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*“She Will Be in the Shop”:
Women’s Sphere of Trade in
Eighteenth-Century
Philadelphia and New York*

IN AN ADVERTISEMENT RUN IN THE *Pennsylvania Gazette* in December 1748 and January 1749, newly widowed Mary Coates urged all persons indebted to “Samuel Coates, shopkeeper, deceased” to pay their bills quickly. She added that she had “sundry sorts of merchants goods” belonging to the estate “to be sold cheap, for ready money . . . she being determined to settle the affairs thereof with expedition.”¹ For the next two decades, she continued to run the shop established by her spouse, selling, as he had, cloth and a variety of other wares. She traded with merchants involved in the distribution of imported manufactures and colonial purchasers engaged in their acquisition. After Mary Coates’s death, her daughters continued to run the business.

This brief example of a woman shopkeeper’s business history draws attention to several key features of colonial commerce and women’s

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¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Dec. 24, 1748, Jan. 3, 10, 17, 1749.

economic activities. First and most importantly, women traders in eighteenth-century cities like Philadelphia and New York ran highly visible shops from which they sold imported luxury wares. Notably, Mary Coates, like many other women of commerce, appeared as a retailer in her own right only after the death of a shopkeeper spouse. Later, she passed the business on to unmarried daughters, rather than sons, who gained their livelihoods as retailers on the eve of the Revolution.

Finding women like Coates among the ranks of colonial America's shopkeepers comes as no surprise. Recently, historians have documented the varied economic involvements of women, from their actions as "deputy husbands" overseeing family farms and fortunes in place of absent spouses to their supervision of complex financial transactions involved in widowhood.² Scholars have typically and rightly described women's participation in business as constituting a logical and expected extension of their familial responsibilities. In that sense, their labor behind the counter can be understood primarily as a fulfillment of household duties.³ A close examination of women's trading, however, points to other possibilities: that the work itself carried implications for women beyond their family roles. Women shopkeepers, whose business practices illuminate the changing consumer world of the midcentury, highlight the interplay of gender and commerce and suggest the existence of a sphere of female entrepreneurship and association. Shopkeeping, an occupation usually understood by contemporaries as falling within accepted norms for women's family employment, had the potential to transcend or contravene those mores, by involving women in spheres of public and feminine interaction, and, eventually, in political action. In the decade preceding the Revolution, women's participation in the sale and consumption of British wares contributed directly to their politicization.

This study suggests that eighteenth-century economic developments, particularly the increases in both imports of manufactured wares and per

² Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York, 1982); Lisa Wilson [Waciega], "A 'Man of Business': The Widow of Means in Southeastern Pennsylvania, 1750-1850," *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter, *WMQ*) 44 (1987), 40-64.

³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich argues that the tasks women performed were less central to their lives than the "forms of social organization which linked economic responsibilities to family responsibilities and which tied each woman's household to the larger world of her village or town." Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 34.

capita consumption of these goods, provided women with possibilities for playing upon gender distinctions within the realm of production and consumption. Commercial developments transformed the economic and social landscape of eighteenth-century urban America, with Philadelphia and New York, the largest ports of the populous middle colonies, achieving unprecedented commercial prominence in midcentury.⁴ According to a number of historians, these economic developments did not translate into across-the-board financial benefits for colonists. Rather, some scholars have argued, the eighteenth century witnessed financial insecurity for merchants and laborers alike and an increasingly imbalanced distribution of wealth.⁵ Nonetheless, women shopkeepers continued to seek and find opportunities for making a living through trade, carving a niche for themselves and their businesses as they catered to colonial consumer demand. The presence of over 300 women retailers in Philadelphia and New York between 1740 and 1775, eighty percent of whom were in business after 1750, demonstrates a degree of tacit acceptance of women's commercial endeavors.⁶ Their ability to acquire stock and deal with a

⁴ Despite periodic slumps, both ports underwent impressive and rapid urban development, with dramatic population increases fueled by immigration, a corresponding growth in building trades, and burgeoning commercial traffic, of both a coastal and transatlantic nature. Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 176, 180. For a treatment of merchants' successes and mobility, see Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, 1986). The harbor traffic of New York and Philadelphia competed with that of Boston, with the figures for Philadelphia surpassing those for Boston by the 1760s. After roughly 1740, per capita imports for New York and Pennsylvania exceeded those for New England; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 313-15; Fig. 3, "Per Capita Imports for New England, New York, and Pennsylvania, 1697-1775," 412. See also John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, Table 9.2, "Destinations of Shipping Clearing Boston, New York, and Philadelphia Annually for Selected Years, 1750-1772 (in Thousands of Registered Tons)," and Table 13.1, "Exports from Great Britain to the Continental Colonies, 1700-1770 (Pounds Sterling)" in *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 196, 280.

⁵ McCusker and Menard survey the literature regarding the thesis of "progressive inequality" in *The Economy of British America*, 271. For discussions of the distribution of wealth, see James A. Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *WMQ* 22 (1965), 75-92; Alice Hanson Jones, Table 8.5, "Inequality Comparison, Male Probate Wealth: Selected Northern Cities, Pre-1774" and Table 8.6, "Inequality Comparison, Male Taxed Wealth: Selected Cities" in *Wealth of a Nation to Be: The American Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1980), 267-68; Nash, *Urban Crucible*; and Gary Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty in Prerevolutionary America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (hereafter, *JIH*) 4 (1976), 545-84.

⁶ Over 160 women in Philadelphia and over 170 in New York retailed wares between 1740 and 1775. Less than three dozen women in each city can be found prior to 1750; the numbers grew dramatically during the 1750s and 1760s. It is important to note that these figures should

variety of traders, from merchants and auctioneers to other local retailers, confirms that shopkeeping was an occupation accessible to some women. Indeed, shopkeeping is one of the few trades involving proprietorship that was open to colonial women. Tavernkeeping, which women also pursued with some frequency, had parallels with retailing in that it could involve proprietorship and often spanned both a woman's years of marriage and widowhood. Although women practiced a variety of professions and occupations, making rare appearances among the ranks of lawyers, doctors, and printers, they more often took in lodgers, worked as midwives or nurses, or taught school.⁷ The requirements and rewards of each of these pursuits varied, as did the extent to which they grew out of and were compatible with women's domestic responsibilities and roles in a family economy.

