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THE IMPACT OF SINGLE WOMEN ON THE EARLY MODERN ECONOMY

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Historians have shown that women are generally more accepted as workers within thriving economic environments. This is particularly true of eighteenth-century Europe, a time of economic transition, expansion and social flux. Historians have indicated a rise of never-married women in eighteenth-century towns and cities, but our knowledge of women's specific roles and contributions during this time of economic expansion remains slim.

My research examined and compared tax records from the parish of St. Philibert in Dijon, France between 1730 and 1750. An examination of the tax records allows historians one indication of the overall economic contribution of individual householders within specific neighborhoods. By comparing the sheer numbers of single and widowed women, and their professions, tax assessments, and living arrangements, historians can suggest a pattern of women's economic involvement over time. This research serves not only as a way to verify and delineate the suggestions of other historians about the potential roles of women in the eighteenth-century urban economies, but also provides an opportunity to discover what life was like for the single, never-married, and widowed women of early modern Dijon.

Single Women and the Early Modern Economy: The Example of Eighteenth-Century Dijon, France

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Until recently, women's roles in the early modern economy were either ignored by scholars or categorized as a part of the male economic contributions. As scholars have turned their attention toward feminist, economic and social history, they have discovered that women had an important impact on many aspects of society. But not all research into woman's impact on the economy has derived the same results. As Judith Coffin noted, "Studies of female labor in early modern Europe have created a contradictory picture. Alice Clark's classic study of the economic marginalization of English women in the seventeenth century has long served as a point of departure, focusing historians' attention on the processes and structures by which women were integrated into and excluded from economic activities."[1] Researchers have since found that women have had a greater impact on the economy than Alice Clark had originally proposed.[2]

However, this economic impact was not uniform throughout Europe. Legal traditions concerning inheritance, for example, influenced economic patterns. In southern

[1] Judith G. Coffin, "Gender and the Guild Order: The Garment Trades in Eighteenth-Century Paris." *The Journal of Economic History,* 54 (1994): 769; Alice Clark, *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century,* rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1992).

[2] Coffin; James B. Collins, "The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth –Century France" *French Historical Studies* 16 (Autumn 1989): 1-16; Maryanne Kowalski, "Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic Perspective" in *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250-1800,* ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, 38-81 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

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Europe, Roman law was influential. This meant that there was an emphasis on the extended family and agriculture and therefore less single women living by themselves. Moving north and west, particularly in England and northern France, where customary law and partible inheritance was more influential, there was an emphasis on industry and the nuclear family. It has also been noted that female participation increased in societies that moved toward industrialization; these societies were more often found in the north and west of Europe. This legal and economic model lead to increased mobility, and meant that there were more opportunities for women away from the home. Therefore it is not surprising that in the customary law areas, one can find a greater number of single women impacting the economy.

Our research on tax records from Dijon, France between 1730 and 1750 contributes to the historical understanding of women's economic and social roles in two important ways. First, the research shows that single women were an important, and increasing part of the eighteenth-century economy. Second, the research shows that women's lives were not wholly focused upon the traditional family unit. Women participated in a number of other living arrangements that have previously been ignored by historians.

The city of Dijon is a particularly interesting area for study because of its central location, both within Europe and France. Dijon's status as a vital urban market with a large number of service industries that catered to the provincial ruling classes created an increased demand for services and goods. The city's industries provided diverse opportunities. This led to an increase in women in the economy. James Farr stated that "developed urban market economies . . . [such as Dijon] . . . provided opportunities for

wage work, often piecework, which enabled single women to attain a degree of economic autonomy."[3] While it is very difficult to guess the exact population of Dijon for any particular year in the eighteenth century, Farr estimated the population at about 24,000 by 1750.[4] No census exists for France before the French Revolution of 1789, so tax rolls are the best way to estimate demographics, even though they exclude the very rich and the extremely destitute.

