Jacqueline Eales

Women in early modern England, 1500–1700

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library
CCA	Canterbury Cathedral Archives
EBD	*The Europa biographical dictionary of British women,* A.Crawford, T.Hayter, A.Hughes, F.Prochaska, P.Stafford and E.Vallance, eds (London: Europa, 1983)
HMC	*Historical Manuscripts Commission, fourteenth report; Appendix, part II: the manuscripts of His Grace the Duke of* Portland, vol. 3 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894)
PRO	Public Record Office
SP	State Papers
SR	*Statutes of the realm* (London, 1810–28), vol. 4

Preface

This book is an introduction to recent historical writing about women in early modern England. Over the past two decades or so there has been a vast increase in research into the lives of women in all past ages and we owe the resulting expansion of our knowledge primarily to two distinct intellectual developments. The first of these is the role played by feminist theorists in prompting historians to investigate crucial questions about the fashioning of women's roles and rights in past societies. The second is the impact of social history, whose exponents have shunned the traditional focus of political historians on battles, dates, kings, queens and parliaments in favour of what might be termed 'people's history'.

This emphasis on history from the bottom up inevitably embraces all sections of society—men, women and children alike—and also serves to remind students of women's history that the influences of class, race, religion and the family were as important as issues of gender in past societies. The fertile cross-influence of the disciplines of gender studies and social history has also led historians to reconsider the role of women in specific political or religious developments. In the early modern period this includes the Reformation, the nature of court politics in the Tudor and Stuart period, the English Civil Wars and the religious and political aftermath of the Restoration. New findings which take the involvement of women into account in these and other areas are signposted throughout this book.

Within the brief format presented here it is, however, impossible to consider fully every aspect of the now burgeoning research and debate about early modern women. The primary purpose of this text there fore is to stimulate the initial interest of both students and general readers. In particular the bibliography is intended to help those who wish to investigate individual topics in greater depth.

Many intellectual and personal debts have been incurred in the course of writing this book and I would like to thank Tony Claydon, Penelope Corfield, 3 Ditchfield, Fiona and Richard Gameson, Stephen Hipkin, Lynne Hulse, Shonaidh Marsh, Tim Wales, Diane Willen and Sonia Wynne for their advice on specific points, and Graham Durkin, Amy Erickson and Sally Minogue for kindly commenting on earlier drafts. Richard Eales has provided moral support as well as the critical medievalist's perspective essential to prevent early modernists from constantly reinventing the wheel. Finally my thanks to Kevin Ruane for his good humoured interest in this project, to the editors at UCL Press, Steven Gerrard and Aisling Ryan, for their support and encouragement and to Gerard Hill for efficient copy-editing.

For Lindsay, Moira and Vivienne

CHAPTER ONE
Women, gender and patriarchy

In 1624 Sir Edward Conway greeted the birth of his grandson, Edward Harley, with joy both for the safe delivery of the mother and, as he pointedly observed, the 'advantage of the sex' of her child *(HMC).* Conway's words encapsulate the nature of relationships between men and women in early modern England. The sex of the child at birth was biologically determined, but thereafter the specific benefits accorded to him as a male were the products of the society and culture into which he had been born. To Conway these social advantages seemed as natural as the physical distinctions between the two sexes: the one flowed from the other.

Young Edward Harley was doubly privileged: as a first-born male member of the social elite he could look forward to an education at university, a public career as a local magistrate and member of Parliament, and the inheritance of the bulk of his father's estates. In contrast, his four younger sisters, Brilliana, Dorothy, Margaret and Elizabeth, were barred as women from studying at the two English universities of Oxford or Cambridge, they could not take high public office and, although they could expect to receive dowries, by virtue of primogeniture only a relatively small proportion of their father's wealth would be transferred to them. By custom, rather than law, they would not vote for their brother in parliamentary elections and, if they married, their legal identities would be absorbed by that of their husbands. Under common law a married woman—a feme covert— could not contract or sue independently of her husband.

