A Methodology for Reading Against the Culture: Anonymous, Women Poets, and the Maitland Quarto Manuscript (c.1586)
Evelyn S. Newlyn

In disciplines ranging from art history to science, scholarship has found accomplishments by women in earlier periods often hidden under the attribution to 'anonymous'. That familiar concept that 'anonymous was a woman' has pointed to possibility, as it suggested places worth searching for previously unrecognised accomplishments by women. Although in recent decades recovered women’s writing has expanded the literary histories of England and Europe, few scholars of the medieval and early modern literature of Scotland have been engaged in the search that elsewhere has had such beneficial effects.¹ Yet early Scottish literary manuscripts such as the Maitland Quarto, a collection of approximately 95 Scottish poems that is internally dated 1586 and named for the politically and socially important Maitland family of Lethington, contain many anonymous poems, some of which seem very plausibly to have been written by women.²

Critics claiming that women are unlikely to have written much early poetry have pointed to medieval and Renaissance conditions that inhibited women’s writing. External and internal barriers ranged from a lack of such basic requirements as space, time, and materials, to restrictive cultural attitudes toward women, including women’s attitudes toward themselves and their proper roles.³ Moreover, because pervasive and institutionalised misogyny associated women with weaker abilities in and toward characteristics society considered ‘good’, and with stronger,
innate abilities for characteristics considered ‘bad’, women were thus believed to be intrinsically an inferior and destabilising element in the culture. Since women could hardly avoid internalising such commonly-held ideas, even when their own experience and knowledge seemed to disprove them, such beliefs inevitably affected many women’s ability to write creatively, or confined their writing to religious or moral topics considered appropriate to the feminine gender role. Alexandra Barratt cites psychological obstacles hindering women as writers, including the cultural beliefs that the ‘written text both carried and created “authority”’, and that authorship was therefore ‘incompatible with femininity’; she notes further that between 1475-1640 women produced only 0.5% of published writing. Yet some women were able to maneuver around external barriers and to manage their own internal obstacles so as to write but may have felt compelled to do so anonymously.

In consequence, a researcher must formulate a methodology for approaching the literary artifact that employs analytical procedures and criteria that may uncover evidence supporting an argument for a woman creator. To do this requires, as Derek Pearsall has said of all new approaches to manuscript studies, ‘a degree of adventurousness’, a ‘certain readiness to try out ideas that have not been tried before and may turn out to need reformulation’, and the arrangement of information into ‘perceivable or plausible patterns of order by the postulation of bold hypotheses, or even theories’. Demonstrating the adventurousness and creativity that Pearsall recommends, some critics of anonymous medieval and Renaissance literature have employed criteria such as the following when searching particular manuscripts for women writers. Elizabeth Hanson-Smith, for example, studying the Findern manuscript, suggested the following criteria as indicating female authorship: ‘references to men as the object of love’; ‘the unique occurrence of these poems in a single manuscript’; ‘errors that appear authorial rather than scribal in nature’; ‘the experimental quality of the verse’; and ‘the originality of some themes’. Some of these criteria seem, however, less reliable than others: positing that ‘references to men as the object of love’ attest a woman author assumes a universal heterosexuality; and arguing convincingly that an error is ‘authorial’ rather than ‘scribal’ is quite difficult in the absence of another manuscript witness. Seeming equally problematic are other suggestions that a female author may be indicated if the poem concerns real life and feeling, or if the speaker’s voice is ‘without irony or detachment and not overtly dramatised’. However, the uniqueness of poems to a manuscript, the ‘experimental quality of the verse’, and thematic originality seem worth considering as possible criteria. To the