Sewing workshop at Arles, by Antoine Raspal, c.1760

University of Alberta

The Fruits of Nimble Fingers:

Garment Construction

and the Working Lives of Eighteenth-Century

English Needlewomen

by

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Abstract

The research objective of this thesis is to re-examine women's labour in the eighteenth-century English sewing trades. Several aspects women's working lives in the sewing trades are explored in three sections. The first section examines diversity within the sewing trades, employment opportunities, working conditions and quality of life. The second focuses on garment construction practices and techniques. The third discusses social standings of needlewomen, and consumer economy issues as they pertained to the needletrades. Methods employed include building upon prior scholarship of women's work and aspects of pre-industrial English garment trades, primary source material, and object-based research using garment artefacts from the Museum of London, England, Berrington Hall, and the Royal Ontario Museum. The research findings indicate that pre-industrial English needlewomen's working lives were highly nuanced, their skills more sophisticated than generally believed, and their role within the burgeoning consumer society worthy of further in-depth investigation.

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Introduction

Eighteenth century costume has long been admired among dress historians and enthusiasts for its aesthetic appeal. However, study of pre-industrial clothing can take us far deeper than admiration for rustling silk skirts, frills and furbelows. What of the makers of these luxuriant confections, and their humbler counterparts worn by the majority of society? Both within academia and without, the commonly held notion is that before the advent of the sewing machine (or even until the early to mid twentieth century) clothing was generally made at home by women as part of their routine domestic responsibilities, hardly an article of commercial manufacture. Madeleine Ginsburg stresses that this idea is untrue of any historical period.[1] In fact, between 1650 and 1800 commercial clothing production in England grew exponentially utilizing, primarily, female labour.[2] Yet, virtually invisible are the generations of girls and women upon whose fingers this economic engine relied.[3]

The eighteenth-century professional English needlewoman (often referred to as a mantuamaker) is an elusive figure of history, particularly compared with her significantly better-documented French counterpart.[4] For example, "Mrs Cheyne who made clothes for Lady Louisa Fitzpatrick in the 1760s is given no occupation with the entry of her burial in 1775, so it is likely that others have

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[1] Madeleine Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850," *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 6 (1972): 64.
[2] Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* (London, England: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1997).
[3] Beverly Lemire, "'In the Hands of Workwomen': English Markets, Cheap Clothing and Female Labour, 1650-1800," *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 33 (1999): 23.
[4] See C. H. Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791,* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), 508, for an in-depth investigation of French needlewomen.

escaped record, working perhaps with tailoring or staymaking husbands, like Rose Hodgkins of Bedford, mantuamaker to Mrs Gery.[5] However, the importance of this occupational history becomes evident when one considers the vast numbers employed in the garment making trades. One study lists 'making and mending clothing' as the commonest occupational choice of single London women after domestic service in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[6] This amounted to approximately twenty percent of working women in England's capital.

It is the intent of this paper to sketch out a portrayal of eighteenth century English needlewomen. To do this I incorporate several forms of research including scholarship from the last four decades, some primary source material, and object-based research applying an overall inductive approach. Because there is no systematic account of the garment making trades in England to compare with what was produced in France[7] I have had to tease many of my insights from between the lines of others' work.

The majority of modern research into both pre-industrial dress history and women's involvement in its production has emerged within the last forty years, and evolved significantly over that period. An unprecedented amount of dress history scholarship surfaced approximately forty years ago headed by costume collection curators such as Anne Buck and Madeleine Ginsburg, and costume specialists like Janet Arnold and Norah Waugh. They were some of the first to

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[5] Anne Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800," *Textile History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 222.
[6] Peter Earle, "The Female Labour-Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Economic History Review* 42, no. 3 (1989): 340.
[7] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 64.

examine dress as something more than a decorative relic of fashion history, and provide information on how western clothing of recent centuries was produced and consumed.

Later scholars built on their innovative work, emphasizing the possibilities resident within historical dress as a vehicle for investigating issues surrounding its manufacture and consumption along with other aspects of social history. Delving even deeper than their predecessors into primary sources including diaries, personal correspondence, ledgers, insurance records, business accounts, probate inventories, and court records scholars began crafting more nuanced pictures of the functions of clothing within society. To this they added research of scholars in other, related fields. For example, John Rule's extensive work on pre and early industrial labour, Peter Earle's examination of the female labour market, Pamela Sharpe and Susan Wright's studies of women's work and economic history, and more recently Claire Walsh's work on eighteenth century shops and consumerism. Some explore facets of trade, like Beverly Lemire's investigations of the second-hand and ready-made clothing trades, and Lynn Sorge-English's illustration of the eighteenth-century London whalebone and stays trades. John Styles uses an assortment of these tools to address the oft-forgotten clothing of ordinary people. Others like Lorna Weatherill, Margaret Spufford, and Giorgio Riello challenge pre-conceptions of consumption patterns amongst different classes. Amanda Vickery and Edwina Ehrman also examine consumer behaviour, but through the use of personal accounts, crafting narratives of the relationships between specific individuals and their apparel.

While each of the studies address the subject of the eighteenth-century needlewoman's history to greater or lesser degrees, none has yet assembled the diverse findings into a cohesive, holistic account. Little direct focus has been placed on the working-life experiences of eighteenth-century needlewomen, and even less on how they physically plied their trade. It is the purpose of this paper to catch up these threads, and begin the process of weaving them together into a suggestive tapestry chronicling the working lives of the myriad, and mostly anonymous, women who clothed England during this pivotal period.

To aid in this, a small amount of primary source material was also used including contemporary trade manuals, and records from the Old Bailey Proceedings. The latter, in particular, is a potentially rich resource from which many characteristics of working women's lives may be gleaned. The scope of this project allowed for only limited employment of Old Bailey records, however it is my hope that the initial findings from them will encourage further, and more in-depth and systematic exploration.

Concurrent with renewed interest in dress history has been the expansion of material culture as a field, which by its very nature is concerned with objects. Jules Prown observed that historical objects provide "direct sensory experience of surviving historical events,"[8] and that "all objects … are the transmitters of signs and signals, whether consciously or subconsciously sent or received. And the interpretation of cultural signals transmitted by artefacts is what material culture is

[8] Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 3.

all about."[9] To paraphrase Richard Grassby, historical objects give material form to the rules and belief patterns of those who traded, purchased, or used them.[10]

Although exhortations by dress historians to use garment artefacts for the study of clothing's position in historical societies appeared in the late 1980s, they appear to have mostly fallen on deaf ears. Even though these pleas included methodological suggestions for the formal study of garment artefacts,[11] historians continued to make little use of physical specimens except as diverting visual illustrations. As Nancy Rexford states, "the monumental fact remains unbudged that *things* have seldom been a source of *ideas* for historians. The substance of their major interpretations almost always comes from someplace else."[12] In the case of dress this primarily took the form of paintings, fashion prints, and advertisements.[13] Over the past ten to fifteen years, however, this has begun to change. The use of objects as a form of documentary research has increased, notably through Linda Baumgarten, along with others such as Beverly Lemire and Lynn Sorge-English. Jules Prown acknowledges, "artefacts are disappointing as communicators of historical fact; they tell us something, but facts are transmitted better by verbal documents. Artefacts are, however, excellent and special indexes of culture, concretions of the realities of belief of other people in other times and

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[9] ibid.: 12.

[10] Richard Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 4 (2005): 592. See also Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method", 6-7. "…belief and behaviour are inextricably intertwined. The material culturist is, therefore, necessarily interested in the motive forces that condition behaviour, specifically the making, the distribution, and the use of artefacts."

[11] Joan Severa and Merrill Horswill, "Costume as Material Culture," *Dress, The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 15 (1989): 51.

[12] Nancy Rexford, "Studying Garments for Their Own Sake: Mapping the World of Costume Scholarship," *Dress, The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 14 (1988): 71.

[13] Naomi Tarrant, "The Real Thing: The Study of Original Garments in Britain Since 1947," *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* (1998): 20.

places, ready and able to be re-experienced and interpreted today."[14] In addition to a similar sentiment Grassby points that most of what survives belonged to elites, and are thus less representative of everyday life for most people.[15] He asserts that artefacts, therefore, cannot generally be used on their own as sources of insight and information; "to 'read' inanimate objects is speculative at best."[16] Instead, he advocates a combination of object/artefact *and* informational evidence (literature, archival sources) in order to practice material culture history.[17] By combining this object-based research with the more traditional forms of documentary scholarship more holistic knowledge and especially understanding is possible.

According to Grassby early modern English people were more concerned with the physical than the abstract world; and therefore, it seems appropriate to take an object-based approach with the study of their history and culture.[18] Since I believe that object study is essential to dress history research and to understand the processes of production, it seems especially important to include it in investigations pertaining to the eighteenth century. Thus, over a period of two months I examined approximately sixty women's dresses and ten jackets, primarily from the collection at the Museum of London.

[14] Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method", 16.
[15] Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History", 597.
[16] ibid.: 599.
[17] ibid.: 592.
[18] ibid.: 594.

For this venture into object-based research I employed a synthesis of the methodology proposed by Jules Prown[19] with that of Joan Severa and Merrill Horswill,[20] which harmonize with the etic and emic forms of analysis later given by Grassby.[21] During my examinations of eighteenth century clothing examples I catalogued my observations of construction techniques and methods. Using my prior existing knowledge of garment construction I was able to understand, assess and interpret what I saw. Based on my interpretations I began to speculate on motives behind certain sewing practices, attitudes of makers towards their creations, and their owner's relationships with them.

In the following chapters I set out to look at various aspects of the working lives of eighteenth-century English needlewomen anew. The primary aim is to introduce the possibility of doing for them what Clare Crowston did for French couturieres of the same period.[22] The first chapter looks at the needletrades and women's participation in them. Suggestions are made of the range of experiences women might have in various aspects of the needletrades and their qualities of life. Wages and trade practices are also examined. The second chapter focuses on the clothing itself and garment construction. Object-based research is used to gain insights into how needlewomen made clothing and the intentions behind their techniques and methods. Artefact garments are also used in conjunction with

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[19] Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method", 7-10. The steps in Prown's methodology for extracting information from objects consist of: description; deduction (what would it be like to interact with or use the object?); and speculation.
[20] Severa and Horswill, "Costume as Material Culture", 54-55. Severa and Horswill propose a method of five properties (design, construction, function, history, workmanship), and four operations (identification, evaluation, cultural analysis, interpretation).
[21] Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History", 592; Etic analysis: study of an item's objective attributes; emic analysis: study of the significance of an object to those who used it.
[22] Crowston, *Fabricating Women: The Seamstresses of Old Regime France, 1675-1791*.

documentary sources to help dispel pre-conceived notions of skill levels and training among women within the needletrades. As Naomi Tarrant notes, "to study how a piece was made is to understand the skills of craftsmen and women of the past. All our contemporary skills are based on those of the past; we build on the past and if we do not understand it we fail to appreciate our heritage in its widest sense."[23] Finally, chapter three explores the social perceptions of needlewomen within society. The implications of and relationship with consumerism and 'fashion' are also considered in terms of their influence on the needletrades.

Although far from comprehensive, the following work opens out the real and varied lives of generations of women in the needle trades. They were not merely a homogenous group of drudges, but resourceful, pragmatic, and potentially market-savvy women carving a place and subsistence for themselves in a difficult and frequently hostile environment.

[23] Tarrant, "The Real Thing: The Study of Original Garments in Britain Since 1947", 18.

Chapter 1: Labour Practices and Work Conditions

The Gender Divisions of Labour

Scholars of women's work long believed gender divisions of labour which disadvantaged women were the product of industrialization. However, "while industrialization affected the structure of the gender division of labour, it was not responsible for instigating women's subordinate position in the labour market."[1] In fact a gender division of labour was long established in Europe by the early modern period. According to this division men dominated the primary labour market in occupations considered skilled and high status.[2] Conversely, women's work was relegated to the secondary labour market, and was considered unskilled and low status. Female labour was typically poorly paid, unstable work, which led to a greater likelihood of under and unemployment than that experienced by men.[3]

The sewing trades were one of these employment sectors. Scholars Honeyman and Goodman postulate two underlying influences on the pattern of women's work: economics, and the sex-gender system.[4] The result of this system was a gradual narrowing of occupational choices for women during the late middle ages who found themselves increasingly shepherded into either domestic service or the clothing trades. Although some women served apprenticeships and

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[1] K. Honeyman and J. Goodman, "Womens Work, Gender Conflict, and Labor-Markets in Europe, 1500-1900," *Economic History Review* 44, no. 4 (1991): 624.
[2] ibid.: 609.
[3] ibid.: 610.
[4] ibid.: 624, in the sex-gender system the patriarchal mindset reacted adversely to female participation in the labour market. This occurred particularly amongst occupations associated with men and connected with their spheres; otherwise it functioned as an underlying organizing concept.

others not, it was their sex more than their training that determined their work and pay.[5]

Even within the sewing trades labour was divided by gender. There were, theoretically, clear distinctions between what was acceptable for male tailors and female seamstresses/mantuamakers to produce. By the later 1600s male tailors primarily focused on the making of men's suits, greatcoats, other outer clothing such as riding dress for both sexes, and women's stays.[6] Female seamstresses and mantuamakers were primarily responsible for making up women's outer clothes (excluding riding habits), women's under clothes (excluding stays), children's outer clothes (for boys, up to age 6-8), children's underclothes, men's underclothes and linen, women's and children's accessories, and general household linens. These were considered the less skilled sectors within the garment production trade. Even mantuamakers who could cut and design were still perceived as possessing inferior skills compared with their male counterparts. Margot Finn notes that one of her subjects "proudly recorded that a tailor had fitted his son for his first suit of clothes."[7] It is significant that this is his first *suit*, not necessarily *set*. It is likely that women made his early clothes. This event, therefore, marks not only the boy's transition from gender-neutral infant clothing to male-specific adult wear, but also from seamstress to tailor, and was a benchmark moment in his young life.

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[5] Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, (London, England: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1997), 50.
[6] Anne Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire," *Bedfordshire Historical Miscellany* 72 (1993): 145.
[7] Margot Finn, "Men's Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution," *Social History* 25, no. 2 (2000): 140.

It is important to note that the clear division between women and men's work within the clothing trades was theoretical because, of course, actual practice was not so clear-cut. Although women were discouraged from competing directly with male tailors, (usually with poorly paying results), not all women followed such strictures, nor even did all men.[8] Men continued to make women's gowns, and women could be found in the staymaking and tailoring trades.

However, a paradoxical shift was occurring throughout the eighteenth century as Enlightenment ideals of women's 'natural' occupations, and the 'unnaturalness' of men practicing them, collided with the factual and long-standing traditions of male tailors, hairdressers, and other body oriented trades.[9] Rousseauean philosophy associated women with needlework, giving rise to the belief that it was a 'natural' female occupation. In her work on eighteenth-century literary representations of mantuamakers and milliners, Jennie Batchelor goes so far as to view these women as active agents who knowingly helped redefine sexual divisions of labour within the sewing trades, and both "effectively consolidated the supposedly innate connection between femininity and fashion"[10] and capitalized on it. However, this claim of agency can be taken too far. It seems more realistic to view these women as having actively pursued those occupational avenues open to them within the clothing trades simply to survive and eke out a living.

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[8] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* 53.
[9] J. G. Coffin, "Gender and the Guild Order - the Garment Trades in 18th-Century Paris," *Journal of Economic History* 54, no. 4 (1994): 787.
[10] Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature,* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 52.

Divisions between women's domestic and professional work could be equally blurred. Home and professional sewing was not always differentiated; it was not uncommon for a woman/wife to take on extra work to supplement household incomes using these housewifely skills.[11] Male tailors, on the other hand, strove to maintain a clear separation from associations with the domestic in order to project a more professional image than their female counterparts.[12] One way of doing this was to avoid the sewing of linen, an occupation closely identified with the domestic environment and female housework.[13]

Types of Sewing Trades and the 'Rise' of the Mantuamaker

Until the late seventeenth century professional garment making for men and women was, theoretically, an exclusively male trade carefully controlled by the guild system. However, around this time the mantua evolved from a loose undress gown that women were permitted to make into the dominant style for women's dress. With that precedent women continued to make the new incarnation of the mantua and eventually took over the making of women's clothing in general. This is when the term *mantuamaker* came into being, and it lasted long after the mantua itself had gone out of style.[14] Indeed, at the end of the seventeenth century, the second most prominent occupation recorded for

[11] Mary C. Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing,* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006), 171-173; Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* 50.
[12] Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing,* 175.
[13] John Styles, *The Dress of the people: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
[14] Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", 148.

London women, after domestic service, was the making and mending of clothing.[15]

Women made clothing for customers on every rung of the social ladder. Contrary to the traditionally held belief that the working classes made their own clothes new garments were, in fact, generally commissioned from tailors, and the growing number of mantuamakers. [16] Most cloth was too costly to risk being cut and sewn by an untrained hand, and cutting in particular was a trained skill. However, perhaps only one's best clothes (if one had best clothes) would be commissioned new. The rest of a labouring person's wardrobe was frequently acquired through the ready-made and second-hand clothing trades. Higher up the social ladder the reverse would be true. Most garments would be commissioned new from the tailor or mantua maker, with smaller accessories bought ready-made, and perhaps a few garments passed down.

Mantuamakers and seamstresses worked not only for a wide range of customers, there were also various individual fields within the needletrades and a woman might engage in several of them throughout her working years. In addition to being a mantuamaker or seamstress, a woman could be a milliner, quilter, embroiderer, bodice-maker, or specialise in children's clothes or linens.[17]

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[15] Peter Earle, "The Female Labor-Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Economic History Review* 42, no. 3 (1989): 340.

[16] Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", 46.

[17] For example, in the mid-eighteenth century needlewoman Elizabeth Mitchell engaged at different times in plain work, hoop petticoat making, children's clothes, bonnet and cloak making, millinery, and petticoat quilting; Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 6 (1972): 68; Susan Wright found several female tailors between 1734 and 1770 as well as a few mantuamakers between 1749 and 1786 in Ludlow, Shropshire; Susan Wright, "Holding Up Half the Sky: Women and Their Occupations in Eighteenth-Century Ludlow," *Midland History* 14 (1989): 57; Mrs Beauvais was a fashionable

One of the largest employers of journeywomen seamstresses since the late seventeenth century was the ready-made trade. Ready-made apparel was becoming increasingly visible and available by the mid-seventeenth century.[18] However, the ready-made trade was galvanized after William III took the English throne in 1689. William engaged in an almost constant succession of wars triggering rapid naval and army expansions. According to Beverly Lemire it is this that transformed the landscape of English clothing production processes.[19] The ready-made trade flourished with the infusion of masses of cheap female labour combined with the erosion of the guild system and its influence.[20] The garments made for sailors differed only slightly from civilian labouring class clothing, thus it was only a matter of time before this process was employed to produce for the wider civilian market as well.[21] London and the southern port cities were the hubs around which this trade revolved, and untold thousands of women at any given time were involved in this putting-out system over the course of the eighteenth century.[22] At the time, the ready-made trade was known to as

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London milliner in the 1770s and 1780s who practised the French mode of being both milliner and mantuamaker; Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England,* (London: Batsford, 1979), 162. Between the mid and late eighteenth century the aesthetics of women's dress shifted visual emphasis from the fabric itself to a garment's trimmings. As a result it appears that later in the century, at least, a mantuamaker might add or shift to the trade of Gown Trimmer. A letter of Marchioness Grey to her eldest daughter, Lady Polwarth, in 1774 refers to patronizing such a tradeswoman; ibid., 161. However, considering this is the only example of the trade I have yet encountered it may have been rare. Perhaps this denotes as much a change in the definition of milliner as it does an independent trade.

