M.R., *The Mothers Counsell or, Liue within Compasse. Being the last Will and Testament to her dearest Daughter* (London: John Wright [1630]; STC 20583)

The Mothers Counsell or, Liue within Compasse. *Being the last Will and Testament to her dearest Daughter* is a quasi-anonymous treatise whose author is identified only by the initials M.R. The text is generally counted among a group of early seventeenth-century mothers’ advice books, manuals which aim to offer their addressees rules and guidelines to lead a virtuous and morally impeccable life. 1 Nothing is known of the author whom the initials M.R. stand for. In fact, while the manual is listed in several reference works and anthologies of early modern women’s writing 2 and included in the Women Writers Project electronic collection, 3 there has been some critical debate about the author’s gender, with some critics voicing doubt about M.R. being a female author. 4 However, I have so far been unable to find any information as to what evidence these doubts are based on.

The issue of the author’s gender is complicated further if one considers that *The Mothers Counsell* is often treated as a companion piece to a father’s advice manual addressed to his son, *Keepe within Compasse: or, The worthy Legacie of a wise Father to his beloued Sonne* (STC 14900 ), which was first entered into the Stationers’ Register in 1619 and attributed to a certain John Trundle. 5 Both works were assigned to the same printer, John Wright, in 1630, and in addition to the compass motif, boast striking similarities in terms of language and tone. 6 Obviously, this does not necessarily have any bearing on the question of the authorship of either text. M.R. could have been a female writer supplementing the father’s advice book with a feminine point of view, a male author doing the same, albeit from an assumed feminine perspective, or even the author of *Keepe within compasse* himself posing as a female writer, either to lend his work added authority and authenticity, or to avoid assuming the demeaning speaking position of a woman. Of course, none of these questions can be answered with any certainty.

Hence, as the manual is treated as a female-authored piece by important scholarly works and, most importantly, since M.R.’s focus on her daughter and her preoccupation with chastity, though socially inscribed, seem feminine and motherly to me, 7 I will largely assume the manual’s female authorship in this introduction.

As its subtitle – *Liue within Compasse* – indicates, M.R.’s advice book is organised around the symbol of the compass. M.R. addresses her *Mothers counsell* first ‘to thy dearest Daughter’, and goes on to include in her dedication ‘all the Women in the World’, setting up her text as her ‘last Will and Testament’ (sig. A4v ). Written in a mixture of poetry and prose, it comprises guidelines on such diverse subjects as outward appearance, conduct, temper, and morality. The advice and admonitions M.R. directs at her daughter are structured around the central idea that a person’s behaviour can be either ‘within Compasse’ or ‘out of Compasse’, i.e. in accordance with or in opposition to the socio-culturally acknowledged virtues and moral principles. Throughout the manual, M.R. remains firmly in keeping with the conventional expectations of virtuous femininity that the patriarchal ideal of chaste, silent, and obedient womanhood, propagated in numerous early modern male-authored conduct books, sermons, and religious treatises, demands. The use of the compass as a title motif is based on the now obsolete, figurative usage of the word, as denoting ‘measure, proper

6. Elaine Beilin quotes just one example of ‘consistent echoes in language’ that exist between the two texts (Beilin, p. 334, n. 27).
7. Other critics take the same view (Roxanne Harde, personal e-mail, 22 January 2009).
8. Roxanne Harde fills in this word, which is cut off from the original title page (in Ostovich and Sauer, p. 115).
9. M.R. later repeats this advice in a slightly amended fashion, directly addressing her daughter: ‘Behold thy selfe in a Looking-glass, and if thou appeare beautifull, doe such things as becomes thy beauteous; but if thou seeme foule, then perfore with good manners the dutie which thy face wanteth’ (sig. C4v).
10. The idea that one and the same thing might seem to be two distinct entities, depending on the onlooker’s perspective, was hugely fascinating for early modern people – hence the popularity of anamorphic pictures at the time.
12. To give but a few examples, Galenic medical theory viewed health as the state in which the four humours are in perfect balance. According to humoral theory, the four different humours should ideally exist in equal parts in a human being. In a healthy body there would be humoral equilibrium, while disease is
propotion, regularity'. By implication, the expressions 'within' or 'out of compass' meant, in early modern English, 'within or beyond the bounds of moderation' respectively (OED). The book's title page shows a pictorial version of such a morally charged compass. In the centre of the emblem, a mother is handing a book to her daughter; with their quiet poise and unobtrusive demeanour that is expressed in the picture, they embody the 'modesty' that is inscribed as a motto over their heads. The first of two concentric circles around this image is divided into four sections, designating four principles of virtue: 'Chastitie', 'Temperance', 'Beautie', and 'Humilitie'. The second circle names the favourable effect of each of these virtuous qualities: 'Chastity of body is the key to Relig[i]on', 'Temperance is the mother of [Virtue 8]', 'Beauty is a woman's golden Crowne', 'Humilitie is a womans best Armor'. Listed outside the circle in the corners of the page, 'out of compasse', are the corresponding vices that result if the virtues are disregarded: 'Wantonesse', 'Madnesse', 'Odiousnesse', and 'Pride'. The manual's structure follows these oppositions, offering commentary on each virtue and juxtaposing it with warnings of the corresponding vice.

