Introduction

In 1668, Frances Angell, an apprentice seamstress, lost her temper with her mistress Apollonia Maddox. She stormed out of the house and refused to return, saying 'she could maintain herself well enough' without her. She meant, as a witness explained, 'she had attained to so good skill and instrucon in hir arte of a sempstress as she was able thereby to gett hir living'. Frances Angell and her father sued Maddox and her husband to get back the premium that had been paid for Frances's training. The Maddoxes resisted, claiming Frances was idle, stubborn and wasteful; disobedient to both her mistress and her father; and 'a slattern in her clothes'.[1]

Frances was one of a generation of young women who, in their mid-teens, were bound as apprentices to learn to make a living. The path of trained apprenticeship for young women featured almost nowhere in printed literature, in advice to girls, in ballads or in plays. But it was a well-established route to independent work, practised in parishes and towns around the country as well as in guilds like those of the City of London and drawing in girls from the poorest to the gentry, as well as the women who ran successful businesses and those who laboured sewing for them, making lace or buttons, washing and starching, making cakes and selling fruit. This book uncovers their stories, and the networks of labour, credit and skill that gave working women their place in the early modern city.

Girls and women who maintained themselves, we will see, were ordinary, familiar figures in early modern cities. Domestic service through the later teenage years was characteristic of the life cycle of women in Northwestern Europe, where marriage was typically delayed till the mid-twenties. But other aspects of women's occupational training and artisanal life cycle are under-recorded both in formal archives and in the historiography. The guilds in London and elsewhere through which

[1] LMA, CLA/024/05/249 (1669).

many girls were apprenticed adopted ambivalent attitudes to their labour, and the formulaic records of apprenticeship minimise women's roles. Court cases like Frances Angell's; wills, tax lists and other administrative records; and record digitisation make it possible to find women in guilds and fill out the picture of their lives.[2] The chapters that follow examine how girls and women in late seventeenth-century London trained to earn a living and incorporated themselves into the institutions of apprenticeship and guilds, and the foundations this laid for the community of working women.

The 'ingenious trade' of the title described the work of one of London's seamstresses, Margaret Reeves. A friend looking to place an apprentice with her in 1694 described her as 'the best & most Ingenious of her tread makes & draws all her own patterns works only to people of the greatest quality'.[3] London's fashion market was teeming with ready-made goods, from shifts and aprons to coifs and gowns. Seamstresses acquired patterns to cut out garments with economy and style, and specialised needlewomen used patterns for embroidery or drew their own. The phrase also stands for the necessary ingenuity of making a career in a City regulated by London's livery companies, the guilds, and pressed by the forces of commerce and patriarchal regulation. 'Ingenious' connoted mastery of a craft, talent matched with technique, but also a kind of cunning in outwitting limits, or contriving an elegant effect with hidden means.[4] It suggested, often, an accomplished male virtuoso; to find it used of a woman's trade illuminates the skills and techniques that went with the seventeenth-century needle and shop.

The ubiquity of seamstress work in early modern cities makes it a fertile ground for tracing gendered conflicts over occupational identity and revealing female agency in the face of the obstacles to women's economic autonomy.[5] London's special place in those conflicts was shaped by the resources and strategies of the women who came to work

[2] Critical here is the searchable guild data on ROLLCO, www.londonroll.org. The London Apprenticeship Abstracts by Cliff Webb and the Freedoms of the City of London are available commercially on www.findmypast.co.uk and www.ancestry.co.uk, respectively.

[3] Bristol University Special Collections, Pinney Papers, Red Box 2 folder VII, Mary Pinney to Hester Pinney, 7 February 1695. This encounter is discussed further in Chapter 3. "Tread" = trade - or possibly, thread.

[4] Alexander Marr et al., *Logodaedalus: Word Histories of Ingenuity in Early Modern Europe* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), introduction.

