

Introduction

Elizabeth S. Cohen and Margaret Reeves¹

Abstract

This collection of essays demonstrates that early modern women experienced a shaping time of life between childhood and adulthood. Drawing on diverse sources from across Europe as well as Spanish America – including literary and visual representations, material cultures, letters, and judicial records – these studies together explore three central themes: how female youth was culturally constructed; how young women underwent distinctive physiological, social, and psychological transformations; and how differences of social rank inflected these changes. Scholarly investigations of European youth have generally focused on the more visible and institutionalized male presence. These essays show that women, too, had a youth that allowed them to reach full adulthood, to exercise agency, and to express themselves.

Keywords: female youth; girlhood; adolescence; young women; ages of woman; agency

Did early modern women have a youth? Yes. Although the scholarship has not only ignored but also, in some contexts, rejected a category for female youth, European women in fact underwent a distinctive shaping time between childhood and full adult status. This interdisciplinary collection explores the many ways that, between 1500 and 1800, young women took steps toward grown-up roles in several domains. The essays draw on a diverse mix of sources from across Europe and even Spanish America, including literary and visual representations, material culture, letters, and judicial

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records. This variety permits us collectively to address two mutually shaped frames of inquiry: first, early modern cultural constructions of youth, and second, particular lived experiences, including young women's exercise of personal and expressive agency in several forms. A third principal axis of investigation highlights the differences among young women of elite and more modest social ranks.

Early modern language designating female youth often lacked precision, but European culture did recognize and represent important transitions. Personal development took place within culturally mediated conventions and the constraints of moral and social norms. Unlike male youth, for some of whom an institutional or corporate dimension made their adolescence more visible to scholarship, girls' experience was largely domestic, if not necessarily private. Although females generally lived under male authority, in practice the rules applied differently to girl children, to grown women, and, we would suggest, to the young women in-between. As youths, girls were maturing sexually, working for a livelihood, leaving home, developing social lives, and sometimes marrying while these transitions were underway. This fluid time brought some danger; it was easy for girls to go astray or to become prey to exploitative adults. Yet young women's physical, economic, and social transformations could also accompany the acquisition of fuller self-knowledge and a greater measure of agency and decision-making.

As represented in the classic schema of the 'Ages of Man', one early modern model for life proposed a series of stages tracing an arc from the cradle and childhood upwards to maturity, and then downwards to decrepitude and the grave. In this imagery, the 'Ages of Man' were sometimes three or four, and more often, as time went on, seven or even ten or twelve.² Before the peak of adulthood stood youth, a time of great energy but not always the best judgement. But these 'Ages', including youth, belonged to men, because for early modern culture the human, indeed the ideal, was based on male patterns. For example, in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare's humorous summation of the drama of life into seven acts traces a progression from '[m]ewling and puking' infant to 'whining school-boy', lover, soldier, and then on to the fifth stage as a justice '[i]n fair round belly', presumably settled fully into adulthood with all of its responsibilities. The decline then begins, '[i]nto the lean and slipper'd pantaloone', with his 'youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide / For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, / Turning again toward childish treble'. The final stage offers a return to

2 Chojnacka and Wiesner-Hanks, *Ages of Woman, Ages of Man*, uses the 'ages' to organize a teaching collection of primary documents.

'second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing'.³ Rather than honouring men's life stages, this passage pokes fun, but it still all too typically ignores women's ages altogether. In other visual representations where female analogues do appear beside men on the stairway of life, the figures are shadows of male stages and little differentiated from age to age.⁴

As Colin Heywood has observed, youth, like childhood, was culturally constructed and historically variable, even within a single era.⁵ Vocabulary, now and then, reflects this diversity. Our modern vocabulary seldom speaks of youths, but rather of adolescents and teenagers.⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines adolescence in physiological and developmental terms as '[t]he period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult', but does not assign age as markers as the modern term 'teenager' suggests.⁷ Early modern usage had other concerns. In religious writing, adolescent immaturity was often linked to sin. For example, in *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1425) Thomas à Kempis wrote of his need of grace in order to overcome 'my Nature proane vnto al impietie euen from my youth', an idea that echoes the perspective expressed in Genesis that 'the imagination of man's heart is euil from his youth'.⁸ Yet, summing up age-specific terms in early modern England, Paul Griffiths finds that, although the word 'adolescence' appears, 'youth' was used much more often.⁹ Margaret Cavendish, despite being an energetic advocate for women's education, autonomy, and travel, was clearly thinking only of young men when she recommended in her brief commentary 'Of Youth':

[S]end them abroad to learn to know the World, that they may know men, and manners, to see several Nations, and to observe several Natures, Customs, Laws, and Ceremonies, their Wars, or Contracts of Peace, thus

3 Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7.139-66.

