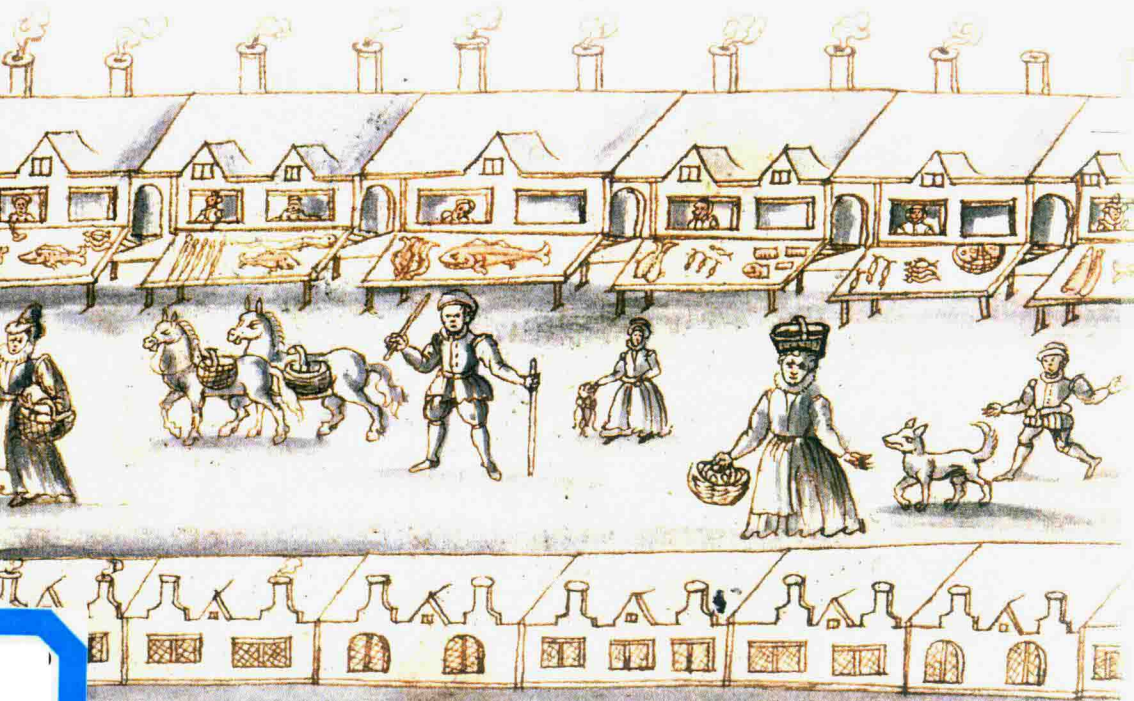


OXFORD

CITY *women*

*Money, Sex, & the Social Order
in Early Modern London*



ELEANOR HUBBARD

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CITY WOMEN

City Women is a major new study of the lives of ordinary women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century London. Drawing on thousands of pages of Londoners' depositions for the consistory court, it focuses on the challenges that preoccupied London women as they strove for survival and preferment in the burgeoning metropolis. Balancing new demographic data with vivid case studies, Eleanor Hubbard explores the advantages and dangers that the city had to offer, from women's first arrival in London as migrant maidservants, through the vicissitudes of marriage, widowhood, and old age.

In early modern London, women's opportunities were tightly restricted. Nonetheless, before 1640 the city's unique demographic circumstances provided unusual scope for marital advancement, and both maids and widows were quick to take advantage of this. Similarly, moments of opportunity emerged when the powerful sexual anxieties that associated women's speech and mobility with loose behaviour came into conflict with even more powerful anxieties about the economic stability of households and communities. As neighbours and magistrates sought to reconcile their competing priorities in cases of illegitimate pregnancy, marital disputes, working wives, remarrying widows, and more, women were able to exploit the resulting uncertainty to pursue their own ends. By paying close attention to the aspirations and preoccupations of London women themselves, their daily struggles, small triumphs, and domestic tragedies, *City Women* provides a valuable new perspective on the importance and complexity of women's roles in the growing capital, and on the pragmatic nature of early modern English society as a whole.

