Women and Reformation in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries: A Historiographical Lacuna

Christine Kooi

Christine Kooi is Price Professor of European History at Louisiana State University. A specialist in the religious history of the early modern Low Countries, her most recent book is *Reformation in the Low Countries, 1500-1620* (Cambridge 2022).

Abstract

The history of women and their experiences of Reformation in the sixteenth-century Low Countries remains largely unexplored territory, especially compared to the rest of Europe and to the seventeenth century. Why this is the case is something of a puzzle, though it may have to do with available source material. Since the 1980s a handful of works has been published on the subject, mostly falling along confessional lines, with Anabaptist women receiving by far the most scholarly attention. Reformed and Catholic women have received comparatively less attention. This article surveys the current historiography on women's experience of religious change in the Habsburg Low Countries and offers some suggestions for future research.

Keywords: women, Reformation, Anabaptists, Reformed Protestantism, Catholicism, historiography

DOI 10.51750/emlc.23013 - URL: http://www.emlc-journal.org
Publisher: Stichting EMLC

Women and Reformation in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries: A Historiographical Lacuna

Christine Kooi

Madaleena, a widow living in the city of Leiden in the late 1590s, was a veteran of the religious upheavals that had afflicted the Low Countries for most of the century. Her first husband Hubrecht Ghijs, a Fleming from a village northwest of Ypres, was arrested by the Inquisition in 1561. His wife managed to escape capture, but Hubrecht died a martyr's death in late 1561 in the town of Veurne in western Flanders, burned at the stake by the authorities for his adherence to Reformed Protestantism.[1] Madaleena eventually married again, but the regime of the Duke of Alba, military governor of the Netherlands in the period 1567-1573, hanged her second husband, presumably under the authority of the Council of Troubles set up by his regime to suppress rebellion and heresy. She then married and was widowed a third time, and now, in her dotage, she lived in Leiden, a refugee from the terrible confessional wars that had ravaged her native Flanders.

This, at least, was the story that Madaleena told in a four-page letter to the elders and ministers, or consistory, of the Reformed church of Leiden, of which she was a member. Because of her poverty she had been living in the Saint Elizabeth Hospital, a charity run by the city to house indigent Leideners, but she abruptly left it after a mere eight months' residence. The consistory reprimanded her and insisted she return, and so in August 1597 she wrote it a long letter defending her departure. The hospital's regentesses, she complained, were allowing Catholic worship to take place on its grounds; a priest came into the hospital and celebrated mass there daily. Furthermore, some residents were permitted to engage in various Catholic practices, such as wearing sooty crosses on the forehead on Ash Wednesday and waving palm branches on Palm Sunday. 'Papist' activity was everywhere in the hospital. What was worse, however, was that the regentesses sometimes kept devout Reformed Protestant residents like Madaleena from attending weekday prayer services in the Reformed church; they could only visit church for the Sunday sermon. Catholic inhabitants mocked and derided the city's Reformed congregation 'with as much scandal and faithlessness as came into their heads'.[2] They taunted and bullied her personally, calling her names like 'sorceress' and 'devil'. Madaleena endured the situation as long as she

1 Decavele, *Dageraad*, 421, including fn. 584.

2 Leiden, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken (hereafter ELO), Stadsarchief Leiden (hereafter SAL) 3419a, Madaleena to Leiden Consistory, 22 August 1597: 'alle schandale en[de] cleenicheyt zoo vele haer inden sin quam zeyden zij.'

could, but eventually felt compelled to leave the hospital. Living there was intolerable, and the consistory was wrong to demand that she return to the almshouse. 'For the sake of my witness to Jesus Christ I have had to flee and suffer great tyranny; […] through the grace of God our Father I have followed the Lamb wherever it went', she averred.[3] Ordering her, because of her age and indigence, to return to 'a place where the Lamb is so mocked and scorned' did not seem to her to be an act of brotherly love, 'but', she added tartly, 'I will let the brethren be the judge of that'.[4]

For someone like Madaleena, who had been a committed Reformed Protestant for at least thirty years, suffering great loss because of it, and who now lived in a state, the Dutch Republic, where Catholic worship was supposed to be outlawed, it was clearly all too much. To her, Catholics were the great confessional enemy: 'members of the devil' (*lidmaten des duvels*) who conspired against every pious 'member of Christ' (*lidtmaet Christi*). That these threats to the 'true' church (that is, hers) were permitted to spread their poison inside her communal home violated her religious sensibilities, as well as the officially Reformed identity of the country in which she had sought refuge; in short, she claimed, the Catholics had driven her out of the almshouse. That the Reformed leadership was ordering her to go back to such a place was clearly unthinkable to her. In defending herself she played every card she knew: her age, her gender, her poverty, her piety, her refugee status, and her long history of religious persecution. Unwilling to go back to the hospital, she asked the brethren instead to write her up a letter of attestation so that she could leave the city and find another congregation that would support her, 'because God will not abandon me in my need'. If the consistory refused to help her, then 'I speak as Sarai who told Abram, may the Lord judge between you and me' (Genesis 16:5). In response, the consistory handed her letter over to the Leiden magistrates and asked them to investigate the matter; there is unfortunately no record of what they may have found.[5]

