

Bids: The Gendered Work of Value in the Early American Market

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Was there such a thing as a “gendered economy” in early America? Would we know it if we saw it? If it existed, what difference would it make? Almost 25 years ago, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich had straightforward answers. In Early Republic Maine there were three economies: a men’s economy, a women’s economy, and a third place where the two intersected. She used the metaphor of a checked cloth to illustrate how to think about separation and intersection in men’s and women’s working lives. The two were distinct, but they blended at times, and because society and economy were one, they were interdependent.¹ In the years since, new studies about the broader world of trade and money that Ulrich’s cloth was woven within suggest that her metaphor does not apply to many parts of early America. But we do not yet have a new conceptual framework for understanding how the activities of men and women, or ideas about masculinity and femininity, shaped economies.

The new, dynamic histories of the Atlantic world and of capitalism do not at present pivot around gender. Their focus on connections between local and distant economic transactions have given prominence to the concept of networks.² Women exist in these networks, though largely as important conduits within family connections. In an effort to expand our understanding of which activities should be counted as economic, other scholars have posited pairings: primary and secondary economies, the formal economy and the informal economy, legitimate economies and shadow economies.³ Women are present in these pairings, usually in the secondary, support-staff position,

¹ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (1990; New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 75-76; Marla Miller, “Dialogue,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14:3 (Autumn 2002): 148-57.

² David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Peter Mathias, “Risk, Credit and Kinship in Early Modern Enterprise,” in *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*, ed. John J. McCusker (Cambridge, 2001), 15-35; Natasha Glaisyer, “Networking: Trade and Exchange in the Eighteenth-Century British Empire,” *The Historical Journal* 47: 2 (2004): 451-76; Silvia Marzagalli, “Establishing Transatlantic Trade Networks in Time of War: Bordeaux and the United States 1793-1815,” *Business History Review* 79: 4 (winter 2005): 811-744; Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties that Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009);.

³ Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Wendy Woloson, *In Hock: Pawning in America from Independence through the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Serena Zabin, *Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), chap. 3. See also the Library Company’s 2012 exhibit (and conference) “Capitalism by Gaslight: The Shadow Economies of 19th-century America,” <http://www.librarycompany.org/shadoweconomy/>.

along with poor men. Finally, new attention to consumption and the slave trade has presented commodification as a key analytical structure.⁴ Women's labor and women's bodies participate, but their presence hasn't yet changed the model of the whole, even in the case of enslaved women, commodified themselves as laborers, sexual objects, and mothers of future commodified humans.

While the new frameworks do not pivot around women, within the analysis, gender is everywhere: in the self-justifying letters of merchants, in the anguished journals of clerks, in the advertising schemes of insurance carriers. We have gained a rich sense of how the print culture of the market used words associated with men and women. But because the content of masculinity and femininity was always in flux, gender's value as an interpretive tool can seem limited. Taking gender to be a hierarchical binary, we have learned how capitalists used gender more than how gender was fundamental to capitalism. If it was not fundamental, was the economy really gendered?⁵

I can illustrate the difficulties of how to "do a gender analysis" of economic culture with an example from my own research on auctions. In 1819, the *New England Galaxy* satirized the behavior of women at auctions of fancy goods. The auction, the author joked, was "one of the best schools for *economy* that was ever invented," because at auction women were paying "three times the value of an article, in order triumphantly to out-bid some other lady, whose father or husband's purse or imprudence was not as deep as hers."⁶ On the surface of it, it is easy to identify the work of "gender" and

⁴ Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Robin Law and Kristin Mann, "West Africa in the Atlantic Community: The Case of the Slave Coast," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., vol. 56: 2 (April 1999): 307-34; G. Ugo Nwokeji, "African Conceptions of Gender and the Slave Traffic," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58: 1 (January 2001): 47-68; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Edward E. Baptist, "'Cuffy,' 'Fancy Maids,' and 'One-Eyed Men': Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States," *American Historical Review* 106:5 (December 2001): 1619-50; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Jennifer Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁵ Joan Scott theorized the use of gender to study topics not previously believed to be "about" gender in her "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91:5 (December 1986): 1053-75. Jeanne Boydston revisited the approach with a critical eye toward its application in early America in Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender and History* 20:3 (November 2008): 558-83. On the relationship between gender and capitalism and which historical questions to ask, see Amy Louise Erickson, "Coverture and Capitalism," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 59 (Spring 2005): 1-16.

