

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the  
Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## *Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters*

Between 1630 and 1680, an international network of female scholars flourished within the republic of letters. That network, which I refer to as the Republic of Women, was an intellectual commonwealth whose citizens were all female scholars.<sup>1</sup> However, their community was not isolated by their sex, and this network was in fact an integral component of a much larger intellectual commonwealth, known as the republic of letters. The republic of letters, a transnational, multi-confessional commonwealth of the learned, was an important component of early modern European intellectual culture. It was an epistolary community that literally embodied the world of ideas in the seventeenth century. Yet much of the scholarship on the republic of letters has tended to reify this idealized community, identifying it too narrowly with an elite cadre of erudite men; moreover, it has been assumed that female scholars were excluded from that larger communal enterprise.

*Republic of Women* takes issue with this assumption. It is a case study, based on an analysis of this network of female scholars; however, this case study in turn argues for a larger reassessment of early modern cultures of learning. It demonstrates that the republic of letters was not a small, heroic cadre of brilliant minds, but rather a much more eclectic, diverse, and conflicted assemblage than we have hitherto believed; and our tidy assumption of an elite, secular, all-male intellectual world is completely undone once we pay attention to the networks of female scholars who were well known and highly respected actors within it. In this analysis, the seventeenth-century intellectual enterprise emerges as a complex structure of smaller interlaced networks, sharing knowledge while pursuing

<sup>1</sup> Laura Cereta (1469–99) characterized learned women through the ages as a “*muliebris respublica*,” distinguished for both virtue and letters. Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, ed. and trans. Diana Robin (Chicago, 1997), 76–80.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the  
Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters*

different goals. Thus the story of the Republic of Women serves to introduce a new, expanded concept of the seventeenth-century community of ideas.

In essence, *Republic of Women* uses the collective biography of seven female scholars to construct the biography of a moment. It was a singularly rich and significant moment in intellectual history, when the birth of modern science meshed with other areas of knowledge – philosophical, natural, religious, and political – to accelerate the gradual demise of scholasticism. It was a moment that ushered in a secular, rational, and empirical approach to learning that still shapes humanistic and scientific enquiry today. And it was a moment populated with a surprisingly diverse array of actors – including zealots, autodidacts, and women – whose names are not generally mentioned along with those of Montaigne, Huygens, Boyle, Mersenne, Descartes, and the other scholars who considered them colleagues in the republic of letters.

I define collegial early modern female scholars as those women who delighted in their studies, who desired to lead lives of active scholarship, and who saw themselves as part of a larger community of like-minded men and women who were interested in ideas. Yet this new concept of the collegial female scholar must first contend with the tradition of the early modern “learned lady.”

Learned ladies have usually been seen as exemplary phenomena. They were exceptions so exceptional that, as Bathsua Makin said: “A Learned Woman is thought to be a Comet, that bodes Mischief, when ever it appears.”<sup>2</sup> From Boccaccio onward, learned women were celebrated in terms that emphasized their strangeness.<sup>3</sup> Since women were excluded from the academy and unable to practice learned professions, their pursuit of intellectual achievement was considered puzzling, trivial, and ultimately pointless. There were many who admired the erudition of learned women, yet would have agreed with the view expressed by Jean de la Bruyère:

One looks at a learned woman as one does a beautiful gun. It is beautifully crafted, admirably polished, and wonderfully well made; it is a collector’s item which one shows to the curious, which has no function, which is useful neither

<sup>2</sup> [Bathsua Makin], *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen, in Religion, Manners, Arts & Tongues. With an Answer to the Objections against this Way of Education* (London, 1673), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris*. Written between 1360 and 1362, the book was immensely popular, and was translated into French, German, Spanish, English, and Italian.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters* 3

for war nor for hunting, no more than a carousel horse, albeit the best instructed one in all the world.<sup>4</sup>

Thus one finds that even in the literature extolling their virtues, learned women were assigned attributes partaking equally of the utmost goddess-like perfection and the merely freakish. For instance, the scholar Anna Maria van Schurman was continually lauded as “The Star of Utrecht,” and “The Tenth Muse.” Yet at the same time, her eulogists reported that she was partial to eating spiders.<sup>5</sup> She was also, according to one of them, “a miracle or monster of nature.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the intellectual woman is usually pictured as a solitary scholar, and a person with no peers – an admirable anomaly locking herself into her “book-lined cell.”<sup>7</sup>

