Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain

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In Invisible Agents Akkerman has produced the first dedicated study of seventeenth-century female intelligencers. She achieves this through her methodological process of “Reading Against the Archival Grain” (23). Akkerman explains this as the process of recovering female voices from records dominated by male histories, carefully piecing together the stories of women from the range of available—albeit previously neglected—evidence. In uncovering these histories, Akkerman establishes the impact of women’s roles in the socio-political history of the early modern period. From the detective-like quality of Akkerman’s methodological processes, to the inclusion of a dedication written in code, this text immediately informs the reader that it is to be approached inquisitively. Akkerman invites the reader to undertake a process of discovery as she unveils the historical data through a series of case-studies.

In her introduction, Akkerman discusses the origins of her study, and openly invites comparison between the historical sleuthing involved in uncovering the details of these female agents’ lives and their real-life espionage work. Akkerman evokes this comparison by referring to herself as “a modern John Thurloe, Oliver Cromwell’s most memorable spymaster” (3). The sheer volume of archival information present in this book creates the need for an overarching orientating principle to guide the reader. This need is met by Akkerman’s opening claim that “female spying activities were at the very heart of British international relations in the mid-seventeenth century” (3). Invisible Agents is a book that successfully establishes its own value and makes the reader question why such work has not previously been undertaken. Akkerman attributes the previous lack of critical attention to the social belief that women were above suspicion: “people simply refused to believe that women could possibly be involved in such plots – and subsequent historiography has tended to follow suit” (4). Akkerman redresses this critical neglect, offering a view of both Parliamentarian and Royalist female agents at a time of heightened political tension.

Akkerman writes that “a spy occupies liminal space” (10). Women were suited to this liminal work as contemporary social attitudes broadly determined them to be guileless. This attitude allowed women to navigate the spheres of the domestic and the political without arousing undue attention. Akkerman highlights this social attitude through her discussion of women’s letters and their role in deflecting suspicion. By considering the content and form of women’s discourses, the reader is shown how these were manipulated or deployed by intelligencers to escape notice. The use of familial terms, or roles such as ‘nurse’ in addressing or referencing female agents placed these women in ‘safe’ social roles; domestic areas that were traditionally feminine and therefore unthreatening. The fact that these women were undertaking concealed activities that, were they to have been observed, would have undermined that social conception is an irony that Akkerman makes clear.

Women who were found to be involved in espionage were not always dismissed or treated with leniency, however. In Chapter 3, Akkerman describes the capture and treatment of Susan Hyde, an agent who
was “arrested in Wiltshire without any of the civility usually accorded to a lady, and brought to London where she was subjected to psychological and physical torture” (90). Despite Hyde's uncommonly severe punishment, which lead to her death within a fortnight of being captured, she has been neglected in subsequent historical studies. Akkerman, using Hyde's fate as an example, concludes that “Women disappeared below the surface, dissolved in water or covered by dust, a process comparable to how they subsequently disappeared in texts and archives.” (115).

Akkerman's historiographical mission to establish she-intelligencers as an integral aspect of royal affairs, civic ruling, and European political struggles is extended to cultural representations in Chapter 7. In this chapter Akkerman focusses on Aphra Behn, making the claim that Behn “may have fooled us all: perhaps the documents she wrote in Antwerp […] are not the work of a female spy, but rather of a writer of fiction” (204). By opening an inquiry into the possible fictionality of such espionage artefacts and narratives, Akkerman also touches on possible routes of further study, including dramaturgical analysis of the roles of women and female spies in early modern literature, culture, and society.

This book is the first study analysing the history of early modern female spies, yet it also transforms our understanding of the seventeenth century in broader ways. The individual case-studies which form the basis of the book's structure firmly establish these women as gatekeepers, generators, and guardians of information. Over the course of these studies, Invisible Agents charts the shifting role of women in espionage during this period from couriers of secret messages to active she-intelligencers. Future histories must account for these women in their discussions of historical gender roles and recognise the importance, and often danger, of the work they undertook. Invisible Agents also creates a springboard for further studies to produce analytical readings of the seventeenth-century dissemination of knowledge and power through different communicative methods and social structures.

Part of this book's lasting impression, especially for a non-historian reader, comes from the careful inclusion of illustrative artefacts, from secret ciphers and letter locking techniques to the artistic representation of espionage culture in Queen Elizabeth's “Rainbow Portrait”. These details are woven into Akkerman's research narrative, underpinning her core mission of recovering historical female voices from archival documents. This is a book full of rich and engaging details, perhaps overwhelmingly at times due to the sheer volume of historical research that Akkerman has undertaken, but this is a testament to the thoroughness of her academic practice. Ultimately, Invisible Agents is a text that serves as an invaluable starting point for the re-situation of women into narratives of early modern spying, and political history, offering readers across disciplines a varied and voluminous history of women's roles in seventeenth-century espionage.

![Aphra Behn. Sir Peter Lely, c. 1670](image)