

The Silk Industries of Medieval Paris: Artisanal Migration, Technological Innovation, and Gendered Experience, by Sharon Farmer. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017. Pp. 354. ISBN: 9780812248487.

As Hilary Mantel recently stated in her 2017 BBC Reith lecture, “Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, although they are part of it—information is not knowledge. And history is not the past—it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past. It’s the record of what’s left on the record.” Sharon Farmer’s study of the silk industries of medieval Paris is an excellent showcase for this truth. Based on close analysis and the reading of a variety of forms of documentation, including the Parisian guild statutes and tax assessments, royal and aristocratic account books and inventories, as well as multiple narrative sources, including court records and miracle stories, Farmer reconstructs an intriguing picture of how Paris’s medieval silk industries were organized and the role that immigrants and women played in them.

Among her aims is to build a case for the role that foreign immigrants played not only as workers and mercers in the new Parisian silk industry of the thirteenth century, but also in establishing these industries by encouraging artisans from other silk-producing centers to emigrate to Paris. Another aim is to chart women’s involvement as mercers and artisans, revealing the gendered divisions within silk production, while also framing this discussion within the context of women’s work and economic interactions in the later Middle Ages.

Each chapter begins with a narrative extrapolated from a document or set of documents, which then sets the stage for the subsequent analysis. Chapter 1 looks at the presence of immigrants in Paris, examining the roles that royal and aristocratic intermarriage, the universities, and foreign bankers played in attracting both elite and artisan immigrant populations and the degrees to which these various populations were assimilated within Parisian society. Chapter 2 describes the process of making luxury silk textiles, tracking the international trade networks that were involved as the cocoon was eventually transformed into finished products. Supported by illustrations from Renaissance treatises, this chapter also establishes the status of Parisian luxury silk products within Western Europe. What is particularly fascinating about this chapter is how Farmer reconstructs the specific technical processes and the peoples involved, given the rather sparse information that is offered in the Parisian guild statutes themselves. Just as Richard and Mary Rouse did for Parisian manuscript production, Farmer mines the rich information to be gleaned from the tax assessments to excellent results both here and in the subsequent chapters.

In chapter 3, Farmer attempts to build a case for the role that immigrant mercers may have played in introducing new technologies and practices to Paris by inducing skilled artisans from their home regions to immigrate. As the documents are particularly sparse, much of the argument is necessarily circumstantial, built primarily on evidence of physical proximity between groups of artisans and mercers within the Parisian neighborhoods where the silk industries were located as revealed by the tax assessments. Farmer is on surer ground in chapter 4, which will be of particular interest to feminist scholars, as it analyzes the gendered divisions within the Parisian silk industry in which women represented around 80% of the workforce, making it the predominant Parisian industry in which women were professionally active. Indeed, Farmer demonstrates how these industries offered tremendous opportunities for women both economically and in regards to leadership and status. Unlike other silk-producing centers, the legal and economic environment of Paris offered unique opportunities for women to be involved at all levels of production and retail, from the highest-status positions as mercers and agents interacting with elite patrons, to the humblest artisanal worker. Certain processes were exclusively executed by women—including throwing, veil-making and gold-spinning—and were at the lowest economic rung, whereas gold-beating, dying, and weaving “*draps de soie*,” velvet, and cloth of gold were much higher-status and more lucrative occupations and were almost exclusively male-dominated, although women were sometimes active in these professions as well. The tax assessments reveal that women silk workers paid far lower taxes than their male counterparts, indicating much lower economic status. As Farmer points out, they were still better off than the majority of Paris’s population, which was exempt from paying taxes due to poverty. Farmer also looks at the structure and authority of the guilds associated with silk production, two of which were exclusively female: the makers of *tissus de soie*—which Farmer argues is linked to narrow ware-woven and embroidered silk products and some monochromatic silk textiles—and the makers of head coverings (veils, wimples, *cendal*, etc.). While these guilds had less autonomy and fewer rights of self-governance compared to the higher-status guilds, they nonetheless offered rare opportunities for female leadership and acknowledgment of expertise. Also, while makers of high-end luxury textiles, such as “*draps de soie*,” velvet, and cloth of gold were exclusively male, women could also be involved in dying, gold-beating, and selling gold thread, lace making, and as mercers. Indeed, the tax assessments reveal that the few women who were mercers paid on average higher taxes than their male counterparts.

In the final chapter, Farmer looks at the relationships between the most

vulnerable and marginalized populations in the Parisian silk-working industry: Jews, foreign moneylenders, and women. Although her case relies on too few records to draw any certain conclusions, she does find intriguing clues to suggest that female silk workers at the lowest rungs participated in Paris's credit economy particularly through the agency of female Jewish pawnbrokers. The book concludes with a series of very useful and fascinating appendices that lay out the names, gender, neighborhood, guild membership, and tax assessments levied against Parisian silk workers. While this study could have benefited from even more illustrations detailing the technical processes—and colored plates of extant silk textiles would have been particularly welcome—this book provides a fascinating look at the economic lives of late medieval artisans, particularly women and foreigners, which will be of interest to a wide variety of readers.

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