



Select an early modern author writing for a small coterie of readers and explore how and why they tailored their work to a specific type of reader

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In the seventeenth century, the church and state wanted to control religious or political narrative to inhibit criticism of the church's teachings, laws or authority. King Charles II was so appalled at the level of religious disobedience in his newly inherited nation that he introduced the Licensing of the Press Act of 1662, to prevent "the frequent Abuses in printing seditious treasonable and unlicensed Bookes and Pamphlets"¹. In this environment, "a woman's 'natural' condition is silence"². Women were seen as unqualified to speak on such controversial topics as religion, politics or even their own domestic lifestyle. Katherine Philips recognised this when she said, in her letter to Sir Charles Cottrell, a member of her coterie, that she was, "so far from expecting applause for anything I scribble" as to do so was "unfit for my sex"³. Through her poetry, Philips expressed her thoughts and feelings on topics such as politics, friendship, and marriage, but she only shared her work with members of her small coterie, themselves given pseudonyms – Philips "known as the pastoral epithet 'Orinda'"⁴. Her coterie was a safe space in which to express her opinions, but also a conduit for her connections to strengthen her and her husband's position in society. Despite much of her poetry being potentially scandalous due to its political content, her effective manipulation of language to the individual, and the privacy provided by her coterie, helped her avoid criticism or scrutiny.

Claudia Limbert describes Philips as, "two women" – one a "conventional product of London's ... merchant class ... Puritan-Presbyterian", consistent "with society's expectations for women"⁵, the other she describes as "wildly unconventional"⁶. Arguably, Philips most "unconventional" trait was her use of poetry to express her royalist sympathies, despite the risk to her husband, a parliamentarian and a member of "Cromwell's government ... member of the High Court of Justice"⁷. In her well-known poem 'Upon the Double Murder of King Charles I, in Answer to a Libellous Copy of Rhymes made by Vavasor Powell'⁸, addressing

¹ Karen Nipps, 'Cum privilegio: Licensing of the Press Act of 1662', *The Library Quarterly*, 84.4 (2014), 494–500 (p. 494).

² Celia A. Easton, 'Excusing the Breach of Nature's Laws: The Discourse of Denial and Disguise in Katherine Philips' Friendship Poetry', *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700*, 14.1 (1990), 1–14. (p. 2).

³ *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*, ed. by George Saintsbury, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), I, p. 491.

⁴ Hilary Menges, 'Authorship, Friendship, and Forms of Publication in Katherine Philips', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, (2012), 517–541 (p. 519).

⁵ Claudia A. Limbert, 'Katherine Philips: Controlling a Life and Reputation', *South Atlantic Review*, 56.2 (1991), 27–42 (p. 27).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸ Katherine Philips, 'Upon the Double Murder of King Charles in Answer to a Libellous Copy of Rhymes made by Vavasor Powell', *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*, ed. by George Saintsbury, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), I, p. 507. (All further references to Philips' poems will be from this edition apart from 'A Married State'.)

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criticism by Powell, a Puritan writer, Hageman states Philips was, “objecting to the assertion that Charles I broke all ten of God’s commandments”⁹. Her retort, as a woman, questioning Parliament’s decision to behead her martyred monarch, risked humiliating her parliamentary husband and endangering both of their reputations. Through the vessel of her “wide circle of influential royalist friends”¹⁰, she was able to express such political sentiments. Drawing on the popular male playwright, Shakespeare, she continued her vitriol against Charles’ critics by using the imagery of, “The dying lion kicked by every ass” (line 10) a nod to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and its line “to make an ass of me”¹¹. The “ass” reflected the dim-witted, ridiculous character, Bottom, perhaps implying Powell was similarly afflicted, or perhaps alluding to Parliament, who endorsed his execution. Such mockery would not have been well-received had it been made public but may have been received with amused approval by her royalist coterie.

