GENDERING THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN WORLD

Edited by Elizabeth S. Cohen
and Marlee J. Couling

Non-Elite Women's Networks Across the Early Modern World

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Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World

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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Amsterdam University Press

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Introduction

Elizabeth S. Cohen and Marlee J. Couling

Abstract: Non-elite or marginalized women, among them the poor, migrants, members of religious minorities, abused or abandoned wives, and sex workers, have left few records of their experiences. Nevertheless, drawing on varied primary sources, ten essays here reconstruct ways that these doubly invisible early modern women built and used networks and informal alliances to supplement the usual structures of family and community that often let them down. Flexible, ad hoc relationships could provide practical and emotional support for women who faced problems of livelihood, reputation, displacement, and spousal violence. Following other historians, we adapt the concept of networks to bring attention to the social dynamics, agency, and solidarity of these women. The essays range in geography from the eastern Mediterranean to colonial Spanish America and in time from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

Keywords: early modern, non-elite, networks, agency, emotions, women helping women

This collection of essays undertakes to show how women in non-elite or marginalized positions, a doubly invisible but numerous component of the early modern population, built and used a variety of networks to solve problems, to fend for themselves and their associates, and to build solidarities with other women. Our chronology stretches from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. While we cannot claim to explore the entire globe, we have gathered case studies sited in a broad reach of lands extending from the eastern Mediterranean across Europe and the Maghreb and on to colonial Spanish America. The collection's geography includes Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Italy, England, Spain, Mexico, and Guatemala. We meet most of our women in urban settings, cities and towns of varying size that often belonged to imperial domains and brought together a cosmopolitan

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population. Around the Mediterranean, Cairo, Istanbul, Rome, and Venice included ethnic and religious minorities, and in the Americas, Mexico City, and Santiago de Guatemala gathered peoples of varied Indigenous, Black, and European descent. In these early modern cities, many residents were people on the move, and the business of making a new life required networking not only among familiar kinfolk and neighbors but also with strangers. Our protagonists include travelers and migrants: one party from England visited the Ottoman Empire; two small groups migrated from the Levant to Italy; a fictional prostitute from Cordoba went to Rome; and one poor woman, in colonial Guatemala, left the countryside for the city. Some of our women occupied, for all or parts of their lives, more bounded urban communities, such as the ambassadorial households in Turkey, the Coptic neighborhoods of Cairo, or the Venetian Ospedali—custodial institutions that housed, trained, and oversaw the whole lives of some women musicians. Others, such as the sex workers of Venice or ordinary women householders and servants in London, Chester, and Mexico City, created spaces for themselves within the larger fabric of the city. Some further themes connecting these stories across geography—such as spousal violence, prostitution, religion, and gendered patronage—are laid out later in this Introduction.

Our cover illustration and frontispiece, details from a painting by the Dutch artist Pieter Isaacsz from circa 1600, depict many women of diverse social classes busily consulting with each other, and with men, on the public site of the Capitol of the ancient Roman republic.[1] The occasion for these animated conversations comes from a story on "Of Women who are not to be trusted" attributed to the fifth-century Macrobius in the medieval *Gesta Romanorum*. The tale related how Papirius, the young son of a senator, accompanied his father to the council as it debated grave matters. Upon returning home, his mother tried by all means sweet and harsh to make the youth divulge the secret discussions. Steadfastly protecting male political secrecy, he distracted his mother by confiding that they had debated "whether it were more beneficial to the state, that one man should have many wives; or one woman many husbands."[2] Intrigued by the latter possibility, Papirius's mother immediately gathered many women, high and low, to visit the government the next day and to urge that a woman be allowed two husbands rather than a husband two wives. The painting shows this mythic moment in early modern garb. The tale concluded with

1 Plazzotta, "Beccafumi," 562, 564.

2 *Gesta Romanorum*, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Gesta_Romanorum_Vol._II_(1871)/Of_Women_who_are_not_to_be_trusted.

the senators baffled by this unwomanly uproar, until Papirius explained his stratagem and earned the governors' good will. Though intended as an ironic send-up of presumptuous and flighty female agency, we prefer to see an imagining, even in a deeply patriarchal society, of women's ability to raise an energetic and forceful crowd to pursue their own ends, or, more succinctly, to network with their peers.

