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Introduction: Issues in the Study of Female Agency in Manuscript Cultures

1 Preliminary remarks

The cultural technique of writing, and with it, the production of written artefacts, has originated in multiple locations, independently and practically simultaneously, resulting in the creation of multifaceted and complex manuscript cultures.[1] However, women's share in manuscript cultures remains largely unexplored and under-represented both in the manuscript cultures themselves and in scholarship. At first glance – or from an 'unacknowledged male perspective'[2] – the acts of writing, copying, illuminating, producing, circulating and consuming written artefacts appear to be gendered, dominantly male endeavours. Nevertheless, with the simple realisation that 'anonymous equals male' is a frequently unquestioned preconception in the way we comprehend, describe and construct the fabric of our world, recent advances in all scientific and scholarly disciplines have begun to focus on this obvious blind spot. Borrowing from Marylène Patou-Mathis, a specialist in prehistory, who poignantly exclaims in the introduction to her much-discussed monograph *L'homme prehistoric est aussi une femme* ('Prehistoric Men were also Women'):

> No! Prehistoric women did not spend their time sweeping the cave! What if they too had painted the caves of Lascaux, hunted bison, carved tools, and were at the origin of innovations and social advances? New techniques for analysing archaeological remains, recent discoveries of human fossils and the development of gender archaeology have challenged many preconceived ideas and clichés.[3]

1 Cf. e.g. Damerow 2006; Olson and Torrance (eds) 2009.

2 Broomhall 1999, 11.

3 Patou-Mathis 2020, 14: 'Non! Les femmes préhistoriques ne passaient pas leur temps à balayer la grotte! Et si elles aussi avaient peint Lascaux, chassé les bisons, taillé des outils, et été à l'origine d'innovations et d'avancées sociales? Les nouvelles techniques d'analyse des vestiges archéologiques, les récentes découvertes de fossiles humains et le développement de l'archéologie du genre ont remis en question nombre d'idées reçues et de clichés'. Translation from the French original by the author.

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Patou-Mathis further states that '[w]hile there was no tangible evidence to differentiate tasks and status according to gender, prehistorians gave a binary vision of prehistoric societies: strong, creative men and weak, dependent, passive women'.[4] This observation is not limited to the field of prehistoric archaeology but can be applied to almost all academic disciplines. Taking this proposition as a stepping stone for the study of manuscript cultures, we have sufficient reason to assume that when we state that 'men write' and 'read', the statement 'women write' is just as true as its counterpart, 'women read'.[5] The term 'female agency',[6] thus, encompasses the 'relatively unexplored aspects of women's participation in publication, women as readers, women printers, publishers, booksellers, women book collectors, women editors, women commentators and critics, and women as patrons commissioning published materials'.[7] To state this fact explicitly: female agency is not the 'rare and exceptional other'[8] but a decisive factor when it comes to our understanding of manuscript cultures in general.[9]

4 Patou-Mathis 2020, 14: 'Alors qu'aucune preuve tangible ne permettait de différencier les tâches et les statuts selon le sexe, les préhistoriens ont donné une vision binaire des sociétés préhistoriques: des hommes forts et créateurs et des femmes faibles, dépendantes et passives'. Translation from the French original by the author.

5 Larsson 1980, 277. Interestingly, there seem to be more depictions in medieval and early modern written artefacts of women reading than of women writing, at least for the European case. See Smith 1997. Katrin Kogman-Appel analyses female literacy in her publications on Jewish manuscript culture (Kogman-Appel 2012 and 2017), discussing portrayals of women with books, focusing on written artefacts from European Jewry. While we encounter female readers, there is a notable absence of female writers.

6 For a discussion of the term 'female agency' and its scholarly usage in the interpretation of medieval and early modern sources, see Howell 2019.

7 Broomhall 1999, 11.

8 For this argument, see Broomhall 1999, 27. A convincing example from a manuscript study's perspective is Jitske Jasperse's monograph *Medieval Women, Material Culture, and Power: Matilda Plantagenet and her Sisters* (2020). Jasperse argues that the 'tendency to foreground the importance of the magnificent gospel book, while largely ignoring the smaller psalter' (Jasperse 2020, 71), exacerbated the perception of Henry the Lion as active duke and of his wife Matilda as passive duchess, and simultaneously ignored that there existed a 'genuine cooperation between the spouses' (Jasperse 2020, 115).