Philips acknowledged the dangers of political criticism for women in her own poetry. She recognised that writing this poem was a “breach of nature’s laws” (line 6), but felt she must defend Charles, despite the handicap of her gender. Sarah Ross describes this as, “untying of her fettered tongue ... forcing of her native, female, dumbness into defence of her martyred monarch.”¹² Furthermore, Philips introduced the personal with the rhetorical question, “And what shall then become of thee and I?” (line 22) – “thee” alluding to Powell but perhaps also the reader, her coterie. Through sharing such volatile opinions, she perhaps wanted the personal tone of her criticism to encourage the reader – her friends and allies – to spread her message via word of mouth, as she could not publish her poem as an open response to Powell.

It could be argued that despite the strength of some of her opinions, because they were only directed to her coterie, they were designed to encourage a confidence and thereby intimacy. Trolander and Tenger believed that her criticism, rather than being purely politically motivated, was more of a “social endeavour” as in her poetry, “No matter the *content*, the *vehicle* was always sociable in nature”¹³. Not all of Philips’ work was an expression of her political views. As all good social climbers attest, who you know is more important than what you know: her coterie was a vital vessel for establishing and maintaining important social and political connections, formed subtly through an apparent sharing of emotions and finding common ground. After the monarchy was restored, Philips attempted to establish herself in wider political circles to strengthen her and her husband’s position in society and, as Trolander and Tenger claim, “salvage her elderly husband’s foundering career through her connections”¹⁴. An example of this is her poem ‘To the Queen’s Majesty, on her late Sickness and Recovery’¹⁵ in which she professes her happiness at her queen’s rehabilitation. Philips uses hyperbole to engender the extent of her affections attesting,

⁹ Elizabeth H. Hageman, ‘Making a Good Impression: Early Texts of Poems and Letters by Katherine Philips, the “Matchless Orinda”’, *South Central Review*, 11.2 (1994), 39–65 (p. 43).

¹⁰ Limbert, p. 27.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’, *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. by Stanley Wells et al., 3 vols (London: Guild Publishing London, 1988), II, 577–600 (p. 586).

¹² Sarah C. E. Ross, *Women, Poetry, and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 2.

¹³ Paul Trolander and Zeynep Tenger, ‘Katherine Philips and Coterie Critical Practices’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2004), 367–387 (p. 368).

¹⁴ Trolander and Tenger, p. 369.

¹⁵ Philips, p. 574.

“When in your Fever we with Terror saw/ At once our hopes and Happiness withdraw” (lines 5-6) using flattery, implying that her and society’s happiness is measured by the health of the Queen. In the same poem, Philips went on to employ excessive imagery to compliment the King: “His Genius did the bold Distemper tame, / And his rich Tears quenche’d the rebellious Flame” (lines 24-25) thereby reducing his critics to curs and assigning his torment lifesaving properties. In return for these expressions of affection, it seems there was “gracious reception of those verses’ (in her letter to Cotterell of 24 December 1663)”¹⁶.

The line between acquaintance and friend was thinly drawn by Philips as she used the bait of friendship to establish connections in both court and wider society. However, beyond the political, she looked to strengthen her closer coterie – coined the “society of friendship”¹⁷ by Philips – as a group of confidantes who would serve as an outlet for her views on political but also social and cultural issues. In the seventeenth century, female friendships were not thought to be of much value in society as they were not considered to hold influential currency. Philips recognised female friendship could be fickle and challenging to maintain, as Mintz claims she “employs images ... that testify... to the difficulty of achieving and maintaining that affection”¹⁸. However, she recognised and nurtured female friendship – particularly within her literary coterie – seeing it as integral to not only political but also societal advancement. Trolander and Tenger observed, “friendship and personal connections were needed to participate in literary and critical activities which in turn help to strengthen social, political and cultural bonds among various individuals.”¹⁹ Perhaps more importantly, Philips may have been trying to strengthen these friendships for personal gain. Her friendship poetry’s open nature encouraged her friends to trust her and believe her protests of innocence. Whether or not she was innocent is a matter for debate as there is no evidence suggesting otherwise. However, publication gave her views a wider audience than her coterie at a time when it would have been very challenging for a woman to do so under her own steam. Inviting her coterie to assist with a revised edition, seemingly to remedy any errors or offence, only further strengthened those relationships. The fact that Sir Charles Cotterell, King Charles II’s “new Master of Ceremonies”²⁰ directed the publication of the revised edition gave her the support she needed to avoid recrimination. Trolander and Tenger claim, “amendment criticism had to be initiated by the poet and performed by her trusted friends”²¹.

