Women Minding the Store in Eighteenth-Century France

Janine Lanza

The status of baker is one of a great many that a solitary woman cannot oversee; she would find herself at the mercy of her workers, and her shop would degenerate.¹

Grimod de la Reynière’s assertion that a woman heading a business could lead nowhere but to failure expressed a widely shared skepticism about women’s entrepreneurial ability and authority. Nonetheless, despite the patriarchal ideology that sought to limit or undervalue their contributions, women forged ahead in virtually all sectors of the economy. They did so not only in order to support themselves and their families, but also to construct their identities as productive and contributing members of their communities. In this essay, I will examine the ways that women living in early modern France participated in businesses—as workers, as proprietors, and as investors. Despite the preponderance of men who directed businesses, women played an active and often crucial role, particularly in family businesses in the skilled trades—the bakeries, shoemakers’ shops, mercers’ boutiques, and other guild-sanctioned shops—that dominated the business landscape of pre-Revolutionary France.

While Alice Clark’s foundational *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* recognized that notions of gender roles shaped conditions of work and compensation for women, she also maintained that a golden age of female economic participation had existed in the late medieval period, when the dominance of household production afforded women the possibility of engaging in lucrative

and prestigious occupations. This situation changed, according to Clark, with the development of a capitalist economic system and the physical separation of work from home. Once women could no longer inhabit a productive space that was at once domestic and market-oriented, they could no longer fully participate in work. While Clark’s successors have revised her conclusions, questioning the idea of a golden age, a number of gender historians have confirmed the notion of decline, seeing the early modern period as one of deteriorating status for women, largely due to the perceived growth in the strength of male-dominated guilds. They have also asserted that other economic developments, like the increased emphasis on market production and consumption, excluded women from full participation in the workplace. As a result, women were confined to tasks connected to the domestic sphere, particularly in food and clothing production, linked to low wages and low prestige.

But despite these gloomy assessments, women could, and did, gain access to varied economic opportunities in the early modern period, including within the supposed masculine bastion of the guilds, which regulated virtually all business activity in French cities. As Clare Crowston has noted, “at the precise moment in history taken as the culmination of their linear decline, French women obtained new independent guilds.” In new female guilds, women not only found employment; as guild mistresses they also headed their own shops. In this and other settings women used their skills, persistence, and hard work, as well as their relationships to men — as daughters, wives, and widows — to open doors that might otherwise be closed to them. Through work experience, family ties, or a combination of both, women could become heads of businesses.

Most working women found employment either in households as domestic servants or as unskilled laborers, but a not inconsiderable number worked

---

in more skilled and lucrative positions. Artisanal businesses, while employing a smaller cohort of female workers, did provide job possibilities, and certainly wives and daughters formed the backbone of family enterprises. Although wives generally had no formally recognized role as heads of businesses, in most instances they performed the same management and productive tasks as did their husbands. Outside of family enterprises, some opportunities for independent female-run businesses did exist. For the most part, women who ran their own independent businesses, as opposed to those headed by husbands or fathers, fell into two broad categories: either they were involved in a sector of the economy associated with female activity, like textiles, clothing, or food preparation, or they were widows who had inherited a family enterprise and chose to continue on their own.

Female activity was highly visible in the provisioning trades given the traditional association of food with female domestic duties. While some women who worked in provisioning did casual, unskilled work, there was the possibility of decent employment and status as well. Some of the best-known market women were the fishwives of the Les Halles market in early modern Paris who owned licenses to run their own stalls in the central market. These poissonsières had the reputation of being crude, loud, and bold; they spoke their minds in the language of the streets. But along with being frank, poissonsières also enjoyed the right to address the monarch and have an audience with the newborn heir to the throne. These women enjoyed a cultural significance, as well as an economic monopoly, that marked them out as privileged among the constellation of early modern workers. The monarch had “the understanding that the women of Les Halles were speaking for and as the people.” Entrusting market women with this right confirmed the importance of provisioning to the kingdom’s well-being and stability, and the way that the market served the people in an arena of prime importance—in feeding themselves and their families. The fact that this economic activity was traditionally in the hands of women legitimized their importance to social stability and the economy at large.