Estimates of the percentage of eighteenth-century colonial shopkeepers who were women vary widely. Figures based heavily on advertisements in colonial newspapers have ranged between two and ten percent.⁸ Other

be taken as suggestive, not absolute; more complete evidence for the 1740s would likely increase the numbers. Many of these women sold goods over a period of many years; 35 women in Philadelphia and 37 in New York kept shop for ten or more years. A detailed discussion of the numbers of shopkeepers appears in chapter 3 of my doctoral dissertation, "She Merchants' of Colonial America: Women and Commerce on the Eve of the Revolution," Northwestern University, 1989.

⁷ For treatments of women's trades, see Claudia Goldin, "The Economic Status of Women in the Early Republic: Quantitative Evidence," *JIH* 16 (1986), 375-404; Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938; reprinted ed., New York, 1972); and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, 1990). For a survey of recent work on women in Pennsylvania, see Jean R. Soderlund, "Women in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania: Toward a Model of Diversity," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 115 (1991), 163-83.

⁸ Based on her examination of newspaper advertisements, Elisabeth Anthony Dexter ventured that women accounted for a little less than ten percent of colonial retailers; *Colonial Women of Affairs: A Study of Women in Business and the Professions in America before 1776* (New York, 1924), 38. Jean P. Jordan also relied predominantly on newspaper advertisements and came to the conclusion that Dexter's figure was too high. She concluded that at most women composed two percent of New York's commercial community; Jordan, "Women Merchants in Colonial New York," *New York History* 43 (1977), 436. Using a variety of sources, especially mercantile records, I found more women involved in trade in New York in the 1760s alone than Jordan did for the period 1660-1775. Another low estimate counted only ten women of business in New York between 1768 and 1775; Robert Michael Dructor, "The New York Commercial Community: The Revolutionary Experience," Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1975, 15-16. Claudia Goldin estimated that in 1791, 28 percent of all shopkeepers in Philadelphia were women; "The Economic Status of Women in the Early Republic," 402.

evidence suggests that women shopkeepers may have accounted for closer to half of all retailers; according to a Philadelphia tax list from 1756, thirty-eight women kept shop, accounting for forty-two percent of the town's assessed shopkeepers and almost two-thirds of the women listed with occupations.⁹ The tax lists, which offer a rough sense of the proportion of shopkeepers of each sex, also show that in the 1750s and 1760s male shopkeepers in general were more prosperous than their female counterparts.¹⁰

Tax lists, however, convey a distorted picture of the Philadelphia shopkeeping community. Assessors recorded a higher proportion of wealthier rather than poorer shopkeepers and significantly underreported the number of people engaging in retail trade. Widowed women who kept shop were sometimes listed as "widows" rather than shopkeepers; at least four of the women listed without a trade kept shop. Although the assessors described only thirty-eight women as shopkeepers, other sources indicate that at least sixty-two women kept shop in Philadelphia in 1756. One study of tavernkeepers in colonial Philadelphia found frequent instances of individuals described under a different trade or without an occupational label. Ten individuals who held licenses to sell liquor in 1756 did not appear on the tax list, while another thirty appeared under occupations other than tavernkeeper. Four women described as widows and four described as shopkeepers also held liquor licenses.¹¹ These discrepancies point to two important issues. First, the assessors did not record the trades of all women with occupations. Second, women did not practice one trade to the exclusion of all others.¹²

⁹ Hannah Benner Roach, "Taxables in the City of Philadelphia, 1756," *Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine* 22 (1961), 3-41. The tax assessors ascribed occupations to 59 out of 184 women on the list, no women were described as merchants. Part of the difficulty in assessing the exact number of shopkeepers stems from the variety presented even by tax lists. A 1767 tax record, for example, lists only 35 men and eight women keeping shop, while other sources show higher figures. See 1767 Tax Record, Philadelphia, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania.

¹⁰ For a discussion of difficulties involved in using tax lists, see Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 63-67, 384-86. Assessments for 1765 are based on the 1765 Lamp Tax for Lower Delaware, High Street, and North Wards, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP), which contains the names of more shopkeepers than the 1765 Paving Tax, HSP.

¹¹ Peter Thompson, "The Origins and Structure of the Tavern Trade in Philadelphia, 1683-1756," a paper presented at the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, October 1988, 59.

¹² In New York seven women retailers held tavern licenses for at least one year during the period 1757-65, Tavern Keeper's License Book, 1757-1766, New York City, Mayor's Office, New-York Historical Society (hereafter, NYHS).

The legal coverture that attended colonial marriages obscures the work of married women shopkeepers and skews the numerical record in favor of widows. Among Philadelphia and New York women retailers for whom marital status could be determined, at least two-thirds were widows.¹³ Many of these widows followed in the business path of tradesman spouses. Although Mary Coates, for example, worked in the family shop prior to her husband's death, jotting down the purchases and payments made by customers in his account book, her status as a shopkeeper appeared only during her widowhood.¹⁴ Her experience no doubt prepared her to keep shop by herself; she had acquired skills in retailing and become familiar with customers and suppliers. Both male and female shopkeepers called upon other family members for assistance. Children and siblings accepted payments from customers, for example, dotting retailers' account books with receipts signed, "for my mother," "for my father," or "for my sister." Many shopkeepers who worked with their husbands and did not survive them never appear in the historical record.¹⁵ The commercial activities of women like Philadelphia retailers Elinor Dexter and Mary Jacobs, who accepted payments from Coates on behalf of their shopkeeper husbands in 1750, would be largely invisible if they had not continued to keep shop as widows for years after their spouses' deaths. Many shopkeepers left a marker only in death, when notices for the settlement of their estates and sale of their shop wares appeared in newspapers.

Other shopkeepers resorted to newspapers on a more regular basis, advertising their latest acquisitions from abroad. Their announcements

¹³ In Philadelphia there were 34 widows to 17 single women. In New York widows outnumbered single women 51 to 16.

¹⁴ Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 41. Account notations in Mary Coates's hand begin to appear in late 1734. See Samuel Coates, *Daybook, 1730-37*, Coates Reynell Collection, HSP.

