

# Women's Work in Early Modern Europe

23-24 September 2010

Jesus College, Cambridge

## Proceedings

### Session 4

### Skill and remuneration

## Discussion

(with thanks to Christopher Pihl)

*Pam Sharpe* opened with a brief historiographical exposé of the subject women's work, a research area in which she observed a decline in the last decade. But Sharpe also noticed that there have been published some really important and widely debated studies in the 21st-century on this topic. One of these studies is Joyce Burnette's *Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain*. Sharpe especially pointed out Burnette's rather controversial thesis that women had fewer opportunities and were less remunerated than men due to their body strength and that they were seen as less skilled.

*Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk* followed as an introducer and she started with a statement that can be seen as directed towards Burnette. van Nederveen Meerkerk said that skill was a construction which heavily affected women's work and the remuneration of women's work. Skill as a construction, or the construction of skills, is very seldom problematized according to van Nederveen Meerkerk. With some clear examples from the Dutch textile industry, van Nederveen Meerkerk showed very well some important aspects of the construction of skills. Firstly, she pointed out the guilds as important because they regulated who was allowed to learn and exercise skills connected with guild-regulated crafts. van Nederveen Meerkerk emphasized that the craft guilds' main function was not to teach apprentices the actual craft, instead it was to learn "the secrets of the craft", or in other words a social training. Secondly, she took spinning as an example of the construction of skills. Spinning was first a female dominated occupation in the Netherlands, but later on it was also performed by men. Some of these spinning men began to call themselves "master spinners", but there was no guild to become a master in. But the master title was a way for these men to create a distance from female spinners by picking up a title strongly connected to skills. Thirdly, van Nederveen Meerkerk problematized in short the connection between skill and remuneration by showing that women and men could be equally productive in spinning, but remunerated differently, according to ideas about skill that were not automatically connected to

productivity or quality. They were rather connected to sex and ideas about women's and men's work, skills and remuneration.

The following discussion was primarily concentrated upon the understanding of skill, today and in the past. Two different understandings, or notions, were delivered. On the one hand skill had an immense impact of the structure of the labour market, and skill was a neutral concept which can be used to understand the organization of labour and the labour market. On the other hand, skill must be seen as a construction that historically varies and skill was a very important aspect of the power relation between different groups in the past.

There was also a shorter discussion about women's work as subordinated or assistant to men's. *Paul Minoletti* said that in his study of women in English industries in the 19th-century, women were never holding positions that were superior to men. *Amy Erickson* remarked that women in positions as mistresses, or housewives, in household contexts could be superior to male employees in the households.

The final discussion in the session considered whether we should view the actions and choices of historical individuals as rational, although in a modern economic view they can many times be seen as irrational. The discussion was ended by *Judith Spicksley* and *Sheilagh Ogilvie* who both most definitely claimed that we as historians have to see their actions and choices as rational, as seen from their prerequisites, for example as women or employers.

Amy Erickson, Jane Humphries, Anne Laurence, Jan Lindegren, Paul Minoletti, Sheilagh Ogilvie, Leonard Schwarz, Pam Sharpe, Leigh Shaw-Taylor, Judith Spicksley, John Styles, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, Jane Whittle, Tony Wrigley, and Heide Wunder participated in the discussion.