



From Babylon to Birchin Lane: Archetypes versus topographical specificity in Whitney and Howard's representations of London

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Mid-Tudor representations of London “frequently tend towards scriptural Babylons”, populated by the “chaotic trishtrash” of the urban landscape.¹ In this respect, Henry Howard's ‘London, hast thou accused me’ (c.1543) and Isabella Whitney's ‘Will and Testament’ (c.1573) typify metropolitan writing of the time. Both poets paint a vivid picture of their London experience, with Whitney bringing a tapestry of localised topography and Howard working in biblical archetypes. However, Howard is not without specificity in rooting the poem's ambiguous occasion, and Whitney still draws on the archetypal cruel city. Similar in deploying archetypes yet contrasting in the social realities they depict, this essay will focus on where the poems depart as well as exploring connections in imagining London.

Whitney's specificity lies in her ability to poetically configure a verbal map of London, discharging the requests of her pseudo-will to its many guilds. Imitating the legalistic formulae of a will, Whitney constructs a metaphorical epitaph as the poem closes the collection, *A Sweet Nosegay* (1573). By confessing that she is “constrained to depart”, Whitney's wit is observable from the outset, implying that she does not want to depart London or life itself.² Whitney further taps into this testamentary form by borrowing the language of a will, declaring that she is “whole in body, and in mind, / but very weak in purse” (p.12). However, this reveals the poem's central irony: she has nothing yet bestows everything. In the style of *copia*, Whitney utilises what she does have, her creative skill, to create abundance through listing. This energetic inventory of marketplace culture manoeuvres through identifiable London locations, in which the poem can be regarded as a historical document, as well as legal, as Whitney informs that you can buy “boots” at “Saint Martin's” (p.14), for example. Published in 1561 as Whitney was in London, ‘The Agas Map’ reveals that these places were close to her home in Abchurch Lane, suggesting that her knowledge of social geography has been acquired from immediate experience of walking these streets.³ The map also shows that Whitney lived near the Royal Exchange, a centre of commerce, implying that her “ordinary citizen's perspective” is perhaps evoked from engaging with the craftsmen themselves.⁴

Although speaking to a legalistic discipline, ‘Will and Testament’ is fundamentally lyric verse. Whitney alternates between iambic tetrameter and trimeter, assuming the accessible ballad metre. By engaging with this populist genre, the poem's form echoes the

¹ Mike Rodman Jones, “O London, London’: Mid-Tudor Literature and the City’, *The Review of English Studies*, 68:287 (2017), 883-901 (p.901).

² Isabella Whitney, ‘Will and Testament’, *Early Modern Women's Writing: An Anthology, 1560-1700*, ed. by Paul Salzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.11, cited parenthetically.

³ ‘The Agas Map of Early Modern London’ (2015) <<https://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/agas.htm>> [Accessed: 4/1/2023].

⁴ Helen Wilcox, “ah, famous citie’: Women, Writing, and Early Modern London’, *Feminist Review*, 96:1 (2010), 20-40 (p.24).

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consumerism that Whitney portrays as ballads were sung for sale, in which the poem itself becomes another commodity to be sold. Ballads were also inexpensive, appropriately reflecting Whitney's destitution. The ballad metre is rather celebratory, complementing Helen Wilcox's argument that Whitney "subverts [...] the *contemptus mundi* genre", perhaps even sharing features with *encomium civitatis* as her style of abundance becomes a commemoration.⁵ Furthermore, the rhyme scheme, rhyming trimeter lines, functions in conjunction with the metre to propel the reader through a narrative that moves rapidly around London. Whitney's enumeration of the city's trades is reminiscent of Henry Brinklow's invective against London, similarly listing mercantile affairs to bring satire into relief. Brinklow's specificity speaks to Whitney's affinity for place names, informing the trade of "horsse in Smithfelde" to likewise offer a survey of London's commerce.⁶ However, Brinklow integrates religion into the urban topography, condemning the population for focusing on material rather than spiritual wealth, in which the "sowles of men" are commodified as "trishtrashe".⁷ By discarding souls as another "object in the urban marketplace", Brinklow ascribes immorality to London's consumerism.⁸ Although this opposes Whitney's celebratory account, her honorary expression may be superficially satirical. Whitney's tone is not as pious as Brinklow's, but through overt condemnation of London abandoning her, she reveals the moral consequences of its institutions. Whitney and Brinklow thus expose that merchants' "roots of wealth" have "deep antipathies, both social and moral".⁹

