

**Ellen Malenas Ledoux, *Laboring Women: Reproducing Women and Work in the Eighteenth Century*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2023. Pp. 290. \$29.50. ISBN 9780813950280.**

Ledoux positions this absorbing study of working motherhood as a feminist project inspired by personal experience of the intersecting ‘demands of productivity and reproductivity’ (1). The core strength of the book comes from Ledoux’s decision to focus on women workers on whom those demands bore most heavily. The chapters cover a wide range of women who laboured by necessity for their, or at least someone’s, economic gain: actresses, midwives, women who enlisted in the military, enslaved women, street sellers and prostitutes. The breadth of such varied forms of labour makes for a stimulating account of the twinned topics of motherhood and work.

Ledoux crystallizes her range of concerns in two core questions: ‘how did they do it?’ and ‘how did they get away with it?’ (19). The first question leans into the difficulties that beset ‘history from below’, difficulties made even more complex by the fact that the principal texts under discussion are, as Ledoux acknowledges, genre-bound productions for the literary marketplace: memoirs by Sarah Siddons and Mary Robinson; midwifery manuals; narratives of soldiering women; Mary Prince’s history; accounts of the Magdalen hospital’s inmates. The study does offer fascinating glimpses into how they did it, such as Sarah Siddons’ recollection of attempting to work alongside her noisy children and Ann Yearsley’s claim to have always settled her children to sleep before she tried to read and write. Looked at from the reader’s position, however, the key concerns of this book can also be expressed in two slightly different questions: ‘how were they supposed to do it?’ and ‘how far could they comply with those expectations?’

This study enters into the conversation about working motherhood in the eighteenth century by connecting the separation of the spheres and the rise of a ‘cult of motherhood’ (3). Ledoux’s central argument is that ‘*most* mothers—because of pressing economic and political conditions—have no choice but to fall short of this ideal’ (13). Readers less familiar with this area of study might have benefitted from a more extended account of the cult of motherhood, and particularly the development of this cult in the time between the earliest and latest texts covered in the chapters, i.e. from the 1730s to 1830s. The opening chapter offers Sarah Siddons’ careful cultivation of sentimental motherhood in the 1780s as the ‘measuring stick by which the less privileged women’s experience in the ensuing chapters can be understood’ (26), but the fifth chapter, which examines images of street sellers, works equally well as an anchor for the argument. In this chapter, Ledoux skilfully contrasts highly unrealistic images of mothers as ‘grateful, civilized vendors’ (16) in ‘orderly, polite ... commercial life’ (167) with Hogarth’s hostile representations of working mothers as abusive and distracted and Rowlandson’s sexualized depictions of mothering-aged women selling their wares on the city streets.

The book is organized into three pairs of chapters. The first pair of chapters introduces actresses and midwives as women workers who were best able to turn the sentimental ideal of motherhood to their professional advantage. The second pairing includes a chapter on the narratives of two soldier women, Christian Davies and Hannah Snell. Ledoux reads both women as queer subjects who negotiated motherhood as part of the century’s ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (112). Ledoux is clear that the following chapter on *The History of Mary Prince* is ‘categorically different’ (117), and she works carefully to examine the assaults on motherhood recorded by Prince. The third pairing moves, via a deft and illuminating reading of an extract from *Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies*, from images of street sellers to conflicting accounts of the Magdalen hospital’s penitent prostitutes to argue that those accounts all ultimately ‘fail to reconcile women’s oldest profession with its likely result’ (192).

Taken together, this is a wide-ranging study that draws readers into the richness of the topic and invites them to look between and across the chapters for fine threads of similarity and connection, contrast and complexity. Ledoux might have drawn the chapters together even more in her conclusion, but she ends, as she began, by bringing together eighteenth-century and twenty-first century working mothers. Her ‘Afterword’ compares ‘Enlightenment constructs of maternity’ (221) to today’s cult of the “supermom”, and she finds contemporary counterparts to her examples of working women of the long eighteenth century, ending with the pressures placed on working mothers during the Covid pandemic.

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