

*Women and Economic Activities in Late Medieval Ghent*, by Shennan Hutton. The New Middle Ages. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. 256. ISBN: 9780230104952.

FROM FOURTEENTH-CENTURY Ghent, Shennan Hutton delivers a vista of savvy women: Mergriete van den Hamme loaned money with her husband to local nobility facing financial ruin (92-93); Trune Beyerix and Alijse sRueden named one another as sole heirs for support in old age (66); Beatrise Blanckaerds collected debts for a male neighbor (35); Aechte van Vinderhout managed the production labor of others in her business partnership with her husband (108). None of these women were inhibited by male guardianship nor were they only free to invest upon the deaths of their husbands. Those living in and around fourteenth-century Ghent valued order and absorbed gender ideologies of the day; of this there is no doubt. But, they also viewed women as active in their economy. Among the 1500 legal acts registered between 1339 and 1361, Hutton finds women who negotiated strong patriarchal discourses to loan and borrow, manage and invest.

Through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the contracts, agreements, legal cases, inventories, and acts recorded in registers of the aldermen of the Keure, Hutton offers three main arguments. First, in contrast to recent scholarship, Hutton argues that these women were not strategic warehouses of capital for the men in their lives. She also argues that the clerks who noted the financial promises and exchanges, and by extension Ghentenars more broadly, were not surprised or threatened by these women's economic contributions. Finally, she suggests that due to a number of economic and political reasons, women in fourteenth-century Ghent held particular advantages over their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century counterparts.

After an explanation of the historical context of this powerful medieval city, Hutton pursues these arguments through an overview of women's economic activity (chapter 2), an examination of property management and investments (chapter 3), an exploration of the credit and annuity markets (chapter 4), and the ways women worked (chapter 5). Hutton reveals that although the registers include the dealings of the elite of Ghent, about forty percent of all of the acts involved women (27), many of whom do not appear in other historical records; women served as primaries in almost one quarter of all legal acts (36); and 45% of women in the registers were not marked by marital status, but instead by their own names (35, 149, and passim). Further, she shows convincingly that most women participated in the credit market, as did most men: they "put

their wealth into circulation” (70) by managing property, buying annuities, and loaning money. In terms of labor, Hutton argues that when we consider women working in tandem with their husbands, they appear with a relatively high labor status, frequently directing the labor of others and present in the central market spaces. In chapter 6, Hutton considers Ghent in a longer view, sampling the later registers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, exploring the ways custom became codified, and detailing the shifting political, legal, and labor landscapes. Briefly, Hutton demonstrates a diminishment in women’s independent economic reach in the later centuries. For example, she includes a fascinating table that compares women’s and men’s presence in the Keure’s registers in snapshots, wherein men acted alone in 48% of the total acts in 1360–61 and in 77% of the total acts 1420–21, women were recorded by their own names in 25% of the acts in the former period and in 16% in the latter, and women were noted with their husbands in 13% of the acts in 1360–61 and in only 3% sixty years later (128). By the sixteenth century, women were less likely to appear in the records as autonomous actors, less likely to engage in multiple economic activities, and more likely to be identified by marital status.

Throughout, Hutton pushes upon the ways that scholars have understood women’s experience in urban spaces. She reimagines the opportunities provided to women and men through burgher tenure by providing a new framework. In her first chapter, she introduces the “burgher construction,” which she juxtaposes with the “patrimonial construction.” Both constructions incorporated “legal customs, a family system, discourses and beliefs, and the scope of economic activities in actual practice”(3), and, importantly, both were patriarchal and performative. The burgher construction emphasized community property and bilateral ties while the patrimonial construction emphasized the patriline. Although the description of these constructions seems overdrawn, in her use of them to evaluate the language of the registers, they prove helpful to clarify the ways Ghenteners thought of their financial arrangements. Through this approach, Hutton reveals that Genteners used both constructions in many acts. They continually negotiated credit deals, land purchases, and financial opportunity within and without the city, among urban and rural elite, and different individuals and contexts called for different arrangements. This framework leads to Hutton’s strongest contribution: women in fourteenth-century Ghent lived continuous economic lives. Their economic status was not determined by marital status alone; instead, circumstance, talent, social status, and business partners were just as, or more, important.

In line with other work on women, the aldermen’s registers fail to show

women wielding political power or engaging in transnational trade. Yet, Hutton offers new ways to think about women's economic contribution in medieval cities. She also provides a solid foundation upon which other scholars can build. In the first chapter, Hutton touches lightly upon the culture—literary and material—that permitted burgher and patrimonial constructions. In the sixth chapter, she returns to this idea to lightly skate over the discourse that shut down these women's economic activities in late medieval Ghent. There is room for expansion here; one could examine women's control and use of movable goods (which Hutton excludes as investments, 67), as well as the literary works that supported women's careful management and others that represented women as spendthrifts.

In an engaging style that brings Ghent's women to life, Hutton drives our conversation forward about the ways that property ownership was gendered. She also challenges the life-cycle categories that historians often draw around women, arguing that these categories can be too confining against the backdrop of the rich complexity that was urban women's lives (95). Instead, Hutton promotes the idea of a continuum of economic activity along which women moved. Her work is informed and refreshing. It will be required reading, either in whole or in parts, for courses on gender, urban space, and economic history.

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