Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

Wiesner-Hanks, Merry

Published by Amsterdam University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81301
3. Crafting Habits of Resistance

Susan Dinan, Karen Nelson, and Michele Osherow

Abstract
This chapter examines women’s material production to explore modes of intervention within regional systems of power. Artifacts such as embroidery, habit, drama, and biblical commentary shaped both their responses and representations of resistance. Local culture formed and informed their choices of media. We draw from three distinct archives to consider methods of resistance available to women during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Taken together, these complicate notions of women’s agency, of public and private space, and suggest that the power of stories to animate and inspire took many guises. Material traces, ranging from the concrete, to the ephemeral, to the imagined, allow opportunities to assess women’s agency that might otherwise remain absent from other, more conventional, archives.

Keywords: France; England; nuns; embroidery; drama; epic; war; material culture

This essay examines localized women’s action and agency within systems of power. How did early modern women appropriate the methods and genres available to them to resist cultural codes that attempted to limit and prohibit them? How did various media shape both their responses and representations of resistance? What impact did local culture and form have upon the choices deployed? In this essay, we suggest that material artifacts reflect ways that people take stories in circulation and use them to create spaces for and of women’s agency.

An interdisciplinary approach to considering women’s opposition to authority presents both the opportunity and the challenge to recognize resistance when we see it. Attending to early modern women means attending to women’s careful negotiation of the many cultural codes designed
to restrict and restrain them. Women played some shows of obedience so skillfully that it took centuries for scholars to concede—let alone to celebrate—a subversive strain in women's texts and histories. Subversiveness of theme bled to form, with the rich acknowledgement that women's texts go beyond the written. The texts considered here demonstrate variously how women constructed resistance and made meaning in pieces crafted through different media for different purposes. They reveal creativity, imagination, autonomy, agency and, most importantly, alternatives to the narrowly defined roles deemed appropriate for early modern European women.

What binds together these disparate archives, for us, is the ways in which material goods or artifacts, ranging from the concrete, to the ephemeral, to the imagined, allow opportunities to assess women's agency that might otherwise remain absent from other, more conventional, archives. Across media, these artifacts allow us to examine the ways in which women's hands and minds crafted materials which function as texts. Those we examine here include how women's hands worked models for behavior, action, and influence, constructed themselves as interpreters of sacred text, and manufactured identities that announced collective agency and service.

We draw in part upon Dinah Eastop's claim that ‘material culture encompasses the processes by which things and people interact [...] vital insight into the way identities are created and negotiated’. 1 We are interested in broadening notions of what constitutes material culture, taking up Daniel Miller’s charge to include the imaginations that give rise to artifacts. 2 We consider ways in which material items carry meanings and messages, and here we turn to Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Tobin, who together posit that: ‘Women in the process of making and manipulating things were not only engaged in self-definition and identity performance, but were actively engaged in meaning-making practices that involved the construction, circulation and maintenance of knowledge.’ 3 The performance of identity seems crucial to our considerations of the project that undergird the artifacts we assess.

Central, too, is the project of resistance, and here, we look especially to women’s relationships to power, and how the objects they craft reflect their mechanisms for operating within the systems they occupy. In each

---

3 Tobin and Goggin, ‘Materializing Women’, p. 4.
instance, the materials at the heart of the inquiry allow women to tell stories of varying sorts, about themselves and about their places within their communities. These stories reveal some of the constraints they seek to navigate. Material and visual representations help them define themselves within their communities, and also help us see across the centuries some of the places in which the dominant systems themselves make themselves vulnerable and allow points of access.

