

Spinnen Out: Women's Work in Early Modern Textile Trades

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Abstract

The production of cloth was a vital aspect of the early modern economy. Women were involved in almost all stages of the process, both in unofficial capacities and sometimes as officially recognized or tolerated artisans. However, associations between women and unskilled labor and guild fear of economic competition led to both legal restrictions and social stigma around women's involvement in artisan textile work. This pushed more women into low-paying piecework, especially spinning. Spinning was the form of textile work women were most encouraged to do, or least restricted from. As one of the most common types of women's labor, it carried both positive connotations of diligence and the social stigmas that followed women as workers, such as anxieties around poverty, sexual immorality, and threats to the stability of male guilds. This essay investigates social attitudes towards women's textile work, followed by a creative component which examines the spinning process directly.

Textile work was a feature of many early modern girls' education. Schools frequently taught poor girls economically profitable trades, which often included textile work; at the end of the seventeenth century in France, hospitals and charity schools taught girls skills ranging from sewing and upholstery to embroidery and lacework.¹ Scholarships in Germany were established for girls "to be sent to school, and especially to learn to sew," and poor women taught spinning and sewing in their houses.² Informal education was also an incredibly common place for girls to learn textile trades. Artisan households in the textile industry often incorporated work by all members of the household, including daughters and maids, so domestic labor overlapped with craft.³

¹ Anna Bellavatis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Cleila Boscolo (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 178.

² Quoted in Merry Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 82 & 79.

³ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 89.

This overlap between domestic work and craft work often led to women being present throughout the textile trades in both official and unofficial capacities. In Germany, wives could get special permission to operate their shops without the husband if he was absent for some reason.⁴ If the craftsman died, however, the widow's ability to stay in business was tenuous: she could not hire new journeymen or pieceworkers, and if she was suspected of immoral behavior she could be denied the right to continue working.⁵ There were some forms of guild work where women were formally accepted; in France seamstress guilds developed, and in Germany gold spinning became a sworn craft with an official apprenticeship system for women.⁶

Generally, the formal acceptance of women workers in guilds was less common. The most common way that women were involved in guild work was through family connections such as a husband or a father. This came with some restrictions; masters' wives were expected to live an "honorable" life, and if they attempted to continue the business after their husbands died they were often restricted in the size of their shops or their ability to hire journeymen.⁷ Over time restrictions on women's involvement increased, and they were completely excluded from occupations such as weaving.⁸

Even unofficial guild work could be restricted to protect a guild's financial interests and prevent women workers from taking work to which the guilds and journeymen claimed a right. For example, when the wool weaving guild relied on supplemental income from spinning for the linen-weavers, they pushed regulations restricting the number of maids who could spin for linen-

⁴ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 154.

⁵ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 158.

⁶ For the seamstress guild, see Bellavatis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Europe*, 52. For the gold spinning, see Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 170.

⁷ Merry Wiesner, "Spinners and Seamstresses: Women in Cloth and Clothing Production," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 195-7.

⁸ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 172.

weavers to ensure that the job would remain available for the wool-weavers.⁹ This also applied to education; maids were not supposed to be taught knitting, which was seen as the work of guild members, though they were involved in carding and spinning.¹⁰

Justifications for the exclusion or restriction of women from trade work generally involved the protection of guild interests, as seen with the wool-weavers and knitters, as well as claims that women were unskilled workers, and thus would not meet the guilds' standards of quality. As Merry Wiesner identified in her study of German women's work, this led to a vicious cycle: women were associated with unskilled work, so any occupation women were involved in was devalued, and men sought to push women out of the trades to prevent their trades being devalued.¹¹

Perhaps the most constant textile work, and the work that women were least likely to be excluded from, was that of spinning. Spinning was vital to the textile economy—according to Merry Wiesner-Hanks, as many as twenty spinners were required to produce enough thread to properly supply a weaver.¹² It was seen as unskilled work which could be performed by pieceworkers, maids, and prisoners.¹³ There were some men who spun, such as the wool-weavers' guild discussed above, but when cases such as those happened, contemporaries described them as acting “as if they were women.”¹⁴

Spinning was generally not a well-paying profession. It was seen as an alternative to poor relief and was taught to children, but in many cases the wages from spinning were not enough to

⁹ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 167.

