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Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants? Women in the Distributive Trades in Early Modern Nuremberg

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Although there are very few studies of specifically female employment or work patterns during the early modern period, general discussions of crafts and industries paint a bleak picture.¹ Women are admitted to few guilds, and in many cities to none; their work as assistants or finishers in the crafts is poorly paid, or totally unpaid if they are working in the shop of their father or husband; their rights to operate a workshop independently as widows are limited; investments and contracts often have to be approved by a male guardian or advisor. The few women who are able to rise above the restrictions are interesting because they break the rules.

One might expect a city like Nuremberg to be more open to female employment. With a population of 30,000-40,000, it was one of the three largest cities in early modern Germany—along with Cologne and Augsburg—, with a cultural and artistic importance that was perhaps unsurpassed. Its economy was based on an enormous variety of products—leather, cloth, metals, gold, and, later, books—and on commerce with all of Europe. Nuremberg's merchants and goods were to be found from Italy to Scandinavia and from Russia to Spain. Thus opportunities for women would not be restricted to a single type of industry or limited by a sluggish commercial life.

Yet Nuremberg fits the pattern very well. Although it has no independent guilds, regulations pertaining to the sworn crafts restrict apprenticeship to young men, except in goldspinning, and generally allow widows to operate shops for only a year or two. There are no female large-scale investors or long-distance merchants, and only a handful of women who own significant amounts of property on their own. Occasionally women run printing establishments, breweries, or iron works, but they are always the exception.

One area of the economy, often overlooked or dismissed as trivial, is open to women, however. Women dominate the distribution of goods and services; they handle nearly all small-scale retail sales. One might almost say that women form a sub-economy in early modern Nuremberg, responsible for local trade, and very aware of the needs and requirements of the local market.

¹Alice Clark's classic *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1919) still stands as the single major study of female employment in the preindustrial period, despite its geographic limitation to England and heavily socialist bias.

Women of many different occupations operate in this sector. The wives of craftsmen act as agents for their husbands, not only selling the merchandise but collecting debts and keeping record books as well. Licensed employment agents act as intermediaries for young men and women coming in from the countryside, finding them positions as cooks, maids, gardeners and the like. Female appraisers assess the value of household goods on a death, or when a household is being broken up, and often act as sales agents for these goods. Other women handle used clothing and implements, perhaps serving as pawnbrokers as well. The marketplace is full of women selling every conceivable sort of food—fruits and vegetables, eggs, dairy products, herbs, fish, fowl and game—, a function which cannot be played down in this period when a majority of the family budget is spent on food. A closer look at each of these reveals the full extent of women's involvement.

As has frequently been noted in studies of early modern crafts and guilds, the wife and often the daughters of the master helped in nearly all stages of production. Their work was rarely restricted by guild ordinances and was so much less expensive than that of a journeyman that cases of masters "adopting" maids arose from time to time. In one such instance, five journeymen belt-makers left Strassburg complaining that "adopted daughters" of the masters were performing work that should actually have been limited to journeymen. The five went to Nuremberg, and then two belt-makers from Nuremberg were forbidden to sell their products in the Strassburg market by the guild of belt-makers there. The Strassburg city council ordered the belt-makers' guild to disallow daughters to work unless they were the actual daughters of the master and sent to Nuremberg for opinions on the issue. The Nuremberg council agreed, commenting that masters in many crafts often tried to get around the regulations on the use of maids in this way.²

More significant than their assistance in production, however, was the responsibility of most craftsmen's wives for sales. Many of the debts to craftsmen listed in inventories are actually noted as owed to their wives, e.g. "to the baker's wife two fl. for bread."³ Besides handling incoming payments, the wife was also often responsible for purchases and the distribution of salaries to journeymen, apprentices, and other assistants. In large households this meant dealing with huge amounts of money and keeping an account of expenditures for various items and services.⁴

In Nuremberg the city council held wives as well as husbands responsible for the payment of fees and taxes and for the quality of their product; in one incident it is the butchers' wives, and not the butchers, who are called in for not paying taxes and for selling spoiled meat.⁵ If the wife of

²This incident is related in: Ernst Mummenhoff, "Frauenarbeit und Arbeitsvermittlung: Eine Episode aus der Handwerks-geschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 19 (1926), 157-165.

