

EXHIBITION REVIEW "CITY WOMEN IN THE 18TH CENTURY"

Electronic reference

Clara Manco, "City Women in the 18th century, followed by an interview with Dr Amy Erickson (Robinson College, Faculty of History, Cambridge University), Curator of the exhibition", *Miranda* [Online], 20 | 2020, Online since 27 April 2020, connection on 25 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/26906>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.26906>

To commemorate the centenary of the Sex Disqualification Removal Act in 1919, which legally opened all professions to women as well as men, the City of London, together with the University of Cambridge and the British Museum, sponsored this Autumn a free, open-air exhibition on the history of women in trade (21st September - 18th October 2019). To be precise, "City Women in the 18th Century" is somewhere between an exhibition and a promenade around eleven displays stands and 36 unique panels, strategically placed in the streets of Cheapside and offering to passers-by a fresh perspective on this century-old history : women are indeed traceable in city trade records as far back as the 16th century. The exhibition's starting point is the British Museum's vast, underexplored collection of thousands of unique trade cards, advertising the producing, buying and selling of goods by women at the heart of the luxury trade in the 18th century. From this extraordinarily rich collection, 75 cards were chosen for their historical and aesthetical value, as well as for the location of the trades they advertised in the neighbourhood of Cheapside. From St Paul's Cathedral to the Royal Exchange, through the heart of the 18th-century City, the visitor is invited to read and meditate on this evidence of a forgotten past, right at the spot where these adventurous women ran their shops some centuries ago.

One of the first difficulties the research team was faced with was simply to identify female shopkeepers, traders and entrepreneurs in this mass of information. Many of the trade cards in the collection indicate only a last name or a vague "& Co", effectively obliterating the sex of the owner, the possible collaboration of a couple, or even of a whole family. The "law of coverture", a specificity of English marital law, adds a layer of difficulty to the effort of tracing the presence of female shopkeepers: as a woman would always take on her husband's name after marriage, her own would virtually disappear from trade registers as a consequence, even in cases where she kept practicing. Moreover, the terms "Mr" and "Mrs" (short of Mister and Mistress) on trade cards should not be mistaken for references to the owner's marital status, as they point out exclusively to its legal position as an employer. A name repeated twice (say, "Mr Thompson and Mrs Thompson") is also more likely, given the law of coverture, to designate a brother and a sister working together as two separate legal entities rather than a husband and a wife: in the latter case, the woman's name would simply be expected to disappear. Many women traders, such as Anna Maria Garthwaite who designed silks, did not use trade cards as they did not sell directly to the public. It is also worth keeping in mind that some of the guild records, where the information was stored, were simply lost in the Great Fire of 1666. One of the paradoxes of this exhibition is therefore to point out the fact that despite the undeniable wealth of material presented, the real number of women involved in trade is, in all probability, still immensely underestimated.

Yet the numbers are staggering: contrary to popular belief, a large number of women were independently involved in trade, at almost all levels. For the City of London only, the current estimates waver around at least 150 women fan makers, 500 female milliners, 165 identified women gold- and silversmiths. There were women printers, coffee-shop managers, chest makers. And then there were also women who, while practising a trade, did not fall under the obligation to register their commerce in city records. That is generally the case for a whole class of women with more skills than capital: doctors, writers, poets or playwrights (Susannah Centlivre or Charlotte Lennox), actresses, theatre company managers (such as Anne Bracegirdle, Regina Mingotti or Sarah Baker), headmistresses of schools. Some of the women had immigrated, such as Susannah Passavant of Huguenot descent, who was a "toymaker", that is, a jeweller. Middle-class women entrepreneurs were indeed ubiquitous.

It may come as a surprise that marriage does not seem to have significantly changed the professional trajectory of women: in fact, there is very little evidence of differences of treatment between widows, wives and unmarried women, between young and older women, between female traders in wholesale, retail or colonial trade, between those who ran businesses themselves and those employed by others. Many women shopkeepers bore children, sometimes many, a situation made possible by the widespread use of the wet-nurse system. Whatever their backgrounds and situations, women's visible engagement in the Cheapside luxury trade seems to have been a widely unquestioned fact in the 18th century, so much so that women do not seem to have found neither particularly desirable nor harmful to advertise their sex, for example as part of a marketing strategy.

Not only were women in trade numerous, there were also, in some cases, particularly powerful. The example of Eleanor Coade, who capitalised on her company's invention of the famous "Coade stone", an artificial building material exported to all parts of the world, is by no means unique, although she was at times presented as such. While Coade ran a factory, women were also building fortunes in joint-stock companies. The remarkable case of lace dealer Hester Pinney, a broker whose success on the London stock market allowed her to accumulate an impressive amount of wealth, is hard to forget. There are traces of a female trader of fans exporting her London-based production all the way to Spain, with goods adorned with celebrations of Spanish naval victories. The Sleepe-Burney dynasty, also involved in fan making, managed to keep a flourishing trade over various generations, their management skills being passed on from mother to daughter. Women traders could also have male apprentices, such as Elizabeth Hutt with John Iliffe.

Of course, this history is not only one of success. The law of *couverture* also had its drama, such as was the case for milliner Jane Cox, whose stock in trade was seized when her husband went bankrupt. Yet even the *couverture* system provided protections in such instances: Jane Cox was judged a "feme sole trader", a procedure which allowed married women to be considered by law, as far as their business was concerned at least, as single and fully autonomous. Women traders were required to be guild members but elections to the guild and governing bodies of the City were however still barred to women.

