

GENDERING THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN WORLD

Edited by
Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks

Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

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Challenging Women's Agency
and Activism in Early Modernity



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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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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| List of figures and tables | 7 |
| Introduction | 9 |
| <i>Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks</i> | |
| Part I Choosing and Creating | |
| 1. Bad Habits and Female Agency | 25 |
| Attending to Early Modern Women in the Material History of Intoxication | |
| <i>Angela McShane</i> | |
| 2. Setting up House | 65 |
| Artisan Women's Trousseaux in Seventeenth-Century Bologna | |
| <i>Joyce de Vries</i> | |
| 3. Crafting Habits of Resistance | 85 |
| <i>Susan Dinan, Karen Nelson, and Michele Osherow</i> | |
| Part II Confronting Power | |
| 4. Confronting Women's Actions in History | 107 |
| Female Crown Fief Holders in Denmark | |
| <i>Grethe Jacobsen</i> | |
| 5. Divisive Speech in Divided Times? | 119 |
| Women and the Politics of Slander, Sedition, and Informing during the English Revolution | |
| <i>Caroline Boswell</i> | |
| 6. Why Political Theory is Women's Work | 141 |
| How Moderata Fonte Reclaimed Liberty for Women inside and outside Marriage | |
| <i>Caroline Castiglione</i> | |



7. 'Wrestling the World from Fools' 163
Teaching Historical Empathy and Critical Engagement in Traditional
and Online Classrooms
Jennifer Selwyn

Part III Challenging Representations

8. Thinking Beings and Animate Matter 183
Margaret Cavendish's Challenge to the Early Modern Order of Things
Mihoko Suzuki
9. The Agency of Portrayal 207
The Active Portrait in the Early Modern Period
Saskia Beranek and Sheila ffollott
10. Marking Female Ocular Agency in the 'Medieval Housebook' 229
Andrea Pearson

Part IV Forming Communities

11. Claude-Catherine de Clermont 253
A Taste-Maker in the Continuum of Salon Society
Julie D. Campbell
12. Religious Spaces in the Far East 269
Women's Travel and Writing in Manila and Macao
Sarah E. Owens
13. Accounting for Early Modern Women in the Arts 283
Reconsidering Women's Agency, Networks, and Relationships
Theresa Kemp, Catherine Powell, and Beth Link
- Index 309



List of figures and tables

| | | |
|------------|---|-----|
| Figure 1.1 | Two eighteenth-century snuffboxes. Image courtesy of John H Bryan II | 40 |
| Figure 1.2 | Cowrie-shell snuffbox, dated 1748. Image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery | 42 |
| Figure 1.3 | Silver snuffbox. Image courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery | 43 |
| Figure 1.4 | Snuffbox with a female textile worker | 46 |
| Figure 1.5 | Snuffbox with phallic image. Photo: author | 53 |
| Figure 1.6 | Engraved snuff-gourd. Image courtesy of John H Bryan II | 55 |
| Figure 1.7 | Knitting sheath front face. Image courtesy of John H Bryan II | 56 |
| Figure 1.8 | Knitting sheath rear face. Image courtesy of John H Bryan II | 56 |
| Table 2.1 | Sixty dowries in Bologna from 1600–1700 | 72 |
| Figure 3.1 | Esther and Ahasuerus (1665) © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. | 91 |
| Figure 3.2 | 'A Heroine Forcibly Enters a Jail to Liberate a Hero', Freer Sackler accession S1986.399, Purchase—Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, www.freersackler.si.edu/object/S1986.399/ | 99 |
| Table 4.1 | Danish crown fief holdings by gender | 112 |
| Figure 8.1 | Margaret Cavendish, <i>Poems, or several Fancies in Verse. With the Animal Parliament, in Prose</i> (London: A. Maxwell, 1668), frontispiece. Engraving by Abraham von Diepenbeeck. 720.h.28. ©British Library Board | 184 |
| Figure 9.1 | Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619), <i>Elizabeth I</i> (1533–1603) c. 1580–1585 Watercolor on vellum laid on paper 3.8 x 3.3 cm (support, canvas/panel/str external) RCIN 422026 | 219 |
| Figure 9.2 | Sofonisba Anguissola, <i>Isabel de Valois holding a Portrait of Philip II</i> Copyright ©Museo Nacional del Prado | 220 |
| Figure 9.3 | Circle of François Clouet, <i>Henri II</i> (Paris: Louvre) | 224 |

