# The Gendered Boundaries of Public and Private in Early Modern Cities. Revising Historiography Through the Lense of Popular Literature

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## Introduction

The notion of "separate spheres", that is, the dichotomy between "public" and "private" as symbolic spaces and areas of everyday experience, associated respectively in Western cultural tradition with "male" and "female" terrains, was a powerful spatial metaphor in the early decades of women's history and feminist theory. Public and private have been variously paired through time with other dualities, all of them heavily gendered and decidedly influential on collective perceptions and individual subjectivities: production and reproduction, interest and feeling, reason and emotion, formal and informal, outside and inside, visible and invisible, known and secret, open and shut, among others. Since the 1990s, however, this dichotomy has been challenged by conceptual reflections and empirical studies which have revealed that neither are the very notions of "public" and "private" self-evident, nor can they be precisely mapped onto the world of the streets, squares and markets, and that of the home, respectively, because the limits between the two were porous in both practical and symbolic terms (Davidoff 1995, Vickery 1993, Van den Heuvel 2019). In particular, despite the heavy stress placed by conduct literature on their separation, the worlds of women and men often overlapped and were mixed.

This dossier focuses on the gendered dimensions of public space in early modern cities.[1] Drawing on research from recent decades across many European territories, our introductory article addresses the complex question of understanding the gendered uses and perceptions of urban space. It examines the influence of gender on how women and men occupied, navigated, and described space in early modern cities and towns, as well as the interaction between moral prescriptions and lived experiences. The first part reviews the historiographical debates, arguing for a nuanced approach that transcends rigid dichotomies while nevertheless accounting for differences and inequalities. The second part focuses more specifically on early modern popular literature to explore how the gendered organisation of space was predicated, lived, negotiated, resisted, and challenged. We examine the roles played by women as sellers of chapbooks, alongside men; as readers of or, more often, listeners to broadside ballads recited or sung in squares and on street corners; as subjects of discourses that hierarchised and moralised roles and spaces; and as protagonists of stories that romanticised unruly behaviours disrupting those very principles. The two pieces that follow provide a closer examination of two distinct types of activities conducted in public spaces within two early modern cities. Kate Osborne discusses the diverse forms of daily coexistence between women and men in the various economic activities that took place in public locations in early modern Exeter. The essay by Jorge Catalá, Daniel Muñoz, Juan Francisco Pardo, and Pablo Pérez explores female transgressions, ranging from prostitution and murder to petty economic crimes, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Valencia. Together, these three articles

[1] The research on which this dossier is based started in the framework of the research project *Public Renaissance: Urban Cultures of Public Space between Early Modern Europe and the Present* (ref. PCI2019–103749) and was completed as part of the project *Género, politica y emociones en el largo siglo XIX. Los tránsitos de la modernidad en España en perspectiva global* (ref. PID2022-139190NB-I00).

reconsider the contours and experiences of urban space in early modern times in ways that qualify formerly rigid categories and enrich our understanding of the dynamics of gendered collaboration and conflict.

**Blurring the public/private, male/female dichotomies, *ma non troppo***

The terms "public" and "private" have been charged with changing meanings through time. In early modern culture and society, these included the public power of the sovereign versus the private jurisdictions of the nobility; public as communal or collective, exposed to the gaze of others (neighbours or strangers), versus intimate or personal, in other words, restricted to the self or to small circles, those of the nuclear family or of *petites sociétés* (salons, academies, close friendships) bound by elective affinities; public, also, in the sense coined by Jurgen Habermas, as (ideally) transparent and open to rational scrutiny, versus private, like the opaque world of Ancien Régime politics.[2] Given that they are highly judgemental, rather than purely descriptive, these oppositions are slippery and not always easily mappable in clear spatial terms onto physical places. As Elizabeth S. Cohen rightly notes, "reducing a complex environment to a sharply bounded theoretical dichotomy is often awkward" (Cohen 2009, 96). A broader and more nuanced set of categories is required to deal with experiences and perceptions across the whole spectrum, many of which fall between the extremes of privacy and publicness: categories such as individual, intimate, domestic, social, political, etc.

