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Wiseman, Susan J. (2017) Women, Poetry and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Britain, by Sarah C.E. Ross. [Book Review]

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*Women, Poetry and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2015)  
£55 ISBN 978-0-19-872420-9

This is a significant contribution to work on both women's poetry and women's political writing in seventeenth century England. In moving the debate on politics to poetry, and primarily manuscript poetry, Ross opens to politics the formal and playful aspects of women's writing and offers a pathbreaking discussion of the way women use poetry to enunciate politics.

The study opens with Katherine Philips who is widely regarded as a milestone in what we have of women's political poetry. However, Ross's study extends far beyond the emerging canon of women political writers headed by Katherine Philips, Lucy Hutchinson and Margaret Cavendish (whose complex political thinking challenges the idea of the side-taking Civil War poet). Finding the Civil War less of a watershed than expected in women's political expression, she argues that in the period 1600-1680 women's political poetry engages politics in 'surprisingly consistent ways' (p. 5). The evidence tells her that the specific poets were responding to circumstances, politics and positions; for Ross it is important to critics that these poets were women writing politically engaged poetry – she is not seeking to imagine or establish these women as participating a female poetic tradition.

Ross's method involves taking five poets or groups of poets as case studies. A periodization now familiar in studies of women's writing, spanning the reigns of James I/VI to Charles II, the case studies begin in Scotland with Elizabeth Melville, move to Lady Anne Southwell (1574-1636), Jane Cavendish writing at Welbeck in the 1640s, with the poet discovered by Mark Robson, Hester Pulter and Lucy Hutchinson taking the studies to the later seventeenth century. Throughout, Ross's attention to the dynamic between the local and the wider world (sometimes to be understood as the nation, but usually better understood as a wider network of conflicts amongst powerful interest groups) allows the interaction of religious and political discourses to be productively illuminated.

The book's first chapter, on Elizabeth Melville, focusses our attention on the size of Melville's likely oeuvre and the significance of the genres in which she wrote – not only the well-known printed *Ane Godlie Dreame* but 3500 lines discovered by Jamie Reid Baxter (p. 27). Ross explores the prolific range of manuscript lyrics embracing parody, acrostic, sonnets and visions. Working from genre and circumstance, Ross pinpoints Melville's involvement in the anti-episcopalian Presbyterianism of early seventeenth-century Scotland, situating her in circles reacting to, and challenging, James VI and I's attempt to impose

bishop's on Scotland. Amongst the still shifting understandings of the new manuscripts, Ross identifies Melville writing in some of the tendentious genres elicited from women in which moments of hot division within Protestantism – genres associated with 'speaking' (in the several ways that can be understood) in, of and at the churches. Melville's poetic innovations (p. 49) and the presence of her writings in multiple locations indicating their, and her, significance within key Calvinist circles (p. 59) and her long writing life, from 1599-1637 shows a writer whose 'spiritual militancy' (p. 30) is a solid foundation for consistent oblique civil rebuke and implicit demand for renovation of the state. As Ross convincingly indicates, Melville's political engagement is consistent, acknowledged and needs to be steadily read in the context of lexical, religious and socio-political debates.

Ross pursues the question of sociality, and our role in understanding and interpreting, that, in her chapter on Anne, Lady Southwell. Examining Southwell's trajectory from court lyric to a 'right' use of poetry, Ross examines both circles within which Southwell's subtle poetic response is significant and particularly illuminatingly draws out the significance of Biblical verse paraphrase as a genre of Jacobean religio-political commentary. In contrast with Southwell in being bound in to a distinct form of sociability, Jane Cavendish the daughter of the Duke of Newcastle, threads political points through social and occasional verse. The discussion of Jane Cavendish raises a significant point in terms of the imbrication of the religious year and forms of political subjectivity. As Ross's excavations indicate, which anniversaries and festivals are marked demonstrates political as well as religious commitment, and Jane Cavendish may well be an example of a substantial range of poets of all social ranks whose religious and occasional writing is marked by, and subtly or showily asserts, political inflection.

The last two chapters of the volume take poets with a bigger reach and power than Jane Cavendish: the royalist Hester Pulter and Lucy Hutchinson, chief memoirist of the Civil War. Pulter's lyric royalism is both subtle and complex. Ross shows Pulter as a reader of the poets of her generation and, particularly, of Edmund Spenser. Tracing the ways in which Pulter turns to her personal and political ends the emblem, family poem and above all complaint and the poetry of rivers, Ross illuminates this writer's powerful and nuanced political critique and its location in place. As Ross indicates, we are at present uncertain how far or the nature of the audience of Pulter's poetry. Thus the emphasis on manuscript poetry exposes contrasts within the nature of manuscript circulation – if Melville's manuscripts seem to have been something close to 'published', Jane Cavendish's were read but probably within a circle of likeminded writers and readers, and Pulter's, apparently so located in place and

neighbourhood, both intellectually bring that to a wider world while, perhaps, having relatively limited circulation. It would be fascinating indeed to have a more fully elucidated understanding of the extent of Pulter's reading community, and Ross' discussion is helpful in exploring the (for the present?) enigmatic possibilities of her connectedness.

Lucy Hutchinson, the final example in Ross's monograph, is a poet whose transmission history is rich with irony. Rediscovered in the light of David Norbrook's important publication of her elegies of her husband, Lucy Hutchinson is a manuscript poet known and read in her own circles. Ross elegantly teases out Hutchinson's subtle and complex use of genres such as Biblical paraphrase to elegantly rebalance our account of Hutchinson in a way that makes her part of her world in terms of religious as well as classical reading, and shows Hutchinson's consistent movement between identity and politics. If this Hutchinson is helpfully linked to, rather than separated from, the genres used by other women writers her force is also acknowledged. Writing against the Restoration during Charles II's reign, Hutchinson's attitude to manuscript publication seems to be partially reconstructable. In terms of the reach of manuscript, it is notable that Hutchinson's manuscript legacy, her acid account of the Civil War, is bound in at the foundation of modern accounts of the period – offering an example of the historiographical (and therefore, obviously, political) influence of women's manuscript

This is a fine study of women's poetry which deserves to be widely read and used. It brings an innovative focus on manuscript poetry to offer a convincing rebalancing our accounts of women's poetry and poetic genre and publication to take account of the importance of manuscript. At the same time, treating each poet deeply in relation to form and location generates specific, subtle and carefully argued analysis.

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