

When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England

Review Number:

365

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 November, 2003

Author:

Bernard Capp

ISBN:

199255989X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

404pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Publisher url:

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199255986.do#.Ui3k08akpbU>

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Laura Gowing

For a long time the historical study of early modern women seemed destined to be confined to the domestic sphere. Almost axiomatically, 'women' have been treated as a subset of household, family, or marriage. And yet even the most vigorous proponents of the 'separate spheres' model of women's history recognised its roots in eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideologies of domesticity. Renaissance advice writers, like those of almost all periods, referred frequently to a model in which men's world was the outside, women's the inside. But below the elites, the realities of everyday life must have refuted their ideals at every turn. And the distinction of 'public' and 'private' is one that, for early modern cultures, often barely seems to hold - if, indeed, it does so anywhere.

It is a mark of the flourishing of this field that Bernard Capp's new book ranges far beyond the walls of the household. For Capp, women's worlds were not just those of family and home, but parish, neighbourhood, and city. Commendably, too, he examines the domestic social relations that countered and undercut those of married couples: servants, mistresses and masters. His focus is those women below the elites, who left few written records, and his aim is to explore the ways in which the vast, heterogeneous system of early modern patriarchy was contested by its subjects. As Judith Bennett has pointed out, such an endeavour is central to feminist history: it has never been enough to trace the operation of patriarchal power, without examining how women - and men - negotiated their own place within it. Sensitive to the micropolitics of power relations within families and neighbourhoods, this is a story in which women are both agents and victims.

Following on from the work of feminist historians, in particular Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford's magisterial *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Capp takes as a starting point the notion of 'women's culture'. In a series of chapters on marriage, the household, neighbourhood, citizenship and recreation, he examines the networks within which plebeian women lived their lives. Gossip, friendship and conflict between women are central to this story. It is a welcome counterbalance to a history of women that has focused, very often, on relations between women and men. This aspect of the work, though, is also restricted by the focus on 'gossips'. A contemporary term for companions in childbirth, 'gossips' also swiftly became a derogatory term for women talking: the slippage begs important questions about the meaning of female friendship and conversation in contemporary culture. Gossip was an easy target for misogynistic criticism; the very title of this book comes from Samuel Rowland's pamphlet of 1602, *'Tis Merrie When Gossips Meet*, one of a series fantasising about the meetings of idle, spendthrift urban women. Their conversation turns out to fulfil men's worst fears and best dreams, being largely about their husbands. Gossiping was certainly an important concept for contemporaries; but for historians, it may be the notion of 'friends' that provides better grounds for inquiry into the realities of women's relationships. Were they perceived as instrumental, in the same way elite men's relations seem to have been? How did kinship and friendship interact? How did marriage support or inhibit friendship? All these are hard questions to answer from the patchy records of plebeian women.

Equally central to this picture is the marital household. The word 'family' in Capp's title is commendably flexible: it is clear from the start that the ideal households of contemporary literature were undercut by the reality of many women living without men, or, living with them and working independently. A detailed discussion of servants explores the complexities of their role in these small units, rubbing up against newly-made wives and interested husbands. What is absent from these families is parenthood, one of the hardest of plebeian experiences to recapture, and yet surely central to women's neighbourhood position. The initiation into motherhood may well have divided women as much as age and marital status did.

Amongst the tales of women's disputes come accounts of the rituals that shamed and celebrated women's sexuality: women washing a neighbour's private parts with soap and water, or 'polling' another woman's pubic hair. Most extraordinary is a newspaper report of 1655 in which a jealous wife confronts her husband's alleged mistress, and asks her if she would rather have her nose, or her 'bearing part' cut off. With her maidservant's help, the wife cuts out the offending part, and feeds it to her husband for dinner. If this presents the spectre of deranged jealousy, it also reiterates a familiar pairing of noses and genitals, described rather delicately here as having 'Freudian overtones'.(p. 98) It was a symbolic structure that provided a whole range of ways of attacking and shaming women. Sexuality and the body are not one of this book's concerns, but tales like these fill the book with rich evidence for anyone interested in the mentalities and cultural practices of early modern England.

