

The Female Economy: the Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930

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The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860–1930, by Wendy Gamber. Women in American History Series and The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xiii, 291 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY ANITA ASHENDEL, PURDUE UNIVERSITY

In this insightful book, Wendy Gamber examines the entrepreneurial world of women who fashioned dresses and hats and sold them in shops. This business niche, based on a "female economy" made and controlled by women, eventually gave way to a "fashion industry that was predominantly controlled by men" (8). The production of women's clothing became "masculinized" and absorbed into the structure of the business of mass-produced clothing. In the process, women lost a lucrative option for personal financial independence.

Gamber focuses on Boston (and a few other cities) to describe this transition. She skillfully blends primary sources—mainly manufacturing and population census data, R. G. Dun & Co. credit reports, and trade publications—to describe this transition. As historians who have examined the antebellum era have also discovered, milliners and dressmakers did not have time to correspond with family and friends or to muse in diaries. Still, the amount of information Gamber gathered from the sources she had, judiciously supplemented by observations by milliners' and dressmakers' patrons (who did have time to write down their thoughts), is impressive.

Gamber's study begins with a brief overview of antebellum businesswomen. The rest of the book is divided into two sections. The first emphasizes the interpersonal interactions of all of the women involved as producers and consumers in the business of women's clothing. The relationships between workers and employers included antagonism and exploitation as well as genuine affection. Gamber does not, however, discount the existence of a cooperative female culture within the workshop. In fact, she illustrates how employers and employees bonded in the face of adversity. Thoughtless customers who demanded hats and dresses on short notice or refused to pay their bills meant long hours, no wages, and problems with wholesalers who demanded payment for goods. At the same time, milliners and dressmakers paid low wages and controlled the number of new competitors by failing to teach their apprentices the entire craft.

Even though this is a skillful portrayal of the events inside the shop and workroom, Gamber is at her best describing structural changes in the trade itself. She combines trade journals and the few

personal reminiscences available to her with secondary sources that detail the development of department stores and women's fashion to clearly present the vanishing world of the independent shopkeeper. Ironically, these changes sometimes originated from within the trade itself as entrepreneurs attempted to develop more efficient ways to cut and fit dresses or to turn out hats at a faster pace. The longest lasting developments, however, coincided with changes in women's fashions. As fashions became more simplified, male entrepreneurs entered the women's clothing business and applied mass production techniques to the cleaner lines of women's garments—fewer frills, lace, or flowers on dresses and hats, which had acquired a "mannish" look. Mass production with sewing machines (now useful for manufacturing women's garments as they became looser and required less hand sewing) required large amounts of capital that would-be male producers had already acquired, usually as wholesalers to milliners and dressmakers. As Gamber notes, this change in business made stylish, cheap garments available to more women, but at the same time forced many women who had once been financially independent entrepreneurs to turn to wage labor. A few shops survived the transition, but those milliners and dressmakers had to charge higher prices and catered to the upper class.

Gamber claims that her study is applicable beyond the East Coast, but the evidence she supplies does not make that readily apparent. The lives of entrepreneurial women in midwestern small towns may have been different from those in eastern metropolitan areas. Research into the antebellum era suggests that this might be so, but extensive work on the Midwest and West has not been done. Still, this is quibbling. This is a comprehensive study of a little-known women's world that would be useful to women's historians and business historians alike.

An Archaeology of the Soul: North American Indian Belief and Ritual, by Robert L. Hall. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. Illustrations, tables, notes, bibliography, index. xiv, 222 pp. \$49.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY HERBERT T. HOOVER, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

In a text derived mainly from publications of the past (without interviews among tribal members, but with the benefit of some perceptions fashioned through participant observation and the author's descent from relatives enrolled in the Stockbridge-Munsee society), Robert

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