Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

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Accounting for Early Modern Women in the Arts
Reconsidering Women’s Agency, Networks, and Relationships

Theresa Kemp, Catherine Powell, and Beth Link

Abstract
While the terms ‘agency’, ‘collectivity’, and ‘social networks’ may seem anachronistic for the study of early modern women, these concepts were very much alive in that era and essential to women’s self-actualization. Using social network theory, feminist calls for intervention into history, and conceptions of feminist collectivity (as derived from the 1970s Woman’s Building), we examine two examples of women’s involvement in professional arts. While some women succeeded by circumventing gendered institutions impeding their agency, others participated in family endeavors that depended on their acting as agents negotiating various networks. These diverse stories provide alternatives to the ‘master narratives’ according to which early modern women either conformed to or rebelled against the supposedly universal mandate to stay home, obey husbands, and rear children.

Keywords: women and botany; feminist collectives; Rose Theater; The Woman’s Building; intersectionality

At first glance, notions of female agency, collectivity, and social networks seem like constructs of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Scholars commonly work from assumptions about gender in the early modern social, economic, and political realms that preclude these considerations: many assume that women were universally expected to stay home, obey their husbands, and rear their children. In this chapter, we argue that women
frequently defied these expectations; they participated in the familial economy and were visible in the public sphere.

Our methodological framework derives from contemporary social network theory, feminist calls for intervention into history, and conceptions and rationales of feminist collectivity. With respect to the latter, we draw heavily from the Woman’s Building, which opened its doors in 1973, as a model from which we can derive an essential set of premises to identify feminist collectivity, even in its nascent stages. Against that methodological backdrop, we consider two early modern case studies: one from Netherlandish art history and the other from English theater. From these two examples, we tease out the ways in which women relied upon relationships that cut across sex and class in forging a path to success, achieving a measure of independence and agency in the process. Together, the women of our case studies demonstrate that the concepts of agency, networks, and collectivity were very much alive in the early modern period and essential to women’s self-actualization.

An alternative to the master (or patriarchal) narrative

The case studies that follow deliberately avoid adopting a monographic or strictly biographic approach. Instead, we turn to the analytical frameworks of collectivity and social networks, which we feel can be more productive and provide new insight. In the first place, stepping away from the individual allows us to engage with narratives that are inconsistent with the traditional ‘lone genius’ patriarchal narrative, which tends to celebrate only women that are categorized as ‘exceptional’, or particularly ‘worthy’.¹

There is also a pragmatic reason for looking to networks and collectivity: the availability of sources, or lack thereof. With the exception of writers and members of the Republic of Letters (not exclusively but most notably), most early modern women seldom left extensive archives. Whereas men (particularly learned men, members of the nobility or bourgeoisie, or civic elite) frequently left archives containing letters, diaries, account books, collected poems, and so on, women artists or patrons,² for example, did not

¹ For an extensive discussion on the diverse types of feminism and the so-called ‘patriarchal narrative’, see the pioneering essays of Joan Wallach Scott, Joan Kelly-Gadol, and Natalie Zemon Davis, amongst others, reproduced in Wiesner-Hanks, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World; Rackin, ‘A Useable History’ and ‘Misogyny is Everywhere’.

² This remains the case today: Moravec, for example, has noted the ‘dearth of feminist artists’ archival materials’. Moravec, ‘Network Analysis and Feminist Artists’, pp. 79–80.
tend to do so—or, at least, they were not preserved as such. Although there are of course exceptions, what we find are often only ‘traces’ of women’s existence: in marriage notices and last wills and testaments contained in notarial archives, or altogether subsumed in a man’s archives. Approaching case studies from a non-individualistic perspective allows us to see beyond archival limitations.

The Woman’s Building

Like women who participate in contemporary collectives, women from the past also looked to one another as role models and for road maps of how to navigate a complex patriarchal system. Thus, as we examine the roots of the struggle for women’s rights, agency, independence, and equal personhood over time, a focus on individuality is counterproductive. Yet collectivity is a rarely used concept in treating historical case studies.

The nature of female collectives is particularly complicated because it is difficult to imagine what a structure not built on masculine and capitalist ideas of competition and hierarchy might look like. Our definition of collectives stems from the work of Ramzi Fawaz, who considers collectives as agentic groupings of disparate people who come together ‘acting in concert for the fulfillment of a shared goal’. Unlike social gatherings or neighborhood communities, these gatherings are intentional and may be driven by efforts to influence social or political change, or by a shared manifesto, a business contract, or a collaborative artwork binding the group together. Fawaz asserts that while collectives are comprised of discreet individuals, the emphasis is on ‘their aggregate engagement as people’ acting ‘for a common purpose.’

Nascent forms of female collectives can be found, for example, in the French and English salons that began in the seventeenth century. Women would open their homes and invite male and female poets, writers, artists, and philosophers from various classes to engage in discussion and debate. These gatherings served as social spaces where women could exchange their ideas (including about the place of women in society) without fear.

3. The very act of collecting and organizing art, papers, and other documents involves a determination: of who and what is important, of who and what should be remembered and preserved for future generations and, critically, of how best to organize this information. For a discussion on the limitations of archival methodology, see Blouin and Rosenberg, ‘Processing the Past’ as well as Randolph C. Head, ‘Documents, Archives, and Proof around 1700’.


