Attending to Fishwives: Views from Seventeenth-Century London and Amsterdam

Our workshop seeks to locate real and imaginary fishwives in the landscape of early modern cities. In particular, we propose to study textual and visual representations of seventeenth-century fishwives at work in London and Amsterdam, where female fishmongers were becoming important cultural symbols even as they plied their everyday trade. Placing emphasis on a specific economic role and the deep associations that accompany it, our workshop elaborates on the themes of environments, exchanges, and communities.

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This workshop combines methods from literary criticism, social history, and the study of visual and material culture to provide a complex view of early modern fishwives. By offering participants a carefully curated set of representative texts and images from seventeenth-century London and Amsterdam, the workshop establishes a comparative framework for the study of fishwives in two cultures. How did the fishwife, with her loud, scolding voice and riotous behaviour, become an entrenched London type? What factors contributed to the centrality of Dutch fishwives in depictions of city life throughout the Golden Age and beyond? And what are the important differences between contemporaneous representations of fishwives in these two cities?

The subject of fishwives can serve as a case study on the early modern convention of comparing female vendors to the goods they sell. The standard association between female and piscine bodies is borne out in images of sirens and mermaids, but also in seemingly straightforward depictions of fishwives, whose bodies bear uncanny resemblances to the creatures on display in their booths and baskets. In English culture, where the sexual pursuits of both genders were regularly metaphorized as a kind of “angling” and women’s bodies were regarded as fishy in every available sense, fishwives were proverbially equated with whores, and vice versa. These entrepreneurs were particularly susceptible to sexualization since they worked on the fringes of legal industry. London records indicate that guild members and city officials continually attempted to curtail the fishwives’ access to capital and thus power by criminalizing their activities and barring them from selling in markets such as Billingsgate. Because they had to sell their goods outside the market, while moving from street to street, the simple act of selling fish could easily be misconstrued as a
sexual exchange. In the Netherlands, women’s increasing presence in market spaces created an anxiety that female sellers with a growing reputation for unruliness would be plying their bodies along with their wares. Paintings and prints of the time blurred reality and stereotype to simultaneously present Amsterdam fish markets as sites/sights of carefully regulated commerce, underscored by the potential for impropriety with objects both economic and erotic.

Fishwives also provide us with a sample of women’s changing roles as participants in the economic and cultural life of early modern cities. In writings and paintings from the period, fishwives are shown to be highly visible, aggressively loud, quintessentially public people. English literature vividly captures their complex negotiations of environment and exchange since fishwives are frequently depicted in conjunction with the site of their work—Billingsgate. Differing social and legal circumstances in Amsterdam allowed women to participate in a broader range of economic activities; however, paintings and prints reveal sensitivity to tensions between emerging class distinctions between public fishwives and private housewives. The gendered spatial narratives of both countries not only highlight the importance of place in shaping identity but also reveal an entrenched societal unease regarding forms of female trade such as street fish selling.

We will invite participants to visit our workshop blog at http://attendingtofishwives.wordpress.com/, which will be launched on March 1st. The blog will present a gallery of primary sources on the subject of fishwives, including paintings, woodcuts, images of objects, recordings of ballads, and excerpts from plays and pamphlets. It will also allow participants (and the broader community of internet users) to comment on these materials and generate new questions about fishwives in the months leading up to the conference. The blog is intended to serve as a pedagogical experiment and a record of our collaborative research.

At the opening of our meeting in June, after a round of brief introductions including all participants, each of the organizers will speak for no more than five minutes on our respective disciplinary inclinations toward the subject of fishwives. In these short talks, each of us will introduce a favourite cultural object and argue for its special importance. The remaining seventy minutes will be devoted to a discussion organized around the questions and notions arising from the workshop blog.

Source Material

Images and Objects

Anon., *A most strange and true report of a monsterous Fish…*, 1604
Anonymous, *The Month of September, Book of Hours, Fishwife*, ca. 1600

Lucas van Valckenborch, *Meat and Fish Market (Winter)*, 1595

Crispijn de Passe after Marten de Vos, *The Four Elements: Water*, [date?]

Anonymous, *Fish colander*, clay, c. 1600

Anonymous, *Fishing bucket*, copper, c. 1800 (similar to those depicted in 17th-century images)

Hendrick Sorgh, *The Fishwife*, c. 1660
Emanuel de Witte, *The Fish Market*, 1672

Cornelis Dusart, *Fish market*, 1683

Adriaen van Ostade, *The Fishwife*, 1673

Pieter van den Berge, *Fishwife*, c. 1700

Marcellus Laroon, “Four for Six pence Mackrell,” from *Cryes of the City of London Drawne after the Life*, 1688

Geoffrey Whitney (text) and Andrea Alciato (image), “Sirenes,” from *A Choice of Emblemes*, 1586
Text Excerpts

“These crying, wandring, and travailing creatures carry their shops on their heads, and their store-house is ordinarily Billingsgate or the Bridgefoote, and their habitation Turnagaine-lane . . . They are free in all places, and pay nothing for shop-rent, but onely finde repaires to it. If they drinke out their whole stocke, it’s but pawning a petticoate in Long-lane or themselves in Turnebull-streete for to set up againe. They change every day almost for Shee that was this day for Fish, may bee tomorrow for Fruit; next day for Hearbs, another for Roots: so that you must heare them cry before you know what they are furnisht withal, when they have done their Faire, they meet in mirth, singing, dancing, & in the middle as a Parenthesis, they use scolding, but they doe use to take & put up words, & not end till either their money or wit, or credit bee clean spent out” (Donald Lupton, London and the Country Carbonadoed and Quartred into Several Characters [1632], 91-94).

“We e’en turn’d our selves into the smoaky Boozing Ken amongst them; where, round the Fire, sat a tatter’d Assembly of Fat Motherly Flat-caps, with their Fish-baskets hanging upon their heads instead of Riding-Hoods, with every one her Nipperkin of warm Ale and Brandy; and as many Rings upon their Thumbs as belongs to a suit of Bed-Curtains. Every one as slender in the Waste as a Dutch Skipper in the buttocks; and look’d together, like a Litter of Squab Elephants” (Ned Ward, The London Spy [1718], 40-41).

“Here’s another ballad of a fish, that appeared upon the coast on Wednesday the four-score of April, forty thousand fathom above water, and sung this ballad against the hard hearts of maids: it was thought she was a woman and was turned into a cold fish for she would not exchange flesh with one that loved her: the ballad is very pitiful and as true.” (Shakespeare, The Winter’s Tale, 4.4.273-79)

“Groping for trouts in a peculiar river.” (Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, 1.2.88)

“So, give the fresh salmon line now, let him come ashore; he shall serve for my breakfast, though he go against my stomach.” (The whore Bellafront in Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton’s The Honest Whore, 6.65-67)

“Were I but o’er your threshold, a next man, And after him a next, and then a fourth, Should have this golden hook and lascivious bait Thrown out to the full length.” (Hyppolyto to Bellafront in The Honest Whore, 6.346-49)
Supplemental Primary Texts


*The Lawes of the Market.* Imprinted by John Wolfe, Printer to the honorable Citie of London. 1595. STC 16717.

[P. G.] *A most strange and true report of a monsterous Fish, who appeared in the forme of a Woman, from her waste upwards.* 1604. STC 11501.5

Lupton, Donald. *London and The Country Carbonadoed and Quartred into Several Characters.* 1632. STC 16944.


Supplemental Secondary Texts


