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THE WOMAN WHO WASN'T THERE: WOMEN'S MARKET LABOR AND THE TRANSITION TO CAPITALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Jeanne Boydston

Female wage-earners occupy an anomalous position in the story of the transition to capitalism in the United States. On the one hand, historians have documented the presence of large numbers of women in paid labor by the 1830s, specifically in key sectors of the new northeastern industrial labor force: textiles, shoe-making, and the early garment industry.[1] On the other hand, women and their paid work are virtually absent from narratives of the late eighteenth-century economic transformations that preceded and laid the foundations for early industrialization. That transition—from "market-places" to

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[1] See, for example, Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York, 1979); Joan M. Jensen, "Cloth, Butter and Boarders: Women's Household Production for the Market," *The Review of Radical Political Economy*, 12 (Summer 1980), 14-24; Jensen, "Butter Making and Economic Development in Mid-Atlantic America from 1750 to 1850," *Signs*, 13 (Summer 1988), 813-29; Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven, 1986); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York, 1986); Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana, 1988); and Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, 1994).

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a "market economy," as Winifred Barr Rothenberg has framed it[2]—is represented as a story of the labor and economic decisions of men: male farmers reorienting their crops, male field workers entering into new labor contracts, male merchants venturing into new relations of credit and debt, and male artisans struggling against the demise of the craft shop. Only relatively late in the process, with the coming of the mills themselves, do women's market activities figure in any important way in accounts of the transition to capitalism.[3]

The absence of women and of women's market relations from this story reflects the ways in which we have approached both the history of women in the eighteenth century and the history of the market transition. Although the field of American women's history began with the question of the transition to capitalism, studies of the late eighteenth century (influenced by Mary Beth Norton's and Linda Kerber's fine early work on "Republican motherhood") remain preoccupied with prescription and ideology.[4] This accent has been

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[2] Winifred Barr Rothenberg, *From Market-Places to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750-1850* (Chicago, 1992).

[3] Women are of course treated in studies of the Lowell mills; see Dublin, *Women at Work*. With the exception of Mary Blewett's work, however, they have not be treated extensively in studies of New England shoemaking in the transition; see Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work*. They are almost entirely absent from general works on the transition. For full citations on the literature of the transition to capitalism see note 4 in Paul A. Gilje, "The Rise of Capitalism," in this volume. Although women appear in economic history during the early years of the factory system, they disappear again once the factory system was established, and men had made their peace with wage labor, males poured into the jobs previously held by women. Having acted their brief hour upon the economic stage, female wage-earners then were heard no more for half a century.

[4] See, for example, Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980). For a critique of the paradigm of "republican motherhood," see Margaret A. Nash, "Rethinking Republican Motherhood: Benjamin Rush and the Young Ladies' Academy of Philadelphia," *Journal of the Early Republic* (forthcoming). The field of United States women's history originated in questions about the transition to capitalism. Indeed, so prominently did the transition to capitalism figure in the first decade of work that women's historians were soon debating their own tendency to romanticize life before capitalism, the so-called "golden age" controversy. As they reopened questions of household production, early factory work, and the changing relation of women to property, meanwhile, women's historians helped to revitalize interest in the transition to capitalism among American historians generally. From the beginning, however, this work was primarily focused, not on questions of labor or the economy, but

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encouraged by the last decade's consuming interest in "republicanism" and by the current postmodern turn away from social history. Recent research has focused on women's efforts to enter and shape the new "public" sphere—a project that tends to center studies of gender in intellectual history rather than in the history of material life and one that seldom encounters women in their daily market relations.[5]

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on ideology, and especially on the appearance of the amorphous cluster of ideas known as the cult of domesticity. Among the important early works were: Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151-74; Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 10 (Spring 1969), 5-15; Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York, 1973); Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work, and the Family: Female Operatives in the Lowell Mills, 1830-1860," *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Fall 1975), 30-39, (Dublin, *Women at Work*); and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs,* (Autumn 1975), 1-29; and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's" Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977). Important examples of the debate over the "golden age" include Joan Hoff Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, IL, 1976), 383-445; Mary Beth Norton, "The Myth of the Golden Age," in Carl R. Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *Women in America* (Boston, 1979), 37-47; and Gloria L. Main, "Widows in Rural Massachusetts on the Eve of the Revolution," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, (Charlottesville, 1989), 67-90. For examples of early work in women's history that addressed questions of women's status before and after the transition to capitalism, see Ann D. Gordon and Mari Jo Buhle, "Sex and Class in Colonial and Nineteenth-Century America," in Berenice A. Carroll, ed., *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Urbana, 1976), 278-300; Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," in Zillah R. Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York, 1979), 206-47; historical essays in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, 1974); and Rayna R. Reitered., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, 1975).

[5] See, for example, Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990); Edith B. Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, 1992); Linda K. Kerber, "'I have Don . . . much to Carrey on the Warr': Women and the Shaping of Republican Ideology after the American Revolution," in Harriet B. Applewhite and Darline G. Levy, eds., *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, (Ann Arbor, 1993), 227-58; and Rosemary Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, IL, 1995). Much of the debate over "republican motherhood" has remained centered almost exclusively in matters of political philosophy and ideology. See, for example, Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*; and Jan Lewis, "The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (Oct. 1987), 689-721.