As the poem unfolds, it shifts from celebratory commentary to ominous reflection on London's establishments, with darkness lurking behind double entendre. Whitney specifies that "by the stocks [...] a boy, / will ask you what you lack", reflecting the calls of boys selling trinkets (p.14). "Stocks" offers a pun, resembling both the stockpile of goods for sale and stocks for punishment. Such boys were usually sanctioned for theft of the very "purse or knives" that they were selling (p.14), further revealing Whitney's wordplay. Whitney outlines London's co-dependency of consumption, suggesting that stocks are consumers of boys who themselves are consumers of stolen goods. London is therefore fuelled by a symbiotic chain of vice and capitalism, thriving from corrupting inhabitants like Whitney, who is metaphorically dead as London is ironically alive. This also echoes Brinklow's polemic that similarly blends commercial and moral invective. Ralph Hanna describes London's "fusion between commercial and spiritual space", however Whitney implies that they cannot co-exist. As consumerist institutions permeate the city, morality and spirituality are drained.¹⁰

Immorality is further expressed in Whitney's exploration of debtors' prisons, embodying the motif of her financial insecurity. For those "whose coin is thin", Whitney bestows "a certain hole" with "little ease" (p.16). "Little ease" may refer to the discomfort of a crowded prison, or it may reference the torture device. The visceral grittiness of this imagery would have likely been perceived as indelicate for a woman to be discussing, however the poem strives to challenge the "conventional roles of an Elizabethan woman in making the

⁵ Ibid, p.27.

⁶ Henry Brinklow, *The Lamentation of a Christian Against the City of London* (1545), adapting *Revelation* 18: 10-13.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jones, "O London, London", p.893.

⁹ Ralph Hanna, 'Images of London in Medieval Literature', *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of London*, ed. by Lawrence Manley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.19-33, p.21.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.24.

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city subservient to her will".¹¹ By outlining London's physical geography, the poem illustrates its moral, or rather immoral geography, criticising the "social injustice of the city it initially [...] celebrates".¹² By presenting a series of paradoxes within a series of commercial activities, the poem provides a full inventory of London as a place of "life and death, opportunity and loss", leaving Whitney nostalgic yet disappointed.¹³

Although Howard's poem lacks Whitney's topographical specificity, it appears to reference particularities of the enigmatic occasion of 1543. Howard was imprisoned for eating meat during Lent and "smashing windows of churches and well-appointed residences".¹⁴ Howard's meat-eating exhibits potentially heretical behaviour as Protestantism denies transubstantiation, suggesting that Howard departs from the orthodoxy of his Catholic family. Smashing church windows may also be political iconoclasm, displaying "suspected Lutheran behaviour" which further breaks from Catholicism and expresses dangerous religious views.¹⁵ Reverberations of this appear in Howard's poem as "thyne idoll'es burnt", demonstrating Protestant ideologies that discard saint idols to purify relationships with God.¹⁶ If Howard was writing with reformist intent, his zealous prophetic language would be appropriate to comment on London's religious situation, as lyric voice and author allegedly bleed together.

However, vandalising the homes of affluent Londoners may function as a moralistic commentary on their lewd lifestyles, diverging from politically fuelled intent to justify his own waywardness. With direct reference to his offence, admitting that "the wyndowes had don [him] no spight" (l.44), the poem reveals that the "prowd people" behind them are to blame (l.45). Inciting the confrontational opening, "London, hast thow accused me" (l.1), Howard exposes London's hypocrisy in judging him when the city is rife with vice. His quasi-legalistic tone becomes an oratorical defence as he reshapes his unlawful activities into satirical ethical nobility, attacking those who must be held accountable for their sins. Paradoxically, Howard's own hypocrisy feeds the dissolution that he lambasts, somewhat reflecting Whitney's symbiotically corrupted London.

Teeming with satire, Howard's poem may even devolve into aristocratic arrogance and "haughty defiance".¹⁷ Further referencing the occasion, Howard documents the "thonder clapp" from the "peoble stones that sowndles rapp" (l.23,25), connecting these lines through terza rima to emphasise the aural imagery. Equating God's divine retribution with a pebble thrown against a window parodies the biblical reference to "trivialise the offence", in which his pervasively proud hauteur mutes any serious intent.¹⁸ The poem's rhetorical instability becomes a "combination of playful ambiguity and political seriousness".¹⁹ Howard's ambiguous social realities are thus more inferred than Whitney's as the Reformation's shifting sands carry religious insecurity. With polarised readings, the poem's concrete

¹¹ Wilcox, "ah, famous citie", p.38.

¹² Ibid, p.26.

¹³ Wilcox, "ah, famous citie", p.22.

¹⁴ Andrew W. Taylor, 'Glass Houses: Surrey, Petrarch, and the Religious Poetics of the 'London' Invective', *Review of English Studies*, 57:231 (2006), 433-55 (p.434).

¹⁵ Taylor, 'Glass Houses' p.435.

¹⁶ Henry Howard, 'London, hast thow accused me', *Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey: Poems*, ed. by Emrys Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), l.63, cited parenthetically.