We draw from three distinct archives to consider methods of resistance available to women during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. First, the Daughters of Charity, who in the course of their creation in Paris in the 1630s, designed a habit that was not a habit. The Daughters composed all aspects of their distinctive garb to communicate a moderate religious stance and to assist in their explicit goals of actively serving the poor. Second, seventeenth-century English women who embroidered biblical scenes in the era surrounding England’s Civil War, and thus created artifacts that commented upon women’s relationship to power and their negotiations within those patriarchal structures. In the process, they interpreted and commented upon the Bible and shaped its narratives into stories of their own for display in their domestic spaces. Third, representations of women at war, especially those under siege, which provide instances of women’s leadership in battle and recourse to spying, across genre and across geography, in English plays such as William Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* and George Gascoigne’s *A Larum for London*, which themselves draw upon strategies available from the story of Jael from the book of Judges in the Hebrew Bible and its treatment in commentaries, and which further resound in stories and illustrations available from the *Hamzamahna* (1562–1577).

**Habits, service, mobility**

When the Daughters of Charity established itself as a confraternity in 1633, it did so to avoid the demands of *clausura*. By not defining themselves as nuns, these women could do the work of Christ and serve the sick and poor. The Daughters defied the rules on enclosure to allow them to embrace the essence of Tridentine reform—education, a clearer articulation of Catholicism, a more orderly church. The Daughters of Charity crafted a collective identity that defined them as neither nuns nor secular women but rather as active women religious. In a letter from 1641, Monsieur Lambert, a priest of the Congregation of the Mission Vincent de Paul’s religious order for men, wrote to Barbe Angiboust, a Daughter of Charity serving a parish in Richelieu,
inquiring if the Daughters were still ‘passing’ for a secular community. The letter demonstrates that, at least among the ranks of the Congregation of the Mission, it was an open secret that the Daughters of Charity misrepresented themselves as a confraternity and not as a religious order. They constructed this identity with care.

Daughters of Charity worked in public spaces and the houses of the poor, nursed the sick in hospitals, and walked the streets of cities and towns; however, they claimed that they were not public women. Vincent de Paul defined the community’s liminal status:

They should consider that although they do not belong to a religious order, that state not being compatible with the duties of their vocation, yet as they are much more exposed to the world than nuns; their monastery being generally no other than the abode of the sick; their cell, a hired room; their chapel, the parish church; their cloister, the streets or wards of hospitals; their enclosure, obedience; their grate, the fear of God; and their veil, holy modesty—they are obliged on this account to lead as virtuous a life as if they were professed in a religious order; to conduct themselves wherever they mingle with the world with as much recollection, purity of heart and body, detachment from creatures; and to give as much edification as nuns in the seclusion of their monasteries.

They were women religious who created a sense of personal cloister through their comportment and by a distinct material marker of identity: a unique uniform. Wearing a consistent uniform, which would become a habit over time, spared them a critical public gaze. The clothing allowed people to recognize them as something other than secular women and girls, but also something other than nuns. It also allowed them to resist the limitations that came from these statuses. For the Daughters of Charity the veil provided holy modesty, but more generally the habit provided space for agency to define suitable work for women as charitable Christian service.

France was in crisis in the seventeenth century due to warfare, famine, and widespread poverty. This atmosphere of crisis gave the Daughters of Charity the ability to create and maintain an active vocation because of France’s desperate need for poor relief. They administered and staffed many municipal hospitals as well as Paris’s main orphanage, insane asylum, and

---

4 Archives de Maison Mère des Filles de la Charité (AMMFC), 187. The original letter, dated 13 May 1641, reads, ‘Je ne sais si vous passez pour seculiere.’
5 Ryan and Rybolt, Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, p. 169.
hospice. In Paris, the Daughters' freedom from enclosure did superficially undermine the disciplinary goals of Trent, but also supported the spirit of Trent because the Daughters brought a message of reformed Catholicism to the poor. Moreover, they supplied the government with an administrative apparatus to care for the sick and poor, populations the government had no interest in assisting. The Daughters of Charity was one of a few groups that were not only willing, but also able, to provide poor relief in an organized and professional manner. Nuns were unable, and others were unwilling, to do this critical work.