For networking, non-elite or marginalized women's resources and opportunities ranged greatly. These women carried roles often associated with marital or family relationships and sometimes with local communities, including membership in minorities or marginalized occupations. At the same time, many came to occupy circumstances where they were on their own—away from home, unmarried, abused or abandoned by husbands—and sometimes without a livelihood, even while responsible for children and servants. Whether facing a challenging situation by choice, by accident, or by another person's imposition, the women whom we feature here responded by taking action, small and large. We highlight, in particular, their cultivation and use of human ties based in proximity and sociability and in shared female experiences. Moved by practical needs and by emotions, they worked, often in concert with allies and friends, especially other women, to accomplish personal, material, spiritual, or public ends. These networking connections could go by many names: alliances, friendships, collaborations.[3] We foreground relationships among women, but men, as well as bringing problems, could also provide support. Sometimes our protagonists connected with peers; other times they relied on those of lesser status or drew on the social and economic assets of patrons and superiors. These networks could arise in a momentary crisis or grow slowly over extended association.

In this collection, the editors and authors use the idea of networks to explore and give value to patterns of social behavior in which early modern people, acting individually or in small groups, made connections and exchanges with others in order to respond to trouble or to serve a larger goal. We emphasize women's agency, exercised on different scales, using familiar patterns of social relationships, but also improvising, pressing against normative expectations, and sometimes violating them. We do not overlook the conventional practices and standard structures that shaped lives and experiences, like marriage and kinship, but we seek to uncover purposive social work that happened around and between normal arrangements. These

3 On how historians use these terms, see "HNR Bibliography," vol. 7 (2021) https://historicalnetworkresearch.org/bibliography/.

less formal connections could be critical for people whose gender, material resources, and social situation left them relatively weak.

To locate and describe such gendered networks requires scholarly ingenuity and a variety of primary sources. Non-elite or marginalized women, among them the poor, members of religious minorities, abused wives, and sex workers, have themselves left few records of their experiences. Since only some women could write or dictate texts, of which fewer yet were preserved or published, we must also resort to other documentation, often mediated by male authors and officials, which represents these networks less directly. Much of the broader scholarship on early modern networks has relied on sources that privilege people, predominantly men, with disproportionate access to governmental and military institutions and to property and financial assets, social rank, and education and cultural capital. The many informal connections of less powerful people may be hard to trace in the papers of corporate bodies and formal organizations. Nevertheless, judicial records, variously transcribed and archived, have provided a rich corpus to mine for the lives of the non-elite and for their relationships and networks in particular. Records of court cases do focus on transgressions and conflicts, and thus risk giving a slanted perspective on the human interactions represented. Still, in courts that kept fuller transcriptions, much material tangential to specific crimes and punishments comes up, including information rarely found elsewhere from which we can reconstruct the networking strategies of diverse groups. And, while non-elite people were certainly often disciplined by judicial institutions, these same people used the courts to fight their own battles. Accordingly, judicial records are central to several of our essays. Other authors have found ways to use many other kinds of sources: travel writing, news pamphlets, picaresque stories, hagiography, letters, and administrative paperwork of different sorts.

Turning to the conceptual terms in our title, let us speak first to "non-elite." To embrace the deep precarity of many early modern lives and the recurrent insecurities of social and economic identities, we have adopted a deliberately broad expression. This catch-all label allows us to seek out and attend to a variety of historical actors who, by reason of birth, fragmented family, economic hardship, disability and illness, or displacement, commanded few or uncertain resources. We also incorporate a dimension of time or change, because stressors often were not constant but rather created sudden, sometimes grave, disruptions. Similarly, without engaging the bounded binary—in versus out—implicit in the concept of "margins," we use "marginalized" as a shorthand to suggest people's experience of carrying a long-term or temporary stigmatized identity, or of moving from a position

of relative security to another, ambiguous situation. Even people often viewed as "marginalized," including religious minorities, abused wives, and sex workers, created networks on which they relied in their daily lives and in times of need.