| | | |
|-------------|--|-----|
| Figure 10.1 | Housebook Master, <i>Military Encampment</i> , drawing from the Medieval Housebook, begun c. 1475, fols. 53r–53r1. Private collection, public domain | 230 |
| Figure 10.2 | Detail of Fig. 10.1 | 231 |
| Figure 10.3 | Master of the Getty Lalaing, ‘Jacques de Lalaing and Diego de Guzman Jousting before the King of Castile’, illumination from the <i>Book of Deeds of Jacques de Lalaing</i> , c. 1530. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Acquired in honor of Thomas Kren, Ms. 114, fol. 76r. Digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program, public domain | 236 |
| Figure 10.4 | Housebook Master, <i>Colonel Joust</i> , drawing from the Medieval Housebook (see caption for Fig. 10.1), fols. 20v–21r | 238 |
| Figure 10.5 | Housebook Master, <i>A Woman in a Tower Scaled by Three Men</i> , drawing from the Medieval Housebook (see caption for Fig. 10.1), fol. 53v | 239 |
| Figure 10.6 | Paris, <i>Casket Lid with Scenes of Courtly Love and Jousting</i> , 1310–1330, elephant ivory, 5 7/8 x 9 7/8 x 5/16 in. (15 x 25.1 x 0.8 cm). New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.173a, b; The Cloisters Collection, 1988.16. www.metmuseum.org , public domain | 240 |
| Figure 10.7 | Housebook Master, <i>Seductions and Entrapments</i> , from the Medieval Housebook (see caption for Fig. 10.1), fols. 23v–24r | 244 |
| Figure 10.8 | Housebook Master, <i>Garden of Lust</i> , from the Medieval Housebook (see caption for Fig. 10.1), fols. 24v–25r | 245 |

Introduction

Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks

Abstract

This introduction summarizes and notes connections among the essays in this collection, which consider women's agency in the Renaissance and early modern period, an era that saw both increasing patriarchal constraints and new forms of women's actions and activism. The volume includes thirteen essays by scholars from many disciplines, which analyze people, texts, objects, and images from many different parts of Europe, as well as things and people that crossed the Atlantic and the Pacific. The essays address a capacious set of questions about how women, from their teenage years through older adulthood, asserted agency through social practices, speech acts, legal disputes, writing, viewing and exchanging images, travel, and community building.

Keywords: material culture; representations of women; women's agency; women's communities; emotional turn

'Agency' is a venerable concept in the study of women and gender in many disciplines. Examining women's agency in the past has taken on new urgency, however, in the current moment of resurgent patriarchy, Women's Marches, and the global #MeToo movement. The essays in this collection consider women's agency in the Renaissance and early modern period, an era that also saw both increasing patriarchal constraints and new forms of women's actions and activism. They address a capacious set of questions about how women, from their teenage years through older adulthood and across the social scale, asserted agency through social practices, speech acts, legal disputes, writing, viewing and exchanging images, travel, and community building. The book's title is intentionally double-meaning, capturing the fact that women both challenged and were challenged by male-dominated institutions.

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This volume includes thirteen essays by scholars from many disciplines, among them Art Education, Art History, English, History, Italian Studies, Spanish, and Women's and Gender Studies. Each essay reaches across disciplines, and several are written by interdisciplinary groups of authors. The essays examine people, texts, objects, and images from many different parts of Europe, including England, Italy, France, Denmark, Spain, the Low Countries, and Germany, as well as things and people that crossed the Atlantic to British North America and the Pacific to the Spanish Philippines.

