

Susan Cahn — *Industry of Devotion: The Transformation of Women's Work in England, 1500-1660*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. Pp. 252.

This provocative but finally unconvincing revisionist view of woman's work by Susan Cahn is reminiscent of early twentieth-century paradigms that also inspired the revival in women's history in the early 1970s. One thinks of the arguments advanced by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*Home*, 1903, 1972) and Alice Clark (*The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919), reissued in 1968 and 1982). Cahn proposes that long before the Industrial Revolution in the Tudor-Stuart era, 1500-1660, or even up to 1700 (the precise endpoint is not significant to her), woman's economic role diminished dramatically and a new model woman appeared. That earlier revolutionary age in politics, religion and economics produced a domestic revolution, largely led by men. She writes:

Because seventeenth-century men did not announce the revolutionary nature of their prescriptions but presented them as if a refinement or continuation or purification of past practice and hallowed tradition, the revolution occurred in almost an evolutionary way. Women experienced a slippage in prestige rather than an abrupt end and an unmistakable fall (123).

Nevertheless, Cahn maintains the total effect was unmistakable. Women experienced "a debilitating collective loss of power and prestige" (169). In an age that created far more rigid divisions between classes, social spaces and the sexes, women as a group gained the least and lost the most.

According to Cahn, a burgeoning early capitalist economy favoured investment in male workers, enabling husbands to acquire the superior role of family provider to the detriment of wives. The roughly equal partner and helpmeet of the Middle Ages became the little esteemed, deskilled housewife, depended on the husband and on the market she had once manipulated herself. A new submissive wife and mother even served as an "emblem of inferiority" for her children, whose easy familiarity soon turned to contempt (155). Yet, woman's decline was neither total, nor passively accepted, Cahn argues. Women looked for "openings" and continued "to play important social and family roles", most notably during the Civil War (171). Nor did poor women join the ranks of the subjugated new womanhood so readily. They

retained a level of esteem lost to wealthier sisters as poor women continued to perform the visible day-to-day tasks necessary for basic survival. While their husbands went out to earn wages, the wives may have been doing wage work at home and very visibly maintaining the meager earnings of the husband.

Cahn concludes that poor women "suffered no effective loss by the exclusion of their gender from society and the political nation" (168, 170).

In 1977, Joan Kelly, focussing on literate, elite women of Italy, answered the question, "Did women have a Renaissance?", in the negative (*Women, History and Theory. The Essays of Joan Kelly*, 1984). Cahn does not cite this influential work, but her argument resembles Kelly's in its reliance on literary studies, its daring challenge of historical periodization and its insistence that sexual difference matters in history. Kelly's essay is part of the remarkable resurgence in women's history from which we have gained a new appreciation of early feminism and of women's familial and economic roles in the late medieval and early modern period. Not surprisingly and in light of these newer works, not only earlier classic studies such as Alice Clark's but even more recent works such as Kelly's are already under review.

Even if the Renaissance proved less liberating to women than once thought, there is also new evidence that the roots of modern feminism lie in the early modern period. Feminism emerged in part as a response to a resurgence of patriarchal ideology, and one of the complicating factors in this response was the role of female piety. The work of Hilda L. Smith, *Reason's Discipline* (1982), and Ruth Perry's articles as well as her biography of the Anglican Mary Astell (1986) show that seventeenth-century English feminism provided a strong countercurrent to any ideology of a new submissive womanhood. Yet, Cahn has not assessed the impact of this countercurrent. Nor has she considered any evidence that puritanism itself was a part of it, as appears in the older literary study by Levin L. Shuecking, *The Puritan Family* (1929, transal. 1970) and the work on New England women

by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives* (1980). While Cahn refers more than once to the 1688 advice of George Savile, the Marquis of Halifax, to his daughter that she submit to her husband, she fails to consider the alternative prescriptions of pious Mary Astell, given only a few years later. Appreciating the need for wifely submission and social order, generally, this early feminist criticized contemporary female education and marriage on new philosophic grounds.

The new economic and social studies also point to Cahn's limitations. For instance, her overly positive assessment of medieval working women, recognized in guilds or living self-sufficiently on their land, omits the majority of the female workforce which was young, unmarried, "unskilled", i.e. unorganized and rural. Three new collections of articles show how the arguments have been honed. *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, edited by Barbara A. Hanawalt (1986), is a critique of the tendency to view late medieval women working in a golden age. Two essays in *Rewriting the Renaissance. The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Margaret W. Ferguson et al. (1986), are also pertinent. Merry W. Wiesner focusses on the declining position of German urban working women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Judith K. Brown's critique of Kelly rests on the evidence that the economic role of Tuscan women grew rather than declined in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Clark is also criticized in the essays by Chris Middleton and Michael Roberts appearing in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*, edited by Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin (1985). While Cahn could not have been directly influenced by these specific works, she might well have profited from the comparison of France and England and the salience of women's family roles in Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott's *Women, Work, and Family* (1978, 1987). Nor should she have missed the chance to examine the coexistence of theory and practice in the family of a puritan clergyman in Alan MacFarlane's *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin* (1970).

