

---

H-France Review Vol. 10 (December 2010), No. 211

Daryl M. Hafter, *Women at Work in Preindustrial France*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2007. ix + 318 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN-10: 0271029692.

Review by Julie Hardwick, University of Texas at Austin.

Daryl Hafter's long anticipated book on women's work in the Old Regime marks the culmination of decades of intellectual labor on gender and production in the eighteenth century and of an equally long term generous investment of encouragement and support for successive cohorts of junior historians with intersecting interests. Both projects have already shaped and fostered the emergence of the broad field of women, family, work and economy in pre-modern French historiography. This book then marks a kind of celebratory exclamation point that encourages us to look forward to what comes next as well as to ruminate about the past and current state of the field.

While the centrality of women's labor in many forms to the pre-modern economy is now well established, *Women at Work* provides a state of the art exploration of female work through case studies of female guild workers in Rouen and the more diffusely organized world of female workers in the vast silk manufacture in Lyon. In line with Claire Crowston's work on female guild workers in Paris, the central argument of the book is that that the classic old regime privileges of guild membership gave women a platform from which to leverage rights and opportunities.[1] This reading has revised an older argument that saw early modern guilds as increasingly hostile to women and as emerging bastions of gendered inequality and exclusion.[2] Hafter insists that gender was only one of many sources of difference in eighteenth-century France, and as such could be trumped by privilege in particular situations. The privilege of guild membership provided women, as wives and daughters as well as female masters, with sizeable advantages, including the legal ability to seek to protect their conditions and the terms of production.

The organization of the vast maze of silk manufacture in Lyon, largely reliant on female piece workers, as well as the intensely hierarchical structure of the silk guild, provides a striking counter to the tightly knit guild work world of Rouen. The use of different kinds of source material for the two cities does give us two separate filters. The world of female workers in Lyon is reconstructed here largely through guild statutes and other regulations, whereas the practice of women guild workers in Rouen is very evocatively described through very careful reading of a wide range of source materials. In a sense then, prescriptive attitudes towards female work are highlighted for Lyon and the practice of women's work, largely revealed through the very rich records of disputes, for Rouen.

In Rouen, the most important guild to admit women as masters was the linen drapers of new clothes (*lingères en neuf*) which had between 100 and 200 members over the third-quarter of the eighteenth century. These female masters ran their operations much as male guilds did, as wonderfully demonstrated in chapter three. They regulated their own affairs, elected officers,

tangled with illicit (i.e., non guild) competitors, both male and female, artfully expanded their own production, sometimes by using guild protections and sometimes by maneuvering around guild regulations. The other female guilds had similar dynamics. The very careful tracing of the history of the *bonnetières* provides one example of how a snapshot view can be misleading. Surely enough, in a paradigm now long familiar to gender historians, these female hat knitters and decorators “lost out” in a battle with male hatmakers in litigation over technology that left them limited to knitting by hand while their male peers in the two *bonnetier* guilds were assigned the (superior and newer) technology of mechanical knitting frames. However, subsequently, the highly specialized nature of the work the female knitters and decorators did nevertheless made them indispensable as subcontractors to a wide range of guildsmen. In all these ways, women’s guilds and female guildworkers mirrored the privileges, pursuit of opportunities, and strategies for economic and legal success that historians have shown to be typical of contemporary male guild members.

In eighteenth-century Lyon, silk production dominated the city’s economy with perhaps 40,000 men, women and children involved, loosely organized into a “guild” (the *grand fabrique*) that had little in common with traditional craft guilds. The latter were in any case historically very weak in Lyon, and women were not nearly as prominent in any aspect of guild production as they were in specific sectors of the Rouen economy. Yet women workers were essential to silk production, doing highly skilled and often dangerous work (right from the starting point of the production process when they dipped silk cocoons into boiling water to loosen their strands of thread). Despite the lack of opportunities in a guild structure that was not only dominated by men but extremely restrictive for women who were paid on a piece work basis and who were by statute at least denied the husbandly protections *coverture* in principle provided, female silk workers also assiduously and entrepreneurially pursued their own best interests in a lively underground black market that existed parallel to licit silk production.