To establish intimate friendships through her poetry, Philips used many different techniques, sometimes inspired by popular male poets such as John Donne. Elements of Donne’s love poetry are explored in Philips’ poem ‘Friendship in Embleme, or the Seal. To My dearest Lucasia’²² closely reflecting the metaphysical conceit in John Donne’s poem ‘A Valediction of Forbidden Mourning’²³, employing the idea of two lovers’ souls navigating their

¹⁶ Elizabeth H. Hageman, ‘Making a Good Impression: Early Texts of Poems and Letters by Katherine Philips, the “Matchless Orinda”’, *South Central Review*, 11.2 (1994), 39–65 (p. 50).

¹⁷ Harriette Andreadis, ‘The Sapphic-Platonics of Katherine Philips, 1632-1664’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 15.1 (1989), 34–60 (p. 37).

¹⁸ Susannah B. Mintz, ‘Katherine Philips and the Space of Friendship’, *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660-1700*, 22.2 (1998), 62–78 (p. 62).

¹⁹ Trolander and Tenger, p. 370.

²⁰ Rebecca L. Tate, ‘Katherine Philips: a Critical Edition of the Poetry’ (doctoral dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1991), p. 7.

²¹ Trolander and Tenger, p. 373.

²² Philips, p 529.

²³ John Donne, ‘A Valediction of Forbidden Mourning’, *The New Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse*, ed. by Alastair Fowler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 108.

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way back to one another just like “stiff twin compasses” (line 26). Philips uses this compass conceit when she writes, “The Compasses that stand above/ Express this great immortal Love” (lines 21-22) suggesting that their platonic love will stand the test of time no matter the distance between them. This homage to Donne’s poetry indicates both her admiration for the man and her recognition of the power of his technique. Philip’s poem is a love letter to a member of her coterie, Anne Owen, who Tate claims was, “the object of Philip’s most consuming friendship”²⁴ evident by the passionate language used. She is ardent in her affection expressing a “Love that no bold shock can break” (line 2). The immense passion in her poetry appears sincere and personal – meant only for the eyes of the intended recipient. Despite adopting some of Donne’s representations of love, Philips highlights the fact that women were more geographically tied than men in terms of their ability to leave a loved one and return as they pleased. Mintz attests the men in Donne’s poetry’s “ability to leave and then return is never in question”, whereas the movements of women in Philip’s poetry is “far less unfettered”²⁵, thus the compass imagery utilised by both poets applies differently to men and women: Donne celebrates the reunion of the two lovers, whereas Philips accepts that their love would have to withstand distance, thus representing its strength.

Such was the intensity of Philips’ expression of love for her female friends in her poetry that critics have questioned whether that love was purely platonic. Lillian Faderman claims, “Had she written in the twentieth century, her poetry would undoubtedly be identified as ‘lesbian’”²⁶. Faderman maintained that Philips’ poetry on friendship was “indistinguishable from romantic love”²⁷. In contrast, Andreadis claimed Philips’ poetry was a “desexualised – though passionate and eroticised – version of platonic love”²⁸. Phillips’ poetry irrefutably expresses her passion for her friends. In her poem ‘Orinda to Lucasia’²⁹ she employs iambic tetrameter, pentameter and trimeter. The trimeter, as a shorter line, stands out as the speaker says, “From thee I’ve Heat and Light” (line 15). This celestial imagery of her “Friend” being the sun, who provided her with the necessities for life, conveys the extent to which that relationship provided her lifeblood, blurring the boundary between the romantic and platonic, but not proving that she was lesbian necessarily, rather evidencing the tremendous affection she held for her female friends in her coterie.

