

Women's Work in the Eighteenth Century

Review Number: 708

Publish date: Monday, 1 December, 2008

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ISBN: 9780754635727

Date of Publication: 2005

Price: £48.99

Publisher: Ashgate

Place of Publication: Aldershot

Author: Nancy Locklin

ISBN: 9780754658191

Date of Publication: 2007

Price: £55.00

Publisher: Ashgate

Place of Publication: Aldershot

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Work in the 18th century has long been neglected by historians, who have focused instead on other aspects of economic life: notably consumption, but also on the legal structures of inheritance and marriage which shaped working lives over the life cycle. So we can identify the legal differences and similarities between 18th-century Brittany and Britain. Inheritance was partible in Brittany, in theory equally divided among all children, although the eldest male generally got the dwelling house. Britain employed a mixture of primogeniture for land and partibility for movable goods, although there was always much greater freedom for the testator than in France. From the age of 21 in Britain and 25 in Brittany a woman, like a man, was a free agent for all legal purposes (buying and selling, contracting, suing). But upon marriage the rights of the Breton woman and the British (especially the English or Welsh) woman diverged: in Brittany a married woman retained her dowry and her inheritance from her parents, and all property acquired after marriage (or after one year of marriage, to test its viability) was held in community, administered by her husband; whereas Britain had complete coverture, whereby the husband took absolute possession of all or almost all of his wife's property, with no grace period. Upon widowhood, the Breton woman enjoyed the community property after her husband's debts were paid, in addition to the property she had retained throughout marriage, whereas the British woman was not legally entitled to anything (although in practice she usually got most of her husband's estate). In the event of marital breakdown, separation was possible in Brittany, but extremely difficult in Britain.^(1 [3])

This brief summary suggests some of the ways in which working lives must have been structured by the law in the different regions. Nancy Locklin cautions (p. 91) that separation cases in Brittany were 'rare', pointing to the fact that the region of Tregor in the northwest had only 160 applications in a 25-year period. Compare that with England, where 160 cases in 25 years in a single small agricultural area would have been an inconceivably large number. Nearly 70 percent of the Breton applications were made on the basis of the

husband's brutality, but in England a husband's brutality was not even a legal ground for separation unless it were accompanied by adultery.

Most people received something by way of inheritance; most people got married and so experienced the law of marital property; a very large minority of people were widowed and experienced a property division at that point; a relative handful of people went through the legal process of marital separation. All of these are economic events over the life-cycle. But it is work that is the most universal economic activity of all, and yet work is the aspect of people's economic lives about which historians know least. Partly this is a source problem: the laws governing inheritance and marriage are readily available in published texts, and their implementation is fairly readily apparent in wills and inventories and marriage contracts, sources which are generally well-catalogued and clearly written. The evidence on work, on the other hand, must be sought instead in the more sprawling, more complicated sources of court cases and guild records and tax registers.

The type of work which appears in the historical record was overwhelmingly remunerative, whether that was paid labour or entrepreneurial. Unpaid work on behalf of the family is virtually unquantifiable in centuries before the 20th, although it certainly deserves analysis in other ways. But early modern women's work was not restricted to unpaid domestic work, and the records show substantial numbers both in paid labour and running their own shops and businesses. The Breton married woman had a more clearly defined right to trade than the British woman. Unusually for Europe, she could trade as a merchant without her husband's authorisation, whereas elsewhere his permission was required. Throughout Europe, these provisions for married women traders which created legal exceptions to the normal marital property laws were related to concerns over debt liability, and not to any conception of the rights or needs of married women. But no one knows what difference it made in practice that the husband's authorisation was not needed in Brittany, or if it made any difference, because the research has not yet been done outside of Brittany.

Locklin has produced a well-researched, clearly written, thorough analysis of women's work in Brittany. She grapples with the big questions: the sexual division of labour and its causes; whether women had a work identity; the relationship between levels of pay, occupational status, and work identity; and longstanding historical assumptions that only poor women worked, because they had to, whereas prosperous women merely served as bridges between fathers and sons in family trades. She shows a multitude of women – single, married and widowed – in a range of occupations: bakers, merchants, midwives, but most of all in 'selling and sewing' (p. 63). She recognises the significance of her conclusions: 'it would surprise no one that poorer people had to combine incomes in order to survive ... But I find that this marriage pattern exists even among artisans and shopkeepers in Brittany. Among these middling sorts, it was not unusual to find a merchant or tradeswoman, literate and in possession of guild membership, married to a lawyer or craftsman' (p. 140).

The aim of *The Invisible Woman* is similar: to show that not only current preconceptions but also the 'contemporary perception of the range of women's employments did not correspond to what it really was: far from being employed exclusively in domestic and pseudo-domestic tasks, working women were also found ... in supervisory and professional jobs' (p. 2). The first section, 'Women in the Domestic Sphere', focuses on middle and upper-class households, and includes essays on the new profession of housekeeper (Gilly Lehmann), the representation of housework in the press (Marie-Claire Rouyer-Daney), needlework and feminism in literature (Christine Hivet), and governesses to the nobility (Sophie Loussouarn), all of which are interesting and, to the best of my knowledge, the first detailed forays into their subjects.

