

URBAN WOMEN IN TUDOR-STUART ENGLAND:

THE VALUE OF BOROUGH SOURCES

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In the days when history was the story of kings, presidents and wars, historians sometimes had a stock response to explain the neglect they accorded the working classes, the uneducated, the blacks, the women--in short, the masses of humanity. They argued that although the history of the masses would be interesting, even significant, unfortunately it was probably impossible to reconstruct; that until the recent spread of literacy, the lower classes were inarticulate and consequently sources were simply not available to tell their story. Within the last thirty years, however, scholarship has clearly refuted this claim. Not only in women's history, but in urban history, demographics, black history, psychohistory, social history, labor history, history of crime, history of medicine, family history--in all these varieties of the discipline, new types of source material have been discovered and exploited in imaginative ways, often through techniques borrowed from the social sciences. Local sources are especially valuable in this respect, for they can reveal the individual acting in the context of his or her community on a variety of issues.

I wish in this paper to discuss a few types of local sources for the study of urban women in Tudor-Stuart England. Let me first, however, address a subsidiary issue which I hope need not distract us. The emergence of women's history as a separate field, whose advocates insist on legitimacy and even parity, has provoked division or, at the very least, unease within the academic community and the traditional disciplines. I have argued on both sides of this debate but prefer to focus on what is the more productive, significant issue: the sources behind the history. Whether one insists on a separate, independent field of women's history or works instead to incorporate the study of women into traditional courses, a rich variety of local sources are available and await investigation.

English municipal records become quite full by the seventeenth century, when 20 percent of the population can be classified as urban. The boroughs, or chartered towns, usually maintained court records, minute and letter books, accounts, and other miscellaneous depositories. Extracts or whole classes of documents may have been published, especially if the area is blessed with an active record society. As an example, I will focus on the city of Norwich and the records of its Mayor's Court. Norwich remained after London the second city in the realm; by 1620 it could boast a population of about 20,000.² A slump in textiles in the early sixteenth century altered the balance among its one hundred trades but did not permanently curtail the city's economic vitality.³ Nonetheless, its government continually wrestled with those problems afflicting all preindustrial towns in England--the onerous burden of the poor and devastation by plague.

The Mayor's Court in Norwich consisted of twenty-four aldermen, who held office for life; the mayor, elected for a one-year term from the ranks of aldermen; and justices of the peace, recruited from all aldermen who had already served as mayor. In practice, the mayor, two or three justices, and from five to ten aldermen attended the court, which was

scheduled to meet twice a week. It was not the only governing body of the city and, in fact, one of its functions was to serve as the upper house of the Assembly, whose task it was to pass municipal legislation. Of the two bodies, however, the Mayor's Court was the more efficient institution, handling both emergencies and everyday administrative and judicial decisions.⁴

The wide range of its activities explains both the importance of the Court and the importance of its records. In the words of William Sachse, who edited Court records for the 1630s: "to write of the functions of the Norwich Court of Mayoralty at this time is nearly tantamount to recounting the history of the city."⁵ As Sachse further observes:

The Mayor's Court as a judicial bench, or an administrative board, or a legislative committee, drafted and enforced laws and orders which brought the business transactions, family life, moral lapses, religious scruples, sanitary practices, modes of amusement, and personal health of the individual citizen under close surveillance; which bound his tongue, controlled his thirst, and even affected his diet.⁶

As a judicial bench, some of whose members also sat in the Court of Quarter Sessions, its jurisdiction included all breaches against the common law except felonies; it enforced laws against vagrancy, petty larceny, fraudulent trade practices, and all pleas relating to apprenticeships. It also established and maintained the right to serve as a court of equity. Being more than a court of law, however, the Mayor's Court assumed in addition many of the functions of a modern town council. In its administrative capacity, the Mayor's Court appointed committees to oversee the poor in workhouses, audit accounts for the poor, attend to city properties, respond to outbreaks of plague, and arbitrate disputes among its citizens. Reading its records,⁷ one sometimes concludes no detail was too petty to escape its attention.

