Drowning Her Sorrows: Widowhood and Entrepreneurship in the Champagne Industry

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On March 26, 1890, the local newspaper of the Champagne wine-producing community sadly announced the death of one of its most prominent local merchant-manufacturers or *négociants*, Veuve Pommery. Through hard work and outstanding intellectual ability, according to the paper, this *négociant* had assured that the family wine firm in Reims "ranked among the best wine houses of Champagne" with a brand name that was recognized "throughout the world." The reporter noted that the deceased would forever count "among the celebrities of Champagne," with an "imperishable fame" much like the legendary widow who had founded a firm earlier in the century, Veuve Clicquot. Much like Clicquot, Pommery was said to have a "cerebral organization" that was "rather more like that of a man than that of a woman." Despite having qualities and imagination that "would have been the envy of a statesman," the path to Pommery's success was clear. "This important business probably would have been lost," the journalist finally notes, "if she had not found in her collaborator and associate, M. Vasnier, an administrator of the first order." Saved by the brilliant and valiant Henry Vasnier, Madame Pommery, it was duly noted, then put her admirable talents to organizing her personnel, acting as a "genuine mother, attentive and devoted" [*Vigneron champenois*, Mar. 26, 1890].

"A genuine mother, attentive and devoted" became the classic description applied to the women entrepreneurs, the so-called "grandes dames du Champagne," who were so prominent in the champagne industry during the nineteenth century. Both Veuve Pommery and Veuve Clicquot were responsible for many extraordinary innovations in production and marketing but, nonetheless, they have been commemorated in the literature on the champagne industry as dutiful wives and mothers, not as innovative *négociants* with important knowledge and training [Fièvet, 1868; Maizière, 1896]. This characteristic is no less true today than it was over one hundred years ago when Madame Pommery's obituary appeared. For modern historians, much like nineteenth-century observers, these women appeared to drown their sorrows in champagne, throwing their grief into the family enterprise in order to assure the

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success of the dead husband's venture [Pellus, 1992; Polignac, 1994; Etienne, 1994]. The most recent works, which are primarily official histories written by family members or associates of the wine houses, have acknowledged some of the more innovative business techniques these women introduced, but their greatest successes, it would seem, still lie in identifying a bright, promising man as a collaborator and arranging the successful marriages of their daughters [Pellus, 1992; Polignac, 1994].

The tendency to remember women such as Pommery as primarily wives and mothers has hardly been examined since the first observations were made about these womens' lives in the late nineteenth century. In many ways, the depiction of women entrepreneurs in a domestic role is hardly surprising. Historians have demonstrated how women's function in French society in the nineteenth century was determined by prevailing notions about the physical, mental, and emotional differences between the sexes. The sexes were to occupy separate spheres: women were to remain within the private sphere of the home – concerning themselves with reproduction and child rearing – while men were to occupy the public sphere of politics and business [Bell and Offen, 1983]. Notions about women's proper place are reflected in commentaries such as the one cited above.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, women in the champagne industry were increasingly excluded from the public sphere of commercial activity in keeping with developing notions about women. By the end of the nineteenth century this exclusion can be seen most clearly in the membership list of the Syndicat du Commerce des vins de Champagne (hereafter, Syndicat du Commerce). A professional organization for the *négociants* and their product, the Syndicat du Commerce between 1882 and 1900 listed four firms headed by women on the exclusive membership list. This meant that these firms were accepted among the exclusive circle of *grandes marques*. These women directors, however, sent male employees or sons to represent the firm in the regular meetings of the syndicate. These representatives did not appear to play a prominent role in the direction of the *négociants* organization, and they have left barely a trace of their activities within the syndicate.

Veuve Clicquot, Veuve Binet et Fils, Veuve Loche, and Veuve Pommery – these names among the list of members of the Syndicat du Commerce suggest, however, the historic importance of women in the development of the champagne industry. While the more prominent male entrepreneurs have been enshrined as "heroes" for their business savvy, the most prominent women entrepreneurs have been enshrined as "heroines" for their roles as "attentive and devoted" mothers. These differing commemorations of the *négociants* not only points to the gendered nature of the historical record, but it also demonstrates how entrepreneurship in France was culturally constructed. Over forty years ago, David Landes suggested that the "human factor" needed to be studied by historians when assessing modern France's economic and industrial development. He concluded that the social and cultural context of French business and business men shaped economic decisions and played a critical role in France's long-term development [Landes, 1951, pp. 334-54].

