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## ISABELLA WHITNEY

fl. 1567–1573

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,<sup>o</sup> pain  
 did find that thou hadst pity.  
 5 Wherefore small cause there is that I  
 should grieve from thee [to] go.  
 But many women foolishly,  
 like me, and other mo'e,<sup>o</sup> more

Do such a fixèd fancy set  
 10       on those which least deserve,  
 That long it is ere<sup>o</sup> wit we get, *before*  
           away from them to swerve.<sup>o</sup> *turn*  
 But time with pity oft will tell  
           to those that will her try,  
 15 Whether it best be more to mell,<sup>o</sup> *associate with*  
           or utterly defy.  
 And now hath time me put in mind  
           of thy great cruelty,  
 That never once a help would find  
 20       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.  
 25 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  
 30       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:  
 35 And see that none you do deceive  
           of that I leave them till.<sup>o</sup> *to them*

*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  
 40       for fear it will be worse.  
 And first I wholly do commend  
           my soul and body eke<sup>o</sup> *also*  
 To God the Father and the Son,  
           so long as I can speak.  
 45 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  
 50       to dwell for aye<sup>o</sup> in joy *ever*  
 Whereas<sup>o</sup> I trust to see my friends *where*  
           released from all annoy.  
 Thus have you heard touching my soul  
           and body what I mean;  
 55 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  
 60 may know my willing mind.  
 I first of all to London leave,  
 because I there was bred,  
 Brave<sup>o</sup> buildings rare, of churches store,<sup>o</sup> *splendid / abundance*  
 and Paul's to the head.<sup>1</sup>  
 65 Between the same, fair streets there be  
 and people goodly store;  
 Because their keeping craveth<sup>o</sup> cost, *requires*  
 I yet will leave hem<sup>o</sup> more. *them*  
 First for their food, I butchers leave,  
 70 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,<sup>2</sup>  
 75 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,  
 80 if they me not deceive.  
 And those which are of calling such  
 that costlier they require,  
 I mercers<sup>3</sup> leave, with silk so rich  
 as any would desire.  
 85 In Cheap,<sup>4</sup> of them they store shall find,  
 and likewise in that street  
 I goldsmiths leave, with jewels such  
 as are for ladies meet.<sup>o</sup> *suitable*  
 And plate<sup>o</sup> to furnish cupboards with *silver-plated dishes*  
 90 full brave there shall you find,  
 With purl<sup>o</sup> of silver and of gold *thread or cord*  
 to satisfy your mind.  
 With hoods, bongraces,<sup>o</sup> hats, or caps, *sunshades*  
 such store are in that street,  
 95 As if on tone side you should miss,  
 the tother<sup>5</sup> serves you feat.<sup>o</sup> *nicely*  
 For nets<sup>o</sup> of every kind of sort, *hairnets*  
 I leave within the pawn,<sup>6</sup>  
 French ruffs, high purls,<sup>o</sup> gorgets,<sup>o</sup> and sleeves *ruff pleats / wimples*  
 100 of any kind of lawn.<sup>o</sup> *fine linen*  
 For purse or knives, for comb or glass,  
 or any needful knack,  
 I by the Stocks<sup>7</sup> 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.

4. Cheapside Market, near St. Paul's.

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.

- 105 I hose do leave in Birchin Lane,  
of any kind of size,  
For women stitched, for men both trunks  
and those of Gascon guise,<sup>8</sup>  
Boots, shoes, or pantables<sup>o</sup> good store, *overshoes*  
110 Saint Martin's hath for you;  
In Cornwall,<sup>9</sup> there I leave you beds,  
and all that 'longs<sup>o</sup> thereto. *belongs*  
For women, shall you tailors have:  
by Bow,<sup>1</sup> the chiefest dwell;  
115 In every lane you some shall find  
can do indifferent well.  
And for the men, few streets or lanes,  
but body-makers<sup>o</sup> be, *tailors*  
And such as make the sweeping cloaks  
120 with guards<sup>o</sup> beneath the knee. *ornamental borders*  
Artillery<sup>o</sup> at Temple Bar *weapons*  
and dagges<sup>o</sup> at Tower Hill; *pistols*  
Swords and bucklers of the best  
are nigh the Fleet until.<sup>o</sup> *near to Fleet Street*  
125 Now when thy folk are fed and clad  
with such as I have named,  
For dainty mouths and stomachs weak  
some junkets<sup>o</sup> must be framed. *milk puddings*  
Wherefore I 'pothecaries<sup>2</sup> leave,  
130 with banquets in their shop;  
Physicians also for the sick,  
diseases for to stop.  
Some roisters<sup>o</sup> still must bide in thee *roisterers, bullies*  
and such as cut it out,<sup>o</sup> *make a show*  
135 That with the guiltless quarrel will,  
to let their blood about.  
For them I cunning surgeons leave,  
some plasters<sup>o</sup> to apply, *poultices*  
That ruffians may not still be hanged,  
140 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.<sup>o</sup> *scarce*  
145 If they that keep what I you leave  
ask money, when they sell it,  
At Mint there is such store it is  
impossible to tell it.  
At Steelyard<sup>3</sup> store of wines there be,  
150 your dullèd minds to glad,  
And handsome men that must not wed  
except they leave their trade.<sup>4</sup>

8. Two kinds of breeches: trunk-hose (full and baglike) and gaskins (wide breeches).

9. "Cornwallish ground" in Vintry Ward.

1. The Church of St. Mary Bow.

2. Apothecaries sold various dainty dishes ("ban-

quets").

