

Wendy Gamber

A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Businesswomen in History

Readers who perused a 1904 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* encountered an article with the intriguing title of “The Small Business as a School of Manhood.” Largely a diatribe against the growing dominance of large corporations, it lamented the presumably inevitable passing of smaller concerns. Curiously, its author, Henry A. Stimson, placed relatively little emphasis on the economic or even the political consequences of this development. Rather, he worried that the new order, which reduced would-be entrepreneurs to the status of corporate employees, represented “the loss of something fine in manhood.” Men who inhabited the newly-created ranks of middle and upper management might lead prosperous lives but faced the loss of their self-respect, their dignity, their “intellectual stamina.” As Stimson saw it, they had been emasculated by the rise of the corporation.¹

Stimson’s article demonstrates with remarkable clarity that the history of business is a gendered enterprise. Preoccupied with the corporation’s threat to masculinity, he never considered that the small business might also be a school for womanhood. Indeed, why should he have? Writing in an era that still embraced—in theory if not in practice—the doctrine of “separate spheres,” Stimson had little reason to contemplate this prospect. Not only did prevailing gender ideology

WENDY GAMBER is an assistant professor of history at Indiana University, Bloomington, and the Associate Editor of the *Journal of American History*.

I would like to thank the University of Illinois Press for allowing me to incorporate materials that I used in *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (1997). I would also like to thank the Historical Collections department of Baker Library, Harvard University, and Dun & Bradstreet for permission to quote from the R. G. Dun & Co. records.

¹ H. A. Stimson, “The Small Business as a School of Manhood,” *Atlantic Monthly* 93 (1904): 337-340. See Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, 1986), 72-78, and Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930* (Baltimore, 1994), 45-55, for similar interpretations.

consign men and women to different spaces (men to the public world of business and politics, women to the private sphere of the home), it assumed that the two sexes possessed fundamentally different characters.² Ambition, assertiveness, competitiveness—the characteristics necessary to succeed in (small) business—were quintessentially masculine traits; indeed, Stimson's exposition of the "feminizing" effects of the corporation depended on this powerful but unstated assumption, one that his primarily white, middle-class audience easily would have grasped.

Yet at the time that Stimson wrote, tens of thousands of American women ran businesses, reflecting not a recent phenomenon but a centuries-old tradition that extended into the European past. Representing a variety of entrepreneurial pursuits, they included sellers of feminine finery, purveyors of food and lodging, keepers of houses of ill repute, proprietors of grocery and variety stores, dealers of books and newspapers, apothecaries, tobacconists, and jewelers, midwives, healers, and fortune tellers, even silversmiths and "lady embalmers."³ Although a precise accounting of their numbers may never be possible, various studies make clear that they were a significant presence in the nineteenth-century marketplace, consisting of at least a tenth of urban businesspeople at mid-century.⁴ If they failed to

² Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39, offers a superb review of this concept and its applications by both contemporaries and subsequent historians.

³ For evidence of women's entrepreneurial activities, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Spring 1982): 46-80; Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; reprint, New York, 1968); Elizabeth Sanderson, "The Edinburgh Milliners, 1720-1820," *Costume* (1986): 18-28; Elisabeth Anthony Dexter, *Career Women of America, 1776-1840* (1950; reprint, Clifton, N.J., 1972); Clyde and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of Opportunity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 242-247; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, 1981); Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York, 1984); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York, 1986), 13-15; Claudia Goldin, "The Economic Status of Women in the Early Republic: Quantitative Evidence," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (Winter 1986): 375-404; Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York, 1987), 23, 36-38; Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, "Her Own Boss: Businesswomen and Separate Spheres in the Midwest, 1850-1880," *Illinois Historical Journal* 80 (Autumn 1987): 155-176; Murphy, "Business Ladies: Midwestern Women and Enterprise, 1850-1880," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (Spring 1991): 65-89; Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1997), esp. 27-30; and John N. Ingham, "Patterns of African-American Female Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship in Ten Southern Cities, 1880-1930," paper presented at the Tenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, June 1996, 1. Ingham discusses the "lady embalmer."

⁴ Goldin, "Economic Status of Women," esp. 402; Griffen and Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers*, 242; Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 205.

match the economic influence and political power wielded by their masculine counterparts, the stubborn fact of their existence demands that scholars take notice. Nevertheless, late twentieth-century historians by and large have accepted the unspoken premises of Stimson's argument; with few exceptions, businesswomen are as absent from contemporary historiography as they are from Stimson's early-twentieth-century account.

This essay seeks both to explore some of the reasons for that absence and to suggest a means of incorporating women into the history of nineteenth-century American business. It draws on my own work on the custom dressmaking and millinery trades to delineate some of the ways that a gendered analysis might help us to construct interpretative frameworks that encompass businesspeople of both sexes, while revealing the ways in which gender shaped their respective experiences.⁵

First, several caveats are in order. One concerns terminology. As Stimson himself made abundantly—if unwittingly—clear, the very language of business history is gendered; as Angel Kwolek-Folland notes, words such as “entrepreneur” (and not the least “businessman”) have profoundly masculine connotations. Indeed, Stimson's contemporaries used “businesswoman,” not to describe women who presided over individual concerns, but as a label that encompassed secretaries, stenographers, and file clerks—members of a new, increasingly feminized clerical workforce; thus the word itself evoked the hierarchical gender relations of the corporate office.⁶ For lack of a better alternative, I use “businesswomen” as well, but in a different sense. I use it as a term to describe female entrepreneurs, self-employed women who ran their own concerns, however miniscule or ephemeral. My second caution involves the occupational and geographical boundaries of my research. Although they accounted for a substantial portion of women proprietors, dressmakers and milliners hardly encompassed the entire nineteenth-century female entrepreneurial universe. The geographical focus of my work, which confines itself to the urban Northeast and Midwest, further limits my analysis to white women of native and Irish

⁵ Gamber, *Female Economy*.

⁶ Kwolek-Folland noted this in her comments at the panel, “Women, Race, and the History of Business in the U.S.,” Tenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, June 1996. See also Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business*; and Marion Harland, “The Incapacity of Business Women,” *North American Review* 149 (1889): 707-712. Definitions of business compiled in *The Oxford English Dictionary* include “that in which one is engaged, or with which one is concerned,” “action which occupies time, demands attention and labour,” as well as “a commercial enterprise.” *OED*, 2nd ed., vol. II (Oxford, 1989), 694-696.

origins; the very composition of the trades—hardly accidental—demonstrates the necessity of considering not only gender but its relation to class, ethnicity, and race. What follows, then, rests a great deal on a very partial portrait of nineteenth-century businesswomen (a group whom I suspect was hardly homogeneous); it should be considered speculative, not conclusive. But to paraphrase Gerda Lerner, I hope that it suggests a means of “placing [business]women in history.”⁷

Explaining Absence

Certainly the fact that scholars have unwittingly accepted the notion of business as a “school of manhood”—while largely ignoring its implications for the history of masculinity—is one reason why it is so difficult to “see” women as the proprietors of business concerns, let alone place them in any interpretative context.⁸ Indeed, context often is the missing ingredient in those studies that do seek to analyze the experiences of women in business. With few exceptions, existing accounts (most of them the work of women’s, not business, historians) either mention businesswomen in passing or celebrate the achievements of those who enjoyed unusual visibility or success.⁹ We learn that some women have been as enterprising, as innovative, as successful as men, but are left with portraits of “exceptional women” that unintentionally reinforce the notion that business is a masculine concern; exceptions, in other words, prove the rule.

It would be easy to attribute the compensatory approach to amateurism, to popular historians’ lack of familiarity with the relevant

⁷ Gerda Lerner, “Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (Fall 1975): 5-14.

⁸ For analyses of the relations between business and masculinity, see Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 72-78; Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business*; Toby L. Ditz, “Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994): 51-80; and forthcoming work by Philip Scranton and Pamela Laird.

⁹ For brief mentions of women in business, see Griffen and Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers*, 242-247; Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*; Lebsack, *Free Women of Petersburg*; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 23, 36-38; and Stansell, *City of Women*, 13-15. The celebratory approach typifies what Lerner has called “compensatory history”; see Lerner, “Placing Women in History,” 5. For examples, see Elisabeth A. Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and the Professions in American Before 1776* (Boston, 1924); and *Career Women of America*; Caroline Bird, *Enterprising Women* (New York, 1976); Sallye Clark, “Carrie Taylor: Kentucky Dressmaker,” *Dress* 6 (1980): 13-23; Judith Jerde, “Mary Molloy: St. Paul’s Extraordinary Dressmaker,” *Dress* 7 (1981): 82-89; and Christie Daily, “A Woman’s Concern: Millinery in Central Iowa, 1870-1880,” *Journal of the West* 21 (1982): 26-32.

scholarly literature. But historians of women in business who venture forth in search of interpretative contexts are apt to return empty-handed. The dominant frameworks of various historical subdisciplines also play a role in explaining both the relative absence of businesswomen from history and the deficiencies of current scholarship. Despite their not insignificant numbers, female entrepreneurs fall between a number of historiographical cracks; perhaps one reason they have received so little scholarly attention is that they fail to fit easily within interpretative paradigms. Venturing beyond the cursory and the celebratory models requires that we pursue two seemingly contradictory strategies: combine the insights of the three most relevant historical subdisciplines—business history, labor history, and women's history—and reveal their blind spots.¹⁰ My purpose is neither to accuse members of these subfields of conspiratorial intent nor denigrate their fine scholarship. Rather, I wish to suggest that in these areas, as in all academic disciplines, prevailing trends and assumptions determine the subjects that scholars pursue and shape the questions that they ask.

