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0521846161 - Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620

Marjorie K. McIntosh

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Part I

Introduction: women and their work

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1 Women's work in its social setting

During the centuries between 1300 and 1620, women played multiple roles within England's society and economy. In social terms, they were most obviously the bearers and raisers of children. Women were expected to marry (though not all did so in practice), and because birth control was not widely used in this period, many were either pregnant or breastfeeding the newest baby much of the time. Some families contained not only the mother's own children but also her stepchildren, since widowers – like widows – commonly remarried. Many households also included live-in servants, usually young people between their mid-teens and their mid-twenties. It was women who provided most of the socialization of all these children and young adults, teaching them the practical skills they would need in their own later lives, showing them how to function socially within families and communities, and supervising their religious development. Women were also the primary care givers for other adults within their households.¹ By attending to the physical and emotional needs of their relatives, they contributed to a positive social environment and enabled men to pursue work outside the home.

In addition, women had essential economic duties within the domestic setting. They were responsible for obtaining food and cooking it, they commonly brewed the ale their families drank, and they made or bought the clothing worn by members of the household.² They fetched water and fuel for cooking, did the laundry, and kept the living space clean. If the head of the family was a craftsman, his wife, daughters, or servants might help with some aspects of his work. Women living in rural areas generally had vegetable gardens and raised poultry, and they often helped with agricultural labor.

¹ For women's roles in attending to "the everyday body," see Riddy, "Looking Closely."

² See, e.g., Hanawalt, "Peasant Women's Contribution to the Home Economy," and Whittle, "The Gender Division of Labour." I am grateful to Dr. Whittle for letting me have a copy of this unpublished paper. Unlike Dr. Whittle, however, I do not define as market production the growing or making of food or other goods at home for domestic consumption in place of ones that would otherwise have had to be purchased.

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All these activities were praised by the male authors of “prescriptive” works that described good women and their roles.³ Sermons, plays, and written texts taught that a woman should be part of a household unit supervised by a male head at every stage of her life: as a daughter, perhaps as a servant with another family, and thereafter as a wife. At all ages women were encouraged to remain within the domestic context, busily employed in their household labors, supporting others, and responding with deference to the man who was responsible for ensuring their good behavior. All these patriarchal expectations were present by 1300, may have been somewhat more muted during the generations after the Black Death of 1348–9, and were expressed with great intensity around 1600.

What one does not learn from prescriptive works is that women were heavily involved in the market economy outside their homes. They were not just consumers, buying goods for themselves and their families. To the contrary, many adolescent girls and adult women, especially those from middling and poorer families, worked to generate their own income. They provided services in return for pay, they loaned money or gathered rent from real estate, and/or they made and sold drink, food, cloth, and clothing. Such work came on top of their duties at home: women did not shed their domestic obligations just because they were bringing in cash. Women living in urban communities were especially likely to have their own incomes, but many of their rural sisters did so too. Women of all marital statuses likewise participated, with wives supplementing their husband’s earnings and singlewomen and widows working to support themselves and sometimes their children. Women’s work was necessary both to the survival of many families and to the successful operation of the broader economy. It was women who brewed ale (England’s staple beverage) and prepared the yarn needed to manufacture woolen cloth (England’s major industry), and it was women who sold many of the goods required by consumers.

Yet their work outside the domestic economy was not valued by the authors of prescriptive texts or town officials. If women’s activities were mentioned at all, it was in negative terms. Men worried about the conduct of women who were out in the public world on their own, free from the control of male relatives. Their sexuality and speech were of particular concern. In periods of limited employment, there was also fear that

³ For a useful summary of this ideological formulation during the medieval period, see Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows*, pp. 3–7; for examples of its articulation during the early modern years, see Aughterson, ed., *Renaissance Woman*. Despite this approval, women’s work as housewives was never regarded as an occupation comparable to that of men.

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working women might take jobs away from men, who were regarded as the natural breadwinners for their families. Even singlewomen and widows who were obliged to earn their own money were not supposed to compete with men. But these patriarchal attitudes did not provide an accurate reflection of many women's actual roles. Working women ignored the messages that told them to restrict their attention to their family and home, and their friends and neighbors were prepared to accept at least many of them as responsible and respected women despite their participation in the wider economy.

This book explores the kinds of work that generated an income for women: the various services they provided for pay, and their role in producing and selling goods. Activities that were less directly related to the money economy have been excluded, not because they were unimportant but simply on pragmatic grounds, to keep the project within manageable bounds. Thus, we do not discuss the tasks that women did on an unpaid basis within their own households, agricultural labor performed on their family's or someone else's land, and selling agricultural items like grain or sheep.⁴ While village women appear occasionally, we will talk mainly about women who lived and worked in small or large towns and cities. The issues associated with women's right to own, control, and inherit landed property, though they were critical components of their broader status and wellbeing, are likewise not discussed here.⁵ To maintain a focus on women's *work*, their role as *consumers* is considered only briefly, in the final chapter.