As austere and matter-of-fact as they might seem, these trade cards are indeed remarkably touching. On the back of one trade card, the visitor can still read traces of hastily written sums and handwritten accounts, or little playful poems. Some of the trade cards are beautifully ornate, such as that of the public house "the Hartichoke", or Hogarth's engraving to advertise his sisters' textile trade. Finally, one cannot help but smile seeing the "Teeth clean'd

in a curious manner" advertised by dentist Catherine Madden, or Eleanor Lawrence's card boasting of "Funerals decently performed".

The initiative of the exhibition was a way for the City of London to encourage the participation of women in the City's governing bodies, which is still very low today. The choice to present the exhibition on the streets where their predecessors would have kept their shops was also meant as a discreet reminder that business women of today should be aware of the history of their independence, and perhaps reassess their patience towards issues such as the current gender pay gap. The exhibition is also meant as a challenge to the "rising tide" narrative of triumph: wherever freedom can be gained, it can also be lost. The exhibition suggests that the history of women's access to financial independence might have been a story of regression as well as one of progress. This small exhibition celebrating women's achievement, despite the simplicity of its presentation, is really full of life. Its focus on particular cases, avoiding too much context and generalisation, is paradoxically what allows the trade cards to speak to us so powerfully. History has seemingly overlooked female shopkeepers in the Heart of the City, whose contribution is by no means insignificant: our surprise when we are confronted with evidence of this history of independence leaves us questioning the active erasure of the contribution of these women to history and the economy, but also our own cognitive error, biases and false assumptions.

Photos, bibliography and further information :
<http://citywomen.hist.cam.ac.uk/>

INTERVIEW OF Dr AMY ERICKSON (Robinson College, Faculty of History, Cambridge University), CURATOR OF THE EXHIBITION:

Where did the idea for the exhibition come from ? What were the various goals and motivations for the different people and institutions who worked on the project ?

Dr Amy Erickson: The project started when I gave a lecture on women and the guilds to open an exhibition at the London Guildhall . A London City councilman then approached me to offer to turn it into a bigger exhibition. I was then in touch with the person in charge of events in the City, and this is when we got the idea of the display stands, which the City lent us. It was the first time they were spread out over a neighbourhood rather than used in a cluster: our idea was to offer a ramble, a trajectory, but also a memorial which would say "so and so worked there" exactly on the place where it happened. The British Museum, who owns an enormous collection of thousands of trades cards, sponsored the project by not charging reproduction fees: they wanted to make this trades card collection better known. The City also wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the Sex Disqualification Removal Act of 1919, as well as to encourage women to join the City government at the moment the numbers of alderwomen are ridiculously low. It was important for them to remind the women in the guilds, which still exist, that the 1919 Act was not the first time women were admitted in trade structures, although many thought it was ! There is a forgotten history of female presence in the City which had to be commemorated. The Cheapside Business Association was interested in the commercial and cultural crossover aspect. Metrobank, which sponsored a reception, was interested in community interaction. Grants were awarded by the City of London and the University of Cambridge, and logistical help through the Faculty of History, which was invaluable with such short deadlines: everything had to be researched, designed, and set up between May and October 2019. One of the most satisfying aspects of the project was also to bring together work by various PhD students, working on

dissenting female printers or doing research on mantua-makers (a specific name given to high end female tailors). I also have to mention the donors who offered documents from their private collections. All in all, it was a rather unusual joint project, and this admittedly caused a number of administrative difficulties, but it worked out eventually.

Did you consider other forms to present this information ?

Dr A. E.: I was involved in various non-academic street projects before this one, so I already had some experience of that type of initiative. We considered placing posters directly on the windows of shops formerly run by women. It was a convenient way of overcoming the limitations of the panel form, which, as a street project, has to follow very specific security rules. There was also too much textual information to hang posters from lampposts, though these are particularly eye-catching. Little plaques were also envisaged, and might be used for a similar project, perhaps in a different city or area. One of the drawbacks of resorting to spread-out panels was that we wanted to avoid repeating information too much, so we chose to place them in a line, with people walking from one to the next, rather than scattered over the whole area. It was also a concern for us (which comes from my own frustrations as a viewer) to give neither too much nor too little information: we wanted to give the viewer the facts and the contextual tools, then let him or her decide how to interpret the results for himself. It was my conscious choice to make individual cases speak for themselves and not make too many general statements.

The exhibition seems to suggest that there was surprisingly little difference between male and female traders, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs: they worked in the same places, had comparable responsibilities, enjoyed similar autonomy. Would you go as far as to say that there were no differences at all ?

Dr A.E.: Aside from the professions (i.e. law and the clergy) which were explicitly forbidden to women, in all my years of research, in which I have studied a large number of female traders and shopkeepers, I am still to find a trade that was forbidden to 18th-century women. There were even female gravediggers and night-soil women ! Not in Cheapside of course, but although different neighbourhoods presented different profiles of tradesmen and women, no trade seems to have been forbidden. If we are to look at popular representations, Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders* are also, in a way, "tradeswomen". I also have in mind Charlotte Charke's autobiography, though she was not a high trader. Frances Burney's *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* presents very interesting portrayals of women working in a millinery shop, which might have been inspired by her own family's experience as fan makers. So although there were often gender imbalances within a particular trade (millinery, for example, was an overwhelmingly female activity), it seems that the idea of women being barred from certain trade is more of a retrospective bias.