¹⁰ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 166.

¹¹ Wiesner, “Spinners and Seamstresses,” 204. For similar patterns in the Low Countries, see Susan Broomhall, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries: Feminizing Sources and Interpretations of the Past* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 63.

¹² Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 182.

¹³ Wiesner, “Spinners and Seamstresses,” 202.

¹⁴ Bellavatis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Europe*, 20-21.

keep the poor from needing relief.¹⁵ Even when demand for spinners was high, this did not necessarily improve their conditions. When the weavers' guild of Augsburg could not find enough women to spin, they responded not by raising pay for spinning but by complaining to the council until they placed legal restrictions on noncitizen women's ability to work, and when that failed, they had the council restrict all women's legal status within Augsburg.

Though its economic yield was low, spinning was a particularly common trade for women. In the Netherlands, spinning was seen as a useful tool for preventing idleness and sin; Dutch artists depicted upper-class women at spinning wheels to demonstrate their pious work ethic, though it was unlikely that they actually spun at all.¹⁶ However, as Cordula Grewe has argued, the association of spinning with diligence did not transfer to the women who actually spun for a living.¹⁷ Its status as unskilled work and subsequent association with poverty connected it to other jobs taken by poor women, and in particular with prostitution.¹⁸ In Germany, public spinning rooms called *Spinnstuben* provided space for women to spin together.¹⁹ This form of community was treated with suspicion by others, and a *Spinnstube* was seen as "a shelter of sin and lust, a hotbed of immorality" in artworks of the time.²⁰ The result of this negative association can be seen in Albrecht Dürer's engraving of *The Witch*: the image of the immoral woman carries a spindle and distaff (Figure 1).

¹⁵ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 184.

¹⁶ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 107-109.

¹⁷ Susan Broomhall, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries: Feminizing Sources and Interpretations of the Past* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 50.

¹⁸ Cordula Grewe, "Shaping Reality Through the Fictive: Images of Women Spinning in the Northern Renaissance," *Canadian Art Review* volume 19, number 1-2 (1992): 13.

¹⁹ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, 105.

²⁰ Grewe, "Shaping Reality Through the Fictive," 10.



Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, *The Witch*, engraving, ca. 1500, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/391139>.

It is difficult to know how the women who spun felt about their work. Few records survive detailing anything about their lives and fewer still record their voices. Still, what records we do have from spinners demonstrate a complex relationship with their work. Women often did not assume occupational identities, but spinning was the most common occupation women self-identified with, even when they also participated in other forms of work such as sewing.²¹ The

²¹ Bellavatis, *Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Europe*, 38.

Spinnstube appeared to form genuine communities of protection for the women working there. In the village of Laichengen, a man tried to hug a woman and broke her spindle as she resisted. When he refused to pay, the women in the *Spinnstube* beat him with their distaffs. At the later trial they said it was their “good right” and “they should have injured him even more.”²²

Still, women were also open about the insufficiency of their pay. When the weavers of Augsburg were scrambling to find women to spin for them, women were recorded saying that “they were not so dumb as to work as spin maids for the weavers when they could earn three times as much spinning on their own.”²³ One woman applying for support from her community said, “What little I make at spinning will not provide enough for even my bread.”²⁴

Creative Component: Spinning, Sewing, and Reflections on the meaning of “unskilled work”

After reflecting on the importance of spinning in early modern women's work, I decided that the creative portion of this essay would be to spin fiber and embroider the results into a depiction of a spinning wheel. This would allow me to both create an artistic product and to incorporate the work of spinning, providing some insight into the process. It is important to acknowledge that, though spinning was an immensely time-consuming part of the textile process, it was far from the only one. A significant amount of work needed to be done to prepare fiber for spinning in the first place.

