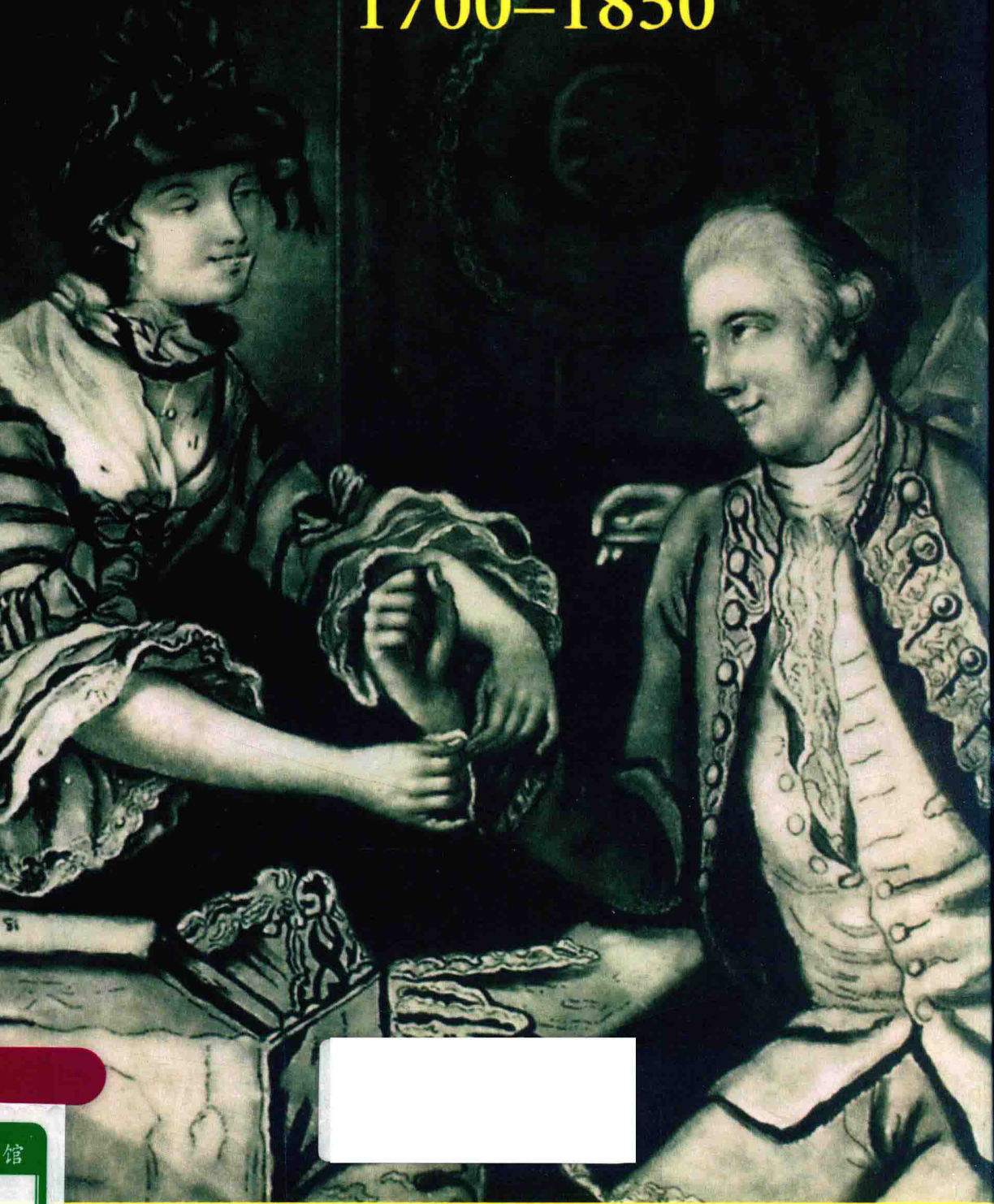


WOMEN IN BUSINESS 1700–1850



Nicola Phillips

Women in Business,
1700–1850

Nicola Phillips

THE BOYDELL PRESS

To Sam and my parents

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Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| BL | British Library |
| BPP | <i>British Parliamentary Papers</i> |
| ER | <i>The English Reports</i> (1220–1867, CD-Rom) |
| GL | Guildhall Library |
| LDA | <i>London Daily Advertiser</i> |
| OED | <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> |
| PRO | Public Record Office |
| RSA | Archive of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce |
| UDL/PG | University of Durham Library, Palace Green Section |