The Daughters of Charity used a variety of visible markers, especially those that could be categorized as tools, to define themselves as active women religious with a mission to serve the sick and poor. They carried with them the soup pots used for feeding poor families and the infirm as they worked in pairs in parishes. Some worked in hospitals, and they carried such implements as bandages and special mixing bowls for the medicines made by their apothecaries. Daughters who served as teachers to poor girls (never boys) had instructional tools like the letter cards used by Ursuline nuns in their schools. The Daughters served in places of poverty and instability; they brought order along with food and medicines to the communities they served. Their resistance to the letter of Trent demanding that they withdraw from the work allowed them to unleash the spirit of Trent and create a more disciplined church that was more responsive to its members, a population that was better catechized in the tenets of the faith in part because of women committed to the education of girls.

To do their work, the Daughters of Charity needed to distinguish themselves clearly from secular women while also not appearing to be nuns, and they developed a uniform to signal their commitment to their active service to the poor. Louise de Marillac referred to their clothing as a habit, but it was simpler than a nun's habit, and the uniform was to look like the dress of simple peasant women. The Motherhouse generally provided the Daughters with fabric so that their habits would be of uniform color and style, then billed the Daughters' local establishments for the material. The Motherhouse did not have the funds to pay for the Daughters' clothing and expected the local elite of the parish, hospital, or other establishment to pay for the uniform. In 1655 de Marillac wrote to a Daughter who was purchasing cloth for the habits: 'Be particular, I beg you, because variations are very dangerous. Send us her measurements for the chemisettes, and we will make them because ordinarily there are so many different ways of making them from one sister to another that they would seem to come from two
different countries. The construction of the habit, the physical artifact, was critical in creating community, and the uniformity of dress reinforced the shared identity of the Daughters of Charity and their assertion of agency when serving the sick and poor while residing in unenclosed communities.

When Daughters went to regions far from Paris and asked permission to vary their dress to conform to local styles, de Marillac denied their requests in the name of uniformity. However, she permitted changes in the headdress to allow for better head and face coverage in more severe climates. Later in the seventeenth century the Daughters redesigned the cornette to drape onto the Daughters’ shoulders, noticeably altering their appearance. According to the Daughters, the original toque did not offer their faces enough protection from the elements. Leaders of the Company changed the headpiece to improve the Daughters’ health, once it was clear that the new design would not hinder the Daughters’ indoor work. With this alteration, the Daughters of Charity gained a more distinct appearance; all Daughters looked less like those around them, and more like one another. As the uniform evolved into a more distinct habit, it helped the Daughters of Charity express their collective identity as neither secular women nor nuns and was an important tool in the work of the community. Over time, as the dictates of Trent posed less of a threat to their liminal status, it became a habit.

Across France, Daughters of Charity interacted with a broad range of people in a very concrete manner. Can respectable women be on streets, in the houses of the poor, in hospitals, near the bodies of men, with illegitimate children? The Daughters of Charity used material objects to emblematize their community as one of active service. Their work was hands-on and required tools, clothing, and an attitude of professionalism. They defined themselves as pious, serving God, and therefore able to walk the streets of cities and towns. They nursed the wounded and sick in hospitals, they cared for babies in a foundling hospital and the elderly in hospices. The Daughters framed themselves as respectable women doing holy, necessary work essential to the fabric of the community. The habit, in particular, provided a means to that agency, and provided them the safety and the mechanisms to perform their work in the urban spaces they occupied.

6 De Marillac, Écrits spirituels, Lettre 450.
7 De Paul, Correspondence, Lettre 534.
8 De Marillac, Écrits spirituels, Lettre 148. In this letter, de Marillac wrote to Monsieur Portail at Richelieu in 1646 about a Daughter who had altered her toque. Despite her anger at the Daughter, de Marillac does concede that this portion of the habit might be changed: ‘although I suggested to [de Paul] several times not a veil, which would be totally unacceptable, but something which could protect the face a bit from extreme cold and heat.’
Embroidering Esther

‘Respectable women doing holy work’ would describe John Taylor’s characterization of the community of women to whom he directs *The Needles Excellency* (1631). In this volume, he locates the virtue of needlework in Scripture and associates sewing with sacred practice.9

But despite its association with submissive behavior, needlework is among those crafted habits that offer opportunities for and sites of feminine resistance.10 In *Women and Things*, Maureen Goggin describes needlework as ‘an act of resistance and purposeful construction and negotiation of [...] identity’.11 Such negotiations show themselves in a 1665 embroidered narrative of the Book of Esther held at the Victoria & Albert Museum (Figure 3.1).

