



EARLY MODERN CULTURAL STUDIES, 1500–1700



WOMEN'S WORK IN
EARLY MODERN ENGLISH
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

MICHELLE M. DOWD



EARLY MODERN CULTURAL STUDIES

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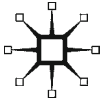
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For my parents, Frank and Pat Dowd

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FOREWORD

In the twenty first century, literary criticism, literary theory, historiography, and cultural studies have become intimately interwoven, and the formerly distinct fields of literature, society, history, and culture no longer seem so discrete. The Palgrave Early Modern Cultural Studies Series encourages scholarship that crosses boundaries between disciplines, time periods, nations, and theoretical orientations. The series assumes that the early modern period was marked by incipient processes of transculturation brought about through exploration, trade, colonization, and the migration of texts and people. These phenomena set in motion the processes of globalization that remain in force today. The purpose of this series is to publish innovative scholarship that is attentive to the complexity of this early modern world and bold in the methods it employs for studying it.

As series editors, we welcome, for example, books that explore early modern texts and artifacts that bear the traces of transculturation and globalization and that explore Europe's relationship to the cultures of the Americas, of Europe, and of the Islamic world and native representations of those encounters. We are equally interested in books that provide new ways to understand the complex urban culture that produced the early modern public theater or that illuminate the material world of early modern Europe and the regimes of gender, religion, and politics that informed it. Elite culture or the practices of everyday life, the politics of state or of the domestic realm, the material book or the history of the emotions—all are of interest if pursued with an eye to novel ways of making sense of the strangeness and complexity of the early modern world.

JEAN HOWARD AND IVO KAMPS
Series editors

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An earlier version of chapter 1 appeared as “Labors of Love: Women, Marriage, and Service in *Twelfth Night* and *The Compleat Servant-Maid*,” in the *Shakespearean International Yearbook* 5 (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 103–126; and part of chapter 2 previously appeared as “Leaning Too Hard Upon the Pen: Suburb Wenches and City Wives in *Westward Ho*,” in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 15 (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 224–242. I thank Ashgate Publishing and Associated University Presses for permission to reprint this material here. The cover image, a kitchen scene from Nicholas de Bonnefons’s *The French Gardiner*, trans. John Evelyn (London, 1658) is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Finally, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my parents, Frank and Pat Dowd, to whom this book is dedicated, for their love, support, and guidance over the years. Mike Cowie has shared his life and his wisdom with me, and I thank him for always reminding me what really matters. He has truly made working on this project a labor of love.

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

When quoting from early modern manuscripts and printed texts in original or facsimile editions, I have retained original orthography except for silently expanding contractions, changing long s to short, and modernizing the letters i, j, u, and v where necessary. Dates in parentheses indicate the year that a work was first published, unless otherwise indicated.



INTRODUCTION

For female laborers in England, the seventeenth century was a period of remarkable economic change. The population of England was growing exponentially, the country was witnessing substantial expansion in trade and consumerism, and, as the economy shifted gradually from a feudal economy to one more consistently based on wage labor, guilds were increasingly being replaced by labor contracts and by more casual economic arrangements. But in the midst of this burgeoning consumer economy characterized by a newly diverse workforce, William Shakespeare wrote *Twelfth Night*, a play in which two female servants rise dramatically in social station *not* through their financial expertise or proficiency at domestic skills but through their ability to secure promising marriages. Maria's clever manipulation of Malvolio leads to her marriage to Sir Toby, and Viola famously ends the play fortuitously positioned as Orsino's "fancy's queen" (5.1.387), substituting the role of mistress for the discarded role of subordinate page.¹ Nor was this kind of idealized narrative unique to Shakespeare. Though more acutely aware of the economic realities of early modern culture than Shakespeare's romantic comedy, Isabella Whitney's poetic miscellany *A Sweet Nosgay* nevertheless deploys a similar narrative trajectory, one in which female servants progress steadily toward marriage regardless of financial difficulties. Given the diversified and wage-driven economy in which these texts were written, what might have been the cultural significance of such fanciful fictions?

Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture argues that the social, religious, and economic changes that transformed early modern English culture prompted the development of new and sometimes surprising narratives about women's work.

Reading texts from both the public theater and the pens of early modern Englishwomen, this book demonstrates that narratives about working women profoundly shape the texts in which they appear, including works such as *Twelfth Night* and *A Sweet Nosgay* that do not seem at first glance to engage with questions about women's labor. These fictional stories play an integral role in a society that was both transformed and deeply troubled by women's increasingly diversified labor within England's proto-capitalist economy. Idealized stories about female servants whose work ends neatly in marriage, for instance, offer a reassuring fantasy of social order to those who might be concerned about women's ambiguous position within a volatile service economy—one that was newly based on yearly contracts and variable wages. These narratives thus serve a crucial social function, namely, to construe and define the limits of female subjectivity within a shifting and contested labor market. In addition to service, this study considers several types of work—including midwifery and wet-nursing, housework, and educational work—that changed significantly during the seventeenth century, generating new discursive formulations of women's economic, political, and religious authority. This book investigates literature's role in this historical transformation, revealing how popular texts shaped the cultural understanding of women's work in early modern England.

Englishwomen's work took a variety of forms in the seventeenth century, as popular literature of the period makes clear.² In the ballad *A Womans Work is never done*, for instance, the female speaker describes the wide range of daily tasks for which she is responsible. These include cooking a meal ("some wholesom mess") to feed her husband and children, sweeping and cleaning the house, breast-feeding her "one sucking Childe," and making the beds "until [her] back, and sides, and arms do ake." The repeated refrain of the title highlights the inevitability and even monotony of many of these tasks; in one stanza the speaker laments: "Sometimes I knit, and sometimes I spin, / Sometimes I wash, and sometimes I do wring, / Sometimes I sit and sewe by my self alone" before concluding with the recurrent axiom "And thus a Womans work is never done."³ Ballads such as this one portray women's daily tasks as diverse, time-consuming, and rigorous, ranging from needlework to cooking to breast-feeding.⁴ The varied nature of women's labor in the period is further borne out by historical and demographic studies, which reveal that the characteristic diversity of women's employment was directly linked to the gendered division of labor. In contrast to early modern men, women of the period changed occupations more frequently throughout their

lifetimes, meaning that they were more likely than men to participate in multiple sectors of the labor economy over the course of their lives. Working women, according to Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman:

were generally more prone than men to long periods of underemployment and unemployment, and enjoyed few of the security buffers built into men's work. In industrial activities women were more dependent upon monetary wage payments than were men. With little other compensation, women workers were particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of the early modern economy. This reinforced the irregular rhythm of work.⁵

Though the intermittent nature of employment would have affected women lower down on the social scale most dramatically, and often with dire financial consequences, it also meant that middling class and even elite women were often directly involved in England's labor economy at some point in their lives, even if their work was temporary. Indeed, women from all social levels participated in paid and unpaid forms of labor, and a high number of them (particularly in London) were "wholly or partly dependent on their own earnings for their living."⁶ Women's labor was thus crucial to the functionality of early modern social institutions as diverse as the family, the retail marketplace, and the church.

The seventeenth century witnessed several significant historical developments that greatly influenced how women worked and how their labor was culturally understood. One of the most fundamental changes to early modern England's labor force was its dramatic increase in size. The population of England exploded during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, doubling between 1520 and 1680, when it reached about 5 million.⁷ In tandem with this growth in population, early modern England saw a substantial increase in trade and consumerism as English families became more dependent on goods produced outside of the home. The number of imported goods rose dramatically during this period, a development predicated on both the increase in England's purchasing power and on "the growth of English commercial and colonial power, which brought much lower prices for some products."⁸ Furthermore, as the economy shifted gradually to favor contractual, wage-based models of labor, the guild system largely gave way to more varied and informal working arrangements, particularly for female workers.⁹ England's rapidly developing consumer economy combined with the sheer size of its population

thus both demanded and produced a larger, more diverse workforce. Many of these workers were drawn toward urban centers, most notably London, looking for either subsistence-level work or for potentially more prosperous work as apprentices, servants, or midwives.¹⁰ This urban migration, together with the variety and unpredictability that characterized much employment in the period, helped to create a labor force that was socially and geographically mobile.