Landes's portrait of a typical French business in the nineteenth century – small scale with an emphasis on the economic unity of the business and family – suggests a cultural context for business that would make the separate spheres more permeable than contemporaries would have us believe. If we look for business women among traditional business histories, however, we are often struck by their absence. As in the champagne industry, women are more likely to be portrayed in their traditional roles with very little reference to their business acumen, technical abilities, and dedication to the family enterprise. Examining the careers and the subsequent commemorations of the women of the champagne industry suggests that larger notions about entrepreneurship and gender roles came to shape a unique vision of women entrepreneurs in the late nineteenth century. Women entrepreneurs in Champagne – poised between their domestic and public roles – paradoxically defied and re-confirmed established notions about women's function in French society. By the turn of the century, these women came to serve as symbols, not of the burgeoning women's emancipation movement, but of the "genuine mother, attentive and devoted" to both family and firm thus shaping a unique definition of women's entrepreneurship in modern France.

Perhaps the best illustration of the woman entrepreneur in the nineteenth century can be seen in the life of Madame Pommery, who successfully marketed her wines in the most competitive market for champagne. While contemporaries attributed her ability to a male "cerebral organization," a recent biography, which makes use of private family papers, hints at a more satisfactory explanation of her success. Family papers show that Pommery, whose father died when she was young, grew up under the guidance of "solitary women, habituated to directing their own affairs," including her widowed mother, a widowed aunt with two children, and an aunt who never married [Polignac, 1994, p. 16]. Lauding her daughter's "brilliant" intelligence, Pommery's mother encouraged her to pursue her studies in Paris. There, Pommery became friends with Clémence Vasnier, whose brother, Henry Vasnier, would later become Pommery's closest business associate [Polignac, 1994, pp. 16-17] .

After the completion of her studies in Paris, Pommery set off with her mother's blessing to continue her education in a private pension in England for several years [Polignac, 1994, pp. 16-17]. We have little information about this stage of Pommery's life: what her "studies" consisted of; what her life was like in England; what motivated either mother or daughter to make such an unusual choice. This early experience, however, appears to have shaped Pommery's later ability to market her product to the British middle classes. After her husband's death in 1858, Pommery made several additional trips to England. It was at this time that she concluded that the English had a taste for wines that were less rich and sweet than the standard champagnes that were then being marketed. Along with her *chef de cave* Damas Olivier, Pommery developed new production techniques to create these "brut" champagnes, revolutionizing not only production but also the marketing of champagne [Polignac, 1994, p. 38]. These techniques were overwhelmingly successful and widely imitated by contemporaries [Bonnedame, 1892]. Pommery's bold innovations transformed

her small enterprise into one of the most important firms active in overseas markets, the so-called *grandes marques*. Under her directorship, the Pommery maison went from sales of less than 30,000 bottles of wine per year in 1858 (when she took over the firm) to nearly 2 million bottles per year by the time of her death.

Just as Pommery had a remarkable ability to understand and relate to the British consumer, Clicquot managed to do the same for the Russian market. Clicquot is credited with opening the Russian market for champagne in the early part of the century, sending a trusted representative to Russia with a boatload of champagne in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars [Pellus, 1992, p. 178]. Legends abound as to how the irrepressible Veuve Clicquot turned the French defeat into a marketing coup by supposedly throwing open her cellars to the thirsty Russian troops [Pellus, 1992, p. 178]. Regardless of the veracity of the story, during the century that followed the Clicquot champagne brand came to dominate the Russian market [Gandilhon, 1973, pp. 502-13]. The veuve would be attributed with the "peaceful conquest" of Russia for the industry [Pellus, 1992, p. 171]. Russia, along with Britain, would remain among the most important markets for the wines of Champagne in the nineteenth century.

During these early years, Clicquot, much like Pommery later on, experimented with production techniques. For Clicquot, the main work was to overcome some of the technical difficulties that plagued the industry in its infancy. Overseeing the production of her wines, Clicquot was frustrated by the prolonged period needed during the second fermentation of champagne in order to expel the small amount of sediment that formed on the side of the bottle. In order to remove the buildup in a more timely fashion, Clicquot developed a technique of placing bottles, neck first (*sur point*), on racks made of two boards united at an acute angle, forming the shape of an "A." Each day, for six or more weeks, a worker would twist the bottle in a succession of slight turns, slowly moving the sediment toward the cork. When the sediment gathered in the neck of the bottle, it was finally removed in a process called *dégorgement*. In the early nineteenth century, it was believed that this kind of manipulation of the wine would not serve to speed up the process of removing the sediment and that it would only trouble the already volatile wines. Clicquot's early experiments were met with ridicule and sarcasm by male contemporaries [Pellus, 1992, pp. 176-77]. Nonetheless, her experiments resulted in the development of a processing technique called *remuage*, which greatly accelerated the processing technique and was eventually adopted by the industry as standard practice.

