

## Note

Sophie Reinders, *De mug en de kaars. Vriendenboekjes van adellijke vrouwen, 1575-1640*, Nijmegen, Vantilt, 2017. 527 pp. ISBN 978-94-6004-326-0.



Reinders' in-depth study on early modern alba amicorum of noble women in the Northern Netherlands is the adapted version of her PhD-thesis, defended and graded *cum laude* at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Women's alba amicorum were especially popular during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries among the nobility and the knighthood. They form a much smaller corpus than the thousands of men's alba, into which relatively much research has been conducted. The core material of Reinders' ground-breaking investigation consists of a well-considered selection of 22 alba, of which the oldest dates from 1575 and the youngest from 1640. The owners, living in Holland, Utrecht, Gelderland or Overijssel, cover about three consecutive generations of noble women. From the 22 alba Reinders examined the formal aspects and the functions in relation to the social circles in which the owners lived.

The alba, all hand-written, contain a miscellany of fairly short and more extended inscriptions and illustrations, often multiple per page. Sometimes a tendency to a certain order is visible. The inscriptions of princes and high nobles, for example, have a place on the first folia and are followed by the contributions of less important relations. A chronological order of the contributions is far to be found. The inscriptions are usually multilingual and written down in careless handwriting that is difficult to decipher, which might be one of the reasons why women's alba formerly were neglected by researchers. French and Dutch, including its regional variations, are the dominant languages of both male and female inscribers, although women-writers seem less practiced in French than men. English is relative scarcely used by both sexes, while Italian, Latin and Greek are exclusively chosen by male inscribers. The inscribers provide combinations of their name or initials with a

device, an emblematic motto or a similar succinct maxim, usually based on commonplace books. These second hand practices, however, do not exclude the personal intention of the inscribers. It was customary to make more or less coded social signals, for instance by interweaving the capitals of names, putting crowns above initials, or adding the family weapon. Likewise eye-catching are the amorous illustrations and the love songs. Usually these songs were based on existing songbooks; existing emblem *picturae* served most of the time as examples for the illustrations.

The main social function of the women's alba was to confirm and to continue the contacts with, mainly, noble blood relatives and family in-law: the so called 'friends'. Persons of a lower rank were not invited to participate. Thus, the women's alba fit in the culture of sociability among the noble class during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which distinguished itself by ongoing exchanges of courtesy between its members, such as visiting each other, giving or receiving presents and favours, and providing support in times of sorrow or misfortune. By these actions of mutual interest early modern friendship was characterized; the trust and loyalty on which it was founded needed continuous negotiation and confirmation. The alba of young and unmarried female owners contain amorous songs and poems, as well as other signs of flirtation and love. The joining of initials was such a sign. So was the interplay with well known emblematic images and Petrarchist conventions, such as the mosquito and the burning candle (the '*mug*' and the '*kaars*' from the title): the restless lover dangerously attracted by the difficult-to-approach beloved woman. Thus, for young women an album offered the opportunity to explore the marriage market in a traditionally playful encoded way. Once they were married, the album lost this function and became an object of memory, initiated as it was to establish social contacts for the time being and for the future as well. After the death of its owner, the memory function came even somewhat more into force, as witnessed by the contributions of next of kin in honour of their beloved deceased. It is, nonetheless, notable that such posthumous inscriptions are still relatively scarce during the second half of the seventeenth century and that only after 1700 the practice of connecting with the family past by means of inscribing in alba of dead owners increased. In that period, however, the inscribers did not always operate equally profound and respectful, as shown by examples of everyday memory notes, such as recipes and even a short shopping list in some of the investigated alba.

Reinders' sparkling study, carefully edited and enriched with beautiful illustrations, convincingly shows the qualities and the functions of noble women's alba around 1600. These alba represent the upper class social network medium of an early modern era, a four centuries old forerunner of Facebook, as it were.

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