Besides fishmongers, a meaningful portion of European market activity was managed by women; many of the market stall licenses in cities like Nantes,

---

Paris, and Cologne were held by female traders.\textsuperscript{8} Many food markets in France were dominated by female proprietors who earned a good living and enjoyed a status as important commercial figures in the marketplace. Observers of several large markets in Paris described them as “teeming with women.”\textsuperscript{9} In the city of Nantes, women traders “provisioned most households” and thereby played a central role in the consumer economy of the community.\textsuperscript{10} As with Paris fishwives, despite the general perception that women were not suited to oversee businesses, the food trades were placed in female hands. James Collins estimates that in the seventeenth century, up to 20\% of enterprises, broadly defined, were headed or managed by women.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition to the opportunities afforded by retail markets, all-female guilds, found most notably in France, provided some women with lucrative and prestigious employment, independent of their male family members. For example, one of the largest craft guilds in eighteenth-century Paris was that of the seamstresses. Mistress seamstresses directed their own guild, trained their own apprentices, and managed lucrative businesses. These women worked in a trade that was growing, largely due to the consumer revolution of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when a greater variety of clothing was available and people owned more clothes and accessories than before. Female fashion merchants also emerged in this period to cater to this demand.\textsuperscript{12} Provincial French cities also harbored guildswomen, with Rouen, Caen, Toulouse, and other cities having important numbers of not only seamstresses but also linen drapers, flower sellers, and weavers.\textsuperscript{13} While these female guilds were neither as numerous nor as powerful as the male guilds, they afforded their members independence in managing their affairs, as well as a respected status in society and a good living.

While there were multiple pathways to engage in commerce and skilled trades independently, most women were involved in this economic sector as part

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Marion, “Dames de la Halle,” 140.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Brunelle, Monopolizing Women,” 13.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Collins, “Economic Role of Women,” 439.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Daryl Hafter, \textit{Women at Work in Preindustrial Europe} (College Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 91–95.
\end{itemize}
of a family enterprise. Merchants, traders, guild masters, and businessmen relied on their wives and children to provide both capital and labor to help maintain and grow their business enterprises. Wives of skilled workers and merchants often brought considerable marriage dowries, in the form of both goods, such as cloth, tools, or raw materials, and cash that could be invested in the family enterprise. Marriage contracts attest to the valuable assets women brought to their marriages. When Catherine Gravelle, the daughter of a Parisian surgeon married master ribbon-maker Louis L’Abbé, she contributed a substantial amount of property to the new household. She had a dowry of 300 livres as well as 900 livres in cash for the household and another 920 livres’ worth of household and personal goods. Gravelle’s husband had received his mastership just prior to the couple’s marriage, and this influx of capital was undoubtedly a welcome addition to this new business. L’Abbé and Gravelle would inherit his parents’ ribbonmaking business just a few years after this contract was signed, and having ready cash would facilitate the success of their enterprise.

Another marriage contract records the bride’s contribution of virtually an entire business to her new husband. Etienne Bonnardot married Jean-Pierre Bancelin, the journeyman who worked in her parents’ locksmith business. Bancelin provided 1500 livres in cash as well as an additional 300 livres’ worth of household and personal goods. Bonnardot’s dowry consisted of 6000 livres in assets from her parents’ business as well as 800 livres in household and personal goods. The contract further stipulated that the young couple would work in the Bonnardot family shop until the following October, after which time they would take complete possession of the business. At that time, the bride’s parents pledged to add another 3000 livres of tools and materials to Bonnardot’s dowry. Although Bancelin, as a master locksmith, would be the legal head of this business, it is no exaggeration to assert that, in terms of capital investment, Bonnardot was essentially the proprietor of this business.

These contracts allude to other equally valuable contributions that brides often made when they married, namely the contribution of networks of clients and suppliers. Both of these newly married couples were set to inherit businesses

---

15 Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), Minutier Centrale (hereafter MC), XIV/448, 29 October 1775.
16 AN, MC, XIV/483, 29 December 1783.
from their parents. In addition to the valuable assets listed in the contracts, other assets just as important were the contacts and clientele they would secure. To take over an already established business meant that the proprietors did not need to expend effort in publicizing their businesses, convincing clients to patronize them, or finding suppliers for raw materials or credit. As business records make clear, when a shop passed from the older to the younger generation, clients and creditors generally made the transition as well, providing the enterprise with credibility and stability from the start.

Just as valuable as capital to the long-term health and growth of the business was the continual work and effort that wives contributed to their husbands’ enterprises. Wives of craftsmen very often came from trade families themselves, and thus became the most versatile and reliable workers in a shop; a master could count on his wife to come to work, put in a good effort, and keep the interest of the firm in mind—qualities he did not always find in his other workers. The wives of Parisian guild masters paid bills, made complaints to the police, and oversaw production in the shop without the slightest hesitation over whether these were appropriate roles for a woman. And officials from the guild or city government recognized a wife’s right to act on behalf of the business.