This picture, however, is a distortion, and only one side of the story. Recent scholarship has begun to uncover the presence of a surprising number of Latinate women in early modern Europe, thus this vision of solitary strangeness must now be complicated with another vision: that of a well-known, well-respected, and fully functional community of early modern female scholars.<sup>8</sup> For more than four decades, a very real and supportive intellectual women’s network centered around the erudite Anna Maria van Schurman of Utrecht (1607–78). The other core members of the group were the English educator Bathsua Makin (c.1600–80), the Anglo-Irish religious reformer Dorothy Moore (c.1612–64), the “incomparable” Katherine Jones, Lady Ranelagh (1615–91), the French scholars Marie de Gournay (1565–1645) and Marie du Moulin (c.1613–99), and the learned Palatine Princess Elisabeth (1618–80), daughter of Bohemia’s “Winter King.” Mirroring the male republic of letters, the citizens of this women’s intellectual commonwealth represented nations at war, religions in conflict, and epistemologies in contention.

<sup>4</sup> Jean de la Bruyère, *Les Caractères de Théophraste. Traduits du Grec avec Les Caractères ou Les Mœurs de ce siècle* [Paris, 1687], ed. Louis van Delft (Paris, 1998): no. 49, “Des Femmes,” 83–4.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Pierre Nicéron, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire des hommes illustres dans la République des Lettres*, 43 vols. (Paris, 1729–45), xxxiii, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Jacob, “Elogium eruditissimae virginis Annae Mariae a Schurman, Batavae” in *Question celebre. S’il est nécessaire, ou non, que les Filles soient sçavantes* (Paris, 1646), 83–4.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret King, “Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance,” in Patricia H. Labalme, ed., *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past* (New York, 1980), 66–90.

<sup>8</sup> A point of entry for the wide range of women’s writing is the online database of the Orlando Project at Cambridge University Press. *Orlando: Women’s Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present* [<http://orlando.cambridge.org>]. For a survey of Latinate women, see Laurie J. Churchill et al., *Women Writing Latin: From Roman Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, 3 vols. (New York and London, 2002).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters*

Apart from their scholarship, then, the women in this community were characterized primarily by a remarkable heterogeneity. In the middle of the seventeenth century, amid civil war, religious strife, and epistemological revolutions, their epistolary network cut across barriers of religion, nation, class, intellectual allegiance, and family formation. These women were Catholics, Calvinists, and mystical millenarians; they were English, Irish, German, French, and Dutch; they were Aristotelian, Cartesian, and biblicist. On the social scale, they ran the gamut from aristocrats to schoolteachers, and from princesses to would-be preachers.

Some of these women have been noticed before. Some garnered attention as the wives, sisters, daughters, mothers, and protégées of famous men, while others were noticed for their singularity. Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, for example, is possibly the most well-known and well-studied female natural philosopher of the seventeenth century, and would seem to be an obvious candidate for inclusion in this study. She read widely in experimental philosophy and science, and published in an impressive range of genres. Moreover, she herself reported that she was sometimes present when scholars like Descartes, Gassendi, and Hobbes met in her home while she and her husband were in exile on the Continent. However, she will not be included here because this is a study of *collegial* female scholarship in the early modern era – an analysis of the intellectual women who did their scholarly work in dialogue with other men and women in the republic of letters. And Cavendish, despite her exposure to some of the foremost minds in early modern philosophy, was extremely clear about seeing herself as singular.<sup>9</sup>

The female scholars in this study, on the other hand, made interpersonal contact a vital part of their scholarship. In earlier studies, they have also been spotted lurking in the margins of seventeenth-century male intellectual networks, such as the Royal Society, and the reforming group associated with Samuel Hartlib, John Dury, and Jan Amos Comenius.<sup>10</sup> However, these women were not merely the recipients of intellectual mentoring by their male colleagues and kin. The information, advice,

<sup>9</sup> There is a large body of scholarship on Margaret Cavendish. See, for instance: Lisa Sarasohn, "A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47 (1984): 289–307; Sarah Hutton, "Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and Seventeenth-Century Scientific Thought," in *Women, Science and Medicine 1500–1700*, ed. Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (Phoenix Mill, 1997); Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington, KY, 1998); and Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Lynette Hunter, "Sisters of the Royal Society: The Circle of Katherine Jones, Lady Ranelagh," in Hunter and Hutton, *Women, Science and Medicine*, 178–97.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters* 5

and correspondence flowed in both directions – thus the position of these women with regard to their respective networks was not marginal at all. In fact, female scholars occupied vital and central positions in a variety of scholarly, religious, and political networks during the seventeenth century.

