

Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London

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Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London is Tim Reinke-Williams' first monograph, drawn from elements of his PhD thesis 'The negotiation and fashioning of female honour in early modern London'. (1) Crucially, it is also the first work dedicated solely to the exploration of how *women* from the 'middling sort' and labouring poor constructed identities as honest, hardworking individuals.

Reinke-Williams argues that whilst scholarship on women in early modern England has grown substantially over the last 30 years, far more attention has been paid to negative attitudes, representations and behaviours. To put it in contemporary terms, historians of early modern women have been 'eagle-eyed in espying their faults, but dark-sighted owles, in perceiving their virtues'. (2) This is comprehensively illustrated in the author's overview of the historiography of female honour and reputation, mapping its course from Keith Thomas' initial exploration of the 'double standard' and the development of this argument by Laura Gowing, through to more recent studies by historians including Faramerz Dabhoiwala and Alexandra Shepard. Whilst it is now arguably a 'truism' within existing scholarship that sexual behaviour was only one way by which the reputations of women of early modern England were judged, there remains a vacancy for a 'holistic book-length study of early modern women of good repute' (p. 6).

The author addresses this imbalance by outlining how women of London's middling sorts and labouring poor could acquire credit and gain honest reputations, specifically through their work and sociability. Included by Keith Thomas in his recent study of what made life meaningful to early modern people, historians have touched on these activities as part of wider discussions of female reputation. Reinke-Williams has argued elsewhere that these activities ought to be explored in more depth; indeed, this work certainly provides a tightly focused analysis of these two elements of women's lives in early modern London. (3) The author expands on the definition of 'women's work' to include 'unpaid yet essential labour' – namely housewifery, reproduction and childcare – and extends the scope of sociability to include a wider range of forms and locations, particularly in homes, streets, and shops as well as the tavern and the alehouse. Reinke-Williams explores these activities through a purposefully diverse range of source material, utilising not only ecclesiastical court records (the mainstay of much of the historiography of female reputation over the past two decades) but also Bridewell hospital court books, cheap print (including conduct literature, jest

books and broadside ballads) and play-texts. In doing so the book acknowledges Martin Ingram's caveat that legal records (particularly when limited to one jurisdiction) provide only a 'partial view' of reputation. This methodology also responds to calls from various historians including Amanda Vickery, Dror Wahrman, Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford for more intertextual approaches and to 'open up the range of source material about women and to demonstrate their possibilities within case studies'.⁽⁴⁾ Emphasising that different forms of text were produced by different authors, to be encountered and engaged with by different audiences, the author posits that 'by reading and listening to multiple voices the historian is better equipped to understand this historical culture she or he is investigating' (p. 9). Through this intertextual approach, Reinke-Williams concludes that women of London's middling sorts and labouring poor negotiated and justified their reputations as 'honest women' through five key areas: good motherhood, efficient housewifery and domestic management, diligent retailing, and appropriate sociability with their fellows.

In his first chapter, Reinke-Williams turns his attention to motherhood, which he argues afforded women greater respect and social status in early modern London. From successfully conceiving and bringing a child to term whilst fulfilling her working and neighbourly duties, diligently and assertively providing for, disciplining and educating her children, through to providing emotional and material support throughout their adult lives, a woman could establish and cement her reputation as an honest, hardworking and respectable matriarch in the wider community. A major finding of this chapter is that female neighbours, relatives and servants were expected to assist in caring for children, whether for financial gain or out of neighbourly duty. Reinke-Williams argues that childless women were also able to establish good reputations through maternal traits, an aspect of motherhood that has been hitherto understudied. He also builds on the suggestions of Joanne Bailey for the 18th-century, as well as the work of Elizabeth Foyster and Ilana Ben-Amos to conclude that supporting their children during their adult lives as well as infancy enabled women to construct 'positive self-images' (p. 43). This final section highlights the need for further studies of parent-child relationships in adolescence and adulthood during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Reinke-Williams' second chapter discusses housewifery, the efficient practice of economy being 'the principle virtue a woman could display in the running of her household'. Less tied to social rank than husbandry was for men, housewifery was an 'honourable and fulfilling vocation' from which women drew pride, respect and good repute (p. 45). The chapter is divided into discussions of women's handling of financial resources, and the provisioning, cleaning and decorating of their households. Reinke-Williams builds upon recent scholarship by Eleanor Hubbard, which emphasises women's preoccupation with marriage in order to establish a household, particularly noting the importance of financial assets in determining a woman's ability to marry. Good wives were praised for seemingly passive qualities including dutifulness, honesty and obedience but were equally commended for their good counsel, responsibility for household accounts and maintaining their own financial security, although the latter two were shaped by factors including social rank and the involvement of their husbands. Reinke-Williams emphasises the value of women's culinary and cleaning skills through an examination of not only married women but also professional cleaners and women working in retail. This chapter also adds to observations by Garthine Walker and Joanne Bailey regarding women's increased responsibility for and attachment to household goods as the 17th century progressed. Reinke-Williams carries this scholarship forward by concluding that decoration enabled women to impress neighbours and visitors, and provided them with further means to establish respect and good credit.