The study expands our understanding of women's economic roles in England between 1300 and 1620 in several ways. It looks at types of work not commonly addressed before, including the full range of personal services provided by women (like boarding other people in their homes) and their role in money-lending, pawning, and real estate. In examining craft and trading activity – manufacturing and/or selling goods – we go beyond existing studies of particular types of work or specific cities to present a more encompassing picture.⁶ The book also explores how women's personal and economic standing underlay their working lives, how women accessed financial credit, and how gender-based disabilities limited their involvement in the increasingly important upper ranges of England's commercial system. In approaching all these issues, we set women's economic activities within a social context.

⁴ Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society*, esp. pp. 27–38, and Whittle, “The Gender Division of Labour.”

⁵ For these issues, see, e.g., Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows*, Hanawalt, “The Widow's Mite” and her “Dilemma of the Widow,” and Erickson, *Women and Property*.

⁶ For discussion of earlier works, see sect. 2, Ch. 2 below.

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Further, whereas nearly all existing studies stop or start around 1500, this book bridges the transition between the later medieval and early modern periods. In 1300, England was primarily an agricultural economy, though production and export of woolen cloth were to increase rapidly across the following century. By 1620, the economy was marked by large-scale manufacturing, growing international trade, and more formalized systems of credit. Identifying what part women played in the earlier system and how they fared as it changed is essential to our understanding of economic issues, social patterns, and gender relations. We therefore pay close attention to alterations in women's work over time: when they happened, why, and how.

The book also emphasizes variations between regions of England and between types of communities. Thanks to some excellent but previously untapped sources, we show that women who worked in the north of the country operated within an economic and social environment that differed in some respects from the better studied south.⁷ Rather than discussing women's work only in large communities, the study considers smaller towns as well, the setting in which most urban women were active. We present new and unusually rich information about women's participation in the drink and food trades in five market centers, located in different parts of the country and featuring distinctive characteristics. These case studies permit a closer look at such issues as how long women worked, how many trades they pursued, whether they gained any occupational identity, and what status married women and their husbands had within the local community. The answers to these questions suggest that some female traders in the market towns during the later medieval period had a more serious commitment to their work and were held in greater respect than other accounts have suggested.

Finally, this account offers a more personal, engaging picture of working women's lives than has been possible before. Research has commonly been hampered by fairly sterile sources that provide the names of women engaged in income-generating activities but tell us little about their actual experiences. Using a sample of 283 narrative petitions submitted to the royal equity courts between 1470 and 1620, we can go beneath the surface.⁸ These statements, prepared by people involved in disputes over women's economic dealings, describe the specific events and individual human relationships that led to conflict. While the petitions cannot be accepted at face value, they nonetheless provide welcome glimpses into what work meant for women during that period.

⁷ These are petitions to the equity courts, which were located in the north of England as well as the London area.

⁸ See sect. 1, Ch. 2 below.

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As background for later chapters, we need to lay out certain key features of women's work, many of them related to gender issues. Most types of labor were assigned either to men or to women in later medieval and early modern England, but this gender division was not rigid: no taboos made it impossible for people to engage in each other's work. To a limited extent, labor designations rested on physical strength (e.g., the difficulty some women might face in handling a heavy loom) or biological factors (e.g., disruptions of activity caused by pregnancy and childbirth). But far more important was the assumption that because men were the heads of households, they had first claim on those types of work that brought in enough income to support a family. Such occupations were often full time and carried an identity as a member of that craft or trade. The types of paid activity regarded as "women's work" were in most periods part time and poorly paid. Only when there was a labor shortage, when there were not enough men to fill all the available economic niches, were women welcomed into more lucrative jobs. Further, men were free to work away from their homes, to travel to other communities in connection with their business, to participate in public discussion, and to plead in their own right in the courts. Women were not. Although some individual women led active and independent economic lives, and although both husbands and wives contributed to the income of many households, men as a group were privileged over women.⁹

Because women's economic activities were seen as secondary to those of men, their engagement with the market economy was generally shallow and subject to change. Seldom receiving the training that enabled them to enter specialized craftwork, they commonly shifted between different types of economic involvement over time, in accordance with their domestic responsibilities and their household's financial needs. Women were therefore less likely to have a visible primary occupation and were rarely described in terms of the kind of work they did. (While men were usually labeled by their employment, as a carpenter or merchant, women were normally labeled by their marital status.)

