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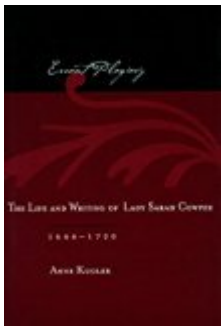

Anne Kugler. *Errant Plagiary: The Life and Writing of Lady Sarah Cowper, 1644-1720.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. viii + 288 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-3418-9.

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Published on H-Albion (June, 2003)

Life of Wedded Misery

Anne Kugler invites readers to meet cranky, self-righteous, Lady Sarah Cowper and to hear her tales of "forty-two years of wedded misery" (p. 1). With a deep breath of fresh air, Kugler analyzes a woman in conflict with her husband, sons, and servants--a rare occurrence in historical biography. We observe independent-minded Sarah going "on strike" from household duties and the sexual obligations of a wife. Sarah's more orthodox strategy for coping with an unhappy marriage was to record a lifetime of reading and writing, first in commonplace books, later in a seven-volume, 2,300-page diary written between 1700 and 1716. Kugler uses extensive diary extracts to show how an eighteenth-century woman read and actively interpreted the gender and social ideologies of her day.

In 1664, Sarah, the daughter of a London merchant, married Sir William Cowper, a man above her social rank, whose landed estate was inadequate for his high status. Sir William was one of many men who used government office, professional training, and mercantile marriage to obtain an estate and a seat in Parliament. "Never met two more Averse than we in Humour, Passions, and Affections; our Reason and Sense, Religion or Morals agree not" (p. 1), quipped Sarah. Nor did she receive the respect due to her from her two barrister sons, William and Spencer, who achieved spectacular success in the Whig political world. William eventually became Lord Chancellor and an earl, while Spencer held high legal office. After producing her sons, however, Sarah spent the rest of her life without leverage, financial security, or a compatible mate. She turned to her diary to express her most intimate thoughts, and the political and religious views that developed from her reading. An appendix of a hundred thirty-three books that she owned in 1701 is, in fact, a lengthy, but otherwise typical reading list of a moderate Anglican woman.

What makes this study so rewarding for historians and literary critics is that Kugler has uncovered Sarah's method of seamlessly incorporating passages from the books that she read into her own personal observations. What at first seems an informal account is actually the product of the

selection and intertwining of her own thoughts with specific conduct manuals, sermons, periodicals, and other prescriptive texts. In effect, Sarah speaks in the voice of others, without signaling that fact. "I account Stealing," she declares, "to be when we altogether Transcribe out of any Author, but to borrow and alter is what most do" (p. 3). This method allows Kugler to examine closely the relationship between prescriptive literature and actual practice. She finds that Sarah's own interpretations of her texts constantly subverted the intentions of their original authors. Sarah clearly read and employed prescriptive literature to support her own views. As she did so, however, she reshaped the words and meanings of those in authority. At times one wishes Kugler showed more clearly who said what, and with what variations (for example, passages from works by Mary Astell and George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, in three pages of text). Nevertheless, she successfully links an individual's reading to the formulation of ideas. As many scholars have found, this is not an easy task.

With archival skill, and thoughtfulness about causation, Kugler fulfills her promise to integrate Sarah's life and writings into the issues of her day. Separate chapters describe her social, political, and religious views in the context of historical debates, with deft, but light-handed summaries of secondary works. There are interesting cameo studies of Sarah's visiting, churchgoing, and charity, as she rose up the social ladder. Her reactions to the Sacheverell trial, presided over by her son and taking place literally next door, are especially fresh and revealing.

A major strength of this book lies in the way it shows change over time, throughout the stages of a woman's life cycle. I have often seen the term "brisk widow" in seventeenth-century texts, and wondered what it meant. Now, I know. Though Sir William's death caused little introspective comment in her diary, the pace and patterns of Sarah's life shifted. Yet freedom from her husband did not bring unmitigated happiness and success. As Kugler notes, good fortune often introduced new, worrisome responsibilities.

The most unforgettable chapter is about Sarah's old age and impending death. As Sarah aged, her diary also changed in terms of intellectual content and emotional tone. Her once angry, busy life slipped away and was replaced by a search for tranquility, often found in reading. "Books every way assist mee," she explained. "They help to bear the provocations of a Servant; the Importunity of Years, the unwelcomness of Wrinkles, and such like mind troubling Accidents" (p. 164). Yet extreme age and illness left her unfit for the meditative life she had expected. "I feel my self Decay apace," she confessed. "O Lord! Give Mee Grace to Wait Patiently till my Change come" (p. 191). Still, she mustered strength for one last entry in her diary: "This is the seventh volume. 'Tis to be hoped there are some collections in them, may be useful to posterity. My phrase now is farewell For Ever" (p. 191).

Though so much is revealed, the reader still misses clues as to what Sarah looked like, illustrations of her handwriting, a page of her diary, and a portrait, if not of her, of her husband. What is more pressingly lacking, however, are other persons' perspectives of Sarah and her husband. Did others see her as she saw herself? Were her negative views and feelings of being wronged justified? Knowing that, like all historians, Sarah selectively interpreted texts to support her arguments, the reader misses multiple viewpoints gleaned from family correspondence. Dialogues with her husband are apparently absent, except in one instance, where he appears to be quite reasonable. Only at the end of the book, do we get a hint of another's view of her, when her son William expresses pity for her dependency in old age. As Kugler herself notes when dealing with a troubled annuity payment, without the other side of the story it is difficult to decide whether Sarah's anger against her family was appropriate.

Kugler herself calls for caution in weighing autobiographical evidence. Indeed, she makes us understand that through her diary, Sarah was consciously "building a case to prove to God that she deserved to be saved on Judgment Day" (p. 63). Though she never contemplated publication, Sarah also hoped that her writings would posthumously vindicate her actions, in the eyes of her descendants. Sarah's journal does live on in Kugler's fine book. Historians and literary critics will want to read it and make their own conclusions about this complaining, self-righteous, but very human woman.