---

9 Taylor, A2–3.
10 Lena Cowen Orlin identifies needlework as one of the ways women were made invisible in the Renaissance. With its ‘mandate of the submissive pose and the downcast eyes’ it was ‘an occupational topos for women across all class boundaries’. Orlin, ‘Three Ways to be Invisible in the Renaissance’, p. 187.
The needleworker, ‘MI’, presents recognizable scenes from the biblical book, but the lens through which she views the narrative and the heroine’s activity within it affirm a feminine agency too often overlooked in commentaries of the period. The stitched piece challenges stifling modes of behavior prescribed to women and indicates the ease with which a woman may substitute for a king.

The stitched Esthers of seventeenth-century domestic embroidery differ from representations on artists’ more recognized canvases. The scene most often featured comes from Chapter Five of the biblical text where Esther appears unbidden in Ahasuerus’s court; she approaches the king in order to save the Jewish people from Haman’s intended annihilation. Paintings by Tintoretto (1546), Rubens, (1620), and Gentileschi (1628–1630) present Esther advancing toward the king and fainting into the arms of the women who accompany her. The Victoria & Albert (V&A) piece similarly features Esther’s approach to Ahasuerus and surrounds that scene with several less elaborate renderings of other narrative episodes. But the needlework Esther at center is shown upright, confident, and wearing a crown matching the king’s, not fainting. The king extends his scepter toward her, and, as described in the narrative, Esther obediently (and suggestively) ‘touch[es] the top’.12 The raised scepter is a show of masculine authority; Esther’s response to this gesture, however, is transformed in the embroidered representation. Rather than present the heroine’s swift, obeisant touch, the embroidered picture locks her hand there. The scepter, permanently balanced between the hands of king and queen, suggests a transfer of power and influence. (A caterpillar stitched beneath it indicates transformation.) Instead of displaying a fearful, submissive Esther, the embroidered picture highlights Esther’s ambition and agency, and locates the promise of each in the heroine’s words.

The Victoria & Albert Esther is extraordinary for the caption stitched inside this scene: a scroll unravels from Esther’s hand reading, ‘At my petition’. The text is biblical, appearing in Esther 7:3, but its repurposing for this moment expands the potential of Esther’s suit. The ribbon of text and the king’s scepter collide on the canvas, making it impossible to separate Esther’s petition for her people from her hand’s proximity to the king’s marker of authority. In this way, the narrative event of a woman’s bid for approval is transformed in the needlework to a woman’s bid for power. And that power is visually shown within the heroine’s reach. That it is specifically Esther’s petition that earns her a share of sovereignty is borne out by the narrative. In the text, with the king’s extended scepter comes his verbal assurance:

12 *King James Bible*, Esther 5:2
'What wilt thou', he asks, ‘and what is thy request? It shall bee even given thee to the half of the kingdome'. The king assigns significant value to Esther’s petition even before she speaks it. What’s more, the success of her petition will be confirmed by Esther’s additional discursive empowerment when Ahasuerus instructs her to ‘Write ye [...] for the Iewes [Jews], as it liketh you, in the Kings name.’