4 See for example, a German calendar (1589), in Chojnacka and Wiesner-Hanks, *Ages of Woman*, ii.

5 Heywood, *History of Childhood*, 28.

6 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in recent usage, 'youth' is not common as a term to designate pre-adult individuals; the word more often appears as a compound noun in such phrases as 'youth culture' or 'youth groups'.

7 For the use of 'teenager' concerning medieval and early modern youths, see Eisenbichler, *Premodern Teenager*, 1.

8 Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 259; Gen. 8:21 (King James Version), 1611, <https://www.king-jamesbibleonline.org/1611-Bible/>.

9 Griffiths, *Youth and Authority*, 17.

they may come to be good Statesmen, or Commanders in War, and be able to do their Country good service.¹⁰

The opportunity of travel and especially the benefits outlined here take gender (as well as rank) for granted. As with the 'Ages' schema, the concept of youth readily defaults to a male reading.

The language commonly used to identify young females was less preoccupied with age than with family relationships and sexual chastity. In the early modern prescriptive literature for young women, the emphasis on marriage generated a triad of categories – maids, wives, or widows – that obscured adolescence as a distinct intermediate stage on the path to adulthood. In Richard Hyrd's 1529 English translation of Juan Luis Vives' tract on female education, *De institutione feminae Christianae* (1524), girls from infancy into their teens are referred to primarily as 'maydes', a term whose meaning, according to the *OED*, could signal either 'young female' or 'virgin (of any age)'.¹¹ As a result, the terminology used in this tract carries specific connotations, for, as Jennifer Higginbotham points out, the word 'maid' could not refer to a sexually active adolescent or young woman.¹² Other lexical choices privilege terms that denote a girl's current and anticipated familial relations, such as 'doughter' and 'euerye kynde of women / virgins / wyues / and wydowes', the latter phrase both capturing and delimiting the options for female adulthood at the same time as it elides reference to female youth. Similarly, *The Lawes Resolution of Women's Rights*, an early seventeenth-century legal commentary, describes the 'Ages of a Woman' in language that effectively renders female youth invisible by proposing that '[a]ll of them are understood either married or to bée married'.¹³ In these formulations, marriage is too strong a marker of adulthood, given the demographic evidence, as discussed below. Essays in this collection by Jennifer McNabb for the sixteenth century and Margaret Reeves for the seventeenth further elaborate the varieties in English-language usage concerning children and female youth.

Similar concerns shaped lexical habits in other languages. In French, *fille* was the word for daughter and for an unmarried female. Since *fille* standing by itself, however, might convey moral ambiguity, the standard usage for a

10 Cavendish, 'Of Youth', 59.

11 Vives, *De institutione*. Here we cite from Hyrd's translation, *Booke Called the Instruction of a Christen Woman*, 4 and *passim*.

12 Higginbotham, 'Fair Maids', 175.

13 E[lgar], *Lavves Resolutions*, 6.

respectable girl was *jeune fille* (or *vieille fille* for an ageing spinster). There was no language to distinguish between younger girls and nubile ones. Italian offered a larger array of terms: as in the French, *figlia* meant a daughter, but for girls more generally, the vocabulary included *putta* for a young child, *ragazza* for a broader range of girlhood, and *zitella* indicating a virgin of any age old enough to marry. These terms and their range of connotations suggest that youth was more potently a social designation than a status bounded by age. In parallel, for the Netherlands, Marja van Tilburg shows in her essay here the slow development in conduct books of differentiation between unmarried young women and wives.

The topoi of the 'Ages of Life' as early modern culture applied them to women echoed these distinctions, and also their variety. Although the visual images of specifically female life stages are not many, they still offer scholars of youth more than one useful perspective. The sixteenth-century German artist Hans Baldung Grien himself made several versions. Aligned with the tripartite model of a woman's life that we have seen, the most common pictorial rendering showed only three stages: babe, nubile maid, and crone. As an allegory, Baldung painted this threesome, accompanied by Death, in 1509–1511 and again in 1541–1544.¹⁴ Depicting scantily veiled female bodies, the representation of human ageing is deeply corporeal. In an article on the 'periodization of women's lives', historian Silvana Seidel Menchi surveys the early modern imagery and argues that the limited tripartite version not only reflected standard cultural constructions of womanhood, but also, potentially, restricted how women viewed themselves.¹⁵ In particular, concerning girlhood, Seidel Menchi suggests a practice, especially where brides were young, of 'anticipation' of marriage that may have precluded opportunities for education and other gathering of experience. Notably, she insists that this regimen was culturally and socially based rather than physiologically driven, and thus may have had different impacts in those strata or settings where brides were typically older.