[18] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* 43.

[19] Lemire, "'In the Hands of Workwomen': English Markets, Cheap Clothing and Female Labour, 1650-1800", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 33 (1999): 23-24.

[20] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* 43.

[21] Lemire, "'In the Hands of Workwomen': English Markets, Cheap Clothing and Female Labour, 1650-1800", 25.

[22] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* 43-44.

the 'slop' trade[23] and a slop shop could supposedly sell all manner of clothes, right up to greatcoats.[24] Depending on factors such as volume of garments being made, for whom, the amount of capital available to the manufacturer, and the numbers employed there could be significant variety in how the manufacture of ready-made clothing was carried out.[25] This array could range from shopkeepers employing seamstresses at the back of the shop making up items for shop stock to large merchants sub-contracting out to a number of manufacturers employing hundreds, if not thousands at a time.[26]

Hierarchical Order Within the Trades

Inevitably, with such diversity under the umbrella of 'sewing trades' not all occupations were considered equal. Correspondingly, workers within each individual area and between specialities acquired different levels of training and skills. Some mantuamakers had superior abilities to others, and the skills required for breeches making were more varied and sophisticated than for sewing up neck cloths. Definite hierarchies existed among women who sewed. While most, if not all, young girls were taught needlework as part of their formative home education, far from providing common ground between them needle arts and skills could sharply demarcate social positions. Upper class girls were taught decorative and fancy embroidery as well as fine plain work. Advanced embroidery skills, employed at home, were considered a testament to gentility. Adeptness with plain work and practical sewing was associated with the working classes, although

[23] Slops referred to a type of male nether garment that was a loose and baggy form of breeches
[24] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 67.
[25] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 56.
[26] ibid., 56.

some received training in highly decorative embroidery. Amongst women who sewed for their living hierarchies were equally pronounced.

Women working in the sewing trades came from various backgrounds ranging from the very poor to the middling classes. Their customers equally differed from their plebeian neighbours up to the gentry and aristocracy. In a socio-economic climate where one's origins usually determined one's future station, needlewomen born into poverty generally remained there, working in the ready-made trade or mending other poor people's clothing. The skill of cutting marked the great divide in the garment making trades between those who had a hope of self-sufficiency and those who consistently struggled to attain bare subsistence. Cutting could only be learned during a good apprenticeship, which cost a substantial amount of money. If a girl came from the artisanal or middling orders capital might have been available from family and connections to get an apprenticeship and then set up business for herself. Such enterprises as these ranged in consequence from the local provincial mantuamaker who made and, more often mended, the clothing of her neighbours of both sexes up to such women as Mrs Lafare, a fashionable London mantuamaker of the 1750s and 1760s patronized by the aristocracy.[27] This same pattern is seen on the male side of the trades, which extended from rural tailors whose bread and butter revolved around "reseatinof breeches and letting out of waistcoats" up to fashionable London masters.[28]

[27] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England,* 160, Lady Anson and Marchioness Grey referred to her as Madame la Marquise.
[28] ibid., 74.

Without the formal training of an apprenticeship a young woman would have to rely on the skills taught her at home. In London these women were most likely relegated to piecework for the ready-made trade, which was among the lowest and poorest paying work. This indeed appears to have been the fate of the majority of needlewomen in London, each of them struggling to make ends meet. When large and important contracts to supply military clothing became available, their distribution was biased towards low-cost, large-scale, male-run sub-contractors who employed masses of underpaid women.[29] Another important issue was the abundance of available female labour. As more women entered the needletrades in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the trade became more hierarchical, and wages correspondingly differentiated.[30] Work became increasingly sweated and unstable.

Rungs on the ladder of this hierarchy can be seen in the use of varying terminology describing a woman who lived by her needle. From contemporary accounts such as Old Bailey depositions, employment and apprenticeship records, and personal accounts a basic hierarchical order can be reconstructed. At the very bottom of the ladder was the needlewoman involved in the putting-out system, in other words doing piecework for the ready-made trade. Such women frequently worked in large, crowded workshops or cramped London garrets. A small step up from this was the *sempstress* (called seamstress today). Her skills were considered of low value and she did not know cutting; however, the term sempstress is most often used to describe a woman who has relatively steady

[29] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 52.
[30] Coffin, "Gender and the Guild Order - the Garment Trades in Eighteenth-Century Paris", 772.

employment in a shop, not doing piecework. Instead, she was often responsible for making up linens and other full garments. Somewhere in the middle were women who specialised in making particular items such as children's clothes, bodices, and quilted petticoats. Positioned on the upper rungs of the ladder, contemporary sources strongly suggest that the title *mantuamaker* was reserved for those women who had served apprenticeships, learned cutting, and were either skilled journeywomen or mistresses in their own right. Tailors and mantuamakers were the principle makers of clothing for the 'fashionable people', gentry, and at least the more prosperous common people.[31] There is the occasional mention of *female tailors*, who might be presumed especially skilful in order to cut men's suits.

In Peter Earle's study of the London female labour market in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the largest group of women within the sewing trades were sempstresses and, thus, those involved in the putting-out system. [32] There was also a group of mantua makers, and four women who described themselves as tailors.[33] Additionally, there were small numbers of women involved in a large number of specialised areas including quilting, embroidery, and bodice making.[34] These findings harmonize with other sources and confirm the social structure of eighteenth-century England. Mirroring society, the largest numbers of women were employed at the bottom ends of the sewing trades, a small number acquired training to work in areas providing

[31] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 180.
[32] Earle, "The Female Labor-Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries". 340.
[33] ibid.: 340.
[34] ibid.: 340-341.

middling prosperity, while even fewer received the training and financial assistance required to work in the most lucrative areas of the trade.

Employment Opportunities

Perceptions of general employment opportunities for women in this period continue to be contentious. As Judith Coffin succinctly states, "studies of female labour in early modern Europe have created a contradictory picture."[35] On the one hand there are those who protest that the avenues of employment for women steadily contracted throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other are those who claim that this picture is too simplistic, that women's occupational choices were always narrow and that it was the *nature* of these options not the *number* that changed over time. Others, like Maxine Berg, paint a picture of variable opportunities depending on the time and location.[36]

For comparison purposes, among the former group, attempts have been made to locate a nostalgic 'golden age' of women's work, a time when women enjoyed a harmonious role alongside men before being consigned to the level of parasites within the workforce. This hypothesis largely derives from Alice Clark's interpretations,[37] which viewed the late seventeenth century as a period during which women were stripped of partnership with their husbands. Susan Wright suggests the reason for women's dwindling participation in skilled trades was a patriarchal shift in social attitudes. The effect of this shift was that the "'leisured wife' became an important symbol for the middle classes who wished

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[35] Coffin, "Gender and the Guild Order - the Garment Trades in Eighteenth-Century Paris", 769.
[36] Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures 1700-1820: Industry, Innovation, and Work in Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 156-163.
[37] Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, new ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), 328.

to ape their betters."[38] According to Honeyman and Goodman, patriarchy is largely accepted as the determining factor of women's historical economic, political and social subordination.[39] In addition, a growing link between women's work and household production coincided with the elimination of single women within guilds, thus generating the belief that women's roles constituted domestic service and household duties.[40] As a result 'honourable', skilled work became dissociated from household production. Honeyman and Goodman claim that the change began in the late middle ages and that during this time women's occupational options polarized and women in towns were increasingly excluded from high-status, skilled work. They purport that "prior to this subordination, medieval urban women were relatively well represented in a variety of high-status occupations."[41] Although participation in high-skilled trades appears to have been greater in London and Cologne while less so in Paris and Venice, girls all over Europe served apprenticeships and women held guild positions. This was particularly true of those economic activities where production was organized on the basis of family units.[42]

However, Honeyman and Goodman oversimplify the situation by conflating the prevalence of cottage industry prior to the rise of proto-factory production with a period of grand opportunity for women's occupational

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[38] Wright, "Holding Up Half the Sky: Women and Their Occupations in Eighteenth-Century Ludlow", 55.
[39] Honeyman and Goodman, "Womens Work, Gender Conflict, and Labor-Markets in Europe, 1500-1900", 609.
[40] J. H. Quataert, "The Shaping of Womens Work in Manufacturing, Guilds, Households, and the State in Central-Europe, 1648-1870," *American Historical Review* 90, no. 5 (1985): 1124.
[41] Honeyman and Goodman, "Womens Work, Gender Conflict, and Labor-Markets in Europe, 1500-1900", 610.
[42] ibid.: 610.

participation. Even Susan Wright cautioned that "we should be sceptical about any temptation to generalize or to narrow down the decline in women's economic position to a particular period, for individual studies make it clear that conditions varied considerably from one community to the next and as one avenue closed another opened."[43] Judith Coffin recommends that many long-held suppositions (like those of Alice Clark's) be re-considered, and arguments have even been made for an increase in women's work opportunities through the seventeenth century, particularly those connected with burgeoning consumer industries. Coffin asserts that women were involved in all levels of market relations, both formally and casually, and were also involved in both the formal and informal economies.[44] Although there was no 'golden age' for women and work, neither were there moral objections to women working; they were, in fact, encouraged and expected to do so. A labouring woman's place was not necessarily in the home since her wages were more often than not integral to a household's ability to make ends meet. Wright believes that women in business and trade were tolerated during this period in many places around England, provided they did not encroach too much into male work spheres.

Susan Wright suggests there was an ebb and flow to women's choices. At the dawn of the eighteenth century she indicates women experienced a decline in many important occupational choices. However, there were a number of women householders involved in trade, and during the eighteenth century there were increasing numbers of women involved in female-oriented trades. According to

[43] Wright, "Holding Up Half the Sky: Women and Their Occupations in Eighteenth-Century Ludlow", 55.
[44] Coffin, "Gender and the Guild Order - the Garment Trades in Eighteenth-Century Paris", 769.

Wright, over two-thirds of the female householders of eighteenth-century Ludlow engaged in some manner of productive work, be it button-making, mantuamaking, or hat making, to name a few. Towards the end of the century, she identifies another decline in women's opportunities as fashion and technology rendered certain trades less profitable or obsolete. [45]

Amanda Vickery suggests that instead of focusing on cataloguing change, the *un*changing nature of women's work over time ought to be emphasized.[46] However, Pamela Sharpe contends that the most recent research illustrates that neither continuity nor change theories are a satisfactory explanation or model.[47] Instead, "the best studies illustrate the range of questions that need to be answered, caution against generalizations that sweep across centuries, regions, and countries, and are refreshingly blunt about how little historians understand of the dynamics at work."[48]

Yet, from all of these views a suggestive picture of early modern women's occupational opportunities does emerge. Although the variety of women's occupational choices may have shrunk during the latter seventeenth century, they were expanding within the garment trades. Where a door may have been closed, a window was opened. Perhaps this was not the ideal solution, however, expansion of the garment production trades in this period did provide alternatives for women who found themselves increasingly excluded from other occupations.

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[45] ibid.: 55, 56.
[46] 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): 403-405.
[47] P. Sharpe, "Continuity and Change – Women's History and Economic-History in Britain," *Economic History Review* 48, no. 2 (1995): 356.
[48] Coffin, "Gender and the Guild Order - the Garment Trades in Eighteenth-Century Paris", 769.

The dispute over narrowing versus widening employment opportunities for women during the early modern period extends into that very field towards which women were increasingly pushed. Everyone needed clothing, and being ephemeral, garments needed periodic repair and replacing in order for a person to maintain even an appearance of decency, let alone fashionability. Thus, almost every village had at least one shoemaker and tailor, or more. The village of Cardington, Bedfordshire, with a population of 756 in 1782, had two tailors and three shoemakers to service its needs.[49] London, in 1752, had an estimated one thousand master tailors and staymakers employing at least fifteen hundred journeymen.[50]

Unfortunately, there are no comparable figures for women involved in the trades.[51] However, by pulling together various sources and studies a suggestive picture of participation emerges. As mentioned, Peter Earle determined that nearly twenty percent of working London women were involved in the making and mending of clothing in about 1700, representing the second largest area of female employment after domestic service. This finding is substantiated by the large number of women recorded in the Proceedings of the Old Bailey (on both sides of the law) who declared themselves needlewomen of some type. Outside London, the record from Cardington shows two mantuamakers in addition to the

[49] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 142.
[50] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 64.
[51] One of the most significant difficulties in locating women's participation in the sewing (or any other) trades in England is that local records are more informative on single or widowed women than married. It appears their status as 'married' superseded whatever occupation they may have engaged in; thus, a large contingent of the working female population has been left no voice whatsoever.

tailors and shoemakers.[52] In Ludlow, a couple of female tailors were present between 1734 and 1770 as well as a few mantuamakers between 1749 and 1786.

Elizabeth Sanderson's investigation of women and work in eighteenth-century Edinburgh is replete with examples of women – single, married, and widowed – who worked both inside and outside the home.[53] Sanderson's findings indicate that many more women held recognized occupations than might be commonly supposed, as marriage did not mean the end of work for many women below the uppermost social classes. Even the wives of professionals such as lawyers, writers, physicians, ministers, and the gentry frequently ran businesses of their own.[54] Far from husbands being ashamed that their wives were employed, Sanderson indicates this could form a source of pride in their partners. The records Sanderson refers to suggest that the type of employment was different between women of different marital and social statuses. For example, in the list of single women sewing-related occupations such as milliner and mantuamaker figure frequently. Among married women, these same occupations are seen most often in conjunction with tailor or staymaker husbands. While Sanderson's findings relate specifically to the city of Edinburgh, the close proximity to England and the constant trade between England and Scotland imply that similar practices are likely to have occurred throughout England as well.

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[52] Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", 142.

[53] Elizabeth Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), 130,131. Eighteenth-century married women in Edinburgh were not as invisible in city records as their English counterparts. They were able to be city burgesses in their own right (through inheritance or purchase) and frequently continued using their maiden surnames after marriage.

[54] ibid., 117-122.

The ready-made trade employed so many women (hundreds if not thousands) that their exact numbers were beyond reckoning, even by their employers. This testifies still further to the significant number of women involved in this sector of the needletrades alone[55]. One might think this would have generated a constant, corresponding need for labour; however, women perpetually faced difficulties in obtaining steady employment. There were simply that many women competing for these jobs. There was an abundance of female labour due to a population disparity between men and women, boys and girls,[56] and dwindling opportunities in other trades. Despite the hard hours and poor wages there was no shortage of girls entering the needle trades; it was the most natural path for them if they wanted to avoid going into service. As a result, although opportunities of employment in the needle trades were varied and expansive the sheer numbers of women entering the trades, especially in London, created an environment of sweated labour where job security was non-existent. Another consequence of the competition for work was that it drove most wages down, sometimes to below subsistence levels. Life as a needlewoman in the ready-made clothing trade was a bleak prospect indeed.

However, this was not the case for all needlewomen. Despite the changing nature of garment production occurring in the early eighteenth century there remained various types of needletrade employment avenues. Many women, both in London and provincially, were independent mantuamakers working for varied clientele. Those who could raise enough capital might combine mantuamaking

[55] Lemire, "'In the Hands of Workwomen': English Markets, Cheap Clothing and Female Labour, 1650-1800", 34.
[56] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 69.

work with millinery or haberdashery shops such as Susan Buck in 1743,[57] Mrs Beauvais in the 1770s and 1780s,[58] and Margaret Thompson in 1797.[59] There were large numbers of journeywomen who worked for masters and mistresses in shops of various size and status. In the large, factory-like shops women could be employed by manufacturers as managers and overseers of production sites, like Sarah Sackfield in 1764.[60]

Wages

Prior to the industrial mechanization of weaving, cloth was a substantial investment for most people. In a new garment or suit of clothes the cloth accounted, by far, for the majority of the cost. Labour, in comparison, was cheap, female labour particularly so. Assessing the actual wages of mantuamakers and seamstresses over the eighteenth century is an arduous and frustrating task. It is difficult to get a sense of typical costs for items due to several variables: differences between London and the country; the impossibility of knowing the quality of goods compared with others; profit margin variability; transport costs; and fluctuations in costs of material and labour.[61] It is also unclear exactly what constituted a subsistence wage. This makes it difficult to pinpoint a benchmark against which to evaluate references to earnings. However, by looking at some anecdotal examples of wages paid for different garments across time and space

[57] Susan Buck was a mantuamaker who also had a haberdasher's shop; Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 7 September 1743 (tl7430907-3).
[58] Mrs Beauvais was a fashionable London milliner in the 1770s and 1780s who was also a mantuamaker; Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 162.
[59] Margaret Thompson was both mantuamaker and milliner in 1797; Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 26 April 1797 (tl7970426-18).
[60] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 70.
[61] Edwina Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765," *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 40 (2006): 31.

the beginnings of a general picture of earnings amongst needlewoman materializes.

Looking at the degree of disparity between materials and labour costs provide a frame of reference to begin understanding wages. In a letter of complaint to an MP in 1745, journeymen tailors included the breakdown of a bill for a man's velvet suit consisting of coat, waistcoat and breeches. The 12 yards of velvet required cost a total of £14.8.0*d*; serge cloth £2.15.0*d*; buttons £2.0.6*d*; linings & facings £4.12.0*d*; it took seven and a half work days to make the suit at 2.6*d* per day. Thus, out of a total bill of £23.0.10 ½*d* the journeyman earned 18.9*d*; he received less than £1 while the Master netted £5.0.3*d* in profit.[62] The bill for a mantua made for Mary Dodson (a member of the gentry) in 1748 included 19 yards of green damask for a total cost of £14.5.0*d*; and 1.6*d* for feril, buttons and loops. The mantuamaker's labour cost 10*s* plus an additional 1.6*d* for lining the body and sleeves with 12 yards of material supplied by Mrs Dodson.[63] Thus, out of a bill of at least £14/18*s* (any profit is not included here), a total of only 11.6*d* was paid to the mantuamaker. In 1762 Charles James was contracted to supply the navy with approx 270,000 shirts for £45,000.[64] This translates into approximately 3.3*d* per shirt, of which the seamstress would have likely received much less than 1*s* for her work.

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[62] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 67.
[63] Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765", 31-32.
[64] Lemire, "'In the Hands of Workwomen': English Markets, Cheap Clothing and Female Labour, 1650-1800", 29.

Table 1.1

Customer	Garment(s)	Year	Wage Paid
Lady Jemima Grey[65]	formal mantua, petticoat	1724	16s.
" "	informal dresses	1724	8s.
Lady Sackville[66]	mantuas	1738-42	12-14s.
" "	wrapper	1738-42	6s.
Martha Dodson[67]	mantua	1748	10s.
" "	bodice & sleeve lining	1748	1.6d.
" "	quilted petticoat	1763	19.6d.
" "	white cotton stockings	1763	3.9d.
" "	pocket handkerchief	1763	5s.
Lady Louisa Fitzpatrick[68]	crape slip	1760s	4s.
" "	white tabby slip	1760s	5s.
" "	2 jackets	1760s	6.4d.
Mrs. Gery[69]	4 gowns	1790	£1.1s.
" "	black silk negligee turned into a nightgown	1790	4.6d.
" "	nightgown	1791	4s.
" "	satin gown	1792	9.7d.
Nancy Woodford[70]	gown	c. 1800	3s.
" "	lining a gown	c. 1800	2s.

Wages paid to needlewomen for making up various garments 1724-1800.

