Women, Poetry, and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Britain. Sarah C. E. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. xiii + 250 pp. \$90.

The stated aim of this study is to establish "a female tradition of political poetry in manuscript," taking the work of Elizabeth Melville, Anne Southwell, Jane Cavendish, Hester Pulter, and Lucy Hutchinson as its principal examples. That entails an important and considered recasting of the political along the lines set out by Barbara Harris, James Daybell, and Danielle Clarke in their work on Elizabethan and Jacobean women writers, where the political is framed and found within the great household, kinship and patronage networks, and through the court and the family. In seeking for the political in

her writers' poetry, much or most of which is not directed toward public political events, Ross offers a compelling argument for finding it in material and literary form. Her study analyzes the poetics of manuscript and pays sustained attention to the genres these writers use and the tropes they share. These are pulled together to propose the outlines of a women's political tradition that is shaped in distinctive ways by women's collective institutional and cultural exclusion from the public political sphere. The particular forms of these exclusions, she argues, privilege both manuscript as a material form and a particular range of "rhetorically modest" (19) genres, such as the biblical paraphrase, the social and occasional poem, the elegy, the emblem, and the epitaph.

One of this study's contributions is to direct critical attention to tropes used by women across political allegiances, including the spiritual fight, the politicized patriarch, the invitation to the country, and the "emblematic girl in her garden," all of which Ross argues enabled women to "imagine and articulate a purchase on the political sphere of seventeenth-century Britain" (214). There is also careful attention to the material manuscript and to the question of readership, a reminder that this continues to be a significant lacuna in studies of early modern women's writing. The fruits of Ross's approach are epitomized in her discussion of Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder* in terms of its complex generic affiliation to the work of Du Bartas and Quarles, on the one hand, and through comparison with the work of Anne Southwell and Mary Roper, on the other. In doing so she perceptively reassesses the poem's generic affiliations, situates it within a longer tradition of writing by women, and reconsiders its much discussed relationship to *Paradise Lost*.

The star of the book, though, is probably Elizabeth Melville. Ross's beautifully sensitive readings of her manuscript lyrics illuminate Melville's sophisticated and authoritative exploitation of her devotional poetic's political resonances. The expansiveness of the book's claims would have benefited from some greater consideration of the limits of its sample. Its writers all belong to a social elite (Hutchinson is the only nontitled writer discussed), and mainly English women writing in England. Hutchinson is also, with the partial exception of Elizabeth Melville, the only representative of a radical political tradition, a role she is often called on to play alongside her other familiar position as an intellectually elite writer. The narrow range is largely attributable to the focus on manuscript. Ross's stated desire to correct the undue prominence of print in "critical narratives of seventeenth-century women's poetic history" (218) and their entry into political voice is a cogent and persuasive reason for doing so. Ross's discussion of women's relationships to politics as a class will inevitably seem partial given that in this same period radical women from the lower ranks began to address politics in print; a more emphatic framing of the study's limitations in terms of examining women's relationship to politics (rather than to poetics) would have added to its considerable strengths. This work supplies a crucial account of the politics of form in early modern women's writing, and new critical narratives of early modern women's political writing — in any genre and in manuscript or print — will benefit significantly from its impressive scholarship.

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