Seidel Menchi's discussion also shows that, in the mid sixteenth century, a few artists elaborated the representation of female lives beyond three phases. Circa 1560, the Italian Cristofano Bertelli portrayed ten ages of women on the conventional stairway, clothed, if lightly sexualized, and heroically

14 Hans Baldung Grien, *Three Ages of Woman and Death* (1509–1511, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna); *Three Ages of Man and Death* (1541–1544, Museo del Prado, Madrid). Note that the gendering in the wording of painting titles is inconsistent on different websites, and elsewhere.

15 Seidel Menchi, 'Girl and the Hourglass', 58–65.

posed.¹⁶ In a different style, the same Hans Baldung Grien represented in a pair of paintings a female life in ten stages; the view of the first seven ages, our frontispiece (Figure 1.1), is unusually nuanced in its representations of youth's trajectory.¹⁷ This painting poses in an imaginary landscape seven figures moving from infancy to middle-aged adulthood. At the left front sits a scarcely gendered, clothed toddler with a coral amulet, and on the right at the back, with her body hidden, stands a firm-looking, postmenopausal woman, her hair covered with a white coiffe. Between them, nudes representing five intervening 'ages' emphasize female corporeality and sexuality. The first is a prepubescent girl with a plain braid down her back and her body little differentiated from a boy's. The second figure with high breasts, more luxuriant, long hair, and a necklace of tiny pearls appears a young teenager; she is, in our volume's terms, in an early stage of youth. The third nude, posing at the centre of the whole array, has a fully rounded body, elaborately dressed hair, and fancy jewellery. Still a youth, sharing the white drapery with her younger companions, she is in her prime, ready for an imminent wedding and wedding night. To the bride's right are two more nudes, both with their hair bound up and no jewellery, and linked by startling dark drapery. By cultural logic, these two represent the life stage of wife and mother, the supposed epitome of righteous womanhood. Yet the nude bodies, sagging breasts, and darker limbs of the fifth more markedly than the fourth, highlight not fulfilment but wear and tear, along with the decline of sexual attractiveness and fertility.

Representations of life stages in other media ambivalently confirm this scheme of female sexuality's progression, incipient in the teenage years, to full-blown and active among brides, to waning quickly after motherhood. For example, the Piedmontese jurist Giovanni Nevizzano, in a compendium on marriage law published in 1526, ironically and misogynistically characterized young women's life stages: ages seven to fourteen, corresponding to Baldung Grien's first nude, virgin; ages fourteen to 21, corresponding to the second, 'prey to love'; ages 21 to 28, corresponding to the central figure, not bride but

16 Seidel Menchi, 'Girl and the Hourglass', 54-55 and 58. See also a Dutch print representing female lives in twelve stages: *The Women's Looking Glass* (after 1667), Folger digital image no. 3150.

17 Seidel Menchi, 'Girl and the Hourglass', 57-58 and 60-61. The painting of *Seven Ages* (1544-1545) is now in Leipzig; the second painting, *The Three Ages of Woman and Death*, survives only in a late sixteenth-century copy held in Rennes. This analysis of the 'Seven Ages', itself a schematic rather than naturalistic representation, does not claim to be a complete or properly contextualized art historical commentary. The intention is only to suggest congruences with features of the category of female youth found in other media.

'whore'.¹⁸ Although we must not take any of these representations literally, their convergence, along with Elizabeth S. Cohen's and Julie Hardwick's essays here, confirms the importance of sexual maturation as a dimension of growing up female that was central to youth.

