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Faiers, Meryl, Lucy Holehouse, Héloïse Sénéchal, Jodie Smith, and Jennifer Moss Waghorn, project team. The King's Women: 1594–1642

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Faiers, Meryl, Lucy Holehouse, Héloïse Sénéchal, Jodie Smith, and Jennifer Moss Waghorn, project team.
The King's Women: 1594–1642.
Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham, 2021. Accessed 30 August 2023. kingswomen.org.

The King's Women: 1594–1642 is an online blog that presents research from the early career research–led project of the same name into the women belonging to the social networks of the King's Men acting company. Utilizing records such as parish registers, church records, and wedding licenses, this research draws on archival sources to reconstruct the lives of women who were associated with some of the most recognizable names of the early modern theatre. The blog's tag line, "Discovering the wives, sisters, and daughters at the heart of William Shakespeare's acting company," promises a unique look into an underexplored aspect of the period's most famous playwright and his contemporaries.

In the study of early modern theatre, some names are particularly recognizable: Richard Burbage, Henry Condell, and John Heminges all appear as "principal actors" in sources for some of the period's most famous plays. From 1594 to 1642, these men and others comprised the acting company the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men in 1603 upon the death of Queen Elizabeth I. Including William Shakespeare as playwright and actor in their number, and performing the plays of Ben Jonson and Philip Massinger as well, the members of the King's Men theatrical company of course had wives, families, and social networks outside of the playhouse. It is those unsung heroes whom *The King's Women* pursues. The members of the King's Men are some of the most famous members of the early modern "middling sort," but the women associated with them are often left out of the historical frame.

The King's Women provides an excellent balance to the wealth of digital research projects that explore the acting company itself, Shakespeare and his works, and the early modern theatre as a whole. There is no shortage of excellent digital editions of Shakespeare's plays, nor of newly digitized sources through projects such as the Henslowe-Alleyn Digitisation Project (henslowe-alleyn.org.uk). Projects have also explored the performance of early modern plays, such as Records of Early English Drama: Patrons and Performances (library2.utm.utoronto.ca/otra/reed). Many of the digital sources and research related to the King's Men players have been in relationship to the stage and

their dramatic contemporaries, so a focus on the players' social networks is a refreshing perspective. The project also stands alongside the research of the Middling Culture project at the University of Kent (middlingculture.com), which has published broadly on the lived experience of early modern middling people. This method of studying early modern theatre, not through the men who performed it but through the women who in many ways enabled those performances, is an important approach to a well-travelled topic that also contributes to the broader social history of an early modern middle class.

The blog's website is of a simple and easily navigable design, with well-chosen illustrations to feature on the home page. The manuscript image is sourced from the Folger Shakespeare Library's digital collection, and the painting is credited as Louise Moillon's *Nature Morte de Fruites à la Jeune Servante*. In the painting, a woman stands slicing a citrus fruit, and an illustration of that slice also features as the website icon. The icon is uniquely identifiable as belonging to the project, and more information about this choice of painting would be interesting. Four tabs at the top of the website are the main navigation tools, leading to simple and clean pages for each tab. There is also a widget for the project's X (formerly Twitter) feed, where some of the project's findings have been shared as part of #KingsWomenWednesday.

The "About" section offers a brief introduction to the project, including a summary of the genre of sources upon which the project relies. This concise description is relatively detailed, but it certainly leaves some room for expansion. For the uninitiated, a more detailed description of the King's Men would provide helpful context for understanding who the women behind the company might have been, as well as their significance in the early modern theatre. The list of potential sources piques interest and intrigues a reader about how much of a life narrative might be reconstructed by sources such as wills and parish registers. I would also be interested in seeing a further description of the methodology used to compose biographies from the few historical sources listed. Such an addition would further improve the pedagogical impact of the blog. The description also mentions that the project employs a "collaborative methodology," and more information on this particular element would be most interesting, as humanities disciplines can often suffer from isolation, even on team projects. It is also not immediately obvious what the product of this project will be. After exploring the small website, it becomes clear that the pieces posted on the blog are being used to present some of the results of the team's

research, but a more descriptive explanation of the project goals would also be beneficial for a user who seeks to understand the scope of *The King's Women* as a blog and as a larger project.