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Questions of the timing and nature of the transition to capitalism have thus become the province of economic and labor historians and historians of the working class.[6] As Allan Kulikoff has pointed out, this effort has not been particularly unified. While economic historians track the forces of the market, labor and working-class historians track the force of ordinary lives.[7] What the two groups have in common, however, in addition to a rough agreement on the timing (1750-1820) and unevenness of the transition, is a marked indifference to women, particularly to women's market activities. Perhaps because women's market labor was only rarely self-owned, labor historians presume it to have existed outside of, and been largely ineffectual in, the transition to a free labor economy.[8]

It is this virtual exclusion of women's market work from narratives of the transition that I wish to reexamine in the following pages. Read both through and, in a sense, against one another, recent work in women's history and in labor and economic history suggest that the material conditions of the transition may have given rise, not to the exclusion of women from the market, but to an expanded dependence on the market labor of women, performed both within and outside the household. In both its material and its ideological character, women's labor tended to be more flexible than the labor men performed—more easily adapted and redeployed to meet the changing needs of household economies. If anything, the transition moved many women into a more critical relation to the market. Ironically, this very aggressive presence of women in the transitional economy fostered their disappearance from its subsequent narratives.

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[6] For full citations on the literature of the transition to capitalism see note 4 in Gilje, "The Rise of Capitalism" in this volume.

[7] Alan Kullikoff makes a distinction between "market" historians and "social" historians, placing, for example, Rothenberg and Henretta in the later. See Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 46 (Jan. 1989), 120-44.

[8] Analyses of the emergence of "free labor," as either an economic system or an ideology, have been remarkably free of discussions of women's market activities. See, for example, Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720-1830* (New York, 1993); David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1993); and Howard B. Rock, Paul A. Gilje, and Robert Asher, eds., *American Artisans: Crafting Social Identity, 1750-1850* (Baltimore, 1995).

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There are several good reasons to undertake a reexamination of women's market labor in the transition, apart from simply improving our understanding of eighteenth-century women's history. American labor history remains a story dominated by men and told within a framework that does not easily accommodate the experiences of most women's lives. However many women in however many paid occupations are added to the canon, in American labor history, the ''worker'' remains resistently gendered male. Arguably, our understanding of the period of the transition provides a conceptual template for our understanding of subsequent labor history in America. Rethinking the processes through which America moved to a market economy may provide the analytical basis for reconceptualizing the larger history of paid labor.[9]

The revised narrative I propose focuses on the evolution of the market in the mid-Atlantic and northern states. But in its main outline and implications, the analysis is not exclusive to the North. Studies of North American slavery suggest related changes in the labor of enslaved African-American women in the late eighteenth century in response to developments of local, regional, and trans-Atlantic markets. More broadly, recent studies of the history of ''race'' in the early republic have begun to lay bare the very deep levels at which American notions of liberty and property for some were authorized in systems of dependency and unfreedom for others. Some of the most important of this work has focused on the discursive construction of the ''free'' market, arguing that the individualism of liberal economics was founded in the structural and ideological exclusion of certain categories of citizens from claims to market activity.[10]

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[9] For additional discussions of the gendered character of American labor history, see Ava Baron, ''Gendered Subjects: Re-presenting 'The Worker' in History,'' paper presented at the Institute for Advanced Study, School of Social Science, March 10, 1994; and Alice Kessler-Harris, ''Treating the Male as 'Other': Redefining the Parameters of Labor History,'' *Labor History*, 34 (Spring/Summer 1993), 190-204.

[10] See, for example, Carole Shammas, ''Black Women's Work and the Evolution of Plantation Society in Virginia,'' *Labor History*, 26 (Winter 1985), 5-28; Jacqueline Jones, ''Race, Sex, and Self-Evident Truths: The Status of Women During the Era of the American Revolution'' in Hoffman and Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, 293-337; and Barbara J. Fields, ''Ideology and Race in American History,'' in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Van Woodward*, (New York, 1982),

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Elsewhere I have argued that women's claim to property in their unpaid labor vanished in the construction of the wage labor market. As Thomas Dublin has accurately pointed out, however, industrialization "transformed . . . much of women's work into wage labor," making the story of women and the transition also the story of "the changing character of women's wage work."[11] That transformation commenced, I believe, not in the nineteenth century, but in the eighteenth.

A new narrative must begin in the households of late British colonial America, for it was as members of such households that most women—most non-Native people—initially experienced the transition to capitalism. The first eddies of that change teased their way into daily life erratically—a shortage of land for planting, a retailer pressing for more shoes to sell, a storekeeper willing to give credit for yarn, more notes in circulation, soldiers needing food, blankets, and shelter. Gradually, as transatlantic and local commerce increased in the first half of the eighteenth century, older relations of exchange began almost imperceptibly to weaken. The growth of commerce was first stalled and then severely interrupted by the political protests of mid-century: nonimportation agreements, trade disruption, shortages, eventually the war itself. Blockades and occupation played havoc with local economies. Peace brought little immediate relief: Great Britain did not reopen its empire to American trade; under the excuse of searching for renegade seamen, British ships preyed on American carriers; and British traders dumped goods on the American market at prices that undercut local production. As states levied new taxes to pay war debts and creditors pressed for compensation, paper money depreciated wildly. Some Americans did well, but, as Jean Lee has observed, for many Americans the founding years of the Republic were comparable to the Great Depression of the 1930s. In this milieu,

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143-77. For recent work on "race" and the construction of the market, see esp. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the Working Class* (New York, 1991); Eric Foner, "Workers and Slavery," in Paul Buhle and Alan Dawley, eds., *Working for Democracy: American Workers from the Revolution to the Present* (Urbana, 1985) 21-30; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990); and Amy Dru Stanley, "Beggars Can't Be Choosers: Compulsion and Contract in Postbellum America," *Journal of American History*, 78 (Mar. 1992), 1265-93.