⁶ *New-England Galaxy*, November 19, 1819.

“economy” in this satire. At this auction, women were performing basic market behaviors: competing, risking, spending money. We might interpret this passage as a humorous depiction of ambitious, go-ahead women participating in nineteenth-century urban markets. And yet, because it is satire, we have to read this kind of evidence armed with wariness and skepticism. The women are accused of spending money that does not belong to them, perhaps a partial reference to the legal concept of coverture. The author is drawing upon old tropes of silly women, a familiar tactic when women were transgressing norms. We might conclude that most women did not bid. At a minimum, the fact that they are at an auction and not a retail shop tells us that they were participating in a secondary economy. Or, perhaps there were no actual women involved. Perhaps this satire, like others, was merely expressing the “gendered” nature of the economy, making the point that nonproductive consumerism—of the sort practiced at fancy-goods auctions—was “feminized” in popular culture and fathers and husbands were not manly enough to stop it.

Each of these varying interpretations could fit into our understanding of the early nineteenth-century marketplace without doing much to change it. Part of the problem is the source, which is a brief, satirical article, hardly the basis for a thoroughgoing analysis. Part of the problem is that there is still much we do not understand about how gender shaped value in the early American economy, and that makes it hard to determine the right lens through which to read this satire. To figure it out, we need to use more nuanced understandings of what gender itself was in particular contexts. Fortunately, there is plenty of exciting research that can open up my quotation and fulfill the promise of gender and women’s history for rewriting the main stories of economic history. I will focus on three areas raised by my bidding women: households and property law, men’s work and women’s work, and reproductive labor. In each case, I want to demonstrate that scholars attentive to how men’s and women’s work and bodies were valued show us the kind of work ideas about value did for American capitalism.

Capital, Property Law, and Marriage

My nineteenth-century satirist insisted that foolish female bidders were wasting money that actually belonged to hapless men, a complaint about female consumerism that

had been around for at least a hundred years⁷. In fact, the question of who controlled a family's money was complex and contentious. The evidence of free wives, daughters, female servants and enslaved women all spending money, signing IOUs, and drawing on credit is so widespread that we can no longer call it an exception when a woman in early America traded goods or used money. They had access; they had knowledge; they were accepted commercial actors. Wealth and race, more than gender, determined who would pay in chickens and who with commercial credit, but the prevalent practice of multiple members contributing to and drawing on a single account tells us that at some level, the account was a shared resource.⁸

How that resource was shared, and how the distribution of power around money within households changed over time and region, brings us into more interesting, and potentially more gendered territory. Most money gathered in free families and was transferred through inheritance, dowries, and other intra-familial means. To understand capital accumulation, therefore, historians have to look to families. In early Anglo-America, households channeled productive capacities. To understand labor, therefore, historians have to understand households. In both cases, family structure caused economic and political events, including the development of capitalism itself.⁹

Households, and the operation of gender within them, were historically and regionally variable. This is an essential point for any claims about "household economies," because gender took on a different value depending upon context. Farm families in eighteenth-century New England seem to have operated patriarchally; the father had ultimate legal control, and significant cultural power, in deciding how and where his children, wife, and servants should work. Men and women on a farm had different areas of expertise and operated in a semi-coordinated manner to support the

⁷ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), Introduction and chap. 4.

⁸ Linda Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Routledge, 2002), chap. 5; Marla R. Miller, *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2006), 9-11.

⁹ Erickson, "Coverture and Capitalism," 2; Carole Shammas, "Anglo-American Household Government in Comparative Perspective," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd. ser., 52:1 (Jan. 1995): 104-44.

whole. We call theirs a “household economy” to see it as a shared endeavor and to recognize the “contributions” of wives, children, servants, and slaves.¹⁰

Early nineteenth-century poor urban households were smaller, unlikely to include servants, and fragile. All members of the household pooled incomes scratched from seasonal jobs, temporary employment, and small businesses; many barely managed to fend off starvation.¹¹ Men found seasonal work on farms and at sea; women had ceaseless work in houses, kitchens, and gardens. But just because there was some separation in the work done by men and that done by women does not mean these “household economies” shared much with the New England farmers. Urban “household economies” depended on and intersected with the economies of other institutions, such as almshouses. As urban men moved out of town in search of work, women and children moved into almshouses; when men returned or a new housing situation beckoned, women and children moved out.¹² Economic authority was dispersed further when multiple partial families rented space together with unmarried people in apartments or boardinghouses.