³NÜRNBERG, Stadtarchiv, Inventarbücher, Nr. 1, fol. 4' (1529).

⁴e.g. "Abschrift des Journals des Sebastian Welser (1530-39)," Stadtarchiv Nürnberg, Quellen zur Nürnbergsche Geschichte (QNG) Nr. 168.

⁵NÜRNBERG, Staatsarchiv, Ratsbücher (RB) 63, Rep. 60 b, fol. 342 (1605); RB 67 fol. 382 (1608).

5 Peddlers or Merchants?



Fig. 1: Wife selling merchandise in her husband's shop.

(Source: G. Steinhilber, *Der Kaufmann in der deutschen Vergangenheit*, Leipzig, E. Dieckmann, 1899)

a butcher or baker was put into the stocks or imprisoned for any infraction, the shop was not to operate as long as she was imprisoned, with a stiff fine if it did.⁶

These measures point out the clear recognition by contemporaries of the central role of the master's wife in any workshop. This is reflected as well in the requirement that masters in all crafts be married, and in the title given to the master's wife.⁷ She is "die Frau Bäckerin" or "die Frau Schneiderin," the same title she would have if she was running the workshop in her own right as a widow, and a title implying much more than simply "the wife of the baker" or "the wife of the tailor."⁸ Although her occupational identity was tied to that of her husband, and was not as distinct or well-founded as his, it was nonetheless a clear one. A woman being described or introduced as "die Frau Bäckerin" was understood to have certain duties in the operation of the bakery; this was an occupational designation in the same way that labelling her husband "Hans the baker" was.

In some crafts the masters' wives had a strong sense of group cohesion and were very ready to object if they felt any prerogatives were being denied them. The furriers' wives made it impossible for anyone else to sell at the furriers' house, despite the fact that the city council insisted it had the right to grant anyone permission to sell.⁹ The council's only recourse was to shut the house completely from time to time. This is the same sort of belligerent group identity against outsiders that one sees in many of the all-female occupations—midwives, prostitutes, licensed vendors.

Given the frequency of widowhood and remarriage for masters' wives, a woman did change work identity more often than her husband, who usually remained in one craft all his life; but her original title often stuck with the woman as well. In wills and testaments, elderly women are described as, for example, "the furrier's wife, previously the wife of a tailor and before that the wife of a glover." This not only established the number of marriages and former husbands' occupations, but also made known the kinds of work with which each woman had been involved.

⁶QNG Nr. 68 III, 1280.

⁷Apprentices and journeymen, on the other hand, were generally prohibited from marrying. Masters were forbidden to take on married apprentices or journeymen without special permission, and apprentices who did marry could not become journeymen but had to remain as assistants or helpers the rest of their careers. In special cases in which journeymen were permitted to marry, their wives were specifically forbidden to work alongside their husbands (QNG Nr. 68 I, 230 [¹⁵³⁵] and Nr. 68 III, 1298 [1601]).

⁸This is brought out in city council decisions. A woman who was granted a special request—to operate a workshop in the extended absence of her husband, to buy and sell property on her own, to confiscate goods if a debt was owed her—is invariably referred to as "die Frau Schneiderin" or whatever as an indication of her place in the community and her ability to make independent decisions. Generally if a woman faced criminal charges, or was felt somehow to be disreputable, she is identified as, e.g., "Anna, die Frau eines Schneiders," which in this case can rightly be translated as 'Anna, the wife of a tailor'. The husband's occupation and the woman's relationship to him had not changed, but the community's view of her had; she had lost the right to the more honorable title by her own actions. (see, e.g. RB 1c, fol. 100 [1465]; RB 21, fol. 85 [1542]; RB 38, fol. 636' [1579]).

