ENGL 374-502 Women Writers  
TTh 2:20-3:35  
Dr. Margaret Ezell

History of literature by women in English, from the mid sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century; study of a variety of genres with particular attention to the significance of gender in the racial, social, sexual and cultural contexts of women writing in English. A KLPC (Core curriculum course: Language, Philosophy, and Cultural Foundational).

The survey starts with a remarkable and extraordinary person, Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603). By looking at her speeches, letters, and poetry as she out-maneuvered Parliament’s plans that she marry, we will have a starting point to consider the themes of who has power and authority, and how are they used by women that will continue throughout the course. We’ll explore the interconnected world of elite aristocratic women’s manuscript writings in the early 17th century, including those by the Countess of Pembroke and her niece Lady Mary Wroth, but we will also read one of the early 17th century’s bestselling print publications by a London housewife, Dorothy Leigh’s The Mother’s Blessing. We will read early proto-feminist writings, part of the querelle des femmes, or “the woman question,” where women actively debated education and social roles and trace the lines of argument that developed through the period.

The women we read disrupt traditional views of literary history about who was reading what and who was writing and why. While many women compiled manuscript volumes of recipes, advice, and devotional writings for their families, Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, claimed she only wrote for public fame. By the mid-seventeenth century, women writers were producing volumes of fiction, drama, and verse involving natural science and philosophy; by the end of the seventeenth century Aphra Behn and other “female wits” were writing professionally for cash, creating roles for the new female actresses on the Restoration stage. Other women writers had more complex agendas, such as Phyllis Wheatley, a Boston slave and the first known African-American woman poet to publish her poetry, and Unca Eliza Winkfield, a native American, who was credited a popular novel, The Female American. Finally, we will conclude the survey with the woman whose name is most familiar to modern readers for her proto-feminist writings: Mary Wollstonecraft, author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

Written assignments, conditions permitting, may include several short response papers, archival exercises working with manuscript and rare book materials, and group research presentations.