

**Inventing the “Virgo Angla”:  
Power, Patronage, and Self-Representation in the Poetry of Elizabeth Jane Weston**

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**Abstract:** An individual's self-presentation can leverage their place in the economy of social power: so suggest the patronage letters of Elizabeth Jane Weston (1582-1612), a young Neo-Latin poet in the court of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II. This paper examines how Weston adopted the persona of "Virgo Angla" ("The British Maiden") and used conventionalized rhetorical techniques to navigate the power dynamics of patronage in the Neo-Latin Republic of Letters. Close readings of Weston's letters explore how her self-portrayal was a critical ingredient in her appeals to patronage: Weston portrayed herself in terms that emphasized her youth and gender, which she deployed in strategic modesty tropes and doubled discourses throughout her oeuvre. Ultimately, these close readings examine how Weston used her literary self-presentation to successfully play the patronage game, underscoring the notion that personal branding has currency in social power dynamics.

## **Inventing the “Virgo Angla”:**

### **Power, Patronage, and Self-Representation in the Poetry of Elizabeth Jane Weston**

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the name “Virgo Angla” grew to prominence in Europe’s Republic of Letters (Cheney and Hosington xvi-xvii). The epithet, meaning “The English Maiden,” belonged to Elizabeth Jane Weston (1581-1612), a young Neo-Latin poet whose family had strong ties to the courts of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II. Weston was born in England in 1581, but was raised in Bohemia and would spend her life there, as her stepfather, Edward Kelley, was employed by Rudolf II (Cheney and Hosington xii). Kelley seems to have initially enjoyed Rudolf II’s favour: sought by the ruler for his alchemical studies, Kelley was knighted by Rudolf II in 1589 (Bassnett 3). His time of prosperity would be short-lived, but Kelley ensured that Weston and her brother received quality educations even when the family fell into financial troubles (Cheney and Hosington xii). In 1591, the family’s fortunes took a turn for the worse when Kelley, who at this point had a reputation as somewhat of a charlatan (Bassnett 3), was arrested after killing one of Rudolf II’s courtiers in a duel (Cheney 120). He was imprisoned several times over the next six years, and died in prison in 1597, leaving his disgraced family destitute (Cheney and Hosington xiii).

In an effort to save herself and her mother from further economic decline, Weston began writing Latin poems and patronage letters, seeking the support of patrons in Rudolf II’s court and farther abroad.<sup>1</sup> Many of these poems implored their addressees to intercede on Weston’s behalf with Rudolf II; others focussed more on developing Weston’s budding literary talents and on expanding her literary network. Weston’s literary self-presentation plays a critical role in both

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases, Weston may have “inherited” contacts from Kelley’s patronage network.

kinds of letters. Early on, Weston (“Westonia” in its Latinised form) began styling herself as “Virgo Angla.” Weston used the name, with its connotations of youth, innocence, and femininity, to strategically structure her approach to potential patrons. Thanks to Weston’s letters and the Virgo Angla persona, Weston became well-known across Europe, and, although Weston and her mother never regained their confiscated property, Weston’s patronage connections ensured that the women were adequately cared for.<sup>2</sup>

Many of Weston’s patronage letters take the form of Latin poetry; in this paper, I refer to them as “poetic epistles.” These poetic epistles feature prominently in Weston’s oeuvre, which she first published in 1602 under the title *Poëmata*, then later revised, expanded, and republished as *Parthenica* in 1608.<sup>3</sup> Both texts are entirely in Latin; this paper uses an English version of *Parthenica* translated by Donald Cheney and Brenda M. Hosington.<sup>4</sup> *Parthenica* is divided into three books, whose contents range from poetic patronage epistles (Book I), to elegies and occasional poems (Book II), and to prose patronage letters (Book III). Whereas the latter deal with practical, business-like matters of patronage and Weston’s literary career,<sup>5</sup> the poetic epistles of Book I use formal literary language, imagery, and rhetorical conventions to build and

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<sup>2</sup> Weston’s financial situation certainly seems to have become more secure after her marriage to Johannes Leo, a lawyer, in 1603 (Cheney and Hosington xiii).

<sup>3</sup> *Parthenica* appears to have been more widely read than its predecessor (Cheney and Hosington xxvii), and its expansion includes contributions from other writers alongside Weston’s work. Although most of these works are letters or poetic epistles written to or about Weston and are relevant to the greater context of each book, some were clearly unwelcome additions. A handwritten note in the margins of the British Library’s copy of *Parthenica* indicates Weston’s displeasure at the inclusion of George Carolides’ poems (I.50) in Book I. Similarly, a manuscript addition to the flyleaf of the same edition further indicates her frustration at some edits that were made without her permission, and at the inclusion of the Catalogue of Learned Maidens at the end of her text (Weston 304-307).

<sup>4</sup> See Cheney and Hosington’s *Elizabeth Jane Weston: Collected Writings* (2000). As Weston’s poems and letters do not have conventional titles, I refer to them in this paper by the numbering system that Cheney and Hosington use in their collection. Each poem is assigned a Roman and Arabic numeral to respectively indicate in which of *Parthenica*’s books a poem is located, and where it is located within that book. So, for example, I.3 is the third poem in Book I.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in the prose letters of Book III, Weston requests and sends out copies of poems (see III.5), corresponds with her editor, Georg Martin von Baldhoven, about collecting the poems that would eventually become *Parthenica* (see III.21-32), and on one occasion, anxiously corresponds with a contact in the British court about how her poems were received there (see III.3).

maintain Weston's patronage relationships. For that reason, this paper focusses on close readings of several poetic epistles from *Parthenica's* Book I.

