

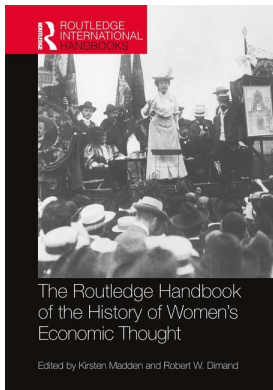
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ENGLISH WOMEN'S ECONOMIC THOUGHT IN THE 1790s

Domestic economy, married women's economic dependence, and access to professions

Joanna Rostek

Preliminary remarks and historical contextualization

In 1798, Priscilla Wakefield, author and philanthropist with “a claim to be seen as the founder of the earliest savings bank in England” (“Priscilla Wakefield: Life”), notes at the outset of her *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex*:

It is asserted by Doctor Adam Smith, that every individual is a burden upon the society to which he belongs, who does not contribute his share of productive labour for the good of the whole. [. . .] [Smith] does not absolutely specify, that both sexes [. . .] are equally required to comply with these terms; but since the female sex is included in the idea of the species, and as women possess the same qualities as men, though perhaps in a different degree, their sex cannot free them from the claim of the public for their proportion of usefulness.

1798, p. 2

Wakefield's reference to Smith calls to mind that in the second half of the eighteenth century, Britain saw what is frequently termed the beginning of modern economics. Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776 and the following decades brought the gradual institutionalization of political economy as an academic discipline (see Schabas 2003, pp. 178–9). Standard histories of economic thought reiterate the male-centered view that Wakefield saw in Smith: they create the impression that women did not participate in these developments and failed to contribute to the economic discourse of their times. The reception of Priscilla Wakefield's *Reflections* is a case in point in that regard: as Robert Dimand notes in a rare economic analysis of her text, Wakefield “is familiar to historians of economics, if at all, as the mother of Edward Wakefield [. . .] and as the grandmother and anxious guardian of Edward Gibbon Wakefield” (2003, pp. 194–5). Posterity is hence more likely to associate

Priscilla Wakefield with putatively ‘feminine’ roles – that of mother, grandmother, and anxious guardian – than with her achievements as an economic writer and founder of a savings bank.

Such relative sidelining of women’s economic contributions from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is partially attributable to the difficulty in handling the terms ‘economy’ and ‘economics’, the meanings of which have shifted over time. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives several possible usages of the terms for the period around 1800, and in perusing texts by English women, it becomes obvious that depending on the context, the terms could refer to different aspects of social organization and individual activity. The most frequent usage in women’s writing at that time seems to be in the sense of domestic economy, i.e. “the art or science of household management, esp. with regard to expenditure” (“economy” I.2a, *OED*). Limiting the investigation into women’s economic thought around 1800 to texts that explicitly mention the word ‘economy’ or ‘economics’ can therefore create the wrong impression that household management was their principal economic concern. A more thorough glance reveals, however, that texts by women also contain observations approaching the understanding of the term as “[t]he management or administration of the material resources of a community, discipline, or other organized body; the art or science of managing such resources” (“economy” I.1a, *OED*). Yet female authors do not subsume their reflections on such topics under the heading of ‘the economy’ or ‘economics’. This is due, among others, to the fact that these terms had not yet become as recognizable and common for denoting a specific form of enquiry, as is the case today. Besides, gender norms narrowed down the realms of knowledge formation and social analysis women could lay claim to.

Bearing in mind the consequent necessity of properly contextualizing economic writing by women around 1800, this chapter puts forward the following claims:

- 1 English women wrote about and analyzed the economy around 1800, despite cultural and institutional obstacles to their participation in the economic discourse.
- 2 English women’s economic thought around 1800 is almost invariably connected to issues of gender. It is marked by a tension between contestation of and conformity to gender norms. This tension reflects the period’s restrictive ideals of femininity on the one hand, and progressive, liberal tendencies of the 1790s on the other.
- 3 The economics of marriage forms an important focus within English women’s economic thought around 1800, with sub-strands examining domestic economy, the economic dependence of married women, and women’s access to professions.
- 4 English women writers around 1800 formulate ideas that would (re)emerge in twentieth-century social sciences (e.g. crowding hypothesis, gender pay gap, positive discrimination/affirmative action).

Women around 1800 had to face and overcome gender-specific challenges in order to participate in the economic discourse of their times. These challenges help to explain why their economic analyses occurred in different genres and emphasized different topics from economic thought by men. One major obstacle was unequal access to education. Women were barred from universities, clubs, and scholarly societies involved in the formation of political economy. Their education – if they received any, that is – frequently focused on so-called female accomplishments, which lay an emphasis on foreign languages and literature, writing, basic arithmetic, singing, dancing, playing the piano, drawing, and embroidering. Within the upper and middle classes, these skills were seen as a suitable preparation for a woman’s desirable economic and social position, namely that of a wife. But given its limited scope, such education prevented women from shaping the public discourse on a par with men. Instruction, moreover,

substantially depended on social class and religious background, with Unitarian women from the middle classes, for example, being more likely to acquire competences necessary to partake in political or social controversies. As a result, the surviving economic texts by women display a certain bias and should not be deemed representative of the experience or ideas of all women. To borrow a phrase from Laura E. Thomason, it is impossible to write “a history of Everywoman” or “to account for every possible permutation of a matter that is both complicated (thus resistant to generalization) and personal (thus resistant to analysis)” (2014, p. 14). This is also true for a history of women's economic thought.

