

Women's Work



Evidence for Women's Participation in Guilds and Trades in High
Medieval York

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Read More

- Class handout (digital) is an abbreviated version of the full paper -- feel free to follow along on a device during class
- If you're into it, the full paper is on my blog at www.medievalyork.com in the "files" section.
- If you want a copy of this slideshow, talk to me
 - If you'd like me to teach this class at an event, talk to me

Women as Workers Generally

- Medieval women worked and earned wages
 - Often restricted to low status / low wage work
 - Laundry, spinning, brewing*, sex-work
 - Lower wages than men for the same work

*By the 16th century, brewing was no longer done on a small scale by women but on a large scale by men; female brewers did not create guilds, but as men “took over” brewing they incorporated into guilds that barred women from entry. Judith Bennett has written about this extensively.



Holkham Bible Picture Book
(England, second quarter of the 14th century)
British Library Add MS 47682

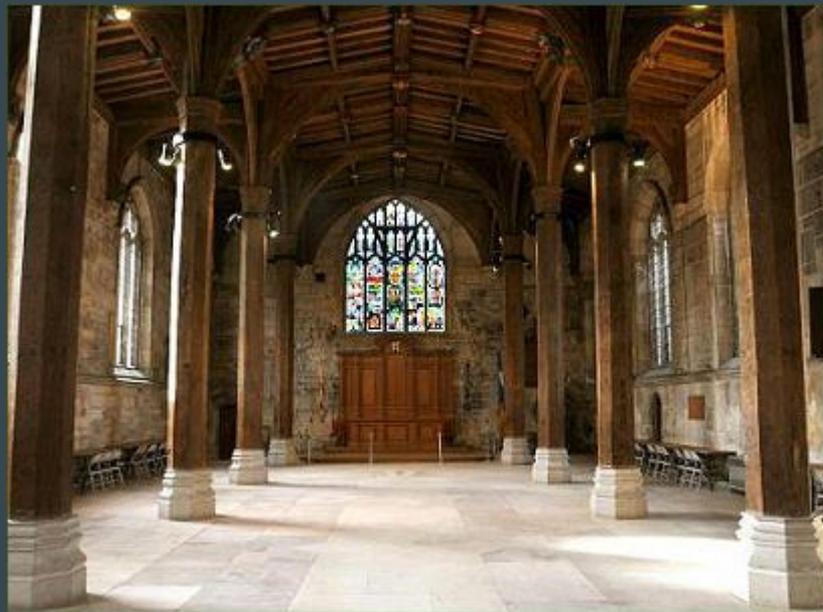
Women as Workers Generally



- Narrow definition of “work”
- Rights varied by time and place - my interest is England
 - London “femme soles”
 - Registered with mayor
 - Right to trade goods, own and sell land, bequeath property, make civil suits
 - Married women could obtain
- Many women worked alongside fathers and husbands
 - Integral to the economy even if unpaid

Guilds

- Guilds and cities grew together - starting ~12th century
 - Increasing urbanization
 - Growth of trade, economies
- Guilds were powerful, organized, and heavily regulated
 - Kept detailed records of members
 - The rolls of the Freemen of York happen to have been archived online



Reconstructed guildhall, York

Women in Guilds?

- Overall, evidence for women in guilds is scant
 - Women are recorded by marital status, not occupation
 - Some exceptions -- silkworkers in France, Italy
 - Evidence for women as apprentices from medieval London:
 - Court records: ~40 cases relating to female apprentices, >200 dealing with male apprentices
 - Early 14th c guild record: 253 people gain “the freedom of the city” through apprenticeship, 0 women.



What about widows?

- Some widows took over husband's trade -- BUT not as rosy a picture as some believe
 - Limited to certain trades: victualling, textiles/apparel
 - Trades already more likely open to women, work not restricted to guild members
 - Tiny minority of guild members, did not have full voting rights
 - Lost guild status upon remarriage
 - In wills, more likely to be left properties for income rather than business
 - Occasionally held business for male heir
- Charity



14th Century Upheaval

- Examined records from the reigns of Edward I, Edward II, and Edward III
 - 1272-1377 (earliest rolls from the Freemen of York)
 - Period of HUGE transitions!
 - Major expansion of guilds, rise of craftsmen
 - Famines during early 14th c
 - Black Death
 - Wages up, more people engaged in wage-work
 - We can see the seeds of our modern world

Purpose

- I wanted to find out:
 - Were women able to gain guild membership in York?
 - Searched for female names
 - What, if any, patterns can I find?
 - Did women hold certain occupations?
 - Did women's ability to gain guild membership fluctuate in correlation with major events (famines, Black Death)?

