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Wendy Gamber. *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xiii + 300 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-252-02298-x; $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06601-6; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02298-2.

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Slowly we are building a gendered understanding of the U.S. transition from an agricultural and artisanal to an industrial nation. At every step of the way, the old stories must be recast: unpaid women's work made low workers' wages stretch far enough to support families; the wages of women and of men of color could be lower still because of pervasive ideologies keeping independence a white male domain; technological and economic change pervaded household and farm as well as factory.[1] In *The Female Economy* Wendy Gamber embarks on a crucial rewriting of several missing pieces of the puzzle: what happened when artisans and entrepreneurs were female, as nineteenth century dressmakers and milliners almost always were? What happened when the purchasers of artisanal products were female, too? What happened when one of the most fundamental material dimensions of late-nineteenth-century gender ideology–female fashion–demanded custom production amidst the steadily growing quest for scale and standardization?

It is no exaggeration to say that, during the nineteenth century, half of the U.S. population was taught to sew. So thoroughly institutionalized was the transmission of at least basic knowledge of needlework that sewing could figure easily in a catalog of natural female talents. All women could sew, and indeed it was a rare nineteenth century female who gave the lie to such assumptions. On the other hand, needlework is no more monolithic a set of tasks than woodwork or metalwork, and the ability to sew a straight seam no more enables one to design and fit a bodice or a bonnet than hammering a nail enables one to build cabinets. Dressmakers and milliners were artisans in all the traditional meanings of the word–training as apprentices, working for increasingly respectable pay thereafter, saving to set up shops of their own–except that they were women, and so were the patrons of their businesses.

These proprietors, workers, and customers comprise the "female economy" Gamber describes. The femaleness, she tells us, matters at every level, whether because women have fewer options for work with decent pay, or because businesswomen were treated differently by creditors, or because women ordering dresses did not always have sufficient control of family finances (or understanding of the marginal finances of most dressmaking establishments) to pay bills on time. Nonetheless the sphere of the female economy, as suggested by these very differences, was not wholly separate: fabrics and supplies were sold by male wholesalers; credit was advanced by male financiers; dresses were paid for, ultimately, by fathers and husbands more often than by women's own earnings. Still the young apprentice was introduced to a female shop culture Gamber compares to that of Susan Porter Benson's department store clerks, and the relationship between patron and proprietor was one of female intimacy (surviving, Gamber suggests, in the bridal salons and beauty salons of the late twentieth century).

Thus, Gamber suggests, the female economy comes complete with the kinds of class-based encounters that challenge or even undermine the female culture one might otherwise expect. The intimacies of fashion creation were generally the one-sided confidences of client to service worker, and the shop culture was based on a clear and potentially exploitative hierarchy. While it was a hierarchy based on the promise of upward mobility–as traditional artisanal hierarchies usually were–the hoped-for independence of entrepreneurial women was often precarious, and many businesses disappeared between one census and the next. Nonetheless, the trade was sufficiently promising, compared to the alternatives, to keep a fairly traditional apprenticeship system alive through most of the nineteenth century–long enough for artisanal proprietors to begin complaining of the declining skills of apprentices. (Indeed the rise of ready-made men's clothing combined with the availability of public schooling, especially in New England where Gamber's study is centered, may well have meant a real loss of needlework training for young girls, as evidenced by the

demise of the schoolgirl sampler. In fact we can trace a parallel lament among engineers over the fate of the "yankee whittling boy," the dextrous lad who spent his spare time tinkering–but all of that is another story.)

Gamber paints a complex picture, and an ironic one. When dressmakers and milliners were at their most successful, they constructed a female independence based on the same fashions feminists and dress reformers have castigated as limiting and oppressive. At the other end of the story, simpler and looser clothing styles and the "democratizing" tendencies of ready-made fashion meant the steady decline of the custom trade, and the encroachment of larger, male-run concerns on what had once been the preserve of the female entrepreneur. In between, the availability and marketing of sewing machines and inexpensive dressmaking patterns introduced a further twist: the customer, encouraged by the marketing of "scientific" methods to believe she could create her elaborate wardrobe herself, became often simultaneously the dressmakers' competition.[2]

Indeed only Part I of *The Female Economy* is called "The Female Economy," including one chapter each on proprietors, workers, and the "social relations of consumption." Part II describes the "Gendered Transformations" of business and manufacturing practices–in short, the incursions of men in the female economy of fashion–with chapters on the gendered division of labor and the introduction of "scientific" dressmaking "systems," wholesalers and retailers, and the advent of department store and factory. There is a sense of chronological movement, too, but on the whole the discussion is thematic, each chapter covering much of the period 1860-1930, and several of the chapters would probably stand well alone (for example for undergraduates in business history, labor history, or women's history classes).

