

*Women and Petitioning in the Seventeenth-Century English Revolution: Deference, Difference, and Dissent.* Amanda Jane Whiting.

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In the early modern context of sharply vertical relationships and deferential cultures, strident petitioning, especially by women, will grab the attention of scholars. Amanda Whiting's study of petitioning by women in mid-seventeenth-century England covers a well-ploughed field but still extends work on this topic in new directions. Up to now, "the standard reference on the topic" (21) is Patricia Higgins's "The Reactions of Women, with Special Reference to Women Petitioners" (in *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War*, ed. Brian Manning [1973]). Whiting's book may well be the new standard reference with regard to forty-two printed texts of petitions from women to England's various rulers from 1640 to 1660. Chapter 3 provides thorough coverage of these petitions, with summary accounts of the context, content, presentation, and outcome for each. Requests range widely across partisan lines. Those from Levellers and pro-Royalist petitioners for peace in 1643 figure prominently in Whiting's study.

In the other chapters, the book breaks new ground by applying the insights of literary analysis, such as Harold Love's work on authorship, and by qualifying extant work on gender by Ann Hughes and on petitioning by this reviewer. Whiting's analysis highlights continuities between diverse traditional petitionary strategies in prerevolutionary England, all effusively deferential, and rhetorical practices and internal tensions in sometimes strident petitions from women in the 1640s. Venues for traditional strategies include prerogative courts such as Chancery and Star Chamber, where women sought equitable relief, and local parishes, where they sought poor relief. The ambiguous standing of women in petitioning on contentious issues from 1640 to 1660 is similar to prior legal inconsistencies with regard to the partial mitigation by equity courts of female disabilities under common law, which denied women access to many procedures by writ.

In chapter 4, Whiting explores more precedents and reinforces her point on formal petitions as only one type of petitionary strategy. In addition to legal pleadings, precedents include supplicatory letter-writing, the literary genre of complaint (e.g., Simon Fish's *The Supplicacyon for the Beggars* [1529]), and prominent tropes in petitionary prayer both in public and private worship in English Protestantism. Still more precedents come from earlier printed petitions: by Puritan and Separatist critics of

the Church of England toward the end of Elizabeth's reign, Catholics in Jacobean England, and by special-interest groups who lobbied Parliament on mostly economic matters in the 1620s. This sprawling chapter ends with petitions to the early Long Parliament, which, up to August 1642, were largely coterminous with traditional petitionary rhetoric, although now deployed to justify collective petitions from women on contentious public issues. This novel development mobilized conventional views on the "effectiveness of an insistent voice or posture that was gendered feminine" (191).

This last point is central to Whiting's analysis in pivotal chapters 5 and 6, where she demonstrates similarities between radical petitions from men and women with regard to content and rhetoric. She also contends, justly, that inquiry into who actually wrote the women's petitions is methodologically misguided, and argues that "the case for women's right to join in public agitation and political lobbying was clearly articulated in 1642" (294). That development preceded the Leveller movement, which did not substantially expand the rationale for female participation in a nascent public sphere, for example, by advocating the right to vote. What changed was the invocation of natural rights for understanding the commonwealth, not the traditional rationale for participation by female petitioners in its public life. The latter continued to rely on conventional ideas and tropes that "made space available for women's complaints, and frequently spoke through a feminine voice of grievance and lament" (294). Hence, that men drafted most of the petitions from women sheds no light on what prompted that activity or how it acquired legitimacy and persuasive force. Dwelling on the issue of composition also overlooks high levels of female agency in related practices — for example, when women gathered together to present petitions, sometimes tumultuously.

Amanda Whiting's well-written book provides many insightful observations on the content and internal tensions in female petitioning in mid-seventeenth-century England. For specialists, her excessive discussion of some precedents may be tedious (e.g., on Renaissance epistolary technique or prayer in Protestantism). That quibble aside, I strongly commend the book.

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