Given this situation, records of the Court reveal attitudes and policies on a number of issues affecting the status and activities of women. For example, town fathers clearly expected that women--whether wives, widows or single--would participate in the family or household economy and make an economic contribution. As historian Lawrence Stone observes, economic necessity created social policy in this respect: "among artisans, shopkeepers, smallholders and unskilled labourers. . . at any period of pre-industrial society, husband, wife and children tended to form a single economic unit in which the role of the wife was critical."⁸ It is easiest to trace the activities of widows, since they were the one group of women accorded independent status and the city fathers were anxious to facilitate their employment as a means of keeping them off poor relief. Thus in July 1621, when the Court sanctioned the number of alehouses allowed in each of the four wards of the city, eight of the thirty-one individuals licensed were women, and seven of the eight were specified as widows.⁹ In November 1621, two of these widows brought to Court the names of four males, who "dwellinge nere them doe tipple without lycence," and the Court immediately took action against the males.¹⁰ In another incident, the Court allowed or "tolerated" Dutch religious aliens

to pay a fine and practice their trade. Often a husband and wife were allowed to work "duringe their joynt lives and hir widowhood."¹¹

Of course, the Court expected women no less than men to abide by the rules of what was a heavily regulated, guild-dominated economy. Females are often cited in the records for market or trade infractions. In 1618 a widow Gilbert and a Mr. Byrd were fined for opening their shops on Sunday; in 1619 the widow Moore, a fisherwoman, was cited for setting her nets illegally; in 1620 the Court closed the market stalls of eight peddlers or "pettichapmen," five of whom were women; in 1630 a female miller was one of the five prohibited from illegally selling grain in the marketplace; and in 1631, the wife of John Longe was fined for keeping false weights.¹² The Court most vigorously enforced its own injunction forbidding single women from living on their own, where it was assumed they would come to no good. Thus time and time again, the Court ordered a female "lyvinge idely at her own hand" to be either retained in service, usually within a fortnight, or committed to the Bridewell, where work of some sort would be provided for her.¹³ In its supervisory role, the Court regularly recorded the terms of wage service, which it frequently arranged for both men and women.¹⁴

Examples of such actions by the Court are interesting but in the end do not suggest any surprising new interpretations. The city fathers were obviously paternalistic in their attitude toward women, as they were paternalistic in their attitude toward all the town and its interests. They accepted the household economy and placed the highest priority on protecting the stability of the family so that no element of the family unit would become economically dependent on the city government. Hence they protected the employment rights of widows; they required fathers to support children and wives, even when the father worked in another county; they sought supervision of single women to minimize the risk of illegitimate children; and they diligently enforced laws against vagrancy.¹⁵¹⁶

Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of the Court, the city faced not only heavy charges but also the threat of potential unrest from the great ranks of the poor, estimated from one-third to perhaps one-half the total population.¹⁷ Many of these people, although employed (or semi-employed), were unable to maintain a subsistence existence, especially during crises like plague or harvest failure. So severe was the problem throughout England that by the end of the Elizabethan era a series of national statutes had been enacted to cope with the phenomenon. The legislation distinguished between the infirm and the able-bodied unemployed, established compulsory taxation to fund relief, recognized the importance of apprenticeship for pauper children, established the principle that the poor should be set to work, and encouraged the creation of hospitals or workhouses for the poor. None of these provisions were new to Norwich, however. Like a few other urban centers, Norwich had led the nation, experimenting in the area of poor relief since the 1570s. One of its aldermen and former mayors, John Aldrich, helped frame the national legislation. In the fact the pioneer efforts of the Norwich city fathers were even more significant than those of London since in all the realm, only the Norwich system was successfully funded and able to last well into the seventeenth century.¹⁸ City records, including those of the Mayor's Court, have a great deal to tell about these efforts and the surprising role accorded women in the experiments.

Women were naturally prominent as recipients of a good deal of this aid. We know something of the make up of the poor population of the city

because in 1570, before drawing up their comprehensive legislation, city fathers ordered a "census of the poor." This document, on deposit in the city archives, was discovered, edited, and analyzed by John Pound.¹⁹ The census included 525 men, 860 women. The majority of the women were married, but 183 were widowed and 46 had been deserted by their husbands; of the 926 poor children listed in the survey, 171 belonged to female heads of households. A surprising number of women were elderly; 25 percent over age sixty, fifteen women over age eighty. Most significant, 85 percent of the women were employed, whereas only 66 percent of the men were. No doubt an unemployed husband made his family near destitute, especially since the vast majority of women (76 percent) were engaged in spinning, a trade notorious for its subsistence wages. After spinning, the most popular occupations for women involved the clothing industries: tailors, embroiderers, button-makers and the like comprised 12 1/2 percent of employed women in the census. But occupations were as diverse as haberdasher, washerwoman, and "flesh seller." Some of the examples are striking. Elizabeth Mason, a eighty-year old widow, "a lame woman of one hand," nonetheless spun with her good hand.²⁰ Two other widows were likewise spinsters although because of their age, one seventy-four, the other seventy-nine, they were described as "almost past work."²¹