In other textual domains, regulatory discourses from European law and religion suggested a transition from childhood to a stage of greater responsibility. Although in many places adolescents remained minors for most legal purposes until the age of 25, arriving at the age of twelve to fourteen conferred some greater agency. Sometimes gender talked, as girls moved into a new state sooner than boys. Classically and canonically, the minimum age to consent to marriage was twelve for girls and fourteen for boys. Analogously, at these same gendered ages, young people in Catholic Portugal acquired additional religious responsibilities, and, if orphans, could participate in some decisions about their fates.¹⁹ Elsewhere in Catholic Europe custodial institutions for orphans or children at risk also typically wanted children to enter before the age of twelve, and certainly not after fourteen.²⁰ This threshold assumed that adolescents should earn their own keep; it also likely reflected mistrust of youthful impulsive energy, even for girls. In eighteenth-century Seville the city council decreed that girls over fourteen years old should not be admitted to asylums because they might set a bad example, including by running away.²¹

In the last 50 years, a multidisciplinary literature on young people in the European past has evolved. Ironically, Philippe Ariès's claim that medieval and early modern culture largely discounted childhood has continued to stimulate a rich body of work refuting his conclusions.²² One strand of this scholarship considers youth, but the term has functioned largely as a false generic. Before scholarship attended explicitly to masculinities, most of the discussion about youth as a distinct age category has been about

18 Quoted in Seidel Menchi, 'Girl and the Hourglass', 43. For the Middle Ages, Phillips, 'Maidenhood as the Perfect Age', 4-5 and 8-9, highlights this age as both sexually attractive and still virginal. In parallel, city regulations from Strasbourg in 1500 made fourteen the minimum age for becoming a prostitute; girls found working 'whose bodies are not yet ready for such work, that is who have neither breasts nor the other things which are necessary for this, should be driven out of the city with blows and are to stay out under threat of bodily punishment until they reach the proper age'; quoted in Wiesner, 'Paternalism in Practice', 191-92.

19 Sá, 'Up and Out', 22; and Abreu-Ferreira, *Women, Crime*, 86.

20 Tikoff, 'Not All Orphans', 46. See also Franco in this volume.

21 Tikoff, 'Not All Orphans', 49-50.

22 Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*. Recent responses include: Heywood, *History of Childhood*; Classen, *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*; Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*; King, 'Concepts of Childhood'; and Averett, *Early Modern Child*.

boys and young men. Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos's observations thus apply particularly to males:

So a person might be considered mentally and emotionally mature for specific rights and obligations at different times during his teens, as well as legally mature at 21; but in terms of social experience, the requirements of some professions, or responsibility for a family, he could be considered, at eighteen, 20, or even 25, as still quite young.²³

In the historical scholarship on early modern male youth, central to the discussion has been education and professional training. For elite men – gentlemen, patricians, and future bureaucrats – there was humanist schooling and, for a privileged few, experiential learning as, for example, on the Grand Tour. Many urban craftsmen, merchants, and some professionals trained through apprenticeship.

Alexandra Shepard, writing about England, has spoken directly to the ages of man. She argues that marriage figured in the construction of adulthood not only for women but also for men. Youth, by contrast with adulthood, was a dangerous and inconstant age.²⁴ As markers of male maturity, an association of marriage with mastership also appeared in German towns. On the other hand, in early modern Turin the linkage between professional maturity and headship of household was less consistent.²⁵ Not only in England, but also in many parts of Europe, male youths were known to be energetic, headstrong, and inclined to violence. They were solicitous of honour and often given to imprudent defence of their own.²⁶ Young men's sexual appetites also threatened disorder which, if not channelled to prostitutes, could endanger respectable girls or other men.²⁷

Antagonism, rivalry, and public performance were also features of a masculine youth culture that cultivated peer-bonding and served, at times by transgression, the management of social tensions. The rituals of charivaris and the *Abbeyes de Jeunesse* in France, described in Natalie Zemon Davis's early work, had analogues in Italy such as the fistfights on Venetian bridges or the Florentine jousts in celebration of St. John the

23 Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 36.

24 Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, Part 1. For the medieval period, see Karras, *From Boys to Men*.

25 Cavallo, *Artisans of the Body*, uses male ages as a recurrent analytical category.

26 Shoemaker, 'Taming of the Duel'.

27 For gang rape in French towns, see Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, 12–13 and 19–22. See also Roche, *Forbidden Friendships*, 94–107.

Baptist.²⁸ Some confraternities also gathered boys and young men to deliver social messages.²⁹ Thus, although young men were expected to be rowdy, in various settings their youth groups had a public role.

