

Textiles and the Reformation

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Prayer of a Spinner, c. 1660
Gerard Dou (1613-1675)

Spinning and weaving played an important role in the lives of European women during the time of the Reformation. While performing these traditional tasks as a cottage industry within their homes, thousands of ordinary women played an important role not only in the rise of the textile industry and capitalism, but also the spread of the Reformation. This paper explores the interrelationship between the tasks involved in producing cloth, and the spread of the Reformation. In particular, we will examine the role of the individual common women who were the chief workers in the making of yarn and thread for cloth.

Interconnecting Societal Developments Involving Textiles and the Reformation

A number of interconnecting societal developments, each playing a part in the subject we are considering, came together at the time of the Reformation. We will briefly introduce each development.

The Beginning of the Textile Industry

The term “textile” comes from the Latin word *texere* (“to weave”). It refers to both threads and yarns used to make cloth and to the cloth that is made from interwoven fibers. In general the process of making cloth is to first spin the raw materials into yarn, and then weave the yarn into cloth. Sometimes, a finishing or “fulling” process is required after the cloth is woven. Spinning and weaving have been done since prehistoric times, the earliest known evidence being from the Bronze Age in about 4500 BC in Egypt.¹ The first technology used in spinning was the spindle, which is essentially a weighted stick. Spinning with a spindle is done by attaching raw fiber to the stick, spinning the stick around, and then winding the spun fiber onto the spindle. See Plate 1 for pictures of many different types of spindles and of a woman spinning flax with a spindle.

The process of spinning was mechanized by the introduction of the spinning wheel into Europe in the 14th century. The spinning wheel, which had been developed and used in India long before, allowed the continuous spinning of thread. The Saxony wheel, an improved version, sped up the production of yarn considerably.² This made it possible to produce enough thread to reliably supply a growing body of weavers, thus providing one of the necessary conditions for the beginning of a textile trade. See Plate 1 for pictures of the Saxony wheel and other spinning wheels used in Europe at this time. Plate 2 shows two engravings of spinners, one *The Visit to the Spinner* by van Meckenem from the 16th century using a hand spindle, and the other *Woman Spinning* by Roghman from the 17th century, using a spinning wheel. Spindles and spinning wheels were the only way to make yarn or thread until mechanical spinners were invented during the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century.³

Rise of Modern Commerce and Capitalism from Feudalism

As European feudal society started to decline in the 16th century, political power began to be centralized in a state government. A mercantile economy arose, attempting to centrally control the economy, in the interest of strengthening the state.⁴ Later, mercantilism would develop into capitalism as we know it. There were two problems of the emerging mercantile state that textiles could help solve:⁵

- Foreign exchange of the nation – Cloth could be produced at home for consumption at home and abroad, thus giving a positive balance of trade. It was recognized that foreign trade was the “engine of growth” for the emerging mercantile economy.⁶ The Hessians, for example, knew that linen exports were the “main channel through which Spanish gold and silver flows into our coffers”⁷
- Impoverishment of rural populations. There was an increasing pattern of dependence on the public or charity. Linen promoters advocated expanding flax cultivation as an alternative to charity. Accounts of the beginnings of capitalist practices in the textile industry towns of Languedoc, France [Johnson 1993] and Swabia, Germany [Safley 1993] show that these developments brought fiber artists into the proletariat.

¹ [Ewing 1984] p. 9

² [Macmillan 2001] article on Spinning

³ [Britannica 1999] article on Textile Industries

⁴ [Britannica 1999] Article on Economy and Society

⁵ [Schneider 1989] p. 184

⁶ [Kriedte 1981] p. 34

⁷ Hessian declaration quoted in [Kriedte 1981] p 36

Thus, textile merchants became some of the most important early entrepreneurs of this emerging economy.

The Printing Press and Literacy

Johannes Gutenberg invented the moveable type printing press in the mid-15th century, which allowed for mass production of printed material. Before 1500, literacy of women was confined to those of noble birth, only 1% of women⁸, but with the wider availability of books to read, this changed. For example, about 40% of English women could read by 1750.⁹ It is significant for our purposes to note that the religious rebels were especially likely to learn to read and write, and communicated their religious ideas in books and tracts.¹⁰

Thus, we see the following interrelated developments, happening in Europe around the same time:

- spinning wheels were introduced, allowing the production of much greater quantities of thread and cloth
- the feudal economy was starting to be replaced by the early capitalist economy
- the textile industry could help solve early problems of the capitalist economy
- the Reformation, the Radical Reformation and the Counter Reformation, with many varied religious ideas that they represented
- the ability to print and read printed material, thus facilitating mass communication of ideas

Textile Industry's Need for Spinners

The fibers used to do spinning and weaving in Europe during the 14th through 17th centuries were wool, cotton, flax (the plant used to make linen thread), and to a lesser extent, silk. In Europe sheep's wool was used since the Bronze Age to spin yarn that was later woven or knit into clothing.¹¹ Cotton thread was produced in quantity in Europe starting in the 12th century using cotton grown in the eastern Mediterranean; cotton, a tropical plant, couldn't be grown in temperate Europe. It declined in the 16th century, and then later rose again in the 18th century using cotton from the New World.¹² Linen was produced most widely in Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries, that is, during the period when cotton production was reduced.¹³ Silk was spun in Italy in the 14th century, and in France starting at the beginning of the 16th century¹⁴.

