Chapter 3

The Knowing Few: Katherine Philips and the Courtly Coterie

John Berkenhead, writing in 1651 on the Royalist divine and playwright William Cartwright, makes Cartwright’s wit the “blood of verse,” which “like a German Prince’s title, runs / Both to thy eldest and to all thy Sons” (“In Memory” [B1]). Berkenhead’s fantasy of the dissolution of primogeniture into a leveled fraternity of Royalist poets seems to exclude women, yet the multi-authored collection of prefatorial poems in which his elegy appears did include one woman writer: Katherine Philips. Philips’s poem to Cartwright, her first published poem, promoted her as a pivotal figure for a group of Royalist writers, many of whom had been expelled from Oxford University by a Parliamentary commission in 1647. Indeed, Philips’s published and manuscript poetry of this period figures her as a proxy poet who substitutes for decentered royal power and panegyric by helping to forge this group into a paradoxically elitist counterpublic. Ironically, given Philips’s own Royalism, it is this very decentering that sanctions the emergence of the nonaristocratic woman writer as a privileged member of the group. From within the exclusivity of the post-courtly coterie, Philips and her interlocutors imagine a thriving public culture of Royalist opposition that hinges on the figure of a woman writer.

Philips’s example indicates that the upheavals of the Revolutionary Period enable even Royalist women to participate in the creation of counterpublics, which, while they are always politically oppositional, need not always be “virtuous,” as Nancy Fraser puts it, but can be
both “antidemocratic and antiegalitarian” (“Rethinking” 124). Philips marks off Royalists from the wider public through the circulation of discourses of commendation and love, creating a community she refers to as “the knowing few,” defined by its elitism in terms of political commitments, aesthetic tastes, and status. Countering radical and republican visions of political culture, these knowing few both hold themselves apart from public debate and offer themselves as an oppositional corrective to Parliamentary power, addressing and even attempting to assimilate a broader readership into their homogenous and hierarchical vision of Royalist culture. As Philips wrote from Wales, at a distance from many of her interlocutors, she used coterie exchange to unite a scattered group.¹ The poetry of Philips and her fellows presents itself as simultaneously exclusive and potentially infinite, the private coterie of like-minded “friends” functioning metonymically as a part that aims to reform and ultimately replace an expansive and volatile public whole.

This public includes readers and writers scattered throughout the British Isles, and Philips’s position within it changes with the fortunes of the monarchy she supports. As a number of commentators have noted, Philips experienced what one critic has called an “apotheosis” at the Restoration of monarchy in 1660 (Beal, In Praise of Scribes 147). Unlike Wight and Leigh, therefore, Philips moves from counterpublic to dominant public toward the end of her career, as her fame grows after the reestablishment of royal power. Her example suggests the relational nature of public identities in such a turbulent period: conflicts between competing communities led to the emergence of new cultures of political and literary dominance and opposition that were mutually defined in shifting and asymmetrical relations of power. In Philips’s case, however, this newfound literary dominance occurred not in a smooth trajectory from the political margins of Britain to the center but via the geopolitically distant viceregal court of Dublin, where Philips translated, staged, and published Pierre Corneille’s neoclassical tragedy, La Morte de Pompée, in 1663. Dublin was particularly significant to Philips’s career as a place from which she supplemented her continued coterie practices of manuscript circulation with the public performance and printing of her play, and, in doing so, facilitated an expanded version of the elitist circle of the knowing few she had already established during the 1650s in England and Wales. If Philips’s career begins by uniting Royalists displaced politically by military defeat, therefore, it ends by forging links between supporters of the monarchical Restoration displaced geographically by their location in the neighboring kingdom of Ireland. Her writings of the Restoration...