Despite Esther’s demonstration of linguistic authority, MI’s characterization of her is uncommon. Esther is consistently celebrated in biblical and other commentaries for the show of duty and obedience she offers her cousin, her husband, and her God. Thomas Heywood claims none is ‘better, more obedient than [Esther].’ In his *Monument of Matrons*, Thomas Bentley praises Esther for duty and humility, noting that she ‘[t]hough [...] a royal queene, yet was obedient unto [...] her poore kinsman [...] and did in everything after his counsel and advise’. Though these descriptions circulated some fourscore years before MI raised a needle, Esther remained bound to obedience throughout the seventeenth century. John Trapp, whose commentary appeared within a decade of MI’s completion of her piece, applies the words ‘obey’, ‘obedience’ or ‘obedient’ to Esther’s narrative nearly two dozen times. His reading, moreover, pointedly denies Esther’s linguistic agency: ‘Worthily also did holy Esther [...] in ruling her tongue that unruly member [...] she had not let go her integrity’. But MI’s needlework confirms Esther’s integrity though the heroine’s speech and language. The frequency with which Esther is featured in domestic embroidery suggests that other women applauded Esther’s behavior similarly. Ruth Geuter links the popularity of stitched Esthers in Stuart England with the increased frequency of female petitioners during the Civil Wars. Esther serves as a role model ‘to seek redress for personal ills and to make [...] comments directly to Parliament’.

A woman’s influence, political and historical, is a clear subject of the Book of Esther and MI drives that point beyond the episode stitched at center.

13 Ibid., 5:3, emphasis ours.
14 Ibid., 8:8.
15 Heywood, *Exemplary Lives*, p. 49
16 Bentley, *Monument of Matrons*, Lampe 7, 149. Bentley refers here to the scene in which Mordecai advises Esther of the danger Haman intends toward the Jews and encourages her to advocate for her people (Esther 4:13–14). Though Mordecai calls Esther to action, the devices by which Haman will be defeated are left entirely to the Queen. The episode closes by punctuating Esther’s authority: ‘So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him’ (v. 17).
18 Ibid., p. 118.
In a tiny scene in the lower right corner of the canvas, the needleworker emphasizes Esther’s significant engagement with written texts, and suggests the ease with which a queen may displace her king. Key elements of the scene—a royal figure reclining in bed, a very large book—reference Chapter Six, where a sleepless Ahasuerus commands a reading from his ‘Book of Records of the Chronicles’ (6:1). But in her rendering of the scene, MI swaps Ahasuerus’s character for Esther’s. The reclining figure wears a crown that matches both queen’s and king’s, but the figure lacks the facial hair given the king in each of his representations on the needlework. Magnification of the piece reveals no identifiable pin pricks in the satin face; no threads peek out from cheeks, chin, or neck on front or reverse. The lack of facial hair may be the artist’s oversight, but the ambiguity of the figure offers several irresistible winks. The ease with which a feminine figure replaces the king’s supports the power transfer displayed in the center of the needlework and recalls moments within the narrative when Esther assumes the king’s authority by directing his judgement, issuing orders, and writing in his name. In fact, a great irony of the Book of Esther is that the king who announces by formal proclamation that ‘every man should bear rule in his own house’ never actually does so.20

Most significantly, Esther’s presence in the chronicles scene further solidifies the character’s engagement with language and heightens her pronounced textual authority. The petition referenced at center emphasizes Esther’s spoken words; her presence in this scene underscores her ties to words written. Unlike the king who will have chronicles read to him, Esther herself will document history. In Chapter Eight, another of Esther’s petitions will result in more than a dozen references to writing, writers and written commandments. Esther’s final description identifies her as one who ‘wrote with all authoritie.’21 The narrative establishes her as an essential begetter of texts. The narrator announces that the days in which the Jews overcame Haman are to be ‘remembered, and kept throughout euery generation’ and that it was Esther who ‘wrote […] to confirme the […] letter of Purim.’22 They are Esther’s words to which future generations of readers will be bound; their value is confirmed by the company they keep.

