Female Same-Sex Desire and Royalist Politics in the Poetry of Katherine Philips

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At the start of this project, I planned to construct a comprehensive theory of the representations of female same-sex desire in early modern English literature. Delving into scholarly sources, however, I soon realized how vast this field has become in the past few decades and accepted the necessity of refining my study. Through the course of my exploration, I became fascinated with a mid-seventeenth century English poet by the name of Katherine Philips. Although relatively well known in her day as the paragon of virtuous female writers, Philips gradually receded from scholarly view and became relegated to the ranks of the minor Renaissance poets. It was not until the late twentieth century that— with increasing interest in rediscovering Renaissance women’s voices and constructing a literary history of lesbianism—scholars brought Philips’s work back to the fore of studies in the field. Despite the numerous texts written on Philips’s life and work however, I’ve discovered there exists a relative dearth in the analysis of her poetry. To my knowledge, no annotated copies of her complete works have been published. Although this scarcity of information made researching Philips difficult, I found in this gap an exciting opportunity to begin an intensive study of a little known but influential poet and analyze some of her best work from a more holistic perspective.

After reading a number of essays on Philips and annotating some of her poems myself, it became apparent that friendship was the strongest theme in her poetry and desire and politics were two possible lenses through which these friendships could be interpreted. Biographical works on Philips informed me that many of her relationships served a sociopolitical function. She used some of these connections to aid the political career of her husband, who found himself on the wrong side after the Restoration of the English monarchy. A supporter of the monarchy herself, Philips incorporates her Royalist views into many poems written to her allies and closest friends. These political sentiments come out in such texts as “A reir’d Friendship, to Ardelia” and “A Dialogue of Absence ’twixt Lucasia and Orinda.” “To my Lucasia” and “L’Amitie. To Mrs. Mary Awbrey,” on the other hand, express in physical and spiritual images the desire of Philips’s poetic persona for her female friends. While it is tempting to make assumptions about Philips’s sexual identity and liaisons, we obviously cannot prove the existence of sexual desire outside of her poetry. Therefore, my study emphasizes what that desire means within the context of the poem—how it is enacted through conceits inspired by the work of Shakespeare and John Donne and how it relates to platonic and literary models of friendship popular during that era.

The result of my analysis ultimately took the form of a research paper still in progress. I addressed the themes of politics and desire in Philips’s body of poems and what is known about her life and relationships. I found that these themes are closely tied in much of her work, mingling in ways that are unexpected and genuine and representative of her time. My work on this topic is far from finished, however. I plan to continue my study of Philips and those she influenced—the playwrights Aphra Behn and Margaret Cavendish are likely subjects. This project is just the first step toward my senior Honors Project, in which I will continue applying my knowledge of gender and sexuality as well as the history and literature of early modern England to the work of underappreciated female writers.

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