The textile fibers used most widely for clothing and other household textiles used by common European people were sheep's wool, cotton and linen. Linen served as a comfortable, inexpensive and hygienic material for underwear, tableware and bedclothes, unlike wool which was uncomfortable and difficult to care for. Demand for linen cloth intensified in the 16th century due to fashion-driven consumption in Europe.¹⁵ Cotton, since it couldn't be grown in Europe, was more expensive than linen, until the import of cheap cotton from the New World. It too was preferred over the dirtier, smellier and less easily worked wool.¹⁶ Silk was chiefly used to make elaborate fabrics and tapestries for the monarchy and the nobility. Sumptuary laws in England [Elizabeth 1562] [Elizabeth 1574] attempted to control the demand for some kinds of cloth and also to maintain social class structure, but were widely ignored.¹⁷ See Plate 3 for pictures illustrating the demand for cloth.

There were two basic methods of textile production in early-modern Europe:¹⁸

- The *kauf* system in which individual households or towns controlled total production of textiles from raw materials to finished cloth. Examples of this kind of production were found in Auffay, France [Gullickson 1986] and in Colne, England [Colne].
- The *verlag* system in which there was a division of labor among various stages of production, finishing and merchandizing to separate communities each having specialized skills. In general, spinners in the

⁸ [Hufton 1995] p. 426

⁹ [Hufton 1995] p. 429

¹⁰ [Spufford 1995] pp. 70 ff

¹¹ [Britannica 1999] article on The Metal Ages

¹² [Schneider 1989] p. 180-181

¹³ Ibid. A brief history of the use of linen by mankind can be found in *The Story of Linen* [Leggett 1945].

¹⁴ [Britannica 1999] articles on Textile Industries of France and Germany and on Textiles in the Middle Ages

¹⁵ [Schneider 1989] pp. 179-181

¹⁶ [Gullickson 1986] p 68

¹⁷ [Leigh 1996]

¹⁸ [Schneider 1989] p. 187

country supplied weavers in urban centers.¹⁹ Examples of this kind of production can be found in Upper Swabia²⁰ and in use of cotton grown in the New World. In Ireland, a Linen Board was set up to control the growth of flax and manufacturing of linen cloth over disparate communities.²¹ There were systems set up to distribute the intermediate products from one area to the next. In particular, there were people who brought raw fiber and gathered finished yarn from the spinners. There were risks in being a traveling clothier. George Fox, leader of the Society of Friends, tells about clothiers in Cornwall, Devonshire who he met in prison who had been apprehended as “suspicious persons” on the highway while going to the mills with their cloth²². We will later learn that this is one of the key steps that facilitated the spread of religious ideas.

Early textile mercantilists quickly realized that the bottleneck in cloth industry was spinning; various accounts tell us that as many as 4 to 20 spinners were needed to supply a single weaver with thread.²³ To help alleviate this bottleneck, mercantilists saw women and children as a vast labor pool waiting to be tapped.²⁴ They encouraged spinning as a cottage industry to get cheap labor of women and children in their homes. They attached spinning rooms to orphanages, sometimes resulting in intolerable exploitation of children.²⁵ Some communities even set up a “correctional training institution” called a *spinhuis* (which became tourist attractions in the 17th century) to encourage prostitutes to spin in “off hours” and thus allow them to become virtuous.²⁶ Wages were kept low, too low to support a family. Sometimes, prizes were created for the best and most production.²⁷

Textiles in Women’s Daily Lives

Everyday clothing worn by common women in the 15th to 17th century in Europe was more utilitarian, more distinct by class and occupation, more precious, and more modest than clothes we wear today.²⁸ Existing art and engravings of common people, when they can be found, typically show a woman wearing a floor-length skirt covered with an apron, a long-sleeved blouse, a vest that laced up the front, and a covering for her hair.²⁹ Underneath her clothes she wore a long-sleeved linen chemise, long woolen socks and leather shoes. Typically, only the apron and the chemise were washed regularly. Protestant women, in particular, were supposed to show particular sobriety in dress; Protestant clerics felt that “excessive display portended vanity in the minds of clerics, and they believed the distance from vanity to moral laxity was slight.”³⁰

As part of the research for this project, I made myself an outfit such as a common woman might wear. (A picture of me wearing this outfit and spinning is on Plate 4.) I find that I quite like wearing it; it is quite warm, even warmer than wearing pants, due to multiple layers of cloth in the full length skirt and linen underwear. I am ever conscious of the sheer volume of cloth that I am carrying around as I walk. This gives me a subjective appreciation for all that the spinners of former times had to do to provide thread for weaving the cloth. How they must have worked so every woman could be clothed as this. Most people did not buy new clothes; when they did so, it was at special times of their life. Clothes were generally carefully handed down from parent to child³¹, and worn until they were worn out.³² See Plate 4 for illustrations of period women’s dress. Other textiles used in a typical home would include bed linen and cloths used in the kitchen and at the dinner table. Sometimes a little lace could add beauty to clothing or household tables. Embroidery and other needlework were used to decorate clothing and to create decorative objects for the home.

¹⁹ [Wiesner 2000] p. 112

²⁰ [Safley 1993]

²¹ [Horner 1920] pp. 35 ff.

²² [Fox 1911] Vol I, p. 231

²³ [Hufton 1995] pp. 92-93, 158, [Wiesner 2000] pp. 118-119, [Gullickson 1986] p. 69, [Ewing 1984] p. 11

²⁴ [Wiesner 2000] p. 119, [Hufton 1995] pp. 78, 158

²⁵ [Horner 1920] pp. 54-55

²⁶ [Hufton 1995] pp. 330-331

²⁷ [Schneider 1989] p. 187, [Wiesner 2000] p. 119

²⁸ [Cumming 1981] Discusses the history of costume and fashion. [Hartley 1931] Gives examples of dress for various occupations in England of mediaeval times, and patterns for making them. [Ewing 1984] Discusses the process of making cloth and clothes from 1650 to 1900.

²⁹ See Plate 2 for contemporary pictures of 16th and 17th century spinners by van Meckenem, Roghman.