[11] The quotation is from Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 8.

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households struggled merely to stay afloat and maintain some semblance of control over their own economic lives.[12]

Although some people may have sought to avoid the increasing interdependencies of the economy, most free Americans lived in middling households that already were deeply, deliberately, and contentedly immersed in commercial relations. For them, the goal was not splendid isolation, but successful negotiation of the market, culminating, most people hoped, in only moderate social change and modest personal prosperity. In the phrase so often invoked in the late eighteenth century, free Americans sought a "competency"—a balancing of such strategies of both household and market production as might ensure economic security and perhaps a luxury or two. As Daniel Vickers has noted, Americans worried less about the abstract "legitimacy" of commercial relations than they did about protecting a competency within those relations.[13]

As had been the case in Europe, Americans' first and fail-safe strategies were domestic: members sought to secure and to increase household productivity—both for internal consumption and for the market. Although specific schemes for coping with the erratic economy varied from place to place, family to family, the range of personal adaptations by men to this new emphasis on household productivity has been documented fairly well: farming fathers geared their crops toward local urban demand, began to travel farther to market, added a cash-earning trade to their farming, opened a saw- or a grist-mill, contracted with "cottagers" to supply their labor

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[12] This summary of revolutionary-era economic conditions is based on John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985), esp. 351-77; James A. Henretta, "The War for Independence and American Economic Development," in Henretta, *The Origins of American Capitalism: Collected Essays* (Boston, 1991); Thomas M. Doerflinger, "Farmers and Dry Goods in the Philadelphia Market Area, 1750-1800," in Ronald Hoffman, John J. McCusker, Russell R. Menard, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *The Economy of Early America: The Revoluntionary Period, 1763-1790* (Charlottesville, 1988), 166-95; Henretta, *The Origins of American Capitalism*; Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism*; Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, 1990); Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976); and Jean Lee, *The Price of Nationhood: The American Revolution in Charles County* (New York, 1994).

[13] Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 47 (Jan. 1990), 4.

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needs, became involved in land speculation; and sons delayed marriage, abandoned farming for craft work, moved to the edges of white settlement in search of land.[14]

Generally less extensive than men's, women's paid labor and production for the market nonetheless also became important components of household economies by the middle of the eighteenth century. As recent work in women's history has demonstrated, this labor, too, provided an important resource for household adaptation during the transition to a market economy. Joan Jensen, who once observed that "the ideology of self-sufficiency of the New England farms in 1800 was based to a great extent on the ability of women in the household to provide a surplus for the local market," has shown that women's increased dairy production provided a source of capital for expanding family farming operations in the late eighteenth-century mid-Atlantic region. In the Chesapeake, women's spinning and weaving—"entirely absent in the mid-seventeenth century," according to Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh—had become consequential household industries by the mid-eighteenth century, providing cash and exchange commodities that ballasted the volatile market for tobacco. Faye E. Dudden has demonstrated the growing importance of a wide range of women's cash- or credit-producing work on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century northern farms, emphasizing that this labor was so profitable to household economies that mistresses would *spend* money hiring workers in order to *make* money selling the goods produced. Some rural women took jobs in small, local manufactories: for example, a pottery in East Caln Township in southeastern Pennsylvania employed nine adults, five of them women. Females were among the children who went to work in the first Slater mills. Other women—both wives and older daughters living at home—earned wages in other peoples' homes by cooking, caring for children, spinning flax and wool, milking and churning. Thomas Dublin has documented the steady and crucial spread of outwork—"[h]andloom weaving, shoe binding, the braiding of straw and palmleaf hats, and sewing"—performed largely by women and

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[14] See, for example, *ibid.*; and Paul G. E. Clemens and Lucy Simler, "Rural Labor and the Farm Household In Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1750-1820," in Stephen Innes, ed., *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 106-43.

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children, as a household economic strategy in New England from 1810 onward. It may well have been the general recognition that rural households needed to hustle to stay afloat that encouraged Alexander Hamilton and Tench Coxe to assume that farm women and children (and old men) would be pleased to take in outwork from early manufactories.[15]

Because the market transition threatened the customary bases of manhood, women (and children) may disproportionately have borne the brunt of the new pressures on household economies. Revolutionary-era republicanism regarded male wage-earners with skepticism—as dependants with uncertain claims to the full privileges of manhood. In her fine study of masculinity and eighteenth-century commercial practices, Toby Ditz has argued that the "voluminous correspondence" of Philadelphia merchants on the conditions of trade in the late 1790s amounts to "a sustained meditation on the precariousness of male identity and reputation, a precariousness linked not only to the competitiveness and volatility of markets but also to the difficulties of defining a reputable self within the world of patronage and connection that still structured market relations."[16] Striving to represent themselves as persons of self-mastery, honest intent, and effectuality, the merchants depicted their dependencies upon others as not dependencies at all (dependence and patronage alike being highly suspect in the new republican culture) but rather as forms of instrumentality. Reliance upon the goodwill or financial investment of someone else was thus transfigured from subordination into economic agency and political virtue. In the chaotic world of revolutionary America,

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[15] Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry: A Study in American Economic History* (New York, 1910), 36-42; Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work*, 14. See also Blewett's "Work, Gender, and the Artisan Tradition in New England Shoemaking, 1760-1860," *Journal of Social History*, 17 (Winter 1983), 221-48; Susan Branson, "The Invisible Woman: The Family Economy in the Early Republic—The Case of Elizabeth Meredith," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16 (Spring 1996), 47-71. Gloria Main argues that, in response to labor shortages, male employers began hiring larger numbers of women in the late colonial period; Main, "Gender, Work, and Wages in Colonial New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 51 (Jan. 1994), 64.