For the majority of women and female children in the late medieval and early modern period, the home — not necessarily their own — remained the significant place for productive work. This was true for the growing numbers of protoindustrial rural households and for the growing legion of female servants. Like the Rev. Josselin's daughters, servants were by no means only found among the poor. More furnishings and clothing used in more specialized, better light and larger domestic spaces also altered expectations of domestic work in the early period of consumer revolution. Unlike modern economists who do not always view domestic work as "productive", earlier moral economists placed high value on it. Housework was far from invisible. Here, Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1987), especially the chapter on purity and housewifery is most instructive (see esp. 416). Yet, neither children's work nor the complex female life/workcycle, generally involving late marriage, are closely examined by Cahn in her focus on attitudes and ideology.

Cahn has not so much studied the transformation of the English woman's work from productive helpmeet to dependent housewife as she has searched for evidence of a new ideology about dependent womanhood, relying mostly on men's writings, especially on puritan clergymen. Failing to document a domestic revolution in the many-layered society of early modern England, this book cannot persuade us that a new woman emerged, much less that she was debased by comparison to her predecessor. Occasionally, Cahn does rely on women's writings, necessarily that of upper or middle strata. She uses the works of Lady Margaret Hoby or Lucy Hutchinson, for instance, but overlooks how they explain their own lives and underestimates especially the potential for resistance found in female piety strengthened by literacy and learning.

Much of Cahn's supporting evidence consists of brief selections from numerous literary and other primary sources. This method rarely permits a close reading of sources informed by awareness of subtleties of voice and tradition. Thus, the powerful image of Mrs. Noah in the fifteenth century should not be taken at face value (87), but rather suggests a case of sexual inversion of the sort studied by Natalie Zemon Davis. Mrs. Noah could either challenge or reinforce traditional sex roles, or more intriguingly still, she could do both ("Women on Top" in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975), 124-51, esp. 129-31). Biographical and autobiographical documents as well as sermons also require close attention to the context and an appreciation of the discriminating voice of the writer — and the intended reader or listener. What did it mean when the clergyman William Gouge

was challenged by the women in his London congregation and mentions this challenge in the second edition of his classic work, *Of Domestic Duties, 1626?* In the Hutchinson case, it matters that the author was a widow, highly sensitive to family life, who lived in insecure times, even before the Civil War. She completed the work for children in the decade after the Restoration recalling the virtues of some of their female ancestors. These were neither examples of dependent, submissive housewives nor obsessive mothers (117, 155), even if they were eminently devout (Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson with the fragment of an Autobiography of Mrs. Hutchinson*, James Sutherland, ed. and introduction (1973), xviii-xix, 18-20, 284-5, 287).

Without a sensitivity to context in the works she has consulted, Cahn cannot savour important subtleties of domestic life and overlooks patterns of kinship, friendship and the still very real overlapping of spheres — public and private, secular and sacred, male or female. This interpenetration negated any powerful tendency toward the kind of rigidities and sharp boundaries of gender and social relations of public and private, outside and inside that Cahn's study of protovictorian ideology in the early capitalist era proposes. While carefully argued within its own terms, *Industry of Devotion* is chiefly a provocative study in gender and social theory rather than a convincing historical synthesis. The time is only just approaching for a new synthesis based on new paradigms. Regrettably, Cahn's interpretation too much resembles that of the pioneers in women's history. It cannot accommodate the new landscape of early modern history that is much more fully populated with both sexes and in which women from all levels of that complex society are far more visible than they were just a decade ago.

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Robert Colls — *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield: Work, Culture, and Protest, 1790-1850*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987. Pp. xvii, 386.

The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield focusses on the transformation of a "hereditary caste of skilled pitmen" into a "market of Victorian labourers" (10). Working-class consciousness did not come readily to a group of men who saw themselves part of the aristocracy of labour, and the pitmen fought tenaciously against the Coal Trade's efforts to demean their craft and regulate their work. Yet, despite the success of the owners in establishing a system of free-wage labour in the mines, it is misleading, Colls believes, to portray the pitmen as passive pawns of the captains of industry. For with working-class status came a sense of solidarity, a collective force and discipline, which gave the pitmen renewed control over their work and culture. Indeed, the very factors which the workers perceived as degrading — "closely supervised labor, standardized bonds, uniform rates of pay and cross-coalfield negotiation — produced a new system which aided the development, in consciousness and practice, of trade unionism" (100).

As the story of the making of a community's working class, *The Pitmen of the Northern Coalfield* clearly owes considerable debt to E.P. Thompson's germinal work on the English working class. Colls, currently a lecturer in History at the University of Leicester, traces the genesis of the book to "a doctoral thesis stung into life by outrage and perplexity at Edward Thompson's view of Methodism..." (xii). Having grown up in the vicinity of the northern coalfields, Colls sensed that the Primitive Methodism which predominated in the region had far greater cultural repercussions than Thompson delineated in *The Making of the English Working Class*. Although Methodist membership did rise in the coalfields after the collapse of political radicalism in 1819-1820, Colls does not think this necessarily represented a "chiliasm of despair". First of all, the proportion of Methodist members was always much smaller than those who attended society meetings, making the size of the membership rolls misleading. Secondly, there seemed to be no oscillating pattern between the growth of Primitive Methodism and the spread of Chartism and the National Miners' Association, which