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Source: *The Economic History Review*, Oct., 1933, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Oct., 1933), pp. 324-335

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the Economic History Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2590651>

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THE LONDON SILKWOMEN OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY¹

IN giving some account of the London silkwomen it is the purpose of this article to illustrate the usual practices among female participants in trade and industry at this time, and to show that although this mystery was not recognized as a definite gild, it was pursued on the lines of the craft guilds of male workers.

Although there are evidences of silkwomen at the beginning of the reign of Edward III., it is not until the succeeding century that they appear in any numbers and can be said to have approached a monopoly in their work. London silkwomen were much later in establishing their art than the silkwomen of Paris, whose ordinances are to be found in "Le Livre des Métiers," a thirteenth-century digest of the Parisian crafts,² but by 1368 they were sufficiently organized, and important, to present a petition to the mayor against a Lombard who was cornering all raw and coloured silks.³ During the second half of the fifteenth century, as a body, they were responsible for several petitions to Parliament, with the result that acts were passed protecting their work against foreign competition, which they suffered in common with other crafts at this time.⁴ The first petition to Parliament, of 1455, was sent from the "Sylkewymmen and Throwestres of the Craftes and occupation of Silkewerk,"⁵ which had long been women's crafts within the city; in 1482 the preamble of the petition shows that those interested were "menne and women of the hole craft of Silkewerk of the Cite of London and all other Citeis, Townes,

¹ The following abbreviations have been used throughout the footnotes: E.C.P., Early Chancery Proceedings; P.C.C., Wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury.

² "Craftswomen in the 'Livre des Métiers,'" E. Dixon (*Economic Journal*, v., 1895, p. 209).

³ *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, 1364-81, ed. A. H. Thomas (1929), pp. 99-106.

⁴ Between 1455 and 1504 five acts were passed forbidding the importation of certain silk goods for periods ranging from four to twenty years. The petitions may have been part of an anti-alien movement, into which it is possible that the silkwomen were drawn at the instigation of other craftsmen. In 1455 and 1463, the occupation was said to be a luxury trade; in 1482 it was pleaded that many men and women had been thrown out of work.

⁵ *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (Rec. Comm., 1832), V, p. 325 a.

Boroghes, and Vilages of this Realme of England.”¹ At present, this indication of so great a spread of the industry has not been supported by information from other sources, but the records of other towns, as they become available, may bring to light the work of the silkwomen outside London. The demand, however, is more likely to have been supplied by mercers, or by women such as a certain Edy Lucas of Salisbury, who sold other goods as well as silk.² Girls apprenticed to London silkwomen came from counties as far away as Warwickshire and Yorkshire,³ and if these women returned to their native town they would work not under special regulations of the craft, but under the local customs in force for other female workers.⁴ Thus, while it is probable that they were working elsewhere, it is in London that we can best study these women who in 1455 maintained that by their craft they “lyved full honourably, and therwith many good Housholdes kept, and many Gentilwymmen and other in grete noumbre like as there nowe be moo than a M, haue be drawn under theym in lernyng the same Craftes and occupation ful vertueusly.” Such contemporary generalizations, though doubtless exaggerated for the purposes of the petitions to Parliament, can be substantiated by incidents recorded elsewhere.

Apprenticeship, the product of the craft guilds, had become an integral element of the whole industrial system; therefore the same practice was found in the mystery with which we are dealing. In this respect, the silkwomen kept the same rules and worked under the same conditions as the men. Following the usual custom, the prospective apprentice was bound by an indenture between her parent or guardian and her future mistress. In the collection of ancient deeds at the Public Record Office are two of these agreements made on the behalf of one girl from Yorkshire and another from Lincolnshire, both of whom were bound to London citizens and their wives, to learn the craft of the wife, who was a silkwoman.⁵ The term of service in each case was seven years and the obligations on both sides were similar to those demanded on the occasion of the binding of a male apprentice. It was the girl's duty to cherish the interests of her master and mistress, not to waste their goods, or merchandise with her own or those of another without permission, to behave well, and not to withdraw unlawfully from their service. For their part, her future master and mistress promised to “teach, take charge of,

¹ *Ibid.*, VI, p. 222 b.