Edward Harley's life merits an entry in the *Dictionary of national biography,* but none of his sisters is separately noticed there. It is important to remember, however, that the privileges accorded to him were class-based. Most men could not vote because they did not fulfil the requirements of land ownership for county elections or of membership of a town oligarchy for the boroughs. Only a minority of men received the academic education offered by the

grammar schools and the universities, and most men could not aspire to the highest political and legal posts.

This book is concerned in the main with the years 1500 to 1700. These dates are not rigidly observed since neither social nor women's history lends itself to exact periodization in the way that political events do (Wiesner 1998). Nevertheless, for over a quarter of the period under consideration the throne was occupied by queens—Mary I (1553–8), Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and Mary II (1688–94). Queen Anne's reign, from 1702 to 1714, lies just outside the scope of this survey, but early eighteenth century material has been considered where relevant. Mary I's reign marked the first involvement of a woman in politics at the highest level since the unsuccessful efforts of Matilda to gain the crown in the mid-twelfth century. The brevity of Mary's rule and her failure to secure the future of Catholicism in England contrasted strongly with the success of Elizabeth in establishing a Protestant religious settlement and in maintaining stability in England over four and a half decades.

After her death Elizabeth's reign came to be seen as a 'golden age' of peace and prosperity. The unprecedented example of successful female monarchy did not, however, lead directly to any radical changes in the lives of ordinary women. Like the first female British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, the Tudor and later the Stuart queens were more concerned with establishing their primacy over male subordinates than in addressing any questions of inequality between the sexes. One distinctive feature of the early modern period that allows us to monitor whether a trickle down effect in favour of women was in operation or not was the expansion of print culture. Works about the nature of women were published throughout the period to satisfy the demands of an increasingly literate readership. The literature demonstrates that traditional views about the inferiority of women continued to dominate the market, and works calling for change were in the minority.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also encompassed two key events in the development of the modern British state—the Reformation and the English Civil Wars. These events had a considerable long-term impact on the lives of ordinary people and both have been seen as important catalysts of change for women in particular. The spread of Protestantism in England from the early 1520s onwards encouraged women to take part in religious debates, and the spread of nonconformist religious sects in the 1640s and 1650s had a similar influence. The Reformation also encouraged literacy amongst the laity and, it has been suggested

more contentiously, helped to elevate the status of women within both the home and society more generally. Similarly, during the 1640s and 1650s many women took over the responsibilities of men who were at Westminster, in exile, or involved in the fighting in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Whether the Reformation and the Civil Wars did indeed result in long term gains for women is a matter of debate and these questions will be analyzed more thoroughly in the following chapters of this book.

Any investigation into the lives and experiences of women in the past must take account of how earlier societies have defined the relationship between the sexes. In the early modern period women were described by male authors as morally, intellectually and physically weaker than men. This analysis was based primarily on biblical teaching and on contemporary medical understanding. The story of Adam and Eve and the New Testament writings of St Paul were influential sources of religious arguments for the subordination of women. They were reinforced by Aristotle's theory that a woman was physically an inferior version of the perfect male form and by the traditional belief that there was a balance of the four humours in the human body. According to humoral medicine, men were believed to be hot and dry and women were cold and moist, making them passive, intellectually unstable and lacking in courage.

In the sixteenth century the most advanced medical thinking developed in France, Italy and Germany, where the growth in anatomical knowledge meant that in professional circles there was a marked shift away from belief in the humoral system by 1600. In the long term this contributed to a change in attitudes towards women, but these ideas were slow to penetrate England and the most popular anatomical work in early Stuart England, Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia* (1615) was still heavily influenced by humoral beliefs. It was not until the late seventeenth century that Thomas Gibson's *The anatomy of human bodies epitomised* (1682) and William Cowper's *The anatomy of human bodies* (1697) presented more accurate anatomical findings to a wider English audience, but popular thinking followed more slowly. Although women were believed by most religious, medical, legal and moral theorists to be inferior to men, they were not seen as naturally submissive and therefore various restraints were imposed on women in order to reinforce the social order (Maclean 1980; Sommerville 1995).