5. Fawaz, ‘Collectives’, p. 3.
In order to design the most complete analytical framework of collectivity possible we look to a contemporary, quasi-utopian example: the Woman’s Building. Opened in 1973 in Los Angeles, the Woman’s Building was an ecosystem of businesses, art studios and galleries, offices, and art classes designed to build feminist consciousness and cultivate a self-realization and feminist community sheltered from the corrosive forces of patriarchy. The impetus for this collective began several years earlier in 1970 when artists and educators Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville became frustrated with the lack of opportunities and the invisibility of women artists in Los Angeles. They decided to nurture their female undergraduates in a separate institution away from the biting critiques of male professors they felt undercut female students’ confidence. Together, these three women started the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW). In many ways, the FSW acted as a traditional art education space by building students’ knowledge of art tools, techniques and history while also tending to students’ feminist identity development through consciousness raising.

The FSW found that there were many other organizations in Los Angeles foregrounding the lives and experiences of women as part of their mission. Together with the gallery Womanspace, the National Organization for Women, Sisterhood Bookstore, and other like-minded organizations, they moved into a large building they called the Woman’s Building. Collectivity based on a desire for social and political transformation was at the heart of this new ecosystem. Sheila de Bretteville intended the Woman’s Building to be a place where ‘women from different sectors of society could gather and meet—heterosexual and lesbian, trust fund babies and welfare mothers, academics, and politicos, and artists’ all collaborating.

Collectivity was evidenced in the artists’ practices as well as the larger organizational functions. The artists of the Woman’s Building disputed traditionally masculine ideas of artists as solitary geniuses in favor of collective art making practices. The building housed many feminist collectives who worked together to create performances, write publications, and design participatory works of art in the larger community. The leadership of the Woman’s Building was also designed to function as an extension of the

6  Hale, ‘Power and Space’, p. 45.
7  Wolverton, ‘Introduction’, p. 20
9  Lippard, ‘Going Around in Circles’, p. 11.
groups’ feminist philosophy by incorporating collective decision-making often without hierarchy or competition.¹²

According to Judith Stein the collective ethos of the Woman’s Building has historical ties to legacies of female networks established in quilting bees and potlucks.¹³ The quilting bee model was a structured collaboration where everyone was allotted an equal amount of space to contribute to a cohesive whole. The women also embodied a potluck structure where everyone decided how they would like to contribute within their means and skill level. These approaches to collectivity attempted to preserve individual agency while working towards a larger project.

Conflict arose when participants had differing ideas about the priorities, process, and mission of the organization. The founders were torn between an ‘egalitarian, anti-hierarchical’ approach to collectivity on one hand resulting in chaos and disorder, or replicating patriarchal systems of leadership and command resulting in members feeling resentful and disillusioned.¹⁴ While the Woman’s Building attempted to bring diverse groups of women together, many participants found that racial, ethnic, and class divisions were overlooked in order to maintain a myopic focus on gender.¹⁵ This limited understanding of what we now term intersectionality caused tension and divides within the collective.

Despite the differences in identity and vision that created rifts in the group, there were a number of core tenets uniting participants. According to art educators Faith Wilding and Cheri Gaulke, there were six core values including:

- consciousness raising;
- collaboration;
- an emphasis on personal experience;
- valued female role models;
- the desire to build a female-friendly environment; and
- ‘exploding the hierarchies of materials’.¹⁶

The expression of these six core values may appear very much a product of second-wave feminism, but can we find evidence of these values in early modern women’s action, networks, and collectives?

¹⁵ For more discussion on race and class struggles within the Woman’s Building see Moravec and Hale, “At Home” at the Woman’s Building’.
Social networks

Social networks have a critical impact on individual and group identity, the creation and dissemination of knowledge and opportunities, and sociopolitical discourse. Networks were just as significant in early modern life as they are now. Employment opportunities, marriage, election to civic office—these are just some of the life events that were impacted by the people one knew. From this perspective, it is not surprising that what emerges most from the archival resources at our disposal for early modern women are relationships: links between a husband and a wife, but also between them and the witnesses to the marriage; links between two women whose husbands are best friends; links between women and important men through inclusion in the latter’s correspondence; and epistolary relationships. Piecing these ties together enables us to reconstruct, albeit imperfectly, collective thinking on the part of women and their participation in social networks, from which we can gain a better sense of early modern women’s sphere of influence and action in sociocultural and even civic activity.

Of course, not all ties are created equal; some links are more tenuous than others. In social network analysis, the principle of embeddedness is designed to capture the strength of a tie between two actors. The stronger the tie, the more embedded it is said to be. In assessing embeddedness, one considers some of the following factors: the duration of a relationship; whether the relationship leads to the creation of knowledge; whether the relationship facilitates the exchange of significant information; and whether the relationship is diverse, meaning whether the actors relate on one level only, or several. Relationships other than purely transactional ones often exist on a spectrum of embeddedness. In the early modern period, where social stability was frequently at stake, kinship was a primary source of friendship (and thus embedded relationships) for both men and women. Interestingly, two key findings have emerged from extensive research into embedded relationships: the creation of knowledge takes place almost exclusively within networks of embedded ties; and the presence of trust

17 For a discussion of social network terminology, see Marx, ‘Why Social Network Analysis Might Be Relevant for Art Historians’ in Brosens, Family Ties, p. 25. For more technical definitions, see Wasserman and Faust, ‘Social Network Analysis’, pp. 17, 20.
19 For a helpful discussion on the dichotomy between embedded and arm’s length relationships, see Uzzi, ‘Embeddedness in the Making of Financial Capital’; and Podolny and Page, ‘Network Forms of Organization’.
is a critical factor in the establishment of an embedded tie. The nature of a relationship, and thus its embeddedness, can be ascertained from historical sources. It is possible to determine whether actors had frequent contacts over a lengthy period of time, or merely came across each other’s path from time to time. It is also possible to discern the type of information they exchanged; on how many levels they related (e.g. sisters-in-law, church members, neighbors, patrons of the same artist, etc.). We can reasonably infer whether trust is present based on the fruits of a relationship, its length, whether kinship is involved, whether money lending occurred, etc.

