at large.

The interpenetration of private and public authorities characterizes the personal, a category that Egerton derives from the possession of a dignified life experienced across both spheres. A poem such as “To the Queen,” a panegyric praising Queen Anne, exemplifies how Egerton expresses her dignity even while praising a figure who, for many women writers, was a public source of authorial and political power and legitimacy. But Egerton’s personal voice does not easily bow to this hierarchical authority. Although “trembling” signifies her humility and fear before Queen Anne, hints of the poet’s self-worth intrude to counter the implied meekness (17). “Awful Duty” presses her forward as she strives to be singled out from the “meanest Slaves” and acknowledged as a unique subject (17). Egerton accepts the queen’s authority, but by pressing
forward through a crowd of other women to bring attention to herself, she also assumes a personal dignity that justifies stating that her gift is “as if the Great, had offer’d it” (17). This poet earns her worth in spite of the overwhelming presence of the queen, not because of it.

The audacity of the personal distinguishes Egerton’s panegyric from those by other women poets, which generally defer to royal authority. Killigrew’s “To the Queen,” while not directed to Queen Anne, displays a more typical humility before the monarch, and Chudleigh’s “To the Queen’s most Excellent Majesty” reveals a similar reverence for the queen at the expense of the petitioner/poet: “Permit me at Your Royal Feet to lay / This humble Off’ring of a trembling Muse.” Egerton, on the other hand, asserts a first-person perspective that dominates her verse, which focuses more on her than on the queen: “Why are we barr’d, or why I woman made” (18). She proceeds to volunteer for Queen Anne’s war against France’s patriarchal laws, a presumably political act: “Revenge on your proud Foes, their Salick Law, / With your fair Hand, their boasted Greatness awe” (18). But her portrayal of conscription—“I . . . / Will strait turn Amazon, but speak the Word”—suggests a response particular to Egerton as a single “I” who claims her own right to speak and avows her personal bravery: “I shall not tremble” (18). This trembling implies rage, not awe, for “Salick Law” concerned her personally: English marriage codes made it difficult, and eventually impossible, for the widow Egerton to maintain the wealth of her first husband, Edward Field. Her concealment of these assets led to major difficulties in her later marriage to Thomas Egerton, difficulties she was facing when Anne ascended the throne in 1702. She derives a military authority from her personal trials, not just from her royal addressee, possibly using private conflicts over property to authorize these feelings.

Certainly Egerton borrows from Anne’s political power, but her poetic authority depends just as much on the dignity of her personal, marital troubles. By the final couplet, the apprehensive subject has filled herself with both military aplomb—“May every Subject you protect; Profess / As much as I, and dare to act no less”—and, if we recognize Egerton’s uncharacteristic enjambment as a sign of spontaneity, poetic courage (19). It also importantly ends in the subjectivity of an “I” who challenges her readers, preparing them for the “daring Pen” of her next poem, “The Liberty.” Through the work of dignifying herself in her poetry, she can own her personal life in a way that sexist laws prevented her from doing with her property.

The generic conventions of panegyric in “To the Queen” obscure the autobiographical potential of Egerton’s complaint. However, the poem that precedes it in Poems on Several Occasions, “Satyr against the Muses,” clarifies the strikingly personal nature of Egerton’s rage. The “Satyr” begins by protesting how the Muse took advantage of her “unwary Innocence” (14). Much like a callous libertine, this “abandon’d” Muse left her “not only Poor, but wretched too” (14). The Muse’s seduction of Egerton evokes an erotic relationship that
confuses gender categories, which gives her the freedom to attack her Muse both as a masculine and feminine figure but leaves Egerton isolated from either. Betrayed and alone, she has no one to inspire her writing but herself.

