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Geraldine Sheridan, *Louder Than Words: Ways of Seeing Women Workers in Eighteenth-Century France*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009. xiv + 256 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8967-2622-2.

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As titles such as *Becoming Visible* and *Hidden from History* suggest, for more than forty years, historians of women and gender have been searching for new ways to uncover what traditional scholarship and traditional sources have typically denied or overlooked: the vast contributions and pursuits of women.^[1] Determining what females were doing in the world of work in the ancien régime has proved particularly challenging. Assumed to be unskilled or unproductive, many women workers and their employments went undocumented altogether. Yet, as Geraldine Sheridan discovered in her work on eighteenth-century female printers, otherwise invisible tradeswomen occasionally left traces in police records when they got in trouble.^[2]

That realization led Sheridan to seek another kind of source that would help reveal the working lives of women. The result is her beautifully illustrated folio-sized volume, *Louder Than Words*, a major scholarly contribution to histories of work and gender—one based on visual sources. Here Sheridan goes far beyond her earlier studies on the book trade to make visible in surprising and illuminating detail a diverse picture of women involved in almost every conceivable kind of occupation: sometimes performing the most grueling physical labors or intricate work techniques along side of men (but paid significantly less) or engaged in a variety of specialized tasks deemed appropriate for women (again—no surprise here—for significantly lower wages). She also has many things to say about skill, working conditions, the physical effects of various tasks on the body, poverty and social status that engage directly with recent discussions and debates about women and work.^[3]

The sources for this monumental project were primarily the two major collections of eighteenth-century engravings renowned for illustrating the trades: The *Descriptions des arts and métiers* (associated most often with Réaumur) and the plates published as part of Diderot's great *Encyclopédie*. Yet both collections had their blind spots: they left out most women's occupations (such as laundering, domestic servitude, mending, and food preparation) and almost completely ignored the important all-female guilds such as the Parisian seamstresses. Indeed as Sheridan points out, images of women appear in only a fraction of the total plates (4.8 percent in the *Descriptions* and 2.3 percent in the *Encyclopédie*). Nevertheless, she makes the most out of what even these tiny glimpses reveal.

Sheridan contends that the designers of these images registered many elements of the contemporary cultural and social contexts within which these women operated and that were not recorded elsewhere. Thus, as she explains in the introduction, Sheridan will attempt to decode this evidence, by reading the images alongside (and sometimes against) each other, their accompanying texts, additional relevant eighteenth-century sources, and the best historical scholarship of the last four decades. She wants to see what new knowledge we can gain from the images—as well as to reveal the ways in which the images confirm, contradict, or complicate what we already think we know about women's working lives.

In the introduction, Sheridan also briefly rehearses how the *Académie des sciences* came to produce accurate depictions of the crafts and manufactories in the first place; the methodology behind the design of the engravings; and the complex relationship between the two sets of plates (Diderot borrowed much from the earlier work). She also deftly situates these engravings within the larger conventions of the fine arts of the time, while affirming the worth and importance of the copper engravings themselves.

The five main chapters of the book are organized around five areas of work: the traditional economy, artisanal crafts and trades, textiles, manufactories, and commerce. Each chapter offers a review of the relevant social history followed by a revealing description and analysis of dozens of copperplate engravings depicting work activities of women. Most readers of H-Net France are likely to be familiar with the illustrations depicting work processes in the *Encyclopédie*. The typical plate had a vignette of the workshop or manufactory in a top panel and the tools or machinery of the trade laid out on a panel below. Roland Barthes once spoke of these images as “sterile,” but Sheridan presents in enlivening detail what is happening at every stage.^[4] She is extremely skilled at describing the complex work processes illustrated in the plates and their likely toll on the practitioner—whether in the field, mining operation, fishing enterprise, workshop, manufactory or boutique.