¹⁵ Pennsylvania and South Carolina were the only two colonies to enact legislation that acknowledged the necessities that brought some women into shopkeeping; see Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 45-46. A 1718 Pennsylvania law ordered that the wives of men who went to sea should be considered independent traders with legal rights in court. It was designed to protect women from unscrupulous and absent husbands and, therefore, would probably not be used by those women working with their spouses; "An Act concerning feme-sole traders," 1718, *Laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (10 vols., Philadelphia, 1810), 1:99-101, reproduced in Marylynn Salmon, "Equality or Submersion? Feme Covert Status in Early Pennsylvania," in Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, eds., *Women of America: A History* (Boston, 1979), 112.

draw attention to the role of retailers as the conduits of consumer goods, the focal points of contact between colonial purchasers and British manufacturers. Those women who advertised their shops did so in terms that revealed an awareness of the role changing British fashions played in business success. Elizabeth Jones reminded her customers that she had "the newest Fashions from England every 6 Months."¹⁶ During midcentury, per capita consumption of these wares rose dramatically, with imports increasing by 120 percent in the two decades preceding the Revolution.¹⁷ Goods that had begun to transform the society and economy of eighteenth-century England were shipped across the Atlantic, filling the shelves of colonial shops with new items to fulfill consumers' desires for metropolitan culture and its trappings.¹⁸ Although advertisements grew correspondingly, in both quantity and detail, few retailers resorted to newspaper notices on a regular basis, relying more on the custom of friends and new sales strategies.¹⁹ Shop architecture evolved to attract the casual customer and comparison shopper. With bow windows, which had appeared both in England and the colonies by the 1750s, retailers could display their goods to passing foot traffic.²⁰ Within shops, retailers arranged lace, needles, and other small items in drawers or glass cases.²¹

Women shopkeepers attempted to meet and capitalize on the demand created by the consumer revolution by characterizing themselves as arbiters of taste with metropolitan connections. Elizabeth Colvell expanded her shopkeeping business in 1762 by hiring "a young woman from England that [*sic*] has been in some of the genteelest shops."²² This

¹⁶ *New-York Gazette*, July 23, 1764

¹⁷ T H Breen, "'Baubles of Britain' The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 119 (1988), 78

¹⁸ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J H Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, Ind, 1982), T H Breen, "An Empire of Goods The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776," *Journal of British Studies* (hereafter, *JBS*) 25 (1986), 467-99

¹⁹ For shopkeepers with an established clientele, mentioning locations in advertisements became superfluous New York shopkeeper Elizabeth Bend used herself as a reference point in one advertisement, explaining that she "removed her Shop two Doors lower down than where she lately lived," without describing the street or locale in more specific detail, *New-York Gazette*, May 5, 1760, *New York Mercury*, May 12, 1760

²⁰ J H Plumb, "Commercialization of Leisure," in *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, 294n

²¹ See inventories of shop goods, for example, John Adair, 1748, administration 4, Sarah Hyde, 1762, administration 56, Register of Wills, Philadelphia

²² *New-York Gazette*, Feb 22, 1762

young Englishwoman embodied fashionable consumption; her mere presence would appeal to gentfolk. Similarly, in a 1766 advertisement, shopkeeper Mary Phillips addressed “the Ladies” and informed them that she had just arrived from London and had “opened a neat Assortment of Millenary.” Phillips thus simultaneously drew attention to changing styles and to her familiarity with London. Visitors to her shop would discover goods “of the newest Fashion,” including “A Neat Assortment of Hosiery.”²³ With this notice, Phillips, like many other advertisers, specifically targeted women consumers.²⁴ One possible explanation for the gendered appeals is that women may have had more responsibility for shopping activities after midcentury, and that advertisers addressed them in recognition of their enlarged roles as purchasers for their households and families and as consumers of fashionable British wares.²⁵

The most notable testimony to such a change in consumer activities comes from Benjamin Franklin, who noticed something different when he sat down to breakfast one day. In place of the earthen dish and pewter spoon he typically used, Franklin found elegant chinaware and cutlery. When he questioned his wife about this intrusion of luxury into their home, she replied that “*her* husband deserved a silver spoon and china bowl as well as any of his neighbors.” Since that day, he remarked, their china and plate collections grew as their “wealth increased, augmented gradually to several hundred pounds in value.”²⁶ The lure of British

²³ *New-York Gazette*, June 9, 1766

²⁴ Richard Bushman found that whereas advertisements from the 1720s solicited the custom of gentlemen consumers, in the 1750s they appealed to both “gentlemen and ladies.” He suggests that such calls attracted colonists by implicitly promising status to those who shopped in particular stores, now in Richard L. Bushman, “Shopping and Advertising in Colonial America,” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, 1994), 247. Retailer Elizabeth Jones, who also made clothing, combined deference with an appeal to a personal bond: “Those Ladies that has been so kind as to favour her with their Work, she hopes will continue her Friends while she can Please.” *New-York Gazette*, July 23, 1764

²⁵ Women’s role as consumers for their families is suggested by the numerous announcements in newspapers of the period from husbands whose wives had left them, these men urged all readers not to give their wives credit. For discussions of women’s responsibility for shopping and consumer activities, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992), Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, 1990), Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990)

²⁶ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. and comp. by L. Jesse Lemisch (New York, 1961), 92.

fashions led to the acquisition of eating wares that exceeded personal dining requirements. While Franklin criticized, somewhat disingenuously, what he saw as his wife's extravagance, he neither thoroughly rejected nor resisted the emulation of the British. His *Autobiography* is replete with examples of his efforts to maintain the appearance of frugality and his deep admiration for metropolitan culture.

While Franklin's text points to the influence of British fashions on colonial tastes, the incident also highlights the behavior of a woman consumer. The new goods appeared on the table as a result of Deborah Franklin's hidden, or at least unnoticed and unauthorized, actions and decisions: reading newspaper advertisements, examining the possessions of neighbors, and comparing shop wares. Indeed, Franklin commented on the purchase being made without his knowledge, suggesting that his wife in her role as a consumer had exercised a new form of control over family finances and perhaps over him as well.²⁷ Once Deborah Franklin resolved upon procuring more refined eating ware for her spouse and for her home, the search for British manufactures transformed her into a participant in an Atlantic market that was changing everyday life in the mid-eighteenth century. How she exercised her role as a consumer depended on the presence of numerous shopkeepers.

While the evidence is somewhat sketchy, it appears that female consumers were more likely to purchase goods and services from other women than were male consumers. A Philadelphia receipt book belonging to Dr. Phineas Bond and his wife, begun in 1759, suggests that when Mrs. Bond handled family finances she dealt most frequently with women. The names of several of Philadelphia's women retailers appear in connection with Mrs. Bond's transactions. From these women shopkeepers she probably purchased cloth.²⁸ Although Mrs. Bond handled only five percent of the overall transactions, her thirteen payments to women represented over two-thirds of her receipts and one-fourth of the Bonds'

²⁷ Women's roles in purchasing goods for their families expanded with the increase in shops. In the seventeenth century, English advice books appointed husbands to be responsible for controlling money and acquiring household goods; Lorna Weatherill, "A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behavior in England, 1660-1740," *JBS* 25 (1986), 154.