The steps of early modern wool processing were iconically depicted in Isaac Claesz van Swanenburg's *Old and New Trades* series. The wool was sheared from sheep, washed, carded, and dyed. Van Swanenburg's series shows men and women working side by side for many of

²² Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, 128.

²³ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 176.

²⁴ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 184.

these steps; the preparation of wool appears to be mostly dominated by men, but it is notable that even in male-dominated scenes van Swanenburg often includes some women.²⁵



Figure 2. Isaac Claesz. van Swanenburg, *Het wassen van de vachten en het sorten van de vol*, painting, 1594-96, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, <https://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/collectie/s-419>. This depicts the washing and sorting of wool.



Figure 3. Isaac Claesz. van Swanenburg, *Het ploten en kammen*, painting, 1594-96, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, <https://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/collectie/s-420>. This depicts workers shearing sheep, beating wool to remove dirt, sprinkling with oil, combing, and hanging it to dry.²⁶

²⁵ As Susan Broomhall has argued, van Swanenburg's art style tends toward androgyny in its figures, and without the gendered signifiers of clothing it is occasionally difficult to identify his characters within the binary. See Broomhall, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries*, 66.

²⁶ Broomhall, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries*, 55.



Figure 4. Isaac Claesz. van Swanenburg, *Het Spinnen, het scheren van de ketting en het weven*, painting, 1594-96, Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden, <https://www.lakenhal.nl/en/collection/s-421>.

Early modern artwork demonstrates that the most common forms of spinning were with either a spinning wheel or a spindle and distaff. Spinning wheels were commonly used throughout early modern Europe (Figure 4). In Germany, women at the most abject levels of poverty were allowed to keep their spinning wheels even when everything else had to be sold.²⁷ Without a wheel, fiber could still be spun by hand using a spindle. Artistic depictions of spindles usually look similar to the above image of St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Figure 5. The distaff, which holds the unspun fiber, is held on a long staff, and the spindle has a small whorl, or weight, at the base. I do not have a spinning wheel, so I spun by hand using a spindle with the whorl at the top (Figure 9).

²⁷ Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 182.



Figure 5 (with detail). Hans Burgkmair the Elder, *St. Elizabeth of Hungary Spinning*, woodcut print, 1510, The British Museum, London, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1854-1211-130. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) licence.

For this project, I based the majority of the spinning wheel's design off of the Quirijn van Brekelenkam painting *The Spinner* (Figure 6), since it depicts the wheel without visual obstruction. I combined the overall shape of that spinning wheel with the distaff portion of Hendrick Goltzius' *Lucretia and Her Women Spinning* (Figure 7) and artistic flourishes inspired by a seventeenth-century German sampler in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 8).

The process of spinning is relatively simple in concept but very finicky in practice. Since I had received lessons from a fiber artist and have practiced on and off at renaissance fairs for the past two years, I was consistently able to turn the loose wool and silk into thinner strands of yarn. However, the consistency of the yarn fluctuated significantly as I worked. This affected the quality of the final embroidery; the thickness of the lines varied with the yarn, making it difficult to create balanced linework. In more extreme cases, an uneven thickness could cause the thread to break. Other factors, such as the speed and angle at which the spindle was spun, could also impact the quality of the thread; at multiple points I twisted my spindle wrong and dropped it entirely or caused it to get tangled with the rest of the fiber. Spinning is a repetitive task, but it is not one that can be done inattentively. This is especially true if one wanted to make thread that could be woven into a cloth fine enough to gather into ruffles as seen in the fashion of the Low Countries (Figure 2-4).

Conclusion

Women's work was essential to the early modern textile industry in a myriad of ways; wives and daughters provided unofficial labor for guild masters, spinners worked for often inadequate wages, and when they were not legally restricted women participated in other textile professions such as weaving and tailoring. However, the organized structures of the early modern economy frequently used biases against women to protect their own interests; guild members restricted women's ability to work to ensure their own job security, and while women were pushed into spinning as a major occupation it held associations with poverty, prostitution and witchcraft. Though spinning was treated as unskilled work in the early modern economy, it

is a task that requires significant awareness of the fiber's properties to ensure a consistent product. Women's labor in the textile industries was devalued even while it was vital.



