REVIEW
Textual Activism as Political Mediation

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Julie Crawford

Mediatrix: Women, Politics, & Literary Production in Early Modern England

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THE CRITICAL STUDY of early modern women's writing in the last thirty years has evolved from an acknowledgment of its physical existence to a myriad of post-feminist approaches. As scholars have examined and compared the diverse textual production primarily of poetry, drama, or devotional writing by women authors, these works' imbrications with religious and political concerns have gained prominence. The canon of women's writing from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has expanded as printed texts have been considered alongside a larger number of manuscript poetry, diaries, or letters. In *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (1999), Margaret Ezell defined a form of social authorship that was intrinsically related to manuscript culture and circulation, since it was a "game" played in the period before print became the dominant mode of transmission of knowledge. More recent studies have delved into the intricacies of women's manuscript literature in court circles as expressions of piety, family bonds, and gender politics. Helen Smith focused her attention on the "circuit" of printing between 1557 and 1660 in "*Grossly Material Things*": *Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (2012) to remind us that womens' involvement with text production in the early modern period was not limited to authorship, and that networks of men and women participated in the "creative action" of making textual works.

Julie Crawford's *Mediatrix* follows this approach to manuscript culture and social authorship and suggests a constellation of thought-provoking associations that interrogate the notion of women's writing itself. John Donne used the term *mediatrix* to refer to Lucy Harington Russell as a patroness, and Crawford is intrigued by its

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relative obscurity in Protestant culture and its lay usage as a metaphor for a woman mediator. In Roman Catholicism, the mediatrix was Virgin Mary, who interceded between God and humanity through her son Jesus Christ; Elizabethan patronage demanded a material rather than spiritual intercession, and this is what Donne seeks from Russell. But Crawford's mediation is not understood as a passive endorsement. It is predicated on an engagement of the person seeking patronage with the causes espoused by the mediatrix.

Crawford puts forward the idea that for the four women who make up her case studies, the production of literature was a form of activism. This characterization may not come as a surprise in the context of the saturated market of cheap print in revolutionary England, but it is a less obvious term to use to refer to the literary output of ladies immersed in a culture of patronage. Crawford's analysis of their writing forces her to interrogate the stability of the concept of patronage along two main lines: the assumptions that gender was a defining trait in aristocratic writing, and that patronage was equivalent to passive endorsement. The introduction takes stock of the different kinds of interpellations and conventions found in the relationships between patrons and solicitors, preparing the way for the main arguments in Crawford's subsequent chapters. She focuses on the views and affiliations that motivate these patronesses' activities, rather than discussing their activities in isolation: "While many of the women who appear in the pages of the book are familiar figures in feminist literary history, I look at their contributions to early modern culture less in terms of their gender or their seemingly discrete roles as writers, patrons, or readers, than in terms of their religious and political affiliations and commitments" (5). Even though the four protagonists of Crawford's narrative are canonical examples of aristocratic culture whose influence in Elizabethan and Jacobean politics is well known, their motives gain depth and scope when their interrelations are considered. The family bonds of the Sidneys, Herberts, Russells, and Hobys may not explain their shared religious concerns, but the latter are indeed the raison d'être for the familial connections. Their politically engaged form of Protestantism is realized through a practice of patronage in which men and women participate as equal partners in an act that we may define as "reciprocal sponsorship." Communities, Crawford argues, are often seen as positive, but they can also be marked by debate and conflict. Mary Sidney, Margaret Hoby, Lucy Harington, and Mary Wroth were successful as patronesses, all the more so because they built up their power and influence through their ongoing support of their causes. Their work as *mediatrixes* goes beyond being agents of refined culture, and becomes a necessary condition for embodying the manuscript text as an instrument of political intercession.