Madaleena's biography, from her early days as a persecuted Reformed Protestant in Flanders to her feisty skirmish with the Reformed consistory of Leiden in old age, can serve as a microhistory of the larger tableau of religious change in the Low Countries during the sixteenth century, with its themes of dissent, persecution, migration, exile, and sectarianism. Hers is also a rare instance of a woman's voice coming from the sources and is therefore all that much more valuable for its singularity. The gendered quality of Madaleena's account of her life as a faithful Reformed Protestant, however self-serving that narrative may be, provides a glimpse into how sixteenth-century Netherlandish women experienced and negotiated religious and political change. She tried to parlay her identity as pious wife and widow in order to prove her bona fides to male ecclesiastical authorities

3 ELO, SAL 3419a, Madaleena to Leiden Consistory, 22 August 1597: 'Hebbe ick omme de ghetuyghenesse Jesu Christi wille moeten vluchten ende met grooter tijerannye v[er]volcht ghewheest […] zoo hebbe ick door de ghenade Gods onses Vaders het Lam ghevolcht waer het henen ghegaen es.'

4 ELO, SAL 3419a, Madaleena to Leiden Consistory, 22 August 1597: 'in een plaetse daer het Lam alzoo bespot en[de] v[er]smaet es […] dat late ick den broederen oordeelen.'

5 ELO, SAL 3419a, Madaleena to Leiden Consistory, 22 August 1597: 'Want God en zal my ijn mynen noot nyet v[er]laten, maer ick spreke met Sara die zeyde jeghens Abraham de Heere zy een rechter tusschen my en[de] u.' See also Kooi, *Liberty*, 183.

as a way to gain their favour. She certainly was not the first early modern woman to do this, nor was she the last.

The Reformation in in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century is a much-studied historical subject, and the history of its interpretation is nearly as old as the event itself, of which Madaleena's voice is but a small part.[6] There is, however, a curious lacuna in its long historiography: the amount of scholarly attention devoted to the experiences of women in this particular time and place is strikingly small. The historiography of the Netherlandish Reformation has certainly tracked with Reformation historiography more generally, with all its attendant interpretive iterations through the last four centuries, from the sectarian to the social.[7] But the use of gender by scholars as an interpretive lens on the subject has been more limited in scope, even though it has been well-established that women were very active in the various religious movements of the sixteenth century. Compared to the literature on women and Reformation in the region's immediate neighbours – England, France, and the Holy Roman Empire, where historians have examined and continue to examine sixteenth-century women's experience in substantial detail – Netherlandish women have suffered scholarly neglect. Furthermore, in contrast to their seventeenth-century sisters, the religious experiences of Netherlandish women in the 1500s have been examined only in patches. Since the early 1980s, a small number of historians have produced a handful of studies on the subject, mostly articles rather than monographs, but they pale in comparison to the mountains of books and articles written about French, English, and German women and religious change. There is no study of female domestic religiosity, for example, comparable to Lyndal Roper's *The Holy Household*, or even a general survey such as Susan Broomhall's *Women and Religion in Sixteenth-Century France*.[8] Of course, large European language areas have always had far more sources (and resources) to analyse and study than a small region like the Low Countries.

Why this is the case is something of a puzzle. Thanks to second-wave feminism, women's and gender history have existed as robust fields of inquiry since the 1970s. Historians of the Netherlands and Belgium have been engaged participants in the production of scholarship in these fields for all time periods, from medieval to modern, though with particular concentration on the early modern and modern eras.[9] Yet even within the early modern era, roughly 1500 to 1800, the bulk of the scholarship has focused on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the relative neglect of the sixteenth. Netherlandish women's religious lives in the seventeenth century, the so-called 'Golden Age', has garnered much more attention than those of the preceding century.[10] This may have to do with the abundance of sources; there is, to be sure, more material to be had the closer one comes to the present; sixteenth-century sources are less plentiful and more scattered. Thus

6 This essay uses the term 'Reformation' as an umbrella category for the whole of religious change that affected sixteenth-century Latin Christendom, not just the emergence of various Protestant Christianities.

7 For an overview of this historiography, see Soen, 'Which'.

8 The literature outside the Low Countries is too large to be cited here, but notable monographs include: Roper, *Holy*; Leonard, *Nails*; Crawford, *Women*; Broomhall, *Women*.

9 Grever, 'Verborgen'; Kloek, *Wie hij zij*, 9-15.

10 Some important examples include Monteiro, *Geestelijke*; Harline, *Burdens*; Pipkin, *Dissenting*; De Baar, *'Ik moet spreken'*.

at least part of the reason for the lacuna appears to be source-driven. Another reason may be the historically denominational nature of Reformation historiography in this region, a characteristic that persisted until well into the postwar era; (male) church historians intent on proving orthodoxy had little interest in notions such as gender. Perhaps the splitting of the Low Countries into two states by 1600 and the concomitant evolution of two distinct traditions of national history (Belgian and Dutch), each with their attendant separate scholarly infrastructures (universities, libraries, and archives), have also contributed to this concentration on later periods. In sum, when compared both to other regions in Europe and to later centuries, sixteenth-century Netherlandish women's religious history has received rather short shrift.[11]

The State of the Field

One of the earliest and most important publications on this subject was Sherrin Marshall's path-breaking 1984 article on women and religious choice in the sixteenth-century Netherlands. In it she offered a brief but provocative survey of the opportunities for Netherlandish women to be religious actors across the confessional spectrum, whether Anabaptist, Reformed, or Catholic. Focusing principally on noblewomen, Marshall argued that, in the first three-quarters of the sixteenth century at least, it was possible for women to exercise some degree of choice and agency when it came to their religious allegiance, even though that choice sometimes came with serious social and legal consequences. But by the century's end, she concluded, as confessional boundaries hardened and institutions solidified, women's room to manoeuvre had been drastically reduced.[12]