The tax (*taille*) records from 1730 and 1750 for the Parish of St. Philibert served as our main focus of study.[5] The tax records listed the head of household, the street of the household, the profession of the head of household, and the tax burden. If women are recorded as heads of households, the records also reveal their marital status. Early modern parishes acted not only as religious groupings, but also as political, legal and economic jurisdictions. In this period, the Parish of St. Philibert was one of the poorest areas within Dijon. Not only did it have the largest sample group, but also a great variety of tax burdens and professions. In 1750, the Saint Philibert parish's *taille* records listed tax burdens ranging from 110 *livres* to 10 *sous*. The parish laid close to the city wall, and indeed some of the listings for streets and areas, were just outside the city walls. This means that there was not only an urban trade influence on this parish, but also a rural influence. As an important part of Dijon and because of its individual characteristics,

[3] James R. Farr, "Consumers and Commerce and the Craftsmen of Dijon: The Changing Social and Economic Structure of a Provincial Capital, 1450-1750," in *Cities and Social Change in Early Modern France*, ed. Philip Benedict (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1989), 160.
[4] Farr, 137.
[5] Rolle des tailles de la paroisse Saint Philibert (1730), Archives municipales de Dijon (hereafter cited as AMD), L 279; Rolle des tailles de la paroisse Saint Philibert (1750), AMD, L 288.

Saint Philibert Parish creates an interesting sample for examining women's influence on the economy in the eighteenth century.

Although women's contributions to the early modern economy have only recently garnered much attention by historians, tax records can reveal important information about women's lives. Tax records reveal women as heads of households, for example, and while no ages are given in the records, we can surmise that many of the widows were elderly.[6] Women and the elderly are groups that were traditionally viewed as not very important parts of the economy. As Amy Froid stated, "scholars have characterized old age as a period of dependency--a decline into a second childhood, when the elderly become dependant upon their families, communities or the state for practical or material assistance--old age for some single women could be rather different."[7]

The women found in Saint Philibert's tax records were predominantly single, and usually widowed. Some of these widows, such as La Veuve Claude Thorey, who was assessed 57 *livres* in 1750, earned a substantial living and could contribute to charities rather than receive from them.[8] However most of the widows were poor, earning below the average of their male counterparts. While the image of the destitute widow is not entirely correct, neither is it wholly incorrect.

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[6] The records also identified some widows as *la Demoiselle Veuve*, rather than *Veuve*. This could indicate a division between those widows who were younger and those that were much older. As there were fewer widows listed as *la Demoiselle Veuve*, and the purposes of this study is to look at single women regardless of age, they are identified as widows.

[7] Amy Froide. "Old Maids; the Lifecycle of Single Women in Early Modern England" in *Women and Aging in British Society since 1500*, ed. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, 89-110 (New York: Pearson Education Ltd., 2001), 94.

[8] AMD, L288, f.63v.

Between 1730 and 1750 there was a distinct increase in the number of female heads of households who participated in the economy. This can be seen by examining the taxation of the women against the total taxation of the St Philibert parish [See Tables 1.1. and 1.2]. In 1730 women represented 22.5 percent of the St. Philibert heads of households (N = 173 of 769) and 18 percent of the tax burden (835 *livres* of the total 4625 *livres*). In 1750, women heads of households represented 29.4 percent of the heads of St. Philibert (N = 224 of 762) and 24.8 percent of the tax burden (1624 *livres* of the total 6542 *livres*). This means that not only were more women directly participating in the 1750 economy, but they were also taking on greater percentages of the tax burden.

To properly extrapolate if this sample indicated a trend, rather than an effect of particular circumstances, one would need to compare this data with a third year. We can use the work of James Farr as a reference to compare the data. In his research based on the entire city, he found that in 1464 there were 222 single female heads of households represented, and in 1643 there were 703 single female heads of households, which shows a definite increase of female participation within the economy.[9] The raw numbers make it difficult to discern an increasing percentage of women in the economy versus an increase in the population. But compared with our data, it seems evident that there was a steadily rising number of women who were listed as heads of households. It is clear that the trend of increasing numbers of women listed as heads of households and participating in the economy occurred throughout the early modern period.

