



# Female Alliances

# Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain



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### Female Alliances

For my brother

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# Female Alliances

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### Introduction

Writing to her son's tutor in the 1670s, Mary Evelyn summarized the duties that were expected of elite women. These included "the care of children's education, observing a husband's commands, assisting the sick, relieving the poor, and being serviceable to our friends." Historians have long recognized the importance of early modern women's responsibilities to their husbands, to their children, and to society's sick and poor through philanthropy. Yet they have seriously neglected Evelyn's fifth topic, the construction and maintenance of early modern women's social networks, and have largely ignored early modern women's relationships with other women. In this period, many women lived in largely "homosocial" worlds, surrounded by female relatives, children, and friends. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British women, especially elite women who lived at this place and time, prayed, ate, worked, learned, read, recreated, and slept in the company of other women. Revealing and understanding these same-sex experiences and alliances are critical tasks for scholars of early modern Britain.

Using an extensive range of sources produced both by and for women, this book examines women's social networks in early modern Britain. Female friendships and alliances were expressed in many ways, and the sources explored in this book reflect the variety and complexity of these relationships. Women's alliances were inscribed into letters and literature, and the sources studied here include every genre of early modern women's manuscript writing: correspondence, household accounts and recipe books, autobiographies, spiritual journals, personal diaries, and literary compositions. And material culture informed and expressed women's friendships, for

exchanges of objects such as pieces of embroidery, portraits, sugared confections, and homemade medicines referenced feminine skills and methods of personal cultivation while simultaneously conveying emotion and building feelings of friendship. The creation and exchange of these objects, many of which were made by hand, are therefore critical to this story. Female alliances were constructed within specific environments, in spaces that were claimed by or relegated to women: household kitchens and dairies, hot spring spas, crowded ships' cabins, religious meetings, and even prison cells, and so all of these spaces will be considered in this book. Women's gendered spaces ranged from the very small—the inside of bedchambers and household work spaces—to the very large—across the streets and buildings of cities. Alliances were also formed through missionary work and through emigration, as women traversed Britain's first empire. The many methods by which women formed social networks often allowed them the textual or artistic or spatial room in which to further female education and knowledge, celebrate women's skills, and gain financial and social advantage. Female alliances not merely provided solidarity and support but also frequently offered other tangible advantages to many early modern British women.

To study female alliances is to learn about constructions of identity, nationality, and gender. In its examination of women's social networks, Female Alliances explores central elements of the origins of modern femininity. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prescriptive guidebooks for women helped to structure and inform elite female behavior by articulating the characteristics of an ideal woman. By the later seventeenth century this genre of literature had been reconceived and had expanded rapidly. The genre encouraged female readers to display qualities such as love, care, compassion, and empathy. Reacting to these printed texts, many early modern British women utilized alliances in actions and performances of their feminine concord and love. This is not to say that early modern women's bonds were formed naturally, instinctively, or easily. Although same-sex friendships were considered essential to female life, women often struggled to maintain harmonious relationships with their female companions. This book discusses some evidence of times when alliances broke down, when women expressed rivalries or staged fights, and explores on occasion how women negotiated differences. But, overwhelmingly, the many forms of writing and handicraft observed in this book describe and reflect female alliances as positive, mutually supportive, and friendly. Powerful social norms bound early modern elite women together.

Female Alliances begins to help us to develop a more nuanced account of modern understandings of British identity. It focuses on the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth, a period when traditional systems of British governance were being challenged, and a period marked by heightened maritime communication and commerce across Britain's first empires. This expansion forced Britain's boundaries outward and, as women and men traveled more widely and frequently, scattered Britons themselves abroad. In the face of these changes, social cohesiveness was maintained by cultivating interpersonal ties, emotional friendships, and individual connections. In ways that have not been adequately appreciated or studied, however, women were tightly implicated in the process of forming and maintaining friendships and familial connections abroad as well as at home and thus in building Britain's first empire. This book includes evidence about a range of domestic and urban spaces, and it analyzes sources not merely from England, Scotland, and Wales but also from British colonies in Ireland, America, and the West Indies. It reveals the importance and durability of female friendship in many diverse spaces and geographies of early modern Britain.

#### The History of Studying Female Alliances

Scholarly study of early modern European women's communities took new directions in the late 1960s, when feminist scholars sought to establish the existence of unified female communities in the past. Historical topics such as the imagined "paradise of women," the *Querelle des Femmes*, and salon culture inspired these feminist historians to seek out and analyze women's cultures, identifying female homosociability in everything from the works of Christine de Pizan and her *Book of the City of Ladies* in the thirteenth century to the literary debates of *salonnières* in the eighteenth. Many of these early works on women's communities sought to show that early modern women lived in supportive, mutually beneficial communities, in which, rather like these feminist scholars themselves, protofeminists bound themselves together in displays of agency and resistance. In the 1980s, in her pathbreaking work *Women, History and Theory*, the Renaissance scholar and feminist historian Joan Kelly tied the modern feminist movement directly to the communal efforts of women in early modern Europe:

All feminist work emerges out of the spirit and reality of collectivity. Mine has. When women are scattered and cannot work together, a condition that originated in the early modern state, women suffer a loss in position and in the possibility of feminist expression. When some connection among women exists, even if it is only a literary one (as it was among the participants in the *querelle des femmes*), it creates an impressive tradition of feminist thinking. . . . [I]t is fair to call this long line of pro-women writers that runs from Christine de Pizan to Mary Wollstonecraft by the name we use for their nineteenth- and twentieth-century descendents.<sup>4</sup>

For Kelly and other feminist historians, early modern European women's homosociality provided evidence of a rediscovered, proud, and empowering history of women's collective action.