The value of social networks to early modern women has already been recognized by several scholars. For example, Carol Pal has explored the role of early modern women in the Republic of Letters, while Elizabeth Robertson and Annelies de Jeu have re-evaluated the role of women in literary publication in England and the Low Countries, respectively. Epistolary relationships, in particular, are ideally and frequently considered through the lens of social network analysis. Art historians, however, have not followed course. Elizabeth Sutton, writing recently about early modern women artists and patrons in the Low Countries, lamented the fact that bringing the collective or institutional perspective to bear in feminist art history has proven elusive. There is yet to be a book-length study of the use of and reliance upon networks by early modern women artists and/or patrons, although two insightful essays demonstrate the potential of the approach. The


22 For scholarship on the use of social network analysis in relation to historical case studies more broadly see, for example, Wellman and Wetherell, ‘Social Network Analysis of Historical Communities’.

23 Pal, The Republic of Women; Robertson, Women and Networks of Literary Production; de Jeu, ‘t Spoor der dichteressen.

24 To name only a few, see: Julie D. Campbell and Anne R. Larsen, Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters; James Daybell and Andrew Gordon, Women and Epistolary Agency in Early Modern Culture; Julie Campbell, Literary Circles and Gender in Early Modern Europe; Diana Robin, Publishing Women, Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation; and Kemp, ‘Women’s Patronage-seeking as Familial Enterprise’. The letters of Protestant women during the reign of Mary I and the related network have been extensively studied by Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian E. Ahnert.

25 Sutton, Early Modern Women, p. 14. This is also acknowledged by Babette Bohn. See Bohn, Women Artists, Their Patrons, and Their Publics in Early Modern Bologna (in press). The case of Michaelina Wautier, a ‘re-discovered’ early modern female artist, provides a recent example of the difficulties of locating early modern women artists in the archives. See van der Stighelen, Michaelina Wautier.

26 The use of social network analysis by art historians with respect to men is more developed, although also lagging behind that in other fields, particularly intellectual history. Koenraad
first, by Tomomi Kinukawa, considers the epistolary relationship between female artist Maria Sibylla Merian and two learned men—one in Germany, the other in England, in her pursuit of publishing success. The other, by Marisca Sikkens-De Zwaan, explores the power of family relationships in a female collector’s pursuit of exotic plant specimens.

Social network analysis has an important role to play in providing scholars with a different toolkit with which to approach the study of early modern women who do not easily fit into traditional models of scholarship and, in turn, bring into the foreground women who may otherwise have been forgotten or marginalized. With advancements in digital humanities, these advantages can be developed further, as noted by Catherine Medici. Medici notes that while reconstructing networks ‘by hand’ can shed important light onto our understanding of early modern women, using digital tools can enable scholars to build networks that are larger and more comprehensive. Computerized network analysis also allows scholars to perform quantitative analysis to reveal, amongst other things, the centrality of a woman in a particular network, or her influence in terms of the number of contacts she helps facilitate.

Alas, as with most (if not all) database technology, the results depend on the quality of the data. Thus, while epistolary communities are ripe for digital network analysis, establishing the existence of a community of female artists is far more difficult due to the paucity of available data. It is therefore critical to maintain a separate understanding of the type of social network analysis that can be helpfully deployed to understand smaller networks of early modern women, and computer-assisted social network analysis, which can produce great results but requires large

Brosens surmises that this is due, in part, to the lingering power of the ‘lone genius’ narrative, which naturally guides art historians towards an individualistic analysis. Brosens, ‘Can Tapestry Research Benefit from Economic Sociology and Social Network Analysis?’ in Brosens, *Family Ties*. Brosens and his colleagues have conducted extensive work on the use of and reliance upon social networks in the production of tapestries in the early modern Low Countries. For an overview, see Brosens, ‘MapTap and Cornelia’. Most recently, Tine Luk Meganck published her research into the networks of Abraham Ortelius by using various objects (such as *alba amicorum* and maps) as the products of exchanges between artists and humanists. See Meganck, *Erudite Eyes*.

27 Kinukawa, ‘Natural History as Entrepreneurship’.
28 Sikkens-de Zwaan, ‘Magdalena Poulle’.
29 Medici, ‘Using Network Analysis to Understand Early Modern Women’.
30 For an example of the use of a quantitative network approach to an early modern case study, see Ahnert and Ahnert, ‘Protestant Letter Networks’, and Lincoln, ‘Continuity and Disruption in European Networks of Print Production’. Ahnert and Ahnert focus on early modern women, while Lincoln does not.
amounts of high-quality data. Indeed, as argued at the outset—and demonstrated below by our case studies—the use of social network analysis can be particularly productive in instances where limited archival information is available or where the available archival materials have been preserved and framed in male-centric ways prioritizing narratives of the ‘lone genius’.