Unless one concentrates on the exceptional—the woman bank president, the rare female millionaire—studying the history of women in business (especially in the nineteenth century) means studying the history of small business, indeed the history of *very* small business.¹¹ Such a perspective has been anathema to U.S. business history, which until quite recently took the large corporation as its subject.¹²

Business historians *have* begun to emphasize the small as well as the large; just as important, they are increasingly abandoning a perspective that emphasizes a linear development from family firm to corporate enterprise for one that acknowledges continuity as well as change, diversity as well as determinacy.¹³ Yet this veritable revolution

¹⁰ Scholars concerned with writing the history of women in business may well find other subdisciplines more relevant to their research.

¹¹ Exceptional cases can be illuminating. See Lynn Hudson's fascinating study of Mary Ellen Pleasant, "When 'Mammy' Becomes a Millionaire: Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African American Entrepreneur" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, Bloomington, 1996).

¹² This tendency owes a great deal to the work of Alfred D. Chandler, Jr.; see esp. *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); and *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

¹³ Stuart W. Bruchey, ed., *Small Business in American Life* (New York, 1980); Mansel G. Blackford, "Small Business in America: A Historiographic Survey," *Business History Review* 65 (1991): 1-26; Blackford, *A History of Small Business in America* (New York, 1991); Philip Scranton, "Diversity in Diversity: Flexible Production and American Industrialization, 1880-1930," *Business History Review* 65 (1991): 27-90; and *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925* (Princeton, N.J., 1997); Howell John Harris, "Getting it Together: The Metal Manufacturers' Association of Philadelphia, c. 1900-1930," in Sanford M. Jacoby, ed., *Masters to Managers: Historical and Comparative Perspectives on*

in business history overlooks female petty entrepreneurs. This deficiency stems partly from business historians' definitions of "small business"; recent studies examine firms that were tiny by corporate standards, but whose assets far exceeded the meager capital that most women could amass.¹⁴ More often than not, analyzing the business of women means shifting the focus, not from big to small, but from small to microscopic.

Even those scholars who examine the workings of small concerns embrace a relatively rigid definition of business, one that centers around the idea of a "firm"—a tangible, physical site of production. As a result they have overlooked a variety of entrepreneurial folk (entrepreneurial because they were self-employed and because their ventures involved economic risk)—hucksters, saloon keepers, shoe shiners, laundresses, boardinghouse keepers, proprietors of private schools, street walkers, dancing teachers, organizers of charitable associations—people whose "businesses" lay at the murky boundaries of public and private, profit-seeking and philanthropic, wage labor and entrepreneurship, legitimate and illegitimate enterprise.¹⁵ The absence of such concerns from business history is understandable. They defy easy categorization; their economic contributions—given the lack of easily quantifiable or comparable sources—are difficult to assess. But ignoring them has unintended consequences: the exclusion of women, and perhaps of racial and ethnic minorities as well, from the domain of business history, and the presentation of a very partial view of the "economy."¹⁶

American Employers (New York, 1991), 111-131; Walter Licht, "Studying Work: Personnel Policies in Philadelphia Firms, 1850-1950," in Jacoby, ed., *Masters to Managers*; Stana Nenadic, R. J. Morris, James Smyth, and Chris Rainger, "Record Linkage and the Small Family Firm: Edinburgh 1861-1891," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 74 (Autumn 1992): 169-195.

¹⁴ For analyses of businesswomen's assets, see Murphy, "Business Ladies," esp. 72, 74-77; Griffen and Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers*, 124, 243-245; Gamber, *Female Economy*, 36-37, 244-245, n.22. Griffen and Griffen found that 61 percent of female entrepreneurs in mid-nineteenth-century Poughkeepsie, New York, headed firms valued at \$1,000 or less; this was true of only 35 percent of male grocers and fancy goods dealers. The property holdings of female dressmakers and milliners in Boston in 1860 \$284, those of their male counterparts, \$6,000.

¹⁵ John Eatwell, Murray Milgate, and Peter Newman, eds., *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, vol. 2 (London, 1987), 357. I find Margaret Levenstein's definition of an entrepreneur "as one who runs his or her own business" helpful; see "African American Entrepreneurship: The View from the 1910 Census," *Business and Economic History* 24 (Fall 1995): 106-122. See also John Benson, *The Penny Capitalists: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Entrepreneurs* (Dublin, 1983), 5. See Lori D. Ginzberg's discussion of the business-like activities of female philanthropists in *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, Conn., 1990), 36-66.

¹⁶ Claudia Goldin found that 67 percent of hucksters in Philadelphia in 1860 were women; see "Economic Status of Women," 402. For the British case, see Benson, *Penny Capitalists*.

Finally, business historians' penchant for viewing their subjects as rational economic actors, guided only by the search for greater efficiency and more substantial profits, and sealed within the self-contained world of the firm, offers few clues for understanding the experiences of businesswomen—or businessmen.¹⁷ Such a perspective implies that issues of gender (or for that matter, class, race, ethnicity, or culture) are irrelevant to the history of business; at the same time, portraying business as genderless reinforces the notion of “businessman” as a universal category, and of “male” as the norm—a norm that requires no further explanation. To be sure, some business historians are beginning to take culture (what Kenneth Lipartito in his path-breaking essay, “Culture and the Practice of Business History,” defines as “a system of values, ideas, and beliefs which constitute a mental apparatus for grasping reality”¹⁸) seriously, a prospect that has far-reaching and exciting implications. But the relationship between economics and culture has yet to be settled. Until we see culture as integral to the creation of economic institutions rather than as a mere appendage to preexisting “rational” economic structures, we cannot explain the shape of local, regional, or national economies or the places of various people within them.¹⁹ We cannot explain, for example, why some businesses historically have been white, male, or Protestant, others African American, female, or Italian—unless we entertain the untenable notion that certain people by virtue of their racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual characteristics are “naturally” suited for certain types of business. To invoke a more familiar example, we cannot explain why Henry A. Stimson believed that small business was a “school of manhood.”

The history of women in business should also concern labor historians. Many nineteenth-century petty proprietors—male and female—hailed from the working classes; running a business was

¹⁷ John Ingham's recent work offers a useful critique of this view; see his “Patterns of African-American Female Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship,” and “Pride, Prejudice, and Protest: African American Business in the South, 1880-1933,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Jan. 1996.

¹⁸ Kenneth Lipartito, “Culture and the Practice of Business History,” *Business and Economic History* 24 (Winter 1995): 1-40, quotations, 2.

¹⁹ Louis Galambos's assertion that “major transitions were products of economic and political forces, not prior or simultaneous cultural changes” seems to me an example of this kind of thinking; I would argue that it is impossible to separate the economic and the political from the cultural. Galambos, “What Makes Us Think We Can Put Business Back Into American History?” *Business and Economic History* 20 (1991): 9. See Mary Yeager, “Women in Business: A Historiographical Journey,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Business History Conference, 1994, 14-16, for a superb analysis of this issue.

“work,” even if it involved non-manual labor (and of course many small business owners continued to work with their hands). But small businesspeople of either sex pose a problem for a field that has resisted the notion of multiple identities; indeed, here business—or class—non-gender, may be the important issue.²⁰ Perhaps more than their colleagues in other subdisciplines, labor historians demand that their subjects take sides—a position that reflects the field’s origins in and allegiance to the labor movement. Petty proprietors, people who chose entrepreneurship over the shop floor, fit uneasily into a field that emphasizes solidarity and collective protest; when they make brief appearances in labor history monographs, they stand on one side or the other of an impassable class divide. They are either “bad bosses”—nascent merchant capitalists bent on exploiting new markets and cheap labor—or “good bosses”—master artisans on the brink of extinction who cling desperately to traditional practices.²¹ Or, they are grocers, variety store keepers, and saloonkeepers in immigrant and working-class communities—people blessed with “insufficiently capitalist mentalit[ies]” who identify with their clientele.²² Despite their proprietary status, they remain within the working class, or as one historian puts it, at the very least “part of a working-class community.”²³ Seen by business historians as embodiments of entrepreneurial individualism, they become agents of communal solidarity in the hands of labor historians.