Using the triad of life stages as a temporal framework has until recently given historians of early modern women little to say about 'girlhood', but that term has now more frequently come into scholarly use to foreground the distinctive experiences of female children. Notably, for England, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford not only break female childhood into several stages but, critically, also attend to social rank.³⁰ Gender differentiation emerged especially at a fourth stage when the child became 'potentially useful'.³¹ By the age of seven, if not earlier, boys in middle and upper classes left the overwhelmingly female circle where they had spent their early years in order to be educated, at home or at school, by professional male instructors. Elite girls, in contrast, continued their training in social and domestic skills appropriate for their future roles as wives and mothers within the household. Daughters of the best families might continue this domestic education as ladies-in-waiting at court. Girls of lower status, if not at age seven, more likely by age twelve, often left home to go into service. Recent literary studies have begun to elaborate further our understanding of cultural constructions of English girlhood. The collection of essays edited by Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh investigates the relationship between gender and childhood, and Deanne Williams and Jennifer Higginbotham have extended this discussion in their respective explorations of girlhood in Shakespeare and early modern drama.³² These patterns in England appeared with variations in other parts of Europe, but few have been discussed in print.

As with girlhood, a discussion of early modern female youth has only just begun. In her study of adolescence in early modern England, Ben-Amos devotes one chapter to female youths, focusing primarily on their training in housewifery and domestic service, and demonstrating how gender constrained apprenticing opportunities for young women in comparison

28 N.Z. Davis, 'Reasons of Misrule', 97-123, and 'Rites of Violence', 152-87, in *Society and Culture*. For Italy, see R. Davis, *War of the Fists*, 59-62 and 109-12; Trexler, *Public Life*, 225-40 and 368-99; and Zorzi, 'Rituals of Youthful Violence', 235-66.

29 Eisenbichler, *Boys of the Archangel Raphael*.

30 Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*. For an earlier period, Phillips, in *Medieval Maidens*, describes 'maidenhood' as a female life stage that corresponds in many respects to what we are calling 'youth'.

31 Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 78.

32 Miller and Yavneh, *Gender and Early Modern Constructions of Childhood*; Higginbotham, *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters*; Higginbotham, 'Shakespeare and Girlhood'; Williams, *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood*; and Williams, 'Introduction: Girls and Girlhood'.

to their male counterparts.³³ Literary studies by Ursula Potter and Diane Purkiss have explored representations of female youth in Shakespearean drama, but the category of 'youth' as it applies to early modern women is still not well articulated.³⁴ Despite an older scholarship that presumed no youth for women, in the domains of representation and cultural commentary, the essays in this volume find rich and subtle renderings by women themselves and by others about them. Furthermore, these studies show that the expectations and opportunities for female youth, like so much in the early modern world, differed markedly between ordinary people and elites, and between those of lay and clerical status.

Although the essays in this collection deliver richly varied accounts of the constraints, challenges, and opportunities that characterized youth for women, we will open that discussion here with a few introductory comments on the conditions within which these experiences took place. Youth typically involved taking steps toward adult roles in several domains. For the individual woman, these included becoming sexually mature, developing the varied skills required for adulthood – that is, education broadly construed – and entry into social networks and work life beyond her natal household. For some it also might involve travel and movement, including between rural and urban settings. The end of youth often appears easier to pin down than the beginning, since marriage as a formal rite of passage has been seen to usher in adulthood for most European women.³⁵ Yet the marital boundary was not so clear for many. On the one hand, for some noble brides who married young, a stage of youth continued after marriage, as appears in the essays by Jane Couchman and Megan Moran in this volume. On the other hand, significant numbers of European women – more and more as time went on – never married or became nuns, the brides of Christ. Jacqueline Holler here observes this phenomenon also in New Spain. What marked the moves from childhood to youth to adulthood for these lifelong singlewomen?³⁶

The beginning of youth is harder to pinpoint, but with the onset of sexual maturity the body was a central locus of change. Outside of learned medical literature, menarche did not attract much cultural attention before the

33 Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 133–55.

34 Potter, 'Greensickness', 271–91; Potter, 'Navigating the Dangers', 421–39; and Purkiss, 'Fractious: Teenage Girls' Tales'. See also Terpstra, *Lost Girls*.

35 Chojnacki, 'Measuring Adulthood'.

36 Froide, *Never Married*, 154–64; and Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 108.

eighteenth century.³⁷ Yet historians now put its arrival for most early modern girls at around age fourteen or even fifteen, well after the canonical age of marriage for girls at twelve. While women becoming mothers in their mid teens was not shocking, early modern physicians did not assume that most were ready to bear children immediately after menarche. A practice likely much more common – an extended virginity – posed risks that preoccupied medical writers with the possibilities of the polysymptomatic ‘disease of virgins’ or greensickness.³⁸

