

City Limits: Female Philanthropists and West Nurses in Seventeenth-Century Scottish Towns

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Abstract



This paper explores the ways in which women contributed to the complex web of negotiations and accommodations out of which the early modern urban community was formed. Drawing on the archives of seventeenth-century Aberdeen and other Scottish cities, it focuses on female philanthropists and unwed wet nurses, women at the top and bottom, the centre and margins of urban society. Rich women founded hospitals for old women and schools for young girls, but these feminist initiatives did not extend to the female guestworkers in their midst: migrant female domestics made pregnant in town had to fend for themselves, and many ended up wet-nursing the children of the rich. Yet in indirect ways they, too, left their mark on urban society. These stories, then, shed fresh light on the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which early modern women pursued their collective and individual interests under conditions of profound gender inequality.

Résumé

Le présent essai analyse l'apport des femmes au système complexe de négociations et d'ajustements duquel émergea la communauté urbaine du début de l'époque moderne. Tirant ses sources des archives de la ville d'Aberdeen et d'autres villes écossaises du XVII^e siècle, l'auteur s'intéresse aux femmes philanthropes et aux nourrices célibataires, aux femmes qui se situaient tant dans le haut que dans le bas de l'échelle sociale, tant au centre qu'en marge de la société urbaine. Les femmes fortunées fondaient des hôpitaux pour les femmes âgées et des écoles pour les jeunes filles, mais les oeuvres de ces féministes ne s'adressaient pas aux travailleuses de l'extérieur qu'elles embauchaient : les domestiques itinérantes qui se retrouvaient enceintes en ville devaient se débrouiller seules, et nombre d'entre elles finissaient par servir de nourrices aux enfants des riches. Pourtant ces femmes, elles aussi, laissèrent indirectement leurs marques dans la société urbaine. Ainsi, l'étude de ces cas permet de jeter une lumière nouvelle sur les moyens complexes et parfois contradictoires que les femmes du début de l'époque moderne utilisèrent pour poursuivre leur intérêts collectifs et individuels dans des conditions de profonde inégalité sexuelle.

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