Figure 6. Quirijn van Brekelenkam, *The Spinner*, oil painting on wood, 1653, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435771>.



Figure 7. Hendrick Goltzius. *Lucretia and Her Women Spinning*, engraving, 1578-79, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336753>.



Figure 8 (with detail). Artist unknown. *Sampler*, silk on linen embroidery, 1661, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70240/sampler-unknown/>.



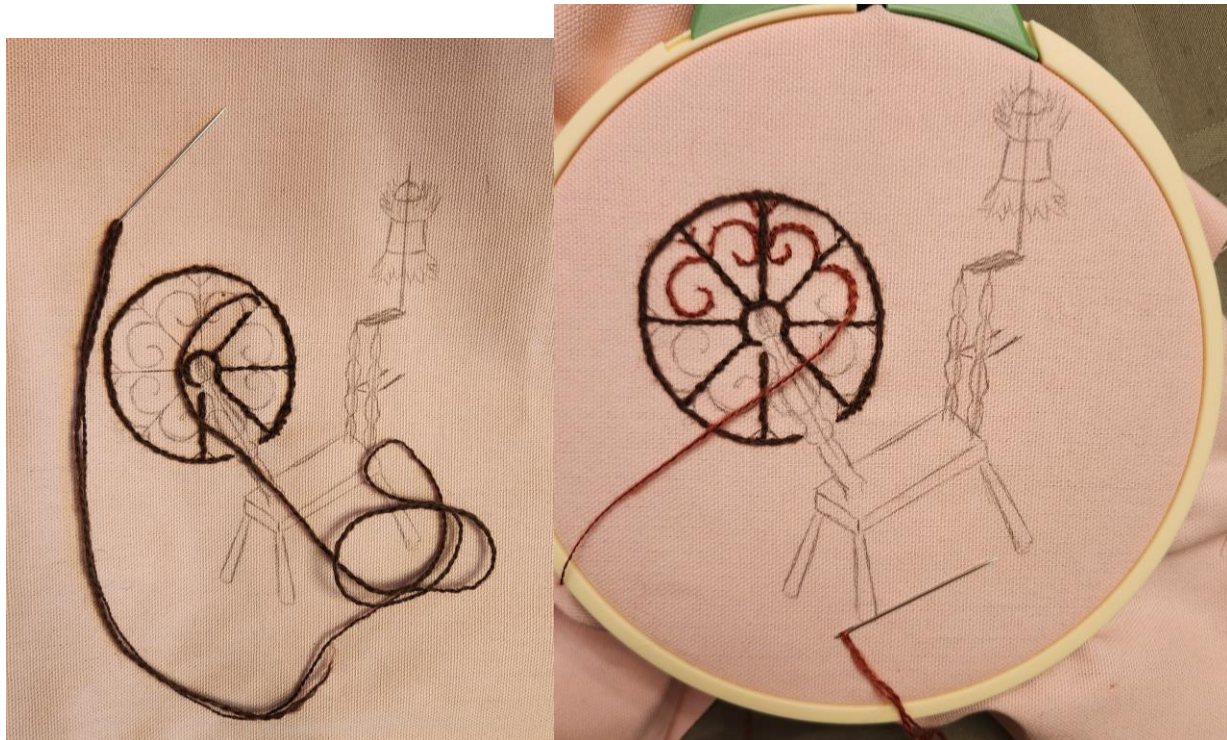
Figure 9. Photograph by author. Drop spindle with wool yarn. Note the whorl at the top of the spindle which the yarn is wound around.



Figure 10. Photograph by author. Unspun wool fiber next to a small ball of spun yarn.



Figure 11. Unspun silk fiber next to a small ball of silk thread. Note the visible inconsistency in the thickness of the silk thread.



Figures 12-13. Photograph by author. In-progress embroidery of the spinning wheel. Note the fluctuations of the lines, particularly in the circle of the wheel itself.



Figure 14. Photograph by author. Finished embroidery.

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