³⁰ [Hufton 1995] p. 40

³¹ [Hufton 1995] p. 173

³² [Ewing 1984]

Early modern European women who participated in the textile industry did so primarily from their homes. They essentially ran cottage industries in which they spun and did needlework after daily chores are done.³³ Mothers taught the “survival skills” of spinning, carding, weaving, needlework, lace-making to their young daughters.³⁴

In order to marry, a woman needed to provide a dowry to her husband. This was not an insignificant expense for a family; sometimes a dowry would consist of up to a third of the assets of the family.³⁵ A family with several daughters would be hard pressed to provide dowries for more than one of them; it was sometimes said that the first daughter wore silk and the other daughters wore wool.³⁶ Many times, the need for a dowry required an independent source of funds, and spinning was one way that this money was earned.

Textiles and Women’s Growing Independence

Because women were able to earn wages by working in the textile industry, some unattached women began to pool economic resources, find mutual protection and gain a sense of identity.³⁷ Such groups, who lived together in loosely structured, but not cloistered, religious communities, were often called Beguines. They supported themselves by weaving, spinning, sewing, other needlework or caring for the sick.³⁸ These women were initially ignored by the church, but starting in the 14th century were increasingly regarded as suspect because they were not under male supervision.³⁹ They were also regarded as cheap competition in the labor market by the craft guilds.⁴⁰

The reason many women chose spinning as a way to earn a wage was because sometimes, spinning was the only possible employment open to women.⁴¹ In fact, the word “spinster” came to mean a woman who was not married, and was independently self-providing.⁴² These women worked for lower wages than men did because they didn’t have families to provide for.⁴³

During this period, some women gained deeper self-awareness, self-identity, and independence by being able to live in community with other women, either cloistered or not.⁴⁴ However, there remained for some a moral ambivalence about capitalism allowed by textile creation. It allowed more opportunities for marriage and independence at the risk of becoming too over committed to labor and thus less committed to family. This ambivalence shows itself in folk tales of the period such as Rumpelstiltskin.⁴⁵

Textile Production and the Church

Both Catholic and Protestant churches encouraged the virtuous exercises of spinning, weaving, carding and needlework at home.⁴⁶ See Plate 5 for pictures of textile work as a virtuous activity. Some religious orders and communities for women were engaged in textile making. Examples of these are the Beguines, as we discussed above, the Urselines, the Sisters of Charity, and the Beates.⁴⁷ Sometimes, just advocating that women should be able to live together for this purpose was enough to get one into trouble with religious authorities.⁴⁸

³³ [Hufton 1995] p 50, p 70, p 78-79

³⁴ [Hufton 1995] pp. 216, 369

³⁵ [Hufton 1995] p. 68

³⁶ [Hufton 1995] p. 377

³⁷ [Conn 2000] p. 9

³⁸ [Wiesner 2000] p. 217, [Strayer 1983] p. 160

³⁹ [Wiesner 2000] p. 217

⁴⁰ [Conn 2000] p. 9

⁴¹ [Wiesner 2000] p. 119

⁴² [Wiesner 2000] p. 119 [Gullickson 1986] p. 78

⁴³ [Hufton 1995] p. 60

⁴⁴ [Hufton 1995] pp. 422-423

⁴⁵ [Schneider 1989] pp. 177-178, 196. Rumpelstiltskin is a poor miller who tells the king that his daughter can spin straw into gold. His daughter promises her first born child to a poltergeist who does the spinning for her, thus ensuring her marriage to the king. In some versions of the story, she must give up her child, and in other versions, she loses her child.

⁴⁶ [Hufton 1995] p. 38

⁴⁷ [Hufton 1995] p 378, 389

⁴⁸ [Hill 1986] p. 105

However, both Catholic clerics and Luther disapproved of women's independence.⁴⁹ In particular, clerics disapproved of *spinnstube* (spinning bees) which were gatherings of spinners for the purpose of sociability and work without the distractions of home. These gatherings, which were encouraged by the textile industry, sometimes attracted unattached men and courtship play resulted. Such unsupervised contact of unmarried women and men was not approved of by clerics.⁵⁰ See Plate 6 for pictures of *spinnstube* both scandalous and proper.

Textiles and the Spread of the Reformation in England

It has long been noted by a number of researchers⁵¹ that there was a correlation between textile areas and the progress of the Protestant Reformation in England. In one of the earliest religious uprisings, Sir John Oldcastle, a follower of John Wycliffe, led a group made up largely of weavers in a revolt against King Henry V.⁵² A recent researcher has remarked that the cottage clothing industry was a "breeding ground" for religious heresy in Essex county.⁵³ The counties with large numbers of clothiers and tradesmen - Kent, Essex, Berkshire, and Yorkshire - were also very active in the spread of radical religious ideas. See Plate 7 for a map of England with trade routes and textile areas marked. These areas saw the first religious uprisings, the first women preachers, and later, during the Industrial Revolution, the first weavers' revolts.⁵⁴

There has been speculation by researchers⁵⁵ about why there was a linkage between clothing areas and the spread of radical religious ideas. The explanations that have been advanced are the following:

- Well-established trade routes linked towns with other clothing communities.⁵⁶ These trade routes allowed traveling clothiers spread tracts religious heresy under cover of "collecting the wool".⁵⁷ We remember that many of the women from whom wool was being collected knew how to read, and thus could be exposed to new ideas. This theory is given credence by observations that religious ideas were also spread via itinerant peddlers⁵⁸ and those engaged in the leather trades.⁵⁹
- These local trade connections were reinforced by strong external trade connections with Protestant Europe.⁶⁰ This link to the wider world, through involvement in the textile trade, proved a fertile ground for spread and reception of Protestantism.
- This was one of the first ways that these people were able to learn about what was happening in areas outside their homes. No wonder that there was a hunger for the new ideas that they brought.
- Many of the early Protestants in England came from prosperous clothier families who bestowed large gifts on the Protestant chapels, thus strengthening this religious segment of society.⁶¹
- Some researchers have speculated that the by-employments of making handicrafts "allowed them time enough to read or talk of holy things."⁶²

Religious Ideas that Spread to Spinners and Weavers in England

The Influence of John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe influenced the beginnings of the tradition of non-conformity in England. A professor at Oxford, Wycliffe in the last decade of his life began advocating increasingly radical religious views. For

⁴⁹ [Hufton 1995] pp. 401, 414

⁵⁰ [Medick 1984] pp. 317 ff. , [Schneider 89] p. 194, [Weisner 2000] p. 121, [Hufton 95] p. 129

⁵¹ [Summers 1906] [Hill 1986] [Spufford 1995] [Vann 1969] A good bibliography of work on this phenomenon is given in [Shiels 1998].