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Introduction

The business of life or a life in business

We go on talking as if it were still true that every woman is, or ought to be supported by her father, brother, or husband. . . . We are (probably to a man) unaware of the amount of the business of life in England done by women; and if we do not attend to the fact in time, the knowledge will be forced on us in some disadvantageous or disagreeable way.

Harriet Martineau (1859)¹

Business is just life, and we had life long before we had business.

Edith Mae Cummings (1929)²

For women today, the distinction between the business of daily life and business as an economic activity is probably as relevant a question – particularly with the advent of ‘home-working’ and ‘the virtual office’ – as it was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For Harriet Martineau and Edith Mae Cummings the two appear to have been inextricably linked. For most historians of women’s work in this period, however, the idea that the business of life and the business of making a profit could be seen as interlinked activities for women is rare. Even though, in economic terms, all business depends on the generation of profit, the pursuit of which is a common goal for men and women regardless of gender, racial or class differences, it is these very differences that are most often highlighted at the expense of other considerations. Business has been located primarily within an economic public sphere and gendered as masculine. By contrast women’s daily lives have been described primarily in terms of a private domestic sphere, which is gendered as feminine. The success of ‘domestic’ enterprises run by women from home tends not to be calculated in the same terms as those of burgeoning corporate ventures, although the modern emphasis on achieving a better work/life balance may force a reassessment of the ways it is measured. Since women have remained largely invisible in histories of economic enterprise, narratives that seek to redress this gender-blind approach focus chiefly on hierarchies of difference,

¹ Harriet Martineau, ‘Female Industry’, *The Edinburgh Review*, 109 (1859), p. 298.

² Edith Mae Cummings, *Pots, Pans and Millions: A Study of Woman’s Right to be in Business* (Washington, 1929), p. 100.

particularly along the lines of gender and class. Yet, while it remains paramount to consider the inequalities of power implicit within social categories of difference, it is also important to examine areas of co-operation and common interaction between men and women, families and friends, and notions of public and private.³ This book aims to retain this broader focus while analysing the role of women in business from 1700 to 1850 and the impact of changing perceptions of gender on that role.

The term 'business' can have many meanings, and those meanings have also shifted subtly over time. Originally stemming from 'busy', the word still incorporates notions of industrious employment in a 'multiplicity of affairs' not necessarily connected with trade. Daniel Defoe seems to have been one of the first to use the word in terms of 'trade, commercial transactions or engagements' in his famous advice book, *The Complete English Tradesman* (1727). In 1768, however, Dr Johnson listed 'business' and 'employment' as synonymous, but only 'trade' was solely connected with commerce and monetary exchange.⁴ Perhaps this was one reason why it was possible for a woman seeking a partnership in a chandlery shop to advertise in 1765 that 'A Sober Woman would be glad to be in business', while another could emphasise that investing in a girls' boarding-school would be far safer 'than to risk it in trade'.⁵ In the eighteenth century at least, to be in business suggested a broader and less vulgar enterprise than to be in trade. In this book, the term 'business' has been chosen precisely because it could include the economic enterprises of women from a wide range of social backgrounds. It might equally be applied to the activities of women of very limited means struggling to make ends meet, of middling-sort women aspiring to gentility, and to those of the higher orders who would have disdained to see themselves 'in trade'. Today, entering business is seen chiefly as a means of upward mobility but for many in the earlier period, while money remained a key motivation, it was a final resort intended to prevent a further decline in their social or economic status.