These innovations in wine production and blending techniques were important to an industry that was relatively new and had few winemaking traditions. How many other women were innovative wine makers or marketers is difficult to say. The vast majority of *négociants* – male or female – and their firms were not included among the *grandes marques* and lacked the financial clout and the kind of dramatic, public lives that drew widespread attention. Their successes and failures, labor and leisure were rarely noted, leaving these individuals and their businesses largely absent from the public record. From the

little evidence that exists we can speculate that these smaller firms may have had an even greater percentage of women entrepreneurs by the end of the nineteenth century than the *grandes marques* firms and even an occasional woman among the sales staff [Bonal, 1987, pp. 13ff].

Smaller firms often had less complex ownership structures than seen among the *grandes marques*. This allowed women to move into ownership positions, particularly after the death of a spouse, without having to contend with male partners. Such was the example of Mathilde Emilie Laurent-Perrier who took over the firm of her husband Eugène upon his death in 1887. Veuve Laurent-Perrier inherited a relatively new firm with an impressive inventory of wines and immense caves and production facilities. According to her biographer, to this substantial capital she added a personal ambition to break into the highly competitive British market. This ambition, however, was checked by a serious debt incurred by her husband, which made her early years of management particularly difficult. A reorganization of the firm in 1887 brought in two male associates, including an Englishman who was responsible for marketing across the channel. There would be three more re-organizations of the firm during her lifetime, but the firm retained the name of Veuve Laurent-Perrier et Cie. Indeed, the veuve remained the center of the firm, directing the day-to-day operations of the firm, taking care of correspondence and verifying the books. "She was rather authoritarian," remembered her granddaughter. "For everyone, she was incontestably *la patronne*" [Pellus, 1992, p. 196]. Veuve Laurent-Perrier remained *la patronne*, raising her three children, while remaining at the center of the production facilities in Tours-sur-Marne.

With the growing vogue for champagne at the end of the century, *négociants* were expanding and modernizing their production facilities [Bonal, 1984, p. 71]. While some of the smaller producers, like Laurent-Perrier, continued to create production facilities adjacent to family compounds, the largest producers after mid-century increasingly chose to build their primary residences away from the center of production. Indeed, among the most prestigious *négociants*, the family moved to estates with vineyards in the countryside surrounding the main manufacturing centers [Vizetelly, 1882, pp. 139, 229ff; U.S. Department of State, May 6, 1882]. Veuve Clicquot had been one of the earlier trend-setters among the *négociants*, constructing a Renaissance-style chateau in Boursault in 1842 where she lived with her daughter. Separation of "family" space and "commercial" space was the trend among the largest *négociants* in the late nineteenth century.

Women who took over the family enterprise before the physical separation of these "spheres" appear to have managed to maintain control of the enterprise. Clicquot, for example, had been running her enterprise for over thirty-five years before she moved with her daughter to Boursault. After the move, she remained very much at the heart of the enterprise, despite her distance from production facilities in Reims. Her partner Mathieu-Edouard Werlé, whom she had groomed for the position since his arrival from his native Wetzler (in the principality of Hesse) in 1821, was in charge of overseeing day-to-day operations [Monselet, 1882]. Contemporaries described her as a woman

"whose soul was devoted to business, and who scanned over each day to the very last the ledger of the commercial house to which she had given her name" [Tomes, 1867].

Veuve Pommery, who also took control of the enterprise before there was any separation of commercial and private space, ultimately chose not to separate the two. She was a notable exception to this general trend. Veuve Pommery, who was raising two children while operating her *grandes marques* firm, chose to construct a residence in the heart of her production compound. In order to accommodate the need for larger production facilities, she took a chance on moving her main residence as well as her enterprise to the edge of the city of Reims on land that was said to be "improper for construction" [Hollande, 1951]. Attracted by the immense underground chalk galleries, which proved ideal for wine cellars, Pommery began building in 1868. Work was completed on her immense project in 1878, and it included her primary residence, all production facilities, cellars, show rooms, along with an immense garden built along the lines of seventeenth-century British chateaux. Here she would be at the center of producing and marketing the wine that carried her name around the world. Some commentators were impressed at the way that the chosen architectural design evoked the "tradition bordelaise" [Polignac, 1994, p. 35]