⁵² [Britannica 1999] Article on Lollards

⁵³ [Hill 1986] p. 93

⁵⁴ [Hill 1986] First religious uprisings: p. 101, First women preachers: p. 92, Weaver's Riot: p. 108

⁵⁵ [Spufford 1995] pp. 40 - 64, [Shiels 1998], [Hill 1986] [Vann 1969] p 13.

⁵⁶ [Hill 1986] p. 98, [Shiels 1998] p. 131, [Spufford 1995] p. 63

⁵⁷ [Hill 1986] p. 98

⁵⁸ [Watt 1995]

⁵⁹ [Spufford 1995] p. 53

⁶⁰ [Spufford 1995] p. 58

⁶¹ [Shiels 1998]

⁶² For example, Richard Baxter quoted in [Spufford 1995] p. 46

example, he denied the doctrine of transubstantiation, discussed the importance of preaching, and viewed the Holy Scriptures as being the primary source of truth in Christianity. He was charged with heresy and retired from Oxford in 1378. However, he was never brought to trial, and he continued to write and preach until his death in 1384.⁶³ He was initially buried in consecrated ground, but after his teaching was condemned by a meeting of the Western Church in Constance, his body was exhumed in 1428, burnt and his ashes dispersed in a stream.⁶⁴ Wycliffe is widely seen as an early influence of many religious reformers, most notably Jan Hus and Martin Luther. In England, Wycliffe provided the motivating ideas of the Lollard sect, one of the original English heretical groups.

It goes without saying that complete and accurate records of what were underground religious activities do not exist; heretics needed to be circumspect and not draw attention to themselves. As Christopher Hill says, "A successful underground leaves no traces."⁶⁵ Thus, many important events and trends were doubtless not recorded and remain lost to us. What we know is based on what has been left behind, sometimes surviving to modern times in today's religious sects, and what scholars have inferred from it. With this caveat, what follows is a brief introduction to some of the radical religious sects whose ideas were spread widely throughout England. These are the ideas that were coming to the ears of the spinners and weavers along the trade routes.

The Lollards

The name *Lollard* comes from the Middle Dutch *lollaert* ("mumbler"), which had been applied earlier to some European continental groups with heretical beliefs.⁶⁶ The first Lollards are identified in about 1382 as associates of Wycliffe at Oxford. The movement soon gained followers outside of Oxford among townspeople, merchants, gentry, and even some clergy. Several knights gave their support, as well as a few members of the House of Commons. In 1414 after King Henry V defeated a Lollard rising led by Sir John Oldcastle, the movement lost its academic and noble members. The movement was driven underground, its remaining members being mostly trades-people and artisans, and a few clerics. Around 1500 a revival of Lollardism started, and the Lollards and the Protestants had begun to join by 1530. The Lollard tradition helped the spread of Protestantism during the English Reformation.⁶⁷ One can assume that many weavers and spinners knew of, or belonged to, the Lollard tradition.

The Lollards were fiercely anti-authoritarian, anti-aristocratic, and rejected the ruling class and its law. This bias shows in the beliefs held by Lollards:⁶⁸

- They refused to take oaths, or to participate in judicial proceedings.
- There was a strong emphasis on study of the Bible, to be interpreted by individual consciences. Accordingly, they undertook study of the Lollard Bible, the first version of which was an English translation made by John Wycliffe.⁶⁹
- They were pacifists.
- They believed that priests should be able to marry.
- Confession should be made only to God.
- They were against ordination.
- No special pilgrimages should be required.
- They were against giving indulgences to priests.
- Women preachers should be allowed.
- Some Lollards were opposed tithes.
- Some thought that there was no immortal soul.
- Worship could take place anywhere, not just in churches.

⁶³ [Britannica 1999] Article on the Lollards

⁶⁴ [McFarlane 1952] p. 129

⁶⁵ [Hill 1986] p. 90

⁶⁶ [Britannica 1999] Article on the Lollards

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ These are from several sources: [Hill 86] [Summers 06] [Plumb 95] [Britannica 99] Article on Lollards

⁶⁹ [Deanesly 1966], [Long 1998], [Williams 2000] p. 604, [McFarlane 1953] p. 127. The first English translation of the entire Bible was done by Wycliffe and his colleagues, a compilation & republishing of which [Wycliffe 1850] is in the Starr King Rare Book Room.

*Familists*⁷⁰

The religious sect called Family of Love is often referred to as the Familists. It was of Dutch origin, founded by a 16th century Dutch merchant Hendrik Niclaes, who had a number of visions that caused him to call himself a “begodded man.” Niclaes’ book *Evangelium regni* was published in England as *A Joyfyl Message of the Kingdom*. He gained many followers, making two visits to England, where his sect had the largest following. Itinerant craftsmen are thought to be among its most loyal adherents. Thus, we can speculate that spinners and weavers had the opportunity to hear of the sect and its beliefs.

The sect was a target of a negative proclamation by Queen Elizabeth I in 1580, and did not survive after the Restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. However George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, believed that some remaining Familists later joined his organization.