Yet the two interpretations may not be mutually exclusive; in any case, the situation may well have been more complex. After all, small businesspeople chose to leave or eschew non-proprietary for proprietary occupations. Many of them became not only entrepreneurs, but

²⁰ I do not mean to imply that labor history as a field has successfully incorporated either women wage-earners or gender as a tool of analysis; on these points, see Ava Baron, “Gender and Labor History: Learning From the Past, Looking to the Future,” in Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), 1-46; and Joan Wallach Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History” and “Women in The Making of the English Working Class,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 53-90.

²¹ Paul Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Albany, N.Y., 1981); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980), esp. 1-14; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), esp. 27-48; Richard B. Stott, *Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), 34-58.

²² Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, U.K., 1983), 48-53, quotation, 48; Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge, U.K., 1989), 133-134.

²³ Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 53.

employers, however miniscule the labor force they commanded. Immersed to varying degrees within working-class communities, they pursued an option that suggested a somewhat individualistic outlook: the desire to be one's *own* boss. Given a larger society that increasingly valued nonmanual labor over manual work, they wittingly or unwittingly set themselves "above" those they served. And the very nature of their businesses—their dependence, that is, on working people's money—strained their ability to remain unequivocally on the side of labor.²⁴

This standard view of working-class entrepreneurs grows increasingly problematic when we turn to businesspeople whose occupations entailed the crossing of class boundaries. Such was the case with milliners and dressmakers, women who accounted for two of the single largest categories of nineteenth-century female entrepreneurs, and women who came for the most part from working-class backgrounds. With few exceptions, they served middle-class and upper-class consumers, not members of their own social class; their work required them to imitate (in dress, manners, and deportment) their "betters." Succeeding in business meant literally occupying new territory, keeping shop (and sometimes residing) in fashionable downtowns far from the ethnic and working-class neighborhoods that supposedly nurtured communal solidarity.²⁵ (See Figure 1)

These circumstances did not always produce "class traitors"; as Carolyn Steedman has argued so eloquently, one can harbor a sense of "the unfairness of things" without embracing those movements that historians conventionally define as radical.²⁶ Clearly, though, some tradeswomen did seek to emulate their customers, identifying not with their working-class roots but with the "ladies" whom they served. Others reacted quite differently, as did Mary Harris, later known as Mother Jones. Harris attributed her class consciousness and her labor

²⁴ "What is a Grocer, Papa?" in Artemus Ward, comp., *The Grocers' Hand-Book and Directory for 1883* (Philadelphia, 1882), 304.

²⁵ Milliners and dressmakers accounted for 42 percent of all female entrepreneurs in late-nineteenth-century Boston; Murphy's figures indicate that they made up 61 percent of Midwestern women proprietors in 1870. See Gamber, *Female Economy*, 28, 30; Murphy, "Business Ladies," 66 (Table 1). For discussions of dressmakers' and milliners' social origins, see *Female Economy*, 32-35, 64-68. For descriptions of urban shopping districts and their social identities, see William Dean Howells, *A Woman's Reason* (Boston, 1883), 185, 376; Moses King, *King's How-To-See Boston* (Boston, 1895), 99; Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 86; Lorinda Perry, *The Millinery Trade in Boston and Philadelphia: A Study of Women in Industry* (Binghamton, N.Y., 1916), 27-28; and Mary Van Kleeck, *A Seasonal Industry: A Study of the Millinery Trade in New York* (New York, 1917), 35-37, 108-109.

²⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987), 6-9.

Figure 1

Trade Card of Madame Gaubert, 1836

FRENCH MILLINERY & FANCY DRESS MAKING
ESTABLISSEMENT
M. GAUBERT
FROM PARIS.
22 Chestnut Street 3 doors above Spruce!
PHILADELPHIA.

Madame Gaubert

1 bonnet De blonde	\$ 10.-
façon a 3 waffres	2 - 6.-
1/2 bonnet marabou bleu	5 - 50
1/2 bonnet fleur bleue	1 - 25
2 bonnet a 3 waffres	1 - 50
4 - 50	
1 fond d'ore waffres blanches	1 - "
requis 1 bonnet blonde	11 - 50
Received payment of	\$ 75

E. Gaubert

Offering “French millinery” and “fancy dress making,” Gaubert kept shop on Philadelphia’s fashionable Chestnut Street. Reproduced from a standard template, this bill tells us little about Gaubert herself. Perhaps, as her stationary suggests, she was a “gentlewoman” of French origins. Just as likely, she was a working-class upstart who adopted a French name and genteel department in order to attract wealthy customers. Tradeswomen like these fit uneasily with interpretations that stress petty proprietors’ allegiance to working-class communities. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

activism to her prior experience as a dressmaker who catered to Chicago's elites in the 1870s.²⁷ Most dressmakers and milliners negotiated the liminal territory that they occupied in more subtle and complex ways, identifying at times with their patrons, and at other times covertly expressing their resentment (for example, by perennially refusing to finish garments commissioned by haughty and overbearing customers on time). But whatever their allegiances, it is difficult to argue that they saw themselves *either* as members of the working class *or* the bourgeoisie. Rather their identities varied according to particular contexts.²⁸

My point is not to diminish the historical importance of community or of solidarity, but to suggest that labor historians need to find ways of incorporating people who pursued different historical paths; they need to find ways of embracing complexity and ambiguity. Ignoring complexity or dismissing ambiguity leaves us with three unappealing choices: celebrating the entrepreneurial vision of small businesspeople, awkwardly enfolding them into seemingly homogeneous working-class communities, or lamenting their false consciousness.

Most of the limited research on businesswomen in the United States has been completed by practitioners of women's history, but here again subject and discipline coexist uneasily. In a certain sense, U.S. women's history began with the study of women in business. Elisabeth Anthony Dexter's influential *Colonial Women of Affairs* (1924) not only sought to relate that history, but provided historians of American women with an important and remarkably resilient interpretative paradigm. Pouring over seventeenth and eighteenth-century newspapers, legal documents, diaries, and letters, Dexter uncovered women engaged in almost every conceivable artisanal or entrepreneurial occupation: tobacconists, innkeepers, fish curers, printers, eye-glass dealers, even blacksmiths and coppersmiths. All of this, she argued, changed dramatically with the dawning of the nineteenth century, when a combination of political, legal, and economic events con-

²⁷ Mary Field Parton, ed., *The Autobiography of Mother Jones*, 3rd. ed. (Chicago, 1976), 11-13.

²⁸ Gamber, *Female Economy*, 96-124, esp. 103-108; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1964), esp. 9-11; Kathleen Canning, "Gender and the Politics of Class Formation: Rethinking German Labor History," *American Historical Review* 97 (June 1992): 736-768; Daniel J. Walkowitz, "The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity: Social Workers in the 1920s," *American Historical Review* 95 (Oct. 1990): 1051-1075. I also found Walkowitz's presentation at 1996 meeting of the Social Science History Association helpful for thinking about the issue of class. Nancy Hewitt's concept of "multiplicity" is also useful for thinking about multiple identities; see "Compounding Differences," *Feminist Studies* 18 (Summer 1992): esp. 319-324.

spired to pluck women out of their shops and into their homes, confining those who remained to a small number of feminized occupations that served others of their sex. Dexter thus originated what became known as the golden age theory of women's history, a declension narrative that contrasted the respected status and relative economic freedoms of women in colonial America to the enforced domesticity of the nineteenth century.²⁹

Yet although the golden age theory endured for several decades, Dexter's contributions spawned little additional research on the history of women of "affairs." Part of this has to do with the New Left origins of the so-called second wave of feminism, whose members in turn played an important role in the flowering of women's history in the late 1960s and 1970s. As Mary Yeager persuasively argues, business history—predisposed to economic and political conservatism—and women's history—predisposed to economic and political radicalism—hardly seemed compatible (nor of course did dominant trends in business history offer much to those interested in the history of women).³⁰ If Dexter had celebrated the entrepreneurial initiative and business savvy of her subjects, later women's historians expressed greater affinity for suffrage parades, striking shirtwaist workers, even the confines of the "domestic sphere." Committed to recovering the origins of feminism and to illuminating little-known traditions of female activism, they did not look to business—nor should they have. Indeed, the political climate in which "modern" women's history emerged does much to explain why there is a sub-subfield called "women's labor history," but none called "women's business history."³¹

Yet the inattention of women's historians to the history of women in business also reflected the very success of Dexter's argument. If the colonial period could be described as a golden age, the nineteenth-century "cult of true womanhood," "cult of domesticity," or "woman's sphere" became its logical corollary. Until recently, the nineteenth-century notion of "separate spheres"—a conception that divided the world neatly into male and female, public and private, work and

²⁹ Dexter, *Colonial Women of Affairs*; see Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 593-594; Goldin, "Economic Status of Women in the Early Republic"; and Kathleen M. Brown, "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, L (Apr. 1993): 311-328 for discussions and critiques of the golden age hypothesis.