The complex historical processes by which public, private, intimate, individual and all other related categories have been defined are strongly gendered, even if urban historians have often turned "a blind eye to the gendered character of towns" (Simonton 2017, 1). That does not mean, however, that we can simply point to a clear male/female duality. There never were "separate spheres" (inside or outside) existing as completely distinct physical and social arenas for one sex or the other, and there is certainly not a "private sphere" to which (all) women were literally restricted. Rather, gender differences and norms cut across the entire spectrum of social and personal life, from the most public to the most intimate. Although early modern women were excluded from public office, they were present in political life and spaces across the social scale, from participation in dynastic and court politics to petitioning, navigating judicial procedures and taking part in popular protests and revolts (Whiting 2015, Laursen Brock and Ewen 2021, Waddell and Peacey 2024). At the other end of the spectrum, solitude – a radically intimate experience – was considered particularly dangerous for women, because they were conceptualized as dependent in both social and moral terms, unable to embody the rationality and autonomy required from full individuals, and lacking in emotional control (Vila 2023, 147).[3] To explore how (gendered) social relations and urban space mutually shape one another, instead of using the notion of spheres – an image that suggests definitive separate spaces – it seems more useful to think in terms of mutable and relatively flexible boundaries, understood as "complex structures that establish differences and commonalities between individuals and groups"; boundaries that are

[2] For discussions of the multiple meanings of public and private, see among others Ariès 1989, Goodman 1992, Bolufer and Morant 1998, Chartier 2002. As it is well known, Habermas' notion of the "bourgeois public sphere" has been subject to strong criticism that points at its exclusion of women and gender and at its wrong assumption that public political discussion did not exist in early modern times. See for example Calhoun (2012) and Rospocher (2012).

[3] See the activities of the "Pathologies of solitude" project, in particular the "Solitude and Gender" seminar. https://solitudes.qmul.ac.uk/ [consulted 23 November 2025].

flexible and permeable and can be "maintained, crossed, resisted, reconfigured" (Miranne and Young 2000, 1).

New research has delved deeper into how women and men engaged with urban space, through their actions and in terms of "values, beliefs, perceptions, emotions and appropriation" (Rodger and Rau 2020, 374), though we still lack sufficient comparative studies to gauge the degree to which the gendering of urban space might have varied in different European cities. These studies draw on gender history, concerned with the interplay between social norms and individual and collective agency, and on the spatial turn, which has made us aware that spaces and places are socially constructed (Papadogiannis, Bavaj, Lawson and Struck 2024). Both perspectives have challenged the master narrative of a gradual confinement of women within the private sphere from the late Middle Ages to industrial times, as a result of complex socioeconomic, political and cultural changes which corroded women's property rights, civic participation, and productive work (Flather 2007 and 2017). They have also confirmed that prescriptive notions about the primarily domestic role played by women were not literally enacted in real life, and that male and female worlds frequently overlapped to a greater extent than had previously been described, in urban as well as in rural spaces: in daily work, in sociability circles (both elite and popular), and even in political arenas.

In spatial terms, although we tend to see private as the home and public as the space of the streets, squares and markets, the disciplines of social and architectural history have shown that early modern domestic space was relatively flexible in terms of both the design of buildings and their actual uses. Multifunctional rooms were used for work and business as well as for family life; families included not only kin, but also clients, servants, slaves and apprentices; liminal spaces such as windows, balconies, doorways and porches connected domestic interiors with the streets beyond, rather than separating the two. At the same time, public terrains of political discussion and protest were in place long before the alleged emergence of a bourgeois (and male) public sphere, through mechanisms that were not always "public", in the sense of formal politics, and were not strictly male (Rospocher 2012). Social gossip and political rumours could be started and transmitted in domestic interiors as well as in open-air settings, although anything occurring in the latter was more easily captured by sources, often official records or reports of activities considered unruly or a threat to the social order (Hindle 1994).