After 1570 such women and their dependents might receive aid in a variety of ways, for the Norwich system of poor relief was comprehensive and complex.²² First, some combination of industrial education and work was provided girls as well as boys. In 1571, the city fathers ordered special chosen, or "select women," to provide learning and work in their homes for poor children and idle maids and women. If these poor were unable to procure their own raw materials, they were given materials and then paid a simple wage by the select women.²³ Other poor children were housed and educated in the city's Great Hospital, St. Giles.²⁴ Although the city dispensed with the services of the select women by 1588, it established additional dame schools throughout the Elizabethan period to train children. By 1630, the Mayor's Court went so far as to decree: "a knittinge Schooledame shal be provided in every parishe where there is not one already to sett children and other poore on work. . . ."²⁵ Moreover, by the 1650s, the city operated both a Boys' and a Girls' Hospital, each endowed by private legacies and housing a small number of pauper children.²⁶ Beyond such efforts at industrial education, the city simply put poor women to work, either at the old Norman's Hospital or at the Bridewell. For those too old or infirm to work, whether male or female, the city fathers could assign one of a variety of hospitals or lazar houses. Sometimes the Mayor's Court itself made payment or ordered the parish to make a direct relief payment for the care of the poor or the sick in a private home. Finally the city, through the Mayor's Court, found itself administering a number of charities, privately endowed. Some of these, like the loan funds available to merchants and artisans, naturally excluded females, but others, like the five tenements reserved for poor widows, were intended specifically for women.²⁷

Historians like John Pound and Wilbur K. Jordan, who have studied poverty, poor relief, and philanthropy, laud the city of Norwich for the compassion, thoroughness, and generosity of its citizens. Jordan explicitly acknowledges the contributions of female philanthropists. No one, however, has drawn attention to the significant role delegated to women in the operation of the system.²⁸ The Mayor's Court expected women, who in effect acted as employees of the city, to provide services and even administer some of the programs. These women served as custodians,

educators, employers, or healers of the poor; in some instances, they made managerial decisions affecting entire institutions. Their services provided one important element in the stability and endurance of the Norwich system.

Borough records reveal the many roles women performed in the operation of the system. The example of the select women and schooldames comes first to mind. In addition to teaching basic reading and writing to the children in her charge, each select woman was to oversee a six to eight-hour workday; she was given responsibility for six to twelve persons, over whom she had disciplinary authority; and for these duties, she received a salary of 20s. per annum.²⁹ Women performed similar functions in other contexts. Thus the city employed a man and his wife to run the free school in the hospital of St. Giles.³⁰ Likewise the Mayor's Court recorded on Christmas of 1630 that it appointed Christian, wife of William Nichols, to set the poor to work. For this task, she received the wage of 5s. per week, a generous sum perhaps,³¹ because she may have been expected to provide the poor with raw materials.

In maintaining and administering its various hospitals, the city authorities also relied upon women to a surprising extent.³² The city operated seven to nine such institutions after the Reformation. Records are too incomplete to give specific statistics, but women, either in their own right or as co-keepers with their husbands, appear to have held more than half of staff positions. Certainly the city fathers saw women as the logical supervisors and caretakers for female inmates. When the Girls' Hospital was established in 1649, its benefactor indicated in his will that he wished the pauper girls to be placed under the supervision of "some aged discreet religious women therto appointed . . . by the Magistrates." Records of the Hospital indicate that matrons in fact served as keepers of the institution throughout the century.³³ Interestingly, when the male keeper of the Boys' Hospital died in 1666, the city employed his widow in turn to fill the position. Earlier accounts for the Boys' Hospital show the wife of another keeper performing separate functions for which the city willingly reimbursed her.³⁴ For the Great Hospital of St. Giles, the city appointed several keepers of both sexes; in June 1631, records of the Mayor's Court indicate that five women keepers were responsible for ninety-two paupers; oddly, no male keepers are noted.³⁵ Until it was converted to a Bridewell in 1571, the old Norman's Hospital housed poor women and was under the supervision of a wardeness or mistress.³⁶ Where women were in charge as sole keeper of an institution, although usually responsible to aldermen who served as auditors and under the ultimate authority of the Mayor's Court, they naturally made administrative decisions. But in other cases, they probably performed as caretakers; for instance in hiring a new keeper for the Great Hospital in 1680, the Mayor's Court used the telling phrase, "Nurse keeper."³⁷