Findings:

Across the 105 years of records examined, a total of 6,152 names were recorded. Of these, 46 can be positively identified as female; female names represent less than 1% of the total names recorded (0.75%).

Findings:

Reign	Duration of Reign (in years) (Y)	Total Recorded Names (T)	Female names (N)	% Female (N/T * 100)	Average total names per year of reign (T/Y)	Average female names per year of reign (N/Y)
Edward I	35	818	4	0.49	23.4	0.11
Edward II	20	986	17	1.72	49.3	0.85
Edward III	50	4348	25	0.57	86.96	0.5
Total:	105	6152	46	0.75	58.6	0.44

Table 1: Calculations and Comparisons of Names per Year and Percentage of Female Names

Findings:

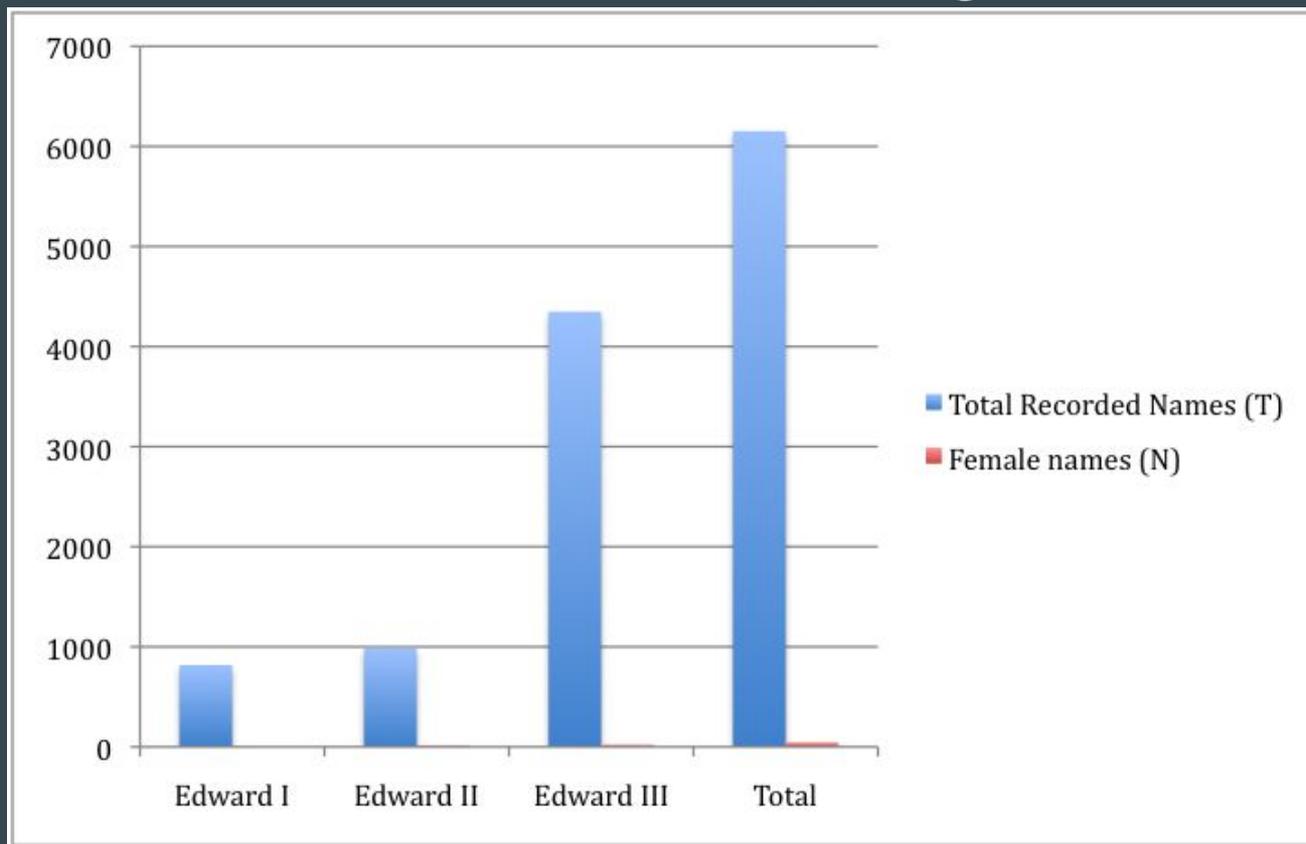
For men:	Unknown	Out of	Percentage
Ed I	304	812	37.4
Ed II	221	965	22.9
Ed III	453	4317	10.5
Total	978	6094	16.0

Table 2: Percentage of Men with Unspecified Occupations; compare orange highlighted values.