Another factor upholding the epistemological inequality between women and men was the by then already operating ideology of separate spheres, which relegated women to the private and domestic realm, thus creating cultural barriers to the engagement with public topics explored by political economists. Ideology, moreover, limited women's access to authorship, as assuming the public role of an author constituted a trespass on male territory and a potential threat to the ideal of femininity. Women who took up the pen could not choose freely from the available range of genres, the ‘higher’ ones in particular. Since literature and pedagogy counted among the areas where women could acquire “some public presence” (Benjamin 2001, p. 415), the bulk of writing by English women around 1800 occurred in genres that, from today's perspective, would not qualify as academic or theoretical: conduct books, novels, poems, plays, moral tales, religious tracts, pamphlets, travelogues, diaries, or letters. In such texts, women could present a female perspective on phenomena that men could explore through more ‘respectable’ genres. As Edith Kuiper points out in the introduction to her invaluable anthology of *Women's Economic Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (2014) – which includes excerpts from many of the texts discussed in the following – women moreover tended to write for different addressees than men:

where early political economists wrote predominantly for those in positions of power in the emerging industrial society (e.g. legislators, merchants, and entrepreneurs), women economic writers mostly addressed audiences economists hardly considered relevant such as women, girls, and occasionally a queen.

pp. xvii–xviii

To retrieve women's historical contributions to economic thought, then, it is indispensable to move beyond generic constrictions and to acknowledge the epistemological worth of texts that do not necessarily adhere to standards of academic composition developed by male scholars. In addition, it must be borne in mind that female authors frequently wrote not only in different genres and for different audiences, but also on different economic topics from men. Kuiper observes that

[a]s gender distinctions in Europe sharpened over the course of the eighteenth century, women's economic position in society, their life experiences and their topics of interest became more and more differentiated from those of men. This is reflected in their writings on economic experiences, insights and perspectives on the eighteenth century economy.

2014, p. xiv

Consequently, it is nearly impossible to separate an analysis of economic writing by English women around 1800 from discussions of gender.

Despite the manifold obstacles to knowledge formation and authorship, female writers entered the literary market in remarkable numbers toward the end of the eighteenth century, making

the period a – hitherto largely under-researched – treasure trove of economic writing by British women. William Stafford quotes figures according to which “[b]etween three hundred and four hundred women published during the decade of the 1790s alone” (2002, p. 51). Their increased publishing activity was related to trenchant social, political, cultural, and economic shifts. In the words of Gary Kelly, “[t]he period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was one of radical and rapid change – too radical and rapid for some and not enough for others” (1996, p. ix). Decisive events include the American and French Revolutions, the Napoleonic Wars, the rise of capitalist forms of investment and management, the shift to wage economy, the rise of the banking system in Britain, national debt, inflation, and the related restriction period, during which the Bank of England was not required to convert banknotes into gold. Crucially, these developments coincided with heated and consequential debates about individual rights, citizenship, nationhood, political participation, and social organization, with the ‘rights of man’ becoming a central, if disputed, concept. In the process, authors of both sexes began to inquire into the status of the rights of women. In Britain of the 1790s, this led to what today is referred to as a wave of feminism. Authors from differing political, religious, and ideological backgrounds explored the questions of the rights a woman should enjoy, what her role in society should be, what her particular duties consist in, how she should position herself vis-à-vis men, etc.

While the social climate of the 1790s fostered new channels of female articulation, the lingering ideology of separate spheres still meant for women that as soon as they entered the public discourse, they had to conform to ideals of femininity or else justify their deviance from them. Conflicting patterns of conformity-versus-contestation thus permeate much of the writing analyzed in this chapter, with women’s economic status and pursuits nearly always being explored in relation to men. What I have illustrated elsewhere with regard to nineteenth-century popularizers of political economy Jane Marcet and Harriet Martineau also holds true for earlier economic writers: “because women at that time were largely denied scientific and economic authority, [. . .] female authors [. . .] chose a contradictory strategy [. . .] that both confirmed and challenged the traditional and restrictive gender norms” (Rostek 2014, p. 21). Dimand makes a similar observation with regard to Priscilla Wakefield, who in *Reflections* uses “the conservative language of the duties and obligations of women to argue for a radical alteration of women’s education and opportunities” (Dimand 2003, p. 201).

The proto-feminist debate – which abated in the course of the Napoleonic Wars – touched upon economic concerns. Stafford concludes in his study of (anti-)feminist controversies in the 1790s that they stressed “the importance of women’s access to resources” (2002, p. 216). For women of that period, access to resources mostly depended on marriage. Elizabeth Bergen Brophy confirms that marriage was “[i]n theory [. . .] a condition ordained by God that provided them the widest opportunities for practicing and promoting virtue. In practice marriage was usually the only way that women could achieve some measure of economic security” (1991, p. 139). Thomason equally stresses that “[m]arriage was the most important practical decision affecting a woman’s life: the means of fulfilling an accepted social role and ensuring financial security” (2014, p. 7).

As a result, marriage is arguably *the* key economic topic in English women’s writing around 1800, yielding several interrelated sub-strands of economic analysis:

1 Domestic economy

Texts within this strand concentrate on household production and expenditure, with a particular emphasis on those aspects of domestic economy that should be managed by wives and daughters in accordance with prevalent gender norms. They often take the form of conduct books and pedagogical treatises, and aim at young women and/or their parents.

2 Economic dependence of married women

Several novels and plays, but also pamphlets and polemical treatises explore the situation of married women. Some of them combine economic with legal analyses, especially when they take issue with the common-law regulations of coverture, which stipulated that a man acquired the right to dispose of nearly all of his wife's property upon marriage. The authors illustrate and criticize the consequences of the economic dependence of married women.

3 Access to professions for women

This strand of analysis relates to the preceding one and concentrates on the question of how women can attain more economic independence, in particular when marriage as the standard source of maintenance fails, be it through spinsterhood, widowhood, or the husband's inability to provide for his family. The texts indict cultural obstacles to women's access to paid labor and recommend concrete professions suitable for women.

It is important to stress that these strands do not reflect a distinct school of economic thought that would have been recognized as such by the authors in question. Used in the singular, 'economic thought' implies the notion of one or several coherent bodies of ideas and axioms. Yet with regard to women's early writings, it seems more appropriate to use the plural and speak of 'economic thoughts'. For reasons explained above, economic observations by women are scattered across various texts, genres, audiences, and topics, and do not take the form of an academic dispute between advocates and opponents of specific economic measures. Women's cultural and institutional exclusion from scholarly practices as well as "[t]he wide variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and interests, prevented these women from developing one vision and one voice, something the political economists of their day were successful in achieving" (Kuiper 2014, p. xix). It is possible to identify strands within English women's economic thought(s) in the 1790s; but it bears emphasizing that this thematic grouping is imposed retrospectively on what was a dynamic, controversial, and multifaceted discourse.