Pommery's building scheme succeeded in two ways. She balanced domestic concerns with the need to expand and industrialize her facilities, managing to remain *la patronne* much like Laurent-Perrier. This building scheme worked to her advantage not only by placing her at the center of production but also by further associating her brand name symbolically with tradition and quality. Enormous status was invested in a firm's brand name by the late nineteenth century, and firms searched for ways to distance their brands from associations with assembly lines, technology, and back-breaking labor. Pommery's new facility, recalling the traditions of fine wine production in Bordeaux, could offer consumers a sense of continuity with quality wine production and old-world traditions. A number of travel books and promotional pamphlets prominently featured drawings of the new Pommery chateau and production facilities [Archives Départementales de la Marne, Chp. 10189, 10577; *A Glimpse of a Famous Wine Cellar*, 1906]. These pamphlets were aimed specifically at the British market where the middle classes were avid consumers of Bordeaux wines, once the symbol of the rich and powerful of eighteenth-century England [Unwin, 1991].

The objective of the *négociants* – male or female – was to sell champagne, and this meant setting the wine apart from the mundane realities of daily life. *Négociants* attempted to associate their wines with scenes of higher status, placing the product in upscale settings, linking wealth with honor, reassuring the consumer that they were part of a community that was removed from the conditions and values of the popular classes [Marchand, 1985]. But in the face of the complexities of the new social world of the late nineteenth century that created a certain anxiety among bourgeois consumers, "snob appeal" was not enough to sell a luxury commodity to the middle classes at home and abroad.

Champagne *négociants* also attempted to reassure consumers by linking their wines with timeless tradition that could offer a sense that one was upholding standards of social intercourse. They sought to create an image of champagne as a beverage that was as effortless to create as it was to drink, a symbol of a balance between old-world traditions and the "good life" of the modern period. For this, champagne and wine brand names were to offer consumers a sense of continuity.

Historians have pointed to the period between 1870 and 1914 in particular as one of rapid change when social groups and their environments were dramatically transformed, resulting in a search for "new social devices to ensure or express social cohesion and identity and to structure social relations" [Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., 1992, p. 5]. Recent work suggests that this changing environment created "a profound sense of losing touch with the past" [Gillis, 1994, p. 10]. No brand name or title could create a better sense of continuity with the past and a certain nurturing reassurance than the one that appeared on the labels of all women *négociants* – "veuve" or "widow." While men were "designated carriers of progress," women were seen as belonging more to the past, "keepers and embodiments of memory" [Gillis, 1994, p. 10]. The "widow" as a "genuine mother, attentive and devoted" and a dedicated wife could provide consolation to those who feared becoming rootless in the new world of the late nineteenth century.

Négociants actively promoted the association of champagne with family gatherings, for which the "genuine mother" would be central [Richards, 1990]. Important "historic events" connected with family life were increasingly celebrated by the opening of a bottle of champagne, marking the event as above the mundane. Wine labels suggested that family events – such as baptisms and marriages – were occasions for secular celebrations [Goffman, 1979]. Indeed, champagne could be used for noting many of the main events of the life course: "Fiancé Champagne" was created to toast impending marriages; "Nuptial Champagne" was created for toasting the newlyweds; and "Bebé Champagne" was promoted for new parents [Archives Départementales de la Marne, 16U194, nos. 549, 2691, 923]. If there were doubts about when to serve the wines, the labels provided examples. On the label for "Bouquet of the Bride Champagne," for example, the happy couple is shown as recipients of a celebratory toast offered by the guests at a wedding banquet [Archives Départementales de la Marne, 16U196, no. 2804].

Historians cannot determine with any accuracy if the presence of the word "veuve" on a champagne label or the stories that circulated about these women entrepreneurs as devoted mothers had any direct impact on the purchasing choices of middle-class consumers. The goal of the Champagne *négociants*, however, was to sell their wines, so it is highly unlikely that they would have chosen or continued using messages that did not further this goal. The popular success of the champagnes of Veuve Pommery and Veuve Clicquot were widely recognized. Looking at the labels that appeared on champagne bottles, we find a marked increase after 1880 in the number of labels that include the title of "veuve." This did not mean that there was an

increase in the number of firms headed by widows. For the most part, these new widows could best be described as "fantasy *veuves*," fictional widows from fictional champagne families. The firm of Mercier, for example, introduced the wines of Veuve Damas of Reims, a purely fictional widow, in 1885 [Archives Départementales de la Marne, 16U194, label 522]. Mercier was one of the more innovative marketers within the region with a well-established brand name within the European market. There are no records of what motivated the directors at Mercier to adopt a "veuve" label. But we can assume that the *négociants* at Mercier were attempting to create an advertising message that was more or less shared by their audience. Other male-owned firms followed the Mercier example, creating labels that featured the names of "fantasy veuves" [Archives Départementales de la Marne, 16U194 label 671 Veuve de la Pleyne; label 729 Veuve Monnier et ses fils; label 734 Veuve Sillery; label 938 Veuve Fonteyne].