[5] See, for example, Clare Haru Crowston, 'Engendering the Guilds: Seamstresses, Tailors, and the Clash of Corporate Identities in Old Regime France', *French Historical Studies* 23, no. 2 (2000): 339–71; Mary Prior, 'Women in the Urban Economy', in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 147–72; Deborah Simonton, '"Sister to the Tailor": Guilds, Gender and the Needle Trades in Eighteenth-Century Europe', in *Early Professional Women in Northern Europe,*

there, and also by the peculiarities of City custom. By the seventeenth century, the livery companies that functioned as guilds were losing their power to regulate their own trades so that seamstresses, like other artisans, could join most companies, could train apprentices and could gain the benefits of City freedom through their husbands, through the patrimonial right of their fathers and through their own apprenticeships.[6] Women's careers were often short or interrupted but laid the grounds for a future working life in which both sewing and trading were likely to be useful resources. Some worked for much longer, setting up shops and businesses that ran for years and taking on a series of apprentices who did the same.

Women's work in the textile trades of early modern London was critical to the expansion of those trades in the service of new patterns of consumption, which included quicker, cheaper fashion, often bought off the peg, with numerous ready-made accessories, alongside more disposable household goods. Shopping, so often portrayed as leisure, was also unpaid work, and learning to distinguish the increasingly varied goods of the seventeenth-century marketplace and shopfront involved expertise and touch. The households of urban tradespeople were the leaders in purchasing mirrors, curtains and goods for entertainment; they probably also led in displaying the clothes they sold.[7] Apprentices learned to make and sell clothes and also to want more or better for themselves. The women of this book lived in this world of shops as consumers, but also as workers and as businesswomen. Learning and teaching sewing put women behind the counter in the consumer revolution, alongside the asset management and economic decision-making that were typical of women's roles in business and merchant households.[8] They learned to make, trim, appraise and sell, and established a place in the world of new shops and shopping galleries like the Royal Exchange. The labour of

c. 1650–1850, ed. Johanna Ilmakunnas, Marjatta Rahikainen and Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2017).

[6] Amy Louise Erickson, 'Eleanor Mosley and Other Milliners in the City of London Companies 1700–1750', *History Workshop Journal* 71 (2011): 147–72 illuminates the significance of female apprenticeship in early modern London.

[7] Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (Brighton: Psychology Press, 1996).

[8] Alexandra Shepard. 'Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy', *History Workshop Journal* 78 (2015): 1–24; Lorna Weatherill, 'A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behavior in England, 1660–1740', *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 2 (1986): 131–56; Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

apprentice girls and their mistresses helped shape the new world of consumption.

Their work was an integral part of an expanding urban economy, sustained by a trade boom and a transatlantic trading empire which made luxury textiles and foods cheaper and more readily available. As in cities across Europe, women migrants came in such numbers, often as servants, that they outnumbered men in the population by 3:2. Textile work – the largest sector of women's employment – was increasingly specialised, involving women of all ages and marital statuses in different roles. Evidence from legal records shows married women working widely independently from their husbands, largely in sewing, provisioning and the service sector.[9] Single women, too, were establishing more opportunities to hold shops and trade in their own name and the number of never-married women reached a peak in the mid-seventeenth century. Tax lists in 1693 show around 16 per cent of London's households headed by women and 26 per cent in the dockside hamlet of Ratcliff, London's Sailortown.[10] While Jan de Vries saw in the long eighteenth century an 'industrious revolution' which expanded women's orientation towards the market, Alexandra Shepard has suggested that what women were doing may simply have become more visible in these specialised urban contexts.[11] While sewing, making clothes and accessories and textile manufacture were the most prominent trades in London female apprenticeship, it extended to pastry-making, pin-making and numerous other trades.

In the bigger picture of women's work, continuity of inequality underpins significant economic and social shifts. Over a century ago, the first extensive study of early modern women's work, Alice Clark's *Working Women in Seventeenth-Century England* organised an exhaustive archival investigation around a transition from domestic and family industry to capitalist production, which effectively marginalised women's productive participation in the economy.[12] Both the chronology and the terms of her

[9] Amy Louise Erickson, 'Married Women's Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London', *Continuity and Change* 23, no. 2 (2008): 267–307; Peter Earle, 'The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', *Economic History Review* 42, no. 3 (1989): 328–53.

[10] Craig Spence, *London in the 1690s: A Social Atlas* (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, 2000), 75.

[11] De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*; Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 30.