Further, many women pursued diverse kinds of income-generating activities simultaneously, in some cases helping their husbands with their work while also taking on assorted projects of their own. Although multiple economic activities were found among men as well, they were a more pronounced feature of female life. In the chapters that follow we will consider the various types of economic participation separately, but we must remember that in practice they were by no means mutually exclusive. A married woman with young children at home, for example,

⁹ Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, pts. I and II.

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might help her husband, a glover, with fine sewing while also spinning yarn that she sold to a nearby weaver; she raised chickens she could take to market if the household needed cash; and she might earn some money in the short term by caring for an elderly neighbor who had broken her leg. Clearly such a woman contributed to her household's financial security and to the economy as a whole, though she worked largely within the context of her own home and had no occupational identity of her own.

Demographic factors affected women's need and ability to generate an income. England experienced significant shifts in population patterns across the centuries under consideration, with probable (though poorly documented) repercussions for family composition and fertility levels.¹⁰ In periods when the population was large relative to available resources, as was true around 1300 and again around 1600, an abundant supply of labor meant lowered wages. Under those circumstances, many poor women were forced to earn money to help their households get by. But because their labor provided unwanted competition to that offered by men, what little work they could find was likely to be undesirable. In 1348–9, however, the first outbreak of bubonic plague killed 35–40 percent of England's population. The disease continued thereafter, with additional national epidemics and local flare-ups that occurred roughly once per decade. The population thus remained low and stagnant until the early sixteenth century. Because the economy was buoyant until the mid-fifteenth century in many parts of the country, a labor shortage resulted. Some women during the post-1348–9 generations had more choice about whether and how to enter the market economy.

The particular demographic and economic regime operative within a given period and place could have differing consequences for women depending upon their socio-economic level, type of participation in the market, and family situation. Conditions of low wages and high prices, for example, might be damaging to a landless widow who supported her young children through her labor but had to rent housing and buy food and clothing. Under those same circumstances, an older married woman who raised vegetables for market sale and brewed ale commercially, using capital furnished by her husband and employing poorly paid local labor, might thrive.

Marital patterns, too, had an impact on women's work. In simplest terms, singlewomen and widows could be forced to earn their own income since they had no husband to provide for them. These categories of

¹⁰ See, e.g., Hatcher, *Plague, Population* and his "Understanding the Population History of England," and Wrigley and Schofield, *The Population History of England*.

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women formed a significant fraction of the population. In 1377, following nearly thirty years of plague, at least a third of all adult women in England had never married or were widows.¹¹ Many young people were employed as servants before they married, and couples generally did not wed until they could afford to set up their own households. As a result, the average age of first marriage for non-elite women was probably high.¹² We lack concrete information about the later medieval period, but during the second half of the sixteenth century, the average age of marriage for women was twenty-two to twenty-seven years. Since some women never married, a considerable number of women were single at any given time.

Other women were left as widows, responsible at least temporarily for their own households. Though some widows remarried, others stayed on their own for the rest of their lives.¹³ Bubonic plague and the other epidemic illnesses of the period were not gender specific, but the death of a spouse had a greater economic impact on women than on men, especially in towns. A man could generally continue his previous economic activity without a wife at home, whereas a widow or daughter who had just become a household head had to come up with a way to support herself and in some cases her children or other dependent relatives. Some widows carried on their husband's former business, but others developed income-generating activities of their own. It is not surprising to see more not-married women participating in the public economy during the disease-ridden generations after 1348–9.

A woman's ability to generate her own income depended heavily upon "credit." That term, in its multiple meanings, will recur throughout this book. In one sense, credit referred to a person's individual reputation or standing. A woman's personal credit, which had social and economic components, was created and assessed through human relationships: in her dealings with relatives, friends, neighbors, the people she saw at church or the alehouse, and those with whom she did business. Credit also had more specifically financial meanings, referring to the various

¹¹ Kowaleski, "Singlewomen," pp. 325–44.

¹² See sect. 1, Ch. 3 below. It has been suggested that after 1348–9 some English women may have delayed marriage so they could continue their independent working lives, and pastoral and medical treatises imply that at least a few women tried to avoid having children through contraception or abortion (Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, esp. ch. 8, Biller, *The Measure of Multitude*, esp. ch. 8, and Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, esp. chs. 4–5).

¹³ Younger widows and those who had inherited some property were especially likely to remarry. In London, 1598–1619, 35 percent of all women marrying were widows at the time; two-thirds of the widows of tradesmen and craftsmen had remarried within a year of the death of their former husband (Brotsky, "Widows"). See also, among recent works on widows, Keene, "Tanners' Widows," Hanawalt, "Remarriage as an Option," and her "The Widow's Mite."