**Female agency**

The tracing of social networks and the formation of collectives also opens space for historicized understandings of women’s agency that do not require autonomy as a defining feature. Agency is a necessary precondition to the analysis and consideration of feminist discourse in this chapter. In order to derive meaning from a woman’s participation in collective action or social networks, agency must be present. However, historical women with agency—whether feminists or proto-feminists, strong or ordinary women—should not solely be identified by virtue of their interests in or ability to transform the patriarchal systems of which they are a part. Privileging autonomy and resistance as a requisite factor of agency not only reinforces the values that have led to the dismissal of all but a handful of exceptional women as irrelevant to history in the first place but also has the potential for anachronism. It is helpful to consider some of the ways in which recent scholarship of feminist agency has addressed these thorny issues before offering our definition of this critical concept.

Building on the ‘pioneering historicist debates’ of Stephen Greenblatt and Jonathan Dollimore, Kathleen Larson notes that ‘the fledgling concepts of subjectivity and creative selfhood emerging […] in conjunction with humanism and the Reformation […] already complicate critical attempts to define agency as the action of an individual aware of herself as speaking agent.’31 Acknowledging the further limited—and often contradictory—subject positions from which early modern women managed to speak, Larson nevertheless posits an ‘understanding of agency [that] evokes the performative action integral to speech acts’.32

Following the work of historians such as Joan Wallach Scott and Lauren Berlant, Lynn Thomas makes a particularly useful contribution to the efforts

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32 Larson, Early Modern Women in Conversation, p. 10.
of feminist historians to ‘de-liberalise scholarly conceptions of agency’ based in nineteenth-century distinctions between freedom and enslavement.\textsuperscript{33} While Thomas critiques the limitations of ‘agency as argument’, she does not abandon entirely the concept.\textsuperscript{34} Rather, she urges historians to retrieve a more sophisticated story of agency by attending ‘to the multiple motivations that undergird meaningful action, motivations that exceed rational calculation and articulated intentions to include collective fantasies, psychical desires and struggles just to get by.’\textsuperscript{35} Despite its potential ‘to enable more compelling, less predictable histories’, such historiography is not without its challenges.\textsuperscript{36} For feminist scholars looking back from the twenty-first century, the agency deployed by people in the past may seem, as Thomas speculates, ‘disorienting.’\textsuperscript{37}

Allyson M. Poska’s recent proposal of ‘agentic gender norms’ as a conceptual frame may provide insight into some of the challenges Thomas foretells as the end of her essay. We have reached, as Poska claims at the start of her essay, ‘a critical moment in the historiography on early modern women.’\textsuperscript{38} Poska’s discussion is in part derived from her observations about the current state of early modern women’s history. As she notes, ‘feminist scholars tend to prioritize female solidarity over exploitation’ while there continues to be a ‘need to contextualise gender expectations within the framework of early modern race and class hierarchies and consider how some women’s agency existed because of their ability to constrain the agency of other women.’\textsuperscript{39}

For our purposes, female agency refers to the actions of a woman who is aware of purposefully making decisions to act or speak on behalf of herself or a collective of which she considers herself to be a member. Indeed, in order to legitimately give weight to collective action or insert meaning into a relationship, the female actor must have been aware of the fact that she was speaking or acting in ways reflective of decision-making. Requiring that awareness be a dimension of agency enables us to apply the concept in a non-anachronistic manner.

\textsuperscript{33} Thomas, ‘Historicising Agency’, p. 326.
\textsuperscript{34} Thomas, ‘Historicising Agency’, p. 329.
\textsuperscript{35} Thomas, ‘Historicising Agency’, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{36} Thomas, ‘Historicising Agency’, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{37} Thomas, ‘Historicising Agency’, p. 360.
\textsuperscript{38} Allyson M. Poska, ‘The Case for Agentic Gender Norms’, p. 354.
\textsuperscript{39} Poska, ‘The Case for Agentic Gender Norms’, p. 360. Note that, even here, the possibility of women’s ability to constrain the agency of some men is not mentioned.
Case study: Agnes Henslowe and Joan Alleyn: mother, daughter, and wives in a patriarchal enterprise

The English Henslowe-Alleyn family, foremost among entrepreneurs on the Elizabethan–Jacobean entertainment scene, provides an opportunity for considering the agency of ordinary women within a context in which class and family alliances rather than those organized around gender could take priority. Early modern England was a time of social mobility, with marriage, family, and kinship playing a vital role in fostering the embedded ties required to successfully navigate patronage networks. By recognizing women’s agency through the attainment of collective or familial goals rather than solely in terms of autonomy, we can see the significance of Agnes Henslowe and Joan Alleyn’s contributions to their family’s social mobility. The ordinariness of their actions, moreover, is indicative of their access to class power, especially as wives within the context of developing discourses of godly companionate marriage, which posited an analogic relation between household and political governance. Women’s expertise as ‘joint governors of the family’ seems to have carried beyond the household, as indicated by the respect they garnered as decision makers in their family’s business matters. Routinely engaged in matters of business, they promoted the collective interests of the Henslowe-Alleyn family and the Rose Theatre, both of which encompassed their own.

