

THE GREAT DIVIDING LINE

...the first thing I noticed when I stepped out of the plane was a sense of freedom. It was as if I had been released from a long and weary journey. The air was fresh and clean, and the sun was shining brightly. I felt a sense of peace and tranquility that I had never experienced before. It was as if I had found a new world, a world where I could be myself and live my life to the fullest. I was free to go wherever I wanted, to do whatever I wanted, and to be whoever I wanted to be. It was a feeling of liberation that I had never known before.

As I walked through the airport, I felt a sense of purpose and direction. I knew that this was my chance to start over, to begin a new chapter in my life. I was going to make the most of this opportunity and live my life to the fullest. I was going to be happy and content, and I was going to love every moment of it. I was going to be free to go wherever I wanted, to do whatever I wanted, and to be whoever I wanted to be. It was a feeling of liberation that I had never known before.

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Few sources remain to tell us explicitly about women's relationships with friends, lovers, marriage partners, neighbours, and enemies. For literate women, the seventeenth century saw a rapid increase in letter and diary writing. Partly inspired by the encouragement Puritanism gave to self-reflection, the 1600s saw women beginning to write detailed spiritual and worldly diaries, commonplace books, and reflections. Some of the earliest women's writings we have are letters; by the seventeenth century many elite women were prolific correspondents, spreading news and passing messages up and down Britain, and sometimes across the world. Their letters are full of references to their roles as correspondents, complaints about the post, and messages or errands for distant acquaintances: letter writing positioned gentry women at the heart of a whole series of county and national networks.

Elite women had also a written language in which to express a wide range of emotions for their friends and families. Mothers and grandmothers wrote articulately and tenderly about their children and grandchildren. Friends and sisters-in-law expressed their depth of connection in an idiom of passionate love that could serve for both heterosexual love and female friendship. For early modern people, the words 'friend' and 'lover' might overlap in meaning: neither was exclusively sexual or non-sexual. This flexibility opened up a spectrum of intimacy that is further explored by Mary Beale's treatise on friendship, with a feminist slant and a plea for companionate marriage.

For non-literate women, we have much less evidence. We might speculate that, for them, friendship was based on proximity and need: it was neighbours who loaned food and money, watched children, and advised on love, pregnancy, and illness. Bequests in wills confirm the significance of those who were close by.¹ The practice of chain migration ensured that young women moving into a town were often welcomed and watched by old acquaintances from their birthplace. At the same time, kin from several counties away might remain significant figures, sending and receiving oral messages or gifts by friends. The everyday friendships of women were, like men's, based on proximity, functionality, and reciprocity. Rather than money, goods or services would be exchanged: cleaning, sewing, or knitting, nursing or helping at a lying-in were all services that one

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woman could offer or expect from another. Women's friendships may also have revolved around their own houses more than men's did: where men consolidated bonds by eating and drinking, women spent less time in alehouses and would have recognised different signs of friendship, such as visiting each other's houses, or talking 'as neighbours do' at the doorstep. Some spaces and rituals – the water conduit, the birthing-room – were specifically female.²

Particularly for non-elite women, the immediate family was likely to be small and depleted by the time of adolescence. Wills and other documents confirm the importance of siblings and step-siblings; high mortality and remarriage rates meant that many households and families included orphaned nieces and nephews, stepchildren and remarried parents. Outside the household, historians have also identified a wide range of 'kin': in many communities, it has been argued, geographical closeness was as significant as blood ties in determining a person's immediate support network. This was particularly so in the case of marriage, where 'friends' had a special meaning. It was friends whom women named as those responsible for overseeing their final marital decisions, helping them with their portions, seeing off unwelcome suitors, or welcoming suitable ones. To stress the term 'kin' rather than 'friendship', though, runs the risk of emphasising the functionality of such relationships at the expense of warmth of feeling, intimacy, and attachment.³ In the absence of detailed records of the emotional lives of non-elite women, we need to allow for complex, deep feelings in our readings of the limited documents we have.