Drawing upon several sources, Table 1.1 illustrates other examples of labour costs for specific garments commissioned over the course of the eighteenth century by women of varying levels among England's elite. Within this small sample we can see that the cost of labour for a variety of garments catering to elites was by and large 10*s* or less. While the customers mentioned are from varying social backgrounds, during the eighteenth century fabric determined and expressed social status far more than the cut and sewing of garments. Thus, the

[65] Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", 148.
[66] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 69.
[67] Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765", 31-34.
[68] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 214.
[69] ibid.: 217-219.
[70] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 69.

cost of making up clothing could be comparatively stable among those serving the genteel social classes. Furthermore, it suggests that such wages may have lowered over the course of the century. This is not surprising considering that women's dress fashions transitioned from incorporated fabric trimmings made and applied by the mantuamaker to bought trimmings applied by milliners or their assistants through to simple styles with no trimmings.

Comparing wage rates between men and women, different trades, and wage differences between London and the country provide context for the wage examples given above. In his work on eighteenth-century English industrial labour John Rule synthesizes several sources to craft an illustrative picture of wage rates amongst male workers.[71] One of these is Massie's survey of 1759, which shows two basic conditions: craftsmen typically earned more than common labourers; and London wages were higher than provincial ones. According to Massie's figures London labourers earned 9s/week, provincial labourers 5s/week; London textile workers earned 10.1d, while provincial ones 7.6d.; wood or metal craftsmen in London earned 12s., those in the country 9s. Another source, Adam Smith, reckoned that masons and bricklayers could earn 15s-18s/week in London, and 7s-8s in the country. Two trade manuals were published in 1747 to assist parents in choosing apprenticeships for their children: *The Description of All Trades*, authored anonymously; and *The London Tradesman*, by R. Campbell. Campbell stated that foremen in a tailor's shop could earn approximately 15-21s/week; but the far more numerous journeyman tailors earned 10s/week in the

[71] John Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth Century English Industry,* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981), 62.

winter and 15s/week in the summer.[72] *The Description of All Trades* corroborates this stating that "the least they are allowed by Act of Parliament is 1s 10d a Day".[73] The author seems to think this a good wage and that if the tailor is frugal may "get a good Livelihood".[74] However, compared with the figures for other trades, London tailors earned little better than common labourers. Rule agrees with the opinion that this "confirms the view that they were 'as poor as rats' on account of being 'as common as locusts'".[75]

Needlewomen, in comparison, fared even worse, *The Description of All Trades* recorded that journey-needlewomen in London worked at least the same hours as tailors for only 7s-9s per week. The plight of needlewomen is thrown into sharper relief by the fact that tailors earning approximately 15*s* per week struggled to make ends meet. For both men and women working in the sewing trades the seasonal nature of their work added an additional level of hardship. In preparing for and during the London season needleworkers experienced over-employment; but when it was over there was little to no work to be found. The lack of consistent employment must have played havoc with needleworkers' abilities to maintain themselves.

The disparity between men and women's wages may have been less severe in the countryside, however. In 1790, country gentleman, Mr Gery paid his tailor Richard Wyse and his man 8*d* per day for two days work at their estate,

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[72] R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster*, (1747), 192-194.
[73] Anonymous, *A General Description of All Trades*, (1747), 206.
[74] ibid., 206.
[75] Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth Century English Industry*, 62.

Bushmead. In 1791 Mrs Gery employed a Miss Brown for two days in May and five in September at the same rate; which was also the same for washing and ironing work two days each month.[76] Thus, Mr. And Mrs Gery paid the same rate to their male and female clothes makers. A daily wage of 8*d* per day totals a weekly income of only 4*s*, half a London journeywoman's. However, the lower cost of country living may have enabled such a meagre amount to provide at least subsistence.

The quilting trade presents a conflicting picture. Campbell records a very low weekly wage of 3 or 4*s* plus "Diet" for quilters.[77] Conversely, *The Description of All Trades* records a daily wage of 1-2*s* depending on skill level, which totals 6-12*s*/week, potentially higher than a mantuamaker's.[78] The Gery's of Bushmead also employed a quilter for some work, a woman named Eleanor Pinkey. It is recorded that for eleven days of quilting she was paid 6*d*/day[79] (a wage typically paid to women harvest workers), which would total only 3*s* for the week. Whether this is a mark of the difference between town and country, or whether the Gery's were peculiarly parsimonious in paying wages is unknown; however, the difference is striking.

The abundance of available female labour drove wages down and profits up for manufacturers. Most, if not all needlewomen were likely underpaid; and they had little or no legal recourse to contest their treatment. As Lemire points out, their only mode of redress was often through theft of either their employer's

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[76] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 218.
[77] Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster*, 213.
[78] Anonymous, *A General Description of All Trades*, 179.
[79] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 218.

or neighbour's possessions. The records of the Old Bailey are peppered with cases of women brought up on charges of theft who plied the needle as their trade in one form or other. It is significant to note that these women appear almost solely in cases of theft, rarely other crimes. Most often, these women were accused of stealing either from their employer or where they lodged. The items most frequently taken were articles of clothing or lengths of cloth, which had been quickly disposed of for cash either at the pawnshop or via sale to others.[80] Not all needlewomen mentioned in the records, however, were on trial. They are, in fact, almost evenly divided between witnesses, defendants and prosecutrixes. This observation may be read in two ways: on the one hand, even a third of mantuamakers mentioned as defendants represents a significant number; on the other, the majority of mantuamakers were not driven to crime as a means of supplementing their small wages.[81]

Working Environments & Quality of Life

Using the situation of male tailors for comparison purposes can be helpful in gaining perspective on the lots of their female counterparts regarding work environments and attainable standards of living from work in the needletrades. For, however bad the men's situation may have been, we can be fairly certain the women's was worse.

[80] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 50. Lemire cites examples of young needlewomen unable to support themselves on their work. Ann Scott, hanged for theft in 1685, had come from Ireland to England sure her needle skills would provide her sufficient honest employment. Martha Pillah, 18, executed for theft in 1717, was a girl fortunate enough to have had an apprenticeship from a male tailor. ibid., 52.
[81] Out of a sample of 83 Old Bailey proceedings cases for the years 1693 to 1817 in which the term mantuamaker (or mantua-maker or mantua maker) appears, 19 mantuamakers are the prosecutrix, 24 are defendants, and 24 are witnesses. www.oldbaileyonline.org. July 15, 2009.

A manifesto survives from 1721 in which London tailors complain of their long hours and physically stressful work conditions,[82] not to mention poor pay and inconsistent work throughout the year. One source records that in 1752 basic wages for a journeyman tailor were 2.6*d* per day (15s/week), and that employment outside March to June was very unsteady. These circumstances would, apparently, make it difficult, if not impossible, to save money.[83] The system that developed around the 'house of call' further aggravated many London tailors' financial situations. Employers and workers alike used the house of call (usually a public house owned by someone related to the trade) as the meeting point for finding work. Journeymen tailors would wait at the house for employers to call for workers at set times throughout the day. In the meantime, the house owner would extend credit for food and drink to the tailors, thus keeping them constantly in debt to the house.[84] In comparison, a woman in the needle trades frequently earned only 6-8s/week, and experienced equally (if not more) unsteady employment opportunities. At the end of the century, radical English social reformer Francis Place recalled that even as a qualified and skilled breeches maker he had starved. However, as a shopkeeper and later master tailor, stocking ready-to-wear as well as made-to-measure, he succeeded.[85] Of course, Place was unfortunate enough to have been a breeches maker when the popularity of leather breeches waned in favour of cloth breeches, trousers and long pants. The life of most tailors, excepting the masters of fashionable shops or large manufactories in

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[82] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 66.
[83] ibid.: 66.
[84] Dorothy M. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 293.
[85] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 65.

either London or one of the other large provincial towns, was probably not lucrative and supported only a very plain standard of living[86]; it is likely the majority of needlewomen were unable to achieve even that. Madeleine Ginsburg cites a sample from 1818 of 405 journeymen tailors, out of which only 16 were over 45 years of age. She interprets this to mean they tended to die young, thus a comment on their quality of life and working environments. Instead, I would suggest it meant few were able to work at this trade into or past middle age because of deteriorating eyesight. Spectacles were a luxury and tailors likely either retired (if able) or (more likely) turned to menial labour. At this point their standard of living likely plummeted. For aging women, prospects were at least equally grim. According to Earle's study, women involved in the sewing trades tended to be in their mid twenties to mid forties. A needlewoman unable to see her work adequately could be relegated to charring, laundering, and other domestic work at best; otherwise she spent her remaining time withering away in a workhouse.

It was very difficult for women to support themselves entirely with their needles; comparative wages were lower than men's even though their hours were equally long and arduous. That prostitution was so readily and closely associated with women in the needletrades speaks to the difficulties women faced to make ends meet with their legitimate occupation.[87] It is impossible to tell how many

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[86] Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster,* 193.; Anonymous, *A General Description of All Trades,* 206; Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 66.; Rule, *The Experience of Labour in Eighteenth Century English Industry,* 62.

[87] Beaudry, *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing,* 173.

women were involved in the lower ends of the trade, working either from their own lodgings or in workshops,[88] providing multitudes of cheap female labour. These women would have occupied some of the lowest positions on the socio-economic scale, vulnerable to sweated labour and its effects.[89] Single women without the added income of a spouse struggled to earn enough to live on by their needles.

Even when a needlewoman was fortunate enough to be self-sufficient, the environmental conditions in which she spent her long working hours left much to be desired. London and England's larger towns were, and remain, densely crowded. One of the centres of the eighteenth-century London slop trade was the poverty-ridden and disorderly neighbourhood of Rosemary Lane (now Royal Mint Street) at the eastern end of the city. Most buildings in general were small and cramped with tiny windows (when they were not boarded up altogether to avoid the 'window tax'[90]), and garment production workshops were no exception. Added to this was the ever-present smog from the city inhabitants' dependence on sea coal for fuel, which also impacted on available light, not to mention health. How did women involved in the ready-made trade who worked in large workshops in London see at all, especially if the sky was constantly overcast with soot and smog, and windows were small? Was candlelight required throughout

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[88] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 74.
[89] ibid., 52.
[90] Liza Picard, *Dr Johnson's London: Everyday Life in London 1740-1770*, (London: Phoenix, 2003), 43, 345 n. 6.: the window tax was introduced in 1695 and progressively raised throughout the 18th century. The Gentleman's Magazine of 1762 recorded that the tax was 1s per week for up to 12 windows, 1s 6d for more than 12.

the day? In this regard, rural needleworkers had the advantage over their urban counterparts with fresher air and better natural light.

The physical effects on the body from working in such environments were many. Sore necks and backs, and aching eyes from long hours of toil immediately spring to mind, yet there was more. Most of the materials used to make sailors' and workmen's clothes were inexpensive and likely of rough, serviceable quality; what, then, was the effect on women's hands to work with such material constantly, day after day, week after week? Did the hands belonging to sewers of finer garments, made of silks and fine linen fare any better? Fabrics made of natural fibres are porous and absorbent; as a result, they quickly leech moisture from skin that handles them. Hands that worked with finer fabrics must have needed frequent cleaning to keep from spoiling the costly cloths, likely depleting natural moisture further. Dry, chapped hands must have been common, not to mention the inevitable frequency of being poked by pins and needles leading to hard callouses.

On the other hand, an area where needlewomen, particularly mantuamakers and milliners, may have had the advantage over other workingwomen was their sartorial opportunities. Mantuamakers and other needlewomen routinely came into contact with linen drapers and other purveyors of fabric, and their interrelationships likely afforded them opportunities for striking bargains for personal acquisitions. Their environment and expertise may have enabled them to dress more fashionably than their peers. Indeed, those catering to fashionable and elite clientele are believed to have advertised as much

with their bodily attire as with anything else.[91] Depending on her circumstances a needlewoman may have made her own clothes, employed other needlewomen, bought second-hand, or a combination of the three. It seems unlikely that women employed in the bottom tier of the sewing trades would have had time or opportunity to indulge in finery; however it does seem possible that such a seamstress may have employed her skill to fashion her second-hand wardrobe into as 'smart' an appearance as she was able.

Some mantuamakers (probably independent mistresses) were prosperous enough to have been able to acquire possessions of some worth. Between 1745 and 1817 fifteen cases presented at the Old Bailey involved possessions of a mantuamaker. In most of these cases the mantuamaker was the prosecutrix (on her own if a spinster, through her husband if married) and deposed to stolen items that were listed, sometimes with values assigned. These goods were predominantly articles of clothing, and presumably belonged to more successful mantuamakers possessing items of resale value. In 1745 a large number of items were stolen from the home of Mr and Mrs Thomas Chitty.[92] Mr Chitty identified his wife as a mantuamaker and among the goods were several gowns belonging to customers including one gown valued at 2*l*, a silk gown valued at 3*l*, a cotton one valued at 2*l*, and six pieces of silk lustring fabric valued at 20*s*. These were fine garments belonging to prosperous women suggesting Mrs Chitty served a fashionable clientele. Among Mrs Chitty's own possessions were a petticoat valued at 1*s*, three gowns valued at 3*l*, a cambrick cap valued at 2*s*, and a cloth

[91] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, 61.
[92] Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 30 May 1745 (t17450530-17).

cloak valued at 2*s*. In addition to these were a number of Mr. Chitty's linen garments including eighteen shirts valued at 4*l* 10*s*, sixteen lawn stocks valued at 5*s*, a neckcloth valued at 1*s*, and a damask cap valued at 1*s*. Owning multiples of different garments was a clear indicator of prosperity; it also demonstrated a relatively comfortable standard of living for the time. The ability to afford multiple garments suggests being able to afford a variety of goods that would add to one's comforts. Another case, however, provides a glimpse into the shopping habits of a mantuamaker on the other side of the law. Sarah Davis was indicted in 1745 for the theft of a pair of stays valued at 4*s* from the old clothes shop of Mary Girdler.[93] Sarah had previously purchased a set of stays from Mrs Girdler for 11*s*, indicating that she acquired at least some of her clothing through the second-hand market.

Just as the social standing of needlewomen from different backgrounds and in different parts of the trade varied from very low to middling, so too did their standards of living. Many needlewomen were abjectly poor, living in pitiable conditions on the brink of subsistence or even starvation. Others, either independently or in co-operation with a husband, managed to maintain a standard of living at or a little above subsistence, albeit their position was likely often precarious. A comparatively small number of needlewomen, mostly mantuamakers and milliners, were able to live relatively comfortable lives, owning possessions of such value and number as to be worthy of theft by their servants or journeywomen.

[93] Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 30 May 1745 (t17450530-3).

Town and Country

As indicated above, the situations for people involved in the needletrades tended to differ between rural and urban environments. Each had their advantages and disadvantages. Wages in London and other urban centres were generally higher than in the country and there were more employment opportunities, even if job seekers out-numbered available work. In the country, cost of living was lower, life moved at a less hectic pace, and one had the benefit of cleaner air and possibly less crowded living conditions, although rural poverty was equally harsh as in the city.

There were, however, several levels between the implied extremes of 'town' and 'country'. Although London was the penultimate 'town', there were many large provincial centres equipped with fashionable shops to rival London, the main difference lying in numbers. Over the course of the eighteenth century, in the county town of Bedford, were found linen and woollen drapers, haberdashers, milliners, glovers, hosiers, hatters, breeches makers, bodice and staymakers, tailors, mantuamakers, shoemakers, and perukemakers.[94] Towns continued to range in size from larger to smaller market towns with, perhaps, one or two fashionable shops, right down to small villages and hamlets where a tailor or needlewoman spent most of their time on repairing, turning, and otherwise prolonging the life of garments and fabrics belonging to their neighbours.

The most visible distinction between rural and urban clothing consumption was among the rural elite classes, or those with residences both in London and the

[94] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 211.

country. They overwhelmingly preferred to buy and commission their most fashionable clothing from urban locations, especially London, rather than locally.[95] Such clothing was bought and made in London either directly or by proxy through friends and family members living there or visiting.[96] Proxy instructions and transactions could be very complicated and must have been frequently vexing for all concerned. The friend or relative in the country had to rely on another's taste, judgement, and interpretation of the commission.[97] The tradesperson was also required to interpret the desires of the client through an intermediary who may have imposed their own taste and biases on the given instructions. Letters between clients and their proxies show the varying degrees of success and failure of this custom. How easy it must have been for the whole endeavour to deteriorate into a game of 'broken telephone'. Some people's qualms about the resultant fit, led them to go so far as to send an old gown to London to be used as a pattern. However, even the very cautious would have accessories for specific outfits made there.[98]

The lesser gentry and middling orders acquired their best clothing primarily from the fashionable shops in provincial towns and centres. Although fashion in the English countryside was more relaxed than in London, even amongst elites, they were still concerned with projecting a 'fashionable'

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[95] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 69. Between 1739 and 1742 Lady Sackville paid the relatively expensive rate of 12-14s to have mantuas made from Mrs Marsh of fashionable St Albans Street.

[96] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 215.

[97] See Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England,* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998), 164-167, for examples of letters between husbands and wives and other relatives on the subject of proxy shopping commissions and their success, or lack thereof.

[98] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 214.

appearance.[99] Clothing for wearing in the country, and everyday dress was commissioned by these lesser elites from local tailors, mantuamakers, seamstresses, milliners, and travelling salesmen.[100] Occasionally the upper elites might patronize local trades and crafts people to supplement what was bought in or from London.[101]

The lesser gentry were active participants in a complex network of trade and consumption, connecting both town and country, and however remotely, elites with their social inferiors.[102] At this level of society capital and province were patronized simultaneously. The genteel Mrs Gery employed local Bedford milliners and mantuamakers as well as those from other provincial towns. She employed Mrs Hodgkins in Bedford to make and turn gowns between 1790 and 1792; and a local village mantua maker, Miss Brown, to work at her estate for two days.[103] In addition to Miss Ryder, a milliner and mantuamaker of Chancery Lane in London, Reverend Woodforde's niece, Nancy employed several local mantuamakers.[104] In Lancashire, Elizabeth Shackleton also employed local women to make and mend the household linen. Several girls and women came to

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[99] ibid.: 213; Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, 214.
[100] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 169-176.
[101] Anne Buck provides the example of Lady Louisa Fitzpatrick who, when a child, had many clothes from London but also a number acquired locally, particularly shoes. Upon growing up, local suppliers ceased to be patronized and her clothing was made by fashionable London tailors for riding habit(s), a French mantuamaker and French staymaker; Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 214.
[102] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, 161-194. Elizabeth Shackleton's diaries demonstrate the variety of methods employed by lesser gentry households and women for acquiring different commodities. Individual pieces of furniture and clothing were commissioned regionally, friends and relatives were relied on to procure goods from London, and the Shackletons themselves would travel to large local centres on occasion.
[103] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 218.
[104] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 172; these included: Miss Bell in Norwich; Miss Tooke, also in Norwich; Miss Batchelor in Reepham; and Betty Burroughs from Mattishall Burgh worked at the parsonage for three days in 1799.

Mrs Shackleton's house through the 1760s and 1770s to make shirts for her boys and mend some of her clothing.[105] Mrs. Shackleton routinely had her gowns fitted at home, demonstrating that she frequently commissioned local mantuamakers.[106] Local suppliers were also employed by parish overseers to fulfil the clothing needs of the poor. Thus, in provincial towns and more rural locations trade and crafts people could simultaneously serve those high and low. Those below the middling ranks would have almost exclusively used local trades people for all of their clothing needs.[107] Buck observes they may well have been dependant on the gentry of smaller estates and the local clergy for information and examples of fashionability. These two social groups would have come in closer contact than common people would with upper elites;[108] however, middle ranked people may have been able to employ the same needleworkers as their direct social superiors.

