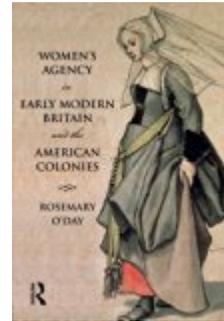


Rosemary O'Day. *Women's Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies*. Harlow and New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. viii + 494 pp. \$42.67 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29463-9.

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Commissioned by Natalie A. Zacek



English Women, at Home and Abroad

This book, aimed at undergraduates and university teachers, sets out to be “a companion to women’s history of the period” (p. 20). It is a very readable account of mainly elite, largely English, women’s lives during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rosemary O’Day discusses secondary debates and uses her own research to provide more in-depth insights into the broad overviews presented. The book is organized into three parts: two on marriage (why and how people married and what married life was like), and one on “culture and religion, which encompasses education, religion, and women’s involvement in the production and consumption of a variety of cultural artefacts” (p. 319).

Women’s Agency in Early Modern Britain and the American Colonies is at its best and most engaging when O’Day describes her primary research into elite English-women’s lives. She tells fascinating stories; for example, she discusses the delicate marriage negotiations that took place at the end of the sixteenth century between individuals acting for Catherine Temple and Sir Nicholas Parker. She also examines Cassandra Willoughby’s researches into her own family history, which O’Day suggests may represent “a tradition in noble and gentle families whereby the women researched, recorded and preserved the genealogy (of great use in the search for a suitable spouse either for themselves or their brothers) and also a tradition of providing the family with a shared identity through its history” (p. 406). Elsewhere we learn about Mary Boyle, daughter of the Earl of Cork, who at the age of fourteen refused to marry her father’s chosen

suitor, because “her aversion to him was quite extraordinary,” and the first wife of Sir Francis Willoughby, who was urged by her son-in-law to marry her daughters off as quickly as possible, since her own illness and impending death coupled with her husband’s likely remarriage would be to her offspring’s disadvantage (p. 87).

Writing a book such as this, which spans widely in terms of both chronology and geography, is never an easy task, and the results are unlikely to please everyone. There is much to recommend this book in terms not only of its ambition but also its readability, its use of some fascinating case studies, and the author’s command of her subject. However, the general absence of poorer women in this account is unfortunate. As O’Day points out, much more is known about elite, and to some extent, middling women in the early modern period, but this does not mean that important work has not been done on those further down the social scale, and it was a shame that O’Day did not discuss it here. The lack of poorer women in this account means that the issue of work is not covered in the book, nor do we find out about the lives of African American women here in the sections on North America.

Another area that O’Day might profitably have included is women’s involvement in politics. Political life was an arena where women from wealthier sections of society were particularly in evidence, and some very important and illuminating work has been done on this area, notably on women’s involvement in the English

Civil War. The inclusion of such issues would arguably have helped to provide more balance in an account so dominated by the subject of marriage. For a book aimed at undergraduates, it was a bit disappointing that O'Day did not explain more clearly some of the concepts and words used. She provides a useful glossary at the end of the book, but it does not contain all the words with which the typical undergraduate might struggle, such as "bundling," nor are the meanings of two key concepts in

the book, "agency" and "patriarchy," spelled out. Finally, although the book contains a long and useful bibliography at the end, this is not a book with many footnotes. Although one could argue that student texts do not need to be referenced as richly as monographs, in my experience students like to mine footnotes for references in books such as this as this is easier to do when looking at specific topics than ploughing through a bibliography.

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