Although early modern conduct books, sermons, and marriage manuals often hold an overabundance of misogynist attitudes, they also situate women—and particularly wives—in the functioning of companionate marriages in ways that urge a consideration of not only gender but social rank as intersecting categories of analyses. Gender alone will not enable us to fully understand relationships of power in an historical context in which all people, from the monarch below God to the lowliest of workers, were seen within multidirectional hierarchies of service and obedience. Women’s authority to govern others, according to contemporary manuals and guides, was commissioned by analogy between domestic and civil government, both of which require commanders and lieutenants. The popular preacher

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41 In A Godly Form of Household Government (London, 1598), for example, John Dod and Robert Cleaver claimed that ‘a household is as it were a little commonwealth’, with the husband the ‘chief governor’ and the wife ‘second-helper’ and ‘fellow-helper.’ See pp. 13 and 60.

42 The women’s inclusion in these interests is manifested when, upon his death, Philip’s estate passed to his widow Agnes, who in turn passed it on to her daughter.
Henry Smith, among others, urged wise husbands to ‘divide offices, and affairs, and goods with [the wife], causing her to be feared and reverenced and obeyed of her children and servants like himself’.\textsuperscript{43}

Within the taxonomy of household governance, husbands hold authority over wives; but as parents and mistresses, wives hold authority over children and servants, including adult males.\textsuperscript{44} This is demonstrated, for example, in a letter Joan Alleyn receives from John Pig, a ‘boy’ in service to the Henslowe-Alleyns (perhaps as a player). Pig writes deferentially to Joan as his employer and mistress of the household.\textsuperscript{45} But Pig is not a child; rather, he has a wife and children of his own. The term ‘boy’ designates Pig’s status as an indentured worker in the household or theatrical company rather than his age.\textsuperscript{46} As such, John Pig is subject to not only the authority of his master but that of his mistress as well even though he is a ‘man’, thus complicating our understanding of how gendered power relations work in the period.

As the widow of a successful member of the Dyers’ Company, Agnes Woodward (c. 1550s–1617) brought wealth as well as court and other social connections to her marriage to Philip Henslowe (c. 1550s–1616), who had been her husband’s assistant.\textsuperscript{47} By the 1580s, the Henslowes—Philip, Agnes, and Agnes’s two daughters from her previous marriage, Joan (c. 1573–1623) and Elizabeth (c. 1575–?)—were living in Southwark where they prospered through various business ventures, ownership of rental properties and entertainment establishments, including the wildly successful Rose Theatre. The Rose was leased to the Admiral’s Men, and Philip managed the company of players which included the most celebrated actor of the day, Edward Alleyn. In 1592, Edward married Agnes’s daughter (Philip’s stepdaughter) Joan, transforming the financial partnership between the city’s premier theater-owners and their star actor into a familial endeavor as well. This collaboration was personally, economically, and socially successful during the remainders of each of their lives. By 1614, Joan and Edward had purchased the manor in Dulwich, and in 1616 they used their substantial wealth to establish the charitable and educational institute they named the College of God’s Gift and which still operates to this day.

That we know so much of this family—and the business of theater and other Bankside entertainments more generally—is because when he died,
Edward left his collection of personal and professional papers, along with those of his father-in-law, to the College. Containing thousands of manuscript pages, the collection famously includes Edward's and Philip's diaries of their day-to-day activities; also included are records of business transactions, loans, and other legal documents as well as various personal and professional correspondences (some of which are simultaneously both). In telling the tale of Philip Henslowe's and Edward Alleyn's success, historians have tended to tease out the predominantly androcentric threads of the archival materials to create a story of Philip and then Edward as theatrical and entrepreneurial geniuses without much consideration of the social structures of networking upon which success depended. Not surprisingly, modern editors have selected only ‘relevant’ documents to publish, often overlooking information that seems more focused on the women and the family. In assigning single ‘authorship’ to letters, editors obscure the frequently collective identity of senders and receivers of the various bits of correspondence.

Nevertheless, there remains in the archival fabric evidence that, as wives and daughter, Agnes and Joan played significant roles in the familial business enterprises. Throughout, Agnes and Joan—as well as other women—are named as witnesses to various financial transactions being negotiated.\footnote{Henslowe, \textit{Henslowe's Diary}, pp. 8, 32.} At other times, Agnes and Joan are recorded as themselves the makers of loans in addition to being named as witnesses to transactions, which they ‘deliver’.\footnote{Henslowe, \textit{Henslowe's Diary}, pp. 49, 60, 172, 190–191.} As S.P. Cerasano has argued with regard to Agnes, she ‘was recognized—in dealings with the local authorities and her husband's business associates—as a substantial individual in her own right’.\footnote{Cerasano, ‘Going Down the Drain’, p. 84.} As widow, her name appears as the responsible party in a number of legal and civil records. She is among the Southwark property owners ordered by the Sewers Commission to make repairs.\footnote{Cerasano, ‘Going Down the Drain’, p. 88.} Following her husband’s death, she assigns (or transfers) leased shares in the Fortune Theatre and the tenant’s rights to property that had been her husband’s.\footnote{Henslowe-Alleyn Digitisation Project. Muniments, Series 1, Item 53.}

Agnes’s expertise in managing finances seems presumed in the arrangements Philip made in his will dated 6 January 1616, naming her his executrix and bequeathing to ‘his loving wife’ the entirety of his estate minus the payment of debts and bequests.\footnote{Honigmann and Brock, \textit{Playhouse Wills, 1558–1642}, pp. 101–102.} It was a substantial legacy. According to Agnes’s brother-in-law William Henslowe, who contested both Philip’s
will and later that of Agnes when she willed everything to her daughter, the estate was worth £14,000 plus another £7,000 in ‘redie monie & other things’. When Agnes composed her own will on 15 February 1616, she in turn left everything to her ‘only and well-beloved daughter, Joane [sic] Allen’. Although Joan’s uncle and cousin again contested the will when Agnes died in April of 1617, probate awarded the estate to Joan on 3 July 1617, indicating the court’s recognition of Joan’s legitimacy to inherit in her own right.

