Afterword: Reflections on Early Modern Women in the Low Countries and Beyond

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Abstract

This afterword reflects on the articles in this special issue, and places them within the context of other historiographic surveys of early modern women, including three from the 1990s and two more recent ones. It highlights similarities and differences in the scholarship on the Low Countries and that of other parts of Europe, and points particularly to common trends, including an emphasis on women's actions and agency rather than representations of women or men's ideas about women; a stress on specific spaces and routes, including the Atlantic World; the importance of material culture in examining many kinds of topics; a broadening of the notion of 'literature' and 'art' to include a wider range of genres and makers; attention to differences among women and the ways these intersected with gender; the growing use of digital technologies; and the importance of trans-disciplinary and sometimes transnational collaborations. Methods and theories developed in the Low Countries have provided models for other parts of Europe, and those developed elsewhere have sometimes been applied in the Netherlands, though more of this is possible.

Keywords: historiography, women's history, material culture, women's work, digital technologies

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Academic women's history is now half a century old, as the earliest articles and book chapters began appearing in North America and Europe in the early 1970s. Anniversaries lead to stock-taking, the first of which in women's history was at roughly the quarter-century mark, in the 1990s.[1] Among the overviews of scholarship written by and for early modernists were Margaret MacCurtain, Mary O'Dowd, and Maria Luddy's 'An Agenda for Women's History in Ireland, 1500-1900', published in *Irish Historical Studies* in 1992, my 'Reassessing, Transforming, Complicating. Two Decades of Early Modern Women's History', published in 1998, and Els Kloek's 'Een nieuw studieveld. Vrouwengeschiedenis, interdisciplinariteit en de Nederlandse zeventiende eeuw', published in 1998.[2]

These overviews in the 1990s were both celebratory and critical. They reflected on what had been done, identified barriers and problems, and set out possibilities for future research. They also became sources for later comments on the state of the field: *Irish Historical Studies* published a special issue in 2022, reflecting on MacCurtain, O'Dowd, and Luddy's 'Agenda' thirty years later; I went back to my 1998 article for an article in *Early Modern Women Journal* in 2018; and this special issue begins with Kloek's assessment of the field. Thus, along with commenting on the articles in this special issue, I want to bring these six historiographic surveys into conversation with one another, both those from the 1990s and the more recent ones that build on them.

The editors of this special issue begin their introduction with the common stereotype that women of the early modern Low Countries were more headstrong and domineering than women elsewhere in Europe, and pose the question: 'Were Netherlandish women indeed exceptional in early modern Europe?' This is a question we can ask about women's history as well as women: how has women's history of the early modern Low Countries differed from that of other parts of Europe, and how has it been similar? This is a huge

1 The most comprehensive general survey of the field in the 1990s was Offen, Pierson, and Rendall (eds.), *Writing Women's History*, which includes chapters about women's history in various countries. These include a chapter on the Netherlands by De Haan, 'Women's History Behind the Dykes', but this does not mention any works in medieval or early modern history, which is largely true of the other chapters in this collection as well.
2 MacCurtain, O'Dowd, and Luddy, 'Agenda for Women's History in Ireland'; Wiesner, 'Reassessing, Transforming, Complicating'; Kloek, 'Een nieuw studieveld'.

question, but the six historiographic overviews allow us to make some comparisons. In my reflections, I try to highlight where I see the historiography on the Low Countries providing a model for other parts of Europe, and comment on models I find elsewhere that have been and could perhaps be further applied in the Netherlands. I also note where I see research from the Low Countries providing evidence for theories that have been developed regarding other places, and where it might contradict or nuance these.

First to where we were in the 1990s. MacCurtain, O'Dowd, and Luddy's 'Agenda' is highly critical of Irish historical scholarship and the Irish academy, emphasising marginalisation and a lack of progress. Political historians were only interested in high politics, and the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland had 'made little progress in the type of social history which has stimulated research in women's history in other countries', nor was it 'supportive of women's history'.[3] It might be easier, the authors suggest, to incorporate the Irish experience into debates in international women's history than to incorporate women into mainstream Irish history, and they are sceptical that the then brand-new field of gender history would solve this. The authors themselves had just published major collections on women in Irish history, however, and their footnotes point to journal articles and chapters on women in collections on various topics. Some of these focus primarily on England, but incorporate Gaelic and English women in Ireland into their discussion.[4] The authors also lay out exciting ideas as to what could and should be done, and the sources one might use. Among the topics they suggest are: the political patronage of aristocratic women; women's legal status in Gaelic and English law; women's role in the Protestant and Catholic Reformations; domestic architecture; women's participation in political upheavals, war, and plantation settlements; rural and urban women's work; women's philanthropic activities and cultural productions.

My 'Reassessing, Transforming, Complicating' uses the themes of the 1987, 1990, 1993, and 1996 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, the largest and best-established conference on women's history in the world, to describe what was happening in key areas of research on early modern women. I examine reassessments of the Reformation's effects on women and women's role in religious change, debates about whether capitalism was a significant transformation of women's work and lives, and discussions of the value and limitations of 'Renaissance' and 'early modern' when applied to women's experience.[5] I end with a call for more research, though don't set out specific topics the way the Irish authors do.

Els Kloek looks at the state of research on Dutch women in the seventeenth century, dividing her article into politics, socio-economic history, and art and culture. She discusses Natalie Zemon Davis's idea that women had more opportunity for political influence

3 MacCurtain, O'Dowd and Luddy, 'Agenda', 4.

4 MacCurtain and Ó Corrain (eds.), *Women in Irish Society*; MacCurtain and O'Dowd (eds.), *Women in Early Modern Ireland*.

