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Women in Business, 1700?1850

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Kathryn Gleadle

In *Women in Business, 1700?1850*, Nicola Phillips has produced a dense and absorbing study of (British) women in business. In line with contemporary usage she employs a capacious definition of 'business' to consider the range, nature, and discursive representations of women's economic activities. The first section of the book considers the legal implications of women's business activity. There follows a case study of female business networks in mid-eighteenth-century Durham, using the archive of gentlewoman Judith Baker. This is succeeded by a consideration of the insurance policies of the Sun Fire Insurance Company between 1735 and 1845. A final section on 'Representation' contains a chapter on gender, trade, and nationalism, and an examination of the advertising strategies of women in the *London Daily Advertiser* between 1731 and 1775. The section concludes with a discussion of early-Victorian perceptions of female millinery and the plight of needlewomen.

As this synopsis suggests, the book is not designed to be a comprehensive study of female business activity. As such there is comparatively little attention paid to some of the more traditional sources for such a study. Trade directories are occasionally cited, but there is no substantive discussion as to their utility, and census data is barely mentioned. Whilst the book thus touches lightly on broader macro-structures, an alternative

narrative framework is provided in the book's first section, which considers a range of legal texts and judgements drawn from across the period. Indeed, one of the great strengths of this work is that it brings legal history into fruitful dialogue with the social and cultural perspectives of women's history. The law, as Phillips reminds us, is not a monolithic entity, invariably dictating the contours of property relations. In practice the law could be variously interpreted and enacted, resulting in a more complicated (and often less oppressive) set of social relations. Chapter two, for example, provides careful readings of a number of legal treatises, enabling the author to reconstruct the ways in which legal principles might be modified by practitioners to allow for more socially responsive judicial decisions. Her close and scrupulous reading of such texts reveals that contemporary legal scholars could prove keenly sensitive to the implications of 'coverture' for married women. Indeed Lord Mansfield, the Chief Justice 1756-88, upheld women's rights to separate property under equity in common law courts.

Phillips is careful not to construct a trajectory of whiggish progress regarding the treatment of married women's legal position. She notes the ways in which legal decisions were constantly reinterpreted and demonstrates the impact of Mansfield's more conservative successors, such as Lords Kenyon and Eldon. Nonetheless, she concludes that the creation of 'numerous exceptions' in the practice and interpretation of legal doctrine provided married women with far greater possibilities for business trading than has often been recognized (p. 47). Furthermore, through particularizing the intricacies of various cases that came before the Court of Chancery in the early-eighteenth century, Phillips reveals further subtleties in women's legal position. As her dense case studies indicate, the ability of women to act as independent traders depended less upon their marital status than upon the degree to which their local communities felt they could be regarded as trustworthy economic agents. Thus, women's economic agency was enmeshed within elaborate local relations and family networks. Such factors might be jeopardized both by remarriage, which had the potential to unsettle kinship loyalties, as well as local assumptions of status or credit worthiness. Phillips leads to the conclusion that 'in equity, the existence of separate property seems to have rested on even the most informal of agreements'. Thus, *feme covert* and *feme sole* were 'highly contingent categories rather than concrete determinants of women's trading status' (p. 91). Such insights make a valuable contribution to the ongoing reassessment of women's legal position. As Margot Finn argued in 1996, 'the law of coverture is best described as existing in a state of suspended animation'. wives' legal inability to contract and litigate debts was often ignored or attenuated in practice' (1).

Phillips's painstaking account involves the minute recounting of exemplary cases. This is a strategy which rightly restores the experiences of marginalized historical agents to the record. Such tireless attention to detail will be welcomed by scholars, but may prove at times just a little indigestible for some undergraduate audiences. Equally, whilst Phillips provides a meticulous consideration of the role of businesswomen and networks in the life of Judith Baker of Durham (see chapter five), the non-specialist may find Helen Berry's recent analysis of the same material a more approachable text, providing, as it does, such an instructive engagement with a wide range of historiographical themes (2). On the other hand a comprehensive survey of the data gleaned from the Sun Fire Insurance office provides Phillips with a range of fascinating material with which to question pessimistic accounts of female economic agency in this period. This includes a discussion of the activities of female insurance agents, as well as a broader consideration of contemporary women's sophisticated business approaches. Her sample indicated widespread practices of risk diversification, with women often supplementing business activities with property investment. Although women remained clustered in small enterprises, Phillips notes that the range of individual trades in which they engaged actually increased over the period. These are important findings. It is possible that their impact might occasionally have been yet greater had Phillips juxtaposed this material with a broader range of sources. For example, in a comparable analysis based upon the same archive, Alison Kay has traced individual female policy holders back to census data to construct a richer picture of these women's circumstances (3). Yet these caveats aside, Phillips's handling of this data is compelling.