Eleanor Hubbard is Assistant Professor of History at Princeton University, where she specializes in the social and cultural history of early modern Britain.

For Leo

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List of Abbreviations

BRHA	Bethlem Royal Hospital Archive
GL	Guildhall Library Manuscripts Section
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
sl.	slide (used to identify microfilm slides for long unpaginated volumes)

Note to the Reader

All dates have been given old style, with the year understood to begin on January first. For the sake of readability, I have consistently modernized spelling, added punctuation, and expanded abbreviations in quotations from early modern texts. The clerks who took down depositions tended to use extremely variable spellings, but these provide little insight into the words of the witnesses who were speaking, and the cost in terms of clarity of retaining the original forms would have been considerable. Quotations from printed texts have also been modernized for the sake of consistency. I have also standardized names, and use English rather than Latin spellings: Hellen appears as Helen, Johanna as Joan, and Margret as Margaret, for example. The common early modern English terms ‘maid’ and ‘maiden’ are used to refer to never-married girls and young women in preference to the legalistic and almost equally archaic term ‘spinster’ and the awkward alternative of ‘life-cycle single woman.’ Where manuscript or printed volumes of parish registers are not given for the dates of baptisms, marriages, and deaths, I have relied on FamilySearch.

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Introduction

The narrow streets and lanes of early modern London were filled with women's voices. Chatting, quarreling, and advertising their wares, London women notoriously took every opportunity to defy conventions of feminine silence, adding their irrepressible noise to the raucous clatter of urban life. In the historical record, however, this cacophony of female voices is largely silenced. Instead, the weighty deliberations of aldermen, the wit and pathos of poets, the rhetorical flourishes of Members of Parliament, and the interminable sermons of popular preachers dominate what remains of early modern London speech. When women's writing and speech survive, those in question were often exceptional, members of the gentry or radical religious sects. Ordinary women and their ordinary lives have largely faded away.

In recent years, historians of early modern England have striven to recapture the experiences and voices of ordinary women. In the absence of diaries and letters, they have concentrated on women's encounters—voluntary or not—with the structures of discipline and administration that preserved glimpses of the people whose lives they ordered. Reading carefully and often against the grain, these scholars have explored courtship, sex and marriage, work, neighborhood life, crime, reputation, and more.¹ The results have been enlightening. It is becoming increasingly clear that histories of gender that distinguish baldly between male privilege and female disability fail to capture the subtleties of early modern English social interaction. Some women exercised authority that was denied many men,

¹ See e.g. Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge, 1987); Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (New York, 1988); Peter Earle, 'The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', *Economic History Review* 42.3 (1989), 328–53; Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (New York, 1993); Jenny Kermode and Garthine Walker (eds), *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (London, 1994); Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford, 1996); Tim Hitchcock, 'Unlawfully Begotten on Her Body': Illegitimacy and the Parish Poor in St Luke's Chelsea', in Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (eds), *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the London Poor, 1640–1840* (New York, 1997); Tim Stretton, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1998); Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester, 2000); Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender 1660–1750: Life and Work in the London Household* (New York, 2000); Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, the Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn., 2003); Garthine Walker, *Crime, Gender and Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2003); Amanda Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (Rochester, NY, 2007).

and if men were constrained as well as empowered by the dictates of patriarchy, so women led lives that were not solely defined by gender.² This book takes these conclusions as a starting point: rather than identifying women as victims, rebels, or collaborators in a patriarchal social order, it investigates what they themselves saw as their struggles, aspirations, and preoccupations. Its focus is the burgeoning capital city between 1570 and 1640, a period of tremendous change. London women were, by and large, not natives of the capital but migrants drawn by the promise of employment and opportunity. Some climbed the social ladder while others struggled to keep afloat, but all pursued visions of success, whether as grand as a rich marriage or as humble as a sober spouse, a new petticoat, or food for their children. This study explores what London women hoped to achieve, how they went about turning their ambitions into reality, where and why they were free to act, and where and why they were constrained. The picture that emerges is a complicated one. The limits and extents of London women's agency were determined in many ways by gender, but charting those margins is not a matter of gender alone. Although notions of sexual order played an important role in delimitating the sphere of female agency, concerns about economic order often conflicted with sexual anxieties. An examination of those sites of conflict makes it clear that both magistrates and communities were inclined to privilege worries about money over those about sex, creating unexpected opportunities for women. For their part, London women were quick to take advantage of these openings.