The book is divided into four sections, each of them headed by verbs to reflect the book's focus on action: 'Choosing and Creating', with essays that examine how women's choice and creation of material objects shaped their lives and the world around them; 'Confronting Power', with essays that examine sites and modes of gendered confrontations in the early modern period and the ways these resonate in our classrooms; 'Challenging Representations', with essays that examine representations of women and by women that challenged dominant cultural interpretations at the time, and continue to do so today; 'Forming Communities', with essays that examine ways that secular and religious women formed collectivities and networks, and how these created new spaces and routes for writing and action.

Most of the essays began as presentations and conversations at the tenth Attending to Early Modern Women conference, held in 2018 at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Over its three meetings in Milwaukee, Attending to Early Modern Women first asked 'Where?' a question that resulted in the conference 'Remapping Routes and Spaces' (2012) and the conference volume *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*. Then we asked 'When?' which led to 'It's About Time' (2015) and *Gendered Temporalities in the Early Modern World*. In 2018 we asked 'How?' For both our subjects and ourselves, the answer was and is the same: action and agency, a conference theme that several members of the organizing committee and I decided on while sitting in the airport of Washington DC, on our way home from the Women's March in January 2017, wearing our pink pussy hats. The conference subthemes—choice, confrontation, and collectivity—also grew out of that conversation, and the experience of collective action that we and millions of others around the world had just shared.

Agency has been a key concept in history since at least the rise of the 'new social history' in the 1970s, with social historians asserting that individuals and groups beyond white male elites had the capacity to act, make choices, and intentionally shape their own lives and the world around them to some



degree.¹ Debates about how much agency various individuals and groups had have recently focused on consumers and children, among others, and especially on enslaved people.² Some historians extend agency beyond the human to animals, arguing that although they do not share human cognitive abilities and self-awareness, animals display some degree of intentionality and self-directed action, and thus are agents.³ As several of the essays in this volume will discuss, agency has also been extended to non-living objects, sometimes dispersed among humans and non-humans as in Bruno Latour's 'actor-network' theory, or simply as a quality that objects or nature possess.⁴

'Agency' has been an enduring notion in women's and gender history as well, one of four key concepts recently highlighted in a forum in *Gender & History*.⁵ Here the historian of modern Africa Lynn Thomas provides a sensitive discussion of why agency has been such a powerful concept, particularly for periods and places in which historians seek to overcome an emphasis on victimization or passivity.⁶ She critiques the limitations of what she terms 'agency as argument', the ways that 'agency often slips from being a conceptual tool or starting point to a concluding argument, with statements like "African women had agency" standing as the impoverished punchlines of empirically rich studies'.⁷ Agency, she asserts, has become a 'safety' argument, that is, an uncontroversial conclusion applicable to nearly every situation. In this she agrees with Joan Scott, who has also commented about ways in which histories 'designed to celebrate women's agency began to seem predictable and repetitious, just more information garnered to prove a point that had already been made'.⁸ Ultimately both Thomas and Scott do not reject the concept of agency in women's and gender history, however, but instead argue that we must be open to its different, historically contingent

1 Johnson, 'On Agency'; Dayton, 'Rethinking Agency, Recovering Voices'.

2 On consumers, see Blanke, 'Consumer Choice, Agency, and New Directions in Rural History'; Reischer and Koo, 'The Body Beautiful'; on children, see Bryant, 'Clothing and Community'; on slaves, see Johnson, 'On Agency'; Millward, 'On Agency, Freedom and the Boundaries of Slavery Studies'.

3 Pearson, 'Dogs, History, and Agency'; Shaw, 'The Torturer's Horse'. My thanks to my colleague Nigel Rothfels for these references to agency in animals.

4 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Martin, 'Agents in Inter-Action'; Jones and Boivin, 'The Malice of Inanimate Objects'; Nash, 'The Agency of Nature or the Nature of Agency?'.

5 'Forum: Rethinking Key Concepts in Gender History'. The forum also discusses intersectionality, gender crisis, and gender binary.