These economic and demographic changes were particularly relevant to women who worked as servants, midwives, and wet nurses, as we will see more fully in chapters 1 and 2. Such women could often pose potential challenges to household governance due to their anomalous place within early modern social hierarchy: they were expected to possess and demonstrate a range of skills and forms of cultural authority, and yet they were also subordinate to the master or family for whom they worked. These kinds of implicit contradictions make it tempting to view such female workers as a testament to a "crisis" of order and gender relations, a term that some scholars have used to describe the period between 1550 and 1700 in England. However, I instead follow Martin Ingram, Laura Gowing, and others in resisting such terminology as ultimately unhelpful in describing how social and economic change occurs.¹¹ As Gowing argues, "Gender is *always* in contest: gender relations seem to be continually renegotiated around certain familiar points."¹² Work is clearly one of these points, a vexed social and economic issue that has prompted the renegotiation and reformulation of gender relations at various historical moments both well before and well after the early modern period. And yet, though I resist labeling this era a definitive time of crisis, I nevertheless contend that in the ongoing process of imagining work as a specifically gendered category of analysis, the early modern period was one of particular urgency. As in earlier centuries, the implicit mandates of a patriarchal culture meant that women's subordination had to be repeatedly advocated and culturally reinforced. But demographic changes and a fundamental transformation of the nature of England's workforce brought concerns about women's work and cultural authority to the fore in new and pressing ways. As a result, I argue, women such as servants and wet nurses, whose jobs often called social boundaries into question, emerged as key figures in early modern writers' attempts to comprehend and discursively manage a changing social order.

Women who worked more exclusively within the household experienced similar upheavals during this period, though these changes were linked as much to religion as they were to economics or demographics.

Though the changes it heralded certainly did not happen overnight, the Reformation was unquestionably instrumental in shaping and reimagining gender relations in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Following the Reformation in England, women assumed positions of greater authority within their households, working as spiritual stewards and teachers. A key component of Protestant domestic ideology, this heightened emphasis on women's familial and spiritual roles altered the nature of gender relations within the household. And yet, as I discuss more extensively in chapters 3 and 4, this gradual increase in domestic influence for housewives and mothers did not remain uncontested. Instead, moralists and writers of the period struggled to define the precise scope and nature of women's household labors and the necessary limits to female agency in the home. The redefinition of women's religious and domestic role in the post-Reformation household fundamentally transformed not only the balance of power and practical duties within the home but also the spiritual opportunities available to women who labored to maintain the economic and moral well-being of their homes and families.

Women's working conditions, their cultural authority as laborers, and their occupational opportunities were thus changing significantly over the course of the seventeenth century. These changes were slow and uneven; they do not, for example, attest to a medieval "golden age" for women workers or a sharp decline in women's working conditions in the early modern period.¹³ Nor were many of these changes recognized as such until decades or even centuries later. That is, it would be misleading to work backward from the Industrial Revolution in order to trace the "prehistory" of England's capitalist workforce, since the seventeenth-century labor economy obviously did not recognize itself as a precondition to later historical developments. Nevertheless, new forms of women's labor and new concerns about women's position within England's developing consumer economy clearly emerged during the seventeenth century.¹⁴ And by the eighteenth century, as I discuss more specifically in the individual chapters that follow, women's work was beginning to look very different indeed, being characterized by a more rigid gendered division of labor, the feminization of many occupations (including service and housework), and a general decline in professional opportunities, such as midwifery.¹⁵ My analysis thus focuses on how texts from the period engaged creatively with a labor economy that was shifting in subtle yet notable ways. Instead of emphasizing a strictly teleological narrative of historical change at the expense of contradictory discourses, I am interested in retrieving and exploring the often idiosyncratic and

contested narratives that were created to make cultural sense of the role of women workers within the dynamic economy of early modern England.

