On the second day of the Gender and Political Culture conference at the University of Plymouth, 30 August 2013, participants filed into the auditorium of the Ronald Levinsky Centre to hear a keynote speech given by the formidable Merry Wiesner Hanks. Hanks stated that the idea of ‘gender [as being] central in this broader understanding of “political” has gone from radical to self-evident’, demonstrating the impact and growth of historical studies of early modern women, gender relations and power structures. The evolution of early modern gender studies has been and continues to be fruitful and dynamic. Historians such as Andrea Pearson, Rosemary O’Day, James Daybell, Merry Weisner Hanks and Barbara J. Harris have all explored the topic of female agency and context in which it was constructed, activated, employed and utilized.(1) Certainly, this edited collection of essays, Attending to Early Modern Women: Conflict and Concord, contributes fresh and current perspectives, while strengthening and expanding on the idea of women as agents of power and authority within the main strands of historical research: politics, society, economy and culture. The collection presents wide-ranging, scholarly historical research that examines the construction and employment of the theory of female agency. These essays challenge and push us as historians to broaden our understanding of power relations and ways in which agency has been commissioned. It is interesting that this book is not the first to be published with this title (2) but it reinforces the need to continuously engage in exploring this magnetic, alluring and evolving field.

Anticipation and excitement grow when you encounter this new collection, hoping it will reveal new data, provide new lenses or even offer new methodological approaches of historical inquiry into early modern women. Amy Froide opens the book with an overview and an explanation of the origins of this collection,
which developed out of the 2009 *Attending to Early Modern Women* symposium at the University of Maryland. The volume contains a collection of ten essays over 14 chapters and four thematic sections: negotiations, economies, faiths and spiritualities, and pedagogies. Four of the chapters are summaries of workshops that were conducted at the symposium. This collection, according to Froide, includes a global perspective and focuses on conflict and concord, to emphasize the:

inherent tensions and polarities in both the lives of women in the past and the present day study of women...illuminat[ing] women’s involvement in contestation, debate and violence on a personal, domestic and even interior level as well as the macro-level of politics, economics and society. (p. xii)

This global emphasis is both warranted and needed to expand our understanding of the lives of early modern women beyond Western Europe, which has dominated early modern studies. Additionally, a global approach allows for a variety of perspectives from women of different geographical, political, social, economic, religious and cultural backgrounds; aiding in the construction of what we know about women in the early modern world. Furthermore, an interesting component of this collection is the inclusion and discussion of female agency, which is an important category for analysis within early modern studies of women and gender. Female agency is the theory that distinguishes women's power, authority and ability to change or influence their own lives and circumstances (as well as the lives of those around them), either through direct or indirect means. It is a fairly new and engaging aspect of women’s studies that has too often been relegated to the sidelines. Yet in the past few years, female agency has emerged as an active and vigorous lens in which to explore not only the early modern world but also the more microscopic aspects of women’s daily lives, including families and gender relations.

The first thematic section, ‘Negotiations’, contains essays that illustrate cases of women who employed negotiating tactics in an environment that belonged, traditionally, to men. In chapter one, Craig Harline examines the Rolondus siblings and how Maria Rolando used her agency to negotiate on her parent’s behalf to bring her brother back to the ‘true religion’. The essay titled ‘Big sister as intermediary: how Maria Rolando tried to win back her wayward brother’ constructs a captivating historical story of the Rolandus family and how the son Jacob converted to Catholicism despite his father being a Reformed preacher. This conversion both shocked and devastated the family because of their devout belief in and adherence to their faith. Harline’s essay not only demonstrates the profound effects of the religious tensions within this period but also the fluidity and ease with which conversion could happen. More telling and more important is the role Maria Rolando played in this early modern drama. She served as not only a representative for the family but acted as a negotiator on the family’s behalf to try and bring Jacob back to what was in her eyes, the ‘true religion.’

