

H-France Review Vol. 1 (August 2001), No. 22

Clare Haru Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001. vii + 493 pp. Tables, graphs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$64.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8223-2662-0; \$21.95 U.S (pb). ISBN 0-8223-2666-3.

Review by Kathryn Norberg, University of California, Los Angeles.

Clare Crowston's study of the seamstresses of the Old Regime is an important book that deserves a broad audience. As its title indicates, the book is about one of the largest groups--if not *the* largest group--of women laborers in eighteenth-century France. Women's historians will pounce upon this book: we have long needed a study of Old Regime needle workers. [1] But other specialists should read this book too: those interested in guilds, royal policy, vocational training, and state finance will all find material of interest, as will historians of Caen, Marseille, and Aix-en-Provence and Paris. Along with a broad geographical sweep, *Fabricating Women* covers a very long period of time: it begins in 1672 when Colbert created the seamstress' guild and ends with a coda on the nineteenth century, carrying the story all the way up to the 1890s.

None too surprisingly, this is a long book, almost 500 pages including notes. It is divided into three separate, somewhat disconnected, parts. Part I investigates the culture, techniques, and economic organization of dressmaking. Crowston briefly considers depictions of seamstresses in prints before devoting a full chapter to the evolution of women's clothing from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Here one finds a conventional history of fashion with one important exception. Crowston revises fashion chronology by moving the "revolution" in women's clothing from the latter third of the eighteenth century back into the seventeenth century. "Crucial developments for gender, clothing production, and the rise of consumption occurred," Crowston argues, "in the 1670s" (p. 72). Chief amongst these developments was the triumph of the sack dress or mantua over the two-piece, tight-waisted outfit favored at Versailles. The mantua was cheaper to produce than its court predecessor and therefore--costly textiles notwithstanding--within reach of more women. Just as the mantua triumphed, Colbert created the wholly female guild of seamstresses in 1672 and conferred upon its members the privilege of making the new dress. Male tailors would challenge this monopoly, and they successfully retained their right to make the whale bone stays and voluminous hoop skirts that were an essential part of the new "look."

Still, fashion appeared to smile on the seamstresses, and a few of them prospered. Using the sources of social history--death inventories, almanacs, and police reports--Crowston reconstructs the hierarchy of wealth and status within the seamstress profession. She finds the corporation to be large--1700 mistresses in Paris--but very porous. Many needle workers never became part of the guild, and the seamstresses, unlike the tailors, never tried to enforce their monopoly. A host of "unincorporated"

needle workers plied their trade in complete obscurity and freedom, while a tiny minority became mistresses and rose to the top of the profession. This elite was Parisian, usually single, and blessed with a wealthy, aristocratic clientele. As successful, independent businesswomen, these elite seamstresses hired and fired workers, loaned money to clients and made a good living, all without the aid of husband or father. Less fortunate were the vast majority of seamstresses who eked out a precarious living altering dresses for neighbor women and working in the workshops of better off tailors and dressmakers.

Next, Crowston turns to the tools and techniques of dressmaking. Using a series of neglected books on sewing and tailoring, Crowston outlines how a dress was made, from cutting the cloth to the final trimmings. One learns, for example, that eighteenth-century tailors and dressmakers did not possess measuring tapes per se. They took strips of paper and marked the client's various dimensions on the strips, remembering all the while to what part of the body the marks corresponded. As this example shows, dressmaking did not require expensive tools. Little capital was needed to set up shop and less still to pay workers. Additional seamstresses—for there were no journeymen in the female guilds—would be hired on a yearly or daily basis, and the whole dress could be fabricated in the seamstress's workshop/home (Putting out was not a feature of eighteenth-century dressmaking.). Just what atmosphere reigned inside these workshops is not clear. Crowston points out that competition for jobs and the vast unskilled labor pool probably kept seamstresses squarely under the thumb of their employers. No guild rules regulated the labor market, and no journeymen's organization, like the *compagnonnage*, protected the common seamstress. Though highly polarized, the dressmaker's shop was all-female, and Crowston imagines—with little evidence—that it was characterized by gossip and camaraderie. Though she claims to have no desire to “romanticize” single sex institutions, Crowston probably overestimates the degree to which a common sex mitigated tension between employer and employee.

Part II of *Fabricating Women* leaves behind fashion and dressmaking and takes up the functioning of the seamstress guild. Like Steven Kaplan before her, Crowston takes a revisionist view of the guilds.[2] She rejects the picture (inherited from Turgot) of outdated, sclerotic institutions and argues that the guilds “offered some of the most salient institutional structures and organizing principles of urban life” (p.275). The officials of the seamstress guild, she admits, were a tiny, privileged minority, but they were a very busy minority. At their headquarters on the rue de la Verrerie, the guild officials or *jurées* carried on an array of activities: each year they witnessed 400 apprenticeship contracts, received 140 new mistresses, collected fees from members, inspected workshops, and engaged in lengthy litigation at the Châtelet court. Supervising and monitoring the trade was their most public duty, but they also distributed aid to needy, senior guild members and levied fees and collected royal taxes. The monarchy relied upon the *jurées* to apportion and recover levies such as the *capitation*, the *dixième* and the *vingtième*. The crown also borrowed—or extorted—money from the guild by creating venal offices and by selling the position of mistress. Much of Crowston's story involves the *jurées'* attempts to respond to these royal impositions and the intrusion of royal authority that they always brought. Little by little, the monarchy whittled away the independence of the guild and placed it under the tutelage of the royal procurator at the Châtelet. As Crowston points out, guild life involved “constant interaction with royal officials” (p.292), an interaction that eventually robbed the guild of whatever “independence” Colbert had bestowed on it. Part III of *Fabricating Women* is a social history of the seamstresses. Using notarial records, death inventories, guild documents, and judicial records, Crowston follows the career path of the seamstress