³⁰ I do not mean to imply that the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was homogeneous or monolithic; see Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis, 1989); Yeager, "Women in Business," 17-18, 35-38.

³¹ Yeager, "Women in Business"; for the best review of women's labor history, see Baron, "Gender and Labor History," 1-46.

home—served as the major organizing principle of American women's history.³² Ideas about man's and woman's different natures were integral to the doctrine of the spheres, and woman's nature (as nineteenth-century analysts saw it) left her uniquely ill-equipped for business. Much subsequent scholarship implicitly accepted the notion that "woman" was the antithesis of the "market," an interpretative stance that might incorporate downtrodden women wage-workers, but left little analytical space in which to consider those creatures whom Dexter termed "women of affairs."³³

Indeed, women's supposed alienation from the marketplace became an admirable trait, for sometime in the late 1970s, the dominant interpretation of domesticity began to shift. No longer merely a source of women's oppression, "woman's sphere" became a separate space where "women's culture" might develop. Owing much to the popularity of cultural feminism outside the academy, the notion of women's culture also closely paralleled the emergence of cultural autonomy theses in working-class, African-American, and immigration history. In simplest terms, it emphasized the positive features of women's gender-segregated experiences, creatively reconstructing "female worlds of love and ritual" where "women ... assumed an emotional centrality in one another's lives."³⁴ Scholars who embraced the concept of women's culture accepted unequivocally that women were different than men (although they attributed these differences to socialization, not biology) and interpreted difference in an unambiguously favorable light.

Although a spate of recent studies detailing divisions between women of different races, classes, and ethnicities has effectively dismantled the notion of a single female experience, the notion of a universal women's culture remains powerful.³⁵ Indeed, the idea of a dis-

³² Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74; Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson, 1800-1840," in Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women* (New York, 1979), 182-196; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, Conn., 1977).

³³ Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place"; Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Household, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, 1990), 144.

³⁴ The concept of women's culture owes a great deal to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's very influential "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs* 1 (1975): 1-29, reprint, in Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), 53-76, quotations, 63; see also Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*. On cultural feminism, see Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 243-256, 269-281. "Feminist businesses," as Echols points out, were a by-product of cultural feminism; see 272-281.

³⁵ Ellen DuBois, Mari Jo Buhle, Temma Kaplan, Gerda Lerner, and Carroll Smith-

tinctive female subculture, characterized by cooperation, empathy, intimacy, and emotional intensity remains powerful enough that a small number of scholars have attempted to apply it to relations between businesswomen and their clients, and to those between female employers and their employees.

Ironically, historians seeking to understand the history of women in business embraced the concept of women's culture just as historians of women in general were abandoning it. In retrospect, its appeal to the former group is understandable, for it offered a means of reconciling businesswomen's businesslike behavior with the unspoken requirement that women's historians valorize their subjects. Thus not only did men and women run different kinds of businesses (a fact that these historians attributed to women's "choices" rather than to discrimination), they embraced different—"non-market"—business values, practices, and customs; in short, women brought women's culture to the business world. The exploitative labor relations that characterized masculine commerce and industry were largely absent here; relations between shopwoman and customer revolved around intimacy not profits. Thus one historian could speak of the "camaraderie surrounding" a nineteenth-century millinery shop and of concerns operated by women as "comfortable, female preserves"; another could depict female doll manufacturers as "material maternalists" who viewed their businesses, not merely as profit-making ventures, but at least partly as opportunities to nurture the female workers they employed.³⁶

The works that I cite are small in number, far too few to constitute a "school" of thought. Based on careful research and astute analysis, none of them attempts to generalize beyond a particular region or industry (for which, indeed, their assessments may well be valid); none claims to have written *the* history of women in business. Nevertheless they deserve our attention, for they are the first serious attempts since Dexter's *Colonial Women of Affairs* and *Career Women of America* to place businesswomen in an interpretative context.³⁷

Rosenberg, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," *Feminist Studies* 6 (Spring 1980): 26-64; Nancy Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood," *Social History* 10 (Oct. 1985): 299-321.

³⁶ Murphy, "Her Own Boss," esp. 174, 176; Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (New Haven, Conn., 1993), 2-5, 61-89. Patricia Cleary offers somewhat similar but more nuanced and less romantic views for the eighteenth century. See "'She Will Be in the Shop': Women's Sphere of Trade in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia and New York," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* CXIX (July 1995): 181-202; and Cleary, "'She-Merchants' of Colonial America: Women and Commerce on the Eve of the Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1989).

³⁷ Goldin's "Economic Status of Women in the Early Republic," devotes itself to disman-

My own work, bound to be sure by its urban Northeastern and Midwestern focus and its emphasis on two particular crafts, makes me suspicious of such interpretations. Numerous examples of exploitation in the dressmaking and millinery trades quickly persuaded me that unadulterated maternalism rarely guided workroom management. Like their male counterparts, female employers could be tyrannical; like them, they could be considerate; like them, they could be both. Indeed, rather than search solely for differences between “male” and “female” business behaviors, we need to consider possible similarities as well. Just as paternalism could be a tool of oppression (as labor historians well know), so too could maternalism; affectionate relations between proprietor and workwoman, between “Madame” and her “girls,” often accompanied brutally exploitative conditions.³⁸

Generalizations are always hazardous; the experiences of female employers in two trades in a particular locale may not reflect the experiences of all nineteenth-century women entrepreneurs. Indeed, a search for a single model of female employer/employee relations is likely to be a frustrating and fruitless endeavor. Nevertheless, I suspect that simple invocations of “women’s culture” only inadequately describe female-dominated shop floors. If we can no longer view businesspeople merely as rational economic actors, neither can we ignore their pecuniary concerns. Businesswomen, after all, were in *business*.³⁹ Writing their histories means facing up to some uncomfortable facts.

Gendering the Business World: Two Examples

The history of women in business lies at the intersection of business history, labor history, and women’s history. Paradoxically, there is a

ting the golden age theory, but by this time, few historians were willing to give the notion their unqualified support. Work in progress by Susan Ingalls Lewis and John Ingham suggests new and promising ways of conceptualizing the history of women in business. Susan Ingalls Lewis, “Female Entrepreneurs, Artisans, and Workers: Milliners in Albany, 1840-1885,” paper presented at the North American Labor History Conference, Oct. 1990; “Beyond Horatia Alger: Breaking Through Gendered Assumptions about Business ‘Success’ in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” *Business and Economic History* 24 (Fall 1995): 97-105; and “Female Entrepreneurs in Albany, 1840-1885,” *Business and Economic History*, 2nd series, 22 (1992): 65-73; Ingham, “Patterns of African-American Female Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship.”

³⁸Gamber, *Female Economy*, 83-88; David Brody, “Labor and Small-Scale Enterprise During Industrialization,” in Bruchey, ed., *Small Business in American Life*, 263-279.

³⁹Murphy’s more recent work tries to balance businesswomen’s economic imperatives with an interpretation premised on the notion of women’s culture; see “Business Ladies,” 65-89; Faye Dudden’s discussion of the analogies between relations between mistresses and domestic service and between industrial employers and employees provides a useful model; see *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Hanover, N.H., 1983), 155-183.

great deal of blank space at that juncture. But if we include tiny, even minuscule and ephemeral, concerns under the rubric of business history, if we abandon or at least modify the notion of businesspeople as rational economic actors, if we allow for the possibility of multiple identities, and if we adopt a healthy skepticism towards “women’s culture,” we might be better able to understand the history of businesswomen—and perhaps that of businessmen as well.

Recent scholarship that uses—to invoke Joan Scott’s well-known suggestion—“gender as a category of analysis” offers one practical way of conceptualizing the history of women in business. By “gender,” I mean “any social construction having to do with the male/female distinction,” as Linda Nicholson succinctly put it.⁴⁰ Such a perspective avoids both the pitfalls of essentialism and the rigidity of notions such as “separate spheres” that depend on inflexible distinctions between public and private, work and home. To be sure, “Victorian” assumptions about femininity and masculinity still matter (otherwise “man milliner” would not have been a pejorative applied to all men whose “masculinity” was suspect); indeed, it is important to emphasize that social constructions of gender are not universal but inexorably linked to particular historical contexts.⁴¹ But by viewing gendered identities as contested, negotiable, and subject to change over time, we can better understand the “place” of businesswomen in history. The remainder of this essay offers two examples of a gendered approach: explaining entrepreneurial divisions of labor and analyzing relations between (male) wholesalers and (female) retailers in the late nineteenth-century millinery trade.