[16] Toby L. Ditz, "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *The Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994), 51. For my related analysis of women's unpaid labor, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in The Early Republic* (New York, 1990), chap. 3.

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men's claim to citizenship rested on forging this association of maleness with economic agency, for it was in economic independence that political existence was understood to reside. Daniel Vickers has similarly suggested that farming fathers were willing to integrate outwork shoemaking into their household economies because it could be delegated to sons (and daughters), thus permitting the household head to distance himself from the taint of wage dependence.

But if eighteenth-century constructions of manhood proved problemmatic in the face of the market transition, female labor carried with it into the transition a long cultural assumption of flexibility in the form of the role of "deputy husband." Under the rubric of household necessity and with the approbation of the household head, a free female could engage in virtually any form of labor without censure. Women's customary labors may also have had a certain spatial and structural malleability lacked by men's: "women's work" often consisted of a greater variety of occupations than "men's work" and was performed within a comparatively smaller physical area (the homelot), where the tools necessary for shifting back and forth from one task to another could be readily at hand. The adjustments and improvisations required to negotiate the market may have been particularly compatible with this pattern of work.[17]

These changes may have had a more vivid impact on the social landscape of women's work in the cities than in the countryside. Although some rural woman surely increased their time working cash crops in the field, the more general rural pattern of intensifying women's labor in *household* production did not entail dramatically altered patterns of spatial mobility. Not so in the cities of the eastern seaboard. War-time occupation of the cities sent floods of refuges—and refuge households—into the countryside. The return of peace and rural dislocation echoed swells of population back into the cities. In this reconstituted urban landscape, women were everywhere visible as aggressive and ostensibly independent economic agents. They worked as sailors, morticians, day laborers, iron mongers, and money

[17] Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition," 9-10. For a discussion of the "deputy husband" role of women's prescribed labor, see Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England* (New York, 1982), 36-50.

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lenders, as well as seamstresses, mantuamakers, and milliners.[18] They claimed their place in the market assertively. When speculations on the debt of the new Republic resulted in a financial panic in 1792, widows, market women, and prostitutes were included in the mobs of creditors threatening to ''disembowel'' the men they held responsible.[19]

Working women may have offered an unusually assertive urban presence in several other, related ways. Most of the early republic's working women were married, but a surprisingly large portion of urban households may have been female-headed. In the years after the war, many urban females were widows. They were joined by single female migrants from the countryside, seeking adventure, jobs, or both in the city. These women appear to have created occupational residential clusters, often choosing to live next-door to, or near, other female-headed laboring class households. In addition, migrants (men and women) may have been responsible for an unusually high postwar fertility rate, especially out of wedlock. Billy Smith has suggested that there was a ''loosening of constraints on marriage'' among new arrivals in Philadelphia. Finally, a visible minority of laboring urban women were African America, many of them newly freed in the wave of postrevolutionary emancipations. In fact, most women in postrevolutionary cities lived in male-headed households. But, as Billy Smith

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[18] I have taken these examples from the Philadelphia City Directories for the 1790s and from the 1790 Philadelphia census. In both the cities and the country, the transition from ''found labor to cash tenancy,'' that is, from the custom of receiving board and lodging as a part of one's compensation to the practice of purchasing room and board on the market, did not change the composition of women's household labor so much as it altered the relations of that labor. As Elizabeth Blackmar has noted, ''In [earlier] integrated household economies, the household head had claimed the authority of proprietor and employer as one. Within the market, boarders as purchasers could claim a status equal to that of seller.'' Formally, the new relations existed between the purchaser (the boarder) and the seller (the legal head of the household, usually the husband). But, as Blackmar's discussion of an argument between Thomas Paine and William Carver underscores, the new relations were likely to produce new tensions within the household, tensions articulated between the buyer and the provider of the services—the mistress: Paine's complaint was that Carver's wife had failed to make the bed, sweep the room, or serve his tea in a timely manner, or to direct her servant-woman to do so. Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca, 1989), 63-64.

[19] Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York, 1993), 278.

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has pointed out, most non-elite households required the direct economic participation of both partners, often in ways that sent wives into the streets alongside female heads-of-household. All of these characteristics gave working women—whether they actually lived in male-headed households or not—an aggressive and ostensibly autonomous presence in the cities of the early republic.[20]

Ready enough to discover friction in other arenas of life during the transition to capitalism, historians have been loath to recognize that these internal household adjustments—present in the country-side, although more visible in the cities—could have created conflict between husbands and wives. As Allan Kulikoff declared in a discussion of the overlap of men's and women's responsibilities, "the presumption of household unity precludes the possibility of conflict or tension within households, especially between husbands and wives, over authority, the sexual division of labor, and the distribution of goods produced by members for consumption, exchange or sale."[21] To presume unity of this sort, however, is to presume more than the evidence will sustain. The point is not that marriages had suddenly become a battleground of individualistic interests, but that household relations had become markedly more complicated.

Carol Shammas's study of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, suggests other divergences of interest between husbands and wives. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century husbands tended to use their wills to protect their widows against the potential claims of sons, by providing more than a one-third share of the estate and by specifying the terms of the widow's maintenance. By the late eighteenth century, that practice had reversed. Husbands who left wills in the early republic tended to leave their wives less than the amount provided in intestacy laws and less than they had in earlier periods. As Shammas has observed, by the 1790s, "the presence of an adult son or sons shrank a widow's portion more severely than earlier, while wealth and the occupation of farming were somewhat less important." The presence of daughters had some effect in siphoning off the widow's portion (the more daughters the greater the impact) but less than the

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[20] Billy G. Smith, *The "Lower Sort": Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, 1990), 57-58, 108-25.

