Introduction

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In a recent survey of women's history for the early modern period, Olwen Hufton commented upon the marked paucity of literature on women's work. As she observes, "We all know that women in pre-industrial society worked... Yet we have very little detailed modern research bearing on the nature and importance of their labour."1 The contributions to this volume address that lacuna, for they all bear on the subject of women's participation in the economy and labor force from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries. These essays have raised issues that have broad implications for current debates in women's history. The first is Hufton's deceptively simple question: What exactly was women's work in preindustrial Europe? The essays in this volume have gone far to answer that question and provide rich descriptive literature on both rural and urban women's work. But the authors have raised further and more profound questions about women in preindustrial Europe. Did women have an economic role outside the family or was their productive labor limited to the context of the domestic environment? Could a single woman be economically independent and successful, or was the only route open to her that of a domestic in a home other than her natal one? How did women's labor fit in with their usual life cycle of unmarried young womanhood, marriage and children, maturity and adult children, and widowhood? And finally, the authors raise once again the question that Alice Clark addressed in Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century. Were women more economically valued and independent in preindustrial, precapitalist Europe than they were afterward?2

The working women in this volume represent a wide diversity of stations in life, ranging from slaves and servants to respectable widows and professional midwives. Through a variety of sources including notarial records, wills, contracts, private account books, and city, manorial, and state court records, their work patterns come to life. The women studied lived in
Ragusa (Dubrovnik), Florence, Lyon and Montpellier, Exeter and rural England, Cologne, Leiden, and Nuremberg. With such a variety of work experiences, locations, and centuries separating their lives, a remarkable continuity of circumstances and options nevertheless emerges.

Working women were homebodies. Their participation in the economy rarely necessitated their leaving their quarter of a city or their village. At most they went to markets several miles from their household or came from surrounding villages to find work as domestics or laborers in nearby towns. The most widely traveled working women were the slaves that Susan Mosher Stuard has studied. Their roots were in the mountainous regions outside of Ragusa. Brought to the city, they were trained in domestic service or household crafts; if they learned well, they were sold to Italian merchants and some ended their lives in the Florentine domestic establishments that Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has analyzed. The merchant-class women that Katherine Reyerson studied in Montpellier, that Martha Howell observed in Leiden and Cologne, and that Maryanne Kowaleski documented for Exeter might control considerable capital as widows, but they never engaged in long-distance trade or went to the cloth fairs. Both the demands of family and household and the social attitudes that frowned on women traveling alone inhibited their personal participation in the larger market economy outside their cities and in the international markets.

Two other common threads running through these women's lives were that the domestic environment accommodated the vast majority of their work experience and that their primary mentor was likely to be their mother or another woman. A household, whether that of their own family or that of another, was the usual setting for their work. Peasant girls learned at their mothers' knees the care of chickens, milking, cooking, brewing, and other domestic occupations. They accompanied their mothers to the fields, weeding and making plaits to bind sheaves. The talents that they acquired in their home environment would serve them in good stead if they passed their late teenage years as servants in a neighbor's house or if they took these skills directly into marriage and their own domestic establishments. Among the artisanal workers in Lyon, as we find in Natalie Zemon Davis's study, girls learned from their mothers the rudiments of their fathers' crafts, helping with those tasks allotted to women.

If daughters could not learn their work from their mothers, a surrogate had to be found. In Ragusa noble and artisanal mistresses taught their slave girls how to serve and work. Orphaned girls in Lyon learned useful trades from skilled matrons in hospitals so that they could find employment in silk and cotton thread-making or as domestics. Apprenticeships in other people's homes were also possible for urban girls. They would learn a useful craft from the artisan's wife rather than learning from their own mothers.
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Such apprenticeships, of course, had to be negotiated and paid for by the girl’s parents or some other benefactor or benefactress. Sometimes a kinswoman or man would take in a relative and teach her a trade. In Nuremberg Merry Wiesner has found that midwives were so in demand that the city government tried to mandate that they take apprentices.

