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PART I

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Redefining Gender and Work



## Chapter One

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### WOMEN'S WORK? MEN AND WOMEN, GUILD AND CLANDESTINE PRODUCTION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PARIS

MORE THAN a woman worker, a seamstress is part of a social and cultural enterprise that we have come to consider distinctively feminine. Making clothing, creating fashion, maintaining wardrobes, and dressing families all seem indissolubly gendered. Yet the image of sewing as a womanly activity is relatively recent. So is the gradual feminization of the needle trades, a trend produced by several related developments in the eighteenth century: the expansion of the clothing trades, protracted battles waged by women's guilds, and the growth of clandestine, non-guild, labor. These developments changed the character of women's work in eighteenth-century Paris and set the stage for nineteenth-century economic developments.

The importance of recounting the eighteenth-century history of the garment trades is not simply to provide a foil for dramatic developments during the century that followed. French historians no longer see the Revolution of 1789–1815 as *the* critical threshold of social, cultural, and economic change.<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth century brought rapid changes in the production and consumption of clothing, changes that helped to establish Paris as the “grand foyer du travail féminin,” or “great center of female labor.” Nineteenth-century writers would charge that the recruitment of women into the labor force, the deplorable “industrialization of women,” was wrought by rapacious capitalists in their own day. But the feminization of the clothing trades is a longer and less familiar story, one with more female agency than nineteenth-century writers would acknowledge and with fewer decisive normative conceptions of femininity than we might expect. That history is crucial to understanding nineteenth-century debates and processes.

<sup>1</sup> The now familiar criticisms of the “social interpretation” of the French Revolution; studies of the relationship between the Revolution and the development of French capitalism; and new histories of consumption, industrial production, and the French economy have all, in very different ways, blurred older panoramas and their landmarks. See also Roche, *La culture des apparences*; Kaplan, “Les ‘faux ouvriers’”; Fairchild, “The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods”; Sewell, *Work and Revolution*; Maurice Agulhon, *La république au village* (Paris, 1970); Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture*; Auslander, *Taste and Power*.

## SPINDLE, SHUTTLE, AND NEEDLE

In the nineteenth century, collections of folklore compiled tales, proverbs, and engravings in ways that evoked a simple world, where the respective talents, responsibilities, and crafts of men and women had always been distinct and complementary.<sup>2</sup> With the sweep and conviction of axioms meant to capture the essential order of the social world and the meaning of life, these images seemed to transform women's work into a metaphorical activity, associated with life cycles and fertility. In *Légendes et curiosités des métiers*, Paul Sébillot's 1895 compendium of French folklore about the trades, both sewing and spinning figured, characteristically, as "attributes of womanhood" rather than occupations.<sup>3</sup>

The vast majority of "traditional" engravings and stories involve spinning, not sewing, although later the meanings proved easily transferred.<sup>4</sup> Paintings and popular engravings pictured female figures of all kinds with distaffs. Their associations with generational continuity (the thread of life) gave distaffs and spindles symbolic importance in funerary reliefs and courting and marriage rituals. Villagers gave newlywed peasant couples a spindle or distaff. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, aristocratic suitors gave their brides-to-be distaffs embellished with family emblems and religious symbols. Through a nineteenth-century prism these gifts seemed admonitions to household duties and domesticity, but in early modern France they had sacred connotations involving ancestral traditions and religious values.<sup>5</sup> In traditional Gallic wedding ceremonies, the bride's maid carried a ritual distaff and either placed it in the hands of a saint in the chapel or laid it across the top of a wedding chest. In some regions, custom invited the bride actually to spin during the marriage ceremony, proving her

<sup>2</sup> Late-nineteenth-century collections also emphasized the harmony and complementarity of the sexes. Arlette Farge's anthology of writings from the Bibliothèque bleue, where many of the texts are exuberantly misogynist, provides an instructive contrast. *Miroir des femmes*, pp. 13, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Sébillot, *Légendes et curiosités des métiers* (Paris, 1895), "Fileuses," p. 1; "Tailleurs," p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Natalie Kampen, "Social Status and Gender in Roman Art," in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York, 1982), p. 72. Many of these tales and images stem from the Greek myth of Arachne, the master spinner punished for her virtuosity by the jealous Athena. Arachne challenges Athena (goddess of handicrafts as well as of learning and the arts) to a contest. Arachne wins the contest, but is turned into a spider and condemned to continue her trade eternally, spinning the yarn from her own body and weaving her web. *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (London, 1959), pp. 107–8; and Marta Weigle, *Spiders and Spinners: Women and Mythology* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1982), pp. 208–9.

<sup>5</sup> Sébillot, "Fileuses," p. 6; Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington, D.C., 1989), pp. 3–4, 21.

competence and, symbolically, her virtue and fecundity, acting out her transition to wife and mother.<sup>6</sup>

Yet these images do not constitute evidence of a timeless association of spinning and sewing with women's duties and the attributes of femininity.<sup>7</sup> They had very different resonances and associations, some ancient, some medieval, and none with any necessary bearing on women's domestic tasks or (even more emphatically) women's role in formal economic activity. The early modern wedding ceremonies evoked fecundity; the distaff as wedding gift referred to ancestral power or lineage; the thread symbolized magical powers. Prescriptive literature recommending needlework as a token of feminine domesticity, or womanly industry (in the early modern sense of diligence) and devotion, seems to have originated with the Counter Reformation's insistence on religious and moral education, when sewing appeared in treatises on female education as "moralizing" work, which taught discipline, patience, and concentration—reinforcing women's sense of their social role and position.<sup>8</sup>

In the nineteenth century, novelists and poets, political economists, and industrialists all summoned these older images of women at the spinning wheel and with needle in hand to show that sewing had *always* been women's work. Sewing machine advertisers in particular tapped into literature and folklore, reappropriated the spinning imagery, and, brashly playing with historical analogies, presented the "Singer girl" as a modern-day Penelope. This worked-over imagery and invented traditionalism, however, is a poor guide to either the early modern history of the clothing trades or changing definitions of gender. It is not simply that the relationship of prescriptive literature to the organization of either household labor or economic activity is tenuous; in this case the prescriptions themselves are absent or contradictory. Once one leaves behind the familiar gender certainties of the nineteenth century, it is nearly impossible to find any single set of convictions, whether elite or popular, about men's and women's respective economic domains. As we will see, in the eighteenth century, tailors' deeply held convictions about the political-economic order clashed with seamstresses' claims about their entitlements, and Enlightened physiocratic writing contradicted corporate (i.e., guild) logic on the sexual division of labor. The assuredness of nineteenth-century popular lore—especially as distilled in collections like Sébillot's—does not even hint at

<sup>6</sup> Sébillot, "Couturières," pp. 1–3.

<sup>7</sup> These folktales' resemblance to either unbowdlerized tales, "popular" beliefs, or social practices is hardly self-evident. See, among others, Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Roche, *La culture des apparences*, pp. 254, 290–91. For parallels, see Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 18 and chap. 5.

the complex history of ideas about the sexual division of labor or the long history of fierce disputes between men and women in the garment trades.

Historians often assert that needlework as an industrial occupation for women arose from the sexual division of labor in the household.<sup>9</sup> This, too, is an oversimplification, one that arises from assuming the primacy of household organization in the structure of women's lives and labors. The links between the household division of tasks, craft organization, and, later, the industrial division of labor are less predictable than common wisdom implies.

#### GUILDS AND GARMENTS

We assume that before the industrial revolution clothing, at least for ordinary people, was made at home. This is not so. By the eighteenth century, even in France's villages, clothing was inextricable from trade and the cash nexus. As far as regional historians have been able to determine, women knit socks and vests for their families. They also invested as many hours as their social standing permitted embroidering, washing, and storing household linens. These items formed a *trousseau*, and maintaining them through life's crucial transitions lent them a sacred and ritual character. The rest of the family's clothing, however, was usually made by village tailors.<sup>10</sup> Those who could not afford cloth or tailoring bought secondhand clothing.<sup>11</sup> For the poor as well as for the better off, then, clothing came from the market, and apart from linens and undergarments, making of clothes in rural areas was dominated by men.

In cities, however, and particularly in Paris, the place of women in clothing production was far larger. Indeed, the expansion of female artisanship and wage labor, tightly bound up with the multiplication of trades for increasingly differentiated markets, was among the most distinctive marks of the Parisian economy.<sup>12</sup> Describing these trades is no simple matter. The

<sup>9</sup> Sally Alexander argues that industrialization drew upon skills women had developed in the family and projected them into a wider arena. "Women's Work in Nineteenth-Century London." Cf. Gullickson, *Spinners and Weavers of Auffy*; and Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*.

