Women and the Labour of Laundry in the English Eighteenth Century

by

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Abstract

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The history of female laundry labour in eighteenth-century England, and the accompanying social and economic contributions of such women, has yet to be fully explored by social historians and material culture specialists. Laundry labour was, with very rare exceptions, universally female. This thesis examines the economic factors and social forces which dictated female agency and perpetuated the profound and pervasive gendering of an essential domestic chore. Through the analysis of several case studies, a review of laundry systems and practices, a quantitative analysis of Sun Fire Insurance policies, and a material object study of linens, this paper demonstrates that the gendering of laundry work reflected and reinforced the lower and marginalized status of both the labour and labourer. Laundry labour involved hierarchical female networks defined by space and sociability that were cooperative and competitive. The low paying, physically demanding work of laundry lacked substantial technological advancements, and was directly tied to female life cycle stages. Clean white linen – the productive work of laundry – was employed as a powerful symbol in the eighteenth century which transmitted key societal values of cleanliness, respectability, status, and even morality. These deeply valued, morally imbued sartorial markers were only realized through the paradoxically undervalued labour of girls and women, who were often associated with an immoral character. The overarching aim of this thesis is to give voice to the collective army of laundry-maids, washerwomen, and laundresses, whose voices have otherwise remained quiet in the historical scholarship of eighteenth-century England.

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My life thus far has been enriched by my circles of female alliances and networks, which have been exactly as Amanda Herbert described of early modern English women; "positive, mutually supportive, and friendly" supported through "relational acts of sociability."[1] I am so grateful for their fierce loyalty and enduring friendships. I am deeply grateful for the love and support of my sons, Jonathan, Evan, and Spencer, and for my daughter Maryn, who has taught all of us about the power of the female voice, and to be a voice for those who have not yet been heard. My deepest gratitude is for my husband Darryl and the equal partnership we share, and who has been as fascinated about eighteenth-century laundry as I have been.

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[1] Amanda Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 2-4, 13.

It is not lost on me the privilege that is mine to be a woman in my fifties, possessing the luxury of time, place, and means to immerse myself in this MA program and thesis, something that has brought me joy and deep fulfillment. The price of this privilege has been paid in part by the women who have gone before me – my mother and grandmothers, and their mothers and grandmothers. This thesis is dedicated to my female ancestors who lived, worked, and died in eighteenth-century England. These are the women whose voices echo in this thesis: Sarah Walker (1703-1738) from Nottingham, Anne Naylor (1700-1779) from Yorkshire, Susannah Dinham (1713-1771) from Somerset, and Mary Clark (1715-1759) from Warwick, to name only a few. I am profoundly indebted to these women who lived common and ordinary lives, who surely scrubbed water-soaked linens with chapped and tired hands, hunched over washtubs with sore backs on cold frosty mornings, and hung billowing sheets out to dry in the breeze and brightness of a clear spring English day.

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Chapter 1

An Army of Amazons: An Introduction to Laundry

Excerpt from *The Woman's Labour*
By Mary Collier, washerwoman (1739)

When bright *Orion* glitters in the Skies
In *Winter* Nights, then early we must rise;
The Weather ne'er so bad, Wind, Rain, or Snow,
Our Work appointed, we must rise and go;
While you on easy Beds may lie and sleep,
Till Light does thro' your Chamber Windows peep
When to the House we come where we should go,
How to get in, alas! we do not know:
The Maid quite tir'd with Work the day before,
O'ercome with Sleep; we standing at the Door
Oppress'd with Cold, and often call in vain,
E'er to our Work we can admittance gain:
But when from Wind and Weather we get in,
Briskly with Courage we our Work begin;
Heaps of fine Linnen we before us view,
Whereon to lay our Strength and Patience too;
Cambricks and Muslins which our Ladies wear,
Laces and Edgings, costly, fine, and rare,
Which must be wash'd with utmost Skill and Care,
With Holland Shirts, Ruffles and Fringes too,
Fashions, which our Fore-fathers never knew,
For several Hours here we work and slave,
Before we can one Glimpse of Day-light have;
We labour hard before the Morning's past,
Because we fear the Time runs on too fast.

At length bright *Sol* illuminates the Skies,
And summons drowsy Mortals to arise;
Then comes our Mistress to us without fail,
And in her Hand, *perhaps*, a Mug of Ale
To cheer our Hearts, and also to inform
Herself what Work is done that very Morn;
Lays her Commands upon us, that we mind
Her Linnen well, nor *leave the Dirt behind;*
Nor this alone, but also to take Care
We don't her Cambricks nor her Ruffles tear;

And *these* most strictly does of us require,
To save her Soap, and sparing be of Fire;
Tells us her Charge is great, nay furthermore,
Her Cloaths are fewer than the Time before:
Now we drive on, resolv'd our Strength to try,
And what we can we do most willingly;
Untill with Heat and Work, 'tis often known,
Not only Sweat, but Blood runs trickling down
Our Wrists and Fingers; still our Work demands
The constant Action of our lab'ring Hands.

Now Night comes on, from whence you have Relief,
But that, alas! Does but increase our Grief;
With heavy Hearts we often view the Sun,
Fearing he'll set before our Work is done;
For either in the Morning, or at Night,
We peice the *Summers* Day with Candle-light.
Tho' we all Day with Care our work attend,
Such is our Fate, we know not when 'twill end:
When Evening's come, you homeward take your Way,
We, till our Work is done, are forc'd to stay;
And after all our Toil and Labour past,
Six-pence or *Eight-pence* pays us off at last;
For all our Pains, no Prospect can we see
Attend us, but *Old Age* and *Poverty.*[1]

Mary Collier was born in Sussex England, near the end of the seventeenth century, "of poor, but honest Parents" who "took great delight" in teaching Mary to read.[2] Unfortunately her mother died young and Mary's home education subsequently ended; as she wrote in her short memoir, she was "set to such labour as the Country afforded." She cared for her sickly and infirm father until his death, after which Mary remained single and spent much of her life chiefly employed as a washerwoman well into her sixties.[3] Mary composed and recited poetry while she

[1] Mary Collier, *Poems, on several occasions, by Mary Collier, ... With some remarks on her life* (Winchester: printed by Mary Ayres; for the author, 1762), 12-14.
[2] Collier, *Poems, On Several Occasions,* iii. Note: 'Between 1650 and 1800 overall female literacy in England increased from under 15 percent to about 36 percent,' quoted in Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England 1680 – 1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 85.
[3] Collier, *Poems, On Several Occasions,* v.

laundered, and eventually published a collection of her works at the encouragement of her employers. The above excerpt was taken from her poem *The Woman's Labour,* which was written as a rejoinder to the popular contemporary poem *The Thresher's Labour* penned by Stephen Duck. In it, Duck championed the work of male farm labourers but also dismissed and belittled the work of women, whom he called, "prattling females."[4] Collier responded, "fancying he had been too Severe on the Female Sex … brought me to a Strong propensity to call an Army of Amazons to vindicate the injured Sex."[5] A published washerwoman-cum-poet of some renown was so unlikely and extraordinary in the eighteenth century that Mary Collier became known in her life as the "Washerwoman Poet."[6]

Mary Collier's life, however, was not at all unlikely or extraordinary. Her life's path, dictated by economics, familial circumstances, and gendered agency, was played out in numerous iterations for multitudes of labouring women and girls like herself in eighteenth-century England. Long days and many years of arduous labour for meagre compensation resulting in 'old age and poverty,' was a common reality for most female laundry workers. Collective groups of laundry-maids and washerwomen taking care not to 'leave the dirt behind' while washing others' 'heaps of fine linnen' was a scene that occurred unfailingly, week after week, in small cottages and yards, urban dwellings, and stately homes throughout the entire

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[4] Lisa L. Moore, Joanna Brooks, and Caroline Wigginton, eds., 'Mary Collier (b. 1679),' *Transatlantic Feminisms in the Age of Revolutions [Electronic Resource]* (Oxford University Press, 2012), accessed 21 April 2021. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199743483.003.0018; Duck, Stephen, *Curious Poems On Several Occasions: Viz. I. On Poverty. II. The Thresher's Labour. III. The Shunamite. All Newly Corrected, and Much Amended, by the Author Stephen Duck* (London: printed and sold by John Lewis, 1738).

[5] Collier, *Poems, On Several Occasions,* iv. Note: the term 'Amazon' refers to a race of female warriors, or generally a very strong woman.

[6] Collier, Mary. *The woman's labour: an epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck; in answer to his late poem, called The thresher's labour. To which are added, the three wise sentences, taken from the first book of Esdras, Ch. III. and IV. By Mary Collier, Now a Washer-Woman, at Petersfield in Hempshire* (London: printed for the author; and sold by J. Roberts, in Warwick-Lane; and at the Pamphlet-Shops near the Royal Exchange, 1739); Moore, Brooks and Wigginton, 'Mary Collier (b.1679).' *Transatlantic Feminisms,* 2-3. Note: The original publisher prefaced Mary Collier's poetry by reassuring the reader, "… with all its Faults and Imperfections, the candid Reader will judge it to be Something considerably beyond the common Capacity of those of her own Rank and Occupation."

century. Mary Collier's extraordinary poem provides a rich yet singular voice, one speaking for the otherwise muted voices of this army of 'Amazonian' washerwomen and laundry-maids – voices often too faint to decipher both then and now. The paucity of extant contemporary documents, compounded by a tepid historical interest in something so commonplace as female laundry labour, has perpetuated elusive gaps of knowledge about the lives, labour and social contributions of girls and women who laundered.[7] Beverly Lemire astutely observed, "the history of laundry is not much celebrated."[8]

As rich and compelling as Mary Collier's poem is, its poetic descriptions of laundry's toil stimulate curiosity and invite exploration, including the following questions, which underpin the central discussion of my thesis. Most significantly, why is laundry labour exclusively 'woman's labour'? What is it about the occupational agency, social relationships, work environment, and technology of laundry in England that relegated this universal household chore to females and reinforced its gendered designation?[9] Furthermore, why was spotlessly clean, fine, white linen such a powerful social imperative in the changing consumer landscape of the eighteenth century, the "Holland Shirts, Ruffles and Fringes too, Fashions, which our Fore-fathers never knew?"[10] Consequently, how were the lives of female laundry workers shaped in the context of these consumer transformations, which were driven by the expanding global textile trade centred in

[7] Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965), 13-14; Patricia E. Malcolmson, *English Laundresses: A Social History, 1850 – 1930* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986), xi; Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 172; Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1669-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 43; Susan North, *Sweet and Clean? Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 208, 230.
[8] Beverly Lemire, "An Education in Comfort: Indian Textiles and the Remaking of English Homes over the Long Eighteenth Century," in *Selling Textiles in the Long Eighteenth Century*, eds. Jon Stobart and Bruno Blondé (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 19.
[9] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses,* xi-xv; Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A history of housework in the British Isles 1650 – 1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 136.
[10] Collier, *Poems, On Several Occasions*, 12.

Britain? What cultural values did laundry workers promulgate for other people through their labour, and how were these values manifested in their own lives? Finally, why was it that many female laundry workers ended up in 'old age and poverty,' struggling to feed their families and make ends meet, with little hope of obtaining the physical comforts that so many of their middling and elite employers enjoyed?

By exploring these salient questions, I will shed light on this obscure corner of English history and reveal a deeper, more fulsome understanding of the ordinary lives and labours of female laundry workers. I will build on the existing historiography of consumption, dress, and women's associated labour, and examine the economic and social factors which both pushed and pulled women towards laundry work. While my thesis focuses on England as its primary geographic location, I have referenced artwork and enlisted sources whose settings and research also include Wales, Scotland and Ireland, western Europe, and America, where similar forces were enacted. This broader perspective will enhance our knowledge of individual and social outcomes that resulted from the burgeoning global textile trade and rise of consumerism. Moreover, I will establish the essential role female laundry labour played in the construction and perpetuation of key social values – values that facilitated social transformation, economic growth, and the global expansion of eighteenth-century England.

Consumption, Fashion and Dress

The history of laundry in Western society can be placed at the point where the history of consumption, fashion and dress intersects with the history of female labour associated with clothing and textile trades. Laundry is at once the social historian's terrain as much as it is the purview of the material culture specialist, where labouring hands meet soiled linens. A review of

the historiography of consumption and material culture in England rightly begins with pre-eminent Oxford historian Joan Thirsk. Her most influential work, volume IV in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* (1967), aroused new interest in rural industries, proto-industrialization, and the unsung work of women in its genesis. This led to further scholarship and her subsequent publication, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (1978). This pioneering study is acknowledged by historians as the starting point for researching consumption patterns in England. Thirsk identified the evolution of cottage occupations such as lace making, stocking knitting, and linen weaving, and the transformational impact they had on expanding household economies and clothing choices.[11]

In 1989, French social and cultural historian Daniel Roche published his ground-breaking work, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Regime',* which reasons that the history of clothing and the "culture of appearances" reveals social codes and practices that were articulated within societies and civilizations.[12] He asserts that "the true discovery of linen" occurred in the eighteenth century, and that women's labour and consumption were fundamental components to what he calls the "clothing revolution."[13] In addition, he argues that the rise of genteel society and the "civilisation of manners" was inextricably linked with the consumption of clothing – the former imposing expectations and constraints on sartorial choices and bodily habits – and yet, as he believed, "the one could not happen without the other."[14]

Building on the foundation of Thirsk and Roche, Beverly Lemire, a material culture specialist who has made an important contribution to the history of textiles and the second-hand

[11] Paul Slack, "Joan Thirsk," *Past & Present,* no. 222 (February 2014): 3-4.
[12] Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Regime'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4-5, 46.
[13] Ibid., 179, 291.
[14] Roche, *Culture of Clothing,* 364.

clothing trade, contends that there was a "constant and growing preoccupation with material betterment" in the eighteenth century, primarily centred on the consumption and use of apparel.[15] Like Roche, Lemire argues that clothing "acted as a material manifestation of an amalgam of expectations and assumptions" in which the public and the private "coalesced in dress."[16] Lemire demonstrates that the arrival of cotton textiles in England in the seventeenth century was a force at work on the choices and behaviour of consumers throughout the eighteenth century.[17] Cotton's affordability and washability were attractions "too powerful to be so easily eradicated," and despite government attempts to quell the industry in favour of domestic wool, its consumer appeal flourished.[18] Lemire further argues that the goal of physical and bodily comfort became more attainable over the eighteenth century for a wider range of the population, leading to an increased demand in washable domestic and personal linens, which in turn increased the need for more laundry labour. Cultural historian Giorgio Riello also confirms the central role of cotton in redressing western populations which was expressed though consumption, needs and desires, arguing that cotton was the first truly global industry, firmly established in the eighteenth century.[19]

In her study of Scottish colonial merchants in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Stana Nenadic found that consumption patterns were directly informed by familial customs and traditions, and that conspicuous consumption was a "spectacular form of self-invention."[20] Lorna Weatherill

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[15] Roche, *Culture of Clothing,* 56; Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660 – 1800* (London: MacMillan Press, 1997), 121.
[16] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 6; Beverly Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c.1600-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 2-5.
[17] Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 3.
[18] Ibid., 44, 77-8. Note: both cotton, and cotton-linen blends.
[19] Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-14.
[20] Stana Nenadic, "Middle-rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburg and Glasgow 1720-1840," *Past and Present*, no. 145 (November 1994), 127.

conducted regional statistical analyses on household accounts and probate inventories to determine consumer preferences and domestic culture.[21] She notes a substantial growth in levels of consumption in the early part of the eighteenth century, as well as the importance of life-cycles in patterns of consumption, which she calls sum totals of "the aggregates of individual decisions," with origins in the household, the essential "unit of consumption."[22]

In his comprehensive survey *The Dress of the People* (2007), social historian John Styles reiterates that one of the defining features of eighteenth-century England was the rise of consumerism and the change in material life, such that people's clothes "were the most blatant manifestation of the material transformation of plebian life."[23] He argues that the innovative technologies of the industrial revolution and increasing global trade dominance of Britain happened in large part because of this rise in demand and interest for new and more types of clothing textiles.[24] However, in Jan de Vries' pivotal work, *The Industrious Revolution,* (2008), a new argument is advanced that the eighteenth-century revolution was 'industrious' rather than 'industrial', and that "long before these technological breakthroughs the growth of demand for linen and cotton had already been intense, supporting major increases in production in a pre-mechanized environment."[25] New consumer desires motivated the industriousness of households, especially that of women and children, increasing both household production and consumption, in what he calls the "household negotiation with the market economy."[26]

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[21] Nenadic, "Middle-rank Consumers," 127; Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660 – 1760*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998).
[22] Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture,* xv, 93.
[23] John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 1-3.
[24] Ibid., 15.
[25] Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 145.
[26] Ibid., 122; Jan de Vries, "Between Purchasing Power and the World of Goods: Understanding the Household Economy in Early Modern Europe," in *Consumption and the World of Goods,* eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 121, quoted in Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 3.

Race figures into the understanding of the industrialization of textile production and trade in eighteenth-century England. Indeed, the massive growth of trans-Atlantic commerce in England's overseas trade depended mainly on domestically produced manufactures, which were made from cotton and other commodities grown in the Americas with African slave labour.[27] Joseph Inikori, a specialist in African-American history, argues that "there can be little doubt that the labour of Africans and their descendants was what made possible the growth of Atlantic commerce during the period."[28] More sobering is historian Roquinaldo Ferreira's observation that textiles made from the fibres grown by enslaved Africans were "by all accounts the most important commodity traded for slaves in Angola."[29] While the implications of race are critical to the dialogue centering on the full scope of the trans-Atlantic trade system, my focus centres on the domestic consumption and associated labour of the textiles trade.

Researching regional church court records, Alexandra Shepard published her findings in 2015 on the social and economic identities of women. She found that the estimation of one's social identity was firmly anchored in the appraisal and assessment of people's tangible and material assets, as these communicated intangible 'social worth,' which was so critical to one's reputation and "common fame."[30] Shepard connects her material analysis with the economic experience of females. Considering the descriptions women used to identify themselves in witness statements, Shepard urges other historians, "to explore women's impact *in* the early modern economy as much as the early modern economy's impact *on* women."[31]

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[27] Joseph Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 482.
[28] Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution*, 486.
[29] Quoted in Cécile Fromont, "Common Threads: Cloth, Colour, and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Kongo and Angola" *Art History*, vol. 41, no. 5 (2018): 847.
[30] Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*: *Worth, Status and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.
[31] Alexandra Shepard, "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy," *History Workshop Journal* 79 (2015): 2, italics added.

Women's Labour and Laundry Labour

The dearth of twentieth-century scholarship in women's history and the history of female labour is no secret; indeed, dedicated research to the subject did not gain momentum until the 1980s.[32] Social historian Maxine Berg argues in her pivotal work, *The Age of Manufactures,* that the growth of industrialization in England was about the organizational changes of work arrangements, which exposed gender biases in technological development. She observes that household tasks merged with productive income and involved networks of women.[33] Women's labour shifted to domestic services and textile industries, particularly the cotton industry in some regions, with women and children outnumbering men in highly labour-intensive industries such as spinning, lace making, and stocking knitting.[34] Further, she contends that female labour power was associated with female consumer power, although over time labour power diminished due to declining wages for women, which lowered the status and value of essential women's work even further.[35] Following Berg, the research of Louise Tilly and Joan Scott determined that women's work was assessed as second rate, sex-typed, and often involved interconnected tensions between "family and work, tradition and modernity, dependency and autonomy."[36] They conclude that women's occupations routinely earned lower wages, and that life-cycle stage

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[32] Note: Except for the pioneering work of historians Dorothy George, Ivy Pinchbeck and Joan Thirsk: Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965); Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (London: Cass, 1969); Joan Thirsk, ed. *The Agrarian History of England and Wales Vol. IV, 1500-1640* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1967).
[33] Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain 1700-1820,* 1st ed. (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1985), 145.
[34] Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain 1700-1820,* 2nd ed. [Electronic Resource] (Routledge, 1994), 119-120.
[35] Berg, *Age of Manufactures,* 1st ed., 157-8.
[36] Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (Routledge: New York, 1989), 2.

had a direct impact on the work available to them. Nevertheless, Tilly and Scott argue that women's work was still "the cornerstone of the family economy."[37]

In Peter Earle's influential study of urban life in London in the early eighteenth century, he found that labouring people, "the mechanick part of mankind," became increasingly unable to accumulate capital, advance socially or enjoy improvements to their livelihood.[38] Many of the working poor lacked life's necessities, a situation that was exacerbated for women because female labourers (deemed 'unskilled') typically earned much less than their male counterparts.[39] Earle also found that as the urban economy became more specialized and capitalistic, women's relative economic importance declined, and became increasingly so as women got older. [40]

Pamela Sharpe argues that the structural flexibility of the female labour market "formed one of the linchpins of Britain's economic success" during the era of global expansion and trade in the eighteenth century.[41] She concurs with Maxine Berg's analysis that women's labour was critically important in the expanding textile and dress industries, in her study of the lace making industry in Devon.[42] Further, she highlights the fact that although women's contributions to household economies could offer them a subjective sense of identity and self-worth, the essential work of nurturing and providing care embedded within the physical work of households was unrecognized and undervalued by the labour market.[43]

Outside the labouring classes, Margaret Hunt considers the economic circumstances of middle-ranked women in her work *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in*

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[37] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family,* 2-3, 60.
[38] Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 327.
[39] Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class,* 330.
[40] Peter Earle, *A City Full of People: Men and Women of London 1650 – 1750* (London: Methuen, 1994), 112-113, 120.
[41] Pamela Sharpe, ed., *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650-1914* (London: Arnold, 1998), 3.
[42] Pamela Sharpe, "Literally Spinsters: A New Interpretation of Local Economy and Demography in Colyton in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *The Economic History Review* 44 (1): 55. doi:10.2307/2597484.
[43] Note: as is still the case today. Sharpe, *Women's Work*, 4.

England 1680-1780 (1996). She determined that the majority of urban women contributed financially to their households in full or in part at some point in their adult lives.[44] However, girls and women had fewer employment options than did boys and men, which invariably placed females in more economically vulnerable positions.[45] Hannah Barker found other evidence when examining business opportunities for middling women living in urban centres in Northern England in the second half of the eighteenth century.[46] She argues that in some cases women were significant economic agents, had opportunities to engage in the economy, and were active participants in the economic and social transformations of the eighteenth century, thus countering the generally held idea that women's opportunities decreased over time.[47] She challenges the "prescriptive ideologies described by historians as fact" and argues that the actual experiences and positive opportunities of some women have been obscured in the pessimistic generalization of women's labour.[48] While Barker's research rightly demonstrates the need to study micro-histories of individuals, communities, and regions in order to better understand the wider experience, her work exposes the fact that the ability of women to exercise economic agency and take advantage of business opportunities was largely dependent on access to capital and supportive social networks – factors which were not always within a female's control. Tanya Evans researched the lives of poor women and single mothers in London who, unlike the women Hannah Barker researched, had little or no social or financial capital. Evans determined that wages and lack of work were major causes of economic insecurity experienced by many,

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[44] Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680 – 1780* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 128.
[45] Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 80.
[46] Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[47] Barker, *Business of Women,* 2-10.
[48] Ibid.

profoundly compounded by women's marital status and life cycle stage.[49] Most women were forced to engage in an "economy of makeshifts," which included miscellaneous and sporadic employment, pawning their clothes, receiving charity from family or parish relief, and in some instances resorting to crime.[50]

This summary of the historiography of women's labour in eighteenth-century England demonstrates that for many women the availability, range and types of employment declined, which was influenced by location, familial circumstances, and social ranking. In some areas, female wage labour opportunities grew. This growth was found predominantly in domestic service and in textile manufacturing and trade, with laundry labour located at the intersection of these two sectors.