² E.C.P., 100/73-78.

³ P. and M. Rolls, A. 57, m. 36. *Ancient Deeds*, C. 2314. Other girls came from Norfolk, Buckinghamshire, Lincolnshire, and Bristol.

⁴ The work would be pursued in the home and the woman would trade “covert de baron,” or as “feme sole” under the regulations of the borough.

⁵ *Ancient Deeds*, C. 2314. *Ibid.*, D. 1176.

and instruct, their apprentice, or cause her to be instructed" in the craft of the wife, to chastise her in meet fashion, and to find her food, clothing, footwear, a bed, and all other suitable necessaries.

In neither of these two deeds is there any suggestion that payment was made for the instruction given. That this sometimes happened is evident from a bill among the chancery proceedings, which was presented towards the end of Henry VIII.'s reign.¹ A man brought a plea of debt against a woman for £5 which he said she owed for board during the time that she was in his service; whereas, according to her petition, this was contrary to the agreement made by her mother, which provided that her mistress should teach her "the crafte and misterie of a Silkewoman & sewyng," wherein she was "expert and Connyng," finding the girl "mete and drynke and all other thinges conveyent." For this teaching her mother was to pay 20s. yearly, while the girl was to do service for her board. Without the contract itself, no comparison at all conclusive can be made between this agreement and the terms of the indentures referred to above. The period of service was much shorter than that usually required of apprentices. Indeed the word apprentice does not occur; although in view of the fact that such phrases as "apprenticeship and service," and "servant and apprentice" were fairly common, this point cannot be stressed too much. Yet the fee for instruction and service for board suggest something less comprehensive than apprenticeship, and this perhaps accounted for the money payment.

It is evident that those silkwomen who took apprentices were expected to keep the city's regulations. For several of them appear amongst the women against whom complaints were made before the mayor and aldermen, when female apprentices asked for exoneration from service because they had not been enrolled within the appointed time of a year and a day.²

In addition to learning the craft itself, the girls were sent on various errands and entrusted with money transactions. Often, like Joan Woulbarowe, who "stode prentice" with Katherine Dore, silk-throwster, they must have delivered silk or made purchases. This girl's apprenticeship did not end happily. She alleged that her mistress, "immagening sotelly to haue hold vppon" her and to cause her to remain in service when her term was finished, found means to have her imprisoned until she became bound in an obligation for £12 13s. 4d. Of this, £8 was the value of silk and ware which Joan had delivered

¹ E.C.P., 274/12.

² P. and M. Rolls, A. 47, m. 4d; A. 51, m. 5, m. 8d; A. 57, m. 3d, m. 6; A. 71, m. 1; A. 72, m. 3. This regulation was re-enforced by proclamation of March 21, 3 Hen. VI., addressed to "every man and woman having apprentices." *Calendar of Letter Books of the City of London*, I. (ed. R. R. Sharpe, 1909), p. 134.

to two women dwelling in Soper Lane, "custumers & werkers to ye said Katerine." A dozen years or so later the trouble was still unsettled. Joan, by then a silkwoman on her own account, petitioned the Chancellor because her former mistress had begun an action against her on the obligation. Katherine maintained that her apprentice had unjustly taken "throwen¹ sylke vncoloured and sylke dyed" amounting to £12 4s. 10d. and more; whereas Joan stated that Katherine had long since recovered for her goods, but that she owed her £7 10s. which Joan had paid to different people of whom she had, "in the tyme of her Prentyshode bought silke by the Commaundement," and for the use of her mistress. The case, which lasted throughout two terms, was decided in favour of the petitioner.²

The very nature of such strained relationships has been the cause of their remaining on record for us, but it is possible from wills, at least, to find a recognition of satisfactory service. Isabel Fremely, silkwoman, in 1456, appointed one legacy outside her circle of kinsfolk and this comprised a pair of sheets and her girdle of green silk garnished with silver, left to her female apprentice.³ A woman of some note, Agnes Brundyssch, who called herself "citizen and silkwoman" of London, remembered several women who may have belonged to her household at some time, while to her apprentice she gave certain goods, adding, "I pardon and remit to the same Alice Seford the rest of her term of apprenticeship to me."⁴ Another, possibly also a member of the household, was styled "operaria mea." The apprentice who had finished her term presumably remained with her mistress until marriage, when, whatever her husband's occupation, she could work as a throwster or weaver or deal generally in silk goods.⁵