Egerton’s feelings towards poetry merge with the rhetoric of the abandoned lover: “Curss’d [sic] be your Skill, you taught me then to Rhime” (14). This conflation of lost love and poetry derives from Egerton’s particular sorrows (her father’s disapproval of her writing and her unrequited love for her pastoral “Alexis,” Henry Pierce) that move the poem from general satire to specific complaint. Egerton elaborates on the rift with her father in “To the Lady Campbell, with a Female Advocate,” where she specifically blames poetry for depriving her of his affection: “But ah! my Poetry, did fatal prove, / And robb’d me of a tender Father’s Love” (22). Egerton resents this estrangement from family; as she writes in the “Satyr,” once “the Jingling noise [of poetry], shed its dark Influence,” she “scarce [has] had one happy Moment since” (14). Poetry divides her life in two, for her father represents the public life she abandons when he forces her into retirement. Egerton, who lived happy “for almost Eight years time” before learning to “Rhime,” brings enough personal frustration to her poetry that its sources cry out for investigation, bringing attention back to Egerton herself (14). And while the “Satyr” may blame “fatal” poetry for her lost life, the entirety of Poems on Several Occasions recovers Egerton’s relationships with family, lovers, and writing through those recurrent, personal moments that she boldly claims ownership over on her title page: “By Mrs. S. F.”

The intensity of Egerton’s fury against authority builds over the course of the “Satyr” in a way similar to that of “To the Queen,” further suggesting that her personal experiences may flow into the latter poem:

Here all the Spite and Rage of Womankind,  
Cannot enough advance my threatening Mind, . . .  
Passion, that common Rage, I here refuse,  
Call Hell itself, to curse my Torturing Muse. (15)

Egerton’s hyperbole summons the rage of all suffering women only to find it insufficient for her needs. She replaces mere “passion” with the fury of hell (as she imagines it) to punish a Muse who is “Not the calm Author of blest Poetry, / But the black Succubus of Misery” (15). Her choice of end rhyme attributes her misery to poetry, not to romantic relationships, and replaces a familiar story of love with her more peculiar inclination towards poetry. Her “threatening Mind,” expressed in verse, proves more damning than womankind’s rage, and she chooses to dignify her resentment by making it the core of her “Satyr.” She formulates a poetics of aggression through this attack upon her Muse and breaks from ideals of female friendship exemplified in kinder attitudes towards inspiration, such as Rowe’s: “Besides my Muse is the most gentle thing / That
ever yet made an attempt to sing.”52 Angry and alone, Egerton affirms the only recourse she has against the “Plagues” of poetry: herself (14).

Egerton’s personal reactions authorize her expanded attack on poetry in general. By the concluding lines, she cannot conceive of a punishment worse than writing verse: “Curses, in vain, on Poets I bestow; / I’m sure, the greatest is, that they are so” (16). To end this diatribe she returns to herself: “Fate, send worse if thou can’st, but Rescue me / From trifling torturing wretched Poetry” (16). The private suffering brought by poetry, highlighted by the driving rhythm of the final line’s asyndeton, prefaces and completes her satire against inspiration. The metonymic attack on all poetry is grounded not in the traditions of Parnassus but in the relationships and emotions of Egerton’s life. And when “To the Queen” follows immediately after this poetic tirade, the “Revenge” and “eager loyal Soul” which she invokes acquire a provenance different from the concerns of national interest and political life.

Even her poem addressed more submissively to a male authority figure, “An occasional Copy, in Answer to Mr. Joshua Barnes,” displays the personal dignity Egerton claims. Although she chooses a sanctioned, male poet to be her literary guardian, she refuses to become his dependent.53 In order to equalize their relationship, she feminizes Barnes, the “pregnant Author of best Poetry,” and suggests that she may one day match his fecundity (48). Autobiographical puns bear out this ambition. When Egerton, the onetime wife of Edward Field, writes, “The fruitful Fields do stock the Barns each Year,” her agricultural image refers to the potential for her own poetry to fulfill Barnes (48). She rewrites their relationship so that she, not he, ultimately becomes the source of production, and Egerton may attain poetic equality if the “obliged Field” becomes a fruitful Field (47). Sarah Field claims ownership over the poem’s authority as she labors to bring herself into a poem ostensibly about Barnes, just as she does in her addresses to the Muse and the queen.