⁹RB 15, fol. 72' [1529]; QNG Nr. 68 I, 273 [1535].

7 Peddlers or Merchants?

These frequent occupational shifts were not really that dramatic; however, they do not imply that women's work was necessarily unskilled or easy to pick up. The skills which a woman might have to master—sales, bookkeeping, inventory—could be used in any occupation, and the knowledge she had gained about the way the city economy worked would be a benefit to any new husband—vitally important things like the most advantageous location for sales, seasonal fluctuations in demand, the severity of various market officials or creditors, the reliability of citizens to pay off their debts, the honesty and integrity of suppliers of raw materials. Her ability to operate successfully in this sub-economy, this day-to-day trade, could mean the difference between solvency and bankruptcy.

Another key group in the city's economic life was the employment agents. As the urban population grew rapidly in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the old informal connections of friends and relatives simply could not supply the number of domestic servants needed. A system of employment agents arose and was then regulated by the council; the number of these licensed agents varied between 8 and 21 throughout the sixteenth century.¹⁰ Most of the women who became employment agents (*Zubringerinnen*) were wives or widows of craftsmen or minor officials—glassmakers, clerks, goldsmiths, comb-makers, church janitors. It was a highly desirable post, with a woman occasionally paying an older agent for the right to take over on her death.¹¹

These women had to have close acquaintance with all the households in the city, as well as a network of contacts in the countryside, for many would-be servants came in from the rural areas. They had to know which families needed help and how they had handled servants in the past, as they were forbidden to send anyone to a dangerous or unhealthy post.¹² They were also held responsible if a servant they placed proved violent or disobedient or was later found to have run away from another position without cause. Servants were only allowed to change employers once a year although from the number of times this law is repeated one can sense that they actually changed more often. Domestic service was a very fluid sector.

It was also a large and growing sector. We find one maid for roughly every two households in the mid-fifteenth century, and complaints by the city council that upperclass households were taking in more and more servants continued throughout the sixteenth century.¹³ How many of these were placed by employment agents and how many by friends and relatives is impossible to determine, but much of the city council's grumbling is directed against "unknown foreign maids," so one senses the employment agents handled the bulk of them.

¹⁰Staatsarchiv, Aemterbüchlein, Rep. 62, Nr. 28-139.

¹¹RB 15, fol. III (1530).

¹²The regulations concerning employment agents were first drawn up into a comprehensive oath and ordinance in 1521, with amendments added throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (Staatsarchiv, Amts-und Standbücher (AStB), Rep. 52b, Nr. 101, fol. 558-567).

¹³Caspar Ott, *Bevölkerungstatistik in der Stadt und Landschaft Nürnberg* (Berlin, 1907). Ott's figures come from the 1449 census taken for the war with Archduke Albrecht Achilles, which finds 1855 maids in a total of 4142 households.

These *Zubringerinnen* were a constant aggravation to the city council; they were hiring out maids they knew were irresponsible, demanding too much payment, allowing maids to stay with them between jobs, encouraging maids to change service so that they could receive a new fee.¹⁴ In 1579 they were forbidden to handle male servants any more; two minor city officials were given this job.¹⁵ There was no attempt to do away with them, however, for the council realized that their services were extremely important. Their familiarity with the tasks performed by female servants, their ability to gain information through informal networks—call it gossip if you will—their approachability as private, lowerclass citizens and as women, would have been lost if their job had been given to male officers.

Another group of women licensed by the city council were the appraisers. An inventory and an appraisal of all property and household goods were required on all deaths, whether the deceased was married or single, male or female, young or old.¹⁶ It did not seem to matter if there was no dispute between heirs, or even if there were no heirs at all. Nor did the size of the estate matter; inventories are recorded for servants who lived in one room and owned nothing more than old clothing. Not only citizens of Nuremberg, but also anyone passing through the city who happened to die there were required to have an inventory.