5 The latter was the topic of a session at the June 1996 Berkshire conference, 'Complicating Categories, Crossing Chronologies. Periodization in the History of Women from Medieval to Modern', and a similar session, 'Defining Moments. Feminist Stakes in the Late Medieval/Renaissance/Early Modern Conundrum' at an October 1996 conference at the University of Frankfurt, 'Geschlechterperspektiven in der Frühen Neuzeit'. I returned to the topic later, in Wiesner-Hanks, 'Do Women Need the Renaissance?'.

in monarchical states than republican ones, and notes that Rudolf Dekker applied this to the Netherlands, contrasting the wives of the seventeenth-century stadtholders, who remained 'background figures', to the three female governors of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, who each acted as the highest authority in political life.[6] Kloek argues that Amalia of Solms was hardly a background figure, and calls for more study on her, as well as interdisciplinary work on the reality and representation of women's power more broadly.

In socio-economic history, she chides historians of women for ignoring 'hard' research themes such as demography, economics, and law, praising only Lotte van de Pol for tackling these and integrating them with other types of sources in her work on prostitution in Amsterdam.[7] She also criticises women's historians for not being willing to ask generalised questions about the role of work in the lives of women, although the articles from the 1990s that she does cite – which as a historian of women's work in Germany I read at the time, thankful that many of them were in English – contradict her assertions to some degree. She views research on women in art and culture (including religion) as the most productive field, mentioning a number of studies of artists, writers, and scholars. She makes a distinction between studies that aim to 'deconstruct' the image of women with a focus on representation, and those that aim to 'reconstruct' the history of women and fill in gaps in historical knowledge, what I would characterise as the distinction between gender history and women's history that was so powerful in the 1990s. She ends with a call for more multidisciplinary research, noting that one topic for this might be the contradiction between the supposed freedom of Dutch women and the proverbial domesticity of Dutch culture.

Now to where we are in the 2020s. The 2022 *Irish Historical Studies* special issue, edited by Frances Nolan and Bronagh McShane, skilfully surveys what had appeared in the thirty years since 1992 on topics set out in the original 'agenda' and in new 'turns' and themes, with massive footnotes pointing to monographs and article collections by a huge range of university presses, and to articles in regional, chronological, and topically-defined journals.[8] The articles trace significant progress on many issues. Sparky Booker provides examples of work in legal history that has moved away from an emphasis on norms, laws, and other prescriptive works (always the easiest things to find) to a fuller understanding of what actually happened on the ground.[9] She reminds us that for all the differences among women, there were deep similarities as well, that the experiences of single women, married women, and widows may not have been as different as we anticipate, especially because these also represent different phases of the same woman's life. Marie-Louise Coolahan surveys the broadening of literary history as feminist scholars have developed a more capacious approach to defining literature, particularly highlighting work on life writing and on women's letters and the virtual communities linked through letters.[10] Clodagh Tait notes that there has been solid work on relations within the family, the life cycle, domestic and popular religion, women's political actions and influence, and gendered

6 Davis, 'Women in Politics'; Dekker, 'Women in Medieval and Early Modern Netherlands'.
7 Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom*.
8 Nolan and McShane (eds.), 'A New Agenda'.
9 Booker, 'Challenge of Writing Histories'.
10 Coolahan, 'The Textual Terrain'.

dimensions of property holding and work, as well as what she terms 'green shoots' on new topics, including material culture, the gendering of space, and masculinity.[11] Evan Bourke analyses several projects that use digital tools and large datasets to study gender through network analysis, though he also includes cautionary notes about how long it takes to learn the skills needed, and the fact that so far the various bean-counting systems of 'outputs' that have swept through academia have – somewhat ironically, in my opinion – had difficulties measuring digital humanities projects.[12]

All of the authors note that sources on women and gender in early modern Ireland still remain a 'dispersed archive', to use Mary O'Dowd's term, reliant on what Patricia Palmer has called 'fugitive sightings […] caught, almost accidentally, in the unsteady lantern-beam of history' – an evocative phrase.[13] Given this, they encourage historians of women and gender to develop innovative approaches in their use of sources, 'and perhaps to begin to make peace with what cannot be known'.[14]

Like Palmer, I use an image from the realm of sight in my 2018 article, starting with actual eyeglasses discovered under the floorboards of the Cistercian convent of Wienhausen in northern Germany, most likely stashed there by a nun – along with prayer books, small pictures, relic bundles, devotional objects, and the materials used for making these items – when Duke Ernst the Confessor, the area's ruler, attempted to introduce Lutheran practice to the convent in the 1520s.[15] I use the lenses of these eyeglasses as a metaphor for the multiplicity of perspectives that has characterised the enormous profusion of scholarship on women and gender in the early modern period. New perspectives in history are often described as 'turns', but, in my opinion, the lens metaphor provides a better way to think about how scholarship develops. Taking a turn moves you in a new direction; it implies a divergence from the initial direction. Lenses, however, can be added on to one another. The lens of gender has been used in conjunction with other lenses, creating multi-lensed microscopes to reveal greater complexities in objects close at hand, and multi-lensed telescopes to view distant objects more clearly, or observe those that are otherwise invisible.

In the article, I provide examples from recent scholarship of three lenses that have been especially illuminating for women and gender in the early modern period: the spatial, the global/transnational, and the material. Among the spaces that have undergone the most intensive research are some I mentioned in the 1998 article, including convents, whose cultural, political, and economic impact has been intensively studied across Europe and in the European colonies.

