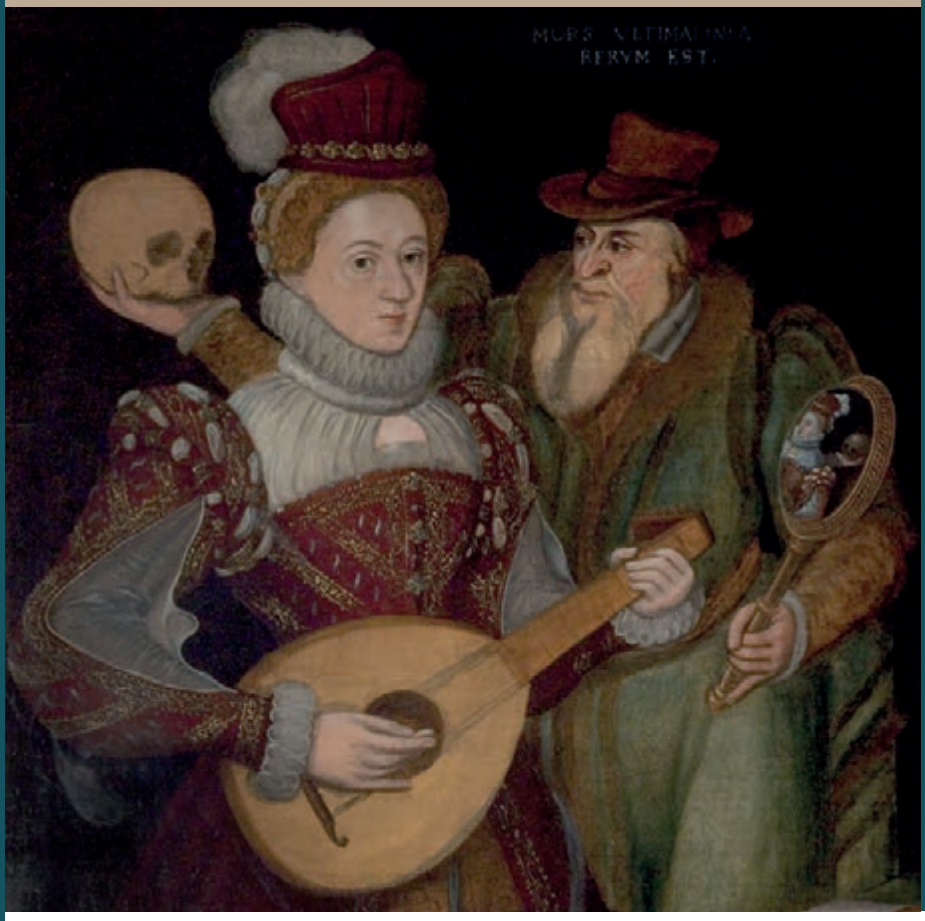
GENDERING THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN WORLD



Edited by Lisa Hopkins and Aidan Norrie

Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe

Amsterdam University Press

Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe

Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World

Series editors: James Daybell (Chair), Victoria E. Burke, Svante Norrhem, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks

This series provides a forum for studies that investigate women, gender, and/or sexuality in the late medieval and early modern world. The editors invite proposals for book-length studies of an interdisciplinary nature, including, but not exclusively, from the fields of history, literature, art and architectural history, and visual and material culture. Consideration will be given to both monographs and collections of essays. Chronologically, we welcome studies that look at the period between 1400 and 1700, with a focus on any part of the world, as well as comparative and global works. We invite proposals including, but not limited to, the following broad themes: methodologies, theories and meanings of gender; gender, power and political culture; monarchs, courts and power; constructions of femininity and masculinity; gift-giving, diplomacy and the politics of exchange; gender and the politics of early modern archives; gender and architectural spaces (courts, salons, household); consumption and material culture; objects and gendered power; women's writing; gendered patronage and power; gendered activities, behaviours, rituals and fashions.

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For
Chris and Sam, without whom I really would be a woman on the edge
—L.H.

For
Janine, Jo, Lyn, Marina, Nicola, Rebecca, Sarah P, Sarah S, and Von:
friends and colleagues who prove that Females Are Strong As Hell
—A.N.