6 For an interesting reflection on this from a medieval historian, see Barbara Newman, 'On the Ethics of Feminist Historiography', in which she points to the temptation to idealize, pity, or blame when looking at the women of the distant past.

7 Thomas, 'Historicizing Agency', p. 324.

8 Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, p. 38.



forms and 'to the multiple motivations that undergird meaningful action, motivations that exceed rational calculation and articulated intentions to include collective fantasies, psychological desires and struggles just to get by'.⁹

The essays in this volume take up Thomas's challenge to historicize agency, to use it as a starting point rather than a conclusion, and to explore how different historical actors have themselves understood agency (though they used different words for this). The three essays in Part I, 'Choosing and Creating', highlight ways in which women's choice and creation of material objects to inhale, carry, wear, read, pray with, work with, work on, and/or display influenced their own lives and the world around them. In 'Bad Habits and Female Agency: Attending to Early Modern Women in the Material History of Intoxication', Angela McShane examines the social practices and material culture surrounding early modern women's tobacco habits. She investigates the modern editorial, historiographical, curatorial, and social practices that have ignored, effaced, and hidden this from view, and then deploys a range of sources to argue that tobacco taking was widespread among all 'sorts' of the female population in Britain and colonial North America, from indentured servants to Quaker matriarchs. Examining the praxis of early modern women's smoking and snuff-taking through judicial documents, periodical and literary publications, newspaper advertisements, personal papers, probate records, court depositions, visual and especially material sources, she reveals how tobacco-taking became a vehicle for social empowerment for white early modern women. Long before the destructive glamour of the cigarette took its hold in modern society, smoking and especially snuff-taking enabled freedom of conversation in a mixed social sphere, and created a canvas on which women could 'proclaim' themselves in society. Though the poor were attacked for the pleasure they took in tobacco, as in so much else, tobacco habits provided white women of all classes with important emotional support, and time for leisure, which they alone had the power to determine.

In 'Setting up House: Artisan Women's Trousseaux in Seventeenth-Century Bologna' Joyce de Vries similarly focuses on material objects as a key to praxis, in this case the linens, clothing, furniture, fabrics, utensils, jewelry and devotional items that artisan brides brought to their marriages, and with which they constructed their outward appearance and social status. The goods listed in trousseaux suggest details of women's activities, interests, and agency, demonstrating their impact in constituting new families, residences, and livelihoods. Brides played a role in selecting,

9 Thomas, 'Historicising Agency', p. 335.



making, and embellishing at least some of the goods that they brought to their marriages, and women oversaw the material assets of the entire household, a domestic duty repeatedly outlined in prescriptive literature. But their domestic work might also be for the market, as some artisan women engaged in the growing and vibrant cottage industry fundamental for textile production, work reflected in the looms, thread, and cloth that formed part of many trousseaux. As de Vries demonstrates, the goods a bride brought with her to her marriage ensured some continuity with the past and provided a material base for the future, anchoring a rich and nuanced realm of female agency in early modern Italy.

In 'Crafting Habits of Resistance', the interdisciplinary author team of Susan Dinan, Karen Nelson, and Michele Osherow examines both actual and metaphorical habits created by women that functioned as texts of resistance within regional systems of power. These include the distinctive garb created by the Daughters of Charity in Paris that communicated their religious stance and allowed them to actively serve the poor; the biblical scenes embroidered by seventeenth-century English women in the era surrounding England's Civil War, through which they interpreted and commented upon the Bible and on contemporary events; and representations of women in war and under siege that provide examples of women's leadership and spying, counterposing the erasure of women from traditional military histories. Taken together, these complicate notions of public and private space, and suggest that the power of stories to animate and inspire took many guises not immediately discernable to those who seek out more standard articulations of women's challenges to misogyny. The authors assert that material traces, ranging from the concrete, to the ephemeral, to the imagined, reflect ways that people take stories already in circulation and use them to create spaces for women's agency.