<sup>10</sup> Well into the nineteenth century, women did not sew for their families. Roche, *La culture des apparences*, pp. 252–53; Nicole Pellegrin, "Techniques et production du vêtement en Poitou, 1880–1950," in Pellegrin et al., *L'aiguille et le sabaron*, pp. 252–53; and Bouvier, *La lingerie et les lingères*, pp. 157, 165. See, generally, Verdier, *Façons de dire*, for rural anthropology.

<sup>11</sup> That trade was governed by the fripiers, or used-clothing dealers, who cleaned, remade, and sold secondhand clothes. Inexpensive used clothes could also be had from street peddling "resellers," whose trade was unregulated. Boileau, *Les métiers et corporations*, introduction; Dusautoy, "Habilleme des deux sexes," in *Exposition universelle de 1867*, pp. 4–7; Roche, *Le peuple de Paris and La culture des apparences*; and Fairchild, "The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods."

<sup>12</sup> See Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoutouses*; Benabou, *De la prostitution et la police*; Roche, *La*

textile and clothing trades included an extraordinary variety of merchants and craftspersons with overlapping specialties: drapers; mercers or dry goods merchants; those who sold trimmings; those who made accessories; the central guilds of tailors, seamstresses, and linen drapers; those who dyed, bleached, and cleaned; the used clothing dealers; and so on.<sup>13</sup> The number of specialized trades alternately expanded and contracted as more powerful guilds first absorbed weaker ones, and then lost them again, or were forced to yield the rights to produce or sell new fashions to new groups of workers and merchants.<sup>14</sup>

Any effort to tally the numbers employed in the clothing business comes up against two problems: the bewildering number of trades and the unknowns of clandestine production. Next to these difficulties, the absence of reliable general statistics seems a minor issue. Daniel Roche, who has studied the eighteenth-century Parisian economy as carefully as any historian, estimates that at the beginning of the century the clothing trades occupied fifteen thousand masters and mistresses, and about twenty thousand workers. That was approximately twice as many employers and workers as in textiles, and accounted for more than 40 percent of all Parisian employers and workers.<sup>15</sup> Even rough reckonings, then, underscore the weight of this industry in the Parisian economy. In certain districts, especially the central ones around the *rues de la Lingerie*, Saint-Denis, Saint-Antoine, or Saint-Honoré, clothing overwhelmed all other economic activities.

Paris stood apart from other Old Regime cities. Nowhere else did the fashion industry employ such numbers. Parisian guilds were firmly entrenched and especially disputatious. Parisian guildswomen were particularly outspoken. Above all, Paris was the case that preoccupied economic thinkers and policymakers. Thus the battles between the men's and women's guilds recounted here assumed singular importance in late-

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*culture des apparences*; Arlette Farge, *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1979); Jeffrey Kaplow, *The Names of Kings: The Parisian Laboring Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1972); Truant, "The Guildswomen of Paris."

<sup>13</sup> The powerful mercers had the rights to market all kinds of goods made by others, from fabrics to furniture. In the nineteenth century their commerce would be taken over by the department stores. *Marchands de modes* or, later, *modistes* specialized in trimmings for dresses, and the trade was often the charge of the mercer's wife. As women's fashion became more elaborate and dress trimmings became increasingly central to design, *modistes* began to sell gowns that they had designed or trimmed themselves. They were the aristocracy of the fashion world, and in the nineteenth century would dominate the world of haute couture. The term also referred to those who began to sell umbrellas, snuffboxes, and other accessories. Roche, *La culture des apparences*, pp. 259–61, 264, 281; and Fairchild, "The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods," pp. 28–29.

<sup>14</sup> Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, vol. 3, s.v. "vêtement."

<sup>15</sup> That count, however, includes groups such as wig makers, bouquet makers, and laundresses. Roche, *La culture des apparences*, pp. 265–67.



eighteenth-century public debate, and, later, in historical memories of the Old Regime.

### THE TAILORS

The tailors' guild believed its domain encompassed all clothing sales and production, and its history is one of incessant battles over that matter. Publicly recognized bodies, the guilds conferred a civic identity on their members and marked them as honorable and creditworthy.<sup>16</sup> The guilds governed the labor market and imposed discipline. Apprenticeship defined skills and regulated their acquisition. The requirements for mastership, enforced by guild officers (*jurés*) were intended to guarantee standards of quality and production, protecting the buying public against fraud. Guild officers therefore had the right to visit members' workshops and to ferret out "clandestine" production. Finally, by patrolling the boundaries between different trades, they regulated competition.

The most powerful guild tailors were merchants, whose wealth and ties to trade contributed to the community's high profile.<sup>17</sup> In production, the guild ranked master tailors, charged with the cut and drape of the fabric, above those who sewed. As the tailoring trades consolidated in the eighteenth century and women were hired as sewers, the trade became more hierarchical.<sup>18</sup> The tailors' guild staunchly defended this ordering of skill and value. A cutter could ruin an extremely valuable fabric with one stroke of the scissors ("... the slips of a [master] tailor's hand are irreparable. . . ."). Sewing labor was an "accessory."<sup>19</sup> The combination of expensive material and cheap labor shaped the form of production characteristic of the clothing industry: merchant capital joined to domestic production.

All of the Parisian trades attempted to police clandestine production, but few worried about it more than the tailors' guild. Tailors accused clandestine workers of driving down prices, making cheap imitations of good clothes, and using shoddy materials.<sup>20</sup> The issue was competition, but questions of legal and political identity heightened the economic stakes. As the

<sup>16</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs de Paris, sur le project de supprimer les jurandes." Bibliothèque Nationale, Department of Manuscripts, Joly de Fleury Collection, vol. 462 (1776), fol. 173, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> For parallels see Simona Cerutti, "Group Strategies and Trade Strategies: The Turin Tailors' Guild in the Late 17th Century and Early 18th Century," in Stuart Woolf, ed., *Domestic Strategies: Work and Family in France and Italy, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Older hierarchies flowed from the market for which an artisan produced and newer ones from the skills he or she brought to the production process.

<sup>19</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 173, p. 4. On hierarchies in earlier times, see Boileau, *Les métiers et corporations*, introduction; and Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, p. 178.

<sup>20</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 173; Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, pp. 189, 190, 196.

tailors' guild put it, a non-guild tailor was no more than an "unknown artisan, without estate . . . a fickle being, always ready to escape and who will only have to flee the neighborhood in order to escape debt." Clandestine production threatened the "indispensable circulation of trust" basic to the metropolitan economy, merchant capital, and social peace.<sup>21</sup>

The tailors' guild regularly banned women from working in the trade. Yet women's work was more common and visible than such bans suggest. Tailors' wives and daughters were crucial to the business.<sup>22</sup> They could work by their husbands' or fathers' sides, and they could legally make clothing for women and young children. Guild statutes drafted in 1660 tried to clarify policy on women's participation. Tailors were not to employ "clandestine workers, seamstresses or workers from used clothing [*friprières*]." Such directives were aimed at independent female labor, that is, women who did not belong to guild tailors' families. A widow could continue to practice her husband's trade and to employ apprentices already in training. But the guild strictly limited her rights. Eager to assure continuity and discipline in apprenticeship, the guild blocked the creation of larger enterprises run by women and encouraged widows to remarry within the trade. The political import of the new statutes was unambiguous: however routine women's work might be, it was only acceptable in the context of a patriarchal workshop. Moreover, that work conferred no political rights whatsoever. The guild's stream of injunctions on the subject underscored the point: "no women or girls may have any privileges under any name or pretext whatsoever."<sup>23</sup> The formation of a seamstresses' guild fifteen years later, as we will see, was the next round in the battle between tailors and women, at least those women who would not be their wives.

The patriarchal reasoning behind these guild regulations is clear. Larger questions concerning the logic of corporate thinking about gender and why some trades were "male" and "female" remain unanswered.<sup>24</sup> Some distinctions seem to have been rooted in the household division of labor. Other

<sup>21</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 173. The political aspects of guild history are particularly well explored by Steven Kaplan, "Social Classification and Representation in the Corporate World of Eighteenth-Century France: Turgot's Carnival," in Kaplan and Koeppe, *Work in France*. On the meanings of "estate," see Sewell, *Work and Revolution*, pp. 190–91.

<sup>22</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 173.

<sup>23</sup> "Statuts des tailleurs pourpointiers," 1660, cited in Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, 3:195, 197, 198. The developments in Paris seem to have paralleled those in other European cities, which also restricted women's rights in the craft trades. See Merry Weisner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1986), pp. 160–62.