That needlework is the means by which one woman recognizes and celebrates the power of women’s words exposes crafted materials as rhetorical spaces, inviting us to recognize the interplay between word and image,
text and textile.23 Within her linen borders, MI negotiates the meaning of a woman's story and the representation of her strengths; her work resists the limited way women's histories may be told or feminine virtue understood. In negotiating Esther's agency, MI negotiates her own, not only as another woman who points generations toward things that 'should be remembered'24, but also as one who presses us to question and uncover—down to the stitch or letter—precisely what those things are.

Women and war on stage and in epic

When we turn our attention to the different sorts of archives associated with representations of war, and women's places in (and absences from) them, Daniel Miller's definition of materiality serves as a mechanism to enfold plays, both as texts and as performances, within the parameters of our collective analysis. Miller defines materiality by pointing to the ephemeral and reminds us to consider the large conceptual realm which smaller definitions of 'artifact' occlude.25 Play texts, and the performances for which they operate as markers or monuments, provide one entry into women's associations with war. 1 Henry 6, by William Shakespeare (and possibly Thomas Nashe and Christopher Marlowe) dated to the early 1590s and printed in the first folio in 1623, and A Larum for London, by George Gascoigne and Thomas Lodge, printed in 1601, provide examples of women's behavior and access to agency across a spectrum. These female characters range from Joan of Arc, who commands armies and strategizes political and military dominance, to the Countess of Auvergne, a French noblewoman, who attempts to capture the valiant English general Talbot, to Lady Champaigne, whom Spanish soldiers almost rape but who persuades the valiant Stump to intervene on her behalf. These staged characters supplied their audiences with examples of women's behavior within the context of war that resonate with the sorts of women who enter literary renderings of war via such epics as Edmund Spenser's The Faerie Queene (1590, 1596), John Harrington's translation of Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso (1591), and versions of the Hamzamana

23 Susan Frye outlines the many intersections among women's visual and verbal textualities and suggests that attending to products of both 'presents an alternative way to read canonical literature.' She attributes the popularity of embroidered Esthers to the fact that the narrative offers 'several explicit scenes when a woman's actions and words carried vast political significance.' See Frye, Pens and Needles, pp. xvii, 145.
24 Ibid., 9:28
25 Miller, Materiality: An Introduction, p. 4.
(1560–1602). These characters in the sixteenth century literary archive help scholars and readers in the twenty-first century recognize the ways in which women’s presence is erased and elided from soldiers’ sketches of camps from field notes and reports from the field, and also from much military history.26 Andrea Pearson, in her essay for this volume, similarly examines a woman drawn after the fact into a battle scene in a medieval housebook. These women’s absences illuminate the constructed nature of the ‘historical’ archives, which in turn inform this reconsideration of the material realities represented in dramatic stagings, and indeed, across the material artifacts this essay considers.

One category for investigation that results from this juxtaposition of play text, epic, and military field notes, especially in the context of the issues of this chapter of materiality and resistance, emerges from the figure of the spy or the conspirator, which points to the importance of women’s perspectives and the spaces to which they have access. The Countess of Auvergne, in 1 Henry VI, calls attention to this articulation of women’s agency. She invites the English super-general Talbot to dine, with the express goal ‘that she may boast she hath beheld the man / Whose glory fills the world with loud report’.27 The play quickly alerts the audience that her actual goal is to imprison Talbot and by his destruction bring her own glory.28 Talbot, though, anticipates her plot and brings his army along, which, he notes, is the source of his strength in the first place. With his benevolence and grace, Talbot forgives the Countess on the condition that she feast his army, and ends the conspiracy on a note of reconciliation, as he has planned all along.29 The play here enacts a woman ready to conquer and to weaponize a tool to which she has access—hospitality—to destroy her own, and France’s, opponent. Whether Shakespeare revises Jael’s story and removes the woman’s success in this regard as a way to demonstrate Talbot’s superiority as a leader, to undermine the French as a fighting force, or to detract from women’s authority is difficult to discern, since the play activates all three trends throughout. Nevertheless, the play stages a woman pragmatically appropriating the means at her disposal to resist an invading enemy; were Talbot not quite so astute, her successful plot would have saved France and ensured her fame.

