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Author

Coffey, Marion

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OLWEN HUFTON. *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500-1800*. New York: Knopf, 1996.

Olwen Hufton writes that one of the most commonly produced mass images in Northern-Western Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries was the ladder of life. This metaphor for the female life cycle symbolizes the various stages women are expected to pass through, including youth, marriage, child bearing, and grandparenting. As a representation of cultural assumptions giving meaning to womanhood, the ladder reveals ideas concerning woman's appropriate roles. "The ladder of life depicts what is seen as essential and appropriate," writes Hufton, "that which is God-ordained, the universal to which each man and woman should aspire." It is the gap that exists between early modern woman's imagined experience, as represented by the ladder, and her actual experience that Hufton seeks to elucidate in her impressive work *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe 1500-1800*.

Olwen Hufton offers a rich narrative of Europe's early modern woman, concentrating on the centuries between 1500 and 1800. This social history which weaves together the lives and experiences of women from various nations, suggesting an interconnectedness in lived histories. However Hufton is careful to distinguish between women of different classes, ages, and regions, writing the story of the wealthy aristocrat with the story of the beggar, domestic servant and prostitute. Her description of early modern living and working conditions is stark and painstaking details flood the pages of the text. "Syphilis in a virulent form spread throughout the European continent in the aftermath of the Italian Wars at the end of the fifteenth century. Sores and pustules and noses eaten away by the ravages of sexually transmitted diseases were the hallmark of the veteran soldier or sailor or whore plying her trade on the city street. Scurvy was the lot of many...and the knock kneed from rickets should be added to the gallery of deformations visible particularly in the north and north-west where fresh fruit and vegetables were seasonally circumscribed." Such intense specificity is the hallmark of Hufton's work, shaping the vivid and real history she writes.

Hufton emphasizes that most early modern women of Western Europe had little option but to marry, so the quest for a dowry became a focal point in all marriageable women's lives. Considered inferior and discouraged from

pursuing an education, women's personal relations became a critically defining factor. Marriage was a woman's life's strategy, structuring all other actions and happenings. This is not to suggest Hufton's neglect of the religious, intellectual and cultural forces at work during the early modern period. Hufton adeptly forefronts the importance of these forces in influencing women's experience while emphasizing the universal weight of patriarchy. She shows her readers examples of a woman centered world in which motherhood is a holy experience and where Catholic women from Saint Teresa reshape religious orders so that they might pursue spiritual work and charity reform. While Hufton writes the history of early modern patriarchy, she also writes the history of women's power and autonomy.

Other chapters explore French culture, misogynistic Bible stories, folk superstitions, the horrendous life of the silk maker, and the fate of women accused of witchcraft. In the end, this impressive study of European women's history is readable, engaging and full of detail. Indeed, the text is so full of anecdotal material that occasionally the reader can become sidetracked as to the larger points. Also, the narrative tends to swing back and forth wildly, between centuries, making it difficult to maintain a sense of the progression in Hufton's story. Still, her rich and multifaceted work, the first of a two volume set, is a must read for anyone interested in European, women's, social or cultural history. Hufton successfully examines the interaction between early Medieval European beliefs about appropriate behavior for women, and the realities of everyday early modern life.

MARION COFFEY
Brown University