Women Writing the English Republic 1625-1681

Review Number: 2197

Publish date: Thursday, 23 November, 2017

Author: Katharine Gillespie

ISBN: 9781107149120

Date of Publication: 2017

Price: £74.99

Pages: 362pp.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/literature/renaissance-and-early-modern-literature/writing-english-republic-16251681?format=HB#DeoRXUi8xTRGVvUY.97>

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: Gaby Mahlberg

The historiography of 17th-century English republican thought is a largely women-free zone. The canonical authors dominating the standard works are almost exclusively male: James Harrington, John Milton, Marchamont Nedham, Algernon Sidney, Henry Vane – with only the most fleeting occasional reference to Lucy Hutchinson, who remains known mostly as the ‘wife of’ Colonel John Hutchinson and author of the *Memoir* of his life. [Back to \(1\)](#) Katharine Gillespie’s *Women Writing the English Republic 1625–1681*, with its focus on the contribution female authors made to the debate about political and religious liberty and government around the time of the English Civil Wars, is therefore a long-overdue and most welcome addition to the steadily growing literature on this fascinating subject.

Her title is a tribute to David Norbrook’s influential *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627–1660*, which similarly set out to widen the range of sources that might aid our understanding of republican ideas and concepts, albeit with poetic writing. [Back to \(2\)](#) As it did for Norbrook, Gillespie’s broadening of the traditional source base also comes with a broadening of the traditional definition of the political from a narrow focus on government and its institutions to a more general cultural understanding of a republican value system, which has more recently taken hold in the literature in the form of Jonathan Scott’s ‘commonwealth principles’ and is also reflected in my own attempt to define republicanism first and foremost as a form of ‘anti-patriarchalism’. [Back to \(3\)](#)

The women authors Gillespie focuses on were not MPs, government officials in the Commonwealth or even authors of detailed constitutional schemes, ‘but they were the wives, daughters, sisters, and/or mothers of men who did occupy various positions or offices’ which allowed them to gain at least ‘an extremely intimate “second-hand” familiarity’ with the workings of politics, ‘and this familiarity shaped their perspectives’ (p. 36).

Eleanor Davies was an author of Fifth Monarchist tracts, ‘a visible critic of monarchy in the mid-seventeenth century’ (p. 59) and, Gillespie argues, ‘an important figure in the antiestablishment subculture from which Milton’s and then Locke’s liberalism eventually emerged’ (p. 58). Brilliana Harley was ‘the wife and mother of Parliamentarians’ (p. 100), a ‘Neo-Stoic’ proponent of ‘republican values’ (p. 107) in her letters and

commonplace book, and most famous for defending her family's country estate against royalist forces 'during her husband's absence' early on in the Civil War (pp. 100-1), while Isabella Twysden's almanac diaries revealed her – in Gillespie's reading – as a 'Hobbesian' skeptic (p. 155).

Anne Bradstreet is the only representative of Puritan emigrants to the American colonies, as a New World poet, who, according to Gillespie, could 'imagine women as agents of history who delve into the chaos, mining it of its resources and using it to create alternative socio-political models, in her case the alternative of a *New English* republic that is to be founded in the *New England*' (p. 199). Anne Venn was a seeker whose 'spiritual autobiography' (p. 245) documents her search for 'religious truth' as a 'daughter of Zion' (p. 247) engaged in the 'construction of the New Jerusalem' (p. 244). And Lucy Hutchinson finally is presented not just as a republican wife, but also as the author of the epic *Order and Disorder* (1679), which Gillespie ranks alongside Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) as a 'defiant text' (p. 285) against the restored Stuart regime. Each author receives her own chapter focusing on a specific aspect of her work and a short biographical sketch that helps to contextualise her in the wider history of the English revolutionary period.

The range of genres mined by Gillespie – including letters, diaries, commonplace books and poetry – also goes beyond the books and pamphlets commonly discussed in the standard works, although other historians and literary scholars have made similar attempts to break out of the narrow republican canon in recent years. [Back to \(4\)](#) What might be more important, and potentially problematic, however, is that those recent attempts at making the study of republicanism more inclusive also risk diluting its message. While purists like Blair Worden tend to insist that only strict opponents of monarchy can be considered truly republican [Back to \(5\)](#) and the recent engagement with 'republican exclusivism' [Back to \(6\)](#) has come to reinstate the regicide of 1649 as a firm watershed, concepts like 'Neo-Harringtonianism' [Back to \(7\)](#) or 'monarchical republicanism' [Back to \(8\)](#) which allow for a constitutional monarchy strictly limited by the law or the co-existence of grass-roots participation within a monarchical structure tend to blur the lines while shifting the focus from narrow constitutional interpretations of republicanism to its values and principles. The same is true for the inclusion of women like Davies, Harley, Twysden, Bradstreet, Venn and Hutchinson.

To enable us to include women authors under the republican umbrella though, it seems, we also have to acknowledge that their engagement with politics was different from that of men, largely because they did not have, or only rarely had an official political role. Gillespie's book is therefore likely to trigger a debate on the question to what extent these women can be considered republicans in their own right at all, and if so, what it is that makes them republican. As with their male counterparts, this is a question of definition. Does republicanism necessarily involve the rejection of all monarchy in principle? Is it about the endorsement of a particular concept of political/religious liberty and self-government? Or is it about the rule of law?