Households further west also bore little resemblance to those New England farmers, even if they, too, drew upon the cooperation of men and women. European and later American men who pioneered in the fur trade and other enterprises were embedded in indigenous and Mexican family structures vital to their economic success. These men depended on the extended kin of their wives for business contacts, customers, and workers. Their position as father or husband did not grant them exclusive access to resources.¹³

¹⁰ Daniel Vickers, Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 47:1 (Jan. 1990): 3-29. The editors of a recent special issue of *The William and Mary Quarterly* called for more research into “the family economy-market economy nexus in the Atlantic world.” Julie Hardwick, Sarah M.S. Pearsall, and Karin Wulf, “Introduction: Centering Families in Atlantic Histories,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 70: 2 (April 2013): 211.

¹¹ Billy G. Smith, “The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 38:2 (April 1981): 163-202. Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2006), chap. 4 and chap. 5. Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Rockman, *Scraping By*, chap. 6.

¹² Herndon poorhouse; Rockman *Scraping By*.

¹³ Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A New History of the North American West, 1800-1860* (2011; New York: Harper Collins, 2012). Hyde critiques the peculiar histories that claim such men “died single,” when in fact they had large extended families and children, pp. 18-19.

Enslaved families pooled economic resources, as well. Men and women specialized in work that sometimes overlapped and sometimes diverged.¹⁴ Working together in the off-hours enabled slaves to strengthen kin relationships that mapped onto blood relationships and also formed new kinds of families.¹⁵ Diversity in households was not variation on a theme; the economic coordination between enslaved men and women was not a pale imitation of what free people did. Families took specific forms, and gender had distinct value in each, with vital implications for economic development in different regions.

Some historians of early modern Europe argue that the small, nuclear families of northwestern Europe were better able to respond “flexibly” to the market. The practice of women marrying later, and marrying men similar in age to themselves, transformed the balance of power in households in such a fashion as to lay the groundwork for capitalism.¹⁶ How might this transformation play out in America’s diverse communities? Investigating further the economic presence of these diverse kin could offer us ways to understand regional patterns of economic development, as well as how a U.S. empire built its economic base.

The idea of “household economies” is enmeshed in private property law, a bedrock of capitalism that was specifically gendered in the way it protected forms of ownership and sustained particular family relationships.¹⁷ The English legal system, upon which U.S. law was modeled, made strong distinctions between the property rights of free married women and everyone else through the doctrine of coverture. But coverture was not the first and last word in “gender” and property rights. Although it sometimes stands in as shorthand for married women’s status, coverture is better understood as a

¹⁴ Stephanie Camp suggests that slave women embarked on a “second shift” of reproductive and caring labor, as well as textile production, after the day’s field labor. See *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 80-82. For more on men and women in the informal economy, see Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), chap. 5.

¹⁵ Dylan Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinship: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 86-91.

¹⁶ Mary S. Hartman, *The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Sara Brooks Sundberg, “Women and Property in Early Louisiana: Legal Systems at Odds,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 32:4 (Winter 2012): 633-665; Laurel A. Clark, “The Rights of a Florida Wife: Slavery, U.S. Expansion, and Married Women’s Property Rights,” *Journal of Women’s History* 22: 4 (2010): 39-63.

contested body of legal practice structuring economic relationships between married men and women. Unmarried men and women were not controlled by it, which meant that free single women made contracts and investments and slaveowners did not need to take it into consideration when breaking up enslaved families. A focus on the specific operation of coverture will help us avoid the trap of seeing “the market” as a disembodied force that compels behavior and instead understand who is exerting power over whom and how.¹⁸

Coverture did generate economic invention. It was so harsh in its prohibitions that men and women spent much energy to work around its economic limitations. Poor couples used so-called “runaway wife” elopement notices to publically negotiate what married men and women owed each other. Husbands asserted their rights to their wives’ work and bodies. Wives insisted that their economic contributions earned them ownership rights. Their claims were designed to speak to local economic institutions such as the civil courts and the Overseer of the Poor. As formal divorce became more available in New England after the Revolution, Vermont courts agreed with wives’ more flexible interpretation of coverture and awarded them alimony, especially if it meant keeping children off the poor rolls.¹⁹

Wealthier men and women devised complex financial instruments to get around coverture. Trusts and lawyers are typically associated with the expansion of business in the eighteenth century, but much of their work was inspired by parents hoping to keep property out of the hands of sons-in-law, second wives, or stepchildren.²⁰ Probate courts used practices that pitted the claims of various creditors against those of widows, thereby establishing the value of a married woman’s rights to money.²¹

¹⁸ Jeffrey Sklansky, “The Elusive Sovereign: New Intellectual and Social Histories of Capitalism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 9 (April 2012): 247.