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Why do men of God seem so afraid of women?
—Mary, Queen of Scots, in *Mary, Queen of Scots* (2013)

Death is the final edge of things.
—Horace, *Epistles*, 1.16.79

1. Introduction: Early Modern European Women and the Edge

Aidan Norrie and Lisa Hopkins

Abstract

This chapter introduces the studies presented in *Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe*, situating the chapters within both the burgeoning field of gender studies and the ongoing scholarly debates concerning the lived experiences of early modern women. This chapter contextualises the studies that follow by exploring how gender impeded the exercise of women's personal, political, and religious agency, with an emphasis on both the conflict that occurred when a woman crossed the edges society placed on her gender, and the role scholars have played in reinforcing these (often anachronistic) edges.

Keywords: women; gender; early modern; Europe; edge

In the *Blackadder II* episode 'Bells', Elizabeth I's nurse offers a comment on the way sex and gender affected women in early modern Europe that, for all its ostensible naïveté, is in fact surprisingly astute:

Nursie:	You almost were a boy, my little cherry-pip.
Queenie:	What?
Nursie:	Yeah! Out you popped out of your mummy's tumkin, and everyone shouted, 'It's a boy, it's a boy!' And then someone said: 'But it hasn't got a winkle!' And then I said: 'A boy without a winkle? God be praised, it's a miracle. A boy without a winkle!' And then Sir Thomas More pointed out that a boy without a winkle is a girl, and everyone was really disappointed.

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Lord Melchett: Ah yes, well you see, he was a very perceptive man, Sir Thomas More.[1]

Elizabeth was the child of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and was thus royal and eligible to succeed according to English law, but for the absence of a 'winkle', her ability to rule—based on her perceived sex—was questioned, and potentially even negated. The point ended up being rather moot: both Elizabeth and her half-sister Mary ruled England as female kings, which has the effect of making Nursie's observation all the more humorous.

As this short interaction demonstrates, gender was a site of contest and anxiety in early modern England, and early modern Europe more broadly. Gender functioned as a distinct edge, and Elizabeth, as a female king, blurred the edge between man and woman as no Englishwoman had done before her: while her sister Mary had reigned before her, and Jane Grey, albeit briefly, before that (not to mention Empress Matilda's designs on the crown), neither had claimed to have the heart and stomach of a king, and neither had greeted the news of an attempted revolution by reaching for Henry VIII's sword, as Elizabeth is said to have done on the day of the Essex Rebellion.[2] But gender, and its role in blurring edges, or the way it could cause one to exist on the edge, does not have to be as obvious as in the case of Elizabeth. While the idea of being on 'the edge' might cause some to think of mental health issues, we use the term in a far more literal sense.[3] As Hopkins has argued elsewhere, early modern people constantly negotiated various edges in their ensure this reads day-to-day lives.[4] Of significance here is the acknowledgement that edges allow two-way traffic, investing edges with a kind of power that could always be crossed, contested, or ceded.[5] People negotiated the edges between various spheres, many of which overlapped or caused friction, including the spiritual and the secular, between the private and the public, and between society's gendered order and their personal agency.[6] The edges

1 For more on Elizabeth I, Queenie, and *Blackadder II*, see: Latham, *Elizabeth I in Film and Television*, 216–220. For a discussion of how Elizabeth's gender is constructed and subverted in film, see: Norrie, 'A Man? A Woman? A Lesbian? A Whore?', 319–340.

2 See: Beem, *The Lioness Roared*; Ives, *Lady Jane Grey*; Castor, *She-Wolves*; and Levin, *The Heart and Stomach of a King*.

3 Women's mental health as an 'edge' in the early modern period is explored by Strocchia, 'Women on the Edge'.

4 See: Hopkins, *Shakespeare on the Edge;* and Hopkins, *Renaissance Drama on the Edge*.

5 Hopkins, *Renaissance Drama on the Edge*, 171, 8.

6 See: Broomhall, ed., *Gender and Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*.

between these spheres, in particular, were ones that required careful navigation: especially by women.[7]