There was a broad spectrum of republican thinkers in seventeenth-century England with those focusing primarily on constitutional forms, such as James Harrington or Henry Neville, on one end and those believing in a rule by the virtuous and godly, such as John Milton and Henry Vane, on the other. Yet, they all shared key values and principles that identified them as republican.

Notably, the women described are for the most part religious republicans influenced by Puritan political thought. Thus their ideas tend to be closer to those of Milton and Vane than to those of Harrington and Neville. None can be said to belong to the strictly constitutional variety, and there is little mention of assemblies – saintly or otherwise – which might be due to the fact that the women concerned had little experience of or even interest in political institutions. Fewer references to classical sources meanwhile might be explained by the different nature of early modern women's education. All this suggests that we might need to change our parameters of what can or cannot be considered republican if women's voices are to feature alongside those of men.

In order to tackle the issue of gender difference in republican history Gillespie herself compares her women authors to Lucretia, whose rape by the sixth-century BC Prince Sextus Tarquinius and her subsequent suicide triggered an act of rebellion against the monarchy which ended in the liberation of Rome and the

establishment of a republic (pp. 3–4). The weak woman excluded from the political sphere and vindicated by men rebelling to defend her honour often exemplifies the marginal role played by women in republican politics.⁽⁴⁾ Refusing to see Lucretia simply as a passive victim whose violation and tragic end stirs men into action, however, Gillespie depicts her *pace* Shakespeare as the true political agent, ‘a city-state harbouring a resistant citizen in control of her reason if not her body’ (p. 344). Because this remarkable woman held on to her own ‘property-in-self’ or ‘the republic within’ by taking her own life, ‘it was not the sacrifice of Lucrece that precipitated the republican founding, but the self-sacrifice of the king as he dethroned himself upon realizing that those he believed his subjects were in fact his equals’ (pp. 343–4).

To Gillespie, the essence of republicanism is thus an attitude of mind, a form of selfhood that strongly resembles Quentin Skinner’s neo-Roman concept of liberty as self-mastery, and it might be worth dwelling on this for a bit longer to see where the woman authors discussed might fit into the Skinnerian paradigm. [Back to \(9\)](#) This parallel is particularly interesting because the women discussed by Gillespie largely adhere to the religious strand of 17th-century English republicanism, while her comparison to Lucrece, which serves as a frame for each chapter, is a classical one, which suggests that the religious and the classical connected in a number of ways that are yet to be fully explored. [Back to \(10\)](#)

I doubt that historians will rush to include Gillespie’s women authors into the republican canon or to change the way in which they define the parameters of what is or what is not republican. But Gillespie’s bold and innovative book is certainly an important milestone.

* I would like to thank J.C. Davis for reading an earlier draft of this review.

Notes

1. Among the standard works are: Z. S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans: an Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England* (n.p., 1945); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975); P. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 3 vols (Chapel Hill, NC, and London, 1994); *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. D. Armitage, A. Himy, Q. Skinner (Cambridge, 1998); *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649–1776*, ed. D. Wootton (Stanford, CA, 1994); Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, ed. C. H. Firth (London, 1885). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge, 1999). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. Scott, ‘What were Commonwealth Principles?’ *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), pp. 591–613; *Commonwealth Principles: Republican Writing of the English Revolution* (Cambridge, CA 2004); and G. Mahlberg, *Henry Neville and English Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century: Dreaming of Another Game* (Manchester, 2009), esp. chapter 3. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*; C. Fatovic, ‘The anti-Catholic roots of liberal and republican conceptions of freedom in english political thought’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66, 1 (2005), pp. 37–58. Mahlberg, *Henry Neville*, ‘Introduction’. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. B. Worden, ‘Liberty for Export: “Republicanism” in England, 1500–188’, in *European Contexts for English Republicanism*, ed. G. Mahlberg and D. Wiemann (Farnham, 2013), pp. 13–32. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. E. Nelson, ‘“Talmudical Commonwealths” and the rise of Republican exclusivism’, *Historical Journal*, 50, 4 (2007), 809–35; J. Hankins, ‘Exclusivist Republicanism and the non-Monarchical Republic’, *Political Theory*, 38, 4 (2010), 452–82. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, p. 406ff; Mahlberg, *Henry Neville*, chapter 4; and the same, ‘Neo-Harringtonianism and *A Letter Sent to General Monk* (1660) revisited’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 24, 2 (2009), pp. 305–22. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. P. Collinson, ‘The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 69 (1987), 394–424; the same, *De Republica Anglorum: or, History with the Politics Put Back* (Cambridge, 1990), and *The Monarchical Republic in Elizabethan England: Essays in Response to Patrick Collinson*, ed. J. F. McDiarmid (London, 2007); Steve Hindle, ‘Hierarchy and community in

the Elizabethan parish: the Swallowfield Articles of 1596', *Historical Journal*, 42, 3, 835–51; Mark Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: officeholding in early modern England', in *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500–1850*, ed. Tim Harris (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 153–94.[Back to \(8\)](#)

9. See among others Q. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. On the parallels between the religious and neo-Roman concepts of liberty, see J. Coffey, 'Quentin Skinner and the religious dimension of early modern political thought', in *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, ed. A. Chapman, J. Coffey and B. S. Gregory (Notre Dame, NY, 2009), pp. 46–74.[Back to \(10\)](#)

Other reviews:

Times Literary Supplement

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/early-modern-womens-writing/> [2]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2197>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/285598> [2] <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/early-modern-womens-writing/>