



Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity. Merry Wiesner-Hanks. Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 312 pp. €108.99.

This useful and stimulating volume brings together thirteen essays first presented at the 2018 Attending to Early Modern Women conference, titled "Action and Agency." In a businesslike introduction, Wiesner-Hanks ties the chapters together thematically and lays out contemporary critiques of the concept of agency, a notion that continues to reverberate through much work in the study of women of the past. Wiesner-Hanks proposes the concept of activism as a useful alternative to agency, to reframe questions about women's autonomy or action in society. Activism is here taken to encompass women who wrote or spoke in defiance of authority, whether domestic, political, or institutional. More specific than agency, activism nonetheless shares some of its features. Some of the book's chapters engage more directly with this debate than others, but all of the contributions reflect on the problem from a variety of disciplinary and geographic perspectives.

Women activists feature in several chapters on intellectual and literary history. Caroline Castiglione studies Moderata Fonte's dialogue in *The Worth of Women* (1600), on women's rights before and during marriage, emphasizing Fonte's position that women may complain to abusive husbands or even leave the marriage if necessary. She shows that Fonte's feminism, already noted as revolutionary by Victoria Cox and others, was deeply political and specifically Venetian in its framing. Caroline Boswell, in a piece on women's slanderous or seditious speech during the English Civil War and Revolution, notes how the larger conversation around political authority shifted and thus opened new spaces for women during this period of disruption. Mihoko Suzuki's ecocritical reading of Margaret Cavendish's poems about animals, like Castiglione's contribution, singles out a learned female author challenging the assumptions of her field.

A good number of the contributions focus on material culture or object history and show women owning, trading, manipulating, and creating things. Angela McShane's fascinating and deeply researched chapter on snuffboxes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain and North America shows that women dipping snuff, while rarely acknowledged in pictures, literature, or even in today's museum catalogs, was widespread and "a primary source of feminine cultural capital" (35) for elite women such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Briefer contributions discuss the objects in Bolognese artisan women's trousseaux; French nuns' choice of habits; and English women's embroidery of biblical scenes, especially of Queen Esther. Most of these pieces furnish examples of female efforts to control their environment, or comment on it.

Embodying the ATW conference's longstanding inclusion of pedagogical discussion alongside the scholarly, Jennifer Selwyn's piece on classroom innovations meditates insightfully on how to balance the demands of empiricism with the historian's

skepticism, while overcoming our professional distaste for presentism and gamification in order to reach today's students. Grethe Jacobsen's valuable and well-documented "Female Crown Fief Holders in Denmark" takes a different tack from most of the rest of the volume, hearkening to the scholarly tradition of locating women who routinely governed, ruled, or otherwise took action in the normal course of events. She shows that Danish noblewomen commonly inherited crown fiefs and retained them for life, quietly administering justice as required by the office, receiving the fees, and paying the expenses, even as advice books and funeral sermons never mention these roles.

Networks and network theory supply another recurring theme. Julie Campbell finds the roots of the eighteenth-century *salonnières* in the sixteenth-century French court; Saskia Beranek and Sheila Ffolliott study the reception and exchange of portraits by and of women; and Sarah Owens takes a global turn, studying the travels of Spanish nuns who established Franciscan convents in Macao and Manila. Finally, art historians Theresa Kemp, Catherine Powell, and Beth Link wrestle productively with social network theory and with how to define women's agency in a way that avoids the trap of replacing great men with great women. This final essay provides a fitting, forward-looking challenge to the community of scholars of early modern women.

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