



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

“I Walked Out”: Perambulatory Poetics, Authorial Independence, and Isabella Whitney’s Poetic Voice in *A Sweet Nosgay*

Shack, A.-R.

DOI

[10.1080/09699082.2024.2284053](https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2024.2284053)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Women's Writing

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Shack, A.-R. (2024). “I Walked Out”: Perambulatory Poetics, Authorial Independence, and Isabella Whitney’s Poetic Voice in *A Sweet Nosgay*. *Women's Writing*, 31(1), 83-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2024.2284053>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)



OPEN ACCESS



“I WALKED OUT”: PERAMBULATORY POETICS, AUTHORIAL INDEPENDENCE, AND ISABELLA WHITNEY’S POETIC VOICE IN *A SWEET NOSGAY*

Anna-Rose Shack

Amsterdam School of Historical Studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The act of walking energizes the formation of Isabella Whitney’s poetic voice in her second volume of verse, *A Sweet Nosgay* (pub. 1573). Walking out of her house, trespassing in Plat’s garden, and traversing the perimeter of Bedlam are just a few of the striking scenes that depict Whitney’s perambulation. To examine the connection between walking and the formation of her poetic voice, I suggest that Whitney’s walking operates in two distinct registers. Firstly, walking is a thematic concern that exposes her interest in the contours of intellectual independence, the process of artistic production, and the vulnerability occasioned by impecunity. Secondly, walking operates as a form of poetic performativity, figurative of her trajectory towards print publication. This essay expands discussion on Whitney’s mobility, suggesting that perambulatory poetics are a crucial component of her authorial self-presentation in *A Sweet Nosgay*.

KEYWORDS Isabella Whitney; *A Sweet Nosgay*; poetic voice; walking; perambulatory poetics; independence

Introduction

Isabella Whitney’s stride into the sixteenth-century literary marketplace establishes her as possibly the first English female poet to publish secular poetry in print.¹ Her second volume of verse, *A Sweet Nosgay* (pub. 1573; hereafter *Nosgay*), exposes the risks and affordances of this venture through sustained deployment of perambulatory imagery.² Walking out of her house, trespassing in a garden, and traversing the perimeter of Bedlam are just a few of the striking scenes that depict Whitney’s perambulation. Critical discussion has been quick to note Whitney’s mobility, both in terms of her self-proclaimed status as a migrant serving-woman in early

CONTACT Anna-Rose Shack  a.k.shack@uva.nl

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

modern London and in terms of the textual mobility of the *Nosgay*, a verse miscellany, circulating in print.³ Nonetheless, how the physical, embodied, act of walking shapes her poetry has been less thoroughly examined. Whitney's poetic perambulation locates her in the literary tradition of the Romantic poets much as it renders her a kind of proto-*flâneuse*.⁴ As these literary figures and traditions exemplify, the act of walking is a distinct facet of what constitutes mobility in literature: one that bears a close relationship to artistic creation and the formation of authorial identity. In order to explore more fully the connection between walking and Whitney's authorial self-presentation in print, this article will consider how forms of walking articulate a productive convergence between, on the one hand, precarity and marginalization, and on the other hand, opportunity and creativity, in *A Sweet Nosgay*.

The prevalence of perambulation in the *Nosgay* gives rise to the following question: what is the connection between the specific act of walking and the formation of Isabella Whitney's poetic voice? I suggest that walking energizes Whitney's poetic voice in two distinct registers, namely as a thematic concern and as a form of poetic performativity. On a thematic level, Whitney uses walking imagery to explore the contours of intellectual independence, the process of artistic production, and the vulnerability occasioned by impecunity. Testing the boundaries, limits and confines of her sixteenth-century urban society, Whitney's walking exposes the adventurous and transgressive impulses that characterize her poetic persona.⁵ I deploy the sustained metaphor of stepping into print to suggest that Whitney's walking also operates as a form of poetic performativity that depicts her trajectory towards print publication as a female writer in early modern England.

Stepping out of her house and into Plat's garden in the poem entitled "The Auctor to the Reader", Whitney gathers "SLIPS" of poetic material, namely pseudo-Senecan *sententiae* picked from Sir Hugh Plat's *The Floures of Philosophie* (pub. 1572).⁶ These figurative flowers comprise the main body of the *Nosgay*, a verse miscellany that Whitney offers to her readers as a prophylactic against moral contagion. Whitney's re-worked *sententiae* are accompanied by a range of poems that profess financial and social precarity in the persona of an unemployed maidservant. The volume includes epistolary poems to friends and family, and concludes with Whitney's last "Wyll and Testament", a ballad that charts her movement through the locales of London as she bequeaths the city to itself.⁷ Michelle O'Callaghan suggests that in her "Wyll and Testament" Whitney "defines her authorship in terms of walking the city".⁸ I take this claim one step further to suggest that Whitney's perambulatory poetics in fact function as a crucial element of authorial self-presentation in *A Sweet Nosgay* as a whole. Whitney's verse miscellany reflects her desire for material, intellectual and authorial independence as a female writer in a male-dominated literary landscape,

and it is precisely the act of walking that energizes the formation of her poetic voice in print.

