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Book reviews

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Teresa Phipps, *Medieval Women and Urban Justice: Commerce, Crime and Community in England, 1300–1500*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. v + 222pp. 2 figures. 16 tables. Bibliography. £85.00 hbk. £25.00 pbk.
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In this well-researched and carefully crafted book, Teresa Phipps offers a new study of medieval urban women's engagement *with* and access *to* legal institutions over two centuries. This is a detailed, archive-focused history that excavates evidence from the legal records of three urban centres – Nottingham, Winchester and Chester. These are towns that have not received the same attention as others with good runs of borough court records, the body of material that Phipps works with. Drawing upon a broad literature on medieval women and urban justice, Phipps cuts through the argument that the Black Death rang in a 'golden age' for women. 'Women's access to justice was never "golden"', she points out (p. 7). Instead, the central thrust of the book is to ask *how* and *how often* different 'types' of women interacted with the law in these three towns. In approaching these questions, Phipps takes two stances. First, she argues that while the engagement of women could be 'defining moments of their lives or points of crisis', their appearance in these records in litigation relating to debt, violence, theft, trespass and other offences represents their inclusion in the quotidian, and 'inordinate negotiations that made up everyday life and work' (p. 185). Secondly, Phipps reminds us that the neat tripartite division of women by marital status into 'singlewoman', 'wife' and 'widow' can be unhelpful in understanding their status under law. Their interaction with the law cannot be so easily categorized.

In the first chapter, Phipps sets out her methodology, the town courts and their operation. The four remaining chapters of this book consider female involvement in: debt litigation; regulation of women's work; women and trespass litigation (meaning both physical attacks on the body as well as on property); and the policing of 'misbehaving' women. Across these four chapters, Phipps shows that urban women interacted with legal practices more regularly than is assumed, both as victims and perpetrators. In tracing their involvement in different types of litigation and in different ways, Phipps identifies a shift by the end of the fifteenth century in the legal institution. Laws of coverture were tightened: the decline of women's legal status as commercial traders is found in their decreasing numbers of litigants in

cases relating to commercial regulation in Winchester, for example. Fewer couples litigated jointly in trespass suits as married women's actions became increasingly subsumed under their husbands'. But despite these findings, Phipps shows that married women were not absent and attends to the circumstances in which they might appear. This has been found elsewhere, but Phipps' evidence adds significant weight to reappraisals of coverture and the limits it placed on married women's engagement with the law.

Phipps' great achievement here is in enmeshing quantitative and qualitative approaches. She shows the importance of not ignoring the small numbers of women appearing in court records as litigants. Quantification acts as her starting point. The tables and graphs included in this book offer important totals and percentages of women and men involved in different types of litigation, broken down further by marital status where possible. Phipps acknowledges that at points, her numbers are too small to chart change over time or for convincing statistical analysis – an inherent challenge in any study of pre-industrial women using legal and administrative records. In this, she is rigorous in her analysis of the numerous tables she presents. In acknowledging the limitations of numbers, Phipps' thoughtful qualitative analysis of the evidence seeks to put flesh on their bones. Again, this is no small feat: the records of borough courts rarely labour over long, detailed narratives of each case. Phipps diligently addresses the gaps that the evidence necessarily leaves. All of this is deserving of much praise; she makes her conclusions judiciously, taking care not to overegg her findings while nonetheless advancing our understanding of medieval women's access to and engagement with local judicial systems.

The interplay with litigation recorded in other legal forums might also have been considered, though of course the real value of Phipps' approach is in her thorough, painstaking analysis of this particular arena. The book might also have pushed a little further at the implications of her findings beyond the legal picture. For example, Phipps makes it clear that there was – in certain contexts – a legal recognition of women's commercial activity: in presentments of women flouting the rules (through forestalling and regrating), these women were evidently responsible for their actions whether married or unmarried. Yet their numbers were small. If borough court records reflect the inclusion *and exclusion* of women in quotidian economic negotiations, then how might they have navigated this? The interaction between legal status and social practice might have been probed further, considering how patriarchal order operated in these urban societies. The category 'woman' is evidently complicated by Phipps' study (as she points out) and paves the way for further discussion about how we understand its nuances, especially when marital status does not offer a wholly satisfactory explanation. Nonetheless, this is a meticulously researched book that persuasively brings women's experiences of law and litigation to the fore.

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