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Mafalda Toniazzi

Feminine Knowledges: Jewish women in the labour market (Italy, 15th-16th Centuries)

Saperi femminili: donne ebree nel mercato del lavoro (Italia, XV-XVI secolo)

Abstract
To examine the relationship between Jewish women and the world of work is to take a privileged perspective on the broader issue of female labour and the links between women and the economy in the Middle Ages and modern times. There are three aspects in particular that we can use to support this statement: high mobility, greater and more active participation in the world of work outside the home compared to Christians, and a relatively more frequent presence in documentation. This paper is intended to provide an absolutely preliminary overview of this topic and thus a starting point for new insights.

Keywords: Women, Jews, Labour, Italy, Middle Ages, Early Modern.

Riassunto
Studiare il rapporto tra donne ebree e mondo del lavoro significa adottare un punto d'osservazione privilegiato sulla più generale tematica del lavoro femminile e delle connessioni tra donne ed economia Medioevo ed Età Moderna. Vi sono in particolare tre aspetti che possiamo portare a sostegno di questa affermazione: l'alta mobilità, la maggiore e più attiva partecipazione al mondo del lavoro extra domestico rispetto alle cristiane e una presenza nella documentazione relativamente più frequente. Il presente contributo vuole offrire una visione d'insieme, assolutamente preliminare, su questo soggetto, e dare così un base di partenza per nuovi approfondimenti.

Parole Chiave: Donne, Ebrei, Lavoro, Italia, Medioevo, Età Moderna.

In the context of the broad studies of the female workforce and the relations between women and the economy between the Middle Ages and the modern period, which have experienced a well-deserved resurgence in recent decades,[1] a study of

[1] On the extreme variety of women's work in the Middle Ages see, for example, M. P. Zanoboni, *Donne al lavoro nell'Italia e nell'Europa medievali (secoli XIII-XV)*, Jouvence, Roma 2016, and related bibliography.

Jewish women can offer another perspective on the subject. Three aspects can be used to support this claim: high mobility, active participation in work outside the home, and relatively frequent presence in documentation.

The first aspect, related to the generally high mobility of Jews on the peninsula, is closely related to the marriage market. Unlike for Christian women, it was exceptional for Jewish women to marry in the place of origin or to maintain a single residence for life, even at the level of the so-called middle classes. Following a Jewish woman on her travels, wherever possible, in the company of her husband and sometimes alone in attending to family matters, brings us in contact with various local economies as well as with various ways in which society deals with the female element.[2] It cannot be denied that this kind of mobility served to implement the male family's strategies for increasing wealth and visibility, but this does not diminish its importance for our analysis.

Jewish women very often engaged in activities that were not necessarily related to "running the household" due to the special position of women in Jewish society. As Michele Luzzati, among others, points out, Jewish women enjoyed great weight in the family (due to the matrilineal transmission of Judaism) and relative equality with their spouses.[3] At work, this led to great operational freedom and presence outside the home. We will see some examples of this in the following sections.

Since Jewish women, like Christian women, are subject to a more secrecy of documentary sources than men, it may be said that the lives and occupations of the former are relatively better attested than those of the latter. In addition to the more general Jewish habit of frequent recourse to writing (as well as to notaries) at all levels, we must not forget the importance of the surviving rabbinic responsa, which offer an interesting insight in this sense.[4]

1. Women and moneylending

As has been pointed out several times, the activity that Jews most often (but not exclusively) engaged in during the period under study was that of lending. Incorporated into an economic development already successfully advanced by Christians,

[2] On this last point, it is sufficient to think of measures such as the Suntuary Laws, which, when present, represented forms of control both within and outside the Jewish group that varied from area to area. See A. Foa, «Le donne nella storia degli ebrei in Italia», in C. Honess-V. Jones (eds.), *Le donne delle minoranze*, Claudiana, Torino 1999, pp. 22-23. On Jewish, Christian and Muslim women and their integration into society from the point of view of private, professional and religious life, see the recent I. Gagliardi, *Anima e corpo. Donne e fedi nel mondo mediterraneo (secoli XI-XVI)*, Carocci, Roma 2023.