The history of female laundry labour has been largely unexamined as an employment sector. In 1986, Patricia Malcolmson published the first detailed history of laundry in England, focusing on the period from 1850 - 1930. Her analysis of laundry labour explored the relationship between home and workplace, the household economies of the poor, the growth of the service industry, and the connection between consumer preferences and working conditions.[51] She reported that laundry work was ninety-nine per cent female work in 1861, and that it was a trade most often taken up by women in economic adversity. Much of this labour, however, was never recorded due to its intermittent, part-time, household-centred nature.[52] Laundry demand accelerated in the second half of the nineteenth century, generating a proliferation of hand laundries and workshops. These were concentrated in large urban centres,

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[49] Tanya Evans, *Unfortunate Objects: Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 28-29.
[50] Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 30.
[51] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, xi.
[52] Ibid., xiii.

ports, and communities with temporary residents, such as university towns. Larger, industrialized steam laundries did not take hold until the end of the nineteenth century, well after the advancing industrialization of other economic sectors.[53] Malcolmson's pioneering research and structural analyses of laundry and female laundry labour were critical in identifying the gendered roles of women within this subject.

Subsequent scholarship did not undertake a more in-depth study into the associations between females and laundry labour, but instead focused more emphasis on the cultural meanings of cleanliness, thus relegating laundry labour to sub-text in the narrative. Georges Vigarello's work, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*, published in 1988, has had an influential impact on the interpretation of early modern ideas about bodily and sartorial cleanliness, claiming that "personal cleanliness was symbolised by clean linen."[54] He writes that "fresh, white linen removed dirt by its intimate contact with the body. Its effect was comparable to water … The shirt had become a sponge; it cleaned."[55] Although his research was centred on French culture, Vigarello's argument was borrowed by historians writing about other places in Europe and America, specifically his assertion that laundry work became more relevant as bodily cleanliness was expressed solely in clean linen. In her book, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America*, Kathleen Brown explores the cultural importance of civility communicated through clothing, specifically clean white linen.[56] She contends, "the freshly laundered white shirt helped a European gentleman to identify his peers by revealing the wearer's good taste, refinement and membership in a global community defined by civility."[57]

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[53] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, 7-8.
[54] George Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 41.
[55] Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness,* 60.
[56] Kathleen M Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 4.
[57] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 111.

While she addresses the cultural value of laundry labour, she relies on Vigarello's theory of cleanliness to explain its significance. Sophie White also employs Vigarello's interpretation to underpin her argument that "cleanliness was predicated on the display of laundered clothing" which then signalled and constructed social and racial identities in colonial America.[58]

Many of these assumptions were questioned in Susan North's recently published work *Sweet and Clean? Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England* (2020). North challenges the acceptance of what she calls a "laundry myth," namely that bodies were rarely washed in the early modern period and that linens served as a surrogate for washing the body. North contends that even though routines of cleanliness for bodies and clothing were seldom recorded – routines that were universally ordinary and personally intimate – this does not mean they did not happen.[59] More importantly, she challenges Vigarello's claim that linen cleaned the body, providing ample and convincing evidence through medical journals, advice literature, and household manuals, that washing both bodies and linens were equally valued and desired in early modern England.[60] North describes the following "cleanliness triage:"

> When forced by lack of time and/or resources, an early modern English person probably focused on the visible hands, face, neckwear, headwear, and cuffs first. Requiring a bit more time and water, the washing of the invisible skin came next and finally the invisible linens that needed considerably more time, resources, labour, and expense.[61]

While North has initiated a welcome and overdue exploration of the influence laundry work had on clothing practices in eighteenth-century England, she herself acknowledges that of the females who laundered, "… a truly comprehensive history remains to be written."[62]

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[58] Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 3, 19.
[59] Susan North, *Sweet and Clean? Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 9,15.
[60] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 284.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 208.

Economic Factors and Social Conditions

The life of a laundry-maid or washerwoman in eighteenth-century England was directly shaped by the larger economic and social conditions wherefrom she lived and worked. England was the first European nation to industrialize, an evolution which took place gradually, marked by continuity rather than revolutionary change and accelerating after 1750.[63] New innovations in technology changed textile production methods and locations, gradually shifting home-based manufacturing to more mechanization in spinning mills. This occurred in varying degrees across regions, in what Keith Wrightson calls an evolving "process of commercialisation."[64] The decline of numerous cottage industries by the later 1700s and the transfer of manufactures from home to factory changed the way many women earned money and contributed to their household economies.[65] Some women benefited financially from this transference, with new employment choices found outside the domestic setting, particularly in the textiles industries. Many more faced decreasing wages and fewer opportunities to secure sustainable employment, a factor felt keenly during child-bearing years.[66] In 1758, John Fielding commented in the *London Chronicle* on how "the infinite variety of professions, trades, and manufactures joined to the army navy and services, leave few men idle, unless from choice; whilst women have but few trades, and fewer manufactures to employ them."[67] Whereas textile production became increasingly intensified

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[63] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family,* 64; Hannah Barker, "Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution: Female Involvement in the English Printing Trades, c.1700-1840," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700 – 1850, An Introduction,* eds. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005), 84.
[64] Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 331; Nicola Pullin, "Business is Just Life: The Practice, Prescription and Legal Position of Women in Business, 1700-1850," (PhD diss., University of London, 2001), EThOS (uk.bl.ethos.247098), 10; Berg, *The Age of Manufactures*, 1st ed., 145; K.D. Snell, "Agricultural Seasonal Employment, the Standard of Living, and Women's Work 1690-1860," in *Women's Work – The English Experience 1650-1914*, ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), 108.
[65] Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 53; Berg, *The Age of Manufactures,* 1st ed., *145.*
[66] Barker, "Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution," 81; Barker, *Business of Women,* 44; Shepard, "Crediting Women," 2.
[67] John Fielding, *London Chronicle* (1758) vol. iii, 327c, quoted in Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 128.

and industrialized over the century, laundry labour did not; thus, laundry labour endured as a productive income option available to women within or without their own households.

The development of capitalism and market structures like joint stock companies, banks, and state monetization occurred in tandem with industrialization, and had a profound effect on the role and status of female work.[68] Global trade rose to unprecedented levels, with England's Atlantic trade increasing sixfold in the first seventy years of the eighteenth century. This spurred the proliferation of novel and widely sourced material goods. In particular textiles and clothing which made up over half of English exports and re-exports to the Atlantic world, and as mentioned earlier, depended heavily on the African slave trade and plantation products for its growth.[69] With more capital circulating in the economy, new ways of borrowing, lending, and investing changed how people engaged with money and goods.[70] Networks of credit became an essential mechanism for commercial activity, and rested largely on one's financial and social reputations.[71] As the century progressed, accumulated profits allowed successful merchants and capitalists to purchase not only more material goods but also labour and domestic service, including laundry labour.[72] So, too, did opportunities rise for middle-ranked families, who grew in numbers, consuming and owning more, which considerably altered the economic landscape.

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[68] Mark Overton et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households 1600-1750* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 3; Tawny Paul, *The Poverty of Disaster: Debt and Insecurity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 3; Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life*, 5; Barker, "Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution," 81; C.F. Smith, "The Early History of the London Stock Exchange." *The American Economic Review* 19, no. 2 (1929): 206.
[69] Robert DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3, 7-8.
[70] Paul, *Poverty of Disaster,* 4.
[71] Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 23; Christine Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen in Eighteenth-Century England, in *Women and Urban Life: On the Town*, eds. Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Lane (London: Routledge, 2016), 96-97.
[72] Earle, *City Full of People,* 111.

Capitalist agriculture, including the commercialization of sheep-herding for wool production, led to the enclosure of large areas of pasture and arable land.[73] Enclosure gradually dispossessed small husbandmen and cottagers of access to lands and livelihoods and decreased their ability to maintain self-sufficiency, compelling many to seek out wage labour.[74] While this affected both men and women, it was women who lost a much higher proportion of agriculturally based labour and had to rely on narrowing choices and gendered lower wages.[75] To compound this problem for impoverished women, the enclosure of agricultural lands denied them the economic activity of gleaning. This was a societal 'safety-net' custom that allowed poor women to collect fallen grain after harvest, as well as wild fruit, wood, and other natural resources from smaller farms and common lands. English local historian Peter King estimates that as much as thirteen percent of annual household incomes of the economically vulnerable was derived from gleaning.[76]

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the population of England was estimated to be just over five million people, three-quarters of whom lived in rural communities.[77] London was by far the largest urban centre with over 500,000 residents.[78] The population rose steadily throughout the eighteenth century, with increasing annual growth in the latter decades that was unprecedented in modern history and transformed society accordingly.[79] The higher standard of

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[73] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family,* 14.
[74] Earle, *City Full of People*, 110; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 11.
[75] Overton et al, *Production and Consumption in English Households*, 82; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 15; Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660 – 1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 27; Snell, "Agricultural Seasonal Unemployment," 107; Pamela Sharpe, *Adapting to Capitalism: Working Women in the English Economy, 1700-1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), quoted in Barker, *Women and Work,* 126; Berg, *The Age of Manufactures,* 1st ed., 117.
[76] Peter King, "Customary Rights and Women's Earnings: The Importance of Gleaning to the Labouring Poor, 1750-1850," *Economic History Review*, 1991, vol.44, quoted in Barker, *Women and Work,* 129-30.
[77] Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities*, 229; Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town 1680-1840: Government, Society and Culture* (New York: Longman, 1999), 7.
[78] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 19; Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 18.
[79] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family,* 89; Barker and Chalus, eds., *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 16-17.

living enjoyed in the first half of the century coincided with a more stable food supply, a decline in contagious diseases and rates of mortality, a drop in the average marrying age for both men and women, and higher fertility rates.[80] Consumer demand for "the necessities and niceties of life" increased alongside the rising population, fueling both the agricultural and industrial economies.[81] By the end of the century, the proportion of the population living in towns and cities had risen to 31 percent.[82] London had close to one million people and the national population exceeded nine million, almost doubling in size over the course of the century.[83]

London's expansion and growing population of fashionable people drew many rural migrants, particularly those in their late teens to mid- to late twenties. These newcomers needed to find work in the wake of enclosure, increasing industrialization, and resulting familial economic hardships.[84] Peter Earle cites that the most common 'push' factor mentioned by young adult females migrating to London was the business failure or untimely death of their father, which invariably lead to their family household's economic collapse.[85] At the same time, the dominant 'pull' factor attracting migrants to London was the increasing demand for services to support the burgeoning growth of the middling, merchant, and elite populace.[86] By the early eighteenth century, women substantially outnumbered men and were a significant presence in the urban economy.[87] A letter in the *London Chronicle* printed in 1762 reported the influx of country girls to the city, "…waggon loads of poor servants coming every day from all parts of

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[80] Barker and Chalus, *Women's History: Britain,* 59; Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family,* 90-91; Sweet, *The English Town,* 12; Peter Razzell, "The Growth of Population in Eighteenth-Century England: A Critical Reappraisal," *The Journal of Economic History* 53, no. 4 (1993): 743. (accessed 3 May 2021.) http://www.jstor.org/stable/2122638.
[81] Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite,* 44.
[82] Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Lane, eds., *Women and Urban Life: On the Town* (London: Routledge, 2016), 1.
[83] Hunt, *The Middling Sort,* 17; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 19.
[84] Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 2, 18-19.
[85] Earle, *City Full of People,* 50.
[86] Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 31.
[87] Earle, *City Full of People,* 39; Sweet and Lane, *Women and Urban Life,* 10.

this kingdom."[88] By 1775, one in eight out of London's population were domestic servants, and most of those were female.[89] The disproportionate number of women versus men decreased marriage opportunities for women. Conjugal domesticity was not possible for thousands of urban female labourers, who often lived communally with others like themselves in makeshift dwellings with scant furnishings. In turn, this increased the need amongst labouring people for their own domestic services like victuallers, innkeepers, and washerwomen.[90]

Under the overarching shadow of the 'law of coverture' operating within English common law, marriage between a man and a woman was a privileged socio-legal entity. Of this law, Lord Blackmore wrote in 1753, "…by marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being, or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband."[91] A married woman was deemed a 'feme covert' meaning that she was 'covered' or under the protection of her husband, baron, or lord. This denied her the legal right to own property, conduct business, sue, or sign legal contracts in her own name.[92] A single woman was legally identified as a 'feme sole' and had fewer legal restrictions, as did also a very small number of married women traders. While the execution and interpretation of this law was more complicated and nuanced, with some married women circumventing its restrictive nature, the societal weight given to conjugal

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[88] Letter in *London Chronicle,* 12 (1762), 58, quoted in Hill, *Servants: English Domestics in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 4. Note: female migrants came from across the country, but the majority came from the Home Counties surrounding London, the Midlands, and western counties. As the century progressed, increasing numbers came from Scotland and Ireland, in Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 18.
[89] Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 31.
[90] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 18.
[91] Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books* (1753) 4 vols (1793), vol. I, 441, quoted in Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 196.
[92] Barker, *Business of Women,* 137-8; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 196.

households whose legal privilege rested with the husband framed the lives of all women in the eighteenth-century – maids, wives, widows, and spinsters alike.[93]

By the end of the eighteenth century, it is estimated that the middling ranks encompassed about ten percent of the population in England, although the boundaries between the ranks were not always clearly defined.[94] Middling households depended on minimum annual incomes of at least £40 to sustain a lifestyle commensurate with their status.[95] In contrast, a male day labourer might earn between £8 and £35 annually and a female domestic servant could expect only a few pounds per year plus room and board.[96] Within this large section of the populace, gradations of social status were measured according to accumulated wealth, occupation, education, and familial and social connections.[97] Women's economic contributions to their households were many and varied. Some women actively participated in income generating activities derived from family farms and businesses.[98] Some women in possession of sufficient incomes and accumulated wealth retreated from labour – both paid and unpaid – employing leisure as a demarcation of elite status.[99] However, for many, the threat of economic insecurity was a constant companion. The income generating labour of able-bodied members in middling households was essential, which often meant combining multiple modes of employment in order to make ends meet.[100] Tawny Paul argues that the middling sort was a group of people, "... for

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[93] Barker, *Business of Women,* 137-8; Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property: in Early Modern England,* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4; Paul, *Poverty of Disaster,* 8.
[94] Hunt, *Middling Sort,*17, footnote 51. Note: This number is based on Patrick Colquhoun's estimate of the census returns of 1801.
[95] Hunt, *Middling Sort,* 15; Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture,* 98.
[96] Hunt, *Middling Sort,* 15.
[97] Barker, *Business of Women,* 180.
[98] Barker, "Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution," 96; Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen in Eighteenth-Century England," 87; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 29.
[99] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 49.
[100] Paul, *Poverty of Disaster,* 26; Berg, *Age of Manufactures,* 1st ed., 131; Earle, *City Full of People,* 140; North, *Sweet and Clean* 182-3.

whom insecurity was the defining feature of commercial experience. Middling people had opportunities for success, but many of them experienced downward mobility."[101] Credit became less secure as networks expanded. During the eighteenth century, thirty-three thousand businesses went bankrupt, and at least ten times as many people went to debtor's prison, which had ripple effects throughout households, communities, and business networks.[102] This economic uncertainty was exacerbated by insecurities associated with gender, life cycle stages, and sporadic employment.[103]

While the "poverty of disaster" for the middling ranks was a constant fear dictating their priorities, the "poverty of inheritance" became an identity and distinction that characterized the labouring and beggarly poor.[104] At the lower end of society "stretched a sea of the less fortunate," three-quarters of the population according to Margaret Hunt, who faced a "remorseless struggle against poverty."[105] In the latter part of the eighteenth century, poor harvests, an economic slump, high food prices, and the fall of real wages led to the pauperization of many on the lower rungs of the economic ladder.[106] The decline of real wages was exacerbated for women who were generally paid one-third to one-half the wage of men, making poverty particularly difficult for women, and even more so for women without husbands.[107] In

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[101] Paul, *Poverty of Disaster,* 4.
[102] Ibid., 5,9,25.
[103] Ibid., 6.
[104] Ibid., 2-3.
[105] Hunt, *Middling Sort,* 20; Janet Todd, "The Belaced and the Beliced," *Times Higher Educational Supplement,* (16 Feb 1996), 22, quoted in Richard Connors, "Poor Women, the Parish and the Politics of Poverty," in *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities*, eds. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Longman, 1997), 128.
[106] Lynn Mackay, "Why They Stole: Women in the Old Bailey 1779 – 1789", *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1999): 623; Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Hambledon, 2004), 6; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics, 49;* Margaret Hanly, "The Economy of Makeshifts and the Role of the Poor Law: A Game of Chance?" in *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts*, eds. Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 77.
[107] Berg, *Age of Manufactures,* 2nd ed. 122; Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family,* 37.

the mid-eighteenth century, over eighty percent of those classified as poor were female.[108] Dorothy George, writing in the early twentieth century, commented that "social conditions tended to produce a high proportion of widows, deserted wives, and unmarried mothers, while women's occupations were over-stocked, ill-paid and irregular."[109] Subsequent historians have confirmed George's findings. In London, women with children made up the majority of workhouse inmates. Street sellers and beggars were primarily women, many with children. Tim Hitchcock observes that in London, "in a very real way, adult male beggars were seen as a problem, and are recorded as such … [the] thousands of female beggars were simply a fact of life."[110]

Sarah Malcolm, Laundress

Sarah Malcolm's life story exemplifies the difficult economic and social conditions within which female laundry workers lived and worked. She was born in 1710, in county Durham in northeast England, to respectable parents. However, her father squandered his estate which resulted in an economic crisis for the family. Sarah, still a young woman, had no choice but to seek paid employment in order to survive. She moved to London and eventually obtained work as a laundress for several lodgers living in the chambers above the Inns of Court in the Temple. It is not known what her employment options were, but she must have had sufficient specialized laundry skills to be hired by reputable employers. In February 1733, at the age of twenty-two, she was befriended by some dubious associates who encouraged her to assist them in the robbery of one her clients: a wealthy 80-year-old infirm woman named Mrs. Lydia

[108] Connors, "Poor Women, the Parish and the Politics of Poverty," 126-27.
[109] George, *London Life,* 174.
[110] Hitchcock, *Down and Out,* 5,8-9.

Duncomb, her companion Mrs. Harrison, and domestic servant Ann Price. It is likely that Sarah Malcolm's economic insecurity and absence of familial support propelled her to participate in a crime which, if caught, could result in the death penalty or transportation to America.[111] Sarah agreed, and acted as lookout on the stairs of the lodge while the others carried out the robbery in the women's bedroom, stealing £300 worth of silverware and other items. Her accomplices escaped and Malcolm insisted that it was not until the next day, when the dead bodies of these three women were discovered, that she learned they had been murdered.[112] When Malcolm's master found a stolen silver tankard and Sarah's bloodied linen shift in his own lodgings, adjacent to the room of Mrs. Duncomb, he called the authorities.[113] Sarah was taken into custody, indicted and then tried for both murder and robbery at Old Bailey's Court on 23 February 1733.

Sarah vigorously defended herself in her trial, and while admitting to her role in the robbery, she emphatically denied committing the murders.[114] Sarah boldly faced the all-male jury and testified that her shift was found in her master's bedroom because it had been left there after he had "… desired me to lye in his chamber," and that the blood stains came from her menstrual blood. She challenged the jury and asked how this could prove she committed a murder when there were not any blood stains on the sleeves or neck, but only on the lower back

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[111] Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock, and Robert Shoemaker, "Crime and Justice – Punishment Sentences at the Old Bailey," *Old Bailey Proceedings Online.* www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, (accessed 4 May 2021).
[112] Note: Mrs. Duncomb and Mrs. Harrison had been strangled, while Ann Price's throat had been slit, "A True Copy of the Paper Delivered the Night Before her Execution, by Sarah Malcolm to the Rev. Mr Piddington, Lecturer of St Bartholemew the Great," reprinted in *The Gentleman's Magazine or Monthly Intelligencer* (London: March 1733), 137.
[113] William Hogarth and John Trusler, *The Complete Works of William Hogarth, in a Series of One Hundred and Fifty-Seven Engravings, from the Original Pictures, including Many of the Author's Minor Pieces, not in any other edition, with Descriptions and Comments on their Moral Tendency* (London: H. Fowkes, 1810), 249.
[114] Tim Hitchcock, and Robert Shoemaker, *Tales from the Hanging Court* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 130.

part of her clothing worn closest to her body.[115] The jury took only fifteen minutes to deliberate and found her guilty. Their verdict stated, "the bloody Linnen … [were] strong Circumstances against her" and Sarah Malcolm was sentenced to death by hanging near Temple Gate. Her execution took place twelve days later.[116]

William Hogarth painted this striking portrait of Sarah Malcolm pictured in Figure 1.1, after she agreed to sit for him in Newgate Prison, just two days before her public execution.[117] While Hogarth may have intended to represent her as a cold-blooded murderer so as to take advantage of the flourishing convict portraiture market, he has instead revealed a more complex commentary. The strength of Sarah's muscled arms folded on the table, her upright posture, and the resolute expression on her face framed by the proliferation of illuminated white linen, evoke an air of defiance, and echo her trade as a laundress, not a criminal. Economic insecurity, urban migration, narrow employment options, and sexual vulnerability were the hard realities for Sarah Malcolm, leaving her with only gendered choices that shaped the inescapable narrative of her life. The most compelling irony in Sarah's tragic ending is that as a young laundress, whose occupation it was to make fouled linens clean for other people, she was found guilty of a crime based primarily on the questionable evidence of her own soiled linen.

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[115] Old Bailey Proceedings, *London Lives, 1690-1800,* t17330221-52 (www.londonlives.org, version 2.0, March 2018), 21 February 1733, trial of Sarah Malcolm.
[116] Note: Sarah Malcolm's linen shift was not presented in court as material evidence. Jane Magrath, "(Mis)reading the Bloody Body: The Case of Sarah Malcolm," *Women's Writing* 11, no. 2 (2004): 228.
[117] Mark Hallett, and Christine Riding, *Hogarth* (London: Tate Britain, 2006), 182-3.