Marshall's pioneering article was a welcome breakthrough, particularly its ambitious multiconfessional approach and its mining of sources for (elite) women's voices. The subsequent literature, however, has tended to divide its focus along the three major confessional boundaries: Anabaptist, Reformed, and Catholic women are generally examined separately. To some extent this is a relic of an old tradition of Reformation historiography being written by its various sectarian partisans. It also has to do with the available sources, which tend to vary in nature and extent depending on the confession, and with the highly variegated nature of each confession's religious experiences. Since these boundaries really only started to solidify late in the sixteenth century, this confessional approach has sometimes overstated the degree of difference among the reforming movements, especially Protestants. The lines among the women and men calling for religious change were on the whole much more fluid than later sectarian literature has suggested. Certainly, the Habsburg authorities saw only heresy and not doctrinal distinctions.

11 Kloek, 'De Reformatie'. This article, a survey of the historiography of women and Reformation generally, has nothing to say about the specific case of the Low Countries.

12 Marshall, 'Women'. Judith Pollmann added a necessary corrective to this conclusion, pointing out that, in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic at least, women still had religious choices within its multiconfessional society: Pollmann, 'Women', 162.

Nevertheless, the confessional approach has yielded valuable information about women's experiences of religious reform. Of the three confessional streams, Anabaptist women, including their Mennonite and *doopsgezind* offshoots, have received the most sustained and extensive attention in the historiography. In terms of numbers Anabaptists took by far the greatest brunt of the inquisitorial prosecution that the Habsburg government employed to suppress heresy. Consequently, the Anabaptists were the first among Netherlandish dissenters to develop a martyrological tradition. That tradition included many stories of women, as well as men, who heroically died for their faith at the hands of the state; in fact, women figure more frequently in Anabaptist martyr tales than any other Protestant martyrological tradition – some 20-30 percent, compared to 5-10 percent for Reformed collections.[13] The fact that these martyrs' stories featured women so frequently no doubt added to their shock value; highlighting the judicial cruelty directed towards women, whom sixteenth-century patriarchy deemed weaker than men, was intended to strengthen the resolve of Mennonite readers. Thanks to these martyrologies, Anabaptists are the single largest group of sixteenth-century Netherlandish dissenting women that historians have thus far examined.

In the 1980s and 1990s several articles were published that put Netherlandish Anabaptist women on the map, as it were. Virtually all of them were based on the same sources, *The Sacrifice of the Lord* and *The Martyrs' Mirror*, two influential Mennonite martyrologies published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively. These early articles were mostly descriptive in nature, making these women visible to a wider readership, in many cases for the first time. The earliest of these articles, written by Ineke van' t Spijker in 1985 and John Klassen in 1986, argued that the Mennonite martyrologies reveal Anabaptist women as dynamic and eloquent spiritual actors, albeit entirely within the context of home and family.[14] Even a dissenting movement as radical as Anabaptism still adhered to traditional, patriarchal gender roles; women could be exemplary martyrs, but they did not serve in any way as formal leaders. Lucille Marr noted in 1986 that Anabaptist women may have been peers in the faith, but they remained subordinate in marriage, at least according to the prescriptions of their male prophets.[15] Jennifer Reed's examination of the martyrologies revealed deep affective bonds between wives and husbands, but still within the parameters of a hierarchical marriage.[16] Auke Jelsma likewise underscored that the martyrologies established a spiritual equality between Anabaptist women and men, but not a legal or social one.[17] This interest in equality, or the lack of it, perhaps reflected the preoccupations of the era of second-wave feminism in which these articles were written. If these scholars were hoping to find feminists *avant la lettre*, they were bound to be disappointed.

In addition to increasing their visibility, the early historiography on Anabaptist women published in the 1980s and 1990s had a faintly laudatory air; female Mennonite martyrs

13 Jelsma, *Frontiers*, 85.
14 Van' t Spijker, 'Huysvrouwe'; Klassen, 'Women'.
15 Marr, 'Anabaptist'.
16 Reed, *Dutch Anabaptist*, 77-80.
17 Jelsma, 'Positie', 36.

were 'heroines' and 'pioneers' who evinced praiseworthy spiritual fortitude.[18] The initial historiographical recovery of sixteenth-century Netherlandish Anabaptist women could thus sometimes also come across as at least slightly hagiographical. This tendency may have been a consequence of the nature of the principal source material; martyrologies, of course, functioned in the service of piety rather than of history. It may also have been a reflection of second-wave feminism, which sought to recover the female heroines of the past. The early literature putting Anabaptist women on the map fit in with the then-current historiography, found in the work of notable historians such as Roland Bainton and Steven Ozment, that argued that the Protestant Reformation represented an advancement for women on the whole and that therefore tended to focus on 'women worthies'.[19] On the one hand, most of this early literature from the 1980s and 1990s concluded that Anabaptism did not advance the position or status of Netherlandish women in any tangible way, but, on the other hand, by shining a spotlight on these women martyrs it did continue the scholarly focus on exemplary women.