Movement and migration is another aspect of space, and historians studying early modern migration have found women and girls on the move within Europe and across the

11 Tait, 'Progress, Challenges and Opportunities'.

12 Bourke, 'Networking Early Modern Irish Women'.

13 O'Dowd, 'Men, Women, Children and the Family'; Palmer, 'Fugitive Identities'.

14 Tait, 'Progress, Challenges and Opportunities', 246. One example of innovative approaches already underway is VOICES, a five-year research project led by Jane Ohlmeyer from Trinity College, Dublin that 'aims to recover the voices and interrogate lived experiences of "ordinary", non-elite women in early modern Ireland' through extensive use of digital technology: https://voicesproject.ie/ (Accessed on 26 February 2025).

15 Wiesner-Hanks, 'Adjusting Our Lenses'.

Atlantic and Indian Oceans.[16] Gendered analyses of work, family, and sexuality have been used to develop more complex understandings of the entangled history of the Atlantic World, a region that is emerging as central to more 'globalised' understandings of the early modern era.[17] The Atlantic first emerged as a coherent region in 1492, and never completely disappeared, but by the nineteenth century the region was being drawn more fully into global patterns of production, migration, imperialism, and trade. Thus the 'Atlantic World' really is an early modern phenomenon. My article cites Susanah Shaw Romney's 2015 *New Netherland Connections* as a model in this, as it shows clearly how women formed an essential part of the networks created by religion, family, trade, friendship, neighbourhoods, and godparentage that bound together the Dutch Atlantic. Unmarried servants, soldiers' and sailors' wives, middling-status artisans' wives, poor young widows, and many other women bounced from one port and one ship and sometimes one spouse to another, loaning money, serving as business partners, and trading in goods as they forged a new colonial economy.[18] Along with examining women and men on the move, scholars who use both a global and a gender lens are looking at households that were somehow 'mixed', in West Africa, Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean and South America, and French North America – all of these sites of cultural encounter and blending.[19]

That blending included material culture, one of Clodagh Tait's 'green shoots' in early modern Irish history. Gendered analyses of material culture have explored what men and women wore and how their choice of clothing made them move and feel, women's crafting, commissioning, and use of devotional objects, and women's transmission of trends in material and spiritual culture when they took books and objects with them to new households when they migrated, married, or remarried. Much new scholarship reflects the move in material culture studies away from a focus on luxury objects and elite consumer practices, and toward more mundane objects.[20] This means not viewing objects as static and passive artefacts seen at a distance in a museum case, but as what Arjun Appadurai has characterised as 'things-in-motion', that is, considering the ways they were used, touched, and handled within specific contexts.[21]

This *Early Modern Low Countries* special issue points to many of the same trends over the last twenty years that have been noted by the historians of Ireland, by me, and by other recaps of the state of the field: an emphasis on women's actions and agency rather than representations of women or men's ideas about women; a stress on specific spaces and routes, including those beyond Europe; the importance of material culture; a broadening of the notion of 'literature' and 'art' to include a wider range of genres; attention to

16 Dursteler, *Renegade Women*; Wiesner-Hanks (ed.), *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces*; Owens, *Nuns Navigating the Spanish Empire*.

17 Amussen and Poska, 'Restoring Miranda'; Poska and Amussen, 'Shifting the Frame'; 'Forum. 'Transnationalisms/Transculturalisms'. On Atlantic World history in general, see: Bailyn, *Atlantic History*; Greene and Morgan, *Atlantic History*.

18 Romney, *New Netherland Connections*.

19 Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade*; Mangan, *Transatlantic Obligations*; White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians*.

20 'Forum. Early Modern Women and Material Culture'; Hamling and Richardson (eds.), *Everyday Objects*.

21 Appadurai (ed.), *Social Life of Things*.

differences among women and the ways these intersected with gender; and the growing use of digital technologies.

The issue begins with women and work, which has formed a major thread in discussions of early modern women for more than a century, since Alice Clark's 1919 *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. As Ariadne Schmidt notes, most of the research since Clark has focused on the impact of economic change *on* women's work, increasingly nuancing Clark's dismal assessment of an across-the-boards narrowing and proletarianisation by pointing to growing opportunities in the production of new consumer goods such as mantuas, lace collars, ribboned hats, and many other items, and to the differences among women due to marital status, age, and many other factors.

Schmidt also notes that research has begun to explore the opposite question, the impact of women's work on economic change. Women's work has become part of debates over the biggest economic story of the period, conventionally called 'the rise of the West', and now in world and global history circles usually called the 'Great Divergence', using the title of the extremely influential comparative study of England and the Yangzi delta in China by Kenneth Pomeranz published in 2000.[22] The work of Dutch scholars has been essential here, particularly as the Dutch Republic was a leader in economic development. As Schmidt mentions, scholars at Utrecht University have argued that the work of young unmarried women was crucial for northwestern Europe's commercial quickening, what they see as a 'Little Divergence' within Europe that preceded the 'Great Divergence' between Europe and the rest of the world. Young women, they assert, participated in the growing high wage economy, because of which they decided to delay marriage. Thus 'girl power', as they term it, was behind the 'Little Divergence' and also behind the European Marriage Pattern with high age at first marriage, high numbers of single people, and neolocality. Being economic historians, they count things, so have come up with what they initially termed the 'girl-friendly index' and more recently the 'girl-power index', which 'measures the average age at first marriage of women minus the spousal age gap, with higher absolute age at marriage and lower spousal age gap both indicating greater female agency and autonomy'.[23] They have mapped this across Eurasia, finding societies at the two edges to be more 'girl-friendly' than those in the middle, though with some exceptions.

This narrative of 'girl power' fits with an increased focus on women's agency and is appealing to students, but other economists and economic historians, particularly those who focus on England, caution that girl power 'was not necessarily girl empowerment, especially during a period of falling real wages when a longer period in service was required to accumulate the resources needed to set up an independent household upon marriage', which remained the surest way to economic well-being.[24] They note there are short-term

22 Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*.