Figure 1.1. *Sarah Malcolm*, 1733. William Hogarth, (1697-1764). National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Sources, Methodologies and Chapter Summaries

The methodological approach for my thesis is centred on the application of gender analysis in all aspects of laundry labour. My primary sources have been interrogated through the lens of the gendered female experience. I researched the online records of the Old Bailey Court proceedings; the central criminal court for the City of London and the County of Middlesex, and where all the trials for serious crimes committed in London took place in the eighteenth

century.[118] I sought out accounts of women who were involved with laundry, as laundresses and washerwomen, and who testified in court as either plaintiff, witness, or defendant. For women who would otherwise not be known or named in historical records, like Sarah Malcolm, these court proceedings give voice to female laundry labourers and are often first-person accounts, albeit through the filtered record of transcribed court documents.[119]

I conducted a quantitative study using Sun Fire Insurance policy records of laundresses and clear starchers from 1700 to 1800. While unable to access the records due to the Covid-19 pandemic (they are not fully accessible on-line and are physically located in the London Metropolitan Archives), I was nonetheless able to build a framework of almost three hundred London laundry businesses by considering gender, dates, locations, and business partnerships. One half of the laundresses were registered as co-insurers with their husbands, and while the husband's name was recorded, the women were each listed only as 'his wife.' Situating these unnamed laundresses together as a cohort in both time and place gives them a collective voice and strengthens the contextual understanding of the nature of their individual experience.

I consulted a comprehensive textile consumer's manual dating from 1696 that provided practical information suitable for the needs and expectations of textile consumers, including laundry labourers.[120] This manual contains appraisals of linens and cottons concerning their wear and washability and is intended not just for textile traders but also female householders, who would direct their laundry workers, accordingly, thus revealing key information about laundering processes and priorities. Eighteenth-century housekeeping manuals and receipt books

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[118] Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock, and Robert Shoemaker, "Crime and Justice – Crimes Tried at the Old Bailey," *Old Bailey Proceedings Online,* www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, (accessed 17 May 2021).
[119] Robert B. Shoemaker, "The Old Baily Proceedings and the Representation of Crime and Criminal Justice in Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of British Studies* 47 (July 2008): 559-60.
[120] J.F. *The merchant's ware-house laid open, or, The plain dealing linnen-draper: shewing how to buy all sorts of linnen and Indian goods, etc.* (London: Printed for John Sprint at the Bell, and Geo. Conyers at the Golden Ring in Little Britain, 1696).

enumerate expectations of behaviour, roles, and work patterns, as well as standards of cleanliness for laundry work. While literacy rates amongst laundry workers were low, manuals such as these provided trickle down information from those who could read to those who applied it in their work. Personal letters and journals – including the journal of farmwife Mary Hardy and the autobiography of Francis Place – provide personal observations and recollections, placing female laundry labour within the setting of the comings-and-goings of everyday life. Mary Collier's poems and brief autobiography provide a clear and original voice, unfiltered by secondary narratives or summative interpretations.

I was very fortunate to have access to a recently acquired assortment of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century linens, by the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection at the University of Alberta. Being able to closely examine the finer details of these linen and cotton garments, including textile type, embellishments such as embroidery and laundry labels, colour, the construction, and signs of wear provided a material study of the physicality of laundry labour. The lives and labours of female laundry workers speak through the clothing they washed, scrubbed, and ironed, filling gaps in knowledge previously unanswered or not fully understood from historical text.

This thesis is an examination of the female voices I have located in my primary and secondary sources – whether apparent, silent, or inferred – in the context of laundry labour in eighteenth-century England. In Chapter 2, I explore the enduring and exclusive connection between domestic chores and femaleness and consider the reflective and reinforcing marginalization of each on the other. The lower, relative status of laundry work as a sub-category within household labour deepened the already low esteem society held for females who did domestic work. The collective networks and female alliances that existed in laundry labour,

defined by space and sociability, were co-operative and collaborative, but also contentious and hierarchical. Parameters of influence in these socio-economic relationships were determined by imbalances of power based on money, skill or expertise, and status. Life cycles, life stages, and familial relationships had a direct and substantial impact on the type and quantity of laundry labour girls and women both performed for others and required for themselves. Significantly, the lack of any substantial technological improvements to laundry processes in the eighteenth century speaks to gender bias, in the face of many other advances in male dominated industries of the time. The expressions and limitations of female agency were clearly demonstrated in the engagement of laundry work. Whether a female chose to do her own laundry, chose to pay another female to do it, or was paid to wash another woman's linens, all were manifestations of the range and scope of female agency within laundry labour. However, choosing to opt out of laundry participation does not appear to be a choice for females in eighteenth-century England. Persistent and enduring gender roles left essentially no room for deviation from this universally accepted cultural idea and practice.

In Chapter 3, I examine the materiality of laundry labour and the transmission of societal values through sartorial meanings, specifically clean white linen. My object study of the garments in the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection reveals an historical narrative of each item of clothing. The linens speak on behalf of those who made, wore, and laundered them. White aprons, caps, sleeves, stockings, shirts, and shifts were essential elements of a universally accepted dress code, whose cultural meanings transcended form and function. The dramatic rise of the evangelical revival movement and the widespread growth of Methodism in the eighteenth century reinforced associations between physical cleanliness and the morality of one's character, or soul. Clothing acted as a preeminent outward manifestation of the inner person, which was

expressed and interpreted at all levels of society. Freshly laundered white linen came to symbolize purity and virtue within, while dirty and tattered linen communicated the opposite. The products of female laundry labour, or lack thereof, became the primary mechanism by which individuals were judged, measured, categorized, and ranked by society. Paradoxically, the meager economic value that society ascribed to laundry labour, reflecting the low social estimation of the female laundry labourers themselves, was in direct contrast to the critical role clean white linen played in social interactions and economic relationships. Essential labour performed by essential workers does not always secure compensation and respect commensurate to the important work they, or the products of their labour, perform, as was the case for laundry-maids, washerwomen, and laundresses in eighteenth-century England.

Chapter 2

Laundry Work as Female Work: Connections, Lifecycles and Labour

A Laundry-maid is the person to whom the care of the linen is committed, and it is most common for her to be brought up to it; but yet any young woman of tolerable abilities may soon learn it, as all women are less or more acquainted with washing.[1]

The work of laundry was universally female work in eighteenth-century England. Although references to laundry and washing can be found in contemporary sources, our understanding about the work and lives of female laundry labourers "remains on the margins of the historical record."[2] The lower and marginalized status of women who engaged in laundry labour was both reflected in and reinforced by the menial status of the labour itself. Moreover, female alliances and networks between women who laundered were common and complicated. Their relationships were defined in part by the spaces within which they worked and the control they had over those spaces. While collaborative working partnerships amongst washerwomen existed, hierarchical tensions between women also endured, arising from imbalances of power based on money, knowledge, skill or expertise, and social ranking.[3] Whether it was women laundering *with* other women or women laundering *for* other women, the universal gendering of laundry labour deeply informed the intersecting and sometimes competing relationships of women. Female life cycle stages and familial experiences implicated the suitability and

[1] *The Complete Man and Maid Servant: Containing, Plain and Easy Instructions for Servants of Both Sexes* (London: printed for J. Cooke, 1764), 62.
[2] Susan North, *Sweet and Clean? Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 230.
[3] Note: This relationship of power can be examined through French philosopher Michel Foucault's theory of power, which 'suggests that power is omnipresent, that is, power can be found in all social interactions.' See Richard A. Lynch, "Foucault's theory of power," in Dianna Taylor, *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts* (Durham: Routledge, 2011), 13-16.

availability of girls and women who engaged in laundry labour, not to mention the fluctuating quantities of linens that needed laundering. As a technological system, laundry advanced very little in the eighteenth century, reflecting a gender bias in the industrialization of labour-saving technologies. While some female laundry workers may have derived a certain amount of personal satisfaction from the finished products of their labours – the perfectly pressed pleats and crisp white collars – or felt a sense of purpose in providing the essential work of nurturing embedded in the physical work of households, the ability to exercise occupational agency was restricted for most women. Thus, women generally viewed the physically demanding labour of laundry as an employment of last resort.

Laundry Labour as Female Labour

In early modern England, the work of keeping households and people clean overwhelmingly fell to women and girls.[4] When the Swedish traveller Pehr Kalm visited England in 1748 he observed that the women in farmers' households kept busy "cooking, washing floors, plates and dishes, darning a stocking or sewing a chemise, washing and starching linen clothes … all they do the whole of God's long day, year out and year in."[5] While some housekeeping tasks could occasionally be assumed by men or boys if need arose, laundry labour was exclusively female labour.[6] This particular connection between gender and laundry work

[4] Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumer and Gender in the Early Seventeenth-Century Household – The World of Alice Le Strange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 37-38, 113-4; Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660 – 1760*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 137; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes – Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780 – 1850*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), xxxvi; *The Office of the Good Housewife* (London, 1672), 19-20, quoted in Mark Overton et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 78.
[5] Pehr Kalm, *Account of His Visit to England on his Way to America in 1748,* trans. Joseph Lucas (London: Macmillan, 1892), *327*.
[6] Whittle and Griffiths, *World of Alice Le Strange,* 87; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 386; Kathleen M Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 7; Patricia E. Malcolmson, *English Laundresses: A Social History, 1850 – 1930* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986), xiii;

long predates the early modern period, and was so entrenched in belief and practice that over time it acquired what Kathleen Brown calls "an aura of timeless, natural fact."[7] In the domestic manual *Countrey Farme* (1616) it is explicitly stated that the care of "Linnens, [and] Clothes for the household … of a *certainetie* belongeth unto the woman."[8] At the all-male Cambridge colleges in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the only female servants employed were laundresses.[9] Caroline Davidson observes that contemporary popular literature like chap-books makes plain that "men only did laundry if there was something wrong with them."[10] Sophie White writes that hiring a man to do laundry work was "beyond the scope of imagination."[11] It was universally assumed that all women (save the very elite) knew how to wash clothing and household linens, and it was expected they would be taught how to do so from a very young age. The domestic manual *The Complete Man and Maid Servant* (1764) states the obvious: "A Laundry-maid is the person to whom the care of the linen is committed, and it is most common for her to be brought up to it; but yet any young woman of tolerable abilities may soon learn it, as all women are less or more acquainted with washing."[12]

Why were women so inextricably connected with laundry labour? One answer points to the argument by some historians that the type and status of work women did reflected and reinforced their hierarchical place in society.[13] Much of women's work was persistently

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Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Regime'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 386; North, *Sweet and Clean,* 230.
[7] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 7.
[8] Ibid., 41. [italics added]
[9] Whittle and Griffiths, *World of Alice Le Strange,* 114.
[10] Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A history of housework in the British Isles 1650 – 1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 136.
[11] Sophie White, *Wild Frenchman and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 196.
[12] *The Complete Man and Maid Servant,* no page number.
[13] Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain 1700-1820*, 1st ed. (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1985), 153.

associated with lower status, "frequently shifting and perceived as marginal, although essential to the economies of households and communities."[14] Margaret Hunt argues it is very likely that more status-conscious women did not even report such paid labour even if they performed it.[15] Laundry labour was marginalized, lower-status work relegated to females because the females themselves were marginalized, particularly those who were most economically vulnerable. In London's workhouses, (charitable institutions for the urban beggarly poor who were given food, work, and a place to sleep) washing linen was consigned to the lowest of the down and out, "the women among the grown Vagrants, Beggars, and other idle and disorderly Persons."[16] In the hierarchy of domestic service, laundry-maids and washerwomen were paid less than and ranked below chambermaids, housekeepers, and female cooks.[17] The etched engraving, *High Life Below Stairs* in Figure 2.1*,* illustrates the laundry worker's place in the hierarchy of domestic service within an affluent household. She is seen here hunched over her washtub in the corner, scrubbing laundry in the shadows, while the other servants enjoy a break from their labours. There is no high life for the washerwoman.

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[14] Amanda Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, The Royal Historical Society, 2007), 75-76; Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (Routledge: New York, 1989), 2.
[15] Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort*: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680 – 1780 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 128-129.
[16] Edward Hatton, *A New View of London,* vol.2 (London, 1708), 750.
[17] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 231; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 132-33.

Figure 2.1. *High Life Below Stairs*, 1772. James Caldwall (1739-1822), after John Collet (1725-1780). 1878,0713.1313. The British Museum, London.

Laundry work was one of the most common and yet poorly paid occupations available to women in the eighteenth century.[18] The widespread availability of laundry skills spread amongst a growing population of economically insecure women further deepened the lower, common status of laundry work. It was a challenge to "put a monetary value on a skill that every other woman knew" and it was "almost impossible to close ranks and create scarcity."[19] In addition, laundry work was often intermittent, part-time, seasonal and temporary.[20] The transitory and unreliable nature of laundry labour exacerbated economic uncertainty, particularly

[18] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, 48; Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, xii; Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 138; Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 404-5.
[19] Hunt, *Middling Sort,* 184; Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, xiii; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, xxxvii; Peter Earle, *A City Full of People: Men and Women of London 1650 – 1750* (London: Methuen, 1994), 120.
[20] Tanya Evans, *Unfortunate Objects: Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 32.

for the most vulnerable who relied on their own labours for survival.[21] The gendering of laundry labour was a result of the reflected and reinforced marginalization of both labour and labourer, intensified by the commonness of the work itself.

Female Connections

With so many female laundry workers scrubbing and starching in both town and country, collective networks of women eventually developed. Washerwomen and laundresses not only worked together, they also comforted each other, ran businesses together, lent and borrowed money from each other, sometimes committed crimes together, and some even lived together. Of course, as in all collective networks, they also disagreed, argued with and betrayed one another.[22] The collective experiences and work patterns of these women were both defined and constrained by what Beverly Lemire calls the "sexually specific patterns of work" to which they were employed."[23] Marcy Norton refers to these kinds of relationships for subaltern individuals as the "interconnectedness of various kinds of agency in an interdependent world."[24] Amanda Herbert argues that female alliances like these were "meaningful cultural constructions," and that many early modern women described their female networks as beneficial, mutually supportive, and positive.[25] Maxine Berg writes that the help women gave each other in sustaining their

[21] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 123.
[22] Earle, *City Full of People*, 122; Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660 – 1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 42; Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 49; Natasha Korda, "Sex, Starch-Houses, and Poking Sticks: Alien Women's Work and the Technologies of Material Culture," in *Early Modern Women*, no. 5 (2010), 202.
[23] Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660 – 1800* (London: MacMillan Press, 1997), 3-4.
[24] Marcy Norton, "Subaltern Technologies and Early Modernity," *Colonial Latin American Review* 26, no. 1 (2017): 18.
[25] Amanda Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 2-4, 13.

households and providing familial care formed "strong and vital community bonds."[26] These alliances were constantly shifting and being negotiated by women in diverse ways as their life circumstances changed.

Many women who engaged in laundry labour, regardless of their level of economic security or success, were able to find communal support in collective networks.[27] An independent laundress with employees and access to capital was unlikely to be without some sort of familial or communal ties, upon whom she might call for support when needed.[28] For economically vulnerable women who lived "on the borders of prosperity," female alliances could be essential.[29] This was especially true for women who did not marry, or whose marriages ended because of death or desertion. Their lives literally depended on their collective female networks, an important makeshift for women eking out a means to survive.[30] Even so, laundry work could also be solitary work; there were women who found themselves friendless or without family ties, unable to obtain or maintain a supportive connection with other women, which only augmented the challenges they faced.

The lives and connections of female laundry workers were shaped and defined by the space within which they laboured.[31] For many of them, washing, scrubbing, and drying were done predominantly outside, either in the yard adjacent to one's dwelling, close to the village pump, or down at the nearest stream or river.[32] Laundry location and space depended primarily on access to clean water, the availability and ownership of equipment, and whose laundry was

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[26] Maxine Berg, *Age of Manufactures*, 1st ed., 165.
[27] Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 16.
[28] Christine Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen in Eighteenth-Century England, in *Women and Urban Life: On the Town* (London: Routledge, 2016), 95.
[29] Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 7.
[30] Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 19; Lynn Mackay, "Why They Stole: Women in the Old Bailey 1779 – 1789," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1999): 630.
[31] Flather, *Gender and Space*, 79-80.
[32] Ibid., 77-78; Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 86; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 386.

being washed. This is illustrated by the painting in Figure 2.2, which shows washerwomen with their basket full of men's linen shirts; these women located their laundry work in close proximity to both the military encampment, by whom they were employed, and the nearest running stream. Their moveable drying lines were simply ropes tied to adjacent trees.

Figure 2.2. *The Camp Laundry*, 1782. Published by Sayer & Bennett. 2010,7081.868. The British Museum, London.

Laundry work was also done inside. One-room dwellings, kitchens, laundry rooms, and washhouses were indoor spaces that were relegated to or claimed by women, for the purposes of

female work.[33] While some domestic manuals idealized female domestic labour in kitchens and washhouses as harmonious and productive, Amanda Herbert argues that these female "workrooms" could be difficult to negotiate. They were often "crowded and cacophonous. They were filled with smells, smoke, and steam … [and yet] women's work often necessitated female collaboration."[34]

As the century progressed, some inventory records suggest an increasing separation of space for laundry work in more affluent households, and in some cases separate out-buildings such as washhouses were used.[35] Many of the grander residences had laundry rooms designated for starching and ironing as well as drying rooms. For most households, laundry work was done both indoors and outside. Wash and bucking tubs were set up on benches, chairs or tables for soaking and scrubbing, with a fire nearby for heating water. Clothes and household linens were wrung out using hooks or poles, and linens were spread out to dry in the sun on the grass, hedgerows, and washing lines.[36] Scenes of drying laundry dotted the eighteenth-century visual landscape everywhere, from the humblest abode, like this painting of a halfway house in Figure 2.3, to the grandest settings, such as outside a royal chapel, as depicted in this engraving of St. Georges Chapel at Windsor in Figure 2.4.

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[33] Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 2; North, *Sweet and Clean, 234;* Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 386.
[34] Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 81.
[35] North, *Sweet and Clean, 212-213, 229.*
[36] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 368; Note: it is no surprise that *Sunlight*, introduced in 1884, was one of the first branded, commercially available laundry detergents in Britain and is still sold today.

Figure 2.3. *Halfway House, Sadler Wells*, 1780. Paul Sandby (1731-1809). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Figure 2.4. *North West View of St. Georges Chapel at Windsor*, 1777. William Watts (1752-1851), after Paul Sandby (1731-1809). 1904,0819.966.39. The British Museum, London.

Washerwomen often described their work as either "going out a washing" or "taking in washing," and in some cases both, depending on their circumstance.[37] A woman might 'take in' someone else's laundry for payment, doing the washing in her own home with her own soap and washtub. This practice was very common and best suited for supplemental income, like the farmwife who spent her days haying, gardening, and baking, but as the commissioner's report on the Poor Law attested, "… would also have earned by her needle and washtub."[38] 'Taking in washing' was one of the few employment options for poor and middling women who suddenly found themselves in a financial crisis, as it could be taken up without delay or the need to learn new skills. Other women 'went out washing', hired as day labourers in households that could afford to pay for laundry labour. Catherine Duffin was employed "washing in the house of Sarah Henchman," but lived with her tailor-husband in her own home.[39] Both of these working arrangements seem to be equally prevalent, depending on household incomes and access to clean water and washing equipment.[40] Some laundry workers, usually single girls, worked as full-time, live-in laundry-maids in households that hired other domestic servants. In the 1720s, a young girl being considered for domestic service told her prospective employer, "if you wash at home, you should have a laundry-maid," making her opinion clear that laundry labour was too much additional work for a general housemaid to take on.[41]

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[37] Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 425 – 427; North, *Sweet and Clean,* 209, 234.
[38] George, *London Life*, 171; Sanderson, *Women and Work*, 136, 140; *Report from Commissioners on the Poor Law* (P.P. 1834, xxviii), 269, quoted in Sarah Horrell and Jane Humphries, "Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male-Breadwinner Family, 1790 – 1865," in *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650 – 1914*, ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), 180.
[39] Quoted in Flather, *Gender and Space*, 89.
[40] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 366.
[41] Earle, *City Full of People*, 126.

Whether laundry work was solitary or communal was often determined by the size and location of the physical space. Some historians argue that laundry labour became less communal as the century progressed, with washing done less in shared spaces at local streams or village pumps with other female neighbours, "collective, noisy and jolly," and instead, more prevalent in private kitchens or washhouses, "familial and domestic, alchemical and silent."[42] However, the sociability of laundry work was also determined by the quantity of linens being washed and how often the washing took place. The quantity of work for a chambermaid washing a few pieces of personal body linen was quite different than the weekly or monthly washing of linens for an entire household, or the seasonal 'great wash' of all the household linens for a larger home or estate. Amanda Flather argues that the heavy physical labour required was generally too much for one person, and so by necessity laundry work remained a communal task for many women.[43]

Relationships: Co-operative and Hierarchical

Female laundry labour was often co-operative and collaborative. The women who 'went out a washing,' could work together for the same employer or alongside each other but independently. Households could hire washerwomen to do the regular washing, or they could hire additional labourers to assist the housewife or full-time servants as needed with extra or seasonal laundry. In 1765, Revd. William Cole of Blecheley hired both Mary Phillips and Catherine Gifford to help his servants with the washing and ironing.[44] Washerwomen such as Mary Lay, the wife of a seaman, paid a penny a day in rent to James Vardy who ran a common

[42] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 382; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 386.
[43] Flather, *Gender and Space*, 79-80.
[44] Hill, *Servants*, 176-77.

washhouse in Northumberland in the 1780s.[45] This was similar to a rinsing house that operated in the 1770s, near Whitby on the coast.[46] Washerwomen like these worked independently but together in shared spaces.

Women could pay other women to help them with their own laundry, working co-operatively. For women charged with keeping households and people clean the demands on their time fluctuated in times of prosperity and crisis, life and death.[47] For those in the middling ranks and elite society, domestic servants were seen as essential in maintaining their households. According to Lorna Weatherill, "they were not a luxury or a form of conspicuous consumption; they were a fundamental part of domestic life."[48] There were times when women got paid to do laundry work, and other times when women – sometimes the very same women – paid others to do their washing, "as necessity demanded or opportunity afforded."[49] Because washing was so time consuming and physically arduous, laundry was often the first housekeeping chore a woman would pay someone else to do, particularly for urban households.[50] Dorothy George writes that, "it is indeed true that among Londoners we have to go very far down the social scale to find the woman who did not employ some other woman or [girl] to help her in washing or scouring."[51] Housewives and daughters could perform other chores or assist with the laundry while servant girls and washerwomen did the dirtiest and more onerous laundry tasks.[52] William Stout of

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[45] John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 82.
[46] Styles, *Dress of the People,* 82, footnote 65.
[47] Mary Prior, "Women and the Urban Economy: Oxford 1500-1800," in *Women in English Society: 1500 – 1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London: Metheun, 1985), 96; Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, 8.
[48] Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 139.
[49] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 114.
[50] Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour,* 151; Flather, *Gender and Space*, 79.
[51] George, *London Life,* 172.
[52] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, 35.