The final two chapters cover a wider sphere: citizenship, recreation, and religion. Here, the rationales for categorisation are less clear; the final chapter ('Recreation, Religion, and Female Culture') ranges particularly widely. A discussion of political roles and citizenship provides excellent examples of the public roles women played; when politics is redefined to include the local, the 'continuous negotiation over the distribution and exercise of local power' identified by Keith Wrightson (p. 266) can be seen to involve women and poorer people, as well as middling-sort men. Thinking about reputation and gossip, Capp

demonstrates, helps expand our sense of what 'politics' and 'the public' means; along the same lines, useful evidence might come from seditious speech, where the issues at stake were national, religious and treasonous rather than interpersonal. Like Mendelson and Crawford, Capp sees female petitioners, midwives, and juries of matrons as further evidence of women's public roles: many ordinary women, he suggests convincingly, assumed that they had 'both rights and duties as citizens'.(p. 319). Like Mendelson and Crawford, whose discussion of female politics explores many of these issues, Capp's evidence makes a convincing case for a political history that expands what political meant to ordinary people.

Geographically, there is a wide range of material here: disputes in the streets and alehouses of London are set against village games of barley break and dancing around the maypole. The archival sources on which the book is based include both urban, London, material and rural sources, largely from the West Midlands. The conjunction raises fascinating questions about the differences between urban and rural women's roles. Over the years, a number of historians have tried to define the differences between regional patterns of gender relations, distinguishing, for example, 'open' and 'closed' parishes, or 'uplands' and 'lowlands'; perhaps, with this further material, it will become possible to establish more clearly how custom, migration and change worked together to vary family life and gender relations.

Like many social historians of early modern England, Bernard Capp has found his best source in the multiplying legal records of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: as well as the records of church courts across England, he uses the court books of London's Bridewell. The stories these varied jurisdictions furnish are rich and fascinating, often contradictory and complex, and the product of multiple voices. The questions of narrativity and mediation that have been highlighted by other historians (Malcolm Gaskill, Garthine Walker, and myself included) take a back seat here, and the result is sometimes a surprisingly homogenous picture of what people said and what it meant. Augmenting the legal archives is the popular literature of the time, the home ground of Capp's earlier work. Sometimes, this makes for an awkward blend of the stories of ordinary women from the legal records with the largely misogynist comments of contemporary male authors. The 'divisive and competitive aspects of the female world' are demonstrated through texts like William Crompton's wedding sermon of 1632, which describes how 'we may observe women strive with their neighbours, who shall excel in decking and trimming their bodies, adorning and setting forth their houses, following new fashions, and outstripping one another in excessive feasting'.(quoted on pp. 371-2)

Examples like this point up a problem with some of Capp's sources, and his methodology. There is certainly no simple way of retrieving an authentic 'women's experience' from this period, or an identifiably female voice. It is hard, too, to know how best to read the mass of contemporary drama and literature, which seems to say so much about gender relations, and does so, often, in such predictable ways. But it is surely worth considering the degree to which Crompton's comments on women who strive with their neighbours are not empirical observations, but stock pieces reiterated in numerous ballads, pamphlets and legislation of the time. That men wrote repeatedly about women's excessive consumption, gossip and fighting amongst themselves tells us much about early modern attitudes to women, but not necessarily a great deal about daily life on the street. There is much room for an interrogation of popular and misogynistic literature in this context. It would be interesting, for example, to examine how far contemporary stereotypes of female consumption shaped neighbourhood conflicts, or whether the ways writers like Rowlands described women's speech were echoed in the accounts witnesses gave in court. But it is hard to treat these sources as simple evidence of what women did. Other sources, too, beg further scrutiny. The Suffolk minister Isaac Archer's note in his diary after his marriage, that 'I found my wife perfectly devoted to please me; and I bless God for giving me one with a meek and quiet spirit', might tell us more about his expectations than that 'Some women were content to accept the subordinate role prescribed by society'.(p. 72)

This is an avowedly empirical work. Previous work in the field is noted, but not much discussed; there is little reflection on methodology or approach. Its arguments are already convincing ones. The central premise, that women negotiated patriarchal culture, is a familiar one to all women's historians, as is the idea that they shaped their own lives in the context of male control and authority, and the point that to homogenise women's experiences risks idealising them, or seeing women only as victims. Without any

explicit feminist underpinning and no discussion of feminist historical work or theory, the basic ideas of this book are nevertheless indebted to some years of feminist scholarship, which have now become fundamental to the field: Judith Bennett's vision of patriarchy as dynamic and flexible, Denise Riley's argument that 'women' are rarely best seen as a coherent group. Perhaps this is good evidence of feminist historiography's successes: if it took feminist historians to imagine how to do women's history within the particular confines of the early modern archive, it's now possible to write early modern women's history without feminism. Certainly, the rich material here will inspire others to develop approaches that will continue to take our understanding of early modern women's lives further, and deeper.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/365#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2035>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>