Even for most early modern women who did become wives, the wedding was no clear marker of the end of childhood. Marriage often came late after a youthful transition to adulthood was well under way. As shown in several of the essays in this collection, the age of first marriage varied with class and, in some measure, with geography. Nevertheless, European women typically married late by global historical standards, that is, in the mid or even late twenties rather than as young teenagers. In classic demographic studies, this pattern has best been documented for ‘northwestern’ Europe, especially England and France, in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some scholarship focused on earlier generations in Italy has suggested that in Mediterranean regions women married younger. Yet, even though the age of first marriage did trace a broader range among ordinary people in the south, many brides were not teenagers, but well into their twenties.³⁹ Social rank, on the other hand, did make a difference. To secure the political and economic ambitions of their elders, aristocratic girls were sometimes betrothed even as children and wed as soon as possible. More usually, however, high-born brides married in their mid to later teens, or even their early twenties.⁴⁰ Thus, elite girls typically went to the altar younger than plebeian ones, but seldom as children. They, too, often had a time for youth.

Later marriage caused young women to traverse an interval likely of several years or even a decade, during which they themselves developed sexual feelings and, more dangerously, began to attract the sexual desires of others, as represented in the Swiss images analysed in Christiane Anderson’s essay. Early modern women lived within an honour culture in which familial reputation put central value on women’s good sexual conduct.

37 McClive, *Menstruation*, 108 and 116–20; and King, *Disease of Virgins*, 84–85 and 88–89.

38 King, *Disease of Virgins*, 43–66; see also Churchill, *Female Patients*, 102–09 and 212–14.

39 Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans*, 138–43 and 203–11; Poska, *Women and Authority*, 113–14; and Abreu-Ferreira, *Women, Crime*, 38.

40 Sá, ‘Up and Out’, 24–25; for several locations, see Litchfield, ‘Demographic Characteristics’, 198–99.

So, as daughters and sisters moved from childhood into youth, protecting their virginity and honour became a more pressing task for families and for surrogate kin such as masters and mistresses. This responsibility was more challenging because, licitly or illicitly, non-elite young women were not wholly cut off from sex. Courtship, including in some corners of Europe premarital cuddling and even intercourse, brought together young men and women with sexual prospects. For such encounters, there were customary rules about what to do and not do, and in some settings young people informally policed each other. Essays here by Julie Hardwick and Eleanor Hubbard explore these regimes. Courtship also provided a narrative through which to seek sexual favours from nubile women whom the men could not or did not intend to marry. Riskier still were the older men – including masters charged with the care of their household dependants – whose appetites lit upon the untried charms of serving girls or neighbours.⁴¹ The loss of virginity, however, need not mean that a young woman forfeited the chance of a respectable future. For some, sex was a resource that they more or less skilfully deployed in pursuit of what they saw as their interests.⁴²

Youth for early modern women also often meant movement. Many left their natal households, sometimes to circulate within a somewhat larger social and economic terrain; others also travelled or migrated some distance. Women moved to marry, but also, earlier or later, many went to work in service or other settings. For most non-elite women, getting married meant setting up a new house. Noblewomen, whose matches were usually matters of family and state politics, moved to an existing and typically large household, often far from home.⁴³ Yet many girls, of both high and low rank, had left their natal homes before they became brides. As the essays here by Julie A. Eckerle, Jacqueline Holler, and Sarah Morris describe, travel – both real and imagined – could inflect female youth in distinctive ways.

The fragility of the demographic regime left many children, male and female, without one or both parents long before they had grown up. When mothers died, a young girl might move to another household as kin or servant, or sometimes both, where an adult woman could oversee her in a kind of fosterage. In parallel, in Catholic cities monastic asylums or conservatories, such as the one in early modern Rome discussed in the essay here by Alessandra Franco, were created to sequester and protect poor girls,

41 For a German example contextualized in the broader features of female youth, see Harrington, *Unwanted Child*, 23–35.

42 Ferrante, 'Sessualità come risorsa'.

43 Baernstein, 'Regional Intermarriage', 204–14.

including prostitutes' daughters, during the dangerous teenage years when they risked recruitment into the family business. As life typically shifted girls and young women from household to household, they also often moved from place to place.

Young women mostly learned essential adult roles by informal routes, usually in one or more households. The content varied by social rank, as shown in Barbara Mujica's comparative essay. Aristocratic girls, sometimes under the attentive eye of a mother or grandmother, learned essential social skills, courtly arts such as dancing, and perhaps even some humanist literary culture.⁴⁴ When they reached the stage of youth, some noble girls were sent to court as ladies-in-waiting. In these positions they refined their manners, cultivated channels of patronage that helped their families, and made themselves visible as potential brides.⁴⁵ In Catholic domains it was also common practice to dispatch well-born girls to convents either to prepare them to take the veil or to mould them into pious wives and mothers.