Residential arrangements were also primarily in household units. Although the Beguines established their own houses to accommodate young women working in urban areas, most women would live with their employers or their family. They slept in the house, took their meals with their employer’s family, and submitted to familial discipline. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has shown how the patriarchal discipline of Italian households extended to the regulation of servants and even control over their marriages.

We should not be surprised that the household and domestic production were such dominant features of women’s work in preindustrial Europe. In urban centers the shop and the house were usually combined so that for men as well as women the house would be the center of production. In rural areas, the woman’s sphere was the house, while the man’s was primarily the field. Only a few of the medieval jobs employed women outside of the domestic framework. Some women did road work and thatching, the agricultural routine took women to the fields for weeding and harvest, and the specialized skills of silk manufacture could take women outside the home or family-run shop. Midwives, of course, took their skills to the home of their client.

Another reason that the domestic model was so common for organizing women’s labor was that most women would eventually marry. Studies of permanent celibacy in early modern France and England show that only about 7 to 10 percent of women never married. For most women, therefore, marriage would be the framework within which they would spend most of their adult, working lives. Skills learned as a teenager would eventually lead to a marriage in which the woman would continue to practice those occupations while adding to them the cares of family and the responsibility of training her daughters to become part of the new work force. For young women who were not fortunate enough to have parents who could provide a dowry toward marriage or pay for an apprenticeship that would make them an asset as a marriage partner, a period of employment would be necessary in order to accumulate sufficient money to make a marriage, as we can observe in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber’s study of Florentine domestic servants. Young women in domestic service might have to work a number of years before accumulating sufficient savings to marry, and many waited until they were in their late twenties to marry. Employment, therefore, was a way station on the road to marriage for some young women.

Two observations may be made about the influence of marriage on
women's work in preindustrial Europe. The first is that marriage itself was integral to the preindustrial economy for both men and women, and the second is that women had to accommodate their work pattern to the stages in their life cycle that marriage imposed. Work of unmarried, young, single women was somewhat different from that of wives, and widows made yet another adjustment in their work to accommodate their new status.

As I will discuss in my chapter on peasant women and the home economy, modern economists have suggested a model for traditional marriages that is based on the complementarity of training and personal preferences for work of men and women. Women were trained by their mothers or some surrogate to become proficient in work related to domestic responsibilities. It was not simply homemaking and housework, but also included such production for the market as could be carried on at home. Spinning was the most typical activity for both urban and rural women to learn, but, as the essays indicate, a variety of other occupations could be practiced at home and contribute substantially to the household economy. Men as well received specialized training either from their fathers or from surrogates for them. Peasant lads learned the outdoor routines while their sisters were learning to take care of house, garden, domestic animals, and supplemental economic tasks. In the urban centers the youth learned a craft either as an apprentice or a laborer. For both men and women the spheres of activity were closely defined. In the country, women's space was the home and men's the fields. In the city, women worked in the home or shop along with their men, but they did not perform the same tasks and they did not take the finished product to the marketplace. Thus marriage was mutually advantageous for men and women, for they were trained and socialized to different economic activities that complemented each other.

Marriage also influenced the rhythm of women's work over the course of their lifetimes. Men pursued a more or less steady course whether they were peasants or urban workers. They took up their occupation, acquired the necessary skills for it, and continued to work until old age or death either as employees or as independent artisans. Marriage and family might make their work more or less profitable but did not change what they did. Women's occupations, on the other hand, were very much influenced by changes in their life cycle. Judith Bennett has demonstrated that single women did not brew in rural England nor, according to Martha Howell, did they finish cloth in Leiden. In Exeter, Maryanne Kowaleski observes, they were unlikely to enter the retail trade. Unmarried women generally held lower-status jobs in cloth making or acted as domestic servants, although the wealthier ones would be apprenticed. In the countryside poor single girls would serve in another peasant's house or move to the town seeking unskilled employment.