This leads me, then, to comment on the specific role of literary narrative in this process. What can fictional stories tell us about women's work? How did such narratives shape the ideologies of labor that were circulating and developing during the seventeenth century? By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the increased availability of printed texts and the popularity of London's public stage meant that more representations of working women were available and reaching a broader audience than ever before. In analyzing a variety of these texts, I argue that the social upheavals of early modern England helped to generate new stories about women's work. In turn, these literary narratives both facilitated and problematized cultural change through the histories of working Englishwomen that they imagined. During a time in which women were taking on a wide range of occupational positions and were acquiring new forms of authority within post-Reformation culture, these stories discursively resolve some of the most pressing concerns associated with women's labor. Often these concerns revolve around questions of agency. For example, how can women's duty to educate and socialize their children best be articulated in a culture governed by the dictates of coverture, in which a wife was officially "covered" by her husband's legal identity? In struggling to find answers to these kinds of cultural questions, writers from the period create narratives that imagine and delineate emerging, and often limited, forms of subject-hood for female laborers. That is, in the process of defining women's work, these texts inevitably produce innovative depictions of working women, ushering in new ideas about women's marketable skills, domestic authority, and professional responsibilities. In tracing specific narrative developments over the period, I am interested in the role of popular literature and, specifically, recurring narrative structures in the cultural redefinition of women's labor. This book thus reveals how early modern literature carved out an imaginative space for the female worker, fundamentally transforming cultural perceptions about women's place in English society.

This study follows recent scholarship interested in developing a field of inquiry begun by Alice Clark in her groundbreaking book, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, first published in 1919.¹⁶ Clark's analysis, which first documented the lives of early modern female laborers and the shift in their economic position during the seventeenth century, has been joined by an outpouring of historical and literary studies in the last few decades that have continued

to investigate early modern women's active participation in various sectors of the labor market and analyze how that work was reimagined in various kinds of early modern texts.¹⁷ Most of these studies, including Natasha Korda's *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies: Gender and Property in Early Modern England* and Wendy Wall's *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama*, have emphasized the material and economic histories of early modern women labor or have explored women's work in order to query the nature of domesticity. By contrast, I shift focus away from domesticity as a primary category of analysis. While recognizing the domestic location of much of women's work, I expand the categories of labor to include those occupations, such as service, midwifery, and education, that often took place outside the bounds of individual households. In addition, I take an approach that is less invested in the materiality of early modern culture per se than in the process by which narratives throughout the period participated in delimiting the scope and nature of women's work. In thus taking narrative and gender as its primary terms of analysis, this book considers how form—the structure and design of textual discourses—actively engages with history to determine how women were constituted as working subjects in seventeenth-century England.

By focusing on narrative, my project aims to integrate feminist historicist methodologies with formalist ones.¹⁸ Like many who have studied early modern women, I read representations of female workers in terms of their complex intersections with economic, social, and literary contexts, and I demonstrate the ways in which differences in class, age, religion, and geography affect the stories that are told about working women. But I also contend that these feminist concerns are intimately related to the narratological structures of individual texts. This study thus seeks to expand the interpretative possibilities of formalist inquiry by building on the work done by practitioners of what has come to be known as the “new” or “historical formalism.” This methodological approach to literary analysis was initiated by the work of Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson to interrogate the ways in which form mediates between the content of a text and its historical contexts.¹⁹ The value of this critical method is that it proposes to examine “every text as a complex and unique interaction of historically specific formal and contextual ideologies.”²⁰ Textual form and its (many) social contexts are not treated as independent categories but as mutually constitutive and culturally productive. Historical formalism thus attempts to understand more precisely, in Jameson's resonant phrase, “what happens when plot falls into history.”²¹