Mary Sidney and *Arcadia* are the focus of the first chapter, in which Crawford seeks to enlarge the critical formulations of Pamela and Philoclea as characters who exemplify models of Christian virtue and constancy. Rather than serving only as symbols of the feminized virtue that corrects the martial *virtus* of *Arcadia*'s heroes Pyrocles and Musidorus, they can be regarded—as they were by early modern readers—as women associated with political power. As with other expressions of

political power, theirs was configured allegorically. Crawford substantiates her argument by pointing to the recursive mode of reading, what she calls "*Arcadia's* deciphering imperative," in which women figures were seen as models of "principled" constancy: "This mode, in which the neostoically constant and providentially minded woman served as the exemplary figure for aristocratic power, was associated with the Sidney circle, and anchored, in many ways, by women, particularly Mary Sidney Herbert and Penelope Devereux Rich" (37). Mary Sidney Herbert published her corrected version of the *Arcadia* in 1593, and Crawford mentions two major motivations for publishing this version that support her argument of patronage as political loyalty: first, the final two books of the original *Arcadia*, which Herbert restored, feature a vindication of female constancy. The marriages between the heroines and their princes promise "a rule based on contract and consent rather than force" (78). Second, by keeping the *Arcadia* under her wing, Mary Sidney Herbert obviously reinforced her status as the new head of the Sidney alliance through the promotion of their literary assets. Thus, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* became more than a text "done for her" and dedicated to her by her brother Philip. By revising *Arcadia,* Sidney Herbert transformed it into a work done *by* her that paid special attention to "liveries," emblems of values that constitute a political statement. The co-authorship of Sidney Herbert and the presence of the two constant women who act as referents for the "deciphering imperative" of *Arcadia* were key agents in the circulation and interpretation of this work in the seventeenth century.

Margaret Hoby, whose second husband was Thomas Sidney—the younger brother of Philip Sidney—kept up the oldest-known diary written by an Englishwoman. Her devout Protestantism with Puritan leanings was partly due to her having been educated in the household of Katherine Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon. Most of Crawford's second chapter describes the breadth and scope of Hoby's public readings, which she held within well-chosen groups. Drawing on the writings of William Perkins, "The Book of Marters," or the sermons of John Udall, the Puritan controversialist, Hoby kept up a very active schedule of community readings, which she either organized in her Yorkshire home or attended in other locations. Crawford's description of Hoby's indefatigable religious activity chimes with Andrew Cambers's recent analysis of Puritan self-examination as a four-fold act involving prayer, reading, the art of hearing, and the discipline of writing. Hoby complemented this regimen with tending the sick and running her household. Despite the privacy and the self-contained nature of these activities, Crawford aptly presents a picture of Hoby that defies the secluded, piteous, and closeted stereotype of early Puritan women. She may not have had the same political influence as Sidney Herbert or the Devereux sisters, but she was nevertheless a mediatrix in so far as "her reading habits were geared toward influencing both local sentiment and belief and religious and political action" (90). Hoby's engagement in proselytism is also seen in other "traces" of her reading in a number of books owned and signed by her. Her signature, however, does not imply that only she used the books. The large number of Hoby's reading partners demonstrate for

Crawford that many other people may have made marginal marks in her books, since those readers "were working in the service of, or at least in active conversation with her" (103), as for the causes that the books they marked supported. Hoby wrote marginalia on *Fowre Books* by Philippe de Mornay and maintained good relations with members of the Puritan church, in particular her chaplain Richard Rhodes. Hoby's list of co-religionists and activities is indeed extensive, and it reveals a degree of influence over her immediate community that brings solace to "the poor and ignorant of the som princeples of religion" (qtd. 99). Her effective Protestant proselytizing, as Crawford defines Hoby's outreach, was in line with the needs of the Protestant ecclesiastical establishment, which sought to make local ministers more learned and abler instructors for their congregations. Her activism begins in the act of writing since "her diary is a record of her relentless effort not only to battle Catholicism, but also to change how Protestantism was lived and practiced in England" (100). Although most critical literature has interpreted Hoby's texts as exercises in self-examination and piety, Crawford's reading challenges the notion of female spirituality as contemplative by convincingly arguing that textuality for Hoby and other *mediatrixes* was the starting point for social and political action. The word incarnates action as well as records it for ulterior purposes—in Hoby's case, to educate more than to produce social advantages. Her diary, as well as her reading activities, were public acts and collaborative efforts in a modern—almost blogger—sense of the word: "It is less the record of a private individual, than of a collective social, religious, and political struggle. Hoby may well have seen her diary as subject to potential scrutiny as well as approbation" (120). Crawford's reading of Hoby's diary is holistic in that—unlike most critics of this text—she does not separate its secular and spiritual contents. These are interrelated ramifications of a life engaged in a cause, which for us modern readers acts as a gentle reminder that manuscript culture in this period may not be less public in matters of religion and politics than its printed counterparts.