<sup>24</sup> On this, cf. Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 40–49; and Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*. Quataert discusses the issue briefly in "The Shaping of Women's Work in Manufacturing," p. 1132. William Sewell lucidly sets out the logic of guild hierarchies, but not how gender would fit into that logic. *Work and Revolution*, pp. 20–23.

distinctions arose from the hierarchy of craft. Tools, associated with craft and jealously guarded as trade secrets, were often off limits to anyone but masters.<sup>25</sup> Still other gender distinctions had less obvious meanings. In Paris, for example, all trades that used silk or gold thread as a primary material were given over entirely to women. The women in those trades may well have been members of wealthy merchant families with access to expensive material through their families' trade. Female guilds resulted from prominent families' efforts to extend their control over different sections of trade and production.<sup>26</sup> Finally, some aspects of the gender division of labor were simply accidental. Household organization often departed from principles. Maintaining patriarchal hierarchies could conflict with the efficient deployment of a family's labor and resources, and a woman might assume an unaccustomed role because she was the only one available to do it, because she was temporarily at the head of the household, or because she was less expensive to hire.

No strict logic governed the gender division of labor in the guild world for several reasons. First, guilds upheld "custom" without having to justify it in higher terms. Second, gender and work had meanings that are unfamiliar to us. In the corporate outlook, the political status of women, subsumed in the household, seemed self-evident; women's place in a gendered division of labor did not. Although the household division of tasks may occasionally have figured in establishing certain traditions of work, that division was not, in principle, a point of reference for the guild order. That women performed certain tasks within the household economy was irrelevant outside the context of that household, in a different economic and political world. Such labor did not give women any title to the civic identity and power established by the guilds, which were, fundamentally, units of political power, legitimated as one of the three estates.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, custom, in the sense of the accumulation of precedents and exceptions, reigned, and no principle was definitive. Men's and women's craft and merchant rights were repeatedly redefined in boundary disputes, the outcome of which varied by region. As the corporate order eroded,

<sup>25</sup> Boileau, *Livre des métiers*, cited in Guilbert, *Les fonctions des femmes dans l'industrie*, p. 24. On the links between tools, craft knowledge, responsibility, and liberty, see Kaplan, "Les 'faux ouvriers,'" p. 327.

<sup>26</sup> Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*, p. 130. See also Cerutti, "Group Strategies and Trade Strategies," pp. 102–47.

<sup>27</sup> Moreover, women's labor in the trades did not, by guild logic, give them any political entitlement. The guilds ordered the world by social standing and occupation, attaching to economic activities meanings that are very different from those created in industrial society. As Steven Kaplan puts it, "Mastership was a system of social classification and representation before it denoted a system of production, distribution, and consumption. Social relations, molded by the corporate code, were anterior to economic relations and in some ways determined or at least significantly shaped them." "Turgot's Carnival," p. 183.

exceptions to rules multiplied, making the privileges left behind seem increasingly arbitrary and unjust.

#### THE LINEN DRAPERS

The oldest women's guild within the garment trades, and indeed one of the best-established Parisian guilds, dealt not in clothing but linens (*lingerie*).<sup>28</sup> Linens included household linens, layettes for babies and nursing mothers, and, in clothing, breeches for women, shirts and their accessories, night shirts, and handkerchiefs. In medieval times household linens accounted for the lion's share of this commerce and production. In addition to a considerable aristocratic market for these goods, the churches of Paris required ritual linens for mass and consumed enormous amounts of plain linens and bedding for the convents and hospitals.<sup>29</sup>

This was a diverse trade. At its low end, the "poor and pitiable" linen workers whose sheds hung from the wall along what is now the rue de la Lingerie at the center of les Halles caused the guild considerable headaches.<sup>30</sup> The widespread perception that these linen workers were trafficking in sex as well as table linens and shirts had long made the guild particularly emphatic about its moral function.<sup>31</sup> The linen trade also offered a respectable occupation for married and single women of high social standing. At this end of the market, the guild's merchant competition came from the mercers (dry goods merchants) and, later, the *marchands de modes* (who sold dress trimmings), against whom the linen drapers' guild held its own with surprising and disconcerting success.

Unlike the tailors, the linen drapers formed a merchant guild, selling others' goods. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, however, more linen drapers began to produce as well as to sell linens, hiring on women workers. From that time on, both guild statutes and court complaints reflect more differentiation between women with merchant skills and those serving much less expensive apprenticeships in sewing.<sup>32</sup> Jaubert's 1773

<sup>28</sup> Cynthia Truant is studying the social history of the Paris women's guilds. See "The Guildswomen of Paris," pp. 130–38, and "Parisian Guildswomen and the (Sexual) Politics of Privilege."

<sup>29</sup> Bouvier, *La lingerie et les lingères*, pp. 147–53.

<sup>30</sup> Officially, guild members needed to serve three years of apprenticeship and work two years in another's boutique before setting up on their own. Yet these requirements did little to stem the swelling tide of poor peddlers of lingerie. See the 1573 and 1594 statutes of the linen drapers, cited in Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, p. 63. Bouvier, *La lingerie et les lingères*, pp. 162–65.

<sup>31</sup> The 1485 statutes pledged to guard against women of ill repute (sexual or otherwise) in the interest of protecting the good reputation of the women, their daughters, and the trade in general. "Lettres patentes de Charles 8 confirmant les premiers statuts des lingères," 20 August 1485, cited in Franklin, *Les corporations ouvrières*, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> The complaints are compiled in the footnotes of Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, 3:71–74. See also Roche, *Le culture des apparences*, p. 291.

Dictionary of Commerce described familiarity with fabrics (usually acquired by being raised in merchant families) as the highly prized skill, and one that brought access to the upper echelons of the trade.<sup>33</sup> This, then, was a varied commerce, providing livelihoods for peddlers to the popular classes, for those retailing luxury goods to the aristocracy, and for a wide variety of seamstresses. It was associated at the low end with poverty and prostitution and at the other with merchant alliances and respectable women's employment.

By the mid-seventeenth century, the production of underclothing was growing rapidly. Daniel Roche's study of seventeenth-century Parisian wardrobes shows increasing numbers of basic items such as shirts, petticoats, and stockings. Since water was difficult to come by, fresh underclothes took the place of bathing, and rising standards of cleanliness increased demand. Aristocratic *armoires* displayed a wider array of fine lingerie, made of higher quality fabrics, and garnished with expensive bits of lace and pearls. Gathered wrists and cuffs, sleeves embellished with rows of pleats, and muslin collars were all intended to draw attention to the presence of undergarments, alluding to the body beneath the surface. In Roche's words they were "the visible accessories of hidden cleanliness"; they were also hallmarks of aristocratic sensuality and *galanterie*.<sup>34</sup> New demands and sensibilities encouraged the multiplication of subspecialties in the production of linens, expanding the guild's trade, retailing, and production, creating more work in sewing, and increasing the numbers, visibility, and diversity of women workers.

That the linens trade was female was one of its distinctive characteristics. Unlike tailoring, linens drew on a separate female labor market.<sup>35</sup> Court records show a great many mother-daughter combinations, and the guild's apprenticeship regulations favored daughters of mistresses. Yet the industry did not develop out of a family-based system of household production. Indeed, the guild seems to have been determined to check any development in that direction, to preserve the guild's independence, and to keep male heads of family from encroaching on their wives' business dealings and the guild's prerogatives. Linen drapers' guild statutes specifically forbade linen drapers'

<sup>33</sup> Jaubert, *Dictionnaire*, 2:595–97, s.v. "lingères." For the social history of women in the lingerie trade, see Bernadette Oriol-Roux, "Maitresses marchandes lingères, maitresses couturières, ouvrières en linge aux alentours de 1751" (Master's thesis, University of Paris, 1980); and Truant, "The Guildswomen of Paris," and "Parisian Guildswomen and the (Sexual) Politics of Privilege."

<sup>34</sup> Roche, *La culture des apparences*, chap. 7; Lescpinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, 3:63.

<sup>35</sup> Truant uses apprenticeship contracts to estimate that up to 40 percent of the guild members of the linen drapers and seamstresses were single. Two of the four officers had to be single women. See "The Guildswomen of Paris," p. 133. See also James B. Collins, "The Economic Role of Women in Seventeenth-Century France," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 455.

husbands from participating in their business. In the emphatic words of the 1594 statutes, reiterated each time the statutes were reissued, husbands were not to “interfere in any way with [linen drapers’] shops,” nor were they to operate other shops in the trade.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, husbands were banned from the bodies charged with administering the trades. All of the women’s guilds in early modern Paris registered complaints that men were usurping women’s jobs, but few were as outspoken, powerful, or successful in defending their turf as the linen drapers.