Women, in their capacity as wives and mothers, began to appear on champagne wine labels with some frequency after the 1870s. In 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's first Jubilee, champagne *négociants* attempted to claim this political figure for promoting their commodity [Archives Départementales de la Marne, 16U194 label 692, Victoria; label 743, Royal Jubilee Champagne; label 808, Jubilee]. Victoria was a reigning monarch – giving the wines an up-scale appeal – but she was commemorated mainly as a wife and mother [Gillis, 1994, p. 10]. Her name and her image, in black mourning dress, appeared on labels of champagne bottles, much as they did on other commodities of the era [Richards, 1990, chap. 2]. Other women appeared as allegories, such as Joan of Arc, a symbol of national identity [Archives Départementales de la Marne, 16U194, label 957, Champagne Jeanne d'Arc; Krumeich, 1991, pp. 63-73]. The history of these "real women," much like the real *veuves* of the champagne industry, was systematically forgotten. The deeds of these women were not what gave them a marketing appeal. It was as a "genuine mother, attentive and devoted" – whether "mother" of a country, "mother" of a family, "mother" of her employees – that brought these women symbolic importance, which could be exploited in the new commodity culture of the late nineteenth century.

Women in the champagne industry, like women more generally in Western culture, came to serve as symbols. As John R. Gillis has noted, "Women and minorities often serve as symbols of a 'lost' past, nostalgically perceived and romantically constructed, but their actual lives are most readily forgotten" [Gillis, 1994, p. 10]. The reality of the women entrepreneurs and estate owners of the champagne industry and their success defied cultural attitudes regarding gender divisions, which should have relegated bourgeois women to the domestic sphere. These women, acting as innovative merchant-manufacturers with important entrepreneurial skills, challenged notions of proper gender roles and women's "nature." Contemporaries, searching for a way to explain the achievements of these women, re-interpreted the meaning of these women's lives, seeing in their success the inconsolable grief of a dutiful wife and the fulfillment of motherly duties to the "family" embodied in her firm.

Women were, however, more than wives, mothers, or grieving widows. Evidence suggests that some women entrepreneurs were not drowning their sorrows but amassing fortunes that were the envy of their male counterparts. The records left by women such as Clicquot and Pommery demonstrate that these women were dedicated entrepreneurs in their own right, more concerned with business deals than the duties of widowhood. Yet these women had little incentive to counter popular attitudes regarding their entrepreneurial skills. Indeed, operating in the public sphere, particularly when it intersected with politics, could be dangerous for these women entrepreneurs. Pommery, for example, encountered very serious public relations problems when an article appeared after the Franco-Prussian War stating that she had heartily welcomed the Prussians, offering to sumptuously accommodate several Prussian officers [Diancourt, 1884, app. A]. Her defense was that she billeted these officers out of fear for her security and that of her daughter, both of whom were "completely alone" during the war. Despite the fact that they were two vulnerable women, Pommery stated that she insisted that the Prussian flag not be flown over her property [Diancourt, 1884, app. A]. Sympathy for the widow and her daughter were rallied and the furor subsided.

The enshrining of women *négociants* as heroines of motherhood by admiring contemporaries could thus serve to the women entrepreneurs' advantage, masking her failure to conform to newly defined gender divisions, protecting her from criticism, and promoting her wines with bourgeois consumers. It was not likely that women *négociants*, or their successors, would counter any of the myths about these women or their firms. Looking at the history of women in the champagne industry reminds us of the gendered nature of the historical record. The story of the commemoration of these women as wives and mothers tells us much about the evolution of gender divisions and bourgeois culture in the nineteenth century and the strategies of women who defied the norms. It also underlines how deeply embedded in their social and cultural context notions of entrepreneurship could be in the nineteenth century. Just as Landes suggested that business and the business man had to be defined in the French context, so, too, must business woman. By starting with a definition of entrepreneurship that takes into account not only the typical French business structure but also prevailing attitudes about gender, historians can begin to discover the lives of the women entrepreneurs whose achievements have been systemically forgotten by the very act of remembering.

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