Walking Out of the House and into the Street

A young maidservant traversing the streets of sixteenth-century London alone would have been a fairly unremarkable sight. Critics have comprehensively demonstrated the porousness of the early modern household, noting that it was “embedded in the community and its boundaries were often permeable and insecure”.⁹ Women participated in trade and production networks that wove in and out of the household proper and maidservants in particular would have had errands and duties to execute beyond the perimeters of the dwelling. While Whitney’s servant status thus offers “some freedom to be a legitimate ‘walker in the city’”, maidservants were simultaneously the target of widespread suspicion.¹⁰ Persistent cultural anxiety linked female mobility to licentious behavior that threatened to undermine patriarchal social structures and maidservants were a particularly mobile demographic as they moved from country to town, around urban centers and between employment in different households.¹¹ Alongside pervasive suspicion of women’s mobility, Wendy Wall argues that the social stigma attached to print publication in early modern England rendered female writers who adopted this medium particularly vulnerable to charges of promiscuity.¹² Women risked cultural disapprobation whether they were physically venturing beyond the home or enacting a kind of social mobility through the circulation of printed texts.

In “The Auctor to the Reader”, Whitney suggests that social and physical constraints hinder her mobility. It appears that while she would very much like to be out and about, unemployment and ill-health mean that she is unable to venture forth: “Harvestlesse, and serviceless also: / And subject unto sicknesse . . . abrode I could not go”.¹³ Her lament generates an image of stasis and immobility within the confines of an unspecified household. Whitney turns to books for entertainment but “straight wart wery” of her studies and soon declares:

And to refresh my mased [mu]se, and cheare my brused brayne:
And for to trye if that my limmes had got their strength agayne
I walked out: but sodenly a friend of mine mee met.¹⁴

Linking intellectual and physical fatigue with her studious endeavors and confinement indoors, Whitney performs an adroit about-face on her earlier indication of immobility and steps beyond the threshold of the home. She casts aside the reading material available to her, namely “Scrip-tures”, “Histories” and classical texts by “VIRGILL, OVID, MANTUAN” in favor of her own lived experience.¹⁵ The repetition of “and” (thrice,

including twice anaphorically) as she explicates her reasoning for going outside, coupled with her corporeal alliteration (“mased [mu]se” / “brused brayne”), builds climactically towards the declaration: “I walked out”.¹⁶ To “walk out” is a phrasal verb that carries a range of literal and figurative meanings; it can imply physically stepping outside as well as connoting defiant abandonment of a situation.¹⁷ Whitney enacts both of these meanings as, dissatisfied with her situation, she steps out of the house in order to assert her physical and intellectual independence.

In the 1573 print edition, “I walked out” comprises the first three words of the first line on a new page.¹⁸ The catchword “I walked” is thus customarily positioned in the lower right-hand corner on the previous page. A convention prevalent in medieval manuscript culture, the use of catchwords to ensure pages were bound in the right order and to facilitate a smoother reading experience migrated into sixteenth-century print culture.¹⁹ Maura Nolan suggests that the catchword “commands the body of the reader to take a certain action”, namely turning the page or, as in this case, lifting one’s eyes to the top of the recto page.²⁰ The kinetic experience of reading and Whitney’s narrative account of walking coalesce in the catchword “I walked”; it propels the reader onto the next page as much as it launches Whitney outdoors.²¹ Whether a happy accident or evidence of Whitney actively manipulating early modern print conventions, the first catchword in this poem embodies a sense of thematic, as much as typographic, movement [Figure 1](#).

However, this propulsion forward is abruptly stymied: “I walked out: but sodenly”.²² A mid-sentence colon interrupts Whitney’s narrative account of her walk and the expansive possibilities of her perambulatory venture are brought to a sudden halt by an encounter with a male friend. Suggesting that she risks infection from the “noysome smell and savours yll” of the street, he not only implores her to “shift . . . to some better aire” but also explicitly condemns her decision to remain in town: “you doo a misse”.²³ His concern for Whitney’s well-being seems genuine enough, in as much as he is “hastyng out of Towne” and encourages her to do the same.²⁴ After all, there may indeed be safer and more preferable environments in which to walk than these “stynking streetes, or lothsome Lanes”: a depiction of the urban landscape that emphasizes a lack of sanitation as much as it calls to mind “the specter of plague”.²⁵ His reproof for not caring about whether she lives or dies (“have regard unto your health, or els perhaps you may: / So make a dye, and then adieu, your wofull friends may say”) also has a religious basis in terms of Christian respect for the sanctity of life.²⁶

While it is certainly plausible that this encounter is a display of genuine concern inflected with Christian sensibility, her friend’s insistent reproval may be read as a rebuke for venturing into the public sphere at all. Walking along unsanitary streets carries an undeniable health risk but this

