

Merry E. Wiesner. *Gender, Church and State in Early Modern Germany: Essays*. London: Longman, 1998. ix + 227 S. \$30.20 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-29282-6; \$84.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29283-3.

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## M. E. Wiesner: Gender, Church and State in Early Modern Germany

### Gender Balance

This work is a welcome addition to the literature on women's and gender studies during the early modern period of European history. It provides balance and calm scholarship in a field often characterized by polemic and high dudgeon. These characteristics are apparent both in the geographical coverage and in the method of treatment.

As Wiesner points out in her Introduction, the greater part of the work done in women's history over the past quarter-century has been done in English and about British or American women, with French and Italian language areas following, leaving the German language region far behind in the extent of research and publication available to the student (pp. 2-4). By focusing on the Holy Roman Empire, she thus brings a greater geographical balance to our knowledge of women's history during the early modern period.

Far more significant is the balance Wiesner brings to the tone of discourse on the topics which she covers. As Professor Wiesner points out, women's history in general has been characterized as depressing (p. 207). This is a result of the subordinate role women have been allowed to play in history, not only of this period and place, but of every historical age and in every developed society. However, unlike some of her colleagues, Wiesner does not allow this undeniable fact to lead her to become shrill, judgmental, or condemnatory of all these past ages and cultures because they do not come up to the standard

set, but not reached, for gender equality in our own time and place. Instead, she attempts to describe the past in a manner which adheres to the dictum of the magisterial founder of modern German historiography, Leopold von Ranke: *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. 'Gender, Church and State in early modern Germany' is a welcome addition to the corpus available to teachers of undergraduate classes for still another reason. The book is well laid-out, with clear introductions useful for students not conversant with all the intricacies of historical in-fighting and methodological fads. In the Introduction, the reader is given a clear and concise review of the status of women's studies, and some of the general issues involved in this historical sub-discipline. For students not already instructed in such matters, this is an invaluable aid to understanding not only the contents and purposes of this volume, but an entire area of historical scholarship. Too often, this helpful type of introduction is entirely absent.

Eight of the eleven chapters which follow are reprints of articles and papers presented elsewhere over the period between 1986 and 1993. Chapter One, entitled "Women's defense of their public role," is introductory to the entire volume both in the sense that it presents many of the issues which will be met in later chapters, and in the sense that it represents the earliest stage of Dr. Wiesner's work found in this book, dating from 1986. In it, the reader is introduced (perhaps not for the first time) to the seminal work by Joan Kelly, "Did women have a Renaissance?" Some of the issues raised in that work, and their application to the entire early modern period

of German history, are touched upon. We will note the development of those issues in subsequent chapters, and at the same time the changing understandings and emphases of Wiesner herself.

The body of the book is made up of three parts, each part made up of an introductory essay and three chapters. The introductory essay is a most valuable addition to this volume, providing the reader with a context for the issues to be explored in that part of the book. For example, for Part One which deals with religion, the introductory essay introduces the reader to the questions about women and the Reformation. We learn that traditionally women had been almost absent from the story of this great religious event of the sixteenth century, but this is beginning to change. Women's historians have not only discussed great rulers, like Elizabeth I of England, or great saints, like Teresa of Avila, or the opinions of great reformers like Luther or Calvin about the proper place for women, but they have asked different questions and considered different aspects of the Reformation, aspects which had been less considered or not considered at all. Included among these are such questions as how the closing of convents or secularization of welfare affected women, and how women responded to the challenges raised by the Reformation itself. This introductory and historiographical essay places the chapters which follow in context, making them more valuable and more enjoyable for the reader. In Chapter Two, "From spiritual virginity to family as calling," one of the chapters not previously published, Merry Wiesner considers the changing attitudes of men and women to virginity, spousal relations, and motherhood during the sixteenth century. She finds that, while male Protestant and Catholic religious authorities eventually reached a broad agreement on the importance of the male-headed family, women often saw things differently, stressing their role as virgins or mothers more than as wives. "Judging by the women who wrote in early modern Germany, the lesson was not learned exactly as the religious authorities wished it to be," writes Wiesner (p. 46).