The following three sections of this chapter consecutively present selected examples of English women's writing on domestic economy, the economic dependence of married women, and women's access to paid professions. They illustrate that women around 1800 produced a gender-sensitive form of economic enquiry and developed ideas that would resurface again in twentieth-century social sciences.

Domestic economy

Within the conformity-versus-contestation spectrum, texts concerned with domestic economy lean toward the former: for the most part, they do not question the sexual division of labor within households, but lay down instead what the particular duties of women consist in and how to discharge them most effectively and appropriately. They combine descriptive with prescriptive elements. This is true, for example, of Hester Mulso Chapone's letter "On Economy", which forms part of her widely read *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind Addressed to a Young Lady* (1773) – a conduct book predating the 1790s. Chapone (1727–1802), a writer associated with the Bluestocking circle, which united a group of intellectual women in the second half of the eighteenth century, begins her letter by stating that

Economy is so important a part of a woman's character, so necessary to her own happiness, and so essential to her performing properly the duties of a wife and of a mother, that it ought to have the precedence of all other accomplishments, and take its rank next to the first duties of life. It is, nevertheless, an *art* as well as a *virtue* – and many

well-meaning persons, from ignorance, or from inconsideration, are strangely deficient in it. Indeed it is too often wholly neglected in a young woman's education – and, she is sent from her father's house to govern a family, without the least degree of that knowledge, which should qualify her for it: this is the source of much inconvenience: – for though experience and attention may supply, by degrees, the want of instruction, yet this requires time – the family in the mean time may get into habits, which are very difficult to alter; and, what is worse, the husband's opinion of his wife's incapacity may be fixed too strongly to suffer him ever to think justly of her gradual improvements.

Chapone 1773, p. 316

In this passage, Chapone does not challenge the association of women with the domestic sphere: female economic activity has to comply with patriarchal standards and includes deference to the husband's needs. Yet in terming economy “an *art* as well as a *virtue*”, Chapone emphasizes that managing a household requires particular skills a woman should be taught to promote the welfare of her family as well as herself. Accordingly, her letter contains advice for young female readers on household expenditure, saving, time management, and the managing of servants. Such general counsel usually appears within a clearly gendered context: expertise in domestic economy accords with notions of ideal femininity. In managing their households, women should “aim at *propriety* and *neatness*” (p. 318), pay attention to their “appearance and character” (p. 320), and avoid becoming “excessively troublesome to every body, [. . .] particularly to her husband” (p. 320).

“On Economy” also contains interspersed references to price, although they seem too short to deduce an underlying theory from them. Chapone instructs her readers that they

must endeavour to acquire skill in purchasing; and, in order to [achieve] this, you should begin now to attend to the prices of things – you should take every proper opportunity of learning the real value of every thing, as well as the marks whereby you are to distinguish the good from the bad.

p. 318

Here, Chapone appears to suggest that price does not necessarily reflect the “real value” of goods, which is why women should take into consideration additional (albeit unspecified) “marks” to measure the value of a good. By underlining public consequences of private economic behavior, Chapone also admonishes middle-class readers not to ruin the working classes through excessive credit-based spending:

Regularity of payments and accounts is essential to Economy: – your house-keeping should be settled at least once a week, and all the bills paid: – all other tradesmen should be paid, at farthest, once a year. Indeed I think it more advantageous to pay oftener: but, if you make them trust you longer, they must either charge proportionably higher, or be losers by your custom. Numbers of them fail, every year, from the cruel cause of being obliged to give their customers so much longer credit than the dealers, from whom they take their goods, will allow to them. If people of fortune considered this, they would not defer their payments, from mere negligence, as they often do, to the ruin of whole families.

p. 318

This passage, like many others, combines an economic analysis with moral deliberations. Elsewhere, Chapone discourages young women from “ever keep[ing] a domestic, however expert in business,

whom they know to be guilty of immorality” (p. 321); she recommends “family prayers” (p. 324), and promotes “[t]he prudent distribution of[. . .] charitable gifts” (p. 324). A moral(ist) perspective on economic behavior is in fact typical of both men’s and women’s writing of that period, calling into mind that classical political economy emerged out of moral philosophy.

A similar amalgamation of domestic economy and feminine virtues with didactic and moral guidance permeates the pedagogical treatise *Practical Education* (1798), jointly penned by the popular Anglo-Irish novelist and educationist Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) and her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817). The book contains a chapter “On Prudence and Economy”, in which the authors assert that “[e]conomy is in women an essential domestic virtue” (p. 274). Like Chapone’s text, *Practical Education* presents the task of educating girls and young women in the realm of household economy as compatible with culturally prescribed notions of femininity. In many respects, it echoes the advice given by Chapone:

Young women should be accustomed to keep the family accounts, and their arithmetic should not be merely a speculative science; they should learn the price of all necessaries, and of all luxuries; they should learn what luxuries are suited to their fortune and rank, what degree of expence in dress is essential to a regularly neat appearance, and what must be the increased expence and temptations of fashion in different situations; they should not be suffered to imagine that they can resist these temptations more than others, if they get into company above their rank, or should they have any indistinct idea, that by some wonderfully economical operations they can make a given sum of money go farther than others can do. The steadiness of calculations will prevent all these vain notions.

Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798 pp. 279–80

The Edgeworths thus promote prudence, modesty, and risk-aversion in women, and they implicitly discourage social mobility.