We also saw a change over time by examining the number of female heads of households by profession. In order explore to this change we first separated the males and

[9] Farr, 158.

females, and then sorted them by profession and tax. We found that not all males and females were identified with professions. In 1730 women represented only 14 percent of all heads of households identified with professions.[10] They also represented 10 percent of all artisans (N=36 of 346), 10 percent of textile workers (N=5 of 49) and 28.2 percent of all traders (N=11 of 39 traders).[11] In 1750 women represented 18.5 percent of the heads of households who were identified with professions and 12.2 percent of all artisans (N=42 of 344 artisans), 42.9 percent of all textile workers (N=21 of 49 textile workers) and 49 percent of all traders (N=20 of 41 traders). An increase of women in craftwork could indicate either guilds allowing more single women or more women participating without guild membership. The increase of women listed with a profession could indicate either an increase of women participation in the economy, or the better records thereof.

Tax records also reveal the demographic trends. As usually only the head of a household was listed, the true number of people that lived at a residence is difficult to derive from the records. Occasionally, tax officials listed two or more people, each a head of economic household, who lived together. However, these figures often provide demographers the only clue to household structure. Demographics are important because they can help historians understand family and social life by more clearly.

Scholars who have studied female demographics in the early modern period have noted a trend called 'spinster-clustering'. This is a situation where never-married women

[10] This excludes all male and female heads of households who were listed with no profession. More women were listed without a profession. In 1730, 532 men were listed with a profession whereas only 96 women were listed with a profession. In 1750 486 men were listed with professions whereas 137 women were noted with one. Those not listed with a profession had an average tax burden of 6.25 *livres* and 5.606 for men.
[11] See 1.3 for lists professions within the categories of artisans, traders and textile workers.

or widows would choose to live with one another in order to better support themselves. Sharing rent, cooking and cleaning duties allowed poorer women to more easily afford to live. One such example was that of the widows Cottegrain and Ricton.[12] These women would have had very little money, and would probably not have been able to afford life without a roommate. Often these women would work in the same or similar professions.[13] In order to look for potential clusters, we looked at both the profession and tax burden when two or more individuals lived next to one another, with similar or the exact same tax burden are likely clusters. Family members and the very poor are the most likely to cluster. Clustering shows that the early modern society did not rigidly exclude non-familial households.

Spinster clustering is, however, not the only form of economic household that can be found in eighteenth century Dijon. There are also examples of men and women who were not related or married coming together to create a household. The clearest example can be found in a 1730 record. Gabriel Lebenet and Widow Mongeot, were marked in the *taille* as living together. While the *taille* rolls would occasionally include a reference to someone living with their neighbor, in this singular case both of them are given a separate line, but then bracketed together and charged only once. Their professions, a laundress and a manservant, are dissimilar enough to assume that it was not their occupations, that brought them together. This example of a male and female living together is a good example of how early modern households were more flexible than previously accorded.

[12] AMD L 279, F. 55 v.
[13] Kowalski, "Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," 38-81.

There are a number of good examples of men and women who lived together without being married. In 1730, the parish of St Philibert had 14 definite female clusters, 2 related male/female clusters, and 6 non-related male/female clusters. These numbers changed in 1750. While females-only clusters remained at 14, the related male/female increased to 4 and non-related male/female clusters decreased to 4. Again without a third year it is difficult to track if this was a trend or a coincidence. The numbers show that clustering and living outside of family was a significant aspect of early modern life.[14]

Non-related male/female clusters perhaps formed out of love or, more likely, economic necessity. Economic necessity could cover a number of situations, such as each member being too poor to be able to live alone. Another, and somewhat more interesting possibility, relates to the gendering of jobs. As some demographers have noted, widows would often reside with sons, whereas widowers would reside with single daughters. Thus the man could have better access to money, while the woman could perform other domestic duties.[15] Similar gender structures undoubtedly were at work in the construction of non-related male/female households. One extraordinary example from 1750 is that of a group of three men and at least two women who create an economic household.[16] The widows Sousselier, sisters-in-law who lived with their dead husbands' business partners, had access to the *Tanneur* (leatherworker) profession, and the men had women to look after the household.