For a variety of reasons, then, ranging from tradition to the growth of markets to the wealth and prestige of the trade, by the end of the Old Regime the linen drapers’ guild constituted a particularly strong corporation. By all accounts, it governed a large and expanding *métier*, well connected, well organized, and vocal.<sup>37</sup>

### THE SEAMSTRESSES

The seamstresses’ guild was much younger than that of the linen drapers, and its existence much more in contention. Unlike the linen drapers, whose principle competition was with other merchants like the mercers, the seamstresses produced as well as sold clothing. Their very existence marked a breach in the tailors’ corporate wall. Guild tailors’ wives had long sewn clothing for women and children, giving them a more or less distinct trade, but leaving markets for that clothing under the tailors’ control. Clandestine tailoring by women also flourished. The tailors’ 1660 statutes that insisted only wives of guild tailors could work in the trade signaled rising competition from clandestine women workers.

The tailors’ battle against clandestine seamstresses grew increasingly bitter and futile with the changing demand for women’s clothing. Eighteenth-century inventories of Parisian *armoires* registered real changes in women’s fashion. The seventeenth-century female “uniform,” which had consisted of more or less elaborate bodices, petticoats, and skirts layered to suit the weather and status of the wearer, gave way to dresses. The dress-wearing fashion was expensive and impractical (because the pieces could not be worn, washed, or replaced separately), but was adopted surprisingly quickly, and it helped create an increasingly distinctive branch of the clothing industry, a subspecialty that women workers were able to carve out

<sup>36</sup> “Lettres patentes de Henri 4 confirmant les statuts. . .” (1594) and “Lettres patentes de Louis 14. . .” (1645) in Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, 3:71–77. See Franklin, *Corporations ouvrières*, p. 87, for complaints of linen drapers. On men in the *jurandes*, see Jaubert, *Dictionnaire*, 2:595–97. Court cases involving many mother-daughter enterprises may be found in Archives Nationales AD XI 20. Howell’s research on women’s guilds in Leiden and Cologne provides general background and interpretive suggestions. *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*, pp. 152–55.

<sup>37</sup> Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, 3:64; Jaubert, *Dictionnaire*, 2:595–97.

as their own.<sup>38</sup> Seamstresses could tap a growing market, and many female clients, including wealthy and powerful women of the aristocracy, had a vested interest in the seamstresses' independence and success.

The weight of the new clientele and commerce made itself felt in the 1675 edict creating a seamstresses' guild entitled to make clothing for women and small children. "Women and girls of all social status have become accustomed to having seamstresses make their underskirts, dressing-gowns, bodices and other useful clothing," the edict stated. The incessant fighting between clandestine seamstresses and the tailors' guild had been "vexing" to the clientele as well as to the women workers, and the prospect of serious perturbations in this lucrative commerce may have helped convince the state to agree to a new guild. The promise of new taxes to be collected from that guild was doubtless equally compelling.<sup>39</sup>

The letters patent authorizing the seamstresses' guild also marked an effort to sort out the work domains of men and women. On the one hand, the formal establishment of the guild was said merely to ratify custom: "since time immemorial they [the seamstresses] have applied themselves to needlework to clothe young children and persons of their sex, and that work has been the only means they have had to earn their living honestly."<sup>40</sup> On the other, the edict sought to justify the new division of the commerce in clothing with reference to cultural sensibilities, considering it "within propriety, and suitable to the demureness and the modesty of women and girls, to allow themselves to be dressed by persons of their sex when they deem it appropriate."<sup>41</sup>

Such decrees did not settle the issue. That women workers had a special title to sewing women's clothes was hardly a principle that would cut through the web of regulations and specialties that constituted the clothing industry.<sup>42</sup> Tailors, predictably, found nothing persuasive, logical, or appropriate in the new divisions of the industry. In their view the seamstresses were a "bizarre" guild, and the argument that seamstressing was appropriately feminine was profoundly at odds with corporate norms that the

<sup>38</sup> Roche, *La culture des apparences*, pp. 140–45 and chap. 6 generally.

<sup>39</sup> Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, 3:231–35. Levansier, ed., *Syndicate de l'aiguille*, p. 20. Seamstresses had the rights to make most women's clothing and clothes for boys under eight but not to make capes, bodices, or corsets. Dusautoy, "Habillement des deux sexes," in *Exposition universelle de 1867*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*; also Franklin, *Les corporations ouvrières*, p. 43.

<sup>41</sup> Franklin, *Les corporations ouvrières*, p. 43.

<sup>42</sup> There were no seamstresses' guilds in Dijon, Coutance, and the Auvergne; seamstresses existed only as an adjunct to the tailoring guild. Abensour, *La femme et le féminisme*, p. 186. Seamstresses' guilds were instituted gradually in Chartres, Alençon, Blois, Orléans, Poitiers, and Nancy. Levansier, ed., *Syndicate de l'aiguille*, pp. 4, 5. On continuing territorial debates in Paris, see "Arrest de la cour de Parlement," (1727) Archives Nationales AD XI 26.

guild should govern the whole trade and that women were subordinate to men. Economic entitlement flowed from social standing and public responsibility, not from economic activity or labor.

The guild seamstresses and their advocates understood the principles differently. They promoted a more “economistic” view that their rights flowed from their labors, a view that clashed with the tailors’ assertions of corporate prerogatives. Claims that clothing was properly women’s work clearly struck responsive chords among the seamstresses and, combined with their rapidly expanding number, gave the guild a strong public identity. The guild was less restrictive than the linen drapers’. In order to become a mistress seamstress, a girl or woman needed to serve three years as an apprentice, two years as a worker, and be at least twenty-two years old. All these requirements were waived for mistress seamstresses’ daughters. In an effort to restrict access to the top of the trade, the guild allowed mistresses only one apprentice in the first three years; other workers in the shop were merely poorly paid assistants (*compagnes*).<sup>43</sup> Over the course of the eighteenth century, between 100 and 150 new mistresses were admitted every year.<sup>44</sup> The upstart seamstresses’ guild, less well-established and connected, considerably poorer than the linen drapers’ guild, frequently unable to pay its fees to the city, and even more plagued by competition from independent workers, was nonetheless equally combative and self-assured.<sup>45</sup> In the 1760s, when the debate on the guilds peaked, the seamstresses did not hesitate to make their grievances known. A powerful “work identity” and sense of entitlement runs through their many petitions to the government.<sup>46</sup>

#### CLANDESTINE PRODUCTION

The number of clandestine linen drapers, seamstresses, and tailors certainly kept pace with and probably outstripped those of guild members. By the eighteenth century the guild structure was strained by economic developments and battered by political and ideological broadsides. Even by the rules, the guilds did not control all production under the Old Regime, and

<sup>43</sup> Lespinasse, *Les métiers et corporations*, 3:231–34.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233; Roche, *La culture des apparences*, p. 288. For numbers in 1776, see “Observations pour les marchandes et les maîtresses couturières au sujet de l’édit de rétablissement des corps et communautés,” Joly de Fleury, vol. 596, fols. 89–91. There were about the same number of master tailors and half as many linen drapers. The linen drapers were a smaller group of well-heeled merchant traders, with larger networks of suppliers and workers. Seamstresses, even more than tailors, were small shopkeepers and artisans.

<sup>45</sup> On the guild’s financial woes, see “Observations pour les marchandes et les maîtresses couturières,” Joly de Fleury, vol. 596, fols. 89–91.

<sup>46</sup> On women’s “work identity,” see Davis, “Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon,” pp. 167–97.



within and without the guild structure there were competing and overlapping modes of production and distribution. A non-guild artisan could work either directly for the crown, or in one of the areas that lay beyond the legal reach of the guilds—places like the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, Saint-Germain-des-Près, Sainte-Genève, or Temple, which were formerly seigniorial and ecclesiastical fiefs under independent authority, and were now “free zones.”<sup>47</sup>

Clandestine workers, both male and female, worked surreptitiously in guild areas. Seamstresses crowded into the central districts alongside *modistes*, flower makers, and fan makers. Some worked independently. Others worked in small shops directed by a seamstress. Linen seamstresses often worked for merchant manufacturers with substantial putting out networks. Hustling small jobs was the key to survival. If we were to follow any individual woman, she would probably be sewing at home one week, peddling her wares in les Halles another, and plying a needle for a small shopkeeper, either a tailor or seamstress, during a third.