²⁸ See, for example, receipt from Nov. 19, 1771, Phineas Bond Receipt Book, 1759-1810, HSP.

exchanges with women.²⁹ A tendency to do more of their buying from other women suggests the possibility that women made choices in shopping that were influenced by gender. What cannot be determined, however, is the extent to which male shopkeepers contributed to or were involved in this practice, by urging their wives to wait on female customers, for example.

An incipient element of specialization in shop wares supports this link between gender and commerce. Although shops were not highly specialized establishments, some evidence points to differences between the wares selected by male and female shopkeepers. As noted earlier, Samuel and Mary Coates primarily sold cloth, as well as a variety of different products, during the years each ran the shop. Although he carried hinges, dozens of knives, chisels, and hammers, and other tools in the 1740s, she did not replenish that stock after his death. The inventory of her shop merchandise, appraised in November 1770, two weeks after her death, revealed large quantities of dry goods and a "Box old Rusty Ironmongery." Perhaps the iron was all that remained of the stock of hardware her husband had carried. Coates, like many other women retailers, carried hose and gloves for men, women, and children; the lack of hardware may have distinguished her establishment and those of other women retailers from the shops of male traders. Inventoried estates of Philadelphia shopkeepers frequently reveal the presence of hardware items in male retailers' shops and their absence from female traders' shelves; some women sold cloth almost exclusively.³⁰ On the whole, the least likely goods to appear in a female shopkeeper's advertisement were hardware, guns, locks, nails, and tools; women did not, it appears, offer for sale all items that were available in the shops of male retailers.³¹

²⁹ Bond Receipt Book. The total number of receipts is 404; Dr. Bond made 360 payments, his wife 19, their son one, and 24 did not note the person making payment. Although too small to be conclusive, this sample nonetheless suggests purchasing patterns.

³⁰ This point is based on a survey of Philadelphia shopkeepers' estate inventories from the 1740s through the 1770s. See, for example, Mary Davis, 1749, administration 30; Thomas Davis, will 1757, 12; Daniel Steinmetz, will 1760, 13; Register of Wills, Philadelphia. Thanks to Jean Soderlund for sharing her list of inventoried estates. Male shopkeepers' advertisements in the *New York Mercury* in the early 1750s support this distinction in stock. While most of the men advertised imported dry goods and food stuffs, they also frequently mentioned "an Assortment of hard Ware," for example, or razors and tools.

³¹ Carole Shammas reports that wrought iron—consisting of nails, tools, and housewares—comprised six percent of commodities legally imported from Great Britain in 1768; "How Self-Sufficient Was Early America?" *JIH* 13 (1982), 267. Another possible explanation for specializa-

Women shopkeepers overwhelmingly retailed dry goods, such as textiles, trimmings, and related merchandise. Among 113 Philadelphia women whose stock could be at least partially determined, eighty-nine retailed dry goods. Thirty-six women sold groceries, imported edibles, and luxuries like spices, sugar, chocolate, and tea, usually in addition to dry goods or liquor. In New York, 122 women sold goods such as cloth, hose, and mitts. Thirty-three sold a variety of other wares in addition to dry goods, ranging from china to snuff and alcohol. This concentration of women retailing particular kinds of imported goods rendered their shops interesting to female consumers.³² The women shopkeepers also drew attention to themselves as fashionable women, models for their clients to emulate.³³

Women consumers socialized with female friends and did business with women retailers in the course of shopping. The activity could be characterized as having elements of incipient female networks. In an urban area, a center of consumption like Philadelphia or New York, shopping provided well-to-do women with an acceptable public pursuit, one of the few they could engage in without male chaperons.³⁴ In her diary entries from 1759 and 1760, Philadelphian Elizabeth Drinker reported making shopping excursions that did not necessarily end in purchases. She frequently went out shopping after dinner. One day's entry consisted primarily of visits to retailers: "Went this Morning to Wests to buy Silk . . . went in the After-noon to sundry Shops. . . ."³⁵

tion in women's stock stems from their lesser wealth; in other words, a more diversified inventory would have required greater financial resources.

³² An eighteenth-century British trade card that carried a representation of a store's interior reveals the shop as a feminine domain. In the engraving for Benjamin Cole's London establishment, two women behind a counter show merchandise to women customers. Another woman, presumably also a customer, fans herself while she sits in the shop. Despite the fact that the shop is owned by a man, and one "Where all Merchants Dealers & Others may be Furnish'd" with all sorts of millinery ware, no men are depicted. Instead, Cole clearly addressed both the female shopkeeper and customer. Cole's trade card is reproduced in Ambrose Heal, *London Tradesmen's Cards of the XVIII Century: An Account of Their Origin and Use* (London, 1925), xxxiv.

³³ An important discussion regarding the definitions and analyses applied to a consumer revolution appears in Jan de Vries, "Between Purchasing Power and the World of Goods: Understanding the Household Economy in Early Modern Europe," in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York, 1993), 85-132.

³⁴ For a case of young women's discomfort in going out in public unaccompanied, see Carole Shammas, "The Female Social Structure of Philadelphia in 1775," *PMHB* 107 (1984), 78-79.

³⁵ Elizabeth Drinker, Diary, Oct. 20, 1759, HSP.

Drinker looked around and compared merchandise before making a purchase, going "to Shops to look for Pocket Handkerchiefs."³⁶ While suggesting how consumers discovered what goods were available, Drinker's references to shopping also point to its social importance for women.³⁷ Drinker's comments characterize shopping as a pleasurable pastime. She described stopping by her friend Betsy Moode's house on the way to buy thread; Moode joined her in visiting a couple of shops and then returned home with Drinker for tea. When Moode called for her one day and discovered that Drinker was out, she caught up with her in Market Street, a center of retailing activity, where Drinker and her sister were most likely in the process of visiting shops. On numerous occasions, Drinker recorded shopping with her sister and other female friends.³⁸ These young women reinforced their ties to each other through the joint pursuit of an activity they enjoyed. Indeed, shopping habits may have been more than an echo of the informal visiting patterns so much a part of daily life for young unmarried Quaker women; in urban areas, shopping together may have been an intrinsic part of those practices.³⁹

This sort of female socializing was greatly facilitated by the geographic concentration of shops and, in the case of Philadelphia, of shops operated by women. Advertisements that mentioned shop locations suggest the existence of shopkeeping districts, such as Hanover Square in New York. In Philadelphia, the Market Street area bustled with commercial activity. Anyone walking down Market Street between Second and Third Streets in the late 1750s would have passed the shops of seven women, all members of the Society of Friends.⁴⁰ Interested shoppers could find twelve other Quaker women retailing goods within a two-block radius

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1759.