Explaining Entrepreneurial Divisions of Labor

Anyone who studies nineteenth-century businesswomen quickly encounters an indisputable fact: women were not evenly distributed within the universe of entrepreneurial occupations; rather, they con-

⁴⁰ Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053-1075; Scott, “Introduction” in *Gender and the Politics of History*, 1-11; Linda Nicholson, “Interpreting Gender,” *Signs* 20 (Autumn 1994): 79-105, quotation, 79; see also Brown, “Brave New Worlds,” 311-328.

⁴¹ By “Victorian,” I mean a nineteenth-century middle-class conception of gender relations that depended on a series of rigid dichotomies, distinguishing “male” from “female,” “public” from “private,” “respectable” women from “disreputable” women. On the importance of particular contexts, see Nicholson, “Interpreting Gender,” 83-88; and Brown, “Brave New Worlds,” 316-328.

gregated in particular types of businesses. Sex segregation, the unwritten set of rules that distinguished “masculine” from “feminine” pursuits, proved as salient for female entrepreneurs as for their wage-earning counterparts. More than 80 percent of the women listed in the business pages of the *Boston Directory* of 1876 prepared food, made clothing, or offered lodging; more than half served members of their own sex. This pattern was repeated again and again in cities and towns across the nation.⁴²

For some historians the reasons for this gendered configuration are obvious: “women capitalized on skills that were extensions of women’s domestic activities.”⁴³ However commonsensical, this argument is less than adequate. The task of explaining sexual divisions of labor in the nineteenth-century business world is neither simple nor obvious, but enormously complex. The belief that some kinds of businesses uniquely suited women (and its corollary, that others uniquely suited men)—seemingly self-evident to contemporaries and to subsequent historians—requires careful investigation. While we know a great deal about how labor markets segmented by race, class, ethnicity, and gender affected the experiences of wage-earning women, we still know little about how such factors affected female entrepreneurs—if only because we know so little about that subject itself.⁴⁴

Rather than attempt the daunting task of describing and explaining women’s place in the panoply of nineteenth-century entrepreneurial occupations (an undertaking that depends on far more research

⁴² Alice Kessler-Harris’s, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982) remains the best overview of sex segregated labor markets in the United States. *Boston Directory* (Boston, 1876); see analysis in Gamber, *Female Economy*, 27-30; Murphy, “Her Own Boss,” esp. 174-176; Murphy, “Business Ladies,” esp. 67-68.

⁴³ Murphy, “Business Ladies,” 67.

⁴⁴ For analyses of women wage-earners, see Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*; Barbara Melosh, “*The Physician’s Hand*”: *Work Culture and Conflict in American Nursing* (Philadelphia, 1982); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana, Ill., 1986); Patricia Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Urbana, Ill., 1987); Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana, Ill., 1988); Harriet Bradley, *Men’s Work, Women’s Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Minneapolis, 1989); Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); Baron, ed., *Work Engendered*; Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City: Gender, Class, and Community in Troy, 1864-86* (Urbana, Ill., 1992); Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912* (Urbana, Ill., 1993); Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994); Alice Abel Kemp, *Women’s Work: Degraded and Devalued* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1994); and Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business*.

than currently is available), I embrace a more modest goal. Nevertheless, I hope that it illustrates the complexity of the larger question. Simply put, I wish to explain how and why custom dressmaking and millinery became “feminine” pursuits. Because both trades involved manual work as well as entrepreneurial labor, analyzing their gendered identities suggests the folly of delineating sharp boundaries between “business” and “labor”—and by extension, between business history and labor history.⁴⁵ It also demonstrates the perils of relying on simplistic ideas about “women’s work.”

According to the commonsense explanation, women’s dominion over the custom fashion trades, like their preponderance in other “feminine” entrepreneurial pursuits, derived from labor they “traditionally” performed in the home. In this version, “sewing” for profit merely extended the borders of the domesticity; woman’s sphere could encompass the market if she took the home with her. Such an interpretation rests on questionable assumptions, many of which, to be sure, nineteenth-century Americans would have accepted at face value. Indeed it illustrates the power of nineteenth-century rhetorical constructs over twentieth-century historians; convinced that women’s work originated in the home, scholars interested in accounting for feminine entrepreneurial and artisanal skills failed to look elsewhere. If all women stitched within the confines of their parlors (how home sewers came to possess these skills is rarely examined), all could easily turn their natural talents to profit—a process that evidently required little additional training.⁴⁶

A closer examination of the history of custom dressmaking and millinery reveals a more complicated genealogy. Without a doubt, nineteenth-century commentators believed that the fashion trades naturally belonged to women. “Essentially feminine,” “especially adapted to the ladies”—phrases like these pepper their observations. Had they consulted the historical record, they would have learned that this seemingly natural and timeless phenomenon had emerged only recently. European women had been household producers of cloth and gar-

⁴⁵ See Sanford M. Jacoby, “Masters to Managers: An Introduction,” in Jacoby, ed., *Masters to Managers*, 1-15, esp. 2-8.

⁴⁶ For analyses that document the gender biases hidden beneath definitions of “skilled” and “unskilled” labor, see Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 229; Judith A. McGaw, “No Passive Victims, No Separate Spheres: A Feminist Perspective on Technology’s History,” in Stephen H. Cutcliffe and Robert C. Post, eds., *In Context: History and the History of Technology* (Bethlehem, Pa., 1989), 78-184; Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes towards a Feminist Economics,” *Feminist Review* 6 (1981): 79-88; and Joan Wallach Scott, “Work Identities for Men and Women: The Politics of Work and Family in the Parisian Garment Trades in 1848,” in *Gender and the Politics of History*, 93-112.

ments for centuries, but men made clothing for the market. Organized into guilds that excluded women, tailors crafted clothing for both sexes well into the seventeenth century. Millinery, named after sellers of fancy goods in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Milan, also originated as a masculine pursuit. Explaining the feminization of dressmaking and millinery is easier said than done; new concerns about the propriety of male tailors fitting female customers, the abandonment of relatively androgynous fashions for those that emphasized sexual difference, and women's convictions that the fashioning of feminine apparel was female terrain furnish possible clues. Only in the eighteenth century did the two trades become identified as "feminine." By the mid-nineteenth century this belief had become so entrenched that "man milliner" connoted not just a man who made and sold women's hats, but one whose manliness could be called into question.⁴⁷

Significantly, most of the women who presided over nineteenth-century dressmaking and millinery shops—heiresses to a century-old female craft tradition—had learned their trades in the workplace, not in the home. Certainly apprenticeship traditions had weakened considerably by the mid-nineteenth century. Yet the artisan workshop, however debased, not the Victorian parlor, taught the "art and mystery" of dressmaking and millinery, skills that included not just "sewing" but cutting garments from the cloth without the aid of patterns (in the case of dressmaking) and the fashioning of elaborate hat foundations and trimmings (in the case of millinery).⁴⁸

Nor were dressmaking and millinery the province of *all* women. While novels and short stories portrayed them as distressed gentlewomen suddenly forced to enter the commercial world, real-life dressmakers and milliners came from working-class, or at best "middling," backgrounds; they were the daughters not of merchants but of farmers, laborers, and artisans.⁴⁹ Of course, "working class"—a term

⁴⁷ Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, 195, 234; Fiona Clark, *Hats* (London, 1982); Claudia B. Kidwell, *Cutting a Fashionable Fit: Dressmakers' Drafting Systems in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 3-4, 11-13; Judith G. Coffin, "Woman's Place and Women's Work in the Paris Clothing Trades, 1830-1914" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1985), 28-43; and *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915* (Princeton, N.J., 1996); Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York, 1985). See Roscoe Conkling's comments on reformers, quoted in Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 248.

⁴⁸ Amy Simon, "'She is So Neat and Fits So Well': Garment Construction and the Millinery Business of Eliza Oliver Dodds, 1821-1833" (M.A. thesis, University of Delaware, 1993), 73; Gamber, *Female Economy*, 129-134, 178-182.

⁴⁹ See, for example, J. H. Ingraham, *Grace Weldon, Or, Frederica, The Bonnet-Girl: A Tale of Boston and Its Bay* (Boston, 1845); Emeret H. Sedge, "Grace Ellerslie," *Peterson's*

invoked variously to describe people dependent on wages or those who performed manual rather than mental labor—was hardly a homogeneous category, especially in the United States. Custom dressmakers and milliners—wage workers as well as proprietors—occupied that category's upper reaches; the trades embraced white women of native and Irish origins, rarely encompassing African-American women or (as the nineteenth century drew to a close) members of so-called “new immigrant” groups.⁵⁰ Proprietors, workers, and consumers collectively erected racial and ethnic barriers, refusing to employ, labor beside, or patronize women they relegated beyond the fringes of gentility. Thus the division of labor in the fashion trades was subtle and complex, resting not only on concerns of gender but on race, class, and ethnicity. Phrases like “essentially feminine” masked a variety of complications.