* * *

Egerton’s poetic authority depends on the “overwhelming sense of a particular, individual voice [that] emerges from [her] collection.”54 But she embraces this voice not just by addressing autobiographical events but also by asserting her self-possession, usually by relishing the personal, intense, and sometimes uncontrollable passions that she opposes to external authority. In “On the death of dear Statyra,” she declares “Begone my Muse” and prefers her “True Grief, like Love” as a source of inspiration that originates in “the Distractions of my troubled Heart” (44; emphasis mine). While “Mod’rate Sorrows may be told with Art,” she must express this extraordinary melancholy “With sad Confusion” in “Verse [that] will, like [her] Sighs, be numberless” (44). These lines authorize Egerton’s professedly raw poetry by associating its unsculpted language with unruly, personal emotions that gain authenticity and dignity because they resist the artificial moderation imposed by poetic custom. These feelings move Egerton away from traditions signified by the “Muse” and towards herself, as
demonstrated in “The Repulse to Alcander” when she defends her independence against an unwanted male flirt:

I thought my self secure, within these Shades,
But your rude Love, my Privacy invades,
Affronts my Virtue, hazards my just Fame,
Why should I suffer, for your lawless Flame? (27)

The possessive “my” dominates this passage that questions the legitimacy of “your rude Love” and “your lawless Flame.” While this suitor struggles to impress Egerton with his bold “excess of Manners,” she resists him not with the protections of custom but with the dignified ownership of her own person, virtue, and passion (25).

Throughout Egerton’s love poetry, she empowers this self-authority by formally distancing herself from other life-writing traditions. Her poetry proceeds non-linearly through pastoral forms that encode her love life by describing specific sentiments, rather than fitting them into a master narrative of moral redemption. Egerton breaks from narrative conventions by conceiving her life not as plot but as events that lack the arrangement of cause and effect and retain their cohesion through one common term: Egerton herself. Furthermore, Egerton’s love poetry relies little on the spiritual authority of the Protestant autobiographical tradition that preceded her. Collins’s poetry, for instance, consistently values love and friendship only in terms of the divine: “No Knot of Friendship long can hold / Save that which Grace hath ty’d.” Collins’s poetry precedes Egerton’s by fifty years, and it is unlikely that she knew it, but it represents a “Protestant culture of private, personal devotion—‘closet devotion’ as it comes to be called in the period” that Egerton chose not to develop in her own practice of personal poetry.

Egerton’s personal love poetry actually acquires its authority by dignifying her less virtuous, secular desires and refusing to translate them into divine language or plot them towards a redemptive endpoint. In contrast to the anonymous author of Eliza’s Babes (1652), who describes herself as “A Lady, who onely desires to advance the glory of God, and not her own,” Egerton flushes out the “S.F.” of her title page with poems about her husbands and her extramarital desires. Eliza’s Babes justifies its descriptions of passion in poems like “The Lover” by using Christ as the love-object—“He is the onely pleasing wight, / Whose presence can content my sight”—whereas Egerton dwells upon her passion for an ordinary man who was not her husband, a topic that the public was unlikely to condone.

“To One who said I must not Love” centers on the inescapability of Egerton’s desire: “Love and I essentially are one” (42). Writing about love was of course not unheard of, but Egerton dares to include herself in the rakish culture of her time in a new way. When Egerton conceives of herself as “Love,” it is
not the “pleasures of being the Lord’s beloved,” nor the erotic love of Restoration lyrics, nor the timeless love of Renaissance sonnets, but the specific love of a woman trapped between love and marriage. She insists on keeping her forbidden love secret even as she publishes it without apology:

My Kindness to his Picture I refrain,
Nor now imbrace the lifeless lovely Swain.
To press the charming Shade tho’ thro’ a Glass,
Seems a Platonick breach of Hymen’s Laws,
Thus nicely fond, I only stand and gaze. (43)

