

Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620. By *Marjorie Keniston McIntosh*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiv + 291 pp. Illustrations, tables, figures, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$75.00; paper, \$32.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-521-84616-1; paper, 0-521-60858-9.

Reviewed by Katherine L. French

Working Women in English Society focuses on the women of the late medieval and early modern period who worked in English towns and cities. Yet, unlike other studies of the same period, it is not a regional study, nor does it focus only on one industry. Marjorie Keniston McIntosh divides her book into three parts. The first part explains her sources, her methodology, and the historiographical debates surrounding women's work. The second section looks at women in the service sector. Service occupations, particularly positions as live-in servants, boarding-house keepers, and health-care workers, were an extension of women's domestic concerns and could be turned into sources of income. It is at this nexus that McIntosh explores the interplay of medieval gender ideology with business. Medieval society understood females to be less reliable and trustworthy than males, a viewpoint that prevented them as a group from accessing the necessary credit to flourish economically. Moreover, married women did not have the same legal rights as men or single women, and concerns were raised about the sexual reputations of independent women in general. Thus, in a world where access to credit depended on one's personal reputation, women were at a disadvantage. The third section looks at women making and selling goods, from ale to cloth. Whatever the manufacturing process, women did not generally run the operation but worked alongside husbands or as piece workers. Unable to gain the skills to be full-fledged artisans, women's work tended to be low-paying, requiring low skills and often conferring low status.

McIntosh offers a new material extensive analysis of equity-court petitions. The equity courts—Chancery, Requests, and Exchequer—heard cases that fell outside the common law. Married women could also plead in these courts. Plaintiffs submitted petitions outlining their grievances. These narratives employed the first person and are unusual in their nitty-gritty details of everyday life. Whether or not the complainants

wrote their own petitions, they played on the courts' sympathies with heart-breaking stories that may not have been strictly true. These sources defy ready quantification, because we do not know how many petitions the court heard or why they heard the ones they did. Although there are some responses from defendants, they are few and far between, and we have no judgments. Yet the growing popularity of the court, as measured by the increasing numbers of petitions, suggests that the attitudes and values expressed in the petitions had merit. Moreover, because of their detailed nature, they provide information on women's involvement in pawnbroking, lodging, and moneylending, activities that are largely absent from other records. They add detail and drama to the statistics on women's business arrangements drawn from the tax and court records and civic licensing procedures that make up McIntosh's other sources.

This book engages the ongoing debate about the condition of women following the plague of 1348. Scholars have long debated the Black Death's impact on women's economic status. Some argue that the fifteenth century constituted a so-called golden age for women. With the death of a third of the European population, the women who survived enjoyed greater employment opportunities and earned higher wages. This so-called golden age came to a close by the end of the sixteenth century, when the population rebounded, wages declined, the economy contracted, and women increasingly found themselves facing poverty. Not all agree with the golden-age thesis. Most notably, Judith Bennett has argued, in *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300–1600* (1996), that the changes brought to work and wages by the plague did not overturn the essential nature of women's work, which continued to be accorded low status and to require low skills. McIntosh tries to take an intermediary position in her study. While she argues that the period between 1348 and 1550 did provide women with greater economic opportunities, women continued to be disadvantaged economically by legal and cultural limitations that prevented them from expanding their businesses on the same scale as men. Yet she goes on to assert that women's work was not always viewed as having low status. Her evidence is the large number of women brewers who were married to locally prominent men. Moreover, because her sources do not lend themselves to a study of wages, she is not able to assess women's earnings compared to men. For those committed to one side of the debate or the other, this will be an unsatisfying

position. Yet the lack of source material for the period between 1480 and 1620 remains a problem. However, McIntosh's use of equity petitions illuminates aspects and areas of women's work largely hidden in other studies. They do not tell us how often women worked as pawnbrokers or how much of their income came from this or other activities, but they do reveal something of how women worked and how gender shaped their business experiences.

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