¹⁹ Mary Beth Sievens, *Stray Wives: Marital Conflict in Early National New England* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 60-66. On self-divorce, see Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, chap. 1. Kirsten Sword argues for a different reading of elopement notices in *Wives Not Slaves*, forthcoming from University of Chicago Press.

²⁰ Linda L. Sturtz, *Within Her Power: Propertied Women in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Routledge, 2002), chap. 1; Vivian Bruce Conger, *A Widow’s Might: Widowhood and Gender in Early British America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), chap. 2.

²¹ Elizabeth Blackmar, “Inheriting Property and Debt: From Family Security to Corporate Accumulation,” in Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith, *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 93-117. For a discussion of women as successful administrators of estates, see Sara Damiano, “‘To Well and Truly Administer’: Female Administrators and Estate Settlement in Newport, Rhode Island, 1730-1776,” *The New England Quarterly* 86:1 (March 2013): 89-124.

We can expand this insight into the generative role of property law to investigate how coverture was at the root of other forms of financialization typical of capitalist invention. Did coverture create life insurance, for example? Nineteenth-century married men, from farmers to lawyers, began taking out life insurance policies as a hedge against financial uncertainty after their deaths. They were encouraged by an industry that gave different values to men's and women's lives and waxed poetic about the need to provide "security" for widows and fatherless children. The gendered language of the insurers' ploy is obvious, but it also referred to a specific legal framework in which widows' rights to personal property and substantial portions of real estate were secondary to the rights of their husbands' creditors. Life insurance worked to uphold and reinforce this particular kind of property law that often undermined the security of the widows the insurers claimed to protect. Arguments in favor of life insurance reform thus closely mirrored those in favor of married women's property laws in the nineteenth century.²² Risk as a financial concept may have been born in the nearly all-male environment of merchant sea voyages, with the invention of marine insurance.²³ But masculine individualism was not the only factor determining the value of a life, and to whom the value of a family was secured.

English common law was only one of "many legalities" of early America and therefore only one of the ways that gender was structured into the economy.²⁴ Naragansett Indians in the eighteenth century manipulated courts to secure property through kin relations they called "customary marriage."²⁵ White wives in early nineteenth-century Florida secured property claims by drawing upon the competing traditions of Spanish-style civil law, which viewed gender within a dynastic, rather than

²² Sharon Miller, *Investing in Life: Insurance in Antebellum America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), chap. 5.

²³ On marine insurance, Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), prologue and chap. 1.

²⁴ The term is from Christopher L. Tomlins and Bruce H. Mann, *The Many Legalities of Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

²⁵ Ann Marie Plane, *Colonial Intimacies: Indian Marriage in Early New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), chap. 6. There is a substantial literature on marriage and the North American fur trade. See, for example, Sylvia Van Kirk, "The Custom of the Country: An Examination of Fur Trade Marriage Practices," in *Rethinking the Fur Trade: Cultures of Exchange in an Atlantic World*, ed. Susan Sleeper-Smith (Lincoln, 2009), 481-511; and Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounters in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst, 2001).

husband-wife, framework.²⁶ The more we know about these competing ways of understanding gender and property within families, the better we will be able to evaluate how and where capitalist forms edged out other economic systems. For example, were certain kinds of investments or ventures more possible in territories and states with common law, as opposed to civil law systems? When wives retained control over the assets they brought to marriage, did that shape spending decisions of men and women and the complexity of credit forms? Since the status of these laws had regional variation, can we see variation in economic developments that mirrors laws governing property within marriage?

New scholarship has demonstrated that empires used cross-cultural intimate relationships to control populations and extract profits from colonized areas. Territorial conquest took property out of indigenous women's hands and gave it to Anglo husbands through U.S. property law. This paved the way for American imperialism and also the specific sex-gender system underlying American capitalism. We now understand that men and women within households had to cooperate on economic matters and share economic expertise. For this insight to change the historiography of capitalism, we will need to determine the intersection of structural and individual causes for such personal negotiations, and how they changed over time.