The married woman cannot faithfully embrace even the image of the absent love if she must “first and foremost . . . protect her reputation for sexual chastity or ‘honesty.’” So Egerton reconciles reputation and desire by asking readers to judge her not by public standards but by personal ones; despite her transgression, she dignifies her love by admitting it and by offering her willpower as a mitigating circumstance: “I only stand and gaze.” This gaze suggests at least a partial ownership of her lover that mirrors her possession of his picture, but more important is the reclamation of the “I” that, by restraining itself, shows Egerton’s self-control and redeems her from being “a double Slave to Love and Vows” (42).

As Egerton reveals her secret, the reader, who eavesdrops on a private epistle written to an anonymous “One,” becomes complicit in the transgression through her or his own curiosity. By tying poet and reader together through this shared secret, the poem further defends the personal dignity of the woman who owns it. Her imagery of suffering attempts to gain the sympathy of the reader and soothe any antipathy he or she may feel towards her situation, a strategy her contemporaries would have condoned. She incorporates medical theories to describe her bodily discomfort in ways that hopefully will increase this sympathy:

Distorted Nature shakes at the Controul,
With strong Convulsions rends my strugling [sic] Soul;
Each vital String cracks with th’unequal Strife,
Departing Love racks like departing Life. (43)

The convulsions that link body to soul reference the mutual sympathy that religious and medical men theorized existed between both, and Egerton proceeds to describe the violent cracking of “each vital String” so that readers might remember that they too have fibrous bodies. Consequently, her soul’s pain over departing love that “racks like departing Life” becomes a feeling that others might share, just as they share the same basic anatomy, and a spontaneous sympathy might occur between these similar bodies because of a natural affection.
Finally, the torturous emotions she describes appeal to the misery which all people experience in a post-lapsarian world; as her contemporary William Bates writes: “Since the Fall . . . Society in Miseries endears the Sufferers, and produces a tender sympathy between them.” Egerton’s concluding verses allude to all of these theories of sympathy to emphasize that her experience of “Love each day [renewing] th’ torturing scene of Death” should be familiar to her audience (43). By asking readers to sympathize with her least noble sentiments, she gives them value; by having the audacity to accomplish this through poetry, she dignifies these personal sentiments as a subject worthy of literary representation.

“The Platonick,” another depiction of the agony of love, also confronts the difficulty of authorizing illegitimate desire. It begins by describing how “Amintor,” Egerton’s dead husband Field, left her in the care of his clerk Pierce, the “Alexis” of most of her love poems. At first, Egerton attributes her affection for Pierce to her late husband’s request: “Amintor’s latest Breath did recommend, / Me to the care of his once dearest Friend,” and she imagines that Amintor “Look’d down and smil’d, and authoriz’d my Flame” (106). The sophistry of transforming unsanctioned love into wifely obedience protects Egerton’s character by transferring that love to another’s authority. However, the poem does not maintain this self-effacement. Instead, Egerton reinterprets her desire as a personal, intellectual choice:

But from the utmost Error I’ll be free . . . .
Confess the kind Platonick at the most,
And make my Passion not my Blush, but Boast. . . .
In Contemplation all my Pleasure lies,
My Joys are pure Ideal Extacies. (107)