Harline’s analysis and extraction of the letters between Maria and her brother Jacob not only reveals examples of a female agent acting in her own right but also show her engaging in theological debates that required knowledge and some education. Maria was engaging in conduct and within a domain (theology) that was not traditionally female. The idea that women could participate in an area that was characteristically male-dominated, such as in the religious sphere as seen with Maria, is quite out of the ordinary and unorthodox. Additionally, Harline demonstrates how Maria satisfied the conditions inherent of her role as a woman by fulfilling her household duties yet still undertook this new role of negotiator (not just political or social but familial and personal), writing in the evenings or at night. Harline’s use and distinction of the term “negotiator” gives a new and fresh perspective, while successfully demonstrating Maria’s extraordinary courage and passion in stepping outside of the expectations of her gender, and helps to point out the unusual circumstances of this particular case study.

In chapter two, Colleen Reardon investigates negotiation tactics and ‘positional bargaining’ (p. 23) among women and on behalf of other women in 16th and 17th century Italy for employment purposes, based on a certain set of skills, mainly singing. Chapter three is a summary of the conference workshops and titles of
papers offered at the 2009 conference in Maryland. Section two explores ‘Economies’ and how women were engaged in the economic arena, specifically as ‘holders of property and power.’ (p. xviii) In chapter four Megan Matchinske introduces Lucy Hutchinson, the wife of an English Civil War colonel, John Hutchinson and discusses how Lucy exerted her agency and power as an author and historian to detail and document the English Civil War while simultaneously giving her a husband a voice.

Holly Hurlburt’s essay on Columbus’ sister forms chapter five. This essay cites Columbus’ sister as an example of the ways women contributed to “European expansionist endeavors.” (p. 78) The paper titled ‘Columbus’s sister: female agency and women’s bodies in early modern Mediterranean and Atlantic empires’ contains both weaknesses and strengths. The strengths are Hurlburt’s ability to document the historiography and demonstrate an area of historical studies within early modern women’s studies that is fairly new, understudied and underdeveloped, namely women’s participation, involvement and status within the Mediterranean and Atlantic empires. This area is ripe for historical inquiry. She provides excellent examples and discussions of female imagery and symbolism as well as the masculine subversion of those images and symbols.

The weakness of this particular essay lies in the omission of the explicit discussion of female agency that is clearly stated in the title. There is mention of female authority and examples of power but the essay could benefit from a more nuanced explanation and discussion of how agency manifested within the context Hurlburt provides. One might ask why the question of female imagery and symbolism that is evident in this region of Europe during this period was not more closely aligned to discussions of female agency? Furthermore, the essay alludes to the use of Columbus’ sister as an example, yet there is no discussion or analysis of Columbus’ sister and her role in empire expansion within the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

In chapter six, Maya Shatzmiller’s essay assesses the economics of the female body and the discourse of law and medicine within the professions that tend to female bodily processes of birth and reproduction. Chapter seven is another summary of conference workshops and titles of papers.

Section three is thematically focused on ‘Faiths and spiritualities.’ In chapter eight, Silvia Evangelisti highlights and investigates the use of and agency of nuns within the context of Spanish Roman Catholic missions in the New World. Evangelisti’s exemplary piece: ‘Spaces for agency: the view from early modern female religious communities’, certainly stands out as she expertly analyzes not only female agency in a global context but also illuminates a novel way in which scholars can approach and use the idea of female agency. By exploring how females, more specifically two nuns, possessed a unique power and authority and employed this power in hopes of spreading, through missionary work, Christian ideals, beliefs and ways of worship to non-Christian groups in New Mexico, Evangelisti clearly provides an excellent case study of female agency at its core.

Though these nuns, both Maria de Agreda and Madre Luisa de Carrion, were not physically present in New Mexico, their visionary or imagined presence not only gave them voices and agency to act as missionaries in the conversion goals of the Catholic Church, it also gave them individual and personal autonomy within their religious community and country. This unique and very well argued use of agency gives historical scholars a new way to approach female agency within an imaginary space where agency can be exerted without physical presence, for example via an apparition or vision. Evangelisti has demonstrated that this was not completely out of the ordinary within this period.

