

A Response to Women and Business in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Europe

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CERTAINLY 20, and perhaps even 10 years ago, we were quite sure about the trajectory of women's economic role in Europe from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. All of the major economic developments of this long era — the growth of capitalism in its various forms, the development of long-distance trade, the spread of industrialization, the professionalization of occupations, the creation of journeymen's guilds and trade unions — were bad for women, either leaving them behind or pushing them down. Women were not able to enter universities or apprenticeship programmes, rarely controlled enough financial resources to enter occupations that required large initial capital outlay, and were formally or informally barred from occupations with political functions. Guilds and unions regarded women who worked as stealing jobs from men and depressing wage scales. Family responsibilities prevented women from entering occupations that required extensive travelling. We had all read or at least internalized Alice Clark, whose 1919 classic *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* was available in a new reprint for each generation of women's historians — 1968, 1982, 1992.

Within the last decade, however, this picture, as with so much else in women's history, has become less clear. The challenges to it have come from two directions. One is from scholars in a variety of fields who have argued that continuity was stronger than change, that gender outweighed all other developments in shaping women's economic role from at least the Middle Ages to the early twentieth century, and perhaps from Mesopotamia to now. Despite whatever else changed in the economy, women continued to fit their work around the life-cycle of their families, moving in and out of various jobs as children were born and grew up, or as their husbands died and they remarried. The idea that there was a "golden age" for women's work or other economic activities was a myth, for these were always a matter of make-shifts and expedients, stop-gap measures that were paid and valued less than

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men's. Capitalism might have increased the gender gap, but patriarchy created and sustained it.¹

The second challenge to the decline trajectory has come from studies such as those in this forum, which examine segments of the economy in which women continued to be active. Some of these studies have focused on single individuals who were exceptions to the rule — Judith Rothschilds who were just as unusual as Virginia Woolf's Judith Shakespeare would have been, or, indeed, as Mayer Rothschild and William Shakespeare were. The Bristol merchant Martha Gay, whose fortunes Pamela Sharpe details, is one of these, as is Christiane Findeisen, whose contracts and negotiations Robert Beachy describes, as is the better known Glickl bas Judah Leib (Gluckel of Hameln), whose business dealings and private life Natalie Davis has most recently analysed.² Daniel Rabuzzi's paper includes a number of such exceptional women: isolated widows — and a few single women — whose names and activities are scattered throughout the city and business archives of Scandinavia and the Baltic. Such women are often difficult to find, as Rabuzzi makes clear, because information about them is not only scattered, but buried, hidden, or even intentionally distorted. Uncovering such women — Natalie Davis termed them “women worthies” — was one of the first projects of women's history, but fell into disfavour as they seemed so male-identified and their extraordinary status made them suspect. Recent trends toward biography, micro-history, and narrative may bring us back to such research again, however, and it is clear that local records are the place to begin searching.

The hunt for exceptional women should continue, not only to provide “women worthies” to match the “men worthies” who have been the focus of history since its beginning, but also, as these papers make clear, because a search for the noteworthy may lead one to the realization that they are not so unusual after all. Beachy and Rabuzzi provide lists of individuals, but also

1 Studies that stress continuities in women's work include Olwen Hufton, “Women, Work, and Family” in Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, eds., *A History of Women in the West: Volume III: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 15–45; Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Chris Middleton, “The Familiar Fate of the *Famulae*: Gender Divisions in the History of Wage Labour” in R. E. Pahl, ed., *On Work* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 21–46; Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, “Women's Work, Gender Conflict and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500–1900”, *Economic History Review*, vol. 44 (1991), pp. 608–628; Anne Phillips, *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class* (London: Virago, 1987); Carol Johnson, “Does Capitalism Really Need Patriarchy? Some Old Issues Reconsidered”, *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 19 (1996), pp. 193–202; Mary Murray, *The Law of the Father: Patriarchy in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1995). The most concise summary of the change/continuity debate with reference to early modern Europe is the exchange between Bridget Hill and Judith Bennett, “Women's History: A Study in Change, Continuity, or Standing Still?”, *Women's History Review*, vol. 2 (1993), pp. 5–22, 173–184.

2 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

note that these “exceptions” added up to around 10 per cent of the active merchants in some cities. As Beatrice Craig makes clear, women continued to be involved in all aspects of business in at least one French city throughout the nineteenth century, in numbers high enough to make quantitative research possible and useful.

Taken as a whole, these papers suggest that the decline trajectory needs to be deconstructed, though perhaps not demolished. In the same way that detailed local studies have pointed out that the gender structures created by proto-industrialization and industrialization were not the same for working-class people everywhere in Europe, detailed studies of business and trade such as these begin to suggest that middle-class experience was also highly variable.³ First, as both Craig and Beachy suggest, “middle-class” is much too monolithic a category, for the experience of professionals and officials — and their wives, daughters, and widows — was vastly different from that of male and female merchants and entrepreneurs. Secondly, as Sharpe emphasizes, both national and regional differences in legal structures, traditions, and the relationship among various sectors of the economy created very different patterns and different timing. The physical split into public and private spheres, which has been such an influential explanatory device for women’s history around the world, simply did not happen in nineteenth-century Tourcoing, where middle-class families lived among the smokestacks, nor did it happen for the eighteenth-century merchants in Hamburg and Leipzig who built palaces housing both work and family life. The conceptual split into separate male and female spheres, often viewed as both cause and consequence of the physical split, was muted in these places as well.