The comparison between Rouen and Lyon provides some suggestive indicators of the variables that shaped women’s working lives in the old regime. Whether as silk workers, linen drapers of new or old clothes, or knitters and decorators of all types, female workers in Lyon and Rouen alike were highly skilled, industrious and ingenious foundational contributors to the macro economy and essential providers in their own family economies. Hafter argues that the difference in the status and security of Lyonnais and Rouennais women workers lay in their varied access to the privileges and protections guild membership offered. Strikingly, she also raises the issue of scale, wondering whether the relatively small scale of production in Rouen where hundreds of guild mistresses worked offered opportunities that the enormous proto-capitalist silk industry of Lyon did not. This attention to scale in part echoes the work of Judith Bennett for England where Bennett has argued that the increasing scale of production (with associated challenges such as raising more capital and others) was an important factor in marginalizing women as lead actors in production.[3]

Hafter makes a series of smaller and very valuable points along the way. She encourages us to think more broadly about the consequences of the legal system of privilege than simply guilds. The range of “corporate” opportunities for women was not limited to guilds. Second hand sellers like market women operated outside of guilds but within a corporate system of licensing that also invoked privilege as a usable resource for women. Throughout, Hafter shows an extraordinary and invaluable grasp of the often elusive details of production of specific types of items in terms of the technology and particulars of process.

Professor Hafter concludes with two chapters on the late eighteenth-century guild reforms, framed in as a declension narrative where the reforms of the 1770s and 1780s followed by the abolition of privilege and guilds in the Revolution led to a decrease in opportunities for women’s

high status work and more generally to a broader, deeper and more difficult to bridge hierarchical division of the sexes in the nineteenth century. The details of the struggles between guild workers, with female masters at the forefront, and “reformers” are fascinatingly reconstructed here, and the vivid sense of the on-the-ground contention over these issues reminds us of the real life stakes of philosophical reforms. I am not quite so persuaded by the argument of this aspect of the book since, as Prof. Hafter notes, the female guild masters of the eighteenth century enjoyed entirely exceptional advantages, and it is not clear that the female labor force at large was similarly disadvantaged by the political shifts of the Revolution. Tessie Liu, for example, has demonstrated that families’ own choices were of great importance in shaping shifts in industrial working patterns in western France in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[4] Moreover, Judith Bennett has provocatively argued that women’s work across these seeming divides has been fundamentally stable in terms of status, assigned skill and pay, that is to say always lower than men’s, despite changes in specific tasks. Here we see that despite the advantages guild membership offered a small group of women workers, “their profits were usually lower” than their male counterparts, and to this (important) extent privilege did not trump gender as “their society, in the end, could not put aside the fact of their being women” (p.143). In this regard as in many others, *Women at Work* offers us much to ponder in terms of making sense of the big picture of gender and work in the preindustrial past.

Hafter observes that preindustrial women’s work “spanned the spectrum from a mass of ill-paid women to a small but important cohort who became guild masters” (p. 18). The highlighting of this broad spectrum raises critical directions for future work. While her argument is entirely persuasive about the guildswomen of Rouen, she admirably frankly admits as other historians have noted that Rouen’s guild life was highly unusual and that the female masters who so skillfully mobilized the possibilities of privilege there were exceptional among the female labor force as a whole. I am struck here, as in Crowston’s work on female guild workers in Paris, by how women’s access to work privilege centered around on particular segment of guild organization, that is, the textile trades. (Even in Rouen, eight of the ten trades – out of a total of 112 guilds – that admitted women as masters were devoted to textiles.) What questions does that specificity of the gender-guild-work access raise? Now the world of guildswomen is so well explored, what can we know about the vast majority of female workers who enjoyed no such privileges? Fortunately, my understanding is that Professor Hafter has embarked on this topic, so we can look forward to the outcome and hope she will inspire yet another cohort of scholars of gender and work to follow her signposting.

## NOTES

[1] Clare Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1781* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

[2] For an excellent overview of this literature, see Clare Crowston, “Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research,” *International Review of Social History* 53 (2008): 19-44.

[3] Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women’s Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[4] Tessie Liu, *The Weaver’s Knot: The Contradictions of Family Solidarity and Class Conflict in Western France (1750 to 1914)* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Julie Hardwick  
University of Texas at Austin  
[jhardwick@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:jhardwick@mail.utexas.edu)

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172