The chapter “On Prudence and Economy” also refers to money, but the brevity of the comments makes it difficult to ascertain the authors’ theoretical understanding of money. Rather, in the context of the didactic treatise that *Practical Education* undoubtedly is, it emerges that economic observations on money go hand in hand with an emphasis on morals, virtue, and education. The Edgeworths claim that money

should be represented to our pupils as what it really is, the conventional sign of the value of commodities; before children are acquainted with the real and comparative value of any of these commodities, it is surely imprudent to trust them with money.

p. 277

What seems important to the Edgeworths is that children should not be trusted with money until they understand the concept of value and are capable of judicious and responsible spending.

Although the passage on money quoted above does not distinguish between girls and boys, but speaks of “our pupils”, other passages contain gender-specific advice on dealing with money. Tellingly, the Edgeworths entrust fathers with their sons’ financial education:

Before a young man goes into the world, it will be a great advantage to him to have some share in the management of his father’s affairs; by laying out money for another person he will acquire habits of care, which will be useful to him afterwards in his own affairs.

p. 283

These stipulations reflect gendered notions of men's and women's specific economic tasks: while boys are to obtain expertise in management before they go "into the world" and thus enter the public realm, girls' economic education focuses on the family and their appearance (dress, fashion, etc.). The Edgeworths' recommendations for mothers/girls and fathers/sons thus adopt and reinforce the ideology of separate spheres.

At the same time, advice for girls and boys seems to be fueled by the rich version of utilitarianism as developed by Jeremy Bentham, whom Maria Edgeworth knew personally. Throughout, the Edgeworths caution their readers to act responsibly in financial affairs and to bear in mind that "real pleasures" have more than just a narrowly defined material dimension:

The worth of money is to be estimated by the number of real pleasures which it can procure: there are many which are not to be bought by gold; these will never lose their pre-eminent value with persons who have been educated both to reason and to feel.

p. 290

Clearly, the Edgeworths view knowledgeability in economic affairs as forming only one aspect among many within the overarching goal of promoting moral perfection and social usefulness in their pupils.

Domestic economy also plays a vital role in Priscilla Wakefield's less-known treatise, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex; with Suggestions for Its Improvement* (1798). Wakefield (1751–1832) was a writer, philanthropist, and founder of a penny bank for children as well as a frugality bank for laborers and servants. Her treatise follows Chapone and the Edgeworths in taking for granted that "[t]he indispensable duties of wives, mothers, and heads of families, are incumbent upon all ranks" (p. 81) of women. Wakefield's text is noteworthy for postulating the existence of four different socio-economic classes. The observations on domestic economy are thus embedded within political economy. The author posits that

[s]ociety may be resolved into four classes or degrees; the first comprehends the nobility, and all those who, either by the influence of high offices, or extensive hereditary possessions, rival them in power; the second contains those, who by the application of their talents to learning, commerce, manufactures or agriculture, procure a respectable subsistence approaching to opulence; to the third may be referred those, whose honest and useful industry raises them above want, without procuring for them the means of splendid or luxurious gratification: The fourth is composed of the labouring poor.

p. 63

Like most contemporaries, Wakefield sees this gradation as God-given, and consequently does not ponder, let alone encourage, social mobility. Instead, *Reflections* contains a chapter dedicated to each rank, with class-specific instructions as to the domestic duties incumbent on women.

In Wakefield's analysis, the amount of bodily labor to be performed by women at home is inversely proportional to their family income: the lower the class, the more menial tasks women have to undertake. Female members of the nobility have above all supervising and managing duties:

to inspect the whole; to regulate the plan of action; and to examine whether their substitutes discharge their respective engagements properly. As wives, the disposal of that part of their husband's revenue, which is consumed by the family, falls under their direction, and they are required to prevent either the profusion of waste, or the unbecoming parsimony of want.

p. 81

Women from the second class cannot afford to delegate as many tasks to servants: their “moderate situation requires that they should be discharged in person” (p. 100). The practical advice given to young women from the second class resembles that formulated by Chapone and the Edgeworths, thus confirming that their texts aim mostly at women from the middle ranks. Wakefield writes:

The art of œconomising and rendering all kinds of food as palatable and nourishing as possible, by different modes of cookery, will repay the mistress of a household for the trouble of investigation, and should indisputably form a part of the regular instruction of girls of the middle rank, to which, as they advance towards maturity, may profitably be added a knowledge of the value of all necessary articles consumed in a family, whether for the table or the wardrobe, as well as the quantities of each which are requisite for respective uses. As theory is of little avail, unless exemplified by practice, they should be habituated to exercise the department of house-keeper under the inspection of their mother, not only by purchasing the different commodities wanted for the use of the family, but likewise by keeping an exact account of the domestic expences, which will afford opportunities of teaching them a judicious application of money, and giving them distinct ideas, where frugality may most properly be exerted, and where greater latitude may be allowed.

pp. 100–2

Observations on the type of household management to be practiced by the third class are less specific, because the latter “includes several gradations, including the daughters of every species of tradesmen below the merchant, and above the meaner mechanic: consequently, very different degrees of refinement befit the individuals who form the extreme links” and “[t]he peculiar duties of each, will vary according to their respective situations” (p. 141). The chapter on the fourth class begins by stating that “[t]he manner in which the labouring poor should pass their time, requires but few observations; for their lot dooms them, even in those countries where their situation is most favourable, to incessant toil, as a necessary means of subsistence” (p. 176). Wakefield nevertheless stresses that “the rigour of the labour of the female poor should be moderated, by the consideration of their inferiority of strength” (p. 176). She exhorts women of this class to remember that “œconomy, cleanliness, industry, and, above all these, good temper, are the attractions which draw the husband to his own fire-side, after the labour of the day is over” (p. 177). The phrasing emphasizes that ‘the husband’ remains a focal point of women’s domestic activities.

That treatises on domestic economy teach women how to ‘draw’ the husband back to his home reflects not only the period’s ideals of submissive femininity, but is also an implicit economic strategy: given that for women around 1800, a husband was the major source of financial maintenance, caring for his needs becomes synonymous with investing into a wife’s economic security. Texts on domestic economy seem to take this arrangement for granted and largely conform to established gender norms; radical women writers, by contrast, protest against the economic dependence of married women.