Still, this work of recovery was necessary and important. More recent analyses of Netherlandish Anabaptist women have cast a more nuanced eye over their subject, including a more careful consideration of the martyrologies themselves as sources. A good example of this newer scholarship is Nicole Grochowina's 2014 essay on images of women in the sixteenth-century Mennonite martyrology *The Sacrifice of the Lord* (published in eleven editions between 1562 and 1599), which analyses its stories through the lens of gender relations. She found a tension between the book's overall portrayal of spiritual equality between men and women (i.e., that women were capable of heroically dying for their faith) and its reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Theological questions played a prominent role in the testimonies of male martyrs, Grochowina observed, while female martyrs' accounts were couched in simpler terms of sentiment, steadfastness, and family love. This contrast was of course intended to reinforce gender hierarchies, reminding women of their station while at the same time encouraging their piety.[20] The distinguished Anabaptist scholar Gary Waite has likewise examined images of Anabaptist women, especially their similarities to depictions of witches during the early modern witch hunts. Just like witches, Anabaptist women could be seen as members of a fearful diabolical sect, and male fears of assertive female heretics would feed growing fears of female witches in the next century.[21] These shifts away from mostly descriptive accounts of Netherlandish Anabaptist women to cultural analyses of the role gender played in their depiction suggest a further sophistication of the historiography. There is less concern for either equality or heroism, and instead an analysis of the ways in which gender shaped sources and the ways in which those sources reinforced patriarchal norms.

The sources for women who joined the Reformed Protestant movement in the Low Countries, which first arose in the 1550s and 1560s, are more diffuse than of their

18 Packull, 'Anna'; Snyder and Hecht (eds.), *Profiles*, 247-405; Joldersma and Grijp, '*Elisabeth's*'; Sprunger, 'God's', 66.

19 Wiesner-Hanks, 'Women', 1.

20 Grochowina, 'Images'.

21 Waite, 'Naked', 51.

Anabaptist sisters. We know from anecdotal evidence that women were already active members of the Reformed movement in the 1540s: Idelette de Bure, the wife of John Calvin, came from Liège, and the polemicist Marie Dentière started her religious career as an abbess in Tournai. Sources, however, are harder to find; Reformed martyrologies, as noted above, did not highlight female victims nearly as much as their Mennonite equivalents.

As was the case with the literature on Anabaptist women, earlier scholarship on Reformed women was primarily concerned with recovering their experience. Because of their social status, we likely know more about noblewomen than any other individual women in the Netherlandish Reformed movement. In a 1969 article the Belgian scholar Johan Decavele brought to light the efforts by the noblewoman Katharina van Boetzelaer to patronise the Reformed movement in Flanders during the 'wonder year' of 1566. Van Boetzelaer exploited her extensive kinship networks among the Netherlandish nobility to provide aid to the Reformed cause, including hosting worship services on her estates and subsidising Reformed preachers. Decavele saw this as an instance of what he termed 'elite Protestantism', somewhat akin to patronage of the Huguenots among the French nobility.[22] Sherrin Marshall similarly analysed how noblewomen of all ranks were well-placed to offer all kinds of material and social support to Reformed dissenters.[23] Jos Venner mined the archives of various communities in the Meuse river valley in Brabant and Limburg to describe the activities of women in the Reformed movement in the 1560s and 1570s; here, too, local noblewomen appear to have played an important role in supporting Reformed activities.[24] These early articles highlight the pivotal role social status played in Netherlandish women's experience of Reformation, as well as what we know about it. Noblewomen enjoyed legal protections and privileges that allowed them a greater degree of agency and religious choice, and consequently their presence in the sources is much greater. The question this visibility raises is of course how exceptional or typical the religious experiences of elite women were. Social class, as these studies indicate, was an important influence on religious agency.

For more ordinary Reformed women, we can get some information from the legal records of the Habsburg persecution of Protestants, and, starting in 1572, when congregations were first freely established on Netherlandish soil, from the ecclesiastical records from the Reformed Church. In these sources women's voices are of course mediated through male authorities, but sharp-eyed historians have managed to glean some important insights from them. The church's conciliar bodies concerned themselves with church governance and discipline, and their minutes are therefore valuable, if uneven, sources for Reformed congregational life in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. One of the pioneers in examining these sources with an eye to gender was Els Kloek. In 1990 she published one of the first essays ever to examine the gendered dynamics of Reformed church discipline; her study of the Leiden consistory in the 1580s revealed that the disciplining of women concentrated primarily on cases of marriage and sexual morality. Consistorial discipline could both enforce patriarchal norms and offer women a recourse for women

22 Decavele, 'Katharina', 168.
23 Marshall, 'Women'.
24 Venner, 'Vrouwen', 38-41.

trapped in difficult marriages.[25] Similarly, Herman Roodenburg carefully examined gender differences in the Amsterdam consistory's cases starting in 1578, noting how central notions of sexual honour were in the disciplining of female church members.[26] Liesbeth Geudeke likewise found in the consistorial records of Edam that cases of marital dispute involved a larger number of women than men and that the consistory could provide female members some respite and protection from abusive husbands. This may in turn explain, if only in part, the attraction of joining the Reformed Church for women, as they tended to make up the majority of members in congregations.[27] These sources can potentially tell us much more about the impact of religious change on family life.

