

Book Review of Deborah Kennedy. *Poetic Sisters: Early Eighteenth-Century Women Poets. (Transits: Literature, Thought & Culture)* [series ed., Greg Clingham].

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Poetic Sisters is a wonderfully accurate and clear map of the terrain of women's poetry in early eighteenth-century England. In separate chapters on Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea; Elizabeth Rowe; Frances Thynne Seymour, Countess of Hertford; Sarah Dixon; and Mary Jones. Deborah Kennedy discovers and charts rich areas of literary history. And, throughout, she colors in their various genres, such as, the pastoral, the epistle, the fable, the light satire, the occasional poem, the encomium, the country house poem, the progress poem, the landscape poem, the night piece, the graveyard poem, in which these five—until now—largely inaccessible poets worked. Seldom did these women attempt poems on the affairs of state or on larger public concerns; nor do they write lampoons, travesties, formal satires, and mock epics. In such matters and modes Dryden, Swift, and Pope are the mountains. Nor are the Poetic Sisters edgy and stormy and sublime like their great male counterparts. But their poems, the meadows and gardens on the map, are mainly of quiet moments alone, or exchanges, often very humorous, among friends and relations that finally complete the landscape of Augustan literary history and foreshadow Romanticism's private reflections and rural leanings so well that we should never again misname the earlier period "The Age of Satire."

While these five poets did not constitute a salon in a drawing room or a club in a coffee house, for Winchilsea, Rowe, and Hertford, their verse-centric world was the country house. The estates of Eastwell, Richings, and Longleat with their surrounding fields and gardens prompted a rural poetry sharply distinct from the urban subjects of most contemporary poets. Their studies granted the context for private reflection and the exchanges of letters among themselves and many others. For Dixon the shire of Kent with its libraries and ruined abbeys nurtured a meditative sense of history and a tendency toward graveyard poetry, while its popular recreations led to poems critical and didactic. The most humorous of the five, the City of Oxford's Mary Jones, with people all about, writes some poems about crowds and shopping. Yet by an inverse calculus, she is also a private poet, far from the madding crowd, who writes as a religious moralist.

Professor Kennedy's book is classic literary criticism, one might almost say "Johnsonian" in that word's very best senses. As in Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, every chapter is biographical, ethical, and critical. Every one reveals the life, religion, and political leanings of the poet. For example, allegiance to the Stuarts and subsequent shunning by William and Mary cast Winchilsea out of London; the dissenting religion of Rowe springs forth in her biblical verse; and Dixon's High Church and royalist leanings leave their imprint on her poems. Like Johnson also, Kennedy sketches the poets' ethos or character that derives from their loves, losses, and allegiances. And like Johnson at his comparative best, Kennedy lets the Sisters' poems stand in relief to similar poems by others. In the background are, *inter alia*, Katherine Phillips, Jane Colman Turell, Lady Anne Irwin, Jane Brereton, Anne Steele, Thomas Parnell, and Pope. This referential practice grants sharper definition to the poems of the Poetic Sisters and argues a commonality of thematic interests. At times Kennedy brings other poets directly forward with their work for a contrast with one of the Sisters. For example, in the chapter on Sarah Dixon, Prior's "Phyllis's Age," Parnell's "An Elegy to Old Beauty," Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," and Leapor's "Dorinda at her Glass" stand against Dixon's

“The Looking-Glass.” All invite smiles about women’s vanity, a common subject of poets, peasants, and philosophers. But mostly, like Johnson, here and always, Kennedy’s analysis is a gem of criticism, clear, crisp, and cogent. Never must the reader move through fogs and thickets of theory to find value and beauty in the poems. For example, we get a close reading of Dixon’s poem that finds a formal balance between mild satire and sympathy for an aging beauty, which is absent in the other poems. One wishes only to have here and throughout the book a firmer assessment of metrics, especially the effect of the frequent tetrameter lines whose rush speeds the reader to a comic effect, probably unintended in many instances. In “The Looking-Glass,” however, one might note that Dixon’s alternate quatrain rhymes convey the hesitation at the prospect of a dowager’s growing old while the speed of the iambic tetrameter verses parallels the sad rapidity of aging. It is sound echoing sense just as Pope would have it.

In their own time and later the Poetic Sisters were praised by major virile voices. Finch was admired by Wordsworth, Rowe by Watts and Thomson, Hertford by Watts, Walpole, Duck, and Thomas Percy, Dixon by Prior and Pope, and Mary Jones by Thomas Warton and Dr. Johnson. The larger reading public enjoyed the Sisters’ work as well. Sarah Dixon’s reputation, for example, attracted four hundred and eighty subscribers for her book, and the promise of Mary Jones’s collection won a remarkable two thousand subscribers, one of whom was Pope—no small accomplishments when the standard subscription list of the time numbered about two hundred. This praise and popularity in their own time starkly contrasts with the little attention these poets get now. Modern single editions of their work are ghosts. They might be admitted to a typical anthology of eighteenth-century literature only by the trade entrance of a short selection. Only Roger Lonsdale’s 1989 *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford Anthology*, organized by poets, and the magnificent collection of Paula Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia, *British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century: An Anthology*, organized by genres and subjects, redress the absence of women’s poetry. Kennedy’s book is a testament to uncommon research and scholarship in discovering letters and searching manuscripts. And the book is a gift of accessibility to readers in its reprinting the full text of many of her poets’ poems. *Poetic Sisters* is a major contribution to our understanding of early eighteenth-century English poetry, so it therefore should have a place in every university’s library to serve both scholar and student long and well.

H. George Hahn
Towson University