Radical critiques of married women’s economic dependence

Marriage had significant and ambivalent economic consequences for English women: on the one hand, a wife obtained a legal claim to maintenance from her husband; on the other, the right to own and dispose of her property devolved almost entirely on him. This mechanism was secured by the English laws of coverture, which remained in place from

the Middle Ages into the late nineteenth century (Stretton and Kesselring 2013, p. 7). Jurist William Blackstone described the eighteenth-century understanding of coverture in his monumental *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–1769):

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law–french a *feme-covert*; is said to be *covert-baron*, or under the protection and influence of her husband, her *baron*, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her *coverture*.

Blackstone 1765, p. 430

This conception of marriage translated into a remarkably constrained economic agency of married women in the eyes of the common law. The limitations were not necessarily enforced in the daily lives of most women and men: Nicola Phillips, among others, claims that there is “strong evidence to show that significant numbers of women could and did remain in business throughout the years from 1700 to 1850, and that even married women could *de facto* and *de jure* continue to trade” (2006, p. 259). Nevertheless, the legal regulations became consequential in times of disagreement between spouses and had, as Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring (2013, p. 9) underscore, ideological and normative power. Coverture meant that

[u]pon marriage a wife lost the ability to own or control property, enter into contracts, make a will, or bring or defend a lawsuit without her husband. A married woman’s real property – her lands – fell under her husband’s control. [. . .] A woman’s movable property – her money, livestock, and personal possessions – became her husband’s outright. He had total control over any cash she brought to marriage or inherited or earned thereafter. He could sell her possessions, including her clothes and personal effects, or make bequests of them in his will without her permission. This extraordinary power of ownership set England apart from most other European countries and territories, where spouses held personal property separately or shared in a ‘community of goods’.

Stretton and Kesselring 2013, p. 8

Women of higher ranks could secure some of their property through costly marriage settlements or the establishment of trusts. Besides, English women also profited from coverture regulations, for instance by not being held answerable for debts and certain criminal offences. Yet female writers of the 1790s explicitly addressing coverture appear to emphasize its drawbacks, rather than the benefits. Arguably, for them, “the written word became a means by which to exercise the power that they otherwise lacked” (Thomason 2014, p. 1).

Because of the longevity of coverture in England, discussions of married women’s property are not exclusive to female economic thought in the 1790s, but form a strand of analysis spanning centuries and genres. A noteworthy pamphlet raising the issue in the early eighteenth century is, for example, *The Hardships of the English Laws. In Relation to Wives* (1735) by Sarah Chapone (1699–1764; mother-in-law of the abovementioned Hester Mulso Chapone). In the mid-nineteenth century, Caroline Norton (1808–1877) challenged the economic discrimination of married women in her *Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce*

Bill (1855). Around 1800, discussions of property regulations also feature in English women's writing, especially in novels. Edward Copeland has demonstrated that in Gothic tales in particular, "it is the economy, as it is represented by unpredictable, feckless, improvident, destructive, and tyrannical males, that provides the active source of terror for women" (2004, p. 41). It should be noted, however, that many of these fictional texts focus more on the emotional consequences of female financial vulnerability than on an analysis of the legal and economic mechanisms as such.

Against this background, Mary Wollstonecraft's posthumously published *The Wrongs of Woman: Or, Maria. A Fragment* (1798) stands out for combining a fictional investigation into the psychological effects of coverture with a description of its legal and economic workings. A vociferous advocate of women's rights and a prolific commentator on social and political questions, Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) is today probably the best known of the authors mentioned in this chapter. *The Wrongs of Woman* recounts the story of the eponymous heroine, who is kidnapped and imprisoned in a madhouse by her avaricious husband. Maria's unjust incarceration provides a metaphor for "the dependent state of a woman in the grand question of the comforts arising from the possession of property" (*Wrongs*, p. 137). The narrative makes plain that Maria's husband views his marriage solely as a means of getting at his wife's money, which he spends on gambling and risky speculations. He frustrates Maria's attempts to provide financially for herself, her sisters, and her daughter, which repeatedly makes her indict coverture regulations:

[A] wife being as much a man's property as his horse, or his ass, she has nothing she can call her own. He may use any means to get at what the law considers as his, the moment his wife is in possession of it, [. . .] and all this is done with a show of equity, because, forsooth, he is responsible for her maintenance. The tender mother cannot *lawfully* snatch from the gripe of the gambling spendthrift, or beastly drunkard, unmindful of his offspring, the fortune which falls to her by chance; or (so flagrant is the injustice) what she earns by her own exertions. No; he can rob her with impunity, even to waste publicly on a courtesan; and the laws of her country – if women have a country – afford her no protection or redress from the oppressor, unless she have the plea of bodily fear.

Wrongs, p. 140

Such summarizing descriptions of the deficient legal and economic status quo are enhanced through interspersed testimonies of fictional women of various social classes, who had been sexually and economically exploited by their husbands and other men. The novel does not stop short at describing the problems; it also advocates a radical solution by the standards of its time, namely the possibility of obtaining a divorce, so that women can regain control of their financial resources and find a more suitable partner. Accordingly, Maria asserts before a judge: "I claim then a divorce, and the liberty of enjoying, free from molestation, the fortune left to me by a relation" (p. 173).

The notion that, from an economic vantage point, marriage is a form of contract in which maintenance by the husband is exchanged for domestic labor performed by the wife was fairly accepted around 1800. Wollstonecraft is exceptional in suggesting that women deserve a bigger share of 'profits' within this exchange. In her texts, she argues that the economy of marriage encompasses emotional and sexual exchanges, and avers that women are as much at a disadvantage in this respect as in financial matters:

Besides, how many women of this description pass their days; or, at least, their evenings, discontentedly. Their husbands acknowledge that they are good managers, and chaste wives; but leave home to seek for more agreeable, may I be allowed to use a significant French word, *piquant* society; and the patient drudge, who fulfils her task, like a blind horse in a mill, is defrauded of her just reward; for the wages due to her are the caresses of her husband; and women who have so few resources in themselves, do not very patiently bear this privation of a natural right.