Lancaster had his sister Ellin keep house for him for much of his life: "She did it without a servant but got one to wash [launder] and dress the house once a week."[53]

Busy housewives also paid for laundry and other domestic labour in order to make themselves more available for income-generating labour or other economic opportunities. Families running their own businesses could routinely employ washerwomen or hire young girls on a casual basis to do miscellaneous laundry work like carrying water or tending fires.[54] Women could generally make more money doing other kinds of paid labour, including spinning, and so if possible would pay to have their laundry done by someone else.[55] In 1747, Betty Pillans, an Edinburgh milliner who trimmed hats and starched caps for her customers, sent her own linens out to a washerwoman.[56] Mary Hardy, who ran a successful farm and brewery with her husband in Norfolk in the latter part of the century, took an active role in the farm work, along with raising children and household management.[57] One daily entry in her diary reads: "Brew'd. Killed 4 piggs, sowd 3 sacks of Barly, stick'd some pease in Garden … Began to make cheese."[58] She also records in her diary that she paid other women to do the laundry. On 29 November 1773, she wrote: "men cleansd and maids washed,' and in March 1777 she records hiring nine women, most likely wives of local farm labourers, to assist the maids with the seasonal 'great wash.'[59] There were some elite women whose affluence afforded them the luxury of paying for all the domestic labour in their households. Even so, as women, it was their responsibility to oversee the timeliness and quality of the laundry work.

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[53] Quoted in Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 139.
[54] Hill, *Servants*, 253.
[55] Flather, *Gender and Space*, 82.
[56] Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work*, 140.
[57] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 29.
[58] *Mary Hardy's Diary,* with an Introduction by B. Cozens-Hardy, Norfolk Record Society, vol. xxxvii (1968), 1,2,5,6,15,6,34, quoted in Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 28.
[59] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics, 29.*

For all these women engaged in laundry labour, including those who hired other women, their interconnected and sometimes hierarchical relationships shifted and evolved. Over the course of a lifetime, a woman could find herself in any or all these laundry-specific roles. A laundry-maid could become a mistress, and a comfortable middling housewife could suddenly find herself a poor widow struggling to survive. Amanda Herbert argues that "it is artificial to separate entirely the lives of laboring, middling and aristocratic women … Higher-status women were at times dismissive of and hostile towards servants and poor women, but they were not necessarily estranged from the lower-status individuals who surrounded and served them … women who supplied milk … who did laundry, or who worked in kitchens and sculleries."[60] Herbert further contends that "very frequently early modern women of higher and lower status forged complex work relationships with one another, negotiating and managing their differences."[61]

While these negotiated relationships between women as both laundry labourers and employers could be collaborative, they could also be contentious.[62] Laura Gowing states that early modern Britain was not always "a world in which all-female environments were necessarily associated with support and validation."[63] These multifarious relationships could be complicated by tension stemming from gendered hierarchies of power between employer and employee, and the ability to exercise agency within those relationships. As discussed earlier, both laundry work and laundry workers were considered lower status, and reinforcing unequal status between two parties could foster resentment from both sides.[64] Bridget Hill suggests that

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[60] Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 8.
[61] Ibid., 80.
[62] Christine Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen," 90; Herbert, *Female Alliances*, 107.
[63] Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 150.
[64] Earle, *City Full of People*, 126; Weatherill, 139.

this was a "paradoxical situation of employer's dependence on employees … the conflict between wishing to distance themselves from the lower orders while increasingly relying on them."[65] Marcy Norton suggests that this entire period of early modernity was "marked by elite … dependence upon subaltern technologies and their 'disavowal' of this dependence."[66] The stanza immediately following the excerpt from Mary Collier's poem quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1 hints at this tension between washerwoman and mistress:

> The Washing is not all we have to do:
> We oft change Work for Work as well as you.
> Our mistress of her Pewter doth complain
> And 'tis our part to make it clean again.
> This work, tho very hard and tiresome too,
> Is not the worst we hapless Females do.[67]

Deborah Simonton argues that the middling sort viewed certain kinds of work, like laundry, as more suitable for the labouring poor. Typifying appropriate labour based on place in the social hierarchy established a "boundary between working women and leisured genteel females" that the middling sort was eager to maintain.[68] In 1722, John Essex accused young and fashionable ladies of thinking laundry and other domestic work was "too mean and insignificant for Persons of their Quality" and only "fit for Women of Inferior Rank and Condition."[69] Hannah Woolley, a middling, genteel female, included these final instructions for the lower-status laundry-maid in her 1729 domestic manual, *The Compleat Servant-Maid:* "Be submissive to your superiors, courteous to your Equals, friendly to your inferiors, and loving to all: And by

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[65] Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 131.
[66] Norton, "Subaltern Technologies," 20.
[67] Mary Collier, *Poems, on several occasions, by Mary Collier, Author Of the Washerwoman's Labour, With some remarks on her life* (Winchester: Mary Ayres, 1762), 14.
[68] Deborah Simonton, "Women and Education," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700 – 1850, An Introduction,* eds. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005), 40.
[69] John Essex, *The Young Ladies Conduct: or, Rules for Education under several heads; with instructions upon dress, both before and after marriage. And advice to young wives* (London: published by J. Brotherton, 1722), xxxiv-xxxv.

doing as you are here directed, you will have the Esteem, Credit, and Reputation of a compleat Laundry-Maid."[70] The gendering of laundry knowledge and labour across all levels of society deeply informed the intersecting and sometimes competing relationships of women, revealing the complexities of gender politics.

Life Cycles and Laundry Labour

A woman's occupational activity and status were profoundly influenced by her familial relationships and life cycle changes.[71] The place in a female's life cycle – daughter, single woman, wife, mother, or widow – determined her suitability and availability for different kinds of labour.[72] Job descriptions could reflect both age and marital status. For example, unmarried young women were called maids, while the job title 'maid' was universally used for an unmarried, female servant.[73] The occupational titles of a laundry worker could differentiate the type or technical expertise of the work, but more often signaled a life stage. Laundry-maids were almost always girls or unmarried young women, whereas laundresses were usually more established single women, although they could be married. Washerwomen, who made up the majority of the laundry labour force, were older women; they were sometimes married, but very often single or widowed. In eighteenth-century London, laundry work was most common amongst women over the age of fifty.[74]

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[70] Hannah Woolley, *The Compleat Servant-Maid* (1729), 16.
[71] Beverly Lemire, *The Business of Everyday Life – Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England, c.1600 – 1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 22; Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen," 94; Evans, *Unfortunate Objects*, 29; Hill, *Servants*, 17.
[72] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, 3, 60.
[73] Ibid., 31.
[74] L. Schwartz, "Occupations and Incomes in Late Eighteenth-Century East London," *East London Papers: A Journal of History, Social Studies and the Arts* 14, no. 2, (December 1972): 46, and Peter Earle, "The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Economic History* Review, 2nd series, XLII, no. 3 (1989), 343, both cited in Evans, *Unfortunate Objects,* 29.

Girls participated in laundry labour from a very young age. As soon as they were old enough, they were taught to make their own beds, tend fires, and fold the clean laundry from off the wash line.[75] As they got older, they could be hired on a casual basis by neighbours or washerwomen to do similar tasks. A teenager or young adult woman could go into full-time domestic service, either as a generalist housemaid who did laundry or as a specialist laundry-maid in a more affluent household. Impoverished young women who had apprenticeships paid by the local poor law authority typically apprenticed in housewifery, enabling them to obtain gainful employment.[76] For single adult women with their own financial means – whether they were not yet married or would never marry – there were limited possibilities for economic independence as laundresses owning their own businesses, either independently, or more likely, in a co-operative partnership with family members or other women.[77]

If women married, and most did, many also became mothers, spending much of their middle years pregnant, nursing, and caring for children.[78] This life cycle stage limited a woman's options for earning income and increased the workload of housekeeping chores, especially washing.[79] Women who could afford to do so paid other women to do their laundry. John Styles writes that "a surprising number of plebian households paid to have their linen washed, including even the households of labourers … arrangements like these may have been temporary, occasioned by ill health, pregnancy, or the demands of looking after small children,

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[75] Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 387.
[76] Keith Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change & Agrarian England 1660 – 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 296.
[77] Maxine Berg, "What Difference did Women's Work Make to the Industrial Revolution," in *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650 – 1914*, ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), 167-68.
[78] Tanya Evans, "Women, Marriage and the Family," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700 – 1850, An Introduction,* eds. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005), 70.
[79] Richard Connors, "Poor Women, the Parish and the Politics of Poverty," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700 – 1850, An Introduction,* eds. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005), 136; John Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 73.

but they were common."[80] For those who could not afford hired help, daughters, spinster aunts, and widowed grandmothers were enlisted. Poor mothers who needed to earn income for their family's survival had limited opportunities to do so. Taking in other people's washing was a readily accessible option, as discussed earlier, affording them a way to integrate their domestic chores with paid employment.[81] Poor, single mothers were the most economically vulnerable. For these women, poorly paid part-time laundry labour was not enough to sustain them and their children. [82] For example, Jean Comb was a gardener's widow living in Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century with five children. In dire financial need after the death of her husband, and as a last resort, she asked that her children be placed in an orphan hospital for their survival. She stated in her petition that "she had got her living by 'spinning, washing, dressing and other such work' which 'with all her possible industry' would not afford the food and clothing really necessary for her family without the help of people who knew her husband."[83]

For many women, especially widows and spinsters, growing old brought increased economic insecurity. Single women over fifty were the "most penurious of the labouring poor."[84] As women aged, their employment opportunities diminished, and so did their wages.[85] Peter Earle observes in his landmark study of female labour in early modern London that "charring [housecleaning], washing, nursing, and hawking tended to be the preserve of older women whose declining eyesight and arthritic fingers prevented them from maintaining themselves 'by their needle.'"[86] Alexandra Shepard likewise found in the witness statements in

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[80] Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 81-2.
[81] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, 44.
[82] Connors, "Poor women," 136.
[83] Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work*, 164.
[84] Hill, *Women Alone*, 255.
[85] Hill, *Servants*, 96.
[86] Earle, "The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," in *Women's Work: The English Experience 1650 – 1914*, ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), 136.

church court records that more widows worked in laundry and charring than single and married women, who made and mended clothing.[87] In the second half of the eighteenth century, the industrialization of the spinning industry gradually put many women out of work, and those who suffered most were older women who had spent their entire lives depending on income from spinning.[88] These older, often widowed women were limited by the compounding effects of marginalization that stemmed from sexist and ageist societal norms. These downward social forces exerted upon eighteenth-century washerwomen both contributed to and exacerbated their economic vulnerability and physically precarious lives.[89]

In his autobiography, London reformer Francis Place describes the circumstances which pushed his aged mother Mary Gray (never mentioned by name) into laundry labour at nearly sixty years of age.[90] During the later years of his parents' marriage, his father's income was inadequate to pay for the family's necessities of life. Francis Place writes that in March 1791, his mother urged her husband "to let her take a shop and deal in anything she could, she was clever and active … and doubted not that she should be able to maintain the family."[91] He refused to give her permission to open a shop and consequently stymied her already limited options to earn an income. To make matters worse, his father ended up losing almost all their money on lottery tickets which had 'drawn blanks.'[92] Francis Place writes that "no human being can conceive the distress of my poor mother, plunged as she and the rest of the family were all at

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[87] Alexandra Shepard, "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy," *History Workshop Journal* 79 (2015): 11.
[88] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 63.
[89] Ibid., 255; Earle, *City Full of People*, 120; Note: "sexism" was first used in 1866, and "ageism" in 1969. OED Online. December 2020. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/Entry/3840?redirectedFrom=ageism (accessed 18 February 2021).
[90] Note: his mother's name is cited in, William Thomas, "Place, Francis (1771-1854), Radical and Chronicler." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* 23 Sep. 2004; (accessed 28 May 2021).
[91] Mary Thale, *The Autobiography of Francis Place 1771-1854* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 97.
[92] Thale, *Autobiography of Francis Place,* 98.

once into what for a moment seemed irremediable poverty and misery."[93] What follows is a story that could be told about scores of economically vulnerable, older women throughout England:

> She soon recovered from her sorrow to a considerable extent and made up her mind to her circumstances. Without saying a word to my father lest he should oppose some obstacle to her intention she went into the neighbourhood she had left, told her tale to some of the housekeepers, and shewed the necessity there was for her doing something by which to procure the means of maintaining her family, and requested them to give her their cloaths to wash which they did not usually wash at home, they all instantly complied with her request and regretting her condition gave her their cloaths to wash and thus when nearly sixty years of age she became a washer-woman. … Not at all ashamed of honestly earning her living as she considered it her duty to her family to do [and] she used to bring home large bundles of cloaths upon her head and take them back again in the same way. Often did she labour till twelve o clock at night, and rise again at four in the morning to pursue her occupation.[94]

Francis Place later writes that after his father died, "my poor mother was almost worn out by attending to him and her business which with all her efforts hardly produced them food."[95]

Life Cycles and Bodily Care

The connection between gendered laundry labour and life cycle stages was also manifested in the laundered linens themselves. These material objects had functional use and also symbolic value marking life cycle events and transitions.[96] Lorna Weatherill argues that the stages of life had tremendous influence on consumption patterns and behaviour in the eighteenth century, which included clothing and household linens.[97] Childbed linens, swaddling linens, churching handkerchiefs, diapers or 'clouts', house linens, and deathbed linens were all forms of

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[93] Thale, *Autobiography of Francis Place,* 98.
[94] Ibid., 98 – 99.
[95] Ibid., 121.
[96] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 28.
[97] Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, xv.

"body linen" employed in what Kathleen Brown calls "body work."[98] Alice Dolan puts it succinctly: "Linen was the fabric of life."[99] The functional dependency on these life cycle linens for comfort, cleanliness, and protection was equally yoked with the symbolic role these material objects played marking life's "key transitional moments."[100]

One of the life cycle events most intimately linked with gendered laundry labour was the birth of and caring for a new baby. Tilly and Scott observe: "for it was she who bore and nurtured children, she who clothed and cared for them."[101] Following a successful birth, the new mother was presented her newborn only after it was swaddled in clean white linen bands. This functional and symbolic act signalled to all the females – and it was only ever females – assembled in the birthing room the safe arrival of a healthy baby.[102] The end of the new mother's month long 'lying-in' period was marked by the ecclesiastical rite of churching.[103] During this public ceremony, which included prayers of thanksgiving and blessings of purification for the new mother, some women wore veils of white linen on their heads symbolizing purity and humble devotion.[104] These linen objects which marked and celebrated the beginning of a new life were not only employed by women, they were laundered and kept clean by women.

Caring for babies and children as well as the ill and afflicted was ascribed to females, in tandem, of course, with the accompanying laundry labour needed to wash the copious piles of

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[98] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 5; North, *Sweet and Clean, 118.*
[99] Alice Claire Dolan, "The Fabric of Life: Linen and Life Cycle in England, 1678-1810" (PhD diss., University of Hertfordshire, 2016), 20, https://doi.org/10.18745/th.17196.
[100] Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (October 2005): 1019.
[101] Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, 56.
[102] Adrian Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth and its Interpretation," *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England,* ed. Valerie Fildes (London: Routledge, 1990), 75; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 84.
[103] Ibid., 78.
[104] Wilson, "Ceremony of Childbirth," 78; Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 16.

soiled linens which ensued from these caregiving responsibilities.[105] It was very common to hire a washerwoman following childbirth and for some, wet nurses, to help bear the burden of laundering diapers, or 'clouts' and other clothing.[106] Susan North's extensive research of domestic manuals confirms that the regular and frequent changing of babies' linens was practiced throughout the early modern period, and universally understood to be done by females.[107] In Hannah Woolley's *The compleat servant-maid*, published in 1729, she offers instruction for the wet nurse or other female charged with the responsibility of caring for the newborn:

> She is to keep it sweet and clean, and not to let it lie in its wet or foul Clouts, which she is to Wash and Dry, if she has no body to do it for her; and therefore she must not be stinted in her Number, but have plenty of them, so that she may have some always in readiness.[108]

In *Aristotle's Compleat and Experienc'd Midwife*, with numerous editions published between 1700 and 1782, the male author reinforces the universally accepted gendered role of laundry in childcare. "As to keeping [the baby] cleanly, she must be a sorry Nurse that needs to be taught how to do it; for if she lets it but have dry, clean, and warm Beds and Clouts, as often and as soon as it has foul'd and wet them … it will be sufficient."[109] Susan North explains that "washing and clean linen were … habits begun in infancy by mothers or by the child's wet nurse. From the moment of birth, children learned not only the physical sensation of clean skin and linen, but also the habits of cleanliness for a lifetime."[110] Henceforth, the gendering of laundry

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[105] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 37; Lemire*, Fashion's Favourite*, 107.
[106] Weatherill, *Consumer Behavior*, 140-42.
[107] North, *Sweet and Clean, 85*.
[108] Hannah Woolley, *The Compleat servant-maid: or, the young maiden's and family's daily companion* (London, 1729), 7.
[109] William Salmon, *Aristotle's Compleat and Experienc'd Midwife,* 11th ed. (1766), 104.
[110] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 91.

labour was also learned and reinforced as each new life cycle began. Both laundry labour and soiled linens were the exclusive domain of women beginning at birth.[111]

Illness and disease were an inevitable part of the ebb and flow of life in early modern England. So too was the laundry labour that resulted from the generally held opinion that clothing and bedding should be shifted, and shifted often, as these textiles were implicated in the transmission of lice, smallpox and other infectious diseases.[112] In 1765 physician Samuel Tissot advised people that "the Linen of a Person in this Disease ought to be often changed."[113] When the sick bed became the death bed, as depicted in Figure 2.5, 'laying out' linens were used specifically for the preparation of the dead body before a burial. Unlike burial shrouds or winding sheets which were buried with the body, the laying out linens were laundered and used again. From swaddling linen bands at birth to laying out linens at death, functional material objects such as these symbolically marked the significant milestone events of life. Like the three women attending to the dying man in Figure 2.5, the labour which kept these common yet meaningful objects white, clean, and freshly laundered was the work of females.

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[111] Note: Except for Sarah Malcolm's bloodied linen, I did not come across anything about laundry and menstrual linens in my research, a vital bodily process of which it was generally frowned upon to talk or write during the eighteenth century. See Magrath, "(Mis)reading the Bloody Body," 229.
[112] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 110.
[113] Samuel Tissot, *Advice to the People in General with Regard to their Health*, trans. By J Kirkpatrick (1765), 350, quoted in North, Sweet and Clean, 92-3.

Figure 2.5. *Cottage interior, deathbed scene,* c.1804-10. William Johnstone White (1780-1844) 1879,0614.769. The British Museum, London.

Laundry as a Technology System

Examining laundry processes and practices as a technological system is critical in understanding the physical and social experience encompassing the lives of female laundry workers.[114] Furthermore, as Marcy Norton argues, "a focus on technology allows scholars to more easily recognize the agency of women."[115] When we examine these technological processes, we reveal "an entangled early modern world" where people in society "were

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[114] Note: 'Technology descends from the ancient Greek *technē.* As Pamela Smith and Pamela Long have each discussed, since at least Aristotle *technē* was used invidiously by elites to refer to 'the lowly knowledge of how to make things or produce effects, practiced by animals, slaves, and craftspeople' and in contrast with prestigious *episteme* of 'learned' men invested in abstractions,' quoted in Norton, "Subaltern Technologies," 25.
[115] Norton, "Subaltern Technologies," 28.

dependent on subaltern actors not only as laborers but also as knowledge producers."[116] While we can study household inventory records listing laundry equipment and supplies and see visual evidence in contemporary art work, few material specimens of laundry tools have survived. This is compounded by the scarcity of personal records documenting the routine and detailed tasks of laundry work; thus, the examination of eighteenth-century laundry processes remains challenging.[117]

We know that laundry work was manual, physical, repetitive, and time-consuming throughout the eighteenth century.[118] The technological development of laundry work was remarkably minimal compared to the industrialization in other sectors that advanced in eighteenth-century England. When it came to laundry, there were not any substantial improvements or labour-saving technologies until well into the nineteenth century.[119] What we need to understand better, as Maxine Berg advocates, is "the extent to which there were 'women's technologies', and the extent to which there was a 'gender bias' in technological development."[120] Anthropologist Francesca Bray has argued that "for [the last] two hundred years Western nations have used technological difference to determine hierarchies."[121] This appears to be most likely the case with gendered laundry labour in the eighteenth century. Although the increasing demand for freshly laundered clothing and clean white starched linen stimulated the improvement of some differentiated laundry skills, the absence of substantial

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[116] Norton, "Subaltern Technologies," 20.
[117] North, *Sweet and Clean, 20.*
[118] Styles, *The Dress of the People*, 80; Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 136-149.
[119] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, xii-xiii; Tilly and Scott, *Women, Work and Family*, 58; Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 30-31.
[120] Berg, *The Age of Manufactures*, 319.
[121] Francesca Bray, "Technics and Civilization in Late Imperial China: An Essay in the Cultural History of Technology," *Osiris,* no. 13 (1998): 13, quoted in Norton, "Subaltern Technologies," 26.

technological advances in laundry labour reinforced and reflected the hierarchical socioeconomic and gender biases embedded in the work.[122]

There is evidence in household manuals and advice books, which proliferated in the eighteenth century, that instructions for laundry processes were common and consistent throughout the century.[123] In 1688, Randle Holme outlined each stage of the laundry process:

> Laundresses Terms of Art
> Sorting. Soaping. Soap Sudds.
> Scalding. Washing.
> Wrenching, or Blorning.
> Booking or Bouking. [bucking]
> Batting, or beating the Cloths to get the Bucking Stuff out.
> Starching. Wringing the Cloaths, to force the Water out.
> Drying. Smoothing or Ironing.
> Hanging up, to Air and Dry thoroughly.
> To Ladder, is beating the Soap and Water together, to make it rise to a
> Froth, which they call Suds.[124]

Linens were sorted by size and colour, and then soaped and scrubbed with some type of detergent. The linens were agitated in hot or boiling water, after which they were beaten or wrung out, bleached, beaten again, starched, wrung out again, dried, and smoothed. By the end of the eighteenth century, beating clothing with a wooden bat or beetle was no longer commonly practiced. Limited technological improvements had been made to assist with hand wringing, and these were available to some.[125] In Hannah Woolley's 1768 edition of *The compleat servant-maid* she adds a note of caution, "where linen is either badly washed, or not properly got-up, it

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[122] Beverly Lemire, "An Education in Comfort: Indian Textiles and the Remaking of English Homes over the Long Eighteenth Century," in *Selling Textiles in the Long Eighteenth Century*, eds. Jon Stobart and Bruno Blondé (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 14.
[123] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 213; Lemire, "An Education in Comfort," 16, 19.
[124] Randle Holme, *Academy of Armory, Book III* (1688), Book III, Chap.3, 98, quoted in North, *Sweet and Clean*, 213.
[125] North, *Sweet and Clean, 213.*

soon wears; and … [one] bad washing does it more hurt than ten times using it."[126] Manuals discussed the finer details of each process, such as how long to presoak linens, how many separate lathers were best, which clothing to wash first when water was scarce, how to spot treat stains, and when to use warm or hot water.[127]

For washerwomen and laundry-maids, a washtub made of wood or an earthenware pot of some sort was indispensable.[128] In addition, metal pots or kettles sometimes called 'coppers,' were used to heat water and boil linens.[129] Washtubs and coppers were not necessarily elaborate, and could be used for other purposes, like cooking or washing bodies.[130] They could be small but were often large, semi-durable, and movable – although in some wealthier households, coppers were built into new kitchens or washhouses.[131] By 1790, *The Ladies' Library: or, Encyclopedia of Female Knowledge* advised that "every family ought to have a copper, if only for reasons of economy 'as it will save almost two-thirds of the coals otherwise consumed.'"[132] Some households had numerous tubs specifically designated for washing clothes. Rinsing tubs appeared in the eighteenth century, demonstrating some increasing specialization in laundry processes.[133] Susan North found that domestic manuals "insisted upon the cleanliness of the laundry utensils: coppers, tubs, irons, etc. – particularly the metal ones whose rust would stain the textiles."[134] For washerwomen without access to a washtub, another option was to take their

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[126] Lemire, "An Education in Comfort," 19.
[127] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 214-15.
[128] Sanderson, *Women and Work*, 138-9.
[129] Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 146.
[130] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 262; Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 151.
[131] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 239-40.
[132] Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 146.
[133] Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 298; North, *Sweet and Clean,* 219.
[134] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 228.

soiled laundry to the nearest water source, either a stream or conduit, and scrub or pound the linens clean against washing-blocks or rocks with wooden bats called beetles.[135]

Effectively laundering linens and other washable clothing required soap, lye made from ashes, or some other alkali-based detergent. There is some evidence that stale urine (a natural source of cleansing ammonia) and dung were used as cleaning agents in the early modern period when soap and lye were not available nor affordable. However, Susan North has determined that this was not as common as once believed, for the concentration of ammonia in urine was too weak to have a cleansing or bleaching effect and was only used by the very poor or in times of scarcity.[136] Lye or 'buckwash,' or simply 'buck,' was the most cost effective and accessible form of detergent. It was made from running water through ashes of organic matter like wood or gorse, kelp, ferns, or threshing straws, but not coal. It produced an alkali salt solution that made grease and oil more soluble in water.[137] Oak ashes produced the strongest lye, while apple tree ashes were the whitest.[138] The practice of collecting, burning, or purchasing ashes was not just for those who could not afford soap. Lye droppers (wooden boxes with holes in the bottom to be fitted over a washtub or buck tub) were used to make the buckwash and were listed in household inventories in all levels of society.[139] This watercolour drawing in Figure 2.6, titled "Washing with Ashes," demonstrates not just the multi-step process of bucking, washing, and rinsing, but also the resulting sociality of laundry that arose from labour-intensive communal work.