Chapter Three, "Ideology meets the Empire: reformed convents and the Reformation," is one of my favorites, perhaps because the subject is closely related to my own work on cathedral chapters. In it, we are reminded of the remarkable manner in which institutions survive long after their original purposes and contexts have changed. We also meet some remarkable women, such as the learned Prioress of Ebstorf, who resisted the Protestant cause, and the energetic and politically astute Elisabeth von Weide, Abbess of Gernrode, who accepted

it. Both stoutly defended the privileges of their houses, but both also defended their roles as unmarried women, and as rulers. They were able to do so, in part at least, because of their status as members of the nobility. In Germany, "class proved itself more important than either gender or religion" (p. 62).

"The Reformation of the women," Chapter Four in Wiesner's book, considers the two meanings of that phrase, viz., attempts by religious authorities to reform women, and the role of women in the Reformation. While women sometimes played a role in carrying out reform, during the sixteenth century they were more often the objects of the reforming activities of others. Protestant preachers had no use for convent life and saw the proper role for a woman as the wife of a man, while Catholic prelates sought to confine women religious to the cloistered life or to marriage. Both agreed that women acting independently of men in a public sphere was undesirable and morally suspect. "Current research also suggests that if any Reformation was successful in the sixteenth century, it was ... a restriction of women's sphere of independent actions and an increase in the power of male heads of household, both temporal and spiritual" (p. 78).

Part Two considers women and the law during the early modern period in Germany, noting that the legal position of women consistently deteriorated during this age. One aspect of the legal world which may surprise some readers is the prevalence of municipally authorized brothels in German towns prior to the sixteenth century, but they disappear during that century as the town fathers concerned themselves increasingly with moral improvement of society.

Part Three concerns itself with the role of women in the workplace, including the changing meanings of the very concept of work during this period. Here, too, Wiesner finds that the condition of women worsened during the early modern era. It is in this section that this reviewer finds a subject of criticism in an otherwise excellent work. In any collection of previously published essays, there is bound to be some degree of repetition. We all have our favorite examples and phrases. However, Chapter Nine "Guilds, male bonding and women's work in early modern Germany," and Chapter Ten, "Wandervoegel and women: journeymen's concepts of masculinity in early modern Germany," contain such a great overlap of material, examples, and general content that including both was probably a mistake. Both chapters make essentially the same point, viz., the exclusion of

women from their former place alongside men in the workshop was a result of concerted pressure applied by the journeymen's associations, who were reacting only partly to economic factors, but much more so to social and psychological impulses. Little is gained by including both articles, and a revised version of Chapter Nine, incorporating a few of the additional points raised in Chapter Ten, would have been preferable.

In Chapter Eleven, Wiesner provides a conclusion to her study by reaching back to the introductory chapter, reminding the reader of the themes developed in the intervening chapters, and summarizing the current status of the craft. Here she repeats a point made frequently, but less insistently, in earlier chapters: women's studies today is a more complex discipline, less willing to accept simple answers to leading questions. In surveying the question whether the Reformation, or early capitalism, had been positive experiences for women, she answers with a complex but generally well supported "no." On the less emotion-laden but nonetheless interesting issue of the appropriateness of the traditional periodization of Western history in women's studies, Wiesner presents some interesting considerations, but ultimately decides to withhold judgement. She writes, "I am going to end

instead with what is the standard closing of every academic study, and call for more research" (p. 211).

Having surveyed the general significance of this work, and found it to be a welcome addition both in content and in tenor, this reviewer nonetheless feels the necessity of mentioning one additional area which might benefit from improvement. This study, like so many, employs the term "early modern" in its title. While some few examples or developments reach into the eighteenth century, and in one instance even beyond, it is primarily anchored in the sixteenth century. Greater attention to chronology—to the specific time frame in which an action took place or a statement was made—would strengthen the author's arguments, while avoiding the perception of a "motionless" condition for women, to which she rightly objects (p. 211).

With only minor reservations, then, this book can be strongly recommended to students of women's studies, German history, and the history of Europe during the early modern period. More well balanced works of this nature are surely what the discipline needs as a corrective to the divisiveness engendered by earlier work, and the responses to it.

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