The Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women, 1558-1680, ed. by Johanna Harris and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann [book review].

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The Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women, 1558-1680 forms part of the Early Modern Literature in History series published by Palgrave Macmillan, bringing together fourteen essays that discuss what Joanna Harris and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann call, in their introduction, the ‘lively and indispensable part’ that puritan women played in the ‘production and reception of what scholars now investigate as the public sphere of early modern intellectual culture’ (2). The editors acknowledge that scholarly work on both women and puritanism in the early modern period has encountered two main prejudices: that women at this time were ‘excluded from a public sphere of intellectual thought and culture’; and that ‘puritanism itself was hostile to both popular culture and high art’ (2). In the course of fourteen wonderfully wide-ranging and rich essays that reflect the diversity of puritan women’s engagement with various intellectual and social networks, it is difficult to imagine any grounds for such prejudices. As Neil Keeble writes in the book’s foreword, these essays ‘illuminate for the first time’ that ‘far from being isolated, untutored, idiosyncratic or marginalised’, these puritan women ‘take their due place in a wide range of intellectual, cultural, social, religious and literary networks’ (x). This study certainly asks us to reconsider whether early modern puritan women ‘identified their puritanism as provoking and stimulating, rather than complicating or repressing, their vibrant participation in intellectual communities and cultures’ (1).

The breadth and effectiveness of the study is enabled by the inclusion of fourteen (medium-length) essays each concentrating on one particular puritan woman, her work (whether surviving in manuscript or in print), and the various ways in which she engaged with intellectual networks. Although primarily concerned with discussing the women’s literary output, every case study includes biographical and cultural information making it of
interest to a wider readership than the purely academic. Included in the study are essays that explore the intellectual relationships of better-known ‘intellectual’ women writers such as Susan M. Felch’s essay on ‘The Exemplary Anne Vaughan Lock’, which explores her relationship with John Knox and her entrance into court politics with the publishing of her translations of Calvin’s sermons, Danielle Clarke’s essay on Mary Sidney Herbert and her practising piety by reading, writing, and revising texts, and Ruth Connolly’s essay on Lady Katherine Ranelagh and her influence within the Hartlib circle. Alongside these appear essays on sectarian writers: Diane Purkiss’s essay on ‘Anna Trapnel’s Literary Geography’ explores the networks of separatist church-goers and ministers as well as the communities which were united by printers and booksellers in the 1650s, while Nigel Smith’s study of Jane Lead and the Philadelphian Society brings the book to a close by showing how her writings call into question what was considered ‘intellectual’ in the late seventeenth century.

Many of the essays are rich in discussions of puritan women’s literary expertise. Sarah C. E. Ross’s essay on Elizabeth Melville is remarkable in its analysis of her recently discovered verse and how she sacralised Marlowe’s ‘The Passionate Shepherd to his Love’; Susan Wiseman’s analysis of Anne Bradstreet’s later poetry is contextualised by a discussion of puritan intellectual networks in New England; Elizabeth Clarke’s discussion of Lady Anne Southwell’s choice of poetic style includes Southwell’s verse lines where she shows that ‘it is only “amorous Idiotts” who disgrace poetry by “making verse the packhorse of theyr passion”’ (67); and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann’s study of Lucy Hutchinson’s Order and Disorder discusses how she interprets the Bible and her remarkable marginal annotations. Joanna Harris’s essay on Lady Brilliana Harley shows the importance of considering the epistolary community of women writers in the study of their intellectual involvement in cultural networks, and Lynne Magnusson’s study of the works of Anne Cooke Bacon analyses her persuasive speech acts. Both Marion O’Connor’s essay on Lucy Harington
Russell, and Jacqueline Eales’s discussion of Mary, Lady Vere, testify to the importance of women as patrons and matriarchs within their godly communities. However, a particular highlight of this project for those especially interested in spiritual autobiography is Erica Longfellow’s analysis of Elizabeth Isham’s ‘Booke of Rememberance’. This essay explores what Longfellow shows was ‘purely intellectual about puritan women’s culture as distinct from the social and political ambitions that were fundamental for the other women of this study’ (123). She also provides an interesting (and perhaps rare) example of a woman who appears unfamiliar with conventional restrictions on women’s speech.

David Norbrook’s considered afterword suggests various other fascinating comparisons between the essays than I can outline here. One particularly important outcome of this study is its indication of women’s involvement in intellectual communities and evidence of their influencing other women around them through their literary achievements, which has the potential to inspire future scholarly research. This beautifully bound study presents rich and vivid snapshots of women’s intellectual lives which will no doubt become the basis upon which further work will build. Quite the contrary to the repressive nature of puritanism that we might expect, this study shows that it was a movement that could be supportive of ‘women’s direct and influential involvement in their intellectual surroundings’ (2). As Keeble’s foreword indicates, puritan women saw it as their duty to participate in their godly communities, whether as patrons, matriarchs, poets, letter writers, rhetoricians, teachers, or prophetesses. To be silent and modest could be easily interpreted as a sin.

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