Isabella Whitney’s name is nowhere mentioned in C. S. Lewis’s encyclopedic survey of English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (1954), and until very recently it was absent from most other accounts of the period’s literature. The significance of her writing is the discovery of contemporary scholars fascinated by the relatively small number of women in Early Modern England who were able to break through the formidable social barriers that inhibited female appearance in print. Little is known about how Isabella Whitney succeeded in doing so. The sister of a well-known writer of emblems, Geoffrey Whitney, she was perhaps the first woman writer in England to publish secular verses, having persuaded the London printer Richard Jones to print a set of verse epistles on love and inconstancy (The Copy of a Letter, 1567). She followed this initial effort with A Sweet Nosegay or Pleasant Posy: Containing a Hundred and Ten Philosophical Flowers, in 1573. This work begins with a series of moral adages, adapted from Sir Hugh Plat’s Flowers of Philosophy. A second section returns to the genre of the epistle, with a collection of letters between family and friends that serves as the occasion for commentary on social and economic problems. The work’s third and concluding section is the author’s satirical Will and Testament.

An Act of Parliament in 1544 reaffirmed the long-standing legal prohibition upon the writing of wills by certain groups or classes of people: those groups included persons under the age of twenty-one, idiots, madmen—and wives. Thus for a woman to write her own will, let alone to publish it, was to lay claim to a certain legal, social, and economic independence. Whitney adopts this stance in order to survey the institutions, occupations, and commodities of London and, in leaving her mock bequests, to articulate a series of sharp criticisms. She writes in the voice of an impoverished gentlewoman who is compelled by her circumstances to leave the city and does so in a mood that mingles regret, complaint, irony, and aggression.

Will and Testament

The author (though loath to leave the city) upon her friend’s procurement is constrained to depart, wherefore she feigneth as she would die and maketh her will and testament, as followeth, with large legacies of such goods and riches which she most abundantly hath left behind her, and thereof maketh London sole executor to see her legacies performed.

A communication which the author had to London, before she made her will

The time is come I must depart from thee, ah famous city. I never yet, to rue my smart,¹ did find that thou hadst pity.  
Wherefore small cause there is that I should grieve from thee [to] go. But many women foolishly, like me, and other mo'ë,²

¹ pain ² more
Do such a fixed fancy set
on those which least deserve,
That long it is ere\textsuperscript{a} wit we get,
away from them to swerve.\textsuperscript{b}
But time with pity oft will tell
to those that will her try,
Whether it best be more to mell,\textsuperscript{c}
or utterly defy.
And now hath time me put in mind
of thy great cruelness,
That never once a help would find
to ease me in distress.
Thou never yet wouldst credit give
to board me for a year,
Nor with apparel me relieve
except thou payèd were.
No, no, thou never didst me good,
nor ever wilt, I know;
Yet I am in no angry mood,
but will, or ere I go,
In perfect love and charity
my testament here write,
And leave to thee such treasury
as I in it recite.
Now stand aside and give me leave
to write my latest will:
And see that none you do deceive
of that I leave them till.\textsuperscript{d}

The manner of her will, and what she left to London and to all those in it
at her departing

I whole in body and in mind,
but very weak in purse,
Do make and write my testament
for fear it will be worse.
And first I wholly do commend
my soul and body eke\textsuperscript{e}
To God the Father and the Son,
so long as I can speak.
And after speech, my soul to him,
and body to the grave,
Till time that all shall rise again,
their judgment for to have.
And then I hope they both shall meet
to dwell for aye\textsuperscript{f} in joy
Whereas\textsuperscript{g} I trust to see my friends
released from all annoy.
Thus have you heard touching my soul
and body what I mean;
I trust you all will witness bear,
I have a steadfast brain.
And now let me dispose such things
as I shall leave behind,
That those which shall receive the same
may know my willing mind.
I first of all to London leave,
because I there was bred,
Brave buildings rare, of churches store, and Paul’s to the head.
Between the same, fair streets there be
and people goodly store;
Because their keeping craveth cost,
I yet will leave hem more.
First for their food, I butchers leave,
that every day shall kill;
By Thames you shall have brewers store,
and bakers at your will.
And such as orders do observe,
and eat fish thrice a week,
I leave two streets full fraught therewith;
they need not far to seek.
Watling Street and Canwick Street
I full of woolen leave,
And linen store in Friday Street,
if they me not deceive.
And those which are of calling such
that costlier they require,
I mercers leave, with silk so rich
as any would desire.
In Cheap, of them they store shall find,
and likewise in that street
I goldsmiths leave, with jewels such
as are for ladies meet.
And plate to furnish cupboards with
full brave there shall you find,
With purl of silver and of gold
to satisfy your mind.
With hoods, bongrases, hats, or caps,
such store are in that street,
As if on tone side you should miss,
the tother serves you feat.
For nets of every kind of sort,
I leave within the pawn,
French ruffs, high purls, gorgets, and sleeves of any kind of lawn.
For purse or knives, for comb or glass,
or any needful knack,
I by the Stocks have left a boy
will ask you what you lack.