[12] Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Amy Louise Erickson (London: Routledge, 1992); Clark's material includes substantial references to women in urban crafts guilds, though it is often not clear what trade they were actually practising.

argument have been substantially modified. The earlier period was no golden age: a relatively free labour market after the population loss of the Black Death was followed by a reduction in the scope of and reward for women's work in the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, the growing wage economy and the move of production outside households still involved significant, rewarding participation from both married and single women.[13] A continuing profile of low reward and poor esteem kept the 'patriarchal equilibrium' in place.[14] Recent large-scale archival projects have pioneered the analysis of legal records, with their extensive details about daily life, to create a time-use analysis of gendered work, noting who was doing what, for how long, and when, and reaching a fuller range of gendered labour by including all work that could be paid for.[15] One of the revealing findings of Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood's investigation of women's work using this method is that women's work is systematically under-reported in witness statements, which were more often than not made by men.[16] The depositions used in this study, similarly, often reflect different stresses on the part of young women, male apprentices, interested neighbours and families. The stories of apprentices, mistresses and freewomen testify to the place of work in women's lives and to the structural system that underpinned their training. They reveal work at the centre of adolescent life, training for work as part of the plans by and for a wide spectrum of young women, and the role of a mistress as a particular and unique aspect of urban women's married and single lives.

The stories that record these roles are contested ones. At the common-law jurisdiction of the Mayor's Court, dissatisfied apprentices 'sued out' their indentures, dissolving their contracts. In the flexible system of apprenticeship, interrupted contracts were more common than completed ones and were mostly managed outside the courts, but the litigation guaranteed a closure of the obligation on both sides.[17] A small

[13] Jan de Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution', *Journal of Economic History* 54, no. 2 (1994): 249–70; Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*.
[14] Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), chapter 4.
[15] Sheilagh Ogilvie, 'How Does Social Capital Affect Women? Guilds and Communities in Early Modern Germany', *American Historical Review* 109, no. 2 (2004): 325–59; Maria Ågren, ed., *Making a Living, Making a Difference: Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society* (Oxford University Press, 2017).
[16] Jane Whittle and Mark Hailwood, 'The Gender Division of Labour in Early Modern England', *Economic History Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 11. Both sexes were less likely to report work done by the opposite sex.
[17] Patrick Wallis, 'Labor, Law, and Training in Early Modern London: Apprenticeship and the City's Institutions', *Journal of British Studies* 51, no. 4 (2012): 791–819.

number of families went on to use the equity side of the Mayor's Court to try to recoup the premium they had paid for training, litigation which could involve substantial costs and which was mostly concluded with the repayment of a proportion of the premium which reflected the court's judgement on how badly each side had failed to perform their duty. Accounts were often wildly divergent, though not irreconcilable. Apprentices and their parents brought witnesses to drudgery, poor food, bad training and violence. Mistresses, hoping to have to pay back as little as possible, complained of poor work, unauthorised absences, idleness, theft and rudeness but reiterated their willingness to continue the contract. While both sides, guided by attorneys, structured their complaints around predictable grounds based on the apprenticeship contract, their narratives and the gaps between them provide a view into a world that has been largely invisible. Moreover, the use that women made of the Mayor's Court system reveals the integration of a set of expectations around women's work into an extensive wider system for managing training through customary norms and institutional mediation.

Over the last thirty years, historians have worked out methods of reading court records as sources for social history. Their narratives are constructed around memories, mediations, truths and fictions; the whole idea of truth in law is historically specific. Fictions woven for court cases tend to reveal fantasies that had real power over people's minds, and the power of the plausible means that fictionalised, exaggerated versions can be as useful to historians as strict truths. Alongside the key contested events, most testimonies include significant extraneous detail that reveals who was doing what, where and when. From the answers witnesses gave to leading questions, a landscape of daily life can be reconstituted alongside an attention to the fantasies and fictions people wove around their daily lives. The Mayor's Court cases come late in the bloom of legal activity that characterised the early modern period. They were pursued by gentry families, City traders and artisans and witnessed by their servants, apprentices, family and neighbours, with the aim of reaching a financial resolution based on the principles of equity. Many of these people had substantial social capital and literacy and were experienced in using the law. Other equity jurisdictions have been shown to be particularly open to women, but at the Mayor's Court, held at the Guildhall with a fixed team of attorneys, fathers or male guardians rather than mothers typically represented their daughters, perhaps reflecting the culture of the City and the guilds. Mayor's Court litigants and many of their witnesses were knowledgeable navigators of their generally privileged world, and they testified accordingly. The degree to which apprentices could or should partake of that privilege was one of the points of

