In recent years, a number of feminist scholars have promoted an ‘ethics of kindness’, or even ‘love’, as a cultural response to what is seen to be the increasing selfishness, competitiveness and isolation of contemporary constructions of self and family. In some cases this is articulated as an act of resistance to the logic of capitalist systems, where success is measured in individual achievements, not group relationships. An ‘ethics of kindness’ of this sort is a social investment, by both society and its individuals, in behaving in a particular manner – one where we remember to ‘be kind’, to think of others when we act and, as importantly, to see kindness as a key value to be taken into account in our decision-making. If the contemporary world embraces kindness as a cultural value, a historian might describe it as the mentalité of an age, an attitude or mindset that fundamentally underpinned, and so can be used to explain, how individuals engaged with the world around them. But kindness is also an emotion or emotional practice, a set of thoughts and actions that is tied to and operates reciprocally with felt experience. Given this, we could describe a widespread social and political commitment to kindness as a form of ‘emotional regime’, to use William Reddy’s term, a dominant norm for emotional life in relation to which other emotions and emotional practices are defined.

Yet, in some ways, it exceeds this definition, acting not just as a norm, but an ethic or value – an emotional aspiration, as well as a constraint.

This chapter argues that love played such a role within early-modern Europe, fundamentally shaping how people interacted with each other and did so in gendered ways. It begins with a discussion of how early-modern Europeans understood love to operate in the making of their communities, before going on to discuss the impact for women’s felt experiences as neighbours and within the family. It argues that neighbourly love may have been especially important for women, who used it to exercise agency and even power within their families and communities.

**Early-modern love**

The nature and boundaries of emotion in the early-modern period have been topics of long and ongoing debate since it was suggested that, due to high mortality rates and hierarchical social structures, individuals and families were ‘low affect’. A robust response from social
historians actively demonstrated the importance of love, both as an ideal and a practice, within early-modern families, but this work primarily focussed on ‘individual feeling’, on how people felt about those closest to them, rather than exploring how love operated as a cultural ideal for communal living. This is perhaps remarkable given that an appreciation of the investment of early-modern people in the concept of community has been so significant to interpreting early-modern behaviours, whether in the domain of morality, economy, neighbourliness or social order.

Barbara Rosenwein has perhaps come closest in her exploration of love in the Middle Ages, recognising its range of meanings. But her focus was in exploring love as part of a shared vocabulary of emotional expression that enabled an emotional community to form, rather than a dominant cultural ideal or ethic. Closer again has been the work on early-modern friendship that, in locating and justifying same-sex (but not always sexual) love within philosophical ideals of friendship, has provided insight into the wider social norms and values that enable individual feeling. Given the focus of their research, however, such scholars have not extrapolated from this work to think about the implications for wider societal emotional structures. Yet, as Claudia Jarzebowski has astutely noted, early-modern society cannot be understood without an appreciation for the love of God that was demanded of members of the Christian community.

That God ‘so loved the world that he gave his only son’ was a fundamental belief shared by most people across early-modern Christian Europe. God’s redeeming love encompassed all believers and was manifested within them as grace; in turn, when grace – the divine working of God – acted on individuals, they were enabled to love others, whether their subjects, their spouse or their neighbour. This form of love – known as caritas – involved the mobilisation of God’s love, through the Christian, into the wider community and in turn brought people closer to God through their loving interactions. It was a virtue and it could be distinguished from love as a passion, which led people into sin (notably sexual sin). Christian caritas was expected to be manifested in everyday behaviours between members of the early-modern community. As Romans 13:9 (KJV) noted when discussing the rules that bound the orderly community, ‘if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’. Whilst this chapter concentrates on Christian Europe, it is worth noting that similar beliefs were held within both Muslim and Jewish European faith communities.