The nature of provincial clothing was simple: everyday wear with the occasional injection of fashionability. As a result, a village or smaller town seamstress would have had few commissions for sumptuous clothing, even if she were skilful and generally successful. The possibility of employment at a fashionable shop making beautiful garments for elite clientele may have been a factor in luring women from the country to London and other urban centres. Not only would the wages be greatly increased, but also the nature of the work would potentially be more varied and enjoyable. It is certainly a greater pleasure, or at least less onerous, to create a garment of beauty than tediously churning out

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[105] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, 324 n. 70.
[106] ibid., 140.
[107] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 174,185.
[108] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 214.

serviceable clothing that all looks alike. Later in the century provincial milliners and mantuamakers who desired to provide their customers with fashionable fare took advantage of transportation improvements, travelled to London for the latest fashion news, and brought it to their local clientele.[109]

However, protectionist tensions between London and local patronage also operated. Anne Buck writes of Sarah How who bought fabric for two gowns in London and had them made up there, even though she was the wife of a Woburn, Bedfordshire draper. Her more affluent bother-in-law rebuked her for both buying above her station, and employing local trades people for neither the fabric nor the making up.[110]

Trade Practices

Although women's participation in the garment trades often appears organic and fluid, they were still part of an overarching, organized system of business, commerce, and consumption. Those employed in the needletrades made garment goods that were sold to either individual customers or other retailers such as haberdashers, milliners, or peddlers, as well as for large manufactures supplying the army and navy. Thus, needlewomen were both subjects and agents in a number of recognized practices spanning several areas of the garment trades.

At the upper end of the needletrades an apprenticeship of seven years was the standard to become a Master tailor. Once the apprenticeship was completed, it was estimated in 1747 (by Campbell) and 1757 that £100 - £500 was necessary to

[109] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 172.
[110] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 223.

set up shop; although thirty years later the upper limit had dropped to £300.[111] In addition to Campbell, Peter Earle used information from Collyer (1761), which recorded comparable costs of £200-300.[112] Mistress mantuamakers also took girls as apprentices, for a fee of possibly £5 to £20.[113] However, the duration and regulation of a girl's apprenticeship to a needlewoman is more ambiguous. Such apprenticeships could range from two or three years to seven, and could vary in instruction from little or none up to an in-depth education in cutting and construction. As for the capital a woman required to set up shop, the *General Description of Trades* assumes "to make a mistress, there is little else wanting than a clever knack at cutting out and fitting, handsome carriage, and a good set of acquaintance."[114] Such a statement may appear thoughtless and trivializing, however, the value of social capital should not be underestimated.[115]

Once a young person had attained the status of either journeyman/woman or Master/Mistress much of their reputation and business was derived from word-of-mouth. Letters between both sexes up and down the social ladder continuously criss-crossed the nation. The communications frequently included instructions for proxy commissions, descriptions of other people's clothes and from whose shop they were obtained, and advice on which shops and crafts people to patronize. Old Bailey records also include depositions in which working class women recommend mantuamakers to each other. The same source also provides evidence

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[111] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 65.
[112] Earle, *Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660-1730*, 107.
[113] Anonymous, *A General Description of All Trades,* 134.
[114] ibid., 134.
[115] See Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* Anonymous (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 289-295, for a discussion on the three types of capital, including social capital.

suggesting that makers of clothing developed relationships with suppliers of materials that may have resulted in professional word-of-mouth advertising. These records are again useful for examples where mantuamaker witnesses recognized stolen cloth from a particular shop and alerted authorities or the shop owner.[116] In a letter from a Marchioness' youngest daughter in 1780[117] fabric is mentioned being sent from the mercer's to the mantuamaker's, and not brought directly by the customer. Needleworkers and merchants would have had ample opportunities to become well acquainted; it seems only logical that many would have cultivated reciprocal good will under a 'what's good for the goose is good for the gander' philosophy.

According to Anne Buck, another common type of professional alliance was tailor-husband and mantuamaker-wife partnerships. Buck provides a couple of examples of this found in Bedfordshire. Rose Hodgkin was a seamstress married to Thomas Hodgkin, a staymaker. Rose is recorded as having made gowns for Mrs Gery near the end of the century, and her husband a set of stays.[118] A husband-tailor and wife-mantuamaker couple are recorded for taking an apprentice in Northill, Bedfordshire, in 1798.[119] This type of partnership occurred in London as well;[120] and would seem, after all, to make good business sense as many tools, materials, and skills could be shared, and well-rounded service offered.

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[116] For example, in 1770 Mary Holmes recognized cloth stolen from George Beck's shop; Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 25 April 1770 (t17700425-22).
[117] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England,* 161.
[118] Buck, *Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800,* 218.
[119] Buck, *Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire,* 147.
[120] Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 29 April 1767 (t17670429-55); 25 April 1781 (t17810425-62).

Once a tailor or mantuamaker was found and decided upon, a relationship between maker and client often developed. Many fashionable people living in the country had specific trades people they patronized exclusively, and even labouring London women mention employing individual mantuamakers for several years.[121] These relationships could also include a social element. Reverend Woodforde recorded breakfasting with his niece, Nancy's, London milliner during a trip there;[122] and Elizabeth Shackleton's local mantuamakers and seamstresses were regularly treated to tea when they called on her to perform fittings or conduct other business.[123] This performance was reciprocated, according to Mrs Shackleton's experience, by the mantuamaker herself. Mantuamaker Betty Hartley acquired the nickname 'Queen of Boston' from her customers for the hospitality they received when visiting her shop.[124]

The typical practices when commissioning a mantuamaker were for the client to provide both the cloth and supplies (thread, lace, other trimmings, etc), and guidance on the garment's style. These procedures could take more than one form however. We have already seen one example where fabric was delivered from the linen-draper to the mantuamaker, who might also be given directions to fetch it herself. Occasionally, she might stock up on fabrics from which her

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[121] Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org); 6 September 1739 (t17390906-23); 16 April 1740 (t17400416-7); 5 December 1781 (t17811205-14); Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England,* 436.

[122] John Beresford ed., *The Diary of a Country Parson: The Reverend James Woodforde,*Anonymous (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 275. Oct 8, 1786.

[123] Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England,* 207,208.In her diaries she recorded "Molly & Betty Hartley drank tea & suppd here, gave Molly a pair of corded ruffles to make for Mr. Parker"; "Betty Hartley Shopkeeper drank tea and suppd. Bot a new black short apron."; "Betty Hartley came to tea. My son paid her. Her bill in full to this day. £2:17."

[124] ibid., 208.

clients could choose, possibly maintaining her own supply of lining materials.[125] There were even a number of women who combined the trades of mantuamaker with milliner or linen-draper.[126] Ginsburg speculates that fashion guidance came from the client, not the mantuamaker because of the frequency with which fashion is discussed in contemporary correspondence, and the dominance of French fashion modes. Accordingly, French names amongst fashionable boutiques and tradeswomen may have been common.[127]

As a result of the various methods for obtaining materials and practicing their trade mantuamakers, whether self-employed or journeywomen in a workshop, regularly had errands to run in the course of a day. Thus the image of a mantuamaker slaving over her work all day, needle ever in hand, might not be entirely accurate. Several Old Bailey trials mention mantuamakers going out to purchase fabrics and other supplies or running other types of errands, visiting clients to work, do fittings or deliver finished work. Thus, her life was unlikely one of unending monotony in her shop or the room in which she worked. Instead, it was peppered with this sort of activity on a daily basis. This does not mean she did not work hard at her trade, but that for women of this class in the sewing trades there were opportunities of at least getting up and outside during her long work hours.

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[125] Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 4 April 1733 (t17330404-53); 23 July 1783 (t17830723-3); 23 July 1783 (t17830723-99).
[126] Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 7 September 1743 (t17430907-3); 27 February 1754 (t17540227-48); 26 April 1797 (t17970426-18).
[127] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England,* 160,162.

Conclusion

Although no known diary of an eighteenth-century English mantuamaker or seamstress survives to illuminate the experiences of her working life, by stitching together the fragments of other sources and historians' interpretations, the beginnings of a suggestive, and nuanced set of pictures emerges. This is a set of pictures, rather than a single image because one of the key revelations is how different the experiences of women in basically the same trade could be. Female society's adoption of the mantua as the primary dress style for women for much of the century opened up new possibilities for professionally trained needlewomen to become independent mistresses. However, the concurrent growth of the pittance-paying ready-made clothing trade exploited and consumed far greater numbers of impoverished women with few other alternatives. Many other needlewomen strove to maintain a position somewhere in between these two extremes. Wages, working environments, and quality of life were equally differentiated, although even prosperous mantuamakers had to work hard at their sewing, cutting, and social skills in order to thrive. The opportunities to become a fashionable mantuamaker were far greater in large urban centres (greatest in London) rather than rural areas, but still exceedingly difficult to attain. However, among those of the middling and upper ranks of the trade, some participation in the burgeoning consumer economy was possible, affording some luxuries in dress and other goods. Opportunities for exercise and air throughout the day were likely common for journeywomen and those running their own shops. Taken altogether, instead

of a one-dimensional portrayal of a way of life, we see instead that even within a single trade a variety of experiences and possibilities existed. The life of a needlewoman was rarely, if ever, one of affluence and wealth, but neither was it always one of unending, abject drudgery.

Chapter 2: What Needlewomen Made and How

In 1747 Robert Campbell described a mantuamaker's occupation in *The London Tradesman* suggesting this trade entailed making "Night-Gowns, Mantuas and Petticoats, Rob de Chambres (sic) and etc. for the Ladies."[1] This, however, only sparingly describes the breadth of apparel women produced. The types of clothing articles made up by professional needlewomen were many and varied. Not only did they make women's and children's clothing, they could be found making the same garments for men that tailors had formally reserved to themselves. In short, women could be found sewing up any and all manner of apparel in existence in England at the time.

In addition to the different types of garments made by women, the following chapter also discusses the construction methods employed by needlewomen. The data collected from my examination of extant eighteenth century clothing comes most strongly into play here by providing detailed information on eighteenth-century garment construction, and insights into the reasoning behind their methods. This in turn leads to further discussions on the skills and training of needlewomen, the role and importance of garment alterations to the sewing trades, and the tools with which they plied it.

[1] R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster*, (1747), 227.

Types of Garments Made

John Styles states that early mantuamakers primarily sewed dresses and petticoats, and only later broadened their trade over the eighteenth century to include many other types of garments.[2] He further indicates that there was a division between garments made inside versus outside the home: main garments were usually made up by some manner of professional; while linens were made up in the home by female members of the household.[3] However, these proposed divisions are too simplistic and general. Not all women could sew, or possessed the necessary leisure time for this domestic work. Although needlewomen are chiefly associated with the sewing of gowns, it is unlikely that this garment-type formed the majority of their work. The sewing of linen, referring to shirts, chemises, cravats, handkerchiefs, scarves, caps, and quoifs, for both male and female consumers (and drawers for men) most likely represented the lion's share of production output from needlewomen.

Daniel Roche's work explains underlying motivations behind the large quantities of linen consumed during the eighteenth century. Roche identified new concepts of cleanliness that developed in Europe over the course of the eighteenth century.[4] Cleanliness became associated both with improved hygiene, and respectability. In European societies water was scarce, and even feared as a cause of spreading contagions. Instead, linen's absorbing property was used to cleanse the body of perspiration and oils. Thus, the ability to change shirts as regularly as

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[2] John Styles, *The Dress of the people: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
[3] ibid.
[4] Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Anciem Regime*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 155-157.

possible, and in that way keep clean, was very desirable. This greatly increased the demand for linen as the century progressed. Even the poorest person likely owned at least two shirts, and wealthy persons could own dozens or even hundreds by the end of the century,[5] far outstripping the production capabilities of domestic women. Handkerchiefs, and caps for women were equally ubiquitous; and all of these could take various forms depending on use and fashion. Many shopkeepers outside the metropolis employed local women to sew up limited quantities of small garments for wholesale to peddlers such as quoifs, quilted caps, handkerchiefs, cravats, and silk hoods.[6] The ready-made trade employed legions of women in London and other large urban centres to produce high volumes of these same goods.

Fig. 2.1 Man's linen shirt, 1750-1800

Fig. 2.2. Women's silk hanging pockets c. 1745

Victoria & Albert Museum Accession numbers T.246-1931 and T.87A, B-1978

Needlewomen also produced a great number of dresses, or gowns. Two dress styles in particular dominated most of eighteenth-century English fashion.

[5] ibid. 169.

[6] Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* (London, England: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1997), 60.

The first is the *mantua*, (known later in the century as the *robe à l'anglaise*).[7] Whether made for a working or elite woman the cut of the mantua remained

Fig. 2.3a & 2.3b. Mantua Gown, English, c. 1735
Metropolitan Museum of Art Accession number C.I.64.14

essentially the same. The other style, which became synonymous with the Rococo aesthetic, was the *sack* (also known as the *robe à la française).* From the front the two looked very similar, however, the back pleats were not stitched down as on the mantua, but fell gracefully from the shoulders. At this time fabric more than cut determined the expense and fashionability of garments. Yet, with its billowing back drapery sack dresses would have been unsuitable for most workingwomen. Around 1770 the 'polonaise' gown came into fashion, worn as an adaptation of the mantua by women of varying social classes. With the greater accessibility to fashionable dress forms with cheaper fabric like cottons and worsteds, the polonaise may well have been a commonly requested item.

[7] An open-fronted dress with a fitted bodice that was pleated at the back, with full skirt and usually elbow-length sleeves.

In addition to linens and gowns were myriad other garments necessary to complete one's ensemble. Most gowns of the period had open skirts, and until the

Fig. 2.4a & 2.4b. Sack -back Gown, United States, c. 1760-1780
Philadelphia Museum of Art Accession number 1955-98-6a,b

1770s open-fronted bodices. Thus petticoats were essential, and women rarely wore only one at a time, particularly in the winter. Petticoats were ubiquitous, and the quilted variety comprised its own distinct trade. To fill in the open fronts of bodices triangular-shaped pieces of the dress fabric, called stomachers, were made and trimmed to match the gowns they were worn with.[8] Jacket and petticoat combinations were particularly suitable for working women in public and elite women in the privacy of home. Some jackets were fitted and constructed similarly to dress bodices; while others, like the bedgown, were quite loose fitting, simply cut, and shorter in length than other gowns. Bed gowns were frequently associated with the working classes, being simple and inexpensive to construct; and when made from a serviceable and cheap fabric, made for a very cost-

[8] Sometimes more than one stomacher was made for a dress, as a surviving example in the collection at Berrington Hall demonstrates; Berrington Hall, Accession # SNO 7.

effective garment – particularly compared with the cost of a full-length gown. They could be both made to order or bought ready-made. In fact, the

Fig. 2.5a & 2.5b Pet en l'air jacket, English, c. 1760-80
Manchester Art Gallery Accession number 1999.171

uncomplicated nature of its construction leant the bedgown, particularly, to the ready-made trade.[9] Another popular style of jacket was the 'pet en l'air', a shortened version of the sack dress, which appears to have been primarily worn by more fashionable women. Because it required significantly less fabric (and therefore money) than a full gown, however, it was accessible to labouring class women as well.

In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, during the latter part of her life, Martha Dodson kept accounts of her purchases that have survived to today. In them are found examples of the variety that may be found in a woman's wardrobe of the lower gentry. Mrs. Dodson's accounts mention gowns,

[9] Edwina Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 40 (2006): 33.

petticoats, quilted waistcoats (worn to bed in colder weather), caps, several bedgowns in both costly and inexpensive fabrics, a new pet en l'air, and diverse linens. Outerwear such as cloaks, a capuchine, and a cardinal are also mentioned.[10] These garments were likely made from a variety of different fabrics by women Mrs Dodson employed locally, regionally, or perhaps by proxy from London.

Fig. 2.6 Caraco and petticoat, English, c. 1770-80
Victoria & Alberta Museum Accession number T.229&A-1927

Needlewomen did not make clothing only for other women and children. Although women were officially excluded from making men's outer clothing, this rule was frequently disregarded. The number of women who made bespoke clothing for men was certainly much smaller than those who sewed for women, or male tailors sewing for men. However, they did exist in large enough numbers to

[10] ibid.: 34.

be periodically found in records and accounts from the period.[11] Occasionally women were so bold as to refer to themselves as tailor, tailoress, or breeches-maker, sewing up waistcoats, frocks, breeches, greatcoats, trousers, and banyans for male clients. The same form of official exclusion applied also to women's riding habits and stays. However, in reality many women likely made whatever they could or had to in order to make a living.

Through much of the century women's involvement in staymaking was limited, particularly during the first half of the eighteenth century. There was, however, an analogous garment, made almost solely by women, simply referred to as 'bodices' or 'bodies'. The exact description of this garment remains elusive. They are variously described as being like stays, even boned, but not actual stays, or as a form of light stays. They were often ready-made in bulk and appear to have been most popular amongst rural workingwomen.[12] Over the second half of the century the construction of stays became lighter and more women both entered and were socially accepted in the trade.[13]

The ready-made trade, on the other hand, was dependant upon female labour.[14] Within these larger manufacturing concerns, women's cheap labour was often preferred to more costly men's. In factory-like workshops a multitude of working class and military men's basic apparel was cut then received as finished

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[11] Anne Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", *Textile History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 229; one such record is of a Westoning, Bedfordshire shop, owned and operated by Leonard Cottchin. Mr Cottchin was a grocer and linen draper who also provided clothes mending and making services: one account entry states that his daughter made a man's frock (a type of coat).

[12] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* 62.

[13] Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England,* (London: Batsford, 1979), 160.

[14] Beverly Lemire, "'In the Hands of Workwomen': English Markets, Cheap Clothing and Female Labour, 1650-1800", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 33 (1999): 26.

garments. The sewing of this clothing was parcelled out to unknown numbers of women in smaller shops or their homes through the 'putting-out' system. This industry also provided some of the clothing needs of the American colonies and the slave trade. Many ready-made leather breeches were exported overseas, and some plantation owners chose to import basic pieces of ready-made clothing in cheap fabrics for their slaves.[15] Lemire further asserts that the ready-made trade, in time, extended beyond labouring men's clothes to include a large variety of goods that could include frocks, morning gowns, mantles, petticoats, cloaks, children's coats, and 'pee jackets'.[16] It also appears that the quality of goods could range from purely utilitarian, to incorporating a "modicum of style" to silk gowns and costly suit components.[17]

Construction Methods for Women's Clothing: How & Why

Today mass-produced, machine-made clothing is universal and customary. The sites of production are removed from our sight and experience so that most people have little to no concept of how clothing is made. In such an environment the concept of hand-sewing clothing is alien. However, a quick reflection on how long the sewing machine has been in some form of common usage (approximately 150 years) triggers the realization that clothing has been hand-sewn for the vast majority of time during which humans have dressed in seamed garments. Yet, because of the clothing manufacture revolution precipitated by the adoption of the

[15] Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America*, (Williamsburg, Virginia: New Haven, 2002), 135. One account shows a bulk order of "60 ready-made 'fear-nothing' waistcoats of the cheapest colour" ordered by Robert Beverley from a Liverpool supplier in 1768.
[16] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 63.
[17] ibid., 56, 64.

sewing machine, hand sewing is now almost a lost art. The insights and information that experience with hand-sewn clothing contributes to knowledge and understanding of pre-industrial garment production has been little considered. My careful examination of surviving garments in conjunction with understanding of sewing and clothing construction combine to reveal insights otherwise undetected. Even in plain sewing, a maker's stitches are a form of signature and personal expression. The size and type of stitches, once understood and performed create regular patterns or rhythms of hand movements and specific postures. Indeed as Laurel Ulrich notes: "women's stitchery, both plain and fancy, offers ways of examining class divisions, education, technology and commerce … attitudes toward the body [and] work."[18] There could be languages and signs of the needle that may be decipherable. For example, women in the sewing trades might have been able to identify types of stitches being worked simply by observing the motions of hands.