To address the lifelong careers of urban women, this study presents a composite biography, following the stages of London women's lives from adolescence to old age. This structure brings out women's lifelong strategies for self-preservation and advancement rather than typecasting them as subordinate daughters, servants, or wives. London women moved rapidly from family to family: as maidservants they frequently changed services, and as adults they were likely to be widowed and to remarry, sometimes several times. Although they always belonged to some household or other—even if it were simply the tiny household of a solitary widow—their long-term strategies were necessarily those of individuals. Their preferment depended on making the right choices when they moved from one role to another.

For women—even more than for men—marriage strategies were an essential component of personal advancement, and these receive particular attention. As one

² See Martin Ingram, '“Scolding Women Cucked or Washed”: A Crisis in Gender Relations in Early Modern England?' in Kermod and Walker (eds), *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England*; Garthine Walker, 'Expanding the Boundaries of Female Honour in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 6 (1996), 235–45; Bernard Capp, 'Separate Domains? Women and Authority in Early Modern England', in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (eds), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (New York, 1996); Bernard Capp, 'The Double Standard Revisited: Plebeian Women and Male Sexual Reputation in Early Modern England', *Past and Present* 162 (1999), 70–100; Martin Ingram, 'Law, Litigants and the Construction of “Honour”: Slander Suits in Early Modern England', in Peter Coss (ed.), *The Moral World of the Law* (Cambridge, 2000); Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003) and 'Honesty, Worth and Gender in Early Modern England, 1560–1640', in H. R. French and Jonathan Barry (eds), *Identity and Agency in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 2004).

might expect, women's marriage strategies and opportunities in London—a large city with high mortality rates, populated predominantly by immigrants—were different from those found in the rural parishes that have often formed the basis of studies of courtship and marriage formation.³ The unusually high proportion of men in London's population and the relatively advantageous legal treatment of widows' inheritance there provided opportunities for ambitious women across the life cycle. Poor maidservants from the countryside routinely married, and the remarriage of widows was both common and rapid. Migrating to London, as a large majority of city women had done in their youth, was a risky but potentially rewarding strategy.

In addition to pursuing their preferment in marriage, London women sought to protect and promote their own and their families' material welfare and social status. To do so, however, they had to negotiate ambiguities in their own dual roles as wives and household mistresses. Husbands and wives were usually allies, keeping servants and children in awe, combining their efforts to make a living, and supporting one another in neighborhood disputes. However, disagreement over how best to spend household money was a common source of conflict. Wives were enjoined to avoid extravagance and to save household wealth: they were endowed with responsibility but not with power. This task was difficult for women whose husbands' expenditures in alehouses and taverns threatened their family economies. When their complaints are taken seriously, it becomes clear that most 'shrewish' wives in popular literature were not, in fact, rebels against male authority but the embattled defenders of household budgets. Conversely, a common male complaint was that London wives, burning with desire to exceed their neighbors in dress and domestic display, drove their unhappy spouses to the brink of bankruptcy. Both husbands and wives, it seems, found it easy to privilege frugality over each other's same-sex sociability, but found it more difficult to resist the temptations of social competition on their own behalf. Whereas husbands were legally able to enforce their will, however, the wives of improvident and destructive men were forced to rely on dissimulation, their own strength of character, and neighborly interventions.