Weston's literary self-presentation was critical to the success of her poetic epistles, as it helped her leverage the power dynamics of patronage that structured the Republic of Letters. This paper begins by briefly examining how patronage operated as an economy of social capital within the Republic of Letters, and then goes on to examine how Weston's literary self-presentation helped her manipulate those power dynamics. Throughout her oeuvre, Weston uses modesty tropes to shape the *Virgo Angla's* connotations of youth and femininity and thereby create compelling patronage appeals. Close readings examine how Weston structures her modest, even self-deprecating self-representations around doubled discourses and *sprezzatura*, a literary dissimulation device commonly used by early modern writers, in order to strategically solicit patronage, advance her literary career, and ultimately create space for herself as a woman writer in a male-dominated society. Weston's poetic epistles were deeply invested in gaining her social capital: the degree to which her letters succeeded points to the relevance of rhetorical strategy as a tool for navigating social power dynamics.

### **Patronage and the Republic of Letters**

The Republic of Letters was an epistolary network of intellectuals that spread across Europe between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was transnational and interdisciplinary in its scope: scholars, politicians, artists, and other thinkers from all over Europe interacted with each other through the written word. Historian Arjan Van Dixhoorn describes the Republic of Letters as a series of overlapping, interconnected networks that linked individuals and institutions across great distances (424). Letters were the Republic's main mode of communication, and served as a

means of holding conversations, engaging in debate, and building collegial relationships (Pal 17-20).<sup>6</sup> These letters helped bridge a distinction between the public and private spheres (Scott xx-xxi): formerly a closed and private mode of communication, letters sent in the Republic were often distributed to a wider range of readers, and were sometimes published, as in Weston's case (Scott xxi).

Weston's decision to write in Latin helped her tap into the international networks of the Republic of Letters, as it was both an international language and the language of scholarship at that time. In theory, at least, the international status of Latin allowed participants to overcome linguistic, political, and ideological boundaries (Cheney and Hosington xv). Weston's international epistolary network bears witness to this: she exchanged Latin letters with members of the court at Prague, as well as with individuals across the German-speaking world, the Netherlands, England, France, and Italy (Hosington, "Respublica" 301-304). That Weston corresponded in Latin and, to the best of our knowledge, only with men is, moreover, telling: the Republic of Letters was a predominantly male environment.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, although Weston was fluent in several vernacular languages, her use of Latin allowed her to enter the predominantly male realm of scholarly discourse (Schleiner and Schleiner 200).<sup>8</sup> Renaissance literature scholars Louise Schleiner and Winfried Schleiner note that the patronage discourses of

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Scott helpfully describes the Republic of Letters as the "Internet of early modern Europe" (xxi).

<sup>7</sup> When Neo-Latin studies emerged as a scholarly discourse in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were largely thought to have had minimal, if any, roles in the Republic of Letters. Evidence suggesting otherwise has since been found. Current conversations in Early Modern European and Neo-Latin scholarship are exploring how and to what extent women participated in the scholarly and intellectual discourses of the Republic of Letters. Carol Pal's *Republic of Women: The Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century* (2012) and Patricia Pender's *Early Modern Women's Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty* (2012) go in-depth on these issues.

<sup>8</sup> A poem by Paulus Melissus praises Weston for her skill in English, German, Italian, and "Bohemian," as well as Latin (III.46, lines 29-30).

the Republic of Letters were particularly gendered towards male participation, and that Weston's voice as a woman appellant would have been relatively rare, and therefore notable (200).<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, patronage was a key component of the Republic of Letters, as it represented an economy, both in terms of monetary support and soft power, that drove intellectual and courtly discourses throughout the Renaissance. While Renaissance patronage could take many forms and appeared in many contexts, the basic dynamic remained unchanged: intellectuals, writers, artists, alchemists, physicians, and other creative types were supported by the wealth and influence of rich and powerful people – kings, princes, courtiers, high-ranking Church officials, and the like. Both parties often sought to gain prestige, which was usually to patrons' political benefit (Nelson and Zeckhauser 49). Often, patrons would commission a piece of work from their beneficiary. In 1497, for example, Cardinal Jean de Bilhères, a French ambassador to Rome, commissioned Michelangelo to create the *Pietà*, to be installed in the Cardinal's funeral chapel in Saint Peter's Basilica (Goffen 103). The final contract shows that both men benefitted from the arrangement: Michelangelo would be paid 450 ducats to create "...the most beautiful work of marble that exists in Rome today..." (qtd. in Goffen 104), which, as the focal point of Bilhères' chapel, would stand as an extravagant legacy of the Cardinal's influence and wealth. Patronage commissions could also work the other way: hopeful appellants could solicit potential patrons to initiate patronage relationships. One such example is Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564), an imperial apothecary in the employ of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who dedicated his anatomical text *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) to the emperor in hopes of gaining a higher position at court. His strategy worked: Charles V's favourable response saw Vesalius promoted to court physician (Moran 258).

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<sup>9</sup> Schleiner and Schleiner suggest that it was more common for women to be patrons than appellants (200).

Beneficiaries routinely sought out patronage as a means of gaining social capital as well as financial income. In a study on 15<sup>th</sup> century Florentine patronage letters, sociologist Paul D. McLean notes that honour, prestige, and social mobility were also on the line, as well as more practical favours and tangible supports like money, marriages, tax breaks, and legal aid (4). Vesalius' promotion, for example, had the secondary effect of restoring his family's honour – Vesalius came from a long line of court physicians, but had previously been barred from holding any post higher than court apothecary because of his father's illegitimacy (Moran 258). In return for a patron's aid, or sometimes prior to receiving it, as was the case with Vesalius, recipients would often acknowledge patrons in their work: dedicated and commissioned works were common in literary, scientific, and artistic circles.<sup>10</sup> In cases like Vesalius', where a dedication was made prior to receiving a patron's support, the dedication itself operated as an appeal for patronage. In cases where a dedication was made after receiving a patron's support, these dedications served as advertisements of a patron's goodwill and influence. Depending on the circumstances, this could either signal the patron's endorsement of the work and thereby improve its chances of success (Binns 161),<sup>11</sup> or have the effect of boosting the patron's honour and social standing. Art historian Jonathan K. Nelson and economist Richard J. Zeckhauser provide an example of the latter: in the late 1480's, Oliviero Carafa (1430-1511), a diplomat and powerful cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church, commissioned the prominent Florentine painter Filippino Lippi (1457-1504) to paint a chapel Carafa had bought for himself in the Roman

