‘TO MAKE FREQUENT ASSEMBLIES, ASSOCIATIONS, AND COMBINATIONS AMONGST OUR SEX’. NASCENT IDEAS OF FEMALE BONDING IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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In view of the numerous defences of women published throughout the seventeenth century in the context of the *querelle des femmes*, one might suppose the existence of female solidarity in early modern England. Women, so it seems, answered back. However, even where the defences are signed by female names, they are as a rule written by men. Attacking women and imagining their repartee was a rhetorical game popular with authors and readers. Only in one case are we sure that it was a woman who defended her sex, namely the nineteen-year-old Rachel Speght. Her pamphlet *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617) is the bold answer to Joseph Swetnam’s crude pamphlet *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women* (1615). Similarly, the numerous catalogues of great, worthy, learned and virtuous women produced on the feminist side of the so-called formal controversy suggest that the act, or at least the idea of women gathering together in the interests of their sex would have been familiar to seventeenth-century readers. Yet the roll-call of women, too, is an empty figure of speech, handed down from one (in most cases male) writer to another. As the deceitfulness of animals is again and again illustrated by the cockatrice, the serpent, the crocodile, the basilisk and the hyena, so the intellectual capacity of women is mechanically exemplified by Aspasia, Corinna, Deborah, Lady Jane Grey, Elizabeth I and others.

From a feminist point of view, the evidence is disappointing. Hopes are frustrated that women as such tend to bond with one another and women writers prefer to address readers of their own sex, sharing with them the pleasures of female togetherness and the security of female

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1 Gwynne Kennedy, in *Just Anger: Representing Women’s Anger in Early Modern England* (Carbondale: 2000) 35, reminds us of the unwelcome fact that Speght’s is the only defence known to be written by a woman.
solidarity. In fact, it would have been difficult for women writers, especially in the first decades of the century, to envision themselves as a separate group capable of collective measures of self-protection or revenge. According to the predominant sexual ideology, the ‘one-sex model’, excellent women were considered as ‘masculine’. As such, they were the rare exception, existing not in the plural but in the singular. At the beginning of the century only a very small portion, namely 0.8%, of all books published was written by female authors, the number rising to 11.1% toward the end of the century.  

Women who wrote were, first of all, members of the heterosocial community of a family and, sometimes, of the royal court. They considered themselves as belonging to the Sidneys, the Carys, the Cavendishes. Within patriarchal structures, women’s power was limited, although it could be quite strong within these limits. The ‘academy’ of Mary, Countess of Pembroke in Wiltshire, the circle of Lucy, Countess of Bedford in Twickenham, and, above all, the coterie of Queen Anne at the court of James I were important influences in cultural life. As Margaret Ezell has shown, the social impact of the ‘patriarch’s wife’ could be considerable. She might look to it that her daughters (as well as her sons) got an excellent education. Women in aristocratic families sometimes assembled large collections of books which were handed down in the female line. Upper-class women getting together with their needlework had books read to them for their entertainment. Thus we may assume that there was something like a female reading culture. However, aristocratic women writers, such as the Countess of Pembroke, Lady Elizabeth Cary and Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, did not join forces; they did not develop friendly relations with one another nor did they mention one another in the complimentary sections of their books. They referred rather to male members of their own families who had a reputation as an author. Female writers

7 Schleiner L., Tudor and Stuart Women Writers (Bloomington: 1994).