[3] See M. Luzzati, «Alle radici della "jüdische Mutter": note sul lavoro femminile nel mondo ebraico italiano fra Medioevo e Rinascimento», in S. Cavaciocchi (ed.), *La donna nell'economia. Secc. XIII-XVIII*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1990, p. 463.

[4] See, for example, H. Adelman, *Rabbis and Reality: Public Activities of Jewish Women in Italy During the Reinassance and Catholic Restoration*, in «Jewish History» 5 (1991), pp. 27-40.

the Jews, small in number but widespread throughout the area, had acquired a near monopoly on the *banchi feneratizi*,[5] also thanks to the creation of a virtual *res publica hebreorum*, whose network spanned almost the entire peninsula. It was a dense and articulated network of interpersonal and family relationships that led the Jews to move frequently on Italian territory, resulting in a single banker or family owning several businesses at the same time (even very distant from each other), and in which marriage strategies were one of the fundamental elements. Here women became part of the system, and their contribution was already primarily both immaterial and material: namely, if on the one hand the act of "wanting to marry" tied an invisible knot around two parental groups, on the other hand the contribution of the dowry was a tangible contribution to the family's economic activities.[6]

Even more important for what interests us here, however, is the fact that they directly assisted their husbands in managing the bank and, as soon as they became widows, not infrequently took over their property, even if there were no minor children, that is, even without having to act as guardians. In the 13th Century, a larger number of examples of this can be found in the northeast of the peninsula, where the Jewish groups were predominantly Ashkenazi.[7] In the great economic centres of today's Friuli and Veneto (such as Cividale, Gemona, Udine, Trieste, Padua and Treviso), which have been well studied by Miriam Davide,[8] the lenders were active

[5] For a study of Jewish banks see, e.g.: M. Luzzati, «Banchi e insediamenti ebraici nell'Italia centro-settentrionale fra tardo Medioevo e inizi dell'Età moderna», in C. Vivanti (ed.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali 11. Gli ebrei in Italia*, Einaudi, Torino 1996, vol. I, pp. 173-235, who also provides a useful and comprehensive bibliography up to the early 20th century, G. Todeschini, *La banca e il ghetto. Una storia italiana*, Laterza, Bari 2016 and Id., *Gli ebrei nell'Italia medievale*, Carocci, Roma 2018. Then there are the documentary collections, where much information on lenders and banks can be found, such as: S. Simonsohn, *The Jews in the Duchy of Milan*, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1982-1986; Id., *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto 1988-1991; Id., *The Jews in Sicily*, Brill, Leiden 2000-2009; A. Toaff, *The Jews in Umbria*, Brill, Leiden 1993-1994; R. Segre, *The Jews in Piedmont*, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1986-1990; R. Urbani-G. N. Zazzu, *The Jews in Genoa*, Brill, Leiden 1998. We can also mention M. Toniazzi, «Il banco ebraico tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna: un quadro bibliografico», in P. Del Corno-I. Zavattero (eds.), *Credito e Monti di Pietà tra Medioevo ed età moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2020, pp. 171-181.

[6] Indeed, it was not uncommon for at least part of the dowry, which consisted of money, to be deposited in the groom's or in-laws' bank.

[7] Many scholars, including Michele Luzzati himself, Alessandra Veronese, and Miriam Davide, have pointed out that Ashkenazi Jews traditionally enjoyed even greater economic and spatial freedom than their Italian co-religionists.

[8] Cf. M. Davide, *Il ruolo economico delle donne nelle comunità ebraiche di Trieste e di Treviso nei secoli XIV e XV*, in «Zakhor» 7 (2004), pp. 192-221; «Il ruolo delle donne nelle comunità ebraiche dell'Italia nord-orientale (Padova, Treviso, Trieste e Friuli)», in G. M. Varanini-R. C. Mueller (eds.), *Ebrei nella Terraferma veneta del Quattrocento*, Firenze University Press, Firenze 2005, pp. 31-44; Ead., «La presenza femminile nell'economia delle terre del confine orientale d'Italia nel tardo Medioevo: donne cristiane ed ebree a confronto», in U. Israel-R. Jütte-R. C. Mueller (eds.), *«Interstizi». Culture ebraico-cristiane a Venezia e nei suoi domini dal Medioevo all'Età Moderna*, Edizioni di Storia