Here, Egerton changes potential shame into pride, much as she does in “The Liberty.” She embraces personal desire and turns towards her own thoughts and away from obligations to her dead husband. Despite the fact that she calls this love “Platonick,” her libidinally infused language—“Passion,” “Pleasure, “Extacies”—suggests that she cannot keep the “Ideal” innocently distant; even platonic feelings may “breach . . . Hymen’s laws” (43). Rowe’s similarly titled “Platonick Love,” on the other hand, interprets her passion as duty to God in a way reminiscent of Collins’s poetry and Eliza’s Babes: “Why should I then the Heav’nly spark control, / Since there’s no brighter Ray in all my Soul. . . . / Nor is the greatness of my Love to thee, / A sacrilege unto the Deity.” But Egerton’s “elevated Flame,” meant to signify ideal love, may just as easily refer to a burning passion for worldly things (107). The final line, “To touch and tast [sic], we blush and are undone,” imagines those very acts of earthly pleasure that her platonic love should not need to mention (108). This concentration of amorous language belies Egerton’s claim that she simply follows her husband’s will and, metonymically, God’s.
Egerton continues to own her personal desires in “The Vision,” which reduces Alexis to an object of her imagination. She begins in typically pastoral fashion, “by a murmuring Stream,” but she reverses pastoral’s traditional power structure by putting the woman in control: “By composing Slumbers I was bless’d. . . . / It was Alexis form I did pursue” (53–54). Her productive nap literally creates her lover according to Egerton’s desire: “Sure he was made for Love, at least for mine” (54). She lingers over the body she has the power to observe, and she represents herself with the active language of a male lover pursuing his shepherdess: “I gaze’d with Wonder at a Form so bright. . . . / His Hand more soft than down of Venus Doves. . . . / With eager Joy I grasp’d the lovely Shade” (53–54). Egerton admits no shame as she publicly dignifies the contents of her private dream by applying the neoclassical language of pastoral romance to her personal life.

Yet Egerton remains aware of how vulnerable her authority may be, and in the end Alexis retains the power to charm and then leave her: “the lovely Youth forsakes my Breast” (54). Nonetheless, Egerton’s honesty about her loss only reinforces the dignity of her autobiography; instead of inventing a happy ending, she admits that she never achieved her fantasy. This authenticity is a necessary precursor to what Lanser calls “the validity of one person’s right to interpret her experience,” and through it Egerton embraces what many other women feared, that their “personal voice . . . would be taken for autobiography.” No longer private, her experiences remain personal as, through her published poetry, she claims ownership over the desire that makes her more susceptible to censure.

In “To Alexis, on his absence,” Egerton uses apostrophe to secure her desire from rejection by keeping Alexis physically distant but mentally present. In poetry, she can speak directly to Alexis—“Say, lovely Youth, why all this niceness shown, / Is modest Passion, so offensive grown?”—without giving him the chance to refuse her (38). However, she also admits that Alexis has “from [her] Sight . . . cautiously remov’d” and that her love continues unrequited (28). With apostrophe, Egerton can dignify her unreciprocated feelings through an imagined conversation, but it cannot be sustained. So she falls back on the contemplation seen in “The Platonick” and “The Vision” that transforms the lover into an object over which the poet maintains ownership: “Know my Alexis, that I have you here: / Here in my Breast, your dearest Image glows” (38). Egerton draws his image into her body and her poetry to make it work for her: “That Shape, that Mein, that dear undoing Tongue, / With thousand unknown Charms [it] shall fill my Song” (39). Pierce’s real existence fades away as Egerton’s poetic labor situates it within her mental world, embedding it among her desires and disappointments.

Egerton replaces narrative progress with stasis by scattering the representations of her love for Alexis throughout her Poems on Several Occasions. She describes a synchronic relationship that never develops and never changes; jux-
taposition and repetition represent Egerton’s relationship as solely dependent on her voice. Her poetic corpus thus resembles early forms of self-writing built from the “repetitive serial representation of particular moments held together by the narrative ‘I,’” except that Egerton disavows the authority of the plotted “I” by relating her personal responses and feelings as constant and unchanging.75 Her poems of pastoral love deny the authority implied by narrative development or religious allegory and find value in Egerton’s dignified ownership of her personal encounters with love.