Once married, women found that a range of new opportunities presented
themselves within the context of household economy. Brewing was a common occupation for married women in both rural and market-town England. The retail trade, particularly that of victualer or tavern keeper, was also attractive. In all of the urban cases cooperation in the husband's craft or trade or taking in piecework such as leather finishing occupied wives when they were not involved with child rearing. As Leah Otis's essay informs us, some married women received stipends for nursing foundlings in their homes.

It was only in widowhood that a woman could have real opportunities as a femme sole. But one's capacity to carry on alone varied greatly with local custom and the pressures of the marriage market. In Exeter, for instance, local laws were generous to widows in property settlements, but because they were so well endowed they were in high demand as marriage partners. Only three widows remained single merchants. Widows in all contexts of the preindustrial European economy had more options than either married or single women. They could choose to remarry and, if they did, they were usually free to choose their marriage partner. They could remain single and invest in real estate, as Reyerson found many did in Montpellier, or continue with a husband's business, even one that involved considerable financial transactions. If they did carry on their husband's business, they had to hire men to do those parts of the labor or travel that only men were allowed to do. Thus a woman continuing a printing shop in Lyon could put her imprimatur on books but would have to hire men to work the press. Even wealthy merchant widows did not travel to foreign markets but had to hire men to do it for them.

A woman changed work patterns with her life cycle, but she might also alter her work within a particular phase of her cycle. Thus a dismissed servant girl or a laborer laid off because of an economic slump might turn to prostitution. During married life a woman might concentrate on thread production if that was paying well but switch to brewing or victualing if the market was more robust in those areas. Some of the shifts were responses not to market economy but to the amount of labor available to the house. If children were young and the mother had to spend most of her time with them, she would find thread making easier to accommodate to her limited time. When the children were growing up, they could be helpful in launching another supplemental economic activity, such as brewing or hawking pastries that their mothers made. Women could, therefore, change their work frequently over the course of their lifetimes.

It was not simply the domestic economy or the life cycle that influenced women's employment in the preindustrial era, however. Biology and social mores also determined their employment. Because childbirth was exclusively a woman's experience and ritual in the medieval and early modern
period, women alone assisted with a birth. Male physicians did not yet have a role in this process, and as a consequence, midwives had a unique professional role. Merry Wiesner has shown that midwives were so highly valued in Nuremberg that they were paid as well as laborers, and both the government and the clergy gave them rather extensive responsibilities including distribution of some poor relief and baptism of endangered infants. The nurturing role also made wet nurses a respected and sought-after group in society. In Florence, the nurses were more highly paid than other female domestics and their moral qualities were as carefully guarded as those of the patrician’s wife. In Montpellier the city willingly paid wet nurses to suckle its foundlings and orphans, and many women with milk must have nursed infants privately for a fee, using their biological capacities to supplement the family income. One of the obvious ways for an employer to use a woman’s biological capacities was to take advantage of her sexuality, and the domestics and slaves of Florence and Ragusa were not alone in being sexually exploited by masters and their sons and friends.

Another factor that determined women’s employment and their wages was demography and the social and economic reactions to population decline and expansion. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber notes that Florentines hired more female domestics in the middle years of the fifteenth century and paid them better than they did in the latter part of that century. Likewise in Montpellier, Leah Otis found that the real wages of the wet nurses decreased in the course of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Both attribute the decline in real wages to the increase of population, which forced women to face more competition for wages. Employers, since they had a larger pool to choose from, simply did not adjust wages to keep pace with inflation. When the nations of Europe were populous, therefore, women’s employment and wages declined. In the northern European cities the population increase led to greater rigidification of social structure. Wiesner found that patrician women in the sixteenth century would no longer trouble themselves serving on a board to supervise midwives for the poor, and Howell found that the increased guild regulation in Leiden and Cologne excluded women from production, even the wives of cloth makers.