Our title, and introductory description, also highlights the term "networks." As used in modern science, the word designates patterns of nodes of interaction in chains or webs. Taken into social science and then into historical studies, the concept usually suggests patterns of people in relationship and interaction with each other. The vocabulary of early modern authors had no term that corresponds to "networks" in the sense that we use it here. Rather the word is a modern scholar's analytical tool. By posing the question, "what did non-elite networks look like?," we bring into view aspects of ordinary people's social dynamics that could be crucial for them but that may elude our eyes when focused on standard structures like family or on articulated precepts.

Definitions of "networks" as a scholar's tool for early modern studies point to social processes involving meetings or connections made between people for useful purposes, including the circulation of information, goods, and services.[4] In an essay on early modern networks in the *American Historical Review*, Kate Davison recommends the concept particularly for its flexibility and neutrality:

> Its great strength is that it allows historians to handle social structures in a way that embraces [a] dynamic and contingent notion of society [...] The concept of a network is neutral enough to capture relationships across time and space, whether they are characterized by intimate familiarity, distant reserve, outright hostility, or anything in between.[5]

To elaborate on the concept's flexibility, in the context of global activities, networks can stretch widely, crossing geographic boundaries or navigating among several peoples or among many levels of social hierarchy. Or networks can track people operating in local settings and inside social groups. Networks can be large, involving long chains of participants or dense intersections among members, or quite small. They can operate over long periods or flourish briefly and then dissolve. As a framework for representing social processes, the idea of networks can help organize

4 On definitions and parameters of "networks" see Erickson, "Social Networks and History: A Review Essay," and Yale Digital Humanities Lab, https://dhlab.yale.edu/networks/.

5 Davison, "Early Modern Social Networks," 466.

thinking about many activities and dynamics. The concept also lets us look at people less as types than as individuals, bearing layered identities and dealing in specific situations.

In addition to flexibilities, Davison also cites "network" as useful for its neutrality, that is, its invitation to attend to a fuller range of dynamics by "sidestep[ping] the assumption [...] that people interacted in neighborhoods, kin groups, or other bounded solidarities."[6] This statement alludes to a related term for social engagement, "community." This latter concept has tended to homogenize social actors with an emphasis on common values and the pursuit of social cohesion within a defined group. For example, in the context of marital violence, Elizabeth Foyster defines communities as "collections of people who shared similar ideas and values. They thus had a moral identity, as well as any social function." Thus, for Foyster, communities had collective social, cultural, and spatial identities. She stresses the force of proximity and of shared experiences between community members in creating local coherence. People who belonged and did their part could draw more readily on others.[7] In this model, not everyone was alike or held the same views, but community well-being rested on the active maintenance of common values and conventional behaviors. A networks approach offers more room for relationships that ignore or challenge the mandated common good.

Of particular interest for this volume, the scholarship on community in early modern cities has over time moved in the direction of networks. In early modern cities, where men and women were often on the move, the older paradigm of cohesive, self-policing communities faced difficulties. In urban settings, how did communities manage boundaries and processes of inclusion and exclusion? Older narratives argued that migration to urban centers meant that community ties were weaker, or non-existent.[8] Away from kin and homeplace, migrant women, especially, were isolated and vulnerable. Challenging these expectations, however, historians have instead pointed to economic necessity and living at close quarters, including in service, as counters to urban anonymity.[9] Seen another way, city life might give women greater independence so that they had both greater need and greater opportunity to defend themselves verbally and physically. In a much-cited book, Katherine A. Lynch argues further that in urban circumstances the