For late medieval Europeans, caritas was not just a form of goodwill, but was expected to be accompanied by passionate bodily sensation, in much the same way as that inspired through romantic love. Indeed, for some early-modern writers, romantic, spiritual and communal love were experienced as similar strong sensations or desires, differing only in the object at which love was directed. John Calvin reminded his followers of the ‘zeal and affection’ that they should show towards other members of the Christian community. He directly compared this with the love shared by members of the same family, reminding them that their shared parentage (as God’s children) demonstrated ‘how strong the feeling of brotherly love between us ought to be’. Brotherly love was a gender neutral term for communal feeling, but, as will be explored, caritas as social practice was often interpreted through a gendered lens. Women’s love, informed by stereotypes about their lack of reason, was viewed as more prone to corruption.

For ministers and others espousing neighbourly love, this model for feeling had to confront a long-standing commitment of individuals to their kin groups, social bonds that not only demanded affective connection but expected individuals to prioritise family
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over others – something Calvin dismissed as ‘lusts of the flesh’. In the seventeenth century, recognition of the strong emotional connection towards family and kin moved from religious debate into secular explorations of human nature, which emphasised affection towards kin as a ‘natural’ trait designed to ensure the survival of the species. Women were particularly important in such scientific modelling, as a mother’s love was seen as the first human bond, with other affective relationships building upon it. Such thinkers, still operating within a Christian framework, did not deny the importance of the brotherly love expected of the Christian community, but rather understood the felt experience of love as heightened amongst close relatives and reduced amongst those who were more distantly connected. Love was felt differently depending on the nature of the loving relationship.

Instead, natural law theorists saw brotherly love as a key sociable and Christian duty designed to enable the successful functioning of society; it was a product of contractual or ethical relationships (in a similar fashion to that born of marriage), rather than nature. The ideas of natural scientists became more prominent in the eighteenth century and so an emphasis on communal love began to reduce. By the end of the century, whilst explicit usage of the term ‘brotherly love’ remained important for fraternities and some political movements, such as that amongst the French radicals, the nature of the love that bound society together had shifted. Neighbourly love was understood as a form of benevolence towards fellow man and a political commitment to ‘sympathy’ between mankind. Sympathy was a form of emotional communication, where people were expected to have fellow feeling with others and act generously towards them. This was something that women were expected to be particularly good at, as they were ‘naturally’ more humane than men. Neighbourly love was now felt as pity and compassion for the less fortunate, but, like the brotherly love of earlier centuries, it still remained a key ethic that bound together the Christian community.

Across the period, love was not simply an abstract concept or bodily feeling, but was closely tied to social behaviour and understood as a social practice. In pre-Reformation and Catholic Europe, Christians, both men and women, were enjoined to demonstrate their love by practicing the seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy. The former consisted of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Spiritual works involved instructing the ignorant, counselling the doubtful, admonishing sinners, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving offences willingly, comforting the afflicted, and praying for the living and the dead. For mainstream Catholics, these actions, inspired by grace, were necessary for salvation, not because works saved, but because they were an instrument (alongside the sacraments) through which God’s grace could flow and through which the Christian was purified. As only the pure could enter the presence of God, such rituals of sanctification could speed the Christian’s movement through purgatory.

The major Reformed sects rejected both purgatory and ‘salvation by works’, emphasising justification as a single event rather than a process of striving. Yet, they also believed that the grace of God was revealed through works; that is, good Christians manifested their faith through action. Some Reformed sects, such as branches of Methodism in the early eighteenth century, shared a similar position to their Catholic predecessors, viewing good works as essential to the process of purification. In Protestant contexts then, whilst the emphasis on ‘good works’ was different from that in a Catholic context, nonetheless, caritas – the love of God manifested – remained an important Christian virtue that should be displayed
through loving behaviour. It was the act of love – not charity or good actions – that formed the bond that tied together early-modern people as a community. Love was a form of ethic, not simply a feeling, but a set of behaviours and guidelines that directed those behaviours.