Beliefs associated with the Familists include the following:

- Mysticism guided them. They believed in the divine spark within all men and the importance of experiencing and acting upon it.
- They were against infant baptism. In this sense, they were Anabaptists.
- They were Anti-Trinitarians.
- They believed that Saints would judge the world as anticipation of the Last Judgment.
- They believed in Universal salvation.
- They rejected the theology of the Atonement (Christ’s vicarious sacrifice),
- Some Familists were mortalists (soul dies with body) and believed resurrection occurs in this life. Thus, they predated our modern Humanist belief that man may save self by his own efforts.

*Anabaptists*⁷¹

Anabaptist ideas spread from continental Europe to England by the early 1500’s. One of the main routes was people fleeing religious persecution from the Netherlands. The English authorities did not welcome them, arresting, trying and burning them after their arrival. The chief tenets of their faith were:

- Adult baptism.
- Refusal to swear oaths, or take office in the Commonwealth
- The doctrine of the celestial flesh of Christ
- “All things be common”

Since one of the main textile trade routes to England was from the Netherlands, it is highly probable that English spinners and weavers heard these religious tenets.

*Baptists*⁷²

Baptists are a sect of Anabaptists, believing that only believers should be baptized and that baptism should be done by immersion. Two groups of Baptists emerged in England during the 17th century. They differed with respect to who had the possibility of being saved. General Baptists, whose first church was found in London c. 1611, believed that all persons could have the possibility of being saved, whereas Particular Baptists believed, as John Calvin did, that only a predestined elect few could be saved. The General Baptists later spread to America and has flourished into present times. Particular Baptist membership declined after World War I.

*Levelers*⁷³

The Levelers began in the 1650’s in England. The name Levelers suggested that its supporters wished to “level men’s estates.” They believed in democracy, a wide franchise, abolition of the House of Lords, election of judges, legal and economic reforms, and separation of church and state. Their religious beliefs consisted of a rejection of sin and belief that Christ was not divine. They unsuccessfully urged Parliament to enact a package of social reforms. In 1649, Leveler leaders were imprisoned, and a Leveler revolt was put down in Oxfordshire, which was the end of the Levelers as an organized political force. Some of their social ideas were taken over by the Quakers.

⁷⁰ Sources for information on the Familists are [Hill 1986], [Britannica 1999] Article on Familists, and [Williams 2000] pp. 724-731

⁷¹ [Williams 2000] pp. 605-608, [Hill 1986]

⁷² [Britannica 1999] Article on Baptists, [Williams 2000] pp. 1208-1209

⁷³ [Hill 1986], [Britannica 1999] Article on Levelers

*Society of Friends (Quakers)*⁷⁴

In about 1650 George Fox founded the Society of Friends, also called the Quakers, in England. The Friend's beliefs stress the guidance of the Holy Spirit, reject outward rites and an ordained ministry, and has a long tradition of actively working for peace and opposing war. They have also supported the equal gifts of women to preach and witness for their faith.⁷⁵ Quakerism spread rapidly first in the north of England, and then in an expansive move to London and the rest of England, then to Scotland and Ireland, to the continent of Europe, and finally to North America. We can assume that any cottage spinners or weavers near the end of the 17th century would have known about the Society of Friends.

*Ranters*⁷⁶

A sect that appeared at about 1650 in England, had tenets that included:

- The belief that a believer is free from all traditional restraints.
- Sin is a product only of the imagination.
- Private ownership of property is wrong.
- They believed, as did George Fox and Hendrik Niclaes, that perfection is possible in this life.

*Diggers*⁷⁷

The Diggers were a group of agrarian communists who flourished in England in 1649-50. They maintained that since Charles I had been executed, land should be made available for the very poor to cultivate. The Diggers' activities alarmed the Commonwealth government and roused the hostility of local landowners, who were rival claimants to the lands they had started to cultivate at St. George's Hill, Surrey. By the end of March 1650 their colony was dispersed.

*Brownists*⁷⁸

Followers of Robert Brown (b. c. 1550--d. October 1633) a Puritan Congregationalist church leader. They demanded separation from the Church of England and freedom from state control. Brown felt that the duty of the state was to keep civil peace, and that only when war was threatened, might it interfere in religion. Scripturally, he believed in the parity of New and Old Testaments.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Work

The golden age of spinning in Europe lasted from the 16th century when spinning wheels became commonplace until the 19th century when the machines of the Industrial Revolution automated spinning. It coincided with and contributed to social, political and religious movements that were happening during the same period. In England, we have seen that there were a wide variety of religious heresies that these grass roots textile workers were being exposed to.

The evidence we have found that ideas of the Reformation were spread to the populace while "gathering the wool" in a *verlag* textile system is from England alone. Why evidence of the same phenomenon happening in other countries isn't also readily available is curious. These possibilities suggest themselves as explanations:

- Weavers and spinners on the European continent did not have as much contact with traders who were spreading ideas of the Reformation.
- Weavers and spinners did have contact with traders and new religious ideas, but didn't have a similar tradition of religious dissent, and thus didn't absorb and embrace the new ideas.
- The phenomenon was there but hasn't been studied by any major researchers, as yet.
- The spread of the Reformation on the continent occurred mostly via the movement of major Reformation leaders, as discussed in [Williams 2000] and [Wilbur 1925]. Therefore, any dissemination from other sources was minor in comparison and thus hasn't been studied.

Determining which of these is the case suggests an interesting line of research that might be undertaken by some future researcher.