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Oswald Croll (c. 1560-1608), physician, chemist, and alchemist, dedicated his text *Basilica chymica* (1609) to the German prince Christian I of Anhalt-Bernburg in acknowledgement of the prince's financial support (Moran 262). Croll asked Weston to compose a prefatory verse for his book (II.106).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Bartholomew Clerke (c. 1537-1590) dedicated his translation of Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*, translated c. 1606) to Queen Elizabeth I. In a letter to Clerke, Thomas Sackville Lord Buckhurst (1536-1608), who contributed a prefatory letter to the volume, writes that "...no one will dare criticize [Clerke's] translation ... when they know that the work enjoys [the Queen's] favour and good opinion" ( Binns 161).



church Santa Maria sopra Minerva. The project was a bid for prestige; its impressive design, location, and decoration were calculated to bear witness to Carafa's exalted politico-religious status (Nelson and Zeckhauser 39-41).

Since epistolary exchanges were a primary method of developing patronage relationships in the Republic of Letters, an appellant's self-representation in these letters was critical. Self-aware appellants and beneficiaries knew that patronage relationships could be leveraged through the written word, so they used specific rhetorical techniques to strategize how to best appeal to their patron's benevolence. By strategically shaping their own representation in these letters, appellants could have a calculated impact on the outcomes of their patronage requests. McLean cites a letter from Francesco Nardi to Averardo de' Medici,<sup>12</sup> in which Nardi petitions de' Medici for a "reappointment to office" (1). Although the men are not related to each other, Nardi portrays them in a father-son relationship: Nardi opens his letter by stating that he has "...confidence in your [de' Medici's] fatherly assistance" (qtd. in McLean 1). McLean points out that Nardi's letter invents a paternal relationship between the two men to "try to impose fatherly obligations on [de' Medici]" (15), all in the name of trying to convince de' Medici to support him. By manipulating his representation of both his patron and himself, Nardi proposes a relationship in which he is subordinate to his patron, who has a familial-like responsibility towards him. While McLean unfortunately does not say what comes of Nardi's letter, it serves to illustrate that players in the patronage game recognised the potential power of literary self-portrayal: an appellant's self-portrayal was a consciously-used rhetorical tool for leveraging the giving and receiving of tribute which patterned the patronage economy.

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<sup>12</sup> Francesco Nardi is not further identified. It is unclear who exactly Averardo de' Medici was; regardless, the Medici name suggests that this man was wealthy and had strong political connections in Florence.

### Self-representation, Gender, and Youth: Strategizing the Virgo Angla

Weston's search for patronage features as the main theme of her epistolary exchanges, which form a large portion of her oeuvre. Two general 'kinds' of patronage appeals emerge from her poems and letters. In the first, she seeks to lift her family out of the destitution they faced after Kelley's death. These epistles are usually addressed to well-connected political figures, and often portray Weston as a humble, wretched maiden whom "Envy and mad Calumny" (I.9) have condemned to a fate of grief and poverty. These poems usually request the addressee's aid in convincing Rudolf II to restore the property of Weston's family.<sup>13</sup> In her second kind of patronage request, Weston seeks to achieve her literary ambitions. These letters are addressed to a broader range of people: older, established poets figure frequently, as do other intellectuals and artists.<sup>14</sup> In these poems, Weston often styles herself as an ambitious young writer whose difficult life circumstances have crippled her inspiration and talent, but who, once her current lamentable state of affairs passes, will flourish into a skilled poet.<sup>15</sup>

Although two different motivations drive Weston's writing, her self-presentation as "Virgo Angla" is a critical aspect in all her patronage letters. While she only explicitly uses the name once (I.1), she refers to herself throughout her work in terms that flesh out her image as a pure, young, tender-hearted maiden. *Parthenica*'s title announces the Virgo Angla at the earliest possible point in the collection: Cheney and Hosington translate Weston's Latin title

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<sup>13</sup> *Parthenica* begins with four poetic epistles addressed to Rudolf II, begging that he would "Arrange that a sufficient portion of our confiscated goods / be restored for us to be nourished in our misery" (I.3, lines 29-30). When nothing comes of these letters, Weston writes to other political figures in hopes that they will influence Rudolf II in her favour (see, for example, I.9).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Weston's correspondences with Poet Laureate Paulus Melissus reveal that he sent her a laurel (I.21, III.6), which was a form of public academic recognition (Flood 13). On another occasion, Weston's letters to Johannes Heller inquire about his use of the hexameter verse form (I.47-49).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, I.19 and I.21.

(*Parthenicôn*) as “Maidenly Writings” (3), and refer to it in their collection as *Parthenica*.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, in its long form, the title of *Parthenica*’s Book I translates as:

The Maidenly Writings	Parthenicôn
of Elizabeth Jane Weston,	ELISABE-
Most noble Virgin, most eminent poet,	THÆ IOANNÆ WESTONIÆ
fluent in numerous tongues, ... (page 3)	Virginis noblissimæ, poëtriæ flo- rentissimæ, linguarum plurima- run pertissimæ, ... (page 2)

That Weston changed her revised collection’s title from the original *Poëmata* (1602), which simply means “poems,” to *Parthenicôn* (1608) further signals Weston’s emphasis on her status as a young female writer.

Gender and youth feature consistently in Weston’s self-portrayal. Schleiner and Schleiner note that Weston uses specific feminine labels like *puella*, *parvula*, and *orphana*, among others, to style herself as “a little orphan girl, handmaiden to mighty patrons” (185).<sup>17</sup> Each of these words have connotations of youth, femininity, and low or subordinate status, and imbue the *Virgo Angla* with a sense of meekness, innocence, and wholesomeness that make her tragic circumstances just that much more pitiable. I.3, for example, is an epistolary poem that Weston ends by portraying herself as an “orphaned Virgin” (line 37). The poem is one of several that Weston writes to Rudolf II to plead her case and implore him to return her family’s property. Throughout the poem, she lists her troubles: the unmentioned but heavily implied death of

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<sup>16</sup> The difference in meaning between the words “Parthenicôn” and “Parthenica” is purely grammatical: *Parthenicôn* is the genitive plural form of *Parthenica*. Cheney and Hosington’s use of the latter as the title of Part I in their collection of Weston’s work is an editorial decision on their part (Part II is titled “Other works by Weston not in *Parthenica*”).