1. “And St. Paul’s Cathedral foremost among them.”
2. To encourage the fishing industry, an Act of 1563 ordered that fish was to be eaten three days a week.
3. Dealers in silk and other costly materials.
5. “Tone . . . tother”: the one . . . the other.
6. The upper walk or gallery of the Royal Exchange.
7. A market in the center of London.
I hose do leave in Birchin Lane,
of any kind of size,
For women stitched, for men both trunks
and those of Gascon guise,⁸
Boots, shoes, or pantables⁹ good store,
Saint Martin’s hath for you;
In Cornwall,⁹ there I leave you beds,
and all that ‘longs⁹ thereto.
For women, shall you tailors have:
by Bow,¹ the chiepest dwell;
In every lane you some shall find
can do indifferent well.
And for the men, few streets or lanes,
but body-makers⁹ be,
And such as make the sweeping cloaks
with guards⁹ beneath the knee.
Artillery⁰ at Temple Bar
and dagges⁰ at Tower Hill;
Swords and bucklers of the best
are nigh the Fleet until.⁹
Now when thy folk are fed and clad
with such as I have named,
For dainty mouths and stomachs weak
some junkets⁰ must be framed.
Wherefore I pothecaries² leave,
with banquets in their shop;
Physicians also for the sick,
diseases for to stop.
Some roisters⁰ still must bide in thee
and such as cut it out,⁹
That with the guiltless quarrel will,
to let their blood about.
For them I cunning surgeons leave,
some plasters⁰ to apply,
That ruffians may not still be hanged,
nor quiet persons die.
For salt, oatmeal, candles, soap,
or what you else do want,
In many places shops are full,
I left you nothing scant.⁰
If they that keep what I you leave
ask money, when they sell it,
At Mint there is such store it is
unpossible to tell it.
At Steelyard³ store of wines there be,
your dullèd minds to glad,
And handsome men that must not wed
except they leave their trade.⁴

8. Two kinds of breeches: trunk-hose (full and baglike) and gaskins (wide breeches).
1. The Church of St. Mary Bow.
2. Apothecaries sold various dainty dishes (“banquets”).
3. The place of business of the Hanseatic merchants, known for their Rhenish wines.
4. That is, the men are apprentices, who were not allowed to marry.
They oft shall seek for proper girls,
and some perhaps shall find
That need compels or lucre lures
to satisfy their mind.
And near the same I houses leave
for people to repair,
To bathe themselves, so to prevent
infection of the air.
On Saturdays I wish that those
which all the week do drudge
Shall thither trudge to trim them up
on Sundays to look smug.
If any other thing be lacked
in thee, I wish them look;
For there it is: I little brought,
but nothing from thee took.
Now for the people in thee left,
I have done as I may,
And that the poor, when I am gone,
have cause for me to pray,
I will to prisons portions leave,
what though but very small,
Yet that they may remember me
occasion be it shall.
And first the Counter they shall have,
lest they should go to wrack.
Some coggars and some honest men
that sergeants draw aback.
And such as friends will not them bail,
whose coin is very thin,
For them I leave a certain hole,
and little ease within.
The Newgate once a month shall have
a sessions for his share,
Lest being heaped, infection might
procure a further care.
And at those sessions some shall 'scape
with burning near the thumb.
And afterward to beg their fees
'til they have got the sum.
And such whose deeds deserveth death,
and twelve have found the same,
They shall be drawn up Holborn Hill
to come to further shame.
Well, yet to such I leave a nag
shall soon their sorrows cease,
For he shall either break their necks
or gallop from the preace.
The Fleet not in their circuit is,
yet if I give him nought,

5. I.e., the discharge fees that prisoners were required to pay.
6. The road to Tyburn—the place of execution—ran by Holborn Hill.
It might procure his curse, ere I
unto the ground be brought.

