

Literacies of Late Modern English Lower-class Women

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Prior to the Education Act of 1870, literacy in England was socially stratified (Schofield 1973; Sanderson 1983). While children from wealthier families typically received private tuition at home and in grammar schools, poorer children were succinctly educated in a range of institutions, including charity schools, Sunday schools, factory schools, and church schools (Fulton and Hind 1997). From a sociohistorical and sociolinguistic perspective, there has been a good amount of focus on the education of the different social classes (Simon 1970; Labov 1972; Sanderson 1972; Steinbach 2005; Lawson and Silver 2013). Nevertheless, working-class women—often associated with low literacy levels and underpaid occupations—have received comparatively less scholarly attention (Simonton 2000). This presentation addresses this gap, starting with a general overview of ‘literacies’ in Late Modern England, followed by an examination of the educational opportunities and employment prospects of working-class girls and women during this period. A case study on embroidered samplers will then be presented, demonstrating their importance in the acquisition of ‘written’ language and their broader significance for female literacy, employability, and professional development (Sebba 1979; Parker 2019).

This presentation aims to offer fresh insights into the concept of literacy within its historical context, emphasising the role that embroidered samplers played for Late Modern English lower-class women. Particular focus will be placed on how these artefacts might have enabled lower-class women to acquire or maintain literacy skills and progress within their professional activities.

References

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