[21] Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," 137. Kulikoff's confidence on this point is the rule rather than the exception.

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presence of any sons. Combined with the changes in the intestate laws, daughters were on the whole inheriting larger portions than earlier, but even those portions generally went into household pools under the legal direction of their husbands.[22] So long as principles of *feme covert* remained stubbornly embedded in the law, the growing importance of contract and free labor in the postrevolutionary United States could only put most women at a severe disadvantage.

On the other hand, their importance in household economies may well have encouraged in women a sense of competence and, in some degree, of social autonomy. The market transition gave new context to women's labor, within which the work gradually assumed new economic meanings and gave rise to new economic relations. We see this development clearly in women's dairying: the growth of markets for dairy products infused women's long-standing work in the barnyard (previously but one of many elements in farm well-being) with new economic importance and, potentially, new social power. The same transformation probably occurred in women's participation in family urban businesses and in the various forms of labor that were absorbed into the vast outwork networks of the early nineteenth century.

The same transformation probably lay behind women's participation in food riots during the revolutionary crisis. Barbara Clark Smith has noted that, in revolutionary America as in other preindustrial economies, women's customary economic responsibilities within the household included a certain right to bargain over prices, quarrel with vendors, even join mobs when the balance of community sentiment opposed specific merchant practices. By the mid 1770s, women were participating actively in food riots and antihoarding mobs that enforced non-consumption agreements and administered a "fair market" in the colonies. Smith has argued that women "conducted nearly one-third of the riots." Her evidence indicates that they

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[22] Carole Shammas, "Early American Women and Control over Capital" in Hoffman and Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, 134-54, esp. 140-47, 149. For a comparison with the Chesapeake region, see Lois Green Carr, "Inheritance in the Colonial Chesapeake," *ibid.*, 155-208. For additional studies of women and the law in the period of transition, see Norma Basch, *In the Eyes of the Law: Women, Marriage and Property in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, 1982); Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 1986); and Richard H. Chused, *Private Acts in Public Places: A Social History of Divorce in the Formative Era of American Family Law* (Philadelphia, 1994), esp. chaps. 2 and 3.

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participated in and/or publicly supported many others.[23] Although Smith finds precedent for this female activism in earlier eighteenth-century events, women's participation in the food riots of the 1770s may have reflected their increased economic importance within their households—a heightened sense of the precariousness of their household economies and a greater readiness to take matters into their own hands. Smith's evidence would seem to suggest that women became more visible in these demonstrations as the war wore on.

Although much of the work on eighteenth-century women's history has focused on "Republican motherhood"—a slant that tends to emphasize the association of women with families—there is good reason to suspect that many women experienced the postrevolutionary years as a period of comparative practical self-reliance. Both Linda Kerber's and Mary Beth Norton's studies of women in the American Revolution indicate an increasing instrumentality over time. Certainly Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* presents a story about a woman's practical daily autonomy and geographic mobility.[24] This view of women in the early republic is supported by Lisa Wilson Waciega's examination of widows in southeastern Pennsylvania, many of whom proved to be better entrepreneurs than their husbands, and by Susan Branson's work on Elizabeth Meredith, who could barely repress her self-satisfaction when she wrote proudly to her son in 1796, "your mother . . . though she is old and weak . . . still acquits herself with some degree of reputation, especially in the financing business."[25]

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[23] Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 51 (Jan. 1994), 5. For additional discussion of women in mobs during the revolutionary crisis, see Alfred F. Young, "The Women of Boston: 'Persons of Consequence' in the Making of the American Revolution, 1765-1776" in Harriet B. Applewhite and Darlene G. Levy, eds., *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Ann Arbor, 1990), 181-226. For a discussion of women in mobs in the postrevolutionary era, see Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill, 1987), esp. 85-91.

[24] Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 119-84; Norton, *Daughters of Liberty*, 228-55. I contrast my characterization of Ballard with James Henretta's emphasis on Ballard's life as an example of women working harder within the household in the postrevolutionary era. See James Henretta, *The Origins of American Capitalism*, 267; and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, 1990).

[25] Lisa Wilson Waciega, "A 'Man of Business': The Widow of Means in

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This fine sense of expansiveness—not yet diminished by the language of domesticity—may have motivated women's growing engagement in civic culture in the early republic, including the question of their own participation in the new government. Certainly, Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, Judith Sargent Murray, and the other women who argued for women's education and for an enlarged political role for women were influenced by European models like Catherine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft. But they may also have been giving expression to a current of American female assertiveness. This is not to claim that the late eighteenth-century was a golden age for women, or that all women experienced the early republic in the same way. It is to suggest that the political crisis and economic transition contained possibilities for an enlarged sense of effectuality—that same sense of purpose and means that informed women's movement into voluntary reform in the early republic.[26]

It is unclear whether this pride was newly acquired during the Revolution, as Kerber and Norton suggest, or was, as I suspect, an expression of a practical daily self-assurance long familiar to women but since obscured in historians' preoccupation with ideology. What does seem apparent is that the economic transition and the political Revolution accentuated the daily plasticity of gender in colonial America, sometimes drawing men and women into social practices long implied but seldom enacted, sometimes seeming to yield wholly new meanings in the context of daily life. In the circumstances of the Revolution, for example, a food riot was potentially an act not merely of *moral* economy but of *political* economy. The point was not lost on

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Southeastern Pennsylvania," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (Jan. 1987), 40-64; and Branson, "The Invisible Woman." This attitude may also inform Nancy F. Cott's findings that both the total number of legal separations and the number of legal separations initiated by women increased in Massachusetts in the years after the Revolution. See Nancy F. Cott, "Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records," *Journal of Social History*, *10* (Fall 1976), 20-43.

