

Sara Read. *Maids, Wives, Widows: Exploring Early Modern Women's Lives, 1540–1740*. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword History, 2015. Pp. 224. Hardcover. \$22.54.

Sara Read, Lecturer of English at Loughborough University with a focus on the cultural representation of women in early modern England, presents an in-depth look at the everyday lives of English women between the 1540s and 1740s. Her research strives to be inclusive of not only the voices of elite women, but also middle and lower-class women during these two centuries. Read argues that women led intricate lives and were more than an extension of their husbands. *Maids, Wives, and Widows* explores the ways in which lower-class women struggled to provide for their families, and their cultural disparities with elite women. Diaries and letters illustrate the close relationships that women created with their children and husbands. Read also illuminates the everyday joys and struggles of English women through published works of the time centered on skills for midwifery and hygiene.

Examining these women through a cultural and domestic lens, Read structures her evidence into sections about their work, personal care, reproduction, religion, and public presence. To broaden this analysis, sources include voices of women of different backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. The most enlightening and intriguing areas outline work-life and reproduction. Poems reflect struggles within the economic sphere that overlap with their household duties as mother and wife, including having to bring children to work and then go home and attend to spousal duties.

The section devoted to reproduction proves interesting in depicting the differences of how women and men viewed periods, birth, and breastfeeding. Menstruation was a female weakness according to medical journals describing the process as evil and purging the “bad humors” from a woman’s body. These journals were written mostly by men with a few rare voices of women to contrast theirs. Sharing their thoughts on the female body strengthened the general stereotypes of women to a large audience. This ties the cultural and domestic realms together as diaries also show differences in class understanding of the importance of breastfeeding as a mother’s duty. Lower-class

women used breastfeeding to bond with their children while most upper-class women did not have this option due to the belief that breastfeeding would age them and “spoil” their figure. Husbands who were keen on having large families often did not allow their wives to nurse their children because it was viewed as “dirty” to attempt for more children if their wife was breastfeeding. Regarding birth and pregnancy, men and women generally saw it as a time when women should not be taking risks; for working class women, this luxury was not afforded to them and most worked for as long as they could. These general myths written in diaries and books at the time demonstrate how both the female body was understood, and the impact on shaping social understandings of gender norms.

Though Read’s book strives to create a full view of the lives of women during this era, at some points it seems like too big a task to undertake. This creates the feeling that the evidence is more of a list instead of a carefully thought-out plan to prove the argument. Focusing instead on key features such as the disparities in working life and views of mothering and reproduction could strengthen her argument that women in different social classes had different concerns and that these women led more engaging lives than once thought. In addition, an emphasis on the evolution of female jobs or duties as wife and mother could strengthen Read’s writing and argument. A proper conclusion in place of an abrupt ending would also further cement the initial argument that is made in the beginning of the book.

Maids, Wives, and Widows does succeed in highlighting the intricacies of the lives of early modern English women. It serves as an introductory examination of women of the period to any reader interested in the topic due to its broad overviews and accessible language use. The wide range of primary sources enhances understanding of what it meant to be an ordinary woman by highlighting their thoughts, allowing readers to come away feeling more informed about British women of the period. Overall, the research proves important in creating a more detailed, and compelling understanding of womanhood in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

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