By the eighteenth century, there was nothing secret about this “clandestine” labor. Moreover, it was impossible to disentangle guild from clandestine production. Shirts and petticoats were produced legally for large merchants but also peddled illegally by women who sewed them. Aristocrats and bourgeois could purchase elegant linens on the rue Saint-Honoré; the common people could buy cheap imitations legally in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine or les Halles, and illegally just about anywhere.<sup>48</sup>

In principle, the battle against clandestine production lay at the center of the corporate project. Without regulation, so corporate thinking went, there would be anarchy, fraud, corruption, and license.<sup>49</sup> Expensive materials, important tools, and manufacturing techniques would be pirated by clandestine workers. Workshops assured control of workers’ behavior and virtue. In striking contrast to their nineteenth-century successors, eighteenth-century commentators considered work done at home (which was called *travail en chambre*) to be undisciplined, and women working beyond the confines of a shop prone to promiscuity. “Apartments, rooms, and garrets hold innumerable crowds of young girls” and were an invitation

<sup>47</sup> On the overlapping modes of production, distribution, and consumption, see Auslander, *Taste and Power*; Roche, *La culture des apparences*; and Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses*. Note, though, that none of them even hazards an estimate of clandestine workers.

<sup>48</sup> See Fairchild on fan making for the overlapping of legal and legal production. Here, the “production and marketing systems [were] truly Byzantine in complexity and so riddled with illegalities that whole neighborhoods in Paris where fans were made and sold lived outside the law.” In “The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods,” p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> “Réflexions des marchands et marchandes lingères de Paris, sur le projet de détruire les jurandes,” Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fols. 128–29, pp. 7–8.

to debauchery, according to the seamstress's guild; by contrast, the watchful eye of a mistress guaranteed the discipline of young workers.<sup>50</sup> Clandestine work was not situated in the "home"; it was seen as outside the order of the workshop. The linen drapers' guild, similarly, argued that morality and discipline were best served by keeping women together under one roof, and writers otherwise critical of the guilds concurred.<sup>51</sup>

In practice, the guild and non-guild worlds were not so starkly separated. Clandestine seamstresses, tailors, and linen drapers in most instances were indistinguishable from their guild counterparts. Clandestine production was not necessarily unskilled. Nor was it more proto-industrial. In the guild and non-guild world artisanal shops prospered alongside large-scale putting out operations. The battle against clandestine production was politically important, but the economic stakes may not have been that high. In the late eighteenth century the tailors' guild acknowledged that easily half of their masters had ongoing commerce with clandestine workers.<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, tailors accommodated women's work. Particularly in Paris, where women's labor was central to the thriving fashion trades, the largely male corporations like the mercers or the tailors had little choice but to tolerate rivals, whether guild linen drapers and seamstresses or male and female clandestine workers. They did so grudgingly. Seamstresses shops were regularly visited by the tailors' guild officers, their apprentices and shop assistants arrested, and their goods confiscated. In a 1764 case that the court considered exemplary, the tailors were reprovved for "having taken from the woman Lahaye by force and violence a dress and petticoat that she was delivering to one of her customers, on the grounds that she was a false worker." The court barred tailors from inspecting seamstresses' shops without specific authorization. It also required the guild to print and post no-

<sup>50</sup> Clearly pleading for public support, the guild said that the *jurandes* policed the morals of guild shops even more carefully than they did the skills of mistresses. "Supplément au mémoire à consulter des six corps pour la communauté des couturières" (1776), Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 117, pp. 4–5.

<sup>51</sup> "Réflexions des marchands et marchandes lingères," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fols. 128–29, pp. 9, 12. This moralizing was not confined to women workers. The male guilds also considered shopwork to be superior because it allowed them to police work habits, control quality, and reinforce hierarchies of master, journeyman, and apprentice. Steven Kaplan, "The Luxury Guilds in Paris in the Eighteenth Century," *Francia* 9 (1981): 293.

<sup>52</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 173. These points are underscored by revisionist studies of the guilds, including Gail Bossenga, "Protecting Merchants: Guilds and Commerical Capitalism in 18th-Century France," Liana Vardi, "The Abolition of the Guilds during the French Revolution"; and Michael Sibalís, "Corporatism after the Corporations: The Debate on Restoring the Guilds," all in *French Historical Studies* 15, no. 4 (Fall 1988); Kaplan, "Les 'faux ouvriers'"; Simona Cerutti, *La ville et les métiers: Naissance d'un langage corporatif* (Paris, 1990); Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*; and Fairchild, "The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods."

tices that tailors would allow seamstresses to “exercise their trade in peace.”<sup>53</sup>

The artisanal world of the Old Regime could not exclude women effectively or systematically. Women’s labor in those trades ran the gamut from skilled to unskilled, guild to clandestine, and familial to independent. On the one hand, then, women had a visible presence in clothing production and sales, made an essential contribution, and enjoyed specific guild rights. On the other hand, their place in the corporate world was hardly secure: guildsmen considered working women’s status ambiguous, and even guildswomen found their title contested in the courts, attacked in petitions to have their corporation abolished, and questioned daily in encounters on the streets. Changes that expanded women’s domain thus did not alleviate their sense of vulnerability.

#### THE CORPORATE ORDER CONTESTED

By the 1760s and 1770s, the struggles between men and women guild members was thoroughly entangled in the battles over the guilds’ future. Social critics assailed guild privileges as symptomatic of those of the regime in general: unjust, unnatural, and burdensome. Physiocratic writers argued that abolishing the guilds would unfetter technological development, eliminate regional differences in the organization and regulation of work, and, in general, do away with “arbitrary” conventions and rules.<sup>54</sup> Such arguments found influential supporters in the royal administration, chief among them the liberal A. Robert Jacques Turgot, appointed controller general in 1774. Turgot’s rise to power and his 1776 edicts met with a battery of angry petitions from the guilds, including the tailors, seamstresses, and linen drapers. These petitions were written by the guild leadership and their legal representatives. They do not reflect the outlook of common needleworkers.<sup>55</sup> They are nonetheless remarkable documents, and revealing about the crucial ways in which trade issues became intertwined with changing definitions of femininity, new concepts of gender as a division of labor, and the

<sup>53</sup> Sentence de police et arrêt de parlement 7 septembre, 1764 and 27 mars, 1765 for the *Communauté des maîtresses couturières de la ville et faubourgs de Paris et la Demoiselle Lahaye, Maîtresse couturière*. This and similar arrêts may be found in Archives Nationales AD XI 26. See also Joly de Fleury, vol. 596, fol. 79.

<sup>54</sup> On the enlightened critique of the guilds and corporate self-defense, see Coornaert, *Les corporations en France*, pp. 170–71; Sewell, *Work and Revolution*, pp. 66–77; Fairchild, “The Production and Marketing of Populuxe Goods”; and Kaplan, “Turgot’s Carnival.”

<sup>55</sup> Simona Cerutti has warned historians of guilds against assuming any common “language of labor” in a trade, a criticism largely directed at Sewell’s approach. See also Hunt and Sheridan, “Corporatism, Association, and the Language of Labor in France.” I am interested in what these petitions show about public debate on women’s work, a debate which drew on a handful of key ideas and rhetorical devices. The petitions do not adequately represent the point of view of workers, or even “the trade.”

intellectual cross currents that began to reshape discussions of women's work.

The master tailors' petition forcefully argued that "competition and liberty," which Turgot hoped to foster, had already progressed too far.<sup>56</sup> The abolition of guilds might be workable in small towns, where "the passions are generally less lively and needs more easily satisfied." In the "capitals," though, such a reform would be "the signal and the food of anarchy."<sup>57</sup> The tailors proposed their own reforms to maintain social order and rationalize the economic world. Chief among these, not surprisingly, was putting all of the clothing guilds back under the governorship of the tailors' guild.<sup>58</sup>

The tailors vigorously defended themselves against charges of "despotism," arguing that guild mastership had never been prohibitively expensive or exclusive. They grounded their privileges in the prerogatives of the male head of household, inextricable from the moral, political, and economic order. A man's craft status was his patrimony. When he died, the guild system assured the orderly transfer of that patrimony, maintaining family hierarchies and providing as well for women within the family. These family hierarchies, the petition continued, were compatible with "enlightened" recognition of women's maternal travails and sacrifices.<sup>59</sup>

Without guilds to guarantee stability, the petition continued, a master's death would leave a vacuum of authority. Journeymen and apprentices would rebel, taking advantage of the master's widow and her children. Such predictions of labor unrest and sedition were accompanied by bleak tableaux of moral decay. Abolishing the guilds portended the collapse of orderly families. "What girl would enter into the solemn act of marriage with a person lacking estate, who has nothing to assure his future, and whom the first accident could reduce to abject poverty?" "Libertinage" would ensue.<sup>60</sup>

The seamstresses' petitions reflected their different and anomalous position in the guild world. They wrote to defend the corporate system, but they also needed to justify their title to a place within it, countering more powerful guilds' arguments that they were trespassers. They did so with reference

<sup>56</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 173, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> They echoed the petition from the Six corps de Paris (which represented the most powerful guilds) claiming that specialized guilds like the cobblers, *fripriers*, and seamstresses were "bizarre" in the corporate world. "Supplément au mémoire à consulter sur l'existence actuelle des six corps et la conservation de leurs privilèges," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 151; and "Réflexions des six corps de la ville de Paris sur la suppression des jurandes," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 154, pp. 11–12. Tailors could enforce discipline and order in the trade only if they had the political power and jurisdiction to do so; creating subgroups, grounded in trade specialties, wreaked havoc with corporate logic.