⁷⁴ [Hill 1986], [Britannica 1999] Article on The Society of Friends, [Vann 1969]

⁷⁵ [Hufton 1995] pp. 418-419

⁷⁶ [Britannica 1999] Article on Ranters

⁷⁷ [Britannica 1999] Article on Diggers

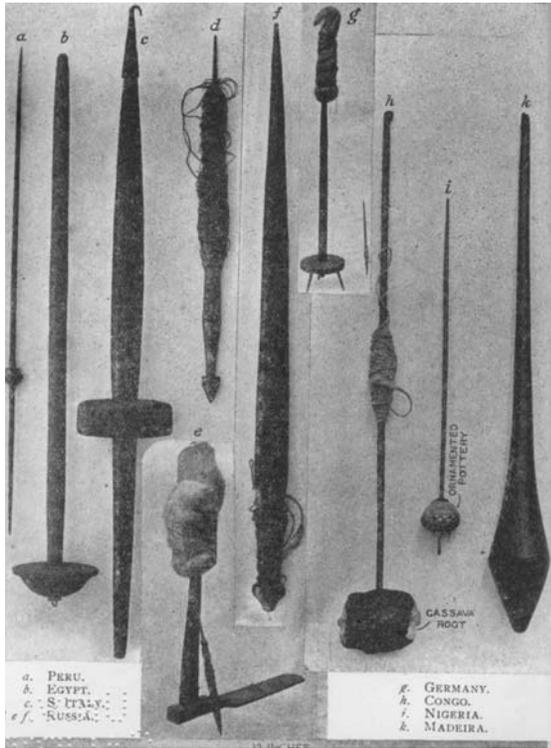
⁷⁸ [Britannica 1999] Article on Brownists, [Williams 2000] pp. 1207-1209

Looking back on the 300-year spinning-wheel period, one can feel both the ordinariness of what was an every-day activity for many women, and simultaneously the importance that thousands of such common women played in advancing the economic, social and religious ideas of the time.

Plates

1. Spindles and Spinning Wheels
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Plate 1. Spindles and Spinning Wheels



Before spinning wheels, spindles were used throughout the world to create yarn from fiber.⁷⁹

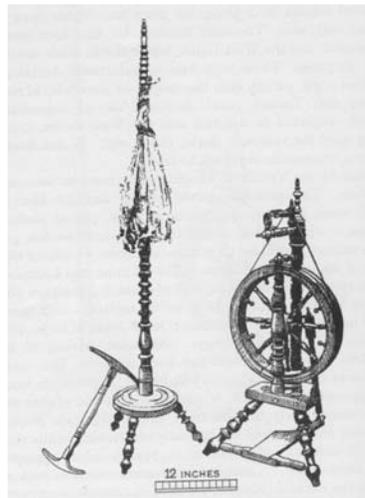


W. EUGENE SMITH
Above, a thread maker uses ancient methods and saliva to spin flax.⁸⁰

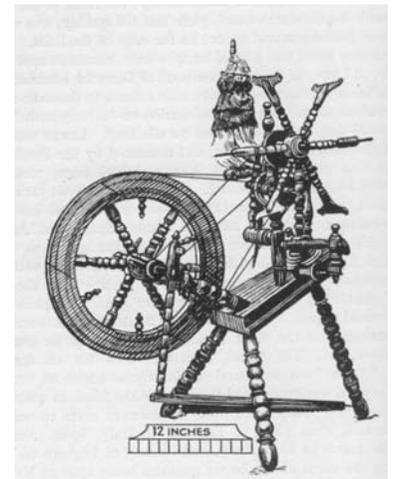
Thread maker using a spindle and saliva to spin flax.⁸⁰



Saxony spinning wheel⁸¹



Bohemian spinning wheel & distaff⁸²



German spinning wheel⁸³

⁷⁹ From [Horner 1920] frontispiece

⁸⁰ From *The Best of Life*, Time-Life Books, 1973, p. 287.

⁸¹ From WoodCraftPlans.com on-line catalog

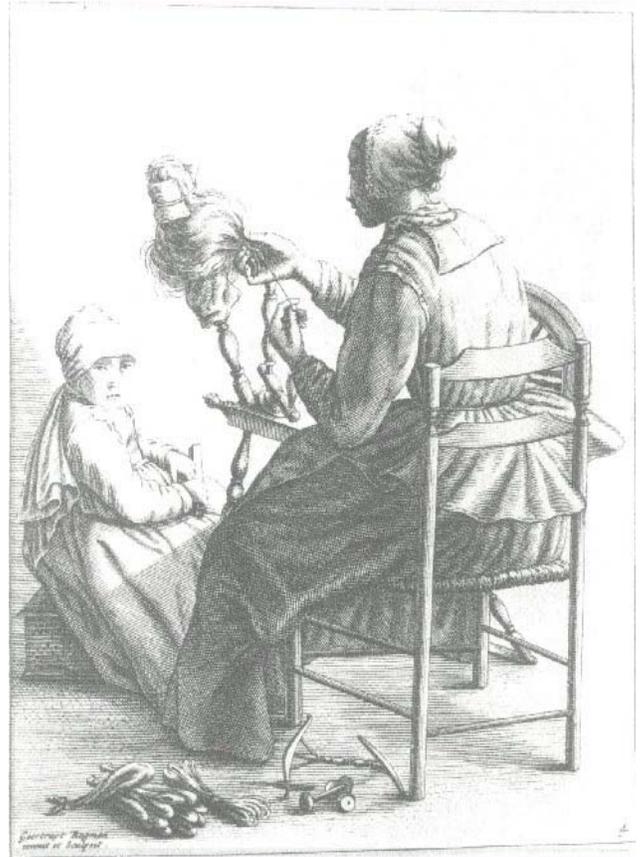
⁸² From [Horner 1920] p. 446

⁸³ From [Horner 1920] p. 424

Plate 2. Engravings of Spinners in the 16th and 17th Centuries



Israhel van Meckenem
The Visit to the Spinner, c. 1495/1503
Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection 1953.4.1
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.⁸⁴



Geertruydt Roghman
Woman Spinning, Before 1650
Harvey Parker Collection
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston⁸⁵

In *The Visit to the Spinner*, engraved at the beginning of the 16th century, the spinner not using a spinning wheel, but rather a hand held spindle. She is using a distaff to hold the fiber, and pulling fiber from the distaff as she spins. She has completed spindles in the basket at her feet.

