

“Women’s Rights to Property in Late Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England: Cultural Attitudes”

In this BA thesis Michala Vondráková managed to combine her interest in British history and literature with the fact that she was also a student of law. As the five-page long list of bibliography testifies, she conducted extensive research (in which she showed much personal initiative) and consequently provides a valuable overview of detailed information crucial for any student or scholar of the period. With the relative scarcity of available material to study, what at first seemed like a short thesis ultimately expanded as thorough research yielded more and more results. Therefore, I personally do not have a problem with the length of the thesis. The study is sensitive to social and historical context, aims and objectives are clearly articulated. The writing style is fluent without grave errors. Structure and division into chapters with sub-headings is logical. The historical frame 1753 to 1857 is appropriate. In some of her assessments of the period, Ms Vondráková relies heavily on the observations of Stone and Erickson, yet especially in the interconnections with fiction and her readings of texts, she has found an independent path.

Slightly over half the nation was female. Yet, compared with men, we know little about what women felt, thought and did. It is men who left most records behind – much of our evidence what women were like and thought – or were expected to think – comes from men, from sermons, courtesy manuals, conduct books, from male diarists etc. Michala Vondráková takes her evidence not only from these, she also attempts to find texts where women did manage to articulate, albeit indirectly, their opinions and attitudes: she looks at the fiction of the time, illustrating the obsessions and social anxieties etc. on such examples. Thus, the thesis not only surveys the history of law, but also attempts to analyse the receptions, representations, indeed cultural attitudes, to the legal position of women. The problem is that despite some very acute readings and contextualisations, in quite a few other cases such analysis is not deep enough and the texts function rather as simple illustrations - that such and such an issue was also described in a novel.

Until recently historians of women have focused attention on upper class ladies or women that have left a trace in the public world as intellectuals. Millions of women earned their living by hard toil. We have very little record of their experience therefore it is highly commendable that the thesis also pays much attention to women from the lowest labouring classes. Here, I would nevertheless have a couple of comments/questions:

As we have so few direct records of their experience, poor women were rather represented by others than representing themselves. Voiceless, muted, these subalterns were described in ways that suited particular needs of the ones doing the representing. The thesis pays attention to the role of Jemima; can we have other examples how/if poor women’s plight was used by other women writers?

Roy Porter talks of the poor as giving the nation a migraine. Attempts to grapple with the question of the poor were manifold – one was the Poor Law when every native (even a pauper) was deemed to possess a settlement in one parish (the settlement is a typical English property right). Benefits of this were plenty, yet could there be also a dark side to this – perhaps precisely for unmarried pregnant women?

A final comment about the conclusion: Rather than repeating most of the points/facts mentioned before, here was space to elaborate on the “attitudes” part of the matter, especially the strategies writers used when dealing with the topic of women and money, how social norms and conventions about women’s roles influenced the law etc. What indeed were the basic assumptions governing relations between the sexes, underpinning attitudes and institutions, and backed ultimately by law?

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose the grade excellent to very good (**v ýborn ě až velmi dobře**) depending on the result of the defence.

V Praze dne 13.6.1014

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