Like her mother, Joan also was respected by men both within her household as well as in her business dealings outside the home. Her significance to the Henslowe-Alleyn house is especially revealed through her activities while her husband is away from home, performing in the countryside when the London theaters were closed during times of plague. Among Henslowe’s accounts for 1593 are notes regarding Joan’s receipt of the quarterly rents from their tenants and records of her expenses for such things as nails, cushions, and the services of a joiner to make a bed, as well as payment of their own rent and for the keeping of Alleyn’s horse while he is away. Elsewhere in the family’s correspondence, Joan is clearly considered to be not only a loving wife and daughter but also an able agent in the family’s financial affairs.

Throughout the records kept between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, neither woman is perceived as challenging authority but rather their actions seem to be built seamlessly into the expectations that they would contribute to the daily business operations and the success of the Henslowe-Alleyn family. By acting as agents in their family’s theatrical and other business enterprises, they fulfilled rather than defied the gender expectations for women of their status. Early modern concepts of conjugal household governance afforded them opportunities to act with a degree of power, negotiated simultaneously in collusion with patriarchal authority and in their collective self-interest.

The Henslowe and Alleyn women thus exemplify a story of agency often overlooked in the scholarly ‘master-narratives’ of submission or rebellion. Agnes Henslowe and Joan Alleyn do not create a utopian separate sphere for women, but rather they work within the existing ‘ecosystem’. By taking on the ‘divided offices and affairs’ of their household, they replicate rather than replace the ‘patriarchal systems of hierarchical leadership and command’ within the early modern institution of marriage. Using social network

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54 Briley, ‘Edward Alleyn and Henslowe’s Will’, p. 324.
55 Honigmann and Brock, Playhouse Wills, 1558–1642, p. 104.
56 Henslowe, Henslowe’s Diary, p. 5.
theory in conjunction with an examination of kinship/family provides a way to account for their agency and render more visible their seemingly unremarkable roles in facilitating the business of theater through the creation of strong, lifelong, multilayered, embedded ties. As ordinary women of the middling sort they wielded power in the household, including over adult males who were their servants; and they garnered reverence and respect outside of the home in the male-dominated world of business partners and civil authorities with whom they dealt. Although not necessarily feminist, their power was both real and substantive of their success.

Case study: Maria Sibylla Merian and her daughters—a matriarchal enterprise

Agnes Henslowe and Joan Alleyn wielded their power and developed their networks within the parameters of the institution of marriage. For Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), even the protections of that institution were not available. Furthermore, as a middling class woman—living apart from her husband with two daughters—the artist and naturalist did not have access to the most influential formal institutions to which Dutch scientists and artists could belong, namely the Royal Society in London or the Guild of St. Luke’s in Amsterdam. Merian could not rely on membership within these learned and professional circles for training, resources, or a clientele in the way her male counterparts could.

Yet, from her rented house in Amsterdam, she and her daughters formed a family enterprise not dissimilar to many of the smaller artist workshops in Amsterdam at the time. Their situation, however, was unique: theirs was a business created and run entirely by women, and their success hinged on the formation and creation of networks that existed outside of the framework of formal institutions unavailable to them owing to their gender. Although Merian has been the subject of increased scholarship over the past decade or so, much of it has followed the narrative of the ‘great woman’. Meanwhile, her daughters and the women who maintained relationships with Merian have largely remained in obscurity, leaving few (if any) ego-documents.

57 St. Luke’s was the painters’ guild. In Amsterdam, women were not allowed to become members in that guild. In Nuremberg, where Merian began her career, women were allowed into the painters’ guild, but subject to limitations. For example, they were not allowed to paint with oil. Whether women were allowed to become members into a guild, and the terms of membership, varied over time and from place to place. Honig, ‘Femmes ‘artistiques’ des Pays-Bas septentrionaux’, p. 55.
Through the application of an analytical framework that values collectivity and networks, we realize the breadth and significance of these women’s contributions and we can help them step out of the shadows.

Merian was trained as an artist by her stepfather, the still life painter Jacob Marrel (1614–1681). As was likely expected of her, Merian married one of her stepfather’s pupils, the painter and engraver Johann Andreas Graff (1637–1701). She lived with her husband in Nuremberg and they had two daughters, Johanna Helena Herolt (1668–1723) and Dorothea Maria Gsell (1678–1743). In 1681, Merian returned to Frankfurt-am-Main with her daughters to console her mother after her stepfather’s death. She would never return to live with her husband, first joining a colony of religious radicals known as the Labadists in Wieuwerd and eventually moving to Amsterdam in 1691. In Nuremberg and Frankfurt, Merian taught young female students, whom she referred to as her Maiden’s Company. Her two most promising pupils, however, were her daughters. Merian taught them to collect specimens and preserve them, to prepare vellum for watercolor, to draw, and to paint.