9 This introduction and the contributions of this volume follow the hypothesis of Julia Bruch, the current holder of the guest professorship Women in Manuscript Cultures at the CSMC, in that 'we cannot speak of a genuine "feminine manuscript culture"' since 'the life worlds of men and women' cannot be thought of as separate entities: <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/publications/blog/2023-10-30-julia-bruch.html> (accessed on 12 January 2024). This, for example, also holds true when we look at manuscript production in early modern female convents, such as Le Murate in Florence, where the nun-scribes produced manuscripts on commission and outsourced certain tasks, such as

Starting from these simple observations, the present volume pursues two major concerns. One is to explore women's engagement with the act of writing. Bringing their engagement to light, we hope to provide a counterbalance to the common impression of the gendered nature of handwriting and written artefact production.[10] The other is to ask questions about how this misled impression came to be manifest in the first place: what are our own scholarly blind spots that cement the androcentrism in manuscript studies, and what strategies can we employ in order to reduce and remove such biases? Were women really excluded from manuscript production? Or were their efforts just obscured and marginalised? If so, for what reasons? And what obstacles do we encounter in our attempt to unearth female agency?

Bearing these concerns in mind, the seven contributions to this volume present case studies whose spectrum ranges from East Asian inscriptions to ancient cuneiform epigraphy, Egyptian graffiti from Late Antiquity, to individual specimen and large-scale collections of manuscripts and codices in medieval and early modern Europe. Each paper sheds light on new findings, gives unique insights and discusses methodological considerations, contributing to the firm and sustainable establishment of female agency in manuscript studies. The outlooks, backgrounds, materials and approaches of the following papers are far from uniform. Rather, their kaleidoscopic variety reflects the diversity of roles women acquired and the multiplicity of challenges, obstacles and outright negations their engagement faced in specific cultural and historical settings.[11] However, what unites them is that they subscribe

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illuminating the manuscript, to secular male artisans. Lowe 1997, 137, 141–142. Also see Melissa Moreton's contribution in this volume.

10 For the purposes of the present volume, this introduction presupposes an – admittedly reductionist and artificial – binary gender relation. This collection, for heuristic and historiographical reasons, documents cases of female agency in the field of written artefact production. All authors do not discount the principal possibility of people identifying as neither male nor female, nor that of those identifying as both. The papers collected herein and the present introduction do not enter into a discourse on non-binary gender agency in manuscript studies due to our present constraints in topic, time and space. It shall be the task of future investigations to breach this topic, and it is our hope that our endeavour makes a first step into the direction of releasing the study of written artefacts from its largely androcentric presuppositions.

11 Note that none of the contributions to this volume focuses on a single, privileged female individual, although, in some cases, one exceptional individual might be the starting point. This takes into consideration, among others, Susan Broomhall's argument that '[s]tudies devoted to a select famous few women continue to obscure the study and reproduction of a wider body of female writings' (Broomhall 1999, 6). She further points out that '[i]nterest in sixteenth-century French women's writings has generally concentrated on the works of a few exceptional women. Typically, attention has focused on women who were notable because of their high social status' (Broomhall

to two basic hypotheses that must be emphasised and made explicit from the very start.

(1) Just as we may generally state that the production of any written artefact involves a sophisticated constellation of enabling and limiting factors, so women's contribution to such productions were complex and took place in several dimensions of material, spatial and processual proximities to the artefact in the making. These range from the individuum who personally put pen to paper, brush to silk or chisel to stone, to those artisans responsible for providing the writing materials; from the authors in charge of drafting the text to be inscribed to the donors and patrons who had taken the very first step in initiating the production process but themselves remain undocumented and unbeknownst in the background. To determine whether the individuals acting in these – and other – diverse capacities were male or female means relying on the documentation embedded in the artefact itself as well as its contexts. The attempt at a precise identification is frequently frustrated by the meagreness, corruption or silence of sources. If our initial suspicion of a universal androcentrism – be it thorough-going or relatively shallow – in the records of a given manuscript culture is correct, it seems entirely reasonable to assume a twofold reason for women's absence from and invisibility in sources. Firstly, specific roles in artefact production processes (e.g. the artisans) tend to remain relatively undocumented. Secondly, even if male agency in more prestigious capacities was recorded, female agency was possibly not.[12] This then entails a lesser degree of probability for the scholar to find documents of female involvement in their artefact at hand or its relevant contexts. Still, a word of caution in a variation of Carl Sagan's famous dictum, 'Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence',[13] is in order: the silence of sources on female agency does not necessarily document their absence from, or unimportance in, a manuscript culture. Instead, it is precisely the multiplicity of roles that has to be taken into account in the pursuit of traces of female agency in manuscript production.