Vindication, p. 86

In *The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft similarly implies that reducing wives merely to the performance of their domestic duties can constitute a form of exploitation that is sufficient ground for claiming a divorce:

The magnitude of a sacrifice ought always to bear some proportion to the utility in view; and for a woman to live with a man, for whom she can cherish neither affection nor esteem, or even be of any use to him, excepting in the light of a house-keeper, is an abjectness of condition, the enduring of which no concurrence of circumstances can ever make a duty in the sight of God or just men.

p. 139

Wollstonecraft's radical observations on marriage tie in with her less controversial suggestions for reforming female education. Like many of her contemporaries (e.g. Priscilla Wakefield; see Dimand 2003, p. 199), she establishes explicit and implicit links between women's education and their economic wellbeing. In her canonical *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft claims that training young girls in the art of attracting and pleasing a potential husband is only a short-term, narrow economic strategy. She deplores that girls

spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, – the only way women can rise in the world, – by marriage.

p. 15

She points out that “[g]irls who have been thus weakly educated, are often cruelly left by their parents without any provision; and, of course, are dependent on, not only the reason, but the bounty of their brothers” (p. 84). Like many other middle-class authors, Wollstonecraft argues that in order to achieve a long-term happy marriage – and, by extension, to secure sustained financial provisioning – women must be educated to be rational and competent companions to their husbands. Such training is also recommended as making women economically more independent in case they cannot fall back on the financial support of a man.

Even if she does not contemplate the possibility of a divorce, Mary Hays (1759–1843) pursues a similarly polemical line of thought as her friend Mary Wollstonecraft in *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798). Hays, a social commentator and novelist, begins a passage devoted to the economic dependence of married women with the observation that “it were much to be wished that women were somewhat more attended to, in the distribution of fortune”, especially since they are “debarred [. . .] from availing themselves of their talents and industry, to promote their interest and independence” (p. 278). She argues that “fortune being in the present state of things, that which procures every comfort, conveniency, elegance and

honour, which this world affords; [women] cannot be accused of being too palpably interested, in wishing to share in it, in a reasonable degree" (p. 280). *An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain* consequently criticizes that men have, "by the most ample and exclusive privileges, secured [money] chiefly in their own hands" (p. 281). The justification men usually provide for the economic disparities between the sexes is

that it is of little consequence whether women have fortunes or not, as in the course of human events it circulates among them; and that the equilibrium is restored by marriage, which raises women to a participation and communion of fortune.

p. 281

Hays refutes this argument with the observation that

all men do not marry. *All* women are not married. And even those who *are*, find that this participation and community of fortune is often merely verbal; – words without any meaning whatever; – and that they are in this respect, as well as in most others, as completely dependent upon their husbands, as it is possible for any one human being to be upon another.

p. 281

The solutions envisaged by Hays are less radical in the context of the prevalent norms than Wollstonecraft's. For women of the upper classes, Hays merely defends the right to so-called *paraphernalia*, which gave wives free use of personal items such as clothes or jewelry, even if the latter technically remained the husband's legal possession for the duration of the marriage (p. 284). With regard to women from the middle and lower ranks of society, Hays is more outspoken and advocates their admission to paid professions as a means of fostering their economic independence.

Reflecting the extent to which liberal ideas pervaded English intellectual circles in the 1790s, Wollstonecraft and Hays' claims were radical and controversial, and drew censure from numerous contemporaries. The more conservative writer Hannah More (1745–1833), for example, averred in her bestselling *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) that Wollstonecraft belonged to a "most destructive class in the whole wide range of modern corruptors" (Vol. 1, p. 48) for attacking the sanctity of marriage, and thus both religious doctrine and social stability. It appears, however, that within debates on matrimony, female advocates of women's subordinate status did not draw as explicitly on economic analyses as did feminist thinkers in the 1790s. One reason for this is perhaps that conservative writers often built their foundations on the authority of the Bible, which traced women's inferior position to Eve's responsibility for the original sin. Those who could cite the word of God in their favor were possibly less in need of secular arguments of the kind brought forward by Wollstonecraft or Hays. Radical critics of married women's financial dependence, by contrast, mobilized economic analyses in their fight for female emancipation.

Access to professions

While discussions of coverture address legal impediments to female economic autonomy, demands for women's access to paid professions challenge obstacles grounded in cultural norms. In her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*, Mary Hays describes a problem raised by several of her contemporaries:

However high the sphere of life in which a man is born, if his fortune be not equal to his birth or his ambitions, there are a thousand different ways by which he may advance himself with honour in the world; whereas women of a certain rank, are totally excluded from a possibility, even of supporting that stile of life to which they have been accustomed, if they are left without competent fortunes. But what is infinitely worse – because it leads to want, or infamy, or both – few, very few are the employments left open even for women of the inferior classes, by which they can secure independence; and to which without a doubt may be greatly attributed, the ruin of most of the sex, in the lower ranks.

pp. 278–9

Hays' observations tie in with remarks on women's waged labor by Mary Wollstonecraft, Priscilla Wakefield, and Mary Anne Radcliffe, who explore the economic vulnerability of women from different social strata.

Wollstonecraft and Hays' remarks on the difficult position of middle-class women contain an early variant of the crowding hypothesis. The authors posit that middle-class women, due to their education and constrictive ideals of femininity, run the risk of not being able to support themselves except by marriage. Only an insufficient number of professions are adequate to their skills and can be pursued without forfeiting public esteem and self-respect; as a result, these professions are difficult to secure and yield a low income. Hays notes in *Appeal*: "Indeed the business appropriated by custom for women, are so very few in proportion to the number of candidates, that they are soon monopolized" (pp. 279–80). Wollstonecraft focuses particularly on the profession of the governess:

The few employments open to women, so far from being liberal, are menial; and when a superior education enables them to take charge of the education of children as governesses, they are not treated like the tutors of sons [. . .]. But as women educated like gentlewomen, are never designed for the humiliating situation which necessity sometimes forces them to fill; these situations are considered in the light of a degradation.