The four essays in Part II, 'Confronting Power', provide further examples of sites and modes of gendered confrontations—physical, oral, and textual—in the early modern period, and the ways these resonate in the histories that have come down to us, the histories we create, and the histories we convey in our classrooms. Grethe Jacobsen takes us north to Scandinavia in 'Confronting Women's Actions in History: Female Crown Fief Holders in Denmark'. She analyzes the actions of two Danish noblewomen who battled with one another for property while serving as crown fief holders with formal power and authority over crown property, an office that appears unique to Scandinavia among non-royal women. As Jacobsen tells it, the seemingly ordinary dispute over property between two sisters-in-law turns out to contain several layers of confrontations: most obviously that between



the women, but also the confrontation between the ideas and notions of later generations of historians and storytellers as to what women could or couldn't do on the one hand, and the actual lives and experiences of women in the past on the other. Women made up 15 percent of all crown fief holders during the sixteenth century, a fact that was ignored by contemporaries and by later historians unable to imagine non-royal women holding formal power.

Caroline Boswell's 'Divisive Speech in Divided Times? Women and the Politics of Slander, Sedition, and Informing during the English Revolution' delves into a series of court records from mid-seventeenth century England regarding provocative speeches, seditious utterances, and incidents in which women engaged. Civil war and revolution destabilized normative concepts of manhood and womanhood, which empowered those who used disaffected and dangerous speech, but also those who regulated it to prescribe acceptable patterns of behavior within their communities. As utterers and regulators, women consciously and unconsciously engaged shifting notions of patriarchal authority and unease over gender and social inversion. In investigating the politics of everyday life, Boswell looks at the potential potency ascribed to women's disaffected and well-affected speech, and how reported speech was tied to larger political discourses about honesty, order, and affection in a world turned upside down. She finds that the reality of female assertiveness represented in examinations reveals tensions over the power of female speech to provoke quarrels and disrupt social relations within an already divided society.

With Caroline Castiglione's 'Why Political Theory is Women's Work: How Moderata Fonte Reclaimed Liberty for Women inside and outside Marriage', we turn from speech to writing, and move from northern to southern Europe. Castiglione analyzes the Venetian author Moderata Fonte's posthumously published dialogue *The Worth of Women* (1600), in which Fonte critiqued the sexist paradigms that deemed women inferior to men. She located specific dangers to women in the institution of matrimony, and articulated her critique of its risks to women by turning to the realm of political ideas, especially to the concept of women's liberty. Women were, according to Fonte, free before marriage and remained free in the marital state, a liberty similar to that of Venice, which was not subject to the commands of any state. The freedom of a wife was not absolute, but neither was that of the husband, who, in Fonte's thinking, was not free to do anything he liked. As Castiglione demonstrates, Fonte's model of marriage was one in which both parties were supposed to gain the co-stewardship of a flourishing domestic enterprise as well as companionship and love, a model that anticipates later

contract theory and that is still deeply contested today, sometimes to the wife's endangerment or even death.

Connections between past and present emerge at greater length in Jennifer Selwyn's "'Wrestling the World from Fools': Teaching Historical Empathy and Critical Engagement in Traditional and Online Classrooms', an essay that takes its title from Patti Smith's 1988 protest song, 'People Have the Power'. Her essay focuses on the pedagogical implications of examining action and agency, as we seek simultaneously to train students in critical inquiry into the past and the skills that this requires, encourage historical empathy that helps them to understand how contemporaries may have experienced those lived pasts, and draw connections with our students between the past and the worlds that we currently inhabit. Selwyn provides suggestions for specific strategies that can be used to do this, from more traditional ones such as novels or simulations to more innovative experiments with letting students anonymously inhabit fictional personae/avatars and then produce extensive written accounts of their life experiences, a pedagogical method that gives students considerable agency, and allows them the opportunity to develop historical imagination. Assignments or whole courses that explicitly draw comparisons between past and present are another way to engage students and cultivate historical empathy, and Selwyn examines several of these, situating these within current debates about presentism.