1999, 5), ignoring the specific circumstances of the lives, social situations, occupations and financial statuses of women who were not in such privileged positions (Broomhall 1999, 7).

12 To paraphrase Lesley Smith: while male scribes draw themselves into manuscripts, female scribes do not. Nevertheless, the fact that there are more depictions of male scribes than of female scribes (Smith 1997, 29–30) cannot be equated with ascribing all written artefacts without depictions to men. Kate Lowe also points out that 'female scribes tend not to reveal their identity or to claim credit for their work', often 'they do not leave their names in manuscripts' (Lowe 1997, 133). For an exceptional instance of a fifteenth-century Italian nun's breviary, signed and with a self-portrait, see Arthur 2017.

13 Sagan 1997, 200.

(2) To ask the question of what role women played in manuscript cultures may easily be misunderstood as hunting for those few areas to which male dominance did not fully extend, or for the niches that remained in between men's more visible forms of involvement. If one were to aim at the identification of these marginal leftovers, one would still fall prey to the androcentric ideology of female passivity and find women only where men's rule did not, no longer or not fully hold sway. The pages that follow, by contrast, amply illustrate that female agency in manuscript cultures is an entity *sui generis* that needs to be recognized as both complementary to and often radically different from its male counterpart. Simply put, even if women had to navigate their own way through the labyrinth of cultural participation as it was constructed by men, their navigation relied on not only what they were allowed to do but also their active choices to chart unregulated waters, push and redraw boundaries, and subvert, ignore and redefine hierarchies.[14] Theirs is an agency in the full sense of the term: the capacity of exerting power – perhaps not one to discipline and punish but certainly one to create the space wherein to act as one sees fit. At the same time, we must not, for reasons of both historiographical and hermeneutic caution, make the mistake of trying to understand their actions under the premises of the modern and contemporary feminist projects. Women in premodern cultures may not have been interested in being men's equals at all, or in institutionalising equal rights or fighting for equal opportunities. Nonetheless, they did negotiate, understand, assert and exert their agency – even if they did so in divergence from what our own expectations in today's world may be.[15]

2 Women's roles in the production of written artefacts

In light of the difficulty of discovering female agency – that is, recovering it from the shadow of male entitlement and scholarly androcentrism – sensitivity to the multiplicity of roles involved in any production, preservation and transmission of

14 On indirect female influence on manuscript production, and women's role as patrons of books and literature, see, for example, Johns 2003, esp. 30–49.

15 For a contemporary example of women challenging an exclusively male domain, see the case of six female scribes who finished a Torah scroll commissioned by the Kadima Reconstructionist Community in Seattle, Washington, in 2010 (Margolis 2011). See also the webpage of this endeavour: <https://www.kadima.org/womens-torah-project.html> (accessed on 14 January 2024).

cultural artefacts becomes all the more important. Take, for example, the intricacies involved in the interpretation of the famous *O utinam liceat* ('Oh, would that I could […]') poetic graffito, discovered on a wall in Pompeii in 1888:[16] Its verbal declinations (*perdita nocte*, 'I [female gender] was lost in the night') clearly indicate the poem to have been written in a woman's voice. It also unmistakably addresses a female partner (*pupula*, 'poppet') in erotic or amicable terms (or perhaps even both). It then also seems natural to presume that the graffito was inscribed similarly by a woman's hand. Taken at face value, this written artefact appears to represent multiple female agencies: it was addressed to a woman, composed by a woman, and inscribed by a woman – and the latter two may or may not have been the same person.