The personal boldness of Egerton’s poetry could also work against her, however, as her relationship with Mary Delarivière Manley demonstrates. Although legal testimony Egerton gave against Manley appears to have sparked her hostility, she responded by specifically belittling Egerton’s dignity as expressed in her life-writing.76 One of the tales from Manley’s *Secret Memoirs from the New Atalantis* (1709) satirizes Egerton’s unhappy second marriage by portraying her as hideous, bellicose, and unfaithful:

An old thin raw-bon’d Priest . . . combat[ed] his Wife, who buffeted him again, and seem’d to be the Agressor . . . [“] [My wife] rumbles in Verses of . . . strange things . . . She vents her Passion in Love-Verses and Dialogues of Clarinda and Daphnis; a pitiful Lawyer’s-Clerk was a long time her Alexis, and there was Love-Letters and Verses printed [“].77

Manley’s unflattering portrayal uncovers Alexis’s ignoble identity and construes Egerton’s marital difficulties as a food fight between a monstrously aggressive woman and her henpecked spouse. The poetry itself provides Manley with the details she needs to vilify Egerton, who suffers for her literary transparency. The satire violently abuses the poet—“He had tore a piece of her Ear from her Head, which made the Blood run down”—and describes her as an unbearable “Black-a-more, flat-nos’d, blobber-lipp’d; . . . her Teeth rotten, and sweet as the Grave.”78 Manley treats Egerton as mere animal flesh, bestializing her and challenging her right to humanity and respect. She racializes the poet to make her foreign, evidence of a degenerate humanity corrupt in both body and gender. Going further than just mocking the poet and her poems, Manley depicts Egerton as unfit for English respectability.

In works such as *The Lady’s Paquet Broke Open* (1707) and *Memoirs of Europe* (1710), Manley also uses the details of Egerton’s life as embarrassing fodder for satire. Her father, her poetry, her expressions of love, and her marriages become in Manley’s hands evidence of the outrageous audacity of revealing oneself to the world.79 Egerton’s poetry becomes a key to identifying her in the satires, and the very life she tried to authorize gives evidence against her as Manley undermines it with ridicule and violence. Nonetheless, by even including Egerton in *The New Atalantis* and other works, Manley acknowledges the public value
of her pursuit of personal dignity by placing her within the roman a clef, a genre normally reserved for satirizing famous or politically well-connected figures and developed in the poetry and prose of English writers such as John Dryden and Behn. Manley derives some of her authority from this tradition of public satire, but the force of her attack more immediately depends on the autobiographical details that made Egerton recognizable as an individual. Her satirical strategy relies on these personal details that are only available in the poetry, thus reinscribing the poet’s pursuit of authority within literary history.

Egerton was not alone in reimagining how personal authority might claim a role in literary history. The details of common lives were becoming increasingly popular items of attention in the early eighteenth century, and the way Egerton redirects traditional forms of authority into self-authority seems to represent a changing perception of the value of everyday life. As J. Paul Hunter has argued, personal exposure was an emerging literary phenomenon that valued the “public sharing of the intimate.” Egerton’s prose-writing contemporaries were also beginning to dignify and give authority to their recorded lives, most notably John Dunton in his The Life and Errors of John Dunton (1704), which proclaims his “New Life” that, he imagines, his readers are in “Suspense” to discover. Dunton’s assurance of his “New Life’s” authority and the urgency of his self-advertisement remind us that Egerton was not alone in her autobiographical strategies, although for women the risks were higher, as Manley’s hostility shows.

Even if the autobiographical information Dunton and Egerton incorporated was not factual, self-writing brought a dignity usually reserved for the great to their ordinary lives. The structure of authority Egerton produced in her poetry ascribed literary dignity to personal life and signified an idea of self-possession that a woman could reserve for herself without fleeing from the public. Increased attention to the personal in the eighteenth century, most noticeable in the novel but also apparent in poetry, continued to build authority, and earn discredit, in ways remarkably similar to Egerton’s. Turning one’s life into literature may not seem unusual to modern readers, but in her time, Egerton’s autobiographical poetry presented a challenge to literary traditions and readers who were unaccustomed to giving respect to an unknown woman’s claim to her own life.

NOTES

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1. Margaret Ezell’s Writing Women’s Literary History (Baltimore, 1993) offers an extended critique of this practice.