Olwen Hufton has aptly described the women’s work pattern in preindustrial Europe as an economy of makeshift or expediency. For the poor single women, spinsters or widows, a number of pieced together, temporary work arrangements would have to be their sole support. Married women in both town and country would supplement the family economy as best they could with the extra products or services that they could sell. Women always had to keep their eye on the main chance and to change according to economic opportunities. As Kowaleski and Howell have pointed out, because their socialization and training were primarily for the domestic sphere, they were
unlikely to develop skills that would permit them to enter high-status positions. The magistrates of England recognized that women were dabblers, and when they reissued the Statute of Laborers in 1363, they required all men to choose a trade and confine themselves to it exclusively, but women could go on as they always had, brewing, baking, spinning, and doing other cloth work.5

Men were reluctant to admit women into their space and their mysteries. The plow was a man’s implement: women might goad the ox, but rarely guide the plow. Only a part of this exclusion was based on the relative weakness of women compared to men. The plow was a carefully guarded prerogative having been part of the European male sexual metaphor since ancient Greece. With the development of male crafts, as well, women were allowed only a limited role. The wife and daughter, perhaps a female apprentice or laborer, might be taught part of the mystery, but they would not complete the whole product and would not be inducted as full members of the guild that regulated the craft. Eileen Power has suggested that part of the reason for keeping women out was the fear of competition. Many of the crafts did not require strength, but men believed that if women entered them they would take over because they were paid less.6 Howell has shown that in Leiden the government organized the high-quality cloth workers into “crafts” and in doing so effectively eliminated women from this work. Depending on the rules of a particular guild, a widow may or may not have been allowed to continue as a guild member carrying on her husband’s trade.

Men also effectively discouraged women from organizing their own crafts into guilds. In Cologne Howell found that, while the silk makers, gold spinners, and yarn makers were organized into a guild, the guild masters were males and the members were related to the chief merchants and traders of the city as daughters, wives, or widows. Two women sat on the guild board, but their only official capacity was investigating the quality of silk production. The existence of all-female guilds or of guilds permitting equal membership of both men and women performing a craft has a spotty record across Europe. While Paris had five female guilds, London had none. On the whole, all-female guilds tended to be rare both because such organization was discouraged and because most female labor took place within the context of family and the family craft.

The denial of any magisterial role for women was as effective as their socialization to the domestic sphere in limiting women to the economy of makeshift. Women could not hold urban or rural offices. Women might be the chief brewers, but they were never ale tasters. Women would never be mayors or aldermen; they would not be admitted as guild masters in their own right but only as wives of masters. Even the rare female guild was male
run. Only occasionally were matrons called upon to determine a judicial matter, and these always dealt with such cases as the virginity of a suspected witch or the pregnancy of a condemned feloness. Matrons also supervised the specifically female service of midwives to poor women in Nuremberg.

The proscription of women from magisterial positions made it difficult for them to have any influence over regulations that would restrict their access to work or worsen their working conditions. Thus if journeymen dyers wished to restrict women of the dyer's household from taking the cloth from vats, they were most likely to succeed without opposition. As Howell points out, the greater the regulations over production, the more likely women were to lose employment. The situation meant that women tended to be limited to work requiring less skilled labor or marginal work that was not worth regulating. The only respectable alternative was to work within the home economy.

The restrictions on women in either organizing their own guilds or having any effective voice over rules that eliminated them from work opportunities brings us to Alice Clark's question: Were women better off in preindustrial economy? An overarching quest of women investigating their own history has been to discover some golden age when women had equal opportunity with men or at least more opportunity vis-à-vis male control. Victorian women authors became very polemical about the erosion of women's legal rights as they fought to pass the Married Women's Property Act. Dame Edith Stenton explains in her preface to *The English Woman in History* that she became fascinated with the topic because she perceived a decline in women's legal position from the Anglo-Saxon to the Norman period. JoAnn McNamara and Suzanne F. Wemple in "Sanctity and Power: The Dual Pursuit of Medieval Women" argued that in early Christianity and the early Christianization and political conquest of northern Europe, women were accorded a more equal position, but that their status deteriorated by the end of the Middle Ages and they were driven to retreat into mysticism. In economic history scholars have had a tendency to look to the Middle Ages for examples of female iron mongers and widows taking over crafts of their former husbands and being allowed to continue guild membership. The essays in this volume suggest that the quest for an El Dorado in women's economic history is misleading. They show that women worked very hard both within and outside their families, but could not enter the magisterial ranks of guild, a government, or a court. They could accumulate capital and run a business, but the legal prohibitions would necessarily bar them from major entrepreneurial ventures or from building up a thriving manufacture or trade of their own. Most of the independent wealthy women were widows carrying on their husbands' trades or businesses.