[26] For additional discussion of educated women in the late eighteenth century, see, for example, Zagarri, *A Woman's Dilemma*; Gelles, *Portia*; Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York, 1981); Kerber, "'I Have Don . . . much to Carrey on the Warr'"; Kerber, *Women of the Republic*; and Norton, *Daughters of Liberty*. On women's voluntary societies in the late eighteenth century, see, for example, Margaret Morris Haviland, "Beyond Women's Sphere: Young Quaker Women and the Veil of Charity in Philadelphia, 1790-1810," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 51 (July 1994), 419-46.

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Abigail Adams. In a letter to her husband, Adams described the mobbing of a merchant rumored to be hoarding coffee, observing that the riot was led by "A Number of females some say a hundred." "It was reported he had a Spanking among them," she remarked with studied insouciance, "but this I believe was not true." And then she added, anticipating what she undoubtedly assumed would be her husband's own reaction: "A large concourse of Men stood amazd silent Spectators of the whole transaction."[27]

The anecdote was a fable of the growing discomfort felt by many Americans at the sight of women's participation in such activities. Necessity had given rise to a healthy culture of "out-of-doors" politics[28] that, continuing past the rebellion, struck many elite Americans as at odds with the rational discourse required by republican government. Even if customary, the appearance of women in spontaneous and highly assertive contexts of political economy was particularly alarming. Vague although it remained, the political culture of the new nation clearly depended upon the proposition that public virtue and political voice rightly belonged to men, on the assumption that men, as creators and owners of wealth and property, would have sufficient stake in the new republic to act as its guides. Since women formerly had been viewed as important producers (although *not* owners) of wealth, the political revolution of the European enlightenment required that the status of producer be dissociated from women and exclusively associated with men. That the material conditions of the transition enlarged women's productive importance within their households heightened the urgency of that dissociation.

Although an increased household dependence on female labor has been identified as an element in the transition to capitalism in a number of European contexts, the cultural stakes may have been particularly high in America. Compared to Europeans, a far greater proportion of free Americans, both rural and urban, lived in relatively stable, independent, middling households at the time of the transition. That is to say, free Americans experienced the transition

[27] Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 31, [1777], in *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784*, ed. L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlander, and Mary-Jo Kline (Cambridge, MA, 1975), 184-85.

[28] John Adams to Abigail Adams, Aug. 11, 1777, *ibid.*, 187; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969), 319-21.

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through the medium of relatively small and stable households, rather than as individuals, as members of communities of uprooted wage-laborers, or (to a lesser degree) as members of extended families. Furthermore, in America the transition to capitalism coincided with a political revolution that emphasized the bourgeois family and male economic independence. The two were linked in experience and compressed in time in a way that was far less the case in European countries.

This linkage—the material dependence on female labor within households joined to the growing ideological association of independent manhood with economic agency—may account for the peculiarly intense and sentimental character of American domesticity. The local, daily, personal conflicts created by economic change may not have seemed avoidable, but neither were they tolerable on a long-term basis. Thinking of the inter-household competition provoked by multiple families struggling to hold their own and yet depending on each other, Daniel Vickers has argued that one form of reconciliation came through the intensification of "domestic ritual" (episodes of neighborliness such as barn-raisings and church gatherings) that functioned to "mitigate ill-feeling and resolve disagreements . . . by bringing people into formal settings where they could reopen lines of communication that had stretched or even snapped in the course of working life."[29] The intense expressions of nuclear family feeling that came to characterize nineteenth century American culture (and the enormous nostalgia with which nineteenth-century Americans would look back upon the revolutionary years) may have served parallel ends, reconciling an increased reliance upon female labor with a more formal male assertion of economic privilege through a romance of family culture.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the reverse also obtained: the market and market relations had begun to assume a distinctly masculine discursive character. There was, in particular, a new association of masculinity with trade and commerce—an assumption that "masculinity" was a condition that inhered in the prosecution of economic activity and the achieving of economic independence. To make this observation is not to argue that males had never earlier cared about

[29] Vickers, "Competency and Competition," 26-27.

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economic power or employed economic yardsticks as a "measure of the man." Mary Beth Norton has noted the frequency with which men in seventeenth-century Maryland framed their criticisms of each other in terms of flawed business practice, while women were most likely to be defamed as whores or witches.[30]

In the years of the transition to capitalism, however, economic success became, not merely an important attribute but indeed one of the central constituting tropes of masculinity. Unsurprisingly, the most dramatic enactments of this exclusive gender claim to economic agency appear to have come from working men, who found their own labor at the center of a thoroughgoing reorganization and found themselves lacking the most public emblem of the new masculinity other than economic agency, the vote. Certainly, laboring men urged their own political vision—artisan republicanism—with an emphasis on maleness that utterly obliterated the presence of women in commerce and the trades. The famous Philadelphia "Federal procession" of July 4, 1788, held in celebration of the founding of the new republic, included axe-men, dragoons, artillery, foreign consuls, architects, house-carpenters, the Agricultural Society, the Manufacturing Society, sail makers, ship carpenters, ship joiners, rope makers, merchants, traders, cordwainers, coach painters, cabinet makers, chair makers, brick makers, painters, draymen, clock and watchmakers, tailors, brickmakers, blacksmiths, hatters, potters, tallow chandlers, lawyers, physicians, clergy, and others. Some of these were occupations in which women participated, and yet in the entire procession there was evidently not a single female.[31]

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[30] Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue," *Signs*, 13 (Autumn 1987), 37-58. Mary Beth Norton, "Gender and Defamation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 44 (Jan. 1987), 3-39. As Norton cautions, however, "The distinction between the all-male world and the world of heterosexual relations in seventeenth-century Maryland did not parallel the familiar modern division between public (male) and private (female) spheres. Rather, it delineated different aspects of the public sphere . . . in a society in which the modern concept of privacy would have been quite alien." (39) See Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York, 1986), 20-24, 90, on misogyny in the early republic.

