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Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World: Shetland, 1800–2000

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Professor Abrams has written a profound and illuminating study of a relatively-isolated, but not inward-looking, community which has been perceived by outsiders as a quintessentially masculine society and yet which was, at least until the 1960s, very much ‘a woman’s world’. This was certainly the case in demographic terms: when the economy was dominated by fishing, a male occupation in Shetland, men were regularly absent for long periods, leaving the landscape populated by women. Abrams sees Shetland as unique, not just in the British Isles, but in Western Europe, as a place where women dominated the family, the economy, and the cultural imagination. Indeed, it is the latter which provides much of the evidence for this work of historical anthropology, since it draws richly and originally on the female tradition of story-telling in Shetland. In so doing, the author makes us re-consider the usual assumptions on which much women’s history is based, notably that there were separate spheres for the sexes, and the dominance of the ideology of domesticity well into the twentieth century. In addition, she argues that we should expand our concept of power to include control over resources, which women in Shetland possessed. She posits Shetland as an alternative story to, and not simply a regional variation in, the history of women in Western Europe. Indeed, when she began research on Shetland, she was writing a survey history of women in nineteenth-century Europe (1). What she realized was that the focus for such a history was the industrialized economies, while she also came to see that the case study of Shetland revealed considerable differences even within peasant, fishing, and island communities.

Throughout the nineteenth century, women dominated Shetland in terms of numbers; the ratio of women to men was greater there than for any other part of the British Isles. As the author records, the census of 1861 revealed the most extreme imbalance of the century, with 143 women to every one hundred men in Shetland. Although this dropped thereafter, it still remained significant, and higher, than elsewhere in Britain until the end of the century; by the 1901 census, there were 127 women to one hundred men in Shetland. Moreover, Abrams points out that these figures were probably an underestimation, since they were taken in April before the men left for the fishing. One result of this sexual imbalance was that the fertility rate was significantly below the average for Scotland as a whole. By the end of the nineteenth century, Shetland’s birthrate was 20.2 per thousand of the population; Scotland’s average was thirty per thousand (2). Interestingly, in Shetland there was an extremely low incidence of illegitimacy. In 1861, 4.3 per one hundred births were illegitimate, compared to Scotland’s average of 9.2 per one hundred; by 1901, this had reduced for both but the gap had narrowed only slightly: 3.7 in Shetland, compared to Scotland's average of 6.3. Moreover, a higher proportion of women worked in Shetland, and a lower proportion married than anywhere else in Britain, while the mean age of marriage was higher.

The rate of marriage among Shetland's men, in contrast, was similar to that elsewhere in Scotland, while Abrams shows that the rate of migration from Shetland was considerably higher for men than for women. Despite the fact that efforts were made to encourage single women to migrate to Australia during the 'hungry' 1840s, few did. In each decade between 1831 and 1861, around 1,500 men emigrated in contrast to about 500 women. The author suggests that the centrality of women to the culture of Shetland both empowered them and made them reluctant to leave. The spinster, who was regarded with pity, and seen as peripheral, in the rest of the British Isles, was a productive member of Shetland society, as least for so long as she was able to work. Like the married woman, she could help on the croft, care for younger children while the mother worked, knit, and engage in seasonal work such as gutting fish. Indeed, if a married woman was widowed, the spinster might play a crucial role in the survival of the household, though, as Abrams shows, in some desperate cases even this support might not be enough.

Besides collections of folk narratives and oral traditions, Abrams uses sources from the nineteenth century, such as travellers' accounts and the testimony of witnesses to government inquiries, to show that Shetlanders were aware of their difference, and that visitors were both impressed and troubled by this otherness. Indeed, by the 1880s, the situation of women in Shetland was taken as a sign of backwardness compared to the rest of Britain where, Abrams argues, working- as well as middle-class women were increasingly confined, at least in ideological discourse, to the domestic sphere, however that was defined. This is not to deny that there was a gendered division of labour in Shetland, nor that it was a patriarchal society, but it is to show how both were limited by the values associated with such a fishing-crofting community, most notably those of self-sufficiency and egalitarianism. Abrams suggests that it was this unusual and prolonged absence of men which altered women's expectations in a patriarchal society and led to a shift in power relations; but she is careful not to claim too much for a matrifocal society such as Shetland, and is at pains to point out that while the woman ran the croft, she could not have paid the rent without a man at the fishing. Hence, the position of the widow or unmarried mother in rural areas was precarious, which Abrams suggests might explain a tendency of these groups to move to Lerwick, a thriving commercial centre. Again, the public prominence of women in Shetland's urban centre came as a shock to visitors and incomers. 'Public women', people from the mainland believed, had low moral standards and, as Abrams points out, this led to a kind of Mary Magdalene image of Shetland women which sat uneasily beside the other notion, based on those low illegitimacy rates, of them as peculiarly virtuous.