Importantly, it was an ethic that was closely tied into local and familial power relationships that reinforced the importance of male power, female subordination and gendered hierarchies. It was the love of God, his grace, that placed monarchs, like other people, within their appropriate spheres, and legitimate authority was expected to be exercised with a share of God’s grace by a loving monarch, one that renounced his tyranny through his benevolent love. The importance of affection to rulership manifested in a wide range of literature and political theory of the period. The Scot, James VI viewed himself as a ‘loving father’, ‘caring for [the people] more then for himselfe, knowing himselfe to be ordained for them, and not they for him’. Yet, similarly Elizabeth I constantly referenced herself as a loving prince. During the English Exclusion Crisis, Whigs and Tories both agreed that affection was vital to ensuring non-tyrannical rule, but debated whether a non-biological father figure could be trusted to feel appropriately towards his or her people. In response to Republican challenge, Jens Snederdoff, the eighteenth-century Danish philosopher, argued that ‘Virtue … consists on the monarch’s side of love for the people, and on the part of the people of love for the monarch, but both must rest on love for the common good’. The position of the monarch over the state was replicated in other contexts, from local communities, civic organisations, to the household; all shared (at least ideally) a male leader who exercised his power benevolently.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, love was imagined as male emotion. As an emotion that was both a channelling of God’s grace and which justified the exercise of authority in societies with a strict gender hierarchy, love became particularly associated with the men who held such authority. The love that wives, families and communities owed their patriarchs tended to be expressed in terms of obedience, duty and gratitude. Subordinates demonstrated their love through their acceptance of their social position, the fulfilment of their responsibilities and through expressing the appropriate emotions associated with them. In this, ‘brotherly love’ reflected the hierarchies that the early-modern world considered to be natural and reflective of good order. Yet, just as there were contexts where early-modern women were able to exercise authority, so too women found spaces to love authoritatively. Moreover, given the association between love and power, acts of love could become sites of political resistance and renegotiation of social order, as will be explored below.

As a masculine emotion, women’s exercise of love, like their position in society more broadly, was framed by gendered expectations around appropriate loving behaviour. Across the period women found themselves in positions of authority where they were expected to exercise loving patriarchy, whether that was as monarchs, mother superiors of convents or as widows heading their own households. Yet, there was significant cultural anxiety around women’s ability to exercise godly love appropriately. John Knox famously argued that ‘the administration of the grace of God is denied to all woman’. He believed that women’s ‘natural weakness and inordinate appetites’ – including the passions of avarice, lust, sudden joy and desire for dominion – made them unfit to godly rule, leading them into tyranny and the destruction of social order. John Alymer responded, not by critiquing the general principle of women’s emotional weakness, but by arguing that female monarchs were given strength by God and good counsel that enabled them to control their ‘excessive passion’.
Early-modern female monarchs, like Elizabeth I (1533–1603) of England and Anne (1665–1714) of Great Britain, described themselves as ‘mothers of the nation’, in much the same way as their male counterparts located themselves as ‘fathers’. Yet, as a mother and not a father, Anne was thought to show too much tenderness towards her subjects. Her critics argued that her love lacked the authority and discipline of male love, and led her to have favourites. Isabel I of Castile (1451–1504), despite ruling Spain jointly with her husband, was advised by conduct writers that her role was to be ‘compassionate like a mother’, ‘defending the lowly against the force of the great’. Isabel was not expected to exercise an authoritative love, but, like queens consort, to use her natural tenderness to encourage godly compassion and good rule in her spouse. Thus, when regent for her son Charles IX of France, Catherine de’Medici (1519–1589) framed herself as the holder of her deceased husband’s heart – she claimed his masculine love as her own to justify her political authority.

For monarchs, like other women, the way that God’s love was manifested through women was not expected to mirror its operation in men, but rather reflected their appropriate place within the social order.

**Loving neighbours**

A cultural ethic of love provided a framework for early-modern social relationships, which is not to say that social practice always conformed to the ideal, nor that individual motivations for conforming to the ideal could not be varied and complex. As is well recognised, early-modern communities were often fragmented, sites of conflict and dispute, as much as locations of harmonious neighbourly love. Yet, what was key was not the failure of early-modern communities to live up to an ideal, but the ways in which they drew on this ethic of loving within their disputes, conflicts and relationships. As Susan Karant-Nunn notes, the peasants during the German Peasant War of 1525 justified their actions as a response to the failure of godly love by the social elite. Maintaining a watchful eye on neighbours and reporting them for discipline to church authorities when they sinned, as happened across Europe, was a loving action (one of the Spiritual Acts of Mercy), ensuring the salvation of the individual and the spiritual health of the wider community. Laura Gowing shows how early-modern English women used this role to discipline other women in their communities, offering some women significant social power but also encouraging a wide array of other emotions, including anger, jealousy and a desire for revenge.