The Court took seriously the importance of nursing and medicine. It not only licensed surgeons, apothecaries, bonesetters and the like, it also financed various medical services for the poor. In addition to appointing a physician for St. Giles Hospital, it assigned some of the five smaller hospitals, or lazar houses, especially for the treatment of the ill.³⁸ A few female keepers are named time and again in the records as they assumed responsibility for curing the ill. Most prominent was Widow Wright, mentioned first as Wright's wife in 1616. In 1617 she was cited as a widow and keeper of the lazar house of St. Benet's Gate when she agreed to tend a family "infected with the french pox."³⁹ In the next

few years she kept busy with similar charges. For example, in a typical case she agreed in 1618 that for a fee of 13s4d., she would keep and heal Robert Allome "who hath a scalded Head."⁴⁰ Even as late as 1630 the Mayor's Court recorded that Widow Wright "doth undertake to kepe Tyes Childe a moneth And to use her best endeavors to heale his heade."⁴¹ By that time the widow may have been returning to work, for during the 1620s Stephenson's wife had acted as nurse keeper for St. Benet's.⁴² The method of payment for such services was curious but apparently successful, as there is evidence of few disputes. Payment was on an installment basis, with an initial sum and then the promise of more to come when the patient was in fact cured; the cost was often shared between the city and the parish.

Never substantial, the city's resources and medical facilities were especially inadequate during outbreaks of the plague. A severe epidemic could be catastrophic as in 1579-80 when Norwich lost perhaps a third of its population.⁴³ When plague returned in the 1630s, city authorities not only enforced isolation and quarantine of the ill, but they also levied new taxes and built additional pesthouses to treat those infected. Men were appointed to serve as night watchmen and gravediggers while female personnel were used to identify and treat the ill. Court records note that in June 1630, early in the epidemic, Sanscroft's wife was paid 7d. per day for carrying water to the pesthouses; in April 1631, the Mayor's Court named Jacqueline Mansay "a Searcher and a Keper of the Infected of the French Congregation," apparently against her will since the Court forbade her to travel abroad; in July Banister's wife was given a similar assignment for native inhabitants, for which she received a fee of 4s6d. per week with the additional incentive of 2d. "for every one she searcheth"; in September the Court specified five other keepers of the infected, four of whom were women.⁴⁴

In one final other way, women played an important part in the operation of the poor relief system. In return for a weekly payment usually made by the parish, the Mayor's Court assigned the elderly, the infirm, and especially orphaned and abandoned children to the care of a relative or a neighbor. Although men and women alike received such charges, the Court was likely to turn to women to care for children. One example will suffice here. When Richard Spencer died, leaving as orphans two sons, age thirteen and twelve, and a daughter, age seven, his goods were sold to parish officials and the children entrusted to two aunts. The aunts were promised 50s. for which they agreed to take care of the education of the children, in this case probably through apprenticeships.⁴⁵

A preliminary survey of borough records in the case of Norwich thus suggests that women made a meaningful, even indispensable contribution to the functioning of the poor relief system, a system whose scale and success was unique to this provincial capital. The study is preliminary, however, and itself raises a host of new questions, which in turn can be answered only through the investigation of additional local sources. I have had the opportunity to examine accounts for the Boys' and Girls' Hospital. But if I could locate other hospital accounts and read them in conjunction with the city's chamber or treasurer accounts, I might find additional female personnel employed by the city, enhance my knowledge about those individuals already identified, and determine the percentage of resources expended by the city on these programs. Even more intriguing would be the task of comparing practices in Norwich with practices in sister cities to determine if in other areas women were also employed to

perform essentially social work. I will admit that at the outset, I was not particularly interested in poor relief and expected to find women only as the recipients of charity. But as is so often the case in research, the records themselves have identified and defined the issues in ways surprising and enlightening to the historian.

NOTES

¹For a good general discussion of borough sources, see G.R. Elton, England, 1200-1640 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 119ff.

²John T. Evans, Seventeenth-Century Norwich. Politics, Religion, and Government, 1620 - 1690 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p.4.

³See J.F. Pound, "The Social and Trade Structure of Norwich," Past and Present, 34 (July, 1966), 49-69.