The problem, then, appears to lie in our concept of the margins themselves, in our defining intellectual networks according to categories that are both too disparate and too small. While the gendered membership of van Schurman's circle made theirs a distinct group within the republic of letters, the evidence also demonstrates that this distinction did not result in their being isolated or segregated within that intellectual community. Thus an analysis of these women as a group – in both their gendered alterity and their membership in the republic of letters as a whole – has important implications for understanding larger issues of gender and knowledge in early modern Britain and Europe. The existence of their correspondence community demonstrates that female scholars were neither anomalous nor invisible. They were, in fact, an important and integral part of the seventeenth-century intellectual revolution. As one follows the evidence, it becomes clear that these women were a collegial presence in the republic of letters, and they were expected to contribute their voices to the intellectual and theological conversation.

Female scholars corresponded with male colleagues to discuss philosophy, theology, and language study, and to offer friendship, advice, and support. At the same time, however, the women inevitably differed from their male counterparts in being limited by their gender; they could never practice learned professions, nor could they participate in the life of the academies. And they had an additional agenda in their correspondence with each other. The members of this intellectual women's network were searching for solutions to the issue they could never quite resolve: how a virtuous Christian woman might reconcile a life of blameless piety with vigorous intellectual pursuits. Thus they functioned simultaneously in multiple networks, participating concurrently in the larger republic of letters, as well as in a gendered subset of that republic.

Although scholars have begun to discuss several of the women involved in this network, no one as yet has analyzed them as a group, a distinct yet integral component of the republic of letters.<sup>11</sup> The present study is a step

<sup>11</sup> Several scholars, however, have argued that such a study should be attempted. See, for instance: Pieta van Beek, "Een Vrouwenrepubliek der Letteren? Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678) en haar netwerk van geleerde vrouwen," *Tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans* 3, no. 1 (1996): 36–49; David Norbrook, "Women, the Republic of Letters, and the Public Sphere in the Mid-Seventeenth

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the  
Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters*

toward filling this analytical gap. My aim here is to analyze the circulation of ideas as *embodied* phenomena. By concentrating on the ways in which ideas were developed through the interaction of persons – representing two sexes and an expanded range of social rank – who in turn belonged to various intersecting networks, this study in many ways takes a sociological and anthropological approach to intellectual history. In so doing, it argues that between 1630 and 1680, the work of moral, scientific, and intellectual reform networks in Europe was in fact a dually gendered enterprise.<sup>12</sup>

This, of course, brings up two immediate questions. First, given that the inclusion of learned women contradicts so much of what is known about the intersection of gender and knowledge in the early modern era, how was it that their counterintuitive community could come into existence? Contained in this query are what the late David Underdown called the historian's *first* questions: why this? why here? and, why now?<sup>13</sup> Second, if these women were such a vital part of the seventeenth-century intellectual enterprise, then why is it that we are surprised to learn that this was so? How and why did historical knowledge of their contribution become so obscured in the following centuries?

The answer to the first question flows from the realization that this seemingly sudden outbreak of public female activity was inextricably allied with its background of religious and political crisis; and, seen in this light, the phenomenon was neither isolated nor unique. The middle of the seventeenth century was a period of world-changing instability. The Thirty Years' War devastated the Continent from 1618 to 1648, while England was being torn apart in two civil wars. At the same time, the empirical New Learning of Bacon and the rationalism of Descartes were ushering in an intellectual revolution. Although the process was complex and contingent, observation and experiment eventually displaced scholasticism and humanism.<sup>14</sup> It was a non-stop storm of religious, political, and intellectual ferment that filtered into almost every sphere of existence, causing many to expect the literal end of the world. And, in

Century," *Criticism* 46, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 223–40; and Jane Stevenson, "Still Kissing the Rod? Whither Next?", *Women's Writing* 14, no. 2 (2007): 290–305.