In chapter nine, Barbara Watson Andaya demonstrates the impact and the role of Catholic imagery and of the idea of the Virgin Mary in Indonesia. Another summary of conference workshops and paper titles is provided in chapter ten and marks the end of section three.

Pedagogies and the importance of teaching women’s history is the theme of section four. In chapter eleven, Susan E. Dinan studies gender disparity within higher education and concludes that to ensure the success of students, both men and women, there needs to be equal representation and access to gender equal curriculums. Chapter twelve continues the section with Albert Rabil Jr.’s essay that explores the changing
male misogyny with the emergence of two gendered writers of the 14th and 15th centuries. This investigation illustrates ways in which a case study can be used to teach about gender relations. Eleonora Stoppino’s essay on ‘Early modern amazons’ constitutes chapter thirteen. This essay utilizes the idea of the ‘warrior woman’ as a way of teaching about early modern conflict. Chapter fourteen is a summary of conference workshops and closes the fourth and final section of the book.

While most of the essays in this collection are fascinating and well-argued, there is a problem with the book’s layout and its format. The inclusion of summary chapters on the workshops held at the 2009 conference, between the four thematic sections, slightly disrupts the flow of historical research and thought. One wonders if this is to provide a break in which the reader can consider the analyses of the previous section, or perhaps this was simply the editor’s way of providing more information about the symposium itself. The chapters do provide insight into the fullest range of possibilities for study, which were beyond the scope of the volume. Yet this in itself is frustrating, as the summary chapters are brief summaries of conference papers.

The summaries do not fit with the overall view of the collection, and seem to merely tease the reader who may want more information about the papers they find interesting or that are relevant to their own particular studies and yet are unable to see the full versions. This also brings up the point of the usability of this source within the scholarly community. In fact, Froide remarks on this by simply stating that these conference proceedings are difficult to ‘replicate in print, but the summaries and readings provide a taste. If you want to experience the energy behind these exchanges, join us for the next symposium.’ (p. xxiii) This superficial dismissal of the inherent problems with the summary chapters limits the overall effectiveness of the source to the wider historical community.

The final critique, aimed to be both positive and constructive, is the inclusion of the section on ‘Pedagogies.’ I will be the first to admit, champion and agree with the need for pedagogical studies on teaching, disseminating and raising awareness of early modern women’s history. It is of vital importance, especially in an age where images, idea and notions about women dominate the mainstream and give false and skewed representations of gender roles and women’s place within society.

However, I believe that pedagogical discussions and studies merit a study and collection by themselves, so that they may be fully and successfully utilized, realized and implemented. The section on pedagogies did not sit well for this reviewer in the volume and in fact loses value as well as detracting from the importance of these scholarly, historical papers and essays. This dilemma warrants asking the collection’s editor why she felt the need to do this. What purpose does adding this final thematic section serve, when the rest of the collection is historical scholarly research? Furthermore, Albert Rabi Jr.’s essay is more a historical analysis rather than a discussion or exemplification of how to instruct students on historical studies of women and might therefore have been better suited to a different thematic category in the volume.

Despite these few limitations, overall Attending to Early Modern Women: Conflict and Concord is a valuable collection to read and own as well as employ in future studies of the lives of early modern women, gender relations and the ways in which female agency can be utilized and expanded upon. It helps to document the evolution and current trends within this area, as well as adding to the evidence available for the various topics and theories that are discussed within the volume. It helps to establish a framework in which historians can expand beyond the confines of a European context. It does in fact reveal new data, provide new lenses and document new methodological approaches to historical perspectives on early modern women.

Notes

1. Female agency is explored in the works of Andrea Pearson’s, Women and Portraits in Early Modern Europe: Gender Agency, and Identity (Aldershot, UK, 2008); Rosemary O’Day, Women’s Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies (Harlow, UK, 2007); James Daybell’s, Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700
(Aldershot, UK, 2004); Merry Wiesner Hank’s, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK, 2008); and Barbara J. Harris’, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550* (New York, NY, 2002). Back to (1)


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