both in consumer credit and in the sale of credit and even in buying and selling, not failing to hold investments and participations even in banks in whose management they did not participate or whose they were not owners. Among the various case studies cited by the scholar, which will not be further mentioned here, the case of the wife of the triestine lender Abramo is noteworthy. At the end of the 14th Century, on her husband's instructions, she had deposited money with his friend and relative Salomone, but had proceeded contrary to the precise instructions and had thought it more advantageous to agree with the beneficiary to pledge part of the sum as a loan to some citizens. Unfortunately, one of the pledges, two pearl necklaces belonging to the innkeeper Almerico Lombardo, had gone missing, and a dispute arose: it was Salomone's wife, apparently entrusted with the delicate task of guarding the pawnshop, who had reported the necklaces missing.[9]

Two women, then, who were granted a confidence and autonomy that seemed to surprise no one. Of course, in everyday life it was sometimes possible to go a little further with the freedom that women enjoyed (due to the sensitivities of the time), and so there were cases, such as that of the well-known rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen (1482-1565), in which women went to fairs and markets unaccompanied.[10] Obviously, at least on a theoretical level, there was a big difference between dealing with customers in the confines of the stall and walking in the street.

But it was not only Ashkenazis women who played an active role in the economy. The same mechanism of participation in one's spouse's business (both directly and virtually, i.e., through the capital brought in with the dowry) applied to Italian Jews as well, with the difference that the members of the large banking families apparently did not always physically go to work as their husbands did. In my opinion, it should also be remembered that even the latter were not forced to be present all the time or to perform all the tasks. There were, in fact, numerous *fattori* and *garzoni* who could be employed in the various banks of a single lender. Even in Sicily, where Jewish women, according to the surviving documents, were much less represented on the credit market than Christian women, there is evidence of the practise of paying the dowry into the capital of the Jewish bank and later assisting her husband in managing the bank itself. In this geographical context, the case of Gaudiosa Sammi from Trapani, studied by Viviana Mulè, is very significant. Her husband Lucio's will of 1461 shows not only that she collaborated in the administration of the loan bank, but also that her husband had agreed that Gaudiosa should manage all her assets after her widowhood and act as guardian for her son. In the same will, the father instructed the son never to question his mother's financial management, even when he would become an adult. Since the

e Letteratura, Roma 2010, pp. 133-153; see also A. Veronese, «Donne ebree italiane e ashkenazite in Italia centro-settentrionale: doti, testamenti, ruolo economico», in L. Grazziani Secchieri (ed.), *Vicino al focolare e oltre. Spazi pubblici e privati, fisici e virtuali*, Giuntina, Firenze 2015, pp. 153-164.

[9] M. Davide, «La presenza femminile nell'economia», cit., pp. 139-140.

[10] H. Adelman, *Rabbis and Reality*, cit., p. 36.

family's economic interests extended not only to lending but also to trade, Gaudiosa, after becoming a widow, took over the management of the business of selling corals, cheese and garments.[11]

There's no denying that, for Italian Jewish women, widowhood and/or the care of minor children were the main occasions for holding a stand. Sometimes, however, they obtained ownership or appointment as partners because they were expressly entrusted with the task by a male relative (father, husband, son): a clear sign of the trust mechanisms established in families, as well as an indication that in many cases women also had adequate preparation and competence (although, of course, it cannot be ruled out that at least some of them could informally turn to "advisors").