¹⁷ Taylor, 'Glass Houses' p.441.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.441.

¹⁹ Jones, "O London, London", p.885.

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intentions are unknown, so hypotheses are based on what its allusions suggest. By diminishing the poem's solemnity through satire, the tone becomes "unbearably self-righteous, if not comical", in which Howard's preposterousness is more convincing than his religious urgency.²⁰

Howard's engagement with biblical archetypes therefore must be considered against his potential satire. He deploys a prophetic lyric voice, lambasting London for its immorality, although this carries further ambiguities. Due its occasion, the poem perhaps "mingles person and persona", implicating Howard as the speaker, but if it's positioned at his defence, he can distance himself from what becomes a symbolic presentation.²¹ Stylistically reflecting *vox clamantis*, the speaker looks down and condemns the city from an outside perspective, and since ironically, Howard is a Londoner, the lyric voice may also be satirical and therefore distanced, exemplifying Howard's biblical parodying to excuse his offences. Becoming a "fygure of the Lordes behest" (l.21), Howard alludes to the Jeremiad genre that "laments the nation's falling-away from its virtuous foundations".²² Assuming a mock-apocalyptic tone, the poem satirically anticipates God's divine retribution through reverberation of Old Testament prophetic books, in which the irony lies in mimicry of "the forms it seeks to parody".²³ Undertaking this moral high voice, a motif of concealment emerges as the speaker reveals London's "secret synn" and "secret spight" (l.14). With moral authority, the speaker awakens London's citizens who secretly reside with vice, becoming reminiscent of Howard targeting the windows of perceived dissolute Londoners.

Furthermore, Howard enumerates the cardinal sins between lines 28 to 40, alternating lines when introducing a new sin. This passage interrupts the poem's terza rima, transforming into an 'abc bcb cef efef' scheme to create an intertwining tapestry of sin. Portraying London as utterly without virtue, the *vox clamantis* figure sees every sin, exposing London's complete dissolution. "Pryde" is listed first (l.28), becoming separated from the passage's rhyme scheme, perhaps as the sin that Howard deems to be most corrupt, especially since this line is linked to "the drefull plage" through end rhyme (l.26). Segregating pride gives it priority over the other sins, as one that is most deserving of "Goddess wrath" from perpetuating self-righteous dissolute living (l.27), sustaining Howard's satirical self-defence as his own antics contribute to London's sinful chaos. Outside of this list, a lexicon of sin permeates the poem, suggesting that London's vices cannot be contained within a single tabulation. By exposing London's lewd living, Howard justifies his actions to "mockingly disguise his vandalism", although his intent remains difficult to resolve.²⁴

Howard deploys Jeremiah's archetype within classical cities that are "haunted by biblical figures", providing a template through which he can confront London's depravities to exonerate himself.²⁵ Although archetypal representations became more accessible from the

²⁰ Taylor, 'Glass Houses' p.436.

²¹ Taylor, 'Glass Houses' p.453.

²² Andrew R. Murphy, 'Longing, Nostalgia, and Golden Age Politics: The American Jeremiad and the Power of the Past', *Perspectives on Politics*, 7:1 (2009), 125-141 (p.125).

²³ Taylor, 'Glass Houses' p.441.

²⁴ Susan Brigden, 'Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, and the 'Conjured League'', *The Historical Journal*, 37:3 (1994), 507-537 (p.518).

²⁵ Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley, 'Eden, Babylon, New Jerusalem: A Taxonomy for Writing the City', *Writing the City: Eden, Babylon, and the New Jerusalem*, eds. by Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley, 1st edn (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 331-41, p.331.

Bible's vernacular translation, Howard would have had access to such material through his high education to read about classical cities, as would his aristocratic friends. Unlike Whitney who is writing for publication, Howard's poem circulated within a coterie audience, all having classical education to comprehend such archetypes as well as private knowledge of the poem's occasion. Mirroring Howard's term of address, Brinklow similarly construes London as "Great cyte Babilon [...], for one houre is her iudgenment come", likewise demonstrating Jeremiah's apocalyptic anticipation of a fallen city.²⁶ Just as Brinklow condemns London for its immoral consumer culture, Howard also appears to reveal the vices of commodification by comparing London to "Babylon! The shopp of craft!" (l.54). By "[blurring] distinctions between religious and commercial invective", Howard associates Babylon's vice with commercial activity.²⁷ This suggests that both Howard and Whitney use satire to demonstrate consumerism's moral consequences, although Whitney's religious castigation is more diminished.