26 For more on women in warfare in early modern Europe, see Lynn, Women, Armies, and Warfare.
27 Shakespeare, 1 Henry VI, 2.2.41–43.
28 Ibid., 2.3.4–10.
29 Ibid., 2.3.70–80.
This comic turn, with the reconciliation and prospect of a banquet, belies the inherent threats to the countess in this scene and to women associated with war. Nearby armies tend to mean that their property will be destroyed, their stores procured without remission, their bodies violated.\(^{30}\) 1 Henry VI continues that theme with its later treatment, in Act 5 Scene 2, of Margaret, daughter of the King of Naples, whom Suffolk would rape and take for his own, until he realizes that he will have more long-term access to her and to her body if he makes a gift of her to King Henry VI. He asks for her agreement and grants the illusion of agency, but as a warrior he notes his ‘right’ to take her for his own, as the spoils of war.

This dynamic explicitly echoes the less subtle, more provocative message of A Larum for London, which opens with Spanish soldiers discussing the beauties of Antwerp and their desire to take it for their own.\(^{31}\) The play then emphatically underlines the destruction at work, as Spanish soldiers destroy various citizens and threaten to rape Lady Champaign, wife of the Governor. This play’s hero, Stump, pauses before rescuing her from soldiers to comment upon her snobbishness and lavish lifestyle. He encounters two soldiers as they ‘begin to strip her’, and remarks, ‘How now? Two Soldiers ransacking a woman?’ He then details her perfidies—she has ‘spent as much on Munkeys, Dogs, and Parrets, / As would have kept ten Soldiers all the yeere’ and has ‘stop[ped] her nose with her sweete gloues / For feare my smell should have infected her’,\(^{32}\) but now she will be ‘torne / By lowzie totter’d roagues.’ He first advises them merely to rob her, since that should be ‘sufficient’, but when they persist, he ‘drawes his swoord, killes one, and the other flyes’.\(^{33}\) She offers to reward him with a jewel, but since that will contribute to his own appeal as a target, he refuses. More soldiers enter the scene, including the Spanish leader Alva; they proclaim victory, and her fate, like Antwerp’s, is sealed and grim.

The play makes use of Lady Champaigne to underline the vulnerability of those falling under Spanish conquest, argues for England’s continuing defense of itself against this sort of ‘menace’, locates the disruption to property and civility that results from these sorts of invading forces who

\(^{30}\) On billeting and the damages thereof, see Parker, Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, p. 81. On damages by military more generally, especially as represented in art, see Kunzle, From Criminal to Courtier. See also Ruff, Violence in Early Modern Europe; Sandberg, War and Conflict; Edwards et al., Age of Atrocity; Lynn, Women, Armies, and Warfare; Akkerman, Invisible Agents; Ailes, Courage and Grief.

\(^{31}\) Gascoigne, A Larum, Sig A3–A4.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., sig D1–D1v.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., sig D1–D1v.
will use any excuse to justify their invasions, and generally suggests the need for supporting English efforts to thwart the Spanish and Catholic forces. Set next to 1 Henry VI, it reveals the ways in which Talbot and Suffolk as invaders refuse this role, which to some extent elevates the English, albeit more emphatically with Talbot than with Suffolk. This pairing of plays also reveals the ways in which Shakespeare's female characters model women's agency, pragmatism, and refusal to accept English dominance. The Countess's plan to use her castle and her role as hostess to garner his defeat, and the general tendency for men to dismiss women's power, provide her the means to make the attempt to slide under Talbot's defenses.

That the spectacle associated with women's agency is one artifact of these performances emerges in part from the visual materials associated with epic and romance. While such women warriors as Edmund Spenser's Britomart and Ludovico Ariosto's Bradamante, and the figure of the Amazon more generally, enter into critical discussions with relative consistency, these renderings cross cultures and stories and indicate ways in which women's active participation and agency within theaters of war, too, operated across cultures. Connections to the models available from the Hebrew Bible, available within the framework of a culture steeped in Judeo-Christian storytelling practices and authority via Biblical narratives, are perhaps unsurprising.