At the same time, we must grant that the possibility cannot be ruled out that neither of these three roles is genuinely female: the inscription of a decidedly female poem may have been done by a male author for personal reasons or for the sake of provoking others; a male author may have adopted a female voice in order to jest or to circumvent literary conventions; the object of their love and friendship may have been no real woman at all but a lyric gesture or an imagined ideal. Careful analysis from multiple angles and with various tools – above all, the spatial contextualization of the graffito and its connection to other inscriptions in the vicinity – nonetheless, imparts the hypothesis with plausibility that CIL 4.5296 attests to a number of factual female involvements in the production of this written artefact in particular and their participation in Pompeiian manuscript culture in general.[17] The attempt at pinpointing the precise nature of their roles and statuses, however, underscores the difficulties in proving female participation over and against the 'male default' of taking for granted that men composed, wrote and read written artefacts. That such difficulties may yet be successfully mastered and overcome, in turn, is attested to in the contributions that follow.

With these qualifications on female agency in mind, we may confidently attempt to outline a systematic typology of women's contributions to the production of written artefacts. The following remarks will proceed from roles that seem (perhaps, in fact, are) simple and passive to those that are more complex, risk-laden and assertive – always seen from the vantage point of the written artefact as datum.

16 Referred to in scholarship by its serial numbers CIL 4.5296 in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and/or CLE 950 in the *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*.

17 See the exegetical arguments presented in Graverini 2012–2013 and, more precisely, in Graverini 2017, esp. 125, n. 3. The newer study concludes the graffito to be a 'literary piece arguably authored by a woman, and in which a woman talks to a female addressee about her personal feelings' (Graverini 2017, 126).

2.1 Women as objects of written artefacts

If it is our intention to holistically observe, describe, investigate and analyse instances of female agency, the inclusion of women as the mere object of a given written artefact becomes necessary. Take, for example, a male author-scribe imagining a female protagonist, devising a narrative about her and writing down his text on paper. Indisputably, this leaves us with a written artefact that addresses a woman, fictional though she may be. To claim a female agency and her involvement in the production of such a written artefact, however, would be ironic and spurious at best, misdirecting and deceptive at worst. By contrast, if a male author's actual interaction with a living woman is documented in handwriting, the case was less clear-cut: the things she said and did inform the written artefacts to varying degrees and it, hence, would be an oversight to dismiss her agency altogether.[18] The more her actions become part of the written artefact, the more she is aware of being written about and assents, even chooses to contribute, the more pronounced we may evaluate her agency – or, in this case, her role – to be. Even in this seemingly obvious case of a purely passive, non-materialised role of a woman as the object in the production of a written artefact, we must not discount female agency wholesale.

I will select but one example from among an immeasurable amount of candidates:[19] The trial of Joan of Arc (1412–1431) – who, after her decisive participation in the Siege of Orléans (1428/1429) in the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) between England and France, was charged with heresy before an ecclesiastical court in Rouen, found guilty and subsequently burned at the stake – was meticulously recorded in a document autographed by the notary present, Manchon.[20] Several copies of the original document were made by the notary himself, and these as well as further copies were authenticated by the affixation of official seals to the writing supports (vellum and paper). Several copies are extant in various states of preservation and revision; one, by contrast, is extant no longer, since it was presented at the rehabilitation proceedings in 1455 (investigations began already in 1452) and

18 For a case study on the graduations of such a female–male collaboration, see Ray 2009.

19 Some of the examples presented in the course of the following typology quote from British Library's wonderfully rich and varied 'Medieval manuscripts blog' (see <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitised manuscripts/index.html>, accessed 13 on January 2024), particularly the 25 March 2023 entry on 'Medieval and Renaissance Women: full list of the manuscripts' (see <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitised manuscripts/2023/03/medieval-and-renaissance-women-full-list-of-the-manuscripts.html>, accessed on 13 January 2024).

20 The transcript is introduced and translated into English in Barrett 2014 [1931] (also see <https://saint-joan-of-arc.com/trial-condemnation.htm>, accessed on 13 January 2024) and more recently in Hobbins 2007.

destroyed by court order when Joan was posthumously found not guilty of her charges. Naturally, the defendant and victim had no immediate hand in these written artefacts. But, by the same coin, it is quite obvious that their production (and that of several others, such as the handwritten transcript of the rehabilitation proceedings in codex format, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, latin 8838) would and could not have happened without Joan of Arc's actions – that is, without her agency.

2.2 Women as providers of context

These considerations immediately lead us to a second type of female agency – one in which the interaction between the male author-scribe and a female partner results in the creation of a written artefact that does not primarily involve the woman as the object but, nonetheless, could not have been produced without her. Such is the case with a manuscript written on textile support (London, British Library (hereafter BL), Cotton Roll XIV 8), which records the diet and menu of the year 1531 for the Princess Mary (1516–1558) – single surviving child to Henry VIII, who would become Queen Mary I of England (aka Mary Tudor) in 1553 – and her household.

