PROJECT MUSE®

Shulamit and Margarete: Power, Gender, and Religion in a
Rural Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe (review)

Dean Phillip Bell

Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 24,
Number 3, Spring 2006, pp. 159-162 (Review)

Published by Purdue University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2006.0042>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/197126>

insights gained from its systematic analysis of the images are its strength, and it is there that its impact will be most significant.

Jerold C. Frakes

Comparative Literature Department

University of Southern California

Shulamit and Margarete: Power, Gender, and Religion in a Rural Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe, by Claudia Ulbrich, translated by Thomas Dunlap. *Studies in Central European Histories*, volume 32. Boston and Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004 (originally in German in 1999). 336 pp. \$165.

This translation makes Claudia Ulbrich's provocative and highly original work available to an English-speaking audience, and for that Brill Academic Publishers and the editors of the series *Studies in Central European Histories* are to be thanked. As always, Thomas Dunlap has crafted a very exacting and polished translation.

Taking her test case of the unusually rich sources from the small village of Steinbiedersdorf, southeast of Metz on the German and French border, Ulbrich argues that gender relations in an estate-based society were not private or individual, but socially and culturally constituted and endowed with power to shape the structure of political domination, economic life, and culture. The volume begins with a review of some recent literature in gender and women's studies and goes on through detailed case studies to offer important insights into the role of women in pre-modern society, utilizing this orientation to grapple with Jewish and Christian relations as well. The choice of Steinbiedersdorf as the focus of the study is extremely helpful, since there was a large percentage of Jews (about one-sixth of the population) living in a city predominantly Catholic but embroiled in a host of complex territorial politics. Throughout Ulbrich not only taps engaging source materials, but she also culls from tight-fisted sources—often legal cases—a wealth of information.

After providing a general overview of the history and political position of the village, Ulbrich turns to women's and gender history in the Christian and Jewish communities and, in a sense, attempts to rewrite the history of the village from female and Jewish perspectives. While Ulbrich contends that women faced inequality—in the separation of men and women in church or synagogue seating, for example—she also argues that women had recourse to communicative structures not available to men and could develop strategies of and networks for empowerment. Women may have been structurally disad-

vantaged, but they could set legal proceedings in motion, and wives could appear in court in place of husbands. Amidst the complex and at times confusing web of courts Ulbrich writes that even when excluded from institutionalized public space (such as courts), women had unencumbered spheres of agency not available to men, which they could use to their advantage.

In addition, the accelerated pauperization in Steinbiedersdorf after 1770 increased the importance of women's agency, which was not restricted to the house. Women often sought gainful employment, and the work of widow households—22% of Christian and 12% of Jewish households were headed by women—included the supervision of non-familial personnel. Women, Ulbrich argues, believed themselves to be capable of running a farm, and they often successfully defended their positions, at times enjoying fairly extensive financial freedom of action. Rioting women were prepared for violence, and women in general were ready to use force to defend their children and household.

Jewish women also had spheres of religious and social tasks in and out of house. In fact, the labor of Jewish women was extremely important, particularly within the context of Jewish social and economic conditions. Jewish women also had some level of recourse to the courts, and legal cases involving women could be treated with great sensitivity, especially since there was a general concern that such cases might provide an opportunity of governmental or church intervention.

Though the distribution of wealth may have been somewhat more equal than in the Christian community, there was a weak middling stratum and a wide gulf between rich and poor in the Jewish community. Most Jews in Steinbiedersdorf were increasingly poor, living through trading or small-scale money lending. At the same time, a rural upper class culture also existed that set itself apart from the lifestyle of the Jewish lower class and majority of Christian rural population. Ulbrich contends that the wife of a Jewish leader had certain influence in her social environment and, what is more, shared in her husband's status and power. Jews also maintained important kinship networks and had particularly significant connections with the Jewish community in Metz.