Like men, women strove to lift themselves up, away from the fears and miseries of poverty and towards the warmth of their neighbors' admiration and esteem. However, being excluded from full participation in most formal institutions, women pursued advancement through different means than men. The livery companies, with their formal regulations, often structured the male life cycle: many young men migrated to London to enter apprenticeships, earned their citizenship, and took part in the government of the City, serving, if they were prosperous, as churchwardens and aldermen. In comparison, young women who migrated to London sought informal employment as maidservants. They achieved adult status by marrying, not by becoming citizens. London women lived their social lives overwhelmingly in the geographical constraints of the neighborhood

³ See e.g. Diana O'Hara's close study of five parishes in Kent, *Courtship and Constraint*.

rather than the occupational communities of the livery companies. In their own streets and lanes, they paid their respects to the 'better sort' of local matrons, and combined to cast judgment on suspicious interlopers. They joined together to support women in childbed as well as to shame those men and women whose actions threatened to cast themselves or their families on the parish poor rates. Toiling in the largely unregulated and over-crowded labor sector that existed beyond the protected confines of the guilds, even poor women claimed credit for helping to maintain their families. Within the limits imposed by their gender and their station, women did what they could to enhance their status.

Women were constrained by legal and cultural understandings of their roles, but these constraints were by no means uniformly imposed. The powerful sexual double standard that has been explored by historians of gender often came into conflict with the demands of economic order.⁴ While it is true that scolds, whores, and witches—traditional incarnations of disorderly femininity—haunted the imaginations of anxious men, they were far from being the only bugbears of the early modern English psyche. Just as threatening were the miscreants whose actions threatened to throw the fragile edifice of neighborhood and household stability into disarray. Vagrants, thieves, and sturdy beggars were obvious threats, but some of the worst damage could be done from within, by men who fathered bastards, drunks who consumed their families' goods in alehouses and brothels, and raging husbands who cast their wives out on the streets. While adulterous women struck a largely symbolic blow against the patriarchal social order, men who failed to fulfill their responsibilities did material damage to local economies. If they did not support their wives and children, charity and parish rates would be called upon to make up the difference, or desperate women and children might slip into prostitution, beggary, or crime.

These two sets of anxieties—sexual and economic—did not necessarily run hand in hand, and individuals and governors were often forced to choose between competing priorities. These tense moments provide a valuable point of entry for understanding the driving forces of early modern English society. The way men and women spoke and wrote about the sexual and economic fears that troubled them enables us to elucidate those anxieties and enriches our understanding of their mental worlds. However, to gain a more precise idea of the relative importance of these different concerns and to determine their impact on the lives of early modern men and women, it is necessary to go beyond discourse and to examine material outcomes. How did communities deal with illegitimate children and their mothers? Was it easier for men to defy their elders in courtship than for women? How did neighbors react when husbands accused their wives of adultery, and strove to cast them out? Or when wives complained of brutality and neglect? When were women barred from working for wages and when were they applauded? What opportunities

⁴ For male anxieties about controlling female sexuality, see Elizabeth Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England: Honour, Sex and Marriage* (New York, 1999) and Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven, Conn., 1995), 51, 71–3. Gowing shows that popular gender ideologies were similarly stark: *Domestic Dangers*, 275–6.

were open to widows and what uses did they make of them? An investigation into these and other questions suggests that when economic concerns conflicted with rigid notions of gender, women were quick to exploit the resulting moments of opportunity—but that they had little recourse when material anxieties reinforced a strict sexual order.

By exploring the importance that ordinary London men and women attributed to social order, this study provides a new perspective on the stability of early modern England in general, and of London in particular. Historians have long been struck by the relatively calm and cohesive nature of the English capital, even in the terrible decade of the 1590s, when harvest failure and plague joined long-term inflation to afflict the common people. Apprentices' riots in June of 1595 seriously worried City authorities, who responded with harsh measures, but the urban disorders notably failed to spiral into broader unrest. To explain this, historians have debated the extent of social strain in London as well as the ways in which authorities kept the city quiet.⁵

This study investigates the problem from the perspective of a population that has largely eluded prior research. Ordinary Londoners were not simply a voracious mass, only kept in check by the harsh threats and calculated benevolence of magistrates. Rather, households and neighborhoods struggled to remain afloat, and they did so by promoting and upholding conservative hierarchies and values. Women went out nurse-keeping, washing, and scouring 'to get a penny', neighbors routinely arbitrated between quarrelsome residents, and respectable parishioners looked askance at men whose drinking and violent tempers threatened precarious household economies. Poor rates did much to establish a common interest in stability: those who paid them resented supporting paupers who, they felt, had fallen on the parish by reason of other men's irresponsibility, while those who received alms had a clear interest in sharing their meager allowances with as few poor residents as possible. One of the reasons London's rulers were able to govern the city so successfully was that much of the city's population was amenable to being governed; they too valued social and economic stability, and worked to uphold it.