The second section, 'Women in Male Strongholds', opens with an essay on the Scottish Highlands (Marie-Hélène Thévenot-Totems), which is not about work, but about male writers' perceptions of women's work, and appears to be completely innocent of either source criticism or any recent research on actual Scottish women. Unfortunately, this is also the only chapter to focus on Scotland in the collection. The section picks up a little with a review of women in the army based on secondary work (Guyonne Leduc), and hospital nurses based on primary research (Jacques Carré). The final two contributions to this section, on women in freemasonry (Cécile Révauger) and in urban communities (Deborah Simonton), are the most comparative in

the book, mentioning Scottish (and, in Simonton's case, Irish), as well as English towns, and looking at the French case. Otherwise, 'Britain' is used in the book and the essay titles as a synonym for 'England', and even for 'London'.

The final section, 'Women and the Cultural Scene', offers chapters on actresses over the century (Séverine Lancia), the female characters of Elizabeth Inchbald in the 1780s and 1790s (Angela J. Smallwood), professional musicians (Pierre Dubois), the publishing phenomenon of the Lee sisters (Marion Marceau), and images of street-sellers (Baudino). Inexplicably, the only illustrations in the book were given to the article on the Scottish Highlands, rather than to these much more interesting and deserving essays which would have profited by them. *The Invisible Woman* doesn't promise anything more than 'aspects' of women's work, and the essays are tasters – interesting glimpses of occupations which may have meant survival or even wealth to their practitioners, but which will never comprise more than tiny fractions of all women engaged in remunerative work.

Locklin's approach, by contrast, is systematic: she assesses all the women she can find in the various guilds, in different types of tax records (which included many more occupations than the guilds, and many more women than the guild records), and in court rolls. She negotiates the intricacies over time of changing guild regulations (which ones admitted women when, and on what terms) in the Breton cities of Nantes, Rennes, Quimper, and Brest. This exercise usefully illustrates the variability of guild control of trade within a single region, let alone within a single country.

One factor that clearly distinguishes Brittany from other parts of Europe is its high number of female-headed households. It is usually thought that female-headed households were more common in urban areas than in rural ones, due to the greater economic opportunities open to women in cities and towns. Local studies suggest that on average 13-15 percent of rural households were headed by women, and nearly 20 percent of urban households.^(2 [4]) But Brittany reverses this pattern: the incidence of female headship was higher in rural areas than in urban ones, and in seven of the 11 locations studied more than 20 percent (and up to a third) of households were headed by a woman. There were also high proportions of single women, rather than widows, among the household heads, perhaps reflecting the relatively egalitarian Breton inheritance regime.

In the depth of her documentary investigation and her regional focus, Locklin's study calls to mind Sheilagh Ogilvie's *A Bitter Living* (2003) on Württemberg, and Pamela Sharpe's *Adapting to Capitalism* (1996) on Essex. It is odd that neither of these appear in Locklin's bibliography. Her conclusions are more optimistic than either Ogilvie's or Sharpe's. She rightly draws attention to the 'ingenuity and persistence' (p. 47) shown by women in the market who had less access to resources and training than their brothers. Most importantly, Locklin's Brittany confirms the earlier German and English work establishing the ubiquity of women's remunerative labour in early modern Europe, whether that be paid or entrepreneurial.

In all three areas women were concentrated in the food and textile sectors. In Brittany these sectors accounted for between two thirds and three quarters of all women. The concomitant of that observation might be merely that men were concentrated in the building and transport sectors – and, of course, the educated professional sector. What is interesting is the particular divisions of labour within the sectors, and the differences in those divisions over time and place. In 1749 in Nantes, the largest town in Brittany with perhaps 55,000 people, all of the clockmakers, masons and carpenters were male, while all the *lingères* ^(3 [5]), hairdressers and *marchandes de mode* were female. The only one of these six occupations in mid-18th-century London (with three quarters of a million people) which matched this exclusive gender profile was the masons. Women were clockmakers and carpenters, and men were linen drapers, tailors, sold women's clothes and dressed hair.^(4 [6]) Whether these differences were due to the difference in size of city or to cultural differences is as yet unclear. Thanks to Locklin, we know that in Nantes, one third of the innkeepers and mercers, and half of the whole-cloth merchants and fish vendors, were women. Something like the same may have been true of London and of other cities, but the intensive research required to find out has not yet been undertaken. Two recent theses on the northern Netherlands show similarly high levels of female

activity in the commercial world and in the textile industry.(5 [7])

Locklin devotes an extended discussion to the intersections of work, sexuality and honour for women, and how accusations of sexual impropriety could be used against a commercial rival for financial advantage (pp. 115-31), the evidence for which is found in court records. Such accusations against single or otherwise independent women occurred in Brittany's two largest cities, Nantes and Rennes (population c.100,000) on average between two and five times per year. For purposes of comparison, recall the frequency of applications for marital separation, which averaged more than six per year in rural, sparsely populated Tregor region. Not that there is any necessary connection between the two types of case, but if the occurrence of separation is described as rare, then accusations of sexual impropriety, while more frequent than we might wish, must also be pretty unusual in fact. And significantly, the number of convictions in these cases appears to have been much smaller than the number of accusations (p. 121, note 28). Locklin is eminently sensible in her conclusions: 'Women had to be careful about their social conduct in a way that men did not. But it would be foolish to conclude from this that women could never enjoy social lives outside the home' (p. 131).