The text gives illuminating insight into early modern subjectivity and the interface of selfhood and authorship and its inflections with gender. Elaborating how the moral equilibrium associated with the compass motif can be achieved, M.R. appears to wholly conform to patriarchal prescriptions of acceptable feminine behaviour. At the same time, she often manages to circumvent these prescriptions by exposing their inherent ambiguities. For instance, she undermines the general prohibition against women's speech by claiming that there are cases in which failure to speak can, in fact, be harmful: 'Forbearance of speech is most dangerous when necessitie requireth to speake' (sig. C5v).

Throughout her manual, M.R. emphasises the need for continual self-scrutiny. In a particularly insightful passage, she equates the self with the text, and self-reflection with reading, referring to 'that text of thy selfe' (sig. A7v). It is crucial to note that this analogy occurs in a distinctly negative context, as M.R. warns her daughter of the potentially detrimental influence of others: 'Corrupt company is more infectious than corrupt aire; therefore let women be advised in their choice; for that text of thy selfe that could never bee expounded; thy companion shall as thy commentarie, lay open to

the result of imbalance. Similarly, humanist educational theory sought to situate knowledge acquisition in-between the aristocratic notion of natural, inherited gifts and the implications of the market-driven accumulation of capital; the scientific culture developed by Francis Bacon engaged in the project of replacing Scholastic disputation with the discursive negotiation of a philosophical and scientific compromise; and Elizabeth I's re-introduction of Protestantism is generally considered as a successful attempt to secure a peaceful Reformation in England via the proverbial Anglican compromise.
themselves in all things’ (sig. B6\v). ‘Self-love’ and knowledge of the self are engaged in a struggle for predominance; a conflict that is particularly vicious because the concepts are, in effect, mutually exclusive. Self-knowledge is possible only if the self is acknowledged as an entity in need of curtailment; it is inconceivable to know one’s self and to regard it as worthy of praise. As such, M.R.’s understanding of self is co-dependent on her persistent devaluation of selfhood.

In this context, M.R. presents the mirror as part of the quest for self-understanding that she advises her addressees to pursue. Observing oneself in the mirror is part of the exercise of deciphering the self: ‘Let every woman behold her selfe in a Looking-glassse, and if shee appeare beautifull, let her doe such things as become her beautie, but if shee seeme foule, then let her make good with good manners the beautie which her face lacketh’ (sigs B4\v–B5\v). Rather than quoting examples of virtuous or improper reactions of beautiful females to their mirror images, which was the more conventional strategy in the early modern period, M.R. prompts her daughter to examine her own attitudes according to an abstract catalogue of behaviour. Of course, whether ‘shee appeare beautifull’, and what ‘such things as become her beautie’ consist of, is not entirely left open to interpretation, as the wider context of the manual suggests. By no means have conventional expectations and religious injunctions become irrelevant; yet they are supplemented with an active engagement with the self. The use of the mirror as a tool for objectifying the self and thus judging and shaping it from an observer’s angle hints at the reflexive self-consciousness that emerged in the early modern period.

In order to achieve a self-reflexive identity which is in tune with conventional expectations of femininity, M.R. appears to be determined to keep at bay anxieties about dissimulation and pretence. She draws a straightforward equation between genuineness and virtue, which she exemplifies with regard to women’s attempts to alter their natural appearance with the help of ‘artificiall painting’ (sig. C2\v): ‘A painted womans face is a liver smeared with carrion, her beauty baits of dead worms, her lookes nets, and her words inticing charmes. An unconstant faire woman may bee likened to Prasiteles Picture which hee made of Flora, before which if one stood directly, it seemed to weepe; if on the left side, it seemed to

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With her emphasis on self-reflexivity, M.R. also engages in the early modern discourse of privacy and solitude. While privacy was largely conceptualised as a masculine privilege and prerequisite for masculine subjectivity, women’s pursuit of solitariness was frequently devalued as potentially conducive to loss of virtue. This mistrust of female solitude is also expressed by M.R.: ‘That kind of fantasticke contemplation which tends to solitariness, is but a glorious title to proud idlenesse’ (sig. C6\v). Being exclusively preoccupied with the self entails the danger of developing excessive pride: ‘Pride is always accompanied with Folly, Audacitie, Rashnesse, Impudencie, and Solitarinesse: as if one would say that the proud woman is abandoned of all the world, ever attributing that to her selfe which is not, having much more boast than matter of worth’ (sig. C6\v).