Valuing Women's Work; Valuing Men's Work

The passage I introduced at the opening described an auction and labeled the women's activities at that auction as a form of competitive consumption. The only reason women bought these goods, the newspaper critic claimed, was to best other women. Like the trope of a woman spending a man's money, this contrast, of spending money as women's work and making money as men's work, is so familiar as to seem timeless. This is the wrong perspective on two counts. First, auctions were important sources of stock for women's and men's small businesses. Many bidders were buying in order to sell, as part of the extensive circulation and recirculation of goods that categorized economic

²⁶ Laurel A. Clark, "The Rights of a Florida Wife: Slavery, U.S. Expansion, and Married Women's Property Law," *Journal of Women's History* 22:4 (Winter 2012): 39-63. An important part of the law in Florida, Arkansas and Mississippi was to specifically protect a free white wife's property in slaves from her husband's creditors. The courts typically did not protect similar rights for wives of Indian and African descent.

practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁷ Consumption was work, we now know, and the more we look into “feminized” consumption, the more we see the economic, as well as social work, consuming did.²⁸ Second, although the idea that some work was classified as “men’s work” and some classified as “women’s work” was broadly shared across cultures in early America, the content of that work, and the variety of activities understood not to be divisible by gender, varied over time and region. The diverging financial values placed on various types of work in mid-nineteenth-century cities resulted from intersecting ideas about the identities of the workers.

Retailing, for example, was not limited to one gender by law or by convention. Male and female traders and small businesspeople in Philadelphia, Liverpool, London, New York City, Newport, Charleston, and Boston all competed and cooperated using similar tactics, though relative wealth meant that the scale of their enterprises differed considerably.²⁹ Hucksters, who sold small amounts of food on town and city streets, were typically described as women, but poor people of both sexes, black and white, took up the work, which usually required no costly licenses.³⁰ In colonial New Orleans, the legal picture was different, but once again, gender was not a primary force in shaping market involvement. When in 1747 the governor’s wife, Madame de Vaudreuil, was exposed as

²⁷For example, at one similar auction, a widowed mother of five brought a purse with \$157 to Gammage & Cooper’s Ladies’ Auction Room, hoping to convert her savings into goods that in turn would produce greater income. Unfortunately, her purse was stolen, allegedly by John Miller, “a negro.” *The New-York Columbian*, March 26, 1818. For an introduction to small urban businesses, see Gloria L. Main, “Women in the Edge: Life at Street Level in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 32:3 (Fall 2012): 331-47, and the other essays in this special issue.

²⁸ Linzy A. Brekke, “The ‘Scourge of Fashion’: Political Economy and the Politics of Consumption in the Early Republic,” *Early American Studies* 3:1 (Spring 2005): 111-39; Jane T. Merritt, “Tea Trade, Consumption, and the Republican Paradox in pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128, no. 2 (April 2004): 117-48; essays in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds., *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Jan de Vries, “The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution,” *Journal of Economic History* 54 (1994): 249-270; and T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁹ For just a few examples, see Sheryllynne Haggerty, *The British-Atlantic Trading Community, 1760-1810: Men, Women, and the Distribution of Goods* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), chap. 4; Patricia Cleary, *Elizabeth Murray: A Woman’s Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Zabin, *Dangerous Economies*; and Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties that Buy*.

³⁰ Candice L. Harrison, “‘Free Trade and Huckster’s Rights!’: Envisioning Economic Democracy in the Early Republic,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 137:2 (April 2013): 151. Seth Rockman points out that in parts of the South, African-American women dominated huckstering, while in Baltimore, their presence was rare until the later nineteenth century. Rockman, *Scraping By*, 127.

a retailer, she faced public slander—not because she was a woman, but because she was noble. Under New Orleans law, retailing was not “men’s work” or “women’s work,” but rather “middling-rank people’s work.”³¹ The most important marker was status.

To see the salvaging and revaluing of material goods at auction as parasitic, critics had to reconceptualize female bidders’ activities as non-productive. They did so by lampooning women’s motivations and making arbitrary distinctions of scale. A country shopkeeper attending an auction to obtain stock was productive. A widow bidding on “infinitely small” lots was not. These arguments, designed to promote the interests of so-called “regular” traders, shaped the development of the auction wars into the 1820s.