Women and men participated – generally in their own specific ways – in various non-institutional forms of behaviour, from rumours to *charivaris*, that were used to impose norms and standards of public and private behaviour, expose individual transgressions, and also express social and political demands (Fabre 1986, Davis 1987). For example, in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Rome, women were involved, usually as victims, but on some occasions as instigators or aggressors, in house-scornings: assaults on dwellings by conspicuous means (noise, songs, objects thrown at walls and windows – the interface between outside and inside) aimed at publicly shaming the owners and their families, often for reasons of female sexual impropriety (Cohen 1992). Sometimes the women targeted by such attacks either confronted the perpetrators, as in the case of Margarita, wife of Giovanni Domenico de Bassi, who gave a heated response from a window when their house on Rome's Piazza San Agostino was attacked in 1608, or took legal action to restore their reputation, as in the case of Aurelia, a prostitute who lived in the same city, near the Piazza Colonna, and in 1604 brought legal proceedings against three men who had attacked her house (Cohen 1992, 604-605, 613-614). Court records for slander also show that women made wide use of insulting language to quarrel and to highlight alleged transgressions of moral and social norms, as well as going to court to defend their honour, with examples ranging from London (Gowing 1996) and

Rome (Cohen 1992) to Antwerp, Mechelen and Leuven (Haemers and Delameillieure 2017). The language of insult was heavily gendered: as Laura Gowing puts it, "slander was the linguistic exposition of a model of gender, sex, and morals" which governed social life (Gowing 1996, 60). "Whore" – used not in the strict sense of "prostitute", but to refer more broadly to women as promiscuous – was the most common insult, employed (by women as well as men) in all sorts of conflicts, from neighbourly disputes to financial transactions in markets, on street corners, in shops and backyards. Because of the powerful association between femininity and domesticity, women's activities outside the home, even everyday, non-sexual transactions (undertaken in their roles as domestics, shop or tavern owners or workers, market- or street-sellers, customers), were more easily labelled, when conflicts arose, as morally dubious or disorderly.

Indeed, when discarding the idea of gendered "separate spheres" as too rigid to encompass the complexities of social organisation and experience in early modern cities, we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Gender and space were "intimately linked in early modern theoretical constructions of patriarchal order" (Flather 2017, 23) and in everyday perceptions. Moral norms that prescribed domesticity and reserve to women, and based men's respectability on their ability to wield proper authority within the home, are neither directly descriptive nor completely dissociated from social practice, but connected in complex ways; they reveal shared anxieties and influenced the ways in which spaces were used, perceived and experienced. There were of course boundaries between public and private, even if these were porous and continuous, and both were loci in which power (complete with gender dimensions) was enacted, negotiated and contested.

If a watertight division between public and private, male and female spaces has given way to more nuanced ways of understanding the gendered configuration of early modern cities (and of Ancien Régime society more generally) in Northern Europe, the presumption that women were indeed confined behind closed doors in Southern Europe has held sway for a long time not only in the popular imagination, but also in scholarship. The image of Spanish and Italian women as enclosed, "dwelling behind veils and walls" (Cohen 2009), and of a society strictly segregated by gender, lacking in mixed sociability, is based on a one-dimensional reading that takes normative sources and travel narratives too literally and plays down differences connected to social rank, marital status and other crucial circumstances. The remarkable endurance of this commonplace proves the seductive power of fiction, of the countless Renaissance *novellas* and swashbuckling plays and travel narratives of the sixteenth, seventeenth and even eighteenth centuries that portrayed Italian and, particularly, Spanish women within domestic confines, guarded by strict husbands or fathers, looking out from their balconies or through the slats of the shutters known as *gelosie* or *celosías*, a name etymologically deriving from (male) "jealousy" (Bolufer 2016 and 2022).

Historical evidence contradicting this powerful stereotype has been accumulating for decades. We now know that women went out and about, that they owned shops and taverns and did a variety of jobs in the urban economy not only in Augsburg (Wiesner 1986), London (Flather 2007) or Exeter (see Osborn in this issue), but also in Rome (Cohen 2009), Seville (Perry 1990) and Valencia (see Catalá, Muñoz, Pardo and Pérez in this issue): "religious devotion, many kinds of work [from peddling and market trading to domestic service or prostitution], sociability both private and collective, and vital communication and networking all drew women into the streets" (Cohen 2009, 96).