In *Woman Spinning*, engraved in the mid-17th century, the spinner is now using a spinning wheel and a distaff. She has several completed spindles at her feet.

⁸⁴ From online image library of the National Gallery of Art: <http://www.nga.gov/>

⁸⁵ From [Weisner 200] p. 120

Plate 3: The Demand for Cloth

Demand for cloth came both from the common people and the aristocracy.



“For common people, linen served as a comfortable, inexpensive and hygienic material for underwear, tablewear, and bedclothes.” [Schneider 1989] p. 182.

For the aristocracy, sumptuary laws dictated what various classes of nobles could wear. These pictures show clothing that was expected for noble men and women in the 16th century. The double ruff collar required a high quality of linen to make the pleats form properly.

Nicolas-Bernard Lepicie
Le Lever de Fanchon, 1773
Musee Hotel Sandelin, Saint-Omer⁸⁶



An unknown man c. 1532-40
Hans Holbein⁸⁷



Double Ruff. Unknown Girl, 1569
Attributed to the Master of the Countess of Warwick⁸⁸

⁸⁶ From online art website at <http://artyzm.com/world/1/lepicie/>

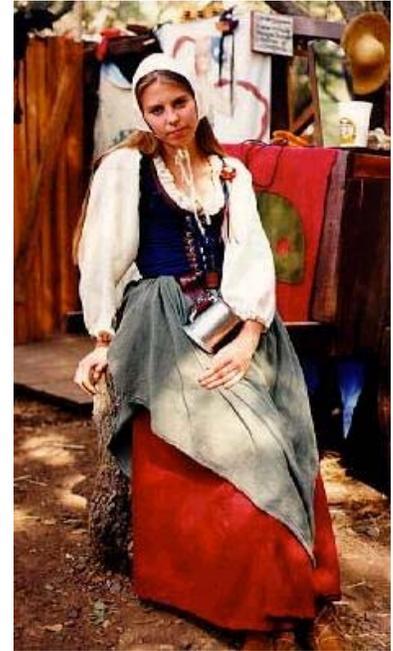
⁸⁷ From online art website at <http://www.tudor-portraits.com/>

⁸⁸ From online art website at <http://www.tudor-portraits.com/>

Plate 4. Clothing Worn by the Common Woman



Above: London's Bermondsey Street during the Renaissance⁸⁹
Noble people and common people mingled on London's streets. When sumptuary laws were followed, you could tell a person's station in life by what he or she was wearing.



Right: A typical Renaissance common woman's clothing: a long skirt and apron, a long-sleeved blouse, a vest laced up the front and a covering for the hair.⁹⁰ This is attire endorsed by the present-day Renaissance Pleasure Faires.



5. Woman's shirt. Probably Italian. 17th century.
Linen with polydrome silk embroidery.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London. T.770.191

Left: Medieval Underwear A chemise is a white linen shirt worn to keep sweat and oils off your good fabric. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, it was usually the only piece of clothing that got washed. Chemise is the French term. Italians called it a "Camicia". The English called the same shirt a "Smock" and the Irish called it a "Léine". In the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, there is an extant 17th century chemise from Italy (see picture at left). This chemise easily could have been in use as early as the 15th century.⁹¹



Left: Typical medieval style lace⁹² and buckle⁹³ shoes.

Right: A modern hand spinner, Barbara Meyers, in medieval clothing.⁹⁴ The articles of outer clothing were made using Butterick "Making History" pattern 6198. Under her outer clothing, she is wearing a linen chemise made from the instructions at the reconstructing history website⁹⁵, long woolen socks, and leather shoes.



⁸⁹ From <http://renaissance.dm.net/sumptuary/>, unknown artist.

⁹⁰ From <http://www.renfaire.com/Costume/index.html>

⁹¹ Picture and text from <http://www.reconstructinghistory.com/beginners/chemise.html> © 2000 by Kass McGann.

⁹² From http://www.sonofsandler.com/queen_of_hearts.htm

⁹³ From <http://www.nativearth.net/>

⁹⁴ Photo credit, Tom Meyers, October 19, 2001.

⁹⁵ Reconstructing history website: <http://www.reconstructinghistory.com/beginners/chemise.html>

Plate 5. Spinning as a Virtuous Activity



School of Caravaggio
The Virgin and Saint Anne, early 17th Century
Fratelli Alinari Archives, Florence, Italy⁹⁶



Gerard Dou (1613-1675)
Reading the Bible, c. 1660
Musee du Louvre, Paris⁹⁷

These paintings show that spinning and other forms of fiber work were seen as virtuous pursuits in the 17th century.

In the picture of the Virgin and Saint Anne, Saint Anne is supervising her daughter's needlework while she is winding a ball of spun yarn off of a swift. Notice finished balls of yarn in a basket on the floor.

Gerard Dou's paintings show the prominent place that a spinning wheel played in the lives of pious people in the mid-17th century. Both of these scenes show a Saxony style spinning wheel, with partially completed spinning projects in the background, while a pious activity is taking place in the foreground. They look to both be painted of the same room and props.