Needlewomen approached garment construction very differently before sewing machines were developed and used to make clothing on a larger scale. Unlike today when the goal is often to make the stitches in seams as invisible as possible, those on eighteenth century women's garments, particularly bodices, were clearly visible. When viewed in comparison with modern clothing, those of the eighteenth century have a distinctive appearance and visual quality. Precision was not the highest priority; neither was there the same 'pristine-ness' to hand-made clothing as there is to factory, machine-made garments. Pre-industrial

[18] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Of Pens and Needles: Sources in Early American Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 202-205.

clothing has a more 'organic' appearance and construction. Nor was there the same horror of raw edges clothing manufacturing developed once the widespread use of overlocking machines was adopted in the mid-twentieth century. Raw edges were not exposed on the exterior of garments, but are commonly found at armholes in bodice interiors, and sometimes inside skirts and petticoats. Garments that have experienced alteration and remodelling tend to have greater numbers of raw edges exposed in their interiors. Many fine textiles were more tightly woven on pre-industrial handlooms than they are today on mechanized looms. Therefore, considering the age of the garments and their textiles the amount of fraying is often minimal, and raw edges less problematic.

Modern dressmaking lore also teaches that using a fabric's selvedge (woven, manufacturer's edge) is improper. However in the eighteenth century (and much of the nineteenth), seamstresses and mantua-makers had no such qualms and they were frequently used in lieu of either finishing fabric edges or leaving raw. Another curious, but common, feature of surviving eighteenth century clothing is the amount of fabric piecing present on many garments. Most cloths were woven to very narrow widths of eighteen to twenty inches. Because of this, and the need for economy, many garment sections required corners and other small pieces to be sewn on to make the section whole. Many of these 'idiosyncrasies', as we may view them, were commonplace and expected at the time.

There was a different attitude towards the making of women's clothes, particularly, in pre-industrial society. Much of this stems from the different lives

a garment might be expected to have over the course of its existence. Because of the very high cost of fabric in comparison with labour, people of all social levels took great care to preserve these textiles and extend their lives as long as possible. When a gown or jacket was no longer fashionable or needed refurbishing it was not necessarily discarded, but very often remodelled, or even completely re-made. In this time there was little or no such thing as maternity clothing, so garments would need to be adapted for pregnancy. High quality garments were also frequently passed down either to family members, friends, or servants. For example, Reverend Woodforde recorded handing down to his niece, Nancy, dresses that had belonged to his aunt Parr including a brown silk gown in 1782 which Nancy had altered and trimmed with fur.[19] It was, therefore, very common for a garment to be altered to fit another wearer. Combined, all of these expectations within the lives of women and their clothes made it only logical that future changes be considered in the original construction of their apparel, and as a consequence women's clothes were expressly made to be taken apart again.

Made to be Unmade

To facilitate making and unmaking, the seaming techniques for women's clothes were ingeniously adapted to accommodate both construction and deconstruction. This was achieved through lapped seams sewn with long-short running stitches, which I observed on the bodices of every one of the sixty extant women's dresses and jackets I examined. This type of seam was not sewn with an overabundance of stitches, but was quite sturdy because of the way it distributed

[19] John Beresford, *The Diary of a Country Parson: The Reverend James Woodforde*, 41, 46. 31 October 1782, 30 November 1782.

stress placed on it. Because it did not require a large number of stitches, it was also much easier to rip out than a seam made with small, closely spaced stitches would be. In addition, certain parts of garments were constructed to be even easier to take apart. Bodice linings in gowns, for example, are relatively loosely sewn to the interiors of the garment in order to expedite their removal and

Fig. 2.7 Example of lapped seams on woman's dress
Museum of London Accession number 35.35-1

replacement. Other parts of garments, such as the facings and linings of a woman's riding jacket at the Museum of London[20] also appear to have been sewn in with future removal in mind as the buttonholes are worked only through the jacket fabric and 'interfacing', while the lining and facing are simply overcast-stitched to the backs of the buttonholes, which I have since observed on men's jackets as well.

Despite the seemingly universal considerations behind the construction methods of pre-industrial women's clothing and its overall homogeneity, garments do not appear to have been put together following a strictly regulated

[20] Museum of London Accession # A.12984.

procedure. For the most part, I observed that bodice linings were made up separately from dresses with the bodice mounted directly onto the lining early in the construction process. The two were then finished together around the edges. However, I did detect a few examples from later in the century of bodice

Fig. 2.8 Riding jacket facing sewn to back of buttonhole
Museum of London Accession number A.12984

parts lined individually, the edges finished, then the parts whip stitched together at the seams.[21] Janet Arnold speculated that mantuamakers generally shaped dresses by draping fabric on the customer and pinning it into place.[22] She also speculated that the mantuamaker may have used an assistant as a model if the dress was for the ready-made trade; something Arnold thinks highly possible because of the uncomplicated cut and pleating involved in women's dresses enabling them to suit a variety of figures.[23] However, other experts describe a slightly different procedure: the lining was made and fitted to the client first, then used as a partial pattern for the dress, which was then partially draped on the

[21] Berrington Hall Accession #SNO 34 & SNO 35; Museum of London Accession # A12411-1.
[22] Janet Arnold, "A Mantua c. 1708-9 Clive House Museum, College Hill, Shrewsbury", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 4 (1970): 27.
[23] ibid.: 28.

body.[24] According to my observations sleeves and their linings were most often made up separately, then the lining slid into the sleeve, and both layers sewn into the garment as one. Occasionally, the sleeves and sleeve linings were, instead, made up as one. There is, however, uniformity to how sleeves were attached to the body of the garment: they were first sewn to the bodice at the underarm, and the sleeve head then fitted to the client's shoulder with pleats. Observation of surviving garments concurs with this appraisal.

However, comparisons of extant examples with contemporary accounts can create some confusion. For example, when Mary Dodson commissioned a mantua in 1748 she paid 10*s* for the making up of the dress, and an additional 1.6*d* for lining the body and sleeves.[25] From my observations of actual gowns, the lining was nearly always made either before or at the same time as the rest of the garment, and the dress fabric was mounted onto the lining, not the other way round. Mary Dodson's puzzling account suggests that the bodice lining was sewn in after the gown was made up.

These first-hand observations demonstrate the hazard of generalizing or assuming there was only one method of garment construction during this period. Indeed, there is certainly no single right way to make clothing today either. Instead, there appears to be an overall loose homogeneity, with visible flexibility in garment construction, revealing the individuality of sewers. In fact, mantuamakers and other needlewomen were occasionally called upon as

[24] See, for example,Norah Waugh, *The Cut of Women's Clothes 1600-1930*, ed. Margaret Woodward (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1968), 75.
[25] Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765", 31-32.

witnesses in trials relating to the theft of clothing. They would be asked not only if they recognized the garment, but specifically, whether they recognized their own work.[26] The hallmarks of their craft were fully evident.

Combining scholarship and direct examination of garment construction may even be able to tell us the gender of some makers. Documentary sources tell us that in the eighteenth century male tailors made men's clothing, and female seamstresses or mantuamakers made women's and children's clothing.[27] Several modern scholars claim that women's stays and riding habits remained the preserve of male tailors.[28] Upon the examination of both men's and women's extant clothing from the period, it becomes clear that male tailors and female seamstresses used different techniques and methods for their work. Using this evidence, it is possible to question some of the assumptions of who made what. For example, it is my belief that the riding jacket, circa 1730-1760, I examined at the Museum of London was made by a woman. This declaration is based on the primary seaming technique used, which is the same as that employed on other women's garments and different from what I observed in the construction of men's garments. The riding jacket in question was sewn using the same lapped seam technique seen on other women's clothes. None of the men's suits I examined employed this method.[29] The men's tailored suits were constructed with backstitched seams and utilised the 'bagging out' method of lining

[26] Old Bailey proceedings online (www.olbaileyonline.org): 9 April 1755 (t17550409-20).
[27] Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster*, 227.
[28] Waugh, *The Cut of Women's Clothes 1600-1930*, 101; Madeleine Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 6, (1972): 64.
[29] It is recognized that examination of a larger sample of male garments is needed to strengthen this statement.

insertion.[30] I have thus far examined six women's riding jackets made during the eighteenth century; two were made in the same manner as women's

Fig. 2.9 Example of men's jacket seaming
Museum of London Accession number A7559

Fig. 2.10 Seaming on woman's riding jacket
Museum of London Accession number A.12984

clothing,[31] three were made in the manner of men's clothing,[32] and one employed a combination of techniques.[33] I believe a woman also made this last jacket

[30] The bagging out method of lining consists of sewing each jacket and lining as separate garments then stitching the two together, with right sides facing, around the perimeter edge. This initially results in the garment being entirely inside out. The jacket is pulled right side out through either the open sleeve ends, or part of a lining seam that has been left unstitched for the purpose.

because it seems more likely that a woman would adopt techniques employed by male tailors than the reverse. It is usually stated that tailors produced all tailored garments worn by elite women, apparel modelled on male garments. My research strongly suggests that both men and women made women's riding habits. These findings provide highly suggestive physical evidence that at least some women were involved in the tailoring trades independent of both men and training from male tailors. This example further illustrates the disparity that can exist between documentary accounts and actual practices of life and work, and could not have been discovered without close examination of the material object.

Types of Stitches, Where They Were Used and Why

Based on direct object examination, there appears to have been a specific repertoire of stitches from which tailors and needlewomen alike drew for the different seams to construct clothing. Furthermore, I observed a certain 'flexible uniformity' among where certain types of stitches were used, and that similar, even identical, stitch choices spanned across decades throughout the century. The types of stitches I observed on these articles of clothing are identified and briefly described below.

Running stitch:

This is the most basic hand sewing stitch and is comparatively quick to execute. It is equally quick and easy to rip out. Running stitches do not produce a very sturdy seam, and was thus used for areas that received little stress, like the seams

[31] Museum of London Accession #A12984 and Hereford Museum Accession #7046.
[32] Hereford Museum Accession #4983, Royal Ontario Museum Accession #922.28.14; Berrington Hall Accession #SNO 709.
[33] Royal Ontario Museum Accession #922.28.12a.

of skirt panels and hems, and for attaching trimmings. One of the reasons a seam made with running stitches could be so quickly executed was because multiple stitches could be made at a time since it consists of simply running the needle in and out through the fabric.

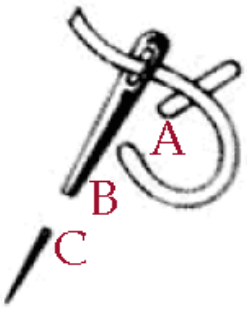

Fig. 2.11 Running Stitch

Slipstitch and slanted stitch:

This is a very common stitch on clothing of this period. It was frequently used to sew linings into garments, and sew bodices to skirts at waist seams.

While not as quick to execute as running stitch, it did combine a certain degree of speed with greater strength. It was also fairly quick and easy to rip out again.

Men's and women's shirts of good quality are primarily sewn up with very tiny slip stitches.

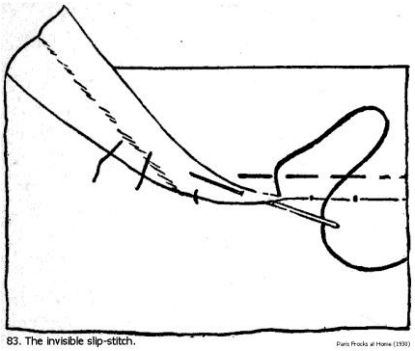

Fig. 2.12 Slip stitch

Backstitch:

This is the strongest, most time consuming stitch used at the time. Interestingly, backstitch is also what modern machine stitching most closely resembles, suggesting that machine stitching may have developed from this style of stitching. Backstitch is seen more on men's clothing than women's. On women's clothing it was mostly used for bodice centre back seams and underarm seams, joining the bodice to the sleeve; both of these are areas that would have experienced significant stress. Conversely, on men's clothing, backstitch was the primary seaming method used. The reason for this is unclear. Perhaps it was thought men were generally more active than women, and thus likely harder on the seams of their clothing; or, because men's clothing was not subject to alterations and remodelling as frequently as women's, it did not need to be as easy to take apart.

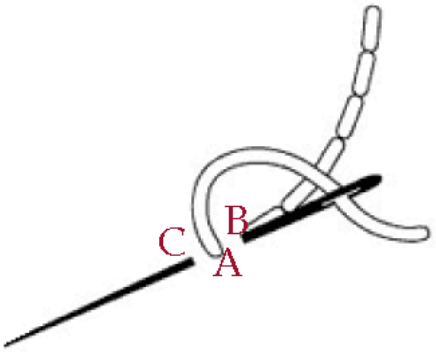

Fig. 2.13 Backstitch

Whipstitch:

This is also known as an overcast stitch. It is generally worked in small, tightly spaced stitches, which makes it very strong. Whipstitch was frequently used to join butted edges, for example sections of stays (where they were worked particularly tightly to provide as much strength as possible), and sometimes on

dress bodice linings. It was also sometimes used to attach bodices to skirts at the waist.

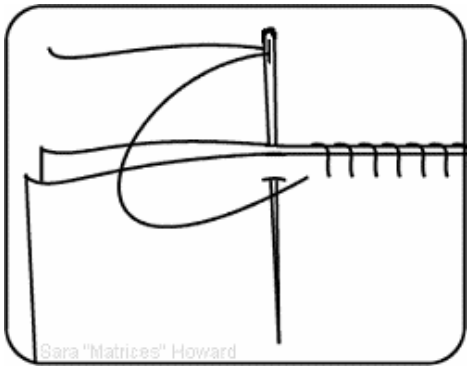

Fig. 2.14 Whipstitch

Skill Levels and Training

Fashionable women's dress of the eighteenth century continues to be one of the most admired eras of historical costume. The exaggerated femininity manifested in graceful, sweeping skirts and masses of ruffles and flounces is the stuff of dreams for many a costumer and moviegoer alike. Observers today marvel at the skill and cleverness surely required to create these lavish confections. Dress historians, however, are not always equally impressed by the workmanship they observe in surviving examples. Janet Arnold described that the interior of one garment appeared to have "been handled by a relatively inexperienced dressmaker, as is usual with early eighteenth century dresses."[34] Anne Buck's opinion was much the same, reporting that dress construction from the first half of the century shows a disregard for fine finishing and that garments were constructed using as few stitches as possible to facilitate future re-making.[35] She does concede that mantuamakers' techniques show greater skill in the second

[34] Arnold, "A Mantua c. 1708-9 Clive House Museum, College Hill, Shrewsbury", 27.
[35] Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England,* 160.

half of the century, without, however, any further explanation.[36] Madeleine Ginsburg admires the ingenuity and skill behind the cutting of women's dresses, the ability to cleverly match patterns without waste; however disparages their sewing skills, stating that:

> The make of eighteenth century dress is not refined. I have not found any information on the training of the English dressmaker at this period and from the 'thrown together' look of so many garments begin to wonder whether in fact they received any. The dresses are held together by running along the selvedge and the jagged unmatching armholes and unevenly hanging skirts suggest that most of them were, rather hurriedly, made on the customer while she stood, more or less, still. In the last quarter of the century there is an extraordinary improvement in the dressmaking techniques. It is as sudden as it is unprecedented.[37]

With the exception of Janet Arnold, these scholars appear to base their assumptions on superficial examinations of extant garments, comparing them, however unconsciously, with modern dressmaking practices. Although Madeleine Ginsburg was a long-time curator of costume at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and would have seen and overseen hundreds of gown, she cites only one garment artefact on which she bases her analysis. Anne Buck, who was keeper of costume at the Platt Hall Gallery of Costume in Manchester, must also have examined hundreds of garments. However, she states, "We have no means of

[36] ibid., 161.
[37] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 68.

assessing the skills of these mantuamakers" and that, unfortunately, no garments yet found can be linked to a particular mantuamaker or seamstress.[38]

Perhaps we have no specific *documentary* means of assessing needlewomen's skills, however, we have actual products of the mantuamaker's needle. I believe that close examination of a range of artefacts dispels long-held assumptions that mantuamakers and other needlewomen were universally untrained or possessed inferior sewing skills to those of male tailors. Prior to conducting significant object-based research, I had accepted these views, and sought only to mitigate their harshness by explaining the messy and sloppy interiors as a result of required haste in the trade. Now, however, my close study of numerous artefacts, coupled with personal re-enactment experience with pre-industrial garment construction practices has led me to different conclusions. Instead, I believe "thrown together" is a misinterpretation. The alterations enacted upon garments, to lesser and greater degrees, has not been taken into account. Out of all the dresses I examined, perhaps three appeared completely unaltered. The interiors of these few unaltered gowns were, in fact, very neatly wrought, and only the armhole edges were left raw and unfinished. When examining garments that have been altered one must mentally peel away each layer of alteration and look at them separately in order to determine the seamstress' skills. Looking at what remains of the original construction one continually finds carefully executed work with consistent threads and stitching techniques.

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[38] Anne Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", *Bedfordshire Historical Miscellany* 72, (1993): 147.

In the eighteenth century needlewomen's skills were equally disparaged

Fig. 2.15a & 2.15b Example of an unaltered dress
Museum of London Accession number 62.163-1

by contemporary popular opinion as by modern dress historians. In contrast, male tailors' skills in construction and, especially, cut were highly valued. Again, direct artefact examination undercuts such simple dichotomies. Comparisons between men and women's clothing show greater differences in production

processes and techniques rather than skill level. Men's tailored jackets and

Fig. 2.16a & 2.16b Example of an altered dress
Museum of London Accession number 47.43-1

waistcoats are constructed using the 'bagged out' method. This means the garment and lining layers are each constructed separately, and then sewn together around the perimeter edges. Thus, all seams are fully enclosed, including armholes. To modern eyes, backstitch possesses a stronger resemblance to machine stitching than any other hand stitch. From the modern perspective, then,

the general construction of eighteenth century men's clothes bears a stronger resemblance on the whole to our own, and the opinion of women's clothing construction suffers unfairly by comparison. Renowned costume historian, Norah Waugh, confirms this attitude stating, "Although the arrangement of the pleating in eighteenth-century dresses was always very skilfully done the internal finish was rather rough by *modern standards* (my italics)."[39] Furthermore, men's fashions changed more slowly than women's, so their clothing was altered and modified less frequently. In fact, more examples of unaltered men's suits are to be found in costume collections than women's clothing.

The likelihood of future modification meant that a different priority attended women's clothing construction than did men's. This priority determined the techniques employed. Although fabric conservation was a principal concern with *all* clothing (men's, women's and children's of all classes), the facilitation of future alterations, on the other hand, appears to have been a particular consideration for women's clothing. The sewing stitches and techniques employed by needlewomen for this purpose are more visible than much of the stitching on male garments, thus emphasizing the 'hand-made' appearance of the clothing. To judge such an approach as sloppy or unrefined is a subjective, ahistoric, aesthetic appraisal applied from within a context of modern, machine-made clothing.