The three essays in Part III, 'Challenging Representations', examine written and visual works *by* women and representations *of* women that challenged dominant cultural interpretations at the time and continue to do so today. In 'Thinking Beings and Animate Matter: Margaret Cavendish's Challenge to the Early Modern Order of Things', Mihoko Suzuki argues that the English author and scientist Margaret Cavendish challenged early modern culture's dominant conception of the relationship between humans and non-humans, humans and their environment, as well as the inanimate nature of matter. In her poems that dramatize a dialogue among birds and between a tree and a man, Cavendish disputes the unquestioned assumption among her contemporaries that non-human beings exist for the use of man, anticipating recent findings about the intelligence and emotional capacity of birds and the sentience of trees that communicate with and support one another. In other poems concerning the environment and the earth, Suzuki notes, Cavendish anticipates twenty-first century understandings of humans' destructive effects on the environment. Her series of poems on atoms, in which she assigns not only motion, but also agency, to matter, offers parallels with contemporary concepts of 'vibrant matter' and notions that objects or nature have agency. Cavendish's writings about animals,

plants, the environment, and matter led her to challenge the prevailing assumption of the unquestioned superiority and dominion of man over all creation, and to critique man's use and abuse of all other creatures and the natural environment, thus also anticipating recent ecofeminism.

In 'The Agency of Portrayal: The Active Portrait in the Early Modern Period', Saskia Beranek and Sheila ffolliott argue for the agency of another type of non-living object, the portrait. They suggest that the mobility and display of visual and verbal portraits grant affective agency to the objects themselves, in addition to the conventional artistic agency of the patron long studied by art historians. Portraits negotiate between sitter and viewer, but also between viewers in the absence of the sitter in order to create social bonds and cement dynastic claims. Beranek and ffolliott examine how portraits representing women and owned by women established or challenged identities, activated spaces, circulated in familial and economic networks, and functioned in forging alliances. They consider the ways in which networks of portrait collecting and exchange provide a gendered parallel for a more traditional written archive. Using case studies culled from a range of times and places through the early modern period, they argue for a site-specific, viewer-response based method of examining portraits that foregrounds the cultural work accomplished by the object itself.

In 'Marking Female Ocular Agency in the "Medieval Housebook"', Andrea Pearson analyzes an enigmatic figure who is both viewer and viewed, a female figure drawn later by an unidentified party in the so-called 'Medieval Housebook', a well-known manuscript of late medieval Germany, begun c. 1475. In the drawing, the woman looks down from a framed aperture at a military encampment, which Pearson parallels with actual and pictorial female spectatorship at tournaments, where the female gaze was important in the cultural construction of elite masculinity. Thus, she argues, this figure has agency, and operates in contrast to another, more passive female figure—which may have inspired the later drawing—and also to the largely negative characterization of women throughout the volume. Reading the images as point-counterpoint, Pearson asserts, is not simply a strategy for modern scholars seeking to understand the manuscript, but recommended in the 'Housebook' itself. The manuscript encourages readers to develop memory skills by cross-referencing the content and thus invites its consumers to shape meaning across the illustrated folios that present positive and negative male and female behavior.

The three essays in Part IV, 'Forming Communities', focus more fully on a theme touched on in earlier essays, the ways women formed collectivities and networks that create new spaces and routes for writing and action. In



'Claude-Catherine de Clermont: A Taste-Maker in the Continuum of Salon Society', Julie Campbell examines a type of space that has long been recognized as female-dominated: the salon. She analyzes the role of one prominent salonnière, Claude-Catherine de Clermont, *duchesse de Retz* (1543–1603), whose mother-in-law was also known for her literary circle in Lyon during the 1520s and 1530s, and whose young cousin would host the most famous salon of the seventeenth century. As Campbell argues, Retz, too, hosted a group of men and women who engaged in game-playing, conversation, the championing of key vernacular literary styles, and the impulse to escape religiopolitical chaos by taking refuge in regulated conversation spaces. Thus, along with several other sixteenth-century noble and royal women, she cultivated a *société mondaine* that partook of Italian social influence and paved the way for the celebrated salons of the seventeenth century, where the so-called *précieuses* directed polite, cultivated conversation and games, and inspired the invention of the modern novel designed according to women's tastes.

