

## Mediatrix: Women, Politics and Literary Production in Early Modern England

**Review Number:** 1737

**Publish date:** Thursday, 26 February, 2015

**Author:** Julie Crawford

**ISBN:** 9780198712619

**Date of Publication:** 2014

**Price:** £55.00

**Pages:** 272pp.

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:** <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780198712619.do>

**Place of Publication:** Oxford

**Reviewer:** Alice Ferron

In *Mediatrix* Julie Crawford seeks to expand our understanding of women's contributions to early modern literary and political culture. Crawford seeks to look beyond the concept of the woman writer to instead focus on the 'startling range of women's literary practices' and the 'collaborative nature of literary production' in pre-modern England (p. 3, p. 4). Crawford's monograph provides unique close readings of some of Early Modern England's most famous aristocratic women's texts and biographies. The book also raises questions about the nature of pre-modern female intercession and of women's involvement in the creation of texts beyond their roles as consumers and supporters.

*Mediatrix* is divided into four body chapters focusing on different female mediatrixes, including Penelope Rich, Margaret Hoby, The Countess of Bedford, and Mary Wroth. In her introduction, Crawford defines a mediatrix as a woman who was 'politically and culturally powerful, but with an edge of oppositionism; at once a patron to be honored and a force to be reckoned with; a maker of texts and careers' (p. 2). In this way, Crawford seeks to look beyond the OED's definition of a mediatrix as someone who interceded with God on behalf of mankind.<sup>(1)</sup> For Crawford, women interceded 'both in the production of ... texts, and in effecting the political goals they served' (p. 10). Medieval women, however, also famously interceded in politics. In her book on medieval queenship for example, Theresa Earenfight describes Queens, such as England's Margaret of Anjou, mediating on behalf of her bedridden husband.<sup>(2)</sup> The fact that women were serving as political intercessors is thus not an early modern construct, but Crawford highlights a uniquely pre-modern aspect to this form of female political involvement by emphasizing the relationship between arbitrating politics and participating in literary production. She also argues that these mediatrixes were part of communities, alliances, and estates that were concerned 'not only with female proprietorship and governance, but with political opposition' (p. 22). In this way, there were networks of female intercessors who aligned themselves with key political associations. Crawford defends her choice of highlighting well known mediatrixes by pointing out that the women she has chosen are 'familiar figures in feminist literary history', yet she argues that she will look at their contributions to pre-modern culture less in terms of their gender but rather 'in terms of their religious and political affiliations and commitments' (p. 5).

Crawford's first mediatrixes are Penelope Rich née Devereaux, the Countess of Devonshire, her sister

Dorothy, and Mary Sidney Herbert. In her first chapter, Crawford argues that Phillip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert sought to make references to the two sisters in *The Arcadia* through the characters of Pamela and Philoclea in order to portray 'the politically symbolic role female constancy played in late Elizabethan culture' (p. 32). Just as female constancy and intercession were important to the plot of Sidney's epic, the two sisters frequently served as political mediators. As Crawford points out, Penelope Rich intervened with Lord Burghley and other notable figures to win political favours and even more significantly the list of people she supported included Philip Sidney's brother, Robert (p. 47). Furthermore, Crawford contends that the idea of female constancy was important as Mary Sidney Herbert, whom *The Arcadia* was written for, published a corrected version of the text in 1593. Her corrections are where 'we see the vindication of female constancy' (p. 78). In this way, Herbert not only mediated her brother's text by amending the publication, she also sought to become a political intermediary, publishing the revised *Arcadia* under her own aegis and 'proclaiming her status as the new head of the Sidney alliance' for whom the 'text was, among other things a political statement' (p. 78). In Herbert's case it is easy to see how she was a mediatrix in both a political and textual sense.

Crawford's second mediatrix is Lady Margaret Hoby, the famous late Elizabethan diarist, who Crawford claims used sociable reading to influence her neighbors and peers 'in certain directions,' particularly in regards to what she called 'principles of religion' (p. 89). For example, she often read alongside her personal chaplain, Richard Rhodes. Hoby, as Crawford points out, would often state that she 'had Mr Rhodes read,' suggesting that they both played a role in choosing which works to contemplate and discuss (p. 98). Even more convincingly, she defined her role in these conversations as to 'read', 'mediate', 'examine', 'talk', 'hear', 'write' – thus presenting 'herself as an active interlocutor' (p. 98). As Crawford rightly explains, 'Hoby may not have had the same political influence as Mary Sidney Herbert or the Devereux sisters' but she still played a role in negotiating a form of politics as she used co-reading and conversation to challenge and deal with her neighbors' Catholicism and recorded her efforts in her diary (p. 93). For instance, in February 1599, Hoby reflected on a discussion she had 'with a yonge papest maide' (p. 105). Crawford thus asserts that Hoby's diary was 'a record of her relentless efforts not only to battle Catholicism, but also to change how Protestantism was lived and practiced in England' (p. 100). This is both an interesting play on the concept of mediating texts as well as reading Hoby's diary. However, it does not concretely prove that Hoby engaged in literary production, showing instead that she was a consumer of both Protestant and Catholic texts. Hoby did in fact mediate recipes she recorded in her diary. This would strengthen Crawford's argument especially as scholars, such as Laura Lunger Knoppers, have seen recipes as having some political connotations in early modern Britain. It would be fascinating to see if the recipes Hoby chose to mediate in her diary fell along a certain religious spectrum.