The surviving spouse, heirs, or their guardians normally enlisted the services of a female appraiser—*Unterkeuflin*—to carry this out. Particularly with larger houses, she went from room to room, noting all contents and an estimation of the worth of each. Metal objects were divided by type of metal and then valued according to weight, but each other item was listed individually, down to dishtowels and spoons.

For very large estates, which included houses, workshops, fields, and woods, a male *Unterkäufer* was often called in to judge the value of the *ligende hab* (immovable goods), but the *Unterkeuflin* was still responsible for the *fahrende hab* (movable goods). If a workshop was being sold, a master of the appropriate craft was called in to give advice on the value of tools and technical items. Very few estates are large enough to warrant this, however. Over 80% of the estates listed in the *Inventarbücher* have a value of less than 100 fl., and less than 5% include the name of a male appraiser. In nearly all inventories the name of the *Unterkeuflin* is given.

The expertise which these women needed is quite amazing. They not only had to know the value of every conceivable household item or article of clothing, of any age, quality or source, but that of jewelry, art objects, armor, weaponry, and raw materials as well. In some cases they also appraised books. These *Unterkeuflinnen* were usually literate, responsible for

¹⁴The annual register of *Zubringerinnen* in the *Aemterbüchlein* is accompanied many years running with "streffliche Rede," admonitions for one abuse or another. On occasion, a line is drawn through several of the names with the note "absetzt" (removed). (*Aemterbüchlein* Nr. 30 (1510), 33 (1513), 43 (1523), 53 (1533), 61 (1547), 69 (1549).)

¹⁵ASStB, Nr. 101, fol. 567.

¹⁶Many of these are collected in the *Inventarbücher*, Stadtarchiv Nürnberg, Nr. 1-4, 16-17.

recording and totalling the merchandise.¹⁷ In the early seventeenth century they began a double entry system if the estate was to be sold, listing not only an appraised price, but also the price for which the items were actually sold.¹⁸ Interestingly, the sale price was always higher than the appraised price, which may have been due either to the practice of appraising low or a good market for used merchandise.

In this sales function the appraisers were joined by another licensed group, the *Keuflinnen*, who did no appraisals but simply handled used merchandise. Clothing, shoes, furniture, armor and weapons, household utensils, tools, linens, leather goods, bottles and containers of all types were to be found at their stands. This was a large group, peaking at 111 in 1542, which points out the dependence on used and remade merchandise by much of the population.¹⁹ These *Keuflinnen* had to prove they owned a certain amount of property as a guarantee and have their honesty attested to by two citizens. Most of them were given designated spots at the marketplace and usually set up small stands; the others were specifically licensed to sell door-to-door. The amount of profit and the hours they could sell were limited, and during times of epidemic they were allowed to sell only merchandise that had come from inside the city.²⁰

These women acted as pawnbrokers although permission to do so is never specifically spelled out. They were also informed whenever there had been a theft and were forbidden to sell stolen goods.²¹ They continually came into conflict with the masters in other crafts, who caught them selling new merchandise or other prohibited items such as bread or meat. The council published their ordinance again and again and ordered that it be read to them several times a year, all to no avail. Minor offences were punished quite severely—with several days in the stocks or wearing a stone collar.²² As is to be expected, the council was particularly watchful of those women selling house to house, as the quality and legality of their merchandise was harder to control than that of women selling from open stands at the market.²³

Despite all the problems with the *Keuflinnen*, their economic role was recognized and the council often decided in their favor in disputes with craftsmen. It ordered the tailors to return clothing which they had confiscated, noting that it was clearly used and therefore the proper province of the *Keuflinnen*.²⁴ Groups of *Keuflinnen* appeared before the council, loudly

¹⁷The payment to the *Unterkeuflin* in the inventory is generally listed as “to N.N., *Unterkeuflin*, to appraise and write” (*für Schätzen und Schreiben*) (e.g. Inventarbücher, Nr. 1, fol. 185 (1530).