stress in their households. These testimonies were given in private and written up by a clerk; cases that were contested involved attorney advice as well. Witnesses responded to explicit and often fulsome libels framed by litigants. All this makes them feel quite practised. London's shopkeepers were interested in manners, politeness and civility, and so it is not surprising that the cases attend particularly to the ways of the body and to the performances of work and respect. Sixteenth and early seventeenth-century church court depositions – fodder for much rich social history of sex and marriage in the period – often echo popular stories, jokes and play plots, especially in London. The stories from the Mayor's Court of the late seventeenth century, with less raw human drama to them and pursuing a financial judgement, tend to have a different psychological dimension. They try to read character, to judge laziness or hard work alongside its appearance; their argumentative working women and men, preoccupied with status, appearance and worldly goods, are characters from an age of epistolary novels with an interest in personality development.

The fullest evidence survives for litigation over expensive apprenticeships. The premiums paid by the women who sued at the Mayor's Court ranged up to £50, representative of three or five times a labourer's average annual income, and a significant outlay for citizens or gentry. This kind of investment has important implications for women's work but represented a tiny minority of female apprentices. Most guild apprentices paid nothing like this, nor did the vast number of arrangements made outside the remit of the City of London and its companies, by families and intermediaries, by institutions like Christ's Hospital and by parishes making plans for their orphans and pauper children. Those apprenticeships went wrong too but were unlikely to reach public attention unless violence or significant debt was involved. Eve Salmon's case was one such problem. Apprenticed to housewifery in Hackney in 1686, she petitioned to be released after four years. Her master and mistress accused her of deserting, purloining goods, frequenting 'debauch't houses' and contracting venereal disease; Eve said she was driven to it by a want of food and clothes. Like Frances Angell, but in very different circumstances, Eve claimed she could provide for herself 'without being a charge to any person'.[18] Glimpses of apprentices' lives come from a variety of records, most of which leave only basic details, but there are enough to put together a rich profile of the households who trained young women of all statuses in the early modern city. Guild records

[18] LMA, MJ/SP 1691/02/11 and MJ/SP 1691/02/012.

and tax listings make it possible to reconstruct the quantitative contours of that world, showing up patterns within different companies, differences of marital and social status and sometimes the long life cycles of women's shop and craft work. Wills and indentures reveal the family and kin structures behind apprenticeship, showing us the informal networks that sustained women's work in the metropolis and reaching out into the provinces.

Apprenticeship for girls was a potentially radical business. The paperwork of apprenticeship reflects the impulse, apparent across London's livery companies as in guilds elsewhere, to celebrate male artisanship and repress the place of women. The records of guilds, unlike those of the courts, used conventions that concealed women's' and girls' roles, speaking of masters rather than mistresses and boys rather than girls, until they were forced to write them in. Keeping women's part in apprenticeship under cover tacitly enhanced the masculine ideal of corporate and civic life and the ideal life cycle of male artisans. Apprenticing girls subverted the apparently overwhelming masculinisation of artisanal labour in towns and cities and their guilds. In the late seventeenth century, London's seamstresses often lived in dyads of single mistresses and apprentices, a quite different model of work to that of the artisanal household. Even without the outright conflicts between women seamstresses and male tailors that characterised places like Oxford and York, or Rouen and Paris, women in London's guilds were changing the system to which they were attached.

Histories of women's work customarily frame it as under-recognised, informal, flexible and unregulated. Apprenticeship was different: it contracted women to each other with binding, legally significant expectations. The profiles of apprentices and mistresses in the chapters that follow reveal a system of formal training, based on reciprocal contracts, that was a familiar part of women's work lives in early modern England. The path of apprenticeship was an increasingly familiar choice for the gentry and middling sort and for artisanal families across the social spectrum. It extended down to the very poorest: the contract of training was not strikingly different from that given, with much less choice, to those bound by parish officers as a result of the provisions of the Poor Laws. Arranged, often, without paperwork that survives, frequently unrecorded by guilds, the apprenticeship of young women nevertheless represents a formal recognition of skills and an articulation of the costs and benefits of training that reshapes the idea of women's work as outside the realms of skill, training and measurable reward. The constraints and assets of a contract between an apprentice and her employer, often in the context of a guild, provided both disciplinary structure and a

recognised place in the business world of the early modern city. More widely, the system of apprenticeship for girls created a capillary network of girls, women and skills across the country.