Salvaging value from used goods and putting that value back into the economy was also one of the unpaid tasks of nineteenth-century housewifery.³² In fact, many auctions were advertised as having special appeal “to housekeepers.” Yet even housework, that quintessential catchall of “women’s work,” incorporated different tasks at different periods and in different regions. Within local economic cultures, people debated whether specific tasks were gendered male or female. The cookbooks of seventeenth-century housewives suggested that making cider was women’s work; husbandry manuals insisted that alcohol making was more of a science, and the proper domain of men.³³

One of the central truths of nineteenth-century economic literature is that middle-class women’s housekeeping was seen as noneconomic—love, not work—valued in the heart rather than the pocketbook. For the majority of Americans, though, housework gained very specific monetary value as it became commercialized. Laundry was one of the first tasks to make this transition. As a chore so repugnant the men of the Continental Army were willing to shiver and scratch in rags rather than wash their own clothing, laundry became a niche market dominated by enslaved and free black women.³⁴ In urban

³¹ Sophie White, “‘A Baser Commerce’: Retailing, Class, and Gender in French Colonial New Orleans,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser, 63:3 (July 2006): 518.

³² *City of Washington Gazette*, November 9, 1818. For the classic study of the shifting ideology surrounding women’s housework, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

³³ Sarah Hand Meacham, *Every Home a Distillery: Alcohol, Gender, and Technology in the Colonial Chesapeake* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

³⁴ Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 169-74; Rockman, *Scraping By*, 130-31.

areas, boardinghouses commercialized an entire package of so-called women's work. The most common complaints about boardinghouse food were that it tasted terrible and the portions were too small, revealing that residents didn't know whether to object to not getting their money's worth or to the fact that the landlady didn't love them.³⁵

Almshouses commercialized the same work for the indigent, serving as "boarding house, nursing home, hospital, nursery, daycare, school" in a kind of "community housekeeping enterprise."³⁶ The almshouse was unique in the systematic way it valued women's household labor. Able-bodied women in the almshouse were often "promoted" to staff, where they performed nursing, cleaning, and cooking services. The Almshouse charged residents for these services, which were always provided by women.

Early Republic Philadelphia's almshouse went further, establishing a manufactory so that poor men and women could weave fabric for sale. However, male and female labor was organized separately, with men working as a collective in a single room, while women worked either in separate rooms or performed outwork.³⁷ This arrangement is an interesting twist on our old understandings of the social nature of female work in the colonial period. In Laurel Ulrich's Maine, collective housework, including work with textiles, existed within a context of community collaboration; in Early Republic cities, women's paid work was highly individualized, by the piece, and lonely.³⁸

As with all forms of commercialization, the "gendering" of work was political, just as commodification is political. In the 1820s, New York's Court of Chancery reviewed the records of two trustees. Margaret Jones produced rigorous accounts of how she had used her dead brother-in-law's money to raise and educate her nieces and invested the rest to supply each with a handsome marriage portion—all for free. Frederic De Peyster, in contrast, had made great use of his nephews' estate to line his own pockets through rents and commissions charged, but failed to invest the capital. The court's response to these cases made it clear that trusteeship in the nineteenth century required

³⁵ Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

³⁶ Ruth Wallis Herndon, "Poor Women and the Boston Almshouse in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 32: 3 (Fall 2012): 351.

³⁷ Monique Bourque, "Women and Work in the Philadelphia Almshouse, 1790-1840" *Journal of the Early Republic* 32:3 (Fall 2012): 383-413.

³⁸ Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale*, chap. 2.

investing the estate for growth, following the “logic of capitalist enterprise.”³⁹ I wonder how ideas about gender shaped the behavior of those tasked with risking their charges’ funds in order to preserve them. Did female trustees assume they were doing kin work for free, while male trustees assumed they were conducting business, which needed to be compensated? How did trusteeship become classified as business (lawyers took over serving as trustees in the first decades of the 19th century) rather than care, and was that change linked to ideas about gender?

In the nineteenth century, bookkeeping, a technology necessary for economic development, reached the masses through published “how-to” manuals. Male clerks in a bank and female housekeepers in a parlor read such manuals, which trained them in numeracy, the ability to model past prices in order to guide future actions, and how to prepare an annual accounting for a supervisor. But while clerks were paid for their work and used their surplus for some leisure, free housewives were paid in “satisfaction,” according to the expert authors.⁴⁰

The “gendering” of work did not always rest on a contrast between “men’s work” and “women’s work,” however defined. Those same clerks, poised on the cutting edge of so many of the social developments of early American capitalism, fretted over whether the work they did was indeed “men’s work.” Some satirical cartoons in the late nineteenth century depicted them as whiskered men in dresses, setting them up with the nineteenth-century male-female binary. But others mocked them as boys, locked into dead-end positions as subordinates with no hope of independence. White clerks also were at pains to separate themselves from African American porters, even if all of them were carrying stock around the shop. Clerks’ masculinity was defined by the kind of work that the nineteenth-century business required, but they were not simply “feminized” by a gendered economy.⁴¹

³⁹ Elizabeth Blackmar, “Inheriting Property and Debt: From Family Security to Corporate Accumulation,” in Zakim and Kornblith, *Capitalism Takes Command*, 103-5.