6 Davison, "Early Modern Social Networks," 466.

7 Foyster, *Marital Violence*, 203–04.

8 For example, see Hurl-Eamon, *Gender and Petty Violence*, 7.

9 Griffiths, *Lost Londons*, 69, 70–71. Griffiths argues that, while high migration made the city "somewhat faceless," individuals and families often stayed in the same parish for extended periods.

distance from close kin led not to isolation but rather to building community through various forms of extra-familial bonds. In her view, such built communities, broadly defined, "complement or even fulfill some of the fundamental missions that families have historically provided, such as a place to live, assistance in times of need, and a sense of identity."[10] For women, such fictive kinship and community relationships extended their domestic responsibilities to roles outside the household. In Lynch, we see the intersection of the concepts of "community" and what we are calling "networks," that Couling elaborates in her research.

From a now large and varied historiography using "networks," we offer a few examples to contextualize our particular take on networks for non-elite early modern women. An important strand of scholarship on the premodern world has used the concept of networks to characterize long distance exchanges of goods and information and relationships between people scattered in space. With correspondence as a principal source, studies have illuminated commerce, diasporas, and the intellectual republics of letters. For example, the Mediterranean region has provided a prime site in works by Francesca Trivellato and by Peter Miller.[11] In these studies, the reliance on letters privileged the better educated and those of some economic means. Recently, large digital projects have taken network studies into another dimension. Projects such as "Mapping the Republic of Letters," "Six Degrees of Francis Bacon," and the "Royal African Company Networks" have adopted new technologies, such as data mapping, in order to study personal and corporate correspondence.[12] Borrowing from science and technology, techniques for marshaling big data into network diagrams have also illuminated other historical themes including demography, literacy, mobility, and work.[13] For example, "Angoulême in 1764" uses parish and civic records to map connections between individuals and families in an eighteenth-century French town.[14] On a smaller scale, Stephanie Leone and Paul Vierthaler mapped the networks of architects, artisans, and laborers

10 Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities*, 1–2 and 104–05.

11 Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers*; Miller, *Peiresc's Mediterranean*.

12 "Mapping the Republic of Letters," http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/index.html; "Six Degrees of Francis Bacon," http://www.sixdegreesoffrancisbacon.com/?ids=10000473&min_confidence=60&type=network; "Royal African Company Networks," https://racnetworks.wordpress.com/.

13 Some examples of works which discuss the evolution and uses of networks approaches in big data and social sciences, see Newman, *Networks: An Introduction*, and Easley and Kleinberg, *Networks, Crowds, and Markets*.

14 "Angoulême in 1764," revised 2021, https://histecon.fas.harvard.edu/visualizing/angouleme/index.html.

needed to build Pope Innocent X's palace in seventeenth-century Rome.[15] These latter inquiries notably incorporate non-elite participants and show networks that crossed social strata.

Meanwhile, several studies by medievalists have investigated the kinds of networks that we pursue here—mostly local and centered on women. For France, Sharon Farmer lays out the conjunction of gender and poverty of urban women's experiences in Paris.[16] In the regional framework of Provence, Kathryn L. Reyerson uses the metaphor of networks to reconstruct the life and local engagements of a merchant wife and, later, widow.[17] For various localities in Iberia, with its mix of different religious groups, several essays in the collection, *Women and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*, also make fruitful use of networks.[18]

For the early modern period, scholarship that thinks about women making connections is evolving. Featuring mostly those with elite material and cultural resources, older studies often figure female participation in relation to male models and institutions. Carol Pal, for example, has put women into the usually male "republic of letters."[19] Other works, *without* using the networks concept, describe prominent, elite women engaged in high level exchanges largely with men. Gracia Mendes Nasi, a sixteenth-century Sephardic Jew and conversa, and perhaps the wealthiest woman of her times, was an exceptional female participant in the diasporic, commercial world of the Mediterranean.[20] Another case were the hostesses who presided over seventeenth-century French salons, alternate spaces for social, intellectual and literary conversation largely, though not exclusively, among men.[21] More recently, however, scholars have addressed women and networks more directly. While using sources from literate middling and upper-class women, Amanda Herbert has offered an innovative exploration of distinctively female patterns of friendship and alliance.[22] In a quite different approach, non-elite women as a group have also figured in a study of syphilis in Venice, where Laura McGough, in a chapter entitled "A Network of Lovers," argues for a generalized real contagion rather than a culturally-constructed association primarily with prostitutes.[23]