In the first chapter—whose focus is primarily on fishing, mining, and agriculture—what really stands out is that rural women participated in much backbreaking and dangerous physical labor. Here women are not driving teams of horses (gender distinctions made that a man’s job), but acting as draft animals themselves. We see somewhat unsettling images of women drawing ox carts and sleds and cranking the windlass to bring to the surface both huge baskets of coal as well as the male workers who labored underground. Women are also dragging impossibly heavy nets from the sea, shrimp-fishing on stilts in treacherously deep water, transporting on their backs 200-pound basket loads of coal, rock salt, and fish, and turning over 140-pound cheeses. These are fascinating (and unusual) pictures of arduous labor (and there will be more examples in subsequent chapters). Yet, interestingly, the accompanying texts typically offer little or no comment about female participation—sometimes they even refer to the working women as men (*ouvriers*). Such invisibility suggests to Sheridan that these sights were commonplace, not unusual. In the subsistence economies of eighteenth-century France, J-J Rousseau’s notions of weak and passive protected females apparently had little place.

Early on Sheridan also begins a conversation about skill (*habileté*), as she subtly speculates about the amount of expertise or training required for the countless tasks relegated to women. How hard, for example, would it have been to learn to smoke or salt fish successfully, or to pack fresh fish so that they would survive travel to market without spoiling? Her point (reinforced through multiple examples in later chapters) is that many seemingly simple tasks likely were not all that easy to do well.

In chapter two on the sworn artisanal trades, Sheridan’s finds many images that provide evidence for one of her main arguments: that women continued to dominate as workers in the same crafts where they had once held membership. The transformation of the feather dressers guild provides a typical narrative. In the Middle Ages, feather dressers were an all female guild; by 1599 the corporate codes referred to both masters and mistresses; by 1644 only masters, sons, and widows had legal status (and widows had no right to train apprentices). Yet, in the plate depicting the feather dressers’ workshop, all the workers are female—a rather significant presence. For Sheridan, it is another instance where the engraving speaks “louder than words.”

She argues that in many cases, wives and daughters continued to work in patriarchal family enterprises, not as qualified workers, but trained none the less by the master. In other cases, masters preferred to hire illegal female chamberlans whom they could hide away and pay much less. Sheridan offers interesting contrasts as well, between the craft of candle making, for example, where various tasks were strictly gendered, and other trades (such as leather goods production) where women and men seem to have been almost interchangeable.

More surprising is the number of women shown in the plates performing “men’s work.” Some engravings show women active in base metal trades, as skilled edge tool makers, or producers of pins, nails, lead shot, and pewter. Women also participated in really nasty jobs such as smelting metal or transforming catgut into strings for musical instruments and tennis rackets. These unexpected findings suggest the need for more research on women pursuing seemingly “male” occupations.

In chapter three, Sheridan amplifies her discussion about women and skilled work in a close examination of the intricate tasks connected with spinning, weaving, silk and ribbon production, and braiding for upholstery—tasks that would seem to require expertise, ability, training, and experience. Yet gendered as female and often labeled as “ancillary,” these jobs did not count as important aspects of the work process: ancillary work was “beneath the trade classification of training and skill” (p. 146).

Here Sheridan confirms what Judith Coffin and Daryl Hafter have also observed. If eighteenth-century authors discussed women’s work achievements at all, they attributed them to nature: a result of female dexterity, female patience, and female temperament—not a matter of skill or expertise. Citing Hafter, Sheridan agrees that “skill was often a gendered artificial label that shed more light on the sex and status of the worker than on what it produced.”^[5] Hence the vital importance of these engravings, for as Sheridan argues, more often than not we have nothing except the image standing “witness to the knowledge, understanding, and dexterity, with which women accomplished the many tasks assigned to them” (p. 146).

Sheridan also reminds us that the consequences of such dismissive regard for “women’s work” generated enormous inequities over time—reflecting patterns and tendencies that continue to the present. Silk, for example, was an extremely prized and costly good, but female silk workers labored in dreadful conditions for very low wages. Similarly, the products of lace making—one of the most difficult crafts to learn—sold many times higher than silk, but its female workers were paid even less than silk workers.

This chapter also includes a number of troubling images, such as one of a giant loom where a woman is reaching to tie broken cords above her head—a task she would have repeated many times a day. Another shows two women who needed to walk continuously in a small circle to provide the power to run a big square mill for twisting yarn, as if they were dogs running a spit. As Sheridan remarks, “women’s bodies are the producers of energy in this world of early mechanization... yet the conventions of the genre operate here to mask the traces such heavy physical toil would have left on their physique and on their clothing” (p. 154).