In the close-knit communities of early modern society, enmity and anger were as powerful as friendship and attachment. Neighbourhood relations involved frequent disputes, some handled between individuals and families, others mediated by local magistrates, clergymen, or, eventually, the courts. The church courts were particularly important as a forum for cases of damaged reputation, and as such, they were used more by women than any other court.⁴

The parish church, where we start, was the stage for neighbourhood relations: women and men had their own seats and the gender and social organisation of the parish was made visible in seating arrangements.⁵

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8.1 Brawling pewmates: Elizabeth Fontstone and Joan Butcher, 1604

Like many disputes between women, this one took place in church, as two women sat in their pew. Joan, who is testifying, had known Elizabeth since her childhood; the two may have been much of an age as they ended up fighting over their daughters, and since they were pewmates they had probably been friends. Jostling for place in church, and fighting for seats in pews, where the order of seating was often firmly established by family, social position, and gender, were the sources of many neighbourhood disputes, particularly, apparently, amongst women.

Consistory Court of Bath and Wells Deposition Book, Somerset Archives, D/D/cd/34 (1604)



Figure 14 Two women talking

From the Pepys Ballads, vol III, no. 290. By permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge

An extremely rare woodcut image of two women. They may be wearing mantuas, are holding fans, and have elaborate head clothes. It is used here to illustrate 'Sweet-faced Jenny', a 'country lass' telling her mother of her plans to leave her spinning wheel for 'a more pleasant employment', prostitution.

[Joan Butcher, wife of John Butcher, smith, of Yeovil in Somerset, where she has lived for 7 years and where she was born, aged 28 or thereabouts . . .]

. . . She deposes that on a certain Sunday happening near about the beginning of Lent last past before . . . the above named Elizabeth Fontstone and this examinant being seat or pewmates in the parish church . . . and present in their seat hearing divine service the said Elizabeth Fontstone fell out with

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this examinant and brawled with her in the said seat saying, dost thou pull thy daughter over my daughter's back thou proud beggarly jade, pride will have a fall, and thy pride is falling already, and I hope to live to see thee pulled lower yet, go home jade, and pluck down thy pride, for it is for no devotion that thou comest to the church mistress turd pie. . . .

8.2 Ancient seating customs: Frances Brown and Elizabeth Clark, 1607

Testimonies in this pew dispute between two women in Allestree, Staffordshire, in 1607 reveal something of the construction of women's places in the community through seating arrangements in church. As in many parish churches, the parishioners of Allestree were accustomed to sit in ancestral seats, men on one side of the church and women on the other. But women, as the churchwarden testifying here reveals, do not sit in the seats of their ancestors, but those of their husbands, and this can produce a quite different sense of tradition and custom. So, here, the two wives of Robert Brown succeed one another in a seat on the women's side. The seating of women in church is thus both ostensibly rigid, and by its very nature subject to change; perhaps this different tradition can be traced in pew disputes between women. The relationships *between* women in various seats are also complex and not easy for everyone to remember: Elizabeth Clark, the grandmother of the husband of the Elizabeth fighting this suit, may have been yielded her place by the courtesy of her daughter, or she may have had it by right; Elizabeth also attempted to defend her use of the seat on the grounds that her husband paid twice as much towards church rates as Robert Brown. Frances won the suit in January 1608: Elizabeth may then have been assigned a penance.

Consistory Court of Coventry and Lichfield, Lichfield RO, B/C/5 1607.

[John Tailor of Allestree aged 60. . . .]

. . . he says there is an ancient and long continued custom observed and kept within the parish of Allestree articulate for every householder in the said parish to sit kneel and hear divine service in the parish church of Allestree aforesaid in the seat or pew there wherein his predecessor inhabitant in the said parish did usually sit and kneel, and saith this custom hath continued throughout the parish aforesaid for the space of forty years and upwards in this deponent's time of remembrance . . . all other inhabitants of Allestree articulate have rooms or pews in the church belonging to their houses and there do usually sit and kneel and have successively so done time beyond the memory of man if so they please. . . .