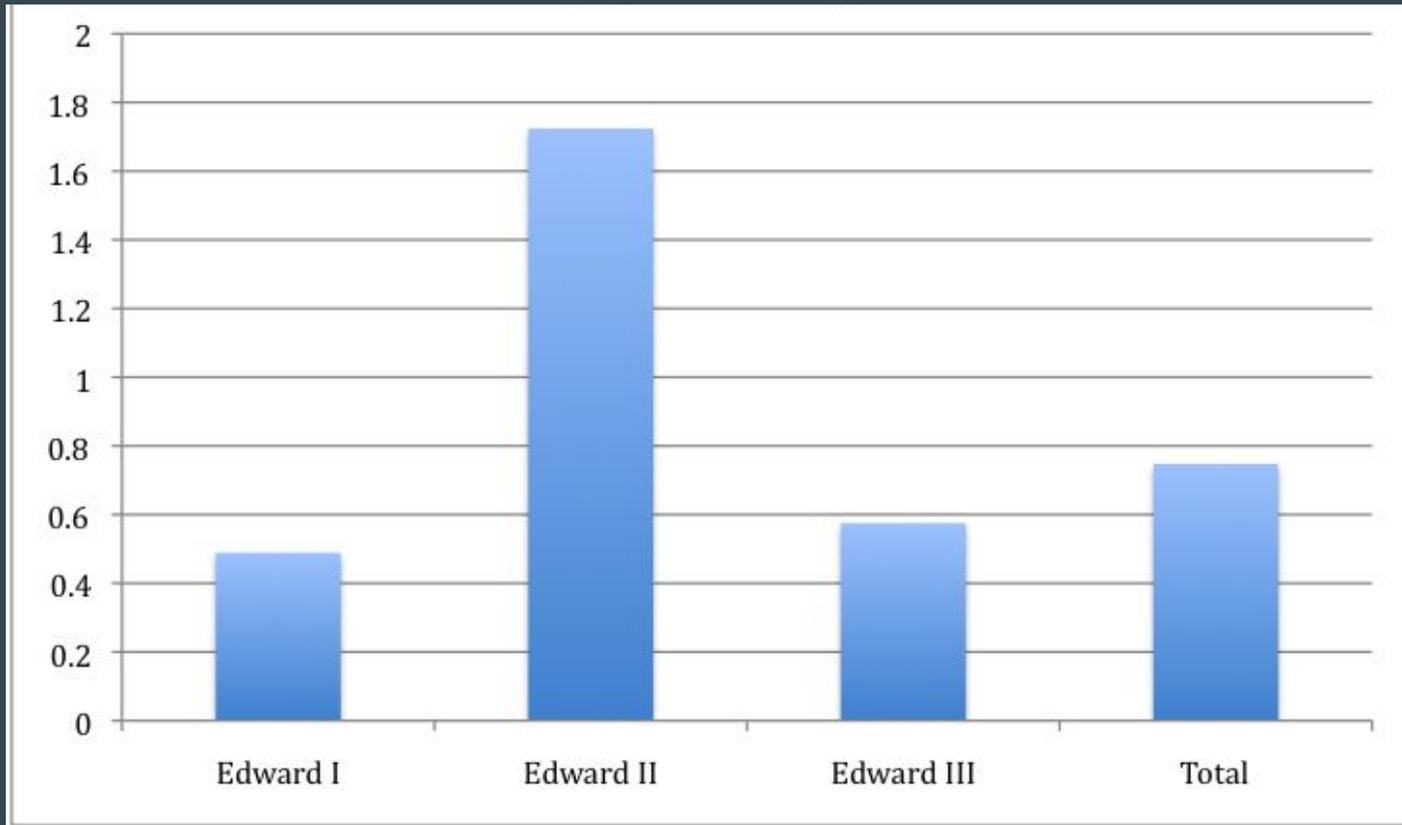
Occupation	Number	Percentage
Unknown	34	75.6
Brewer	2	4.4
Mason*	1	2.2
Merchant	1	2.2
baker	1	2.2
glover	1	2.2
pelter	1	2.2
spicer	1	2.2
cloth seller	3	6.7
Total:	45	100