Vindication, p. 184

The profession of a governess, briefly undertaken by Wollstonecraft and Radcliffe, indeed counted among the few income-earning and respectable occupations for educated, middle-class women. This resulted, among others, in oversupply and low wages, as Wollstonecraft's Maria exemplifies by relating to her daughter the case of her sisters:

They were accomplished, yet you can (may you never be reduced to the same destitute state!) scarcely conceive the trouble I had to place them in the situation of governesses, the only one in which even a well-educated woman, with more than ordinary talents, can struggle for a subsistence; and even this is a dependence next to menial.

Wrongs, p. 131

The plight of governesses continued to preoccupy Victorian writers and is explored in some, partially autobiographic, detail by mid-nineteenth-century English novelists, for instance by Anne and Charlotte Brontë (see Gilbert 2015).

As solutions to the diagnosed problem, authors of the 1790s propose a more practically oriented education of middle-class women and changes to the extant system of occupational

segregation. Wollstonecraft suggests that women could work as physicians, nurses, midwives, and conduct “[b]usiness of various kinds” (*Vindication*, p. 184). Wakefield is more specific in a chapter of *Reflections* entirely devoted to “lucrative employments for the first and second classes [. . .], recommend[ed] as agreeable means of procuring a respectable support” (p. 123). For Wakefield, the difficulty faced by this group of women is that their employments “must be such as are neither laborious nor servile, and they must of course be productive, without requiring a capital. For these reasons, pursuits which require the exercise of intellectual, rather than bodily powers, are generally the most eligible” (p. 125). Building on this premise, Wakefield indicates occupations within the realms of literature, painting, engraving, music, landscape design, gardening, and school management. She hence suggests only professions that are both profitable and congruent with prevalent gender (and class) norms.

This, in fact, is true of all authors addressing the question of women's professions: while on the one hand, they challenge what they often term ‘false custom’ and ‘prejudice’ regarding women and work, on the other they maintain a clearly gendered notion of economic pursuits. Their argument is not an egalitarian and integrative one, in the sense that women ought to be allowed to choose the same professions as men. Instead, they promote vertical segregation and urge men to drop ‘feminine’ professions. As Wakefield explains:

Men monopolize not only the most advantageous employments, and such as exclude women from the exercise of them, by the publicity of their nature, or the extensive knowledge they require, but even many of those, which are consistent with the female character.

pp. 150–1

The doctrine of separate spheres is hence transferred onto the labor market and leads to the identification of putatively ‘feminine’ occupations.

This logic is particularly evident in passages devoted to women from the lower-middle and lower classes, for whom gender-based work restrictions were less severe, but nevertheless present. Mary Anne Radcliffe (1746?–1810?), a less-known writer and novelist with a turbulent economic biography, attacks certain male artisans in her pamphlet-cum-fictional-tale with the suggestive title *The Female Advocate: Or, an Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation* (1799). She censures men who earn a living with ‘feminine’ tasks, such as making hats, dresses, and corsets: “What can be said in favour of men-milliners, men-mantua-makers, and men stay-makers? besides all the numerous train of other professions, such as hair-dressers, &c. &c.; all of which occupations are much more calculated for women than men.” (p. 20) Hays argues in a similar vein: “women of the inferior classes might be taylor, hair-dressers, &c. &c.” (*Appeal*, p. 200).

Hays, moreover, exposes how internalized ideals of gender and propriety translate into economic discrimination. While it is deemed unseemly for women of the lower ranks to be outfitters of men, which effectively deprives them of income-earning opportunities, it is acceptable for lower-class men to serve upper-class women:

it is an unaccountable peculiarity, that women of those [lower] ranks, should from motives of delicacy [. . .] abstain from making clothes to men, dressing their hair, and doing other offices for them, by which they might gain their living without hard labour; yet that women of the higher ranks [. . .] admit without scruple – men hair-dressers – men milliners – men mantua-makers. Nay worse than all these, – I blush to write it, – men stay-makers. This is an abuse of privileges indeed.

pp. 200–1

Hays criticizes that lower-class men end up having a larger choice of professions than lower-class women, but she also censures women for colluding in this form of segregation.

Wakefield mentions the same fashion-related professions as Radcliffe and Hays, but additionally indicts what in modern parlance would qualify as the gender pay gap: “Another heavy discouragement to the industry of women, is the inequality of the reward of their labour, compared with that of men, an injustice which pervades every species of employment performed by both sexes” (*Reflections*, p. 151). She substantiates her claim with a footnote quoting the respective annual wages of male and female domestic servants: a footman earns 2.5 times as much as a cook-maid, “though her office is laborious, unwholesome, and requires a much greater degree of skill than that of a valet” (p. 151).

The stress on physical labor involved in the cook-maid’s work implies that Wakefield might subscribe to a variant of the labor theory of value. She justifies higher wages where more bodily exertion is required. On the basis of differences in corporeal strength, she also seems to accept gender-related differences in income, as men can generally perform more physical labor (and are hence more productive) than women: “In employments which depend upon bodily strength the distinction [in wages] is just, for it cannot be pretended that the generality of women can earn as much as men, where the produce of their labour is the result of corporeal exertion” (p. 152). Wakefield argues that women taken together (“the generality of women”) cannot earn as much as the collective of men, because wages reflect “corporeal exertion”, which in the case of women will in sum be always lesser than that of men’s total bodily exertion. Yet while women’s lower *aggregate* pay is justified, paying women less on an *individual* basis is not, if she performs the same amount of bodily labor as a man:

[I]t is a subject of great regret, that this inequality [in wages] should prevail, even where an equal share of application are exerted. Male-stay-makers, mantua-makers, and hair dressers are better paid than female artists of the same professions; but surely it will never be urged as an apology for this disproportion, that women are not as capable of making stays, gowns, dressing hair, and similar arts, as men.

p. 152

As a means of setting right what she deems an unjust situation, Wakefield encourages women of rank to resort to positive discrimination:

[T]hey should determine to employ women only, wherever they can be employed; they should procure female instructors for their children; they should frequent no shops that are not served by women; they should wear no clothes that are not made by them.

p. 154

Radcliffe, in *The Female Advocate*, half-seriously contemplates a similar boycott:

Suppose no lady would suffer herself to be served, in the shops of these effeminate traders, by any of the short clothed gentry, would it not be a means of compelling all those who chuse to carry on the tragi-comic farce, to effect the business under the disguise of gown and petticoat?

p. 59

Hays, somewhat in passing, recommends imposing a tax on premises where men engage in 'feminine' occupations: "Why does not the legislature tax such she-he gentry to the teeth?" (*Appeal*, p. 201).