23 Van Zanden, De Moor, and Carmichael, *Capital Women*, cover blurb.

24 Shepard, 'Crediting Women', 13. Other critical assessments of 'girl power' in Europe include Humphries and Weisdorf, 'The Wages of Women'; Dennison and Ogilvie, 'Does the European Marriage Pattern Explain Economic Growth?'. This provoked a response from the Utrecht University group: Carmichael et al., 'Reply to Tracy Dennison and Sheilagh Ogilvie'. For a comparison of women's work in Europe and East Asia, see Pomeranz, 'Women's Work, Family, and Economic Development'; for a comparison of female domestic servants across Asia and Europe, see Stanley, 'Maidservants' Tales'.

blips upwards, but argue that in general women lost ground to men and were not part of any high wage economy. As Schmidt comments, the debate 'has not yet reached its conclusion'. One of the reasons for this is that historians of other areas are now paying more attention to the role of women's and girls' work – and their other economic activities, such as money-lending and investing – in economic development than they had been earlier, a trend in which Netherlandish economic historians have led the way.[25] As we have more data, the picture becomes more complex, but what is certain is that Kloek's criticism that historians of women have ignored quantitative topics is no longer true.

The case study of four petitions for licences in the printing business presented by Heleen Wyffels reinforces Schmidt's point about just how *normal* women's work was in the urban Netherlandish economy. Printers' widows and their children routinely mention women heading printing houses, which Wyffels suggests might be a reason to rethink purely patrilinear narratives about family firms. This case study fits with Alexandra Shepard's discovery that widows and married women emphasised their own labour when they appeared in court, both because they did work hard, and because they knew this would get them a more sympathetic hearing from the judges.[26] It also reinforces the point made by Maria Ågren and Allyson Poska, that early modern people expected everyone except small children to carry out tasks that would support themselves and their family, if they had one. They expected single women to work, widows to work if they were physically capable, and married women to work, and were not surprised when they did.[27]

As Schmidt mentions, Maria Ågren and a group of her colleagues in Sweden have developed a new method for trying to measure work, recording all verbs and verb phrases that describe tasks in a wide variety of sources from the period from 1550 to 1799, developing a huge dataset of more than sixteen thousand references. This 'verb-oriented method' allows them to analyse quantitatively the incidence, character, and division of work in an era when almost everyone – men, women, and children – did multiple tasks throughout the course of the day, to say nothing of over a lifespan. They find women working everywhere, with married women (and widows) performing a wider range of work than single women, either as a joint endeavour with their husbands or something unrelated. This new method for measuring work by all members of a family offers much promise for early modern historians, which Wyffels's analysis demonstrates well.

Suze Zijlstra turns from the Netherlands itself to focus on maritime connections and colonial contexts, providing Dutch examples for scholarship on women and gender that uses all three of the lenses I highlighted in my 2018 article – spatial, global, and material. She advocates bringing Dutch colonial history and the history of the Dutch Republic itself together, something that was not envisioned in the 1990s, as Kloek's article makes no mention of studies of gender in the colonies, such as Jean Gelman Taylor's groundbreaking 1983 *The Social World of Batavia*.[28] Zijlstra comments that the number of European

25 Along with works cited by Schmidt, see Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*; Bray, *Technology, Gender and History*; Baudino, Carré, and Révauger (eds.), *The Invisible Woman*; Sarti, Bellavitis, and Martini, *What is Work?*; Spence, *Women, Credit, and Debt*; Dermineur (ed.), *Women and Credit in Pre-Industrial Europe*.

26 Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*.

27 Poska, 'Agentic Gender Norms'; Ågren (ed.), *Making a Living*.

28 Taylor, *Social World of Batavia*.

women in many Dutch colonies was higher than previous scholarship has recognised, a situation that Allyson Poska has noted for the Spanish New World as well.[29] Men still made up the majority of those who went to sea or travelled to the colonies, however, leaving Amsterdam, like other European port cities, with a population in which women significantly outnumbered men, a situation that has been the focus of increasing analysis across Europe.[30]

Zijlstra's call to bring the histories of colonies and metropole together has been voiced by many others, as it has become increasingly clear that the histories of Europe and its colonies are intertwined. Relations between Europeans and non-Europeans were not simply explorations or conquests (though many were both of these), but cross-cultural encounters involving the movement, exchange, and hybridisation of people, material goods, and ideas. Thus Zijlstra's suggestion to incorporate the experiences of women and men of colour better is one that has been expressed widely, and scholars have used innovative sources to examine the story of non-Europeans in Europe itself as well as that of European colonies.[31]

The case study presented by Nicole Maskiell's follows Zijlstra's suggestion, analysing the will of Judith Stuyvesant, a wealthy European woman and the wife of New Amsterdam's leader Peter Stuyvesant, as well as petitions for freedom from Mayken von Angola, one of the first Black women to arrive in the colony. Maskiell notes the many, and sometimes unexpected, ways the lives (and afterlives) of these two women were intertwined, as Mayken celebrated the second of her two marriages to a free Black labourer in the chapel on Stuyvesant lands that Judith bequeathed to the Dutch Reformed congregation in her will and may have been buried in the Stuyvesant family vault. Maskiell also discusses the deposition and will of Judith's daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Stuyvesant Sydenham, whose second husband was physically abusive, tried to steal Stuyvesant property from her, and had her imprisoned, reminding us that the lives of European women, even those from elite families, were not always easy.