<sup>12</sup> In this I am following, among others, Deborah Harkness, and Peter Burke: Deborah Harkness, *The Jewel House: Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution* (New Haven and London, 2007); Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> From David Underdown, "Gentlemen, Players, and Media Moguls: Cricket and English Society Since 1600," plenary address given at the Pacific Coast Conference on British Studies, April 4, 1997, Mills College, Oakland, CA.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 3–4, 11–12.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the  
Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters* 7

common with other episodes of extreme, wide-scale instability – times of war and revolution, in other eras and other places – many of the customary social barriers did not hold. This abnormal social openness is usually one of the unintended consequences of conflict, one that creates opportunities for persons whose options are limited under normal circumstances. These are also doors that are soon closed, as social and cultural norms reassert themselves, and a certain amount of conservatism returns with the calm and quiet.

In terms of women's access to public discourse, religious activism, and political participation, this is a pattern that has had many forms and many repetitions. Thus the inclusion of women – as well as the inclusion of those men who would normally have been considered “outsiders” to learned discourse – came about because the opportunity existed. It was a synergistic moment, arising from the confluence of remarkable minds in a remarkable time. The force and variety of spiritual, intellectual, and scientific issues being discussed and promulgated in the mid-seventeenth-century republic of letters created a highly nutritive instability; and these agendas, combined with political and confessional conflict, gave rise to a situation in which a community of women intellectuals could flourish.

The answer to the second question, regarding the posthumous obscurity of this women's intellectual network, follows very closely on the chaotic situation described above. Political stability began to return to Europe and Britain after 1660. In a parallel process, the production of scientific knowledge outside the universities became institutionalized in various academies. Within these institutions, a certain level of social and epistemological homogeneity began to prevail.<sup>15</sup> The mid-century's plurality of religious and intellectual approaches resolved into something resembling mainstreams and margins, and subsequent historiography reified the triumph of rational, secular, latitudinarian learning. As this whiggish narrative unfolded, the outsiders disappeared.

Yet neither the original historiography nor its modern feminist corrective should be allowed to obscure this complex cooperative episode in seventeenth-century intellectual history. Gender was certainly an important constitutive element in the intellectual lives of Anna Maria van Schurman and her fellow female scholars of the early modern era. However, it was only one of many factors. In fact, if one were to choose the single factor most often responsible for limiting the shape and scope of women's learning, it would be social rank. The demands of survival on

<sup>15</sup> Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1975), 114–15.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the  
Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters*

one end of that scale, and of political and social obligations on the other, were usually quite effective in precluding the pursuit of learning – which often held true for men as well as for women. For instance, scholars of both genders who lived in areas removed from the easy circulation of books and colleagues would find their studies limited by their location, unless they also possessed the time and money for travel.

Female scholars, however, faced additional hurdles. And those women who were trying to construct lives of intellectual and religious activity – lives that were both collegial and visible – were contending with the entire weight of accepted Christian doctrine concerning the need for women to epitomize the Christian virtue of *modestia*. The meaning of *modestia* changed over time, and in translation between different languages, cultures, and confessional contexts. While it originally referred to the shared practice of chastity by men and women in early Christian sects, it quickly split into two streams; for men, chastity became a specialized practice forming part of monastic life, while for women, modesty and chastity became the stuff of everyday life.<sup>16</sup> Modesty was the public performance of a woman's private virtue. By controlling her behavior – her carriage, clothing, gestures, and glances – a modest woman could avoid inciting men to unchaste thoughts and immoderate actions. Female modesty was thus in many ways a woman's contribution to social control.

It is crucial, therefore, to consider gender as a factor in any analysis of early modern women's intellectual lives. However, it is equally important not to stop there. Van Schurman and dozens of other intellectual women managed to interact with numerous male scholars, acquire a high level of erudition, and participate in the republic of letters in a way that rendered these expectations moot – and they apparently did so without committing those transgressions of feminine modesty that would have resulted in their being labeled as viragos.