Tracing women in business in the past is a difficult task; they tend to be obscured from the record by law and custom, which gave primacy to the identities of their male relatives, and by the often informal organisation of their enterprises. Defining women in business is equally difficult. The OED only quotes usage of the term 'business woman' from 1844. Although this suggests a degree of acceptance of their role rather earlier than might be expected, it does mean that, strictly speaking, reference to businesswomen in

³ Mary A. Yeager, 'Review of Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States*', H-Business, H-Net Reviews, April, 1999. URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=30313927576847>, pp. 14–16, presses for a greater focus on the interaction between men and women in business.

⁴ OED sub: 'Business'; Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (3rd edn, 1768), sub: 'Business', 'Employment', 'Trade'.

⁵ LDA, 8 November 1765; 5 August 1765. For an extended discussion of these and other advertisements placed by women in business see below, pp. 203–29.

the eighteenth century could be considered anachronistic, even if the activities they engaged in conform to our expectations of independent economic enterprise. Mary Yeager has pointed out that, 'as an activity business confounds with multiple meanings and definitions': it includes production, trade, agriculture, manufacturing, service and retail; it also encompasses producers, professionals, entrepreneurs, workers, administrators and managers.⁶ In this book the definition of business is narrowed somewhat because it does not include those entering it as a form of paid employment. Women in business are thus defined here as any females, whether in partnership or alone, who owned any independent unit of production or service. This definition includes those who were independently self-employed and those who were involved in, sometimes multiple, partnerships with men or other women. The notion of 'ownership' did not necessarily include proof of hands-on daily activity in the business and there was no restriction on size or profitability. Nor did the business need to be the sole, or even the main, source of income. Indeed, in some cases, it included a projected income that may never have materialised. The focus here then is solely upon women running businesses rather than upon the rather different issues relating to women's waged labour; it is, none the less, overwhelmingly towards the latter that debates about changes in women's economic role have focused.

Continuity vs. change: women's economic position, 1700–1850

In an attempt to provide a historical basis for women's current inequality in the workplace the historiography of women's work has ploughed some deep and well-worn theoretical furrows.⁷ Most accounts focus chiefly around long-term models of linear change. However, within the commonly argued case for women's declining economic opportunities and an increasing separation of the public sphere of work from the private sphere of home, there are a number of complex and overlapping debates. One issue is the question of whether the advent of capitalistic or industrial modes of production restricted or improved women's position in society. Yet for those who see the persistence of patriarchal power as the chief factor in restricting women's economic opportunities, there is little question of any change at all.⁸ Then there are debates over the change in the dominant mode of production from a family-based economy at home

⁶ Yeager, 'Review of Angel Kwolek-Folland', p. 2.

⁷ Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 383–414, critiques the two main historical narratives of women's work.

⁸ For the uncertainties of definition and chronology of organising categories such as 'capitalism' and 'patriarchy', see below, pp. 6–8.

to more mechanised production outside the home and how far the separation of work and home created specifically gendered separate spheres of activity for men and women. There is also considerable argument over the concepts and chronologies used to link narratives of industrial change and rapid economic growth to a story of class formation. Often, the rise of a powerful middle class with its own distinctive cultural identity is seen as crucial in narratives of how new perceptions of sexual difference were mapped on to the public/private division to create a domestic ideology that confined women to the home.

The two seminal works that still serve as a starting point for many studies are Alice Clark's *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*,⁹ and Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution*.¹⁰ Both books are chiefly concerned with the effects of capitalism/industrialisation on the lives of working women and consequently the changing position of women in society, but they locate that change in different centuries. Clark argued that women's economic power declined during the seventeenth century with the advent of increasingly capitalistic forms of industry, which removed production from the home. Pinchbeck found that increasing industrial change in the eighteenth century robbed women of economic opportunities but argued that it had beneficial effects in the very long term. More recently historians have divided into those who, like Peter Earle, believe that Clark's model of decline was 'more or less right',¹¹ and those who, like Bridget Hill and Tilly and Scott, favour Pinchbeck.¹² In the latter case, a U-shaped model is implied, with initial decline followed later by improvement in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the central concern of much recent scholarship, divided by Janet Thomas¹³ into 'optimists' versus 'pessimists', remains the view that capitalism and/or industrialisation¹⁴ was a watershed for women's experience of work. This approach relies implicitly or explicitly on an assumption about

⁹ Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; reprinted London, 1992).

