

Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Geraldine Sheridan. *Louder than Words: Ways of Seeing Women Workers in Eighteenth-Century France*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009. xvi+256pp. US\$55. ISBN 978-089672622-2.

In *Louder than Words*, Geraldine Sheridan goes beyond what is revealed by the written word to embark on an exploration of the visual representation of female work in the eighteenth century. Her main sources are *Descriptions des arts et métiers*, published between 1761 and 1788 by the *Académie royale des sciences*, and the well-known volumes of engravings from Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1762–72). To these known sources, she adds twenty engravings produced for *Descriptions*, which her study makes public for the first time.

Sheridan bolsters the arguments of economic historians that women's exclusion from guilds was in no way synonymous with their absence from the workforce. The proportion of engravings representing women at work might have been modest (2.7 per cent in the *Encyclopédie*, 4.8 per cent in the *Descriptions des arts et métiers*), but Sheridan convincingly argues for their significance and subtle complexity. The fact that these plates provide a "stylized" representation of the living conditions of working women does not preclude them from offering a glimpse into what Sheridan calls "the complexity of the social and cultural contexts of work in France in the period" (18). In many cases, the plates confirm the often subaltern position of women workers "across cultures, and indeed across time" (19), a fact that broadens the relevance of this study. Sheridan uses her thorough knowledge of economic history to articulate an array of parameters at work in these engravings (and to occasionally comment on accompanying texts) and to tease out the multifaceted meanings of these visual artifacts.

In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, five chapters represent the major eighteenth-century economic sectors: "The Traditional Economy (Agriculture, Mining, Fishing)," "Artisanal Trades (Ornamental and Luxury Products, Essential Goods)," "Textiles," "Manufactories," and "Commercial Activity." Sheridan opens each part with a well-documented introduction in which the research of economic historians provides the necessary background to her subsequent analysis of the plates. This structure enables her to maintain a balance between a general discussion of economic conditions during the pre-industrial era and her detailed analysis of particular visual artifacts.

This study challenges possible misconceptions attached to female economic activity, misconceptions that can be explained, Sheridan

argues, by the vision of female physiology that gained scientific ground during the Enlightenment period and endured for more than two centuries. In the chapter on the traditional economy, as well as in other parts of her study, Sheridan underscores the necessity of women's work for economic survival as well as the taxing and quite often perilous nature of their assigned roles. That women were involved in agriculture comes as no surprise, but that they worked in mines and participated in fishing activities is less known. They were not only employed in small family businesses, but also were hired in manufactories, which were "large enterprises often supported, and sometimes fully capitalized, by the royal administration" (183), such as the Turkish carpet manufactory in Aubusson. In the chapters on artisanal work and on textiles, in which she describes a wide range of trades, Sheridan discusses the often difficult working conditions (for example, handling molten metals) and outlines how statutes denied women the status of apprentices and the right to pass the trade down to their children. Yet, as the plates make clear, these regulations were not followed scrupulously, and women fully participated in those trades. Although the engravings reveal that they frequently performed highly skilled work, Sheridan found evidence in the texts accompanying the plates that their participation was taken for granted and their skills received little recognition.

While Sheridan highlights the value of these visual artifacts in order to reveal what written texts frequently obscure, she is mindful of the possible pitfalls of such an undertaking, and she carefully contextualizes the engravings. In the book's introduction, she provides an overview of the visual culture in which these engravings found their place. Furthermore, she is aware that "the attention devoted to any one area of the economy reflects primarily the particular agenda of the editors and cannot be supposed to correspond to the importance of that area in terms of the number of people employed or the value of the goods produced" (9). This explains, for example, the absence of servants from this corpus and the limited presence of the Parisian trade guilds that were exclusively in the hands of women. Interestingly, the clothing that women were forced to wear for some activities was also a reason for their virtual absence, as it could easily be deemed indecent (exposing their lower limbs while they fished, for example). As importantly, Sheridan points to the high level of stylization and idealization that characterized the engravings: they certainly suggest the demands that many tasks imposed on women's bodies, but the cleanliness of the work space and the ease with which workers accomplished their work provide no "realistic" representation of the challenging conditions described in other sources.

Finally, in addition to providing visual clues of the active participation of women in the workforce during the eighteenth century and

giving credit where it is due, the iconography of this beautiful book allows modern readers a glimpse into the lives of women who did not belong to the elites and whose role was vital in the material culture of the period. *Louder than Words* makes a substantial contribution to the history of female work, not solely thanks to Sheridan's conclusions, but also because of the questions that she asks throughout her book, suggesting new research pursuits for economic, cultural, and art historians.

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Dena Goodman and Kathryn Norberg, eds. *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century: What Furniture Can Tell Us about the European and American Past*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. x+246pp. US\$69.95. ISBN 978-0-415-94953-8.

Amanda Vickery. *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xviii+382pp. US\$45. ISBN 978-0-300-15453-5.

The twelve strong essays collected in *Furnishing the Eighteenth Century* illuminate the circuits of production and consumption that moved furniture and decorative objects from city to countryside, back and forth across the Atlantic, as well as the social pressures that imbued those objects with significance. The first of four thematically organized sections maps the global itinerary of materials and styles. Madeleine Dobie's terrific essay studies the use of luxury woods from French colonies in the West Indies to construct furniture in an Orientalist style. She argues that the exotic guise of the furniture concealed from metropolitan consumers the slave economy that supplied them. Chaela Pastore discusses the vogue for mahogany; though the wood grew in Saint Domingue, Creoles who bought mahogany furniture were criticized for mimicking the elites in France who wanted to monopolize this luxury as a token of national and racial purity. David Porter's chapter returns to the topic of Orientalism by way of a treatise on aesthetics by William Hogarth. Chinoiserie exemplified the features that Hogarth claimed had universal appeal (for example, novelty, asymmetry, and femininity), yet the style repelled him. Porter shows that the Chinese style was often satirized as a source of female pleasure that displaced men; its connotations thus undermined the heterosexual dynamic implicit in Hogarth's theory of beauty.

While Pastore and Porter examine efforts to regulate fashion, the second set of essays profile people who carried fashions across