The development of feminist thinking certainly played an important role in altering perceptions about women. From the mid-seventeenth century, women began to argue that the restraints

imposed on them originated not from any innate inferiority of the female sex, but from society's understanding or construction of what was appropriate male and female behaviour, in other words from nurture rather than from nature. Modern feminist theorists have adopted the term gender to identify the distinctions between men and women which are socially constructed (Scott 1986; Lerner 1986; Riley 1988). Despite this definition the boundaries between differences of gender and of sex are often difficult to identify and are still open to debate (Corfield 1997).

As Sir Edward Conway's words cited at the beginning of this chapter indicate, social meanings are attributed to sex from the moment of birth. As a result the extent to which psychological or emotional differences between the sexes are innate or culturally determined is more difficult to assess than, for example, the historical origins of distinct dress codes for men and women in different societies. Yet, broadly speaking, within a feminist model of society the sexual distinctions between men and women can be said to be those which are biologically determined, while differences of gender can be defined as those that are culturally constructed.

Since the 1970s the influence of gender studies has provided women's history with greater theoretical clarity. The mapping of how definitions of male and female behaviour have changed over time has revealed the differences between men and women which were specific to past cultures, the ways in which they were reinforced and how they have changed over time and place. Women in early modern England were disadvantaged because they were born into an overtly patriarchal society. In its broadest sense patriarchy means the political and social dominance of men over women and children. In early modern England male dominance was reinforced through a fully articulated political theory of patriarchy in which the function of men as heads of households and as fathers was believed to be analogous to the role of the monarch. The family was regarded as the most important unit of social organization and it was seen as both the origin of civil society and as a microcosm of the state itself.

Political, religious and legal authorities thus drew a parallel between power in the state and that of the father within the family. Both forms of authority were natural and God-given and, just as the ruler or his officials represented the best interests of the subjects, the father was responsible for and represented the needs of his family. Disobedience to either political or paternal jurisdiction was seen as unnatural and, it was believed, would lead to widespread disorder. Such patriarchal theories were

commonplace in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and were derived from a variety of earlier classical and medieval writers as well as from the Bible, which was regarded by contemporaries not only as a guide to religious and moral behaviour, but also as a social and political blueprint. Patriarchal theories did not go unchallenged, particularly by republican writers during the 1650s, and they found their most formidable opponent in John Locke, who argued for a separation of royal and fatherly power in *Two treatises of government* (1690). Locke and subsequent writers did not, however, abandon the notion that fathers were the natural heads of households (Schochet 1975; Amussen 1985, 1988; Ezell 1987).

There was also a gulf between theory, which for much of this period was exclusively composed by male authors, and practice, which involved negotiation between men and women on a daily personal basis. Many of the most influential authors of the time were clerics and, because women could not share in their ministerial functions, they drew very rigid lines between the public duties of men and the household responsibilities of women. In practice, the boundaries between the private and public spheres were diffuse and this was reinforced by the personal nature of political and other forms of patronage as well as by economic structures (Eales 1998). Furthermore, differences of class could also cut across the gender divide. Very few theorists maintained that all women were inferior to all men and aristocratic or gentry women expected and received deference from men and women who were not their social equals.

The extent and influence of patriarchal control has therefore been the subject of considerable debate and two distinct and influential master narratives about the status of women in early modern English society have emerged. The older of these is a story of progress, which argued that the educational and spiritual standing of women was elevated in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the effects of both the Renaissance and the Reformation. This interpretation was based on humanist demands for better female education coupled with the Protestant emphasis on the important role to be played by women in promoting godliness in the home amongst children and servants. The more recent interpretation is a story of decline, which posited that the growth of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution had a damaging effect on the economic status of women. This analysis was founded on the belief that for much of the early modern period the production of goods and foodstuffs was largely centred on the home where women could exercise some measure of