

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Luckyj, Christina. Liberty and the Politics of the Female Voice in Early Stuart England

Cristina León Alfar

Volume 45, Number 3, Summer 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099759ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40462>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Alfar, C. (2022). Review of [Luckyj, Christina. Liberty and the Politics of the Female Voice in Early Stuart England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(3), 334–336. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40462>

© Cristina León Alfar, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Luckyj, Christina.**

***Liberty and the Politics of the Female Voice in Early Stuart England.***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. x, 281. ISBN 978-1-108-84509-0 (hardcover) \$114.95.

Christina Luckyj's *Liberty and the Politics of the Female Voice in Early Stuart England* argues that both male and female writers of the Stuart age used female voices to express powerful political criticism. Seven chapters and an epilogue feature Elizabeth Cary, Lady Mary Wroth, Amelia Lanyer, Rachel Speght, Anne Southwell, Esther Sowernam, and William Shakespeare, William Whately, and William Gouge, among others. The deliberate choice to place women speakers at the centre of political critique revises the current critical emphasis on feminist-focused readings of these authors, which have overlooked the religious and political influence of their texts. Luckyj's argument is persuasive and exciting, expanding how we can read and teach women authors, in particular. Women writers do not only advocate for women's education, equity in marriage, and equality with men before God, but they also critique the monarch's silencing of conscience and freedom of speech; his self-indulgence and inappropriate associates at court; his negotiations for national and marital alliances with Spain; and his intolerance of Puritans. Protestant discourses of political and religious liberty used by women writers removes them from the margins of the canon of early modern literature, where they have been consigned. While women writers focused on the cultural, domestic, literary, and biblical legacies of women, Luckyj reads them in concert with male writers to place them in this larger context of political and religious dissent. As she argues at the end of her introduction, "the 'reasonable libertie' sought by men and women in early Stuart England authorized the voice of the wife/subject as a powerful political tool" (23).

The chapters successfully demonstrate this thesis, with extremely effective work on Cary, Lanyer, Speght, and an epilogue on Esther Sowernam and *Haec Vir*. The biblical Esther's "If I perish, I perish. For was there not a time to speak?" sets up the rest of the book's interest in the use of the female voice. Luckyj foregrounds this argument with the Puritan minister, Thomas Scott, who criticized Spanish influence over King James in 1620. To defend himself and his *Vox Populi, or Newes from Spayne*, he ventriloquizes Esther's voice to defend both religious and political liberty. Scott is not the only male writer

to be studied in *Liberty and the Politics of the Female Voice*. William Whatley plays a central role in several chapters, and the first chapter is dedicated to a reading of William Shakespeare's Emilia and Iago in *Othello* and Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*, and a reading of John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* (alongside works of lesser-known female writers such as Elizabeth Caldwell and Anne Askew). This chapter does a great deal to demonstrate Luckyj's claim that female voices were used in the service of radical criticism of male tyranny by both male and female writers, public and private. Her work on Whatley (throughout the book) shifts how we will think about his use of female voices and his position on marriage. It is, however, the weakest chapter in a very strong and important argument due to its lack of engagement with the significant body of feminist criticism on Shakespeare, in particular, and would have been strengthened by this scholarship.

The rest of the book, especially the chapters on Elizabeth Cary and Rachel Speght but also on Anne Southwell, Esther Sowernam, and *Haec Vir* in the book's epilogue, contribute substantially to a revision and reimagining of the political and religious significance of women writers in Stuart England. Luckyj's argument on *The Tragedy of Mariam* links it to the Protestant cause of spoken liberty, so that Mariam becomes a champion of the freedom to speak one's conscience against the efforts of the Crown to silence its subjects. While *The Tragedy of Mariam* has long been read as a play in which female voices (not just Mariam's, but Salome's and Doris's as well) speak complaints against the tyranny of marriage, Luckyj's argument expands this reading, connecting Cary to reform-minded Protestants (due to its date well before Cary's conversion to Catholicism). The right of freedom of speech and open debate, Luckyj argues, was under pressure in the 1604 session of Parliament, of which Cary's father, Lawrence Tanfield, was a member. The play's legal arguments about the right of divorce for women and the right to speak one's conscience are inflected with this political context. Similarly, Speght's *Mouzelles for Melastomus*, *Dreame*, and *Mortalities Memorandum* are read as not just affirming the worth of women but also as using female narrators to voice an "attack [...] on those enemies of the reformed faith" (153).

Anne Southwell's critique of James and his court of favourites, compares his extravagance at court to the "biblical King Belshazzar" (227). Of all Luckyj's women writers, Southwell struck me as the most daring, and this may be because she intended the work to be solely for herself, unread by anyone else.

But the work stands available to any with access to the Lansdowne manuscript. Southwell's writing is political not only in her criticism of King James but also in her belief that women were entitled to reject the tyranny of marriage without endangering their spiritual freedom. Scholars are sure to read her manuscript with eager eyes given Luckyj's discussion of her work in this volume. Finally, I must mention the book's epilogue, which may have been my favourite chapter, with the return of Esther (in Esther Sowernam's *Esther Hath Hang'd Haman*) and a reading of *Haec Vir*, which made me want to return to both immediately and to include them in my teaching, alongside the sixteenth-century texts I use.

Christina Luckyj's *Liberty and the Politics of the Female Voice in Early Stuart England* compels readers to revise their assumptions about the female voice as merely interested in domestic forms of conduct and marital conflict. She opens their work to a wider political interest, which is related to that more private but no less political agenda. The personal is political, as we know, and Luckyj brings this home to her readers in new and exciting ways.

CRISTINA LEÓN ALFAR

Hunter College, City University of New York

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40462>