¹⁸e.g. Stadtarchiv, Heilig-Geist-Spital Inventarbücher, Rep D 15 / I, Nr. 6655 (1623), 6650 (1615), 6671 (1602). ¹⁹Aemterbüchlein, Nr. 62. ²⁰ASStB Nr. 101, fol. 182-190.

²¹e.g. RB 67, fol. 181' (1608).

²³Along with the licensed *Keuflinnen*, people illegally selling house-to-house appear continually in the city council records as well. They broke hygienic, sumptuary, and censorship laws with illicit merchandise, but the council's attempts to crack down were never very successful.

²⁴RB 28, fol. 163 (1555).

protesting sales by unlicensed operators and occasionally refusing to leave the *Rathaus* unless a bailiff accompanied them on his way to arrest the guilty party.

One senses that this group of women, more than any other, really felt themselves a close-knit body, tightly bound together by a certain set of rights and privileges. There are surprisingly few denunciations of one *Keufflin* by another, and instances of their attacks on other groups or individuals abound. The justification given is always something like "according to our long-standing prerogatives" or "as we have always had the sole right to do" or "as our ordinances have always allowed us," exactly the same phrases as those used by craft guilds when they felt their own province was somehow being infringed upon.

Along with the stands of the appraisers and the *Keufflinnen*, the market at Nuremberg was filled with the stands of other women selling food, candles, books and pictures. Every different type of food had its particular location, which made price and quality control and maintenance of cleanliness standards easier. Each woman could have only one stand and could generally sell only one sort of merchandise. They all paid an annual fee and had their ordinance read to them at least once a year.²⁵

Many of these women ran very small operations, and their work is rightfully seen as an extension of their household responsibilities. They sold eggs which their chickens had laid, milk and cheese from their own cows; they gathered wild fruits and berries, herbs and nuts; they raised vegetables and sold them, made sauerkraut and pickles, baked cookies and buns, made soap and candles. Along with their husbands they caught and salted or pickled fish, or shot and dressed game and fowl. In many cases the city council permitted a woman to operate such a stand specifically because she had no other means of support and would otherwise be forced to turn to municipal charitable funds.²⁶

Women also served as the retail distributors of items of long-distance trade, however. They sold citrus fruits which had been shipped up from southern Italy, spices and dyestuffs from the East, salted fish from Denmark, books and pamphlets printed in Nuremberg and elsewhere. Although the wholesale trade and foreign contracts for such goods were handled by major merchants, their local distribution, as with all food, was the province of the market women.

These women were very aware of the limitations and opportunities of the local market. They raised prices during times of shortage, sought out new sources of fruits and vegetables, made independent contracts with farmers to assure themselves of a constant supply, secretly arranged to fix prices and restrict distribution, operated two or three storage areas instead of the allowed one—in short, showed the same sort of business acumen and used the same sharp business tactics that Nuremberg merchants were famous for throughout Europe.²⁷

²⁵RB 6, fol. 215 (1497) and ASB 234, fol. 81, "Marktordnung" (1562).

²⁶e.g. RB 5, fol. 80 (1489); RB 8, fol. 11 (1504); RB 20, fol. 75 (1539); RB 52, fol. 30' (1593).

²⁷RB 11, fol. 293' (1520); RB 48, fol. 699 (1590); RB 30, fol. 298 (1559); RB 39, fol. 222' (1580); RB 47, fol. 272' (1588); RB 70, fol. 185 (1616).

11 Peddlers or Merchants?



Fig. 3: A farmer's wife, carrying eggs and a wheel of cheese to sell. Sketch by Albrecht Dürer in the prayer book of Emperor Maximilian I.

Fig. 2: A female inn-keeper, holding a beer-jug. Woodcut from a *Flugshrift* by Hans Sachs.