The pieces of women's garments were cut in geometric shapes as often as possible to satisfy both primary considerations, and it was up to the sewer to shape the seams and garment. Both objectives also had to be achieved within a

[39] Waugh, *The Cut of Women's Clothes 1600-1930,* 75.

fast-paced environment where speedy turnover was another high priority. This is why top edges of skirts and petticoats are simply folded to the interior when a dipped or v-shaped waistline was made. Additionally, dress bodice seams were usually stitched directly to the bodice lining for stability, rendering the bagged out method of construction unfeasible. Although the process of constructing a woman's bespoke garment was more organic than that of a man's this does not mean it required less skilful hands. The same stitches are found in both men's and women's surviving garments, the ratio being the significant difference. Men's clothing employed far more backstitching, while in women's clothing slip and running stitches dominate. One need only examine a fine linen shift or shirt, and the impossibly minute stitches with which it has been sewn, to plainly see how skilled and nimble needlewomen's fingers could be.

I also observed a certain 'flexible uniformity', spanning several decades, among the types of stitches and where they were used. A woman's gown made in the 1770s was very likely to have been made by the same methods, using the same stitches in the same areas as one made in the 1730s. This suggests to me that there must have been some manner of regulated instruction for mantuamakers, at least among the upper echelons of the trade, from which most surviving garments originated.

The situation in the ready-made trade is far more difficult to gauge. With the possible exception of quilted petticoats and certain linen garments, very little identifiable evidence of ready-made clothing survives. Lemire's research into the ready-made trade suggests that the quality of goods produced varied from cheap

and serviceable working clothes up to fine and fashionable items.[40] It stands to reason that sewers employed at the higher end of the ready-made trade may have possessed superior skills to their counterparts at the poorer end.

In order to succeed in the needletrades and become a master or mistress one had to learn the art of cutting, and the only way to acquire such knowledge and skill was through a good apprenticeship. Cutting had to be taught directly, as no instruction manuals exist prior to the late eighteenth century; even such manuals as were published towards the end of the century concern cutting layouts more than describing nuances of the art.[41] Most girls learned the fundamentals of plain sewing in their formative years at home; however, apprenticeships with mantuamakers, milliners, quilters, and other needletrade masters and mistresses appears to have been fairly common. Susan Wright cites references to girls being apprenticed as gloveresses, tailors, and mantua makers in Ludlow, Shropshire.[42] Wright's findings suggest that instead of lacking training, Ludlow mantuamakers may have been the women in their region most likely to receive training for their occupation. Buck found young Bedfordshire women apprenticed to mantuamakers, milliners and sempstresses between 1711 and 1720.[43] Through the Harpur Trust in Bedfordshire of the 1760s, sixteen girls were apprenticed to

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[40] Lemire, "'In the Hands of Workwomen': English Markets, Cheap Clothing and Female Labour, 1650-1800", 26.
[41] Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 66.
[42] Susan Wright, "Holding Up Half the Sky: Women and Their Occupations in Eighteenth-Century Ludlow", *Midland History* 14, (1989): 58.
[43] Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", 146; examples include: Martha Babb of Woburn to a London mantua maker; Rose Rogers to Hester Wright of Ampthill; Sarah King of Wilden and Martha Spring to Sarah Kippax of Bedford; and Mary Fordham to Sara Negus, also of Bedford, whose husband, Gilbert, took tailoring apprentices. Also one apprentice sempstress, and four other girls sent to London, two of who were apprenticed to milliners, one to a mantuamaker, and one to a sempstress.

eleven mantuamakers, four to staymakers, seven to sempstresses, two to a lacemaker-mantuamker, and one to a mantuamaker-quilter between 1763 and 1767.[44] It is interesting to note that in the earlier statistics of 1711 to 1720 forty-seven boys were apprenticed to tailors compared with nine girls to the sewing trades, and that forty-five years later the Harpur Trust records show twelve tailors' apprentices compared with sixteen mantuamakers'. Records of the Old Bailey proceedings are also sprinkled with references to mantuamakers' and other needlewomen's apprentices, implying that the practice was commonplace in London as well as the country.

What Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos refers to as 'informal apprenticeships' also occurred.[45] The number of widows found in registries and other records practicing trades from which they would have been barred as apprentices indicates that they could learn their husband's trade or craft at his side. Not all wives of tailors or staymakers were already seamstresses or mantuamakers, but the sewing skills they likely learned in their formative years would have certainly pre-disposed them to quickly learning their husband's craft.

While it was no guarantee of future success and wealth, obtaining a good apprenticeship was necessary to becoming a master or mistress, and was recognized as a vital component for the chance to earn a self-supporting wage. A good apprenticeship, however, could cost upwards of twenty pounds, and could only be paid for by friends and family in good financial stead. As a result, it was

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[44] ibid.: 146.

[45] See Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 145-150, for a discussion of women's apprenticeships in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and women's informal training.

predominantly artisan and mercantile class daughters, or those from the professions or lesser gentry, who received the best apprenticeships, with the intent that they would thereafter work for fashionable society. It is, by and large, the fruits of their labours that survive today. Unfortunately, however, these women represent only a small fraction of all women employed in the needletrades. What of those whose backgrounds were lower, their connections much poorer? In her work on the ready-made trade, Lemire states "skill acquisition was unlikely to be systematic".[46] Denied the opportunity to learn cutting, and advanced sewing techniques, the majority of needlewomen had only the simple home-learned skills of their formative years on which to rely. Regrettably, almost none of the products of their labours have survived, thus there is no basis for comparing their skills with those of their more affluent sisters-in-trade.

The Business of Alterations

Throughout the history of costume and dress collecting, (whether practiced by museums or private individuals) the emphasis and greatest value has been primarily placed on acquiring artefacts of the highest quality, in the most pristine conditions possible. Only within the last twenty years have curators and collectors begun to recognize the historical richness present in altered garments. Historian and author David Lowenthal explains that we need a "stable past" in order to validate our traditions and even identities, and to be able to make sense of our time.[47] He points out, however, that we are constantly changing and altering

[46] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800,* 50.
[47] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 263, 278.

that past, often unknowingly, even in our efforts towards preservation. Alteration is an inescapable reality in the broad context of life and history; it is equally so with historical, particularly pre-industrial, garments. Most surviving women's garments, and a number of men's, appear to have had 'multiple lives'. The prevalence of alterations among this clothing is primarily due to the costly investment clothing represented prior to industrialization; it was simply too valuable to waste in any way. Cloth was much more expensive than labour, which made time-consuming fabric conservation techniques and painstaking alterations the economical choice.[48] The vast majority of garment artefacts I have examined show evidence of alterations to greater and lesser degrees. It is important to note that all of these garments belonged to the upper echelons of society, the elites who had more money to spend on clothing than anyone else. Clearly, alterations comprised a significant portion of a needlewoman's workload, perhaps even the bulk of it.

Clothing was altered for a number of reasons, and in many different ways. What Baumgarten calls "in-use" alterations and repairs, the necessary care to extend the life of a garment in the face of everyday wear and tear, were probably the most frequent. These were made to clothes from all social levels; economy was practiced by the high and low alike.[49] Both Mary Dodson and Elizabeth Shackleton were of the financially comfortable lesser gentry; yet despite their lack of want they were still very concerned with practicing economy. Both women recorded in their diaries and accounts having garment and linen items periodically

[48] Linda Baumgarten, "Altered Historical Clothing," *Dress, The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 25 (1998): 44.
[49] ibid.: 44.

repaired and remade.[50] Ehrman, who researched the diaries of Mary Dodson, believes this to have been typical of her class and period. Vickery notes that Elizabeth Shackleton also displayed emotional attachments to several items, and suggests that sentimentality may have helped fuel the drive to preserve.

Women's stays are particularly interesting to look at in this context. In her article on the eighteenth-century English whalebone trade, Lynn Sorge-English considers the connection between women and their stays.[51] According to her women developed close 'relationships' with their stays, attaching significant importance to them, and seemed to prefer broken-in ones to newly made. She examined a set of stays from the Kenmore Plantation and Museum in Fredericksburg, Virginia dating from c. 1760-80 as an example. The stays show signs of significant alteration and repair, evidence that they were used and maintained over a long period. Based on the nature of some of the alterations Sorge-English speculates that the stays may have originally been a child's. Additions have been made to the garment's length such as might accommodate a girl growing into young adulthood. Sorge-English suggests that in addition to considerations of economy, women chose to maintain their old stays because of the mouldable properties of whalebone, which would allow it to conform to the body over time, making them more comfortable to wear. Sorge-English also looked into Martha Dodson's account and points out that over nineteen years she had only seven new pairs of stays made and recorded having these same ones

[50] Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765", 35-36; 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): 282-283.
[51] Lynn Sorge-English, "'29 Doz and II Best Cutt Bone': The Trade in Whalebone and Stays in Eighteenth-Century London," *Textile History* 36, no. 1 (2005): 33-35.

altered and/or repaired seven times. Ehrman points out that Mrs Dodson's only bought new stays every two to three years.[52]

Garments were also frequently altered to fit a different wearer; "clothing was routinely left in wills to survivors who presumably made it over for themselves or their family members."[53] Recipients of such clothing could include family members, friends, and servants. In the 1780s Reverend Woodforde recorded in his diary passing along old dresses inherited from an aunt to his niece, Nancy, who had the dresses remade.[54] The evidence of such alterations are found on surviving garments in the form of old stitch marks indicating that bodice seams were either let out or taken in, and skirts removed, refashioned, and re-attached. The frequent gifting of cast-off clothing to servants came with the assumption that they too would be significantly altered to make them suitable to the servant's station.[55] The second-hand clothing trade flourished throughout the eighteenth century and many "old clothes sellers" were women who would mend and alter clothing to render it saleable. One might also need a garment resized for oneself after a period of years, or perhaps after childbirth. Some re-sizing alterations were performed even before the clothing had been worn at all. For example if clothing from the ready-made trade, or upon arrival from the tailor or

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[52] ibid.: 34.; Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765", 35.
[53] Baumgarten, "Altered Historical Clothing", 44.
[54] Beresford, *The Diary of a Country Parson: The Reverend James Woodforde*, 41,46; on 31 October 1782 Reverend Woodforde gave his niece, Nancy, a brown silk gown that had been his Aunt Parr's; 30 November 1782 This same dress was brought home from Nancy's mantuamaker, Miss Bell.
[55] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, 22-23.

mantuamaker's did not fit properly, adjustments would need to be made in order to make the garment wearable.[56]

Another important reason for the altering of clothing was to economically keep up with changes in fashion. Again, the fabric was too valuable to waste simply because styles had changed. In the early to mid-eighteenth century many women's garments were adjustable by means of lacings and ties. However, when fashions abandoned stomacher fronts in favour of more fitted (and less forgiving) edge-to edge closures, alterations were often necessary. I observed several examples of this particular type of alteration among artefact garments. A significant number of women's dresses in the styles of 1770 or later showed signs of having begun their lives mid-century. Many of the same alterations were found on a variety of dresses, particularly on the bodice fronts where old robings had been unpicked and unfolded to help create the newer bodice style; falling cuffs (ruffles) were taken off of sleeves, which were also lengthened. Transforming a gown from the 'sack' style of mid-century to the fitted *anglaise* style of the 1770s to 1780s was another form of fashion-related alteration. Since there appears to be a pattern of such alterations occurring with frequency at particular time periods, it may have affected the nature of a needlewoman's workload. The ratio between fashion-related as opposed to size alterations may have noticeably changed during those periods of transition.

Another method of prolonging a garment's life was a practice known as 'turning'. This could be done only to garments whose cloth was reversible since it involved taking the garment apart, flipping the pieces around, and sewing it

[56] Baumgarten, "Altered Historical Clothing", 44.

back up with the newer-looking side facing out. To reconstruct a garment faithfully would require skill at least equal to that required to make the garment in the first place; the actual 'doing' of it would be more challenging than at first appears. Evidence of turning may be found on surviving clothing at seams where old fold lines for the opposite direction are still visible.[57] Lining skirts of dresses may have been a method of planning for future turnings in advance by preserving the fabric on the inside of the skirt.[58] I examined approximately seven dresses made of reversible fabrics; of these only one had a lined skirt and only one more exhibited evidence of having been lined. Both of these dresses were made from silk damask fabric dating from the mid eighteenth century or a little earlier. Many of the other dresses from this sample were made of lightweight silk taffetas during the post-1770 period when an effect of lightness was important to the reigning aesthetic of the time. Perhaps, therefore, it was a practice that died out over the century; and possibly it was more time consuming than some fabric was worth.

Some garments might have had parts replaced, like the collars and cuffs on men's shirts; these usually betray themselves by being made of a slightly different fabric in terms of texture and colour or shade from the original.[59] If more than a part replacement was necessary, one might commission to have one garment made into another. George Washington made such a request of a London tradesperson in 1760 for a dress of his wife's: "…made up into a handsome Sack again would be her choice, but if the Cloth won't afford that, then to be thrown into a genteel

[57] ibid.: 46.
[58] ibid.: 46.
[59] ibid.: 47.

Night Gown."[60] When an adult's garment had come to the end of its usability as such it would often be cut down to make children's clothes, then perhaps doll clothes, and finally wash rags or quilt pieces.

Considering the variety of alterations needed, and their likely frequency, combined with many people's apparent reluctance to perform the tasks themselves, it is no wonder that a tailor, seamstress, or mantuamaker's bread and butter were alterations and repairs of existing garments rather than making-up new ones. Jane Nylander's study of tailor Asa Talcott's accounts found that much of his time was spent "cutting apart, turning, and resewing old clothing for clients."[61] Martha Dodson recorded a significant number of alteration commissions in her account book. She appears to have had her lace and muslin accessories mended in London, but commissioned a local woman, Hannah Emblin, for turning her garments. [62] Ehrman questions whether admitting to London society of having your clothes turned would cause embarrassment, or whether it was just more convenient to have this type of work done locally by someone whose labour was likely cheaper than a London seamstress. Mrs Dodson also mentions having some outdoor garments such as a capuchine, cardinal, and cloaks regularly refurbished and serviced, by having lace trimmings replaced every two years. Of note is a pair of gown cuffs Mrs Dodson had altered by a Mrs Poule in 1753 on a gown she had commissioned in January 1752. Sleeve cuff styles were changing in the 1750s from a winged shape to a cascade

[60] ibid.: 46.
[61] Jane Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 165.
[62] Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746-1765", 31.

of falling ruffles. It is possible this was the type of alteration Mrs Dodson commissioned, and falling cuffs would require the additional fabric Martha mentions buying for the job. According to Claire Walsh, "visits to shops were … often for the reconditioning, repair, and refashioning of goods."[63] Given the extensive care taken to clean[64] and refresh clothes to keep them looking good as long as possible, leads me to speculate that many of the stains and dirt found on clothing from this period may derive from later wearing as costumes and no longer as regular clothes. The variety and extent of alterations and modifications made to clothing clearly demonstrate the value eighteenth-century owners and wearers placed on their apparel at every social level, and the importance of these practices to the tailor, mantuamaker, and seamstress's trade.

Conclusion

The discussions of this chapter further emphasize the importance of not generalizing about needlewomen and their work, and subsequently about women's work as a whole. Needlewomen were, in fact, involved in producing very nearly any and every type of garment available in eighteenth-century England, although primarily associated with sewing womenès and children's clothing. Professional needlewomen also appear to have had their own 'style' of sewing that was distinct from that practiced by male tailors. I have conjectured

[63] Claire Walsh, "Shops, Shopping and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*, eds. John Styles and Amanda Vickery, (New Haven, 2006), 162.

[64] Alan Mansfield, "Dyeing and Cleaning Clothes in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 2, (1968): 38, 40. Alan Mansfield's study includes costs dyeing and cleaning specific garments. The prices given are comparable to labour costs sewing new garments. This demonstrates that people valued their clothing enough to spend sums on their cleanliness and colour comparable to the cost of making up the garment in the first place.

that an important reason for this was the consideration of future alteration or deconstruction at the time of the original sewing. The types of stitches needlewomen employed were certainly more conducive to unmaking clothing than those used by male tailors. This gave clothing made by women a more organic, less 'refined' appearance to our modern eyes, for which these women's skills have subsequently been harshly and unfairly judged.

However, the recognition of this distinctive sewing style also enables the potential identification of a craftsperson's gender. This can lead to enlightening insights that dispel common assumptions, such as the likelihood that riding habits were made by women as well as men, contrary to popular belief.

Furthermore, the 'flexible uniformity' of garment construction strongly suggests that among mantuamakers, serving elite clientele at least, some type of formal or semi-formal instruction or apprenticeship was common at this level of the sewing trades. The unskilled, unrefined look of women's clothing construction may be more to do with our modern perspective than the eighteenth century mantuamaker or seamstress's skills.

Chapter 3: The Social Politics of Women in the Sewing Trades & Fashionable Consumption

Women and the Sewing Trades: Gender Tensions and Institutional Structures

Today the association of women with sewing, both domestically and professionally, seems natural, a given. However, it was not always so, particularly within the professional sphere, except in the cases of monastic and secular embroidery. Throughout the European middle ages and afterwards male tailors dominated the garment production trades while women were identified with sewing basic linens for their households and families within a domestic setting. Evidence suggests this only began changing demonstrably well into the early modern period. In their article on workingwomen of early modern Europe, Honeyman and Goodman assert that between the late Middle Ages and the seventeenth century "activities such as needlework, embroidery, and belt-making were becoming defined as women's work."[1] To explain this they employ a theory they call the sex-gender system. This system refers to patriarchal biases that rise up when threatened by women's participation in the labour market, particularly in areas associated with men and considered their spheres. As a result, work in male-associated trades and fields became increasingly difficult for women to obtain and they either gravitated or were pushed into avenues of employment to which their home educations disposed them. The sewing trades would have been one obvious and common choice. It is only natural then, that an increasing

[1] K. Honeyman and J. Goodman, "Womens Work, Gender Conflict, and Labor-Markets in Europe, 1500-1900", *Economic History Review* 44, no. 4 (1991): 611.

presence of women in the sewing trades would lead first to their increased visibility in that line of work, and eventually generate an association between the two.

Honeyman and Goodman also describe the role of economics in shaping patterns of women's work. Over the seventeenth century, guild influence in England gradually eroded in the face of cottage industry and emerging large-scale proto-industrial manufacturing, which offered increased occupation opportunities for women. As a result those in guild-oriented occupations, feeling threatened by the presence of women within their spheres of work, increasingly excluded them.[2] Guilds had previously been hostile towards cottage industry, but after the mid-seventeenth century they also turned their attention towards women involved in production.[3] In response, 'honourable' work became associated with that which was separated from household production; only then could masters conduct formal training for apprentices that afforded greater legitimacy.[4]

According to Honeyman and Goodman the change was complete by the end of the seventeenth century. Urban women were excluded from most artisanal trades and "confined to a narrow band of industries consisting primarily of textile manufacture and the clothing trades."[5] In the eighteenth century the association was solidified as Rousseauean philosophy spread, which promoted women's use of the needle both in the home and outside it as a consequence of nature. This

[2] ibid.: 611.
[3] ibid.: 612.
[4] Jean Quataert, "The Shaping of Womens Work in Manufacturing, Guilds, Households, and the State in Central-Europe, 1648-1870", *American Historical Review* 90, no. 5 (1985): 1127.
[5] Honeyman and Goodman, "Womens Work, Gender Conflict, and Labor-Markets in Europe, 1500-1900", 614.

was easy for societies throughout Europe to believe, as sewing was part of every girl's early training or education. Furthermore, setting up in the sewing trade required relatively little capital and one could easily serve a wide range of customers both in town and country.[6]

The degree of control and agency women had in this transformation is still unclear. Batchelor imputes to women an active and deliberate role, in which they purposefully "consolidated the supposedly innate connection between femininity and fashion", and participated as "active agents in the burgeoning consumer economy, rather than its mere beneficiaries."[7] Honeyman and Goodman, on the other hand, clearly paint women as the victims of patriarchal malice and protectionism. The reality experienced by most needlewomen was likely more nuanced. It seems probable that most of these women, given the conditions and choices available to them made use of the few advantages they had and simply did what was necessary in order to survive.