15 Leone and Vierthaler, "Innocent X Pamphilj."
16 Farmer, "Down and Out."
17 Reyerson, *Women's Networks*.
18 Armstrong-Partida, et al., *Women and Community*.
19 Pal, *Republic of Women*.
20 Birnbaum, *Long Journey*.
21 Craveri, *Age of Conversation*.
22 Herbert, *Female Alliances*.
23 McGough, *Gender, Sexuality and Syphilis*, 17–44.

Finally, we turn to the essays in our collection that demonstrate the great variety of places and social settings where we see networks in play. To introduce the case studies, we offer a roster of the general dimensions of people's activities and resources that networks, in all their agility, might engage.

1. Material and economic resources. For example, a) what a person had or lacked; b) what they wanted; c) what capacities they had to mobilize and exchange assets, including illicitly.

2. Social resources. For a given person, a) what social relationships were available through household, kinship, neighborhood, employment, patronage, and homeplace; b) what opportunities were there to activate other relationships through social affinities such as gender and occupation; c) was it possible to navigate up and down hierarchies; d) what skills did someone have to initiate new connections with strangers.

3. Cultural resources. To help establish identities and legitimate social claims, a) what shared knowledge and cultural repertoires of values, motivations, and emotions were available; b) were organized affiliations such as religion or guild useful.

4. Space and terrain: a) how, including in cities, was space accessible, or not, for different sorts of people; b) were people operating locally, on familiar turf with the possibility of proximity supporting relationships; c) moving long distances and into new territories, as many people did, how did they cope with displacement, sometimes repeatedly.

While our volume is organized to represent its geographic range and variety, here we offer other groupings to highlight thematic connections. We first signal studies of ordinary women's efforts to manage and counter men's injuries to them. For two settings far apart in geography and culture, Marlee Couling for England and Jacqueline Holler for Mexico track women's deployment of female alliances to cope with the strains of spousal violence and marriage breakdown. Using judicial sources, both authors emphasize how proximity and shared experience shaped women's agency. For London and Chester, Couling elaborates on her earlier publication on servants to track the strategies of female kin and neighbors in helping dangerously abused and neglected wives.[24] These efforts ranged from emotionally and materially supporting the women to the verbal shaming of their husbands and occasionally even physical intervention against them. In a discussion of spousal violence in colonial Latin America, where legal authorities, both ecclesiastical and secular,

24 Couling, "'She Would Long Since Have Been Starved'."

failed in their duty, Holler shows how, as in England, in Mexico City, local women—mothers-in-law, *comadres*, and "wall neighbors"—stepped in. Exchanging legal knowledge and practicing strategies of mockery and even magic, allied women worked to defend against men's violence and neglect.

In essays by Min Ji Kang and Saundra Weddle, sex workers, the classic women transgressors of early modern European cities, are the social agents. Using very different kinds of sources, these two studies show how prostitutes, rather than being excluded from their local environments, used social relationships to occupy urban spaces and to carry on their work. Drawing on picaresque literature from early sixteenth-century Spain, Kang explores representations of shared eating and drinking in taverns and other public settings where feisty prostitutes sometimes supported one another, and other times maneuvered for personal advantage. For Venice, Weddle has assembled a large bank of data from printed and archival documents in order to reconstruct the interactive urban place-making and local mobilities associated with the sex trade. On the one hand, fixed sites, such as dwellings, inns, brothels, and bathhouses, and urban pathways, such as streets, canals, quays, bridges, porticos, and piers, shaped human movement and activity. On the other, despite regulation and stigma, sex workers, procuresses, gondoliers, and others involved in the transgressive trade made parts of the city very much their own.