³⁷ For a discussion of the meaning of shops and shopping to women in a later period, see William R. Leach, "Transformations in a Culture of Consumption, 1890-1925," *Journal of American History* 71 (1984), 319-42.

³⁸ See for example, Drinker Diary, May 4, 1759, July 2, 1759, Jan. 26, 1760.

³⁹ For a discussion of visiting patterns as part of daily rituals, see Nancy Tomes, "The Quaker Connection: Visiting Patterns among Women in the Philadelphia Society of Friends, 1750-1800," in Michael Zuckerman, ed., *Friends and Neighbors: Group Life in America's First Plural Society* (Philadelphia, 1982), 174-95.

⁴⁰ "A Directory of Friends in Philadelphia, 1757-1760," *PMHB* 16 (1892), 219-38.

of this spot.⁴¹ These women's lives intersected in several ways; they shared religious beliefs and activities, commercial experiences, and residential area. Religious affiliation spilled over into business ties. Retailers like Coates did business with a network of Philadelphia businessmen and women, many of them Quakers.⁴²

Women retailers obtained goods through contacts with other commercial actors, both female and male, in public settings. The ease with which they conducted their business suggests that contemporaries, accustomed to the presence of women continuing family enterprises, recognized and accepted their commercial endeavors.⁴³ Moreover, trade itself may have enlarged feminine spheres of activity. Women purchased goods at the stores of some merchants in addition to buying from them at public vendues, or auctions.⁴⁴ At vendues, lots of goods, some of which were damaged or out of season, were offered to the highest bidder. Purchases at public vendues constituted a primary part of Philadelphia retailer Mary Coates's commercial relations. Her business records suggest that when she bought merchandise in partnership at public sales, she was more likely to deal with women than with men. She made vendue purchases, primarily of cloth, with at least twenty-five other women retailers. Many of the women appeared repeatedly in her records, temporarily acting as her business partners.⁴⁵ During the 1740s and 1750s, Coates made

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Three blocks—Chestnut, High Street, and Walnut wards—possessed 29 retailers, almost 31 percent of the town's assessed retailers in 1756. According to the Philadelphia tax list for that year, most shopkeepers lived in a few wards: Lower Delaware, High Street, Middle, and Mulberry wards.

⁴² The strong sense of community among Quakers, as well as the ties of marriage between families, promoted mutual aid; Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1786-1763* (New York, 1948), 89-91.

⁴³ The history of women's trading activities is extensive; see, for example, Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; reprint ed., Boston, 1982); Carole Shammas, "The World Women Knew: Women Workers in the North of England during the Late Seventeenth Century," in Mary Maples Dunn and Richard Dunn, eds., *The World of William Penn* (Philadelphia, 1986), 99-115; Merry Wiesner Wood, "Paltry Peddlers or Essential Merchants? Women in the Distributive Trades in Early Modern Nuremberg," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 12 (1981), 3-13.

⁴⁴ Harry D. Berg, "The Organization of Business in Colonial Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History* 10 (1943), 173-74; Thomas Doerflinger pointed out that auctioneers dealt only for cash or short credit, thus making it less likely that shopkeepers or anyone else in dire need of credit purchased much of their stock at vendues, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*, 171.

⁴⁵ In Mary Coates's receipt books, her sister-in-law Paschall appeared more frequently than any other individual. Over the course of several years, the two women shared vendue purchases

numerous payments to shopkeeper Rebecca Steel for cloth, a parcel of shoes, and sundry other goods "bought in partnership at vendue."⁴⁶ Content Nicholson bought goods at vendue sales with Coates and sold her merchandise from her own stock as well. In 1750 Coates bought quantities of several types of cloth from Nicholson on short credit.⁴⁷ During the 1760s, she made twenty-one joint purchases with eleven other women in contrast to only eight purchases in partnership with five men.⁴⁸

Associations among female trading partners encompassed both commercial transactions and personal relationships. Some women traders with large-scale business transactions sold stock to smaller retailers. In New York, for example, Mary Alexander, characterized by contemporaries as "a very eminent Trader in this Place," purchased wares from importer James Beekman and sold goods to several local women shopkeepers.⁴⁹ In Philadelphia, shopkeeper Ruth Webb turned to Mary Coates for business and administrative help. With her partner Mary Tagart, Webb bought various goods such as snuff and sugar, "in partnership" with Coates, from Philadelphia merchants and at public vendues during the 1750s. When she wrote her will in 1759, single woman Webb appointed her friends Mary Coates and Mary Tagart to be her executors.⁵⁰ She also gave Coates £50, more than ten percent of the total value of the estate, "for her troubles" in executing the will. Webb may have learned something of shopkeeping from Coates's example. During the 1730s and early 1740s, Webb worked as a servant in the household of Coates's stepfather, Samuel Preston. Perhaps Coates had even assisted the former family servant in her business venture. With even modest financial help,

of tea, chocolate, gloves, and especially cloth. See receipt from Nov. 8, 1753, Mary Coates Receipt Book 1748-1759, Coates Reynell Collection, HSP.

⁴⁶ See, for example, receipts from April 27, 1752, Jan. 15, 1753; Mary Coates Receipt Book.

⁴⁷ Samuel Coates Cyphering Book, 1724, HSP.

⁴⁸ It is uncertain whether the receipts that noted purchases at auctions include all such transactions; receipts typically indicated a sum paid for "goods bought at vendue" or "goods bought in partnership at vendue." Thus, the receipts may be considered suggestive but not conclusive about purchasing habits at auctions. Mary Coates Receipt Book 1760-1770, HSP.

⁴⁹ "List of Recoverable debts," July 1, 1763, Alexander Papers, Box 8, NYHS. Alexander purchased cloth and buttons from Beekman, typically paying cash for these items either on the day of purchase or within several weeks. Her only debit to him at the time of her death was for ten gross of brass buttons purchased only days before her final illness. A death notice acknowledged her business reputation; *New-York Mercury*, April 21, 1760. For an examination of Alexander's business history, see Cleary, "She Merchants," chap. 6.