Despite the strong social approbation that developed towards women working within the sewing trades, male professionals were not about to surrender a time-honoured occupation they viewed as rightfully theirs. From their perspective, women's open presence in the sewing trades was doubly responsible for both usurping male tailors' jobs and lowering the prestige of their trade; for the opinion of women's capabilities was such that if they could make garments with equal skill to men, it must not require much skill at all.

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[6] Anne Buck," Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", *Bedfordshire Historical Miscellany* 72, (1993)148.

[7] Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 52.

It could be argued that the patriarchal system itself, in part, caused the sewing trade labour market to flood with women by marginalizing their access to other fields of employment now increasingly associated with male labour. In turn, seamstressing had inherently flexible qualities to it, which recommended these women to clients, much to the chagrin of tailor craftsmen.[8] However, the proliferation of female involvement in garment production was seen by contemporaries as the cause, not result, of the changes occurring within the clothing trades.[9] Beverly Lemire identified three sources of grievance in existence by the start of the eighteenth century: the expansion of the ready-made clothing trade outside workshop production centres; the employment of untold numbers of women in the manufacture of these goods undercutting guild-made goods; and, at the higher end of the scale, the establishment of the distinctly female trade of mantuamaker producing apparel specifically for women by women.[10] Male tailors taking on female apprentices also became guild targets along with independent women. They were both penalized and urged to refrain from accepting female apprentices.[11]

Male guild members in the tailoring trade assiduously denigrated women's work and skills. They promoted its association with cheap garret labour and, by extension, equally cheap ready-made goods. The primary skills needed for most ready-made goods were speed, competence and especially endurance to put up

[8] Quataert, "The Shaping of Womens Work in Manufacturing, Guilds, Households, and the State in Central-Europe, 1648-1870", 1130.
[9] Beverly Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, (London, England: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1997), 53.
[10] ibid., 54.
[11] ibid., 53.

with the long hours of drudgery rather than refined workmanship. "Legions of women were defined as unskilled or semi-skilled because they were adults of the other sex making apparel, regardless of the quality of goods being made."[12] The guilds reacted further by mounting costly campaigns and lawsuits against women workers and subversive guild members in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to suppress their activities.[13] However, these eventually failed, as local and government officials were unwilling to put an end to a practice employing so many poor women, keeping them off parish relief.[14] Although city officials were hostile towards women working illegally they were unwilling to exclude them completely because of the risk they would become a social and economic burden.[15] Of course, the government itself benefited from the cheap labour so many of these women provided by outfitting the army and navy via the ready-made trade during this same period. Still, tailors continually attempted to have women banned from the trade, to no avail. Government recognized how commonplace women's practice within the sewing trades had become and continued to accept the system as it existed.[16]

Consequently, over the course of the eighteenth century, women gained dominance over the garment trades; at least as far as the production of women's and ready-made clothing was concerned. Between 1706 and 1738 a tailor in Eaton Socon includes in his accounts making several women's and girls' clothing items such as gowns, petticoats, stays, leather bodices, and remaking old clothes

[12] ibid., 73.
[13] ibid., 54-55.
[14] ibid., 55.
[15] ibid., 55.
[16] ibid., 55.

into new ones for different wearers.[17] This was not an unusual situation, and women at this time were still derided for transgressing gender norms by involving themselves in the male world of professional garment making.[18] However, in her examination of an early eighteenth century mantua, Janet Arnold cites three advertisements from *The Spectator* for ready-made women's mantuas and men's banyans.[19] Two of the ads name women as the proprietors and all three date from 1711 demonstrating that there were women confident enough to publicly advertise their services this early in the century. By the end of the eighteenth century the transformation in gender associations within the clothing trades was quite complete. A bill for payment of £20.3.3 to Thomas Jackson, London habit maker, in 1792 indicates there were still men occupied in making women's clothing even at the end of the century.[20] They were, however, a dwindling breed. A 1798 exhortation pleads with women to "be guided by reason and wear no clothes that are not made by women."[21] By then men in the millinery or dressmaking trades were considered an aberration.[22] Thus, an occupational field once dominated by male workers was subverted by the inexorable tidal wave of women steered into it who were denied admittance to alternate employment avenues by other men.

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[17] Anne Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", *Textile History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 232.
[18] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, 72.
[19] Janet Arnold, "A Mantua c. 1708-9 Clive House Museum, College Hill, Shrewsbury", *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 4, (1970): 27, 28.
[20] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 217.
[21] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, 72 n. 49.
[22] ibid., 72.

The Sewing Trades and Prostitution

Women in the English sewing trades were attacked not only by their male counterparts on charges of usurpation of male tailors' rightful occupation. Society at large criticized their characters and decency. The shops of milliners and mantuamakers had poor reputations and were "associated with vice, considered almost synonymous with brothels, and women working as prostitutes were regularly recorded as being mantuamakers by trade."[23] One opinion recorded in the early eighteenth century stated, "that when we caught a fine Sempstress or Mantua-Maker on the publick Streets after Nine at Night…it might…be lawful to charge her in Custody of the first Hackney Coach, and convey her to the next Bagnio as a proper and rightful Chattel of the Publick's."[24] A few cases in the Proceedings of the Old Bailey in which mantuamakers were either involved or mentioned at least suggest they were also streetwalkers.[25] At least three of Georgian London's most celebrated courtesan's had connections with the millinery and needlework trades.[26] Eighteenth century popular culture is rife with references to the loose sexual morals of needlewomen, and the association of their trade with sexuality.[27] Mantuamakers, seamstresses, and milliners were portrayed and viewed, in both literature and art, as inherently debauched, and the connection

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[23] Dan Cruickshank, *The Secret History of Georgian London: How the Wages of Sin Shaped the Capital*, (London: Random House, 2009), 103.
[24] ibid., 103.
[25] For example, Old Bailey proceedings online (www.oldbaileyonline.org): 6 September 1739 (t17390906-23); 27 February 1740 (t17400227-8).
[26] ibid.: Sally Salisbury had started out apprentice to a milliner, p103; Fanny Murray gave a milliner's house as her address, p 183; Kitty Fisher was a sometimes hat-maker, p 353.
[27] Aaron Santesso, "William Hogarth and the Tradition of Sexual Scissors," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 39, no. 3 (1999): 505-506.

between the needletrades and prostitution was well known.[28] They were represented as both willing victims and instigators of sexual advances, of which Moll Hackabout in Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress* was only one example.

This perception derived from two sources: widespread poverty amongst women in the sewing trades; and the nature of their occupation. Most needlewomen occupied a lowly position on the social ladder, and poverty was almost universally associated with vice in general and immorality in women specifically. The nature of their trade, making clothing, further discredited these women by the belief that they manufactured not only individual garments, but also entire appearances.[29] As such, they facilitated the blurring of class distinctions and a perceived breakdown in social order, and could not be trusted.

The amount of satirical and derisive writing concerning the association between the clothing trades and prostitution suggests that this connection was readily accepted by society. In *The London Tradesman*, for example, R. Campbell makes the assumption that prostitution was widespread within the clothing trades. In defence of needlewomen Jennie Batchelor points out that Campbell provides no evidence to back his assertion.[30] However, logic suggests he was likely correct. Most women involved in the needletrades were paid below subsistence wages, and what they did earn by their needles was often inconsistent due to seasonal fluctuations in the availability of work. Even when performing the same or comparable work as men (ie tailors), women were paid less than their

[28] ibid.: 505.
[29] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature,* 61.
[30] ibid., 56.

male counterparts. The result was that, "Such differentials reinforced female dependence, and the poverty of labouring women without men."[31] It is sad but reasonable to conjecture, as do Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, that many of these women turned to streetwalking to supplement their inadequate incomes.[32]

Prostitution was not the only vice associated with needlewomen, even the nature of their trade subjected them to censure. Clothing and fashion had greater significance than simple protection from the elements, a modest cover for nakedness, or even an outlet for creativity and aesthetics. Clothing and fashion were also essential tools of social control. People were expected to dress according to their social rank, and satisfy their needs for protection from the elements and aesthetic tastes from within the boundaries of their 'sphere'. However, this use of clothing was problematic since social inferiors could use it to fool their betters. The sumptuary laws of previous centuries had been abandoned in England in 1604 and in the eighteenth century any person could wear whatever they chose, made of whatever fabric they wished with impunity, provided they had means to acquire it.[33] Thus, clothing was simultaneously a marker of class, and a tool for its subversion. Needlewomen not only made clothing, they, like their male counterparts, were thought to manufacture appearances and, therefore, could not escape associations with deception, frivolity, and subterfuge. [34]

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[31] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550-1720*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 258.
[32] ibid., 295.
[33] Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law*, (Basingbroke, Hampshire: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1996), 28-38.
[34] R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster*, (1747), 227-228.

A mantuamaker or milliner's shop was frequently portrayed as a deliberately eroticised environment where members of both sexes might meet and interact. As Claire Walsh states in her essay on the emergence of modern shops and shopping, "part of the pleasure and appeal of shopping must have been the erotic encounter of the opposite sex provided within a formalized [and thus safe] setting."[35] The shop employees were particularly involved in this. Despite employing new technologies to market their goods, including the shop window and trade card, their bodies, like those of prostitutes, were perhaps their best form of advertisement. Thus, a dual message was suggested of just what was for sale: both the fashions and the shop girls wearing them. According to Campbell, milliners were even worse than mantuamakers because they intentionally exploited their workers and apprentices both financially and sexually.[36] While his argument is harsh and generalized, Campbell was certainly attuned to the erotically charged sites milliners' shops could offer. Adding to the eroticised environment of shopping are the different attitudes towards it between men and women in different types of shops. For example in a millinery shop a female assistant complained of a man wasting her time, supposedly just to watch her pretty hands work. Men are supposed to be more interested in the assistants and

[35] Claire Walsh, "Shops, Shopping and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth-Century England", In *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830,* Ed by John Styles and Amanda Vickery, (New Haven, 2006), 160.
[36] Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster,* 208-209.

other women (a positive reinforcement of male heterosexuality) rather than in the actual goods.[37]

The association between the needletrades and sexuality in the consciousness of society was so pervasive it extended beyond the bodies and characters of its trades people to the tools they employed. Although put to many uses, scissors were primarily connected with tailoring and seamstressing and became symbols of various sexual metaphors. Aaron Santesso wrote an entire article interpreting the meanings of a little pair of scissors worn by Moll Hackabout in the first print of Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress* series.[38] Santesso agrees with the general consensus that Moll's scissors may well indicate an intended occupation as seamstress, but believes much more lies behind the diminutive tool hanging from her waist. According to him, tailors had reputations in society for thieving, malice, degeneracy, and seamstresses for harlotry. If he is correct in the belief that scissors were generally associated with these trades, than their presence on Moll's body could be interpreted as casting aspersions on her character. Santesso also asserts that many of the sexual associations with scissors date back to the Middle Ages, but stubbornly persisted well into the eighteenth century. One of these was the impression of scissors as effeminate weapons in the hands of male tailors, adding to a distrust of them and contributing to the unsettling and dangerous ambiguity of their sexuality. Scissors in the hands of a

[37] Walsh, "Shops, Shopping and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth-Century England", 167.
[38] Santesso, "William Hogarth and the Tradition of Sexual Scissors", 499-521.

woman could suggest castration. Open scissors form into the sign of the cuckold while handles were likened to male genitals, and blades to women's legs.[39]

Not all contemporary sources, however, viewed the needletrades in such an insidious light. Many considered this type of work to be the only respectable jobs for daughters of respectable, artisanal or middle ranked families. As often as they are accused in the Old Bailey records of streetwalking by angry defendants they testified against, their clients and neighbours describe them as good, honest women who worked hard at their trade.

Late in the eighteenth century novelists began to sentimentalise the prostitute, they "sought to recuperate the harlot by emphasising the socio-economic conditions that precipitated her fall."[40] This was part of a counter-movement within society focused on the conditions of a needlewoman's trade that made her what she was. This developed further towards the end of the century to alter the representation of these women in literature and drama as either products of their environments, or even with characters above them, and especially their frivolous customers. The consumer, instead of the producer, became the butt of satire.

Regard for the Female Sewing Trades

Considering the widespread association between work in the needletrades and prostitution, the high level of antagonism that could exist between needlewomen and their male counterparts, and the general estimation of sewing as unskilled work, it is not surprising that female employment in the garment trades

[39] ibid.; 515.
[40] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature,* 71.

was generally held in low regard. Not only that, but many writers and moralists of the time also looked upon these women with decided suspicion. For example, Samuel Richardson vociferously derided apprentices in general for dressing far above their station. This derision was further extended to the people responsible for supplying the means of sartorial social subversion. Writers and artists at times portrayed mantuamakers and milliners as more dangerous to the social fabric than servants in terms of pride, social ambition and immorality.[41] Critics of professional dressmakers feared that close association between these tradeswomen and their fashionable clients would contribute to erosion of class distinctions. However, only a very few dressmakers worked at the fashionable level, and they likely came from the artisanal class, not the lowest by far. In early to mid-eighteenth century fiction and drama seamstresses, mantua makers and milliners are used as foils for virtuous heroines. They provided the image of corrupt femininity so the heroine could remain pure and above suspicion.[42] "Within the sentimental novel, women in the clothing trades were targeted as both the cause and effect of some of the most pernicious effects of the commercialisation of fashion";[43] seamstresses and mantuamakers were portrayed as perpetrators of social and sexual subversion. In an Italian comedy of the same period, a seamstress, Barabe Biencousue (the 'well-sewn') introduces the scandalous hoop petticoat. The seamstress, not a male tailor, introduces, makes, and even modifies the hoop reinforcing the connection between women and both sides of fashion (producers and consumers), and justifying seamstresses'bad

[41] ibid., 52.
[42] ibid., 53.
[43] ibid., 53.

reputations.[44]

This viewpoint was contentious. The anonymously published *General Description of All Trades* (1747) actually presents mantuamaking and millinery as respectable and potentially profitable opportunities for women, whereas Campbell, writing in the same year (the *London Tradesman*) is dismissive of these occupations and even warns parents against them for the sakes of their daughters' moral well-being.[45] While Campbell does, apparently, view tailors with some respect (if a little satirically) and admires the skill involved in their profession; he is dismissive of their female counterparts. [46]

It is, however, important to differentiate between literary representations and the actual business of everyday life. Although textual representations of women within the clothing trades is an example of "how an age discursively constructed its understanding of itself",[47] it is necessary to remember that these go beyond historical fact. It is also significant to note that it was men who wrote the majority of pejorative literary portrayals of needlewomen, not the women who most often commissioned and interacted with them. Male writers observed this socio-commercial system from the outside and rarely troubled themselves to learn what might actually be going on. Instead, as Jennie Batchelor states, "their unique place within the developing commercial marketplace rendered milliners and

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[44] Reed Benhamou, "Who Controls This Private Space? The Offense and Defense of the Hoop in Early Eighteenth-Century England," *Dress, The Journal of the Costume Society of America* 28 (2001): 17.
[45] Anonymous, *A General Description of All Trades,* (1747), 134; Campbell, *The London Tradesman: Being a Compendious View of All the Trades, Professions, Arts, both Liberal and Mechanic, Now Practised in the Cities of London and Westminster,* 208-209, 227-228.
[46] ibid., 190-192.
[47] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature,* 186 n. 15.

mantua makers particularly resonant figures through which to debate a range of concerns from issues surrounding gender inequalities, class and commerce, to sentiment and fashion."[48] However, in surviving diaries and accounts women do not portray needleworkers from a moral perspective, but as a supplier of essential goods. They are judged by the quality of their work, and their reliability. The tradesperson-client dynamic at this time did include a social component as well, people developed relationships with their tailors, mantuamakers, grocers, and other shopkeepers.[49] However, the charge that mantuamakers and milliners wielded undue influence over their clients is likely a spurious one. First-hand information on the latest fashions would have been difficult for even a high-end tradeswoman to come by, and it is generally accepted that directions on style were communicated from client to mantuamaker, not the other way round.[50]

Oddly enough, trades relating to the production of materials destined for the garment trades were not generally the victims of such vitriol as mantuamakers and seamstresses. Spinning, and especially weaving, while associated with poverty, were viewed as well-established, respectable, and skilful trades. According to Sorge-English, even the whalebone trades appear to have been considered of greater eminence and respectability than those that used the material.[51] Whalebone trades are found in London trade directories in the 1740s,

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[48] ibid., 82.
[49] See Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England,* 207,208. For examples social elements to Elizabeth Shackleton's interactions with mantuamakers and milliners; and Beresford, *The Diary of a Country Parson: The Reverend James Woodforde*, 275. 8 October 1786, Rev'd Woodforde and his niece, Nancy, breakfasted with her London milliner, Miss Stevenson.
[50] See Ginsburg, "The Tailoring and Dressmaking Trades, 1700-1850", 68.
[51] Lynn Sorge-English, "'29 Doz and II Best Cutt Bone': The Trade in Whalebone and Stays in Eighteenth-Century London", *Textile History* 36, no. 1 (2005): 25.

tailors not until the 1760s, not regularly till the 1790s nor staymakers at all until then.[52] "Thus, at least in the eyes of the writers of the London directories, it appears that the whalebone trade held higher social status than did clothing makers."[53]

Consumer Developments and Expansion of the Sewing Trades

As producers of one of the most visible and moveable consumer good, clothing, needlewomen's working lives were interwoven with issues surrounding consumer behaviour. Ever since Neil McKendrick published his book, *Birth of a Consumer Society*, in 1982 scholars have debated the existence of his 'consumer revolution' of eighteenth century Europe. McKendrick asserted that the late eighteenth century witnessed a dramatic expansion in trade and consumption. He explained it was fuelled by a combination of sudden, increased demand among people to imitate their social superiors, and the proliferation of affordable goods. He relies heavily on Veblen's concept of 'social emulation' as the key to the will to consume.[54] However, innumerable scholars disagree with McKendrick's assessment. Lorna Weatherill, for example, argues that historians have tended to erroneously conflate the increased buying power of the middling classes in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with the lower orders. She places the lower limit of this increased consumption ability of domestic textiles and other household goods somewhere below the craftsman and above the small farmer.

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[52] ibid.: 25.
[53] ibid.: 25.
[54] Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History", 275.

She accedes that clothing, however, may have been an exception to this.[55] Margaret Spufford's study of clothing purchased for seventeenth century children and adolescents of the labouring classes supports this exception demonstrating that the sartorial distinctions of class were hazy and blurred.[56] However, Spufford's data does not necessarily indicate increased buying power among the labouring classes over time, rather a very general increase in costs across the spectrums of income and materials. Claire Walsh recently claimed that McKendrick's dating of an emerging consumer society to the late eighteenth century has been rejected by other scholars such as John Styles, Christopher Brewer, and Roy Porter in favour of a more gradual "expansion in consumption and retailing over many centuries."[57] Jan de Vries argues that the emulative model of consumerism espoused by McKendrick "denies agency to most of society and is almost wholly abstracted from the economic sphere."[58] De Vries also notes that even while emulation appears to describe consumer behaviour, it does not explain why people are attempting to emulate their betters. Instead, he suggests that *innovation* rather than *emulation* was the stronger force behind consumerism.[59] Perhaps the greatest luxury afforded people of varying social positions was that of choice.