¹⁰ Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (1930; reprinted London, 1981).

¹¹ Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London, 1660–1730* (London, 1989), p. 166.

¹² Bridget Hill, *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-century England* (1989; reprinted London, 1994); Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (1978; reprinted London, 1987); Eric Richards, 'Women in the British Economy Since about 1700: An Interpretation', *History*, 59 (1974), pp. 337–57.

¹³ Janet Thomas, 'Women and Capitalism: Oppression or Emancipation? A Review Article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1990), pp. 535–49.

¹⁴ As Thomas points out there is some confusion regarding the use of the terms 'industrialism', 'capitalism', 'modernisation', and 'urbanisation' which requires clarifying, as do the chronologies attached to these concepts which also vary considerably. Amy Erickson also criticises Clark's conflation of 'industrial' and 'capital' in her Introduction to the third edition of Clark, *Working Life* (1992), pp. vii–x.

a medieval 'golden age' of economic opportunity for women which has proved notoriously difficult to locate.¹⁵ It also corresponds with traditional narratives of 'the industrial revolution' as a period of dramatic transformation, although this view too has been seriously undermined by recent scholarship stressing the more gradual nature of change.¹⁶ Yet this 'revisionism' in turn is also coming under attack; and there are now calls to study both the continuities and discontinuities of industrialisation on a regional basis along with the social and cultural impact of such changes.¹⁷ Although this indicates a general lack of consensus, it nevertheless suggests that histories of women's work should no longer be tied to overarching narratives of a nation-wide transformation in methods of manufacturing and production.

One of the most commonly highlighted features of industrial change for women is the belief that there was a transition from a pre- or proto-industrial family or household economy to a waged economy, making home and work increasingly separate.¹⁸ According to this view, women could no longer work with their husbands at home but became increasingly dependent on the male breadwinner's wage.¹⁹ There has, however, been a growing criticism of models based on the conception of an idyllic pre-industrial family unit of production.²⁰ The notion of universally harmonious family relations of shared domestic

¹⁵ There is a fierce debate between those like Caroline Barron, 'The "Golden Age" of Women in Medieval London', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 15 (1989), pp. 35–58, who argue that women were economically active in the medieval period, and others like Maryanne Kowaleski, 'Women's Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century', in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Bloomington, 1986), pp. 145–64, who argue that women's work was always restricted. Others like Martha C. Howell, 'Women, the Family Economy, and the Structures of Market Production in Cities of Northern Europe during the Late Middle Ages', in *ibid.*, pp. 198–222, see a decline beginning in the sixteenth century.

¹⁶ For the view that 'less happened, less dramatically than was once thought', see David Cannadine, 'British History: Past, Present and Future?', *Past and Present*, 116 (1987), pp. 131–72.

¹⁷ For an overview of the changing historiography on the speed and extent of industrial change but arguing for the concept to be retained, see Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992); and Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, 'Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), pp. 24–50. See also Katrina Honeyman, *Women, Gender and Industrialisation in England, 1700–1870* (Basingstoke and London, 2000), pp. 9–14.

¹⁸ For a discussion of how the idea of a family economy underpins most writing on women's work and a European-wide perspective, see Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work, 1700 to the Present* (London, 1998), pp. 17–18, 37–47.

¹⁹ Sara Howell and Jane Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male Breadwinner Family, 1790–1865', *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), pp. 89–117.

²⁰ Maxine Berg, 'Women's Work, Mechanisation and the Early Phases of Industrialisation in England', in *The Historical Meanings of Work*, ed. Patrick Joyce (London, 1987), pp. 64–98, argues that the concept of the household economy is a 'myth'.