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A Bitter Living: Women, Markets, and Social Capital in Early-Modern Germany

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Since the 1970s historians have been redressing the longstanding omission of women from virtually all types of history. We now know much more about women?s experiences in the past, both in their own right and as contributors to larger historical events, than had previously been the case. Unfortunately historians have yet to take up the full challenge of studying women?s experience in all its facets: there is, to date, very little *economic* history of women.

The paucity of attention to women?s economic history has long puzzled many historians outside the field. After all, many assertions about the place of women in historical societies turn on their role in the economy: what women could own, the kinds of work they could do, their ability to contract in their own right, and, most importantly, the ability to earn, control, and enjoy an income as independent actors. That is, many discussions of women?s secondary status take for granted a set of answers to questions about the how and why of economic inequality. Some accounts of the Industrial Revolution?s impact on women, for example, do little more than apply some generalization taken from elsewhere (?markets are good for women? or ?markets are bad for women?). By the standards usually applied in modern historical research, much of the received literature would not be taken very seriously. *A Bitter Living* is part of a newer literature that amounts to a very welcome, if long over-due, effort to properly study the role of women in economic life.

One path-breaking contribution of this sort is Claudia Goldin?s *Understanding the Gender Gap*, which was the first full-scale account of the economic history of women in the United States in the twentieth century. This widely admired book used simple economic models and a lot of digging for evidence to understand how American women?s economic roles were shaped by technology, biology, and the constraints of law and social custom. Goldin?s contribution reflects more than anything else her gift for ferreting out the empirical sources ? many quantitative, some not ? that allow her to construct a fine-grained portrait of how American women lived and worked. After all, if we want to know why women earned (and earn) less than men, we need detailed and credible information on women?s wages and how they compare to those of men. This simple point seems to have gone missing in some of the literature.

Goldin?s influence can be seen in much very welcome work in economic history, including the study under review. The society at issue here, early-modern Württemberg, differed from twentieth-century America along virtually every dimension, and Ogilvie?s emphasis differs from Goldin?s in many respects. But the central task of the study is the same: Ogilvie sets out to describe how women?s economic lives differed from men?s, and then to explain both why they were different and the consequences of these patterns for both the people concerned and the larger economy and society. Given the state of the literature one can think of *A Bitter Living* as making two, distinct contributions. One contribution is factual: we get the what, the why, and the what it meant. In addition Ogilvie makes a strong, if implicit, case for a different methodological approach to the study of women?s economic histories. I consider each contribution in turn.

A Bitter Living focuses on two communities in the Württemberg Black Forest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One of them, Wildberg, figures heavily in Ogilvie?s previous book *State Corporatism and Proto-Industry: the Württemberg Black Forest, 1580?1797* (Cambridge, 1997). In *A Bitter Living* Ebhausen is paired with Wildberg to increase sample size and to provide a glimpse at differences across communities. Several features of the economic and institutional history of this region suggest themselves for study. The Black Forest had a strong and variegated economy, with multiple ?industrial? activities in addition to agriculture. The growth of textile industry in the sixteenth century had led to so much specialisation that the region depended on imports of raw materials and foodstuffs ? a very highly market-oriented economy for the period. In addition, the institutional arrangements that shaped this economy differed dramatically from well-studied societies such as England or the Netherlands. Two institutions are familiar to students of much of central Europe. Communities in Württemberg were quite strong, and effectively carried out their assigned tasks of regulating marriage, mobility, consumption, and many other aspects of their citizens? lives. Guilds (and guild-like merchant associations) controlled the right to enter into many occupations, some of them surprisingly non-industrial (my favourite being ?serving as public executioner?). Between them, the communities and the guilds created a world that strictly limited life for both males and females. Few males could live and work in Wildberg or Ebhausen without a guild license as master, journeyman or apprentice. In consequence, most men emigrated if they did not have a guild position, which meant, in practice, if they were not the son of a guild member. Women could work in guilded occupations only if they were the wife of a master or if they were a guild master?s widow, and had inherited his guild licence. Even work in non-guilded activities was often strictly regulated, with maximum wage rates for men and for women, limits on gatherings of female workers in the evenings to share light, and prohibitions against work on the Sabbath.

Two sources lie at the heart of this study. One is a ?soul table,? which lists every economically independent person and the number of his or her dependents for the single year of 1736. A source like this can only be of so much use, however, since most women were not allowed to be economically independent. The more ingenious effort here focuses on minutes of church courts (*Kirchenkonventsprotokolle*). Church courts in Württemberg were responsible for all church and family matters, as well as for infractions related to work on the Sabbath or holidays. Ogilvie extracted from the court records every mention of a man or woman carrying out a work-related task. This exercise yielded 2,828 instances of someone working in a way that came to the attention of the church court. About half the mentions deal with allegations about Sabbath-keeping. The rest mention someone working as part of another issue.