But the boundaries of the trades were never fixed; like all divisions of labor, they were continually affirmed, contested, and renegotiated.⁵¹ Male tailors, for example, monopolized the manufacture of women's cloaks and riding habits, garments they claimed represented the more “masculine” elements of the feminine wardrobe. The growing popularity of women's suits in the late nineteenth century caused dressmakers much grief, for the beneficiaries of this fashion trend were not women but a new class of male clothiers called “ladies' tailors.” And while few questioned women's aptitude for making “feminine” garments and “fluffy” hats, dissenters could be found. The male proprietor of a New York millinery establishment charged in the early 1860s that “women ... have not as much originality of thought as men.” Even that bastion of Victorian propriety, the fitting room, was not immune to male intervention; reformer Virginia Penny complained of “tall, beard-

Magazine 34 (Sept. 1858): 167, 172; J. H. Ingraham, “The Milliner's Apprentice; Or, The False Teeth. A Story that Hath More Truth than Fiction in It,” *Godey's* 22 (Jan. 1841): 194, 201-202, 205-206; Alice B. Neal, “The Milliner's Dream; Or, The Wedding-Bonnet,” *Godey's* 52 (July 1855): 30-31; Howells, *A Woman's Reason*; and Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905; reprint, New York, 1986), 271-285. See Amy Gilman, “Cogs to the Wheels: The Ideology of Women's Work in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fiction,” *Science and Society* 47 (1983): 178-204, esp. 185, for a perceptive analysis of such portraits.

⁵⁰ This conclusion reflects the urban Northeastern and Midwestern focus of my research; African-American women practiced the two trades in the South. Gamber, *Female Economy*, 33-35, 61-64; Ingham, “Patterns of African-American Female Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship.”

⁵¹ Ava Baron's fine work provides a useful model. See “Contested Terrain Revisited: Technology and Gender Definitions of Work in the Printing Industry, 1850-1920,” in Barbara Drygulski Wright, et al., eds., *Women, Work, and Technology: Transformations* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1987), 58-83; and “An ‘Other’ Side of Gender Antagonism at Work: Men, Boys, and the Remasculinization of Printers' Work, 1830-1920,” in Baron, ed., *Work Engendered*, 47-69; see the other essays in this collection as well.

ed men ... in mantua-making establishments measuring the waists of women." Craftswomen, for their part, turned cultural prescriptions to their own advantage, heaping opprobrium on man milliners in an attempt to defend the femininity of their trades.⁵²

Even the notion of the home as the foundation of women's work proved relevant in the end. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, inventors of dressmakers' drafting systems and proportional patterns shamelessly marketed their creations to dressmakers and home sewers alike, blurring the boundaries between the artisan workshop and the domestic circle. Promising to make every lady her own dressmaker, they argued that each—once armed with the latest "scientific" innovation—could enter the marketplace as a professional, bypassing the training offered by the dressmaking shop.

Such arguments rested on two, contradictory assumptions: women, by virtue of their sex and their prior experience as crafters of clothing for themselves and their families, were naturally suited to dressmaking (in truth, most women, even those of the prosperous middle classes, made most of their own clothing; their efforts, however, rarely equaled those of professional dressmakers),⁵³ and dressmakers' artisanal skills were inadequate to the sartorial challenges that confronted them. In turn, inventors premised their appeals on two, mutually reinforcing, sources of masculine identity. As tailors, members of a trade that excluded women from the skilled task of cutting garments from the cloth, they claimed superiority over mere dressmakers (whether indeed one trade required greater skill than the other is questionable). As originators of "scientific" methods, they heaped opprobrium on the traditional practices of the custom dressmaking shop.⁵⁴ "We frequently meet [dressmaking] cutters," one such inventor wrote, "who have practiced the greater part of their lives, and yet, who ... work by such a crude system, compared to that sanctioned by experts in the art, that they can scarcely be mentioned beside them." In short, inventors of drafting systems asserted the right to redefine

⁵² Kidwell, *Cutting a Fashionable Fit*, 93-94; Virginia Penny, *The Employments of Women: A Cyclopedic of Woman's Work* (Boston, 1863), 317-318; and Penny, *Think and Act: A Series of Articles Pertaining to Men and Women, Work and Wages* (1869; reprint, New York, 1971), 290; *Illustrated Milliner* 1 (Aug. 1900): 79.

⁵³ Nancy Page Fernandez, "'If a Woman Had Taste': Home Sewing and the Making of Fashion, 1850-1910" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 1987), 103-5; and Fernandez, "Women, Work and Wages in the Industrialization of American Dressmaking, 1860-1910," paper presented at the Ninth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, June 1993, 8-10.

⁵⁴ Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, Conn., 1985), esp. 7-13, 33-65, 75-94.

dressmaking skills, packaging them neatly into devices and techniques “so simple ... that a child can use [them].”⁵⁵ While the results of such campaigns cannot be gauged with any accuracy, they undoubtedly encouraged amateurs to enter dressmaking. By 1900 a much larger proportion of tradeswomen *had* learned their crafts in the home. Thus dressmaking was deskilled by a curious process. “Management,” by and large, was not the culprit; rather, inventors of scientific systems redefined “women’s work”—albeit at a considerable distance from the dressmaking shop.⁵⁶

In the case of dressmaking and millinery, then (and I suspect in other feminized entrepreneurial pursuits such as boardinghouse-keeping and fancy goods retailing), no simple transition from home to marketplace suffices. Nor do notions of fixity; the gendered identity of the trades—even the “kind” of femininity they expressed—was continually subject to challenge. Indeed, by the 1920s, as mass production overwhelmed the custom manufacture of women’s apparel, the sexual division of labor within the fashion trades would once again be transformed. Women would continue to be employed as makers of dresses and hats, but entrepreneurial and managerial functions would be appropriated by men. Finally, the ever-precarious notion that dressmaking and millinery were “women’s work” resulted from a cacophony of voices—artisan women, middle-class home sewers, tailors, inventors, employers, consumers, and eventually the innovators who began to mass produce women’s clothing—each of whom assigned a different meaning to that term. Surely some voices were more powerful than others, as the subsequent history of the clothing trades suggests. Nevertheless, the gendered dimensions of the nineteenth-century business world cannot be understood unless we listen carefully. Nor can we settle for easy answers.

The Gender of Credit: Wholesalers and Retailers in the Millinery Trade

An examination of relationships between wholesalers and retailers (custom milliners) in the millinery trade offers a second means of

⁵⁵ Charles Hecklinger, *The Dress and Cloak Cutter. In Two Parts.* (New York, 1883), preface; *The McDowell Standard System of Garment Cutting* (New York, [1886?]), 2; see also Caleb H. Griffin and David Knox, *The Science and Art of Cutting and Making Ladies’ Garments, As Demonstrated by Griffin & Knox’s Great American Draughting Machine* (Lynn, Mass., 1873), 6.

⁵⁶ The best discussions of “conventional” deskilling are Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974); and David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggle* (Cambridge, 1979). See Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 102, for a critique of the masculinist bias of this literature.

analyzing ways in which gender structured the nineteenth-century commercial world. Wholesalers or “jobbers,” merchants who resold imported or domestic goods, supplied milliners with the raw materials of hatmaking: flowers, feathers, ribbons, fabrics, and lace. Like their counterparts in other fields, wholesale milliners played important roles in ensuring the success or failure of those they served. They chose whether to extend or deny credit, to extol or denigrate business—and sometimes personal—reputations. They even had a significant say over what type of merchandise a retailer sold.⁵⁷

In millinery the distinction between wholesaling and retailing was intensely gendered; sexual hierarchies overlay already unequal relationships between jobber and client, big business and small concern, and white-collar worker and manual laborer. If men accounted for only a tiny proportion of retailers (perhaps 5 or 6 percent), female wholesalers were virtually nonexistent.⁵⁸ Among themselves, wholesalers asserted a robust masculinity (headlines like “Millinery Men in Bowling Battle” and “Chicago Milliners Go After Deer” frequently appeared in trade journals). This was perhaps the predictable response of men who risked the appellation of “man milliner.”⁵⁹ Interactions with retailers were quite another matter, for millinery merchants—in marked contrast to other sorts of wholesalers—dealt almost entirely with women. Historians are just beginning to examine how ideas of masculinity affected relations between businessmen, a task well worth further exploration. Analyzing the millinery trade, with its unique configuration of male wholesalers and female retailers, forces us to confront business’s gendered implications.⁶⁰ And here the notion of “relationships,” interactions that cannot be reduced to statistical calculations or described by models of distribution,⁶¹ must be taken seriously. Without a doubt, millinery merchants were men of business who hoped to reap profits from their commercial endeavors.

⁵⁷ See Bill Reid Moeckel, *The Development of the Wholesaler in the United States 1860-1900* (New York, 1986); and Glenn Porter and Harold C. Livesay, *Merchants and Manufacturers: Studies in the Changing Structure of Nineteenth-Century Marketing* (Baltimore, 1971) for general histories of wholesaling.