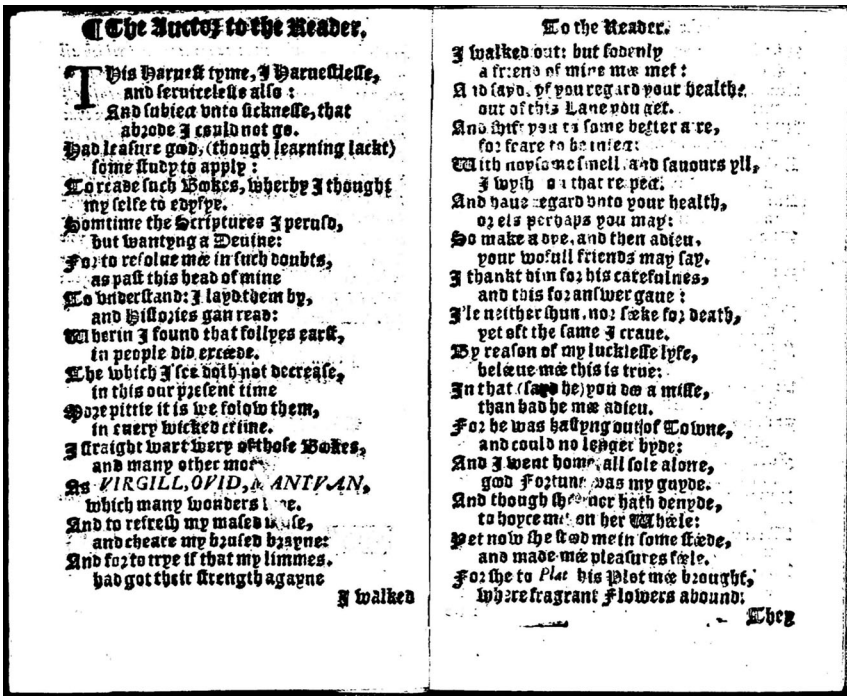


Figure 1. A facsimile of the first two pages of "The Auctor to the Reader" from the 1573 edition of Isabella Whitney's, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*.

specific threat is also a figurative representation of the moral contagion risked by a woman in the public sphere. If we recognize that "The Auctor to the Reader" depicts various stages of Whitney fashioning herself as an author, as will be elaborated further in my discussion, then her friend's objections raise the possibility that he is a figurative embodiment of public, and particularly male, scepticism towards her (authorial) trajectory. The obstacle he poses alerts the reader to the idea that Whitney cannot walk in public unimpeded; in the space of their brief encounter, he manages to challenge, advise, and chastise her for not taking due consideration of the risks she faces. Yet, Whitney displays profound equanimity towards both him and the supposed threat her environs pose. She courteously rebuffs his concern in a defiant assertion of self-governance and in declining assistance, she refuses to be swept along in his hasty exit: "I thank him for his carefulnes, and this for answer gaue: / I'll neither shun, nor seeke for death, yet oft the same I craue".²⁷ In this death-defying assertion of independence, Whitney seemingly refuses to acquiesce to her interlocutor's advice.

Whitney's assertion of autonomy is nonetheless rendered somewhat ambiguous by the events that occur after his departure. She relates that as soon as her friend "bad he mee adieu", "I went home all sole alone".²⁸ The

tautological nature of the phrase “sole alone”, emphatically insists upon her solitary route as a performative act of self-determination.²⁹ Jean Howard also connects Whitney’s assertion to her “status as a *feme sole*, someone not yet ‘covered’ by marriage” and thus, in a generic interpretation of the legal term, trading under her own name.³⁰ However, having experienced little more on her walk than an objection to it taking place at all, her decision to turn around and head home signals at least partial acceptance of her friend’s advice to exit the street promptly. Furthermore, Whitney reveals that “good Fortune was my guyde”, meaning that even though her companion is an unusual one, she is not in fact as alone as she claims.³¹ While the affective power of an anthropomorphized Lady Fortune operates in a different register to a physical interlocutor blocking her progress, both encounters have the effect of interrupting Whitney’s walk and re-directing her narrative. Her friend interrupts her walk as soon as she leaves the house, cutting short more expansive wandering, while Fortune interrupts her return home. Fortune stops Whitney in her tracks before proceeding to alter her route: “she stood me in some steede, and made mee pleasures feele. / For she to *Plat* his Plot mee brought, where fragrant Flowers abound”.³² Rather than accompanying her home, Fortune leads Whitney to Plat’s garden. The abundance of “fragrant Flowers” she finds there is a metaphor for the poetic material, namely Sir Hugh Plat’s recently published, pseudo-Senecan sententiae, that Whitney will gather for her own verse miscellany.³³

Trespassing in Plat’s Garden

Publishing her *Nosgay* in print, Whitney steps beyond conventional gender expectations as much as she steps into a sphere dominated by male writers. Whitney’s arrival in Plat’s garden dramatizes her indication to George Mainwaring that “I go about (like to that poore Fellow which wente into an others ground for his water) did step into an others garden for these Flowers”.³⁴ Whitney alerts her reader to the transgressive act of crossing into a space demarcated as private property. In “A Farewell to the Reader”, a lyric that follows the sententiae, she exhibits a similar “awareness of an emergent concept of literary ownership, modeled on property in land”, betraying “an assumption that cultural property is male”.³⁵ Whitney earnestly hopes that Plat will not,

... say in rage were she a man,
that with my flowers doth brag,
She well should pay the price, I wolde
not leaue her worth a rag³⁶

Whitney indicates that she is anxious about stepping on Plat’s toes and yet she appears to think that she may be held less culpable for her actions and

be less vulnerable to retribution precisely because she is a woman. While in her dedicatory address to Mainwaring she compares herself to a fellow stepping into the garden, in the “Farewell” lyric she self-consciously draws attention to the possibility that as a female writer her work may be perceived as less valuable or taken less seriously.