Gamber is perhaps at her best when she wears the hat of business historian, insisting on the need for gender analysis in understanding American business practice. Her arguments are supported by her creative integration of Dun and Bradstreet credit reports with manuscript census data to determine the stability of these entrepreneurial ventures, and to explore bureaucratic attitudes toward businesswomen's capital, personal style, and credit-worthiness. For example, she finds an older paternal approach to women's credit–in which female deference became a business asset–shifting to a more "rational" economic evaluation of women in business, in which the definition of credit-worthiness was effectively narrowed. She also makes use of portrayals of dressmakers in literature, either the genteel woman come upon hard times, or the dangerous one ready to lure men into sin, in her discussions of the contradictory positions of "independent" women.

In all of this, of course, she encounters the classic interdisciplinary problem: how to integrate insights from women's, labor, and business history, plus history of technology and of consumption? Gamber is largely successful, but scholars working on related problems may experience a not infrequent sense of lost possibilities of connection: Gamber is not consistent in pushing insights in each field by introducing the basic lessons of another. She is also, occasionally, timid about her own arguments: she makes clear the highly skilled nature of the work, but occasionally backs off with phrases like "not necessarily unskilled work." Here I suspect she is falling prey to an old difficulty in labor and business history, that of relying on the simple dichotomy "skilled/unskilled" (with, occasionally, the middle category "semi-skilled"), an oversimplification which masks the wide array of knowledge necessary to accomplish various tasks and allows nineteenth-century assumptions and pay scales to determine our present day understandings of what work actually entailed.

The Female Economy not only gives us a new understanding of gender and business, but also raises many intriguing questions for further research. Clearly a comparative study of tailors, using Gamber's methodology (Gamber analyzes a small sample of tailors)–both linkages and literary portrayals–would be enlightening. Gamber's sources hint that the tailors' "art" incorporated different methods, trade secrets not shared with dressmakers; at the same time obviously these were men who sewed. We also need more detailed understandings of women's roles in the production and maintenance of clothing, understandings freed from the paradigm classifying such work as "reproductive." More general questions lurk here about women's treatment in credit records and women in other businesses (the biographical sketch at the back of the book suggests Gamber is moving on to a study of boarding house keepers, a project we should all encourage); about regional differences such as those Gamber suggests between Boston and Ohio cities; about urban and rural manufacture of women's clothing; and about the nature of the dressmaking and millinery businesses before 1860, by which time New England, at least, was a committedly industrial region.

Following these paths will lead us even farther beyond the standard conception of "artisan," "entrepreneur," and "progress" than this study of entrepreneurial women has already done. An exploration

of region, for example, would lead to more extended comparisons between labor systems: Gamber makes some use of the autobiography of Elizabeth Keckley, dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln, who bought her own freedom with money made by dressmaking (pp. 102, 105-106). The literature on enslaved artisans is young and could use some gendered analysis, and the construction of the well-to-do white southern belle surely required someone's complex (and as Keckley's story suggests, somewhat differently entrepreneurial) dressmaking.[3] Gamber's work also challenges us to think more about the role of ideology in shaping technological and economic change, in this case the femininity of corsetted torsos and fitted bodices in noticeably slowing the "progress" of large-scale production, as well as the idea that the looser fashions of the '20s were better suited to the new industrial manufactures.[4] In short, Gamber gives us an exciting jumping-off point as well as a solid study of an important and neglected topic.

Notes:

[1]. For further reading on these issues see Ava Baron, ed. *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor (Ithaca, 1991); Jeanne Boydston,* Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic *(New York, 1990); Alice Kessler-Harris,* A Woman's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences *(Lexington, KY, 1990) and "Teating the Male as 'Other': Redefining the Parameters of Labor History,"* Labor History *34(1993):190-205; Nina Lerman, Arwen Mohun, and Ruth Oldenziel, guest editors, special issue "Gender Analysis and the History of Technology,"* Technology and Culture_ 38:1(Jan. 1997).

[2]. Gamber does not explore this last point; for further discussion see Arwen Mohun's work on steam laundries: "Why Mrs. Harrison Never Learned to Iron: Gender, Skill, and Mechanization in the Steam Laundry Industry" *Gender and History* 8(1996):231-251; "Laundrymen Construct Their World: Gender and the Transformation of a Domestic Task to an Industrial Process," *Technology and Culture* 38(1997):97-121.

[3]. On both free and unfree artisans see Howard Rock, Paul Gilje, and Robert Asher, eds., *American Artisans: Crafting Social Identity, 1750-1850* (Baltimore, 1995).

[4]. On ideology shaping technology see Eric Schatzberg, "Ideology and Technical Choice: The Decline of the Wooden Airplane in the US, 1920-1945," *Technology and Culture* 35(1994):34-70; Lerman, Mohun, and Oldenziel, eds. (see n. 1).

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