Both books struggle with the apparent contradiction between patriarchal legal and economic structures which attempted to control women's labour, property, and reputation to a much greater extent than they attempted to control men's labour, reputation and property, and evidence of women not merely entering the labour market and the public sphere, but not infrequently doing so successfully and on a long-term basis. The editors of *The Invisible Woman* offer as evidence of the invisibility of the professional woman that women were not represented as writers or painters or actors (p. 5). But the recent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, 'Brilliant Women: 18th-century Bluestockings', brought together a large number of rarely seen but significant pictures. Portraits of the artists Mary Moser and Angelica Kauffmann, the 'milkwoman' poet Ann Yearsley, the scholar Elizabeth Carter, historian Catherine Macaulay, and writers Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft, among others, all represented the tools of their professions. The mythologised but nonetheless real group portrait of the 'nine living muses' (painted in 1777, and subsequently etched and engraved for reproduction, so relatively widely seen) also represented these women as the possessors of artistic skills.(6 [8]) As Locklin might have pointed out, some women carved out a space to create and were both lauded and attacked for it. These were of course only the most prominent women, and only those in the bluestocking circle. But thousands of women took more mundane public roles. The matron of St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, who in 1771 supervised more than 100 sisters, nurses, servants, and porters (*Invisible Woman*, p. 94), like her predecessors and successors in the job, was seen daily by hundreds of people in her official capacity, albeit she was not (as far as I know) represented for posterity in a portrait.

Dubois's study of London musicians articulates a recurring problem in the study of women's work: one 'comes up against the difficulty of having a clear picture of the concrete reality of this work. One is soon led to tackle the question in terms of representations, as most primary sources tend to obliterate the practical details which might enable one to build up a clearer idea ... of the material, practical and technical aspects of the profession, beyond the common stereotypes of the period' (p. 160). The same applies to many, many trades across Europe, from the humblest (the *fripriers*, the Nantes junk dealers' guild, for example), through the hospital matrons, to the most elite (noble governesses, say).

But it is not only female occupations about which historians know so little: not a great deal is known about male occupations either. The qualifications often appended to discussions of women's work – that it was largely unskilled, insecure, seasonal, and part-time – probably also applied to most men's work. Both of these books are part of the project leading towards a fully gendered view of the early modern economy and a fully gendered account of work and identity. The essays in *The Invisible Woman* offer pointers and ideas for future research. Locklin's study provides impressive evidence of the extent of remunerative work among Breton women at all social levels and also at all stages of their lives. (The female occupational cycle may have been less affected by the familial cycle in the early modern period than it would become in later centuries.) The process of understanding develops through a dual process of highlighting the presence of women in economic activities traditionally thought of as 'male', like farming or business, and at the same

time restoring traditionally female pursuits like housekeeping and needlework to the status of economic activities.

Notes

1. I have summarized Nancy Locklin's chapter on the law here for Brittany. For more detailed examination of the legal comparisons between Britain and the continent, see A. L. Erickson, 'The marital economy in comparative perspective', in *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400–1900* (Ashgate, 2005), ed. Maria Agren and A. L. Erickson.[Back to \(1\)](#) [9]
2. The most detailed discussion of female headship is Sheilagh Ogilvie, *A Bitter Living: Women, Markets and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 219–24.[Back to \(2\)](#) [10]
3. *Lingère* is translated by Locklin as linen draper, which does not work for England, where the drapers' guilds represented large-scale cloth merchants. Since the descriptions of a *lingère*'s work appear to have been closer to that of a seamstress, she should perhaps be identified as the equivalent of a tailor.
[Back to \(3\)](#) [11]
4. For further information on women clockmakers, see A. L. Erickson, 'Married women's occupations in eighteenth-century London', *Continuity & Change*, 23 (2008), 267–307.[Back to \(4\)](#) [12]
5. Danielle van den Heuvel, *Women and Entrepreneurship: Female Traders in the Northern Netherlands, c.1580–1815* (Aksant, 2007) and 'Partners in marriage and business? Guilds and the family economy in urban food markets in the Dutch Republic', *Continuity & Change*, 23 (2008), 217–236, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, 'Cooperating couples? Dutch textile workers, family labour and the "industrious revolution", c. 1600–1800', *Continuity & Change*, 23 (2008), 209–216.
[Back to \(5\)](#) [13]
6. See Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women* (National Portrait Gallery, 2008).[Back to \(6\)](#) [14]

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