SOURCES

The main archival sources for this study are the deposition books of the London consistory court between 1570, when record survival for the court became fairly reliable, and 1640, when the court ceased operations in the confusion of political breakdown. The consistory court was one of a set of ecclesiastical courts with

⁵ See A. L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560–1640* (New York, 1985); Michael J. Power, 'A "Crisis" Reconsidered: Social and Demographic Dislocation in London in the 1590s', *London Journal* 12 (1986), 134–46; Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London* (Cambridge, 1989); Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991); Joseph P. Ward, *Metropolitan Communities: Trade Guilds, Identity, and Change in Early Modern London* (Stanford, Calif., 1997); Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City 1550–1660* (Cambridge, 2008).

overlapping jurisdiction over a set of moral offenses.⁶ Its records constitute a source of unparalleled richness for the study of early modern London women. Due to the jurisdiction of the consistory court, and the nature of the canon law that governed it, the court drew high numbers of ordinary women both as litigants and, even more importantly, as witnesses. Although this population was largely illiterate, depositions were recorded in writing, producing a trove of circumstantial information touching on many areas of women's lives.

The ecclesiastical courts were long dismissed as fossilized relics of pre-Reformation England, despised for their old-fashioned interests, cumbersome and inefficient process, and lack of means of enforcement. However, since Martin Ingram's ground-breaking work on the courts in Wiltshire, the value of ecclesiastical court records has been increasingly recognized, particularly with regard to women's history, as they provide a rare view into the lives of poor and middling women. Although the pre-1640 London records have been comparatively neglected,⁷ English church court records have been used in studies of gender,⁸ labor,⁹ courtship and sexual mores,¹⁰ honor and reputation,¹¹ and literacy.¹²

This study is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence drawn from the deposition books of the consistory court for the diocese of London. To focus on the urban capital, witnesses and cases from the rural parishes in the diocese of London have generally been excluded, while the built-up suburbs beyond the City's boundaries have been included. The geographical definition of London used here includes the parishes of St Leonard Shoreditch, Stepney, Whitechapel, St Katherine by the Tower, St James Clerkenwell, St Martin in the Fields, St Giles in the Fields, St Margaret Westminster, St Mary le Strand alias le Savoy, and St Clement Danes from Middlesex, and St Thomas, St Olave, St George, and St Saviour in Southwark.¹³

Each deposition follows a set pattern. The first section is an autobiographical summary, mostly in Latin, that includes the name and status of the deponent, as

⁶ For the church courts' jurisdiction and procedures, see R. B. Outhwaite, *The Rise and Fall of the English Ecclesiastical Courts, 1500–1860* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁷ Laura Gowing is the only historian to have made a systematic study of them. See *Domestic Dangers; Common Bodies*.

⁸ See Flather, *Gender and Space*; Gowing, *Common Bodies; Domestic Dangers*.

⁹ See Earle, 'The Female Labour Market' and *A City Full of People: Men and Women of London, 1650–1750* (London, 1994); Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender*.

¹⁰ See O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint*; P. Rushton, 'Property, Power and Family Networks: The Problem of Disputed Marriages in Early Modern England', *Journal of Family History* 11 (1986), 205–19; Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage*; Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia, 2006).

¹¹ See Ingram, 'Law, Litigants and the Construction of "Honour"'; Shepard, 'Honesty, Worth and Gender' and 'Poverty, Labour and the Language of Social Description in Early Modern England', *Past and Present* 201 (2008), 51–95.

¹² David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980).

¹³ While witnesses living in Southwark have been included, the area south of the Thames fell within the diocese of Winchester, so cases from there would ordinarily not have reached the London consistory court. So few witnesses were resident in other parts of urban Surrey (Bermondsey, St Mary Newington, Lambeth, and Rotherhithe) that these areas have been excluded.