

Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620

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Author:

Marjorie Keniston McIntosh

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Louise Wilkinson

Working Women in English Society offers a fascinating insight into the numerous ways in which women engaged with the market economy in England between 1300 and 1620. Marjorie Keniston McIntosh's study is a timely addition to the growing body of literature on women and work, and one which is all the more welcome for bridging the traditional historical divide between late medieval and early modern England. This allows the author to chart the long-term impact of cultural, demographic, economic and social change on women's working lives and on the nature and level of their involvement in income-generating activities. McIntosh carries forward existing scholarship into women's economic roles by drawing on unpublished material from equity court petitions and by undertaking a substantial body of original research into five market centres: Tamworth (Staffordshire), Ramsey (Huntingdonshire), Northallerton (North Yorkshire), Romford (Essex) and Minehead (Somerset). She thereby illuminates women's participation in the often neglected areas of boarding, financial services and real estate, as well as in the more frequently studied areas of food, drink and craft work.

This highly accessible book is structured in three parts. Part 1 addresses the social context of women's work and places it within its current historiographical setting. Part 2 focuses on the roles open to women as service providers. Part 3 examines the occupations open to women as manufacturers and sellers of goods, and concludes with a short chapter on women as consumers. There is also a useful series of appendices at the end of the book which lays bare McIntosh's source materials and methods. Care and caution underline McIntosh's approach to her sources. The sheer volume of surviving equity court petitions, for example, necessitated the selection of a sample of 283 narrative petitions (229 from central courts and 54 from northern courts) between 1470 and 1620, chosen to reflect as wide a chronological and regional range of cases as possible. McIntosh remains sensitive to the potential pitfalls of such material, notably a petitioner's need to construct as persuasive a case as possible. In selecting the five market centres for her localised case studies, McIntosh's decision was influenced by their diverse regional economies and locations (e.g. compare the southern port of Minehead with the northern town of Northallerton), as well as their relatively complete sets of surviving court rolls. This reviewer, though, would have preferred a little more clarity about how Tamworth constituted 'an ordinary little market town' (p. 17).

The first part of the book offers a valuable critique of the sources for, and the existing historiography on, women's economic activities in medieval and early modern English towns. McIntosh adds her voice to the growing chorus of scholars (e.g. Maryanne Kowaleski, Sandy Bardsley and Judith Bennett) who are sceptical of the now increasingly discredited notion of a 'golden age' for women in late medieval urban communities, during which women enjoyed 'rough economic equality with men' (p. 31). (1) McIntosh herself concurs with the general thesis that the century and a half after the Black Death provided women with increased opportunities to participate in the market economy, but wisely acknowledges that this did not necessarily mean that 'their situation was rosy even in the best of periods' (p. 30). The author offers a critical reading of Judith Bennett's work on changes to female participation in brewing in the late medieval and early modern periods. In particular, she flags up the apparent contradiction in Bennett's argument that, on the one hand, women's work was underrated and inadequately remunerated in late medieval England, while, on the other hand, commercial brewers enjoyed a high level of agency and involvement in the local economy (p. 33). McIntosh also, quite reasonably, draws attention to the problem of reconciling 'the inherently low status of the *work* [McIntosh's italics] done by women' with the sometimes weighty local standing of those families whose women brewed (p. 34).

McIntosh's study deftly highlights the close relationship between a woman's ability to generate income and her access to credit, in its social and financial senses. Working women faced gender-based disadvantages in so far as their creditworthiness was concerned. On a personal level, a woman's creditworthiness was related to her marital status and, in the case of a wife, to her husband's willingness and ability to support her business activities if she was not a *femme sole*. A woman was also handicapped by her lack of an occupational identity which might render lenders less willing to extend credit. In addition, a woman's reputation was particularly vulnerable to slurs against her sexual conduct, which could potentially undermine and prejudice her renown for honesty and reliability as a re-payer of debts.

Part 2 uncovers interesting new evidence for women's employment in 'domestic and personal service' occupations (p. 45). McIntosh sheds light on the experiences of groups of female live-in servants and housekeepers often overlooked in recent studies – women who remained in service (rather than marrying) and older women (usually widows) who re-entered service. The author also employs material drawn from the equity court petitions to look at residential boarding as an activity engaged in by 'relatively poor women' (p. 61), many of whom were married. Some houses catered for women as customers, boarding babies with wet nurses or accommodating pregnant young single women, illegitimate children, orphans, children from earlier marriages and the elderly.