⁵⁰ Ruth Webb, 1759, will 175, Register of Wills, Philadelphia.

a woman with few skills could enter the relatively open field of colonial retailing.⁵¹

Partnerships like that of Tagart and Webb were not uncommon. Among Philadelphia's unmarried women retailers were several sisters working together. In a group of fifteen single women, there were five partnerships of sisters, accounting for eleven shopkeepers, and one brother-sister partnership. Two sisters who originally worked together continued to keep shop independently regardless of their marital status. Ann and Mary Pearson, who advertised dry goods in the early 1760s, dissolved their partnership when Mary married William Symonds in 1765, but both continued to keep shop. William Symonds advertised goods and the couple ran the business together. A widow by early 1769, Mary Symonds continued the business alone until her death. Ann Pearson stayed in business on her own through at least 1772.⁵² Women who did not have formal partnerships nonetheless had contacts with other women in trade. After Philadelphia retailer Rebecca Cooper's death in 1761, her administrators paid small sums to traders Mary Jacobs and Mary Leech, presumably for debts owed to them for goods.⁵³ After Ann Dawson died in 1758, at least two other women shopkeepers, Catherine Spangler and Dinah Dowers, showed up at her house for the estate sale of her "shop-Goods" in Philadelphia's Strawberry Alley.⁵⁴

Trips to wholesalers' warehouses to obtain fresh stock offered women shopkeepers another opportunity to interact with each other as well as with other members of the commercial community. After shipments of goods arrived, merchants found their trade busier, as retailers hurried to lay in the latest fashions. Although merchants did not log the hours when customers entered their establishments, their daily account books point to retailers congregating in their stores. For example, on the day

⁵¹ Comments from a London merchant about the differences between shopkeeping in London and Boston suggest that colonial retailers could get by with fewer skills and less experience. Edward Bridgen claimed that shopkeeping in Boston required mostly "an exactness in arithmitic [and] an acquaintance with the people & the money." Elizabeth Murray, February 1770, J. M. Robbins Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter, MHS).

⁵² See receipt books of Phineas Bond, Daniel Roberdeau, and Samuel Murdock, HSP; and Frances May Manges, "Women Shopkeepers, Tavernkeepers, and Artisans in Colonial Philadelphia," Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1958, 51-52.

⁵³ Rebecca Cooper, 1761, administration 16, Philadelphia.

⁵⁴ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 18, 1758; Ann Dawson, 1758, estate inventory, administration 23, Philadelphia; Roach, "Taxables in the City of Philadelphia, 1756," 3-41.

when Rebecca English visited Samuel Coates's store to purchase some cloth and different types of gartering, she may have seen and spoken with Sarah Walters, a shopkeeper who that day bought large quantities of assorted dry goods from Coates.⁵⁵ On May 12, 1763, Rebecca English, Ann Marsden, and Mary Dougherty all went to Coates's store, altogether purchasing almost £50 worth of goods.⁵⁶ On another occasion, the four customers Coates recorded during one day were women retailers. All four of them selected primarily one particular kind of hat, buying from one dozen to nine dozen each.⁵⁷ Merchants like Coates, who sold goods to many of Philadelphia's women retailers, may have acted as conduits of information about shopkeepers themselves, commenting upon the selections made by previous customers in hopes of inspiring greater purchases.

James Beekman's daily accounts for his New York mercantile firm offer additional evidence for women retailers meeting informally while doing business. The last week of October and first week of November frequently saw him do tremendous amounts of business. In October 1763, seven women traders visited his store one day, six the next, and another seven the third day.⁵⁸ On November 8, 1763, nine women bought goods from Beekman, who recorded a purchase by Abigail Forbes, then purchases by Ann Lyne and Helena Rutgers. The notations for purchases, listed in sequence, show that six other women then bought goods, before Lyne and Rutgers selected additional items. They both chose a specific type of cloth that had also been purchased by the three previous women retailers. This decision on their part suggests at the very least an awareness of which goods other women thought would sell well; it also raises the possibility of competition among women retailers. As potential rivals vying for the same female customers, they needed to carry the most popular wares.

Supplying female retailers could constitute a significant part of a wholesaler's trade as well as a natural extension of business dealings with

⁵⁵ Oct. 4, 1762, folio 118, Samuel Coates Journal, 1760-66, pt. 1, HSP.

⁵⁶ English and Marsden each purchased some men's hose, while Marsden and Dougherty both bought ink powder and a dozen "dandriff combs" in addition to other wares; folios 150 and 151, Samuel Coates Journal, 1760-66, pt. 1, HSP.

⁵⁷ The women bought a total of 18.5 dozen hats; April 25, 1768, folio 412, Samuel Coates Journal, 1767-76, pt. 2, HSP.

⁵⁸ James Beekman Account Book, 1760-65, NYHS.

particular families. Between 1752 and 1767, James Beekman sold goods to ninety women, almost all of whom were retailers in New York.⁵⁹ Elizabeth Bend, Belitia Dickenson, Jane Durham, and Abigail Forbes purchased hundreds of pounds worth of merchandise from Beekman. He also routinely did business with widows whose husbands he had previously supplied. From 1753 through 1756, for example, Beekman sold goods to Dickenson's spouse Charles; her account began in 1756. Beekman supplied Gideon Avory in 1761 and 1762, and then began to sell cloth to his widow Sarah in June 1763. Sarah Avory probably sold the goods purchased in her husband's name prior to his death. Gideon Avory identifies himself as a mariner in his will, which suggests that he was away for periods of time, leaving his wife to run the shop on her own.⁶⁰

Widowed shopkeepers occasionally showed favoritism toward their daughters, passing family businesses on to them or praising their filial actions.⁶¹ Some acted with partiality toward female relatives when planning the distribution of their estates.⁶² In her will of 1769, Mary Coates gave formal expression to the closeness of her relationship with her daughters, nominating them and her brother-in-law John Reynell to be her co-executors while ignoring her three sons.⁶³ In a 1770 codicil to the will,

⁵⁹ Most accounts identified the purchaser's town of residence James Beekman, Ledger 1752-67, NYHS

⁶⁰ James Beekman Ledger 1762-67, NYHS, folio 203, Gideon Avory, 1764, will 1729, Historical Documents Collection, Queens College, New York

⁶¹ In Boston, shopkeeper Abigail Whitney, Sr, consigned the family business and the bulk of her estate to her daughter Abigail Whitney, Jr, rather than to her son Samuel, an upholsterer Whitney bequeathed £400 each to her son Samuel and daughter Anna and the rest of the estate to Abigail Abigail Whitney will, Suffolk County Probate Records (hereafter, SCPR), 66 89-90, Boston Boston retailer Hannah Newman, who ran a shop with her daughter Susannah, bequeathed only paltry sums to her two sons In her will, Newman elaborated on the qualities her daughter possessed that earned her esteem and estate Susannah, Newman wrote, "has been a great Comfort, & Support to me, in my advanced age, & has taken Care of my Business, & by her Diligence & Industry," contributed immensely Hannah Newman will, SCPR, 51 657-660