Moreover, whilst brotherly love was not a new idea during the early-modern period, it was an emotional ideal that was given greater structural foundation with the growth of the early-modern ‘state’, manifested in the growth of charitable institutions, the development of confraternities, and the consolidation of guilds, local government and monarchical control. Whilst such lateral bonds between people were not unimportant in the medieval period, early-modern Europeans had more opportunities to bind themselves together as neighbours, to think of themselves as part of overlapping bodies, communities and eventually nations. In this, women, like men, came to have greater opportunities to practice neighbourly love and to build institutions that rested on that ideal; but, reflecting wider social hierarchies, their chances to do so were shaped by their gender.

Whilst many guilds, fraternities, clubs and associations excluded women, there was a place for women in early-modern associational life, particularly as part of organisations that sought to expound neighbourly love and charity, rather than manage economic and political power. Confraternities were especially popular in Catholic Europe, both before and after the
Reformation. Designed as sites of lay religious devotion, they created mixed- and single-sex communities based on religion, occupation, neighbourhood, or associated with a religious cause. Members of particular confraternities came together for regular prayer and worship, collected money to support members through hardship, provided aid during times of need, and ensured the Christian burial of their dead.  

Münster’s neighbourhood confraternities (Petrobruderschaften) recruited from select streets, with the aim of creating ‘good, friendly and loving neighbourhood between neighbours, to keep the peace and unity, to help each other in time of need and illness, sadness and other misfortunes and difficulties, to soothe and show human comfort’. Münster’s confraternities devoted to Mary sometimes restricted male membership, but not female, providing a particular domain for female worship and community. Similarly, whilst there were few women in Florence’s late medieval confraternities, the surrounding countryside saw significant numbers appearing in both mixed and female-only groups. Over the centuries, women’s access to Italian confraternities waned and rose, depending on political circumstances, whilst in Spain women’s participation and whether they held leadership roles varied enormously between regions. In these roles, women had the opportunity to organise worship, offer spiritual and practical guidance, oversee the provision of aid and charity to their neighbours and to provide patronage. Christian confraternities were paralleled in southern Europe with Jewish organisations, where women’s roles were often more prominent. In sixteenth-century Ferrara, Jewish women signed the confraternity original charter, which explicitly stated that women members should have active roles. Whilst structurally similar to Christian groups, Jewish charitable endeavours were extended beyond their members to all poor and needy. Such organisations were the manifestation of neighbourly love in action; groups that were designed to ensure that an ethic of love was applied in the everyday.

Protestant states formally rejected confraternities, seeing them as lay efforts to imitate the clergy. Yet, it was not neighbourly love they refused, but rather that Protestants, particularly those following in the Presbyterian tradition, saw the duties of the church towards its members as the responsibility of everyone. Rather than encouraging separate and overlapping communities of devotion, they sought to draw together the body of Christ within the local parish, seeing the church itself, followed by the family, as the location of shared devotion, communal prayer, charitable love, neighbourhood and, equally important, social and moral discipline. That the leaders of most of the Protestant churches were almost exclusively male excluded women from the positions of authority that they held within all-female confraternities (mixed confraternities tended to have a male direction), but as full members of the godly community, women were able to participate through acts of charity, policing neighbours and occasionally forms of spiritual leadership. Baptists, found in Germany, the Netherlands and England, recognised women as lay preachers and prophets; Moravians (originating in central Europe but spreading quickly) grouped their congregation in choirs and acknowledged female spiritual leadership.

Neighbourly love may have been more important for women than men. Situated within patriarchal family units that subordinated women to men, it was within communities – in relationships with neighbours – that women found space to hold authority. As Bernard Capp’s classic English case study demonstrates, women’s relationships with their neighbours – their gossips – provided both vital sustenance and support networks, and space to exercise authority as they sought to maintain morality in their neighbourhoods. Such authoritative roles within their communities may have reinforced women’s exercise of power in other domains, such as credit networks and financial brokering. In early-modern Denmark, legislation that
allowed poor women to trade outside of gilds as an act of Christian charity could even be used by women to establish successful businesses. Elite and middle-class women found multiple sites of authority. Elite women, who were often well educated, were called on to head juries of matrons, passing judgements of sexual immorality on the bodies of women who denied giving birth.

