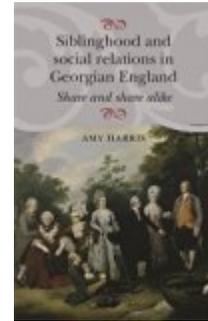


Amy Harris. *Siblinghood and Social Relations in Georgian England: Share and Share Alike*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. xiv. + 205 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8737-0.

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## Share and Share Alike: A Case for Sibling Equality in Georgian England

Amy Harris's new monograph, *Siblinghood and Social Relations in Georgian England*, proposes an important alternative to the understanding of social structure in early modern western Europe. Harris focuses on the academically neglected sibling relationship in the transitional period of eighteenth-century Britain. She identifies this period as "a transition phase to 'modern' families," when the concept of what constitutes a "family" shifted from including extended kin and household servants to the "exclusionary nuclear family" (p. 3). Siblinghood fits uneasily within this model of changing family structures, according to Harris, who makes a compelling case for a more nuanced approach to eighteenth-century family politics, economic exchange, and gender. Harris's central argument—built on an impressive array of epistolary correspondence, testaments, probate court records, contemporaneous prescriptive literature, and fiction—proposes that "horizontal" sibling relationships, which were increasingly shaped by legal and social expectations of equality and friendship, counterbalanced the "vertical" pressures of hierarchical inheritance practices and gender roles. Demonstrating that siblings maintained lifelong relationships—bridging both childhood and marital homes—which involved mutual affection and material support, Harris contends that Georgian sibling relationships are an important barometer of social change.

In the opening chapter, Harris introduces us to the characters of the landed, genteel Travell family: Anne,

Agnes, Frances, Francis, Ferdinando, and Catherine. These siblings, born between 1726 and 1748, preserved a trove of records: wills, diaries, account books, and copious letters exchanged among them. Their lives form the bedrock and the narrative of Harris's text; we follow them from their natal home through schooling, marriages, economic successes and failures, the birth of children, and the loss of loved ones. By focusing on the relationships among these siblings, cemented throughout their entire lifetimes by exchange of letters, visits, material gifts, and financial support, Harris foregrounds siblinghood as the longest-lasting interpersonal relationship in a person's life and a connection—with both economic and political implications—that was maintained even as individuals form other social and familial ties. In examining the richly documented life of Anne Travell, the longest-lived of the siblings, Harris highlights what we stand to gain through the study of siblings. "For Anne, a never-married woman, orphaned well before her thirtieth birthday, siblings were the cornerstone and foundation of her family and kin connections.... [I]f traditional, vertical, conjugal and parental approaches to family history are used to analyse Anne's life, she is reduced, at best, to a footnote in her parents' and married siblings' stories" (pp. 17-18). Instead, Harris's text centers Anne within broad-reaching lateral networks of siblings, cousins, and in-laws. Anne, in performing the duties of a record-keeper, accountant, and family historian, not to mention those of a loving sister and doting aunt, reveals herself to be a binding element within her family, who

richly contributed to her siblings' successes and the upbringing of their children. Harris is right to call attention to her presence in the Travell family story, and in doing so adds depth and nuance to our understanding of Georgian social structures.

Harris constructs her argument over the course of five substantial chapters, each of which opens with a different event in the life of a Travell family member, and proceeds through a torrent of supporting examples from the Travells' records, contemporaneous sources, and secondary literature. In chapters 1 and 2, "Learning to be a Sibling" and "The Ties that Bound," Harris emphasizes that, though people were born into sibling relationships, the expectations of this role were learned from parents, prescriptive literature, and even fiction, while the realities of the relationship were negotiated amongst siblings themselves. Importantly, she also demonstrates that the intimacy of the role, leading to expectations of mutual love, affection, and coequality, contrasted sharply with the gender and age hierarchies that surrounded them at birth. Although children were affected by adult attitudes toward gender and birth order, "Georgian siblings learned at an early age that not all hierarchies were straightforward" (p. 38). Sibling deaths, parental preferences, and, notably, inheritances from aunts and uncles—their parents' siblings—meant that children's positions relative to their own brothers and sisters could and did fluctuate, creating room for siblings to "experiment with convention and develop their own internal power arrangements." These mutual negotiations continued into adulthood, as siblings branched out into their marital households. Expectations of love and of fair and equal treatment among siblings persisted and were reinforced, even as education, careers, and marriage changed their social standings dramatically. Siblings went to great efforts to cement lateral ties by integrating brothers and sisters-in-law into their families and developing idiosyncratic patterns of exchanging letters, gifts, and visits among their households.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5—"Ties that Cut," "Sibling Economics," and "Sibling Politics," respectively—demonstrate the inherent tension between the expectations of love and filial equality and the realities of economic, gender, and political inequalities. In "Ties that Cut," Harris examines the differential distribution of wealth to children of the same parents through provisioning for education and inheritance. Although strict Georgian settlement laws treated siblings equally regardless of gender, the enduring custom of primogeniture and parental preference ensured that when a parent left a will, el-