<sup>17</sup> According to William Whitaker’s *Words* website, “*puella*” means “girl,” “maiden,” “sweetheart,” and “slave girl.” “*Parvula*” means “very small,” “very young,” or “unimportant,” and Weston uses it in its feminine form. “*Orphana*” means “orphan girl.”

Edward Kelley has left Weston and her mother “with sorrow and destitution” (line 16), and they are dependent on the goodwill of others to keep them alive (lines 19-20). After listing her troubles and invoking Rudolf II as the means to her rescue, Weston concludes the poem by referring to herself as an “orphaned Virgin.” Addressing Rudolf II directly, Weston writes, “As you [Rudolf II] are gracious to all, be so when an orphaned Virgin / prays...” (lines 37-38). The image is one of vulnerability and weakness – as if being a young, orphaned, and virginal woman makes Weston’s circumstances, which are already presented as being quite severe, even more worthy of Rudolf II’s aid and attention.

Weston’s self-description as a vulnerable “orphaned Virgin,” however, is not quite so straightforward when read in the context of Weston’s larger oeuvre. Weston’s description as “orphan” refers to Kelley’s death, which left Weston without the provision of a father. With his death and the subsequent seizure of her family’s property, Weston and her mother found themselves destitute. Their survival was suddenly dependent on the support of friends and patrons: “And even the living air we still breathe as paupers / is loaned to us, the gift of an outsider’s hand” (lines 19-20).<sup>18</sup> In the context of Weston’s other patronage letters, though, we learn that Weston was not completely without means. Some of Weston’s patronage appeals were successful: a poem to Heinrich von Pisnitz, a distant relation to Kelley and deputy to Rudolf II’s Chancellor, reveals that he held a name day feast in Weston’s honour and provided for her and her mother “as a parent would” (I.8, line 4).<sup>19</sup> With patrons like von Pisnitz stepping into the fatherly role of provider on Weston’s behalf, her status as “orphan” is somewhat mitigated.

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<sup>18</sup> Cheney and Hosington explain in a footnote that “outsider” presumably means someone who is not part of Weston’s immediate family (9), i.e. a patron.

<sup>19</sup> “Parent” here refers to Kelley – to avoid reminding her readers of her relation to the highly-disliked Kelley, Weston does not refer to him by name in her letters. In I.8, then, line 4 strengthens the parent image in which Weston casts von Pisnitz: not only has he taken on a parent-like role by helping her, he has taken on *Kelley’s* role as father-figure.

Moreover, Weston's correspondence with physician Oswald Croll reveals that she sent her mother's serving-woman to him when the woman was suffering from headaches (II.105). The fact that Weston's mother had a serving woman suggests that their poverty was not of the penniless, on-the-verge-of-death destitution that lower classes would have experienced in the Westons' situation. In short, Weston was not quite the destitute waif that the "orphaned Virgin" image might initially suggest. Weston and her mother certainly struggled – Weston frequently expresses grief, depression, and trauma in the wake of Kelley's death and the seizure of their property – but they were not completely without means. The "orphaned Virgin," while vulnerable, retains a degree of respectability, and maintains a modicum of status that enables her to reach out to her network of well-connected and well-to-do patrons.

In that case, Weston's description as the "orphaned Virgin" is more strategic than literal. It embraces the complicated nuances of her privileged poverty, styling Weston as a pure young woman of decent, if recently and unjustly diminished, social standing, who needs a father-figure to fill the role of provider and protector – and who, asks Weston's rhetoric, would not want to chivalrously step into that role on behalf of such a worthy candidate? Halfway through I.3, Weston addresses Rudolf II directly, saying: "Therefore, most gentle Caesar, grant aid to the wretched, / and I beg you, snatch us, half-dead, from death" (lines 21-22). The exaggerating and flattering tone of her words adds drama to her appeal, raising the stakes of her request. Although later letters suggest that Weston's appeal to Rudolf II went unanswered (III.19, III.29), her poem leaves the door open for him to step into the role of protector and provider should he want to. In a strategy similar to Francesco Nardi's in his letter to Averardo de' Medici, Weston styles herself and Rudolf II in a child-parent relationship, writing a sense of closeness, familiarity, sympathy,

and familial duty into their relationship that likely did not exist in real life.<sup>20</sup> Weston uses images of gender and youth in I.3 to create a strategic, subtle, and compelling appeal to Rudolf II, representing a revealing attempt by Weston to use her literary persona to play the patronage game.

### **Modesty Tropes as Strategic Self-Representation**

Patronage letters in Early Modern Europe, like Weston's, were indeed like a genteel game, in the sense that they operated within a set of consciously-used conventionalised strategies and social expectations. One of these strategies was the modesty trope, which Weston consistently applies to her self-representation in a way that adds a sense of drama to the Virgo Angla character. Throughout *Parthenica*, Weston refers to herself (that is, herself "in character" as Virgo Angla) in modest and self-deprecating terms: her poems are "trifles" (I.1) and "inept song[s]" (I.18); she is a "wretched maiden" (I.2) whose poems "...[utter] the rustic tunes of a hoarse reed" (I.42). In a poem addressed to Georg Martin von Baldhoven, her editor, Weston instructs that "...if either I err in my verses, or individual songs / run in a confused order, simply say that a maiden sent them" (I.37, lines 17-18).<sup>21</sup>

Although Weston's modesty tropes are heavily contrived, as was common in early modern European writing, they add to the drama of the Virgo Angla character by building off aspects of Weston's real-life situations. For example, many of Weston's modest self-references

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<sup>20</sup> It is not known whether Weston ever met Rudolf II; however, considering how close her stepfather had been to Rudolf II before his fall from grace, and considering that Weston would become known across Europe for her poetic skill, it is not far-fetched to imagine that Rudolf II was at least familiar with Weston's name.

