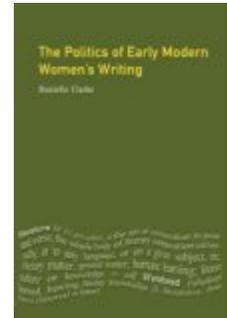




Danielle Clarke. *The Politics of Early Modern Women's Writing.* Harlow: Longman, 2001. 289 pp. \$31.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-30909-8.



Reviewed by Hilda Smith

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This is one of those literary studies that is difficult for historians to review because disciplinary terminology and assumptions are sufficiently different that a reviewer is continually questioning just what is signified by the work's chronological demarcations and characterizations of individual authors or groups of authors. One of the first of these difficulties arises with the use of the term "early modern." Here early modern ends in 1640, and so many of the issues identified as inherent in assessing women's writings and women writers have relevance for the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, but not beyond. The work assumes women primarily do translations or complete loose replications of earlier male works. By ending in 1640, it misses the large outpouring of women's original works from 1640 to 1660 and again after the Restoration. Whether focused on religion, politics, story telling, or household and medical guides, they are fundamentally different from women's writings during the late 1500s and early 1600s. By using "early modern" in the title but assessing only the first half (and for women the lesser period) of that term's chronological

reach the author presents an incomplete account of women authors.

Thus a continual conflation of Renaissance, humanism, and early modern creates a set of overlapping periods and characteristics, that for the broader reach of "early modern" as used by historians, is only part of the story. It is an old saw that the seventeenth century has disappeared as a period among both historians and literary critics for different reasons; historians keep moving back the "long eighteenth century" to encompass more and more of the seventeenth century and literary scholars continue the Renaissance through at least the mid-seventeenth century, making the 1600s either the tail end or the beginning of more important, thematically-defined ages. Thus questions emerging from the historiography and criticism of these periods are often applied to the 1600s without sufficient questioning as to whether they apply without alteration to a period which had its own fairly substantial political and cultural issues.

Danielle Clarke's work is divided into six chapters organized thematically or according to

genre: a broad introductory overview that touches "women, language and rhetoric"; next, the "Renaissance debate" around women; thirdly, drama and the "gendered political subject"; fourth, religion or "the divine: faith and poetry"; next, "poetry, politics and gender"; and a final chapter on both women reading and writing romances. The chapters overlap in analysis although they move along a chronological trajectory, yet their titles appear to emerge more from the identity of the authors that are being discussed rather than as distinct analytical divides.

After offering a fairly well-known account of women's distinct literary path during the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries when discussing issues of literacy, rhetorical styles, and the nature of works addressed to women, as well as their particular role as early modern readers, she moves primarily to discussions of well-known early women authors such as Jane Anger (who she admits most scholars dismiss as an actual woman); Amelia Lanyer; Isabella Whitney; Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke; and Lady Mary Wroth. She does discuss Anne Dowriche, a lesser-known Protestant apologist, who directs her criticism against the Guise family's abuse of French Protestants in *The French Historie* (1589). Dowriche's work is similar to Foxe's more famous martyrology, but it is significant as an example of one of the few examples of political statements from female authors during the late 1500s, a period before any except a small number of women around the Court were writing formal political works. The poet Isabella Whitney, while discussed more frequently and anthologized in some early modern women's collections, has also gained limited attention. Here Clarke highlights her less elevated social standing as perhaps the reason for the limited attention to her poetic output. And she notes the importance of "poetic voice" over the usual autobiographical aspect that interests a number of those studying early modern women writers (p. 193). It was especially Whitney's connection to Ovid's poetic tradition that character-

ized her verse and pointed to its significance rather than any reference to the author's biographical context.

While Clarke makes a number of useful comments about individual authors, and while she includes fairly limited discussions concerning a few lesser known writers, she is mostly covering well-trodden ground discussing authors familiar from Barbara Lewalski's standard work[1] on early-seventeenth-century women writers, along with a range of literary studies, especially of Lanyer, Sidney, and Wroth. Also, there is insufficient new historical material to offer significant interest for historians not conversant with the themes undertaken by these early authors. In general, the work offers another account and critique of late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth women authors and presents a useful context for those seeking an introductory overview. But for specialists, it for the most part tells a fairly familiar tale, interspersed with some original insights.

Note

[1]. Barbara K. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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