der children received more material wealth than their younger siblings. Rivalries developed over these disparities, threatening the sibling bond. However, a survey of probate court cases in which heirs "thought their siblings' share or handling of their mutual inheritance had only 'the appearance of friendship' and none of its substance" suggests that increasingly siblings expected to be and legally were treated as equals (pp. 88-89). Harris argues in her third and fourth chapters that economic inequalities among adult siblings, combined with "expectations of equitable friendship" may actually have served to reinforce lateral bonds by intertwining siblings' financial stability with each others' educational, occupational, and marital successes (p. 103). Anne Travell, for instance, took part in the household management of several of her married siblings, even after she became an independent householder herself. Anne Travell's day-book records a constant exchange of economic support amongst her siblings, which included not only money but also material provisions and intangibles such as child-care, occupational assistance, educational provisioning, and even help in courtship. Ultimately, Harris's case for the profound complexity, and the emotional and financial interdependency, of Georgian sibling relationships demonstrates the importance of siblinghood as a vital source of social support in the increasingly liberal and individualistic context of eighteenth-century Britain.

However, Harris's study does not adequately address issues of class and gender, which are highly salient to her material. The book's central characters, for whom she has the most complete records, are all landowners and professionals; as a class they fall somewhere between the declining aristocracy of post-Restoration Britain, and the emerging middle class of the nineteenth century. Her thorough research includes statistics and case files from poor law and probate records from the Consistory Court of Gloucester, an ecclesiastical-legal court that dealt with disputes over personal property. These sources provide Harris with a sketch of the conflicts occurring between siblings of poor and laboring families; however, she works them into her chapters on sibling economics and sibling politics with little or no acknowledgement of how the experiences of these individuals differed substantially from the privileged lives of the Travells. Likewise, with the issue of gender, Harris argues that the feelings of attachment and filial equality among siblings served to level the relationships between brothers and sisters, and consequently that women held more political power within the extended family than we might otherwise assume. Her conclusions in this respect could

be more convincing if she spent a few pages clearly addressing the structural inequalities that Georgian women faced, such as lack of access to formal education, the inability to own land or to earn a living in any but the most gendered professions, and restrictive gender expectations for both men and women. Harris's fleeting discussion of gender and class suggests that such hierarchies are irrelevant to her account of sibling social structure. This does a disservice to the manifold forms of resistance, micro-powers, and autonomous actions to which women did have access and which do not receive adequate attention here.

Finally, Harris identifies herself in the preface "as a member of a religion that as a matter of practice and doctrine is based on a sibling model" (p. xi), yet for the remainder of the text the meaning of a "sibling model" of kinship goes unexplained. This is a feature of her writing overall: necessary definitions are absent, and major

contextualizing social conditions go unquestioned or unacknowledged. Readers must divine that a sibling model of kinship, following Harris's examples, is best explained as a form of "nurture kinship" in which siblinghood is an intimate, democratic state that cements horizontal ties through the performance of caring acts and is described with concepts of "love" and "friendship," while vertical ties are understood as bonds of duty, obligation, and deference (pp. 28 and 56-57). With that definition in mind, however, siblinghood is revealed to be a pivotal issue in the transition to modern nuclear family structures and a fruitful subject for further research. Scholars may find the argumentative merits of this text problematic, but they will certainly find the bibliography useful for its rich and relevant citations and omnibus approach to the experiences of Georgian siblings. Students will enjoy her use of humanizing personal histories and case studies as a pleasurable read.

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