⁶² Male testators in colonial America discriminated against daughters more than female testators did, increasing their sons' portions to their daughters' detriment, Carole Shammass, Marylynn Salmon, and Michel Dahlin, *Inheritance in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Brunswick, 1987), 45, 55

⁶³ Examinations of wills from the 1790s found that the main difference between men and women in the matter of executor was that mothers were more inclined to appoint their daughters, almost one-quarter of all widows named their daughters for this task, as opposed to only eight percent of widowers, Shammass, Salmon, and Dahlin, *Inheritance in America*, 120

Coates modified her bequests in her daughters' favor. Where she originally ordered that her personal estate be divided equally among her five youngest children—all of the family's real estate having been devised to her oldest son by her husband's will—Coates decided to increase her daughters' portions "in Consideration of their dutiful and tender Care of [her] in [the] long and tedious Indisposition of Body" that plagued her.⁶⁴ By comparing the goods she bequeathed to them with the inventory of her estate, it is clear that Coates made sure that her daughters would receive some of her finest possessions. By the time of her death, it seems likely that her daughters were effectively running the business. Shortly after Coates's death, Margaret, then in her thirties, purchased sundry goods and snuff from merchants Thomas, Samuel, and Miers Fisher, former suppliers of her mother, who noted the debits to the account of "Margarett Coats & Compy."⁶⁵

Knowing from personal experience the need for women to be able to support themselves, Mary Coates had raised her daughters to earn a living. In 1754 she hired Rebecca Owen to teach her daughter Mary, then sixteen, dressmaking.⁶⁶ Neither Mary nor her sisters Margaret and Beulah married, which is surprising given that almost all colonial women, particularly affluent ones, married.⁶⁷ Their shopkeeping success may have removed the economic necessity of marriage. Still, possession of shopkeeping skills and income should have rendered them desirable mates on the mercantile marriage market. The Coates children presumably

⁶⁴ Mary Coates, codicil to will, 1770, 8, Register of Wills, Philadelphia. Suzanne Lebsack found that women showed favoritism in making bequests and that, more than men, they responded to the needs or merits of individuals; *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York, 1984), 135, 142. One reason women testators tended to recognize particular persons in their wills may have to do with the fact that most of them had only personal property to disperse, the real estate in their possession having already been devised in their husbands' wills.

⁶⁵ The Fishers did not treat Margaret Coates's account as a new one, distinct from that of her deceased mother; it ran directly below Mary Coates's with no demarcation between the two. Ledger of Thomas, Samuel, and Miers Fisher, 1769-1773, folio 100, HSP.

⁶⁶ Receipt from April 3, 1754, Mary Coates Receipt Book, 1748-1759. Shopkeepers frequently offered millinery services. For an analysis of this trade in the nineteenth century, see Wendy Gamber, "A Precarious Independence: Milliners and Dressmakers in Boston, 1860-1890," *Journal of Women's History* 4 (1992), 60-88.

⁶⁷ Shammas, "The Female Social Structure of Philadelphia in 1775," 77. Mary Coates's three unmarried daughters died relatively young: Mary died before her mother, in 1769 at age 30; Beulah died in 1771 at age 31; the following year, Margaret died at age 35.

knew at least the rudiments of arithmetic; Mary and Margaret accepted payments on behalf of their mother and settled accounts.⁶⁸ Coates may have thought it especially important for her daughters to learn to write and keep books, believing, as Boston retailer Elizabeth Murray put it, that "many families are ruined by the women not understanding accounts."⁶⁹ Tangible advantages for family fortunes attended women's familiarity with bookkeeping.⁷⁰ That fact, however, did not necessarily translate into an expectation that women retailers possessed the skills to train their sons to become merchants. In Mary Coates's case, John Reynell, a Philadelphia merchant related to the family through marriage, oversaw the upbringing of her son Samuel. Reynell had supplied her husband with large quantities of merchandise during the 1730s and continued to sell stock to her.⁷¹ He made Samuel his partner in 1771.⁷² Coates and Reynell agreed that he was the appropriate person to train the boy to pursue a mercantile career.⁷³

⁶⁸ See entries for June 4, 1766, Oct 24, 1768, and Dec 1, 1768, John Reynell Receipt Book, 1763-84, Coates Reynell Collection, HSP

⁶⁹ Quoted in Mary Beth Norton, "A Cherished Spirit of Independence: The Life of an Eighteenth-Century Boston Businesswoman," in *Women of America: A History*, 52. Contained in a letter to Murray's niece, Feb 17, 1762, this was one of a series of observations on women's education and commerce. J. M. Robbins Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁷⁰ Describing the customs of eighteenth-century Nantucket, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur praised the industriousness of the wives of the town, who, compelled by their seafaring husbands' long absences, were "necessarily obliged to transact business, to settle accounts, and, in short, to rule and provide for their families." J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, ed. by Albert E. Stone (New York, 1981), 157. Earlier in the century, Daniel Defoe argued for the necessity of women being trained in accounting and business skills, such training provided economic benefits to the family, particularly preservation of the family estate in case of the husband's death. Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman, in Familiar Letters Directing him in all the Several Parts and Progressions of Trade* (London, 1727), 294. For a discussion of Defoe's comments about women and commerce, see Cleary, "'She Merchants,'" 86-89.

⁷¹ John Reynell, Journal 1764-78, HSP.

⁷² Berg, "The Organization of Business in Colonial Philadelphia," 158. While Mary Coates paid teachers and tailors for items related to her other children, no references to her son Samuel appear in her receipt book after those for a nurse for the infant. In addition, letters written to Samuel as a teenager are addressed to his uncle John Reynell's house.

⁷³ The educational choices made by the Murray family in Boston, as to who would oversee young men and women's training, also suggest this possibility. With long experience in shopkeeping, Elizabeth Murray instructed nieces whom she had destined for retailing, while her nephew and brother-in-law who were being trained to become merchants were men's responsibility. Cleary, "'Nothing but Parties of Pleasure' Educating Women as Cultural Consumers," in *Elizabeth Murray and "the Spirit of Independence": Public Roles and Private Lives in Eighteenth-Century America* (forthcoming). After New York merchant Cornelius Kortright died, his widow retailed dry goods for at least two decades. Their son Laurence became a merchant, their daughter

Although some of the business practices and decisions of women like Coates can occasionally be glimpsed, their attitudes toward shopkeeping remain elusive and have to be inferred from their actions. That they trained their daughters and called themselves "shopkeepers" in their wills, attests to their commitment to trading endeavors and to their acceptance of a commercial identity. In a letter to a friend, James Alexander offered indirect testimony of his wife's enjoyment of and involvement in trade. Although serious illness had obliged her "to keep her room for several weeks," she would return to her business as soon as possible. "[I]f She is able to Crawl," he explained, "she will be in the shop."⁷⁴ Commercial activity informed the daily texture of Mary Alexander's life, as it did for scores of other women traders. While James Alexander's comments convey a sense of his wife's will and desire to do business, they also contribute to an image of the shop as her domain.