Chapter four on “Manufactories,” presents more images of women participating in difficult, dirty, dangerous, yet essential activities. These eighteenth-century women seem tied to their tasks and their machines much as they will be in the nineteenth century’s satanic mills. In larger enterprises—such as paper manufactories, glass works, or carpet weaving establishments—vulnerable women experienced wretched conditions and harsh discipline for very low pay (sometimes receiving only one third of a man’s wages). Many jobs were laborious or painful, yet required “precision and judgment” (p. 188). Women sorted and graded huge piles of rags for paper making, for example; they smoothed and glazed-sheet by fragile sheet—six reams of paper per day; they ruined their eyes following intricate carpet patterns; they wielded large mallets to reduce blocks of stone into sand—that they subsequently sifted, refined, and graded—for various types of glass production. As in the earlier chapters, these illustrations show women participating in taxing work that often required endurance, finesse, ability, skill, and judgment.

Chapter five focuses on the one area where women were both ubiquitous and visible: as sellers at all levels of commerce. Their abilities were crucial to a successful enterprise. Women were typically responsible for trading, bookkeeping, managing credit, paying bills, and maintaining correspondence—

activities requiring literacy, skills, and good judgment if the enterprise were to thrive. Since many goods were not priced, women also had to be skilled hagglers and negotiators. Somewhat more intangible, but of crucial importance, saleswomen needed to create a certain sociability within the shop to attract and retain customers. And, as wives and daughters of masters, these working women were typically unpaid, thereby saving the business the price of their labor. Here again Sheridan's shrewd analysis of the plates enables us to comprehend the variety and importance of women's activities behind the counter in both high and low trades.

Sheridan concludes her book with a thoughtful and sophisticated essay that offers an even more penetrating exploration of ideas, language, and speculations about gender, skill, dexterity, the worker's body, and the family economy, and much more besides. Along the way she raises many important questions about the vast amount that we do not yet know—and point the way for future work on work. It is a satisfying end to an impressive volume.

Sherlock Holmes once said to Dr. Watson, "You see, but you do not observe." Certainly many of us have seen these plates illustrating the trades, but with Sheridan's guidance we can now observe and understand much more acutely what is happening. Even specialists in the history of work and labor are likely to find surprises, as well as much support for what they have always suspected and imagined. Thanks to Sheridan's labors, these engravings of "irrepressible women workers of the eighteenth century" (p. 17) have indeed spoken louder than words.

NOTES

[1] Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women and European History*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) and Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: Rediscovering Women in History From the 17th Century to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

[2] Geraldine Sheridan, "Women in the book trade in eighteenth-century France," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15.1 (Spring): 51-69.

[3] A brief list of some of the key texts informing Sheridan's discussions includes Olwen Hufton, "Women, Work and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 9 (1975):1-22; Daryl Hafter, "Female Masters in the Ribbon-making Guild of Eighteenth-Century Rouen," *French Historical Studies* 20 (1997): 1-14 and "Women in the Underground Business of Eighteenth-Century Lyon," *Enterprise and Society* 2 (2001): 11-40; Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2001); Michael Sonenscher, *The Hatters of Eighteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Judith Coffin, "Gender and the Guild Order: the Garment Trades in Eighteenth-century Paris," *Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994): 768-93; Cynthia M. Truant, "The Guildswomen of Paris: Gender, Power, and Sociability in the Old Regime," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 15 (1988): 130-38; and Liana Vardi, *The Land and the Loom: Peasants and Profit in Northern France, 1680-1800* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1993). Sheridan is completely conversant in the vast scholarship of the last forty years of "work on work" in Early Modern Europe and seems to have gleaned from that corpus nearly every mention of the lives of working women in the old regime. Many scholars will be grateful for her extensive bibliography.

[4] Roland Barthes, "Image, raison, déraison," in *L'univers de l'Encyclopédie* (Paris: Librairies Associés, 1964).

[5] Daryl Hafter, "Women Who Wove in the Eighteenth-Century Silk Industry of Lyon," in Daryl Hafter, ed., *European Women and Preindustrial Craft* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 42-64, p. 44.

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