A few women figure in the chancery proceedings and wardrobe accounts as trading with large quantities of goods. The activities of women silk dealers can be illustrated by the petition of Jane Langton, widow of a saddler, who became involved in transactions with two merchants of Genoa, in which she agreed to become bound for payment for silk goods to the value of £300 15s. in the place of her daughter-in-law Agnes, who had died while away at Stourbridge fair.⁶ In this

¹ Technically called "thrown" silk—*i.e.*, ready for weaving.

² E.C.P., 27/482; 28/83-84; 75/106.

³ Somerset House, Commissary Court of London. Register Sharpe, f. 193.

⁴ *Ibid.* Register More, f. 187*d.*

⁵ There are occasional references to "singlewomen"—*e.g.*, Joan Litster of Nottingham, who bought and sold grain; Christian Baxster of London, who brought an action of debt first against a draper and then against his wife. But, if Coventry can be taken as an example, society had no room for the unattached woman, whom it considered to be an evil. Cf. the regulations in its Leet Book, ed. M. D. Harris (*E.E.T.S.*, 1907-13), i., pp. 545, 568.

⁶ E.C.P., 48/507.

case, since so large a purchase was made, Agnes Langton may have been a middleman, but there is nothing to show whether the silk was to receive further working, or whether it was merely intended for resale. Jane Langton herself is called silkwoman in her will dated 1475, not long after the events cited above.¹ It is of interest to note that she mentions her son John and Elizabeth his second wife, also engaged in the craft, since the latter must be the silkwoman of that name who, during 1503, supplied quantities of silk and other goods amounting to £101 17s. 5½d. for members of the royal family.²

The transactions described above indicate that the women interested were expected to share in the necessary financial obligations, a position fairly common in the fifteenth century, when husbands and wives, for varied reasons, were frequently named jointly in pleas of debt brought either by them or against them. It is probable that many of the silkwomen, especially the poorer sisters in the craft, remained "covert de baron" so far as concerned their business dealings; which meant that their husbands were always responsible for payment of their debts. In general, to use words from the bill of a woman who was imprisoned in Canterbury, it was not usual "to make a woman that hath a husband to answer as a woman sole."³ The somewhat different practice of London was set forth in certain chancery proceedings in which one of the parties stated that "the commune gise within the saide Citie is, and for long tyme hath been that the wyfes of men of worship and thrifte infraunchised in the same Citee haue by the sufferance of their husbondes in thabsence of them vsed to by and selle all manere of marchandise towards thencrece and lyving of them and their household, the dutees of alle whiche bargaines commyng or gowyng hath alwey ben contente by suche wifes; or for nowne paiement of them by their husbondes."⁴ But that it was by no means an unusual custom for the woman who worked alone to be answerable for her contracts as "feme sole" is seen in the provision made for such a trader in the ordinances of other towns as well as London.⁵

In the city of London women could make public declaration that they intended to trade as "sole merchants"; the records of such declarations, however, appear to be far too few, compared with the number of women so designated,⁶ for this to have been the usual procedure. The Guildhall journal for 1457 shows that two silkwomen at different times in the year came before the mayor, affirming that they

¹ P.C.C., 18 Wattys.

² John Langton's will (P.C.C., 28 Blamyre) was proved by his wife Elizabeth in 1502. ³ E.C.P., 32/344. The nature of the debt is not stated.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43/293.

⁵ Cf. *Borough Customs*, ed. M. Bateson (Seldon Soc., xviii., 1904), i., pp. 227-9.