Considering women's shops as spheres of feminine activity, rather than simply as extensions of the family, opens up intriguing possibilities about the meaning of these spaces for women.⁷⁵ Shops may have served as acceptable places for women to interact in the same way that taverns and coffeehouses functioned as locales of male culture.⁷⁶ Although women often took up shopkeeping because of prior family experience and background, they pursued a trade that began to have distinctive social and political implications, some of them highly gendered. As arbiters of taste, it is more than likely that women retailers contributed to the transmission of genteel ideals.⁷⁷ In stocking fashionable wares, shopkeepers proclaimed confidence in their own taste. In addition, dressing themselves in the latest mode emphasized their own consumer abilities; they knew how to select and acquire the most becoming and novel attire for themselves

Helen became a retailer. Joseph A. Scoville, *The Old Merchants of New York City* (4 vols., New York, 1866), 4:19.

⁷⁴ James Alexander to Cadwallader Colden, Feb. 2, 1753, in *The Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden*, 7 vols. in *Collections of the New-York Historical Society*, 53 (1920), 4:369.

⁷⁵ A shop could encompass a sense of a woman's sphere of activity. For an analysis of these ideas and the evolution of the concept of "woman's place," see Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Sphere, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988), 9-39, esp. 31-2.

⁷⁶ For discussions of the reformation of manners and the participation of both sexes in public gatherings and events, see Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 89-98.

⁷⁷ See Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992).

and others.⁷⁸ While presenting themselves as cloaked in gentility, these shopkeepers made the markers of gentility—fans, fine clothes, china-ware—available to everyone who had the desire and resources to embrace them.⁷⁹ Participation in the world of genteel goods was not limited to those of lofty status.⁸⁰ By selling such merchandise, shopkeepers occupied a position imbued with meaning for the transformation of society and manners.

Part of what distinguished the experiences of women shopkeepers, who fit squarely within European traditions and antecedents regarding women in trade, was that their occupation came to assume increasingly negative connotations.⁸¹ Eighteenth-century consumer culture, which facilitated their work, became politicized in the midst of pre-Revolutionary boycotts and the rhetoric that linked consumption, corruption, effeminacy, and vice. Women's participation in commercial exchanges, as both retailers and consumers, involved them in political debates in the decade before the Revolution. When their business lives and purchasing decisions became imbued with public implications, some women felt compelled to make political statements, declaring their views on importation and

⁷⁸ According to Susan Porter Benson, in the early twentieth century the saleswoman who dressed well used her own clothing as "evidence of her skill as a consumer, a way of asserting that she was not always on the worker's side of the counter," *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Chicago, 1986), 235.

⁷⁹ Through selling genteel wares to all comers, they may have helped "to blur and dilute social distinctions," a phenomenon Bushman noted of an earlier generation's adoption of a genteel lifestyle. Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 28-29. See also see Barker-Benfield on class and shopping, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 174-75.

⁸⁰ A 1751 petition to Philadelphia's Overseers of the Poor conveyed the request of Mary Marrot and her daughter for more refined fare in the almshouse. Although they appreciated the plentiful food, they "were both brought up in a delicate way" and therefore required something more dainty and "pretty." The petitioners hoped that the overseers would resolve this "Important Affair" in the Marrots' favor and grant the pair "Tea, Coffee, Chocolate or any thing else . . . more agreeable to their palates." Petition signed by William Plumsted and Edward Shippen, March 29, 1751, Overseers of the Poor, 1750-1767, Soc. Misc. Coll., HSP.

⁸¹ Earlier in the century, trade was often characterized in moral rather than political terms. Benjamin Franklin's fabricated letters to the editor on the behavior of a lying and cheating shopkeeper, Betty Dilligent, which appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 19, 1730, highlighted the link between commerce and character. Significantly, Franklin chose to make the shopkeeper whose behavior he decried female and the fictitious merchant who responded male; see *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Dec. 3, 1730. A detailed discussion of this exchange appears in Cleary, "She Merchants," 58-59.

supporting boycotts. Their behavior mattered in the struggle for liberty.⁸² T. H. Breen's arguments about the links between consumption and the development of a shared language and national consciousness among colonists can be applied to women. Their participation in the distribution and acquisition of British goods informed their understanding of the ways their activities tied them into developments outside their communities. Consumption nurtured the development of their sense of themselves as women who had distinctive connections to transatlantic economic and political issues.⁸³ Somewhat paradoxically, then, the association of women with buying imported goods, which fostered enduring negative images of women as consumers in our culture, empowered them in the political sphere in the 1760s and 1770s by necessitating their involvement in boycotts.

In doing business with each other and with their customers, women shopkeepers in Philadelphia and New York participated in both a transatlantic and local economy, in both familial and female networks. Shopkeeping shaped their relationships with other women retailers, with merchants, and with consumers. Their involvement in commerce had an impact on the lives of other colonial women; the stature of some women retailers and the ways they catered to a female clientele worked to broaden women's involvement in consumption. By continuing existing businesses or taking up retailing endeavors for the first time, some women retailers worked to carve out an economic niche influenced by gender distinctions in the consumer market. In their lives, gender and commerce were intertwined.

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⁸² Eight women shopkeepers in Philadelphia signed non-importation resolutions. "Signers of Philadelphia Non-importation Resolution, October 25, 1765," HSP; "An Alphabetical List of the Subscribers to the Non-Importation Agreement entered into the 6th February & 10th March 1769," 1765-1769, box 1, Henry S. Drinker Papers, HSP. Linda Kerber discusses how contemporaries addressed women as consumers whose purchases carried political implications in *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980; reprint ed., New York, 1986), 37.

⁸³ See Breen, "'Baubles of Britain.'" There are tantalizing suggestions that some women expressed a consciousness of gender informed by commercial activities; see Cleary, "'Who shall say we have not equal abilities with the Men when Girls of 18 discover such great capacities?': Women of Commerce in Boston, 1750-1776," *Entrepreneurs: The Boston Business Community, 1750-1850* (Boston: Center for the Study of New England History at the Massachusetts Historical Society, forthcoming.)