**The distorting mirror of popular literature**

Early modern popular literature and its wide circulation can give valuable glimpses into how the gendered organisation of space was perceived, predicated, lived, negotiated and, sometimes, challenged. Broadside ballads and chapbooks (known in Spanish as *pliegos de cordel*, in French as *canards* and *livrets bleus*, in Italian as *stampe effimere*, in German as *Flugpublizistik*, and in Dutch as *Volksboeken* and *Liedbladen*)[4] were read aloud in squares and markets, more often by male hawkers but also by women involved in the business of producing, marketing, distributing, writing or reciting ballads in public. Such performances attracted audiences consisting of both men and women, literate and illiterate, helping popular prints extend their reach to encompass even those who could not read them on their own.

Women's involvement in the world of books and printing was nothing new, as demonstrated by a rich historiography (Parker 1996; Broomhall 2002; Garone Granvier 2008; Smith 2012). While there are fewer studies relating to cheap print, the growing interest among popular print historians in incorporating a gender perspective into their analyses has led them to interrogate their (scant and elusive) sources about female agency in the processes of producing, circulating and reading printed ephemera (McDowell 1998).

As regards the printing of chapbooks and broadside ballads, and their equivalents around Europe, women played a role in the process, as they did in the printing world more generally. Although some presses specialised in popular literature, the vast majority alternated between producing larger-format works and printing pamphlets and other smaller documents, enabling a steady and rapid, albeit low-level income stream. This strategy was common practice for all printers, men and women alike. The traditional view in book history that women working in print shops played only subsidiary roles, supporting master printers or, in the case of widows, acting as absentee owners, has been challenged in recent years by studies that highlight the very active roles played by some women. Print shops, like other businesses, were family run and needed everyone to do his or her bit. As daughters, sisters or wives of printers, women could be responsible for all kinds of daily activities, from ink-making and paper handling to checking the order of pages and proofreading. Widows, however, also took on the tasks of managing the business and making editorial decisions (Gregori Roig 2018, Wyffels 2022). The same is true of other, related professions, such as bookselling and bookbinding.

Printing houses and bookshops had been part of the urban landscape since the latter half of the fifteenth century, their wares including ephemeral printed matter. The location of such businesses within European cities followed a common pattern, as they were set up close to institutions that were potential clients (cathedrals, universities, local government buildings), or in streets and squares that were already busy with commercial activity. In Valencia, for example, it was the *Plaça del Mercat* [Market Square]; in Venice, *Piazza San Marco* [St Mark's Square] and the *Ponte di Rialto* [Rialto Bridge], as well as the *Merceria*, the street that runs between the two (Salzberg 2014, 52); in Antwerp, the triangle formed by the *Kammenstraat* [Breweries Street], the *Steenhouwersvest* (Stone-Cutters Rampart) and the *Lombaerdeveste* [Lombards Rampart], close to the Collegiate Church and the bustling *Onze-Lieve-Vrouwepand* [Market of Our Lady] (Adam 2014, 23). As well as printing and selling substantial and costly volumes, these establishments produced popular prints that could easily be traded in such crowded areas, often directly from the print houses and bookshops themselves, which opened onto the street and advertised stock on their walls to attract people's

[4] See the *Glossary of Early Modern Popular Print Genres* (https://popular-print-glossary.sites.uu.nl/glossary/) [consulted 23 November 2025].

attention. Women working in print shops participated in producing and distributing those items.

The principal means of dissemination for ephemeral printed matter was street trade. All kinds of itinerant sellers, from occasional hawkers to specialist charlatans, would buy runs of the titles they assumed would be best-sellers from the printers, pack them into sacks or baskets, set themselves up at strategic points around town and attempt to sell them to the passing crowds. In recent years, scholarship in different European contexts has begun to consider the key role played by these cultural mediators in the distribution of popular literature (Degl'Innocenti and Rospocher 2019). There is still a lack of research focused on the participation of women in this particular form of street selling. Nevertheless, the evidence gradually emerging from the archives about the colportage of printed matter in early modern cities is allowing us to recover the names of more and more women who once occupied the public space singing ballads and reading other works aloud.