Like the position of women, the position of Jews was on the one hand insecure and at times embroiled in conflict. On the other hand, there was no separate Jewish street in Steinbiedersdorf; Jews had complex social and economic relations with their Christian neighbors, and anti-Judaism was generally latent, even if it never completely disappeared. While the Jewish population in Steinbiedersdorf was under the direct (patriarchal) authority of the territorial lord, through the person or office of the *parnas*, Ulbrich maintains that that does not imply that the Jewish community accepted the power of the *parnasim* without objection. She further asserts that the Jewish community was not re-

ally a corporation, since although Jews resided within village boundaries they were not tied into the community of Christian housefathers or integrated into the structure of domination through the bailiff.

Given her specific findings relative to women and Jews and her general observations about Steinbiedersdorf, Ulbrich forwards two important conclusions for scholars of the early modern period. First, she argues that in Steinbiedersdorf one cannot speak of a closed society with self-contained social strata defined by family and wealth. Rather, Steinbiedersdorf was an open village interconnected with the surrounding world through kinship bonds and characterized by a high degree of social mobility in the eighteenth century—reinforced by its location along a border. There existed a village or court public that transcended gender, and women in various ways were integrated into the process of creating the social hierarchy within the village. Ulbrich also adds that the house may have been a starting point for, but it was not a counter-pole to, the state. The ever-increasing intervention of the lord in village life probably, in the end, had greater impact on men and the authority of housefathers anyway.

Second, Ulbrich concludes that the village social order was built upon inequality but grounded in plurality. Such a pluralistic construction, however, does not obligate us to see Christian and Jewish relations as characterized exclusively by either integration or segregation. The openness to a public that transcended religion should not be equated with integration, and it was possible simultaneously to pursue both integration (in the sense of incorporation into the state) and segregation. In the end, it was the capacity to resolve conflicts that created an important precondition for living with differences and co-existence. There was an ongoing latent, and occasionally open, anti-Jewish hostility, which required Jews to manage a delicate balance with their Christian neighbors and to acquire an extensive knowledge of prevailing power relationships and social networks. Given their simple proximity, Jews and Christians could not really be strangers. Both groups participated in constituting the village public, sharing, for example, a code of honor that transcended social, religious, or business boundaries. And yet, even as a small Jewish upper class set itself apart from the majority of Jewish coreligionists and cooperated with Christian officials, it did not assimilate or give up ties to its religion.

Ulbrich's early modern rural society was complex, simultaneously unequal and grounded in pluralism. Such a model, which is in part understandable within the matrix of overlapping and competing forces of authority and local and regional community, helps to explain why both women and Jews could appear both marginalized and central. Building from fascinating case studies and details about the development and position of the village, this model offers the

opportunity to understand early modern society on its own terms, without having to resort to modern typologies or models that continue to make little sense for pre-modern society. Ulbrich's engaging study has opened significant possibilities for understanding the development of community and the position of women and Jews in European society.

Dean Phillip Bell

Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies

The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood, by Christopher E. Forth. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. 300 pp. \$46.95.

Although other scholars have written about gender and the Dreyfus Affair, Christopher Forth's *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* is the first book to concentrate exclusively on gender within the context of Dreyfus Affair.¹ Moreover, the third part of the book extends beyond the Affair to examine the "new man and the culture of force" which emerged at the fin de siècle. As Forth argues, cultural historians have tended to avoid the Dreyfus Affair, while most historians of the Affair have sidestepped the issue of gender. Forth's study has the merit of combining these two heretofore largely separate approaches, thereby offering us a more complex and rich picture not only of the Dreyfus Affair but also of the concerns of the period with regard to manhood, medicine, and modernity. Forth's study, as he acknowledges, owes a large debt to the historian Robert Nye, whose pathbreaking work on gender and national identity has exerted a great influence on the field of cultural history.

The book, divided in three parts, is composed of six chapters, and organized more thematically than chronologically. Forth begins with "Masculinity and the Jewish Question," in which he concentrates specifically on Alfred Dreyfus and the "paradoxes of the Jewish soldier" through representations in the contemporary press. In the words of the author, "if much of the mainstream

¹See John Cerullo, "The Intellectuals and the Imagination of Heroism during the Dreyfus Affair," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 25 (Fall 1997): 185–195; Venita Datta, *Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: SUNY, 1999); Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Willa Z. Silverman, *The Notorious Life of Gyp: Right-Wing Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).