Kloek had begun her survey with politics and called for more work on the reality and representation of women's power, a challenge that Lidewij Nissen and Dries Raeymaekers assess has still not been met in their chapter on women and politics. They highlight work on female regents and governors, who were so common in the early modern Netherlands, incorporating this within the discipline of queenship studies, which has exploded in the last several decades, thanks in part to the Queenship and Power book series edited by Carole Levin, Alicia Meyer, and Jo Carney, published by Palgrave Macmillan. Mary of Hungary, who served as the regent of the Netherlands and Hungary after the death of her husband King Louis II, has seen several recent biographies, and Margaret of Parma one, by Charlie R. Steen, though this has received fairly critical reviews for not contextualising her regency within existing scholarship on elite women's power and governance, and for

29 Poska, *Gendered Crossings*.

30 See, for example, Catterall and Campbell (eds.), *Women in Port*, which includes a chapter on women merchants and traders in New Netherland.

31 Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives*; Otele, *African Europeans*; Andrea, *The Lives of Girls and Women from the Islamic World*.

not examining her very long life in centres of power across Europe.[32] More unfortunate, in my opinion, is the lack of a recent scholarly biography of Margaret of Austria, who served as governor of the Netherlands from 1507 to 1515, and again from 1519 to 1530, and who negotiated the Peace of Cambrai – the so-called 'Ladies' Peace' – with Louise of Savoy, although there is a biographical novel, a popular biography in French, and some recent scholarship that considers her along with other regents.[33]

Actually, a broader, comparative approach to female regents might be a good thing. In her review of Steen's biography, Christine Kooi notes that Margaret of Parma and Catherine de' Medici were contemporaries with 'remarkably parallel lives. Both women had close ties to Italy, both were used to advance the dynastic interests of their families, both became regents of their lands at nearly the same time (1559 and 1560, respectively), both governed during times of political turbulence, religious rebellion, and civil war, and both were largely regarded as failures as sovereigns'. Kooi suggests that 'a comparative analysis of these two princesses' political trajectories might have proved illuminating'.[34] I agree. Although it may be unfair to ask for comparative studies of Netherlandish regents when no one expects this in the hundreds of books on Elizabeth I, their lives and networks were transnational in a way hers was not. Studies of noblewomen and gentry that go beyond the individual biographies mentioned by Nissen and Raeymaekers might also help answer the question they pose about whether these women were exceptional or representative of a larger group of politically active women. Research, particularly on Spain, has found that wealthy men generally saw the women in their families as reliable and capable, and expected them to engage in political, legal, and economic activity on behalf of their families, which they did.[35] If this was true in Spain, it should certainly be true for those bossy women of the Low Countries.

Nissen and Raeymaekers end their article calling for a broadening of the notion of what is considered 'political' activity and for moving away from traditional sources to alternative source materials such as pamphlets, newspapers, or popular songs. Nina Lamal's case study does just that, commenting on the potential of digitised seventeenth-century Dutch newspapers for examining women's involvement in diplomacy. Those newspapers have revealed that wives accompanied their husbands on some diplomatic missions, a fact that official sources omit, and that they were part of important social occasions, as crucial to projecting soft power in the seventeenth century as they are in the twenty-first.

In her 1998 article, Kloek subsumes religion within art and culture, though she herself wrote several influential early articles on women in Reformed church discipline using consistory records. In this special issue, religion is its own section, with a historiographic

32 Steen, *Margaret of Parma*. See the reviews by Broomhall, 'Review of Steen'; Kooi, 'Review of Steen'; Sánchez, 'Review of Steen'; and Von Habsburg, 'Review of Steen'. There is also an edited collection on Margaret of Parma, issued in both Dutch and English in conjunction with an exhibit held at the Museum Oudenaarde: Lichtert (ed.), *Margaret, Duchess of Parma*.

33 Gaston, *Margaret of Austria*; Guillot, *Marguerite d'Autriche-Bourgogne*; Ylä-Anttila, *Habsburg Female Regents*; Triest, *Macht, vrouwen en politiek*.

34 Kooi, 'Review of Steen', 749.

35 Poska, 'Agentic Gender Norms'; Coolidge, *Guardianship, Gender and the Nobility*.

chapter by Christine Kooi on the sixteenth century and two case studies. Kooi judges the gendered dynamics of religious change in the sixteenth century to be a 'lacuna', noting that much remains unexplored, and that what there is has often remained siloed in separate studies of Catholic, Reformed, and Anabaptist women. Anabaptists are the best studied, though some of this is slightly hagiographical. Both siloing and hagiography can be found in the entire field of women and the Reformation. Although there is more work on other geographic areas – especially England, which dominates the field of research on early modern women on nearly every topic – this also is divided by religious denomination. Books titled 'women and the Reformation', whether scholarly or popular, are almost all only about Protestants, and often a small subset of these, generally from the author's own religious tradition. Roland Bainton's three-volume series *Women of the Reformation*, which appeared in the 1970s and is still in print today, does include a few Catholics, reflecting his concerns for toleration and religious liberty, though Protestants still vastly outnumber Catholics in the books.[36]

There are no corresponding overviews of women in the Catholic Reformation, though there has been a huge outpouring of scholarly work on Catholic women published over the last several decades, particularly on convents, for in terms of sources *by* women about religious issues, those from educated nuns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries far outweigh those from lay women, Protestant or Catholic. Scholars in many fields – art history, music history, literature, social history, and religious history – have explored the role of convents and their residents in cultural production and patronage, family dynamics, and political change, arguing that they were very much part of the public realm of power politics and culture.[37] This convent history contributes to the sense that it was Catholic rather than Protestant women who had more agency and more options during this period. They had, as long recognised, *maritus aut murus* (marriage or the convent) but also various in-between forms of an active religious vocation for women out in the world.[38] There has been so much scholarship that I did not recognise so little of it has been on the Low Countries, so Kooi is right that the time has come for more work on this, as well as work that crosses the confessional divide, which has primarily been collections of articles, of which only a few include Netherlandish material.[39] Some of this future research might also have a global aspect, as by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Netherlandish women who travelled and migrated to colonies across the Atlantic and Pacific, or who supported colonial endeavours through their money and work, no doubt included Catholics and Protestants, and

36 Bainton, *Women of the Reformation*.

37 Just a few of the many books are: Weaver, *Convent Theatre*; Baernstein, *A Convent Tale*; Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*; Strasser, *State of Virginity*; Lehfeldt, *Women and Religion in Golden Age Spain*; Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*. Studies of convents in the colonial world include Burns, *Colonial Habits*; Kirk, *Convent Life in Colonial Mexico*. Walker, *Gender and Politics*, and Bowden and Kelly (eds.), *English Convents in Exile*, include discussion of the Southern Low Countries, but only English convents, not those for local women.