[31] John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Time* (1830; 3 vols., rep., Philadelphia, 1899), I, 341-46. On "artisan republicanism," see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), 61-103.

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Such an all-male parade was an enactment, in the concrete terms of craft insignia, of a far larger exclusion of women from the "public" sphere of the new nation, an exclusion expressed in commerce, politics, and civic debate, all of which spheres were constituted as gendered male. In its most formal manifestation, that exclusion was inscribed in the new federal Constitution, which fixed in law long-standing prejudices against females in office and denied to women direct participation in federal legislative debates over the direction of the Republic's political economy.[32]

Women were also represented as incapable of entering the world of letters so central to the emergent bourgeois public sphere. Journalist William Cobbett lampooned both newspaper publisher Margaret Bache and author Susanna Rowson for their educational deficiencies: Bache's grammar and Rowson's use of figurative language. "I beg leave to observe," he wrote of Rowson in his broadside, *A Kick for a Bite*, "that, though tropes and figures are very useful things, when they fall into skillful hands, they are very dangerous, when they fall into those of a contrary description. When I see you flourishing with a metaphor, I feel as much anxiety as I do, when I see a child playing with a razor."[33] The metaphor associated language—the vehicle of public presentation—with the razor, a male instrument. It identified femaleness with childishness, a lack of skill, and a certain heedlessness, and stressed the dangers to females who played with the tools of public presence.

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[32] On the citizenship of females in the new republic, see Linda K. Kerber, "The Paradox of Women's Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of *Martin* v. *Massachusetts*, 1805," *American Historical Review*, 97 (Apr. 1992), 349-78; and Kerber, "A Constitutional Right to Be Treated Like American Ladies: Women and the Obligations of Citizenship," in Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays* (Chapel Hill, 1995), 17-35.

[33] Peter Porcupine [William Cobbett], *A Kick for a Bite; or, Review Upon Review; with a Critical Essay, on the Works of Mrs. S. Rowson; in a Letter to the Editor, or Editors, of the American Monthly Review* (Philadelphia, 1795), 7, 12. For a further discussion of Cobbett's attack on Bache see Susan Branson, "Politics and Gender: The Political Consciousness of Philadelphia Women in the 1790s" (Ph.D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1992), 72. On the importance of literacy and publishing in the new "public" sphere, see Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1989) 27-140. Compare with Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1988), esp. 1-23.

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In an old libel now revisited with gusto, this supposed incapacity for participation in public debate was inscribed in the female body. Obviously, women continued to go about their daily business in their communities. But the female body asserted as an active public presence was rendered as a sign of social disorder. The only public commerce easily imaginable for a female was the commerce of her body. In *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated*, for example, Thomas Branagan complained that "We may even see the consorts and daughters of the guardians of the public weal strutting through the streets, with the disgraceful and obscene appearances peculiar to lewd women," and concluded that "the fashionable female, who exposes publicly what prudence should conceal, not only entices the male of ardent passions to perpetuate, but also commits the crime of sentimental fornication herself. . . ." "Prostitution" was the name given to female agency in the public realm.[34]

In contrast, the new republican female *ideal* expressed a certain public hesitation and incapacity—better yet, public absence. When depicted within households, women were romanticized as "Republican mothers" and cultivated companions—a nostalgic reinterpretation, I would suggest, of the increased dependence on their productive labors. Out-of-doors alternatives—that is to say, ways of expressing ideal womanhood out in the community, visible, active, and capable on the streets—became increasingly inaccessible in republican culture. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the alternatives available to women who risked an active public presence would be figured in the correlatives of seduction and prostitution, the one implying public incapacity, the other flagrant public genius in a woman.[35]

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[34] Thomas Branagan, *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated, Being an Investigation Relative to the Cause and Effects of the Encroachments of Men upon the Rights of Women, and the Too Frequent Degradation and Consequent Misfortunes of the Fair Sex* (1807; 2d ed., Philadelphia, 1808), 26, 75. For a compatible analysis several decades later, see also Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Ballots and Banners, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990).

[35] For a discussion of these terms in the later nineteenth century, see Ellen DuBois and Linda Gordon, "Seeking Ecstacy in the Battlefield: Pleasure and Danger in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Thought" in Carol Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, 1984), 7-25.

