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Containing a diverse range of essays on the experiences of early modern women from female investors to indentured servants, Challenging Orthodoxies: The Social and Cultural Worlds of Early Modern Women is an important contribution to the growing body of research on early modern female experience. First presented at a conference held in honour of Hilda L. Smith’s work at the University of Cincinnati in May 2011 (with the exception of Barbara Todd’s essay which was a later addition), these essays promise to celebrate Smith’s contribution to gender history by ‘confront[ing] some received wisdom, ‘truth’ or orthodoxy’ concerning women (p. 5).

One overarching orthodoxy in particular draws the collection together as a whole; discussion of female access to power and their challenges to authority underpins the central argument of this book and demonstrates the influence of Smith on the work of each author. The editors set out a methodology that does not ‘rely on or reinforce the worn-out trope of the last 30 years in European and American women’s history – the gendered division between public and private spheres’ (p. 3). It is a credit to the authors that each essay adheres to this methodology, exploring instead various ways in which women exercised power and authority in early modern Europe.

The collection is comprised of ten essays, divided into three distinct parts: part one, ‘Challenging cultural and social traditions’; part two, ‘Challenging scientific and intellectual traditions’; and part three, ‘Challenging legal and political traditions’. The strength of the collection lies in the breadth of both the topics covered and the different approaches of its authors in considering early modern women. This is an interdisciplinary collection that includes contributions from authors across history, English and politics departments. The essays therefore draw on a wide range of source material including legal documents, financial records and literary and scientific texts. Examining the experiences of women from England, France and Spain, the collection celebrates the numerous ways in which the history of women has both extended and expanded over the last 40 years.

The first section of the collection, titled ‘Challenging cultural and social traditions’ contains three essays that
explore what it meant to be a woman in early modern Europe, considering the cultural and social boundaries of womanhood and how women pushed or challenged these boundaries. In her essay on the Gonzales sisters, who suffered from ‘hypertrichosis universalis’, a condition in which the whole body is covered with hair, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks highlights the artificiality of gender categories, arguing that boundaries ‘were unclear and dependent on who was making the categorisation’ (p. 32). She discusses at length the connection between women and animals within the scholarly and intellectual traditions in which the Gonzales sisters lived, concluding that ‘all women, and not just the hairy girls, were to some degree monsters’ (p. 32).

The other two essays within this section of the book focus on women’s economic activities, as Lois G. Schwoerer and Barbara J. Todd consider women’s experiences working within the gun industry and as money-lenders respectively. Shwoerer’s analysis of records of the gunmakers guild (the Worshipful Company of Gunmakers), and the Ordnance Office, which provided supervision and control of military supplies, demonstrates women’s involvement in the making and repairing of guns. These women represented a minority of those involved in the gunmaking industry; however, Shwoerer demonstrates their engagement in several key areas of business, including the apprenticeship of new gunmakers and running shops where guns could be bought and repaired. This, alongside women’s everyday exposure to guns in early modern London, she argues, shaped women’s perceptions of guns and ‘helped to soften the idea that guns could kill, wound, and destroy – in effect, it helped to make firearms seem harmless’ (p. 52). By considering women who lived and worked within this context, Schwoerer calls for a re-evaluation of our understanding of guns and military equipment as weapons that were interacted with only by men. Gunmaking was an occupation in which women could, and did, participate. This important form of women’s work that took place within London flags up the need for further research that considers the economic and social conditions in which the women of her study undertook this type of employment.

Todd’s examination of female money lenders using the records of government loans challenges another orthodoxy that situates fiscal activities within a male-dominated economic culture. Whilst the works of Amy Erickson and Judith Spicksley have credited women as relatively active money-lenders on a local level, Todd’s work places both single and married women within a wider, public context of money lending. She notes how these women became ‘fiscal citizens’ who made choices about whether to lend their money to particular schemes and were a physical presence at Westminster. This, she argues, gave female money lenders both a political and financial identity. Like Schwoerer, Todd places women at the heart of an economic activity that has typically been perceived as male, forcing a reinterpretation of women’s roles within early modern public finances.

Alongside the other two contributions to this section, Wiesner-Hanks’ essay is a less comfortable fit. The social and cultural worlds in which the women discussed by Schwoerer and Todd lived do not map onto the world of the Gonzales sisters. However, this weakness only serves to raise further important questions and points to some gaps within the field itself – how did the perception of women vary according to the socio-economic worlds in which women lived? How did women’s engagement with economic activities like those discussed by Schwoerer and Todd shape perceptions of gender?

Women’s interaction with science and learning is the subject of the second section of this collection, centring on the intellectual achievements of women and their interaction with learning and the learned. The section opens with a thoughtful essay by Lisa T. Sarasohn on Margaret Cavendish’s responses to microscopic images of parasites. Some parallels between Sarasohn’s work and Wiesner-Hanks’ study of the Gonzales sisters might be drawn here; both works highlight the connection made by contemporaries between the female body and the animal or insect world. In the same way as the Gonzales sisters were, like other women, characterised as animals, Sarasohn points to the ways in which lice and parasites were satirised particularly in relation to the female body. Sarasohn draws together commonplace and scientific views of the inhabitation of insects on the human body, arguing that parasites ‘could function as a kind of double entendre, which implicated experimental philosophers as sexual voyeurs, or even sexual predators’ (p. 78). Her work discusses Cavendish’s critique of experimental science, including the work of Robert Hooke and Robert Boyle, in which lice and fleas viewed under a microscope seemed to her ‘monstrously out of
proportion and therefore terrifying’ (p. 77). Sarasohn’s analysis of Cavendish’s critique situates her response within a context of moral outrage at the ‘political and gendered assumptions’ she felt were reflected within Hooke’s studies (p. 100).