⁴William Sachse, ed., Minutes of the Norwich Court of Mayoralty 1630-1631, Norfolk Record Society, 15 (1942): 13-14, 18-19, 21-23. Hereafter cited as NRS.

⁵Ibid., p. 52.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., pp. 11-16.

⁸Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 199.

⁹Norfolk and Norwich Record Office (NNRO), D. 16a, #15, fols. 352v-353r.

¹⁰Ibid., fol. 373v.

¹¹Ibid., fol. 26r.

¹²Ibid., fols. 208r, 261v, 320v; NRS, 15: 91, 224.

¹³See e.g., NNRO, D. 16a, #14, fol. 4v; D. 16a, #15, fols. 19v, 208r, 396v; D. 16b, #25, fol. 2.

¹⁴NRS 15: 37; NNRO, D. 16a, #15, fols. 21r, 235r, and passim.

¹⁵NRS, 15: 32; NNRO, D. 16a, #15, fol. 244r.

¹⁶There is much literature on the issue of vagrancy in Tudor-Stuart England. See e.g., A.L. Beier, "Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England," Past and Present, 64, (August 1974), 3-29.

¹⁷John POUND, Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 25-26. Cf. p. 61.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁹John Pound, The Norwich Census of the Poor 1570, Norfolk Record Society, 40 (1971). For statistics that follow, see "Introduction," p. 12 ff. and Appendix IV, p. 99.

²⁰Ibid., p. 28.

²¹Ibid., p. 62.

²²The Norwich system is described in Pound, Poverty and Vagrancy, pp. 60-68.

²³John C. Tingey, ed., The Records of the City of Norwich (Norwich: Jarrold and Sons, 1910), 1: 352.

²⁴Pound, Poverty and Vagrancy, p. 64.

²⁵NRS, 15: 92. Pound notes the end of the use of select women. J.F. Pound, "The Elizabethan Corporation of Norwich, 1558-1603," (M.A. Thesis, Birmingham University, 1961), p. 216.

²⁶For the hospitals' records, see NNRO, G. 25, f.

²⁷NNRO, D. 16a, #15, fol. 112v. For a discussion of private philanthropic endowments in the city, see W.K. Jordan, Charities of Rural England 1480-1660 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 130 ff.

²⁸Pound, Poverty and Vagrancy, pp. 57, 68; Jordan, Charities of Rural England, pp. 96-98, 125-126, 138. Compare, however, Natalie Davis' comments on "vocational schools" in the French city of Lyons; Natalie Zenon Davis, "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon," Feminist Studies, 8 (Spring 1982), 51.

²⁹Pound, Poverty and Vagrancy, pp. 65-66. For other types of schooldames, see Tingey, Records of the City of Norwich, 1: ciii-civ; p. 196, note 1; NRS, 15: 92; Dorothy M. Meads, "An Account of the Education of Women and Girls in England in the Time of the Tudors," (Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1928), p. 485.

³⁰Meads, "Education of Women and Girls," pp. 236-37; Tingey, Records of the City of Norwich, 2: 352.

³¹NRS, 15: 109.

³²William Page, ed., The Victorian History of the County of Norfolk (1901; Rpt. London: Institute of Historical Research, 1975), 2: 442-50. Hereafter cited as VCH, Norfolk.

³³NNRO, G. 25. f., Will of Robert Baron, Mayor. Account books for both the Boys (Children) and Girls' Hospital are found in the same collection.

³⁴NNRO, G. 25, f. No folio numbers; see entries from 1666 and 1636.

³⁵NRS, 15: 34, 162.

³⁶VCH, Norfolk, 2: 447-448. Meads points out that after it became a Bridewell where poor women spun, there was appointed a male keeper, whose wife was "as much in charge of the vagabonds and their work as he was"; Meads, "Education of Women and Girls," p. 236.

³⁷NNRO, D. 16b, #25, fol. 76v.

³⁸NRS, 15: 34, 43-44.

³⁹NNRO, D. 16a, #15, fols. 83r, 145v.

⁴⁰Ibid., fol. 177r.

⁴¹NRS, 15: 95. See also p. 143.

⁴²See e.g., NNRO, D. 16a, #15, fols. 210v, 351r, 430v. For other women keepers, see fols. 187r, 190r, 363v.

⁴³Pound, Poverty and Vagrancy, p. 14.

⁴⁴NRS, 15: 62, 147, 172, 190.

⁴⁵NNRO, D. 16a, #15, fol. 212v.