When Angélique Letûmier’s husband, a master pastry maker, left her in charge of his shop, she found herself in conflict with a worker. Letûmier requested that a police commissioner come to the shop so she could lodge a complaint against the apprentice who “raised his hand to her and refused to obey.”\textsuperscript{17} In his notes, the commissioner wrote that he reprimanded the apprentice and ordered him to heed his mistress. Similarly, when Marie Cassot’s husband, the proprietor of a spice shop, stepped out, she had a conflict with a customer refusing to pay. Again, the police commissioner who came to take a complaint both supported her right to “manage the shop while her husband was away” and compelled the customer to pay.\textsuperscript{18} In both instances neighbors detained the guilty parties on behalf of these women, thereby affirming their rights to manage their shops. One Parisian mercer even complained that his wife, by engaging in that trade without either his permission or a license, forced him to obtain a mastership and pay fines due to her commercial activities.\textsuperscript{19} In some instances, women could even sign and

\textsuperscript{17} AN, Y 15352, 1 August 1753.
\textsuperscript{18} AN, Y 9528, 14 March 1771.
\textsuperscript{19} AN, Y 11941, 5 May 1758.
issue letters of credit in favor of a family enterprise.\textsuperscript{20} As part of a married couple, both wives and husbands had the authority to direct a business.

Widowhood represented a moment of transition for women and their relationship to a family business. When a master artisan died, his widow had the option of taking over his status as “master” (her title became mistress) and hold on to the shop. If she opted to maintain the family business, the widow smoothly stepped into the role her husband had inhabited. A widow could also remarry and her new husband could become a guild master on preferential terms.\textsuperscript{21} Widowhood thus provided an opportunity for a woman to come out of the shadows and assert her full control over a business. The willingness of guilds to allow widows to take on nearly all the privileges and responsibilities of mastership was recognition of how much leadership, expertise, and effort a wife contributed to the success of her family’s enterprise.

Widows also served as important investors in businesses, for women from the merchant and artisanal classes tended both to outlive their husbands and to resist remarriage.\textsuperscript{22} Older widows in particular often opted to support themselves with the profits of the business while walking away from its day-to-day responsibilities. Many chose to enter into partnerships and contracts that allowed them to remain invested in family enterprises without having to work themselves. Widows sometimes empowered a son or a son-in-law to run the family business, while providing capital and guidance. When Anne Moreau’s printer-husband died, she drew up a partnership contract, called a \textit{société}, with her son Nicolas. He took responsibility for the shop, took possession of all of its tools and machines, and drew a salary of 500 \textit{livres} per year. His mother demanded that he “manage everything as a good father of a family” and paid him a salary from the income the shop generated, keeping the remainder for herself.\textsuperscript{23} She also demanded an accounting of how Nicolas was running the business and retained the right to override him if she did not agree with the way he was managing her affairs.


\textsuperscript{21} Daughters of masters could also provide their husbands with an expedited path to mastership — another valuable asset they contributed when they married. In both instances, new husbands paid a fee to the guild that was much lower than usual; neither did they have to go through training and testing to achieve the mastership.

\textsuperscript{22} Lanza, \textit{From Wives to Widows}, 154.

\textsuperscript{23} AN, MC, XLIX/690, 27 August 1751.
At times, a trusted worker could become a business associate. Widow Thomas formed a similar partnership with her shop assistant who had worked for her with the family's window-glazing business. Rather than simply continuing to employ Pierre Saillier, Thomas took him on as a partner in order to keep him loyal to her business and to ensure access to his labor. Under the terms of the contract, Widow Thomas provided the materials, tools and her advice in exchange for the proceeds of the shop over and above the 200 livres per year her partner would earn. In both these instances, women provided the crucial capital for a business and supported themselves by means of these investments.

The economic landscape of early modern Paris provided space for women to participate in and run businesses; in fact, many businesses relied on female investment, labor, and management to survive and flourish. Although in terms of practice, women contributed just as much as men did, social norms and discrimination prevented women from having their contributions to businesses fully acknowledged and accepted. Only a few privileged women — mistresses in the few female guilds or single femmes marchandes (female merchants) — fully functioned as the head of a business. Even widows, who in their daily lives exercised a great deal of authority, had to abide by certain limitations set by the guilds and civil law, and while they used the honorific title “mistress”, they did not possess the full range of privileges enjoyed by masters. Wives and daughters, despite their considerable and even crucial contributions to masters’ enterprises, were not received as members by the guild, or even formally recognized as vital parts of business success. Their support was taken for granted without being entirely appreciated.

This leaves us with a somewhat mixed assessment of women’s role in businesses in early modern France. We can have no doubt that women were key to the success of family enterprises that constituted the majority of businesses in this era. Husbands absolutely relied on the labor and investments of their wives. And yet women were rarely considered the fully empowered director of a business. In the face of this paradox, women leveraged the assets they had in order to create the most expansive role possible within the workplace. They oversaw workers and looked over accounts, not relying solely on their husbands’ explanations. They appealed to guild authorities and government officials when their orders were challenged, and received confirmation of their authority from those quarters.

24 AN, MC, XXVIII/448, 12 January 1775.
They provided investment and labor to help their families’ enterprises become as successful as possible. Despite the limitations placed on women by the law and by guilds, as well as by society’s attitudes, women succeeded in becoming key figures in businesses of all kinds, attaining vital and respected roles in the world of business in early modern France.