Links, though, to linguistically disparate and culturally less connected epic traditions such as those in Persia and India suggest that twenty-first century generalizations about women and war need more nuance. A number of these representations appear in a manuscript edition of the Hamzamana, produced by artists during the reign of Akbar, in the third quarter of the sixteenth century in the Mughal empire. See, for example, 'A Heroine Forcibly Enters a Jail to Liberate a Hero' (Figure 3.2).

John Seyller notes the conventional agency associated with a subset of female characters within the genre of Persian romance: 'Princesses are inevitably beautiful and virtuous, and are the objects of fleeting but honorable romantic attachments (Hamza, for example, marries a Greek princess), but the women who participate in the most dangerous activities are usually their clever handmaidens (see cat. 60, 61, and 66)'.34 This particular image is from a Hamzanama manuscript commissioned by Emperor Akbar of the Mughal dynasty in the third quarter of the sixteenth century; as Seyller observes, women's agency emerges on multiple occasions in the narrative and the richly detailed renderings included in this manuscript of fourteen volumes. In this instance, Khurschidchehr wields a sword and assumes

a soldier’s dress to rescue Hamza’s son Hamid from the jail in which he is being held. Women as agents are not exceptional in this narrative or in that of other epics; they emerge on stage and in the texts and images associated with narratives of war as contributors. Their subsequent erasure and diminishment, especially as part of nineteenth-century historiography complicit with a move to professionalize the military, warrants our continued awareness and skepticism.
Conclusions

Taken together, these material artifacts and these archives complicate notions of women's agency, of public and private space, and suggest that the power of stories to animate and inspire took many guises not immediately discernable to those who seek out more standard articulations of women's resistance to misogynist structures and ideas. Kate Manne defines misogyny ‘as serving to uphold patriarchal order, understood as one strand among various similar systems of domination (including racisms, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on). Misogyny does this by visiting hostile or adverse social consequences on a certain (more or less) class of girls or women to enforce and police social norms that are gendered either in theory (i.e., content) or in practice (i.e., norm enforcement mechanisms).’\(^{35}\) It is clear, however, from examination of women's goods, how possible it is to maintain an illusion of compliance while practicing subversion. In writing on material culture, anthropologist Daniel Miller refers to ‘the humility’ of objects, suggesting that much of the power of material cultures lies in its ability to go unnoticed, and yet to profoundly affect our impressions. The artifact’s ‘affinity to the unconscious’ enables ‘perspectives arising from different social positions to exist concurrently without coming into overt conflict’.\(^{36}\) The different instances and artifacts we point to in this chapter, of habits, of craft, of story, do just that; they demonstrate some of the ways that women—and men—maneuver to make the systems themselves more capacious. They also demonstrate the value of looking to these expanded archives and to material artifacts to illuminate aspects of women's lives and works beyond the narratives available from more traditional archival records and texts.

Works cited


**About the authors**

Susan Dinan is Dean of the Honors College and Professor of History at Adelphi University. She is author of *Women and Poor Relief in Seventeenth-Century France: The Early History of the Daughters of Charity* (Ashgate) and co-editor with Debra Meyers of *Women and Religion in Old and New Worlds* (Routledge, 2001).

Karen Nelson co-directs the Center for Literary & Comparative Studies in the Department of English at the University of Maryland and serves
as Editor for the *Sixteenth Century Journal*. Her publications include four co-edited and edited collections on early modern women’s lives and works.

**Michele Osherow** is Associate Professor of English and Judaic Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is the author of *Biblical Women’s Voices in Early Modern England* and numerous articles on Shakespeare, early modern women, and the Bible. Michele serves as resident dramaturg for Folger Theatre in Washington, DC.