To bring non-European women into the light, three essays pose questions from unusual angles to elite and governmental sources. Bernadette Andrea re-reads the well-studied letters of Mary Wortley Montagu, the British ambassador's wife, as well as those of other diplomats in Turkey in a search for the diverse serving women who worked in their households. These small, quite closed female communities brought imported British servants together with local women, often Christians, and even, perhaps, slaves. In sixteenth-century Cairo, the minority Coptic community worked to protect their religious identities but also to fit in with the Muslim majority. Shauna Huffaker's study, excavating the records of urban administration, uses gendered naming practices to provide glimpses of otherwise shadowed women. While for Coptic men names asserted Christian distinction, for Coptic women, who, like their Muslim peers, lived largely in domestic seclusion, names reflected a broader Egyptian culture of femininity. Brianna Leavitt-Alcantara's contribution takes us far to the west to Santiago de Guatemala, the colonial capital of Central America. There an early eighteenth-century Spanish cleric penned a hagiography in praise of Anna Guerra de Jesús, a poor, countrywoman, a migrant to

the city, soon abandoned by her husband. While supporting her children as a single mother, she cultivated devotional networks with lay women like herself, with mixed-sex religious confraternities, and with priests. Anna and her peers positioned themselves in the eyes of the global Catholic church as a agents of a vibrant, spiritual Renaissance of female mysticism and affective piety.

The remaining three essays involve women whose success in securing a future for themselves depended on navigating, with the help of other women, male patronage. In case studies by Cristelle Baskins and by Elizabeth Cohen, in the late sixteenth century two Greek women, each with a distinctive story, traversed the Mediterranean and arrived in Rome as foreigners with scant means of support. Although the newcomers found few lay compatriots to ease their landing, they benefited from papal generosity toward the worthy poor. Baskins reconstructs from news pamphlets the story of a refugee woman's brief celebrity as the "Queen of Algiers." Captured with her mother by Ottoman sailors and taken to North Africa, Anna was made to convert and marry a Muslim official. Fifteen years later, with help from Catholic redemptorists, Anna arranged to flee her husband and Algeria, taking along her mother, two daughters, and many retainers, including slaves. Feted in Rome, she received funds from the pope, who also assigned noblewomen to oversee her re-education as a Christian. The pope's death, however, left the women in straitened circumstances. Elizabeth Cohen's essay follows a young Greek woman, Despina Basaraba, who migrated voluntarily with her husband and son from Istanbul to Rome. Through an intricate web of negotiations detailed in a later criminal trial, Despina secured papal and private patronage. Two years later, however, abandoned by her husband, and inadvertently embroiled in the politics of the papal household, her fortunes collapsed. In contrast to these far travelers, Vanessa Tonelli describes, for a tighter, highly organized setting, the lives of professional women musicians associated with the Venetian Ospedali in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As sometimes lifelong members of these institutions, individual women had to network internally with male administrators and teachers, and sometimes also outside with family and with noble patrons and employers, both women and men.

Early modern historians have recently put the concept of networks to work in a variety of ways. In this collection, we adopt a broad version of the term in order to seek out informal and ad hoc strategies in the social agency of non-elite and marginalized women. While the precarity of early modern life touched everyone, it left these women sharply exposed.

As they wrestled with misfortunes and aspired to better their lots, their resources varied, but material assets and family were often lacking. For these reasons, occasional and impromptu networks with other women, and sometimes with men, were especially important. Neither non-elite women nor their informal relationships are easy to track in early modern sources. The concept of networks, however, invites our authors to seek out these elusive histories. Many of our examples focus on local settings, where proximity provided opportunities for women to create new relationships. Women shared gendered experiences that supported not only the habits of community life, but also ad hoc connections that addressed individuals' urgent or irregular predicaments. Need motivated these alliances but so did emotions like empathy and affection. Although life remained hard for many, the networks that these essays rescue from the shadows help account for the resilience and success of some non-elite or marginalized women.

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