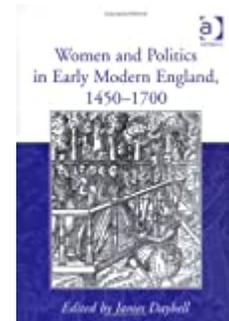




James Daybell, ed. *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004. v + 268 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-0988-9.



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Women and Power

This collection of fourteen essays is dedicated, as James Daybell points out in the introduction, to expanding our conception of the political domain in such a way as to include women. The contributors take as their inspiration Barbara Harris's important "Women and Politics in Early Tudor England" (1990). Harris argued that political historians of the Tudor era have traditionally focused on the institutions of the monarchy, parliament, and the courts, the world of high politics "that really counted" and that was, for the most part, male. But more recent research, in particular the work of David Starkey, has refocused attention on the more informal and personal side of court politics, especially the interactions between the nobility and the monarch and how these relationships determined the distribution of patronage in the form of offices, land, annuities, wardships and other privileges. "Members of the elite," wrote Harris, "conceived of politics as a way of increasing their wealth and power by gaining access to the bounty of the crown." [1] If we envision the maintaining and expanding of patronage networks and dynastic wealth and power, then aristocratic women, were major political operators. Certainly, Harris's work has demonstrated this point, both in this article

and in *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers*. [2]

Like Harris's work on aristocratic women, many of the articles of this collection also problematize any strict boundaries between what is public, domestic, political, or private. Naturally, this is all well and good for women's history. Women (other than queens and Sarah Churchill) tend to play only the most marginal roles in the traditional political histories of the late medieval and early modern era. Of course, it has been seventeen years since Harris's article first appeared and this is changing. In part, this collection's strength is that it not only reinforces Harris's model, but it goes further by taking her ideas about what is political and what is domestic into areas she did not explore.

As is fitting, Harris kicks off the collection with an essay on the emotional and material relationships between aristocratic women, in particular mothers and daughter, but also between sisters, aunts and nieces, godmothers and goddaughters. Harris makes a subtle but suggestive argument in this piece, showing that the "emotional and material cushions" female kin offered each other, helped

enable them to accept their subordinate roles within the family and society as a whole (p. 22). Furthermore, Harris sees—in the ways women provided for other women through gift exchange, legacies, and favors—values that contrasted with the dominant culture. These women provided for their daughters, often at the expense of sons, thus deviating from their supposed commitment to the interests of their marital patrilineage.

Many of the other essays follow suit insofar as they focus on the powers of aristocratic women from the Tudor and Jacobean periods. Lynne Magnusson examines the semantic strategies of women's suitors' letters, finding a link, interestingly enough, between the language women employed in these rather formulaic petitions and the individual woman's "estimate of her power—just who it is she thinks she is" (p. 64). Natalie Mears confronts Pam Wright's work on the Elizabethan Privy Chamber, arguing against Wright's assertion that the Privy Chamber women were of little political significance. In the informal world of court politics and intrigue, Mears asserts, these women played important roles by receiving and dispensing information and by providing others with "points of access to Elizabeth and 'barometers' of her moods" (p. 77). Karen Robertson is also interested in the political significance of the Elizabethan Privy Chamber. She examines the letters of the unfortunate Lady Elizabeth Throckmorton, whose secret marriage to Sir Walter Raleigh so enraged the Queen. Like Mears, Robertson highlights the involvement of Privy Chamber women in power struggles at court. She also finds that Elizabeth's reaction to Throckmorton's marriage (both she and Raleigh were sent to the Tower in 1592) was not merely a matter of feminine jealousy, as the Queen's biographers tend to argue, but suggestive of just how important aristocratic marriage was in early modern England. Marriages were political alliances among the most powerful and naturally the Queen wished to "control the marriages of those closest to her" (p. 102).

In addition to his very fine introduction, James Daybell contributes an analysis of the news and intelligence networks of Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (known as "Bess of Hardwick"). He asserts that female correspondence networks were central to maintaining patronage and kinship relations and that the passing of letters was the chief way in which they were strengthened. Women were gatherers, readers, purveyors, and writers of news. Daybell also asks whether the news was gendered. Did women merely concern themselves with news of family, household, and locality, remaining unconcerned with national and foreign news items? By

looking at the extensive correspondence and intelligence network of Elizabeth Talbot, who received news and gossip about absolutely everything (the monarch's health, the fluctuations of royal favor, the news from abroad, etc.), he answers this with a resounding "no."