He says there is within the church of Allestree articulate a seat being the nethermost saving one on the south part of the middle aisle, in which seat the articulate Frances Brown hath possessed and enjoyed for a certain space until she was interrupted by Elizabeth Clark the defendant in this cause the next room or place saving one on the left hand towards the south And saith the same room or place did belong and appertain to Johane Browne and

Alice Browne the first and later wife of Robert Browne articulate in their times and there they did sit and kneel viz. the said Johane in the time of Queen Mary and the aforesaid Alice in all the late Queen Elizabeth's time without the disturbance or interruption of any other.

... He says the articulate Elizabeth Clarke hath divers times sithence Our Lady Day last past hindered the aforesaid Frances Browne so that she could not come to sit or kneel in her room or place aforesaid but hath been forced to kneel without her seat in the common aisle he knoweth it for he saith that he this deponent being one of the churchwardens of Allestree articulate hath observed so much and been present in the time aforesaid when as the aforesaid Elizabeth Clark hath in time of divine service sat in the place where the aforesaid Frances Browne and her predecessors have used to sit and caused the said Frances to look some other place to sit and kneel in. . . .

[Roger Mould, vicar of Allestree, aged 57 . . . testifying on the supplementary evidence of Elizabeth Clark against Frances Brown]

... He says that sithence the death of Margaret Smart which was about Candlemas last past to this deponent's now remembrance the articulate Elizabeth Clark hath used to kneel and sit most commonly in the uppermost room on the left hand in the seat in question whereby Frances Brown articulate hath not been hindered to go into her room in the said seat where she useth to sit being the second room on the left hand towards the middle aisle but hath had free liberty to come and go into her room without disturbance for aught that this deponent knoweth to the contrary. And further saith that he hath seen one Elizabeth Clark the grandmother of William Clark husband to the plaintiff in this cause in her time to sit and kneel in the uppermost room on the left hand next to the font in the aforesaid seat, but whether it were on the sufferance of Margaret Smart her daughter who might in courtesy yield her the highest room on the left hand or whether it were of right she there sat he knoweth not.

... He says the articulate Johane and Alice Browne were wives of Richard Brown and not of Robert Brown for the said Robert Brown had nor hath no other or more wives but Frances Brown his now wife.

8.3 Insults at the door: Mary Daintrey, Elizabeth Hulme, and Margaret Keeling, 1697

Insults between women and men were a stock part of the currency of neighbourhood dispute, and only occasionally ended up in lawsuits: they could be sued at the church courts on the grounds that they imputed sexual sins and hence damaged reputation. In such cases, both the words used and the circumstances in which they were spoken can be revealing. Here, as so often, the insulting words are exchanged at the entry of the house, on the doorstep, and in this case they led to

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two separate lawsuits, one between Mary Daintrey and Elizabeth Hulme, a neighbour, and one between Mary and Sophronia Daintrey, her husband's sister.

Consistory Court of Coventry and Lichfield, Lichfield RO, B/C/5 1697.

Mary Daintrey *v.* Elizabeth Hulme

Margaret Keeling [of Mayfield in the county of Stafford, spinster, aged 25, who has known the parties in the case for three years]

