Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

J. A. RAFTIS—*A Small Town in Late Medieval England. Godmanchester, 1278-1400*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982. Pp. xii, 479.

Godmanchester in 1300 was a small town of 3,000 souls situated where the river Ouse was bridged at its lowest point, sixty-five miles northeast of London. This book sets out "to understand" it in terms of the "life cycle organization and economic roles" (pp. 143, 147) of 1,366 families which have been reconstituted from the 6,000 individuals whose names appear on its manor court rolls between 1278 and 1400. Two institutions, custom and the family, are central to the analysis. Little that was important seems to have escaped their pervasive influence: property arrangements, and hence family structures, were affected through customary practices (among them, dower, dowry, gifts, sales and inheritance); structures of local government were helped in keeping abreast of the "new clerical and economic expertise" of the period by the "powerful resiliency of customary family organization" (p. 85); the pattern of large and small tenants was to a large extent the result of the "family spread of property" (p. 97). But if the social structure of the town can "be described in terms of families" (p. 201), the fate of the family itself was determined by "the whimsical pattern of family replacement rates" (p. 202), which were beyond the control of human agency. Alongside these broad propositions, the book presents details as important as they are arresting: mothers, using the convention of gifts to endow daughters with property; townsmen, adopting strategies designed both to keep a complement of clergy at their service and curb their notorious acquisitiveness; or the author, attempting to calculate the amount of "gross new capital per year" (£2000) that Godmanchester produced in 1300. A significant amount of the book is taken up with a table listing the individuals of the town as they have been arranged into families. Over everything a clear vision prevails of a community where the (better-off) townsmen, cleaving with skill and ingenuity to family and custom, achieved self-government at their own behest.

Few studies have penetrated more deeply than this one into the form-creating capacities of median groups in society. As a result, its analytical methods take on a general interest. The book may be said to address the broader problem of how to discover the role of less-lettered or unlettered members of a society in which élites dominate the instruments of written expression. Raftis adopts two general, if implicit, rules of procedure with respect to this problem: first, a group's role should, if possible, be described in terms of the actions of the group itself; secondly, the most appropriate ways of interpreting these actions are derived from concepts that relate directly to them. Concepts which are connected to activities only indirectly through the relationship of both to a general theory of historical development fare badly here. The *de facto* rules that have been used so effectively amount to a modern version of Occam's razor, with their preference for direct over derived relationships, for concrete over abstract analytical categories. At a time when so much of the best thinking and writing in social history

depends on abstract and universal categories of analysis formulated by the social sciences, this challenge must be welcomed.

The author is, however, less convincing in his strictures against the approaches he rejects than he is in his use of those he has chosen. Evidence in the book itself raises questions about the wisdom of dismissing several of the more abstract analytical concepts. Specifically, although the author repeatedly notes the existence in Godmanchester both of considerable occupational specialization and of wide disparities in wealth, he nevertheless rules out the "liberal" theory of "division of labour" and the "marxist doctrine of exploitation of surplus labour" (p. 180) as being irrelevant to the explanation of the town's development. Or, in a similar vein, he suggests that labourers were both numerous and important to the town's economy; but, despite the absence of meaningful records concerning them—surely itself a fact of great significance—he rejects "such hidebound heritages of nineteenth-century thought as theories of exploitation" (p. 189). It would appear that the very success of his method in revealing the social roles of the town's propertied families has led Raftis to treat the method, and the groups about whom it tells so much, as normative for the town as a whole. This attitude would appear to explain as well some of the questions which are asked—"Were the people of Godmanchester content with their local government?" (p. 7); and some of the conclusions which are formulated—Godmanchester's welfare costs were absorbed by "the immediate circle of those involved" (p. 232), the family. In these sentences the poor and the unpropertied have disappeared from view.

To conclude, this study contains much that is of interest to any student of medieval society. But its importance transcends these things, to be found in how it addresses the fundamental problem of measuring historical causes and influences. Impressive where it succeeds, the book remains instructive even where it fails.

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DEBORAH GORHAM—*The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal.* London: Croom Helm, 1982. Pp. 223.

When historians began to investigate the position of middle-class women the picture that emerged was one of the "perfect lady", confined to the private sphere of home and family, submissive and essentially idle. Such an analysis was soon perceived to pose problems. First, the gap between prescription and behaviour: perfect ladyhood may have been an ideal, but how far was it accepted by middle-class women? Second, even if the ideal was widely accepted, how many middle-class families had the financial resources to hire the large number of servants to translate it into reality? Patricia Branca's wholly revisionist thesis has gone so far as to suggest that the behaviour of Victorian women of the "lower" middle class in no way reflected idealized perfect ladyhood. Branca has portrayed these women as busy housewives, asserting control over their lives (and in particular over their health), albeit within the confines of the private sphere.

Yet in distinguishing sex from gender, feminist analysis has insisted at every turn that biological female and male human beings become women and