In 1699, Merian and Dorothea Maria sailed from Amsterdam for Paramaribo, in the Dutch colony of Surinam. This was an extraordinary adventure to undertake, especially as women. After all, ‘what experience does such a woman have […] crawling about in forests and thickets’? Johanna Helena, by then married, stayed behind in Amsterdam, working on the third volume of Merian’s treatise on caterpillars. With the assistance of Dorothea Maria and slave plantation workers, Merian spent two years in the hot and humid jungle of Surinam collecting, nurturing, and observing insects and plants, and recording the results in her study books. While working in the family enterprise, Johanna began receiving commissions herself. A 1698 *Bloemenbuch* of 49 plates bearing her signature, now in the Anton Herzog Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig, Germany, attests to her talent. Dorothea Maria worked closely with her mother until the latter’s death, at which point she moved to Russia with her husband, where she worked for Peter the Great.

In addition to countless watercolors, Merian’s matriarchal enterprise published several volumes on caterpillars and flowers, culminating in the 1705 *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensum*, a book containing 60

58 For a biography of Merian, see Reitsma and Ulenberg, *Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters*; and Davis, ‘Women on the Margins’, amongst others.
60 Merian, *Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandlung und sonderbare Blumennahrung*.
61 Band Nr. 24 b.
plates illustrating the insects, flora, and fauna of Surinam. After Merian's death, Johanna Helena and Dorothea Maria completed the third installment of the treatise on caterpillars she had begun. They included some of their own drawings in the volume, published in Merian's name. As we now know, the watercolors and publications were the work products of an entire family. During the women's lifetime, they reached some of the world's most important collectors, from Peter the Great in Russia to Hans Sloane, an important physician, naturalist, and collector in England.

Merian and her daughters functioned much as a traditional workshop would. Merian relied on her daughters to color plates for her books and to transfer some of her drawings onto copper plates. Together, they assembled model sheets that they could draw upon to produce various compositions, in a method Ella Reitsma has described as 'collage'. Most of the drawings dating from the pre-Surinam period are signed in the name of Maria Sibylla Merian — whether she was in fact the author of the drawing or not. In the workshop context, there is nothing particularly controversial about this practice. The fact that the women adopted the practice, however, signals that they were aware of the reputation and value attached to Merian's name. In addition to teaching them the art of insect and botanical illustration, it is likely that Merian inculcated in her daughters the importance of family legacy in their business. As Natalie Zemon Davis puts it: 'One suspects that she passed on to her daughters, at the expense of their father, the feeling that they were Merians first and foremost.' Indeed, for the short period of time during which she was widowed, Dorothea Maria took the name Merian, rather than her father's surname, which would have been expected. Interestingly, there are also instances where Merian and Johanna Helena both signed a drawing. This practice, identified by Sam Segal, confirms that the artists collaborated on individual works. It testifies to a perceived need to highlight the relationship between the artists. The double signature—J.H. Herolt and Maria S. Merian—served the purpose of firmly placing Johanna Helena in her mother's artistic legacy.

The women's practice with respect to authorship provides clear evidence of female agency. In choosing to produce works under the name of Merian and in using the double signature, the women chose how they wished...
to present themselves to patrons. Furthermore, their workshop process situates their enterprise on the continuum of collectivity. Rather than seek the support of a male partner, as widows often did for example, the Merian women carried on by themselves. They maximized production by generating artworks collaboratively. Theirs was a space where the women could safely develop as artists and share knowledge and commissions.

Thanks to a small collection of surviving correspondence and the presence of Merian’s works in many important collections, we can establish that Merian actively cultivated relationships with fellow artists, scientists, civic leaders, and collectors. Amongst other things, these relationships enabled her to continue to develop her knowledge as a naturalist and resulted in some of the most important commissions for her family workshop.

One of these relationships was with Caspar Commelin, a regent of the Amsterdam botanical garden, civic leader, and prolific author and publisher, who would prove to be an important ally and patron. For example, Merian would observe plants in the botanical garden and discuss their properties and characteristics with Commelin. He also arranged for Johanna Helena to contribute to the multivolume project to illustrate the Amsterdam botanical garden, now known as the *Moninckx Atlas*. Further, he asked her to color the frontispiece of his *Horti Medici Amsterlaedamensis*, and likely asked her to do the same for some of his other works, such as *Praeludia Botanica* (1703 and 1706). Commelin contributed directly to the Merian family enterprise by writing the Latin commentary for the illustrations in the Surinam book. This enabled the book to reach a wider, more learned audience. Importantly, Merian’s relationship with Commelin would have lent support to her own status as a naturalist and testified to the worth of her family workshop.

Another significant relationship for the Merian women was with Amsterdamer Agnes Block (1629–1704), a wealthy patron and celebrated amateur botanist. Block was the owner and developer of Vijverhof, a country estate on the banks of the river Vecht, near Utrecht. Vijverhof was central to Block’s social and scientific relationships as a site of creativity, exchange, knowledge production, and personal identity. By the end of the seventeenth century, Vijverhof was generally considered to be second only to the botanical gardens of Amsterdam and Leiden with respect to the quantity and quality of rare and exotic plants it contained.

Like Merian, Block also maintained a relationship with Caspar Commelin, although her relationship with him differed from Merian’s. In addition to

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67 Universiteitsbibliotheek van Amsterdam, *Voor de Kruyd-Lievende Leser*, pp. 117–118.
68 The most complete work on Block and her life remains Graft, ‘Agnes Block’.
exchanging information about plants, the two also exchanged seeds and saplings. Beginning in 1695 and again in 1696 and 1697, Block commissioned Merian and Johanna Helena to illustrate some of the rare specimens in her garden. Johanna Helena likely had extended stays at Vijverhof in 1697, only two years before her mother’s travels to Surinam, and possibly had additional stays during her mother’s absence. The Block commission would have provided the Merians with financial security during this period of uncertainty. It would also have allowed them extended periods of close observation of plants and exotic birds in Vijverhof’s aviary. Between 1701 and 1704 (the year of her death), Block commissioned Johanna Helena to produce a title page for a florilegium.