⁶ The usual phrase is "mercatrix sola in arte de . . ."

were sole merchants, and seeking that in the future they should enjoy the benefits of the custom touching such traders.¹ This, as set forth in the *Liber Albus*, enabled a married woman pursuing a craft alone, to be charged as "feme sole," in all things touching her occupation; yet both of these silkwomen said that for a long time they had carried on the craft as sole merchants, so that perhaps they made this public avowal because they purposed to confine themselves to one craft, or to work on a much larger scale than before. On more than one occasion, the creditor of a silkwoman could not maintain an action for debt against her because there was no record that she had ever been admitted as sole merchant. In one case the woman was said to have beguiled a creditor by affirming that she was sole merchant, whereas there was no record that she had such power.² Therefore it may be that the two women mentioned above thus acquired prestige, or were the better enabled to trade satisfactorily by means of their guarantee.

The purchase of silk goods imported by Italian and other merchants into England was sometimes made through a broker, a practice common to traders at that time. Thus Isabel Norman, "trading for herself in the craft of a silkwoman," bought "gold of Cyprus on a pipe" from a Genoese merchant through a certain David Galganete who acted as a broker between them.³ That these merchants also dealt directly with the silkwomen is evident from the views of the hosts of foreigners, chiefly Venetians, for the years 18 to 22 Henry VI., which give the names of twenty-three women who bought silk from them during that period.⁴ The silks included fardels of raw silk, raw silk by the pound and "papers of silk" of divers kinds. The size or quality of the fardels must have varied considerably, since of those sold by Leonard Conterin to eight women during one year no two were of the same value, their prices ranging from £30 18s. 9d. to £57 12s.⁵ Further glimpses of these direct transactions are provided by cases from the chancery proceedings, where merchants who had sold silk to women for considerable sums had not been able to recover debts, or were asking for better security.⁶

The industry of the silkwomen included three processes, and consisted in converting the raw silk into yarn, weaving the lesser silken materials (but not whole cloths), and making up goods of different descriptions. First, they were engaged upon throwing the raw silk, which came principally direct from the hand of the Italian reeler.⁷

¹ Guildhall Journal, vi., ff. 182*d*, 184.

² E.C.P., 201/32.

³ P. and M. Rolls, A. 50, m. 10; see also A. 78, m. 4.

⁴ Exchequer K. R. Accounts, Various, 128/30.

⁵ See also *ibid.*, 128/31.

⁶ E.C.P., 48/507; 64/1131; 110/125.

⁷ The strands from several cocoons were gathered by the reeler into one thread, thus producing the raw silk of commerce. Cf. J. E. Staley, *The Guilds of Florence* (1906), pp. 204-235.

This was then ready for further manufacture, or could be sold, possibly after special treatment, by the ounce or pound, as a finished article, for sewing silk and for other purposes. Private individuals such as the Paston women sometimes bought it in this form, while it also figures in the accounts of the King's wardrobe.¹ Its colour and quality varied, as can be seen from payments made by the clerk of the Queen's household in 1419 to a silkwoman who supplied, amongst other goods:

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|----|----|----|-------------------------------|
| Silk of divers colours | .. | .. | .. | 18d. the oz. |
| Fine black and blue silk | .. | .. | .. | 17d. the oz. |
| Fine black silk | .. | .. | .. | 2s. 10d. the oz. |
| Black and blue silk | .. | .. | .. | 1s. 4½d. the oz. ² |

But apart from the distinction "fine," and differences in price, there is little here to show variety of texture.³ According to a late fifteenth-century document relating to weights and measures, the silks produced in England were of an inferior quality to those of the Paris silkwomen.⁴ Thus the dearer silks sold before the acts forbidding the importation of thrown silk may well have been prepared overseas. Among the lists of purchases from Elizabeth Langton in 1505 is a group of special interest as throwing some light on the materials used in her own workshop. Under one warrant she received money for the following goods, for the use of "the Lady Mary":

| | | | |
|---|----|----|------------------|
| 1 oz. of "open silk" ⁵ of divers colours | .. | .. | 16d. |
| 1 oz. of "twyne silk" of divers colours | .. | .. | 16d. |
| 1 oz. of Venice gold | .. | .. | 4s. |
| 1 "weving stole cum sleys pro eodem" | .. | .. | 3s. |
| 1 oz. "webbe silk" | .. | .. | 16d. |
| "a quarter hedelyng ⁶ threde pro le webbe" | .. | .. | 5d. |
| 1 oz. of gold "de damask" | .. | .. | 5s. ⁷ |

¹ There are many small items of silk purchased from Anne de London in the account of the bailiff of John Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, for the year 1423 (Brit. Mus. Add. Roll, 17209).