Lucy Harington Russell, Countess of Bedford, had an even more acute sense of strategic political action, as shown by Crawford's analysis of her correspondence in chapter 3, in particular the verse letter known as "Reason is our Soules left hand." She was one of John Donne's main patrons and the almost exclusive recipient of his verse letters between 1608 and 1614. In *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (1993), Barbara Lewalski calls her "the most important and most powerful patroness of the Jacobean court, except for Queen Anne herself" (95). Donne displays his characteristic wit in his correspondence with women in a combination of flattery and self-promotion. Crawford's method of analysis here differs from her previous chapters, since Lady Russell's way of spinning her own political and social influence from her interactions with Donne is explored through his persuasive rhetoric rather than hers. We know that besides receiving his letters, Lady Russell sent Donne several poems for his consideration, although most of them have not survived.

The beginning of this "buttressing" of Lady Russell's faith begins when he identifies her as a "factor of our loves," and according to Crawford, Donne chose his term

well: "Factor was a maker, a performer, and an author of a literary work, and Bedford was all of these" (129). The term refers also to God's image and the agent God used to attract mankind to love Him, which led Donne to further describe Lady Russell as "God's masterpiece." She commissioned and performed in court masques and was known as an "author" for her translations (of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, for example). She also managed the affairs of her estate, especially after her husband, the third Earl of Bedford, fell out of grace for his participation in the Essex rebellion. She even held the earl's proxy in Parliament and became an influential "factor" or go-between in the Stuart court, where the couple revived their social fortune.

The chapter traces the evolution of Donne's letters addressed to Russell from his early approaches, in which the poet calls her a "Saint" and appeals to reason as "our soules left hand," to their developing trust in matters of literary preference and their growing politico-religious concerns. Lady Russell's growing taste for Continental Protestantism led her to support Elizabeth of Bohemia. Donne actually visited and gave sermons to Elizabeth, but the intricacies and the degree of their involvement in this cause is less evident from his correspondence than from Lady Russell's biographical records. Her role as mediatrix, however, is put into relief in Crawford's analysis when we are further made aware of the intimate connections between epistolary writing and religious-political action.

The politics in *Mediatrix*'s last case study links to the opening chapter on Sidney. Mary Wroth, niece of Sidney Herbert, wrote the pastoral romance *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* in 1621 as a way to continue "the complex forms of familial and political entrenchment that this work solicited" (161). This is a refreshing claim to make, especially because most critical studies on Wroth place emphasis on her biography or analyze her use of "cabinets." Crawford does pay considerable attention to Wroth's cabinets, but not as spaces for female privacy and gender construction; instead she sees them as "privy" councils of female rule and political affiliation. Wroth's characters carry out transactions by means of those cabinets, depending on their political allegiances, which, at the time of the *Urania*'s composition, involved the cause of Elizabeth of Bohemia. Crawford argues that Pamphilia's constancy as the heroine of *Urania* signals Wroth's promotion of her own loyalty and thus her suitability as a new spokesperson for the Sidney–Herbert alliance, especially after Mary Sidney Herbert died in September 1621. Wroth implies that seeking this role was in the service of continuity rather than self-promotion. Crawford argues that Wroth assumed her role as mediatrix because Philip Sidney supported the cause of international Protestantism through the medium of literature. In line with what her aunt had achieved, Wroth asserted the right of the Protestant nobility to participate in political matters affecting the English nation. Crawford also expounds on a curiosity related to Wroth's work: the Sidney papers held in the Kent History and Library Centre include a collection of commonplace books that belonged to Wroth's father, Robert Sidney, about the ruling families of Europe and the divisions of empires. The similarities between the kingdoms mentioned in those commonplace books (Morea and Naples) and Urania are

not coincidental, a detail that bespeaks the political orientation of *Urania* as well as Wroth's care to follow her family's literary linage.

Mediatrix is compelling and compulsory reading for scholars of early modern women's writing. Crawford's care in making connections among the four case studies to justify her joint approach sometimes strains the main argumentative line, and it is not always clear whether textual activism leads to a mediated political action or the other way around. At times, the numerous and lengthy footnotes, which clarify and expand on the main text, can interrupt the flow of reading and comprehension. But this small quibble does not detract from the book's main asset, which is the contextualization of a wealth of historical information often missed in individual studies of these four women.

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