Utilising his classical education, Howard transposes Francis Petrarch's attacks on Avignon into a satirical polemic against London. Howard's political climate contextually echoes Petrarch's Babylonian sonnets, as competing papacy systems can be compared to Henry VIII's departure from the Church of Rome, both bearing shifting religious sands. Howard's engagement with this could be perceived as an assault on Henry, invalidating his alleged rejection of Catholicism, although the boundaries between person and persona appear to fluctuate again as the poem unfolds. However, both poems clearly personify their city with the aim of castigation. Petrarch's *Canzoniere* sonnet '136' illustrates a dissolute woman who becomes "symbolic of the papal court in Avignon and its vices".²⁸ By deploying the satirical genre of *vituperium in vetulam*, a tradition of "harangue against a stereotyped old woman", '136' seeks to "inspire ethical reprehension of the character" and therefore the city it personifies.²⁹ Similarly, Howard's disgust for London is rooted in his satirical condemnation of its personified immorality, as both poets offer ethical attacks on the dissolute urban landscape.

Howard's London possesses a generative quality, breeding people perpetuating sinful behaviour, ironically like himself. Referencing London's medieval walls, Howard exposes the "synnes that groo, / Within thy wicked walls" (l.5-6), reflecting Petrarch's expression of Avignon's "nest of betrayals".³⁰ Just as Petrarch's vulgar woman "gives birth to evil", London and Avignon are presented as rotting wombs, festering with sin.³¹ References to classical work in Tudor writing may imply that humanity will repeatedly regress into failure unless moral change starts within these metaphorical "walls", although this interpretation remains ironic as Howard himself is refusing to amend the "secret synn" (l.14). Howard further condemns Londoners' "ill gott goodes" (l.37), alluding to Petrarch's paradoxical assertion that Avignon prospers from impoverishing its populace, growing "rich [...] by making others poor" (l.4). Howard may be alluding to the vices of affluent Londoners, using his assumed moral authority to confront them with retribution by throwing stones at their

²⁶ Brinklow, *The Lamentation of a Christian*.

²⁷ Jones, "O London, London", p.883.

²⁸ Fabian Alfie, 'Old Lady Avignon: Petrarch's *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* 136 and the Topos of *Vituperium in Vetulam*', *Italian Culture*, 30:2 (2012), 97-106 (p.98).

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.99.

³⁰ Francis Petrarch, *Canzoniere* no.136, from Anthony Mortimer, ed. and trans., *Petrarch. Canzoniere: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2002), cited parenthetically.

³¹ Alfie, 'Old Lady Avignon' p.103.

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windows. Borrowing Petrarch's idea of "mirrors" (l.11), Howard taps into the medieval tradition of *speculum principis*. By holding a mirror to London, urging its inhabitants to examine and amend their sinful behaviour, Howard excuses his wrongdoing by exposing the sins of London's populace, pompously demanding reformation whilst indulging himself.

Whitney similarly personifies London, however she taps into the genre of love complaint, portraying the city as a jilted lover. Howard and Whitney both use direct address to establish a relationship with London, although Whitney implies a romantic, or perhaps unromantic dynamic, depicting an archetypal cruel city. Amongst her oeuvre, Whitney's poem, "Letter" (c.1567), similarly addresses a lover who "wooed then jilted the poet", likewise depicting an outcast female.³² By identifying herself with "many women foolishly" that "do such a fixed fancy set" (p.11), Whitney presents London as a source of attraction that did not deserve her affection. As the first attributable English woman writing lyric verse, Whitney parades her feminine perspective, offering an alternative understanding of the city as an "unworthy man who harshly rejects a once-loved woman".³³ London's indecency and "great cruelty" of casting out Whitney reflects Babylonian tropes (p.11), echoing Howard's claim that London survives by preying on people until they have nothing left. By appointing "London as sole executor" (p.11), double entendre grants the city responsibility of discharging Whitney's will and being the cause of her death. On a homographic level, London may be further charged with killing her soul, outlining the moral implications of the urban landscape. However, the idea that Whitney "loath to leave the city" suggests a degree of longing (p.11), indicating lingering desire and admiration. By returning the city's "goods and riches" (p.11) in abundance, Whitney's poem honours an "uneasy romance, paradoxically symbolising both possibility and disappointment" by celebrating and mourning her life in London.³⁴

Both Whitney and Howard portray London as an unforgiving city. Although Whitney ascribes London a coldness for abandoning her, there is a degree of redeemability as she does not expose its dissolution like Howard does, castigating the city as Babylon. Instead, Whitney's tone appears disappointed, making her departure more personal. The nature of Howard's tone, however, is complicated by the clash of satire and political gravity, clouding his intent. Despite this, there is clarity in the interpretation that both poets passionately illustrate London's different shades, deploying archetypal representations within particularities of their experience.

³² Betty Travitsky, 'The "Wyll and Testament" of Isabella Whitney', *English Literary Renaissance*, 10:1 (1980), 76-96 (p.80).

³³ Wilcox, "ah, famous citie", p.38.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.37.

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