² Exchequer K.R. Wardrobe Accounts, 406/30, f. 9d.

³ Also it has not been possible to discover from any other source whether the silk was ever dyed by the silkwomen. Customs accounts do not always show if the silk imported was already coloured; but one bill among the chancery proceedings mentions "throwen sylke vncoloured and sylke dyed," said to have been stolen from a mistress by her apprentice (E.C.P., 28/84a).

⁴ MS. Cotton, Vesp., E., ix., ff. 86-110. A treatise called "The Noubre of Weyghtes," part of which has been included in *Select Tracts and Table Books relating to English Weights and Measures*, ed. Hubert Hall and Frieda Nicholas (Camden Miscellany, xv., 1929, pp. 12-20).

⁵ This was perhaps used as a weft thread, which was composed of two or three strands of raw silk, not thrown.

⁶ *I.e.*, to make loops to which the warp was attached, and by means of which the warp threads were separated into two sets to allow the weft to pass between them. (See *N.E.D.* under Heddle.)

⁷ Exchequer K.R. Wardrobe Accounts, 416/3, f. 10.

Further processes of the industry were those of weaving the thrown silk into corsages, ribbons and laces,¹ and of making up the materials into goods both useful and decorative, such as caul for the hair, points for silk laces,² and other trappings of all kinds. Fringe and tassel of different qualities were in considerable demand, in the royal household at least, and at times the goods were more elaborate, as when the wardrobe keeper paid for quantities of laces "botons & tassel" of silk, and laces "cum knoppes & tassell," or "cum Botons & knoppes." Occasionally he delivered from his stock the material for some specific task. Thus we find him paying 75s. 8d. to have 4½ lbs. of gold of Cyprus mixed with 2 lbs. 2¼ ozs. of silk fringe, the latter being supplied by the woman who did the work.³ Besides these delicate smaller productions made up from the silk thrown and woven by them together with the gold and silver from Venice, Cyprus, or elsewhere, the later wardrobe accounts show that some silkwomen were selling articles of clothing, and from the evidence of a letter written by John Paston to his brother at Norwich, it can be assumed that such goods came sometimes from their own workshops. He says: "as for Stoctons doghte, she shall be weddyd in haste to Skeerne, as she tolde hyrselfe to my sylkemayde, whyche makyth perte of suche as she shall wear, to whom she brake hyr harte, and tolde hyr that she sholde haue hadde Master Paston, . . ." ⁴ Here is disclosed the mediæval dressmaker carrying gossip from one customer to another. The interest lies in the work she was doing and in the suggestion that her business with John Paston was no casual task, but that he was one of her regular customers.

Before turning to the problem of organization, it is necessary to consider two questions which have received no comment in passing—the male worker, and the making of piece silks. The active interest of a certain proportion of men might be expected from the 1482 petition, which represented that the petitioners, "aswell men as women, and yonge Damesels, beyng servaunts and apprentices to the said Craft of Silkewerk" had, during the period of protection, gained a reasonable living by their work. But whereas men, as well as women, were selling silk fringe and other silks by the pound for the great wardrobe of Edward III. and Richard II., with one exception, no examples of men

¹ While the ribbon was a finished article, the corse generally served as a foundation for further work of embroidery or other form of decoration. Its commonest use was in the making of girdles. Lace, or twisted silk cord, fulfilled many purposes, such as the hanging for a sword, the attachment for seals of charters, and, very generally, the fastening together of different parts of dress.

² *E.g.*, Exchequer K.R. Wardrobe Accounts, 431/1, in which is the payment of 22s. 2d. for the pointing of sixteen dozen silk laces, and for nine gross nine dozen points of silk at 2d. the dozen.

³ *Ibid.*, 406/9, f. 3d.

⁴ *Paston Letters*, ed. J. Gairdner (1910), iii., p. 118.

dealing with the silkwomen's goods have as yet come to light in the fifteenth-century records, apart from the mercers in London who sold Cyprus gold and silver as well as piece silks.