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[135] Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 138.
[136] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, 4-5; North, Sweet and Clean, 244-47.
[137] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 220, 247; Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 142.
[138] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, 4. Note: making ash balls for sale was a profitable cottage industry, Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 143.
[139] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, 4; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 220.

Figure 2.6. *Washing with Ashes*, undated. Ibbetson (1759-1817). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Clothes were 'bucked' or bleached by being soaked in lye, which could be "a substitute for, or adjunct to, washing with soap."[140] Even when the use of soap became more widespread as the eighteenth century progressed, there is evidence that bucking was still commonly practiced as a preferred method to whiten linens.[141] In her *Servant's Directory* (1760), Hannah Glasse instructs laundry-maids to use ash when boiling linens, and in 1770 Anne Barker details "the best Method of whitening any Sort of Cloth," beginning with the instructions "first, let your cloth be well bucked, then spread it on the grass."[142] In J.F.'s *The Plain Dealing Linnen-Draper* (1696), a comprehensive consumer's manual detailing the vast array of linens and cottons, the author

[140] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 219.
[141] Ibid., 221-222.
[142] Hannah Glasse, *The Servant's Directory, or House-Keeper's Companion*. (London, 1760), 49; Anne Barker, *The Complete Servant-Maid: or Young Woman's best Companion* (London, 1770?), 23, both cited in North, *Sweet and Clean*, 221-222.

praises a less expensive linen that could be washed as white as the finest available: "It is not extream white at first, yet in a few washings becomes as white as any sort of Holland."[143] Bucking and bleaching linen were essential laundry processes because the degree of whiteness achieved was equal to the degree of cleanliness it signified.[144] A 'bluing' agent, usually in the form of powdered smalt (ground glass containing cobalt), was added to the final rinse water in order to visually counteract any residual greying or yellowing of the linens that could not be washed or bleached out.[145]

Soap, both soft and hard, was made by mixing lye or other alkalis derived from ash with animal or vegetable fats and oils. Soft soap was made with oils and lyes containing potassium carbonate and was semi-liquid or jelly like, and black or dark green in colour. When fish or whale oil was used to make soft soap, the smell was offensive as it retained its rancid odor, "very Nauseous and Unwholesom," at least according to *The Case and Humble Petition of the Hard Cake and White Soap Makers* (1711).[146] Hard, white soap was more expensive than soft soap, and was made from tallow and lyes containing sodium carbonate. This soap was solid at room temperature and could be cut into bars and sold by weight. Both hard and soft soaps were used for laundry, but it was generally agreed that the hard, white soap was best if one could afford it.[147] The high alkalinity of these soaps was preferred as an effective detergent, but unfortunately it was extremely caustic on the hands and arms of female laundry workers, who were sometimes condescendingly referred to in print media as 'red-armed belles.'[148] Soap was expensive,

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[143] J.F. *The merchant's ware-house laid open*, 15.
[144] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 228.
[145] Ibid., 222.
[146] Ibid., 215-16.
[147] Ibid.
[148] *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 20 July 1754, cited in Beverly Lemire, "'Second-Hand Beaux' and 'red-armed Belles': conflict and the creation of fashions in England," *Continuity & Change* 15, no. 3 (2000): 410.

particularly when ashes were in short supply due to increased coal burning.[149] In 1725, Daniel Defoe complained that his maidservants used too much soap because "they wore printed linen, cotton, and other things of that nature, which required frequent washing."[150] Soap was an attractive taxable commodity for the government, along with other inelastic consumer goods like beer, salt, and coffee. This much needed tax revenue was used in large part to fund the colonial wars in America and Britain's global expansion.[151] The political cartoon in Figure 2.7 reflects the public's angry response to Lord North's unpopular increase in the soap tax in 1782. The rhyming caption below the image explains why North is shown soaking in a washtub full of suds:

> For taxing tobacco and soap.
> Some say that Lord North is deserving a rope.
> His Lordship you see he is now in a Tub
> While the Old Woman lathers and gives him a scrub.

I must point out that while this engraving explicitly demonstrates the public sensitivity to the price of soap and its cultural importance, it also exposes negative age and gender biases associated with female laundry workers in eighteenth-century England, along with the questionable company that they keep.

[149] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 247.
[150] Daniel Defoe, *Everybody's Business is Nobody's Business* (1725), 10-11, quoted in Hill, *Servants*, 66.
[151] Margaret Spufford and Susan Mee, *The Clothing of the Common Sort 1570-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 259; Ronald Max Hartwell, "Taxation in England during the Industrial Revolution," *Cato Journal*, 1, no. 129 (1981): 145-46; Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 136.

Figure 2.7. *Lord No—h, in the suds*, 27 March 1782. Published by T. Evans, Oxford Street, London. The Lewis Walpole Library, Farmington, CT.

Access to clean or suitable water was essential for the laundry worker.[152] Raising buckets of water from the well or transporting water from nearby streams or community conduits was "an onerous and everyday task for most women, … a major household chore in its own right."[153] So difficult was the work that some washerwomen subcontracted other women for the singular task of fetching or carrying water.[154] Household manuals are filled with concern and advice about the quality of the water used for washing. Hannah Glasse suggests lining the walls

[152] Flather, *Gender and Space*, 79.
[153] Note: 'And it was nearly always women's work: men rarely fetched water unless they earned their living by doing so,' in Davidson, *A Woman's Work*, 7-8; Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics,* 108.
[154] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 109; Earle, *City Full of People*, 117.

of a well with chalk to minimize dirt. If that didn't work, Anne Barker advises to let the water stand for a few days, to allow the mud to settle.[155] As the eighteenth century progressed, middling and elite new homes in urban locations were equipped with water cisterns connected to piped water sources. This was a major technological advancement for the few who had access, but the supply was intermittent, which thus required careful planning by the laundry-maid.[156] Gathering fuel for fires to heat the water was another time consuming and physical task all on its own, as was managing the fires on wash day to keep the water in coppers and kettles hot.[157]

Laundry Labour and Specialized Skills

Above all, laundry labour was physical, manual labour. It required stamina and endurance, strong arms, hands, backs, and in some cases, strong feet and legs as well.[158] Dirty linens had to be agitated to loosen the dirt, whether by beating, stirring in boiling coppers or scrubbing in washtubs. Women in Scotland were known to trample the laundry in washtubs with their feet, as Edward Burt wrote in 1754, even "in the hardest frosty weather, when their legs are red as Blood with the Cold."[159] Wet linens had to be starched, wrung out by hand or with rudimentary equipment, and then ironed with presses or smoothing or box irons.[160] Laundry had to be air dried, either outside in the sunshine on hedgerows or grass, on stretchers or washing lines, or inside on drying racks in kitchens or any available space.[161] Francis Place wrote of his one room dwelling: "we frequently went to bed … with the wet cloaths hanging up in the

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[155] Barker, *The Complete Servant-Maid,* 41, quoted in North, *Sweet and Clean,* 214.
[156] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 239-240.
[157] Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics*, 114.
[158] Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*, 3.
[159] Edward Burt, *Letters from a gentleman in the north of Scotland to his friend in London; containing the description of a capital town in that northern country …* vol.1 (London, 1754), 52, quoted in Davidson, *A Woman's Work,* 140.
[160] Earle, *Making of the English Middle Class*, 298.
[161] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 219-222; Davidoff and Hall*, Family Fortunes*, 386.

room."[162] All of these steps required the physically strenuous actions of lifting, scrubbing, wringing, bending over, reaching up, hanging, and folding.

Laundry was a time-consuming process that took days to complete. Washerwomen began their work in the very early hours of the morning or the middle of the night, "when bright *Orion* glitters in the Skies."[163] Ann Nichols would arrive at midnight to wash for a master-builder in Hackney in 1753, who wrote, "that is what we call a day and a half's work" when referring to her 18-hour workday.[164] In the eighteenth century, Monday was traditionally the first wash day of the laundry cycle. In some literature, inferences to slovenliness are made about women who started their laundry later in the week, attaching character judgements to the working schedules of female laundry workers.[165] Pre-soaking and first washings were usually done on Monday, followed by bleaching, starching, and drying midweek. The drying depended on the weather, and the hope was that all the ironing was completed by Friday.[166] For the country gentry and those with access to space and equipment, and who were in possession of an ample inventory of linens, washing generally occurred monthly. It could be more frequent, and became so towards the end of the century.[167] The 'small' linens, such as cuffs, collars, handkerchiefs and caps, were often washed separately from the 'great' linens – bed sheets, napkins, shifts and shirts.[168] In the 1740s, Elizabeth Purefoy mentioned that her maid and the washerwoman "wash all but the small linen, & next day she & the washerwoman wash the Buck [meaning larger linens]."[169] Seasonal or 'great' washes occurred during a stretch of good

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[162] Thale, *Autobiography of Francis Place*, 138.
[163] Davidson, *A Woman's Work,* 151-53; Collier, *Poems, On Several Occasions,* 13-14.
[164] George, *London Life,* 207.
[165] Davidson, *A Woman's Work,* 149.
[166] North*, Sweet and Clean,* 213.
[167] Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes,* 386; North, *Sweet and Clean,* 253.
[168] Roche*, Culture of Clothing,* 153.
[169] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 219-220.

weather, usually in the spring, when all the 'great' or household linen could be washed and whitened properly.[170] The laundry cycle repeated itself every Monday, every month and every season, across households and from one generation to another. As Beverly Lemire reminds us, "achieving pristine household linens was a fleeting reward in an unending battle."[171]

Although laundry work did not see substantial technological improvements during the eighteenth century, a hierarchy evolved amongst laundry workers based on increasing knowledge, skills, and expertise. According to Natasha Korda, this conferred "value, meaning, and legitimacy on different categories of work and workers."[172] While Susan North argues that the distinction in status and division of labour amongst laundry workers diminished during the eighteenth century, there is some evidence to the contrary.[173] Madam Johnson distinguishes between laundry-maids and "accomplished" laundresses in her 1770 advice manual.[174] Hannah Glasse acknowledges in her *Servant's Directory* (1760) that " the Landry-maid … knows better than I can teach her, as being always a Person brought up to it from Childhood; for every poor Woman teachers her Children to wash, that's a thing they can't do without. But it certainly must be allowed, that some excel others in that Profession."[175]

The rank-and-file members of the laundry workforce were the washerwomen. So common was their occupation (one not distinguished by any kind of apprenticeship as such) that they were routinely referred to as 'ordinary washerwomen.'[176] The ranking of a laundry-maid was associated with the kind and quality of linens she washed. A late-seventeenth century

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[170] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 253.
[171] Lemire, "Education in Comfort," 26.
[172] Natasha Korda *Labors Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 5; Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 386.
[173] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 230.
[174] *Madam Johnson's present: or, every young woman's companion, in useful and universal knowledge* (Dublin: printed for James Williams, No. 5, Skinner-Row, 1770), 169-170, 175.
[175] Glasse, *The Servant's Directory*, 45.
[176] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 237; Sanderson, *Women and Work,* 139.

manuscript entitled 'A Plan of a Person of Quality's Family' differentiates the duties and level of importance between senior and junior laundry-maids.

> The first is to wash the Lords, Ladies Wearing Linnen all the Laces, heads, Ruffles and all the Small Linnen in Generall. The Second to wash the Wearing Linnen of such Domesticks as are allowed their washing. The Third to Wash all the Great Linnen such as the Table Linnen, Napkins, Towells, Sheets and such like.[177]

Some chambermaids, who always ranked above laundry-maids in domestic service, were given the task of laundering the fine, small or body linen. Madam Johnson clearly differentiates between the higher level of expertise expected of chambermaids and the more common skills required of laundry-maids.[178]

Laundry workers who employed highly technical skills in finishing work such as starching (sometimes referred to as clear starching) and ironing were considered specialists and held in higher regard than laundry-maids or ordinary washerwomen.[179] Immigrant Dutch and Flemish women who settled in England in the seventeenth century brought with them specialized starching skills and technologies, and as Natasha Korda maintains, "transformed the low-status labor of laundering, which had always been and would remain women's work, into a highly skilled and lucrative occupation."[180] When advising on the purchase of 'Bettelies Colconda' linens, J.F. warns that "they be starched by those that make it their profession only to starch."[181] The laundry section of *The Ladies Library* (1790) instructs that effective starching required careful skill and applied knowledge: "Lying too long in the starch, not adding enough blue,

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[177] London Metropolitan Archives, London, Anonymous, 'Plan of a Person of Quality's Family', 1680 – 1700, 4, quoted in North, *Sweet and Clean*, 231, 241.
[178] *Madam Johnson's present,* 169-170, 175.
[179] Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 386-7; Earle, "The Female Labour Market," 132.
[180] Korda, "Sex, Starch-Houses, and Poking Sticks," 206.
[181] J.F. *The merchant's ware-house laid open, or, The plain dealing linnen-draper: shewing how to buy all sorts of linnen and Indian goods, etc.* (London: Printed for John Sprint at the Bell, and Geo. Conyers at the Golden Ring in Little Britain, 1696), 3.

starching them dry, boiling the starch too much, and keeping boiled starch too long before using it" were all mistakes to be avoided.[182] The combined finishing work of starching and ironing was highly valued, as these complementary labours could make white linen look cleaner and fresher for longer.[183] The use of heavy ember-filled box irons, special goffering irons, and poking sticks for ruffled collars and caps required skill and precision.[184] Pleating the sleeves of linen shirts and shifts, like this men's 'medium holland' linen shirt in Figure 2.8, was a practice that began in the later eighteenth century as the sleeves of outerwear such as dresses and coats grew tighter. This would have required skill and dexterity, adding substantial labour to the workload of finishing linens, which of course would have been washed out in the next laundry cycle only to be repeated before every wearing.[185]

Figure 2.8. Man's linen shirt, British, 1740-1780. T.246-1931. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[182] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 228.
[183] Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 386-7.
[184] Ibid.
[185] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 162-3, 232.

When comparing the etched engravings depicting “Miss White, Clear Starcher to the Queen” in Figure 2.9 and “Mrs. Grosvenor, Landry Woman to the Queen” in Figure 2.10, we can see subtle differences which represent the hierarchical strata of laundry labour. Miss White, a single young woman presumably available for full-time employment, would have been highly regarded for her specialist starching skills. In this representation, the position of her body is confidently turned and in full gaze of the viewer down to her apron, as she stands next to a finer earthenware pot. Her neatly coifed hair, her own clean white cap, apron, and kerchief, and especially her double string of pearls tell us that she inhabits a high level of respectability within her station. She proudly displays her work of fine and delicate starched white linen which in turn, when worn by the queen, reaffirms the ranking of the queen’s place in the social hierarchy. Turning to Mrs. Grosvenor who is married, we can see that she is also respectable, as she is clean and neatly presented. However, when compared to Miss White, we see that the angle of her body posture is less prominent and more obscured while leaning over the rustic wooden washtub, still engaged in her labour. Her slightly untidy hair, the simple, inexpensive ribbon worn around her neck, and the fact that she is in the middle of washing a garment not yet clean, all suggest that Mrs. Grosvenor ranks below Miss White in the status of their laundry labour. The physical representations of these two women tell us that while each of their labours is important and gendered female, they are unequally ranked based on specialist skills and the products of their labour.

Figure 2.9 *Miss White, Clear Starcher to the Queen* and **Figure 2.10** *Mrs. Grosvenor Laundry Woman to the Queen*, 1750-1800. Mezzotint engravings, The British Museum, London.

Insured Laundresses and Clear Starchers

For every woman who claimed occupational status as a washerwoman, laundry-maid, laundress, or clear starcher, six times that number would be a more realistic total of women who were actually paid to launder.[186] The magnitude of this female workforce, as well as their pervasive anonymity, make a comprehensive study of their lives and livelihoods seemingly insurmountable. Micro-histories are more manageable. A quantitative analysis of Sun Fire Insurance policies purchased by laundry business proprietors in eighteenth-century London reveals some significant details about a small subset of female laundry workers. An archival

[186] Shepard, "Crediting Women," 100.

search of the Sun Fire Insurance records, located in the London Metropolitan Archives, of the terms ‘*laundress,’ ‘clear starcher,*’ and ‘*washerwoman*’ for the years 1700 – 1800 resulted in 289 insurance policy records, as shown in Table 2.1:

Table 2.1. Sun Fire Insurance Policies for Laundresses, Clear Starchers, and Washerwomen 1700 – 1800.

Sun Fire Insurance Policies 1700 - 1800	1787	1788	1789	1790	1791	1792	1793	1794	1795	1796	1797	1798	1799	1800	**Total**
Insured female: laundress	3	7	1	10	15	9	4	8	3	2	3	4	1		**70**
Insured female: clear starcher	1		6		1	5		4		1		1			**19**
Insured female: washerwoman											1				**1**
Insured female: other property/occupier - laundress			2	1							1		1		**5**
Total independently insured females:															**95**
Co-insured female/male: clear starcher				1											**1**
Insured male: with 'his wife' - laundress	4	10	13	29	24	17	12	22	5	2	6	7	1		**152**
Insured male: with 'his wife' - clear starcher		3	3	1	4	1	1	1				1	1		**16**
Insured male: other property/occupier - laundress	1	2	3	2	3	3		3	1			2	1		**21**
Insured male: other property/occupier - washerwoman							1								**1**
Insured male: other property/occupier - clear starcher				1		1		1							**3**
Total insured males:															**193**
Total:	**9**	**22**	**28**	**45**	**47**	**36**	**18**	**39**	**9**	**5**	**11**	**15**	**5**	**0**	**289**

In the entire eighteenth century, not one laundry proprietor or operator purchased Sun Fire insurance until 1787, and almost half of the policies were clustered between 1789 and 1791. Based on Peter Earle’s findings that it was rare for anyone to insure property or goods less than £300, we can assume that for this short period of time near the end of the century, there was an upsurge in the ownership and operation of laundry businesses which had acquired sufficient capital investment deemed worthy of insuring.[187] The clustering may reflect the increased demand for laundry services, mirroring the growing size of London and the even more dramatic growth in clothing consumption. It could also indicate economic pressures on middling or

[187] Earle, *City Full of People*, 147.

genteel families due to the rising cost of living towards the end of the 1780s.[188] Just over half of the men insured in these policies, whose wives were listed as laundresses or clear starchers, define their own occupation as 'gent' (meaning gentleman). Perhaps a family-run laundry business provided much needed income to pay for the increasingly more expensive necessities of life for some in the middling sort. For every married man listed as the primary insured person, the full entry simply lists his wife as such – 'his wife.' The glaring absence of married women's names from these insurance registers highlights the restrictive economic and legal realm within which married women operated. While they surely were the ones performing and/or supervising the actual laundry labour, by law the marital status of these women prevented them from independent business ownership or co-ownership with their husbands, except in rare cases.

A survey of four major London insurance companies shows that businesses insured by independent women made up about eight per cent of all insured businesses in the 1770s.[189] The data in Table 1 show that roughly one third of the 289 policies for laundry work were purchased directly by independent women, with no male intercessory. This ratio is substantially higher than the eight percent of all female-owned insured businesses, demonstrating that independent laundry proprietorships were more likely to be owned and operated by women compared to most other types of insured businesses.[190] This reaffirms our understanding that laundry labour was more universally gendered female than other feminine enterprises. My attention was drawn to policy holder Margaret Bevan, located at Three Oak Lane in Southwark, who is the only

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[188] Note: the drop off in clustering could also reflect the fact that 'Sun Fire's share of the insurance market increasingly eroded from 1790s,' cited in Nicola Pullin, "Business is Just Life: The Practice, Prescription and Legal Position of Women in Business, 1700-1850" (PhD diss., University of London, 2001), EThOS (uk.bl.ethos.247098).
[189] Pullin, "Business is Just Life," 142.
[190] Note: This was less so the case in the nineteenth century, with the rise of male owned mechanized and commercial laundries. See Malcolmson, *English Laundresses,* Chapter 5, "Mechanization and Social Change."

independently insured washerwoman with Sun Life Insurance in the entire century.[191] For a single woman with an occupation considered to be low-paying, low-status, temporary and intermittent, at a location situated in the poorer part of London, it is noteworthy that Margaret Bevan accumulated sufficient goods and property deemed insurance-worthy, as well as the money to pay for it. This small group of female business owners must be acknowledged for their accomplishments in the face of restrictive economic parameters and social biases; their work was not diminished in any way because it was 'just laundry.' Christine Wiskin rightfully argues that with regards to eighteenth-century female business owners,

> many … may have engaged in typically 'feminine' trades, although not all did. Dismissing those who did as merely exploiting women's domestic expertise is too simplistic. Occupational designations frequently hid complex, prosperous businesses, requiring the proprietress's skillful management of resources and staff.[192]

These ninety-five independent businesswomen – laundresses, clear starchers, and washerwoman Margaret Bevan – exercised what available limited economic agency they had, while operating within a narrow legal and social environment, to establish and run successful businesses.