⁴⁰ Jessica M. Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 75.

⁴¹ Brian Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010). See also “Connection, Contingency, and Class in the Early Republic’s Economy,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26: 4 (Winter 2006). This special issue devoted extensive attention to clerks.

The evidence of the shifting, uncertain categories of “men’s work” and “women’s work” remind us that gender itself is historically specific. While an influential bourgeois ideology of the mid-nineteenth century presented gender as a binary connected to “natural” differences and a hierarchical imbalance of value, gender over the course of early America operated in a much more fluid way, intersecting with race, rank, and other markers of identity and difference. American capitalism helped codify the gender binary familiar to us through laws of property and processes of commodification, but we cannot use the resulting binary itself to analyze capitalist development.⁴²

Valuing Reproductive Work

Going back one more time to my ladies’ auction, it becomes obvious that because auctions traded in objects of uncertain value, there was always the danger that a sale might violate established understandings of what could and could not be priced. One early nineteenth-century newspaper claimed that there were creditors who “would sell the widow’s milk at auction, which nature had given her for the support of her orphan child, if it were possible to do it.”⁴³ Stories about auctions used free female bodies to discipline market practices by marking the limits of commodification. Readers were expected to laugh and shudder at the thought of selling a white widow’s milk, which was neither natural resource nor commodity, but her physical expression of care for an infant. Enslaved women were regularly priced, but the only way a free woman’s body could be valued in monetary terms, under the logic of the early nineteenth century, was through prostitution.

For an enslaved woman, mother’s milk had a financial value. Slaveowners’ letters and plantation records indicate that “productive potential” was a prime consideration when making market decisions about the people they owned.⁴⁴ Slaveowners purchased men and women to create “couples.” Enslaved women who were fertile and still young enough to give birth were expected to fetch higher prices—a 29-year-old with three children was perceived as a different commodity than a 41-year-old who had given birth

⁴² On gender as a historical process rather than a category, see Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis,” 559-61.

⁴³ *Niles’ Weekly Register*, v. 21 (1821-22): 146.

⁴⁴ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

to ten.⁴⁵ When such a sale was disputed, the challenge came not to buyers' or sellers' fundamental assumptions about enslaved women's reproductive destinies. Instead, the parties contested whether the woman had been fairly represented to the buying public. Experienced eighteenth-century slave owners scrutinized enslaved women's bodies for signs of youth and fertility, developing a preference for women "without fallen breasts."⁴⁶ At other times and places, however, motherhood or potential motherhood was a liability. Sellers put women up for sale, claiming "tis not convenient to have a breeding wench in the family."⁴⁷ Comparative prices of women and men of varying ages suggest that neither perceived fertility nor gender itself was always the strongest predictor of price.

"Rate," a measure constructed by slave owners to classify and commodify the people they were selling, meshed strongly with price. A classification system at whose top sat the "prime slave," rate was devised by slaveowners to suggest the amount of field work a slave performed. "Prime slaves" had the highest prices.⁴⁸ But the process of linking a unique individual to a single rate was complex and could be idiosyncratic; we do not know sex or gender precisely influenced these categories of commodification. From the enslaved person's standpoint, we know that men and women were aware of their prices and feared family disruption, but we do not know how, or if, awareness of their potential market value shaped women's as opposed to men's behaviors and decisions.

An essential part of constructing a culture surrounding a monetized economy is deciding what cannot be priced.⁴⁹ Auctions not only put a price tag on women's bodies; they seemed to charge for love, as well. What an item was "worth" could be explicitly related to emotional histories associated with the object being sold. In 1829, New Yorker

⁴⁵ Jenny Bourne Wahl, *The Bondsman's Burden: An Economic Analysis of the Common Law of Southern Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 38. The case of Hannah, a 41-year old sold as a 29-year old, entered the Tennessee courts in 1808.