<sup>59</sup> "Réflexions des maîtres tailleurs," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 173, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14. The petition from the *tapissiers*, Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 176, made the same point.

to the history of the needle trades, to concerns about moral propriety, and, speaking “with an Enlightened accent,” they grounded their rights (and monopoly) not in custom and privilege, but in the nature and the character of the sexes. There were, the seamstresses argued, distinctly masculine and feminine responsibilities, honors, and work roles.

In society there are certain tasks that call for only gentleness, intelligence, and justice; there are honors that could reward peaceful heroism and charity; there are labors that require only a quick and sparkling imagination, only grace and finesse in the execution. Women have had the right to claim these; man has snatched them away because he is stronger.”<sup>61</sup>

The seamstresses’ petition also borrowed Enlightenment ideas in framing a moralized and “sexualized” denunciation of aristocratic society. To be sure, the seamstresses’ grievances against the tailors’ guild and male monopolies had been forged in a century of battles and antagonisms in the clothing trades. But their petitions also traded in the currency of larger public debates. Indeed, they provide a good example of the rhetorical “over-bidding” that so marked debates of the late eighteenth century.<sup>62</sup> The 1675 letters patent founding the guild had underscored cultural concerns for modesty (women should dress women), but the linen drapers’ petition embellished that theme in a characteristic way:

For a long time the vulgar hands of men have held the delicate waist of a woman in order to measure it, and to cover her with elaborate clothing; for a long time modesty has been compelled to suffer the prying gaze that prolongs its regard under the pretext of a greater exactitude.<sup>63</sup>

The tailors’ pretensions to craft and skill barely disguised their lascivious tyranny, one of the corruptions of privilege.

The linen-drapers’ petition struck similar chords, but even more boldly. With perhaps an edge of parody, it opened in an emphatically female voice, speaking as a “community of women,” vaunting the community’s skills and entitlement.<sup>64</sup> Like the seamstresses, the linen drapers insisted theirs was appropriately women’s work. They argued, first, from natural law: nature

<sup>61</sup> “Supplément au mémoire . . . des couturières,” Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 117, pp. 1–2. See William Sewell’s point that “even [Turgot’s] enemies speak with an Enlightened accent.” *Work and Revolution*, p. 63. In 1776 and again in the *cahiers de doléance*, many of the guilds defended their organizations while demanding sweeping changes in the state.

<sup>62</sup> The phrase is François Furet’s (*Interpreting the French Revolution*), but see also Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*; and Sarah C. Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> “Supplément au mémoire . . . des couturières,” Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 117, p. 3. Again, this borrows from physiocratic attacks on luxury and consumption.

<sup>64</sup> “Réflexions des marchands et marchandes lingères,” Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fols. 128–29.

endowed men with “strength,” suiting them for particular kinds of work and it gave women “dexterity,” fitting them for others. History and social custom (traditional guild points of reference) powerfully confirmed “nature’s” order. Linens had been “in all times” the special responsibility of women. “From their earliest education they are accustomed to make it the goal of their labors and thoughts.” If education and families had so honed women’s skills and minds, why should the state or corporations ban women from the marketing of these goods or from administering this commerce?<sup>65</sup> The linen drapers argued from professional competence and utility: their continued stewardship of their trade was a guarantee of the highest quality, continuous improvement, and public satisfaction.<sup>66</sup> Finally, they argued for the need to assure womanly industry, lest exclusion from economic activity drive masses of women into poverty. Their guild, which in their view represented the principle of a female monopoly of the linens trade, guaranteed women an occupation and foothold in the industrial world. In a culture where, in their words, “our customs at once forbid women from almost all kinds of work in society and at the same time multiply women’s needs,” such a monopoly was amply justified.<sup>67</sup> Within the context of the late-eighteenth-century corporate structure, this was the best way for women to carve out a place for themselves.

These “reflections” issued from women at the top of the trade. From their perspective, the greatest danger came from merchant capitalists who debased the quality of the merchandise and shouldered aside women artisans or merchants, turning many into clandestine workers and reducing the wages of workers on the lower rungs of the ladder. “The workshops of these pirates [merchant capitalists] are filled with women reduced to having to scrounge for work.”<sup>68</sup> Like the seamstresses, the linen drapers cast the issue not simply as poverty, but also, and more vividly, as women’s independence and self-governance. They presented their trade as a last bastion of female artisanship and autonomy in a society that seemed otherwise determined to crush both. In a remarkable turn of phrase, they said that the linens trade was “the only one where she was obliged neither to rent herself to a greedy entrepreneur nor to submit to a tyrannical associate, disguised under the appellation of ‘husband.’”<sup>69</sup> The rejection, from this quarter, of the tailors’ vision of orderly patriarchal workshops and marital complementarity could hardly have been more decisive.

The seamstresses argued that dismantling the guilds would reduce work-

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

ing women to prostitutes.<sup>70</sup> In the linen drapers' view, the dangers of free trade and free work appeared even more far reaching. Femininity itself would be corrupted. Turning physiocratic arguments against Turgot, the linen drapers cast their guild as a bulwark against the decadence of aristocratic display and consumption. Their petition read as if it had been written by an austere bourgeois rather than by merchants and manufacturers who traded in embroidered linens for churches or delicate nightcaps and muslin scarves for the aristocracy. Lingerie shops run by mistress linen drapers were both modest and instructive, the petition carefully suggested. "Shelves filled with useful objects teach lessons of economy. There are no decorations other than order and cleanliness." If the guilds were abolished, they warned, the tone of commerce would be quite different. "From the rubble [of the guilds], we will witness the emergence of glittering shops . . . where the attributes of pleasure will eclipse those of labor, where commerce will be conducted by the eyes rather than by the mouth."<sup>71</sup> The image thus evoked of aristocratic galanterie, idleness, and consumption for display, and of a world where pleasures and privileges "eclipsed" labor was a staple of eighteenth-century social and economic criticism; in it women were transformed, literally and figuratively, into objects of desire and consumption. To that unsettling image of feminine and social corruption, the linen drapers juxtaposed a vision of simple, unadorned, and productive womanhood.

#### "TRAVAIL FÉMININ" AT THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

However mannered and tactical their arguments, the hardy feminism of the women's guilds' petitions is a powerful reminder of the centrality of gender to criticism of the Old Regime. Recasting women's character and roles, a project that included providing education and teaching skills, encouraging usefulness, and allowing women to work, formed an integral part of the general project of reforming the country and regenerating its *moeurs*. The linen drapers' arguments counterpoising useful womanhood with corrupt femininity were common currency. They circulated freely through the pre-revolutionary press, works of eighteenth-century social critics, and, later, in more republican versions, through petitions from revolutionary women.<sup>72</sup> The linen drapers advanced the arguments considered above on behalf of guild women. But it is symptomatic of women's precarious position in the guild world that critics of the entire guild system found their arguments equally congenial. In the preamble to his 1776 edict abolishing the corpora-

<sup>70</sup> "Supplément au mémoire . . . des couturières," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fol. 117, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> "Réflexions des marchands et marchandes lingères," Joly de Fleury, vol. 462, fols. 128–29, p. 13.

<sup>72</sup> Kaplan, "Les 'faux ouvriers,'" pp. 360, 369; and Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses*, pp. 82, 84–86.

tions, Turgot underscored that guilds were male monopolies, excluding women from many occupations that might rightly be considered theirs.<sup>73</sup>

The linen-drapers and seamstresses' guilds were monopolies too, and occasionally came under reformers' fire. Guild fees excluded many women completely and allowed others in only through the intermediary of established mistresses, who became subcontractors paying low wages.<sup>74</sup> Yet most social critics considered "corporate" and "male" privilege synonymous. Systematic discrimination, epitomized by male guilds, had made it difficult for women to get work and deepened women's vulnerability—such was a frequently voiced criticism of the corporate organization of work.