from apprenticeship to old age and death. Her richest source are the 843 apprenticeship contracts that she has gleaned from guild documents and from notarial records of 1751 and 1761. These documents reveal that most of the apprentices came from artisanal families, and if they married, they wed other artisans. Many (about 37 percent) in fact did not get married and instead maintained independent workshops. Crowston pays particular attention to these unusual, female-headed households. Few were large because most seamstresses could not afford numerous apprentices, and journeymen were non-existent in the all-female guild. Single seamstresses gathered around them a few employees, many of whom resided with their husbands and children and not with the mistress seamstress. All of the independent seamstresses could read and write, and many (Crowston learns from a careful scrutiny of their death inventories) owned books, especially after 1760. Their most valuable possession was their furniture, and as with many other artisans they owned a few, small images, generally religious in content. None of this makes the seamstresses very different from their fellow artisans such as Steven Kaplan's bakers. But the seamstresses' wardrobes—as one might expect—were much more extensive, elaborate, and even fashionable than the clothing of other working people.

Crowston ends *Fabricating Women* with a coda on the seamstress in nineteenth-century France. The seamstresses' "legacy," Crowston claims, "was the idea that needlework was above all women's work" (p. 400). "Women's work," she claims, was an "ambiguous concept" in the seventeenth century which awaited the creation of the seamstress guild to attain "a new level of rigidity" (p.406). Seamstresses contributed to "gender ideologies" by "encouraging observers to imagine an innately female sphere of appearances transcending distinctions of social and economic status." They made "clothing a privileged site of performing femininity" and more, much more. Usually cautious in her arguments, Crowston makes somewhat extravagant claims in this conclusion for the seamstresses and their guild. Does the creation of the female guild throw into doubt the notion that work options for women declined in the early modern period?[3] Are we to reject the "family-state compact" because Colbert made some women mistresses of a guild? Are we to believe that seamstresses (likened here to Coco Chanel) created "comfortable" fashion and imposed it on elite women (p.40)?

These claims become broader and less focused when it comes to "gender." Did the seamstress guild "first foster the idea of social segregation . . . based on sex" (p. 413)? Is it plausible that seamstresses singlehandedly brought about the new notions of male and female that emerged in the late eighteenth century? Such generalizations are particularly hard to sustain because Crowston has no journals, letters, or autobiographies to reveal what the seamstresses thought about fashion, gender or anything else. That is not Crowston's fault. No female Ménétra or Réstif de la Bretonne wrote about her experiences as an artisan so we have no window into the interior life of the dressmaker.

But if such a dressmaker had existed, she probably would have prompted Crowston to take into account social as well as sexual difference. Why should we imagine that a wealthy mistress seamstress and her impoverished employee saw the world—much less femininity—in the same light? In Parts 2 and 3 of *Fabricating Women*, Crowston neglects the very economic disparities she herself outlined in Chapter 3. Focused on "gender," Crowston treats the seamstresses as an undifferentiated and homogenous group. That vague (and now contested) category "gender" is probably at fault.[4] Like its less satisfactory alternative "woman," gender can lead even the most circumspect researcher into essentialism.

Still, this book is entitled *Fabricating Women*, not woman, and it holds many insights and surprises. Who would have predicted that the seamstress *jurées*, unlike their male equivalents, would managed their investments so skillfully that their guild, unlike the tailors', was solvent, even wealthy in 1791? Who too would have imagined that single women, like the mistress seamstresses, could survive, even prosper, outside the "family economy?"[5] And who would have known that vocational training was so widely sought for girls or so readily available? *Fabricating Women* is based on extensive, even exhaustive research. It is the best kind of social history: inventive in its use of sources, attentive to political ramifications, and tireless in its search for the telling detail that illuminates the social landscape. The seamstresses were not an insignificant element in that landscape. They may not have changed the sexual politics of France, but they were still important. As Crowston remarks, a seamstress "probably lived on every block in eighteenth-century France" (p. 404). Anyone interested in the history of women, work, the city, or daily life needs to know about them, and thanks to Clare Crowston's meticulous social history, they now can.

NOTES

[1] Nineteenth-century needle workers have been better served. See Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Parisian Garment Trades, 1750-1914* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-to-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997). Of course, Crowston is not the only scholar to focus on early modern French needle workers. We also have the work of Cynthia Truant, Daryl Hafter, and Janine Lanza. But Crowston's study is the longest to date.

[2] See Steven Kaplan "Réflexions sur la police du monde du travail 1700-1815," *Revue historique* 261(janvier-mars 1979):17-77.

[3] For the best statement of this interpretation see James B. Collins, "The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 16, no.2 (Fall 1989): 436-70.

[4] See Mary Hawkesworth, "Confounding Gender," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no 3 (1997): 142-213; and "Comments" by Wendy McKenna and Suzanne Kessler, Steven G. Smith, Joan Wallach Scott, R.W.Connell and Oyeronke Oyewumi in the same issue.

[5] Crowston is criticizing or at least amending Olwen Hufton's formula, outlined in "Women and the Family Economy in Eighteenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 9, no 1 (Spring 1975): 1-22.

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ISSN 1553-9172