Netherlandish women who joined the Reformed movement sometimes found themselves forced to move abroad, either to escape Habsburg prosecution or to flee the ravages of the Netherlandish wars. Typically, they wound up in congregations in England or the Holy Roman Empire. Religious migrants have recently become an increasing object of study for scholars of the sixteenth century, and the gendered aspects of this phenomenon have only patchily drawn the attention of a few historians.[28] In a 2007 article Jesse Spohnholz examined women in the migrant Reformed community in Wesel, a community which appointed deaconesses, a rarity in the early Reformed tradition. These female officials worked alongside male deacons and were responsible for the care of the sick and the poor, especially women and children. The establishment of this office was a largely pragmatic decision by the Wesel consistory, as its migrant congregation was swamped with refugees from war and persecution.[29] After 1572 local Reformed churches in the Dutch Republic generally eschewed the office, though the Edam congregation appeared to have at least one deaconess as late as 1596.[30] In a 2014 article Spohnholz widened his focus to Netherlandish women's experiences in exile communities in England and Germany more broadly; these transient, institutionally underdeveloped congregations made the fates of already vulnerable female refugees even more precarious.[31] Timothy Fehler examined the diaconal rolls of the Emden Reformed community where thousands of migrants wound up in the period 1550-1580; most of those receiving help were men, with women seldom named but instead listed according to their relationship to a husband or father.[32] Examining evidence from the Dutch stranger church in Norwich, Raingard Esser noted that women made up a majority of the congregation.[33] This mirrored a similar gender pattern in the Dutch Reformed churches after 1572: women made up a majority of church members in most communities.[34] Migration, it appears, took a more severe toll on women, especially those separated from husbands or family, than on men.

25 Kloek, *Wie hij zij*, 78-121.
26 Roodenburg, *Onder Censuur*, 230-278.
27 Geudeke, 'Mannenbastion', 74-75.
28 Spohnholz, 'Instability', 113.
29 Spohnholz, 'Olympias', 105.
30 Geudeke, 'Mannenbastion', 81-82.
31 Spohnholz, 'Instability', 124.
32 Fehler, 'Refugee', 195.
33 Esser, 'Norwich's', 38.
34 Pollmann, 'Women', 164; Carlson, 'Women', 120.

Recently Amanda Pipkin has done a close reading of a rare piece of published writing by a sixteenth-century Netherlandish Reformed woman, Cornelia Teellinck (1554-1576). At age nineteen Teellinck, daughter of an influential Zeeland family, submitted a written confession of faith to the elders of the newly formed Reformed congregation in Zierikzee, a document which, along with some of her religious poetry, her sister Susanna had published in 1607 as *A Short Confession of Faith*. The religious convictions expressed therein were orthodox and not innovative, relying heavily on the authoritative Belgic Confession, and they were accompanied by heavy doses of anti-Spanish rhetoric. Though women were barred from holding any office in the Reformed Church, devout women like Cornelia could serve the church by these kinds of indirect and didactic means, especially if they came from prominent families with extensive social networks. Religious agency was possible for Reformed women, albeit in very informal and unofficial ways and primarily for those with some social privilege.[35] Like the noblewomen studied by Sherrin Marshall, their elite status as members of a prominent Reformed family allowed the Teellinck sisters to exercise a rare degree of confessional visibility.

Interestingly, Catholic women in the Low Countries, who were of course far more numerous than their Protestant counterparts in the sixteenth century, have in recent years received the least amount of historiographical attention. Although much archival spadework was done by Dutch Catholic historians in the first half of the twentieth century to recover sources about Catholic women religious, more recent historiography has not concentrated on them a great deal. An exceptional individual such as the fiercely Catholic Antwerp poet Anna Bijns, who published sharply anti-Lutheran verse in the mid-sixteenth century, has been studied by literary scholars, but collectively Catholic women have been harder to find in the literature.[36] What about the 10,000 or so women religious, for example, whose convents dotted the Netherlandish landscape in this period? Convents could be found in every town of the Low Countries, though local archival sources for them are quite uneven. Scholars have done some research on Netherlandish monastic women in the high and later Middle Ages, but the attention paid to the sixteenth century in particular has been sparse. The general scholarly consensus sees an overall decline in the numbers of religious women in the 1500s, a trend that would be exacerbated by the Revolt of the Netherlands in the last third of the century.[37] Madelon van Luijck's fine study of convents in late-medieval Leiden and Zwolle devotes a chapter to the Reformation, specifically their dissolution in the 1570s as Protestant regimes took over those cities.[38] Nuns forced to leave their convents sometimes went abroad or retired into private life.

In fact, the fate of women religious in the Low Countries, especially those displaced by the wars of the last quarter of the sixteenth century, awaits further investigation. In this case, too, sources are scarce. In 2019 Raymond Fagel and Joke Spaans translated and

35 Pipkin, *Dissenting*, 65-92.
36 Keßler, *Princesse*; Pleij, *Anna Bijns*.
37 Roest, 'Clarissen', 58-62.
38 Van Luijk, *Bruiden*, 277-296.

published a wonderful seventeenth-century account of a company of Poor Clares in Alkmaar who were forced to flee their convent after Protestant rebels took over that city in 1572. In her essay accompanying this chronicle, Spaans reiterated how little is known about these women as they faced a tidal wave of religious change.[39] Their counterparts living in the southern regions that stayed under Habsburg control experienced far less upheaval. Much of the research on these women, however, focuses more on the seventeenth century and primarily on the effects of the monastic reforms of the Council of Trent on conventual life there.[40]