Some of these women would be accompanied by a man, generally their husband. So, for example, in mid-seventeenth-century Paris, the famous blind singer Philippot le Savoyard was assisted by a woman as he plied his trade, and in around 1780, another well-known street singer, Baptiste le Divertissant, used to sing and sell printed matter at the Quai de la Ferraille, together with his wife, Madame Baptiste. A municipal ordinance issued in Paris in 1645 had actually forbidden "all colporteurs to employ their wives and children to sell in the city", showing that this was common practice (McIlvenna 2019, 82-92). Various iconographical representations of such couples exist, such as Antwerp-based artist Pieter Aertsen's *Ecce Homo in the Marketplace* (c.1550-51), in which a man and woman are portrayed addressing the crowd that has gathered round them, and selling their printed wares, or the work of the same name by Aertsen's nephew Joachim Beuckelaer (Henry 2019, 149-154). On some occasions, such vendors would experience the negative side of selling this kind of ephemeral literature, which was an ideal means of circulating prohibited texts because it could be produced and distributed with such speed: in Mechelen in 1539, two pedlars, husband and wife, suffered public humiliation for having printed and hawked "controversial libels" both there and in Dendermonde (Dumolyn and Haemers 2014).

The sources also reveal stories, however, of women working alone to sell leaflets. Some even before the invention of the printing press: in 1429, an Ypres woman named Mary was punished for having brought copies of a song that criticised the city's aldermen from Tournai and for having sung it in public (Dumolyn and Haemers 2014). In the English context, there are abundant examples of female ballad singers associated with the world of vagrancy and criminality. In 1651, for instance, Helen Aspinall was bound over after the denizens of Cow Crosse in Clerkenwell claimed that "her ballad-singing was the cause of many tumults and uproares at Smythfield barrs"; Ann Laddington is described as "a vagrant girl taken singing ballads in the streets" and Elizabeth Walker as a "balladsinger and common nightwalker": both were arrested in 1650; in 1649, meanwhile, a news report had detailed how "a poor woman singing of a Ballad neer Creplegate, a trooper standing by, assayl'd her, and tore her Ballads" (McShane 2019, 100-109). Angela McShane also suggests that English publishers "employed female singers […] to spread their more sensitive wares", in the belief that women were less likely to be charged with sedition (McShane 2019, 112). Numerous pictorial representations of female print sellers appeared in the successive series of London Cries produced between the sixteenth and nineteenth century (Shesgreen 2013). The particular role played by women in the English print trade is indicated by the use of the term "mercury women", to describe the itinerant female hawkers who sold newspapers,

specifically, during the civil war and interregnum years (Peacey 2013, 101). In the Low Countries, female news sellers make relatively frequent appearances in court records (Bowen 2013, 169). In Paris, female street singers, like their male colleagues, had their regular spots in the city: we know from one of Tallemant des Réaux's *Historiettes* that the poet Maillet once sold a song to a woman who used to sing on the Pont-Neuf, and Mme de Motteville's *Mémoires* include the mention of a certain "dame Anne", who "earned money by singing songs in the street against the Queen [Anne of Austria]" (McIlvenna 2019, 87).

As for southern Europe, there is no reason to believe that women were not involved in as everyday a business as the selling of printed ephemera just as they were in the street trade of other merchandise. As noted by Rosa Salzberg for the Italian territories, although few cases of women selling printed materials have been uncovered in the sources so far, it is more than likely that the advance in research into the informal economy, which existed in parallel with the guild structure, will shed further light on their involvement in this kind of itinerant trading (Salzberg 2011, 751). Of the rare cases known to us at the moment, one of the most notable is that of Lucia Buffa, who came from a long line of pedlars from the *Valle de Tesino* with links to the Remondini publishing house, and who in 1788 signed a legal document manifesting her desire to accompany her husband on a trip to Germany (Rospocher and Caramel 2024). In Spain, the print trade was associated from the sixteenth century onwards with blind hawkers, who joined together in brotherhoods. Women were admitted into the ranks of the latter and, in line with their ordinances, could participate (with certain restrictions) in the kind of trading carried out by the blind men, including the saying of prayers and the sale of leaflets (Gomis 2019).

