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Women, Crime, and the Courts in Early Modern England

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Recent years have witnessed a considerable body of published research on both crime and women in the early modern period. There have been few attempts, however, to synthesize such studies and to examine in detail the relationship between the law and women's lives. This collection of seven original essays explores that relationship by examining the nature and extent of women's criminal activity and surveying the connections between women, their legal position, and their involvement in legal processes. The words, actions, and treatment of women who came before the courts as plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses are examined here in a variety of contexts, ranging from the assertion of a variety of rights to scolding, thieving, and witchcraft. The contributors demonstrate that women were far from passive victims in a male-dominated legal system. As both breakers of the law and important agents of its enforcement, women were far more assertive than their formal legal positions would suggest. The contributors are Garthine Walker, Jenny Kermode, Laura Gowing, Martin Ingram, Jim Sharpe, Malcolm Gaskill, Geoffrey L. Hudson, and Tim Stretton.

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