Women of the aristocracy, nobility and gentry acted as patrons for confraternities and charities, particularly those aimed at providing relief for women and children. French aristocratic dévots financed several charitable endeavours, not least St Vincent de Paul’s Filles de la Charité (Daughters of Charity), channelling Christian love through single-sex institutions. Many, like their husbands, quickly recognised the opportunities for such patronage to maintain their own authority, providing lavish feasts, luxurious fabrics and encouraging exuberant festivities that drew attention to their own ‘good works’. Such activities were informed by an ethical framework that saw charitable giving as an act of worship for God; exuberant displays of charity were a form of glorification of God. Yet, increasingly, such behaviour irritated the male leaders that ran charities and confraternities and they placed women under pressure to demonstrate their prudent use of resources. The male officers of Bologna’s Opera Pia de Poveri Medicanti, perhaps frustrated that more subtle attempts had not worked, eventually printed and distributed public proclamations warning their female counterparts to ‘abstain from any expenses which might be judged superfluous’.

Lower down the ranks, women might be utilised by the church to collect alms on behalf of the poor, sometimes in contexts where charitable activity was increasingly institutionalised and begging was restricted. In Verdun, it was bourgeois women who were permitted to go about the streets with alms-boxes and to stand with collection boxes outside the church on Sundays. In Münster, Lichtmutter (typically wealthy laywomen) not only maintained the candles and lighting in church, but collected alms and the donations associated with funeral and other religious rituals. Opportunities for women in Protestant contexts were more restricted, but the ‘minister’s wife’ played a key role in local communities, whilst women were patrons and engaged members of charities, including orphanages, elderly care facilities and hospitals. In these spaces, women were provided opportunity to exercise ‘brotherly’ love in ways that affirmed their place within the early-modern Christian community and, on occasion, to exploit the social authority that engaging in such acts of loving provided. Whilst framed in terms of women’s ‘tenderness’ and motherly role, women’s charitable work nonetheless expanded women’s access to love as a masculine emotion.

Conversely, as a socially and economically disadvantaged group, women relied on neighbourly love, and particularly charity, to survive. Across Europe women were more likely to live in poverty, to seek poor relief and to engage with charitable institutions than men. Female beggars were also more visible in public spaces, in part because being unable to provide for yourself or your family was more shameful for men. Within the Christian faith, women, particularly if widowed and elderly, were viewed as members of the virtuous poor, especially selected by God as deserving of charity. Widows reminded patrons of their special status and the blessings that flowed from providing aid to such groups. Joan Robertson, a Scottish peasant, wrote to the Duke of Buccleuch ‘May the blessings of god even be with you for your former kindness to me – your Nobel graces will have the widow and the fathelas [fatherless] blissing’. Isobel Grant was more effusive in her letter to her patron Miss Grant, observing that ‘as I am not in a Capacity to Retallerate [retaliate] your Good offices. I hope the almighty who is a husband to the widow & father to the fatherless will’.
In making such reminders, women like Isobel and Joan were articulating the reciprocal nature of the charitable exchange, where patrons were provided with the opportunity to allow God’s grace to work through them and so to receive God’s blessing. Moreover, the gratitude that recipients of charity were expected to convey to patrons played a significant role in binding the poor into the community and ensuring their respect for social and gendered hierarchies. The virtuous emotion of gratitude was not simply a feeling of thankfulness, but a commitment that bound the poor in a relationship of ‘reverence and respect’ to their patrons and entailed a ‘desire to return benefits’, even if for the very poor that return was spiritual in nature. An investment in charitable giving then ensured that the appropriate lines of power and authority that were suggested within early-modern imaginings of Christian love were activated.