In order to counter the threats of exaggerated self-veneration, M.R. introduces a recurrent motif which links her concerns with balance and virtuous moderation: the idea of the ‘golden meane’, which is, of course, a direct function of the compass motif that structures her manual. Developing her thoughts on female beauty, the author abstracts a general theory of the ‘golden meane’ as the central prerequisite for a satisfied life: ‘Let no woman strive to excell in beautie, but hold the golden meane, which is the true mediocritie and best part of any action, and must be used in all things: it containeth the full effects of prudence touching government, and tranquilitie concerning the soule. [...] To live on the mountains, and have too much heat, is to be Sunne-burnt; to live in the valley and have too little, is barren; to hold the meane is ever most fruitfull’ (sig. B8\v; emphasis added). Compromising and balancing out conflicting impulses is here presented as a workable feminine strategy that effects personal satisfaction and a successful life. Excess, by contrast, would work to the woman’s detriment. Significantly, the ‘golden meane’ is not a specifically feminine ideal in the early modern period, but one of the most pervasive injunctions in the culture — which, of course, might suggest that for a woman to strive for the ‘golden meane’ is an inherently conservative venture. Indeed, the pursuit of the ‘golden meane’ is part of a general cultural preoccupation with moderation and avoidance of excess that establishes a set of ideals in support of the dominant culture. The ‘golden meane’ has its roots in the quest for religiously inflected self-knowledge that had pervaded Western, Christian culture since the Middle Ages. Consequently, the need to create and uphold balance so as not to fall prey to extremes is an oft-met feature in a variety of early modern discourses — from medicine to education to religion — and is prominent in various areas of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought.
In spite of the ubiquity of the motif, however, M.R.’s text provides it with a distinctly feminine dimension. Feminine moderation occurs exclusively in the guise of chastity. In tune with conventional conduct literature addressed to women, the section of M.R.’s pamphlet that centres on ‘temperance’ conceptualises the latter as ‘an enemy to lust’ (sig. B1v), a virtue that ‘calleth a womun backe from all grosse affects and carnall appetites’ (sig. B1v). Hence, for women to pursue the ‘golden meane’ also implies their outward adherence to patriarchal norms. At first glance, this makes the concept an inherently problematic one: there is no place ‘outside’ the patriarchal order if a woman is to stay ‘within compasse’.

Conversely, the types of behaviour that M.R. considers to be ‘out of compasse’ and hence detrimental to a woman’s moral impeccability are consistently aligned with lack of modesty and restraint. For instance, ‘wantonnesse’, the moral and structural opposite of chastity, is described in terms of all-devouring monstrosity: ‘Wantonnesse when it turnes to lust, in a womans bosome, is a desire against reason, a furious and unbridled appetite, which killeth all good motions in her minde, and leaveth no place for virtue’ (sig. A6v). Straying from the ‘golden meane’ — that is, succumbing to passion — is not merely a temporary and reversible aberration, but destroys virtue altogether. Surpassing the bounds of virtue ultimately leads to self-destruction, clearly conceptualised as an outgrowth of excess: ‘Wantonnesse maketh a woman covet beyond her power, to act beyond her nature, and to die before her time’ (sig. A7r). As such, it results from the failure to carry through the radical self-scrutiny and to achieve the self-mastery that are the foundations of virtuous selfhood.

In a sense, then, the ‘golden meane’ entails both self-curtailment and stable, coherent subjectivity — limiting though it may be, it allows for a workable, liveable sense of self. Possibly, we can take M.R.’s compass of virtues and her injunction to pursue the ‘golden meane’ as paradigmatic for early modern women’s subjectivities more generally: while she adheres to the patriarchal imperatives of ‘Chastitie’, ‘Temperance’, ‘Beautie’, and ‘Humilitie’, she simultaneously uses these constraints as enabling conditions and supplements them with strategies that promise agency.

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