

This brings me to my second point. If, indeed, women were publicly active in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries, and even beyond, why did this change? To say that the private sphere was more sharply differentiated from the public sphere begs the question, for some things can never be called even quasi-private – such as the quite legal and well-accepted regency of the Empress Theophanu for the infant Otto III between 983 and her death in 991 against, for instance, the

physical removal of a small child from its mother (in 13th century feudal practice) because she could not be its guardian. If we are going to understand the place of women in the historical realities of our past, then we must look closer at just why and how women lost their place in public life. This is a question not necessarily answered easily – and certainly not by asserting that ancient and patristic teaching laid down the ideals of womanhood as chaste, modest, silent, and obe-

dient, and that thus by definition a public woman must be unchaste, as she deals with men; immodest, as she strives to succeed; certainly not silent, for obvious reasons; and assertive, rather than obedient to the wishes of others. Until we have taken a much more detailed look at women in public life, we are not going to find all the answers as to why they lost these "freedoms."

THE ENGLISH HOUSEWIFE

Gervase Markham. Ed. Michael R. Best. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986.

Margaret Knittl

This edition of a work first published in 1615 is beautifully produced and illustrated. It includes, besides Markham's text, a fine introduction by the editor to the author and his sources and very rich and full notes in explanation of the text. In Markham's words, the work is a compendium "containing the inward and outward virtues which ought to be in a complete woman; as her skill in physic, cookery, banquetting staff, distillation, perfumes, wool, hemp, flax, dairies, brewing, baking, and all other things belonging to a household." It is indeed a mine of information about women's work, fascinating to dip into, but tantalizing too: fun to read, but a challenge to interpret.

The book offers, of course, a male view of what, ideally, "our English housewife" should be, know and do, but gives few clues as to how closely actuality approached this ideal. Further, Markham's text does not bear out his opening statement that he is providing the guidance needed by the wife of the English husbandman (small farmer). Delightful as his recipes are, I read them with growing skepticism that he was writing for the ordinary country woman. Would even a yeoman's wife have had to hand such quantities of sugar, spices and dried fruit as these recipes call for? I doubt it. Or take the chapter on wine. Contemporary inventories of village homes do not record the butts or pipes of wine Markham writes of. As the editor shows, this chapter is based on a manuscript which recorded the practices of vintners, and not always very

honest ones at that. The reader must tread warily, then, if she is to draw from this book useful information about the daily work of real country housewives. Still, a careful reader can glean much from it, both from what it tells and what it passes over in silence. It is remarkable, for example, that a work of this scope has nothing to say about the care and upbringing of children. Nor is there anything about the making or care of clothing. Were these such unimportant functions or merely too commonplace to be worthy of Markham's attention?

Markham's account of the housewife's inward virtues is brief and traditional. The good housewife must be sincerely religious; time spent on daily religious exercises is time well spent, for servants religiously raised are more faithful "and therefore a small time morning and evening bestowed in prayers, and other exercises of religion, will prove no lost time at the week's end." The good housewife must also be temperate in speech and act towards her husband, and careful to adjust her dress and diet to his rank and income. Some of her general virtues surprise a little: among such else, she is to be "witty, pleasant, constant in friendship, full of good neighbourhood, wise in discourse, but not frequent therein, sharp and quick of speech but not bitter or talkative." Do we see here Markham's personal ideal, or qualities generally valued by Englishmen in their wives?

Markham is at his best in chapters like those on malt making, brewing and dairying, where he can draw upon his personal experience as a man who "followed the plough" for nine years. It was a revelation to me to read his careful, step-by-step account of these processes, and to visualize the sheer labour they involved, and the skill too. Equally complex were the tasks involved in making yarn (for the loom), wool, flax and

hemp. No wonder a servant's allowance of clothing was a single outfit a year!

Finally, Markham's occasional asides can be illuminating; when he speaks of baking and brewing, he remarks "And forasmuch as drink is in every house more generally spent than bread, being indeed made the very substance of all entertainment, I will first begin with it." Again, in the discussion of dairies he tells us "The best use of buttermilk for the able housewife is charitably to bestow it on the poor neighbours, whose wants do daily cry out for sustenance. Why also it is fitting to give to the poor, though it may also be used to feed swine." Touches like these provide glimpses of village life, the more to be trusted because the effect was unintended.

In summary, this is an entertaining book, full of information both curious and useful.

HERSTORY

1 • 9 • 8 • 7

The Canadian Women's Desk Calendar

- stories about remarkable women
- over 35 historical and contemporary photographs and illustrations
- thought-provoking quotations
- coil binding, one-week-per-page calendar, space for personal notations

Ask about discounts for stores, galleries, and women's groups

Herstory 1987 \$7.95

Write to: Coteau Books
Box 239 Sub #1
Moose Jaw, Sask.
S6H 5V0

Or phone: (306) 693-5212