We know of one fascinating case in the German context that is particularly revealing both of female involvement in the distribution of popular literature and of the porosity of borders between the public and private spheres. In Augsburg, in 1588, a young woman of 24 named Sabina Preiss was arrested and interrogated for her part in spreading a prohibited song (Tlusty 2012, 52-55). She had been in hospital in the city for a year, suffering with pain in her limbs and, according to the report on the interrogation, had been in possession of the leaflet on which the song text was printed because her "room mother" had asked her to read it to her and then left it with her for a number of weeks so that she could learn it by heart. Her poor state of health and limited level of literacy (the text contained some difficult words) prevented her from memorising it, but one night, when she heard two visitors to the hospital singing the song, she recognised it as one she had heard before at her brother's house. She decided to ask him for a copy, which she had only had for a short while before she was caught singing it. It seems that having heard it that night, she was then able to sing it herself once she had the copy, and she was then reported by the "hospital father". Preiss swore she had not known that the song was forbidden and that others had been punished for singing it: according to her statement, her "room mother" had told her there was no ban on singing it at the hospital.

The case of Sabina Preiss illustrates several key aspectsthat we would like to emphasise: the hybrid nature, somewhere between public and private, of certain spaces (such as hospitals, for example); the everyday and fluid distribution of ephemeral printed matter; and the oral character of this kind of literature, which meant it could be easily learned and passed on despite its mediators' lack of literacy and thus become familiar to a very wide and varied audience.

The fact that the titles of these kinds of ephemeral printed materials were cried out in public and that their texts were recited or sung explains how they were spread so widely and rapidly – oral transmission allowed them to circumvent the barrier of illiteracy. Their reception, therefore, was not limited to those who could read, as was the case with other

kinds of written texts, whose accessibility was very unbalanced in gender terms because of men´s considerable higher levels of literacy. The audiences of popular literature were as varied as the crowds who passed over the bridges and through the arcades, squares and other locations in towns and cities selected by hawkers because they were particularly busy. Anyone, male or female, could choose to join the throng that had gathered around a street singer and listen to the song being sung or the tale being told, and maybe even buy their own copy for a few pennies. An inability to decipher the printed word did not preclude an interest in purchasing a text because, as shown by the case of Sabina Preiss, and many other documented examples, as long as the owner had access to someone who could read, she or he could listen to the text as often as wanted.

Although the oral character of works disseminated via cheap print points to broad and heterogeneous audiences, however, an analysis of their contents does suggest that some were specifically aimed at female readers and listeners (Marsh 2018, 85-87; Clark 2002). All of this material offers abundant moral advice and warnings about how to regulate domesticity according to Christian principles and societal norms. The figure of the obedient wife, modestly keeping to a home in which all authority was wielded by her husband, featured in many such texts, as well as in countless hagiographies, sermons and devotional works. This image of the good wife was a metaphor for social and political order at large, her "natural" submissiveness a mirror of the lawful subordination of subjects to sovereigns and civic authorities, peasants to landowners, and believers to the power of the Church. As Natalie Davis pointed out in a seminal study, "in the little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the large matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization" (Davis 1987, 127). While recent investigations have moved away from the oversimplified idea of regarding broadside ballads and other popular prints as mere vehicles for traditional misogyny (Marsh 2018), it cannot be denied that the model of female domesticity presented by these texts involved the submission of women to the authority of their husbands (Sánchez Pérez 2013, Gomis 2007), as argued by Arlette Farge in her classic work on the *Bibliothèque Bleue* (Farge 1982). One paradigmatic example of such female docility and obedience is Griseldis, a character who began life in the *Decameron* and whose story – that of a dutiful wife who patiently and unquestioningly accepts each of the trials set up by her husband to test her constancy – spread extensively through European popular literature (Schlusemann 2019).

The same genre, however, also abounds in colourful images of unruly women: disorderly wives ruling over ineffectual husbands, ridiculed for their inability to impose their authority; terrifying Amazons; fierce women bandits, sometimes dressed as men and rivalling them for cruelty; grotesque madwomen. After all, in Davis's words, "the female sex was thought the disorderly one par excellence in early modern Europe" (Davis 1987, 124). The powerful image of the "woman on top" could work as an escape valve, ultimately reinforcing order and stability in a hierarchical society, just as the controlled disorder of Carnival gave way to the penitent solemnity of Lent. This ambiguous icon could also inspire real women by offering them cultural scripts for behaviour that challenged customary expectations at home or out in the street. For example, research into cross-dressing and cross-gender identification reveals an interesting circularity between literature and social practices. In early modern European cities and towns (from Spain, Portugal and France to the Netherlands and England), a relatively large number of women adopted male names and appearances for reasons that cannot always be deduced from the extant sources, but would include escaping poverty, emigrating – to America or the East Indies – pursuing criminal activities, evading the law, expanding their economic and social possibilities, living out homoerotic sexualities, even, sometimes, transitioning