So there is evidence of the *condotte feneratizie* given directly to Jewesses. Consider the case of Brunetta di Daniele di Vitale da Pisa,[12] who in 1425, together with her sister Dolce and her aunt Giusta di Vitale di Matassia da Roma, received a chapter from the Florentine government for lending in San Gimignano:[13] the three women must have done a good job, because the contract was renewed in 1430 for another 5 years.[14] Moreover, the small consortium did not make its first experience: in 1423 it had already acquired the Bank of Pisa,[15] and when this passed to Giusta's husband, Isacco di Emanuele da Rimini, in 1426, she remained as a partner, together with Dolce and Brunetta and Buonaventura di Salomone da Terracina.[16]

Finally, it should not be forgotten that other activities were also associated with the banks, such as the collection of rags and the resale of unredeemed pledges:[17] in this

[11] V. Mulè, «La presenza femminile nel mercato del credito in Sicilia (sec. XV)», in G. Petti Balbi-P. Guglielmotti (eds.), *Dare credito alle donne. Presenze femminili nell'economia tra Medioevo ed Età moderna*, Astigrafica, Asti 2012, pp. 175-178.

[12] The "da Pisa" family was one of the largest in Italian Jewry in the period that interests us here. Apart from the numerous references found in more general texts, the following deserve special mention: D. Kaufmann, *Notes sur l'historie de la famille da Pisa*, in «Revue des etudes juves» 26 (1893), pp. 142-147; U. Cassuto, *Sulla famiglia da Pisa*, in «Rivista Israelitica» 5 (1908), pp. 227-238; 6 (1909), pp. 21-30, 102-113, 160-170, 223-232; 7 (1910), pp. 9-16, 71-86, 144-150; M. Luzzati, *La casa dell'Ebreo. Saggi sugli ebrei a Pisa e in Toscana nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento*, Editore Giardini, Pisa 1985; Id., *Gli ebrei di Pisa (sec. IX-XX)*, Pacini Editore, Pisa 1998; Id., «A Pisa e Asciano due palazzi dei banchieri da Pisa tra Quattro e Cinquecento», in E. Daniele (ed.), *Le dimore di Pisa*, Associazione dimore storiche italiane, Firenze 2000, pp. 315-319.

[13] Archivio di Stato di Firenze [=ASFi], *Statuti delle Comunità Autonome e Soggette*, n. 759, ff. 6r-9v. Brunetta was associated, on 1432, in the bank of San Savino (see R. Salvadori-G. Sacchetti, *Presenze ebraiche nell'aretino dal XIV al XX secolo*, Olschki, Firenze 1990, p. 34).

[14] ASFi, *Capitoli*, *Appendice (1324-sec. XVII)*, n. 28, ff. 118r-120v.

[15] Ivi, ff. 86r-91r.

[16] Ivi, ff. 91v-99v.

[17] The collection of rags was well suited as a complement to the pawnbroking business: indeed, the Jews often found themselves in the position of having unredeemed garments in their hands, but which were not in a condition suitable for sale. It was not uncommon for the lower classes of the population to pawn things that were already quite worn and threadbare. The rags collected in this way were used for other "industries", including paper making.

case too, the women could be active in the business together with their husbands or children, or they could run the business alone.

2. Women in other professions

We have already mentioned the workshops: evidence of this activity, widespread throughout the peninsula, Sicily and Sardinia, is particularly numerous in geographical areas where lending was not allowed, especially in Rome.

As Anna Esposito[18] points out, in Rome between the 15th and 16th centuries we find Jewish women running taverns and inns, shopkeepers, dressmakers, cosmeticians dedicated to the production of creams and preparations for skin care,[19] but also *fruttarole* [fruit sellers] in the city squares. Esposito also points out that they were active in the production and sale of textiles in other centers of Lazio, and in cities like Rieti, where the business of lending was not forbidden, they reappeared in the pawnshops.

In Sardinia, studied by Cecilia Tasca,[20] where the Jewish presence in the period under study was predominantly Iberian, Jewish women worked as innkeepers, but also as importers and traders of linen, hemp, leather and fine fabrics. From the large amount of documents analysed by the scholar, for example, clearly emerge figures such as Ester, who bought silk and fine fabrics at auctions, Alfonsa, who traded in red wine and malvasia from Campidanese area, or Seseta and Maset, who traded in linen, hemp and leather on the Alghero-Cagliari commercial route. Of course, this should not make us forget that in Sardinia, as elsewhere, women of more modest social status were unable to raise the necessary capital to establish and maintain commercial enterprises and earned their living as servants of rich and noble families in the cities.[21]

It is perhaps superfluous, but not useless, to point out that members of the wealthier classes, if present, did not engage in the above activities.