However, Jameson's evocative pairing of these two categories fails to capture the full complexity of their relationship. As suggestive as his formulation is, it implies that plot and history are mutually exclusive domains; plot remains outside of history, at least until it "falls" into it. But one of the primary aims of this study is to demonstrate that the stories circulated about early modern women workers *are* the trace history of those workers in the sense that those stories actively produce the definitions, subject positions, and discursive contexts by which those women were called into being as working subjects in early modern England.²² Embedded within history, plot, in other words, is also constitutive of that history, even if that process is often messy and contested. The stories that I examine throughout this book—however fanciful, conventional, or convoluted they may sometimes seem—are thus historical to their very core, as they are always engaged in the process of positioning the female worker within the complex and shifting economy of seventeenth-century England. Taking individual narrative strands rather than larger generic categories as its primary focus, my own practice of historical formalism is also narrower in scope than the approaches to genre developed by Williams and Jameson. By combining some of the theoretical methods of narratology with the general analytical premises of new formalism, I concentrate on the ways in which narrative structures within individual texts—and the stories held in common between different texts—have historical and material consequences.

Narratologists often refer to the two key categories of "story"—a sequence of events—and "discourse"—the narration or representation of those events. While classic theories of narrative, dating to the 1960s and the work of the French structuralists, emphasize that story is necessarily prior to and independent of discourse, poststructuralist or "postclassical" narratology resists this distinction, stressing instead that an individual event can often be "a product of discursive forces rather than a given reported by discourse."²³ Furthermore, more recent theories of narrative share with new formalism more generally the conviction that narrative dynamically engages with its historical moment. In the words of David Herman, "stories are what they are not because of their form alone, but because of a complex interplay between narrative form and the contexts of narrative interpretation, broadly construed."²⁴ In using the term "narrative" to analyze stories about women's work found within individual texts, I thus suggest first that these stories do have a sequence of events, not so much in terms of definitive plots, but in terms of standard features and episodes that get repeated and redeployed. In chapter 3, for instance,

we see that women's housework is frequently represented through a narrative of proof and introspection so that the pious housewifery of a heroine can be manifested to readers. Though this is not a "plot" in the traditional, narratological sense, it is a notable recurring pattern that helps to shape stage plays, women's private diaries, and the stories of housewifery that they tell.

Additionally, I find the category of narrative useful for describing the process by which early modern literary texts engage with a historical moment marked, as we have seen, by large-scale social, economic, and religious changes. As Hayden White, following Roland Barthes, has ably articulated, narrative often arises out of a desire to "have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary."²⁵ In this sense, he argues, historical texts and literary texts share the same propensity for narrative, for a satisfying formal structure to make sense out of individual events. White's emphasis on the coherence of narrative has been challenged by poststructuralist and feminist critics who have rightly argued that not all narratives follow the plan of "well-made stories," nor do they always achieve the "integrity" and "closure" that White describes.²⁶ Like these critics, I do not assume narratives to be internally consistent. In tracing recurring stories and narrative structures in this book, I do not suggest that these narratives are invariable, single, or even predictable. They always make room for alternative stories or suggest precisely what must be excluded from a given narrative to make it function in a certain way. Similarly, I am not proposing an archetypal theory of narrative, such as the one developed by Northrop Frye, which tends to flatten out historical differences in favor of universal aesthetic categories.²⁷ Instead, I argue that it is precisely in the gaps, fissures, and inconsistencies within individual stories that we can locate the sedimented traces of social struggle and the points of tension within early modern ideological debates about women's work.²⁸

But at the same time, White suggests that the *desire* for narrative coherence, or at least for narrative intelligibility, is notable in and of itself. Though this desire is inevitably thwarted by the unpredictability of texts themselves, it helps to explain the processes by which literary texts both respond to and feed back into the culture of which they are a part. I base my arguments in this study on the premise that the act of storytelling, the literary process of relating early modern women's work in narrative form, is rooted in part in the desire to represent, explain, or clarify these figures, even if that attempt is predetermined to fail. During a time in which the position of women