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Gender and space in early modern England by Amanda Flather

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Book Review: Amanda Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (Royal Historical Society, London: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. viii + 208. ISBN 978 0861932863.

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Amanda Flather's research on gender and space offers a new and exciting perspective on social relations in the early modern period, despite a somewhat weak introduction. Drawing on sociological and anthropological theory, Flather argues that understanding the interaction between the historic spatial environment and the social construction of identity illuminates our understanding of gender and agency. Influenced by Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, Flather explores the claim that space was not simply a passive backdrop against which gender identities were played out. How space was used within individual spaces allows the difference between prescription and practice to be brought to the foreground. As a result, Flather argues that normative prescriptions and real life experience were connected in a dynamic interchange, raising doubts about the analogy of the separate spheres as a useful method of interpretation.

Basing her work upon the secular and religious court records of Essex and East Suffolk, Flather examines the spatial context of presentments, examinations and depositions to understand how contemporaries used and experienced space. In particular, she considers public and private spaces, analysing the working and domestic environment, social and religious space. The last two are particularly interesting, not only because they have been sadly neglected by gender historians but also because they highlight the gap between real and prescribed experience. The physical space of the church, for example, represented the pinnacle of hierarchical symbolism in the parish, epitomising the microcosmic ideal of social relations. Church space was connected to the rigid idealism of hierarchy and, as such, frequently challenged and asserted in the form of pew disputes, which Flather uses to read the negotiation of gender and status within this setting. In contrast, her analysis of social spaces considers the dynamics of informal interaction. The social composition of alehouse customers, for example, has been considered by historians to portray a process of masculinisation in the public sphere as female involvement in the beer brewing trade declined. Flather's research, however, finds that at least one third of parties present at the alehouse were women, as customers or workers, suggesting that gender divisions may have been overstated. More importantly, it was not simply the presence of women in these areas that challenges our preconceptions, but the extent to which their presence was deemed acceptable. Her evidence suggests that, with some obvious exceptions, female presence in the alehouse was accepted and not automatically associated with negative connotations.

Similarly, her portrayal of domestic spaces suggests that the multi-functional use of the house as both home and working space weakened strict structures of gendered space, highlighting the impossibility of a strict divide between private and public spheres. At this point, the discussion becomes somewhat confused over the issue of control and power within the home, but does raise the important point that men were regularly associated with domestic activities and entertainment, bringing in the male experience as a useful contrast.

The picture of society we are left with is one where patriarchal ideals were unevenly applied; in some areas formally adopted but in others less overt, or even irrelevant, and determined by practical necessity. The construction of gender and identity were incredibly complex and the introduction of spatial theory complicates our understanding even further. Needless to say, it is a welcome and necessary complication that can only broaden our knowledge of this area. Overall, this is an innovative study that explores the diversity and contradiction inherent in the construction of gender, although not all the topics Flather tackles are as consistently well developed or expressed. Her findings also lean heavily upon prescriptive literature, which contradicts her original premise. Readers may learn much from this book on a fairly new and untouched research area; however, there still remains a great deal to be explored and expanded upon, not least the discussion of space and masculinity which takes second place throughout.

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