McIntosh extends her discussion of female involvement in service occupations to examine their standing in credit relationships. The credit mechanisms in which women most often found a niche in the period between 1300 and 1620 were those based on informal and casual relationships, where women typically loaned small amounts of money to family members and local contacts. Female servants, for example, sometimes loaned out wages or inheritances to friends or even to their masters and mistresses. Married women also acted as moneylenders, although legally a married woman needed her husband's consent to do this. Not altogether surprisingly, in view of their independent access to and ability to accumulate resources, widows with spare cash often acted as lenders. McIntosh, however, persuasively argues that as credit transactions became more professional and increasingly sophisticated, and the size of loans increased, women were pushed out of large-scale, commercial lending agreements by c.1600. Yet even at this time, women still found a place in the lower and middling ranks of credit structures. In late medieval and early modern London, some women participated in the market economy as pawnbrokers, catering to the poorest sections of society, including newly arrived migrants. Women were, more often, borrowers in pawning agreements. All in all, McIntosh creates a compelling picture of women's roles in low level credit arrangements.

In addition to investing resources in small-scale loans, women also invested in the urban property market, purchasing buy-to-let (or buy-to-rent-out) property. Drawing on information from the equity court petitions, McIntosh suggests that the significant body of female rentiers present in London during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may well have had their origins among the landladies of the late sixteenth century.

Widows contemplating remarriage appear to have regarded rental property as a fairly reliable means of providing for the future financial security of children from former marriages. McIntosh contends, though, that, in general, the service roles open to women, although 'essential to the functioning of households and the broader economy', generally brought women little return by way of pay and little advantage in terms of enhanced social standing (p. 116).

Part 3 focuses on women's contribution to the production and sale of goods. McIntosh argues that contemporaries possessed a deep-seated concern, which was strongly reflective of patriarchal values, about whether women's work in manufacture and retail posed a threat to the financial well-being and standing of male household heads. Women's regular participation 'in the lower levels' of cloth production and food and drink work can partly be explained not only by the outgrowth of such activities from women's traditional domestic roles but also by the lack of competitive threat which such activities posed to men, due to their meagre financial returns (p. 121). Men predominated in the more skilled occupations and especially in those which required specialist training and 'capital investment' (p. 121). The expansion in manufacturing which took place during the sixteenth century provided new, semi-skilled occupations for women, notably in small garment production (e.g. knitting caps and stockings). Yet even in these fields, women's work was distinguished by its poor pay, usually via piecework, and its temporary, often part-time, nature. Women, with a few notable exceptions in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, remained excluded from large-scale importing and exporting enterprises. Their lack of access to capital also inhibited their ability to set up shops; most women who operated middling-sized shops in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were widows. Women were more numerous as hucksters – petty retailers who sold in the streets or rented stalls in late medieval towns. Demographic and economic change, however, influenced the fortunes of hucksters. Although, during the fifteenth century, some hucksters enjoyed 'a certain degree of occupational identity and may have earned a reasonable income' (p. 131), by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries women faced growing rivalry from men desperate for any form of employment in an increasingly competitive labour market, challenging women's occupations in petty retailing. The economic pressures of the same period also contributed to important shifts in apprenticeship which had a detrimental impact on women's access to skilled crafts. The nature of female apprenticeship itself was evolving away from skilled craftwork towards agricultural or domestic work. Whereas small numbers of girls from prosperous urban families had secured apprenticeships in the major cities of late medieval England, greater numbers of girls from poor backgrounds were becoming apprentices at younger ages and in more onerous conditions by the late sixteenth century.

McIntosh's research into women's economic activities in her five market centres comes into its own when she turns her attention to examine women's roles in drink work. The evidence that she has collated from the period after the Black Death undermines the idea that because women engaged in multiple economic activities on an intermittent basis, their involvement was seldom lucrative. McIntosh asserts that individuals who participated in a variety of drink and food trades were potentially in a stronger position to secure a greater profit than those who did not diversify. Women engaged in drink work within the market centres were able to play a greater economic role after the plague of 1348–49 than they had done before. Some women secured work as long-term commercial brewers and challenged male domination of malt production. McIntosh successfully contests Bennett's thesis that brewing was a relatively lowly activity by demonstrating that a significant portion of women who engaged in brewing in the five market centres belonged to the households of local government officials. 'There is no sign here that brewing was held in low esteem' (p. 156). If the post-plague generations provided women, most notably wives from established local families, with improved opportunities for sustained commitment to brewing, female participation in drink work experienced significant change from the fifteenth century onward. This was partially stimulated by the trend towards large-scale, commercial brewing and by the arrival of beer and the growing popularity of sweet wines. By c.1620 women drink workers usually only remained at the bottom of the spectrum.