These insurance policies additionally delineate different types of business partnerships between women and also with men. While the majority of policies are for either a solitary woman or one man and his wife, there are many instances of shared occupancy with other properties insured, and in a few cases, equal business partnerships. On 2 May 1789, shopkeeper Rachael Lee purchased insurance for her property located in Church Passage on Cross Street and listed Miss or Mrs. Broadway as a laundress occupying the same location.[193] On 29 May 1790, James Nash and Thomas Smith purchased separate insurance policies for the same location in

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[191] London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, MS11936/409/665150, Sun Fire Insurance Office Records.
[192] Wiskin, "Urban Businesswomen," 109.
[193] LMA, MS 11936/361/557039.

Fox and Knot Yard on Cow Lane, both listing their wives as laundresses in what was presumably a joint business venture between married couples.[194] On 28 January 1791, laundress Jane Martin purchased her own insurance policy for a property at 21 St John's Lane, Clerkenwell, as did Thomas Guest for the same address, with his wife listed as laundress. On both policies, Mrs. Day, widow, is listed as a third occupier at the same premises.[195] The business arrangement between Jane Martin, Mrs. Guest and Mrs. Day could have been an independent agreement, a collaborative partnership, an employer/employee relationship, or a combination, and in all cases could have included other unnamed washerwomen hired to do the work.

A study of the addresses listed on the insurance policies reveals that laundry proprietorships were evenly distributed across London, although the highest numbers are found in the poorer districts of Southwark and Lambeth. Laundresses and clear starchers located in affluent areas like Mayfair, St. James, and Westminster were situated amongst their genteel clients, wealthy Londoners and parliamentarians residing in suburban townhomes. In other locations, like St. Giles, Drury Lane, Soho and Fleet Street, laundry businesses were located adjacent to and near commercial, legal, and institutional customers. Gentleman Henry Wilkinson and his laundress wife purchased insurance for their business located at 3 Half Moon Alley, just off Bishopsgate Street and right next door to the London Workhouse.[196] William Limbery, a dealer in ropes and rags, insured a property located 'near Deptford Bridge, Church Street, Deptford,' in Greenwich. His wife is listed as 'laundress to Greenwich Hospital.'[197] In Southwark, cordwainer John Arnold and his laundress wife list their property location as

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[194] LMA, MS 11936/369/570055, MS 11936/369/570054.
[195] LMA, MS 11936/375/579339, MS 11936/375/579338.
[196] LMA, MS 11936/370/570487.
[197] LMA, MS 11936/351/539248.

'Thames Street, Maid Lane,' just across the street from the whitening grounds used for bleaching linen.[198] The analysis of these insurance policy records offers a broader contextual understanding about the business of laundry, including partnerships, locations, and customers. And while most of the women listed in these records will always remain nameless, seeing the few who surfaced as businesswomen and laundresses in late eighteenth-century London provides a small glimpse into the limited economic and social opportunities for the many women beneath them who are silent in the historical record.

Concluding Analysis: Female Agency in Laundry Labour

The examination of laundry as a technological system and the study of proprietorships of London laundresses provide insight into the agency of female laundry workers. It is clear that this physically demanding gendered labour was deemed an essential service for the benefit of both genders, all ages, and all levels of society. Considering this, is it possible that women exercised positive agency and chose to be employed in laundry labour? Could they have found purpose or intrinsic reward fulfilling personal needs or desires? It is an idea that needs exploring. As Beverly Lemire observes, "everyday praxes expressed the hopes, beliefs and priorities of ordinary people."[199]

One possible interpretation is that laundry labour could be viewed not simply as 'paid or unpaid work' but also as care for self, kin, and community, an act of service or kindness from which one could derive satisfaction. Susan Himmelweit argues that it is important to ascribe "value to the personal and relational aspects of much domestic activity."[200] Moreover, female

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[198] LMA, MS 11936/361/557659.
[199] Lemire, *Business of Everyday Life,* 2-3.
[200] Susan Himmelweit, "The Discovery of "Unpaid Work": The Social Consequences of the Expansion of 'Work,' *Feminist Economics* 1:2 (1995): 2, quoted in Lemire, *Business of Everyday Life*, 4.

laundry workers may have found personal satisfaction resulting from the finished products of their efforts: a tangible reward to enjoy "the beauty of their creations as with the conditions of that labour," in spite of clean laundry's ephemerality.[201] Laundresses and others who were paid to do laundry labour could have felt fulfillment for contributing financially to their households, or for the fortunate few, even enjoyed financial independence. Garthine Walker has argued "it is widely accepted that women's contributions to their household economies gave them a subjective sense of social identity and self-worth, as well as neighbourhood status, all of which have a relation to honour."[202] Clean white linen was a material manifestation of good housewifery, whether the housewife washed her own linens or not, and whether it was seen on the bodies of her household members or stored and stacked neatly in linen cabinets, or even while still hanging out to dry.[203] An observer passing through an early nineteenth century village in Essex noted that "busy bustling housewives of the town send forth their household linen to be blown about," implying that these women sought approbation and admiration for their domestic labours by hanging their clean white laundry out to dry, quite visible to all who passed by.[204]

Unfortunately, we have little evidence to more confidently ascertain the depth, scope, and realization of positive agency found in female laundry labour.[205] For now, it is more certain that for the overwhelming majority of women and girls engaged in laundry work, their ability to exercise personal positive agency was severely limited. Caroline Davidson writes that "the one striking feature of laundry that set it apart from the rest of housework was the tremendous

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[201] Auslander, *Beyond Words,* 1021.
[202] Garthine Walker, "Expanding the Boundaries of Female Honour in Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* no. 6 (1996): 236, quoted in Pamela Sharpe, *Women's Work – The English Experience 1650 – 1914* (London: Arnold, 1998), 8.
[203] Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution – Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy 1650 to the Present,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 135; Whittle and Griffiths, *Consumer and Gender,* 152.
[204] John Player, *Sketches of Saffron Walden and Its Vicinity* (Saffron Weldon, 1845), 18, quoted in Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes,* 386.
[205] Hill, *Servants,* 3.

amount of antipathy it aroused."[206] Susan North determined that "washing appears to have been the first chore that women paid someone else to do when they had the resources and their last resort for income when all attempts to find other work failed."[207] Ellen Taylor, a domestic servant and daughter of 'an indigent cottager' wrote a short poem titled "Written by the Barrow side, where she was sent to wash Linen". The following excerpt from this poem reveals the angst and longing surely felt by many washerwomen and laundry-maids whose personal agency to opt out of laundry work and choose other pursuits was not possible:

> Thy banks, O Barrow, sure must be
> Thy Muses' choicest haunt,
> Else why so pleasing thus to me,
> Else why my soul enchant?
>
> To view thy dimpled surface here,
> Fond fancy bids me stay;
> But Servitude, with brow austere,
> Commands me straight away.
> …
>
> Thrice happy she, condemned to move
> Beneath the servile weight,
> Whose thoughts ne'er soar one inch above
> The standard of her fate.
>
> But far more happy is the soul,
> Who feels the pleasing sense;
> And can indulge without control
> Each thought that flows from thence.[208]

Laundry labour was universally female labour. The low status of laundry work was both reflected in and reinforced by the marginalized status of females in society and the gendered bias of limited technological advances made within the profession. Laundry work was generally

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[206] Davidson, *A Woman's Work,* 150.
[207] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 237.
[208] Ellen Taylor, quoted in *Eighteenth-century Women Poets,* ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 455-56.

social by necessity and demonstrated both collaborative connections and hierarchical relationships. While laundry work may have been a labour of care in which women found purpose and chose to engage, it is more evident that the labour itself was undesirable because it was so physically demanding. It was an employment choice taken when few other options were available, and often the first domestic chore that women paid other women to perform. The factors which pushed women into laundry labour – gender, economic circumstances, social networks, life cycle stages, and technical knowledge – were the factors that most often restricted the social and occupational agency with which women could exercise.

Chapter 3

The Transmission of Societal Values through Female Laundry Labour

She is always clean without,
because she is always pure within. [1]

Clothing and other forms of tangible, material culture express intangible ideas and values such as social estimation, preference, bias, and conformity.[2] The arduous work of laundry performed by an army of laundry-maids and washerwomen transmitted societal values through the materiality and symbolism of the product of their labours: namely, clean white linen. Eighteenth-century England saw the expansion and entrenchment of social codes which were manifested through manners and dress. Notions of respectability, social rank, and gentility were demonstrated and validated through the clothing people wore and the manner in which they behaved. The degree of cleanliness and whiteness achieved and maintained in visible linen clothing came to be employed as a preeminent sartorial marker used to judge the degree of one's respectability and status. In this chapter I will consider the significance of clean white linen in a wider cultural context, as well as part of gendered norms and practices in England. This will intersect with my findings from the study of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century linens, recently acquired by the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection in the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta.[3] At first glance these white linen and cotton

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[1] William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) (2009), 72-3, quoted in Susan North, *Sweet and Clean? Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 36.
[2] Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'Ancien Regime'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4-5, 46; Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800* (London: MacMillan, 1997), 6; John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 16; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 5.
[3] https://clothingtextiles.ualberta.ca

garments (yellowed with time) can be viewed as a collection or 'family' of similar objects. Further exploration of their unique attributes leads us to a more fulsome and tangible understanding regarding the recurring routines of female laundry labour that were required to keep linens both clean and white.

Moreover, clean white linen came to be a powerfully symbolic material expression which affirmed the morality and virtue of one's character, and even one's soul. Paradoxically, marginalized female laundry workers were often associated with unvirtuous characters and immoral behaviours, including theft, itinerant begging, and sexual improprieties. These were in large part rooted in their gendered economic insecurity, as well as the imbalance of power expressed through societal priorities and privileges within which female laundry workers had no choice but to live and work.

Meanings of Clean White Linen

In the eighteenth century, one's respectability and social status, financial success, affiliations, and character were estimated based on manners, clothing, and the "medium of the body," which Daniel Roche termed, "the culture of appearances."[4] Up until the early seventeenth century, sumptuary and clothing laws in England regulated and differentiated the types and styles of dress that were both allowed and prohibited by different ranks of society.[5]

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[4] Amanda Flather, *Gender and Space in Early Modern England*, 24; Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 6, 366; Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*: *Worth, Status and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2; Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 6; Styles, *Dress of the People,* 11*;* Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 3; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 5; George Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 72; Robert DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5.
[5] Ulinka Rublack & Giorgio Riello, eds. *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c.1200-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1,4; Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1669-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 161.

Long after these sartorial statutes were removed, the cultural meanings of what people wore were "maintained by force of public opinion and the weight of ritual and habit."[6] Clothing was a tangible, visible marker that established and enforced social boundaries and distinctions. What clothing one wore, as well as how and when it was worn, were all quick and reliable ways to measure the social status of the familiar and unfamiliar.[7] The eighteenth-century statesman Lord Chesterfield remarked that "dress is a very foolish thing; and yet it is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed, according to his rank and way of life."[8] Clothing was considered "the body's body" and as such, the state of a person's inward character could supposedly be reflected by their outward dress.[9] Of course, the estimation of status and character through clothing was not always foolproof. As Beverly Lemire reminds us, sometimes "appropriate dress affirmed the reputable and disguised the rogue."[10]

While the quality, style, and even quantity of one's wardrobe communicated rank and respectability, Roche argues that it was the condition and upkeep of clothing that most expressed and confirmed status.[11] Kathleen Brown notes that it was the cleanliness of linen shirts and shifts that "distinguished the wearer as much as the quality of the weave."[12] Tim Hitchcock writes that, "clean linen, washed once a week, was the absolute marker of decency and a necessary prerequisite for making the complex system of clothing worn in the eighteenth century work properly."[13] In a 1711 edition of *The Spectator*, a London daily periodical, an English gentleman was described as unbuttoning several buttons of his silk waistcoat "to let us see that

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[6] Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 12, 15.
[7] Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 161.
[8] Quoted in Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton, "Visible Bodies: Power, Subordination and Identity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History* 39, No. 1 (2005): 41.
[9] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 6.
[10] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 3.
[11] Roche, *Culture of Clothing,* 366.
[12] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 109.
[13] Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Hambledon, 2004), 98-9.

he had a clean shirt on which was ruffled down to his middle."[14] The corollary was that dirty, ragged linen signalled a state of poverty and humility, which reinforced the notion that being poor was an identity as much as an economic circumstance.[15] These sartorial associations were perpetuated in part through prescriptive and popular literature, such as the widely circulated periodical *The Gentleman's Library.*[16] One anonymous author wrote in 1715, "Nothing is more Obvious [odious?] than to see Men of known Wealth and Ability shrunk out of their proper Character, and shuffling about the Town, with a Weather beaten Wig, a Threadbare Coat, darn'd Stockings, and a dirty Shirt."[17] Clean and well-kept clothing demonstrated personal propriety but also respect and polite consideration for one's associates, which reaffirmed acceptance of place within one's rank. In 1730, English nonconformist minister Isaac Watts wrote that "a degree of cleanliness [is as] necessary to my own health as well as to keep my clothes from spoiling and to render my company agreeable and inoffensive to others."[18]

For those who aspired to gentility but found themselves economically stretched, adhering to respectable standards of cleanliness was an expensive priority.[19] While the costs of laundry may not have been prohibitive for the middling sort (including access to clean water and quality soap, or paying to have laundry done by someone else) this expense made up a significant portion of household budgets for those with more limited means.[20] And yet, laundry was not a

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[14] Quoted in Katherine Ashenburg, *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsanitized History* (Toronto: A.A. Knopf Canada, 2007), 109.
[15] Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 102; Tawny Paul, *The Poverty of Disaster: Debt and Insecurity in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 12-13.
[16] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 366; Amanda Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 10; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 18.
[17] Anonymous, *The Gentleman's Library, Containing Rules for Conduct in all Parts of Life* (1715), 68, quoted in North, *Sweet and Clean*, 35-36.
[18] Isaac Watts, *Catechisms* (2nd ed., 1730), 187, quoted in Keith Thomas, "Cleanliness and Godliness in Early Modern England," in *Religion, Culture, and Society in Early Modern Britain: Essays in Honour of Patrick Collinson,* eds. Anthony Fletcher and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 68.
[19] Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality,* 113; Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 109.
[20] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 255.

discretionary expense. Clean linens and clothing could mean the difference between economic survival and failure, because a good reputation based on bodily cleanliness facilitated essential social networks and economic transactions. Margot Finn contends that the ability to secure credit was crucial for many of the middling sort to sustain their economic security, and was no doubt "contingent upon dress, manner, verbal facility and connection."[21] In 1762, James Boswell, a young man newly arrived in London, complimented himself in his journal for the "effect of [his] external appearance and address" in establishing his personal credibility for the pursuit of trade and commercial opportunities.[22]

For the working poor it was even more challenging to maintain the cleanliness and upkeep of their clothing with meager wages. Still, they knew their appearance would be used as a measure to judge their character, not only by their superiors, employers, and landlords, but also by their own peers.[23] Even parish paupers who depended on poor relief for sustenance could ask for fresh linens every week as part of their assistance.[24] In 1789, John Howard associated cleanliness with character when observing male prisoners at Portsmouth. He wrote that "the most cleanly men are always the most decent and honest, and the most slovenly and dirty are the most vicious and irregular."[25] John Loppenburg, a poor servant who recognized the value of a clean shirt, regularly washed his own. Perhaps he could not even afford to pay a washerwoman. He recounted that on a Saturday in April 1740, at the Paddington ponds near Tyburn in London, he set out:

> in order to wash a coarse dirty shirt; I was ashamed to be seen doing it by any body, because it was torn and ragged. I went to one pond, and saw

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[21] Paul, *Poverty of Disaster,* 16.
[22] James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-1763,* quoted in Paul, *Poverty of Disaster*, 19-20.
[23] Styles, *Dress of the People*, 78.
[24] Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 100.
[25] John Howard, *An Account of the principal Lazarettos in Europe* (1789), 281, quoted in North, *Sweet and Clean*, 292.

> people there, so I went to another … I hung my shirt up to dry, and walked to and fro while it was drying, and saw two men walking about; I threw the shirt from me least they should laugh at me.[26]

John Loppenburg's laundry dilemma reveals the insecurity he felt about the condition of his clothing, the lengths he went to in order to hide from others while washing his shirt, and the fear of ridicule he might receive if found washing his own clothes. At the same time, his actions confirm an instilled societal value of cleanliness, regardless of rank or status. To him and others like him, clean, ragged clothing was something worth maintaining, and John Loppenburg was willing to risk his reputation to do so.

The proof of sartorial cleanliness as judged by society was found largely in the whiteness of the linen. [27] Clean white linen became the preeminent marker of respectability. It was generally assumed, although not always accurate, that the whiter the linen, the cleaner the garment.[28] Furthermore, the symbolic employment of white clothing became entangled with developing ideas about race and whiteness. With the global colonial expansion of Britain, Kathleen Brown argues that "the equation of whiteness with cleanliness coincided with an emerging racial commentary on the skin of 'Blackamoors.'"[29] The desirability of achieving whiteness in clothing is evidenced in the sizable number of entries in J.F.'s textile consumer manual, *The Merchant's Warehouse Laid Open*, that discuss a textile's capacity for whiteness before and after washing.[30] For the middling and elite, the ability to wear freshly laundered,

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[26] Old Bailey Proceedings, 5 October 1740, John Loppenburg, t17401015-66, quoted in Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 99.
[27] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 369.
[28] Styles, *Dress of the People*, 79. Note: In France, whiteness often trumped lack of odour as a sanitary objective, William Tullett, *Smell in Eighteenth-century England: A Social Sense*, 2019, 19.
[29] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 42.
[30] Styles, *Dress of the People*, 79, noted in Footnote 49.

high-quality white linen clothing differentiated them from their inferiors, and signaled their membership in a community of mutual civility and respectability.[31]

For men, white linen shirts, cravats, and stockings became emblems not just of gentility and sophistication but also of elite masculine power and financial success. This material meaning still resonates in today's modern society with gendered affirmative references to 'white collar' occupations.[32] Elisabeth Gernerd argues that the men's tight-fitting white stocking drew attention to the masculine physique and, as seen on the gentlemen pictured in Figure 3.1, "acted as a beacon … a visible articulation of the health of Britain's dominant sex, on whose legs the nation and empire stood."[33] Keeping white stockings white and free from the stains of mud and shoe-blacking would have required the repetitive and laborious work of a host of laundry workers.[34] Both Hannah Glasse's *The Servant Directory* (1760) and *Madam Johnson's Present: Or, Every Young Woman's Companion* (1765) include the description "white as Snow" in their laundering instructions for stockings. The optimal goal for a laundry-maid would therefore be nothing short of the purest of whites for these masculine accessories.[35] The impracticality of white stockings, often made from finer yarn or thread, and the difficulty in keeping them clean, were material attributes that would have elevated the status of the wearer, clearly demonstrating the direct influence female laundry labour had on eighteenth-century society.[36] The scene in Figure 3.1 of the British gentlemen posing in their sartorial finery framed by the Roman

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[31] Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 135; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 111.
[32] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 110-11; Karen Harvey, "Men of Parts: Masculine Embodiment and the Male Leg in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 54 (October 2015): 812; Susan Vincent, *Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 52.
[33] Elizabeth Gernerd, "Pulled Tight and Gleaming: The Stocking's Position within Eighteenth-Century Masculinity," *Textile History* 46, no. 1 (2015), 4-6. Note: In his 1753 *Analysis of Beauty,* William Hogarth refers to the shape of the lower leg as an example of the sublime, serpentine line of beauty.
[34] Marcia Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity* (London: Reaktion, 2013), 132.
[35] Gernerd, "Pulled Tight and Gleaming," 10-11.
[36] Ibid., 11.

Colosseum and the Arch of Constantine, juxtaposed with the unseen image of a washerwoman hunched over her washtub in a quiet corner, scrubbing the black stains and dirt out of a pile of men's stockings, is a stark contrast.

Figure 3.1. *British Gentlemen in Rome*, ca.1750. Katharine Read (1723-1778). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Clean white linen clothing for middling and upper elite women and girls were necessary tokens of female civility within respectable society. Accessories like white caps, kerchiefs, and shawls were requisite daytime wear and enabled propriety and modesty for the female body. Kerchiefs, shawls, or partlets covered the neck and shoulders to fill in low cut bodices and gowns, as seen in Figure 3.2.[37] This scene depicts a wealthy woman and her two daughters

[37] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 138.

giving a small token of charity to a poor cottager; the comparison between the clothing is striking. The white kerchiefs, sleeves, gloves, and dresses worn by the elite family contrast sharply with the mostly dull, presumably dirty linens and darker coloured clothing of the poor mother and her young child, with some dishevelled linen spilling out of her bag onto the ground. These differences accentuate the economic inequality between these two families and reinforce the disparate social ranking. Yet we can see that this needy mother still dons a white linen cap underneath her hat, a small but meaningful effort to salvage some display of respectability.

The presence of the African boy-servant in this scene is a compelling counterpoint to the elite women and children. While his own clothing and the woman's cloak and umbrella which he holds emphasize the hierarchies of whiteness, the colour of his skin is another clear representative iteration of the priorities of whiteness and his racialized lower status. As England's global reach accelerated in the second half of the eighteenth century, racial differences in skin colour came to embody the 'civilizing' attributes of whiteness, in contrast with the darker skin tones of the uncivilized 'savages' – indigenous peoples and African slaves.[38]

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[38] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 208.

Figure 3.2. *A Lady and Children Relieving a Cottager*, 1781. William Redmore Bigg (1755-1828). 1947-64-1. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harald Paumgarten, 1947.

The association of respectability with white clothing was equally significant for the lower-middling sort and working poor. White shirts and shifts, aprons and caps, handkerchiefs and collars were universally worn by those who laboured for their sustenance, from domestic servants and shop assistants to housewives and tradesmen. Regardless of other clothing, if their linens were white, then respectability suitable for their station in life was confirmed.[39] If accessibility to laundry labour was difficult, or if one lacked sufficient clothing, detachable collars, cuffs, and sleeves were a practical and common way to manipulate clothing in order to create an illusion of cleanliness without the full laundering of shifts and shirts.[40] Referencing

[39] Lemire, *Business of Everyday Life*, 115.
[40] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 142.

Susan North's description of the 'cleanliness triage', from visible to invisible linens, this allowed individuals to maximize their respectability within the limits of their personal means.[41]

As for the destitute and begging poor, most did not possess clean or white linen. Considering the social significance of such clothing, this speaks to the desperation of their circumstances.[42] In 1741, a London waterman claimed that a prostitute, in an attempt to elevate her lowly status "shew'd her white Stockings, and said, do you think these Stockings can walk to the Gatehouse? No, D- you, I will have a Coach."[43] This prostitute understood and employed the cultural meanings of white clothing as best she could in her circumstances. It is interesting to note that across the Atlantic, enslaved African women and men exercised what very little agency they had and chose white linens for their 'special-occasion' dress, assuming and asserting sartorial meanings of civilized identities.[44] With this understanding of the cultural import of clean and white linen clothing and accessories, I will now conduct a detailed object study of historic linen and cotton garments to identify more fully the material connections between sartorial meanings and laundry labour.

