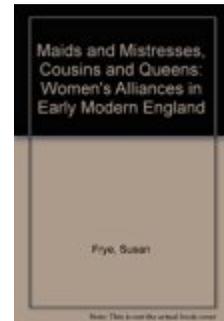


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Frye, Karen Robertson, eds. *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xviii + 350 pp. \$53.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-511735-6; \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511734-9.

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A New Frontier in Women's History:

In the last two decades, literary critics as well as historians have produced a great deal of scholarship on early modern Englishwomen.[1] Scholars have focused on women's writing, work, religious experiences, and involvement in the early modern political world. Nevertheless, relatively little has been written about early modern women's alliances.[2] Thus, *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens* is a particularly welcome addition to the growing body of work devoted to early modern women. As the book's editors, Susan Frye and Karen Robertson, point out in the introduction of the volume, the lack of attention paid to women's relationships is largely a result of their informal nature. While men took part in formal and thus more visible alliances such as guilds, universities, and governmental assemblies, women's alliances were less institutionalized and thus more difficult to trace. Despite this obstacle, the various authors of *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* have been able to unearth an impressive number of women's alliances.

Although most of the volume's contributors are literary critics rather than historians, many of the female alliances they document were comprised of historical women. For example, Elizabeth A. Brown analyzes the relationship of Queen Elizabeth I with her female attendants, and Karen Robertson documents the links between Elizabeth Throckmorton and her female relatives and political allies. Susan Frye details the ties which Elizabeth Tudor, Mary Stuart, and Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury created with each other through their needlework,

whereas Lowell Gallagher examines the nature of Mary Ward's controversial female religious community. Other contributors to the volume concentrate on female alliances in literature. Helen Ostovich scrutinizes the relationships among the female characters in *The Magnetic Lady*, while Simon Morgan-Russell delineates the alliance that the London wives create in *Westward Ho*. Various contributors also discuss the relationships between female authors and their female subjects, as well as the alliances which writers formed with women at large. Lisa Gim illuminates the rhetorical alliance that Bathusa Makin and Diana Primrose formed with Elizabeth Tudor, and Valerie Wayne uncovers the process by which the anonymous author of *Swetman the Woman-Hater* "did the work of a woman's ally" (p. 237).

Some of the most interesting essays in the book blur the line between historical women's alliances and purely literary ones. For instance, Ann Rosalind Jones's contribution on maidservants not only treats Isabel Whitney's poem *A Modest Means for Maids* as a literary creation, but also deals with Whitney as a woman who worked as a maidservant in London and then wrote about her experience. Thus, Jones is able to examine *A Modest Means for Maids* not only as a literary "text" but also as a historical document. Jodi Mikalachki's essay centers on a vagrant named Alice Balstone who accused her former master of impregnating her. A great deal of evidence on which Balstone's story is based is her testimony before the Dorchester justices. Intriguingly, the language of one of Alice Balstone's depositions bears striking similarities to the

“canting” literature of the period which describes a mysterious vagrant underworld. Mikalachki uses Balstone’s deposition to challenge historians who argue that canting literature was patently fictional and bore little resemblance to the realities that early modern vagrants faced. While Mikalachki raises the question as to whether Balstone shaped her testimony in order to fit what her deponents wished to hear, she maintains that historians have too hastily dismissed works such as Thomas Harman’s “A Caveat, or Warning for Common Cursitors” as purely literary sources. Mikalachki points out that Thomas Harman was a Justice of the Peace who claimed to have interviewed over one hundred vagrants for his work, and yet his “Caveat” is regarded as literary and thus fictional (and hence less valid), while Alice Balstone’s deposition, which was written years after Harman’s “Caveat” and seems to be based on it, is regarded as a historical (and thus somehow a more valid) document. Mikalachki employs rich irony to expose the process by which historians label documents such as Balstone’s deposition as historical evidence, while classifying works such as Harman’s “Caveat” as literary and fictional, rather than historical.

All of the critics in this volume who examine literary works apply historical analysis to their literary endeavors. Many do so with great skill and attention to historical detail. This should silence those critics who complain that historicist literary critics are not “historicist” enough. It is clear that the contributors are quite familiar with the latest historiographical developments in women’s history as well as cultural, political, and social history. Moreover, the essayists in this volume utilize a variety of (mostly printed) primary sources to develop their arguments. Poems and plays are analyzed alongside government documents, ecclesiastical records, wills, diaries, personal letters, conduct books, and even textiles such as needlework. For example, by using Chester Corporation records, Mary Wack is able to ground her analysis of the female characters of the Chester mystery cycle plays in the contemporary politics of the town. Wack begins by considering two seemingly strange and anachronistic scenes taken from the Chester plays: the scene from the Noah play in which Noah’s wife and her gossips sing a drinking song, and the scene in which in a female tapster admits to the adulteration of drink in the Harrowing of Hell play. Both of these scenes were probably added quite late to the Chester mystery cycle and have been dismissed by other critics as belated additions which corrupt the integrity of the plays. For Wack, these scenes become an opportunity to investigate the way in

which the women of Chester would have viewed these scenes. Wack shows that a series of laws were passed in sixteenth-century Chester which restricted women’s access to both female sociability and to job opportunities. In the 1530s, the Corporation of Chester passed a law which prevented women from holding childbirth and churching ceremonies (which usually involved “gossiping,” and drinking.) Three decades later a new statute prohibited women aged fourteen to forty from working as tapsters (that is, from serving alcoholic drink). Wack skillfully links the enactment and enforcement of these statutes to the “anachronistic” scenes in the Chester mystery cycle, making it possible for us to “read” these scenes in ways its female audience members may have viewed them.

