



Introduction

Women's voices in Renaissance and early modern scientific culture

Meredith K. Ray

John Hopkins University; mray21@jh.edu

Natacha Fabbri

Museo Galileo and University of Siena; n.fabbri@museogalileo.it

Abstract

This focus section reassesses the overlooked yet meaningful role of women in shaping early modern scientific culture during the late Renaissance and the seventeenth century. By foregrounding marginal spaces and manuscript sources, these six essays offer fresh insights into the gendered dynamics of scientific authorship and the epistemic boundaries of early modern science.

Keywords

women in science, female authorship, recipes, natural philosophy, manuscripts

How to cite this article

Ray, Meredith K., and Natacha Fabbri. "Introduction. Women's voices in Renaissance and early modern scientific culture". *Galilæana* XXII, 2 (2025): 3-6; doi: 10.57617/gal-94

Copyright notice

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0).

Article data

Date submitted: n/a

Date accepted: n/a

This focus aims to contribute to a broader reappraisal of the meaningful, though long neglected, role played by women in the shaping of scientific inquiry during the late Renaissance and the seventeenth century. As a wave of pioneering scholarship has begun to demonstrate, women, though traditionally relegated to the periphery of historiographical narratives, were in fact active agents in the dissemination and transformation of early modern scientific culture.

At the intersection of natural philosophy, empirical knowledge, and moral philosophy, the engagement of women must be regarded as a sociological phenomenon and a philosophical challenge to prevalent epistemologies of the period. In a context marked by the flourishing of the *querelle des femmes*, debates over the intellectual and moral capacities of women came to be entangled with emerging notions of experimental method, empirical observation and practice, and the ongoing reconfiguration of knowledge hierarchies.

Women increasingly participated in scientific activities – whether through naturalistic observations; alchemical experiments; domestic medicine; correspondence, including with learned men connected to scientific circles; or, less frequently, publication – yet their intellectual labor was often silenced or absorbed into male-authored works. The question is therefore not only one of visibility, but of epistemic legitimacy as well: under what conditions could female knowledge be recognized as such?

Early modern catalogues of illustrious women – ranging from literary compilations to encyclopedic treatises – sought to document female excellence in a variety of fields, including medicine, alchemy, and natural philosophy. These texts, often structured according to humanist ideals of virtue and erudition, simultaneously reinforced and contested the gendered structures of intellectual authority, further fueling the vexed notion of female “exceptionality”.

Drawing on the groundbreaking historiographical scholarship of the past two decades – which has deepened our understanding of the intellectual, social, and material dimensions of women’s scientific contributions – this issue seeks to widen the analytical lens, continuing to examine marginal, hybrid, and often overlooked spaces of knowledge.

Particular attention is given to sources that have traditionally been undervalued: handwritten recipe books, paratextual writings, household records, poetic compositions, letters, and testimonies from oral exchanges. These documents provide access to alternative epistemologies and offer a valuable contribution not only to our understanding of women’s presence in specific fields of inquiry, but also to a fuller reconstruction of those very fields themselves.

The six contributions gathered in this focus section interrogate the complex entanglements between gender, knowledge, and authority in early modern scientific culture. Taken together, they offer a multi-faceted exploration of the ways in which women inhabited and shaped the intellectual and empirical practices of their time, situating themselves at the intersection of science, literature, and philosophy. Far from operating within sanctioned in-

stitutional frameworks, these women – whether authors, patrons, experimenters, or silent compilers – often acted within liminal, even imaginary, space. This collection of essays indeed investigates not only what counted as scientific discourse in Renaissance and seventeenth-century Europe, but also who was permitted to contribute to it, and on what terms.

One of the central questions that animate many of the contributions is how women were involved in empirical practices and with what degree of agency, intentionality, and awareness. Women were not merely passive recipients of male-authored discourse; rather, they actively contributed to shaping experimental culture. This line of inquiry also extends to intellectual forms of participation as well: women's contributions are traced not only in their writings but also in the epistemic function of inner dialogue, translation, and editorial curation.

The articles cover approximately a century of scientific and philosophical production, and span a wide variety of case studies, genres, and geographies, unveiling a rich array of female engagements with discourse around natural philosophy. Mary Purcell examines Margaret Cavendish's use of inner discourse in her philosophical dialogues, arguing that she employed it both as a strategy of resistance to her exclusion from the Royal Society and as a means of rebutting her contemporaries' excessive reliance on experimental methods and sensory knowledge. Noemi Di Tommaso delves into the poetic and epistolary works of Maria Selvaggia Borghini, situated within the post-Galilean intellectual climate of Medicean Tuscany, marked by dialogues with Redi, Magliabechi, and the court of Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere. Annastasia Conner shifts the focus to the medical and cosmetic recipes attributed to Lady Venetia Digby, revealing her role not as a passive observer of her husband's experiments but as an autonomous producer of scientific knowledge. Jelena Bakić, in turn, examines dedicatory epistles and other form of paratextual writings authored by Renaissance women, in which the boundaries between rhetorical self-fashioning and scientific contributions become fluid. In so doing, these articles question traditional notions of authorship, authority, and intellectual legitimacy. The final two essays expand a plurality of voices, media, and sites involved in the making of early modern science. Cheng He, through a meticulous examination of numerous manuscripts, traces the circulation of some Asian botanical plants within British domestic medicine and recipe collections authored by women. Maria Chiara Milighetti explores the gendered implications of scientific reflection in the writings of the physician Emilio Vezzosi, whose largely unpublished works offer a significant male perspective focused on women's bodies, education, and philosophical capacities.

The essays presented here are authored by a generation of emerging scholars whose work marks a vital expansion of both gender studies and the history of scientific thought in the Renaissance and early modern periods. Accordingly, this special issue not only contributes to ongoing efforts to revisit and illuminate the richness and polyphony of voices – at times even discordant – that characterized scientific modernity, but also attests to the enduring potential of interdisciplinary dialogue within the historical-philosophical study of knowledge.