The manuscript's structure is oriented along the household's hierarchy, with Mary occupying the leftmost column, followed by her advisors, senior officials, gentlewomen and gentlemen, junior staff and servants. Diet differed according to status, apparently, but the written artefact itself is targeted not merely at Mary's apex position; instead, it must be read as a general overview of administrative and logistic purposes. As such, the object of its representation is neither a female individuum nor the group of women living with Mary, but the functioning of the ecumene in which they all participated. Nonetheless, it was Mary's position in society as a royal scion and heir apparent (even if this status was temporarily revoked when her descent was judged illegitimate in 1533, but restored with the Third Succession Act of 1543) and the economical privileges it entailed that enabled, indeed necessitated, the culinary table in the first place.

This type of female agency, then, takes into account any social constellation in which a woman provides the context that enables scribes, artisans and/or artists to follow their profession and exact their competences. Even though her involvement in the production of the manuscript, inscription or artwork may not at all be directly perceptible in the created artefact, to disavow her agency would be to disregard the fact that without her funding, protection or endorsement, the creation could not have been realised. Granted, to state such a type of involvement means to rely not on the materiality of the written artefact in question as such but rather on circumstantial evidence, such as the artist's attestations or contextual records.

Still, the point – hypothetical though it may be – stands: if she donated money for the purchase of production materials, provided workspace, board and lodging, and brought to bear the influence, network and infrastructure at her disposition, none of these facts would necessarily make a visual appearance on the object – even though all of these factors were essential to its production.

2.3 Women as owners, collectors, readers and donors

Yet another form of female agency is, by and large, passive but may be formative to the gestalt of a written artefact. Women owned – no different from men – individual manuscripts and codices as well as libraries and archives, and their ownership left a visible mark on the object(s): Her hand may have inscribed her signature in short or full or any other indication of her possession, or she may have affixed her *ex libris*, her seal or other imprints on the written artefact(s).[21] While her contribution to the genesis of the written artefact may be considered secondary, inconsequential or inauthentic, one cannot dispute that the written artefact as we have it before us today would not be the same without her contribution.[22] Take, for instance, women not only reading but actively collecting, gifting and exchanging copies of plays by William Shakespeare in the first half of the eighteenth century: consulting a representative sample of such playbooks, Sae Kitamura has investigated women's signatures, *ex libris*, and other marks of ownership as well as their manuscript annotations to the source texts.[23] The result is the image of a tight-knit bibliophile network that spans several families laterally, and three to four generations. Or think about Empress Matilda (*c.* 1102–1167), who donated 'books from her personal chapel to the abbey of Bec-Hellouin on her deathbed in 1167, confirming that manuscripts were owned and gifted by women'.[24] It is also indispensable to

21 See the illuminating reflections on the topic of *ex libris* and others in Burns, which reflect on her own practice of 'minor writing genres' (Burns 2010, 243b).

22 For a compelling collection of women's handwritten insertions, marginalia and addenda to folii, codices and manuscripts, see the 'Early Modern Women's Marginalia blog' at the Australian National University (<https://earlymodernwomensmarginalia.cems.anu.edu.au>, accessed on 12 January 2024).

23 See Sae 2017. Note that the author's identification in the journal as well as in the databases is erroneous, since Sae 紗衣 is the given, Kitamura 北村 the family name. The correct bibliographical reference should read Kitamura 2017.

24 Jasperse 2020, 68. For a valuable source for the identification of female book owners in Europe, see the database *Books of Duchesses: Mapping Women Book Owners, 1350–1550* (<https://booksofduchesses.com/>, accessed on 13 January 2024). The database also contains information on

acknowledge the fact that women did not necessarily leave any marks in the written artefacts they possessed. These books, in fact, could 'have been so generic that [...] they would not be recognized as once having belonged to women'.[25]

Again, to ignore female agency not in the production but in the preservation and transmission of the written artefact would be to fail the goal of a holistic scrutiny of the object's givens: we would – quite contrary to both objective fact and the project of reconsidering female participation – implicitly subscribe to a hierarchy of agencies, which is informed not by the materiality of the written artefact but by the – effectively male-centred – assumption of the superiority of a primary male creator (read: male author) over and against female epigones.