Phillips used poetry within her coterie to strengthen, but also excuse collateral damage to, relationships. This applied particularly to her husband, James Philips, to whom she wrote the poem, ‘To Antenor, on a Paper of Mine which J. Jones threatens to publish to prejudice him’³⁰; pre-empting the potential release of a poem of hers that criticised Jones, “a Parliamentary sympathiser”³¹ and “below a poet’s curse” (line 28), but also apologising for the public embarrassment he might experience as a result, without compromising her views. Interestingly, in contrast to her other love poetry, in which Mermin states the “hierarchy of gender is mitigated or evaded”³² gender hierarchy in this poem is recognised as she

²⁴ Tate, p. 110.

²⁵ Mintz, p. 63.

²⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (London: William Morrow, 1981), p. 68.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁸ Andreadis, p. 39.

²⁹ Philips, p. 593.

³⁰ Philips, p. 535.

³¹ Limbert, p. 29.

³² Dorothy Mermin, ‘Women Becoming Poets: Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Anne Finch’, *ELH*, 57.2 (1990), 335–355 (p. 336).

acknowledges she should not contradict her husband's convictions in public, taking full responsibility for her anti-Parliamentarian beliefs. She proves her romantic love for her husband stating, "My Love and Life I must confess are thine" (line 8) professing passionate, romantic, all-encompassing love rather than simply apologising to him. It could be argued that Philips manipulated her writing to achieve her goals, using poetry to assert her power over the situation, initiating the apology rather than passively issuing a response and taking responsibility, but also she recognised the tool of her "Ink may provide a stain / My blood should justly wash it off again" (lines 23-4) implying the blood is on her hands and she is at fault for writing such strong opinions in the first place. She accepts her fate and addresses her wrongdoings but does not stand down from them. Philips acknowledges social protocol and works to ensure she retains her husband's affection and the status her marriage affords her.

Her willingness to repair her marriage, however, seems at odds with her negative opinion of the institution, feeling that marriage took away from her friendships within her coterie, a controversial opinion for a woman at the time as it was seen as a woman's duty to marry and then provide heirs to the family, willingly. Through her poetry, she outwardly professes her distaste for marriage, evident in her poems such as 'A Married State'³³. Here she uses the descriptive imagery of "No blustering husbands" (line 7) and the idiom "No pangs of childbirth" (line 8) – the repetition of "No" reinforcing the negative features of marriage. She insinuates that virginity, the state before marriage, led to greater happiness: "virgin state is crowned with much content; / It's always happy as it's innocent" (lines 5-6) personifying the 'institution' of pre-marital freedom as something to be relished. Limbert claims Philips had "no control over her birth and little over her marriage"³⁴ however, she did have complete control over her opinions expressed in her poetry: 'A Married State' could be seen as an expression of frustrations engendered within her own marriage. Her ability to speak so freely demonstrates that this opinion was not to be publicised, but rather understood by her trusted coterie, one step beyond a confidential diary. Mintz said this "stance seems potentially bankrupt for Philips as a poet, as it would serve to confine her to a sphere already encoded for women as 'separate' and inferior"³⁵. However, it seems that Philips understood the importance of such a group.

Such was her admiration for women in her coterie that her Petrarchan sonnet, 'An Answer to Another persuading a Lady to Marriage'³⁶ uses metaphysical, goddess-like imagery in the style of Donne, to label the woman a "Deity" (line 5) and a "Household God" (line 6). She communicates to the reader that she does not need to be constrained by marriage, perhaps hoping to persuade the reader not to 'abandon' her, as she felt Anne Owen had done. Philips was apparently "crushed by the marriage"³⁷ of Owen as she not only married someone Philips disliked but also moved away from Philips and her coterie to Ireland. Mermin claims that in some of Philips' poetry we see, "her most important usurpation of male poetic privilege – she initiates both speech and desire"³⁸. Philips addresses the intended recipient as if Philips is a man scorned. Her poem proceeds to change on a volta,

³³Katherine Philips, 'A Married State', in *Kissing the Rod: an anthology of seventeenth-century women's verse*, ed. by Germaine Greer et al. (London: Virago Press, 1988), p. 189.