Women on the Edge in Early Modern Europe examines various occasions when a woman's navigation of an edge was impeded by her gender, or indeed, when her gender caused her to blur the edge and cross between two spheres. The lives of the women who are analysed in this collection demonstrate the way that gender—'a social category imposed on a sexed body'—impeded the exercise of personal, political, and religious agency in various ways.[8] Thanks to the excellent scholarship in the field of gender studies, this observation is well established in the scholarship.[9] Nevertheless, there is still much to be done in illuminating the lives of women in early modern Europe who were neither queens nor queans, in that they gained their infamy through their sexual exploits—both real or imagined.[10] This collection begins to fill a gap in the scholarship by focusing on such a wide range of women, across a variety of social and economic classes, between *c*.1457 and *c*.1701. Rather than make the accounts of these women's lives fit or focus on a particular topic, we have allowed their stories to be told without undue emphasis on arbitrary conceptual constraints. Many of the women featured here have only been afforded cursory scholarly focus, or the focus has been isolated to a specific, (in)famous event. This collection redresses this imbalance by providing comprehensive discussions of the women's lives, placing the matter that makes them known to history within the context of their entire life.

We have also applied a less rigid definition of 'early modern' to the collection. We are interested in a wide range of women, from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, in as wide a geographic range as possible. Our contributors thus discuss women who lived between the fifteenth and early eighteenth centuries, across an array of countries in Europe (and indeed in the New World). We have also included chapters on women whose legacies

7 It is for this reason that we prefer to speak of 'edges', rather than 'margins'. Our thinking on this topic, however, has been influenced by Davis, *Women on the Margins*.

8 Scott, 'Gender', 1056.

9 In addition to Scott, see, for example: Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*; Meade and Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *A Companion to Gender History*; Canning, *Gender History in Practice*; Rose, *What Is Gender History?*; and Monter, *The Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300–1800*.

10 There is an increasing amount of scholarship of both queens consort and female kings. See, for example: Woodacre, ed., *A Companion to Global Queenship*; Schutte and Paranque, eds., *Forgotten Queens in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*; Bertolet, ed., *Queens Matter in Early Modern Studies*; Dunn and Carney, eds., *Royal Women and Dynastic Loyalty*; Woodacre, ed., *Queenship in the Mediterranean*; Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe*; Woodacre, *The Queens Regnant of Navarre*; Cruz and Suzuki, eds., *The Rule of Women in Early Modern Europe*; and Earenfight, ed., *Queenship and Political Power in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*.

were part of early modern culture (such as Beatrice d'Aragona and Elizabeth Sawyer), and some of the contributors have considered the legacy of their subjects from the early modern period to the present.

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The book is divided into three, thematic sections. Section One—'Life on the Edge'—provides three case studies of different women (or groups of women) from across Europe in the seventeenth century. These women were either hampered in the exercise of their careers simply because of their gender, or were forced against their will to enter into relationships because they were required to occupy the spheres society believed their gender required.

The various bouts of plague that raged across Europe in the premodern period affected people indiscriminate of gender, class, or race. As Lara Thorpe establishes, those often charged with caring for the sick were the poorest women of the parish, who were subjected to the double indignity of being socio-economically marginalised women who, thanks to various polemic tracts, were seen as personifications of the horrors of quarantine. Thorpe uses parish records to create a prosopography of a typical plague nurse during the Great Plague of 1665 in London, demonstrating both the women's competence and medical skills, and the unfair association they had with the disease they treated.

As many of our contributors demonstrate, women often did cross over into spheres and careers society deemed unusual—or even unacceptable—for a woman in early modern Europe.[11] Sarah Gordon's contribution assesses the career of Marie Meurdrac, a self-taught chemist who, in 1656, published what can be described as the first modern chemistry textbook, *La Chymie charitable et facile en faveur des dames*. The book was a culmination of years of experimentation on Meurdrac's part, and, as Gordon demonstrates, while the instructions are written with detailed steps and clear language, it is still highly technical, and is certainly much more than the mere recipe collection the book is sometimes dismissed as. Read today, Meurdrac's book gives a voice to the often voiceless women of premodern science, and forms the basis of a conversation about gender bias in science that continues today.

11 See, for other examples: Hanawalt, ed., *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*; Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*; McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620*; and Simonton and Montenach, eds., *Female Agency in the Urban Economy*.

Most of the women analysed in this collection are known through the writings of others, usually men.[12] Some women, however, were able to not only escape their particular situation, but also write about it themselves. Lynn Lubamersky's chapter analyses the autobiography of Anna Stanisławska, a Polish woman who was married against her will to a mentally ill man before managing to procure a divorce. Stanisławska might have accepted her fate, but instead she extricated herself, using all of the tools available to her, including secular and canon law, patronage, and family connections. Her autobiography, which is unique in European history, paints a damning picture of the commonplace 'transaction' of women, and reveals a woman from a distant time whose desire for liberty and self-determination is eternal.