Another field of employment was physical or surgical medicine, ophthalmol-

[18] A. Esposito, «Donne in casa, donne in piazza. Le donne ebree dell'area laziale tra '400 e '500», in L. Grazziani Secchieri (ed.), *Vicino al focolare e oltre. Spazi pubblici e privati, fisici e virtuali della donna ebrea in Italia (secc. XV-XX)*, Giuntina, Firenze 2015, pp. 165-173.

[19] One of the most famous cases of cosmetician is perhaps that of Anna, a Roman Jewess, who was required from the Duchess Caterina Sforza of Imola to made a preparation for smoothing and "brightening" the face. E. Caruso (ed.), *Ricette d'amore e di bellezza di Caterina Sforza, signora di Forlì e Imola*, il Ponte Vecchio, Cesena 2009, p. 16.

[20] C. Tasca, «"De juya fadrina ho maridada que no aport aresaments de perles". Donne ebree nella Sardegna catalana», in L. Grazziani Secchieri (ed.), *Vicino al focolare e oltre. Spazi pubblici e privati, fisici e virtuali della donna ebrea in Italia (secc. XV-XX)*, Giuntina, Firenze 2015, pp. 97-122.

[21] Cecilia Tasca recalls, for example, the case of the shrewd servant and thief Bona Fonata, called Bonfat, who in the XIV Century worked for the royal vicar and, with the complicity of some castle officials, stole from his own master's guests and underwent a long trial. C. Tasca, «"De juya fadrina ho maridada que no aport aresaments de perles"», cit., pp. 109-110.

ogy[22] and gynaecology.[23] The practise of the latter discipline concerned not only the moments of pregnancy and childbirth, but also more generally the health of women in the various phases of their existence, as well as their reproductive life. Often, but not always, these ungraduated *medichesse* came from families where this art was already practised and where they were carefully educated and completed their training. Like their male counterparts, they were particularly numerous in Sicily,[24] while elsewhere they often worked as midwives. Sicilian, for example, were Virdimura, the wife of Pascale de Medico, who in the mid-14th century had been licensed by a royal commission to practise "physical" medicine and to engage in the care of the human body,[25] and Bella de Paja, well known as expert in any kind of disease that requires surgery.[26]

In addition, again in the field of gynaecology, they had to perform abortions, although it is not known how often. The author has also found evidence of this in Tuscan documents, which show that around 1490 there was a Savina (or Sarina) in the small village of Cintoia who offered this service to the inhabitants of the surrounding areas.[27]

There is no lack of evidence of Jewish women who were authorised to perform ritual slaughter, another task that required the acquisition of very specific knowledge.[28] Between the 14th and 15th Centuries, the *šeḥitah* [ritual slaughter] was also the subject of a process of professionalisation related to the emergence of the market economy, involving a whole range of activities that had not previously been considered a true and proper profession. However, while in other European countries during the same period there was a withdrawal of women from this profession, for which they were considered unsuitable because they could not study the *Torah* (and therefore were unable to specialise), in Italy, both because of the now ingrained practise and because of the numerical shortage of Jews, in which the exclusion of some of them would have created serious logistical problems, women were able to continue to work like their male counterparts after obtaining some kind of certificate.[29]

[22] The practise of ophthalmology by Jewish physicians and especially by women in southern Italy is sufficiently attested by the findings of the so-called Genizah of Cairo. See S. D. Goiten, *A Mediterranean society. The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1967, pp. 368-371.

[23] M. Luzzati, «Alle radici della "jüdische Mutter"», cit., p. 465.

[24] For an interesting *excursus* of sicilian cases see A. Scandaliato, *L'ultimo canto di Ester. Donne ebree del Medioevo in Sicili*a, Sellerio, Palermo 1999, pp. 158-164.

[25] J. Shatzmiller, *Jewish Physicians in Sicily*, in «Italia Iudaica» 5 (1995), pp. 347-354.

[26] In 1414, Queen Bianca of Navarre gave her special protection in the practise of medical art because of her fame. See A. Scandaliato, *L'ultimo canto di Ester*, cit., p. 160.