The linen drapers' and seamstresses' arguments about the corruption of women who were denied their productive roles found wide appeal. They resonated with the economic and moral attack on luxury. Many critics of the regime found displays of reified femininity (prostitution, sumptuous fashions, mistresses as symbols of status and social mobility) one of the defining dangers of urban life.<sup>75</sup> Particularly in Paris, the European capital of aristocratic splendor and luxury commerce, the image of idle women was a lightning rod for critics of the government. Negative portraits of aristocratic "feminine character" supplied critics with a vivid image of the regime's defects: it reveled in coquetry and luxury, lacked discipline and a sense of proportion, and had no education in or appreciation for useful skills.

That work was essential for women, that particular trades should be reserved for them, and that "nature" was a sure guide to "feminine" and "masculine" work roles were the seamstresses' and linen drapers' convictions. But they also became increasingly commonplace in the economic and social debates of the late eighteenth century. Searching for principles of social organization encouraged writers and thinkers to explore the "character of the sexes" in a newly systematic fashion; to elaborate on the different biologies, mentalities, and destinies of men and women; and to apply these in-

<sup>73</sup> Abensour, *La femme et le féminisme*, pp. 195–96.

<sup>74</sup> Mercier, *Les tableaux de Paris*, pp. 135–36. On the cost of mastership, see Madeleine Guilbert, *Les fonctions des femmes dans l'industrie*, p. 24. This debate is also discussed in Camille Bloch, *L'assistance et l'état en France à la veille de la Révolution* (1908; reprint, Geneva, 1974), pp. 24–30.

<sup>75</sup> These included philosophes, physiocrats, and "grub street" writers. Mercier lavished attention on fashion, consumption, and women and workers and objects; the play of appearances, the reification of women, and social mobility through imitation and fashion were among his favorite subjects. In addition to passages from *Les tableaux de Paris* cited elsewhere, see his chapter on "marchandes de modes," in 2:212–15. Daniel Roche's arguments about the distinctive *culture des apparences* of late-eighteenth-century Paris take Mercier's themes and observations as their point of departure. See also Nicolas E. Rétif de la Bretonne, *Les nuits de Paris* (London, 1788–94); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Origins of Physiocracy: Economic Revolution and Social Order in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), p. 129; and Jones, "Repackaging Rousseau."



sights to the ordering of the social and economic worlds.<sup>76</sup> Any number of Enlightenment works laid out, with surprising decisiveness, views on the gender division of labor, nature's prescriptions, and women's capacities. They used the same dualities that ran through the seamstresses' and linen drapers' petitions: men were strong and robust, women imaginative, dexterous, artful.<sup>77</sup> Rousseau's speculations on the gender division of labor were enmeshed in his certainties about feminine character. Little girls "love ornament. Not content to be pretty, they want others to find them so; . . . no sooner are they able to understand what is said to them than they can be governed by telling them what one will think of them." In little girls' play with dolls Rousseau "discovered" both a feminine gift for fashion and, pressing further, the seeds of desire for self-display.<sup>78</sup>

While no one could consider Rousseau mainstream, similar conceptions were becoming coin of the realm. Views of women's labor were increasingly essentialized, or attached to conceptions of feminine nature. Women's innate qualities or inclinations suited them for clothing work. Endowed by birth with grace and beauty, women had a "natural" sense of fashion—though no aesthetic sense that would help them in other crafts or arts. Discussions insisted on the gendered character of crafts and labors. Earlier guild regulations had described "good" tailoring and seamstressing in identical terms; eighteenth-century dialogue insisted on sharper differentiation. The Abbé Jaubert's 1773 *Dictionnaire raisonné universel des arts et métiers*, which appreciatively detailed the skills and knowledge involved in various trades, said seamstressing required more "cleverness" than skill.<sup>79</sup> The *Encyclopédie's* engraving of a tailor's workshop presented a well-ordered array of tools: chalk, tables, marking instruments, weights for making pleats and folds, thimbles, needles, irons for special cuts, and different patterns. Its counterpart on seamstressing depicted workers fitting the dress directly to the body. Women had less capacity for abstraction, the engravings suggested; their trades required fewer "precision" tools and instruments.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> On the eighteenth-century redefinition of gender, see, among many others: Offen and Bell, eds., *Women, the Family, and Freedom*, vol. 1; Hausen, "The Family and Role Division: The Polarization of Sexual Stereotypes in the Nineteenth Century," in Evans and Lee, eds., *The German Family*; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (San Francisco, 1980); Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); Samia Spencer, *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984); and Abensour, *La femme et le féminisme*.

<sup>77</sup> Abensour, *La femme et le féminisme*, pp. 417–19. The *Encyclopédie* summarized the debate about women's capacities and nature, citing a Hebrew proverb that held women incapable of using any tools except the distaff (s.v. "Femme"). Voltaire's "nature" forbade women "the heavy work of carpentry, masonry, metal-work, carting.

<sup>78</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile ou de l'éducation*, 1874 edition, pp. 443–44, 446.

<sup>79</sup> Jaubert, *Dictionnaire*, 1:571–73.

<sup>80</sup> William Sewell's study of the *Encyclopédie's* plates remarks that virtually none of them

Louis Sebastien Mercier's indignation at violations of the natural order illustrates the assumptions that informed these discussions. "It is grotesque," he wrote, "to see male hairdressers, men pushing a needle, handling a shuttle, and usurping the sedentary life of women. . . . It is immoral . . . for strong and robust persons to invade areas which nature has particularly designated for persons of the opposite sex."<sup>81</sup> In light of the centuries-old tailors', mercers', drapers', and *fripriers'* guilds, and considering the seamstresses' precarious foothold in the needle trades, the certainty with which "nature" deems everything associated with dress, fabric, and fashion a "feminine" enterprise is striking indeed. The spirit of self-evident rationality and naturalness with which Mercier presents his views illustrates the gulf that divided Enlightenment conceptions of the gender division of labor from corporate convictions about patriarchal authority.

The concern to reserve certain trades for women also marked the growing influence of political economy and the newly systematic discussion of economic questions at the end of the Old Regime. Reform-minded administrators presented manufacturing and labor rather than philanthropy as key weapons in attacking social problems.<sup>82</sup> Women, like men, needed to be productive and to be given work. "Work is the people's only patrimony. They must work or beg," said one reformer, who assailed the guilds for making people purchase the "right to work."<sup>83</sup> Women, especially, could ill afford this indefensible exaction. By the same token, the guildwomen's proud emphasis on productive and independent womanhood echoed changing views of work that we associate with physiocracy and emerging political economy: the critique of hierarchies of craft according to the status and privilege they conferred, increasing respect for mechanical arts, the emphasis on the right to work, and the pervasive criticism of "unproductive" social groups like the nobility and clergy.<sup>84</sup>

Broad currents of eighteenth-century social theory condemned as "unnatural" distinctions of wealth, estate, and privilege. An order of gender that emphasized the natural complementarity of the sexes increasingly figured as a foil to what critics considered radically corrupting social hier-

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represent women working, that "work was seen as essentially a male activity." "Visions of Labor: Illustrations of the Mechanical Arts before, in and after Diderot's *Encyclopédie*," in Kaplan and Koepf, *Work in France*, pp. 259–60. See also Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the *Encyclopedie*," *New Critical Essays* (New York, 1980), pp. 23–39.

<sup>81</sup> Mercier, *Les tableaux de Paris*, 9:178–79.

<sup>82</sup> Benabou, *De la prostitution et la police*, p. 462; and Fairchild, "Government Support for Working Women."

<sup>83</sup> Echoing Adam Smith, cited in Bloch, *L'assistance et l'état*, pp. 24–30.

<sup>84</sup> See Cynthia Koepf, "The Alphabetical Order: Work in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*," in Kaplan and Koepf, *Work in France*, pp. 230, 232, and 240. See also Kaplan and Koepf's introduction on how inherited classical and Christian notions of work combined with Enlightenment reassessments of work, connecting labor to wealth.

archies. At a time when the project of regenerating the country's *moeurs* could compel wide assent, rethinking women's role and character and providing education and work for women proved particularly popular proposals.<sup>85</sup> The image of the useful and independent working women offered an attractive contrast to older models of femininity. These themes dominated the women's guilds' self-defense and the discussion of women's work.

#### FROM THE OLD REGIME TO THE REVOLUTION

In 1776, opposition to Turgot's edicts had proved overwhelming. Six months after they had been abolished, the corporations were reestablished. They were reformed in minor ways, however, including opening more opportunities to women.<sup>86</sup> All women over eighteen were allowed into the male guilds, including tailoring. Yet they continued to be barred from the assemblies governing those bodies, they could exercise no responsibilities in those guilds, and, in mixed trades, they had to meet in separate assemblies, which drew sharp protest from groups like the seamstresses.<sup>87</sup> In this form the corporations, and the debate surrounding them, continued until the collapse of the regime itself.