A Bitter Living uses the court records especially to construct a rich and nuanced portrait of how women

earned their living, and the various obstacles they encountered in doing so. One might worry about all sorts of bias inherent in such a source; for example, if church courts were more or less worried about women violating the Sabbath, women would appear in Ogilvie?s database either too much or not enough. Her entire defence cannot be summarised here, but a subtle and thorough discussion (pp. 22?36) of possible biases convinces this reviewer, at least, that the most likely biases are slight, and that in any case Ogilvie is fully alive to the limitations of her sources.

A Bitter Living considers a wide range of arguments about women?s work and women?s lives, and the results cannot be condensed here without doing the book an injustice. Some central ideas will challenge historians of other times and places, however. Ogilvie is skeptical of those who claim markets were bad for women (sometimes resort to the labour market was all that Württemberg afforded women who could not marry, given the male emigration, and who could not operate their own businesses, given guild regulation). She is equally skeptical of claims that markets always improved women?s lot; as she demonstrates, markets could be distorted into one more way for the community or the guild to extract surplus from women. She finds technological explanations of women?s status over-drawn; true, women had some (relative) advantages in home production, but she emphasises the role of regulations in keeping women in the household, and also notes the numerous instances where a woman ? sometimes well advanced in pregnancy ? was out doing the heavy work some think only possible for men.

Much of Ogilvie?s analytical emphasis focuses on the role of the communities and the guilds. There are larger stakes to this debate. As she notes, some fans of ?social capital? and all it entails have noted that early-modern corporatist communities, and guilds in particular, share many of the features these fans would like to recreate in suburban America (or Britain) today. Another literature within economic history attributes to the guilds a host of Good Things: product quality, training, technological advance, etc. Ogilvie will have none of that (1), and it is hard to believe that any reader of *A Bitter Living* will disagree with her conclusion that much of the misery experienced by the Black Forest?s women can be attributed to the guilds? ability to regulate economic affairs to their own ? which is to say, to men?s ? benefit.

One novel feature of this study is worth special mention. Most of the existing economic history of women focuses on work, incomes, asset-holding, etc. A very different literature stresses consumption and its role in women?s lives, but rarely as the twin of women?s production.(2) Throughout *A Bitter Living* we see the way sumptuary laws restricted women?s right to use their income as they saw fit, and more troubling, the sometimes grossly unequal allocation of food and other resources within households. Women?s future economic historians would do well to keep this second half of the production/consumption issue in mind.

Regarding methodology, much of what Ogilvie does reflects the old-fashioned virtues of judicious use of sources. (Anyone who has tried to read the handwriting in early-modern German records will have a sense of the effort required to gather 2,800 instances of anything.) There are, sadly, those who view such efforts as a reflection of epistemological naïveté rather than the mark of a good historian, but this particular foolishness is not specific to women?s history. Her book raises two other issues that warrant some discussion in this context, however.

One is her use of what some might call a ?case-study? method. Some earlier reviews of *A Bitter Living* make the point that this area of Württemberg had special features that might make Ogilvie?s conclusions of little relevance for other regions of Europe. The unstated claim behind such remarks is usually that some more ?typical? study area would have yielded different results. Ogilvie anticipates this claim, but the criticism is so common and specious that extended defence is worthwhile. The familiarity with context and sources that makes *A Bitter Living* so effective is simply not possible for a scholar trying to deal with a larger region. And the implication that some other place is more ?typical? is just fatuous. We know enough of the profound regional variation in the European economies to know that no single place can stand for all, and, in any case, to criticise a particular locale as bizarre requires more specific knowledge of everywhere than we can claim to have.

Another, more reasonable complaint in this context cannot be lodged against Ogilvie, but is warranted in

some cases where scholars rely on close study of small regions. There is now such much rich historical information on so many times and places in European history that there is little excuse for not setting a particular place in a broader context through careful comparison to what is known about other areas, those both similar and dissimilar. Ogilvie, for example, frequently remarks on how Wildberg and Ebhausen differed from other areas with slightly different guild organisation, which is a way of asking whether some subtle quirk of local organisation had produced a true anomaly. She also compares Wildberg and Ebhausen to very different areas, such as England or the Netherlands, where guild power had completed eroded by the early-modern period. Thus we get, from both the original research reported in *A Bitter Living* and from the author?s discussion of the rich secondary literature, a sense of what was and was not unusual about the context.

The best possible version of the criticism about case studies is that the trade-offs required to achieve this level of detail are not worthwhile; that we would, in fact, do better learning less about more. Perhaps there are situations for which this is true, although I cannot think of any myself. But if we want to learn what Ogilvie delivers for early-modern Germany, then I see no alternative to the case-study approach.