With Sarah Owens' 'Religious Spaces in the Far East: Women's Travel and Writing in Manila and Macao', we explore a trans-oceanic community, that of Sor Magdalena de Cristo (1575–1653), one of the co-founders of the first Franciscan convent in the Philippines and later the co-founder of another convent in Macao, China. Owens examines Sor Magdalena's role as an intrepid traveler and author, but in particular analyzes how she helped form a writing community amongst her peers, assisting her Spanish sisters in cultivating their own religious and literary space in the Far East. Sor Magdalena's story, and that of the women with whom she formed networks and alliances, comes down to us from the friars who accompanied the nuns or who later interviewed them for biographies, but also from the pens of the original nuns who set out to establish the first female Franciscan convent in the Far East. Many of those pens, Owens argues, were inspired by Sor Magdalena, who served as a scribe and collaborator, helping to make sure the literary and missionary contributions of these Spanish women would be recorded.

The final essay, 'Accounting for Early Modern Women in the Arts: Reconsidering Women's Agency, Networks, and Relationships' comes from the interdisciplinary author team of Theresa Kemp, Catherine Powell, and Beth Link. Like earlier authors in this volume, they connect past and present, looking to contemporary social network theory, feminist calls for intervention into history, and conceptions of feminist collectivity to examine several examples of women's involvement in professional arts in the early modern period. They draw from two seventeenth-century case studies, one exploring



the female family enterprise of the Dutch naturalist and illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717) and her daughters and patrons, and the other the role played by the English woman Agnes Henslowe and her daughter Joan Alleyn in the family's entertainment establishments, including the wildly successful Rose Theatre. The authors argue that the study of female agency should not be limited to 'great women', but should also incorporate the social and familial networks of patrons, agents, managers, assistants, and others who allowed the great women (and great men) in their lives to succeed.

The themes in the book's title, action and agency, are not the only ones that connect the essays. Many of the essays focus on material objects, along with representations and imaginings of objects, reflecting the 'material turn' in both history and literary studies. This 'turn' has drawn on material culture studies for methodology and theory about the role of objects and the relationships between things and people in the creation and transformation of society and culture.¹⁰ Through taking tobacco, purchasing a snuffbox, designing and sewing a habit, exchanging portraits, embroidering clothing or decorative objects, drawing exotic insects, or writing about atoms and oak trees, the women in the essays reinforce the point made by Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Tobin, that: 'Women in the process of making and manipulating things were not only engaged in self-definition and identity performance, but were actively engaged in meaning-making practices that involved the construction, circulation and maintenance of knowledge.'¹¹ As the authors in this volume note, examining or re-examining objects and their representations has highlighted ways in which museum and archival collecting and labeling practices, as well as written texts, have hidden women's agency from view.

The self-portrait that we chose for the cover image, by Louise Hollandine of the Palatinate (1622–1709), provides a further example of women's performance through material objects. Louise Hollandine, the granddaughter of Britain's James I and the daughter of Frederick of the Palatinate and Elizabeth Stuart, was born in The Hague after her parents had fled from Prague at the onset of the Thirty Years' War. She began drawing lessons as a child, showing great talent in portraiture. Among her self-portraits was the one on the cover, painted when she was in her late twenties, holding a paint brush and wearing an elegant brooch and necklace, but also a striped shirt and flat multicolored hat. These latter would have been clearly understood

10 For a general theoretical introduction, see Hodder, *Entangled*. For applications to the early modern period, see Hamling and Richardson, *Everyday Objects*.

11 Tobin and Goggin, 'Materializing Women', p. 4.

as ‘gypsy’ apparel at the time, which Louise Hollandine could have found in the printed costume books that were popular reading material. Why she chose to portray herself this way is not known, though portraits and self-portraits in clothing understood as ‘exotic’ were fairly common in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. Louise Hollandine’s life as well as her art also reflects the book’s action and agency theme: to the horror of her staunchly Protestant family, when she was 35 she fled from home in disguise, became a Catholic nun in France, and was appointed abbess of the Cistercian Maubisson Abbey. Here she spent the rest of her long life, painting to the end.