Catholic lay women are even more invisible in the historiography of the sixteenth-century Low Countries. They pop up only very rarely, such as the three hundred Amsterdam women who in 1531 protested new construction near the site of the Holy Stead, the city's most sacred shrine.[41] Certainly there was a long medieval tradition of devout lay women gathering in pious communities. The Modern Devotion, for example, included more sisters than brothers, and only recently have scholars started to pay attention to its gender dynamics, but mostly for the medieval rather than early modern era.[42] Similarly Beguine communities could be found in every major town in the region. These semi-religious women took no vows but lived in communities doing good works. In 2001 Walter Simons published a masterful overview of these women in the southern Netherlands, but there is scant literature on the fates of these women in regions taken over by the rebellion in the later sixteenth century.[43] One group of lay women who have garnered more attention from scholars recently are the spiritual maidens or *kloppen*, who under the Protestant regime of the Dutch Republic in the wake of the Revolt dedicated themselves privately from the 1580s to the service of beleaguered Catholic communities. In some respects, they were a continuation of the Modern Devout and the Beguines in that they were a movement to accommodate pious laywomen. As Joke Spaans pointed out in her study of the most famous *klopje* population, that of Haarlem, the *kloppen*, unlike Beguines, lived in private households rather than in community.[44] Spaans's book concentrates mostly on the seventeenth century, but there are nuggets of information about the late sixteenth century from the collection of biographies that forms the book's principal source. These women's lives recorded valuable memories of the trauma and disestablishment inflicted on Catholic women by the twin assaults of revolt and Reformation. They also tell stories of how confessional difference could complicate family dynamics.[45] Sources like this are exceedingly rare, however; documentation on the experiences of Netherlandish Catholic women in the sixteenth century seems to be even more sparse than that of their Protestant counterparts.

39 Spaans, 'Nonnen', 86-110.
40 Harline, 'Actives'; Van Thielen, 'Augustinessen'.
41 Caspers and Margry, *Miracle*, 43-45.
42 Van Engen, *Sisters*, 125-137.
43 Simons's study has little to say on the fate of Beguinages during the Reformation and Revolt: Simons, *Cities*, 138-139.
44 Spaans, *Levens*, 9-10.
45 Spaans, *Levens*, 107-112.

Future Perspectives

The selected works surveyed above suggest that future study of Netherlandish women in the sixteenth century will continue to lead to much richer insights into the gendered dynamics of religious change. Much of the historiography so far has focused on rediscovering and recovering women's stories, which has been important and necessary work. It has yielded valuable insights about the different life experiences of women of the various confessions, such as the persecution undergone by Anabaptist women, the religious agency exercised by elite Reformed women, and the underappreciated role of Catholic women, both religious and lay. These works produced in the last fifty years have rightly integrated women to the historiographical conversation and have thereby both enriched and complicated it. They have enhanced our understanding of sixteenth-century Netherlandish women as religious actors who were not simply bystanders or victims of reformation but also active agents of it.

Still, this historiography's focus on confessional boundaries has its limits; by studying only one confession, it becomes easy to fall into historiographical silos. The result is an emphasis on the singularity or exceptionalism of the differing reform movements rather than on any commonalities. And until the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the boundaries between different religious reforming groups could be exceedingly porous. In effect, the historiography on women and Reformation in the Low Countries has thus far privileged confession over gender. But in the twenty-first century the historiography of the Reformation has been almost entirely secularised. It is generally seen nowadays not as a purely Protestant movement but a movement for religious change across Latin Christendom. What is sorely needed at this juncture is a more cross- or multi-confessional perspective, or perhaps even a non-confessional one; that is, perhaps it is time to flip the analytical lens on its head and focus more intentionally on the question of gender. The question that we need to ask now is how gender shaped and influenced women's experience across confessions, or even despite them. To what extent did sixteenth-century Netherlandish women's religious lives mirror each other? Were there similarities of experience that transcended confessional divides? Did privilege and status pertain in the lives of Catholic women as much as it did for their Reformed counterparts, for example? There are many possible comparative avenues: Nicole Grochowina's gender analysis of Mennonite martyrologies might, for example, also be fruitfully applied to how women were depicted in Reformed and Catholic martyrologies produced at the same time. Women of all confessions were persecuted and killed for their beliefs in the sixteenth century; were there similarities among their cases that the confessional focus that currently dominates the historiography has obscured? In short, a comparative approach might prove very fruitful. Sherrin Marshall's 1984 essay offered some tantalising initial forays into this approach, but it has not been emulated much in the interim.

So, much more research is sorely needed. A possible next step is to apply a more deliberately gendered analysis of the available sources, as Grochowina and Waite have done. Looking at familiar sources through a new analytical lens will undoubtedly provide fresh insights. A very promising recent study is a master's thesis for the Catholic

University of Leuven, *'Simpele harten verleyt?' Gender-analyse van de geloofsvervolging in de kerngebieden van de Nederlanden, 1520-1540*, written by Lynn Callewaert in 2012. The study is an analysis of the gendered dimensions of the prosecution of Protestant heresy in the western core provinces of the Low Countries (Flanders, Brabant, and Holland), using both inquisitorial records and martyrologies, focusing on the trials of 201 women. Callewaert does not attempt any confessional taxonomy of the defendants. She instead examines these cases from multiple perspectives, including legal, familial, and social, and concludes that women accused of heresy could, at least to a limited extent, influence the course and outcome of their trials depending on how they exploited traditional gender roles within their family and social networks. In this manner women were able to exercise some agency even when faced with the most severe consequences of their religious choices.[46] This is an interesting, combined quantitative-qualitative approach that might be applied to other legal records. Would a similar method work for such analogous sources as the records of the Duke of Alba's Council of Troubles, which prosecuted thousands for rebellion and heresy in the period 1567-1574? Similarly, Els Kloek's and Liesbeth Geudeke's examination of Reformed consistorial records could be extended to all the consistorial minutes that survive from the late sixteenth century. There are not many, and they are scattered in local archives across the Netherlands, but a wider-scale examination of most of them might yield new information and perspectives about how Reformed women wrestled with and benefitted from church discipline in their familial, social, and spiritual lives.