<sup>21</sup> While a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader might initially interpret these phrases as autobiographical truth statements that point to an oppressive patriarchal context, Patricia Pender argues that modesty tropes in early modern women's writing are in fact of important literary and rhetorical significance, and should be read as such (3) – to do otherwise ignores the particularities around the individual authorships of early modern women writers, and collapses our understanding of them into a narrow, homogenous role as victims of patriarchal oppression (3).

insinuate a frailty about her sanity (or, rather, the *Virgo Angla*'s). In one poem, Weston tells Baldhoven that "...my songs are unworthy of a famous press: / most songs are the work of a disturbed mind" (I.40). Similarly, epistolary poem I.42, which is addressed to Ecbert Maius, the secretary to a member of Rudolf II's court of appeals, Weston explains that grief over her family's fate hinders her writing: "Frequently excessive woes have threatened my undertaking, / and endless sobbing interrupted my work" (lines 15-16). Passages like these bear witness to the personal nature of Weston's poetry and the Neo-Latin genre – no doubt Weston *was* experiencing a lot of distress after her stepfather's death and the seizure of her property; her brother's death a few years later would only add to her struggles (I.28). To read Weston's sanity-questioning statements as autobiographical truth statements, however, ignores the literary function of her self-deprecating self-presentation. Weston often expresses her moments of darkness and depression in a way that adds to the drama of the "downtrodden *Virgo Angla*" image. I.42, for example, is a 32-line poem about how Weston is unable to write poetry because of her griefs. While her situation was undoubtedly tragic, it remains that Weston was able to write through her trauma and incorporate it into her literary stratagem. Weston works the facts of her depression into the *Virgo Angla* character, and uses her real-life struggles in her appeals to patronage. The strategic elements of soliciting patronage may have been like a game, but this game was firmly rooted in real life.

Indeed, if patronage was a game, the modesty trope was one of the literary strategies players used to play it. The modesty trope featured across genres, in both Latin and vernacular traditions, and was used by men and women writers alike. I focus on the modesty trope's use in patronage letters, prefatory poems, and dedicatory texts, as this usage sheds light on the role that rhetorical and self-representational modes played in leveraging an individual's place in the

power dynamics of patronage that shaped the Republic of Letters. Although dedications and prefatory poems are not strictly patronage letters, they constitute a communication between beneficiary and patron, and served the common purpose of strengthening patronage relationships (Glomski 165). Within these genres, authors used the modesty trope to shape the way they presented themselves in their work, although even this could be done in a variety of ways.

Denial of skill or of authorship were common ways of applying the modesty trope. French poet Maurice Scève (c.1500-1564), for example, presents himself as an unskilled poet (a technique that I call the “unskilled” modesty trope) in the sonnet that precedes his epic poem “Microcosme” (1562). Literary scholar Barbara Garlick explains that Scève, addressing his readers, “asks only to please, aged and useless as he is” (207). Garlick goes on to explain that this authorial self-denial early on in a text was a conventional practice among early modern poets: “...an initial protestation of incapacity not only gives the reader a comfortable sense of superiority, but also must elicit a vigorous denial” (Garlick 206) – by pleading his unsuitability at the beginning of his work, Scève stood to gain his readers’ approval and attention.

Women writers often used the “unskilled” modesty trope as a tactic for gaining entry into the male-dominated literary world. In an analysis of French writer Gabrielle de Bourbon’s (c. 1446-1516) religious text *Voyage spirituel*,<sup>22</sup> Susan Broomhall, a historian specialising in Early Modern European culture, notes that Bourbon portrays herself not as the author of the text, but as a scribe whom “the Devout Soul” called to write (78). This reduces Bourbon to a passive and therefore publicly acceptable object, rather than a creative force (Broomhall 78). Bourbon uses a similar strategy in *Fort Chasteau*,<sup>23</sup> where she describes herself as an unworthy writer by means

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<sup>22</sup> *Le Voyage spirituel entrepris par l’âme dévote pour parvenir en la cité de Bon Repoux* (c. 1510-1515)

<sup>23</sup> *Le Fort Chasteau pour la retraicte de toutes bonnes âmes, fait par le commandement du glorieux Saint-Esperit* (c. 1510-1515)



of her being a woman (Broomhall 78-79). Bourbon's denial of creative agency appeases her readers, thereby gaining her access to the public sphere of literary exchange.<sup>24</sup> Modesty, it would seem, was a prerequisite for women's permission to "speak."

Like Scève and Bourbon, Weston also employs "unskilled" tropes in her writing. In poetic epistle I.18, for example, Weston uses humble terms to refer to herself. The poem is addressed to Nicolaus Maius, a counsellor in Rudolf II's court of appeals, the Prefect of Mines at Joachimstal (Cheney and Hosington 37), and a potential patron for Weston. The poem responds to Maius' previous praise of her work, and Weston styles herself as struggling to know how best to respond to her benefactor:

Since you link so many honours to my name, Maius,  
 and bestow more on me than should be bestowed,  
 since your Muse conveys subtle praises in weighty epigram,  
 and considers my work to be of some value,  
 how shall I respond?... (lines 1-5)

Nominibus quòd MAIE, meis tot jungis honores,  
 Et mihi plus tribuis, quàm tribuisse decet;  
 Quòd tua Musa gravi tenues Epigrammate laudes  
 Evehit, atque operas quid putat esse meas;  
 Quid referam?... (lines 1-5)

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<sup>24</sup> Note that Bourbon's texts are public treatises that were written for a public audience, whereas Weston wrote semi-private letters. While Bourbon's modesty tropes clearly sought permission to speak in the public sphere, the purposes behind Weston's modesty tropes are harder to assess because it is unclear whether she composed her letters as private or semi-private exchanges. Regardless, Bourbon's texts provide a strong example of how the modesty trope served women writers with regards to publishing.