By that time, the guilds embraced such diverse methods of production and were so deeply interwoven with "clandestine" labor that their formal abolition made little difference to the workers in the trade, or even to the organization of production. Merchant capital had long since made inroads into garment manufacturing; small artisans, male and female, subsisted alongside wage earners, some of them working in shops, others dispersed in their lodgings. So they continued through the revolutionary period. Dominique Godineau's portrait of the female labor force in 1791 and her "map of Parisian labor" confirms this continuity.<sup>88</sup> That does not mean that the Parisian economy remained stubbornly "traditional," but rather that the dynamism of the eighteenth century had already left its mark, especially in the garment and fashion trades.

By all accounts the most dramatic effects of the Revolution arose from the

<sup>85</sup> See, for instance, "Petition des femmes du Tiers Etat au roi, 1er janvier, 1789," in Harriet Applewhite, Darlene Levy, and Mary Johnson, eds., *Women in Revolutionary Paris* (Urbana, Ill., 1979), pp. 19–20; Groppi, "Le travail des femmes," p. 37, n. 25.

<sup>86</sup> Abensour, *La femme et le féminisme*, pp. 196–97; Coornaert, *Les corporations en France*, pp. 165–77; Kaplan, "Turgot's Carnival"; and Vardi, "The Abolition of the Guilds," p. 708.

<sup>87</sup> "Observations pour les marchandes et les maîtresses couturières," Joly de Fleury, vol. 596, fols. 89–91; patent letters of 1785, in Archives Nationales, AD XI 26.

<sup>88</sup> On the Revolution and women's work, see Hufton, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship*; Gullickson, *The Spinners and Weavers of Auffay*; Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses*; Groppi, "Le travail des femmes"; Raymonde Monnier, "L'évolution de l'industrie et le travail des femmes à Paris sous l'Empire," *Bulletin d'Histoire Economique et Sociale de la Révolution Française* (1979); and Roche, *La culture des apparences*, pp. 272–77. See Kaplan, "Turgot's Carnival," though, on how hard it is to answer precise questions about the effects of abolishing guilds.

acute crisis of the luxury trades, which brought devastating unemployment in the capital until the Empire, when conditions slowly and fitfully began to improve.<sup>89</sup> Hard times heightened the peripatetic character of women's work, forcing needleworkers in all branches of the garment industry to seek short-term jobs from any employer. Thus the economic crisis swelled the ranks of female laborers who could be hired by (usually male) entrepreneurs operating on a larger scale, confirming the earlier fears of guild seamstresses, linen drapers, and tailors. In the guild world these had been called clandestine workers; now they were called home workers, or *ouvrières à domicile*.

Predictably, gender antagonisms rose as employers tried to hire cheap female labor. In one of several similar incidents, the revolutionary commissioners of the Tuileries section had to remind angry male workers protesting the hiring of women that "the corporations had been abolished" and that they had to allow women to work in peace.<sup>90</sup> As far as many "citizens" were concerned, the spirit of male corporatism, privilege, and monopoly remained strong. Trying to relieve distress and keep order during the revolutionary wars, the Convention gave jobs sewing clothes for the army to unemployed women and relatives of soldiers. Some of this work was put out by the government and by popular demand administered through the sections.<sup>91</sup> The rest was routed through private contractors with recourse to large putting out networks. Assemblies of women demanded that the Republic fire these contractors, "bloodsuckers of the people," who had seized control of markets in order to drive down wages. In 1793 their protests registered. By 1795 they fell on deaf ears, and the municipally-run workshops had closed down. The Ministry of Clothing had also set up centralized workshops for the manufacture of tents and overcoats, employing large numbers of seamstresses. Those, too, were handed over to private manufacturers during the Directory.<sup>92</sup>

Neither of these experiments constituted a dramatic departure from past practices; large putting out networks were not new. Nonetheless, in their scale, in the weight of large contractors and capital, and in the deteriorating

<sup>89</sup> There are several studies of the crisis, none of them very precise. Some, like Braesch's influential study, are now being reconsidered. See Roche, *La culture des apparences*, p. 520, n. 65. In 1807 (when the population of Paris was about 580,000), the prefecture of police's "worker-statistics" showed a labor force of 100,000. Of those, 30,651 were in clothing and textiles, a much lower percentage than earlier, and a sign of deep crisis. Roche considers those numbers misleadingly low, however, for these statistics counted only workers with a livret, and thus excluded all casual labor. It is a particularly inaccurate count of female labor; the author of the survey admitted to having counted women only in the trades where they were very numerous (p. 274).

<sup>90</sup> See Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses*, p. 85.

<sup>91</sup> They elected commissioners who supervised the putting out, did the cutting in central shops, and served as a board of appeal for women workers with grievances. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–88.

<sup>92</sup> Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses*, pp. 86–88.

conditions of work, they prefigured developments to come. The crisis took a heavy toll on small artisans, and the reorganization and slow recovery accentuated trends already present at the end of the Old Regime. Without for a moment romanticizing the laboring lives of dressmakers, linen-workers, or seamstresses under the monarchy, it is fair to conclude that as the Revolution gave way to the Empire, Paris—*le grand foyer du travail féminin*—was becoming a more difficult place for women to work.<sup>93</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The importance of the clothing trades, the variety of markets for which they produced, and the range of women's employments in those trades were among the most important hallmarks of the Parisian economy before the Revolution. The artisanal world of Old Regime Paris was by no means male; one found women up and down the guild hierarchy. Much female labor was clandestine, done outside the control of the guilds. Still, it was hardly concealed from public view and consciousness. On the contrary, seamstresses, *modistes*, and working-girls emerged by the mid-eighteenth century as new urban types, representing to contemporaries both the promise and peril of life in the capital.

Clandestine work was not necessarily less artisanal than guild work: it simply lacked legal status. Clandestine work should not be equated with household production. Some of this work was part of a family economy, with women working alongside their tailor husbands and fathers. Some of it was waged or entrepreneurial, though; seamstressing and linens drew upon a separate female labor force. Last, clandestine production, usually called *travail en chambre*, was not associated with the home and domesticity as it would be in the nineteenth century.

The gender division of labor in the clothing trades did not simply issue from the division of labor in the household. Nor did contemporary judgments about the appropriate domains of men and women necessarily flow from convictions about how households were or should be organized. The guild order defined gender politically, as a relationship of authority. That definition overlapped and clashed with others. While the guild order provided the normative structure of Old Regime France, the eighteenth-century guilds bore little resemblance to their early modern (let alone medieval) ancestors.<sup>94</sup> Thus an older logic was overlaid with exceptions and with concessions to aristocratic demands, new sensibilities and markets, and the government's fiscal needs. The eighteenth century created new economic

<sup>93</sup> Information on wages is difficult to come by, and the range of earnings makes generalizations virtually meaningless. See, though, Monnier, "L'évolution de l'industrie," p. 55; and the chart in Godineau, *Citoyennes tricoteuses*, p. 363.

<sup>94</sup> Kaplan and Koeppe, *Work in France*, introduction; and Auslander, *Taste and Power*.

and ideological fault lines, making the guild structure particularly fragile and, in the process, changing ideas about women's domain and economic roles. In this context, guild women, with a clear sense of their craft and entitlement, helped to forge Enlightenment definitions of gender as a "natural" division of labor and economic spheres. They drew from the larger arsenal of Enlightenment beliefs about labor, industry, and moral discipline in defending the claim that the sewing trades were theirs.

It is remarkable, though, that none of the various perspectives informing the late-eighteenth-century discussion considered women's work per se to be problematic. Economic theorists, social observers, and opponents and defenders of the guilds alike all emphasized, to different degrees, the importance for women of industry and productivity, and the value of labor and its moral discipline. For all the invocations of nature's order, female labor was not represented as violating a natural order of womanly vocations. Newly minted economic views seemed straightforward: the right to work ("the patrimony of the people") should be open to all, and "free" work would distribute benefits to industry and the people alike. The discussion of female labor was dominated by political attacks on monopoly and privilege. Female vulnerability and its consequences (prostitution and "libertinage") were issues; so were discrimination against working women and guild or spousal "tyranny." The conflict between labor and family that so troubled thinkers of the nineteenth century hardly figured in this discussion. Only later would the woman worker become an emblem of rampant exploitation, an anomaly, a violation of the "natural" division of labor. Only later would the "patrimony of the people," in nineteenth-century terms the "right to work," be cast in distinctly gendered terms.