³⁴ Limbert, p. 29.

³⁵ Mintz, p. 62.

³⁶ Philips, p. 594.

³⁷ Tate, p. 8.

³⁸ Mermin, p. 342.

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now directly addressing the woman of whom she spoke so fondly in the octet, now using imagery to tell her that the speaker believes the sun's "beams confine/ In complement to you" thereby indicating the loftiness of the women's attributes, without being overshadowed by the sun, who is personified as a man.

Philips abandons many of these elaborate conceits for a more direct tone when she tackles the idea of betrayal within her coterie. In the instance of Regina Collier, who was once Philips' friend, she directly criticises her former ally, not even giving her a pseudonym when one had been allocated to the 'victim' John Jefferies, also part of her coterie. Pseudonyms were a rite of passage in Philips' 'society of friendship' and indeed when "members were initiated"³⁹ they were allowed to choose their pseudonym. In her poem 'To Regina Collier, on her Cruelty to Philaster'⁴⁰ Philips criticises Regina by name, which would have publicly embarrassed her upon publication, unintended or not. Tate claims that Philips is "chastising her for her cruelty in spurning Philaster"⁴¹. Philips subsequently labels her a "Triumphant Queen of Scorn!" (line 1). Her imagery alludes to what she perceives as Regina's contemptuous personality, criticising her for rejecting Jeffries. Regina's betrayal by spurning a member of Philips' friendship coterie was unforgivable. Philips further attacks her in 'To the Queen on Inconstancy, Regina Collier, in Antwerp'⁴² when Regina cemented her fate by moving away from Philips to Antwerp after the death of her first husband and baby⁴³. Patrick Thomas claims Philips had a "deluded belief of the unanimity between friends"⁴⁴, which is evident in Philips' lambasting of Regina: by going against Philips' wishes, Collier is branded "unworthy" (line 1) of her friendship as "of which our Faith thou hast betray'd" (line 8) and further lists her other 'sins' – "Idolators" (line 9) and "Treacheries" (line 7). Philips clearly wants a sense of control over her life and when she lost that control over relationships within her coterie, her poetry reflects her strength of feeling.

It is evident through her language and form that Philips intended to express her views and emotions through the vessel of poetry to her trusted coterie. She craved control in her life – control over who received her work, control over her and perhaps her friends' opinions, control over her own friendships and perhaps some control and influence over others' political beliefs. Either way, her coterie was the only platform in which Philips, as a woman, would have been able to express her views and criticisms without experiencing immense scrutiny. To maintain that platform and protect herself and her reputation, she had to secure her relationships with such members. Whether she hoped to extend her network further through the accidental publication of her work is open to discussion as her sentiments on politics and society were strongly rooted. Nevertheless, the tone chosen, conceits adapted and personal tailoring that went into her work suggest that the intended audience was, above all, the trusted and esteemed audiences in her coterie.

³⁹ Tate, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Philips, p. 539.

⁴¹ Tate, p. 112.

⁴² Philips, p. 537.

⁴³ Ellen Moody, *Orinda, Rosania, Lucasia et aliae: Towards a New Edition of the Works of Katherine Philips* (2003) < <http://www.jimandellen.org/orinda.ordering.poems.html>> [accessed 1 March 2023].

⁴⁴ *The Collected Works of Katherine Philips, The Matchless Orinda*, ed. by Patrick Thomas, 2 vols (Essex: Stump Cross Books, 1990), I, p. 12.

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