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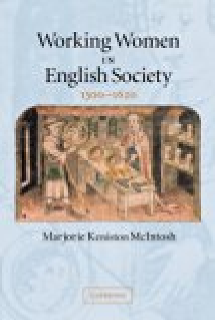
Marjorie Keniston McIntosh. *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiv + 291 pp. $84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84616-5; $36.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-60858-9.



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A Not-Quite-Golden Age

In 1989, Caroline Barron famously claimed that the later Middle Ages was a "Golden Age" for women in London because of the many and varied work opportunities they possessed, especially in contrast to the decline in such opportunities over the sixteenth century.[1] Seven years later, Judith Bennett responded by arguing that women's work opportunities did not decline in early modern England, because there never was a "Golden Age" for women's work; rather, women always worked in occupations that were low skilled, were low paid, required little capital investment, and could be pursued in breaks of time between home and childcare. Any changes at the end of the Middle Ages were in the industries in which women worked, not the nature of that work itself. Using the ale industry as an example, Bennett demonstrated that women stopped being brewers only when brewing became more lucrative and began to require more skills, capital, and full-time application, and she argued that women's opportunities for work have been characterized by continuity, not change.[2] The resolution of this golden age debate (of which Barron and Bennett are representatives, not the sole participants) has significant implications for thinking about women's status in many contexts: if women in the past had greater work opportunities at one time than at another, understanding what created better opportunities might provide insight into how to improve employment inequities in other eras and societies. If, however, women have universally suffered from fewer work opportunities than men, we need to rethink modern solutions accordingly. Marjorie Keniston McIntosh's *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620* brings a wealth of archival evidence to bear on the question and presents a trajectory of women's work that treads a middle ground between a golden age and unchanging oppression.

McIntosh has long been at home in the often overlooked period of transition from medieval to early modern England, as evidenced in her previous studies, including *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200-1500* (1986), *A Community Transformed: The Manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500-1620* (1991), and *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370-1600* (1998). Central to *Working Women in English Society* are records of the equity courts surviving from the late fifteenth century and local records from five market towns throughout England, chosen to represent a variety of regions and economies. These rich sources allow McIntosh to examine questions of women's work on a larger scale than many previous studies, which have usually been limited either by industry or by region.

Working Women in English Society addresses work done for pay and divides that work into two categories: service work, and production and sales. Unsurprisingly, McIntosh finds that service work in medieval and early modern Europe, as today, was less lucrative and offered less prestige than production and sales. Within the service industry, women worked in the domestic and personal arenas; they performed household work, took in boarders, served in health care, and engaged in sex work, tasks that were seen as culturally appropriate to women and analogous to those they already undertook in their own homes. In the financial arena, women also lent money, pawned goods, and rented out property. As for production and sales, McIntosh identifies women in the drink trades, the food trades, and some skilled crafts, especially the production of cloth, clothing, and accessories. She concludes with a brief but intriguing chapter on the role of medieval and early modern women as consumers, arguing that by 1620 the development of a consumer culture placed Englishwomen, especially of the middling sort, at the intersection of conflicting interests: merchants tried to woo women consumers by creating a pleasurable shopping experience, while moralists condemned the greed and love of luxury to which women's desire to shop was attributed.

A recurring theme throughout the book is the importance of credit, defined both personally and financially. McIntosh emphasizes that both kinds of credit were crucial to women's ability to function in a market economy. Without access to financial credit, women were unlikely to be able to accumulate the capital necessary to successful participation in many industries (for instance, to buy brewing supplies before bringing in any money in sales). Financial credit, however, relied on personal credit–one's reputation for trustworthiness, honesty, reliability, and ability to repay debts. This argument succeeds in placing women's work in the context of community relationships and embedding it in a lived society, rather than treating it as an economic abstraction. McIntosh also stresses that, especially in the service industry, the work available to women did not provide enough income to support a household independently. While production and sales offered women a higher possibility of gaining economic independence than the service industries, McIntosh's research implies that few women could live comfortably on their own. While McIntosh does not directly address debates over the nature of marriage in medieval and early modern England, her research confirms its economic necessity for most women.

Finally, McIntosh paints a consistent picture of decline in women's work opportunities over the sixteenth century, both in quantity and quality. She argues that the conditions of household service worsened, especially for women, due to population increases that led to a glut in young people looking for service work. The medieval tolerance of sex work largely vanished in the sixteenth century due to an increasing (often Protestant) desire to eliminate sex outside of marriage. Growing formalization of credit mechanisms made it more difficult for women to lend money or engage in real estate transactions at profitable levels. Apprenticeship, a means by which women in the Middle Ages might learn a skilled craft, became by the end of the sixteenth century scarcely more than a long-term contract for service, with little to distinguish female apprentices from servants. McIntosh confirms Bennett's picture of women's exclusion from brewing by 1620 with a close examination of how this process took place in each of the five market towns under study, making clear that the change was in who brewed and not in how brewing was recorded. By the end of the sixteenth century, the only venue open to most women who sold ale brewed by others was the streets, resulting in a less lucrative, more taxing, and more dangerous trade than men's work overseeing drinking establishments. Women who sold bread and some other foods were similarly more likely to sell in the streets by the end of the sixteenth century than in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Increasing disapproval of the poor and concern about social control made it more difficult for women to run public spaces, such as inns or taverns, as English people viewed women as less capable than men of handling the disruptive individuals likely to appear in such places. Opportunities to work as weavers or in the silk industry also declined over the sixteenth century. Finally, women's inability to travel as easily as men meant that as trade and industry developed larger scale networks, women were left out and left behind.

McIntosh ultimately concludes that women's work opportunities were limited between 1300 and 1620. While women participated in a wide range of activities, they did so at lower and less profitable levels than men. Those who succeeded in working in more elite positions and professions usually did so only as widows of men in those occupations. Women faced real handicaps in the market due to the patriarchal expectations of medieval and early modern English culture. In this respect, McIntosh supports Bennett's evaluation of women's employment. McIntosh stresses, however, that those opportunities were not static and changes did occur during that time. For instance, in response to Bennett's argument that brewing was a low status occupation when women engaged in it, McIntosh examines the social status of families who brewed in her five case study towns and finds that brewers came from affluent and influential families as often as from minor ones. In line with proponents of a golden age, McIntosh argues that post-plague economic crises did afford women greater work opportunities and agency between the mid-fourteenth and late fifteenth centuries than at the other times in her study. Yet, even those improved opportunities, she points out, fell well short of constituting a golden age. Thus, while McIntosh does not want to overestimate the economic opportunities that medieval and early modern English women possessed, neither does she want to underestimate the “real loss” that the changes of the sixteenth century brought (p. 252).

Working Women in English Society is a valuable contribution to the golden age debate. While it does not reframe the terms of this debate, it examines the question through a wider lens. Addressing a broader range of regions and industries over a longer period than other studies, McIntosh provides a comprehensive, nuanced, and convincing analysis of the changing fortunes of medieval and early modern women’s work.

Notes

[1]. Caroline Barron, “The ’Golden Age’ of Women in Medieval London,” *Reading Medieval Studies* 15 (1989): 35-58.

[2]. Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women’s Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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