Crawford's third mediatrix is Lucy Harington Russell, The Countess of Bedford, who patronized John Donne. Yet Crawford contends that Bedford did far more than just provide the poet and cleric with material support, as she also actively read his poetry and corresponded with him. Crawford argues that beyond this Russell was an authoress in her own right who commissioned and performed in court masques as well as broadly authored a variety of texts 'from Florio's Montaigne to poems, religious treatises, and a translation of Lucan's Pharsalia' (p. 129). Crawford also demonstrates that Russell participated in political culture through arranging marriages 'and the promotion of men to particular offices and benefices to writing poems and letters and commissioning and patronizing masques, and ... patronizing works of religious and political commentary' (p. 132). Most of the books dedicated to Bedford, for example, were written by clerics who the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* categorizes as 'severe Calvinists' and 'unrepentant puritans' (p. 136). Crawford suggests that Donne even challenged Bedford on her religious beliefs in a 1609 verse letter. She believes that the epistle sought to reference the speech James I gave in response to the Gunpowder Plot where he argued that the fire is reserved for those 'Puritanes' 'that will admit no salvation to any Papist' in order to inspire Bedford to contemplate her own views on 'Papists' and 'Puritanes' (p. 154). Donne thus wrote to Bedford not only to thank her for her support, but also in order to politically engage her. Crawford is right to highlight Donne and Bedford's intellectual exchanges, but it is not entirely clear whether Bedford played any role in the production of Donne's poetry or whether she was just an active reader. Ultimately

Crawford proves that Donne and Bedford participated in 'textual exchange,' not that they collaborated on literary production (p. 126).

Crawford's fourth mediatrix is Mary Wroth née Sidney, the controversial authoress of *The Urania*. Sir Edward Denny publicly censured Wroth because he believed her play satirized his daughter's marriage. In her last chapter Crawford seeks to demonstrate that *The Urania* was a politically motivated text beyond Wroth's use of ciphers. Crawford argues that Wroth saw her work "as a form of advice for Parliament" and a form of support for the Sidney-Herbert alliance (p. 197). Wroth published her play in "the middle of one of the most contentious parliamentary sessions in English history" and used an emblem of "Dutch ingenuity" placed over the hill from the Palladian Gardens of Wilton as her front piece to emphasize England's role in international Protestantism (p. 197, p. 179). England's role in a Protestant alliance was a chief concern of Wroth's lover and cousin's, William Herbert (p. 172). In this way, Crawford shows that Wroth used her play to both ally herself with her cousin and their family as well as with the greater cause of global Protestantism. Most scholars who close read Wroth's life and *The Urania* are more focused on her personal concerns, and mainly with her torrid romance with Herbert. Crawford then takes a distinctive approach to both Wroth and her text by demonstrating that her personal worries were individualistic as well as broadly political. Wroth is different from the other women presented in Crawford's book, as she was a published authoress as well as a political participant. There is perhaps then more scope to consider the relationship between the authorship of a text and the act of political intercession.

Rather than writing a conclusion, Crawford ends her book with an epilogue to show that women continued to serve as mediatrixes in the latter part of the period. She focuses on Dorothy Percy Sidney, the Countess of Leicester and the wife of Robert Sidney. Like her female relatives, Mary Sidney Herbert and Mary Wroth, Dorothy Sidney also served as a political mediator. She recorded in her correspondence details about her role 'as a gatherer of what she called 'intelligence' during the years between the contentious parliaments of the 1620s and her death in 1659 (p. 212). Like Hoby, Dorothy Sidney was a vociferous reader, but again it is unclear whether she played any role in literary production.

By seeking to view women's roles in literary culture more broadly, Crawford joins a growing trend of looking at women's roles mediating texts. However, in some of her case studies it is difficult to fully make the claim that the woman she examines was involved in textual mediation. For example, it is clear that Mary Sydney Herbert mediated *The Arcadia*, as she edited it and subsequently published a second edition. However in regards to Margaret Hoby and The Countess of Bedford it is difficult to find clear evidence that they mediated texts by making measurable contributions to literary culture. Hoby may have been widely read, but did she correspond with any authors? The Countess of Bedford corresponded with John Donne, but did she give him any ideas or suggestions for his poetry? Crawford presents two different kinds of mediatrixes, women who interceded in politics and women who interceded in the creation of texts. The relationship between these two activities is not always clearly cut, and there is perhaps scope to think more about how some of the women Crawford considers engaged in literary production rather than just textual engagement.

Overall, *Mediatrix* provides innovative close readings of the lives and writings of some of early modern England's most famous and controversial aristocratic women. Crawford's research raises questions about the nature of pre-modern political intercession, versus female mediation in the medieval period. Crawford's reader cannot help but wonder if literary production made these processes different and the types of arbitration she discusses unique to the early modern period. Furthermore, the book challenges the reader to consider the nature of textual intervention and how women could play a role in impacting the material nature of texts beyond their roles as readers and patrons. Ultimately, Crawford successfully demonstrates that literary history can be political in nature and that we can use women's words and roles in manuscript and print culture to write a new political history where women were not only mediatrixes but also active participants.

## Notes

1. 'mediatrix, n.', *The Oxford English Dictionary* <  
<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/Entry/115677?redirectedFrom=m...> [2] [accessed 23 Oct 2014].[Back to \(1\)](#)
  2. Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 215–16.[Back to \(2\)](#)
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