« soigneusement effacé et désavoué les traces de son fond historique afin de constituer le mythe du commencement radical de la raison ». Otto modifie la thèse de Blumenberg avec sa propre hypothèse que Descartes ne s'est détaché de la Renaissance « que pour en *transformer* les idées déjà “suspectes de modernité” pour pouvoir les *accommoder* à sa propre pensée “nouvelle” » (p. 236).

En fin de compte, s'il y a continuité entre Descartes et la Renaissance, il y a aussi rupture ; et la rupture a été faite par le philosophe lui-même, en toute connaissance de cause.

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Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford. *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. Pp. 480.

Anyone working in the field of early modern women owes historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford a profound debt of gratitude for *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720*. Fifteen years of painstaking archival research fuel their carefully considered conclusions about women's everyday lives across a variety of classes, including the much-neglected (because difficult to reconstruct) lives of laboring women. Mendelson and Crawford use their thousands of concrete examples from the lives of historical women to discuss how women's engagement in daily activities provided the means to agency and to association with other women, a discussion that leads to new, more complex understandings of what women were about in the early modern period. The authors' recognition that their archival documents were invariably shaped by the “purposes of the institutions and individuals who created them” (p. 9) means that the mountain of evidence they have amassed about women's lives is carefully weighed and presented, whether it derives from women's own narratives or from less direct sources: from court records, parliamentary papers, diaries, letters, medical treatises, ballads, portraits, woodcuts and book illustrations, pamphlets, proverb and jest books, accounts, or memoirs. Moreover, the authors deftly bring together archival information with a sweeping awareness of the secondary historical work available to make this the single most exciting and useful book in years available on the subject of early modern English women, and the first book to provide a complex picture of the lives of poor, laboring, and middling class women alongside the lives of the privileged.

Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720 is divided into seven sections that fall between a careful introduction and a brief epilogue. Chapter 1, “Contexts,” which makes a good introduction to early modern English culture's general assumptions about women, includes sections on “Medical understandings of woman's body,” “Religious teachings,” “The law and its administration,” “Citizenship,” “Popular notions,” and “Stereotypes”; these serve to lay out the social position of women and the expectations of the dominant culture with regard to women's behavior. While concluding that patriarchal thought proved deeply resis-

tant to change, the authors also acknowledge the gaps and ambiguities within English culture that opened ways for women to present their own histories. Chapter 2, "Childhood and Adolescence," begins the authors' consideration of how what it meant to be a "woman" changed at different times in a woman's life by considering the "Early years" and "Courtship" of girls and young women, as well as the implications of "Service." Especially useful are the discussions of service as "a sexual as well as a physical and economic constraint on young women's lives" (p. 97) and of the degree to which young women of different classes exercised freedom of choice in selecting a husband. Chapter 3, "Adult Life," considers "Marriage," "Maternity," "Single women," "Widowhood," "Old age," and "Death," concluding again that English society remained conservative about women's roles as the bearers and nurturers of children, while presenting a wide range of examples of women's own perceptions of their experiences that make the conclusion far less grim than it appears on its own.

Chapter 4, "Female Culture," wrestles with this contradiction between the social conservatism of the English and the repeated presence of women's voices in a variety of documents that provide a sense that they found room to express themselves. English attitudes toward women, although conflicted, unclear, and varying from place to place and class to class, remained fundamentally conservative; at the same time there was a strong sense among all classes that "women as women had concerns of their own" (p. 204). As a result, women, although under constant suspicion of sexual promiscuity, nevertheless associated with one another in a variety of ways that gave rise to women's cultures in different times and places. Talking about female culture is difficult, given the fact that women also regularly interacted with patriarchal culture, but it is this part of the book that interests me the most for its theoretical implications. Although Mendelson and Crawford are not prepared to launch into a full-scale theoretical argument for the existence of female culture, they lay the groundwork here for just such a discussion, a discussion that I believe will alter forever our view of early modern England and the roles of women within it. In this chapter, the authors consider women's relations to "Space," to "Speech," to their own "Material culture" — women's transactions with one another formed an entire sub-economy — and to "The Practice of piety," a section which is followed by a lengthy and ground-breaking discussion of "Female friendship."

The final three chapters consider women in their public roles as workers. Chapter 5, "The Makeshift Economy of Poor Women," considers makeshift workers, thieves, laborers, and lower-class housewives in sections titled "Work and gender," "Poverty," "Making a living," and "Indigence and destitution." Chapter 6, on "Occupational Identities and Social Roles," discusses textile workers, midwives, physicians and surgeons, teachers, and the roles of privileged or elite women in sections entitled, "Running a household," "Professional and skilled work: medical, educational, and cultural," "Crafts, trades, and multiple occupations," "Royal, civic, and institutional employment," and "Public housewifery." *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* concludes with a chapter on "Poli-

tics,” which treats, as always with first-hand documentary evidence, “Female monarchs,” “Aristocratic women: queens consort, female courtiers, and matriarchs,” “Popular politics before 1640,” “Women and revolution, 1640–1660,” and “Women in political movements, 1660–1720.” In this final chapter, the authors examine the participation of women from many social positions in English public life and the responses to their political activity, in order to trace the increasing exclusion of women from public life, as political theory and participation became even more overtly prerogatives of men.

The brief epilogue with which Crawford and Mendelson end this impressive volume concludes that the seventeenth century's conservative sense of women's roles evolved into the eighteenth century's increased insistence on the split between the public male sphere and the domestic female sphere. Moreover, in spite of the articulate writings of elite educated women like Mary Astell on the condition of women, women were tried for half the capital offences in London (most for petty thievery) at the same time that their rights as citizens declined, as the nation became organized around a two-party system and parliamentary power. The epilogue's conclusions, however, fail to imagine how these disappointments, co-existing alongside articulate statements asserting women's intellectual and political equality, might have resulted in the later challenges to the patriarchal control of politics — how, for example, if even privileged women were initially denied the vote, all English women eventually gained it. A deep contradiction, of which the authors are fully aware, runs through the center of this book: at the same time that women lived in a society with firmly entrenched attitudes about their behavior and roles, many (if by no means all) of the women's comments on their own experience as women suggest, not women repressed and miserable, but women whose everyday lives continually challenged the patriarchal norm, if only in small ways — for example, by associating regularly with other women, by exchanging talk, work, and household produce. Although Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford highlight the contradictions and instabilities of women's positions in early modern England and discuss them as such, they do not always take the next useful step, toward a theoretical discussion of how contradictory discourses may also contain emergent ways of thinking.

This is a minor quibble, however, in the face of a powerful and substantial book, a quibble that anticipates the direction that some scholars may wish to take in interpreting further the mine of information that the book presents so clearly, with such a variety of well-chosen visual illustrations, and with such a wealth of bibliographic citation. For scholars and students alike, *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* is obligatory reading, and for many of us, it deserves a special place on a shelf close at hand.

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