In addition to providing the women with income, these commissions also placed them within a circle of important botanical artists of the time, who were also working for Block. These included Herman Saftleven, Alida and Peter Withoos, and Jan and Maria Moninckx (of the aforementioned Moninckx Atlas)—all useful connections.

Merian’s and her daughters’ relationships with Caspar Commelin and Agnes Block are but a few in a complex web, the full extent of which is not discussed here. These relationships were not merely transactional but, rather, could accurately be described as embedded. Merian’s relationship with Block and Commelin began in the 1690s, when she first arrived in Amsterdam, and endured to the end of her life. These time-tested relationships were sufficiently strong as to grow to incorporate Johanna Helena and Dorothea Maria. It is reasonable to infer that trust and reciprocity could be found in these relationships. Merian trusted Commelin to produce accurate Latin descriptions for her Surinam book, an important factor in ensuring the successful marketing of the work, on which the economic future of the family enterprise depended. She trusted that Johanna Helena could continue to learn and grow as a botanical artist through stays with Block while Merian was away in Surinam. Specimens were traded, observations and interpretations discussed. Without trust or reciprocity, these exchanges would not have taken place, certainly not over such a lengthy period of time.

Merian and her daughters benefited tremendously from their pursuit of relationships with Commelin and Block. These relationships allowed the women to expand their knowledge of botanical and natural organisms

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69 For example, as Kinukawa has noted, Merian’s epistolary relationships with the English apothecary Petiver and the German Physician Volkamer were critical in the marketing of Merian’s book on Surinamese insects and to growing her reputation internationally. See Kinukawa, ‘Natural History as Entrepreneurship’.
and to obtain significant economic benefits in the form of commissions. Furthermore, the networks to which the women belonged conferred upon them increased status and perhaps even legitimacy through their association with individuals of international reputation, which included both Commelin and Block.

Merian and her daughters can accurately be described as proto-feminists. They were women determined to speak for themselves, and worked together to maintain that voice. For them, networks (as flexible, informal organizations) replaced the formal institutions often considered critical in the pursuit of professional success, but from which they were precluded owing to their gender. Networks allowed the women to maintain their autonomy as a small, collaborative family enterprise.

**Conclusion: insights and rewards**

Our case studies show that the values embodied in the Woman’s Building—collaboration, consciousness raising, personal experience, and the significance of the presence of a female role model—existed in the early modern period. They also show the weakness of traditional, individualistic methodical approaches, and the value of collective or institutional (whether formal or informal) approaches.

Maria Sibylla Merian was a ‘great woman’—without fear, traveling to a faraway colony and literally getting dirty. That compelling story, however, is only partially accurate: Agnes Henslowe, Joan Alleyn, Dorothea Maria Gsell, Johanna Helena Herolt, and Agnes Block were not necessarily ‘great women’, or even ‘female warriors’. But they were the ones who allowed the great women and great men in their lives to succeed. The roles they fulfilled, as agents, assistants, and managers, assured the existence of the networks on which their households relied upon to function. Merian could only be made ‘great’ because of the assistance provided by her daughters and because she received important commissions, including from Block. The Rose Theatre was a successful going concern because Agnes Henslowe and Joan Alleyn contributed to the management of its financial affairs.

Yet, of the six women mentioned above, only Merian has benefitted from extensive scholarship, the others remaining in the margins, if not in complete obscurity. Gsell and Herolt rarely even receive a mention in compilations of early modern female artists, and the only book-length study of Block dates to 1943. Similarly, while scholars sometimes give a passing nod to the property and connections Joan and Agnes brought to their marriages,
no attention is paid to their post-marital roles in maintaining and building the networks of embedded ties crucial to the Henslowe-Alleyn family’s success. It is only when approaching Merian’s work and the Rose Theatre from a collective and/or social network perspective that the important roles played by Henslowe, Alleyn, Gsell, Herolt, and Block are revealed. Other actors still stand in the shadows and on the fringes of the historical records, urging scholars to shine inquiring lights on the roles played, for example, by Surinam slaves and married ‘boys’. It is our task as scholars to learn the lessons taught by the Women’s Building, to use the values and frameworks to look back with fresh eyes at archival materials we already have, and to seek in new ways to uncover the histories we have overlooked.

It is undeniable that the early modern women of this chapter possessed agency and navigated networks, often in collaboration. The trajectory of feminist consciousness, however, is not a straight line leading inexorably to progress. Rather, it is a map woven of intersections of greater or lesser prominence. A significant challenge to our work as an act of feminist intervention is that historians and archivists have often only unearthed or published the archival sources that fit a linear, Whiggish, ‘great person’ narrative. Our analytical framework, which eschews an individualistic focus on ‘great women’ and embraces the concepts of female agency, collectivity, and social networks, seeks to illuminate a different trajectory of feminist consciousness by overcoming these deficiencies. The result reveals the potential for recognizing, recovering, and valuing the lives of historical women and making space for them in a broader, more inclusive, view of history.

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