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  
 155 That need compels or lucre lures  
 to satisfy their mind.  
 And near the same I houses leave  
 for people to repair,<sup>o</sup> *resort*  
 To bathe themselves, so to prevent  
 160 infection of the air.  
 On Saturdays I wish that those  
 which all the week do drug<sup>o</sup> *drudge*  
 Shall thither trudge to trim them up  
 on Sundays to look smug.<sup>o</sup> *neat, trim*  
 165 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,  
 170 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,  
 175 Yet that they may remember me  
 occasion be it shall.  
 And first the Counter<sup>o</sup> they shall have, *a debtors' prison*  
 lest they should go to wrack,<sup>o</sup> *ruin*  
 Some coggers<sup>o</sup> and some honest men *cheats*  
 180 that sergeants<sup>o</sup> draw aback. *police officers*  
 And such as friends will not them bail,  
 whose coin is very thin,  
 For them I leave a certain hole,  
 and little ease within.  
 185 The Newgate<sup>o</sup> once a month shall have *a prison for felons*  
 a sessions<sup>o</sup> for his share, *court*  
 Lest being heaped,<sup>o</sup> infection might *overcrowded*  
 procure a further care.  
 And at those sessions some shall 'scape  
 190 with burning near the thumb,<sup>o</sup> *branding*  
 And afterward to beg their fees<sup>5</sup>  
 till they have got the sum.  
 And such whose deeds deserveth death,  
 and twelve<sup>o</sup> have found the same, *a jury*  
 195 They shall be drawn up Holborn Hill  
 to come to further shame.<sup>6</sup>  
 Well, yet to such I leave a nag  
 shall soon their sorrows cease,  
 For he shall either break their necks  
 200 or gallop from the preace.<sup>o</sup> *press, crowd*  
 The Fleet<sup>o</sup> not in their circuit is, *another prison*  
 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.  
 205 Wherefore I leave some papist old  
 to underprop his roof,  
 And to the poor within the same,  
 a box<sup>o</sup> for their behoof.<sup>o</sup> *money box / benefit*  
 What makes you standers-by to smile,  
 210 and laugh so in your sleeve,  
 I think it is because that I  
 to Ludgate<sup>o</sup> nothing give. *debtors' prison*  
 I am not now in case to<sup>o</sup> lie, *in a position to*  
 here is no place of jest:  
 215 I did reserve that for myself,  
 if I my health possessed<sup>o</sup> *retained*  
 And ever came in credit so  
 a debtor for to be,  
 When days of payment did approach,  
 220 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.  
 225 Yet 'cause I feel myself so weak  
 that none me credit dare,  
 I here revoke, and do it leave  
 some bankrupts to his share.<sup>o</sup> *to Ludgate's share*  
 To all the bookbinders by Paul's,<sup>o</sup> *St. Paul's*  
 230 because I like their art,  
 They every week shall money have  
 when they from books depart.<sup>o</sup> *sell their books*  
 Amongst them all my printer must  
 have somewhat to his share;  
 235 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,  
 240 to set the girls afloat.  
 And wealthy widows will I leave  
 to help young gentlemen,  
 Which when you<sup>o</sup> have, in any case *i.e., the young gentlemen*  
 be courteous to them then.  
 245 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  
 250 that compass thee about,  
 I fruitwives<sup>o</sup> leave to entertain *fruit sellers*  
 such as come in and out.  
 To Smithfield<sup>7</sup> I must something leave,

7. West Smithfield, known for its horse market.

my parents there did dwell:  
 255 So careless for to be of it,  
     none would accompt° it well. *account*  
 Wherefore it thrice a week shall have  
     of horse and neat° good store; *oxen*  
 And in his spittle° blind and lame *hospital*  
 260 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.  
 265 At Bridewell° there shall beadles 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,  
 270 but strive for house or land,  
 At th' Inns of Court<sup>8</sup> I lawyers leave  
     to take their cause in hand.  
 And also leave I at each Inn  
     of Court or Chancery,  
 275 Of gentlemen a youthful rout° *crowd*  
     full of activity:  
 For whom I store of books have left  
     at each bookbinder's stall,  
 And part of all that London hath  
 280 to furnish them withal.° *with*  
 And when they are with study cloyed,  
     to recreate their mind,  
 Of tennis courts, of dancing schools,  
     and fence° they store shall find. *fencing*  
 285 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),  
 290 within thee and without,  
 As comes into my memory  
     dispersèd round about  
 Such needful things as they should have  
     here left now unto thee:  
 295 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  
 300 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.

305 Ringings<sup>o</sup> nor other ceremonies  
     use you not for cost,<sup>o</sup> *of church bells*  
 Nor at my burial make no feast,  
     your money were but lost. *because of the expense*  
 Rejoice in God that I am gone  
 310 out of this vale so vile,  
 And that of each thing left such store  
     as may your wants exile.<sup>9</sup>  
 I make thee sole executor, because  
     I loved thee best.  
 315 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,<sup>o</sup> *task*  
 I wish Good Fortune be thy guide, lest  
 320 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 need<sup>o</sup> to thee. *are needed*  
 325 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,  
 330 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,  
 335 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,  
 340 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.  
 345 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,  
 350 in Anno Domini  
 A thousand five hundred seventy-three,  
     as almanacs descry,<sup>o</sup> *declare*  
 Did write this will with mine own hand  
     and it to London gave,  
 355 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<sup>o</sup> were  
 at that same present by,  
 With Time, who promised to reveal,  
 360 so fast as she could hie,  
 The same, lest of my nearer kin  
 for any thing should vary:<sup>1</sup>  
 So finally I make an end,  
 no longer can I tarry.

*inkstand*

1573

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