The petitions of the silkworkers asked for protection for all "wrought" silk in any way connected with their craft. The imports named as those which they wanted to keep out of the country were twined silk and silk goods of the lesser variety. It is improbable that they were at this time interested in piece goods, to which reference is first made in this connection in the act of 19 Henry VII.,¹ which stated that no person might bring into England for sale "eny maner of Sylke, wrought by hyt selfe or w^t eny other stufte in eny place ou^t of this Realme, in Ribandes laces gyrdylles Corses Calles² Corses of tissues or poyntes," but gave at the same time freedom to any person, denizen or stranger, to import "all other maner of Sylkes, aswell wrought as rawe, or unwrought to sell at pleasour." In his *Life of Henry VII.*, first published in 1632, Francis, Lord Bacon, commenting on this statute, says that it does not refer to "stuffs of the whole piece," because "the realm had of them no manufacture in use at that time."³ Under Edward IV. an Italian was assigned a house at Westminster for the weaving of cloths of damask, velvet and gold, and other cloths of silk, thereby arousing opposition from merchant strangers, who tried to prevent him from teaching his art in the land.⁴ That this attempt to set up the craft in England had no permanent success is clear from the suggestions for introducing Italian silkweavers, made⁵ in the reigns of Henry VIII. and Elizabeth.⁵

The assumption that no whole cloths were made in the country in this period removes the possibility that the petition of 1482 refers to the mercers, or to weavers of piece silks, who would have been interested in keeping out these goods, which are not specifically mentioned. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive that the mercers would not have named their company in the petition, or that any appreciable number of craftsmen could have existed without some of them appearing in the records, as the silkwomen have done. The male workers referred to must signify an occasional corse-weaver, such as the one who became a freeman of York in 1499.⁶ It is certain that in London women alone were selling the lesser silk articles with which the craft was concerned, and the delicate nature of the work supports the other

¹ 19 Hen. VII., cap. xxi. ² *I.e.*, cauls for keeping the hair in place.

³ Francis, Lord Bacon, *The Life of Henry VII.* (Pitt Press Edition, 1876), p. 195.

⁴ *Cal. of Chan. Proc. Eliz. (Rec. Comm.)*, ii., p. ciii.

⁵ *Cal. of Letters and Papers of Henry VIII.*, vol. ix., p. 203; vol. xiii., pt. i., p. 206. *S.P. Dom. Eliz.*, vol. viii., nos. 32-5.

⁶ *Register of the Freemen of York*, ed. F. Collins (Surtees Society, 1897), p. 224.

evidence that they were also mainly responsible for the manufacture of these goods.¹ There is no trace that here men were weaving the corsers, ribbons and laces with which the women traded, and at the end of the century the act of 19 Henry VII. protecting these commodities was merely headed "For Silkwomen."

The use of the general terms silk and silkwomen, and the fact that those buying and selling silken materials also received payments for making up silk for specific purposes, make it difficult to decide if the women usually confined themselves to one branch of the industry.² This difficulty is seen in the evidence from proceedings concerning the debt of a throwster. William Hull, mason, was sued for silk worth £22, sold to his late wife Agnes by Ellen, wife of William Lovell, vintner.³ Agnes was called a "Throwster" by one woman witness, and said by another to have been "accustomed to buy and sell silk in her lyfe and bought and sold divers tymes of and to divers persones." This case discloses trafficking in silk by a group of women, most of whom worked independently of each other. Since Agnes Hull was also said to have bought corsers worth £19, she must have been a trader as well as a throwster. But in practice a number of women were doubtless occupied in their own homes solely as throwsters. These were either independent, preparing yarn which they sold to a fellow craftswoman, or they worked on the goods of another, like the "custumers" of Katherine Dore already noted. Perhaps throwing and weaving went on side by side in the workshops of some of the bigger traders, for the stock-in-trade of these women covered the whole range of goods, from coloured silks or gold and silver thread sold by the ounce, to the more elaborate decorative articles or ribbons and similar woven silks. So that while the term "throwster" suggests workers at one process only, it seems likely that the other handicraft and trading functions were often

¹ The materials produced did not require large looms. Cf. the ordinances of Norwich worsted weavers of 1511, in which women were forbidden to weave certain cloths because they had not sufficient strength for the work (*Records of the City of Norwich*, ed. W. Hudson and J. C. Tingey, 1906, vol. ii., p. 377).