Building on Leeds Barroll's recovery of Anne of Denmark's political significance, Susan Frye unpacks the parallels between Anne's unenviable position at James's homosocial (at the very least) court and the depiction of Catherine of Aragon in the play *Henry VIII* by Shakespeare and John Fletcher. Both Anne and Catherine are in many respects "discarded Queens," a situation Fletcher and Shakespeare seem to be warning James against. Still Frye does adeptly show that Anne was able to influence James on some foreign and domestic matters. She was by no means a nonentity. Sara Jayne Steen's essay describes the high-stakes political gaming of three Cavendish-Talbot women; Alan Steward's contribution seeks to recover the stories of several Jewish (or "Portingale") mercantile women in Elizabethan London; and Tricia Bracher provides us with a complex reading of three of Esther Inglis's manuscript books, situating them squarely in the context of the succession crisis of 1599.

I am particularly impressed by Helen Payne's thoughtful analysis of the activities of aristocratic women at the Jacobean court. Payne confirms that these women were active and significant members of family networks at court, who served the political, dynastic, and economic ambitions of their families as courtiers and ladies-in-waiting. But she also makes an important distinction about what kind of political power these women (and most of the women described in this collection) actually wielded. Yes, they did have power, but it was always indirect, informal, fluid, and non-institutional. Women could be brokers, they could mediate, but in the end, any actions taken were entirely dependent on men. Women could make positive contributions to family interest, but their power was contingent.

The last four essays in this collection are rather outliers insofar as they all concern women of various social classes after the Civil Wars. Jerome de Groot's essay is not about real women at all, but rather about depictions of parliamentary women and their antithesis, royalist women and particularly, Henrietta Maria, in royalist propaganda. De Groot maintains that royalists equated sexual libertinism and perversion with the Roundheads, especially preaching and petitioning women. Royalists themselves maintained "compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 197). Cavalier women were all virgins and martyrs who

may have transgressed gender norms by defending their castle but not their class roles. But the irony continues. Henrietta Maria becomes the mother healer of her country, who, like the Virgin Mary, is an inspiration, an intercessor, a mediator. She is a “fetishised and idealized paradigm for behaviour in contrast to the libertine and lascivious enemy” (p. 208). I found this essay the most vexing in the collection. I do not doubt de Groot’s description of royalist propaganda, but felt it needed to be placed within the historiographical context of female activism during the mid-century crisis and perhaps juxtaposed to Republican polemic. Furthermore, it may be a small point, but the military expectations for elite women were very much a part of their gendered persona. Gender and class constructions are rarely distinct entities that can be easily separated.

Elizabeth Clarke offers us an intriguing analysis of the rhetorical strategies employed by nonconformist women’s spiritual journals. Unlike the aristocratic women’s letters, these journals by middle-class women tried to erase both the personality and circumstances of the individual author as they conform to certain nonconformist and gender expectations. They seek to influence their readers, not through their own power, but through God’s providence. Claire Walker, on the other hand, describes how English nuns in France, the Low Countries, and Portugal assisted the later Stuarts and destitute Jacobites with information, hospitality, and spiritual support. And finally, Valerie Wayne examines two literary

texts and one real life narrative about common women who imitated gentle status by adopting the clothing and manners of their betters and, by doing so, duped wealthy men into marrying them.

This is a strong, valuable collection. It certainly goes far to demonstrate the public prowess of aristocratic women in the Tudor and early Stuart eras. But Helen Payne’s cautions are important. Women were excluded from high office, their power was the power to influence only, and, moreover, their power was usually limited to promoting family interest. But things would change. On the other side of the Stuart divide, post-Interregnum, a new world of the press, the sects, the stage, and the political party offered women new avenues of public expression. Daybell may wish to begin organizing a second collection, volume 2, on “the Long Eighteenth Century.”

Notes

[1]. Barbara J Harris, “Women and Politics in Early Tudor England,” *Historical Journal* 33 (June 1990): 259.

[2]. Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See Amy M. Froide, “Review of Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers*,” H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, February, 2003: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=200741047797069>.

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