2.4 Women as initiators, patrons and commissioners

Wealthy and powerful women did much the same as their male counterparts when they made use of their resources, and through them, procured the skills of scribes, painters and artists. Even destitute women gave what was available to them in order to create indirectly, by way of relying on another's expertise, some kind of effect or benefit. Such cases, amply attested to in religious contexts, lead to the inscription of women's concerns and female agency in the written artefact.[26] While such inscriptions may not have been made by their own hands, they were certainly produced on their behalf and for their benefit.[27] Examples also abound in legal contexts and those of legitimacy: Isabel of Portugal (1397–1471) stated the lawfulness of her – and her offspring's – claim to the English throne after the demise of King Henry VI in the form of a lengthy document (London, BL, Add Ch 8043), dated 21 May 1471.[28] The text was clearly written by an expert scribe (observe the ornamented initials and the near-perfect regularity of the main body of the text), and the contents were drafted, in all probability, by notaries who also affixed their signatures at the end of the statement. While Isabel did contribute materially to the making of the written

how women came into the possession of the written artefact using archival records, inscriptions and other sources.

25 Jasperse 2020, 69. Another example are books that may be part of a female convent's library as well as that of a male monastery. See particularly the contributions of Michael L. Norton and Patricia Stoop to this volume.

26 See the contributions by Wendi L. Adamek and Bryan D. Lowe to this volume.

27 The case of Angela da Foligno – who, being able to read but not to write, dictated her spiritual experiences to a Franciscan monk – is an exquisite display of this type of agency. See Cervigni 2005.

28 See <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2023/03/claim-of-thrones.html> (accessed on 14 January 2024).

artefact when she undersigned in her own hand, it was primarily her – effectively unsuccessful – entitlement and instruction that effected its production.

2.5 Women as authors, compilers and supervisors

The creation of a text is frequently dissociated from its inscription, even in highly literate cultures, since the two roles – author and scribe – require sets of skills that are altogether different.[29] This is particularly the case if the goal of writing down the created text is not the production of a rough draft but of a clean manuscript copy or, all the more, an epigraphic inscription.[30] In these instances, auctorial female agency may be synonymous with the imagination of what a written artefact was supposed to look like, what contents it was supposed to make available and what purposes it may serve in social practices. As such, the female author may be responsible for everything that precedes, indeed makes possible, the physical production as the final stage of an idea's manifestation. Her creativity and prestige may then, possibly centuries later, also become an anchor point for subsequent acts of inscription. Such is the case when a male calligrapher chooses lines from a woman writer's poems. Supposedly, his choice intentionally makes use of features – the status of female literature; the relative scarcity of highly visible women poets; the change of gendered voice and idiom – that were unavailable if he was to select male poetry. At the very least, her authorship informs the written artefact to a non-negligible extent that needs be acknowledged in the study of such manuscript specimens. More often, male scribes, readers and annotators openly and reflectively produce copies of female-authored texts or use those in various ways. The *Book* of Margery Kempe (1373–1438) survives today in only one manuscript copy (London, BL, Add MS 61823), written shortly after her death by one Richard Salthouse from Norwich. The manuscript subsequently entered the library of Mount Grace Priory, where the monks inscribed their ownership and made annotations and additions to the text.[31] The *Book* was evidently valued even among men not in spite but because of having been authored by a woman.[32]

29 Cf. Smith 1997, 23.

30 For a discussion of female author-scribes in Mesopotamia and early Byzantine Egypt, see the contributions of Cécile Michel and Leah Mascia to this volume.

31 See Bale 2017; Fredell 2009.

32 Of course, the opposite reaction can be also observed. Broomhall describes a 'masculinization of poetry' (Broomhall 1999, 27) in early modern France: by trivializing poetic genres considered to be emblematic of female writers, men effectively excluded women from 'poetic activities in which