Table 3: Occupations of All Women in the Register

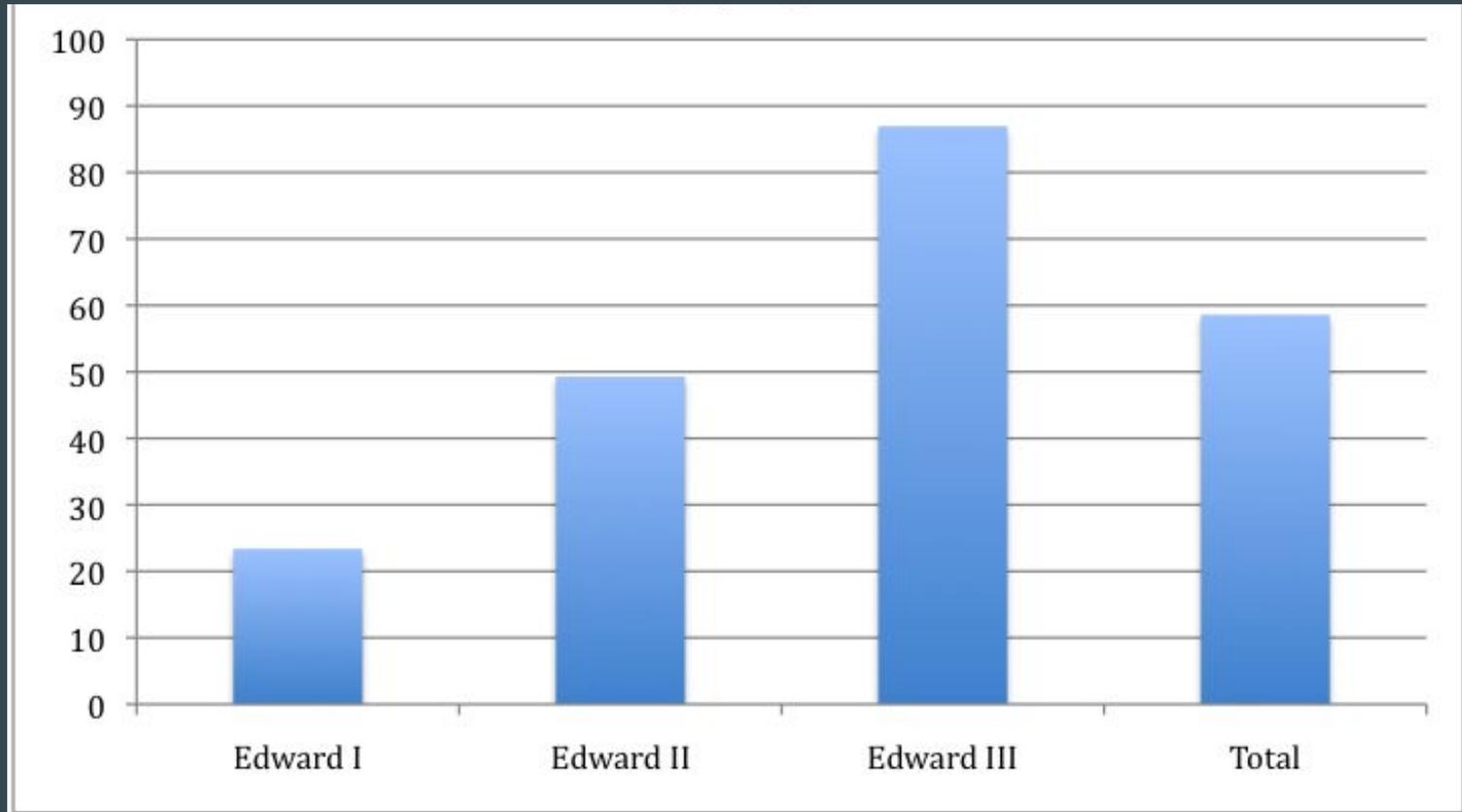
Findings: Total and Female Names by Reign



