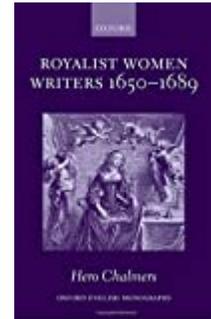




Hero Chalmers. *Royalist Women Writers, 1650-1689.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. xii + 228 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927327-0.



Reviewed by Howard Nenner (Department of History, Smith College)

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Hero Chalmers's study of three women writers in the second half of the seventeenth century is an attempt to demonstrate through the authorial careers of Margaret Cavendish, Katherine Philips, and Aphra Behn "the birth of the modern woman author" (p. 2). To assert, as she does, that there was a noticeable shift from the overwhelmingly sectarian concerns of women writing in the 1640s and 1650s to the secular writing of the Restoration is unproblematic. And to the extent that Chalmers uses Cavendish, Philips, and Behn to stand for a new breed of women writers interested in issues that were specific to gender, sex, and politics, she is certainly correct. But Chalmers goes further in that she argues each woman's royalist connections and sensibilities were centrally important in informing her literary output. She argues that it was their royalist agendas, necessarily coded, that distinguished the work of Cavendish and Philips in the 1650s and connected them to the overt expressions of royalism in Behn's work in the years of the Restoration. In historicizing the context of their writings Chalmers's proclaimed aim is "to put women writers back on the map of seventeenth-century royalist literature" (p. 5).

Chalmers resists efforts to marginalize women writers in the royalist canon while at the same time disputing Carol Barash's assertion that her three subjects were only part of a larger tradition of royalist female poets

or Hilda Smith's and Catherine Gallagher's categorization of them simply as proto-feminists. Chalmers is concerned instead to particularize her three subjects, arguing the importance of the distinctions as well as the similarities among them. One obvious distinction is that Cavendish and Philips, while writing during the Interregnum, had necessarily to be circumspect in their royalism, whereas Aphra Behn experienced no such constraints. Behn had free rein to express her royalist and tory sympathies, especially during the Exclusion Crisis of 1679-81, and did not have to mute her denigration of whigs and dissenters until the Revolution a decade later, shortly before her death. Another difference along an admittedly artificial continuum is that Philips was conspicuously private, allowing her work to circulate only in manuscript and having expressed her indignation when her poems were published without authorization in 1664. Cavendish, ostensibly shy by nature, was able to find expression in print as her husband's surrogate. Behn, at the far end of the spectrum, neither retreated into a private circle of friendship that defined Philips, nor needed to use the political and military status of an aristocratic husband as an avenue to a male-dominated literary world. She was an independent public figure, prolific in her production of plays, poetry, and prose fiction.

It is, however, the similarities among the three

women that interests Chalmers most, their royalism, of course, but also the motif of exile. Whether personal or political, contingent or self-imposed, it was living at the margins that characterized the lives and work of all three. In this regard Chalmers sees Cavendish as particularly worthy of exploration. Having spent most of the Civil War and Interregnum years in exile with her royalist husband, Cavendish returned briefly to London at the Restoration and then retired to the country for the remainder of her life. Most important were the years of enforced seclusion on the continent during which she justified the “immodesty” of her desire for fame through authorial self-display as appropriate to the behavior of an aristocratic *femme covert*. This ambition for recognition through publication, Chalmers argues, was a way of Cavendish’s publicizing not only herself, but her husband, who, like his cohort of disenfranchised nobility in exile, was deprived of a political voice. Margaret, then, was William’s surrogate and spoke for both him and the royalist cause. “Cavendish is able to voice the desire for glory on behalf of her husband and other royalists who have been disbarred from the heroic actions or public statements which might otherwise testify to their noble yearnings for an honourable fame” (p. 39). That may well be so, but if the circumstances more than the content of Cavendish’s literary output are to be read as an expression of royalism, the question whether her royalism was central or merely incidental to her published work remains open.

Katherine Philips, the second of Chalmers’ marginalized women writers, differs from Cavendish in several ways. Philips found little solace and much to regret in her enforced seclusion as the wife of a country gentleman in Wales. Furthermore, her royalist sympathies remain an unexplained anomaly, especially given her puritan background and her husband’s prominence as a parliamentarian and judge during the Interregnum. Although her retreat into a private sphere of women’s friendships may have afforded her the emotional sustenance to write, her empowerment through exile can only be speculative. Unlike Cavendish, and later Behn, who were drawn to the power projected by feminine self promotion, Philips constructed her life on a much less conspicuous scale. Hers was a model of female modesty and decorous respectability. Chalmers’s finding, therefore, of “the potency of feminized retreat” (p. 105), plausible in the case of Cavendish, is less so in the works of Philips. More is needed to persuade that “the existence of a stateless king in exile dur-

ing the 1650s lends credibility to the idea that the true nexus of power resides beyond its state apparatus, in retreat from the traditional public world” (p. 106). That was certainly not true of the politically impoverished Stuart court in exile. It may also be that it is not true of the coded royalism of Chalmers’s female subjects as well. The most we may be able to argue with confidence—as Lois Potter has written (particularly in *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature, 1641-1660*, 1989) and as Hero Chalmers agrees—is “the centrality of notions of secrecy in binding Interregnum royalists” (p. 68).

Aphra Behn is a category of her own, and Chalmers’s attempt to link her in the trio of royalist women writers seems sometimes strained. Behn never did retire from the public sphere. At most, she can be wedged into a model of exile by virtue of her activities as a government spy. But those activities are of little interest to Chalmers. Chalmers recognizes, of course, that Behn’s post-Restoration empowerment came not from retreat, but rather from the erotic and audacious presentation of self on the public stage. Her argument is that the Restoration, allowing for dramatic shifts in political and theatrical culture, liberated Behn to connect her royalism and eroticism in ways that were not only powerful but would have been unthinkable, let alone impossible, during the Interregnum. Her purpose, then, is to demonstrate how Behn explored the “relationships between female sexuality and political agency” (p. 151). In pursuing the theme of “coded royalism,” Chalmers points to Behn’s “dissemination of ‘secret’ political ‘Instructions’ through writing her plays” (p. 161), all of this in the service of her thesis that Behn associated “heroic eroticism” in her plays “with loyal Tory resistance to Whiggish constraint” (p. 150).

Chalmers has done an excellent job of surveying and engaging the critical literature on royalist women writers in the second half of the seventeenth century, and it is perhaps no surprise that her study is stronger on literary criticism than on political analysis. She is on solid ground in exploring the different avenues of female authorial agency and demonstrating the royalism of her subjects, but that ground becomes less stable as she attempts to create a cause and effect relationship between the plights of the marginalized feminine and the marginalized royalist in the Interregnum. Where sexual freedom and Tory politics are openly conjoined to display female agency, as in the plays of Aphra Behn, the task of establishing connections between the two becomes that much easier.

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