[27] ASFi, *Otto di Guardia e Balia della Repubblica*, n. 86, f. 60r. In this case, the woman, who had been referred to the Jewess by her own brother, who had impregnated her, was from San Giovanni Valdarno, a village about 25 km from Cintoia.

[28] A. Foa, «Le donne nella storia degli ebrei d'Italia», cit., p. 22 and related bibliography.

[29] M. Perry, «L'abbattage rituel et les femmes: tradition, lois, et réalité à la fin du Moyen Age», in M. Luzzati-C. Galasso (eds.), *Donne nella storia degli ebrei d'Italia*, Giuntina, Firenze 2007, pp. 171-178.

On the other hand, the level of education of many women, which was also reflected in the production of finely illuminated prayer books,[30] made it possible for them to devote themselves to activities in their homes that, although unpaid, took the form of a real work commitment, such as literary production and teaching boys and girls.[31] The latter could sometimes cross the threshold of the home: Jewish governesses worked for other families, including Christian ones, as in the famous case of Bienvenida Abravanel, governess to Eleanor of Toledo in Naples.[32]

We conclude with a series of occupations that affected women who belonged to the lowest strata of Jewish society by birth or who had suffered blows of fate in the course of their lives: employees of craftsmen, peddlers, maids, and, not to be forgotten, prostitutes. The latter occupation was of particular concern to the civil authorities and the Israelites themselves. Contact between Christians and Jews and their peaceful coexistence should in no way lead to promiscuous sexual practises. The reason for this concern was primarily the idea, shared also by the Jews, that this type of relationship was a source of real physical contamination (which could spread further within the respective groups if it was a mercenary relationship), which would be even more undesirable if it resulted in children.[33] Thus, the existence of a separate group of Jewish prostitutes, known to all as such, was not a rarity, but a necessary element of urban life.

Conclusions

To speak generally of female knowledge and workforce in mediaeval and early modern Italy does not necessarily mean focusing exclusively on practises and activities that were performed only by women. It means, above all, considering their inclusion in the labour market alongside men and, on the basis of what has been highlighted by scholars such as Maria Paola Zanoboni at the European level, combating the prejudice about the alleged social and cultural neglect of the centuries in question that is so persistent in general opinion. This, of course, without wanting to apply paradigms of equality between the sexes, which we feel would be historically out of context. More generally, the change in perspective regarding the relationship between women and the world of work has benefited from a decisive shift and increase in the study of

[30] E. M. Cohen, «Women's Illuminated Hebrew Prayer Books in Reinassance Italy», *ibid.*, pp. 305-312. The fact that these illuminated volumes, commissioned by men, were expressly intended for use by women is evidenced by the fact that the formulas and expressions contained in the prayers were all declined or altered in feminine form.

[31] H. Adelman, «The Literacy of Jewish Women in Early Modern Italy», in B. J. Whitehead (ed.), *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe. A History, 1500-1800*, Garland Publishing, New York-London 1999, pp. 133-157; Id., «Italian Jewish Women», in R. J. Baskin (ed.), *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1991, pp. 150-168.

[32] M. Luzzati, «Alle radici della "jüdische Mutter"», cit., p. 465.

[33] Id., *Lo scudo della giustizia dei «gentili». Nascite illegittime e prostituzione nel mondo ebraico toscano del Quattrocento*, in «Quaderni Storici» 39.1 (2004), pp. 195-215.

women's history in the mediaeval and modern periods, which in turn was marked by the abandonment of the notion that documentation on women was sparse and incomplete. Crucial to this has been the shift of attention to evidence relating to the middle groups of society and female education. In addition, the number and type of documentary sources analysed have changed, extending to notarial production, diaries, letters and iconography, to name but a few examples.

Outlining the contours of Jewish women's constant presence in a variety of professions, and consequently highlighting their diverse range of knowledge (from crafts to study and education), is also useful in countering at least two other myths: that of the seclusion of Jewish groups from the everyday life of the societies in which they were embedded, and that of the binomial Jewish-rich lender that has profoundly affected perceptions of them over the Centuries.