To take apprenticeship and mistresshood seriously means rethinking the place of work in women's minds and manners. Being trained, earning money, and doing work that could be rewarded or substituted with pay was a normal experience for seventeenth-century women, and for many it helped shape their sense of who they were and who they might become. The social history of later seventeenth-century women is still underdeveloped. By the 1660s, the verbal, spiritual and popular political authority that women had claimed in the Civil Wars and the English Revolution functioned as much as a reminder of the dangers of the world turned upside down, as an example of what women could do; the return of a court in which women's roles were highly sexualised reinvented patriarchal order in a different vein. A nominally universalising political language came to signify the practical exclusion of women and the identification of political agency as masculine.[19] In the realm of political theory, social contract shifted the marital relationship and women's role out of politics and into the world of nature. The naturalisation of the politically resonant patriarchal household made marriage, paradoxically, less public and perhaps less open to debate.[20]

At the same time, a new model of politeness structured behavioural norms for women around inward modesty: the outward performance was meant to demonstrate the inner virtue. A rhetorical bifurcation of male and female worlds functioned as an insistent backdrop to women's agency in economic, political and print worlds. In the context of metropolitan life before and after the Fire, as trade, housing, social life, work and manners underwent rapid change, young women who came to the City made identities as workers and consumers, seamstresses and shopkeepers, single women and wives. In the closely written legal records, a new language of sensibility traces what they learned and the challenges of their social, domestic and labour relations. The seamstress's life had its own power dynamics: conflicts of words and violence between apprentices and their mistresses, the pressure to fit women's work into family economies and the trade-offs between exploitation and autonomy that characterised learning to sew in the metropolitan market. The chapters

[19] Hilda L. Smith, *All Men and Both Sexes: Gender, Politics, and the False Universal in England, 1640–1832* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

[20] The classic statement of this development is Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, 1988); see also Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family, and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714* (Manchester University Press, 1999).

that follow trace the possibilities and the limits this brought for individual women and the networks of work, interest and credit that connected them. In the stories of apprenticeships that worked out and those that did not, from those of paupers to those of gentry daughters, we will see pragmatism, determination, calculation, childish fantasy and rebellion.

The course of the book follows the careers of girls and women in and around London's guilds, the places they worked, the skills and manners they learned and their place in the changing city. It begins in the shops where they worked and moves through their careers as apprentices, mistresses and freewomen. Each chapter begins with a case study from the legal archive. Chapter 1 starts the story in the shops of the Royal Exchange, reconstructing its particular, feminised shopping space and the working lives of its shopkeepers. Chapter 2 goes back to apprentice training, using guild and court records to uncover the extent and nature of female apprenticeship in London and reconstructing a moment of transformation in the 1650s when girls started to join London's companies. Chapter 3 turns to mistresses and shows how skills were transmitted through networks of women, how marital status shaped work life and how guilds and contracts constrained and enabled women's work. Chapter 4 explores how, and what, girls learnt in apprenticeship, using legal records to recover in new detail the occupations, mostly textile-related, in which women trained and the skills and teaching that established girls in the sewing trade. Chapter 5 looks at the other side of apprenticeship: the behaviour that made girls into appropriate workwomen and the battles that marked their adolescence. Here, the language of legal records, attentive to subtle shades of gesture and character, presents apprenticeship as a mode of manners and a window into the social dynamics of shops and working households. The final chapter looks at the longer relationships women made with City Companies over their lifetimes: claiming the freedom, using their fathers' patrimonies, and petitioning for the right to trade, making themselves, to some degree, citizens. Petitions and the diverse documentation of freedoms reveal the paths by which women negotiated a formalized place in the civic community. As in many contexts of women's public lives, they trod a tautly balanced line between exclusion and acceptance, initiative and compromise.