Other intriguing essays in this volume question commonly held assumptions about race and sexual orientation. Jessica Tvordi examines Celia’s erotic protestations of love for Rosalind in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, as well as the possibility of Maria’s romantic attachment to Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Harriette Andreadis examines the amorous language which women used to address other women in their poetry, demonstrating that this erotic discourse became more veiled after the English Restoration. Barbara Bowen examines how the poet Aemeilia Lanyer, daughter of an Italian Jewish musician, constructed herself as a dark “Other,” who stood outside the community of white womanhood. Margo Hendricks suggests that Aphra Behn may have had a black African grandmother, and that Behn’s racial identity may have influenced her writings such as *Oroonoko*. The value of these essays is not that they “prove” that Aphra Behn was black, or that Shakespeare wrote about lesbians in the sense that we use the term today, but rather to demonstrate that our perceptions of “early modern Englishwomen” remain too rigid. While academics and their students may no longer envision “early modern women” as an unchanging coterie of countesses clad in farthingales, we still tend to view such early modern Englishwomen as universally white and unwaveringly heterosexual. Critics like Tvordi, Andreadis, Bowen, and Hendricks reveal such assumptions to be false as they expose the fluctuating, culturally constructed nature of categories of race and sexuality.

As the contributors in this volume deconstruct the category of “women,” they focus on how race, status, and position divided women from one another and led to the formation of female alliances directed against other women. For example, Mary Wack recounts how Alice Baltone, while under arrest, was forced by the prison

midwife and a fellow female prisoner to name the father of her unborn child. Otherwise, the midwife threatened, Balstone would receive no help during her delivery. Ann Rosiland Jones reveals that the female maidservants who wrote "A Letter Sent by the Maydens of London," threatened to quit their jobs and move to the country if their mistresses would not treat them fairly.[3] Kathleen M. Brown details how three plantation workers in Virginia, an unnamed Indian servant, Betty Mazey, a white servant, and Mary, a black slave, formed an alliance against their plantation mistress, Anne Tayloe, when Mary discovered Tayloe apparently trying to discard the body of a dead infant. In all three cases women were divided by differences in status and position. Balstone, a woman who stood at the very bottom of the social scale, was set upon by a midwife, a woman of the middling sort with the authority to seek out the names of the fathers of babies born out of wedlock.[4] The authors of "A Letter Sent by the Maydens of London" and their mistresses were divided by rank as well as by their roles of employer and employee. Likewise, Anne Tayloe was divided from her servants by both social status and her position as the owner of the plantation. The servants themselves, however, were also divided by their positions in the plantation hierarchy. Significantly, when Mary discovered Tayloe attempting to dispose of the dead baby, she did not confront Tayloe directly, but she and the Indian woman turned to Betty Mazey, the free white servant, to do so. It was necessary for Mary to form an alliance across racial lines because Mary's race and slave status left her with no right to speak out against her mistress. Thus, the essays in this volume repeatedly emphasize that race, status, and position, as well as gender, defined women and dictated the shape of their alliances.

Jean E. Howard ends the volume with what may be read as a literary critic's challenge to historians. Howard's notes that historicist literary critics eagerly read the work of historians, and laments that historians do not read the work of literary critics to the same extent. She wonders, in fact, if historians will actually read *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens*. Howard is probably overly pessimistic (and a bit conservative in her estimate of historians' interest in literary criticism). This book covers an extremely important topic, and early modern historians of women undoubtedly will read this book. They, as well as other scholars outside the field of literary criticism, will find the essays insightful and thankfully free of jargon. This book will provide its readers from all disciplines with ideas which will prove useful in their own work. It should also be helpful in stimulating

discussions in upper level undergraduate as well as graduate courses. *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* is recommended for anyone interested in early modern women and their relationships.

Notes

[1]. A list of the recent scholarship on early modern women would take up a copious amount of space. The following works, however, are particularly valuable and helpful for students and scholars of early modern women. They also boast extremely useful bibliographies: Margaret Hannay, ed., *Silent But For the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writer of Religious Works* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985); Richard L. Greaves, ed., *Triumph over Silence: Women in Protestant History* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1985); Jean R. Brink, et. al., eds., *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1989); Merry Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Amy Louise Erikson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Betty F. Travitsky and Adele F. Seeff., eds., *Attending to Women in Early Modern England* (Newark, N.J.: University of Delaware Press, 1994); Anne Lawrence, *Women in England, 1500-1760: A Social History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1994); and Sara Medelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[2]. A few works dealing with early modern women's alliances have been published, including Ralph A. Houlbrooke, "Women's Social Life Common Action in England from the Fifteenth Century to the Eve of the Civil War," *Continuity and Change*, vol. 2 (1986), pp. 171-189; Barbara K. Lewalski, "Re-writing Patriarchy and Patronage: Margaret Clifford, Anne Clifford and Aemilia Lanyer," *Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 21 (1991), pp. 86-106; Patricia Higgins, "The Reactions of Women, with Special Reference to Women Petitioners," in *Politics, Religion, and the English Civil War*, ed. Brian Manning (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), pp. 178-222; and Patricia-Ann Lee, "Mistress Stagg's Petitioners: February 1642," *The Historian*, vol. 60 (1998), pp. 241-256.

[3]. Although other critics have argued that "A Letter Sent by the Maydens of London" was written by a man, Jones argues persuasively that it was written by female maidservants.

[4]. Local governmental officials used midwives to discover the names of men who fathered illegitimate children. It was often during the birth process, when the mother would be in maximum pain, that the midwife as well as the other women present (the other women sometimes being referred to as a “jury of matrons”) would pressure the mother to name the father. Later the mid-

wife and the women who attended the birth might be called to testify as to the identity of the father.

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