In sum, the examples and themes presented here suggest that there is still much spadework to be done in the terrain of women and Reformation in the Low Countries. The biggest challenge is, of course, in the sources, which for the sixteenth century are far more piecemeal and scattered than they are for subsequent periods. They mostly comprise prosecutorial records, martyrologies, consistorial acta, and the rare, occasional ego-document. Still, with some diligence and imagination these sources can be fruitfully mined, particularly if historians concentrate less on confessional difference and more on gendered experience. The lives of women in the Netherlandish Reformation in the sixteenth century await still more historians, so that the historiographic lacuna can continue to be filled. As we have seen with our Leiden widow Madaleena, women in the sixteenth-century Low Countries could be both agents and victims of religious change; their stories need much more (re)telling and (re)examining. Gender is precisely the analytical lens that will give us new perspectives.

Bibliography

Archival Sources

Leiden, Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, Stadsarchief Leiden 3419a, Madaleena to Leiden Consistory, 22 August 1597.

46 Callewaert, *'Simpele'*, 77.

Secondary Literature

Baar, Mirjam de, *'Ik moet spreken.' Het spiritueel leiderschap van Antoinette Bourignon* (Zutphen 2004).
Broomhall, Susan, *Women and Religion in Sixteenth-Century France* (Basingstoke 2006).
Callewaert, Lynn, *'Simpele harten verleyt?' Gender-analyse van de geloofsvervolging in de kerngebieden van de Nederlanden, 1520-1540*. MA thesis, Catholic University of Leuven, 2012.
Carlson, Marybeth, 'Women in and out of the Public Church in the Dutch Republic', in Susan E. Dinan and Debra Meyers (eds.), *Women and Religion in Old and New Worlds* (New York 2001) 115-134.
Caspers, Charles, and Peter Jan Margry, *The Miracle of Amsterdam. Biography of a Contested Devotion* (Notre Dame 2019).
Crawford, Patricia, *Women and Religion in England, 1500-1720* (London 1993).
Decavele, Johan, 'Katherina van Boetzelaer', *Bulletin de la société d'histoire du protestantisme belge* 5 (1969/1) 151-171.
Decavele, Johan, *De dageraad van de Reformatie in Vlaanderen (1520-1565)* (Brussels 1975).
Esser, Raingard, 'Norwich's "Disorderly Maids". Immigrant Women and the Institutions in Early Modern England', *Nieuwe Tijdingen* (2021) 15-40.
Fehler, Timothy G., 'Refugee Wives, Widows, and Mothers', in Amy E. Leonard and David M. Whitford (eds.), *Embodiment, Identity, and Gender in the Early Modern Age* (London 2021) 187-196.
Grever, Maria, 'Het verborgen continent. Een historiografische verkenning van vrouwen-geschiedenis in Nederland', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 12 (1986/3) 221-268.
Geudeke, Liesbeth, 'Mannenbastion of vrouwenbolwerk? De positie van vrouwen in de gereformeerde kerk, 1566-1650', in Mirjam Cornelis, Marjet Derks, Marit Monteiro, and Josian Strous (eds.), *Vrome vrouwen. Betekenissen van geloof voor vrouwen in de geschiedenis* (Hilversum 1995) 67-86.
Grochowina, Nicole, 'Images of Women in the Anabaptists' Martyrology *Het Offer des Heeren*', in Mirjam van Veen, Piet Visser, Gary K. Waite, Els Kloek, Marion Kobelt-Goch, and Anna Voolstra (eds.), *Sisters. Myth and Reality of Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Doopsgezind Women, ca. 1525-1900* (Leiden 2014) 105-120.
Harline, Craig, *The Burdens of Sister Margaret. Private Lives in a Seventeenth-Century Convent* (New York 1994).
Harline, Craig, 'Actives and Contemplatives. The Female Religious of the Low Countries before and after Trent', *The Catholic Historical Review* 81 (1995/4) 541-567.
Jelsma, Auke, *Frontiers of the Reformation. Dissidence and Orthodoxy in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot 1998).
Jelsma, Auke, 'De positie van de vrouw in de Radicale Reformatie', *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 15 (1989/1) 25-36.
Joldersma, Hermina, and Louis Peter Grijp, *'Elisabeth's Manly Courage'. Testimonies and Songs of Martyred Women in the Low Countries* (Milwaukee 2001).
Keßler, Judith, *Princesse der rederijkers. Het oeuvre van Anna Bijns. Argumentatieanalyse, structuuranalyse, beeldvorming* (Hilversum 2013).
Klassen, John, 'Women and the Family among Dutch Anabaptist Martyrs', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (1986/3) 548-571.
Kloek, Els, 'De Reformatie als thema van vrouwengeschiedenis. Een histories debat over goed en kwaad', *Jaarboek voor vrouwengeschiedenis* 4 (1983/1) 106-151.
Kloek, Els, *Wie hij zij, man of wijf. Vrouwengeschiedenis in de vroegmoderne tijd* (Hilversum 1990).
Kooi, Christine, *Liberty and Religion. Church and State in Leiden's Reformation, 1572-1620* (Leiden 2000).
Leonard, Amy, *Nails in the Wall. Catholic Nuns in Reformation Germany* (Chicago 2005).
Luijk, Madelon van, *Bruiden van Christus. De tweede religieuze vrouwenbeweging in Leiden en Zwolle, 1380-1580* (Zutphen 2004).
Marr, M. Lucille, 'Anabaptist Women of the North. Peers in the Faith, Subordinates in Marriage', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61 (1987/4) 347-362.
Marshall Wyntjes, Sherrin, 'Women and Religious Choices in the Sixteenth Century Netherlands', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 75 (1984/1) 276-289.