Gerard Dou (1613-1675)
Prayer of a Spinner, c. 1660
Alte Pinakothek, Munich⁹⁸

⁹⁶ From [Hufton 1995] Figure 31

⁹⁷ from [Hufton 1995] Figure 46

⁹⁸ From the online Art Renewal Center at: http://www.artrenewal.org/images/artists/d/Dou_Gerrit/

Plate 6. Images of Spinning Bees: Both Scandalous and Proper



A Spinnstube (Hans Sebald Beham, 1524)

Hans Sebald Beham *Spinnstube*, 1524.
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg⁹⁹

At the 16th Century *Spinnstube* engraved by Hans Beham, there is only one person actually spinning from a distaff in the back. All of the other people are behaving in various scandalous ways, with the sexes freely mixing. This may have been drawn as a satire, or as a demonstration of societal/church disapproval of these gatherings.

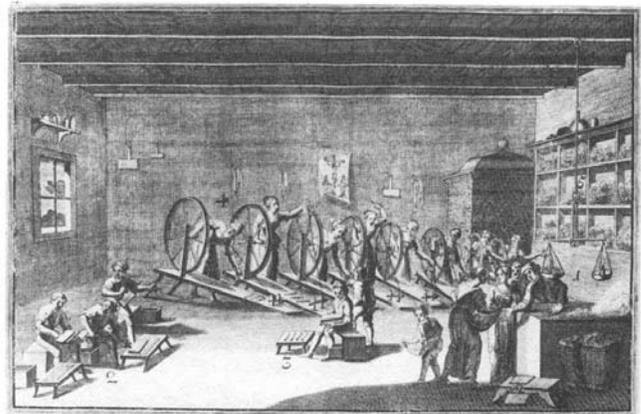
The *Spinnstube in the 18th Century* shows a much more proper setting, still involving both men and women, but exhibiting much better behavior. By this time, the Spinnstuben were under the supervision of a respectable *Lichtherr*, who was responsible to the village morals court, a church entity. All participants were required to register.

The Model Spinnstube Wool Factory in Bohemia shows a scene where social activities and work have been separated. A Bohemian lord enforced this separation.



A Spinnstube in the eighteenth century⁹⁹

Spinnstube in the 18th Century, 1759
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg¹⁰⁰



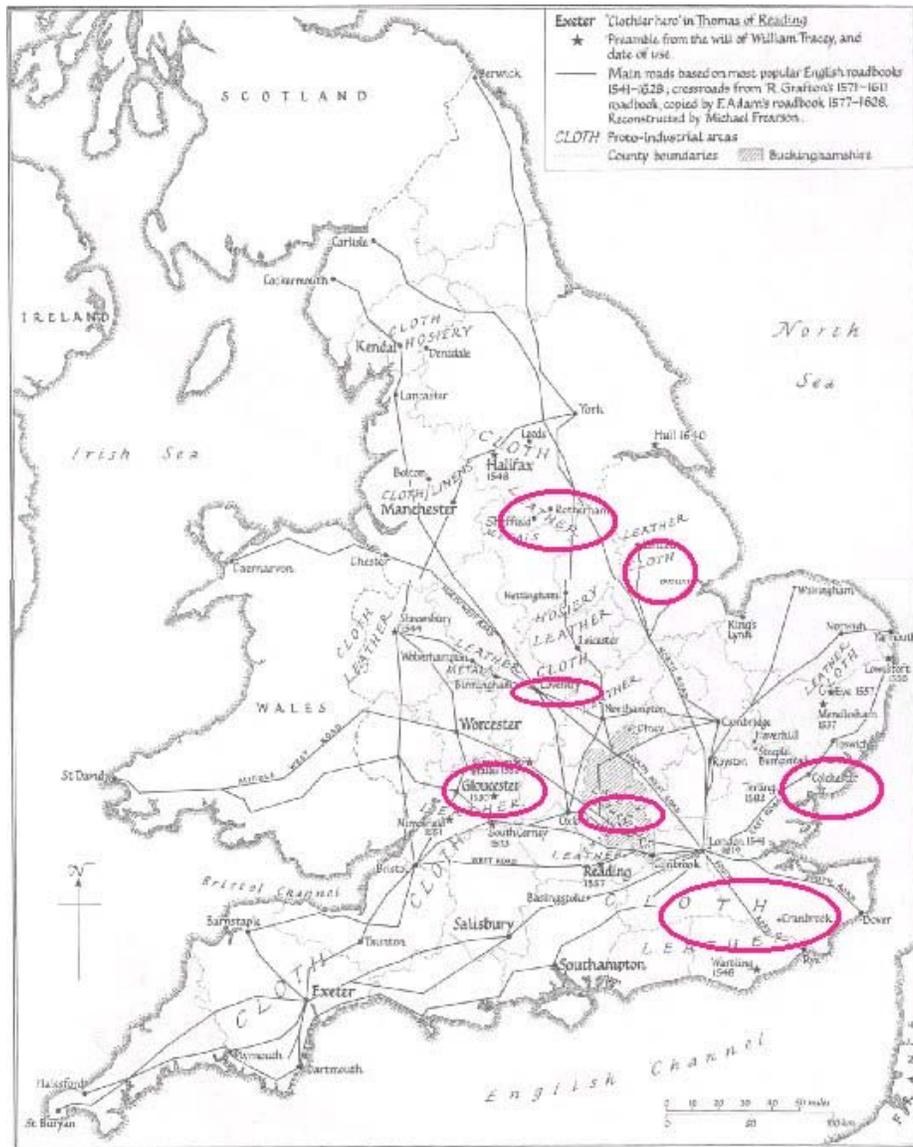
Model Spinnstube Wool Factory in Bohemia, 1727
Deutsches Museum, Munich¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ From [Medick 1984] p. 320

¹⁰⁰ From [Medick 1984] p. 330

¹⁰¹ From [Medick 1984] p. 327

Plate 7. Map of Roads, Industry and Dissenting Connections in England c. 1600



Map from [Spufford 1995] pp. 38-39

The red ovals show locations of particular strength of heretical religious ideas. Red ovals drawn by Barbara Meyers.

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