Phillips appears to be most at home when helping the reader to make sense of the dense and technical material relating to business or legal history. Nonetheless, her section on 'Representation', whilst slightly uneven in execution, raises intriguing issues. One of the most interesting chapters investigates the intricate

connections between gender, trade, and nationalism. Here Phillips has identified a 'language of praise available for women in business within patriotic discourses' (pp. 176-7). Phillips's illuminating discussion of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, founded in 1754, illustrates how female business initiatives might be rewarded as part of a patriotic project of national progress. The material hints at themes for further investigation. Whilst Phillips emphasizes how that society might champion the national good, some of the women cited actually expressed a counter-discourse of regional identity. A Mrs Croft, for example, claimed that the committee discriminated against Yorkshire women, such as herself, in favour of southerners (pp. 199-200).

In chapter ten the book's tone and focus shift to consider early-Victorian attitudes towards female milliners and dressmakers. Phillips concentrates largely upon the figure of the emaciated needlewomen. Greater attention to businesswomen per se might have helped to cohere the various themes of the book at this point. Nonetheless, the material raises important questions concerning the processes whereby businesswomen were obscured within contemporary discourses, as public concern came to crystallize around either 'exploitation or domesticity' (p. 233). Of course, gender is differently constructed across discrete discursive sites. If the existence of businesswomen was rarely mentioned in government publications and prescriptive works on woman's position then the same cannot be said of fiction. As any reader of Charles Dickens will know, economically active women were an accepted component of the contemporary imaginary. His novels are bustling with female innkeepers, proprietors of dressmaking establishments (as Phillips does note on p. 168), school-keepers, toymakers, landladies, professional artists, and midwives. Phillips's arguments therefore prompt further questions as to the uneven nature of representations of female businesswomen. Why were their activities 'suppressed' (p. 253) in some contexts, yet acknowledged in others?

In a similar vein Phillips's discussion of 'Christian maternalism' (pp. 250-3) in which she argues that the responsibilities of female employers were cast within a discourse of maternal care will also provoke debate. None of the sources cited by her explicitly evoke women's maternal responsibilities, but rather speak more broadly of Christian imperatives. But would not many men also articulate a Christian duty to care and protect employees and apprentices? Phillips argues for a distinction between 'the paternalism expected from male factory owners' and that exhorted of employers in the millinery sector. I would question whether this is simply a matter of gender. Would not the paternalism of a man who owned a factory be differently conceived and articulated to that of a man who owned a small-scale, home-based enterprise assisted by apprentices? Whilst Phillips categorizes the care of employees' morals as a distinctly feminine construct here, such assumptions had, of course, been a feature of male paternalism for centuries. Early-modern definitions of the family might include the extended household of apprentices and labourers, for whom the male head of the household was expected to assume responsibility. Further elaboration, then, as to the qualitative distinctions between maternalism and paternalism would be helpful. Unless such terms are very precisely employed there is a danger of ascribing to contemporaries more static gender codes than were, in fact, salient. The same might be said at times of Phillips's handling of the vexed issue of separate spheres. In an insightful discussion of commercial women's use of advertising, the author concludes that 'in the language of advertisements the gentlewoman, more commonly associated with the private sphere, was often interchangeable with the businesswoman of the public sphere' (p. 229). However, 'gentlewoman' was a term which could be used to connote social status rather than necessarily implying particularly feminine qualities or behaviours, whilst the location and nature of businesswomen's activities (which in this study includes such pursuits as midwifery, for example) might often blur any simple dichotomy between public and private. I would venture that there is no need to re-inscribe the language of spheres in this way. The wealth of Phillips's empirical data speaks for itself and more than adequately problematizes any simple concept of gendered spheres.

Phillips's case studies provide rich insights into the range and nature of female business enterprise. It is possible that readers new to the field might appreciate a more general overview of the range and nature of female business practice in the book's introduction. For example, whilst we hear much of needlewomen in the volume there are but few references to school teachers. The establishment of educational enterprises was such a common avenue of income generation for those of the middling sorts that its omission here seems

surprising. Equally, Phillips barely mentions the ubiquitous practice of female inn-keeping, nor does she dwell upon those activities whose business activities thrived in the interstices of the domestic and the formal economy?such as landladies, child-minders, and brothel keepers. However, Phillips?s work forms part of a broader historiographical trend. It may well be that she designedly focused upon particular issues, rather than attempting a more comprehensive survey, so as to distinguish her work more clearly from other recent publications in the field?most notably Hannah Barker?s *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England, 1760?1830* (Oxford, 2006). Overall the eclectic format of Phillips?s work?with its consideration of such a wide range of sources and contexts?makes for a stimulating contribution to this burgeoning literature.

Notes

1. M. C. Finn, ?Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c. 1760?1860?, *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), 707. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. H. Berry, ?Prudent Luxury: the Metropolitan Tastes of Judith Baker, Durham Gentlewoman?, in *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England: ?On the Town?*, ed. R. Sweet and P. Lane (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 131?55. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. A. C. Kay, ?Small Business, Self-Employment and Women?s Work-Life Choices in Nineteenth Century London?, in *Origins of the Modern Career*, ed. D. Mitch, J. Brown, M. H. D. Van Leeuwen (Aldershot, 2004) pp. 191?206, here at p. 201.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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