

H-Net Reviews

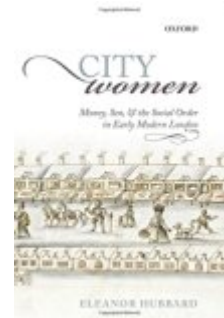
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eleanor Hubbard. *City Women: Money, Sex, and the Social Order in Early Modern London*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 297 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-960934-5.

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This highly accessible and beautifully written study brims with telling details of the lives, loves, fortunes, and fates of ordinary women in London during a period of intense growth and change. Drawing on consistory court depositions from around 2,500 deponents and a wealth of popular literature, Eleanor Hubbard's book recaptures with unprecedented success the sights, smells, joyous laughter, anguished tears, and fierce competitions over reputation that punctuated women's lives in the closely packed neighborhoods of England's largest city. The result is a collective biography of London women between 1570 and 1640 organized around the chronology of the lifecycle. Beginning with young women's migration to the city, it progresses through the search for a suitable husband, employment and the tribulations of maid-servants, life as the mistress of a household, neighborhood dynamics and public interactions, widowhood and remarriage, and finally old age and death. Individual testimonies can be heart wrenching, with their reports of sexual and physical assault, poverty, disease, painful or fatal childbirths, vicious personal attacks on reputation, and miserable deaths without dignity. But the mood of the book is consistently positive, championing the independent spirit of women who largely refused to be constrained or defined by ideals of chastity, silence, and obedience, whether as unmarried women actively negotiating their marriages, wives striving to police their husbands' spending habits, or widows battling to secure family survival or prosperity. Hubbard charts the invaluable contributions that London women made to their families, households, and communities, and resists at every turn the temptation to paint them as passive bystanders in the bustling metropolis or as victims of their gender. This is a history that the women of the time might have

embraced, one free from even the barest hint of the condescension that hindsight can bring.

The clearest strength of the book is the statistical analysis of rich incidental details drawn from witness testimony about the age and status of deponents and their marital, employment, and migration histories. Building on the pathbreaking work of Vivian Brodsky Elliott, Hubbard tracks with admirable precision the origins and average ages of female migrants arriving in the city. Over three-quarters of the sampled consistory court deponents were born outside of London, and on first arrival migrant maids predominantly lived and worked in neighborhoods within the city walls, not outside as previous studies have suggested, and rarely stayed in one household for more than two years. Few women entered formal apprenticeships, but the range of employment in which they engaged was remarkable and extended to exploiting the demand for new products or services (such as the starching of ruffs) that did not fall within existing guild control. Hubbard is also able to calculate average ages at first and subsequent marriages (for London born and migrant women), the age differences between husbands and wives, widow remarriage rates, and much more. Her careful comparisons of these results with those for the rest of the country confirm time and again London's exceptional nature.

In addition, the book presents a bold revisionist conception of attitudes, values, and practices in early modern London that challenges numerous existing assumptions about the experiences and treatment of maids, wives, and widows. Hubbard argues, for example, that "the consequences of bastardy were severe enough to protect most maidservants from casual seduction or rape, reinforcing

the moral strictures that condemned such abuses as unacceptable breaches of patriarchal duty” (p. 110). While she does not minimize the discrimination women faced, she goes to great lengths to emphasize how often concerns about women and gender took second place to concerns about economics and the social order. Keeping mothers and orphans off the poor rate was always more important than regulating women’s sexuality, and the records reveal examples of pregnant maidservants maintaining their employment and receiving support from employers and authorities and of masters supporting children that were not their own. The primary concern of civic leaders was in identifying a bastard’s father, not in punishing the unwed mother, seen most starkly in the formal interrogation of unwed mothers during the heights of the pain of childbirth: in Hubbard’s words, “The harshness of the ritual concealed the power it gave to the mother” (p. 90). Similar impulses led neighbors, servants, and authorities to intervene and prevent husbands from beating their wives, not simply out of human compassion, but because they believed that wife beating undermined patriarchal authority. When it came to widowhood, the curators of patriarchal authority understood that a mother should not be expected to live under the authority of any of her children, with the result that “the independence of widows was not a problematic accident, but the actively subsidized result of early modern English social policy” (p. 264).

The collective outlook shared by Londoners of all sorts that Hubbard extracts from deposition evidence, ballads, and conduct books is deeply conservative, born of a collective desire to maintain social and economic order. Skeptics might wonder how much this conservatism owes to these particular sources and the conditions of their creation. Hubbard is aware of the problems involved in using deposition evidence, but after briefly

rehearsing them she concludes that in most matters deponents either spoke the truth or aimed to sound authentic. In her words, “while it is impossible to guarantee the truthfulness of testimony, in order to be convincing, testimony needed to be plausible and could not contradict contemporary expectations of what might reasonably be expected to occur” (p. 13). Similarly, she mines prescriptive, satirical, and popular printed works, such as ballads, for evidence of popular attitudes and of the wide array of “cultural scripts” Londoners drew on “according to circumstance” (p. 15). The difficulty, of course, comes in gauging the distance between truth and representation in all of these sources, and not every reader will accept that the gap between public ideals or prescriptions and private realities was as narrow as Hubbard suggests.

This book deserves a wide audience and should become a staple on university reading lists in English and history courses. As well as its other virtues, its detailed case studies set out a wealth of primary material that undergraduate and graduate students can tap, while its firmly articulated vision of the place of gender in late Elizabeth and early Stuart London will engage and challenge specialists and nonspecialists alike. Hubbard’s work also raises a number of tantalizing questions: Why did consistory court litigation grow so dramatically in the late sixteenth century and what does the rise and subsequent decline of party against party suits tell us about social relations in London? What role did the cost of suits play in shaping patterns of litigation? And what changes did London’s social landscape undergo between 1570 and 1640? The answers to these puzzles must wait for another day, but for now Hubbard is to be applauded for squeezing all of the available evidentiary juice from a rich and underutilized body of source materials and presenting it in such an elegant form.

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