McIntosh detects similar changes to female involvement in aleselling to those in brewing in her five market centres: the numerous women alesellers of late medieval England were later pushed out of the top end of the market by men. The licensing of taverns in the mid sixteenth century reflected and contributed to a growing

social concern about the ability of women to enforce propriety in drinking establishments, as well as adding to the financial hurdles encountered by potential alehouse proprietors. McIntosh modifies Bennett's argument that women gradually vanished from the drink trades in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Her material indicates that such a change was more sudden than Bennett suggests and took place within a single generation in four of the five market centres (Tamworth, Ramsey, Northallerton and Romford). Even in Minehead, the shift occurred within four decades. After making allowance for changes in reporting practices relating to how drink workers were recorded by local courts between 1460 and 1490, McIntosh explores the impact of demographic, economic and social change in bringing about a shift towards male dominance. First of all, she contends that the disappearance of many earlier drink workers in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries may well have been connected with outbreaks of disease, such as plague and sweating sickness. Secondly, she links the transition with anxiety on the part of local officials about controlling and tackling the growing numbers of poor in towns in the same period. Thirdly, she draws attention to changes in 'how and where drink was served to customers' (p. 180). Finally, the transition was facilitated by a growing concern among leading townsmen about the maintenance of order in alehouses, and about 'the presence and possible sexual availability of women' in such establishments (p. 181). The urban authorities in all five market centres prosecuted alehouses which failed to maintain appropriate order and which were associated with sexual impropriety.

In addressing food work and innkeeping, McIntosh suggests that the obstacles which women faced in securing access to credit for purchasing utensils and supplies, and hiring assistants, conspired to keep most women confined to the lowest ranks of the food trade, as sellers rather than makers of consumables. Female involvement within the skilled crafts was also limited throughout the late medieval and early modern periods. Only the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries temporarily provided women with more favourable opportunities to engage in the middling and, sometimes, upper strata of cloth production processes. London, with its market for luxury goods and customs supportive of widows and wives as traders, produced the most extensive array of outlets for women's work. Yet even within the fields of cloth and clothing, women remained concentrated at the lowest, least well paid, end of the range. They seldom operated workshops in the leather and metal crafts, unless they were the widows or daughters of craftsmen engaged in these activities. The final chapter of part 3 briefly considers women as consumers within the market economy. McIntosh acknowledges that this is 'a brief and preliminary account' of women's roles as spenders of money (p. 240), and there remains plenty of scope here for a more extensive analysis of women's spending and shopping habits at all social levels.

McIntosh's book succeeds in expanding our understanding of women's work between 1300 and 1620. It demonstrates how women occupied an essential but often poorly (financially and socially) rewarded place within the market economy. It conveys the centrality of credit relationships in determining women's scope for financial action. Admittedly, it dwells relatively infrequently on the role of women within the pre-plague economy, although this is largely a consequence of the nature and late date of McIntosh's source material. As it stands, this book offers a valuable synthesis of existing scholarship on women and work. It also constitutes a highly original study in its own right of the changes affecting women's occupations and the handicaps which they faced in trying 'to generate some income of their own' between 1300 and 1620 (p. 250). This will be a useful addition to undergraduate reading lists.

Notes

1. M. Kowaleski, 'Women's work in a market town: Exeter in the later fourteenth century', in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. B. A. Hanawalt; S Bardsley, 'Women's work reconsidered: gender and wage differentiation in late medieval England', *Past & Present*, 165 (1999), pp. 3–29; J. M. Bennett, 'Medieval women, modern women: across the great divide', in *Culture and History 1350–1600*, ed. David Aers (1992), pp. 147–75; and J. M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World 1300–1600* (Cambridge, 1996). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is grateful to Dr Wilkinson for her detailed and constructive review and regrets that a massive

university commitment makes it impossible for her to respond fully.

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