⁵⁸ At least 10/222 of the proprietors of Boston dressmaking and millinery shops in 1860 and 18/325 in 1890 were men. *The Boston Directory* (Boston, 1860); and *Boston Directory* (Boston, 1890). I found no female wholesalers in nineteenth-century Boston directories; the R. G. Dun & Co. records refer to one, Harriet Lowell; see Massachusetts vol. 68, 44; and vol. 75, 283, 287, R. G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, Boston, Mass. (hereafter cited as RGD).

⁵⁹ Penny, *Think and Act*, 25; *Milliner* 26 (Feb. 1915): 81; and 25 (Dec. 1914): 42. I have been unable to locate similar descriptions for the nineteenth century, primarily because trade journals that documented wholesalers’ activities were creations of the twentieth century.

⁶⁰ See Ditz, “Shipwrecked.”

⁶¹ Harold Barger, *Distribution’s Place in the American Economy since 1869* (Princeton, N.J., 1955).

Like most businesspeople, they looked out for their own economic interests. But “irrational” concerns of gender inexorably shaped their supposedly rational economic universe. Maintaining that millinery was “especially adapted to ladies,” a representative of a New York wholesaling firm who styled himself “Philo” explained, “The articles in which ... [they] deal are neither bulky nor heavy; and so ... [their] strength is not taxed beyond endurance.” Milliners, he continued, possessed “delicate taste”—a quality absent from the ranks of butchers and blacksmiths.⁶² Conjuring up contrasting images of masculinity and femininity, and strength and delicacy, Philo did more than affirm what he considered the essential femininity of the custom millinery trade. Rather, he implicitly charted a course for wholesaler conduct; doing business with “ladies” demanded “gentlemanly” behavior. (His appeal to feminine delicacy ignored an alternative, albeit perhaps more accurate, description of the labor milliners performed. Instead of emphasizing their difference from butchers and blacksmiths, he might have noted their resemblance to these brawny craftsmen; after all, milliners—employers as well as employees—typically worked fourteen-hour days during busy season.)

Indeed, simple notions of “sexual discrimination” will not do, for in many cases wholesale milliners did behave like “gentlemen.” Their willingness to extend credit to the proprietors of risky ventures allowed many cash-poor women to open shops of their own. As one credit expert put it, “the financial status on which women receive credit, would not warrant us in giving credit to men, whatever their business might be.”⁶³

The credit records of R. G. Dun & Co. provide intriguing glimpses of wholesalers’ attitudes, for they routinely reported the opinions of “those who sell her.”⁶⁴ By and large, wholesalers described their clients as “respectable.”⁶⁵ “Respectability” rarely offered a precise accounting of particular tradeswomen’s characters. Rather, it represented a more or less blanket assessment that served two purposes. “Respectability” countered unfavorable appraisals, especially a widespread cultural ten-

⁶² Philo [pseud.], *Twelve Letters to a Young Milliner* (New York, 1883), 5-6.

⁶³ P. R. Earling, *Whom to Trust: A Practical Treatise on Mercantile Credits* (Chicago and New York, 1890), 151; Gamber, *Female Economy*, 163-165.

⁶⁴ James H. Madison, “The Credit Reports of R. G. Dun & Co. as Historical Sources,” *Historical Methods Newsletter* 8 (1975): 28-131; Madison, “The Evolution of Commercial Credit Reporting Agencies in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Business History Review* 48 (1974): 164-186; and Gamber, *Female Economy*, 162.

⁶⁵ I examined all Dun & Co. reports for male milliners in Boston as well as those for a small sample of tailors (see Gamber, *Female Economy*, 257, n. 70, 263, n. 13). In sharp contrast to the regularity with which this adjective was applied to female proprietors, the partners of only one firm were described as “respectable.”

dency to identify milliners with prostitution.⁶⁶ More important, the image of the respectable milliner offered businessmen a means of reconciling their own beliefs concerning the estrangement of “woman” from the marketplace and the naturalness of female dependency with the demand that they assess the creditworthiness of women’s businesses.⁶⁷ (See Figure 2)

Designating a tradeswoman “respectable,” then, proclaimed that she presided over a legitimate business, not a brothel. But the term also provided a convenient shorthand—a positive, if double-edged, valuation of conventional femininity applied to the marketplace. Dun & Co. reporters expected milliners to be helpless, timid, and refined, not capable, boisterous, or crude. They routinely described male proprietors in the most unflattering terms: “worthless,” “rather boastful,” “gets tight sometimes on hardly anything.” Yet they rarely impugned a woman’s character, even if she failed to pay what she owed. Indeed, character could generate profits, however miniscule; a milliner’s “respectability” might make up for a lack of more tangible assets.⁶⁸

At times wholesalers portrayed themselves as more interested in extending assistance to needy businesswomen than in economic rewards (a characterization that almost certainly reflected wishful thinking more often than actual business practice). In response to the *The Illustrated Milliner’s* query of why there were no millinery millionaires, a representative of a New York concern replied that wholesale milliners were “too gallant to get rich.... [T]hese men, dealing for the major part with ladies, who do most of the retail business of the country, are too considerate to load their goods with a rate of profit which would put their accumulations into seven figures.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See, for example, George C. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light: With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine* (New York, 1850), 66; Frank Leslie’s *Illustrated Newspaper* 7 (Feb. 12, 1859): 160; Lewis, “Female Entrepreneurs, Artisans, and Workers,” 16.

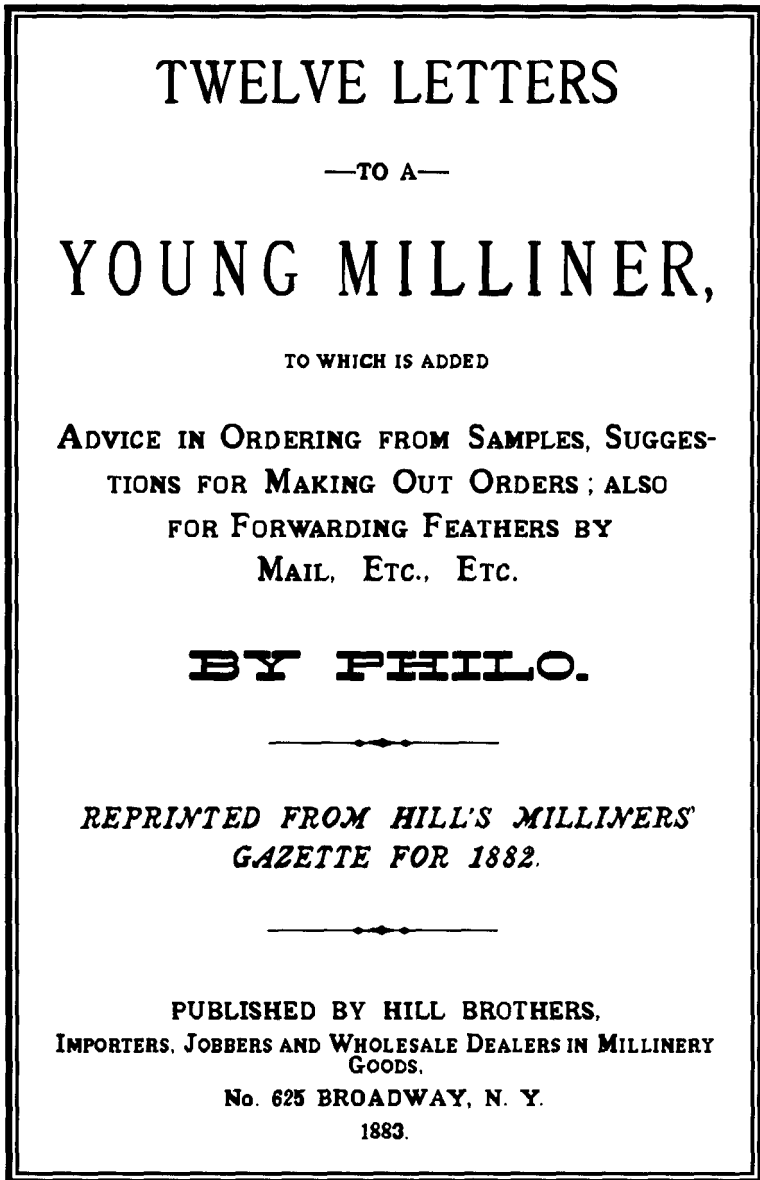
⁶⁷ Female dependency was an important cultural ideal for both the middle and working classes; on the working-class notion of the family wage, see Martha May, “Bread Before Roses: American Workingmen, Labor Unions, and the Family Wage,” in Ruth Milkman, ed., *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of US Women’s Labor History* (Boston, 1985), 1-21; and Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Woman’s Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington, Ky., 1990), esp. 8-12, 19-20.