For this reason, in many early-modern communities, the poor, particularly the virtuous female and local poor, were not inconvenient outsiders, but through engagement in charitable exchange were recognised as part of the Christian community. Receipt of poor relief could be a marker of social status and membership of society. This was reinforced in many parts of Europe by a persistent belief that charity should be personal. Whilst a number of early-modern cities tried to rationalise poor relief through banning street begging and managing charity through institutions, people remained resistant to these models, persisting in giving to individuals on the streets and at doorways. In other places like Scotland, personalised giving was viewed as preferable, leading to more direct patronage relationships between rich and poor. Importantly, it was women who were at the frontline of such giving. As going from door to door to seek alms remained a key charitable practice, it was women, who were physically present at home and who managed the household, who gave generously and offered hospitality to the poor. For such people, the exercise of Christian love was a significant sociable activity that brought rich and poor together as a community, as neighbours, and it was an act that produced not only love, but pleasure, gratitude, social order and harmony.

None of this is to suggest that early-modern communities were without contest or conflict. The same Christian love that authorised nosey women to intervene in the sins of their neighbours might create anger and violence when those judged as immoral resisted such labels. The activity of exuberant female patrons might irritate or challenge the authority of their male counterparts, whilst, especially at times of economic downturn or war, expanding numbers of poor created contest over resources that required communities to define more strictly who was part of ‘their’ Christian community and who was a stranger, who was ‘deserving’ and who was not. This, in turn, could create poverty and hardship, argument and debate, and rituals of cruelty and exclusion. As a number of historians have noted, it is also difficult to ignore that, at times, acts of love and charity appeared to be motivated more from selfish desire for earthly or spiritual benefit than the selfless exercise of God’s grace. Yet throughout the period and across Europe, such debate and discussion was underpinned by a broader Christian ethic of the desirability and importance of neighbourly love in everyday relationships that supported certain types of authority and support for women.

**Loving wives and mothers**

It was not only in the community that God’s love was expected to inform social relationships. The ideal love between husband and wife should be a manifestation of God’s love – an emotion that was situated in contradistinction to romantic love that encouraged young people to disobey parents, to commit sexual immorality and to disrupt social order.
the Catholic tradition, marriage was a sacrament, a covenant with God that was designed to further the sanctification of the believer. It did this both by removing the temptation to sin and by providing a channel for God’s grace, a love that strengthened the bond between husband and wife (ensuring the indissolubility of marriage) and spread outwards towards children and wider kin. Marriage also symbolically represented the bond between Christ and the Church. The Eastern Orthodox churches took the Catholic position that marriage was a sacrament, but Protestants following in the Lutheran and Calvinist traditions rejected its sacramental quality. They saw marriage as a sacred covenant, which, as for other Christians, created one flesh of man and woman. It was not however a channel for the grace of God. On the other hand, the post-Reformation household in both Catholic and Protestant countries was considered a key site for the practice of communal love and the manifestation of God’s grace in operation.

Given that until the Reformation, marital love was a form of God’s grace in action, and because early-modern society placed more weight on love as an action or set of practices (than a ‘feeling’), most early-modern European societies did not believe that love was necessary before marriage, although it was an expectation of marriage. This had a significant impact on courtship practices. Whilst many communities across this period allowed couples to court and engage in a wide range of gift-giving rituals, flirting and affectionate touch, it was also not uncommon for courtships to be short or for couples to have arranged marriages. As marriage required free consent, forced marriage was disapproved of and most couples expected to at least have the right to veto a proposed match, but there was no particular expectation that couples should feel strongly about each other before they wed.

This understanding of love enabled early-modern European communities to envision the purpose of marriage in terms of the benefits for kin and community networks. As marriage enabled the working of God’s grace to flow through the couple, their love for each other was also a form of brotherly love that tied families into near relation. Just as marriage provided an opportunity for God to strengthen the love of the marrying couple, so it was an opportunity for his love to strengthen the Christian body, in this case the family’s kin. As a result, marriage became a key ritual through which warring families could be brought into godly communion, or through which economic or dynastic ambition could be reinforced through brotherly love. In this, it mirrored the medieval tradition of the ‘kiss of peace’, where, through a corporal ritual activity, the grace of God was enabled to transform destructive bodily emotion (hatred, anger, grief) into peace and brotherly love. If Jewish and Muslim faith communities construed ‘love’ through their own religious frameworks and laws, in practice their courtship rituals and use of marriage to consolidate broader social relationships were very similar, informed by the legal and cultural contexts in which they lived.