Pre-empting Plat’s response is one way in which Whitney seeks to mitigate the aforementioned risks attached to her authorship. In order to help shape a favorable response among her readers, the *Nosgay* also includes a “commendation of the Authour” by her friend Thomas Berrie (T.B.), inserted between “The Auctor to the Reader” and the reworked sententiae.³⁷ Notably, Berrie deploys his own walking imagery in the first stanza:

Marching among the woods of fine delighte
Where as the Laurell branch doth bring increase
Seelde, of Ladies fresh, a solem sight:
I viewd, whose walkes betokened all their ease:
And how in friendly wise, it did them please:
While some did twist the Silke of liuely hewe
Some other slipt the Brannch for preyses dew.³⁸

Moving purposefully through a wood wherein “the Laurell branch doth bring increase”, Berrie invokes the Petrarchan laurel of poetic achievement before depicting something that is seldom seen: “Ladies fresh, a solem sight”.³⁹ By choosing to publish in print, Whitney was indeed walking sparsely trodden ground in terms of poetic precedent but in situating her amongst other women Berrie signals that, while this event may have been rare, it was not unique. His depiction of the scene as “a solem sight” suggests that these women are worthy of reverence and respect. Moreover, he characterizes their collective “walkes” in terms of graceful and self-satisfied “ease”.⁴⁰ Berrie indicates that while some women have twisted the fibers of silk together to weave a colorful thread of artistic creation, others have “slipt the Brannch”, namely grafted their work onto the laurel branch of poetic achievement to garner “preyses due”.⁴¹ Whitney Trettien demonstrates how “Whitney exploits the rich semantic network of the word *slip*, as it refers variously to plants, paper, and needlework motifs, to carve out a space for her own composition”.⁴² Perhaps recognizing this authorial strategy at play in the *Nosgay*, Berrie also draws on the multivalent word “slip”, both to situate Whitney’s work in a predominantly male poetic lineage and to encourage praise for her creative “slipping” of Plat’s work.

Merely “one howre” in Plat’s garden is sufficient for Whitney, the idle and unemployed, to metamorphose into a busy working woman.⁴³ She claims that she would have liked to linger longer had she not “leasure lackt, and

business bad [her] hye”.⁴⁴ This business/busyness to which she must hurriedly attend is indicative of her new occupation as a writer. She returns to the garden “ech day” to gather material for her verse: “I may be bolde, to come when as I wyll: / Yea, and to chuse of all his Flowers, which may my fancy fill”.⁴⁵ Whitney is careful to note that it is as much her decision *when* to visit the garden as it is *which* material to choose. Even though she is reliant on Plat for source material, Whitney is keen to represent the crafting of her verse as an independent activity. Her carefree movement in and out of the garden and the habitual nature of her visits foreground the ease with which she undertakes the writing process, and her self-satisfied tone indicates the pleasure she gleans from the work. In the closing lines of “The Auctor to the Reader”, however, she adds a provocative afterthought: “One word, and then adieu to thee, yf thou to *Plat* his Plot / Repayre: take heede it is a *Maze* to warne thee I forgot”.⁴⁶ Whitney metaphorically aligns entering a maze, an experience characterized by dead-ends, wrong turns and retraced steps, with the process of gathering material from Plat’s garden. Despite the rich offerings available in the garden, this warning is a cryptic allusion to the complexity of the path that she has navigated to bolster her authorial development.

The possibilities for mis-step implicit in Whitney’s poetic trajectory are echoed in her “familier Epistles”. In her address “To her Sister Misteris. A.B.”, she acknowledges that while “you to huswifery intend...I to writing fall”.⁴⁷ The juxtaposition of her sister’s domestic duties with her own fall (a mis-step perhaps leading to injury) suggests the peril attached to gathering “SLIPS”: indeed, slipping beyond the security of the household.⁴⁸ The imagery of a fall reinforces the virtuous/fallen woman paradigm circulating in the sixteenth century as well as associations of promiscuity specifically attached to print publication.⁴⁹ Whitney signals that she will mitigate the risk of treacherous terrain by leaning on her brother: “You are, and must be chiefest staffe that I shal stay on heare”.⁵⁰ Whitney metaphorically represents her brother as a crutch that will help her sustain her independent trajectory; her pleas for financial assistance suggest that her life in London is on a precarious footing. Whitney’s desire for material and authorial independence is palpable (“til some houshold cares mee tye, / My bookes and Pen I wyll apply”), and yet the ideal of walking “all sole alone” belies the obstacles, mazes and falls that must be overcome, as well as the necessity of obtaining guidance and assistance *en route*.⁵¹

Whitney’s advice to her readership, in both the epistolary poems and the sententiae, is characterized by insistent reminders of the risk of solo ventures. In her reworking of Plat’s fifty-first saying (in Whitney’s volume, verse fifty-two), she asserts:

He that is voyd of any friend,
 him company to keepe:
 Walkes in a world of wyldernesse,
 full fraught with dangers deepe.⁵²

The sentiment articulated, namely that operating “sole alone” is a source of danger, is comparable to Plat’s original: “He that hath no friend to keep him / company, is in the widest and most fear- /ful wilderness of the whole worlde.”⁵³ In Whitney’s version, however, she not only adopts a more forceful tone (e.g. the alliteration of “full fraught” and “dangers deepe” heightens the sense of threat) but also mobilizes the situation.⁵⁴ Being alone is no longer a matter of statically inhabiting the wilderness but is rather a walk over rough and risky terrain.

