

Women of the Road



Hortense Mancini (left) and her sister Marie gained notoriety in the seventeenth century for abandoning their families in favor of life on the road.

**FOLLOWING
THE
SEVENTEENTH
CENTURY'S
THELMA AND
LOUISE**
BY SHERYL
FLATOW

It sounds like the plot of a novel: two sisters in seventeenth-century Europe, trapped in unhappy marriages — one to a Roman prince, one to a French duke — abandon their families for a life of travel and adventure. They hitch rides from country to country, evading kidnappers and stalkers, as they try to develop a network of friends to sustain their journey.

But it's all true. The sisters, Hortense and Marie Mancini, are the central figures in a book being written by Elizabeth Goldsmith, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of romance studies. Goldsmith first encountered the Mancinis in 2001 while studying the memoirs of six seventeenth-century women, and she found the sisters' choices — and their words — especially intriguing.

"The secular women became notorious because they left their families and traveled, and they wrote to defend their reputations," she says. "I started looking more into Hortense and Marie Mancini, trying to figure out how they traveled, how they got around."

The Mancini sisters, favored nieces of Cardinal Mazarin, the chief minister of France, were brought up in the court of Louis XIV — Marie was the Sun King's first mistress. Both later walked out on their husbands, even though it meant leaving behind their children. Their choice made them prominent figures in the early media of the era and a source of fascination for Goldsmith.

"I'm interested in how women's travel relates to the idea of taking risks and the usefulness of taking risks," she says. "I also wanted to know why women on the road were so fascinating to everybody. Their travels were documented in news gazettes and in correspondence, in addition to their own memoirs."

Eager to learn more about the Mancinis, Goldsmith searched the family archives of Lorenzo Colonna, Marie's husband and a Roman prince. There, she found letters and documents that tracked Marie's and Hortense's journeys.

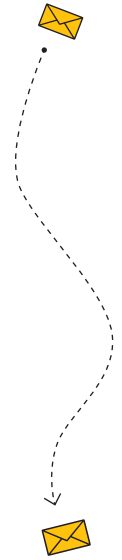
Goldsmith's work revealed the answer to a

mystery: how did two runaway wives travel across Europe during *le grand siècle*? It turns out, the sisters' seemingly arbitrary paths were the direct result of an early and often imperfect form of public transportation — the postal system. "In the late seventeenth century, there were regularly scheduled carriages that carried mail all over Europe," Goldsmith says, "and that's what made it possible for the women to travel the way they did. When I first traced their travels, their routes didn't make any sense to me. Then I realized they were connecting with postal coaches, and they weren't necessarily sure where the coaches would lead them."

Goldsmith finds the sisters' story both surprising and invigorating. "People tend to assume that women from this period weren't able to operate freely at all," she says. "And despite the fact that these women had a very difficult time on the road, there's a kind of exuberance to their stories that I find fascinating and uplifting. They really made something of their lives and their educations in deciding to write about themselves and defend themselves and go public with their stories."

She hopes that historical figures like the Mancinis can help readers see the eddies and whirls in history's flow.

"People are surprised to learn that progress in the area of women's independence does not move steadily from this dark period of the past toward this bright and open period of modernity," she says. "There are different moments in history when you see examples of women being able to defy convention in interesting ways."



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VERNON DOUCETTE



ELIZABETH GOLDSMITH

says she found the exuberance of the Mancini writings fascinating and uplifting. She plans to publish a book on her research, titled *Runaway Women: Hortense and Marie Mancini and the Pleasure of Risk*.