Weston explains that she wants to express her gratitude, but that she lacks the inspiration to properly express herself: “I know not what to do since the Muse is denied me” (line 9). Weston continues by unpacking her “unskilled” modesty trope for Maius, explaining that her lack of inspiration stems from her grief at her stepfather’s fate and from the troubles her family has endured after his death (lines 11-20). Neo-Latin poetry often tended to personal matters (Cheney and Hosington xvi), so Weston’s confession of inner turmoil is not unfounded. Line 20 specifically mentions the “legal quarrels” she has endured – and yet, given that the poem is addressed to someone with strong legal and political connections in Prague, it is hardly coincidental that Weston works her legal troubles into her “unskilled” modesty trope by blaming them for her inability to write.

Indeed, while Weston’s self-belittling language in I.18 operates as a function of her grief and of recent traumatic events, there is a sense in which they are contrived and serve another purpose. After telling of her sorrows, Weston asks how, given that her abilities and inspiration have been sapped by her griefs and troubles, she should be able to praise Maius’ “famous name” with her “inept song” (lines 26-29). A few lines later though, and despite her misgivings, she resolves that “... my rustic reed / will sound your titles (pardon, I pray) in rough notes” (lines 35-36). Weston then launches into a lengthy passage that praises Maius, only to conclude in lines 65 and 66 that “My care consigns the rest to lofty poets; for me it is enough / to have touched great matters glancingly.” In one final dash of lowly self-presentation, the final two lines of the poem ask Maius to not forget a “wretched girl” (lines 69-70). Where Weston’s encomium of Maius (lines 37-64) satisfies the letter’s overt purpose of responding to his previous praise of her, each of these lowly self-presentations is staged to remind Maius of Weston’s unfortunate lot in life. Weston’s lowly self-presentation in I.18 quietly presents her case before her patron while the rest

of the poem praises his name and reputation: Weston's self-presentation in I.18 uses modest rhetoric to operate in two discourses at once.

### **Self-Deprecation as Doubled Discourse: The Rhetorical Manoeuvring of Patronage**

The secondary purpose of Weston's discourse in I.18 speaks to how modesty tropes were frequently used by early modern European writers in what literary scholar and Early Modern European specialist Patricia Pender has called a "doubled discourse" – that is, "a discourse which seems to say one thing while it implies something quite different" (93). Pender's chapter on Mary Sidney's (1561-1621) prefatory poems to the *Sidneian Psalms*, for example, observes how Sidney's deployment of the modesty trope operates in a doubled discourse. In a dedicatory poem to Queen Elizabeth, Sidney downplays her abilities by apparently being unable to describe Elizabeth: the queen is too great for Sidney to describe; such things are beyond the poet's ability. Mary Sidney's signature at the end of the dedication all but erases herself: she signs her work as "By the Sister of that Incomparable Sidney" (qtd. in Pender 100) – apparently unable to express even her own name, Mary Sidney identifies herself in relation to her late brother and co-author, the famous Philip Sidney (1554-1586).

Sidney's "inexpressibility" topos, as Pender calls it (100), and self-effacing signature are not as submissive as they first appear, however. Sidney's apparent inability to describe Elizabeth reads as a flattering approach to the queen, for whom the manuscript was intended as a gift.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Pender points out that, rather than subordinate Sidney to her male sibling and co-author, Sidney's signature declares her family connections and "impress[es] upon the reader her credentials as one of the most important and influential figures in Elizabethan England" (100).

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<sup>25</sup> The Tixall manuscript (c.1599) is the only surviving manuscript of the *Sidneian Psalms* to include Mary Sidney's prefatory poems (Pender 92).

Sidney's "inexpressibility" topos thus engages in a doubled discourse by serving two conflicting yet complementary purposes: her "inability" to describe Elizabeth I and her brother defers to social hierarchy to ingratiate herself with the Queen and the memory of her late brother, but her signature, a seemingly humble denial of self, proudly declares her place in the upper echelons of England's courtly and literary culture.<sup>26</sup>

Where Sidney structures her doubled discourse around an "inexpressibility" topos, Weston's doubled discourses often build off her self-deprecating terms of reference. Weston's poetic epistle I.34, for example, opens in a self-deprecating tone. The poem is part of a correspondence with George Carolides, a "Citizen of Prague," Imperial Poet, and one of Weston's frequent correspondents. Weston's opening lines refer to some poems which she had previously written and sent to Carolides. "[Y]ou can tell [they] were the uncertain issue of a female brain" (line 3), she writes, as if to excuse her participation in the male-dominated task of literary production. She describes the poems as unexceptional pieces of work, "...prepared in haste with a swift hand" (line 2), and compares them to the hypothetical mediocre odes that the archetypal pastoral shepherd – a figure of lowly, charming innocence and honesty – would produce (lines 5-8).

While I.34 opens in a self-deprecating tone, Weston uses the same "unskilled" modesty tropes and humble terms of self-reference to subtly invert the belittling tone while maintaining an

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<sup>26</sup> Modesty tropes, submissive modes of literary self-presentation, and doubled discourses were commonly used by all writers, not just women. For example, Jacqueline Glomski notes that humanist scholars Rudolf Agricola (c. 1490-1521), Valentin Eck (c. 1494-1556), and Leonard Cox (c. 1495-1550) used submissive expressions of self-reference in their dedicatory letters to stress devotion to their patrons. They used specific expressions of humility and de-emphasised their role as authors, highlighting instead the role of the dedicatee or patron in the creation of their work (Glomski 170-171). While all three writers use modest tones throughout their dedication letters, they take care not to completely deface themselves: for example, in a letter thanking the Bishop of Krakow for his support, Agricola wrote that he "did not let an hour pass which he did not devote to commenting on texts or reading the celebrated authors" (Glomski 173). Agricola, Eck, and Cox employed the modesty trope in calculated efforts to downplay their talents while emphasising their diligence and industriousness, as such desirable traits would help prompt patrons to support them (Glomski 172-173).