While the precise nature of the danger is left to the reader’s imagination, in her revision of Plat’s seventeenth saying, she is more explicit. Plat advises, “Let not youth range abroad, for if / he see the yong mares, he will neigh or / bray if he see time.”⁵⁵ In Plat’s version, young men, figured as both horses who neigh and donkeys who bray, risk distraction by young women, represented as female mares. Whitney’s reworked verse (number eighteen in her volume) omits this equine analogy in favor of a more direct, un-gendered condemnation of youthful mobility:

You must not suffer youth to raing
 nor stray abrode at wyll:
 For libertye doth lewdnesse breed,
 wherefore preuent that yll.⁵⁶

Whitney’s rendering removes Plat’s gendered dichotomy, instead suggesting that the freedom all young people have to travel away from home will generate “lewdnesse”, variously connoting that someone is unchaste, of low social status, ignorant, unprincipled or un-learned.⁵⁷ Whitney also emphasizes the unguided nature of this movement by adding the suggestion that they may “stray ... at wyll”.⁵⁸ Mobility is presented as a source of precarity that can relegate both men and women to the social margins. The idea that liberation from household ties weakens the protection afforded by community and connection is similarly expressed in “A modest meane for Maides”: “The rolling stone doth get no mosse your selves have hard full off”.⁵⁹ In contrast to her own itinerancy Whitney advises other young women in particular to remain within household service to cushion themselves from life’s hardships.

Alongside her moral exhortations against “stray[ing] abrode at wyll”, Whitney aims to equip her readership to manage their own mobility.⁶⁰ She both proffers her *Nosgay* as a kind of protective “mosse”: “for thy health, not for thy eye, I did this Posye frame”, and counsels her readers to visit Plat’s garden to pick their own bespoke nosegay:

“repayre, to Master *Plat* his ground. / And gather there what I dyd not”.⁶¹ By encouraging her reader to develop their own gardening practice to avoid physical contagion, Whitney figuratively advocates the development of literary skills, namely the analysis and careful selection of *Plat*’s material, that will enable her readership to mitigate moral corruption. She is equivocal about the likelihood of her readers’ success, emphasizing the importance of “good skyl: / To slip, to shere, or get in time, and not [*Plat*’s] branches kyll”.⁶² While Whitney repeatedly warns against the perils of walking out on one’s own, she also promotes independent labor and a diligent work ethic as means by which to cultivate greater personal security.

Navigating London in Whitney’s “Wyll and Testament”

In the final poem in the volume, fortified by her *Nosgay*, Whitney expands her own perambulation into the wider environs of London. Announcing “The time is come I must departe”, Whitney’s “Wyll and Testament” both indicates the beginning of the end of her poetic trajectory and connects this ending to the fact that she is once again on the move.⁶³ As Lawrence observes, by “[a]ppropriating the perambulation, a literary mode concerned with boundaries and order, Whitney reads the city through the lens of one who has been relegated to its margins”.⁶⁴ Part protest walk, part urban walking tour, part psychogeography, her stimulating trajectory through early modern London is spurred by a sense of discontented marginalization. By anthropomorphizing the city as an unfaithful lover, Whitney aligns herself with other young women who:

Doe such a fyxed fancy set,
on those which least deserve,
That long it is ere wit we get,
away from them to swarve.⁶⁵

Her own “swarve” away from London represents her departure as the avoidance of an unhealthy relationship.⁶⁶ Despite London’s “great cruelnes”, Whitney asserts that “I [am] in no angry moode, / but wyll, or ere I goe / In perfect love and charytie”.⁶⁷ Characterizing her departure in these beneficent, dignified terms, indicative of the love and charity Christians are expected to show even their enemies, it is clear that this is no walk of shame. Rather, Whitney reclaims autonomy in an imbalanced relationship; while she may have been treated poorly in the relationship (“thou never didst me good”), she is in control of how she stages her exit.⁶⁸ She proceeds to enact her departure by bequeathing the city to itself through a vivid, ekphratic mapping of London’s locales and landmarks. Her depiction of London exposes intimate knowledge of

the city and conversancy with the populace that live and trade in its environs.