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[55] Lorna Weatherill, "Consumer Behaviour, Textiles and Dress in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Textile History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 305.
[56] Margaret Spufford, "Fabric for Seventeenth-Century Children and Adolescents' Clothes," *Textile History* 34, no. no. 1 (2003): 61.
[57] Walsh, "Shops, Shopping and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth-Century England", 151 n. 8.
[58] Jan De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650-the Present*, (New York: Cambridge, 2008), 51.
[59] ibid., 51-52.

Although there is widespread discussion amongst the ranks of scholars in this and related fields, McKendrick's assertions at least incited debate amongst scholars about how the modern consumer society came to be. Both Weatherill and Amanda Vickery use this work as a stepping-stone towards deeper investigation and understanding of eighteenth-century consumer behaviour. Vickery points out that not only has the eighteenth century become associated with growth in domestic consumption, but also recently the *way* this worked has become of increasing interest. She claims the traditional explanation that supply creates demand has been found too simplistic and unsatisfactory.[60] She likewise rejects Veblen's 'social emulation' concept and its resultant belief that everyone who was able (and some who were not) attempted to 'keep up with the Joneses'; and the way women were particularly attacked by being depicted as envy-ridden, compunctionless coveters of everything new and novel. Vickery cites anthropologists and sociologists to argue that class competition may have little to nothing to do with consumption, and that classes are at least as likely to emphasize difference from those above rather than imitate them.[61] The assertion is that the choices made when acquiring goods may well be more about identity creation than status. Giorgio Riello supported this position in his book on the eighteenth-century production and consumption of footwear: "Neil McKendrick's 'top-down' theories of emulation rest on thin evidence because of the

[60] Amanda Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751-81," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, eds. J. Brewer and R. Porter, (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 274-275.
[61] ibid. 278.

impossibility of providing any conclusive quantitative data."[62] Indeed, Vickery points out that McKendrick and his followers did not bother to examine any examples of actual consumption practices engaged in by any real people.

Weatherill's study is instructive for showing that a straightforward, linear 'trickle down' of goods was not necessarily behind increased consumption. She found that prosperous merchants were more likely to consume fashionable commodities than their social betters, the lesser gentry, and that urban craftsmen were also more likely to engage in these practices, as they were able, than rural agriculturalists.[63] She also claims "it is unduly naïve to take it that servant girls who wore silk dresses handed to them by their mistresses, or the farmers' daughter who wore silk ribbons, were really trying to be taken for members of a different part of society".[64] Nor did they necessarily even wear these clothes; as Vickery points out they may well have sold them.[65] Apart from motives of social emulation, servants saw clothing that came to them through the informal perquisite system as moveable goods with resale value, like a part of their wages. Easy enough to understand considering how quickly and easily cast-off clothing could be turned into cash.[66]

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[62] Giorgio Riello, *A Foot in the Past: Consumers, Producers and Footwear in the Long Eighteenth Century*, (Oxford; New York: Pasold Research Fund/Oxford University Press, 2006), 19.

[63] Weatherill, "Consumer Behaviour, Textiles and Dress in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries", 303,305.

[64] ibid.: 307.

[65] Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751-81", 283-284.

[66] See Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 94-120; and Beverly Lemire, *The Business of Everday Life: Gender, Practice and Social Politics in England 1600-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 82-109, for discussions on the thriving second-hand trade in early modern England.

Whether or not it was on the revolutionary scale, a change in consumer behaviours certainly occurred during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The continued growth of the ready-made clothing trade and large-scale manufacturing are strong indicators that clothing consumption was increasing. The introduction of cotton, which was cheap, durable, and fashionable, to European markets spurred this trend to even greater heights. More clothing became increasingly affordable to greater numbers of people up and down the social scale. This did not happen instantaneously, but it did happen.

One of the principal reasons the debate over an eighteenth century 'consumer revolution' has continued for more than two decades is that the measurement of consumption is less quantifiable than that of production. It is, therefore, evident that a greater range of goods became available to the British over the eighteenth century, but not how the population consumed them. Inventories provide a small glimpse, but only a static picture that demonstrates ownership, not consumption practice(s).[67]

This is not to say, however, that attempts were never made. In the 1690s, for example, Gregory King conducted a census of England and came to the conclusion that twenty-five percent of the population's expenditure was on clothing.[68] Despite the useful picture of overall English consumption that King provides, it does not elucidate how it was distributed throughout the population according to class and wealth. Poorer people, for example, appear to have spent a

[67] Riello, *A Foot in the Past: Consumers, Producers and Footwear in the Long Eighteenth Century*, 19.
[68] ibid. 19-20.

larger percentage of their income on shoes and clothing than the wealthy.[69] Distribution was also affected by the life cycle: while single, young people spent a greater portion on clothing than when they were part of a young family; the portion increased again when their children began to work.[70] Lorna Weatherill looked at individual household accounts and then put them together to create an idea of more general consumption behaviours between c. 1675 and c. 1740. She found that clothing expenditure in these households was second only to food and food production. The accounts also suggest that clothing was a steadier market for consumption than other household goods: clothing wore out and needed replacing (and mending), whereas utensils were more durable. Clothing was clearly high on the list of expenditure priorities, even in families of middling rank and modest means. "If the people of the middle ranks were sensitive to their projected images, as seems likely from the evidence of their household goods, then we would expect them to be prepared to acquire appropriate clothing, possible in as large amounts as they could afford."[71] Riello also points to the importance of quality and variety in understanding pre-industrial clothing consumption dynamics. The materials and level of craftsmanship employed in garment production can provide key evidence of the cost, market, and users of different clothing artefacts.

Shopping existed in the early eighteenth century, but did not refer to the activity of buying superfluous items as a form of entertainment that it does today.

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[69] ibid. 20,26.
[70] ibid. 27.
[71] Weatherill, "Consumer Behaviour, Textiles and Dress in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries", 308.

It was closer to "provisioning", but could include the purchasing of items not absolutely necessary.[72] Anne Buck stated, "it is often assumed that before the mass production of ready-made clothing developed during the nineteenth century, the clothes of the common people were home-made. Eighteenth century evidence from Bedfordshire suggests otherwise."[73] Even overseers of the parish bought either ready-made clothing for the poor, or commissioned it locally, neither do the poor appear to have been expected to mend their own clothing.[74] According to Weatherill's findings, main garments were made from cloth bought for the particular item and made up by a professional tailor or seamstress/mantuamaker. Some smaller or specialised things may be bought ready-made, including aprons, scarves, shoes and hats.[75] In 1790 Westoning a female servant bought fabric from a local grocer and draper, and his daughter may be conjectured to have made it up because another bill shows her as a maker of garments. This demonstrates that even servants commissioned clothes to be made, and that women of families in trades that incorporated fabric could be employed in the connected occupation of dressmaker or seamstress.[76]

It is noteable that men also played their part as shoppers and there could be a gender division of consumption as well as of labour.[77] Within the four men's diaries Margot Finn examined, she identified a particular preoccupation with

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[72] Patricia Bruckmann, "Clothes of Pamela's Own: Shopping at B- Hall," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 25, no. Spring (2001): 204.
[73] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 233.
[74] ibid.: 231, 233.
[75] Weatherill, "Consumer Behaviour, Textiles and Dress in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries", 298.
[76] Buck, "Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800", 230.
[77] Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751-81", 280-281.

describing acquisitions of textile and personal possessions, both for themselves, their family members, and others around them, "Woodforde's many entries on fish are dwarfed by his myriad notations on the purchase of cloth and clothing."[78] Although men actively involved themselves with shopping, women did more of it as they might shop both for themselves and their household. According to Claire Walsh, they were also more likely to go shopping in groups, which made female involvement in the activity more visible. This, along with the large numbers of women and girls working in shops may have contributed to the feminisation of the activity.

As the century progressed so did the notion of shopping as an entertainment and social activity for pleasure. "Elite shopping zones developed in physical conjunction with other elite leisure and entertainment venues, such as assembly halls, theatres, promenades, and milk bars, and as such sites of personal material exhibition were mutually reinforcing"[79] – places to see and be seen. Social commentators looked on with disapproval. "Neither pleasure, fashionability, nor consumption itself were perceived as the problem in shopping, but rather a lack of dignity, the wasting of others' time and resources, and an absence of personal restraint, all of which might lead to excess and familial and national ruin"[80]

However, John Blanch, writing in 1707, declared that consumption was the economic engine of the nation, which materials could multiply by being made

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[78] Margot Finn, "Men's Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution", *Social History* 25, no. 2 (2000): 139.
[79] Walsh, "Shops, Shopping and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth-Century England", 154.
[80] ibid. 165.

into goods, the consumption of which provided a visual demonstration of national wealth and its increase.[81] "As clocks, china, furniture, textiles, and exotic goods became increasingly common in English households, profound modifications of their meanings and roles within people's lives created new attitudes towards the acquisition, enjoyment, and the social and cultural use of things."[82] At the time, this was also connected with ideas surrounding democracy, particularly liberty and freedom, of which consumption was seen as an expression. "The rising material culture of middle-class English homes was seen as the outcome of a successful and stable economy."[83]

Perhaps the greatest argument in favour of a consumer revolution towards the end of the eighteenth century, as far as clothing was concerned, was the rise of the cotton trade. Cottons were attractive, fashionable, and affordable, and its trade irrevocably altered the English clothing industry. "It was the ordinary, everyday people of Britain who dressed themselves in British cottons", only the very high or very low exhibited noticeably different sartorial behaviour.[84] Barbara Johnson had seventeen gowns made between 1780 and 1800, while only six were made of silk and one of wool, the other ten were of cotton. Earlier in her album (before 1770) she records mostly silk, linen, and wool for her clothing and only a few cotton garments. The ban placed on cotton imports to England in 1721 (the 'Calico Act') was lifted in 1774, with the result that the British cotton trade,

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[81] Riello, *A Foot in the Past: Consumers, Producers and Footwear in the Long Eighteenth Century*, 113.
[82] ibid. 17.
[83] ibid. 113.
[84] Lemire, *Dress, Culture and Commerce: The English Clothing Trade before the Factory, 1660-1800*, 314.

having grown in the interim, grew still further. The choice and availability of ready-made men's cotton shirts increased greatly over the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and men such as the hairdresser Thomas Reed were able to boast of owning 16 calico shirts in 1784.[85] Certain distinctions of rank persisted, however: not all cottons were created equal, and those aspiring to appearances of gentility bought costlier varieties than those of the labouring classes.[86]

As cotton continued to be fashionable and increasingly affordable for greater numbers of people, the emphasis on presenting a stylish appearance among different classes correspondingly grew.[87] Cotton's comparative cheapness could also have enabled people to afford greater quantities of clothing and thus provide more work for seamstresses and mantuamakers. The availability of inexpensive and colourful cotton fabrics grew dramatically over the 1750s and 1760s and allowed even servant girls to own multiple gowns and other garments.[88] "The costume of many in Britain's working classes was both vivid and varied according to contemporary comments, shop invoices, and itemized accounts of pilfered clothing."[89]

Not everyone lauded the increasing democratisation of fashion. Throughout the eighteenth century there were critics who protested and warned against increased access to fashionable clothing amongst non-elites. Daniel Defoe blamed the erosion of visible distinctions between the classes on 'coquettish

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[85] Beverly Lemire, "'A Good stock of Cloaths': the changing market for cotton clothing in Britain, 1750-1800," *Textile History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 316.
[86] ibid.: 318.
[87] Bruckmann, "Clothes of Pamela's Own: Shopping at B- Hall", 202.
[88] Lemire, "'A Good stock of Cloaths': The Changing Market for Cotton Clothing in Britain, 1750-1800", 312.
[89] ibid.: 312.

female servants', and even Pamela's tastes are indelibly changed by her time at B-Hall.[90] Master tailor, Francis Place, complained of his fiancée's expenditure on clothing and how she never had any money left over from her wages because it was all spent on clothing; evidence that even those of limited means came to desire an attractive appearance.[91] As Richard Grassby observed, "the emergence of a consumer society in eighteenth century England tended to blur the distinction [between luxuries, wants, and needs]."[92] Women defended their preoccupation with fashion proclaiming it was the only arena in which they could dominate, or even participate fully, being excluded from every other.[93]

Conclusion

The eighteenth century was a pivotal period of transformation for women involved in the English garment productions trades. At the outset of the century needlewomen were marginalized and stigmatised by male tailors who viewed them (not entirely incorrectly) as threatening competition. However, by the close of the century they had attained undisputed dominance over the production of women's clothing and made significant inroads into men's clothing as well. This was not the product of a conscious campaign, rather the result of certain social and economic changes including the evolution of the mantua style of dress into a form of day and even formal wear, and the developing ready-made trade, spurred on by decreasing opportunities for women in other employment sectors.

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[90] Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature,* 23.
[91] Lemire, "'A Good stock of Cloaths': The Changing Market for Cotton Clothing in Britain, 1750-1800", 311.
[92] Grassby, "Material Culture and Cultural History", 593.
[93] Benhamou, "Who Controls This Private Space? The Offense and Defense of the Hoop in Early Eighteenth-Century England", 17.

On the one hand, work as a mantuamaker was viewed as a genteel option for daughters of artisans, professionals, even members of the lower gentry. On the other, mantuamaking, millinery and seamstressing came with bad reputations and distinct associations with prostitution. Prostitution was a reality for many needlewomen, and other working women in general. The difficulty of maintaining oneself legitimately, especially in London where throngs of young women flocked to make their fortune, and the apparent ease with which one could enter the sex trade made it a likely means of supplementing and inadequate income. Their reputations also suffered because of their association with fashion and consumption. As fashionable clothing became increasingly accessible those farther down the social ladder mantuamakers and milliners were implicated in the erosion of sartorial social boundaries. They were also accused of eagerly feeding the frenzy with which elite women supposedly consumed fashion. The reality, however, was likely different. Most needlewomen throughout the century would have had minimal access to news of the latest trends, relying instead on their clients for such information. While independent businesswomen (through avarice or the will to survive) surely took advantage of whatever means at their disposal to maximize profits, the vast majority of needlewomen were simply not in such a position.

Conclusion

The eighteenth century was, in its way, a period of significant transformation within the English sewing trades with far-reaching consequences for the women who made their livings in these sectors. The rise of the mantuamaker in the late seventeenth century offered some women the opportunity to wrest control of women's clothing production from male tailors. They overwhelmingly succeeded by the close of the eighteenth century. The other major development was the expansion of the ready-made trade, which swallowed countless numbers of women over this period and paved the way for industrial factory production in the nineteenth century, which continued to rely on cheap female labour. Somewhere between these two extremes myriad women plied their needles in a variety of sewing occupations with varying degrees of success.

The primary aim of this thesis has been to offer an additional approach for the study of pre-industrial English needlewomen and dress history to add to the innovative and insightful body of scholarly work already in existence. One of the chief characteristics of this work is the recognition that the sewing trades were nuanced and varied, and that generalizations obscure the reality of these women's lives and actual production practices. Because these women have left so little direct evidence of themselves and their lives, a considerable amount of generalizing may be unavoidable. However, because the large numbers of women involved in the needletrades represent a significant segment of the female population of eighteenth-century England it is not enough to know they existed.

The nature of their lives is important to understanding and accessing pre-industrial women's history.

Almost twenty years ago Anne Buck stated that evidence gathered from research into these women is more suggestive than conclusive.[94] Perhaps it can only ever be suggestive, but it is possible to develop increasingly plausible explanations. Paraphrasing both Pamela Sharpe and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the issue is not so much a lack of sources, nor the difficulties in wading through them, but the need to examine them from the right perspectives.[95]

Personal correspondence, diaries, and court records such as the Old Bailey proceedings are potentially valuable resources, which, if brought together, can illuminate both the manufacturing and consuming sides of the trade and their interrelationships. From increased study of diaries and personal correspondence we can learn the attitudes of different types of men and women towards their clothing, how they acquired, valued, and cared for it. We also see glimpses of the interactions between the various writers and trades people from various points of view. Records such as the Old Bailey proceedings offer us impressions of the sewing trades from the makers' standpoints. Important details of needlewomen's everyday and working lives may be collected, in which we sometimes even hear them speak for themselves.

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[94] Anne Buck, "Mantuamakers and Milliners: Women Making and Selling Clothes in Eighteenth-Century Bedfordshire", *Bedfordshire Historical Miscellany* 72, (1993): 148.

[95] Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Of Pens and Needles: Sources in Early American Women's History", *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (1990): 201; P. Sharpe, "Continuity and Change - Womens History and Economic-History in Britain," *Economic History Review* 48, no. 2 (1995): 373.

The other key intention behind this work was to demonstrate the value of incorporating artefact study as a research tool. One of the most valuable, fascinating, yet also frustrating consequences of using actual artefacts for the study of dress is how frequently they differ from the paintings and illustrations routinely treated as authoritative representations. At first, being confronted with an artefact that does not conform to any familiar image is unsettling, and the first reaction may be to assume that the artefact is unrepresentative. However, when one moves past the dictates of historical fashion plates and recognizes that the artefact is a survivor of lived history, it becomes the authority and proves the lie of the image. The artefact physically and visually demonstrates that what people wore did not always conform to idealized illustrations and paintings. Women adapted fashions and the clothes themselves to suit their tastes and budgets, and accommodate their needs. Eighteenth-century women, therefore, did not necessarily view the fashions handed down by society's leaders as strict canon, but as guidelines and references.

I strongly favoured object-based research as a methodology before my time at the Museum of London, and since that experience I have become an impassioned advocate. I believe its incorporation in scholarly work will be an invaluable asset in continuing to push dress history towards an increasingly meaningful future. Studies of broader samples of artefacts would allow for systematic and statistical analyses of various aspects of clothing, its production, and subsequent usage. The interpretations of findings could provide more definitive clues to production

processes, skill levels, the relationships between people and their clothing, and apparel's economic function within consumer society.

With a marriage of these sources additional questions may be posed and hypotheses developed. For example, just how widespread was female involvement in tailoring, and how well did people, other than male tailors, accept them? How well were women really able (or not) to support themselves by their needles according to which aspects of the trades they worked in and where? Did the increasing demand for clothing over the course of the century, as it became more affordable to greater numbers of people, mean more substantial work for needlewomen, or just result in more needlewomen? What were the real opinions of customers towards needlewomen apart from the diatribes of contemporary moralists such as Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson? That Reverend Woodforde and Mrs Shackleton, both members of polite society, saw fit to socialize and dine with milliners and mantuamakers strongly suggests that some needlewomen were considered more genteel and respectable than contemporary literature implies. Or perhaps that people, in their pragmatic everyday lives, might not have observed their world so strictly as moralists did.

The task of crafting an in-depth representation of needlewomen in eighteenth-century England may seem a daunting one. In France the couturieres had their own guilds, and much of the attendant records and documentation have survived. English needlewomen, in comparison, are shadowy at best, having left no direct accounts as yet discovered. However, this does not mean their histories are are invisible or entirely irretrievable. A strong foundation on which to build already

exists, and many source materials have been both discovered and utilized. Many more of these await exploration with potential for important new discoveries and valuable confirmations or checks on previous ones. The journey may be arduous, but no less the due of our female forbears in whose hands lay the weight of clothing the backs of a nation.

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