Despite many reformed Churches rejecting marriage as a sacrament, in practice Christian courtship practices were more likely to be informed by social class, region and place in the life course than religious affiliation. However, there is evidence that the rejection of the sacramental quality of marriage raised questions about the role of love within courtship and marriage. Despite believing that marital love was distinct from (immoral) sexual desire, Jean Calvin believed that mutual attraction was important for courting couples. Martin Luther understood marital love as a form of caritas implanted in the heart of courting couples that enabled their marital success. When such marriages failed, Lutheran reformers then blamed couples for not recognising the ‘true love’ of God that would have enabled their marriages to succeed, and instead trusting in false love or lust. Protestants therefore placed less reliance
on love as practice and more emphasis on right feeling, something that was mirrored in their devotional practices. Love within marriage was gendered. The union of two people into one in practice meant the subordination of female will and identity into that of her spouse. Most social commentators and women themselves accepted that a loving marriage reflected the gendered hierarchies that were vital to orderly patriarchal society, where women should show obedience to their husbands. Moreover, most women desired to demonstrate their loving obedience as evidence of their commitment to their marriage and to God. Women displayed their love by conforming to gendered models of acceptable wisely behaviour, fulfilling their household and kin responsibilities and duties, by practicing obedience, showing gratitude for their husband’s benevolence and acting in a neighbourly fashion to their new marital kin and the wider Christian community. Of course, as women were thought to have less control over their passions, women’s love was considered more likely to go astray and particularly to lead them into lust. The benevolent patriarch therefore had to be careful to manage his wife’s emotions for her spiritual security and the success of their marriage.

As well as being loving wives, women had the opportunity to love as mothers. Within Christian marriage, a mother’s love for a child was a manifestation of God’s grace and an important site of female authority, as children owed their mothers respect and obedience. In fulfilling their maternal roles, women performed a significant Christian duty. A mother’s love for her illegitimate child was more contentious. Natural law theorists felt that motherly love was an innate instinct that did not distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate children. But others recognised that children ‘born in sin’ were more likely to be killed or abandoned by ‘unnatural’ mothers, providing a stark challenge to this new emphasis on a natural maternal affection. Moreover, as the love mothers felt for illegitimate children could not be a manifestation of God’s grace, but was born of lust, it may have been a problematic emotion in the first place.

Even within the bonds of marriage, maternal love caused problems for early-modern Europeans. Some commentators, like Michel de Montaigne, were sceptical of its power, observing that the widespread practice of wet-nursing was suggestive that ‘this natural affection, to which we give such authority, has very weak roots’. Other, largely male, social commentators felt that motherly love was too passionate, reflective of female weakness and their inability to control their emotions. Women were considered to be particularly susceptible to excessive mourning and illness on the death of their children; in extreme cases, their love led them into sin, as when mothers murdered their children in fits of religious mania (to save their souls) or to protect them from violent fathers. Women’s tendency to strong emotion also placed their children at risk, as their feelings could be communicated in the womb or through breastmilk and so risked their vulnerable children’s health. The gestating mother was thus instructed: ‘overcome the passions of your soul, & do not let yourself go in excessive movements of sadness or fear, or even of joy’. More broadly, women’s motherly instinct was believed to make them compassionate and tender, but, without the ability to contain this instinct through reason, women were thought to be unsuited to political power.