2.6 Women as scribes and copyists

Conversely, women also acted as scribes for male texts. This constellation may seem contra-intuitive at first glance but is, in fact, a frequent phenomenon. Think of the requirement to write a text with legal relevance in one's own hand: small wonder, then, that scholars attest to the existence of 'thousands of acknowledgement deeds written by divorced women'[33] from fifteenth-century Jerusalem alone, with which they certify to henceforth forgo all claims to their ex-husband's property. In order to prevent juridical ambiguities, the text they inscribed on slips of paper was formulaic and not of their own device – instead, we may presume, it was male authorities and the specifications they gave that authored the formulae. If one only starts looking for them, other examples abound. We may cite the case of the female monastic Abutsu 阿仏 (1225–1283) in medieval Japan,[34] whose skilled calligraphy copies the so-called *Settsushū* 摂津集, an anthology of *waka* ('Japanese songs') and, in the process, inscribes a number of poems from both male and female authors.[35] It bears emphasis that the poems are not of her own device, and that the poetry survives in a multitude of individual copies, personal and summary anthologies, in both manuscript and print. What lends the written artefact by Abutsu its prestige is not the extraordinary nature of its content but the mere fact that in it, one the most accomplished scribes and culturally emblematic figures in Japanese history put her brush to paper.[36]

2.7 Women as artists

For lack of a better term, we will call this seventh category in our typology of female agency 'women as artists'. This nomenclature will comprise all those cases in which

[they] had been able to participate in the past' (Broomhall 1999, 28). On questions of female authorship and women's autobiographies in Muslim South Asia from the sixteenth century to the present day, see Lambert-Hurley 2018; Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley (eds) 2015.

33 Aljoumani and Hirschler 2023, 103.

34 For an overview of the nun Abutsu's life and contexts, see Laffin 2013; on questions of artistic prowess, esp. pp. 26–31. It bears mention that Abutsu was not only a respected calligrapher but also capable in a number of other arts, as well as a prolific author.

35 Monochrome digital images of the written artefact, archived at the Archives and Mausolea Department of the Imperial Household Agency (Kunaichō Shoryōbu 宮内庁書陵部) are available at <https://kokusho.nijl.ac.jp/biblio/100002856/5?ln=en> (accessed on 13 January 2024).

36 On the palaeographic intricacies in the unambiguous identification of Abutsu as the scribe, see Kuboki Hideo 2007.

a woman or several women contribute in a dominant, intentional and active fashion to the production of a written artefact or an identifiable group of written artefacts. When Japanese aristocrat Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (966–1025), lady-in-waiting to Imperial Consort Teishi 定子 (977–1001), autographed her impressions and reminiscences in the famed *Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi* 枕草子), she was simultaneously acting as author, scribe and object of her own prose.[37] Hence, her agency was one of literary artistry, and even though no holograph of the *Pillow Book* is extant, its existence is well-attested to and remains a constant point of reference also for later artists, both male and female. Another example is vividly presented by Babette Bohn: over the course of several decades, a group of women painters in early modern Bologna created self-portraits, as well as portraits of one another, in which the portrait's model was rendered not naturalistically but styled in the fashion of nuns and female saints. Women were acting as creators (i.e. as authors) who devised the painting's subject in pursuit of their own ambitions; as painters (i.e. as scribes) who realised the idea in colour and form; as models who posed for the artist and became the painting's object; as iconographic *topoi* for the painting's allusion and symbolism (i.e. as providers of context); as a social network which stimulated a serialized production of similar but not identical productions (i.e. as initiators); and as audiences whose interests and connoisseurship facilitated the production and subsequent transmission of the artefact (i.e. as owners) – all at the same time.[38]

Situations such as these make it obvious that, in many cases, women's roles were not singular but multifarious and heterogeneous. One woman may be the passive object of a written artefact in the moment of its creation and its owner in the next, later transforming the object by adding her own imprints or even destroying the artefact. It, thus, goes without saying that the aspects of this typology are frequently neither distinct from one another nor mutually exclusive. An illuminative, if obvious, case that exemplifies the multiple layers of female agency is *The Book of the Queen* (London, BL, Harley MS 4431), presented in 1414 by Christine de Pizan (1365–*c.* 1431) to Isabel of Bavaria (1370–1435), queen of France. The scene of the gift being offered is part of the manuscript (fol. 3^{r}): The colourful illumination depicts eight women, among them Isabel, who had commissioned the book, and Christine,

37 On the *Pillow Book*'s impact on Japanese literature, see Bundy 1991. For the most recent English translation of the work, see McKinney (tr.) 2006.