Shetland was distinguished by its Norse heritage and its economic structure. Into the twentieth century it was primarily a fishing community which had a fundamental, if secondary, dependence on crofting, a form of small-scale subsistence farming. There was a basic sexual division of labour, with the men responsible for the former and the women the latter. The author's discussion of the economy reveals that women played a prominent role, and were credited as doing so, despite the fact that since the end of the seventeenth century the tenancy of crofts depended on fishing, and so was dominated by men. Moreover, two waves of clearances (the 1820s to the 1840s, and the 1860s to the 1870s) resulted in the concentration of the land in very few, generally male, hands. Yet Abrams reveals how the croft was more than a type of economic activity: it represented a way of life, and one which was in practice dependent on women. This was due not only to frequent and lengthy male absences, but to a significant death rate among men of working age, related to the dangers of open-boat fishing. This underpinned a culture of loss, represented by what Abrams terms the 'tragic woman'. However, the latter was not seen, except by outsiders, as a downtrodden victim; rather, the image within Shetland is of a strong woman who overcame adversity to ensure both her own and her family's survival. This heroic figure is memorialized as uncomplaining and stoic, emotionally as well as economically self-sufficient, not as an isolated individual, but as deeply integrated into the community.

In contrast to the rest of the British Isles of the late-nineteenth century, women in Shetland continued to work on the land, though this had declined. The 1901 census showed that around sixty-six per cent of employed females were concentrated in the hosiery and textile industries, fifteen per cent in agriculture (a considerable underestimate, since female ‘dependents’, who usually worked on crofts from at least the age of ten, were excluded from the occupied category), and eight per cent in domestic service. The latter confirms how different Shetland was from the rest of Britain, where domestic service was still the biggest employer of women. Interestingly, Abrams observes that it was not simply the fact that women still took on such heavy physical labour which so shocked visitors to Shetland, but that when the men were at home they did not relieve the women, but rather appeared to the outsider to be lazy in contrast to the hard-working female drudges. Certainly, the men were central to the main economic activity of fishing, but that took place away from home, and paradoxically made men marginal there and curiously absent from the women’s stories which Abrams analyses. Women, on the other hand, were central to both crofting and the associated craft of knitting. Again, the latter was not so much a domestic as an economic activity for Shetland women. In an economy with few alternatives for women to earn, knitting was a necessity. Often it was bartered rather than sold for cash. Abrams reveals a complex process of bargaining, bound up with the truck system which the Truck Act 1872 failed to ameliorate. Indeed, while the Crofting Commission at the end of the century gave greater security and fairer rents to tenants, barter in knitting continued into the twentieth century. By then, there were more cash-paying jobs open to women. From the 1880s until the First World War, the herring industry grew, and it employed women in fish-processing on a seasonal basis. However, as Abrams points out, many of these women workers were not from Shetland, but from other parts of Scotland.

Fish- processing was a sociable job, whereas most Shetland women worked for their own household, and their sociability centred on family and neighbours. There were few public places of entertainment in rural areas, and these were in any case usually associated with men. Abrams suggests that the lack of such respectable amenities for women may have predisposed them to attend religious events, which they did in large numbers. Indeed, the women seem to have enjoyed the spectacle offered by itinerant preachers, both men and women, and to regard their services as a form of dramatic entertainment, in contrast to the dour and judgmental discourses of the Church of Scotland and the Free Church.