to male (Dekker and van de Pol 1989, Steinberg 2001, Soyer 2012, Mantecón 2020).[5] Ballads, popular narratives and songs recreated their stories, embellishing and exaggerating the adventurous lives they had led, often as soldiers or sailors, possibly inspiring other women to follow their example; conveyed a powerful (if at times ambiguous) sense of women's capacities; and, more generally, expanded the cultural horizons for imagining and shaping gender identities. Erudite galleries of mythological or biblical "strong women" and learned biographies of local or national heroines may also have contributed to this. For example, the allegorical figure of the Maid of Holland or *Hollandia*, representing the United Provinces in their fight against the Spanish empire, circulated widely in many formats (from paintings and prints to samplers and stained-glass windows) during the Dutch Golden Age, and was often depicted alongside real wartime heroines or female scholars and artists. For Martha M. Peacock (2019), this reflected the importance of women's domestic and social roles in the cities of the new republic, provided them with public visibility and inspired them to expand the boundaries of what was sociably and culturally acceptable.

In the Spanish world, cases of cross-dressing and cross-gender identification are also documented in inquisitorial and civil court records, scientific treatises and popular narratives (Cleminson and Vázquez 2016, Soyer 2012 and 2023). The most famous such case is that of Catalina de Erauso, who after escaping from a convent in 1603 and living an adventurous life, first as a woman and then as a man and soldier across Spain and Spanish America (Vitoria, Valladolid, Seville, Lima, Cuzco…), was allowed by the pope and the king to keep his acquired male identity – her story was widely popularised via a supposed autobiography, a play (*The Lieutenant Nun*) and other printed narratives (Velasco 2000; Aresti 2007). Apart from this emblematic case, numerous leaflets disseminated romances about other cross-dressing women who became soldiers or bandits, works which enjoyed enormous success in Spain (Masera 2021; Gomis 2007, 301-306). In England, the famous broadside ballad about Mary Ambree's heroic role in the liberation of Gaunt (Ghent), which was published in the late 1500s and remained famous for centuries, heralded a rich tradition of "female warriors" in popular balladry (Dugaw 1989), a literary vein that also existed in France and the German territories (Hopkin 2003; Gleave 2011). These heroines were transgressive figures who defied the model of domestic and conjugal subjugation, and as such were censured by the moralising discourse of the elites: it was no coincidence that Ben Johnson referred to the "dangerous" examples set by Mary Ambree in his play *Epicœne, or, The Silent Woman* (Dugaw 1989, 32). Female transgression was pushed to the limit in certain works about lawbreaking women, whose lack of self-control, caused by insufficient (paternal or marital) control, drove them to murder, lustful acts or prostitution[6] (Liebel 2013, Gomis 2007).

Disorderly female figures (Wiltenburg 1992) were not merely fictional or fictionalised characters in a wide range of both high and low literary genres. They were also a common part of ritualised protest that symbolically worked to sanction political disobedience for both men and women (Davis 1987). It is already widely known that women played an often crucial, sometimes leading role in different types of protest in early modern cities, from food and tax riots to upheavals that were primarily religious or

[5] Dekker and van de Pol (1989) documented 119 cases in the Netherlands between 1550 and 1839, most of them urban and dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (54 and 55 respectively). Their monograph's original Dutch title (and its Spanish translation, though not the English version) very effectively captures this complex connection between life and fiction, between popular literature and the practice of cross-dressing, by citing the opening words of a popular song about a young woman who wanted to become a sailor ("Daar was laatst een meisje loos"), orally transmitted until recent times.

