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Book Review

Herbert, Amanda E. *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$55.00.

Claiming “[t]o study female alliances is to learn about constructions of identity, nationality, and gender” (2), Amanda E. Herbert opens *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* by arguing that historians of early modern Britain have failed to attend to “the construction and maintenance of early modern women’s social networks” (1). To remedy this gap in scholarship, her book focuses on the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, covering the British empire from England, to America, to the travels of both Quaker missionaries and elite households. Relying on a vast array of manuscripts, published texts, and material artifacts, Herbert’s careful analysis embraces less well-known sources, such as household inventories, alongside already familiar ones, such as prescriptive literature and recipe books. In these, she finds evidence of the scope of women’s alliances in early modern Britain. She grounds her work theoretically by positioning herself in relation to Sarah Lucia Hoagland’s concept of *autokeonomy*, or “the self in community” (as

expressed in Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value*), and Nancy Chodorow's "ideas of a self that is in opposition to a bounded, masculinized conception of identity" (12-13). Thus, Herbert attends not only to direct accounts of friendships, but also to women's narratives of self that reflect their internalization of commonly-held beliefs about their sociability. While her fourth and fifth chapters on spa cities and Quaker women are based on articles previously published in the *Journal of Social Studies* and *Early American Studies*, much of the book is new, and as a cohesive whole it presents a daunting and impressive examination of primary source evidence of early modern women's alliances and attitudes toward alliance.

In her first chapter, Herbert lays a strong foundation for the book as she identifies the language early modern women used to express friendship and traces it to five discursive traditions: "classical and neoclassical descriptions and definitions of friendship"; religious, medical, and epistolary texts; and prescriptive literature. In her second chapter, Herbert focuses on gift-giving as a gendered practice with important social ramifications, examining four representative items—marmalade, perfume, embroidery, and portraiture—to explore the realm of women's artisan gift-giving. Crucially, gift-giving had inherent meaning in relation to class. Sugar, for example, was so expensive that the traditional ratio of one pound of sugar to one pound of fruit meant that only wealthy women could make marmalades, jams, and other preserves as gifts. In the case of perfume and embroidery, to create one's own meant to imitate and reappropriate the luxury items being imported from the far reaches of the British empire. Thus, giving highly valuable gifts was a way of making materially evident female alliances and granting them economic and political weight.

In her third chapter, Herbert takes up women's domestic labor, in three specific spaces: kitchen, bedchamber or closet, and "domestic exterior," consisting of gardens, yards, and dairies. Consulting the household inventories of several elite women, she finds evidence of tools and materials associated with labor and production in each of these spaces (cooking, childcare, gardening, churning butter, brewing beer), and narrative clues that suggest this labor was undertaken communally by women in the household. This is further upheld by her analysis of several fascinating frontispieces and engravings from prescriptive literature, illustrating women of different classes working together in kitchens, bedchambers, gardens, and dairies.

In the next two chapters, Herbert turns from women's domestic alliances to female alliance in the urban context of spa cities and female Quaker traveling ministers' alliances. Chapter four is one of the book's most interesting contributions, as scholarship on spa cities has tended to focus on the Georgian and later periods. Referencing correspondence, diaries, and household account books, Herbert uncovers evidence of early modern women's same-sex socializing at the spas, their communal endeavors in childcare and healthcare while visiting these sites, and their production and exchange of small gifts. Chapter five explores the wealth of writing by female Quakers, emphasizing how female Public Friends or traveling preachers relied upon the support of female traveling companions to share the burdens of travel, ministry, and the difficulties encountered by the traveling ministers in foreign cultures and unfriendly lands, from verbal abuse, to imprisonment. These women, referred to as "yokemates," were an essential element of the Public Friends' lives.

In her final chapter, Herbert examines the diaries of Sarah Henry Savage, a Nonconformist woman who lived in Northern England and Wales. Savage falls outside the

normal population of women who engaged in female alliances in early modern Britain, but Herbert is quick to point out that this ostracism helps explain why female alliances were so important to her: in forging strong relationships with women around her, both within and outside of her own religious community, Savage could protect herself against hatred and suspicion and strengthen her place in society. Savage sought out alliances with women based on her religious faith—traveling to sermons with other women and discussing religious literature. While Savage objected to many of the traditional modes of female alliance, disliking idle talk and the exchange of expensive gifts, Herbert argues that her criticism “reinforced the normativity of these practices as they were experienced by most early modern British women.” (193).

At times, I felt Herbert’s analysis fell short of a full payoff. For example, early on in the book Herbert states “women often created and maintained their alliances by writing of and also by performing acts of weeping and crying” (35). However, Herbert does not further pursue her salient observation that, while medical texts expressed an expectation that women be emotional, philosophical texts cautioned women from overly indulging in weeping because it would weaken them, while simultaneously encouraging men to weep openly and freely (36-37). This double standard—to caution women against an expected behavior while urging men toward it—seems very important given that the behavior in question, weeping, was meant to strengthen alliance. Could this be read as an attempt to curtail overly demonstrative alliance among women? Or to appropriate this means of expression for men? It would be good to see Herbert comment further on this.

And yet, the book was full of fascinating discoveries and excellent takeaways, such as Herbert’s insightful tracing, across multiple editions of guidebooks and handbooks, of specific

illustrations depicting women communally engaging in domestic labor. Likewise, the chapter on spa cities is particularly enlightening as it focuses on a familiar site—Bath—but in an unfamiliar context. Referencing a 1675 engraving of the city by Thomas Johnson, Herbert supports her claims with excellent visual and textual evidence, even unearthing population and business owner data to suggest that Bath had an unusually large and active female population in residence.

The book closes with a brief but effective epilogue which restates the main concerns of the volume and supports Herbert's claims with one final, curious piece of evidence—a fiction written by one friend for another, imagining a magical image of all her female friends gathered together. On the whole, it's a meticulously gathered collection of evidence of early modern female sociability. The book's scope alone is impressive, but more than this is Herbert's attention to nuance, her detailed exploration of small, rich details, and her constant awareness of the limits of her source material. *Female Alliances* is a rigorous and admirable charting of the complex landscape of early modern British women's alliances.

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