38 Cf. Bohn 2004. The circulation of poems by female authors, their appreciation in female circles, and the inscription of connoisseuses' lines of admiration on the very same written artefacts in imperial China is described in Yang 2010, esp. 224–228.

who now presents the completed book to her.[39] This written artefact was not only commissioned by a woman (Isabel) from a woman (Christine). The latter was also involved in all aspects of manuscript production and took over various roles in its making process: employer of scribes and artisans, provider of materials, supervisor, copyist, compiler, translator, scribe and author, among others.[40] After 1425, a change of ownership must have happened, and the book reappears in a woman's collection around 1433/1435. The new owner is Jacquetta of Luxembourg (1415/1416–1472), duchess of Bedford, who kept it until her death in 1472, and left her mark in the book by inserting several inscriptions of her name and her motto.[41]

However, any attempt at identifying female agency also has to take into account that gender is not the only issue in play. Rather, the typical case is constituted by what we may call the intersectionality of agency.[42] In fact, at any given point in time, region and cultural development, the possibility of participation is distributed unequally throughout society. If women may have limited access to resources and

39 See <http://www.pizan.lib.ed.ac.uk/gallery/pages/003r.htm> (accessed on 13 January 2024). For a vivid description of this scene and a brief outline of the gendered nature of *The Book of the Queen*, see Cooper-Davis 2023, 1–5. In her monograph *Christine de Pizan: Empowering Women in Text and Image*, Charlotte Cooper-Davis (2023) outlines various ways in which women acquired power through written artefacts in the late Middle Ages. Building on the case of *The Book of the Queen*, she analyses the roles of women as authors, patrons, presenters and receivers. On *The Book of the Queen*, also see <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2013/06/christine-de-pizan-and-the-book-of-the-queen.html> (accessed on 13 January 2024).

40 See Inès Villela-Petit's insightful study of Christine de Pizan's workshop (Villela-Petit 2020); also Laidlaw 2003, 231–249. Christine simultaneously appears in several miniatures in *The Book of the Queen*, and in various roles and settings: we see her making corrections in a book (fol. 4^{r}), sitting before an open book, teaching her son (fol. 261^{v}) and instructing four men (fol. 295^{v}), and presenting books to male patrons, such as Louis d'Orléans (fol. 95^{r}) or King Charles VI (fol. 178^{r}). Lori J. Walters argues that '[i]n placing miniatures that include depictions of parchment sheets and/or books at prominent spots in the iconographic cycle of the Queen's MS, Christine reinforces her oral and written authority; otherwise said, the authority she has to give advice to royalty, both during her own lifetime and in future times' (Walters 2012, online); for depictions of Christine in her other works, cf. McGrady 2012.

41 The ownership of London, BL, Harley MS 4431 during the fifteenth century can be traced through the database *Books of Duchesses*, <https://booksofduchesses.com/books/BL%20Harley%20MS%204431> (accessed on 13 January 2024). The database lists fifty-four books in the possession of Isabel of Bavaria, and her ownership of Harley MS 4431 is confirmed by the patron portrait mentioned above and dates between 1414 and 1425. Three of the five entries of written artefacts possessed by Jacquetta of Luxembourg bear Jacquetta's inscription, among them Harley MS 4431. Jacquetta's inscriptions in Harley MS 4431 are on fols 1^{r}, 52^{v}, 115^{v}, 387^{r}. See <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2015/12/traces-of-jacquetta-de-luxembourg-in-the-book-of-the-queen.html> (accessed on 13 January 2024).

42 See also Garrard 1976.

options when compared with men, it is also the case that poor women are deprived of the possibility to realise their agency more regularly, more systematically and more consequently than wealthy and powerful women. Even gendered invisibility, to put it differently, has graduations. Agency is limited not only by gendered discourses and habituations but also by economic facts and social standing. To disentangle such limiting factors from one another is a challenge that cannot be generalised, but is in need of the attentive, careful and unprejudiced deliberation of all the specifics that, while part and parcel of any case study, are especially salient to the reconstruction of female agency. And it is here that the contributions to this volume exemplify how such a project may succeed in spite of the silences and scarcities of sources, unexamined assumptions and lack of scholarship that may encumber it. Due to their extensive range, scholarly depth and richness in cultural specificity, this volume is kaleidoscopic in nature. Accordingly, the seven contributions follow a simple geographical arrangement oriented roughly along an East-West trajectory – Japan, China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Italy, Austria and the Low Countries.

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