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**Review of Bellavitis, Anna (2017) Il lavoro delle
donne nelle città dell'Europa moderna**

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nomie al veel langer zwaar onder druk stond. Ik verwijs hierbij naar de eigentijdse publicaties van econoom Georges De Leener die aantonen dat de Belgische economie overvleugeld werd door Duitsers en Britten met een krimpend marktaandeel tot gevolg. De kartelvorming bewijst bovendien dat het geloof van de Belgische ondernemers in de vrije markt al vóór de Eerste Wereldoorlog ver te zoeken was.

Zeer belangrijk is dat Buyst en Smeyers het debat over de rol van de staat in de economie opentrekken naar het verleden en dat hun boek aanspoort tot verder onderzoek. Of ze het 'ideaalbeeld' van België (of Vlaanderen) als economische grootmacht en de almacht van een kleine economische elite, die huivert voor iedere vorm van staatsinterventie, verkocht zullen krijgen, is nog maar de vraag.

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Anna Bellavitis, *Il lavoro delle donne nelle città dell'Europa moderna*. (Rome: Viella, 2016). 247 p. ISBN 9788867286720.

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In 2016 Viella, one of Italy's most important publishing houses, published Anna Bellavitis' *Il lavoro delle donne nelle città dell'Europa moderna*. This book examines the often neglected issue of women's work in early modern European cities. Its main aim is to revise the erroneous (yet persistent) notion that women in the past only had a marginal presence on the labour market, if any at all. Based on the existing scholarship Bellavitis argues instead that women's labour force participation was omnipresent throughout early modern Europe. It was often formalized, official and regulated by laws. At times it was also clandestine and illegal, but it was always diffuse and oftentimes tolerated by the authorities because of its significance for the survival of its inhabitants.

To substantiate her argument, Bellavitis probes several important labour activities of the early modern period. These include silk work, tailoring, peddling, trade, domestic service, wet nursing, health care and prostitution, but also printing, music and science. In examining women's contributions to these fields, the book is careful not to draw absolutes. While some occupations were predominantly female, it is emphasized that there was no fixed gender division. For example, while women's activities in the manufacture of textiles are well-known to have been diffuse, many young as well as elderly men were very active as spinners in sixteenth-century Augsburg. The book also has abundant attention for ambiguities throughout time and space. The status of women's work within the textile industry is a good example of this. That women were increasingly active in silk work

in eighteenth-century Italian towns did not mean an increase of their esteem, but was above all related to merchants' desire to lower the costs of production.

Aside from work activities specifically, the rights of women are also examined in this book: from the access to property to schooling and access to roles of power in a labour context, in particular within the guild systems. An especially interesting aspect about this section is the emphasis on women's capacity to mould the often ambiguous norms and regulations to their own will, interpreting them in a way that suited themselves best. While heavily regulated for married women, legislature's silence on nubile women of age – viewed as an anomaly – for example enabled them to engage in trade and enter into contracts in eighteenth-century Tours. Similarly, women were also known to endow money and goods to other women, while this was officially only permitted between husband and wife. In a similar mode did the wills of Venetian artisans commonly designate spouses as heirs, while this was not according to the prescribed norms.

The most important contribution of this book is that it brings together so many scattered works on women's economic activities in different towns from England, Holland, Germany, France, Italy and Scandinavia. Particularly valuable in this context are Bellavitis' nuances regarding the differences between the North and the South of Europe. For example, contrary to what is commonly assumed, she contends that the relationship between the dowry system and a distinct pattern of labour participation is blurry. Importantly, she reminds us that many Italian girls from the lower and lower-middle classes actively contributed to their own dowry with their labour. Sometimes they had to work up to twenty years to scrape one together. Furthermore, the available labour participation rates for early modern Italian towns are comparable if not higher than those found in Northern Europe. For the early modern period, the North-South divide thus requires much more scrutiny.

All in all this book provides a much-needed and important synthesis of the scholarship on women's work in the early modern period. It succeeds particularly well in demonstrating the agency of women in navigating restrictions and opportunities in the field of work in a broader European context, characterized by a constant ebb and flow. The only very minor point of criticism concerns the reader's desire to learn more about spatial and regional specificities. How universal were women's labour experiences? How were they distinct? The book for example alludes to a deterioration of the status of women's work in the eighteenth century, but any real narrative of differentiation has remained outside of its scope. This book is nevertheless a highly recommended read. That a translation in English is in the making, will delight the many scholars that will benefit from this pivotal synthesis.

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