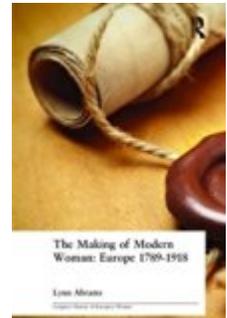


Lynn Abrams. *The Making of Modern Woman.* London: Pearson Education, 2002. x + 382 pp. \$27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-41410-5.



Reviewed by Wendy Parkins

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Food, Clothing, and Shelter: The Domestic Realities of Early Modern Europe

Lynn Abrams's survey of European women's history in "the long nineteenth century" is an ambitious attempt to recount the complexities and contradictions of "the liberation of European women" during this period (p. 8). As the use of the term liberation implies, it is also an avowedly optimistic account (pp. 2, 13). Abrams's aim is not to present an alternative history of the nineteenth century "but rather a history of that period from a woman-centred perspective" (p. 10). Such an aim means that *The Making of Modern Woman* still frames its examination of the nineteenth century in terms of traditional grand narratives of the period—as the bourgeois century, the age of revolution, and the age of empire, for instance (p. 9). In doing so, however, it seeks to re-evaluate such narratives by positioning women "not merely as onlookers but as participants in the political and economic upheavals of the age" (p. 9).

>From the outset, then, Abrams's study grapples with the methodological issue central to much of feminist history, the question of whether

women should be regarded as victims or agents, and declares that "Historical currents are shaped by women's agency" (p. 11). Beginning with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Abrams traces women's progress toward emancipation, arguing that "the story of European women is dominated by [the] struggle to achieve the equality denied them by the Enlightenment" (p. 2). In tracing this trajectory, Abrams's study of the modern woman is divided into three parts: her discursive construction; her role in the family and community; and her participation in the public sphere.

In the first two parts, Abrams re-considers the separation of spheres, a long-held orthodoxy in accounts of nineteenth-century women, although one which, like most orthodoxies, has recently been questioned and considerably qualified. Acknowledging the force of critiques offered by historians like Amanda Vickery, Abrams similarly states that "the rhetoric and the reality of gendered public and private domains was well established at least two centuries prior to the industrial revolution" (p. 43). However, Abrams also argues

that during the first decades of the nineteenth century the discourse of feminine domesticity was newly and forcefully articulated and was widely disseminated across classes and cultures throughout Europe (p. 44). Despite the pervasiveness and uniformity of this discourse, Abrams warns against assuming that it produced a singular notion of what it was to be feminine.

Herein lies a problem in the historical survey approach: in the negotiation between the commonalities and the specificities of women in Europe, it can become difficult to draw meaningful conclusions which are not overly generalized. For instance, a statement like "few middle-class women resented or resisted the strictures of domesticity" (p. 48) is followed later in the chapter by the qualification: "We should remain skeptical of the degree to which the ideology of domesticity was internalized" (p. 64). In the chapter on sexuality, this tendency to generalization is most marked and results in some unresolved contradictions. "The story of women's sexuality in the nineteenth century," Abrams asserts, "is the story of women reclaiming their bodies for themselves. From sex being something assigned to women by others, and given meaning by others, sex became something that women owned" (pp. 172-173). Just a page later, however, Abrams concludes: "By the First World War, women in the industrialized states *were beginning, if very slowly, to glimpse a liberation* from the pure and passionless ideal and the [sexually] unruly and dangerous stereotype. Elsewhere, notably in southern and eastern Europe, it was to be much longer before women's sexuality was to be divorced from the state of motherhood and for the politics of reproduction to be placed on the agenda" (emphasis added, p. 174).

So which is the case? Did nineteenth-century women "own" their sexuality? Or were they just beginning to glimpse this possibility? And how is the reader meant to reconcile such statements? The qualification that non-western European

women were in a significantly different category further complicates the picture and raises the question as to whether it is possible to tell the story of modern woman in a meaningful way without eliding national and cultural differences. Abrams acknowledges, in the introduction, that she is a historian of Germany and Scotland, and the majority of examples and specific instances cited in the book are from Britain, Germany, and France, so perhaps a more limited framework would have resulted in a richer, more nuanced account.

While parts 1 and 2 provide a spectrum of interesting instances and quotations from across (mostly western) Europe, they will offer few new insights to specialists in European history who may be frustrated with the selectiveness and/or over-familiarity of the examples given. Part 1 does, however, offer a significant contribution in its consideration of the place of religion in the lives of nineteenth-century women and, in this instance, the survey approach works well to address a common oversight in women's history accounts by providing a range of interesting instances and examples. Eschewing a perspective which sees religion purely as another site of women's oppression, Abrams considers the importance of piety in the construction of women's identity in nineteenth-century Europe. The feminization of popular religion in nineteenth-century Europe is a phenomenon which Abrams argues needs further attention from historians. In France, Belgium, and Spain the number of nuns increased dramatically in the nineteenth century (in France, from 12,000 at the start of the century to 135,000 in 1878) (p. 35). In Berlin, women comprised two-thirds of Protestant congregations, with a similar percentage in Church of England congregations in London. While such figures have been interpreted to show that the feminization of religion was the result of women maintaining their church involvement while men increasingly withdrew from active participation, Abrams makes a persuasive case for the positive opportunities for

identity-formation and an expanded sphere of action which religion provided, despite its patriarchal authority structures. >From the apparitions of the Virgin seen by young girls in France to the British visionary Dorothy Gott "who renounced housework for the work of the soul" (p. 38), piety was for many women a way of life which enabled them actively to negotiate a domestic and public identity and role. Without underestimating the ways in which religious discourse could constrain women's behavior and opportunities, Abrams nevertheless argues convincingly that "the pious woman claimed for herself a privileged place in the family and in society" (p. 40). In this notion of piety, which encompassed both the personal and the public, women could begin to articulate a legitimate form of participation in the public sphere, which could be re-invoked, and re-configured, in the feminist movements that would emerge later in the century, even if it also left feminists with a dubious legacy of an essentialized virtuous femininity.