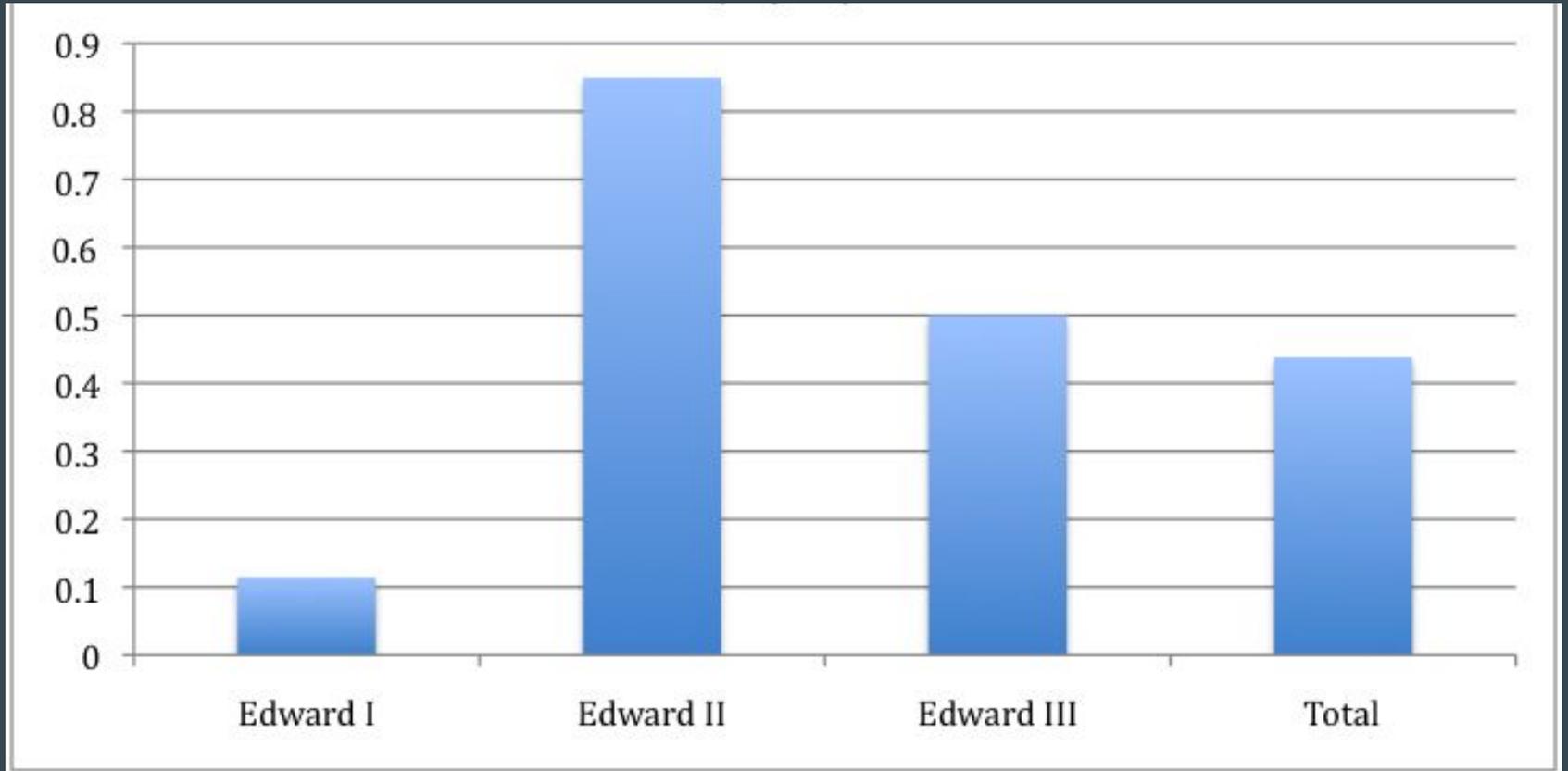
Findings: Percentage of Female Names by Reign



Findings: Total Names per Year by Reign



Findings: Female Names per Year by Reign



Conclusions

- During a 100+ year period, over 6,000 individuals became citizens of York with trading rights
- Of these, fewer than 1% can be definitively identified as women.
 - By their existence in this record, these women were exceptions to the norm.

Patterns when comparing reigns:

- Increase in overall names-per-year from Edward I's reign to Edward III's
 - In line with overall trends
 - Golden age of guilds

Patterns when comparing reigns:

- Noticeable uptick in female names-per-year during Edward II's reign
 - Corresponds with period of famine -- agricultural laborers moving to cities?
 - York was periodically the seat of government
- NO evidence for increase in female guild members following Great Mortality
 - If anything, fewer!
 - Supported by other studies - regulations tightened

What about the plague?

- NO evidence for increase in female guild members following Great Mortality
 - If anything, fewer!
 - Supported by other studies/evidence
 - Overall, regulations tightened

But what does it all MEAN?

- My internal monologue recapitulated development of feminist theory:
 - I'm going to prove women could do anything!
 - Oh... oh. Wow. Medieval women were oppressed.
 - How can I come to understand medieval women *within their own context*?
 - What if instead of trying to make medieval women more like medieval men (valuing guild work only), I let myself value the lives they actually led?

What's next?

- If this interests you:
 - Visit my blog and explore my bibliographies
 - Play with my database (!) goo.gl/0P5nMg
 - Complete this analysis for the rest of the archived rolls from York: www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/york-freemen
 - Look for records from the time period / place / occupations that interests you
 - Explore other sources of evidence for women's work and lives -- archeology, personal letters, court records, etc. etc.

Thank you!