Such excessive emotion ultimately could endanger a woman’s soul. Particularly amongst puritan (Protestant non-conformist) families, excessive love of children was thought to be a sin, as children were made ‘idols’ that distracted the Christian from his or her faith. Parents were encouraged to love their children moderately, as a form of grace, rather than immoderately, which risked angering God and having children removed through death. In this,
Calvin’s warning not to place family and kin relationships ahead of those of the Christian community can be seen in operation. It may well be that such religious distinctions played out in child-rearing, with Protestant parents showing less affection than their Catholic counterparts. Yet the evidence for this is weak, with affectionate and tender parents, as well as cruel, found on both sides of the religious divide.\[^87\]

Another commonplace was the tendency amongst parents to show partiality towards particular children. Both men and women were known to prefer sons, bestowing on them greater levels of resource, education and care.\[^88\] Yet, there were exceptions and many parents had a ‘favourite’ child. Whilst natural law theorists thought such preferences unnatural, given that ideals for loving were strongly tied together with models for political and gendered hierarchies, they are not surprising. Love was expected to reflect social hierarchies, such as that between the eldest son and younger siblings, or between men and women. Moreover, early-modern European societies placed little emphasis on equality as an ideal. If children were expected to be loved as equal members of the Christian community, their positioning within that community, and so the nature of the love they should experience, was not necessarily expected to be the same. This may have meant that girls were provided with less food, a different and sometimes lesser education, entitled to fewer household resources, and perhaps even less affection.\[^89\] There is some evidence that baby girls were more likely to be abandoned during times of economic hardship and famine.\[^90\]

**Conclusion**

What early-modern women felt and should feel was strongly shaped by wider norms for acceptable emotional behaviour. Here emotion cannot be understood as simply a biological urge whose meaning was glossed by culture, but rather a form of social practice, in which emotion was generated by the reciprocal relationships between models for emotional behaviour (discourse), the appropriate actions that people were taught corresponded to particular emotions, and ‘felt’ experience (the physical manifestation of emotion in the body). For early-modern Christian Europeans, what should be felt, and the appropriate responses to such feeling, were shaped by an ethic of Christian love. Under this teaching, Christian love was a manifestation of the operation of the grace of God at work within human beings. For Catholics, this led to sanctification; for Protestants, it simply reflected their previous justification.

Christian love ideally should be a ‘strong feeling’ for all mankind, although some recognised that this was shaped by the nature of the personal relationship. Importantly, it should be manifested through action, loving behaviour. As a virtue, such love was also distinct from earthly appetites and passion that led the Christian into sin. For women raised and taught to feel in this environment, this ethic for feeling underpinned and framed both their emotional experiences and their engagement with the wider world. Christian love was a form of logic that taught women to respond in particular ways to the people they encountered and the events that they observed; it was a framework through which their other emotional experiences – of love, lust, jealousy, anger, gratitude, fear, etc. – were understood and judged.

As a feeling closely tied to action, it was also an emotional practice that presented women with constraints and opportunities. The construction of Christian love was closely tied to traditional models for social order. The ‘administration of God’s grace’, as Knox put it, was viewed as a male privilege that reflected their biblically sanctioned domination over women. The exercise of love was an act of power that reinforced the social hierarchies necessary for
good order. As such, women’s love should be a reciprocation of God’s love that reflected their subordination, not the operation of godly authority. Moreover, women were widely understood to have less control over their emotions, leading them into error and tyranny. Christian love reinforced women’s subordinate positioning within early-modern society. Despite this, as in other contexts, women found themselves in positions of leadership that provided them with opportunities to love authoritatively. As importantly, that women were expected to be full members of the body of Christ, and so to show the working of God’s grace provided them with occasions for such leadership, often through charitable engagements in confraternities and as patrons of philanthropic activity, or as godly mothers in the household.

As an ethic that emphasised community, Christian love also brought benefits for poor women. Neighbourly love required people to exercise charity towards the poor in their society, and some groups of women, such as widows, were designated virtuous poor, who should especially be provided with aid. As a model for love that provided reciprocal benefits for patron and client, Christian love reinforced the view that the poor had a significant role to play in society and reminded the rich that good social order required them to be in loving relationship with the weakest. Similarly within marriage, a benevolent husband should exercise his authority lovingly and with an appreciation for the community that should be formed between spouses. A Christian ethic for love reinforced the communality of the body of Christ, emphasising people’s roles in relation to each other, rather than seeing them as independent actors in competition. For the modern reader, and for those that found themselves subject to discipline and constraint, such communality could be stifling and oppressive; for others, it enabled social harmony. Love, as an emotional ethic, was, thus, a key feature of early-modern relationships and a key dynamic in shaping the gendered social practices of emotion.

Notes
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