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The maleness constructed in this discourse appeared sometimes in manifestations of violent activity: Ditz's merchants, for example, imaged masculinity in furious storms, crashing thunder, damaging winds. But masculine agency in the early republic was most fundamentally enacted, not in violence, but in sheer presence. Indeed, the most important element of masculinity was the presentation of a simple, transparently capable self. Ditz notes the preoccupation of eighteenth-century merchants with themes of deceit and with "distinguish[ing] honorable from dishonorable conduct and men. . . ." The honorable man was the man who could present himself openly, disguising nothing, holding nothing back, available for inspection and scrutiny—the man fully exposed. In this rendering, as John Barrell has noted, passionate activity of any sort was unattractive in men, since strong drives, frantic motion, erratic conduct, could only smudge the highly prized image of "public plainness."[36]

The growing discursive animosity toward visible, laboring, ostensibly independent women did not come from men only. The history of women workers in the transition to capitalism is also preeminently a history of the changing practice of gender between and among women—a point made a quarter of a century ago by Gerda Lerner.[37] The response of elite women to the political and economic turmoil of the late eighteenth century was to separate themselves emotionally and rhetorically from working women.

For prosperous women, the process of withdrawing from bonds of familiarity (not equality, which had not existed) with working women was part of a process of moving toward an identification with the new social order, and particularly with the civic culture of the men of their class. After the Revolution a number of elite women (and some men) began to argue for the inclusion of women in the public culture through education. Men were likely to emphasize the advantages to

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[36] Ditz, "Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self," 63; John Barrell, "'The Dangerous Goddess': Masculinity, Prestige, and the Aesthetic in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Cultural Critique*, 12 (Spring 1989), 124. The term "Public plainness" is from Kenneth J. E. Graham, *The Performance of Conviction: Plainness and Rhetoric in the Early English Renaissance* (Ithaca, 1994), see 1-24. See also Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993).

[37] Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl." See also Stansell, *City of Women*, 193-216.

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husbands of educated partners: "To give us happiness, and to enable us to support the vicissitudes and misfortunes of the world, was the intention of a benevolent Deity, in adding women to the society of men," as John Swanwick explained in 1787 to the students of the Young Ladies' Academy in Philadelphia.[38] Elite women had mixed motives for advocating improved female education, among them the search for vehicles that would provide them greater instrumentality in the new republican civic culture.[39] But their arguments very often shared with men the assumption that women's activities should remain private, unrevealed, out of the observing eye. Susanna Rowson represented respectable womanhood as a retreat from publicity, counseling American women in her *Mentoria; or The Young Lady's Friend*: "True happiness . . . flies the glare of fashion, and the midnight revel. . . ."[40] The point was not that women were not smart, performed no function in the household economy, or had no thoughts to contribute to the new polity. The point was that women should exercise these functions undisclosed. It was in that lack of disclosure that "womanhood" existed.

This newly identified threat to the status of men in the Republic, combined with the influences of European bourgeois culture, thus prompted elaborate new iterations on and revisions of older notions of colonial "vertuous housewifery," coming eventually to constitute that elaborate female domesticity that historians have identified with the antebellum era. By the early nineteenth century, female "domesticity" had assumed a particularly commercial stamp—or, rather, a particular anticommercial—stamp. Femaleness was inappropriate to the public realm of commerce and trade and could exist there only as a personal degradation (seduction) and a public danger (prostitution), both of these being monstrous abnormalities. While full public disclosure might be the mark of the honorable man, for women public visibility was the sign of dishonor and pollution. Female domesticity was

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[38] John Swanwick, *Thoughts on Education, Addressed to the Visitors of the Young Ladies' Academy in Philadelphia, October 31, 1787* (Philadelphia, 1787), 26.

[39] The common construction of this point is that women were seeking their initial entry into civic life. I suspect that, more precisely, women who had exercised familial influence in the older paternalistic culture were seeking ways to replicate that power in the culture of the new republic "public sphere."

[40] Mrs. [Susanna] Rowson, *Mentoria; or The Young Lady's Friend* (1791; 2 vols., Philadelphia, 1794), I, ii-iii.

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thus constituted historically in the United States not simply as a discourse about males and females but as a discourse particularly about working women. In this idiom, the world of labor was, by definition, a male world and females who appeared in that world were engaging in unnatural relations. The growing ideological prohibition of female exposure soon assumed a particular association with women workers, as this group became the very embodiment of natural disorder. Republican political economy was figured in the aggressive presence of men and the emphatic absence of women.[41]

Prescription is seldom an adequate sole guide to daily experience—least so in times of rapid and profound change, when the search for order, becoming peculiarly urgent, is likely to produce highly stylized and unusually polarized representations of social life, almost by definition at odds with more local social practice. In such times, as Sean Wilentz has demonstrated in *Chants Democratic*, idealized identities are apt to be urged with particular (and particularly misleading) firmness: ''artisan republicanism'' prospered in New York City just as the artisan system began to give way to the bastard shop.

In the United States, the emergence of the ideology of separate spheres must be viewed at least in part as a hardening of the attitudes of certain groups against specific actual practices of gender they deemed particularly threatening during the political and economic revolutions. That is to say, although the tropes of separate spheres had begun to appear in the colonies by the early eighteenth century, representations of the protected household and the private female became conventionalized after the Revolution in part as a response to the exceptional volatility and permeability of households during the revolutionary era and to the changing practices of gender within households and throughout society more generally.

The refiguring of gender in the closing decades of the eighteenth century helped construct a culture in which ''working woman'' became a logical inconsistency—an oxymoron. This process was well underway by the time the female operatives entered the first Lowell

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[41] I am indebted for this way of framing the impact of these changes to Rosemary Kegl, *The Rhetoric of Concealment: Figuring Gender and Class in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, 1994), 3.

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mills, helping to construct their presence in the industrial labor force from the beginning as exceptional. The workplace was by definition male—not because only or mainly men inhabited it (they did not) but because femaleness had been defined successfully as absence from the work place. Of course women remained in the labor force, but always on the terms of outsiders having to make anew the case for their seriousness, their respectability, and their economic contribution.

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