38 Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*; Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*; Mazznois, *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self*; Clark, *Masterless Mistresses*.

39 Dinan and Meters (eds.), *Women and Religion in Old and New Worlds*; Weber (ed.), *Devout Laywomen*.

the religious networks they created at home may have extended across the seas, just as those of German women did.[40]

Renske Hoff and Evelyne Verheggen both provide case studies of Catholic women's devotional objects, Hoff an annotated vernacular Bible owned by a seventeenth-century Dominican sister in Antwerp, and Verheggen devotional prints (some of them annotated) owned by women who lived in the Beguinage in Amsterdam, a Catholic institution that survived long after the Protestant Reformation. Vernacular Bibles are often portrayed as Protestant objects, central to public worship and household devotional practices.[41] The Bible studied by Hoff resided instead in an enclosed convent, but its owner was just as active as lay Protestant women and men in using it to express her religious identity and personal concerns. Hoff's analysis brings insights from the history of the book and of reading to an object owned and used by a woman, just as earlier work has demonstrated women's role in the production and transmission of religious texts and books.

Verheggen's discussion of Beguinages in the Dutch Republic and their connections with Catholic institutions in the Southern Netherlands and Rhineland provides evidence of Kooi's point about the need for work on women and religion that takes all denominations into account. Verheggen notes that thousands of Catholic women chose a religious or semi-religious life in the Netherlands in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and echoes Kooi's point that we know next to nothing about them. Hoff and Verheggen both make the point that the sources they analyse are often difficult to locate, though digital tools can help.

With Lieke van Deinsen and Karen Hollewand's essay, the issue turns to science, both the science *on* women and science *by* women. They find that in studies of science that focus on women and gender, the Low Countries play a minor role, which is somewhat surprising given the major role that the Low Countries play in discussions of early modern science in general. What there is has focused largely on anatomy and the female body, and on learned women, some of whom were celebrated already in the early modern period in those biographical catalogues of 'illustrious women' that were such a common genre across Europe. They agree with Natalie Zemon Davis's comments from fifty years ago that these set a path for women's history, which often focused on what Davis terms 'women worthies' such as Anna Maria van Schurman, set apart from others by exceptional talents.[42] Van Deinsen and Hollewand instead recommend an approach that moves beyond the singular, to networks and collaborations, some of which included women who were not among the elite, enslaved women among these. This fits with a prominent trend in scholarship on early modern science and thinking in general, which has increasingly focused on informal networks and the new institutions for learning and the creation of culture that developed during the early modern period. To my knowledge, the *Natuurkundig Genootschap der Dames* founded in Zeeland in 1785, which they mention, is the first learned society for

40 On Reformed women's networks in the Netherlands, see Pipkin, *Dissenting Daughters*. On German women's global religious networks, see Gleixner, 'Mäzeninnen im Reich Gottes'; Gleixner, 'Fürstäbtissin, Patronage und protestantische Indienmission'; Hsia, *Noble Patronage and Jesuit Missions*.

41 Dinenis, 'The Hand of Felicitas von Selmenitz'; Hamling, *Decorating the Godly Household*.

42 Davis, '"Women's History" in Transition'.

women devoted to science anywhere in Europe, and could use a fresh look, as the scholarship on it is twenty years old.

Claire Morrison uses testamentary records to reveal ways that women shaped education that have been overlooked – not their own education, but that of male university students to whom they provided scholarships of money and material goods. She makes good use of Maria Agren's 'verb-oriented method' for something other than work, noting that focusing on women's actions can also be used when looking at donating and investing. The women donors came from different social classes and were religious and lay. Some were actively involved in choosing the scholarship recipient, just as donors often are today. I have actually never seen this explored for any other university, but can't imagine that the University of Leuven was alone in receiving such gifts from women donors. Clearly this is a possibility for future research elsewhere, as we attempt to fully grasp the role of women in institutions we used to think were completely male. Jonas Roelens also highlights women's agency in a situation where we might not expect this, a witch trial in which the accused successfully resisted efforts to force her to confess, including torture, and was actually acquitted.

With the essay by Feike Dietz and Nina Geerdink, the issue turns to topics on which Kloek found the most research in 1998, women's role in literature and art. This richness has continued, but with some caveats. They highlight the impact of the 1997 biographical anthology *Met en zonder lauwerkrans*, which included 158 writers, but note that the time has come to move beyond this to include more writers in an online database. They also call for moving beyond a certain sameness in approach, which has emphasised constraints on women writers, to one that views women writers intersectionally, noting differences in opportunities created by age and health as well as class and race. They echo the recommendation of Marie-Louise Coolahan to broaden the notion of literature to include manuscripts, paratexts, and letters, and to extend the concept of 'authorship' to give more attention to collaborations and networking. Scholars of women's letter-writing, such as James Daybell and Julie Campbell, explicitly analyse letter-writing as an example of agency, through which women expanded their rhetorical and persuasive skills as they developed epistolary strategies.[43] The works discussed by Dietz and Geerdink are thus part of what has been a huge amount of scholarship on letters, as well as on informal settings for women's learning – including households, reading circles, salons, and virtual communities linked through letters – and of women who participated in the new social and cultural institutions of the Republic of Letters.[44] There has been so much, in fact, that when I did the fourth edition of *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* in 2019, the chapter on education got retitled 'Learning and Letters'.