In attempting to reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable truths, Nicéron and a long list of other writers opted for the “beyond nature” explanation. In published works, emphasizing the singularity of a van Schurman or a Princess Elisabeth enabled gendered expectations to remain intact. These works, however – whether positive or negative, crafted by contemporaries or assembled by later generations of scholars – are indicators only of a

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, IL, 1956); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Word, Spirit and Power: Women in Early Christian Communities,” in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York, 1979), 29–70.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the  
Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters* 9

discourse. They do not give us access to the women themselves, nor to their functional role in learned Europe.

Yet modern analytical categories which foreground considerations of gender can be equally unhelpful in this case. In Joan Scott's formulation, gender as "a useful category of analysis" must include a consideration of gender as a discourse of power:

The core of the definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.<sup>17</sup>

But in the case under consideration here, we are not dealing with an established institution, a state, or a broad concept of early modern European culture. We are considering, rather, the actual work done by women in the republic of letters, an amorphous, egalitarian, and self-conscious community whose stated ideal was to transcend divisions in order to work together for the advancement of learning.<sup>18</sup> Relationships of power qualified as one of those divisive categories that the republic of letters explicitly tried to transcend. And indeed, the women in this study functioned within that republic on a level that would have been the envy of many male contemporaries. Thus neither the "beyond their sex" model of extreme praise on one hand, nor the repressive "hierarchies of power" approach on the other, is likely to result in a useful analysis of how the learned women in this study actually functioned in the seventeenth-century intellectual landscape. And the problem with both of these approaches would appear to be their primary focus on gender.

Considerations of gender were, for van Schurman and other female scholars, problems of a practical, instrumental nature. Membership in the female sex was attached to a number of circumstances, expectations, and limitations that needed to be dealt with in order to pursue a life of scholarship. Sex was not, however, the primary consideration for any of the women under consideration in this study. Thus our analytical approach should be based on their own approach to scholarship – and that was a focus on *practice*. If we foreground what these women actually did – what they read, said, and studied; the people they knew; how they crafted a network of connections; and how they structured their lives to

<sup>17</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. edn. (New York, 1999), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Françoise Waquet, "Qu'est-ce que la République des Lettres? Essai de sémantique historique," *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 147 (1989): 473–502.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01821-1 - Republic of Women: Rethinking the Republic of Letters in the Seventeenth Century

Carol Pal

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Introduction: The Republic of Women and the republic of letters*

include a space for learning – then gender slips much further down the list of priorities. It certainly does not go away; but while it was always present, that presence was often part of the background.

Yet if the gendered membership of van Schurman's circle made theirs a different and distinct group within the republic of letters, then why did that feminine distinction not result in their being isolated, segregated, or minimized within that intellectual community? How did their female intellectual enterprise differ or not differ from the informal correspondence networks of their male contemporaries? How does one define that larger intellectual community, and how does one define the republic of letters?

## THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The seventeenth-century republic of letters was not a place, or a polity, or a club for gentleman scholars. It was rather a heterogeneous, multi-faith, transnational and inclusive group fuelled by a shared desire to advance learning, and to discover the best pathway to knowledge. The citizens of the republic of letters were philosophers, poets, doctors, linguists, and theologians from cities across Europe, who created a shared intellectual identity – they were collegial scholars, connected by friendship, pedagogy, patronage, and learning. They pursued their investigations in a variety of ways and places for a variety of reasons, but the shared desire to know was the engine of that republic. Thus the republic of letters was rather an impossible, ambitious, and inclusive *ideal*.<sup>19</sup>

Adherence to this ideal involved an understood agreement to set aside religious, political, and social differences when participating in the activities of that entity. These activities involved, to various degrees: the translation of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew texts; complete familiarity with the humanist encyclopedia of learning; Biblical exegesis and theological discussion; sharing information on scientific experiments, apparatus, and events in the advancement of learning; lending, sending, and reviewing books; and introducing and assisting other scholars.

<sup>19</sup> The majority of scholarship on the republic of letters, and almost all the synthetic work, has been published in either French or Dutch. Two notable exceptions in English are Dena Goodman's *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, 1994), and Anne Goldgar's *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters 1680–1750* (New Haven, 1995). In the present study, I am building on Goldgar's analysis of the republic of letters as a self-aware social network.