Monteiro, Marit, *Geestelijke maagden. Leven tussen klooster en wereld in Noord-Nederland gedurende de zeventiende eeuw* (Hilversum 1996).
Packull, Werner O., 'Anna Jansz of Rotterdam, a Historical Investigation of an Early Anabaptist Heroine', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78 (1987/1) 147-173.
Pipkin, Amanda, *Dissenting Daughters. Reformed Women in the Dutch Republic, 1572-1725* (Oxford 2022).
Pleij, Herman, *Anna Bijns, van Antwerpen* (Amsterdam 2011).
Pollmann, Judith, 'Women and Religion in the Dutch Golden Age', *Dutch Crossing* 24 (2000/2) 162-182.
Reed, Jennifer, *Dutch Anabaptist Female Martyrs and their Response to the Reformation*. MA thesis, University of South Florida, 1991.
Roest, Bert, 'De clarissen in de Noordelijke Nederlanden', in Hildo van Engen and Gerrit Verhoeven (eds.), *Monastiek observantisme en Moderne Devotie in de Noordelijke Nederlanden* (Hilversum 2008) 43-68.
Roodenburg, Herman, *Onder censuur. De kerkelijke tucht in de gereformeerde gemeente van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam 1990).
Roper, Lyndal, *The Holy Household. Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford 1989).
Simons, Walter, *Cities of Ladies. Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia 2001).
Snyder, C. Arnold, and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (eds.), *Profiles of Anabaptist Women. Sixteenth-Century Reforming* (Waterloo 1996).
Soen, Violet, 'Which Religious History for the (Two) Early Modern Netherlands before 1648? Questions, Trends and Perspectives', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 112 (2017/3-4) 758-788.
Spaans, Joke, *De Levens der Maechden. Het verhaal van een religieuze vrouwengemeenschap in de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw* (Hilversum 2012).
Spaans, Joke, 'Nonnen op drift. Nederlandse clarissen en de opstand', in Raymond Fagel and Joke Spaans (eds.), *Nonnen verdreven door Geuzen. Cathalina del Spiritu Sancto's verhaal over de vlucht van Nederlandse clarissen naar Lissabon* (Hilversum 2019) 86-110.
Spijker, Ineke van' t, '"Myn beminde huysvrouwe in de Heere". Dooperse Vrouwen in de vroege Reformatie in de Nederlanden', *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 11 (1985/1) 99-108.
Spohnholz, Jesse, 'Olympias and Chrysostom. The Debate over Wesel's Reformed Deaconnesses, 1568-1609', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 98 (2007/1) 84-106.
Spohnholz, Jesse, 'Instability and Insecurity. Dutch Women Refugees in Germany and England, 1550-1600', in Jesse Spohnholz and Gary K. Waite (eds.), *Exile and Religious Identity, 1500-1800* (London 2014) 111-125.
Sprunger, Keith L., 'God's Powerful Army of the Weak. Anabaptist Women of the Radical Reformation', in Richard L. Greaves (ed.), *Triumph over Silence. Women in Protestant History* (Westport 1985) 45-74.
Umble, Jenifer Hiett, 'Women and Choice. An Examination of the Martyrs' Mirror', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 64 (1990/1) 135-145.
Van Engen, John, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life. The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 2009).
Van Thielen, Esther, 'De Augustinessen van Falcon en Vredenberg. Een studie naar twee post-Tridentijnse vrouwenkloosters in het bisdom Antwerpen in de late zestiende en zeventiende eeuw', *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 92 (2022/2) 169-201.
Venner, Jos, 'Vrouwen en de Reformatie. Godsdienstkeuze en activiteiten van vrouwen in het Maasdal aan het begin van de Opstand', in R.M. de la Haye, P.H.A.M. Abels, P.J.A. Nissen, and J. Snel (eds.), *Religie aan de grens. Aspecten van de Limburgse kerkgeschiedenis* (Delft 1997) 37-49.
Waite, Gary, 'Naked Harlots or Devout Maidens? Images of Anabaptist Women in the Context of the Iconography of Witches in Europe, 1525-1650', in Mirjam van Veen, Piet Visser, Gary K. Waite, Els Kloek, Marion Kobelt-Goch, and Anna Voolstra (eds.), *Sisters. Myth and Reality of Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Doopsgezind Women, ca. 1525-1900* (Leiden 2014) 17-51.
Wiesner-Hanks, Merry, 'Women and the Reformations. Reflections on Recent Research', *History Compass* 2 (2004/1) 1-27.