Much of what non-elite girls learned as daughters or servants, however, were common skills and attitudes appropriate to their gender. Elite girls, like those in Michele Nicole Robinson's essay, were taught them too. After praying, the normative tasks, both practical and moral, were spinning, sewing, and other activities that sustained the labour of other members of the household. We often call these tasks 'domestic', although that can leave us with an overly narrow view of their scope because early modern housekeeping involved many productive activities. In the countryside, for example, young women often performed a range of agricultural tasks. Some youthful work engaged more specialization. Contractual apprenticeships in specific crafts were rarely accessible to girls.⁴⁶ Yet many kinds of artisans and even some low-level professionals such as notaries depended for prosperity and even survival on collaborative labour that drew on not only male but also female workers. In such cases, as daughters and wives, young women learned the skills needed to support the family trade.⁴⁷ In a few settings, unmarried women, such as the silk workers of Lyon described here in Hardwick's essay, left their homes to live with their peers and take up skilled work.

Far more common was the practice of service, a means for many girls to get some training, earn their keep, and, as they got older and more productive,

44 Couchman, "Our little darlings", 101-14; and Paoli, 'Foreign Mothers'.

45 Adams, 'Fostering Girls in Early Modern France'; Guasco, *Discourse to Lady Lavinia*.

46 Spence, "A Perl for Your Debts?"

47 Hardwick, *Practice of Patriarchy*; and Cavallo, *Artisans of the Body*.

to build some capital in promised contributions toward a dowry. Especially for orphans, entry into service as a form of fosterage might start at the age of seven or nine. For many girls, service often began around the age of eleven or twelve, with an expectation, if only sometimes a formal contract, to stay for seven to ten years and receive some compensation in clothing and money.⁴⁸ Others became servants later in their teens.

Although institutional schooling dominates our twenty-first-century assumptions about preparing young people for their lives and careers, the early modern context was quite different, especially for girls. Female literacy advanced during the early modern era, and by the seventeenth century more and more, especially elite, young women learned to read and write, though not at a set age and rarely in a public classroom.⁴⁹ These skills helped them cultivate their souls, conduct their own or family business, and, for a few, reach past their own thresholds to participate in the emerging 'republics' of letters.⁵⁰ Poorer girls, notably those growing up in cities, sometimes had access to limited instruction in dame schools or charity classes taught by nuns. In the countryside, moreover, non-elite women remained predominantly illiterate into the eighteenth century. Even for those early modern young women who acquired these potent skills, school and an age-staged curriculum were not standard structures shaping their youth.

Read together, the essays in this interdisciplinary collection argue forcefully that youth was in fact an important phase of the early modern woman's life cycle. These case studies from across Europe and beyond also document how all human experiences, female as well as male, came in many forms and colourations. The nature of social expectations and of individual women's responses varied not only by gender but also by rank, education, religion, local situations, and, always, personal temperament. At the same time there are several recurrent themes that we highlight with our groupings of essays: cultural conceptualizations of female youth; self-representations in life-writing and letters; evolving models for training girls for adulthood; and courtship and the potential or actual sexual lives of young unmarried women.

The first section of this collection considers efforts to conceptualize female youth through representations in assorted settings and media. Two

48 Romano, *Housecraft and Statecraft*, 152-56; and Vergara, 'Growing Up Indian', 79-80. Wolfthal, 'Household Help', 14-18 and 25-35, discusses portraits of several young women servants.

49 Houseman, *Literacy in Early Modern England*.

50 With the mastery and judicious display of rare skills in Latin, art, or music, a 'virgin' female youth could, as a prodigy, garner public admiration and honour for her family. For examples, see Ross, *Birth of Feminism*, 4, 6, 9-11, 30-47, and 107.

essays probe literary framings in seventeenth-century England. Reeves examines Puritan writings as well as lyric and epic poetry in order to track the nuanced imagery that distinguished children from youths, including girls. Morris reads Aphra Behn's play, *The Rover*, as a representation of a young gentlewoman going 'rogue' in order to see the world. In a very different, judicial, domain of English discourse, McNabb probes court records from Cheshire to explore the range of words strategically deployed to characterize girls and young women. Then, taking us into the realm of emotions and imagination, Holler extracts ideas about youth from testimonies before the colonial Mexican Inquisition by and about a sixteen-year old Spanish girl suspected of diabolical possession. Finally, using visual imagery, Andersson shows us from Switzerland male artists' drawings of young women that position them ambiguously between eros and war.