In part 3, devoted to women's public roles, I found the synthesis approach more successful, despite (or because of?) the inclusion of a broader range of national and cultural contexts. Beginning with the important reminder that for most of "the long nineteenth century," European women did not possess citizenship rights or political representation, Abrams examines the range of ways in which women nonetheless "act[ed] like citizens without citizenship" (p. 224). I particularly enjoyed Abrams's attention to the diversity of what is too often generically described as "the 1848 revolutions," which illustrated well her central argument in this section that women's contributions to the national and political revolutions cannot be dismissed as mere "walk-on parts" (p. 213). "Women," Abrams writes, "assumed they had a public, political role to play in the revolutionary uprisings. They attended political meetings, they formed their own political clubs and they began to reconceptualize their own position in the context of the new political conditions, establishing

associations to promote women's education for instance and calling for women to be admitted to appropriate fields of employment" (p. 225).

In these often nationalistically inflected revolutions, the conflict between the liberatory struggles in which women were involved and their own agendas for autonomy could be varyingly articulated and prioritized. In the midst of 1848, Kathinka Zitz-Halein wrote to Sophie von Hatzfeldt, a fellow-supporter of the revolution in Germany, "Be patient, women's rights are not important now. The most important problem is the success of the revolution" (p. 223). As Abrams concludes, it was perhaps because nineteenth-century nationalism was "neither a coherent movement nor a coherent ideology" that women could find ways to identify their own aspirations within national ideals and were able to accommodate apparently conflicting aims (p. 232).

Women's capacity to embody the nation--to be encouraged to identify as national subjects if not legitimate citizens--was also bound up with their capacity to contribute to the public sphere. It was, for instance, during the nineteenth century that many countries (such as Iceland, Norway, Wales, the Netherlands) "invented" a tradition of national dress which was often best exemplified in women's dress. The wearing of dress, which harkened back to an imagined rural culture, not only located women in the domestic realm but also linked the home with the nation in ways which could be productively deployed in national ideology (p. 233). Similarly, women's prominent role in folk culture (e.g. dance, food, local languages/dialects) furthered this embodiment of the nation as unified and authentic (p. 232). Women, through both education and the family, played central roles in preserving linguistic traditions--"the mother tongue"--across Europe. For example, Abrams mentions the Secret Teaching Society, established in Poland by a group of women teachers with the aim of educating working-class children in the Polish language, history, and cul-

ture, as a resistance to the intensive Russification of the elementary education system in the 1880s and 1890s (p. 234). Abrams also notes the way in which national identity could be used as a point of comparison to offer women a reassuring sense of identity in contrast to the (presumed) shortcomings of women of other nations. German domesticity, she argues, was understood as superior by middle-class German women, in contrast to the shortcomings of their French and English counterparts (p. 233). The ways in which modern women were "made" through negative constructions of their neighboring countrywomen seems to me a particularly interesting and productive line of examination to pursue, but it remains under-utilized in a historical survey such as this, where the emphasis is on synthesis, rather than contrast.

In the remainder of part 3, Abrams turns her attention to areas of historical debate in considering women's role and participation in imperialism, suffrage campaigns, and the First World War. While Abrams provides a good introduction to the disparate views of feminist historians on these topics, the survey approach seems to presume that the historical account of, say, women's involvement in the war will somehow speak for itself; the synthesis method seems to allow for the adoption of a "fence-sitting" position when a more definitive conclusion would have provided a better sense of closure for readers new to the field and a clearer position for specialist readers to critically evaluate. For instance, Abrams begins the chapter, "The Great War," by interrogating the notion of "the war as *caesura*, a defining moment in modern European history" (p. 297), and asking whether the war marked a similarly defining moment in the liberation of women, only to conclude, somewhat weakly, that "the values of the previous century were reaffirmed" but the gender system did not "survive completely unscathed" (p. 322). The complexities of the historical arguments, combined with the sheer breadth of the source material, should of course make any historian hesitate to offer a final answer to such ques-

tions. However, after the declaration in the book's introduction that an optimistic account of women's liberation would be offered, I was expecting a more clearly "triumphant" conclusion, or at least a concluding chapter to rearticulate the book's thesis after eleven chapters of detailing women's long nineteenth century.

The Making of Modern Woman is a highly readable account of a huge and daunting topic--the history of European women in the nineteenth century--and if I have emphasized here the limitations of a survey-style account this is not to deny that the book would be an invaluable resource for students and general readers, as well as specialist historians who want a "snapshot" of cross-cultural contexts for comparison with their own period or nation of interest, or to fill a gap in their knowledge on topics like women's work or imperial feminism, for instance. The inclusion of a "Further Reading" list for each chapter is also very useful in this regard.

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