overall modest appearance. Weston's doubled discourse uses modest language to reveal her poetic skill and determined ambition, all while keeping in character as the demure Virgo Angla. Weston uses this technique right from the beginning of I.34. The opening lines proclaim the mediocrity of Weston's poetry, but then she argues that even mediocre poems can be pleasing:

...if an ode is relatively polished  
 and never stumbles awkwardly into harsh sounds,  
 its reception can be more pleasing to a casual hearing  
 even if the idle voice of a shepherd has produced it. (lines 5-8)

Nam veluti numeris, si quae concinnior oda est,  
 Quæ nusquàm raucis errat inepta sonis:  
 Aure queat meliùs concepta placere vacivâ,  
 Etsi hanc Pastoris vox moduletur iners... (lines 5-8)

The exception in line 8 is key: with some polish, unexceptional poetry – implying poetry like hers – can be pleasing “*even if* the idle voice of a shepherd has produced it” (emphasis added). Weston draws parallels between the shepherd's poetry and her own: the shepherd's poems are not devalued even though they are humble in origin and mediocre in quality; neither, therefore, should her poems be devalued. Although Weston speaks in self-deprecating terms, her comparison to the idle shepherd upholds her poem's value and gives it a certain edge that subtly reveals her talents. While the poem opens with a confession of weakness on the part of Weston's literary abilities, it quickly complicates those statements with a veiled confidence and ambition that demonstrate her skill as a writer. The effect of Weston's doubled discourse is convincing:

not only is this Virgo Angla worthy of patronage on the basis of her modest and maidenly virtue, but also on the basis of her wit and intellect.

### **Doubled Discourse as *Sprezzatura*: Addressing Power, Patronage, and Female Authorship**

Weston's doubled discourse – her saying two contradictory yet complementary things at once – is perhaps best understood as a form of *sprezzatura*, a literary dissimulating device that entailed a simultaneous revealing and concealing (Schoenfeldt 373). English scholar Michael Schoenfeldt explains that, although *sprezzatura* could take many forms, the modesty trope lent itself well to *sprezzatura*'s dissimulating function (373).<sup>27</sup> As a conventionalised form of doubled discourse with roots in courtly conduct – Baldassare Castiglione coined the term in his 1528 conduct manual *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) – *sprezzatura* was a widely-used form of rhetorical and behavioural posturing in early modern Europe. As a manner of courtly conduct, *sprezzatura* called for "...a kind of nonchalance to be used when a courtier is speaking, so that even if he or she is using prodigious skill, it does not appear that an effort is made to do so" (Sandy-Smith 12). In *sprezzatura*'s translation to a literary context, writers would create the look of ease "...by downplaying themselves within their writing, using language coated with humility while they went about composing literary masterpieces..." (Sandy-Smith 12).

The doubled discourses of *sprezzatura* served as rhetorical manipulations of power. *Sprezzatura* allowed its users to indirectly but consciously address power dynamics through their discourse; it was a means to manipulate power when a user had none (or had less than others, as

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<sup>27</sup> In mentioning that *sprezzatura* could take many forms, Schoenfeldt notes that, for example, "...the Renaissance courtly penchant for pastoral derived not from an anthropological fascination with the speech of actual shepherds but rather from the capacity of the form to address matters of state under the veil of apparently simple figures" (373).

the case might be). Literary scholar Jon R. Snyder explains that the impact of *sprezzatura* was to separate representation from intention (75). Snyder likens *sprezzatura* to a one-way mirror that conceals the courtier's "behavioural calculus" (79): it allows them to maintain a genteel and congenial presence while strategizing how to best navigate the intrigues of court life. In both courtly and literary contexts, then, the doubled nature of *sprezzatura* provides a helpful framework for understanding the underlying power dynamics and strategic throat-bearing that pattern genteel early modern exchanges.

As with Weston's shepherd imagery in I.30, *sprezzatura* is particularly evident in the patronage poems that express Weston's ambition as a writer and which seek to advance her literary career. Poetic epistle I.30 is a strong example of how Weston employs her modest self-representation as *sprezzatura* in order to express her ambition and gain the patronage of Eric Lymburch, a counsellor to the Count of Oldenburg.<sup>28</sup> I.30 is the second of two poems that Weston writes to Lymburch, apparently replying to his previous praise of her (see I.29, lines 1-2). In the poem, Weston expresses her literary ambitions by at first denying them. She spends most of the poem formally enumerating a series of well-known and highly revered Classical and contemporary women poets, all while denying her literary ambition by claiming that she is not a better poet than any of them:

May I not be said to be able to surpass Praxilla, Sappho,  
and learned Corinna in my songs.

May I not seek to be placed before you, learned Fulvia,  
since my small vein flows from an arid little fount.

O would that my Muse might equal the graceful Morel sisters;

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<sup>28</sup> Eric Lymburch is not further identified.

that a praise worthy of me might rise from my Muses. (lines 1-6)<sup>29</sup>

Non ego Praxillam, Sapphō, doctamque Corinnam

Carminibus dicar vincere posse meis.

Non ego docta tibi præferri, Fulvia, quæram;

Cum mea ab aridulo venula fonte fluat.

O utinam faciles æquaret Musa Morellas;

Surgeret ex Musis laud mihi digna meis. (lines 1-6)

What follows this apparent denial of ambition, however, transforms these six lines into a conditional statement that turns Weston's humble tone into a highly ambitious one. On lines 7 and 8, Weston writes that she would consent to being compared to these women only if Lymburch were to "...think me redolent of the holy-tongued bards / in my wit, morals, art, poetry." The initially modest poet has high literary aspirations; Weston's meek self-portrayal is in service of an ambitious motivation. Without breaking the humble, virtuous tones of the *Virgo Angla*, Weston proclaims her ambition and invites Lymburch to participate in her quest to create a name for herself and achieve literary fame.