[To the second and third articles of the aforesaid libel she says and deposes] That this deponent having ever since Christmas last been as now she is domestic servant to Mary Daintrey, party agent in this cause and the said Elizabeth Hulme alias Homes having all the time aforesaid been domestic servant to Sophronia Daintrey wife of Thomas Daintrey (brother of the said Brian Daintrey the said Mary's husband) who with his wife and family have all the time dwelt in one end of the same house where the said Brian with his wife and family have all the time aforesaid lived in the other end of the said house being divided into two dwellings, this deponent knows that about March last to the best of her remembrance as to the time, a little girl that was with the said Sophronia at her house happening to be playing with this deponent's mistress's children at her mistress's house being hurt by some of the children fell a crying and thereupon the said Elizabeth Hulme coming for the child in a passion took the child away from among them and said, What canst expect amongst these whores and bastards? And after she had put the child into their own house the said Elizabeth came to the said Mary her door again and asked her the said Mary, When will you have another kissing bout in Stone Meadow? and the said Mary asking her with whom, away the said Elizabeth went saying no more to the said Mary at that time. And that within this fortnight or three weeks as she thinks, but is sure within a month at furthest . . . this deponent and Joseph Sale her precontest sitting in their own home one evening after their master and mistress were gone to bed and hearing some talk in the said Sophronia's house suspected she and the said Elizabeth were talking of the said Mary this deponent's mistress and so went into the entry which is betwixt the two dwellings aforesaid to harken what they said and peeping in at the door into the said Sophronia's house plain this deponent saw and heard Elizabeth Hulme alias Homes the said Sophronia's maid say, Mary Daintrey (meaning the party agent in this cause) is a whore, and the said Sophronia reply, Aye; so she is a whore, and I can prove her one when she has all done. By which speaking of which words spoken by the said Elizabeth as this deponent has predeposed, she the said Elizabeth must mean that the said Mary was an adulterous person . . .

[To the interrogatory]

. . . [she answers] at the speaking of the words which happened upon the crying of the child the plaintiff was sitting in the house, and when the defendant and her mistress were talking of the plaintiff in the said Sophronia's

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house the defendant was walking about the house and her mistress sitting in her chair near the fireside. . . .

. . . [she answers] . . . Joseph Sale this deponent's precontest dwells in the same house with this deponent and she never saw any carriage betwixt him and his mistress but such as is used and ought to be betwixt mistress and servant, nor believes nor ever heard of any familiarity betwixt them more than ordinary. . . .

Mary Daintrey v. Sophronia Daintrey

Margaret Keeling . . .

[To the second and third articles of the libel she says and deposes] That this deponent having ever since Christmas last been as now she is domestic servant to Mary Daintrey party agent in this cause who with her husband and his family have all that time dwelt in one end of the same house where the defendant Sophronia Daintrey and her husband Thomas Daintrey (brother of the said Brian) with his family have all the time aforesaid lived in the other end thereof . . . this deponent knows there has been frequent differences betwixt those two families and in the beginning of May last the said Sophronia coming to the said Mary's door saw a poor man begging there and the said Mary telling him she would not relieve him the said Sophronia asked her why she would not and the said Mary said she would not to please her, and the said Sophronia thereupon replying, Not to please any you whore, the said Mary and Sophronia fell into hot words amongst which the said Sophronia called the said Mary Whore several times, and whilst she was so calling her Mr William Jarvis the younger came in and heard her. And this deponent was in the house with her mistress all the while and saw and heard all that passed at that time and about a fortnight after . . . this deponent being in the garden the said Sophronia being there also and finding that the said Mary's children had fouled her water which she had set there for whitening her cloth, called one of the said children Bastard and said to him Thy mother is a whore, over and over. And a third time . . . since this suit was began, this deponent and Joseph Sale her precontest sitting, one evening after their master and mistress were gone to bed, in their own house and hearing some talk in the said Sophronia's house suspected she and her maid were talking of the said Mary this deponent's mistress and so went into the entry, which is betwixt the two dwellings aforesaid, to harken what they said and peeping in at the door into the said Sophronia's house plain this deponent saw and heard Elizabeth Hulme alias Homes, the said Sophronia's maid, say Mary Daintrey (meaning the party in this cause) is a whore and the said Sophronia reply Aye, so she is a whore, and I can prove her one when she has all done; and just after they had so said the said Elizabeth coming to shut the door this deponent and her precontest Joseph Sale went back again into their own house.