The case studies by Martine van Elk and by Rebekah Ahrendt and David van der Linden do exactly what Dietz and Geerdink call for, and also provide examples of various scholarly turns mentioned by other authors in this issue, the Irish scholars, and me. Van Elk evaluates the playwright Katharina Lescailje's *Ariadne*, a translation of a French play

43 Daybell and Gordon (eds.), *Women and Epistolary Agency*; Campbell and Larsen (eds.), *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters*.

44 Ray, *Writing Gender*; Goodman, *Becoming a Woman*.

performed five times at the Schouwburg in Amsterdam with a female actress playing the leading role, as a text and as a material object in two editions, with visual and written paratextual material provided by men. Van Elk finds contradiction between the presentation of Ariadne's final act of attempted suicide in the play itself and in the paratexts, with Lescailje's play presenting this as an act of violence and the frontispiece engraving attached to the play as the swoon of a suffering woman. Ahrendt and Van der Linden analyse a letter written by a woman from what they term an 'accidental archive' – in some ways the opposite of Mary O'Dowd's 'dispersed archive' – the 2,600 undelivered letters from 1689 to 1706, discovered in postmaster Simon de Brienne's trunk in the Hague.[45] They focus on one letter, which, like the play analysed by Van Elk, comes from the world of the theatre, paying attention to its materiality and its message. They recommend 'responsible speculation' as a method to 'better account for historically marginalized voices', a suggestion that they draw from scholarship outside the early modern period, though of course this is exactly what Natalie Zemon Davis advocated and practiced decades ago.[46]

Catherine Powell focuses on the visual arts, and like the authors who focus on literature, advocates greater emphasis on the collaborative nature of early modern cultural products and the use of technical analysis and digital humanities. She traces recent scholarship on women's artistic practices in a variety of genres, and briefly mentions several recent exhibits on women artists and makers. I was fortunate enough to see one of these, *Making Her Mark. A History of Women Artists in Europe, 1400-1800*, when it was at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2023. It featured oil paintings and drawings by canonical artists, and also prints, sculptures (in marble, wax, and paper), miniatures, embroidery, paper-cutting, lace, tapestries, glassware, clothing, ceramics, silverwork, furniture, devotional objects, printed books, and manuscript illuminations by named and anonymous individuals and groups.[47] Among its more than two hundred fascinating objects was a book printed by the nuns of the convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli in Florence in 1476 (only five years after the first printing press began operating in the city), and another printed by the nuns of Santa Maria Maddelena in Venice in 1559, which displays their printer's mark of Mary Magdelene with flowing hair covering her body, reflecting the fact that many women in the convent were former sex workers. Women worked as printers in Netherlandish cities, but also behind convent walls.

Women in convents were only one of the female artisanal collectives featured in the exhibit, reflecting its emphasis on the collaborative nature of creative work that Powell calls for. I must admit that I didn't specifically seek out works by women from the

45 The Brienne Collection is the focus of Signed, Sealed, and Undelivered, a collaborative international project of scientists and humanities scholars with expertise in history, languages, material studies, conservation, curation, artificial intelligence, imaging, and engineering. It is now part of Early Modern Letters Online, a project housed at the Bodleian Library. See the introduction at: http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=brienne-collection (Accessed on 26 February 2025). The collection includes letters by women, but there does not yet seem to be an analysis of these taken as a whole.

46 For Davis's classic defense of her method, see her exchange with Robert Finlay in the *American Historical Review*, 'On the Lame'. For her most extended example, see the introduction to *Women on the Margins.*

47 There is an excellent detailed review of the exhibit, with many photographs, by Gaffney, 'Reflections', and another review of the exhibit by Banta, 'The Making of *Making her Mark*'.

Low Countries in the exhibit, but they were there. In its success in bringing forward the stories of unexceptional women makers alongside that of recognised stars, the exhibit as a whole clearly answered Powell's central question: 'Where and how can we locate the many "ordinary women" who must have contributed to the creation and production of art?' The same is true of Erika Gaffney's project Art Herstory, online now on several platforms for more than five years and with new material added monthly.[48] Thus in some cases, public-facing projects have gone beyond purely scholarly ones in their innovation, diversity, and breadth, and should be included when we talk about the state of the field.

In its exploration of Michaelina Wautier's spectacular oil painting, *Flower Garland with Butterfly*, the case study by Kirsten Derks, Koen Janssens, Katlijne Van der Stighelen, and Geert Van der Snickt provides a fascinating example of how technical studies can reveal things that nothing else could and for which there is no textual trace. They used X-ray fluorescence scanning and microscopic analysis to explore Wautier's painting techniques and use of pigments, arguing that these *might* (the responsible speculation advocated by Ahrendt and Van der Linden) have come from contact with male painters outside her family, which her connections at the court of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria made possible. As the authors comment, we know little about how women artists received their training, but the objects themselves provide evidence, just as material culture has revealed so many other aspects of women's lives.