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mechanisms that regulated the exchange of money, goods, or services and the promise of future payment. Loans of cash or property were common, with interest sometimes charged, and many agreements for goods or services were set up with the expectation that delivery or payment would be made later. Most working women were therefore embedded in complex networks of obligations due by them and to them. Whether they succeeded in their business often depended upon their ability to access loans or postpone their debts to others. But due to the gendered assumptions and practices of their society, women were at a disadvantage in obtaining credit. As the scale of money-lending, production/sales, and importing/exporting increased across the sixteenth century, few women could compete in the upper levels of the new environment.

Because the lives of all working women were affected by their personal standing, we will explore that aspect of credit here, reserving discussion of their involvement with the forms of financial credit for a later chapter.¹⁴ English people of middling or lower rank – those examined in this study – employed a variety of terms when describing how they or others were regarded within the community.¹⁵ The wordings “credit,” “reputation,” “standing,” and “good name” seem to have been used interchangeably and could be applied to both women and men. Although the social and economic aspects of a person’s reputation were related, different features might be emphasized depending upon the context. You could be seen as a good friend, based upon sociability and your willingness to help in an emergency, but still be regarded as economically unreliable with respect to repaying a loan.¹⁶ The phrase “honor” appears infrequently at lower social levels, though it remained in use among the gentry and nobility, where it kept some of its older courtly or chivalric connotations. In the northwest of England, a sense of collective family credit, in which an individual’s reputation was linked to the good name of her or his relatives, continued through the sixteenth century for non-elite people as well as for the aristocracy.¹⁷ Neighborhoods or communities might likewise have shared reputations.

¹⁴ See sects. 1–3, Ch. 4 below.

¹⁵ An extensive literature has grown up over the past few decades concerning credit. Selected studies that focus on its sexual/social components include Haigh, “Slander and the Church Courts,” Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander*, Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, Walker, “Expanding the Boundaries,” Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England*, and Capp, “The Double Standard Revisited” and his *When Gossips Meet*. Studies that emphasize economic credit include Shepard, “Manhood, Credit and Patriarchy,” Muldrew, “Interpreting the Market,” and his *The Economy of Obligation*. For an examination of the interrelated meanings of credit in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Finn, *The Character of Credit*.

¹⁶ McNabb, “Constructing Credit.”

¹⁷ Ibid. and Carney, “Social Interactions.” For below, see Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, ch. 7.

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Many factors contributed to the social side of someone's individual credit. Earlier research demonstrated that women were deeply concerned about their good names in sexual terms, while men worried mainly about their economic reputations or the behavior of the women under their supervision.¹⁸ Newer studies make clear, however, that while good sexual conduct may have been especially significant for women, a wide range of issues mattered to both sexes.¹⁹ Reliability and generosity were key ingredients. Was a woman responsible in caring for her family? Was she ready to loan a piece of clothing or some spoons to a friend for an important occasion, or to look after a neighbor's children during an illness? Did a man provide adequately for his household? Was he careful to return the harrow he had borrowed in good condition, and was he willing to join with others in repairing the roof of an elderly neighbor? People gained credit through being hard workers, whether in the fields, the market, or at home, and by being fair. But those who "scolded," arguing or spreading malicious gossip about others, lost credit for threatening local harmony. People who drank too much or who failed to keep their children and servants under control were considered weak, unable to govern their own or their dependents' actions.

Interwoven with the social components of personal credit were economic ones. A good reputation in economic terms meant that others regarded you as honest and trustworthy, a person whose word could be counted on in business dealings. Did other people believe that you would complete economic agreements as promised? Repaying one's debts was also important. People could be poor but creditworthy, borrowing no more than they could afford to pay back and completing their commitments as arranged.²⁰

While maintaining a positive reputation was a concern for all women, it was especially important for those who engaged in income-generating activities. Their ability to function within a working environment depended in large part upon their own social and economic credit. A woman who sought employment in someone else's house would probably not be hired if she had a reputation for sexual laxity, gossiping about her employers' private lives, or dishonesty. Agnes Peryham of Devon said around 1540 that because Richard Wyll and his wife Margaret had falsely

¹⁸ E.g., Gowing, "Gender and the Language of Insult" and her *Domestic Dangers*, Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England*, and Shepard, "Manhood, Credit and Patriarchy."

¹⁹ E.g., Gowing, "The Freedom of the Streets," Capp, "The Double Standard Revisited" and his *When Gossips Meet*, Carney, "Social Interactions," and McNabb, "Constructing Credit."

²⁰ Expectations varied greatly on the basis of status: an aristocratic male might be admired for being extravagant but scorned for keeping careful track of his finances.