Wherefore I leave some papist old
to underprop his roof,
And to the poor within the same,
a box for their behoof.  
What makes you standers-by to smile,
and laugh so in your sleeve,
I think it is because that I
to Ludgate 0 nothing give.
I am not now in case to 0 lie,
here is no place of jest:

I did reserve that for myself,
if I my health possessed 0
And ever came in credit so
a debtor for to be,
When days of payment did approach,
I thither meant to flee,
To shroud myself amongst the rest
that choose to die in debt
Rather than any creditor
should money from them get.

Yet 'cause I feel myself so weak
that none me credit dare,
I here revoke, and do it leave
some bankrupts to his share.
To all the bookbinders by Paul's, 0
because I like their art,
They every week shall money have
when they from books depart.
Amongst them all my printer must
have somewhat to his share;
I will my friends these books to buy
of him, with other ware.
For maidens poor, I widowers rich
do leave, that oft shall dote
And by that means shall marry them,
to set the girls afloat.
And wealthy widows will I leave
to help young gentlemen,
Which when you 0 have, in any case
be courteous to them then.
And see their plate and jewels eke
may not be marred with rust,
Nor let their bags too long be full,
for fear that they do burst.
To every gate under the walls
that compass thee about,
I fruitwives 0 leave to entertain
such as come in and out.
To Smithfield 7 I must something leave,

7. West Smithfield, known for its horse market.
my parents there did dwell:

So careless for to be of it, none would account it well.
Wherefore it thrice a week shall have of horse and neat oxen good store;
And in his spittle blind and lame hospital
to dwell for evermore.
And Bedlam must not be forgot, the lunatic asylum
for that was oft my walk:
I people there too many leave that out of tune do talk.

At Bridewell there shall beadle be, a workhouse for the poor
and matrons that shall still
See chalk well-chopped and spinning plied, and turning of the mill.
For such as cannot quiet be,
but strive for house or land,
At th’ Inns of Court I lawyers leave to take their cause in hand.
And also leave I at each Inn of Court or Chancery,

Of gentlemen a youthful rout full of activity:
For whom I store of books have left at each bookbinder’s stall,
And part of all that London hath to furnish them withal.

And when they are with study cloyed, to recreate their mind,
Of tennis courts, of dancing schools, and fence they store shall find.

And every Sunday at the least I leave, to make them sport,
In divers places players that actors of wonders shall report.

Now, London, have I (for thy sake),
As comes into my memory dispersèd round about
Such needful things as they should have here left now unto thee:

When I am gone, with conscience let them dispersèd be.
And though I nothing namèd have to bury me withal,
Consider that above the ground annoyance be I shall I shall be

And let me have a shrouding sheet to cover me from shame,
And in oblivion bury me and never more me name.

8. The Inns of Court and Inns of Chancery trained and housed lawyers.
Ringings⁹ nor other ceremonies use you not for cost,⁹
Nor at my burial make no feast,
unless your money were but lost.
Rejoice in God that I am gone
out of this vale so vile,
And that of each thing left such store
as may your wants exile.⁹
I make thee sole executor, because
I loved thee best.
And thee I put in trust to give
the goods unto the rest.
Because thou shalt a helper need
in this so great a charge,⁹
I wish Good Fortune be thy guide, lest
thou shouldst run at large.
The happy days and quiet times
they both her servants be,
Which well will serve to fetch and bring
such things as need⁹ to thee.
Wherefore (good London) not refuse
for helper her to take:
Thus being weak and weary both,
an end here will I make.
To all that ask what end I made,
and how I went away,
Thou answer mayst: “like those which here
no longer tarry may.”
And unto all that wish me well
or rue that I am gone,
Do me commend, and bid them cease
my absence for to moan.
And tell them further, if they would
my presence still have had,
They should have sought to mend my luck,
which ever was too bad.
So fare thou well a thousand times,
God shield thee from thy foe,
And still make thee victorious
of those that seek thy woe.
And though I am persuade that I
shall never more thee see,
Yet to the last I shall not cease
to wish much good to thee.
This twenty of October, I,
in Anno Domini
A thousand five hundred seventy-three,
as almanacs descry,⁹
Did write this will with mine own hand
and it to London gave,
In witness of the standers-by,

⁹. I.e., rejoice that I’ve left you such abundance of everything that you will have no further needs.
whose names if you will have,
Paper, Pen, and Standish were 
at that same present by,
With Time, who promised to reveal,
so fast as she could hie,
The same, lest of my nearer kin
for any thing should vary:
So finally I make an end,
no longer can I tarry.

1. Time will hasten ("hie") to reveal the will, lest kinsfolk begin to quarrel over her property.