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Review of Mary Prior, editor, *Women in English Society 1500-1800*

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Mary Prior, editor. *Women in English Society 1500-1800*. London and New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd. 1985. Pp. xvi, 294. \$33.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Though there has been in recent years a substantial development in the research and writing on women in early modern England, work on women's experience and status in this period is still at an early stage. Many of the other fine studies that have been published recently have focused on upper-class women. Mary Prior's edited collection, *Women in English Society, 1500-1800*, takes a different approach and centers on other socio-economic groups. It is a further example of the new work in feminist scholarship on such topics as religion, work, and family in early modern England from the vantage point of gender.

Prior states that the purpose of her collection is to focus on generalized women's experiences through investigating small groups of women intensively using primarily methods of historical demography and local history. The book attempts to cover a wide range of women's activities and conditions, and, indeed, some of the essays present information on groups of women that is not otherwise easily accessible.

Joan Thirsk's forward is an excellent and substantial piece that places the collected essays within the context of a historical analysis of the writing on the status of women in early modern England accomplished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She demonstrates how this writing reflected changing political and social status for women.

A number of the essays in this collection support as well as modify earlier historians' assumptions. Dorothy McLaren's essay on marital fertility argues, as did Peter Laslett much earlier, that prolonged breastfeeding worked as a form of birth control for women of most lower classes. This led to a very different reproductive pattern than for that of upper class women who, having abandoned breastfeeding, experienced far more pregnancies. Some historians have argued that in this period mothers did not feel strong attachments for their infants. McLaren's reading of women's diaries and other sources, however, convinces her "that there is good evidence of strong maternal instincts in women in history, especially those who nursed their own infants" (p. 26).

Barbara Todd addresses another stereotype in her essay on the remarriage widow. Contemporary drama presented the widow as a figure of comic contempt, foolish and pathetic in her desire to remarry. Yet the independent widow was also an anomaly in a society that expected households to be headed by men. Todd focuses her essay on women in Abingden, Berkshire between 1540-1720. As well as concluding that throughout the early modern period widows came to be less likely to remarry, Todd also presents a subtle psychological analysis of the pressures on widows and how the larger society regarded them.

Mary Prior's two essays, on women working in Oxford, 1500-1800 and on Tudor bishops' wives, also touch on the problems of widows both in the urban economy and among the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In her essay on Oxford Prior demonstrates how women often provided the family with continuity and economic stability. Her conclusions about the reasons why women worked have parallels for today: they did so because of necessity, even though work may also have provided enjoyment and achievement.

Prior's essay on the Tudor bishops' wives is particularly useful in that it addresses an issue on which little material is available. She demonstrates the dilemma of these women, the difficulty in determining their status and role. Prior provides a useful background to

the debate on clerical marriage at the time of the Reformation and presents some of the political questions over clerical marriages that concerned the Tudor monarchs. Both Henry VIII and Elizabeth feared that bishops would intermarry with the nobility, thus altering the political balance of power and undermining the position of the ruler. Prior's essay also presents in moving terms problems encountered by bishops' wives and the courage with which they met them.

Equally courageous were the recusant women Marie Rowlands discusses in one of the strongest essays in the collection. While Rowlands admits that her evidence, from court cases, is biased to reveal the minority who were vigorous and active, she argues that a study of this special group can also be revealing of the attitudes of the state and the Roman Catholic Church toward women in general. Rowland discovered that hundreds of women were involved in receiving priests into their houses for a few hours or days at a time so mass could be said for small groups of people. Rowland argues that these women made use of stereo-typical expectations of women's behavior to protect themselves and their families. In fact, women who harbored priests rarely paid the full legal penalty for their defiance of the law. Only three women were executed, though a number of others died in prison. Rowland discusses how being a recusant could mean individual power for many women, and places her work within the context of the similarities and differences between English Catholic women's experiences and those of Anglicans and Puritans.

The final two essays of the book also deal in part with women's religious experiences but in the context of written work. Sara Hellar Mendelson examines the writings of twenty-three women in the seventeenth century who left diaries, occasional memoirs, or other serial personal memoranda. Patricia Crawford analyses women's published writing between 1600-1700. Both authors find that while religion and motherhood were frequent topics, in both private and public writing women had an understanding of their differences in perspective from men and a concern with the world in which they lived. Both essays have extremely useful appendixes of women authors.

As with all collections, this book is somewhat uneven. One limit to some of the essays is that they are so closely focused they do not always use their material to ask larger questions about women's status and role expectations in England from 1500-1800. In general, however, this is an excellent collection that furthers the inquiry into women's experience and it is work of this nature that will lead to a greater understanding of the impact of gender on religion, work, and the family in early modern England.

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Charles Carlton. *Royal Childhoods*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1986. Pp. xi, 204. \$29.95.

Charles Carlton, Professor of History at North Carolina State University, has waded into treacherous waters. While controversy continues among the general public as well as experts over the primacy of nature or nurture in human growth and development, Carlton seeks to examine the childhood and adolescence of several selected British monarchs in order to explain their behavior as adult rulers. In so doing, he relies heavily on Freudian interpretations of familial relationships and later actions, thereby involving himself in a