The role of women within the history of the Church of England is the topic of Melinda Zook’s essay. Positioning her essay within both historic and more recent religious climates, she discusses the religious writings of two 18th-century women named Mary Astell and Elizabeth Burnet, noting how both history and historians have neglected the role of women in the Anglo-Catholic movement. In this essay, Zook seeks to reinstate the female voice within the Church’s history. Her analysis of the journals, guidebooks, correspondences and theological texts produced by these two women integrates their accounts of the three ‘ages of danger’ in which the Church was perceived as faced by internal and external threats within the traditionally male-dominated understandings of these crises. Voices of religious women are therefore reinstated into the history of the 18th-century Church; however, Zook points out that even now ‘men dominate the literature of the Church, including the subject of women’ (p. 121).

This absence of the female voice is further drawn out within discussion of intellectual traditions. In the following essay, Judith P. Zinsser considers the role and success of Émilie Du Châtelet in playing the intellectual game of the querelles des femmes with her male contemporaries. Zinsser demonstrates how Châtelet’s responses to critiques of her work represent her participation in learned discourse and her challenge to the authority that male intellectuals attempted to assert. Like Zook, Zinsser also indicates the limitations of Châtelet’s power within these intellectual circles, rather pessimistically ending on the point that Châtelet’s work was subsequently only ever referred to in terms of her sexuality, mentioned only ‘to titillate Voltaire’s numerous readers’ (p. 144). Historic interpretations of Châtelet’s work then might challenge orthodoxies of female scientific reasoning and engagement; however, Châtelet’s work did little to encourage her contemporaries to conclude the querelles des femmes debate.

The final essay within this section celebrates Charlotte Lennox as one of the first female critics of the works of Shakespeare. Ann Thompson’s rather brief contribution to this section discusses how Lennox challenged Shakespeare’s work in a context in which he was ‘becoming established as the national poet’ (p. 150). Thompson demonstrates how Lennox’s critiques of Shakespeare’s writings were also situated in a masculine tradition of literary criticism; her work therefore challenged orthodoxies both in daring to question the work of Shakespeare and his place as a national poet, and in challenging the place of women within 18th-century scholarship on Shakespeare.

Using intellectual, scientific and religious texts, the essays within this section of the book consider the ways in which women were able to insert themselves into intellectual discourses. This section is successful in demonstrating that women did achieve this; however, the authors also highlight the limitations of women’s power within intellectual, religious and scientific circles. Collectively, the authors offer a nuanced understanding of women’s agency within the intellectual traditions.

The final section of this collection focuses on challenges to political and legal traditions. Mihoko Suzuki’s ‘Daughters of Coke: women’s legal discourse in England, 1642–1689’ discusses the intellectual legacy of Sir Edward Coke, suggesting that his Institutes improved legal knowledge of common law and captured a wide readership, which included women. She argues that this female audience, including Brilliana Harley, and the wives of Levellers, who in the mid-17th century petitioned Parliament for the release of their husbands, demonstrated their knowledge of common law discourse in ways that Coke probably never intended. These women directly quoted from Coke’s work, extending the common law rights accorded to men to themselves as women. Suzuki’s work not only successfully challenges the idea that women did not engage with legal discourse in early modern England, it also demonstrates the agency and power these women exercised through knowledge of their rights.

One of the more exceptional contributions to this collection as a whole lies in Anna Suranyi’s chapter ‘“Willing to go if they had their clothes”: early modern women and indentured servitude’. Suranyi focuses
on the power indentured servants who were sent across the Atlantic Ocean in the 17th century held, and the ways in which these women navigated the legal system and the system of service. She uses examples of women who negotiated transportation sentences in order to avoid imprisonment and her use of The Proceedings of the Old Bailey records allows her to consider power held by women of lower social status. Suranyi’s work offers an interesting concluding remark that extends female agency beyond the sources. She suggests that whilst the records available largely represent the ‘unlucky women who failed or were caught in their endeavours, these probably represent only a few of the working and servant women who strove to ensure a better future for themselves’ (p. 210).

The volume concludes with an epilogue by Bernice A. Caroll, whose work on Virginia Woolf draws together the discussion of female power and agency that is threaded throughout the book. Using Woolf as an example of an individual who challenged authority and intellectual traditions, Caroll notes the struggles of women like Woolf in ‘engagement in, and recognition of, their contributions to the life of the mind’ (p.227). Caroll indicates how the book has shown how women wielded power despite their alleged powerlessness, and highlights how gender is not the only resource of dominance. She cites ‘wealth, status, control of institutions, and weapons’ as other resources that might lead to dominance; however, I would argue that some of these resources might have been explored in more detail throughout the collection in relation to women. The collection engages with women across social classes and status groups; whilst section two predominantly makes reference to elite culture and traditions, Schwoerer, Todd and Suranyi’s work examines the experiences of women of the middling and lower ranks of society. These social distinctions might have been teased out further in order to consider how the experiences of women might be shaped by factors external to their gender.

Overall, this is an important book that both celebrates and builds upon the work of Hilda Smith. The authors both contribute directly to debates that have been explored by Smith herself, whilst also building upon Smith’s mission to rediscover the voices of women of past societies. Given Smith’s recent comments on the Journal of Women’s History and its evolution since its first publication in 1989, in which she praises the more transnational approach to studying gender, I would query the decision to include only essays with a European focus. (2) Readers interested in the experiences of western women will find this collection useful, insightful and interesting, whilst those considering women’s experiences on a more global scale will need to look elsewhere. This is a minor criticism and does not diminish the great value of the collection. The essays presented here are both thoughtful and thought-provoking, inviting the reader to consider gender in new ways, whilst also suggesting further avenues of research to further enhance our understanding of the experiences of early modern women.

Notes


The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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