Along with the material turn, several of the essays also reflect history’s ‘emotional turn’—what in literary studies is generally labeled ‘the turn to affect’—which has led scholars to seek to understand the changing meanings and consequences of emotional concepts, expression, and regulation.¹² Individuals in the essays express anger, sadness, jealousy, desire, affection, and other specific emotions, sometimes in ways that fit with established standards, and sometimes in ways that others sought to control or negate. But women also fashioned new emotional norms, an aspect of agency that is only beginning to be studied. As they created informal and formal groups that gave their lives meaning, women tobacco-takers, the Daughters of Charity, women who exchanged portraits and letters, salon hostesses, Franciscan nuns, and others established what Barbara Rosenwein has termed ‘emotional communities’, which she defines as ‘social groups that adhere to the same valuations of emotions and how they should be expressed.’¹³ Part of the historical empathy—itself an emotion—we seek to encourage in our students is thus to help them better understand the emotional communities and concepts of the past.

Norms regarding emotions are not the only type of norms analyzed in the essays. Several of the authors discuss the patriarchal ideas and structures within which early modern women and men operated, but they also provide examples of what Allyson Poska has recently labeled ‘agentic gender norms’, by which she means a parallel set of expectations, shared by women and men alike, in which women were viewed as capable, economically productive, rational, qualified, skilled, and competent. Poska notes that across Europe queens and noblewomen were expected to engage in political activity on behalf of their families, so were educated to do so. In many places women

12 On early modern emotions, see Lynch and Broomhall, *Routledge History of the Emotions in Europe*; Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*.

13 Quoted in Plamper, ‘History of the Emotions’, p. 253.



were given guardianship over children, with full confidence in their capabilities. Laws gave men power over their households, but also limited this, as did inheritance practices and marriage settlements. Women expected to earn a living, and migrated when they could not. Female writers and artists produced works not *despite* patriarchal disapproval, she argues, but because 'early modern society recognized the talents of female artists' and women writers were 'supported by the literary culture of the period'.¹⁴

Many of the essays in this book provide support for Poska's idea: Danish kings chose noblewomen as crown fief holders because they expected the women would administer royal estates effectively; families included looms in trousseaux because they expected women would support their marital families through textile production; printers published works decrying violence against women because they expected these books would sell; people expected women to engage in conversation or arguments about literary or religious issues in mixed social settings (sometimes while dipping snuff); they expected women to be competent financial managers of family business establishments and knowledgeable patrons of the arts. Women thus defied certain social norms, but fulfilled others, what Poska describes as a process of 'making choices about which set of gender norms they acquiesced to and attempted to enforce'.¹⁵

Finally, many of the essays in this book connect with issues that remain of vital importance today, and will only be more so in the future, as we and our students contemplate and shape a post COVID-19 world. Marriage and other intimate relationships remain dangerous for women, as domestic violence and even femicide make 'safer at home' an unattainable goal, not a reality. The pandemic has created a brief hiccup in fossil fuel use and the resultant pollution and climate change, but the human impact on the environment is now far beyond what even Margaret Cavendish's vivid imagination could have envisioned. Empathy, historical or otherwise, remains a difficult quality to cultivate, particularly when showing empathy or even concern for others is ridiculed or described as dangerous. But, as the essays in this book have shown, women of the early modern period—real and imagined—were active agents in unexpected ways and places, and their legacy can inspire those of us who study them. To return to Patti Smith, who always has words that capture the possibilities of confronting power and forming communities: 'The people have the power / To redeem the work of fools.'¹⁶

14 Poska, 'The Case for Agentic Gender Norms'. This article is part of a broader group of reflections, 'Forum: Early Modern Patriarchy'.

15 Ibid., p. 364.

16 Patti Smith, 'People Have the Power', *Dream of Life* (Arista Records, 1988).



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