Weston clearly uses *sprezzatura* in I.30 to propose a patronage relationship with Lymburch. By humbly refusing to declare herself equal to these renowned women poets, and instead inviting Lymburch to make that decision, Weston places her reputation as a poet in Lymburch's control. Fittingly, she goes on to describe him as a source of "protection" (line 10).

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<sup>29</sup> Although lines 5 and 6 do not seem particularly humble, given that Weston is responding to Lymburch's previous praise of her, these lines can be interpreted as Weston's retroactive wishing that she was equal to the Morel sisters so that she would be worthy of Lymburch's earlier praise. Weston's roundabout rhetoric implies that she is in fact not equal to the Morel sisters, and therefore not worthy of Lymburch's praise.



Weston, in short, proposes a patronage relationship where, in exchange for his support, Lymburch becomes the gatekeeper of Weston's literary reputation: Weston would be able to rely on Lymburch's endorsement, while he in turn would gain a reputation as the protector and patron of a poet who is as worthy of renown as the women Weston lists in the first six lines of her poem. While the outcome of Weston's letter remains unknown, the interplay of humility and ambition in I.30 tries to initiate a patronage relationship in which both she and Lymburch gain social capital.

Finally, Weston's list of women poets also employs *sprezzatura* to legitimate her authorship by locating herself among her literary predecessors. Feminist scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that woman writers seek female precursors as allies in their fight against patriarchal male readings of themselves (49). Literary scholar Helen Smith confirms that these women often invoked "old authors," both ancient and recent, to legitimate their writing (179). Weston's *sprezzatura* in I.30 humbly and ambitiously inserts herself into the ranks of the renowned poets she lists in the first six lines of the poem. Praxilla, Sappho, and Corinna (lines 1 and 2) were ancient Greek poets who are remembered for their poetic innovation, skill, and fame (Blundell 83-85), while "learned Fulvia" (line 3) and the "Morel sisters" (line 5) refer to Olympia Fulvia Morata (1526-55) and Camille, Lucrece, and Diane Morel (born c. 1550), highly educated women and distinguished participants in the Republic of Letters (Cheney and Hosington 61, Ford 9). Indeed, it seems that Weston was keen to place herself in a long lineage of skilled women poets, and *sprezzatura* allowed her to do so without being presumptuous. By listing a series of women poets, Weston quietly inserts herself in their ranks – a list of women poets, after all, begs the inclusion of the woman poet who writes it. Although Weston never adds her name to the list in ink, her skillful solicitation of Lymburch's patronage

makes the insinuation. Weston's *sprezzatura* was an act of sisterhood that allowed her to lay out precisely how she wanted to be remembered.

In parting, it must also be said that Weston's list in I.30 engages in a distinctly feminine doubled discourse that makes the case for a long lineage of female authorship. For Weston to insert herself in such a list implies that such a list exists. In a time when literary production and scholarly discourse were dominated by men, women writers in early modern Europe were often either shamed for their efforts and regarded as monsters,<sup>30</sup> or praised as angels, goddesses, and divine muses (Hosington, "Men's Discourse of Praise" 110).<sup>31</sup> Weston's list exerts the existence of a long line of female authorship, and it does so in terms that reject the gendered and mythological vision of femininity perpetuated by men's conventional terms of praise.<sup>32</sup> Rather, Weston's enumeration of women poets lists her predecessors by their proper names: rather than comparing them to various Greek goddesses or invoking each of them as a tenth Muse,<sup>33</sup> Weston gives Praxilla, Sappho, Corinna, Fulvia, and the Morel sisters their proper names. In doing so, Weston legitimises these women as real writers. Moreover, by legitimating her predecessors, Weston also asserts her own humanity and her own right to wield the pen. Weston engages in a

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<sup>30</sup> For example, detractors of Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-78), a German scholar, writer, and member of the Republic of Letters, claimed that she ate spiders (Pal 56).

<sup>31</sup> Many poems included in *Parthenica*, for example, praise Weston and address her as a "Nymph" (III.45), "virgin goddess" (III.46), "most celebrated goddess of British goddesses" (III.53). II.101, a short and anonymous poem, praises Weston:

To Elizabeth Weston, noble Englishwoman.	ELISABETHÆ WESTONIÆ, Nobili Anglæ.
Are you Angle or angelic? Or simply an angel? Well, if your sex rules out the last, your spirit is an angel.	Angla vel angelica es? vel prorsus es angelus? immò Si sexus vetat hoc: angelus est animus.

<sup>32</sup> For further discussion on Weston and gendered terms of praise, see Sylvia Brown's "In Praise of *Filia Docta*: Elizabeth Weston and the Female Line" (in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Cantabrigensis: Proceedings of the Eleventh International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, Cambridge, 30 July-5 August 2000*, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2003, pp. 105-113) and Brenda M. Hosington's "Elizabeth Jane Weston and Men's Discourse of Praise."

<sup>33</sup> Women writers were commonly praised as a "tenth Muse," placing them among the ranks of the nine Muses who presided over and inspired music and poetry in Greek myth. The term often had sexual connotations, as the female muse was a metaphorical body on which a male poet might "beget" art (Gilbert and Gubar 49).

distinctly feminine doubled discourse, rejecting patriarchal ideal of the female writer and asserting instead an authoritative and ancient community of female authorship.

### **Conclusion**

In short, Elizabeth Jane Weston's literary self-representation was a critical factor to her successful navigation of the patronage system that structured the Republic of Letters. Weston's Virgo Angla persona allowed her to strategically create nuanced images of herself as a virtuous young maiden, which she used to great effect in her solicitation of patronage. Weston also employed highly-contrived modesty tropes in her self-representation, and structured them in doubled discourses and as *sprezzatura* to gain social capital and to manipulate the power dynamics that shaped patronage. Weston's oeuvre represents the voice of a woman writer trying to survive, both physically and metaphorically, in a male-dominated world. Her modesty tropes and rhetorical strategies successfully manipulate the economy of social capital upon which the Republic of Letters was built, allowing Weston to build patronage relationships, work towards her literary ambitions, and legitimise her female authorship in a male-dominated world.

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