While the authors have not found a golden age for women's work, those
Although population studies stretch up into the sixteenth century have found that medieval women had more access to high-status and independent employment than women did later. Women were less evident and were paid less as domestic servants in sixteenth-century Florence and wet nurses were more in demand but more poorly paid in Montpellier. Both Klapisch-Zuber and Otis attribute this deterioration of women’s employment and wages to increased population and decreased standard of living. In Lyon even Protestantism could not give women the access to work they had enjoyed earlier, and in Leiden and Cologne legislation systematically set blocks in the way of women who might formerly have entered high-status employment. Davis and Howell see the growing power of city and state governments as encouraging an emphasis on patriarchy. The debate is not a new one.

Alice Clark argued that even when preindustrial women acted in the role of femme couvert, legally and economically dependent upon the domestic environment, their work was more valued than in the modern period. Her view of the plough and craft economy is in sharp contrast to that of social scientists such as the Lenskis, Ester Boserup, Jack Goody, and Ernestine Friedl. These authors argue that women were at a closer approximation to equality in the hunting and gathering societies and early horticulture societies. Although women could only gain in this early economic form because of their reproductive responsibilities, their contribution was as important as men’s if not more so. Game was readily available and generally shared, but nuts, seeds, fish, and such food gleaned by women could only serve the needs of one family. The horticulture society employed men to clear the land and women with wooden hoes to provide the basic necessities for cultivation of domestic crops. The arrangement was a fairly equal one. But as metal became more common for both fighting and farming, men relied on conquest to give economic supplement to agriculture.

The most oppressive economic arrangement in this scheme, however, was precisely the one that we have been looking at, the agricultural society. Women were banished from the fields and men took over the agrarian output using plows, the male symbol. It was not only lack of physical strength that drove women from a major role in food production, but also the fact that cultivating large fields could not be accommodated to women’s reproductive and nurturing roles. Because their productive capacity is lower, women are less valued in plow societies unless they can bring landed wealth with them, for land becomes the measure of wealth. The landed heiress or the woman dowried with land becomes highly valued, but her own contribution to the economy, outside of reproduction, is less valued.  

Close scrutiny of even peasant women in preindustrial Europe does not entirely bear out these conclusions. The women’s contribution was highly valued because they provided the domestic skills that balanced and formed
an economic complementarity with the agrarian skills of the husbandman in the fields. Here the dismal science of economics, with the complementarity of marriage discussed earlier, seems to provide a better model than the humane one of the anthropologist. In addition to the tasks of running the household the wife produced and trained the new work force, gathered berries and nuts, sent sons out to fish and daughters to get water, cared for the garden and domesticated animals, and engaged in a number of supplemental economic activities. A good part of the extra cash, in addition to the running of the domestic side of the economy, came from the woman’s work. Hufton quotes the French peasant proverbs that a family can survive without the husbandman, but not without the goodwife.9 One has no trouble arguing that the peasant woman’s contribution to the home economy in preindustrial western Europe was indispensable, and that the economic unit of production was a household one with well-defined and mutually beneficial productive roles for man and wife. But the women’s productivity did not lead to broad control over resources and expenditures.