A Bitter Living raises a second methodological issue that is more directly connected to themes in women?s histories. The heart and soul of this work is the rich evidence, but Ogilvie organises and interprets that evidence using some of the basic ideas at the heart of orthodox economics. As she notes explicitly, the fundamental point of departure is that households allocate time across different activities to maximise the well-being of the household?s members subject to the constraints imposed on choice by institutions such as guilds. Different household members will be better at some tasks than others for strictly biological reasons, but differences in returns to time spent may also differ because of institutional constraints, such as maximum wage rates, or restrictions on production in ?guilded? sectors.

This approach, to my mind, accounts for much of her account?s persuasiveness. It permits her to distinguish between differences in work patterns that reflect differences in innate abilities (such as biological differences); abilities that reflect different life experiences (such as formal training or education); and differences that reflect institutional constraints. No fair-minded person will accuse her of over-simplifying matters: a sophisticated understanding of the distortions introduced by community, guild, and state regulation pervades the book. But much of what is fascinating here reflects the judicious use of this approach. Women?s relative advantages in some aspects of home production meant that they were always close to the margin whereby economic change could alter their decisions to increase or decrease production for the market. Making sense of this kind of idea ? and understanding how to interpret it, when found in the historical record ? almost requires the economic framework that underlies the interpretation.

This approach has not featured heavily in women?s history, but when it has, a common line of criticism has sought to dismiss the effort as at best naïve. One line of argument has been to say that if women did X instead of Y, it does not reflect a choice of X so much as a lack of any choice at all. Part of this criticism rests on a semantic confusion raised again below. But part of it illustrates the value of the case-study approach and how much it can tell us about particular times and places. Ogilvie devotes considerable attention to the way the Wildberg guilds ruled out some alternatives for women. But, as she insists, the local institutions did not make all decisions for women. Women could still choose from a small group of activities outside the household, and there was also, of course, a decision about home production, market production, or production on household-held lands. There is an old joke to the effect that economics is all about having choices, and sociology is all about how we have no choices. Perhaps some economists tend to exaggerate the range of choice available to women in the past, but that is no less useful than claiming choice did not exist when it clearly did. The right approach, of course, is to figure out what choices historical actors did have, and then learn what we can about their lives from the choices they actually made.

A second and more ideological criticism of this approach takes the claim that ?she thought X was better for her than Y? and turns it into a straw man: ?she thought X was great?. The obviousness of this ploy has not, for reasons that escape me, reduced its popularity. For example, Joanna Bourke?s *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change, and Housework in Ireland, 1890?1914* (Oxford, 1993) documents

a reduction in paid female labour in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century. Rural women switched to devoting more time to household production and to the housewifery *per se*, and less time to the paid labour market. Bourke?s careful study cannot be detailed here, but she argues that underlying this shift was, primarily, a change in the Irish economy that reduced the rewards of paid labour for rural women relative to those of household work. In her review of this book, Cliona Murphy claims ?One must question her [Bourke?s] premise. To what extent was it [the shift out of the labour market] a choice on the part of these women to improve their ?well being,? and to what extent were women making the best of difficult circumstances??(3) The distinction is meaningless. More importantly, it is a distraction from the real point: Bourke, like Ogilvie, never claimed that women were happy about their choices. A central theme in *A Bitter Living*, in fact, is the relentless and heartless willingness of the male citizens of Wildberg and Ebhausen to impose considerable hardship on women just to avoid even the *possibility* of some reduction in their own well-being. To say that women exercised considerable ingenuity and fortitude in contending with this circumstance is not a defense of how they were treated. It is just true.

A Bitter Living is a significant work that will rightly takes its place alongside works such as *Understanding the Gender Gap*. Scholars of early-modern Germany in particular and of the economic history of early-modern Europe more generally, will profit from the author?s careful use of sources and sound comparative perspectives. But the larger implications of this work will be felt among women?s historians. Ogilvie has mounted a powerful, if sometimes implicit, challenge to received understandings of women?s experience in this period and to the way scholars approach women?s history overall. One can only hope that others take up that challenge.

Notes

1. S. Ogilvie, 'How does social capital affect women? Guilds and communities in early modern Germany', *American Historical Review*, 109 (2004), 325?359.Back to (1)
2. For a recent example of work that studies the relationship between female earnings and allocations with the household, see Carolyn M. Moehling, '"She has suddenly become powerful": youth employment and household decision making in the early twentieth century', *Journal of Economic History*, 65.2, (2005), 414?438.Back to (2)
3. C. Murphy, ?Review of Joanna Bourke, *Husbandry to Housewifery: Women, Economic Change, and Housework in Ireland, 1890?1914*, *American Historical Review*, 100 (1995), 906?907.Back to (3)

Professor Ogilvie has no comment to add to this intelligent and penetrating review by Professor Guinnane, who accurately represents the theoretical approaches and empirical findings of this book, and perceptively draws out their wider implications.

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