Ruth Karras has written on the place of female, and particularly single-woman's sexuality in the early modern era. She noted that single women who lived alone were

[14] There are also examples of male-only clusters within the records.
[15] Kowalski, "Singlewomen in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Demographic Perspective," 38-81.
[16] AMD, L 288, f. 71v.

likely to be viewed as "meretrix" or whores. This term was not strictly used for professional prostitutes.[17] In a society where moral crimes were still punished by law, it is amazing that women would choose to live with men that they are unrelated to, risking censure and fines. However the evidence shows that this did occur. Perhaps it means that society was not as stringent upon the moral crimes as the statutes might lead historians to believe, or that economic necessity might outweigh the moral strictures.

With the surge of research since the 1970s on the position of women in history, historians have discovered that women were indeed more influential than previously believed. The parish of St. Philibert lends support to the historians who have stated that single women became an important force in economies that were moving toward industrialization. One cannot, based on two samples, prove a trend of increasing female participation in the Dijon's economy. However, when paired with the research of James Farr that looked at the whole city, one can see the trend of increasing female participation. In St. Philibert there was also an increase in the percentage of female artisans, textile workers and traders between 1730 and 1750. Evidence from this parish has not only supported historians' views on women in the economy, but new demographic findings. Spinster clustering is a trend that has been supported by numerous examples within the taille records. Another, more exciting, trend that can be found is that of non-related male/female clustering. This means that the people of early modern Dijon aligned their households not just along familial lines, but also along economic ones.

[17] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Sex and the Singlewoman" in *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250-1800*, 127-145.

Table 1.1 – All heads of Households in Dijon in 1730 and 1750

Year	1730	1750
Average Tax Burden	6.85	9.06
Median	4	6
Number of heads of households	769	762

Table 1.2 – Female heads of Households in 1730 and 1750

Year	1730	1750
Average Tax Burden	6.095	7.283
Median	4	3
Number of head of Households	173	224

Table1.3 – Lists of Professions

Artisan- *Baigneuse, Boulanger, Bourrelier, Cabatier, Cadet tanneur, Camionnieur, Carreleur, Chamoiseur, Charbonnier, Charcutier, Charon, Charpentier, Chaudronnier, Compagnon Blanchisseur, Compagnon Boulanger, Compagnon chamoiser, Compagnon Charon, Compagnon charpentier, Compagnon Cordonnier, Compagnon Corroyeur, Compagnon Couvreur, Compagnon Fayancier, Compagnon huillier, Compagnon Menusier, Compagnon Savatier, Compagnon serruier, Compagnon taillandieur, Compagnon Tallandier, Compagnon tanneur, Compagnon Tissier, Compagnon tonnalier, Compagnon vinigrier, Conroyer, Cordonnier, Corroyeur, Cuisenier, Epissier, Fayanciere, Ferreur, Garcon Charpentier, Garçon cordier, Garçon jardinnier, Huillier, Marchand de Poisson, Marchand Fermeir, Maitre, Maitre de bois, Maitre de betail, Maitre de chaveaux, Maitre de Fer, Maitre de poisson, Maitre de vin, Maitre d'Ecolle, Maitre de compter, Man et chasseur, Manonrais, Manouvrier, Masson, Menusier, Mesureur, Orfevre, Papetier, Patissier, Peintre, Perruquier, Platrier, Poissonniere, Sculpteur, Sellier, Serruier, Taillandier, Tainturier, Tanneur, Tissier, Tombelier, Tonnalier, Vigneron, Vinaigrer*

Textile Workers- *Bonnetier, Brodeuse, Cardeur de laine, Compagnon drapier, Compagnon taillier d'habits, Cordier, Coutriere, Drapier, Fileur du laine, Laine tanneur, Mercier, Tailleur de corps, Tailleur de pierres, Tailleur d'habits, Tricoteuse*

Traders- *Blanchesseur, Bourgeois, Entrepeneaur, Fruitiere, Lauandiere, Laveuse de lessive, Louer de chauaux, Revendeusse, Vendant vin, Vendant de Tabac, Vendeuse de fruits, Vendeuse d'huille, Vivandier*

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