⁴⁶ Philip Morgan, "Slave Sales in Colonial Charleston," *The English Historical Review* 113: 435 (September 1998): 918. Jennifer Morgan discusses the iconography and meanings of high-breasted and low-breasted women in the creation of the Atlantic slave system in Morgan, *Laboring Women*, chapter 1.

⁴⁷ *Virginia Chronicle and Norfolk and Portsmouth General Advertiser*, 9 March 1793. See also Daina Ramey Berry, "'In Pressing Need of Cash: Gender, Skill, and Family Persistence in the Domestic Slave Trade,'" *The Journal of African American History* 92:1 (Winter 2007): 22-36.

⁴⁸ Daina Ramey Berry, "'We'm Fus' Rate Bargain': Value, Labor, and Price in a Georgia Slave Community," in Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas, 1808-1888* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 59-61. On slave pricing from multiple perspectives, see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, chap. 2 and chap. 4.

⁴⁹ Viviana A. Zelizer, *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

John Pintard reported to his daughter that her mother and sister had attended an auction of the goods belonging to her deceased cousin Julia Weeks and “bought a few articles, decanters & glasses as a remembrancer.” Others attending were willing to pay a premium for Weeks’ furniture, as Pintard reported that “everything sold very well, indeed high.”⁵⁰ The valued and the invaluable were linked by capitalism at the auction and in slavery. Abolitionists and slaveowners alike claimed that “loving freely” was fundamental to humanity itself, a capacity that must be insulated from the logic of market values.⁵¹

Pricing enslaved women as producers of future slaves reminds us that reproductive decisions are labor decisions. The growth of plantation slavery in North America, in particular, depended on a struggle between slaveowners and enslaved women over the meaning of motherhood. It was not a given that a particular woman’s body would be valued in a specific way. Slaveowners recognized individual slaves as women when it suited them, and as unsexed “hands” when it suited them. The idea that enslaved women’s bodies gained and lost value in terms of their ability to reproduce a new supply of workers to feed international demands for sugar, tobacco, or cotton emerged in the context of expanding, profit-driven slavery.⁵²

Free women had increasing control over their reproductive lives in early America. Free black and white women in the late eighteenth century, motivated by higher standards of mothering as well as elevated expectations for what gave a middle-class woman’s life worth, looked for ways to limit pregnancies.⁵³ How did this transformation influence women’s and men’s decisions about the intersection of so-called “productive” and reproductive labors? If the demographic transition came first, then it might have been women driving the decisions for smaller families, rather than would-be-capitalist fathers making the call. Abortion before “quickening,” when the mother felt the fetus moving inside her, was legal through the middle of the nineteenth century. In the 1830s and 1840s, it was even commercialized, and literate women could scan the pages of

⁵⁰ March 26 and 27, 1829 in *Letters from John Pintard to her Daughter Eliza Noel Pintard Davidson, 1816-1833* Vol. III (New York: New-York Historical Society, 1941), 69.

⁵¹ Amy Dru Stanley, “Slave Breeding and Free Love: An Antebellum Argument over Slavery, Capitalism, and Personhood,” in Zakim and Kornblith, *Capitalism Takes Command*, 119-44.

⁵² Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women*, chap. 6; Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27-31.

⁵³ Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

newspapers for remedies. Only in 1857 did the newly formed American Medical Association begin a campaign of criminalization, resulting, by the 1880s, of anti-abortion statutes across the country. As histories of capitalism engage the histories of sexuality and gender, they will be able to account for connections between a broad range of laws about the body and the forms that capitalism took.⁵⁴

In Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys*, the sole female teacher declares "History is a commentary on the various and continuing incapacities of men. What is history? History is women following behind with the bucket."⁵⁵ We need a way to understand the exploitation of working people, specifically the exploitation of women, in the course of economic development that does not relegate them to carrying historical buckets. Historians may have given up on finding the "transition point" to capitalism, but the problem of value in women's work and women's bodies reminds us that change over time matters.⁵⁶ Households, laundry, and childbearing were not static realms upon which the economy acted; they were dynamic pieces of women's and men's lives that all had value, in terms of sustaining life, expressing care, and channeling social energies. By the nineteenth century, each had a monetized value. In historicizing these concepts, we will historicize gender itself.

⁵⁴ Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

⁵⁵ Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006).

⁵⁶ Seth Rockman, "What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy?" *Journal of the Early Republic* 34:3 (Fall 2014): 442.