The "Team" tab introduces the minds behind *The King's Women*: five researchers, each involved in early modern dramatic research. The team, comprised of Meryl Faiers, Lucy Holehouse, Héloïse Sénéchal, Jodie Smith, and Jennifer Moss Waghorn, is primarily based out of the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham. The brief biographies of each member of the research team demonstrate their wide-reaching backgrounds, and the great variety of perspectives from the contributors strengthens the product. As noted, the results of the team's public-facing research are presented in blog posts (under the "Blog" tab), where the project news is also published. One slight structural change might be to move the news items to a separate tab in order to let the research stand on its own.

The greatest strength of this project is that it shares so much original research in this open-access format. At the time of this writing, there are three posted research pieces. The three blog posts explore the lives of different women associated with the King's Men from different perspectives, utilizing archival and historical research methods to draw out the lives of women so often hidden in the records. The posts are written in a narrative style, which makes them easy to follow and thus accessible to students and non-experts. To field specialists, these pieces are equally engaging, as the discoveries and biographical reconstructions have clearly taken immense work.

The longest blog post, "Remembering Elizabeth Condell" by Jodie Smith, also includes content that serves as an introduction to the project as a whole (in fact, using some of this description on the blog's "About" page would be helpful to readers seeking out a more detailed explanation of the project's aims). The post provides some excellent context about the King's Men, as well as about Henry Condell in relation to the larger scope of early modern history and Shakespeare, with whom non-specialist readers may have more familiarity. In an effective visualization of the project's aims, Smith demonstrates what a play text may have looked like with the names of the women associated with the King's Men printed on the list of players. It is a stark reminder that these men had significant systems behind them that included, and were even dominated by, women. In highlighting that the King's Men brought the plays of

Shakespeare, Jonson, Fletcher, and Massinger to life, "Remembering Elizabeth Condell" reminds us of the unseen labour behind those players.

This and the other blog posts showcase the research and in some cases literal legwork it takes to expose the lives of early modern women. For instance, Meryl Faiers's piece, "1603: The Heminges Family in the Year of the Plague," is an example of the wide variety of methods applied to this research. Using parish registers, church records, and even contemporary historical markers, Faiers is able to reconstruct the likely events surrounding the Heminges family's actions during a plague year as they pertained to the death of the family's children.

The King's Women is in a wonderful beginning stage of open-access scholarship and rich research on early modern women, a group so often relegated to the margins behind their more well-known husbands, brothers, and fathers. That such quality scholarship is both available and written in such an accessible way is a boon to the field in both pedagogy and research. Pedagogically in particular, this project is an exemplar of methods and best practices in research on women and other groups on the margins. Its roots in furthering research about both women and the middling sort, not always popular topics for digital projects, makes *The King's Women* all the more valuable and unique. The determination to "read between the lines of the men's histories to piece together the lives of women," as Smith writes ("Remembering Elizabeth Condell"), is a strong contribution in the lineage of digital feminist scholarship. By publishing case studies on the women behind the King's Men, the project sheds further light on the period and its culture as a whole. It is a stark reminder that our literary and dramatic figures did not exist in a vacuum.

Overall, there is much room for this blog to grow. Given the project's focus on collaboration, I would be interested, for example, in seeing how it might extend beyond the core team of researchers by allowing outside contributors to submit their own findings, much as the Women Writers Project (wwp.northeastern.edu) does through its "Women Writers in Context" exhibits. An expansion in the area of contextual information and some basic clarification of the project goals, methods, and final product would also make this already useful blog space even more helpful. That my primary desire for this project is to see even more from it is a testament to its value and quality.

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