4. I refer to Sarah Egerton as “Egerton” throughout this article. Because of the autobiographical nature of her poetry, I also use “Egerton” to refer to the speakers in her poems, as other scholars have.


6. Jeslyn Medoff usefully situates Egerton’s “encoded autobiography” in the context of modern feminism by discussing her “active position vis a vis the patriarchy” and her call to “women to assert their ‘Rights’” (“‘My Daring Pen’: The Autobiographical Poetry of Sarah Fyge [Field, Egerton], [1668–1723],” [PhD diss., Rutgers, 1994], 9, 16, 64, and passim). While I find Medoff’s interpretations valuable, my approach to Egerton differs from hers by emphasizing how the personal dignity and authority of her poetry develops separately from a general critique of the subordination of women.


13. Condescension towards personal voice has been a recurring problem in studies of women’s writing that reduce it to a “product of ‘intuition’ rather than art” (Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*, 20).


15. For example, Katherine Philips’s *Poems by the Incomparable K. P.* (London, 1664), Lady Mary Chudleigh’s *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1703), and Jane Barker’s *Poetical Recreations* (London, 1688) establish literary authority—the “what is important” element of their poetry—by appealing to forms of authority (royalty, community, reason and its philosophical history) that overshadow the specific experiences of the author, although Barker occasionally values the dignity of autobiography in a way similar to Egerton.


18. Taylor explains how valuations of ordinary life took place through changes in religious, marital, and labor practices (223, 226).


20. Lanser, focusing on novels, points out that “once they are identified as discursive ‘I’s’ . . . , women become ‘individuals,’ occupying the position of privileged-class men,” but Egerton’s personal voice predates the Enlightenment democratization of the “I” that allows women to legitimize later first-person literature (Fictions of Authority, 26).


22. Locke, Two Treatises, 250.

23. Locke, Two Treatises, 245.

24. Williamson, 165; and Medoff, 59.


26. For Egerton as a defender of women as general, political subjects, see Backscheider, 68–69; and Medoff, 56.

27. Ezell, Writing Women’s, 61.


31. For women’s autobiographical selves as alternatives to identities imposed by history or culture, see Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves,” The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill, 1988), 34–62.

32. Anne Killigrew’s “A Pastoral Dialogue” praises the security and insight that reason can give to anyone, male or female (Poems by Mrs. Anne Killigrew [London, 1686], 70). Chudleigh consistently asserts women’s right to reason, and in her introduction to her Poems on Several Occasions she defends reason as the cure for personal troubles (A5).


35. Suvir Kaul reminds us that poetics always invokes various tropes of authority, “some sanctioned by contemporary cultural usage, others anchored in literary-historical practices” (Thomas Gray and Literary Authority: A Study in Ideology and Poetics [Stanford, 1992], 246).


38. Finch, “To the Honorable The Lady Worsley at Long-Leate,” 53, 52.


42. Chudleigh, 2.

43. Chudleigh, 7, 9, 13.

44. Medoff also notes this general tension (73).


46. Killigrew, 6–10; Chudleigh, 41.

47. In contrast, E. S. Rowe’s “Upon King William’s passing the Boyn” includes the poet only as a humble supplicant and projects authority solely onto a militant monarch (*Poems on several occasions* [London, 1696], in EEBO, 30, 31).

48. Kathryn King reads these final verses as stressing the Queen’s authority (“Political Verse and Satire: Monarchy, Party and Female Political Agency,” *Women and Poetry, 1660–1750*, ed. Sarah Prescott and David E. Shuttleton [New York, 2003], 203–22, 214). However, the “I” who “dare[s] to act,” and whom other subjects are challenged to emulate, actually usurps the authority of the queen in this couplet.