A recognizable account of the urban cityscape, Whitney's sustained projection of a maidservant persona, and the lack of readily available maps in the 1570s, are all factors that lead to the reasonable assumption that Whitney's "Wyll and Testament" is a visualization of her own movement through the city on foot. Certainly, as Wendy Wall notes, "her inventory of London reveals her mastery of a public world often denied to more privatized aristocratic women".⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Wall's characterization of this leave-taking as a "stroll" does not quite correspond with Whitney's pace.⁷⁰ Noting the sheer quantity of city sites listed, other critics have drawn attention to the urgency of her "hasty progression" as she "rapidly" "swings from area to area".⁷¹ While the poem's spirited ballad meter indeed conveys a sense of expeditious mobility, there are in fact very few moments in the poem where Whitney explicitly elaborates on her own movement in the city. The most striking of these is her reference to her habitual route past Bedlam, apparently recollected from memory:

And Bedlem [*sic*] must not be forgot,
for that was oft my walke:
I people there too many leave,
that out of tune doo talke.⁷²

In the early modern period, Bethlehem Hospital, known colloquially as Bedlam, was an asylum for the mentally unwell. Bedlam was a well-known London landmark and it is thus unsurprising that it should be mentioned in Whitney's vibrant catalogue of city sites. Even so, while Bedlam certainly belonged to London's wider environs, it was in fact situated in the parish of St. Botolph, north of Bishopsgate, and thus just outside the city's walls [Figure 2](#).

Rather than merely listing Bedlam among the other landmarks that comprise her "Wyll", Whitney makes special mention that it was "oft my walke".⁷³ While this may be an autobiographical indication that the environs of Bedlam were familiar to her, it is also intriguing that Whitney uses this specific place-marker to situate herself on the periphery of the city. Insistent assertions that she is "whole in body, and in minde" and in possession of a "stedfast brayne" make it clear that Whitney is keen to distance herself emotionally and intellectually from the Bedlam inmates who "out of tune doo talke".⁷⁴ Yet, curiously, Bedlam is the only landmark in the poem in connection with which she emphasizes her habitual physical proximity. Imagining her embodied relationship to the city in this precise way speaks to the precarity of her position as a female migrant in the city, despite her somewhat conflicting claim that she was London "bred".⁷⁵ Knowledge of her gender may prompt readers to consider



Figure 2. A section of the Agas Map showing the location of Bethlehem Hospital (Bedlam). Bedlam is marked by the larger circle in the centre while the four smaller circles mark the nearest city gates: Cripplegate, Moorgate, Bishopsgate and Aldgate (from left to right). The map was produced using the MoEML drawing tools and this edition of the Agas Map was used with kind permission of Janelle Jenstad and the *Map of Early Modern London*.⁸²

whether the social constraints around female literary expression have a bearing on why Whitney marks her poetic trajectory as one that skirts the perimeter of those who have been relegated to the fringes of society. The fact that she aligns talking “out of tune” with madness is also suggestive of concern with how her own poetic voice will be received.⁷⁶ By signaling her habitual walk past Bedlam, Whitney raises questions about the nature of her vulnerability as a female author projecting her voice into the public sphere.

Whitney suggests that had her impoverished situation further deteriorated, her habitual walk along the perimeter of Bedlam may have turned towards actively ensconcing herself in the teeming multitude of London’s marginalized. The debtor’s prison at Ludgate is presented as a likely destination:

When days of paiment did approach,
 I thither ment to flee.
 To shroude my selfe amongst the rest,
 that chuse to dye in debt:
 Rather than any Creditor,
 should money from them get.⁷⁷

Whitney imagines a situation in which, no longer traversing the city at ease, she will have to pick up the pace and hotfoot it over to Ludgate. Her projected flight into obscurity signals a specific situation in which her own expansive city wandering would be curtailed by extracting herself from debt repayment obligations. As Whitney informs her reader that she is too poor to obtain financial credit, this flight does not materialize. Having dispensed with London and all contained therein, Whitney draws her “Wyll” to its close: “So finally I make an end / no longer can I tary”.⁷⁸ Whether these two final lines announce the end of her time in London, departure from life itself, or merely the closure of her poem, is ambiguous. Recalling the headnote wherein she is both “constrained to departe” and “fayneth as she would die”, all three possibilities remain implicit in this ending.⁷⁹ Unable to linger any longer, Whitney prepares to leave her youthful urban ambitions behind, hastening forward to destinations and fortunes unknown.

Despite her farewell, it is certainly possible that Whitney’s perambulatory poetics did not end with her “Wyll and Testament.” Michelle O’Callaghan has identified a similarly peripatetic ballad that Whitney’s printer Richard Jones entered in the Stationers’ Register several years later in 1576: “a walkynge Ladyes now goo we somme pleasant thinges to view and see”.⁸⁰ Whether or not Whitney was the author of this now lost ballad, she is certainly a walking lady; her perambulation is integral to the formation of her poetic voice and the presentation of her authorial identity in *A Sweet Nosgay*. In the verse miscellany as a whole, walking is both a persistent thematic concern and operates as a form of poetic performativity that charts Whitney’s trajectory towards print publication. Perambulatory poetics energize her poetic voice as much as they offer an exposition of the boundaries and fault lines, limitations and opportunities that shape the contours of an inescapably interdependent world. Her ambiguous claim that she walks home “all sole alone” is at least partially indicative of her sustained assertion of independence.⁸¹ Nevertheless, this assertion belies the deeply interconnected nature of the world in which she moves: a thought by which Whitney is persistently troubled and intrigued.

Notes

1. Michelle O’Callaghan offers a useful overview of critical sources pertaining to Whitney’s “status as England’s first professional woman writer” (15) in Michelle O’Callaghan, “My Printer must, haue somewhat to his share’: Isabella Whitney, Richard Jones, and Crafting Books,” *Women’s Writing*, 26.1 (2019): 15.
2. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from *A Sweet Nosgay* are taken from Danielle Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney, Mary Sidney and Aemilia Lanyer: Renaissance Women Poets* (London: Penguin, 2000).