The urban woman in preindustrial Europe functioned economically as a transplanted version of the rural woman, as Louise Tilly and Joan Scott have pointed out. Their economic contributions were essential, but within the familial context. They, too, were not the chief force in the market, but rather a supplemental part of the family economy. Indeed, the family economy of preindustrial rural and urban dwellers helped the population of Europe adapt to the industrial revolution, for in its initial phases women and children continued their supplemental activities in the industrial context and remained faithful to the idea of the family economy as the basic unit.10

Clark, to return to this early theorist on women’s status in preindustrial Europe, labeled the rural and urban production types as “Domestic Industry,” in which labor of all family members goes to the support of the domestic unit, and “Family Industry,” in which the family was the unit for the production of goods to be proffered in the marketplace. The question finally to grapple with is whether women had more financial independence and respect in the domestic or family industry of preindustrial Europe or in the “Capitalistic Industry” of later Europe. Clark argued that in the capitalist economy women of all status groups lost their economic importance. Among the upper classes the ideal was to accord women leisure time, and among the wives of yeomen this pernicious ideal was emulated. Where in the past such women had organized home production and supplemental economic activities such as spinning and brewing, they now disdained such work. Those poor women who continued spinning could not make enough on it to support their children. The wives of journeymen did not have the same entrée into crafts as the wives of masters had in the Middle Ages. Not
only did capitalism gradually undermine the viability of “Family Industry”; it destroyed “Domestic Industry” as well. Rather than the married woman being more economically viable than her daughters, single women who were free from child care were more valued in the market. Thus the housewife was stagnant in a position that was less economically desirable than it formerly was. Cheaper industrial products and the move away from the home as the basic unit of production left her with a lower economic value. The old couple were left on marginally productive land holdings while their sons and daughters sought wage labor in agriculture or new industries.11

Clark's analysis is initially a very appealing one. Women’s contribution to the home economy was both necessary and rewarded, but the domestic framework was restrictive as well as secure. The family-based economy gave more dignity to women’s work, but only as long as women remained within their space and their sphere. A “good woman” managed her household well, contributed to its well-being, and took over in the event of an early widowhood. But what happened to the women who wished to step outside their allotted area? It does not stretch the imagination to regard the household economy as a trap that kept women from having access to the market economy. No signs of an active rebellion against the division of work by sex appeared. Women rioted, but only in bread riots, which were considered the woman’s prerogative because ultimately she had to feed the family. The first real rebellion against the domestic economy may be seen in the young women who, in spite of health and moral risks and possibly bad living conditions, flocked to the new job opportunities in the early years of the industrial revolution partly because they wanted to throw over the old domestic work environment.

Preindustrial women’s work appeared to be an El Dorado only to reflective women and men at the turn of this century who had the leisure to observe that the shop girls had exchanged the security and respect of work in the familial milieu for the hardships of work in the capitalistic environment. The old options did not seem golden enough to many young women or men to keep them down on the farm in a traditional economy.

This volume of essays has at last permitted us to form an overview of women’s work in preindustrial Europe, but it has hardly exhausted the subject. Whole areas, such as gentry and upper-class women who became estate managers, are missing. Also lacking is mention of those women, mostly nuns, whose work was in the charitable institutions of preindustrial Europe. The oldest profession, prostitution, also has received only slight mention. The authors in the volume do not claim to have made the final statement on women and work, but to have opened new doors only to see that more remain to be opened.
Introduction

The present volume grew out of a session on women and work in medieval Europe at the American Historical Association in 1982, for which I was the commentator. The three excellent papers by Judith Bennett, Maryanne Kowaleski, and Martha Howell inspired the idea of a collection of essays on the topic. The project was aided by a grant-in-aid of research from the Women's Studies Program at Indiana University. Both the volume and my contributions to it were furthered by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Research Fellowship at the Newberry Library (1979–80), a sabbatical grant from Indiana University, and a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant given by the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, where I had the honor of being a member of the School of Historical Studies for the year 1982–83. I am very grateful for the aid that these resources provided in furthering both my scholarship and the completion of this fine volume of essays.

6. Ibid., p. 60.
11. See Clark, Working Life of Women, pp. 6–12, for a statement of her thesis.