⁶⁸ Mass. vol. 75: 91; vol. 73: 78; vol. 75: 411; vol. 67: 216 a/4, RGD. After the Civil War, Dun & Co. reporters increasingly favored economic considerations over those based on moral character. But character remained an important basis for credit; see James D. Norris, *R. G. Dun & Co., 1841-1900: The Development of Credit-Reporting in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn., 1978), xvii, 93-94, 130. See, for example, the credit reports of Martha J. Davis and Mary McManus (Mass. vol. 72: 456; vol. 75: 256; vol. 84: 197; vol. 78: 318, 156, RGD).

⁶⁹ Philo, *Twelve Letters to a Young Milliner*, 14-15; see also 35, 46; *Illustrated Milliner* 4 (Apr. 1900): 70.

Figure 2

Cover of Twelve letters to a Young Milliner



Writing under the pseudonym of "Philo," a wholesale milliner offered paternalistic advice to "ladies" engaged in custom millinery. Courtesy, Library of Congress.

Certainly, men too received assistance on the basis of their “characters.” Indeed, wholesalers in all lines of business extended credit to deserving applicants whose character exceeded their collateral.⁷⁰ But in nineteenth-century parlance, character meant different things for women than it did for men. Both sexes needed to demonstrate sobriety and honesty in order to be judged of good character; potential creditors smiled on “respectable” women as well as men of “steady habits.” But while credit experts might speak of men’s “indefatigable energy,” they warned businesswomen not to “tax ... their strength beyond endurance.” They described the ideal man of business as alert and aggressive but characterized women as “not over-ambitious, like [men].” Trade journals that catered to an audience of male merchants published inspirational rags-to-riches tales that celebrated businessmen’s pluck and initiative; articles in such publications as *The Illustrated Milliner* depicted their (mostly female) subscribers as victims of sudden catastrophe, forced by unfortunate circumstances to enter a hostile marketplace. Wholesale millinery merchants, in other words, premised their business relations on a particular construction of femininity that emphasized dependence.⁷¹

Some milliners, at least in the eyes of credit investigators, defied these stereotypes. Dun & Co. reporters described a small but prominent proportion, not as “respectable,” but as “too smart,” disagreeable,” “unpopular,” “fussy,” or “troublesome.” A correspondent noted of Ann Rowe: “Without improvement in credit or change in manners, parties would not sell her for cash, if busy at the time of [her] call.”⁷²

Significantly, “troublesome” retailers were conspicuous in other respects as well, for they tended to represent the most successful of their trade.⁷³ Wholesalers should have eagerly vied for their patronage; after all, most of their customers had little collateral to offer. Instead, they slandered their reputations, even—as Rowe’s situation suggests—declining to serve them. Existing documents can only hint at the reasons. Perhaps credit reporters’ descriptions should be taken literally;

⁷⁰ Earling, *Whom to Trust*, 58, 64, 149-150; Mass. vol. 70: 898, RGD.

⁷¹ Earling, *Whom to Trust*, 58, 64; Philo, *Twelve Letters to a Young Milliner*, 5-6; *Dry Goods Merchants Trade Journal* 22 (Nov. 1921): 60; and 23 (Dec. 1921): 17; Stimson, “Small Business as a School of Manhood,” 337-340; *Illustrated Milliner* 4 (May 1903): 46; and 4 (July 1903): 43; Alice Kessler-Harris, “Independence and Virtue in the Lives of Wage-Earning Women: The United States, 1870-1930,” in Judith Friedlander, Blanche Wiesen Cook, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, eds., *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), 3-17.

⁷² Mass. vol. 70: 699, 857, RGD; see also the reports on Mehitable Sampson and Maria and Catherine Roeth (Mass. vol. 75: 131; and vol. 67: 216a/9, RGD).

⁷³ Gamber, *Female Economy*, 36-37, 166-167.

perhaps these milliners truly were “disagreeable.” More likely, they could afford to stand up to wholesalers in ways that their poorer competitors could not: demand the right to inspect the merchandise millinery merchants proffered, haggle over prices they considered excessive, bargain for credit on the most agreeable terms.⁷⁴

But unflattering descriptions in credit reports suggest that wholesalers might find it difficult to reconcile their economic interests with their assumptions concerning female dependency. Hardly rational economic actors, they remained imprisoned by cultural beliefs regarding the nature of middle-class womanhood. These beliefs, it is important to emphasize, had consequences. Both their eagerness to assist “ladies” and their willingness to punish those who dispensed with ladylike behavior ensured that an exaggerated Victorianism pervaded their business relations. Their ambivalence toward female success, and indeed their willingness to aid the respectable but unsuccessful, also helped to ensure that millinery—both its retail and wholesale branches—remained a volatile industry characterized by short-lived concerns.

Paternalistic assistance diminished as the nineteenth century drew to a close. “Rational” business methods and “businesslike” behavior gradually replaced sympathy as the hallmark of wholesaler/retailer relations; these new procedures, however unintentionally, favored the prospects of larger, male-operated firms at the expense of smaller, female-run concerns. Seemingly gender-neutral, these newer practices nevertheless would depend on notions of gender, this time on far less flattering stereotypes of “feminine” behavior.⁷⁵

Conclusion

In a larger sense, perhaps, “economies”—whether they involve steel manufacturing or peddling, textile factories or prostitution—are social constructs; neither the local and regional entities that characterized the nineteenth century, nor the national and international “markets” that describe modern industry and commerce are rational systems governed by rational economic laws.⁷⁶ Rather, they are the contested results of innumerable individual and collective decisions, decisions governed in part by concerns of class, gender, race, and a host of “irra-

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 170-176.

⁷⁶ See Alice Kessler-Harris, “Ideologies and Innovation: Gender Dimensions of Business History,” *Business and Economic History* 20 (1991): 46.

tional” imperatives. Embracing this view does not mean jettisoning entirely the notion of economic interest. Rather, it means, as Kenneth Lipartito has noted, that “all human actors must always and everywhere filter their perceptions, and hence decide their actions, through a set of cultural constructs.”⁷⁷

Gender is one such construct. Despite its absence from the language of business history, business has always been gendered. Focusing on businesswomen makes the workings of gender relatively easy to see; yet its usefulness as an analytical tool for historians of business, as both Angel Kwolek-Folland and Toby Ditz recently have shown, need not limit itself to the study of women.⁷⁸ As Henry A. Stimson, quoted at the beginning of this essay, suggested, not only was the nineteenth-century small business a “school of manhood,” masculinity itself was socially constructed, easily imperiled by the appearance of new corporate forms.

Nevertheless, careful investigations of social constructions of femininity can illuminate the history of businesswomen. Concerns of gender (often presented as universal notions that concealed biases premised on race and class) delineated “appropriate” venues of female entrepreneurial activity, even the disposition of credit. Yet if the history of the custom dressmaking and millinery trades is any indication, gender did not “work” in any simple, mechanistic, or predictable manner. Milliners and dressmakers did not simply move household production into the marketplace; most learned their crafts in artisan workshops, however “bastardized.”⁷⁹ But the very flexibility of definitions of women’s work (which could connote paid labor in the workplace, unpaid labor in the home—or both), allowed inventors and home sewers to challenge their authority over their crafts. Similarly, Victorian notions of femininity infused relations between wholesalers and retailers in the millinery trade, but in ways that accommodated—at least for a brief historical moment—women’s participation in the public world of commerce.

Because business historians have assumed that business is a masculine endeavor, because labor historians embrace models that allow little space for petty entrepreneurs, and because few women’s historians have found female entrepreneurship a congenial subject, our

⁷⁷ Lipartito, “Culture and the Practice of Business History,” 33.

⁷⁸ Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business*; Ditz, “Shipwrecked.”

⁷⁹ See Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 105-142, for the notion of “bastard” workshops, that is, those in which traditional craft practices had been diluted by divisions of labor. Interestingly, the term itself has gendered implications.

knowledge of the history of women in business is still incomplete. Much work, empirical and theoretical, remains to be done. Only then will we be able to render businesswomen visible, to see them not as exceptions to preconceived rules, but as part of the gendered history of economic life.

Miss SARAH M. SPILLER

275 Essex Street,

SALEM, MASS.,

FANCY GOODS,

AND

Dress Trimmings,

Ladies' Under-Clothing, Corsets,

HOOP SKIRTS

Embroideries, Ruffling, Laces, Handk'ts,

Hosiery, Gloves, &c.

FRENCH FLUTING DONE TO ORDER.

Agent, in Salem, for the sale of

E. BUTTERICK & Co'S
CELEBRATED

Patterns of Garments

FOR

**Ladies, Misses, Boys and Little Children of both
sexes.**

MISS SARAH M. SPILLER,

275 Essex Street, Salem, Mass.

An advertisement from 1870 for Sarah M. Spiller, a sales agent for E. Butterick & Company. Catalogue of E. Butterick & Co.'s *Patterns for Fall, 1870*. Verso cover. Trade Catalog Collection Baker Library, Harvard Business School.