
Jan Stirm

*Monmouth College*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra

Part of the *Comparative Literature Commons, History Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Renaissance Studies Commons*

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol19/iss1/17

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
conclusion and calls for more studies of female "state and subject" for the period.

The two books, appearing in 1998, do not represent engagement with much material published after 1993, so presumably they have been waiting awhile to appear. Still, each presents a thesis well worth considering, and they complement each other admirably. Hanson argues for a central strain of early modern English male subjectivity, emerging from increasingly bureaucratic state formation that requires a new kind of interiority—through-secrecy in men who become at once agents and potential torture victims of the state. Matchinske tracks a strain of emerging female subjectivity from the Reformation to the Civil War.

Louise Schleiner
Washington State University


*Women in Early Modern England* fills an important void in early modern studies today by providing a closely researched, extensive history of early modern English women. Rather than presenting a single overarching argument, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford seek to explain what women's experience of life and the world was in early modern England. As a whole, the book stands as a convincing argument that women's experiences were different enough from men's that they need to be studied and understood in more depth; and this book makes an important and ambitious contribution to that study. Mendelson and Crawford begin by arguing for a history of women rather than woman, "not as a simple linear description of female behavior, but as an intricate process of interactions" (2). They explain these processes of interactions by organizing the book around intersecting categories based primarily on life stages and social status. While their work is aimed at scholars of history, literary scholars will find it useful and illuminating, and a pleasure to read as well. The abundance of detailed explanation and information makes this an invaluable addition to the study of early modern women.

After explaining some of the basic contexts for understanding discourses about women in early modern England, Mendelson and Crawford follow with chapters on life stages, female culture, work and economics, and
politics. Organizing this vast array of material proves difficult; Mendelson and Crawford refer the reader from one chapter to another a bit too often for comfortable reading. For example, we learn about poor girls in service in the third chapter but have to make the connection to the economics and working lives of adult women several chapters later, and adult women servants find a place in both chapters. This difficulty comes with the complexity of early modern women's experience, however. Mendelson and Crawford provide a fine index, while the book's overall organization makes finding related information relatively easy.

Among the most exciting chapters are those on service, the economies of poverty, and female culture. Rather than bringing new material about service to light, Mendelson and Crawford largely draw on now familiar work by Ann Kussmaul, I. K. Ben-Amos, and others, but bring the information together to form a broader, more inclusive story, making sense of the effect of the 1563 Statute of Artificers on the poorest segments of society, especially on children of poor families, who could be forced into service. Having spent more time than I like to think trying to understand historical contexts for dramatic representations of women in service, I found myself nodding enthusiastically and wishing that Mendelson and Crawford had published *Women in Early Modern England* at least a decade earlier. They and other historians of women's history have spent that time well, though, for Mendelson and Crawford bring out both the benefits of service—training, safety, and networking (to use an anachronistic term)—as well as the contradictory problems—lack of training in marketable skills, exposure to sexual abuse from masters, their sons, and fellow servants, and other dangers—which are as two sides of a coin.

*Women in Early Modern England* argues that "historians' preoccupation with 'the family economy' has contributed to the invisibility of women's labour, subsuming all women within the household" (257), and tries to counter this attitude by viewing women as individuals. Further, they include in work, activities such as child-bearing, child-rearing, housekeeping, and cooking, activities which have too often been ignored in comparison with wage-earning activities (even by Alice Clark's pioneering work). Their discussion of the working lives of the poorest women, from early apprenticeships (to housewifery and bone-lace weaving) to adult service, through marriage and widowhood explains the benefits, difficulties, and contradictions to which poor women were subject. The analysis of the diet and cookery of poor households is fascinating and illuminating, especially for the attention given the historical changes in these practices through the early modern
period, ending in the eighteenth century, when many families bought their entire diet rather than producing it themselves (269). Mendelson and Crawford distinguish helpfully between rural and urban women, as the latter had fewer opportunities to scavenge and glean food, though more opportunities to scavenge cloth and profit from trading used clothing. Those of us interested in early modern drama will find the information on the clothing economy suggestive. Disappointingly, though, the authors fail to include a developed discussion of the economics of prostitution, an activity which seems important to the literature of the period.

In their chapter on female culture, Mendelson and Crawford open with a provocative section on space in which they explain that “the household was a female-dominated milieu, offering women a secure yet flexible base of operations for their forays into the outside world” (205). Later they note the special import of doorways in women’s experiences as a liminal space between the household and the community which enabled women to work (especially on needlework or lacemaking) while participating in the life of their community (208). Except for the childbirth, they don’t differentiate much between interior household spaces nor between households of women of different social status. Nor do they consider how material spaces contribute to cultural transmission. By opening the issue, Mendelson and Crawford suggest much, but they develop their analysis in less depth than they imply it deserves.

Mendelson and Crawford approach “Passionate Friends and Lesbian Relationships” cautiously, explaining that while “some women expressed passionate feelings for each other . . . there are difficulties in interpreting the evidence” (242). They rightly note that the meaning of “the term ‘lesbian’ . . . needs to be established in a particular historical context” (243). Rather than establishing a historical context, however, they use the term “to speculate about sexual activity between women, to distinguish this kind of relationship from a non-sexual or erotic friendship” (243). After relating and analyzing the fascinating story of Amy Poulter and Arabella Hunt, whose marriage was annulled after Hunt sued for annulment and a jury of midwives found the cross-dressing Poulter to be a woman (248–49), Mendelson and Crawford conclude that “in this and other popular narratives, phallic sexuality was represented as the universal feminine desideratum” although “clearly there was a discursive space, a silence, about the subject of lesbian relationships at this period” (251). It’s notoriously difficult to write about silence, even as a discursive space, but *Women in Early Modern England* provides some evidence of relationships that made it into popular and legal discourse. Disappointingly
but understandably, the authors do not venture analysis of literary representations between women, nor do they attempt to rethink or restructure dominant definitions of sexuality. Such rethinking is vital as the dominant psychoanalytic vocabulary for reading sexual affect and desire is a relatively ineffective frame of reference for grasping the modes of erotic connectedness among women.

Relative to its expansive discussions of economics and female community, *Women in Early Modern England* is weaker in relating women’s lives to religious belief and practice. This isn’t surprising since Patricia Crawford’s own *Women and Religion in England: 1500–1750* covers much of that ground. Still *Women in Early Modern England* makes a contribution to understanding the effects of gender in late seventeenth-century churching, the ritual through which post-partum women returned to the church community (62), even as it oversimplifies the significance of different practices in different religious communities. David Cressy’s *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* will provide a useful counterpoint for more in-depth information about religious practices, though it lacks the kind of serious interest in gender issues that makes Mendelson and Crawford’s work most exciting.

*Women in Early Modern England* will be a vital resource for scholars of early modern England, women’s history, culture, and literature, as it provides a coherent and diverse account of women’s lives in the period. I can well imagine asking advanced undergraduate literature students to read selections in a course in early modern literature, especially as a way of opening discussions of the canon and specific literary works, including *The Witch of Edmonton*, *The Adventures of Master Ff*, and Aemelia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Graduate students, especially those interested in historical contexts, will probably find this among their most useful historical readings, vital for those working on women’s literature and representations of women alike.

Jan Stirm
Monmouth College