² While details of bigger transactions suggest the middleman buying for resale, the smaller purchases must have been made by craftswomen for manufacture and sale. The wording of their petitions, with reference to silkwomen and throwsters, would suggest two main divisions of the industry, just as later, under Charles I., there were the separate guilds of the silk-throwsters and silkmen; but while throwster clearly signified a spinner of yarn, the term silkwoman was a general one applied to those who were in any way interested in the production or sale of the commodity. Some girls were apprenticed to silkwomen to learn their craft, the particular branch not being stated, others were bound to women who were distinguished as throwster or corseweaver. Sometimes a woman was called "lace-wheuerer." (P. and M. Rolls, A. 51, m. 8d; A. 72, m. 3. *Ibid.*, A. 50, m. 6d; A. 71, m. 1. Guildhall Journal, ii., f. 27d.)

³ E.C.P., 31/476; 43/158-60; 43/291-4.

combined in the activities of one craftswoman. On the other hand, from the quantities sold by one or two women to the King's wardrobe, it may be that these were occupied as retailers of goods which they themselves bought from several sources—viz., the importer, the throwster and the corseweaver.¹

Although the number of "good and notable Housholdes" who were engaged in this industry must always remain an obscure question, it is certain that members of the craft were women of standing in the city. Thus one girl was apprenticed to a woman called a throwster, whose first husband was a goldsmith, and whose second, of the same craft, was also an alderman.² The wife of a citizen and fishmonger bought £46 worth of Venice ribbon from a Genoese merchant,³ while the widow of William Horne, knight and alderman, received silk amounting to the value of £56 from John Fynkell, knight, who believed her to be trading as "feme sole."⁴ From these examples it can be seen that their transactions were by no means on a small scale, and the households of such women may well have included more than the usual number of persons because of the handicraft pursued there as a regular business.⁵ From the scale upon which some of them traded, and from the evidence of their activities described above, it is clear that their work cannot be dismissed as a mere domestic occupation. Indeed, perhaps its most important characteristic, considered in the light of the wider question of the economic position of women at that time, is that it shows them working, not as wives (or widows), but as artisans who were wage-earners, or as traders, supplying a market.

The evidence examined above is sufficient to demonstrate that the "mystery and craft" of the silkwomen followed the usual practices of industry and trade at the time, although it was not recognized as a regular craft guild of the city. The women received apprentices and

¹ From wardrobe accounts throughout the century one or two women always stand out as supplying a greater quantity of goods than any others, but at the same time there are usually single items for one or more of their fellow-craftswomen. The practice of appointing one person to "the rowme or office of our sylkwoman," which happened later under Queen Mary, had not yet been adopted.

² P. and M. Rolls, A. 72/3, and her will, P.C.C., 32 Vox.

³ E.C.P., 64/1131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 301/32.

⁵ In the will of a mercer's widow, known from other sources to have been a silkwoman, are references to three female servants, one of whom was appointed executrix, and to "Margaret Taillour myn Apprentice," "Alice my Mayde," and a male servant who was to gather in her debts (P.C.C., 24 Milles). Another silkwoman of importance was Elizabeth Stokton, who was first the wife of John Stokton, mercer, mayor in 1471 and knighted in that year, and who afterwards married Gerard Caniziani, the wealthy Florentine merchant with whom she may have become acquainted through her dealings in silk.

employed workers; they undertook their own business transactions, and they were sufficiently organized among themselves to present petitions (as a body) concerning their work. Yet they have left little trace of the craft consciousness that is obvious in the guilds of male workers. They had no ordinances of their own, and there was apparently no strict attempt to keep up the standard of work among them. This absence of a definite guild may be due to two considerations. The work, being more of an art than a craft, could not be submitted to regulations directed towards standardization of quality and prices; and what was of greater importance, religious and social needs would be satisfied by the guilds or companies to which the husbands of these women belonged.

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