Abrams painstakingly builds up a picture of a female culture which depended on solidarity and reciprocity. Both church and sheriff court records, however, reveal another side to these women, and Abrams uses this evidence to show that they were prepared to resort to the law to defend their interests, even against each other. For example, in a society of such scarce resources, women contested ownership of both food and fuel. Moreover, despite the centrality of community to Shetland society and culture, compassion was sorely tested by women who fell on hard times (the unmarried mother, the widow with young children, the elderly widow). A woman who could not work was a liability. Abrams cites cases brought against sons who refused to support mothers, against men for breach of promise, or fathers for refusing to support illegitimate children which show that Shetland women were prepared to assert themselves.

Yet as Abrams acknowledges, these strong women nevertheless believed that there were fundamental differences between the sexes. True, the ideals of Victorian womanhood seem to have had little relevance for most Shetland women, but the author traces changes in both discourse and the economy from around the 1860s. In terms of the latter, both the crofting and fishing industries were in decline by the end of the nineteenth century. Fishing tenure itself was coming to an end in the 1880s, undermined by the growth of the herring industry and off-shore cod fishing, as well as by improved communications with the Scottish mainland. Shetland men by the turn of the next century could become independent fishermen; however, as Abrams notes, there was no such transformation in the position of Shetland women.

Moreover, while women had been celebrated for their ability to do ‘men’s work’, itself a reflection of the continuing belief in distinctive gender roles, relations between the sexes were increasingly discussed in the language of Victorian respectability introduced by the people from the mainland who staffed Shetland’s institutions. They also brought the pre-occupations of Evangelical Christianity, particularly with temperance and sexual morality. These discourses overtook the earlier language of gender equality (at least of the ‘different but equal’ variety), according to Abrams. Late-Victorian officialdom insisted that moral order required strict control over female sexuality, which previously in Shetland had been related to material circumstances. Women were still prepared to defend their reputations, but they came up against different expectations. Thus, for example, where previously a couple sharing a bed was seen as part of the courtship process and was used by the woman in a breach of promise case, by the late-nineteenth century it was taken as proof of the woman's loose morals.

Of course, the uniqueness of this 'world of women' was related to poverty and social homogeneity. By the late-nineteenth century, Lerwick's economy in particular was thriving and it was becoming more socially diverse. With such changes, the power of Shetland's women diminished. Yet Abrams has found no evidence that women's active role in the economy was decreasing. They certainly never enjoyed the growth in job opportunities or wage-earning capacity that men did, but Abrams argues perceptively that women's economic autonomy empowered their cultural autonomy, which was not bound by domestic values. Nevertheless, while her contention that the ideals of Victorian womanhood had little relevance for Shetland women is convincing, such notions were increasingly articulated; and while women did have control over household resources and a degree of authority in decision-making, they did not hold any formal positions of power. Abams's overall argument that we need to widen the concept of power to acknowledge female control over resources is well-made; but, as she also acknowledges, those resources were scarce. These women struggled to survive in a harsh economy of truck and barter which restricted their chances as well as their choices in what remained a deeply patriarchal society. Shetland's patriarchy was less evident than elsewhere in Britain, and possibly subverted because of the long absences of men, but the power which women had, as household producers and culture-bearers, seems to have been limited, and never challenged the established order.

Women outnumbered men in Shetland until the 1960s, but today are in a slight minority in the population. The late-twentieth century witnessed a demographic resurgence, mainly due to incomers. The oil industry that transformed the economy has offered most opportunities to men. As the author points out, economic growth and population change stimulated Shetlanders' interest in their past, especially as the oil industry is new, has no roots in that past, and threatened to push women's role into obscurity. The original interpretation offered here will help to ensure that the crucial part played by women in Shetland's history will not be forgotten. It also makes a powerful case for that history representing a different narrative of women in the past. However, any answer to the question of whether this offers an alternative to, rather than just a regional variation of, women's history in Britain or Western Europe remains tentative without further case studies, including of Shetland itself. This closely-argued book should serve as an inspiration.

Notes

1. See L. Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789–1918* (London, 2002). Back to (1)
2. The average birth rate for England and Wales in the same period, 1896–1900, was 29.3, and for Ireland, 1895–99, it was 23.4. See C. Cook, *Britain in the Nineteenth Century 1815–1914* (Harlow, 1999), pp.112–13. Back to (2)

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