But an important correction to this cooperative, rosy vision of women's communities began to surface in the 1990s, when a further generation of scholars sought to historicize, dehomogenize, and complicate the idea of early modern women's culture. These authors have shown convincingly that salient disparities in social status, race, nationality, employment, education, and religion divided many early modern women. They have argued that these critical differences influenced many early modern women's relationships; that not all interactions between women were harmonious; and that many female-female interactions were marked by acrimony. These historians have shown that early modern women fought with one another, slandered and censured the behavior of their female associates, and evaluated and criticized the bodies and moral characters of the women who surrounded them. In her book Common Bodies (2003) Laura Gowing argues convincingly that early modern Britain "was not a world in which all-female environments were necessarily associated with support and validation."6 Gowing is unquestionably correct. But, as the letter by Mary Evelyn quoted above illustrates, female alliances were considered by many early modern women themselves to be an essential component of their lives, and these relationships were often described as beneficial, mutually supportive, and positive. How do we reconcile these findings? Kelly and her colleagues certainly offered views of women's communities which were unduly optimistic; but to understate the importance of positive female alliances would be to ignore the very many attempts these early modern women themselves made to forge positive bonds with other women. And it may well be the case that female alliances and friendships were all the more necessary amidst the other forms of acrimony and contestation, including those among women, that were so present in early modern Britain.

It is time to analyze the evidence of early modern European women's friendships and alliances. While men's social networks have been the subject of many studies, too little work has been done in exploring the facets of female sociability in early modern Britain and its colonies.7 Some historians, among them Amy Froide, Naomi Tadmor, and Karin Wulf, have established the importance of women's communication networks in this period by breaking away from older scholarship that privileged the strictly conjugal or nuclear definition of family, but their valuable studies have not made homosociability a central focus.8 Others, including Alan Bray, Valerie Traub, and Hariette Andreadis, have attempted to trace women's methods of identity creation through analysis of homoeroticism and homosexuality in Britain and colonial British America. These works, typically in the field of literary criticism, help to establish the presence of vibrant same-sex cultures in the past, and the authors introduce crucial methods of interrogating and listening to sources. But these scholars tend to focus on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when overt expressions of love, sensibility, and emotion were common in both public and private writing, and they concentrate very heavily on literary texts and representations of friendship rather than on the data of historical evidence.9 There has been some good preliminary work on women's alliances themselves in collections of essays by a diverse group of literary critics, dramatists, historians, and women's studies scholars, but no focused monographic work on female alliances has hitherto been attempted.10

These books and articles have helped to clear the ground for the study of female alliances and friendships in early modern Britain, and they represent various essays into the territory itself. But this topic calls for a work that has as its central concern the range and meaning of female alliances in Britain in the early modern period." That is the purpose of my book. *Female Alliances* examines women's social networks in early modern Britain and its colonies. Study of these female communities is critical to our understanding of early modern history. This book seeks to recover historical evidence of women's relationships, especially in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and especially (but not exclusively) of elite women. In the chapters that follow I will explore hundreds of examples of the letters, social activities, labors, and gifts and services that bound early modern women together. In so doing, I will inquire into the many ways early modern women

thought and wrote about their alliances, and I will show that prescriptive literature helped to shape early modern ideas about gender identity, nationality, sociability, and politeness.

#### Subjects and Sources

What were the female subjects of this book like? and how did they live? The majority of women featured in this project possessed education, wealth, and privilege. Most could read and write, and many had received training in foreign languages, usually French or Italian, dancing, the playing of musical instruments, and singing. They generally lived in large houses in respectable urban neighborhoods or on prosperous rural estates and were responsible for the maintenance of these buildings and for the hiring and management of the staff who worked in them. They often wore expensive clothing made of silk, linen, and fur, and they wore shoes. They usually ate well; they could afford to either cultivate or purchase exotic fruits and vegetables, and they wrote of enjoying salmon, venison, and partridge, foods which, in the seventeenth century and early eighteenth, generally were reserved for people of high social status. They labored extensively without pay in such employments as the care and education of children, sewing and embroidery, tending the sick and manufacturing medicines, managing household staff, preserving and candying fruits, and cultivating herbs and vegetables. Several of the women whose lives are depicted in the book possessed hereditary titles, and some of them would even have been familiar with the rituals of court required for audience with or attendance on the monarch. But only a very few were of the high rank required for close or constant proximity to queens and kings. As Amanda Vickery has described the subjects of her book on eighteenthcentury Georgian women, "As a group they defined themselves as 'polite,' 'civil,' 'genteel,' 'well-bred' and 'polished' . . . their possessions were contrived to have a genteel effect, rather than a dazzling elegance, and their entertainments aimed at generous liberality not sumptuous magnificence . . . while polite manners could be practiced at lower social depths and amplified at greater heights, this label captures the moderate social eminence I wish to convey, combined with an emphasis on outward behaviour, while not prejudging an individual's source of income."12

Although the subjects of this book lived one hundred years earlier than Vickery's Georgian women, they too sought to attain "moderate social