Object Meanings and Material Evidence

The study of objects for historical evidence and understanding reveals information about individuals and societies that is absent in historical texts. This is particularly so for the otherwise undetectable past lives of women, of whom there is a lack of historical records and archival

[41] North, *Sweet and Clean,* 284.
[42] Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 101.
[43] Old Bailey Proceedings online, December 1741, Hannah Rossiter (t17411204-55), quoted in Styles, *Dress of the People*, 44.
[44] DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic*, 159; see also Fromont, "Common Threads," 847-853, for connections between clothing, whiteness and religion for African men and women.

material.[45] In 1990, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich encouraged historians to be "brave enough to learn a new language, [because] research in women's material culture is a promising new terrain."[46] Indeed, over the last several decades, material culture research has grown as an interdisciplinary field, with an increasing understanding that such objects can answer questions and fill in gaps of knowledge pertaining to women's history that have been previously unanswered or not fully understood. Laura Peers' historical analysis of an embroidered bag made by a First Nations woman in nineteenth-century North America, for example, demonstrates the depth of information that can be found in this decorative museum object, when nothing else is recorded about the woman. Not only does this bag tell us about the woman's skills, cross-cultural knowledge, and participation in inter-continental trade, the bag itself has its own history or 'biography' which can be traced through its path from maker to museum.[47] Lorna Weatherill, in her analysis of probate inventories in eighteenth century England, concludes that the ownership and use of material objects can indicate not just utilitarian function but also the behaviours and attitudes of those who purchased, used, and sold them.[48] While objects are tangible remnants of the past, Leora Auslander reminds us that they are not only products of history but also active agents in the lives and events of history, both reflecting and creating social position.[49] Through Susan North's extensive research of eighteenth century fashions and clothing, she concurs that the very materiality of objects (i.e., their function, shape, design, decoration, etc.) plays a role in

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[45] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich et al., *Tangible Things: Making History Through Objects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1, 4.
[46] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. "Of Pens and Needles: Sources in Early American Women's History" *The Journal of American History* 77:1 (1990), 206.
[47] Laura Peers, "'Many Tender Ties': The Shifting Contexts and Meanings of the S BLACK Bag," *World Archeology* 31, no. 2, The Cultural Biography of Objects (October 1999), 291.
[48] Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660 – 1760*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 5.
[49] Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (October 2005): 1017-18.

shaping experiences, fashioning identities, and negotiating relationships.[50] In his seminal work, *The Culture of Clothing*, Daniel Roche invites the historian to "understand better the continuity of the material and the symbols, the effort of intelligence and crystallised labour which is conserved in the least of objects, the unity of representations and realities."[51] In so doing, the material object's biography can be revealed, the "shifts and losses of knowledge" and "surplus of meanings," can inform and elucidate understanding about the objects themselves as well as the individuals and societies who possessed them.[52] Considering this understanding of objects and their meanings, I will turn now to the collection of linens for this study.

In October 2019, the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection received a generous donation from Cora Ginsburg LLC in New York, which included 45 articles of white linen and cotton clothing. Most of the items are dated from the early to mid-nineteenth century, with one exception being this mull[53] kerchief shown in Figure 3.3, dating from the 1780s.[54] As there is a scarcity of surviving linens from the eighteenth century, this kerchief is a prized accession.[55]

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[50] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 5.
[51] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 7.
[52] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 7; Peers, "'Many Tender Ties,'296.
[53] Note: 'Mull' is an abbreviation for 'mullmull' a type of plain, fine Indian muslin. "mull, n.6." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2021. Web. 11 April 2021.
[54] 2019 Cora Ginsburg Donation, Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta.
[55] Note: Susan North writes, "A survey of over sixty museums in England revealed only eleven shirts, eight smocks/shifts, three pair of drawers, and three items of bed clothing, for the period dated 1650 – 1800," North, *Sweet and Clean*, 21.

Figure 3.3. White mull kerchief with floral whitework embroidery borders, ca.1780s. 2019.9.21. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

The types of clothing in this collection include caps, cuffs, detachable sleeves and undersleeves, kerchiefs and shawls, collars, aprons, chemises, a shift, bloomers, a shirt, underpants, two petticoats, and two corset covers. While these items are dated from the early to mid-nineteenth century, their type and variety resemble what was worn in eighteenth-century England. A milliner's advertisement in *The London Tradesman* from 1757 itemizes a common assortment of linen and cotton clothing in use: "Smocks, Aprons, Tippits [hood or scarf], Handkerchiefs, Necaties, Ruffles, Mobs [cap], Caps, Dress'd Heads with as many Etceteras as would reach from Charing-Cross to the Royal Exchange."[56] Although styles did evolve and change over time and new fabrics were introduced, the similarities are sufficient to make this collection a suitable object study for eighteenth-century laundry labour.

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[56] R Campbell, *The London Tradesman,* 2nd edition (1757), 207, quoted in North, *Sweet and Clean*, 135.

While the curator and collections manager at the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection did not intentionally curate these linens as an aggregate grouping (they were received all together as one donation), considering them as such allows us to see them as 'families of goods' with similar attributes.[57] This collection is comprised of two broad categories, which Daniel Roche refers to as 'great' linen and 'small' linen. He explains the difference, referencing laundry methods as a distinguishing feature:

> We call 'great' linen that which is put to wash, which is sent to the laundry for 'great' linen, such as sheets, napkins, cloths and shirts. We call 'small' or 'fine' linen the bands, cuffs, cravats and handkerchiefs which are sent to the starchers to be soaped. It is said that someone is in plain linen when there is no lace, that there is beautiful linen when it is trimmed with lace and fancy stitching.[58]

For this object study, in the category of great linen there are six chemises and one shift, a pair each of bloomers and underpants or drawers, one shirt with gathered sleeves, one shirt with decorative cuffs and collar, two petticoats and two corset covers. Some of them are made with coarser, heavier linen, like the chemise shown in Figures 3.4 and 3.5.

[57] Ulrich et al., *Tangible Things*, 8.
[58] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 153.

Figure 3.4. White linen chemise with scoop neck, short sleeves with gussets, 1810-1820. 2019.9.36. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Figure 3.5. Detail, white linen chemise with scoop neck, short sleeves with gussets, 1810-1820. 2019.9.36. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Many of these shirts, chemises, and shifts were worn frequently as undergarments, which necessitated regular laundering, so durability was a desirable quality. The natural fibres of cotton and linen absorb moisture well and have a greater tensile strength when wet, which allows them to stand up to the rigours of scrubbing and wringing, as well as the harsh alkali soaps and lyes used in laundering.[59] The natural colours of cotton and linen could be made whiter by bleaching, but not all the different varieties of these textiles were created equal to this task. Those who purchased and laundered linens would have accumulated knowledge about the different attributes of each type through mentoring, experience, shared skills, and household and consumer manuals. For example, in J. F.'s textile manual, the author describes 'Bore-laps' as a strong and durable cloth for shifts and shirts because it wears well, however the author cautions

[59] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 115-16.

that "the ill-conveniency that attends this sort of Cloth is, that it seldom wears white."[60] For undergarments washed repeatedly but not necessarily visible when worn, like the shift in Figure 3.4, durability over whiteness was preferable if cost was an issue. For a little more money, J. F. recommends a finer linen made in the North of Ireland, that "are of great use for Shirts and Shifts, and wear very white and strong."[61] These are the kinds of linen garments that would be found soaking in lye-filled wash tubs and boiling in steaming coppers, being stirred, soaped, scrubbed, and beaten with the utmost energy to purge both dirt and soap. These garments tell us that laundry work was physical and tactile, and required strong arms, hands, and backs. The heavy weight of water-filled tubs and water-drenched, coarse fabrics would have required great strength to lift, carry, scrub, and wring. As well, good eyesight would have been an asset for the job. Garments would have been routinely inspected by laundry workers, not only for dirt and stains, but also for tears or other signs of wear. Laundry labour was repetitive work, not only because garments were washed often and regularly, but also because the tasks of stirring, scrubbing, wringing, and pressing were themselves repetitive physical movements. In many cases, proximity to fires burning and water boiling would have made the conditions of this work hot and smoky. On the other hand, washing wet and heavy garments outside in cold weather would have been just that - cold and wet.

The linen chemise in Figure 3.6 and apron in Figure 3.7 tell us that detailed, specialist skills were employed even for ordinary dress that was either hidden underneath outerwear, or worn in semi-private, domestic work settings. Both garments have tucks or pleats sewn into the

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[60] J.F. *The merchant's ware-house laid open, or, The plain dealing linnen-draper: shewing how to buy all sorts of linnen and Indian goods, etc.* (London: Printed for John Sprint at the Bell, and Geo. Conyers at the Golden Ring in Little Britain, 1696), 2. Note: Although this was published around 1700, it would likely have been used as a reference long after its first publication, and the information from this book would have passed down from person to person.

[61] J.F. *The merchant's ware-house laid open,* 16.

design, perhaps for aesthetic variation or fashionable appeal. Although the chemise would not be seen in public, the fine pin tucks required meticulous ironing and possibly starching after each washing. The narrowness of the tucks and the lightness of this fabric would have required a light but firm hand, not to mention a reliable and evenly heated iron. The pleated apron would have been ironed after every washing with the pleats carefully set straight in one direction. The evenness and orderliness of the well-ironed apron would reflect the character of the female wearing it, who would presumably be engaging in some type of domestic service or setting.

Figure 3.6. White knee-length linen chemise with short sleeves, embroidered yoke, pin tucks and monogram, 1876. 2019.9.38. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Figure 3.7. White cotton half-apron with pleated hem and waist ties, date unknown. 2019.9.35. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

The pleats and tucks in these garments are like the pleated and starched sleeves on the man's shirt shown in Figure 3.8, dating from the mid-eighteenth century and currently located in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection in London. As the jacket sleeves of men's outwear became more narrow during the century, it was expedient that the sleeves on men's shirts have a tighter fit around the arm to maintain the tailored silhouette of the jacket.[62] In comparison to the unpleated shirt sleeves in Figure 3.9, it is quickly apparent that specialized laundry skills were necessary to facilitate changing fashions, even if they were hidden under outerwear and out of view. Gentlemen's shirts were changed frequently by those who could afford plentiful wardrobes, sometimes several times a day, and laundered regularly.[63] The laundry labour

[62] Susan North, *18th-Century Fashion in Detail* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 14.
[63] Roche, *Culture of Clothing,* 176-77.

required to starch and press the pleats in these sleeves after every single laundering is worth contemplating. Pressing narrow pleats into the restricted space of a billowy, circular sleeve with hot irons while avoiding any scorching would have required the most nimble of fingers to perform such delicate and exacting work.

Figure 3.8. Detail, man's linen shirt, sleeves pleated by starching, British, 1740-1780. T.360-1984
Figure 3.9. Man's linen shirt, British, 1740-1780. T.246-1931. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The other family of goods in our collection are those pieces of clothing or accessories considered 'small' or fine linen: six head caps, five pairs of cuffs, ten pairs of undersleeves, four kerchiefs (including shawls and a fichu), five collars, and one half-apron.[64] Most are made of a

[64] Note: a 'fichu' is a triangular piece of some light fabric, worn by ladies as a covering for the neck, throat and shoulders. "fichu, n." *OED Online.* Oxford University Press, March 2021. Web.11 May 2021.

finer weave of linen or cotton and many have lace or embroidered embellishments – Roche's 'beautiful linen' – because they would have been wholly or partially visible when worn.[65] These types of 'small' linens were widely worn in a vast range of qualities and styles by all levels of society, and were considered indispensable for respectable and fashionable wardrobes. The finer fabrics, lace and embroidered detailing would have necessitated less vigorous and more careful treatments, gentle starching and vigilant ironing by laundresses and laundry-maids, 'taking pains' not to cause unnecessary wear or damage to the delicate fabrics.[66] Keeping these linens as white as possible was the highest priority. J.F. recommends cambrick linen for handkerchiefs but with a note of caution:

> sometimes there comes over some of Cambrick whiting, those wear very white … the coarsest sort wears often ill and yellow … there be of this sort some of the Cambrick whiting, but very seldom, which if you can get it, wears as white as any, but this I must tell you, that both sorts notwithstanding they are of Cambrick whiting, when they grow old will incline to wear yellow; but right Cambrick wears white to the last.[67]

More expensive white soaps would have been favoured along with buckwash bleaching (perhaps made from the ashes of apple trees) in order to maximize the whiteness of the linens. The caustic properties of soap and buckwash, which were made with lye, caused skin to burn, chap, and crack, recalling Mary Collier's "blood trickling down [her] wrists and fingers."[68] The 'painstaking' labour required to clean and whiten delicate fine linens takes on a double meaning for the rough and chapped hands and arms of female laundry workers.

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[65] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 153.
[66] Note: I would compare this to the 'gentle cycle' on our modern washing machines.
[67] J.F. *The merchant's ware-house laid open,* 37. Note: Cambrick linen is a lightweight, closely woven white linen or cotton fabric, originally from Cambrai, France
[68] Mary Collier, *Poems, on several occasions, by Mary Collier, Author Of the Washerwoman's Labour, With some remarks on her life* (Winchester: Mary Ayres, 1762), 13.

Throughout the eighteenth century, women wore linen clothing over bodices and dresses to cover their necks and shoulders during the daytime. Shawls, handkerchiefs, partlets, and fichus, like the one pictured in Figure 3.10, were universal wardrobe accessories for females in elite and genteel society, the middling sort, and working poor.[69] These coverings were worn by girls and women in times of leisure and sociality, but also when engaged in labour. The kerchiefs and shawls of laundry-maids and washerwomen were requisite elements of their working wardrobes and therefore in close and constant contact with dirt, ash and sweat. The need to wash their own soiled clothing because of the physicality of their labour carried with it a hidden cost of time and material, a burden layered on top of their already meagre wages.

Figure 3.10. White mull fichu with floral chainstitch embroidery, ca.1840s. 2019.9.24. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

[69] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 138.

Along with shawls and kerchiefs, white linen caps in a wide variety of styles, were also essential and universally worn elements of a female's daytime wardrobe, from elite women down to domestic servants, as shown in Figures 3.11 and 3.12.[70]

Figure 3.11. Women's cotton house cap with ruffle, 1800-1810. 2019.9.3. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Figure 3.12. Women's white cotton and linen embroidered cap with scalloped edge, ca.1830. 2019.9.2. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

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[70] Sarah E. Woodyard, "Martha's Mob Cap? A Milliner's Hand-Sewn Inquiry into Eighteenth-Century Caps ca. 1770 to 1800," (MA Thesis, University of Alberta, 2017). https:/doi.org/10.7939/R3GM82154, 5-10.

Some were plain and unadorned while others were embellished with rows of ruffles and fine embroidery, or with a colourful ribbon attached. Functionally, caps kept women's hair covered and in place, could be worn under a hat, and may have provided some warmth in cold temperatures. Like kerchiefs and shawls, caps would have required frequent laundering due to direct contact with the head and neck and exposure to perspiration, dirt, food, and even vermin, as Scottish poet Robert Burns' poem "To A Louse, On Seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet, at Church," (1786) commendably depicts.[71] Caps in all their varieties would have required careful washing, whitening, starching, and ironing – as Mary Collier penned, "Cambricks and Muslins which our Ladies wear, Laces and Edgings, costly, fine, and rare, Which must be wash'd with utmost Skill and Care."[72]

Contemporary images of female domestic servants and housewives, including female laundry labourers, are universally shown wearing some variation of a white cap, as seen in Hogarth's painting of his servants in Figure 3.13.[73] In this composition, Hogarth painted his household servants in the typical clothing for their rank and labour. While the men's white collars create a visual contrast to the darker colours of their coats, it is the women's caps that garner the most attention in this group portrait, drawing the eye to each woman's face, framed in white by the cap's ruffled edges and ties. Beyond the functional attributes of women's caps, they also fulfilled gendered norms in society which dictated that women's heads should be covered, for reasons of respect and modesty.[74] It would have been considered entirely unfitting for a female servant to work and be seen without a head covering. This was not the case for male

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[71] Robert Burns, "To a Louse, On Seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet at Church." *Scottish Poetry Library.* Accessed 18 May 2021. https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/louse-seeing-one-ladys-bonnet-church/.
[72] Collier, *Poems, On Several Occasions*, 12.
[73] See Styles, *Dress of the People*, in which he describes servants' caps as "a highly visibly accessory", 285-86.
[74] Woodyard, "Martha's Mob Cap," 5-10.

servants, even boys. In concert with the positioning of the women in this portrait in relation to the men and boy – on the periphery and at the bottom of the grouping – these caps reinforce gendered sartorial customs of female subservience. Female laundry labourers were not just subservient to their masters and employers, they ranked lower than their fellow male labourers and servants.

Figure 3.13. *Heads of Six of Hogarth's Servants*, ca.1750-1755. William Hogarth (1697-1764). © Tate Gallery, London.

Removable cuffs, sleeves, and collars like those worn by Hogarth's male servants, were very common in the eighteenth century, which is reflected in this collection of objects, including those pictured in Figures 3.14, 3.15 and 3.16.[75]

[75] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 141.

Figure 3.14. Pair of white net undersleeves with wide bobbin lace cuffs, ca.1850s. 2019.9.16. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Figure 3.15. Pair of white net undersleeves with bobbing lace cuffs and inserts, mid-19th cen. 2019.9.14. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Figure 3.16. Pair of starched tailored white sleeves with 3-button cuffs, mid-19th cen. 2019.9.20. Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

These detachable accessories facilitated variations in personal fashion and style without the expense of purchasing multiple shirts and shifts. In turn, this could expand the wardrobe choices of people with limited financial means. Owning one shirt or shift along with several cuffs or collars could maintain one's respectability and create "the illusion of cleanliness" without incurring additional clothing or laundry expenses.[76] The popularity and wide-spread use of these accessories – even among the elite – speaks less of cost and more about fashion preferences and functionality. Daniel Roche quoted an eighteenth-century observer who said, "lace cuffs and fine linen are becoming general: they are changed every day, which means you

[76] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 142.

need to have a lot of them."[77] Cuffs and sleeves accumulated dirt easily, and so the ability to remove them from a shirt or shift for cleaning would have permitted more focused laundering on the visible spots and toughest stains. The body of a shirt might not need to be washed as often as the removable cuffs or collars, which would lighten the workload for female laundry workers. However, as Daniel Roche indicated, these removable accessories were changed more frequently – daily and sometimes multiple times a day – which may have conversely increased the amount of laundry that needed attention. Furthermore, cuffs and collars were generally starched and pressed, which added additional fine laundering steps to the laundry process. The removable feature of these accessories would have made it easier to manipulate them and achieve the desired results, but they would have also required the specialized skills of a clear-starcher or expert laundry-maid, skills unattainable for most households and domestic servants.

Achieving standards of respectable dress, which included clean white linen clothing like those in this object study, was utmost in the minds of people in eighteenth-century England. Clothing was not only used as a sartorial marker of one's economic condition or social status, but, as I will now explore further, it also came to be a powerful material symbol used to judge the quality of a person's character and even the purity of one's soul.

White Linen and the Representations of Morality

Beyond respectability and status, clean white linen came to hold a deeply symbolic meaning representing the moral purity of one's character, which was profoundly rooted in eighteenth-century religious thought and practice.[78] Keith Thomas argues that "since the

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[77] Daniel Roche, *A History of Everyday Things – The Birth of Consumption in France, 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 216.
[78] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 11, 15, 29, 110; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 33; Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965), 26.

association between bodily and spiritual purity was an ancient theme in Judeo-Christian thought, it is not surprising that cleanliness should have been linked to godliness in several distinct religious milieu in early modern England."[79] Post-Reformation England saw the dramatic rise of the Evangelical revival movement which began in the early eighteenth century. English culture experienced a second wave of religious change at the end of the century with the popular and widespread growth of Methodism. This evangelical enthusiasm, with women as active participants, permeated far down the social hierarchy and across other Christian sects, including the Religious Society of Friends (more commonly known as the Quakers) as well as the Church of England.[80] These eighteenth-century religious groups centred their doctrinal understandings on Biblical scripture which taught abstract Christian doctrines about sin, salvation, and the embodied soul by employing metaphors of bodily cleanliness and sartorial purity.[81] The Old Testament prophet Isaiah rejoiced in the Lord who had clothed him with the "garments of salvation" and "the robe of righteousness."[82] The Psalmist wrote, "wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin .. and I shall be whiter than snow."[83] New Christian believers were invited by Paul to "be baptized [with water] and wash away thy sins,"[84] who also taught that one could be 'washed by the blood of Christ' which removed the 'stain of sin and purified one's soul'.[85]

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[79] Thomas, "Cleanliness and Godliness," 65.
[80] Anne Stott, "Women and Religion," in *Women's History: Britain, 1700 – 1850, An Introduction*, Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, eds. (London: Routledge, 2005), 102; Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 398; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 36.
[81] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 31; Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 9.
[82] Isaiah 61:10 (King James Version – all subsequent citations from this version).
[83] Psalm 51:2,7.
[84] Acts 22:16.
[85] 1 Corinthians 6:11.

In connection with religious movements and practices, virtue societies and other societies for the reformation of manners were intense moral campaigns that took root and flourished in the eighteenth century.[86] Moral conformity was aggressively preached and patrolled by these organized groups, made up mostly of middling men.[87] Attention was drawn to the lives and moral choices of the poor, with a strong emphasis decrying the evils of prostitution, which was seen as a defilement not just of bodies and souls but of communities as well.[88] Associations between cleanliness and virtue persisted, as did conformity to sartorial markers which signalled the measure of one's morality. John Wesley (1703-1791), founder of Methodism, repeatedly emphasized the association between bodily cleanliness and virtuous living. In one letter he wrote: "Be cleanly … avoid *all* nastiness, dirt, slovenliness, both in your person, clothes, house, and *all* about you."[89] This sermonly letter preached an ideal and a discipline, prescribing both thoughts and behaviours for any who would heed his words.