An issue that disproportionately affected women in early modern Europe was accusations of witchcraft.[13] The use of witchcraft as a tool to deny women political, religious, or social agency is the focus of Section Two, 'Witchcraft and the Edge'.

Alex MacConochie's contribution analyses the treatment of Elizabeth Sawyer, convicted witch, in Henry Goodcole's pamphlet, *The Wonderful Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer, Witch*, and in the collaborative play *The Witch of Edmonton* (both 1621). MacConochie focuses on acts of touch, demonstrating that the play exemplifies common contemporary attitudes towards touch, and treats the witch's touch as a demonic influence over her victims, whereas the pamphlet employs acts of touch between Elizabeth and others to model reciprocal forms of contact that contrast markedly with hierarchical uses of touch in the community from which she is excluded. The play and the pamphlet blur the divide between Sawyer's 'real' life, and Sawyer as a personified manifestation of public anxieties. As MacConochie demonstrates, where the pamphlet constructs communal bonds by scapegoating Elizabeth, the play models alternative forms of association between elderly, poverty-stricken women like Sawyer and other figures on the edges of the community.

Anna Trapnel, who came to prominence as a prophetess in England during the 1650s, is the focus of Debra Parish's chapter. One of hundreds of visionary women who identified as prophets during the Civil Wars and Interregnum period, Trapnel gained a following for her compelling visionary trances

12 This fact is discussed in, for example: Knoppers, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*; Gilleir, Montoya, and Dijk, eds., *Women Writing Back / Writing Women Back*; Ross and Salzman, eds., *Editing Early Modern Women*; and Daybell and Gordon, eds., *Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture, 1450–1690*.

13 Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe', 449. Interestingly, male witches were in the majority in Russia. See: Kivelson, 'Witchcraft Trials in Russia'.

and prophetic declarations. She published several works giving accounts of her visions and propounding God's warnings to all outward political and religious powers. As Parish demonstrates, while being unmarried allowed Trapnel the freedom to travel and prophesy, she was constantly forced to subvert her own agency by declaring herself simply the mouthpiece of God in order to deflect criticisms directed at her blurring of the edges of the various spheres she existed in. Parish explores the writings and actions of this independent and outspoken woman, analysing her shifting public identity from 'prophet' to 'witch', and demonstrating that she not only pushed boundaries of gender, but also challenged dominant political and religious institutions and authority.

Section Three, 'Courtly Women on the Edge', analyses the lives of four royal women across early modern Europe. These women navigated different edges from the women previously studied: born into relative affluence, these women were all expected to marry well (the three who survived into adulthood did, to different degrees), and to produce heirs who would continue and expand their family line (though only one of these four did). Their noble heritage placed them very much on the edge: some blurred the line between virtuous wife and ruler, others dutiful daughter and public figure.

In the case of Beatrice d'Aragona, Jessica O'Leary demonstrates the way the queen-consort of Hungary and Bohemia navigated the four spheres of daughter, wife, ruler, and public figure. Born in Italy, which we now think of as the centre of Renaissance culture, Beatrice d'Aragona moved to Hungary, a land whose status as a beacon of Renaissance art and learning is less well remembered (although it deserves to be). Her marriage in 1476 to its king Matthias Corvinus took her to the edge of Christendom, since Hungary lay in the line of advance of the Ottoman Turks, and also brought her to a point of crisis in the contemporary definition of femininity, for the marriage produced no children. Widowhood in 1490 seemed to offer her political power, but actually led her to a second marriage with a man who quickly repudiated her. Childless, husbandless, and unqueened, Beatrice d'Aragona inhabited the edge in many senses.

Lisa Hopkins's chapter considers how Arbella Stuart hovered on the edge of the succession to two thrones, that of England and that of Scotland, although she never inherited either. Too important to be allowed to marry freely, Arbella engineered an elopement (during which she disguised herself as a boy) with the grandson of Lady Catherine Grey. She seems in general to have identified with the Grey sisters, but she was also inevitably compared to her aunt, Mary, Queen of Scots, and also to Elizabeth I herself. Hopkins explores how Arbella was fashioned by others, as well as how she tried to fashion herself.