The articles go beyond what has come to be a central point in all women’s history over the last decade, however: that women’s experience differed along many axes and that generalizations are dangerous. They also suggest that several key issues have been ignored or overlooked in existing explanations of women’s economic role in this period. One of these is religion. Religious differences, whether Protestant/Catholic, dissenter/established church, or Christian/Jewish, provided opportunities for female entrepreneurs, as did ultra-Catholic norms such as those noted by Craig. A second is the continued centrality of the middle-class family as a business unit in which women could play an active — though sometimes hidden — role. This was not simply at the level of shopkeepers, but included major merchants and industrialists, whose training remained informal rather than tied to guilds or universities

3 For studies of working- and lower-class experience, see Heide Wunder, “*Er ist die Sonn’, sie ist der Mond*”: *Frauen in der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: Beck, 1992), especially pp. 173–190; Tessie Liu, *The Weaver’s Knot: The Contradictions of Class Struggle and Family Solidarity in Western France, 1750–1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Ann Cento Bull and Paul Conyer, *From Peasant to Entrepreneur: The Survival of the Family Economy in Italy* (Oxford: Berg, 1993); several of the essays in Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, eds., *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

which barred women, and who often, as Craig notes, did not use formal written contracts. Thus the exclusion of women from business (or their voluntary retreat) did not necessarily occur from the top of the middle class down. This may explain, in fact, why Ludovici's eighteenth-century lexicon uses the word *Handelsfrau* (business woman) for women who conducted business under their own names, instead of what had earlier been the more common and much less exalted term *Marktfrau* (market woman). A third issue is that alliances between the family and the state, or models that linked them metaphorically, which have generally been portrayed as distinctly negative for women, could sometimes work to their advantage.⁴ This was certainly the case with the business widows whom Sharpe and Beachy study, as well as the wives acting as deputy husbands whom Craig examines.

Finally, these papers contribute to what is a small, but growing, trend within economic history, which reverses the usual lines of causation and pays attention to the ways in which gender structures shaped economic change rather than simply the reverse.⁵ Rabuzzi suggests, for example, that we should rethink the standard explanation of the connection between industrialism and domesticity, and he provides clear evidence that women were a major part of the "Industrious Revolution" in which Europeans worked more in order to have money to purchase consumer goods from around the world.⁶ Sharpe and Beachy emphasize the role that women played in the trade in those goods, not simply as consumers — which has been well studied — but

4 The most influential voice arguing for the negative effects on women of the "family/state compact" has been Sarah Hanley, in "Engendering the State: Family Formation and State Building in Early Modern France", *French Historical Studies*, vol. 16 (1989), pp. 4–27, and various other articles. See also Isabel Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700–1815* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

5 Along with Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Women and Men of the English Middle Class, 1780–1950* (London: Random Century, 1987), and Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), which have been frequently cited in the papers, several other studies explore ways in which gender shaped economic activity in this period: Susan Staves, "Investments, Votes, and 'Bribes': Women as Shareholders in the Chartered National Companies" in Hilda L. Smith, ed., *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 259–278; Mary Poovey, "Accommodating Merchants: Accounting, Civility, and the Natural Laws of Gender", *differences*, vol. 8 (1996), pp. 1–20. Studies of the English working class have also viewed gender as a causal factor: Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the English Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). A few studies of trade in areas beyond Europe also take this point of view, such as Barbara Watson Andaya, "Women and Economic Change: The Pepper Trade in Premodern Southeast Asia", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 38 (1995), pp. 165–190; Dhiravat na Pombejra, "VOC Employees and their Relationships with Mon and Siamese Women: A Case Study of Osoet Pegua" in Barbara Watson Andaya, ed., *Other Past: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming).

6 The phrase "Industrious Revolution" is Jan de Vries's, from "The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution", *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 54 (1994), pp. 249–270.

also as both shopkeepers and merchants. All of the authors warn against overemphasizing the impact of changes in property and commercial law and propose that cultural changes, including those in gender norms, might lead rather than follow legal developments. Their proposals about the impact of gender on international business and commerce, combined with their own archival research and the work of others upon which they draw, suggest that the nineteenth century may not have been as uniformly grim as either the decline or the continuity model proposes — much to the dismay of those of us, including myself, who love to portray it as the nadir. Their work also suggests why extending “early modern” to include the nineteenth century may make great sense for business and commerce, as the family firm retained such importance. Indeed, given the continued importance of family firms today — which accounts for all those statements one hears about “women controlling three-quarters of the world’s wealth” — perhaps we are still to some extent in an early modern mode, or perhaps we need to rethink what we mean by “modern” business practices.