
Article:
Brennan, MG orcid.org/0000-0001-6310-9722 (2018) Julie Crawford, Mediatrix: Women, Politics and Literary Production in Early Modern England. Notes and Queries, 65 (3). pp. 443-444. ISSN 0029-3970

https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjy111

Julie Crawford, *Mediatrix: Women, Politics and Literary Production in Early Modern England*. Pp. x + 257. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2014. £55.00 (ISBN 978 0 19 871261 9).

Focusing primarily on Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, Lady Margaret Dakins Hoby, Lucy Harington Russell, Countess of Bedford, and Lady Mary Sidney Wroth, Julie Crawford borrows from John Donne his description of the Countess of Bedford as his 'proper Mediatrix', to explore how a select (and now widely studied) social grouping of women of the period were able to blend political and social potency with personally influencing the careers of writers and the creation of their literary texts. Alongside these four dominant figures, this study also considers the familial importance of a wide range of other women from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, including prominent members of the Rich, Clifford, Dudley, Hastings, Herbert and Sidney families. Crawford focuses not so much on their familial identities as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives but more on their ability to facilitate, support and direct a wide range of vested interests and ambitions central to the political and international affairs of early modern England.

Crawford's four richly informative and often strikingly nuanced chapters are particularly concerned with a broad range of politically assertive and, at times, oppositional facets of English Protestantism espoused by members of the Sidney, Herbert, Hoby and Russell family networks. Her scholarly and subtle analysis of Mary Sidney Herbert's central role in the *Arcadia* of her elder brother, Philip, demonstrates how the erotic testing of Pamela and Philoclea – recalling their real-life referents, Penelope and Dorothy Devereux – may be interpreted as possessing within its multifaceted representation of social and sexual morality an implicit but potent level of politically symbolic metaphor. Just as these two fictional women are presented in the *Arcadia* as a source of both constancy and intercession on behalf of male characters, so the Devereux sisters, along with other wealthy and aristocratic women readily interceded with influential courtiers of Queen Elizabeth and later King James I on behalf of various male members of the Sidney family. These included Philip's younger brother, Robert, who in 1618 was raised to the Earldom of Leicester – pointedly chosen by him as a title previously held by his uncle, Robert Dudley, the most potent figure (before his untimely death in 1588) within the Protestant circles of influence examined in this study.

Moving from pastoral prose fiction to private diaries, Crawford turns in her second chapter to Lady Margaret Hoby as a mediatrix of principles of religion. She carefully studied

biblical and theological works with her puritan chaplain Richard Rhodes while constantly seeking to uphold the central values of Protestantism in the face of what she viewed as the ever-present Catholic threat to English faith and national security. Close attention is also paid to Hoby's surviving marginalia (for example, in her copy of the 1600 translation of de Mornay's *Fowre Bookes*) and how she may have sought to utilize these annotations in later debates. Crawford's argument is especially important here since she proposes that diaries and marginalia (usually viewed as essentially private records of personal thoughts and responses) may also be interpreted as the determined creation of a level of textual meaning which manifested itself as a part of a broader social, political and religious struggle. Her conclusion that 'the reading and exchanges of texts was in many ways the grounds of Protestant reform' is entirely persuasive.

Just as Lady Hoby frequently shared her close readings with her trusted chaplain, so the third chapter traces how John Donne's panegyric and dialogic verse epistles to his patron Lucy Harington Russell, Countess of Bedford, may be viewed as another key manifestation of the importance of shared reading or 'co-reading' within the period. For Donne, the countess possessed a multiplicity of identities, ranging from a rich source of literary inspiration which at times veered close to Mariolatry (hinting at the poet's personal tensions between his Catholic early family life and his later Protestant public career) to her considerable personal influence at court. Her multiple cultural roles cast her as the commissioner, collaborator, patron, dedicatee and reader of literary texts and so Donne's epistles may be seen as offering themselves as a form of on-going dialogue between two individuals of vastly different social status but who, nevertheless, were united by shared passion for literary and theological debate.

The fourth chapter, on 'Wroth's Cabinets', picks up again on the potency of female constancy in the role of Pamphilia and traces how in Mary Wroth's politically astute prose romance, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, readers are allowed access to the cabinets and private writings of her female characters, thereby underlining the more public significance of her personal narratives and encoded meanings. Sir Edward Denny's renowned fury over what he interpreted as implied derogatory references to his family in the *Urania* tends to confirm Wroth's desire to compile an outward-looking and politically motivated text. Crawford cogently proposes that the romance contained important messages for both Parliament and those engaged in anti-Spanish international affairs from the perspective of the Sidney-Herbert alliance, represented through the relationship of Wroth with her cousin,

William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, who was also her lover and the father of two of her children.

Each of this study's four chapters offers innovative and imaginative close readings and, ultimately, it is the diversely talented Sidney family who dominate this stimulating and thoughtful study. Rather than offering a summarizing conclusion, Crawford's epilogue usefully points chronologically forward to the political efficacy and 'constancy' during the reign of King Charles I of such women as Dorothy Percy Sidney, the countess of Robert Sidney, second Earl of Leicester. She indicates, thereby, how much more work still remains to be done on the potency of women's networking, advocacy and patronage, as well as their own words and roles in manuscript and print culture, during the reigns of Charles I and his son Charles II, both during his exile abroad from 1651 and after the Restoration.

Michael G. Brennan
University of Leeds