(Source: Friedrich Zoepfl, *Deutsche Kulturgeschichte*, Vol. 1 [Freiberg, 1928] Fig. 182)

(Source: Alwin Schulz, *Deutsches Leben im XIV und XV Jahrhundert* [Vienna, 1892] Fig. 218) .

Women were continually involved in all aspects of the liquor trade. They served in inns, brewed beer, made wine, distilled hard liquor, and operated taverns independently. During the Thirty Years War, over one hundred brandy stands were set up in the city, providing a quick shot to anyone who needed it; customers were specifically forbidden to sit while drinking.²⁸ Old women ran most of these, and women made up nearly half of the 92 brandy distillers reported in Nuremberg. Many of the city's taverns were operated by women, who appear regularly in the city council records for tax evasion, serving sour beer, adulterating their wine, operating without a proper license, or allowing disreputable elements to congregate in their inns.²⁹

The council recognized the need of all these women for economic independence; "*Keuflinnen*, money changers, innkeepers and those who have stands at the public market" were specifically exempt from the five pounds limitation set on the amount of money a woman could be lent without her husband's knowledge and approval.³⁰ They were free to loan and borrow money—and did often handle large sums—and conduct business with no male guardians in a way no other women, even wealthy widows, were.

The pattern that emerges is one of the primacy of women in the distributive trades. All the sworn *Keuflinnen* were female; all of the employment agents except for the two city officials were female, as were nearly all of the game and poultry dealers.³¹ No quantitative records exist for the women who sold fruits and vegetables, eggs, dairy products, nuts, herbs and other foodstuffs, as they were not registered annually, but all references to those selling such items in the city council records and court records refer to women. In most cases they were very small operators, with little or no capital investment, and in some instances their employment was seen as an inexpensive means of public welfare. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of an attempt totally to exclude women from public economic activity; restrictions on market women, peddlers, fishmongers and innkeepers are never imposed because they are women.

Thus women not only solved problems within crafts and industries—by serving as short-term laborers during periods of peak production—but general problems within the expanding urban economy as well.³¹ They facilitated the hiring of increased numbers of domestic servants, made used merchandise available as more and cheaper goods were needed by the growing population, provided room and board for merchants and traders, both resident and itinerant, extended the lines of supply into new rural areas in order to bring more food into the city. Perhaps rather than terming this a sub-economy, one should rightfully call it *the* economy of the city, and look

²⁸August Jegel, *Ernährungsfürsorge des Altnürnberger Rates* (Nuremberg, 1937), p. 159.

²⁹RB 8, fol. 155' (1505); RB 43, fol. 278' (1585); RB 2, fol. 232 (1478); RB 23, fol. 80' (1545).

³⁰Joseph Baader, ed., "Nürnberger Polizeiodnungen" *Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins Stuttgart*, 63 (1861), 30.

³¹Aemterbüchlein, Nr. 1-139.

13 Peddlers or Merchants?

at long-distance trade—the usual focus of economic studies—as simply the frosting on the cake—interesting, important, but not essential.³²

³²The function of female employment in providing flexibility in the craft economy is discussed at length in Natalie Zemon Davis' article "Women in the *Arts Mechaniques* in Sixteenth Century Lyon," *Mélanges en hommage de Richard Gascon*, ed. Jean-Pierre Gutton (Lyon, 1979).

The problem of focus seems particularly acute in studies of early modern urban economics, as so much attention has been paid to conflicts between traditional forms of craft organization and large-scale capitalist enterprises, or to institutions which prefigure modern industrial and commercial organization. This concentration on the transition from a medieval to a modern economy leaves out an enormous part of the economic life of the city which may have changed very little during the period. Sociologists and economists exploring the modern economy are beginning to pay more attention to this secondary economy, especially in reference to the labor market, a broadening of scope which would be useful as well for economic studies of an earlier period, when even more of the population had little contact with the primary sector. Although sources about servants, peddlers, unorganized domestic production, piece-workers, casual laborers and the like are extremely hard to find, the large proportion of any urban population engaged in these low-paying occupations necessitates a more intensive search for them.