Aidan Norrie provides a biography and re-assessment of Princess Cecilia of Sweden, later Margravine of Baden-Rodemachern and Countess of Arboga. Cecilia is best known for her eight-month visit to England to meet Elizabeth I in 1565–1566. The rising debt that finally forced her to leave has tainted Cecilia, and accounts of her life barely mention the sixty years between her leaving England and her death in 1627. Norrie re-assesses Cecilia's life by focusing on the way her gender caused her to exist on the edge, demonstrating that no matter her situation, Cecilia was ultimately defined by the men—present or absent—in her life.

Jessica Becker's chapter on Elizabeth Stuart reminds us of Charles I's forgotten daughter. Elizabeth died at the age of fifteen, so never exercised power and never married, but Becker argues that studying her helps us understand more clearly the tensions and cross-currents of the English Civil Wars. Dying on the edge of her own maturity, Elizabeth paradoxically occupied centre ground in that her youth and fragility spoke to both sides of the conflict. Along with Beatrice d'Aragona, Arbella Stuart, and Princess Cecilia, the vulnerable, imprisoned Princess Elizabeth helps us see some of the ways in which women could exercise symbolic appeal even when they wielded no actual political power.

The book concludes with an epilogue, 'The Early Modern Edge in the Twenty-First Century', which seeks to demonstrate the role scholars have played in both reinforcing, and breaking down, edges. Eva Mendieta examines the literary (after)life of Catalina de Erauso, 'the Lieutenant Nun', contextualizing both Erauso's life, and the literary evidence of her life. Importantly, Mendieta analyses the recent scholarship on Erauso, demonstrating the (positive) effect of gender and feminist critiques on understanding the Lieutenant Nun's *Autobiography*, and the renewed focus on the way that Erauso constructed her identity—without emphasizing her interpreted gender identity—with attention being paid to her Basque origin.

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We hope that the essays in this collection continue to encourage the increasing scholarly focus on the lives of people on the edge.[14] We acknowledge that

14 Ashgate's (now University of Nebraska Press's) series, *Women and Gender in the Early Modern World*, has been at the forefront of encouraging this kind of scholarship. Some recent examples of other such works include: Pearson, ed., *Women and Portraits in Early Modern Europe*; Tarbin and Broomhall, eds., *Women, Identities and Communities in Early Modern Europe*; Broomhall and Spinks, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries*; Akkerman and Houben, eds., *The Politics of Female Households*; Poska, Couchman, and McIver, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to*

royal and aristocratic women make up a large part of this collection. This is not an accident: royal and noble status did not do away with the issues women faced in early modern Europe. But we hope by placing the lives of these women against other, non-noble women, who achieved much in spite of the obstacles placed in their way, we can expand this scholarly conversation, and continue to include the people who lived on the edge—not only because of gender, but also because of their race and/or sexual orientation—in the increasingly inclusive and accessible histories being written of not only early modern Europe, but also of periods and places that have long been neglected by both academic and popular audiences alike.[15]

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15 The idea for this collection was in part inspired by the groundbreaking studies of extra-European women in various royal courts, including: Walthall, ed., *Servants of the Dynasty*; Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*; and Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*.

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Lisa Hopkins is Professor of English at Sheffield Hallam University. She is co-editor of *Shakespeare*, the journal of the British Shakespeare Association, of *Arden Early Modern Drama Guides*, and of *Arden Studies in Early Modern Drama*. Her publications include *Renaissance Drama on the Edge* (Ashgate, 2014), *Drama and the Succession to the Crown, 1561-1633* (Ashgate, 2011), and *Shakespeare on the Edge* (Ashgate, 2005). She has recently edited a collection of essays, *Bess of Hardwick: New Perspectives*, published by Manchester University Press, and is co-editing (with Tom Rutter) *A Companion to the Cavendishes: Writing, Patronage, and Material Culture* (ARC Humanities Press).

Aidan Norrie is a historian of monarchy, and is a Chancellor's International Scholar in the Centre for the Study of the Renaissance at The University of Warwick. He is the editor, with Marina Gerzic, of *From Medievalism to Early-Modernism: Adapting the English Past* (Routledge), and, with Mark Houlahan, of *On the Edge of Early Modern English Drama* (MIP University Press). Aidan is working on a study of Elizabeth I's depiction in modern films and television series, and is currently developing a monograph that analyses Elizabeth's engagement with the Old Testament.