Sarah Moran ends the special issue with a look at women's patronage and funding, a topic feminist art historians have been exploring since the 1980s, dividing her analysis by social class and religious or lay status, thus an intersectional approach. She notes that some topics have been understudied, especially in the seventeenth century, but as someone who tries to keep up with new works, to me her bibliography is dishearteningly long rather than dishearteningly short. As with exhibits of women artists, there have also been recent exhibits focused on early modern women's patronage, particularly the multi-year Prado exhibit, 'The Female Perspective', organised by Noelia García Pérez.[49] This focuses only on women from European royal dynasties, but its organisation as a 'thematic route' rather than a special exhibit in separate rooms was a brilliant decision. In this, paintings and objects stay where they are, and visitors learn about the women's funding and collecting through new signage. What this means it that *every* visitor to the Prado can learn about this, not simply those willing to go into rooms labelled 'women'. Though the Prado is unusual in its level of female patronage – its initial collection was that of Maria Isabel of Braganza, who also convinced her husband King Ferdinand VII of Spain to create a royal museum open to the public – this model could be used elsewhere. As most readers of this special issue probably know, the Rijksmuseum is in the midst of a multi-year 'Women of the Rijksmuseum' research programme, which thus far has sponsored multi-disciplinary symposia designed for academics and specialists. I do not know what the plans are for integrating this into the museum's displays, but they might want to follow the Prado's model, and provide signage about women's role in art for the hordes trouping

48 *Art Herstory*, https://artherstory.net/ (Accessed on 26 February 2025).
49 'The Female Perspective II', *Museo del Prado*, www.museodelprado.es/en/whats-on/exhibition/the-female-perspective-ii/649edef3-b71f-726e-afb1-a8403fb8cbc1 (Accessed on 26 February 2025).

by all the Rembrandts and Frans Hals.[50] Decades ago in women's history we argued about whether 'mainstreaming' this into general history courses was better than teaching separate courses, and decided the answer was to do both, which might be a good tactic for museums and collections, just as it still is in our own teaching and writing.

Moran also takes us back to where the special issue started by calling for art historians to pay more attention to economic issues, particularly property laws and practices that allowed women to control a substantial amount of wealth, which they might then choose to spend on commissioning buildings and art. For this, they might need the help of those who are familiar with legal sources and quantitative techniques, one of the many recommendations in this issue for collaborative work in the present as well as attention to this in the past.

To return to my original question: how has women's history of the early modern Low Countries differed from that of other parts of Europe, and how has it been similar? It has led the way in exploring how the work of women and girls shaped economic development, and examining the lives of women in cities. Historians of the Low Countries have joined those of Ireland in examining elite women's political actions, women's letters and the networks these created, and legal realities, and in using digital technologies. They have joined historians of Italy, France, England, Spain, and other parts of Europe in exploring material culture, women's religious life, the Atlantic World, and the actions and ideas of both elite and non-elite women, all of which has emphasised women's agency.[51] The similarities are more striking than the differences, which is not surprising to me, as historians from the Low Countries have been essential members of transnational research teams on many, many early modern topics. Their transnational work may be one reason that few of the authors in this issue directly address the question posed in the introduction about whether women in the early modern Low Countries were somehow exceptional: Netherlandish women had different opportunities because they lived in a relatively urbanised and commercial society, but women across Europe and around the world could also be 'bold, headstrong, and enterprising'.[52] Lodovico Guicciardini just didn't know where to look, and now we do. The similarities and parallels do not mean that we should give up exploring the history of women in one area, however, as the only way we can make good comparisons is to have rich examples and incisive local analyses, which often require specific linguistic, palaeographic, and methodological skills as well as deep background knowledge, an impossible combination for any one person. This is why transnational and interdisciplinary collaboration is so important.

Although several of the authors in this special issue point out specific lacunae and imbalances in scholarship, my overall sense is just as I noted in regard to the final essay on patronage: the bibliographies are enormous, full of things I didn't know about and need

50 'Women of the Rijksmuseum', *Rijksmuseum*, www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/research/our-research/overarching/women-of-the-rijksmuseum (Accessed on 26 February 2025).

51 Theoretical discussions of women's agency include Poska, 'Agentic Gender Norms'; Thomas, 'Historicising Agency'. See also the introductions to Wiesner-Hanks (ed.), *Challenging Women's Agency*; Allan and Patel (eds.), 'Women's Agency'; Simonton and Montenach (eds.), *Female Agency in the Urban Economy*.

52 For just two among many, Allyson Poska provides examples from Spain in *Gendered Crossings*, and Amy Stanley from Japan in *Stranger in the Shogun's City*.

to read. This is true for the entire field of early modern women's studies. There are several book series – one now at Amsterdam University Press – that have published hundreds of monographs, article collections, and translations. There is a specialised interdisciplinary journal, *Early Modern Women Journal*, though as the editor of the *Sixteenth Century Journal* I can testify that this has not lessened the number of submissions on women and gender to other journals. I can hardly make it through the book reviews, much less read the books. In comparison to the 1990s, the field has become richer and far more diverse. As noted by several authors in this issue, those who study early modern women often do so intersectionally, exploring other social categories, including race, social class, age, and health, along with gender.[53] Because of this, other than the emphasis on agency, it is no longer possible to say the field as a whole is headed in this or that direction, as the paths are too numerous and their overlaps and connections too complex. Women's history as a field has also swung back and forth between foregrounding agency and highlighting oppression in the last fifty years, and it may yet swing back, so whether the emphasis on agency will continue is uncertain.

The explosion in scholarship has been joined within the last few years by an expansion in sources available online, including digital projects mentioned in several essays in this issue. Going forward, new technologies in Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) software will allow even faster digitisation of manuscripts and early print sources, further expanding the range of materials open to scholars and students around the world. This both requires and will allow collaborations across distance and disciplines, which is always a good thing. The archive on women will continue to be more dispersed than that on men, but perhaps less reliant on 'fugitive sightings' than it has been in the past. It is easy to get depressed about many things involving women at the moment, but the study of early modern women is not one of these, and the work of scholars *of* the Low Countries and *in* the Low Countries has been a central part of this.

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53 For a discussion of gender and intersectionality in world history, see Wiesner-Hanks, 'Gender, Intersectionality and Global Social History'.

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