Daniel Roche observes that "it was the achievement of the civilization of manners to imbue everyone with the idea that dirty clothing indicated a blemished soul, a prejudice so universal that the art of cleaning was stretched to the limits."[90] Habits of hygiene and material evidence of cleanliness became powerful signs of religious purity, morality, and virtue; this was particularly true for females.[91] Spotless, starched white linen caps, kerchiefs, and aprons did not just indicate a capable housewife, but also signalled a virtuous female. William Law, one of John Wesley's mentors, described a woman named Miranda in his work *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728): "She has but one rule that she observes in her dress, to be always

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[86] Hill, *Middling Sort,* 101.
[87] Ibid., 111.
[88] Ibid., 103.
[89] Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, 113; Quoted in North, *Sweet and Clean*, 47, italics added.
[90] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 368.
[91] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes – Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780 – 1850,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 386.

clean … Everything about her resembles the purity of her soul, and she is always clean without, because she is always pure within."[92] Alexander Monroe penned a cautionary letter to his twelve-year-old daughter in 1739, writing "whatever a Girl or Woman puts on ought to be clean and whole, if ever I seen you with stayned Cloaths, dirty Linnens, Slit Seams, ragged Tails, torn Frocks or Gowns, Stockings with Holes, Shoes awry or Slit, I shall be very angry, for it will fix the Character of a careless lazy Slattern on you."[93] The author of *Female Folly: or The Plague of a Woman's Riding-Hood and Cloak* (1713) warned that women of ill-repute wore hooded cloaks to hide evidence of their immoral behaviour, which among other things included stolen goods, pregnancies, and their "slovenly and dirty dress."[94] The anonymous author of the book *Satan's Harvest Home* (1749) "attributed the rise in prostitution to the careless and slovenly upbringing of girls, who were allowed to …slop around the house in a 'loose Petticoat," instead of wearing proper clean white shifts and tightly laced corsets.[95]

The virtue signalling of clean white linen became inextricably associated with the female labour required to make and keep linens both clean and white, from the swaddling bands at birth to death's laying out linens. There was a widely held belief that cleaning, including laundry work, was a moral duty because of the weighty association between cleanliness and virtue.[96] Simon Schama writes that "it would be unhistorical to assume that domestic chores were a trivial

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[92] William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) (2009), 72-3, quoted in North*, Sweet and Clean*, 36.
[93] North, *Sweet and Clean*, 39. Note: the definition of 'slattern,' from which 'slut' originates: an untidy or slovenly woman; a woman who is habitually careless, lazy, or negligent with regard to appearance, household cleanliness; a disreputable or sexually promiscuous woman. "slattern, n. and adj.". OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press. https://www-oed-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/Entry/181442?rskey=bINPAZ&result=1 (accessed May 25, 2021).
[94] Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, 96.
[95] Ibid*.*, 103.
[96] Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 151.

business, unburdened with any moral overtones."[97] The compelling irony for female laundry workers is that despite the associations of gendered morality with the outcomes of their labours, persistent negative stigmas endured surrounding the women themselves.[98] The withdrawal of middling and genteel women from most active, household labour during the century generated increasing societal distaste for female manual labour of any kind, but especially laundry work, because of its close proximity to dirt, bodily emissions, and the strenuous physical demands it required.[99] The growing undercurrent of aversion towards laundry workers and their labour seemed to foster suspicion surrounding their collective moral character. While individual instances may have warranted charges of dishonesty and immorality, the unrelenting economic insecurity and sexual vulnerability of laundresses and washerwomen reinforced unfounded accusations of immoral behaviour and associations against them, simply because of the labour they performed.[100]

Associations of Immorality with Laundry Work

Clothing was not just one of life's necessities in eighteenth-century England, it was a valuable commodity that was both "mobile and mutable" and, as such, an overwhelmingly appealing target for thieves.[101] Clothing and household linens played a significant part within the active domestic and economic roles wherein women worked and lived. Consequently,

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[97] Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: an interpretation of Dutch culture in the golden age* (London: Fontana, 1991), 378, 382.
[98] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 114.
[99] Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 52.
[100] Tanya Evans, *Unfortunate Objects: Lone Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 164.
[101] Pointon, *Portrayal and the Search for Identity*, 132; Note: "In the urban districts, prosecutions for the theft of clothes accounted for 27.1 per cent of recorded larceny cases, the greatest percentage of all prosecuted thefts," Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 124-125.

women had familiarity, intimate knowledge, and ready access to what they sewed, mended, washed, and wore.[102] Garthine Walker notes, "The world of stolen clothes, linens and household goods was populated by women: women stealing, women receiving, women deposing, women searching, and women passing on information, as well as goods, to other women."[103] The theft of clothing and household linens was an ever-present occupational hazard with which laundry-maids and washerwomen had to contend.[104] Washtubs, drying hedges, bleaching grounds and laundry bundles – clean or dirty – were an easy target for would-be thieves, unattended or not.[105] In 1701, Mary Browne confessed to stealing "a parcel of wet linen" found soaking in a washtub.[106] Mary Stinson's clothing was stolen in 1743 by Rachael Milford, who walked right into her wash-house and made off with the soaking linens.[107] On 5 December 1744, Hannah Roffe was found guilty of stealing a shift worth 7 shillings off the line of washerwoman Ann Hilliard. Luckily for Hannah, she only had to endure a whipping after being found guilty, whereas for many convicted thieves, transportation to America for seven years was a common punishment.[108]

In the engraving, *The Idle Laundress*, (perhaps more aptly named *The Exhausted Laundress*) shown in Figure 3.17, we see a thief taking advantage of the laundress' moment of rest (she had likely been up since before dawn), sadly unaware that she is the victim of a crime in progress. Like washerwoman Ann Hilliard, the exposure and access to the laundress' outdoor

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[102] Lynn Mackay, "Why They Stole: Women in the Old Bailey 1779 – 1789," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1999): 626, 629.
[103] Garthine Walker, "Women, theft and the world of stolen goods,' in Jenny Kermode and Garthine Walker, eds. *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 81-105, quoted in Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 139.
[104] Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 140.
[105] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 132-135; North, *Sweet and Clean*, 222-223; Mackay, "Why They Stole," 624.
[106] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 136.
[107] Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite*, 92.
[108] www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, (09 April 2021), December 1744, trial of Hannah Roffe (t17441205-15).

workspace, which includes the drying line, increases her vulnerability to the actions of opportunistic thieves. Societal suspicion of the character of female laundry workers is reinforced in the message this engraving conveys. The laundress is portrayed as lazy and lacking discipline rather than as the victim of a crime. Perhaps there is an implication that she deserved to be robbed because of her loose morals and undisciplined work ethic. Engravings like these acted as a precautionary warning to people who paid others to do their laundry: to be wary of idle and unreliable laundresses.

Figure 3.17. *The Idle Laundress*, 1788. William Blake (1757-1827). The British Museum, London.

However, female laundry workers were not only victims of theft, they were also perpetrators. They had ready access to the clothing they were hired to wash and, as Beverly

Lemire observes, "propinquity enhanced the opportunity for larceny."[109] In 1790, John Varney's domestic servant decided to quit her job, and left with the clothes worth £3 she had not finished washing.[110] Washerwoman Anne Colstone paid her neighbour, Catharine Bradley, to help her with ironing on a Saturday morning in November 1745. After the ironing was done, Catharine stole one of the shirts, and then turned around and sold it to a second-hand clothing dealer for cash.[111] The circumstances of women like Catharine Bradley were such that they could not afford to live on their wages regardless of how much they worked, and so resorted to crime to make up the difference. Hitchcock reminds us that "these were the thefts of the beggarly poor – people took advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves and overstepped the bounds of legality."[112] Heather Shore argues that "what might be seen straight-forwardly as criminal behaviour by the authorities might by the offender be viewed as solutions to poverty, dearth, crisis, under- and unemployment."[113]

Often, very poor women would go door to door 'charring', seeking to earn money or receive 'victuals' in return for their labours of housecleaning or washing. The itinerant nature of this kind of temporary and mobile labour blurred the boundary between begging and honest labour, neighbourliness, and vagrancy.[114] The mobility of all independent washerwomen and laundresses, not just the very poor, challenged notions of female agency in public spaces and raised suspicions. Visiting a neighbour was a virtuous pastime but gadding about was considered a vice. Kathleen Brown argues:

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[109] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, 131.
[110] Old Bailey Records, February 1790, 289, in Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce,* 133.
[111] www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, (09 April 2021), December 1745, trial of Catharine Bradley (t17451204-12).
[112] Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 82.
[113] Heather Shore, "Crime, Criminal Networks and the Survival Strategies of the Poor in Early Eighteenth-Century London," in *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts*, eds. Steven King and Alannah Tomkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 139.
[114] Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 62-3.

> single women who earned wages laundering the clothes of people outside their own households … always operated under a cloud of suspicion. The laundress's ability to be a mobile, independent, wage earner tarnished her reputation for chastity. If sexual virtue was embodied by the domestically contained industrious matron, busily employed at the spinning wheel, then her foil was the peripatetic laundress, whose labor gained her access to the intimate lives of her customers.[115]

A female laundry worker's proximity to the bodies that she cared for, both in the private living spaces of others and through the laundering of intimate linens and underclothing, stoked suspicions of immoral behaviour and associations. It did not matter that her labours were essential or that she committed no indiscretion – she was considered guilty by association.[116]

In eighteenth-century England, a woman's core identity was linked to her moral and sexual reputation, which was held to an incomparably higher standard than a man's. Paradoxically, at the same time there was a general sexualization of female labour, which exploited the sexual insecurity of economically vulnerable women and girls, as we saw in Chapter 1 in the case of Sarah Malcolm.[117] This was particularly the case for female domestic servants.[118] Bridget Hill comments that "female servants existed, it was held by many, for their masters' convenience. Sexual encounters with servants seemed 'natural' and were 'socially acceptable' – at least to the upper class." Some historians have suggested that middle- and upper-class men found a particular sexual attraction to girls and women in the lower and labouring classes, in what Hill describes as an "eroticism of inequality."[119] The majority of females working in positions of domestic servitude accepted the advances of masters and fellow

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[115] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 31-32.
[116] Brown, *Foul Bodies*, 31-32; Bridget Hill, *Servants: English Domestics in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 46.
[117] Natasha Korda, "Sex, Starch-Houses, and Poking Sticks: Alien Women's Work and the Technologies of Material Culture," *Early Modern Women* 5, (Fall 2010), 203.
[118] Hill, *Servants*, 44.
[119] Hill, *Servants*, 49-50.

male servants because they had no choice.[120] This sexual exploitation would have been particularly immediate for laundry-maids and washerwoman, who were already suspected of proximity to and participation in immoral acts and intimate liaisons. Carolyn Davidson writes that, "normal, virile men never ever helped with laundry, although some of them enjoyed making love to laundry-maids."[121] For example, in the early 1800s, magistrate Mr. Stevens refused to act against one of his footmen when he "got Heal, the Washerwoman's daughter, with child." He testified that, "if he was obliged to attend the private conduct of his servants, he should have enough to do" and then added: "he could not well reprove his servants for a conduct which his example taught them to pursue."[122] The gendered social imbalance of power wielded by men in the absence of legal protections for women exploited and perpetuated the sexual vulnerability of subservient females, thereby reinforcing their status as debased and immoral. Bodily agency for female laundry workers was rare indeed.

The presumed sexual availability of female laundry workers was often represented in popular literature and art. Natasha Korda argues that the tools used by laundresses and clear starchers, such as hot irons and poking sticks, were commonly used as a source of sexual innuendo in plays and other literature.[123] The sexualization of gendered laundry labour was evidenced in the double entendre of the following stanza from the poem "Washing Week," published in the *Weekly Magazine or Edinburgh Amusement* in 1771:

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[120] Cissie Fairchilds, *Domestic Enemies: Servants & Their Masters in Old Regime France* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 88, quoted in Hill, *Servants*, 48.
[121] Caroline Davidson, *A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles 1650 – 1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 136-7.
[122] *The Journal of a Somerset Rector 1803-1834,* 21-2, 33-4, quoted in Hill, *Servants*, 61.
[123] Korda, "Sex, Starch-Houses, and Poking Sticks," 203.

> The washer, as she wrings,
> Cracking some jest ; then o'er the tub
> Pauses awhile, and every rub
> With pleasure sweats and sings.[124]

The French painting entitled, "The Laundress", in Figure 3.18, employs European tropes by depicting the young female laundry worker with expectant, perhaps promiscuous eyes, which are looking directly at the viewer rather than focusing on the dirty linens in her hands. Her red lips, cheeks, and one visible red slipper sliding off her foot all hint at possible desire and lust and are visually juxtaposed with the 'pure' white linens all around her, albeit slightly rumpled. She is sitting in a provocative pose with her legs apart and her dress pulled up askew. The wet linens hanging to dry behind her are dishevelled, the laundry basket is tipped over on the floor, as is the washtub on the cabinet. All these details represent a disorderly and immoral laundry-maid who is not observing her moral duty to launder. This suggestive portrayal both reflects and reinforces the assumed immoral character and sexual availability of a female laundry worker while performing her moral duty to society.

[124] *Weekly Magazine or Edinburgh Amusement*, 1771, where it is "Addressed to G----- T-----", in W.H. Logan, *A Pedlar's Pack of Ballads and Songs,* (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1869), 379-81.

Figure 3.18. *The Laundress*, 1761. Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805). J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Sadly, for many women – particularly in London and other urban settings – economic and sexual vulnerability led to prostitution as a very last resort for survival.[125] Prostitution increased over the course of the century, especially in major cities, because of the increasingly inadequate wages of female labourers in occupations and trades that were most susceptible to periods of unemployment.[126] Bridget Hill writes that for many, prostitution was "a temporary expedient resorted to in order to tide them over until a suitable place became available."[127] For

[125] Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 15.
[126] Note: Population growth and female urban migration were major demographic forces that affected rising levels of prostitution.
[127] Hill, *Servants*, 100.

many more, it was the last stop in a descending cycle of poverty.[128] In his 1758 book titled *On Prostitution: A Plan for Establishing a Charity-house or Charity Houses for the reception of repenting prostitutes*, Jonas Hanway wrote: "domestic servitude is the fruitful supply of prostitutes and female servants in the metropolis, generally much more numerous than can be accommodated."[129] While this male philanthropist perhaps meant to do some good by establishing a residence for sexually exploited girls and women, it is telling that he places the onus of moral culpability squarely on the shoulders of the women themselves, and not on the men who exploited them or the insufficient wages which drove them to prostitution. He goes on to write: "as these servants have also many hours of leisure, and much exposed to the company in great families, and in these hours evil desires have most easy access to the heart."[130] Clearly, he was oblivious to, or ignored the fact, that laundry-maids and other domestic servants worked long and arduous hours; nor did he acknowledge the gendered power imbalance between masters and servants and men and women, a discrepancy which put downward pressure on already restricted female agency and exploited the vulnerability of female labourers.

There is a compelling irony when considering the product of female laundry labour and the sexual exploitation of prostitutes and street walkers, which is revealed in a small item of clothing. Francis Place wrote about the young women who worked the streets in the East End, observing the poor condition of their clothing and their lack of clean white linen. He wrote that "many had ragged dirty shoes and stockings and some no stockings at all … numbers wore no handkerchiefs at all in warm weather."[131] Interestingly, in addition to their ragged clothing,

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[128] Hitchcock, *Down and Out,* 90.
[129] Jonas Hanway, *On Prostitution: A Plan for Establishing a Charity-house or Charity Houses for the reception of repenting prostitutes* (London, 1758), 39.
[130] Jonas Hanway, *On Prostitution,* 39.
[131] British Library, Add. MS. 27826, 'Place Papers, xxxviii, Manners and Morals', iv, fol. 119, quoted in Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 89.

prostitutes were known to wear a single white ribbon to attract their customers, hoping to declare "the small promise of luxury and cleanliness."[132] This simple accessory demonstrates the extensive reach of the powerful meaning of clean white linen in society, those sartorial symbols produced by female laundry labourers who were often sexually exploited themselves.[133] Knowing this makes Sarah Knight's story particularly tragic. In the week following the death of her mother on 10 September 1774, Sarah was picked up by the night watch for street walking and remanded overnight in a watch house cell for the first time in her life. The adversities of economic insecurity and sexual vulnerability were compounded by the recent death of her mother and the knowledge of her likely doom. Surely these dire circumstances led Sarah to commit one final act of despondency: before morning, she tied a sliding knot in her white ribbon and hung herself with it from the door post of her watch house cell.[134]

Conclusion

Clean white linen was a universal and powerful symbol that transmitted societal values of respectability, status, and morality through the "culture of appearances."[135] These sartorial markers resonated in every level of society. Those who could afford to purchase the most expensive Holland linens and employ the most specialized laundresses showed off their whitest stockings, collars, and cuffs to convey their elite and genteel status. The middling sort took pride in their clean and pressed aprons, caps, and kerchiefs, demonstrating not only their domestic skills but also their respectable and moral characters, as expected for their station in life. All the

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[132] Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 90.
[133] Ibid.
[134] WAM, Westminster Coroner's Inquest, 12 September 1774, 'Sarah Knight', quoted in Hitchcock, *Down and Out*, 90.
[135] Roche, *Culture of Clothing,* 366.

way down the social ladder, the beggarly poor used what little means they had to wash their own ragged clothing or own a token white accessory as an attempt to assuage societal expectations and salvage a modicum of self-respect.

The inventories of linen cabinets and wardrobes stocked with clean white linen were only made possible through the arduous and undervalued labour of an army of female laundry workers in eighteenth-century England. My study of the Cora Ginsburg linens reveals tangible clues and insights that broaden our understanding of the materiality of laundry labour, connecting the linens with the hands that washed them. Different kinds of linens required different kinds of laundering. Great linens, like shirts, shifts, petticoats, and household linens were often made of durable textiles that stood up to vigorous, regular washing, starching, and ironing, tasks which required strength and stamina. Small linens, like aprons, kerchiefs, stockings, and caps were bleached with caustic detergents to maximize whitening and demanded specialized laundry skills that were tedious and repetitive. The results of the productive work of laundry were deeply valued by society and employed as a universal outward manifestation of the inner character and soul.

Paradoxically, the high value that society placed on clean white linen was in direct contrast with the low esteem held for female laundry workers themselves. The hard, physical, dirty labour, the proximity to private spaces and intimate clothing, the persistent economic disadvantages and social insecurities, and the general sexual exploitation of subservient females were all factors that perpetuated and reinforced the marginal and undervalued status of laundry-maids, washerwomen, and laundresses. These women and girls were eighteenth-century essential workers performing indispensable services, and like so many female essential workers today, they were invisible, undervalued, and underpaid. They were rarely recognized or

rewarded, and yet expected to perform labours that would offer up freshly laundered white linen to individuals, households and, indeed, to all of respectable society in eighteenth-century England.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Mary Hardy, Sarah Malcolm, Mary Collier, Francis Place's mother, and Margaret Bevan are just a few examples of the myriad of women whose lives were shaped and dictated by their economic circumstances, familial relationships, and the societal values of eighteenth-century England. For some women, like Norfolk farmwife Mary Hardy, they had the ability to hire other women to do their personal and household laundry. But for so many other women, their limited social and economic agency offered them little choice but to take up laundry work as a means of survival. Young and single, urban, migrant women like laundress Sarah Malcolm were unable to escape disadvantage and exploitation stemming from social vulnerability and economic insecurity. 'Old maid' washerwoman Mary Collier, who perhaps could have made a living writing poetry in another time and place, wore herself out while subsisting on meagre wages for decades. Francis Place's mother, Mary Gray, who suffered the full brunt of her husband's folly and conjugal authority, took up washing as a last hope of staving off financial ruin for her family. London washerwoman Margaret Bevan exercised what limited agency she had in order to operate an independent business, and was successful enough to require and pay for insurance, and perhaps even hire other women. Laundry labour was, with very rare exceptions, universally female. It was work done by women and supervised by women. Knowledge and skills were shared and passed down from mother to daughter, mistress to servant, laundry-maid to washerwoman, and between female networks and alliances. Laundry labour was directly tied to life cycle stages and familial relationships, from the birthing bed to the death bed. The repetitive and physical work of laundry was arduous, labour-intensive, and poorly paid, but above all, laundry labour was the epitome of gendered labour.

I return to Alexandra Shepard's call to historians, to "explore women's impact *in* the early modern economy as much as the early modern economy's impact *on* women."[1] The products of female laundry labour in eighteenth-century England had a profound impact in regards to the transmission of key values which undergirded social relationships, gendered identities, business transactions and societal priorities. The materiality of clean white linen clothing, accessories, and household textiles came to symbolize good manners, respectability, and genteel status: in essence, they represented a uniform of membership within one's rank. The whiteness of the linen became the key attribute, strengthening the "hierarchy of appearances" and acting as an outward and material manifestation reflecting the morality and virtue of an inward character.[2] Moreover, with the global colonial expansion of Britain and the growing dependence of enslaved Africans for commerce and trade, these powerful sartorial meanings of white clothing became entangled with emerging ideas about race and whiteness. These powerful material symbols of status and character could only be obtained and sustained through the diligent and difficult work of female laundry labour. Clean white linen required bucking, bleaching, soaking, scrubbing, wringing, starching, and ironing, all of which demanded a range of laundry skills and technical knowledge. The ephemerality of clean laundry necessitated unending repetition in the pursuit of cleanliness. Ironically, the symbolic connections of respectability and morality with clean white linen applied to the wearer only, and not to the females who laboured to make that linen both clean and white. In fact, it was the opposite. Associations with femaleness, poverty, and dirt – in addition to proximity to personal space and

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[1] Alexandra Shepard, "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy," *History Workshop Journal* 79 (2015): 2, italics added.
[2] Roche, *Culture of Clothing*, 392.

intimate clothing – reinforced and perpetuated the marginalized status and moral aspersions directed towards females who laundered.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich wrote that material culture history enables those who want to know about the past to also "live critically in the present."[3] While there has been much progress in society's view and estimation of the value of women and gendered labour, the exploitation and disregard for women in low-paying, essential service jobs is still present.[4] In England, Amy Erickson notes that women are in the majority among those receiving government welfare assistance, at the identical rate of women who received parish poor relief in the seventeenth century.[5] In Canada, a recent study found that sixty percent of Canadians struggling economically are women.[6] Median annual employment income in female lone-parent families with children under six was $21,200, less than half the income of male lone-parent families.[7] A 2018 report on women and poverty describes the experience of Canadian women today: "in order to juggle their domestic responsibilities, many women choose part-time, seasonal, contract, or temporary jobs. Unfortunately, most of these jobs are low paid, with no security, few opportunities for advancement, and no health benefits."[8] The similarities between this description and the circumstances of English eighteenth-century female laundry workers are apparent. The social and economic contributions women make towards individuals, households, and society should be esteemed and valued commensurate with the essential work they perform. Furthermore, uncoupling gendered designations to domestic labour such as laundry allows

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[3] Ulrich, *Tangible Things*, 3.
[4] Sanderson, *Women and Work,* 165.
[5] Erickson, *Women and Property,* 3.
[6] Angus Reid Institute. What Does Poverty Look Like in Canada? July 2018. http://angusreid.org/poverty-in-canada/.
[7] Income composition in Canada, National Household Survey, 2011. http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-014-x/99-014-x2011001-eng.cfm%23a6.
[8] Canadian Women's Foundation, Women and Poverty in Canada, 2018. https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Fact-Sheet-WOMEN-POVERTY-September-2018.pdf.

women to more fully employ and realize their social and economic agency. A greater understanding of the lives of women from the past can inform our collective will to achieve social and economic gender equality today. I will give Mary Collier the last word, quoting her final words written in her short memoir. Clearly, she hoped to be remembered not as a washerwoman, but as a poet, reminding us of the individual identities and untapped potential of so many laundry-maids, washerwomen, and laundresses in eighteenth-century England.

> The infirmities of Age rendered me incapable of the labour … Now I have retired to a Garret (The Poor Poets Fate) in Alton where I am endeavouring to pass the Relict of my days in Piety, Purity, Peace, and an Old Maid.[9]

[9] Collier, Mary. *Poems, on several occasions, by Mary Collier, ... With some remarks on her life* (Winchester: printed by Mary Ayres; for the author, 1762), v.

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