49. Medoff also notes how commonly love and poetry merge in Egerton’s work (26, 70, 86).

50. For the history of the conflict between father and daughter, see Medoff, 48, 154.

51. Egerton’s acknowledgment of her single-authorship distinguishes her from women, especially those writing devotional verse, who “did not seem to be troubled by questions of authorship. . . . These were not authors announced with a flourish of trumpets at the front entrance of the literary establishment” (Wilcox, 450).

52. E. S. Rowe, *Poems on several occasions*, 6 (second pagination). Jennifer Keith discusses the relationship between women poets and their Muses at length (*Poetry and the Feminine from Behn to Cowper* [Newark, Del., 2005], 51–79).


54. Medoff, 70.


58. Eliza’s Babes, or *The virgins-offering* (London, 1652), in EEBO, title page.


60. Hunter notes how unusual it was in this period for anyone to recount his or her follies publicly (“The Insistent I,” 33). For the unnaturalness of a woman writing about her individuality, see Staves, 127. Narrative theory also recognizes the literary ramifications of this historical situation (Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*, 19, 142).

61. Staves restricts Egerton’s personal presence in her love poetry to the general type of the traditional, pining lover (138). Backscheider links Egerton to later women writers who resisted love’s conventions but sidesteps the question of what makes her earlier, autobiographical wrestling with romantic love important (99).

62. Rambuss, 78.


64. My argument about Egerton’s love poetry might also usefully be applied to some poems in Barker’s earlier *Poetical Recreations*, e.g., “To Dr. R. S. my indifferent Lover, who complain’d of my Indifference”; “To my Friend Exillus on his persuading me to Marry Old Damon”; and “To My Unkind Strephon.” However, Barker’s epistles to men and deference towards the Cambridge writers with whom she was published distinguishes her collection as a whole from Egerton’s later publication.

65. A translation of Eustache Le Noble from 1701 suggests that Egerton’s contemporaries saw sympathy as a strategy for winning allies: “We must make it our Constant Study, to Second and Strengthen the Sympathy, which we find in some, and to Surmount the Indifferency or Aversion, which Nature has implanted in others” (*The art of prudent behaviour . . .* [London, 1701], in ECCO, 8).

66. For contemporary ideas of physical and emotional sympathy, see George Cheyne, *A new theory of continu’d fevers* (London, 1701), in ECCO, 16; and John Flavel, *The whole works of the Reverend Mr. John Flavel* (London, 1701), in ECCO, 206. John Norris refers to the “mutual Connexion or Natural Sympathy between these two Substances Soul and Body,” although he ultimately dismisses it (*Discourses upon several divine subjects* [London, 1701], in ECCO, 33, 206). For a critical examination of the relationship between Cheyne’s nerve-theory and sensibility/sympathy, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), 6–15.

67. H. M. Herwig published a treatise explaining sympathy as a natural affection between like things (*The art of curing sympathetically* [London, 1700], in EEBO, 21 and passim). Cheyne apparently regarded this belief as widespread enough to specifically counter “the absurd Metaphorick Terms of Sympathy” (34).


69. For the history of these characters and relationships in Egerton’s poetry, see Me-doff, 86–87.

70. E. S. Rowe, *Poems on several occasions*, 2.

71. My emphasis on Egerton’s use of feminine and masculine voice, which also occurs in “Satyr against the Muses,” has some affinities with Lanser’s work on gender and narratology (see “Toward a Feminist Narratology,” *Style* 20 [1986]: 341–63, and “Queer-

72. Henry Pierce “was apparently unresponsive to Fyge’s advances” (Medoff, 106).


74. As Jonathan Culler explains, apostrophe privileges discursive time, which the poet controls, over empirical time (*The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* [Ithaca, 1981], 150).


76. Medoff discusses their dispute at length (141–67).


78. Manley, 158–59.

79. Manley’s treatment of Egerton underscores Dorothy Mermin’s observation that “to send forth one’s poems [was] first to adorn one’s body, and then to be stripped naked” (“Women Becoming Poets: Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Anne Finch,” *ELH* 57, no. 2 [1990]: 335–55, 340).

80. Hunter, “The Insistent I,” 26