The book's third chapter compares domestic management with motherhood in that achieving a balance of discipline and compassion towards household servants was not without its difficulties. However, relationships between mistresses and their maidservants were more positive than previous historiography has suggested. Mistresses rewarded their servants with gifts and privileges, maintained supportive relationships with former employees and in some cases, offered covert assistance to maidservants who fell pregnant, which suggested a greater (though not unlimited) level of compassion and tolerance towards young single mothers than previous scholarship has suggested. In return, whilst not all maidservants maintained a good relationship with their employer, a significant number spoke of and were praised for their honesty, good behaviour, piety and 'character', qualities which were consistently recognised across the early modern

period. Reinke-Williams also emphasises that servants were far from passive in upholding their own reputations and that of their household, taking it upon themselves to morally police other servants, report the wrongdoings of an employer or escaping households they deemed to be of ill repute. Women were given further opportunities to display their skills in domestic management by taking in lodgers. Whilst such arrangements were not without risks, and whilst not all landladies were of good repute, strong and mutually beneficial relationships sometimes developed between these women and their lodgers, particularly in the case of sick or poor individuals who enabled landladies to increase their standing within the community.

Reinke-Williams' fourth chapter explores how women operated as reputable retailers, focusing on streets and marketplaces before turning his attention to the tavern. Reinke-Williams adds to a growing body of scholarship including recent studies by Michael Roberts and Marjorie McIntosh, concurring that that working in retail enabled women to fashion positive self-identities through good business acumen and judgement. Whereas previous historiography has regarded this period as a 'dark age' for female retailers, Reinke-Williams argues that during the course of the 16th and 17th centuries the numbers of women selling goods in London and its surrounding areas, as well as retail as a proportion of the female employment market, grew in real terms. Reinke-Williams also finds that the number of women working in victualling-houses rose substantially. Moreover, such women were depicted in a positive light not only in print, but on stage and in depositional evidence. Echoing Alexandra Shepard's ongoing studies of 'worth' in this period, women themselves spoke of how they worked for their livings and of their industry in taking up honest labour, although they were nonetheless willing to construct themselves as dependents in order to emphasise the industry of their husbands. The active role of female publicans in upholding the good repute of themselves and their establishments is also suggested by their skills in food and drink production, displays of hospitality and the moral policing of their customers.

Reinke-Williams' final chapter envisages 'sociability' as split into three interconnected yet distinct concepts: 'neighbourliness', 'company' and 'civility'. The chapter builds on recent work by historians including Phil Withington and Naomi Tadmor, arguing that these concepts 'did much to define the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and enabled women to fashion respectable identities in early modern London' (p. 155). Whilst the author finds 'neighbourliness' to be a more readily definable term, 'keeping company' carried a host of conflicting and complex connotations, heavily dependent on contexts including time of day, place, the parties involved and the amount of alcohol consumed. Moreover, Reinke-Williams suggests that attitudes towards company-keeping between unmarried men and women loosened somewhat during the later 17th century, encompassing wider courtship practices. The connection between 'company' and drinking-places remains significant in this work. Reinke-Williams emphasises that women could drink in public houses depending on context, echoing earlier scholarship by Bernard Capp. One of Reinke-Williams' major findings, however, has been that women, as well as men, participated in drinking rituals, often with similar aims of fostering and strengthening bonds of credit and amicability. Additionally, the author's interpretation of 'civility' as friendliness, tempered by behavioural and spatial boundaries and therefore essential to participation in 'company', marks a significant move away from previous historiography which has largely focused on elite, male contexts.

Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London is a comprehensive, well-written and exciting addition to a growing scholarship investigating how the middling sort and labouring poor forged and expressed positive identities for themselves in early modern England, particularly through their work and sociability. It particularly opens up new directions for histories of women's work during this period, moving away from the arguable binaries of previous historiography which has so often limited itself to particular evidence bases. Reinke-Williams has offered fresh insight through his emphasis on the *positive* self-identities of women, constructed and reinforced as they laboured as mothers, housewives, domestic managers and retailers, and engaged in appropriate forms of sociability in early modern London. This book convincingly reiterates a now well-established argument that whilst sexual reputation remained important, it was not solely responsible for determining women's credit. As well as focusing on previously understudied aspects of women's lives, Reinke-Williams deftly navigates the social, economic and cultural contexts that determined how women experienced them. Women are not treated as one homogenous group in this study,

although, not unusually, the line between ‘middling sort’ and ‘labouring poor’ remains fairly permeable.

The author particularly highlights three methodological choices that make this work unique. First, as aforementioned, Reinke-Williams draws on a wider range of printed and archival sources than previous studies of plebeian reputation, with the intent to compare, contrast and interrogate a variety of attitudes and representations across diverse cultural and social boundaries. Such a wide evidence base inevitably raises the question of a study becoming too broad, particularly within the author’s chosen time frame, and raises potential concern regarding the agency of the source material and how thoroughly it can be plausibly interrogated given the inevitable limitations on time and space. Spread across a variety of source material and across a wide chronology, Reinke-Williams’ examples, although illuminating, can appear somewhat scattered. Furthermore, there is understandably little room for questions of mediation and narrativity, although the author is clearly familiar with previous discussions by historians including Laura Gowing. This results in a potentially one-dimensional correlation between what contemporaries said and what they meant. However, this work is nonetheless rich in source material, and will certainly encourage historians to continue to develop our understanding of this aspect of women’s lives in this period.

Second, Reinke-Williams notes that this study encompasses the entire 17th century (as well as the latter half of the 16th) whereas previous historiography has limited itself either to one half or the other. This approach can certainly be lauded for helping to heal what Steve Hindle has termed the ‘broken-backed historiography’ surrounding this period. Furthermore, this work engages convincingly with Faramarz Dabhoiwala’s narrative of a ‘sexual revolution’ occurring towards the end of the 17th century. Highlighted economic and demographic changes during this period, including increased availability of consumer goods and an increase in numbers of female retailers, are also crucial to Reinke-Williams’ conclusions. However, this particular aspect feels somewhat under-emphasised throughout the body of the text. The reviewer wonders whether more could have been said on the choice to explore the 17th century in its entirety, particularly in light of recent work on wider social and economic shift which appear to have been underway during the underexplored latter half of the period. What impact, if any, did shifts such as the so-called ‘industrious revolution’, or what Hindle has termed a ‘growth of social stability’ have on women’s working lives?

This reviewer would also highlight a further distinguishing feature of this monograph. Reinke-Williams’ discussion of ‘sociability’ offers a broader range of contexts and locations for this particular social practice, which recent scholarship has largely confined to drinking in the alehouse. Drinking in this particular space remains key to Reinke-Williams’ work – indeed, one of his major findings may be found in his discussion of women’s engagement in drinking pledges. However, it is highly encouraging for social historians to see the scope of early modern sociability being widened to encompass a range of social interactions in a variety of spaces.

This review concludes with a word on Reinke-Williams’ focus on London for his study. The author is clear in his justification for basing his research within the capital, discussing the circulation and audience for printed material, the richness of the available source material, London’s uniqueness as a cultural, social and economic centre and its dynamic migrant demographic. It certainly makes sense to begin such a study here to take advantage of these factors, and the reader is left in no doubt of London’s significance during this period. The author’s emphasis on London’s primacy raises questions about the understudied localities beyond the capital and what historians have perceived to be a ‘southern bias’, particularly in historiographies of work. However, such questions only reinforce the importance of Reinke-Williams’ work as the first of its kind. This book is undoubtedly an inspiring starting-point for further, in-depth histories of women, work and sociability in early modern England.

Notes

1. Tim Reinke-Williams, ‘The negotiation and fashioning of female honour in early modern London’ (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 2006, supervised by Bernard Capp). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. Newstead, *An Apology for Women: or, Womens Defence* (London, 1620). Quoted by Reinke-

Williams in 'Introduction', p. 1.[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Tim Reinke-Williams, 'Review of Eleanor Hubbard, *City Women: Money, Sex and the Social Order in Early Modern London*. *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*' (May 2013), para. 7 <
<http://www.northernrenaissance.org>> [2] [accessed 18 August 2014].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Martin Ingram, 'Law, litigants and the construction of 'honour': slander suits in early modern England', in *The Moral World of the Law*, ed. P. Coss (Cambridge, 2000), p. 150; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* (Oxford, 1998), p. 9.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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