[6] On prostitution and transgression in the early modern city, see the essay in this issue by Catalá, Muñoz, Pardo and Pérez.

political in nature. Because they were so central to building and sustaining both communities and family and neighbourhood relationships, women were able to establish ordinary solidarities that could be quickly mobilised in extraordinary times (Dekker 1987), but their presence, often under-represented or distorted in sources issuing from royal or local authorities in charge of surveillance and repression (Pérez García 2002, 318; Bernat i Roca 2005, Haemers and Delameillieure 2017, 330-31), varied a good deal, depending on the ways in which protests were organised and developed. In 1450, for example, a certain Katlijn Goblijns found herself banished from Mechelen for having sung rebellious songs about the Grey Friars; in the same city in 1517, Barbara Van Steynmolen was fined for having publicly questioned the way in which the mayor dispensed justice (Haemers and Delameilleure 2017, 334 and 323). Women were at the forefront of political riots in The Hague, Alkmaar, Hoorn and Rotterdam in 1653, and in Amsterdam in 1672; they led the so-called "women's revolt" in Delft in 1616 against a tax on grain, and Kaat Moseel, a skilled mobiliser of crowds, especially the women hawkers of Rotterdam, was admired throughout the Dutch Republic (Dekker 1987, 340, 342, 352). Other cases range from Masaniello's revolt in Naples in 1647 to popular uprisings in Lyon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Farge 2002).

In sources relating to Mallorca's Revolt of the *Germanies* (Brotherhoods) (1521-23), there are 122 references to women, most of whom were active in Ciutat de Mallorca (the island's main city), but some in other towns and villages as well. Some are referred to as preachers or orators (*sermonadores*), meaning that they spoke out either in public or in domestic circles in favour of the revolt, one such being Joana Falaguera, who was hanged in Calvià; others cried out seditious slogans (e.g. Francina, wife of Guillem Totobaus), insulted royalists or stirred the crowds (Bernat i Roca 2005). In the earlier parallel uprising of the same name in Valencia (1519-1522), women are almost undetectable in documents relating to the initial, moderate phase of the revolt, led by the guilds, from which they were formally excluded, although there are suggestions that they might have helped communicate the rebels' plans and acted as spies and supporters (Pérez García 2002). Their presence became more prominent from summer 1520 onwards as more far-reaching goals were pursued and the rebellion acquired a messianic aspect: at least eight women supported the radical leader Vicent Peris, and some fought, unsuccessfully, to stop the final assault on his home on 3 March 1522 (Pérez García 2002, 328-31, and 2017, 153-161). Isabel Navarro, Peris's wife, was confined to a convent, while Isabel Sanch, along with a dozen men, was executed, her body put on display in the ruins of Peris's home, her long hair streaming down to her feet, according to contemporary chronicles (Pérez García 2002, 318-23). Other women, exceptionally, took up arms defending the city of Xàtiva against the viceroy's army from September to December 1522, and Isabel Castell, widow of the rebel leader Guillem Sorolla, was heavily fined on 10 April 1524 for having been found in the city streets at night dressed as a man, which suggests that she might have participated in the last, clandestine attempts to rekindle resistance (Pérez García 2002, 331).

The examples presented here confirm that, as a now extensive historiography is demonstrating in different countries across Europe, women and men regularly crossed paths in the streets, squares and markets of early modern cities: in their daily work, for reasons of sociability, business, worship, celebrations, and in activities that transgressed social norms and established mores. These cases also indicate that the boundaries between private and public were fluid and frequently traversed, though by no means non-existent. Norms and transgressions were expressed in literary representations with an extensive social scope and meanings that in many cases were open to opposing interpretations – both obedience and resistance. Chapbooks, broadside ballads, *canards* and *romances*

were populated by female characters of many different types, by no means homogeneous or devoid of ambiguity; and the ways in which these characters were redefined by their audiences were similarly diverse. The strong oral content of these widely disseminated texts helped expand their potential meanings, given the weight of the performative aspect in their dissemination. Our aim has been to illustrate this complexity by considering the contents, circulation and commercialisation of printed popular literature from a broad European perspective. The remaining articles in this dossier, whose spatial focus is on the cities of Exeter and Valencia, take a closer look at specific examples of interaction between women and men in early modern cities, exploring female agency on the borderlines between submission and transgression.

José de Ribera, *Combate de mujeres*, 1636 (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid)

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