The second group of essays, engaging both retrospective and very immediate forms of life-writing, yields self-representations of early modern youth by mostly well-born European women. From Spanish autobiographical writings, Mujica compares the girlhoods of three Carmelite nuns who emerged from very different social backgrounds to become religious reformers. Also drawing on retrospective texts, Eckerle examines the impact for seventeenth-century English gentlewomen of passing part of their girlhoods in the colonial environment of Ireland. Two other essays rely on the more immediate medium of family letters. Both also consider elites where women were more likely to marry young. Moran shifts our attention to the urban patricians of sixteenth-century Florence in order to reconstruct young women's negotiations around clothing and fashion before and after marriage. In parallel, noblewomen's correspondence from the Netherlandish court of Orange-Nassau allows Couchman to trace how marriage and even motherhood might not feel definitively like being all grown up.

The third grouping, presenting female youths of different social ranks in European cities, explores several modes for training girls and preparing them for adulthood. For Italy, first Franco, reading regulations and administrative records from a Roman asylum for girls at risk, argues that a period of institutional education corresponded, for some, to a special time of youth. Next, looking in contrast at patrician and middling families in Bologna, Robinson studies material culture – both its few surviving objects and its representation in art and archival documents – to concretize our understanding of female transition from child to adult. Third, moving to the north, Tilburg compares Dutch conduct manuals to show that norms for bourgeois female youth differentiated from those for wives only later in the eighteenth century.

Using judicial records from several kinds of tribunals, the essays in the fourth section explore early modern courtship and the entanglements that followed as teenagers became sexual. All of these studies suggest that young women of the urban middle and working classes risked misuse; but they also worked – alone or in collaboration with family and peers – to shape their lives, or at least the stories told about them in court. For Rome, Cohen uses prosecutions of illicit sex with unmarried teenagers to show that these encounters had multiple meanings and that the young women were not simply victims. For metropolitan London, Hubbard lays out a lively, night-time youth culture that included young women as well as men and crossed social strata. Similarly, Hardwick's study of Lyon shows young workers, male and female, collaborating not only in premarital sex but also in dealing with the resulting pregnancies through 'remedies'.

In sum, early modern culture did not often concertedly articulate a specific stage of youth for women. Yet if we pose the question of whether women had a youth, there emerges from a rich mix of literary and visual representations as well as from testimonies and other documentary sources, a distinctive, critical phase of late girlhood. Prescriptive discourses sometimes worked to discount such an in-between interval for girls. A persistent scholarly expectation, however, that women passed from an undifferentiated childhood abruptly into adulthood misunderstands the varieties and complexities of life experience. Especially for the bulk of any population that struggled with limited resources, everyday practice had to have ways to accommodate the routine disjunctions and internal contradictions between the approved and the real. Not surprisingly, therefore, this gathering of essays figures female youth as a time of multiple and critical transitions. With or without consistent labels, laws, or literary tributes, all young women went through a series of functional changes that altered their physical capacities and social identities, and prepared them to take on varied adult roles. Although experiences differed with social and economic resources, maturity required teenage girls to become familiar with altered bodies that brought new powers and new risks; to learn to deal with people outside the household and often to leave home; and to work for their own keep as well as to fend not only for themselves but also for family and associates. Most female youths continued to live as dependants. Nevertheless, steps toward adulthood brought them increasing responsibilities, fuller skills, and a greater measure of agency within their local settings.

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About the authors

Elizabeth S. Cohen is Professor of History at York University (Toronto). Based on research in the criminal court records of early modern Rome, her articles explore such themes as work, family, sexuality, prostitution, street rituals, self-representation, oralities, and the home life of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi. With Thomas V. Cohen, she has co-authored *Words and Deeds in Renaissance Rome: Trials before the Papal Magistrates* (University of Toronto Press, 1993) and *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy* (ABC-Clio, 2001; 2nd edition, forthcoming).

Margaret Reeves teaches seventeenth-century English literature and children's literature in the Department of Critical Studies and is an Associate Member of the Gender and Women's Studies programme at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus. She co-edited *Shell Games: Studies in Scams, Frauds, and Deceits (1300–1650)* with Mark Crane and Richard Raiswell; co-authored a history of the Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies with Louise Frappier; and has published essays on the literary historiography of the novel and on women's writing, including works by Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish, and Aphra Behn. Her current research examines children's literary cultures in the early modern period.