The authors unanimously assert that the scarcity of respectable income-earning opportunities for women frequently leaves them with but two options for making a living: beggary or prostitution. Socially, both activities tended to be seen as, at least to some degree, resulting from moral depravity, thus locating the problem on the level of individuals. Hays, Radcliffe, Wakefield, and Wollstonecraft, by contrast, conceive of beggary and prostitution as stemming from systemic, socio-economic discrimination. This allows them to frame their demands for women as serving not just a particular clientele, but the common good. Wakefield, for example, postulates, in *Reflections*, that

[w]ere it easier for women to find employment, or were they brought up more capable of earning a maintenance, the good effects of such a practice would not be confined to themselves alone, but would extend to the whole community, as it would be a powerful means of reducing the number of those miserable women, who support a precarious existence by the wages of prostitution, and who, in their turn, become the seducers of the inexperienced youth of the other sex.

p. 166

Radcliffe concurs by claiming in *The Female Advocate* that

until the grievous precedent of men usurping females' occupations is entirely done away, *or some proper substitute provided*, so as to enable women to share the common necessities along with their fellow-creatures: till then, we need not wonder at the vast number of pickpockets and housebreakers which, at all times, infest the streets, to the disturbance of all civil society.

p. 45

The writers present income-earning opportunities for women as a means of stabilizing public – and thus also male – safety, morals, and prosperity. Such reasoning arguably serves economic, but also strategic purposes: all four authors at some point appeal to men, as the group vested with political power, to help amend the situation of women. They were in all likelihood conscious of the fact that their appeals had a higher chance of success if they could be shown to contribute to the wellbeing of male readers and decision-makers.

Conclusions

Despite cultural and institutional obstacles, English women writers around 1800 conducted economic analyses. Marriage and its economic and legal consequences loom large in their writing, as does the question of women's financial (in)dependence. Undoubtedly, debates on women's access to education, their employment opportunities, or the economic rights of wives are not exclusive to the 1790s, but recur in women's writing throughout the centuries. The period around 1800, however, marks a noteworthy stage within the more prolonged, contested, and intermittent process of women's economic emancipation, because while on the one hand, women faced traditional and restrictive notions of femininity, on the other,

the 1790s nurtured a social climate in which those notions could be questioned. This led to a remarkable engagement with gender-related economic topics, covering a wide spectrum of traditional, conservative views and progressive, radical ideas.

Treatises on domestic economy (e.g. by Hester Chapone or Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth) tend to focus on female economic activities congruent with the cultural ideal of a wife and a mother. Assuming that it is women's quasi-natural duty to manage their father's and/or husband's households, the texts emphasize that women must be taught the necessary moral and practical skills to perform their economic functions well. According to Hannah More, "[t]hat kind of knowledge which is rather fitted for home consumption than foreign exportation, is peculiarly adapted to women" (*Strictures* Vol. 2, p. 3). With the family considered the bedrock of society, the (economic) education of women in domestic affairs acquires social significance. Since the texts themselves partake in this educational endeavor, their observations on the economy are virtually inseparable from moral overtones, producing a mixture of positivist and normative claims. Because of their frequent adherence to the generic conventions of the conduct book, texts on domestic economy tend to be descriptive and prescriptive rather than analytical. They moreover provide a female perspective on that realm of the economy that was most readily associated with and attributed to women around 1800.

The novels and pamphlets of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays lean toward the radical range. They contest (albeit not fully) the gender norms of their times and probe alternatives to women's economic status quo. The financial dependence of wives enshrined in the common-law practice of coverture is one of their chief objections. Wollstonecraft and Hays challenge the established view of marriage on several levels: they argue that it is economically irresponsible to make marriage the sole source of maintenance for women, because not all women will marry and not all husbands live up to their role of providing for the family. They moreover censure the limited property rights of married women. Wollstonecraft condemns the subordinate status of wives as "the slavery of marriage" (*Vindication*, p. 193) and makes a case for divorce as a means of regaining financial and emotional independence. Historically, it was not until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1874, and 1882 that some of Wollstonecraft and Hays' farsighted observations were implemented in English law.

Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, but also Priscilla Wakefield and Mary Anne Radcliffe identify women's limited access to paid professions as another crucial economic problem. Reflections on this topic arguably fall into the middle range of the conformity-versus-contestation spectrum, because although, on the one hand, the authors challenge the extant system of occupational segregation and argue in favor of women's economic agency, on the other, they propose solutions that transpose the ideology of separate spheres onto the labor market: men are to withdraw from 'feminine' professions. From today's point of view, the strand of analysis focusing on women's access to paid labor is particularly remarkable for describing economic phenomena and measures that would be taken up and conceptualized in more detail in twentieth-century (feminist) economics: crowding hypothesis, occupational segregation, gender pay gap, and positive discrimination.

The writings by English women authors of the 1790s examined in this chapter illustrate that they produced original, gender-sensitive analyses of the economic and social phenomena of their times. As such, they lived up to the task that Priscilla Wakefield formulated in the quotation cited in the beginning of this chapter: they contributed their "share of productive labour for the good of the whole" (*Reflections*, p. 2).

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