3. For a consideration of Whitney's servant status, particularly as it relates to her urban mobility and authorial identity, see Patricia Phillippy, "The Maid's Lawful Liberty: Service, the Household, and 'Mother B' in Isabella Whitney's 'A Sweet Nosegay,'" *Modern Philology* 95.4 (1998): 439–62; and Laurie Ellinghausen, "Literary Property and the Single Woman in Isabella Whitney's 'A Sweet Nosgay,'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 45.1 (2005): 1–22. For critical discussion on the textual mobility of the *Nosgay*, see Michelle O'Callaghan, "Household Books: Richard Jones, Isabella Whitney, and Anthology-Making," in *Crafting Poetry Anthologies in Renaissance England: Early Modern Cultures of Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 73–113; and Ingo Berensmeyer, "From Pilgrimage to Picaresque Dimensions of Mobility in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature," in *Offprint Real Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 28, *Mobility in Literature and Culture, 1500–1900*, eds. Ingo Berensmeyer, Christoph Ehland and Herbert Grabes (Tübingen: *narr verlag*, 2012), 3–21.
4. The body of scholarship on intersections between walking and literary creation is extensive and encompasses topics and eras from medieval pilgrimage to the Romantic poets to modernist flânerie to contemporary urban psychogeography. See, for example, Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) and Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso Books, 2014). The interrelation between women, walking and literature, has been examined by Lauren Elkin in *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2017) and Kerri Andrews in *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020). With the notable exception of Ingo Berensmeyer who reads the *Nosgay* as a travel narrative alongside Chaucer and Hoccleve in "From Pilgrimage to Picaresque", 3–21, Whitney's relationship to literary traditions of walking has received insufficient consideration.
5. Whitney's biographical impulse encourages the conflation of poet and constructed poetic persona. For the purposes of this article, I use "Whitney" to refer to Isabella Whitney's authorial self-presentation in print.
6. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "To the worshipfull and right vertuous yong Gentryman, George Mainwaring Esquier: IS. W. wisheth happye health with good successe in all his godly affayres," 42. In her prefatory address Whitney presents these poetic "SLIPS" to her friend George Mainwaring.
7. Whitney's epistolary poems are gathered under the heading "Certain famelier Epistles and friendly Letters by the Auctor: with Replies", Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*. The "Wyll and Testament" as her final poem is conventionally known, is divided into two parts, namely "A comunication which the Auctor had to London, before she made her Wyll" and "The manner of her Wyll, and what she left to London: and all those in it: at her departing", Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*.
8. O'Callaghan, *Crafting Poetry*, 94.
9. Laura Gowing, "'The Freedom of the Streets': Women and Social Space, 1560–1640," in *Londinopolis: A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern London, 1500–1750*, eds. Paul Griffiths and Mark S.R. Jenner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 134.
10. Jean. E. Howard, "Textualizing an Urban Life: The Case of Isabella Whitney in Bedford," in *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*, eds.

- Lloyd Davis, Ronald Bedford and Philippa Kelly (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 228.
11. See, for example, Phillippy, "The Maid's Lawful Liberty," 439–62; Ellinghausen, "Literary Property," 1–22.
 12. Wendy Wall examines the gendered experience of writing and publishing in early modern England in Wendy Wall, "Isabella Whitney and the Female Legacy," *ELH* 58, no. 1 (1991): 35–6.
 13. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "The Auctor to the Reader," 1–2.
 14. *Ibid.*, 11, 13–15.
 15. *Ibid.*, 5, 7, 12.
 16. *Ibid.*, 13–4, 13, 15.
 17. "walk, v.". OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oed-com.proxy.uba.uva.nl/view/Entry/225241?rskey=TmLfki&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed June 04, 2022).
 18. Isabella Whitney. [*A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*] [*Contayning a Hundred and Ten Phylosophicall Flowers &c.*] (London: R. Jones, 1573). ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/books/sweet-nosgay-pleasant-posye-contayning-hundred/docview/2248546198/se-2> (accessed June 11, 2022).
 19. See Maura Nolan, "Medieval Habit, Modern Sensation: Reading Manuscripts in the Digital Age," *The Chaucer Review*, 47.4 (2013): 465–76.
 20. *Ibid.*, 469.
 21. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, "The Auctor to the Reader".
 22. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "The Auctor to the Reader," 15.
 23. *Ibid.*, 18, 17, 24.
 24. *Ibid.*, 25.
 25. *Ibid.*, 37; Dana E. Lawrence, "Isabella Whitney's 'Slips': Poetry, Collaboration, and Coterie," in *A History of Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. Patricia Phillippy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 121. Lawrence provides an insightful overview of the *Nosgay* as it relates to early modern plague experiences noting that, "[j]ust ten years before the publication of *A Sweet Nosgay*, bubonic plague swept through the country," 125.
 26. *Ibid.*, 19–20.
 27. *Ibid.*, 21–2.
 28. *Ibid.*, 24, 26.
 29. *Ibid.*, 26.
 30. Howard, "Textualizing an Urban Life," 221; For a discussion of what constituted *femme sole* status, in terms of both legal parameters and cultural understanding, see Marjorie K. McIntosh, "The Benefits and Drawbacks of *Femme Sole* Status in England, 1300–1630," *Journal of British Studies*, 44.3 (2005): 410–38. McIntosh suggests that while, legally speaking, *femme sole* status applied to married women trading under their own names, in practice the term was sometimes also applied to single women and widows.
 31. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "The Auctor to the Reader," 26.
 32. *Ibid.*, 28–9.
 33. *Ibid.*, 29.
 34. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "To the worshipfull and right vertuous yong Gentlyman," 25–8.
 35. Crystal Bartolovich. "Optimism of the Will": Isabella Whitney and Utopia," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 39.2 (2009): 413.

36. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, “A farewell to the Reader”. This poem is not included in Clarke’s edition.
37. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, “T.B. in commendation of the Authour”. This poem is not included in Clarke’s edition.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Whitney Trettien, “Isabella Whitney’s Slips: Textile Labor, Gendered Authorship, and the Early Modern Miscellany,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 45.3 (2015): 516.
43. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “The Auctor to the Reader,” 32.
44. Ibid., 33.
45. Ibid., 38, 45–6.
46. Ibid., 89–90.
47. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “To her Sister Misteris. A.B.,” 22.
48. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “To the worshipfull and right vertuous yong Gentlyman”, 42.
49. Wendy Wall, “Isabella Whitney and the Female Legacy,” 35–6.
50. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “To her Brother. G.W.,” 8.
51. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “To her Sister Misteris. A.B.,” 27–8; “The Auctor to the Reader,” 26.
52. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, “Verse 52”.
53. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “The Auctor to the Reader,” 26; Sir Hugh Plat, *The Floures of Philosophie with the Pleasures of Poetrie Annexed Vnto them, as Wel Pleasant to be Read, as Profytable to be Followed of all Men*, (London: Frauncis Coldocke and Henry Bynneman, 1581), “Verse 51”. <https://www.proquest.com/books/floures-philosophie-with-pleasures-poetrie/docview/2264214784/se-2?accountid=14945> (accessed June 11, 2022).
54. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, “Verse 52”.
55. Plat, *Floures of Philosophie*, “Verse 17”.
56. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, “Verse 18”.
57. “lewdness, n.”. OED Online. March 2022. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed-com.proxy.uba.uva.nl/view/Entry/107738?redirectedFrom=Lewdness> (accessed April 20, 2022).
58. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, “Verse 18”.
59. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “A modest meane for Maides In order prescribed, by Is. W. to two of her yonger Sisters serving in London,” 34.
60. Isabella Whitney, *A Sweet Nosgay, Or Pleasant Posye*, “Verse 18”.
61. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “A modest meane for Maides,” 34; “The Auctor to the Reader,” 51, 70-1.
62. Ibid., 78.
63. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “A comunication,” 1.
64. Dana E. Lawrence, “Isabella Whitney’s ‘Slips,’” 134.
65. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, “A comunication,” 9–12.
66. Ibid., 12.
67. Ibid., 18, 27–9.
68. Ibid., 25.
69. Wall, “Isabella Whitney and the Female Legacy,” 53.
70. Ibid.

71. Ulrike Tancke, 'Bethinke Thy Selfe' in *Early Modern England: Writing Women's Identities* (Leiden: Rodopi, 2010), 106; Helen Wilcox, "'ah famous citie': women, writing, and early modern London," *Feminist Review*, 96 (2010): 24; Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "Introduction," xv.
72. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "The manner of her Wyll," 225–8.
73. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "The manner of her Wyll," 226.
74. *Ibid.*, 1, 20, 228.
75. *Ibid.*, 26.
76. *Ibid.*, 228.
77. *Ibid.*, 183–8.
78. *Ibid.*, 327–8.
79. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "The Aucthour (though loth to leave the Cite) upon her Friendes procurement, is constrained to departe: wherfore (she fayneth as she would die) and maketh her WYLL and Testement, as foloweth: With large Legacies of such Goods and riches which she moste abundantly hath left behind her: and therof maketh London sole executer to se her Legacies performed."
80. O'Callaghan, "My Printer must, haue somewhat to his share," 26.
81. Clarke, ed. *Isabella Whitney*, "The Auctor to the Reader," 26.
82. Janelle Jenstad, dir. *The Map of Early Modern London*. v.6.6. Victoria: University of Victoria, 2021. <https://mapoflondon.uvic.ca>.

Acknowledgements

I am exceedingly grateful and offer my sincere thanks to Carrol Clarkson, Rudolph Glitz and Danielle Clarke for providing insightful and generous feedback on early versions of this article. I would also like to thank Ingo Berensmeyer and Sören Hammerschmidt for sharing some of their (published and unpublished) work on Whitney's urban mobility.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This publication is part of the project Languages of Vulnerability in Early Modern Women's Writing (with project number PGW.21.010) of the research programme PhDs in the Humanities 2021 which is (partly) financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).



Notes on Contributor

Anna-Rose Shack is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School of Historical Studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her doctoral project examines how early modern female poets represent and articulate vulnerability in lyric poetry.