

Women in the printing business

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The history of Basel printing, like that of printing elsewhere, includes women who ran printing houses, usually as widows of printers. Under the rules of the guilds and the customs of the city, a widow could continue her husband's business, often with the help of a foreman or a son, until she remarried or handed it over to an heir. Several important printing houses of the sixteenth century passed through such periods of female direction.¹

The family of Johann Froben illustrates the pattern. After Froben's death in 1527, his business passed to his son Hieronymus Froben and his son-in-law Nicolaus Episcopius, who continued it under the Froben name. Froben's widow married the printer Johannes Herwagen, who had worked in the house. Herwagen then established his own printing business. The succession of printing houses through marriages and family alliances was common, reflecting the fact that the business was a family enterprise in which capital, skills and reputation were transmitted through kinship.

The role of women in the family enterprises of Basel, which is well documented for the printing houses, would recur in the silk ribbon industry and in the merchant houses of the following centuries. The wives and widows of merchants managed households that were also businesses, kept accounts, received clients and correspondents and sometimes directed the business during the absence or after the death of their husbands. The formal exclusion of women from the guilds and from public office coexisted with their informal but substantial role in the economy of the city.

1 Notes

1. On widows who ran printing houses in sixteenth-century Basel and elsewhere, see the literature on women in the early modern book trade. Specific Basel cases to be verified. ↩

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