A Wives’ Tale: Marital Status and Women’s Economic Power in Late Medieval England

My thesis analyzes how women’s marital status in late medieval England affected their economic opportunities. Women in late medieval England were expected to subscribe to gender norms regarding subservience in marriage and their role in the domestic sphere of the household. Women were limited by practices like coverture, which put the husband in complete control over his wife’s assets and properties. However, women participated and produced goods in industries like ale-brewing and silk work, exerting influence and dominating their trade numerically. By using this influence and their skills, and manipulating the power structures by using their husband’s as liaisons between their domestic sphere and the public sphere, and certain economic statuses that allowed for financial autonomy, these women were able to gain economic success through their marriages. Widows like Alice Claver, a silk worker, represent the privileged status of widows, who enjoyed the highest degree of autonomy and the most economic success in their industries, used the skills and connections made during their marriages to their economic benefit upon the death of their husbands. Single women, such as Cecilia Penifader, enjoyed full financial autonomy and control over their properties. They represented themselves in court proceedings and utilized their assets and properties freely. The confines of the domestic sphere led women to create informal communities. Within these communities, they worked together to protect their own interests and each other. The actions of these medieval women, and the ways in which they subverted and used patriarchal norms of marital status allowed them to find success economically.

Sources Include:


