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Sole Traders? The Role of the Extended Family in Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Business Networks

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Despite significant developments in understanding the role of women in early-modern business, more is needed to fully understand women's impact on eighteenth-century trading networks. Further, much less is known about the role of wider family members, especially children, in the eighteenth-century Atlantic economy. The formal documentation that is privileged in business histories does not tell the whole story, and it frequently represents mercantile activity as a pursuit dominated by a patriarch at the center of a trading network. This article explores eighteenth-century familial commercial networks through extensive use of the personal family correspondence of three merchant families who lived and traded within different locales of the northern Atlantic: Hugh Hall, a merchant and vice judge of the admiralty in Barbados; the Black family, who were wine merchants in Bordeaux; and Joseph Symson, a mercer and shopkeeper from Kendal, England. This article will show that women appear as autonomous players with the power and ability to make informed and independent decisions that directed the business interests of their families. Moreover, it includes an assessment of the ways in which merchants cultivated the expertise of their extended families to enhance their commercial networks and advance their business pursuits. Focusing on children who supported or enhanced the prosperity of the family firm, this article emphasizes that their participation was intentional, not incidental. This article asks questions about the emotional consequences of such activity—which have rarely been considered in any detail—as well as the financial benefit of operating in this manner.

Keywords: women, merchants, networks, 18th century

Introduction

In April 1719, Lydia Coleman received a cargo of goods in Boston that had been dispatched by her son-in-law, Hugh Hall, from Barbados. Thanking Hall for his gifts of luxury items, including sugar, oranges, and cocoa—which she claimed “makes the best chocolate that ever I

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ate”¹—Coleman also noted receipt of an assortment of textiles, including scarves, hoods, and nightdresses.² Though items such as these are usually considered to be for personal use (and thus tend to be excluded from business analyses),³ Coleman had been instructed to sell them in her hometown. Crucially, Coleman was not a passive participant in these events. She was approximately seventy-five years old at the time, and her letters reveal a sound understanding of the local market, including the standard pricing of similar goods. As she explained to Hall, “I shall never sell at that price as they are marked at.” Coleman wrote that Boston’s “gentle women won’t give me a hundred percent for them” because “they say they can make them cheaper here.” To help with what she anticipated would be a difficult sale, Coleman asked Mrs. Hall “to write to me the lowest that I shall sell them at or if I shall send them to her again.”⁴ If Coleman were unable to obtain the lowest price wanted for the goods, she would be obliged to return the unsold items to Barbados.

Traditionally, scholarship of the eighteenth-century Atlantic has depicted mercantile activity as a solely masculine pursuit. At best, such works ignore the essential work performed by women and their contributions to early-modern commerce completely; at worst, they emphasize the exceptional entrepreneurial vigor of individual males who acted, it would seem, entirely alone.⁵ However, a cursory glance at the commercial activities described by Lydia Coleman suggests that this simply was not the case. Recent scholarship has successfully dispensed with the categorization of eighteenth-century business as wholly masculine, and this article serves—in part—to confirm the crucial roles performed by women like Coleman in the trading networks of the British-American Atlantic.⁶ Despite significant scholarly advancements, however, there is still much more to be done in order to fully understand the proportion and type of economic activity undertaken by women. Further, much less is known about the role of family members—especially children—in the eighteenth-century Atlantic economy, or the consequences—emotional as well as financial—of such activity. Both of these issues are explored here. In addition to further strengthening existing conclusions regarding women in eighteenth-century mercantile networks (and here for families not before explored in this way), we also investigate the roles played by their extended families and the emotional impact of this activity, particularly for those separated from immediate family. This article contributes to a burgeoning literature that investigates the reintegration of the role of the family into business histories.

Our analysis moves these debates forward in several important ways. First, in examining the ways in which female family members—including wives, mothers, widows, and, as demonstrated by Coleman, even mothers-in-law—contributed essential labor to the

1. Eighteenth-century contractions have been expanded and spellings have been modernized.

2. Lydia Scottow Gibbs Checkley Coleman (hereafter Coleman) to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, American Antiquarian Society (AAS).

3. Talbot, *Conflict, Commerce and Franco-Scottish Relations*, 5–6, 37–38.

4. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1 Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS. Note that Mrs. Hall was not Coleman’s daughter (who had died in 1699) but Hugh Hall’s second wife.

5. See, for example, Doerflinger, *Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise*; Hancock, *Citizens of the World*; Matson, *Merchants & Empire*.

6. Damiano, “Agents at Home”; Simonton, “Claiming Their Place”; Haggerty, “‘Miss Fan can turn her han!’”; Haggerty, *British-Atlantic Trading Community*.

maintenance of trading networks, we argue that the business documentation which is—understandably—privileged in business histories does not tell the whole story (and is likely to exclude women). Instead, our understanding of how eighteenth-century commerce was conducted is supplemented here by extensive use of personal family papers. Through this approach, women appear not acting on the behalf or at the behest of a male protagonist but as autonomous players with the power and ability to make informed and independent decisions that directed the business interests of their families. Second, we look at the ways in which the (usually male) heads of firms specifically cultivated the expertise of their extended family to enhance their commercial networks and advance their business pursuits. Those who were apprenticed at home directly contributed to the daily operation of the business, while the action of sending sons to be apprenticed elsewhere extended and strengthened those ties of business and kin that were so essential to early-modern trade.⁷ We focus particularly on children who supported or enhanced the prosperity of the family firm, emphasizing that their participation was intentional, not incidental. But we also ask questions about the emotional cost, as well as the financial benefit, of operating in this manner. The emotional consequences of splitting families in such a way have rarely been considered in any detail.

In contrast to previous studies that have adopted a narrower geographical focus, we compare the experiences of three merchant families who lived and traded within different locales of the northern Atlantic; namely, North America and the Caribbean, Southern Europe, and England. We ask whether the results of studies that focus on a specific place hold when applied to a wider range of localities. Our three case studies—the networks of Hugh Hall, a merchant and vice judge of the admiralty in Barbados; the Black family, wine merchants in Bordeaux; and the family of Joseph Symson, a mercer and shopkeeper from Kendal, England—all offer the opportunity to combine the use of business and personal correspondence. Despite operating in different countries and regions, these families acted in similar ways in utilizing their wider family networks to facilitate economic activities. Moreover, the appearance of all three of these networks as dominated by the male protagonist—exacerbated by the ways in which the archival collections are identified—is challenged. We provide a comparative overview of the shared experiences of mercantile families in early-modern Atlantic business networks. As we will show, Atlantic merchants within these three locales operated in comparable ways, lending strength to our conclusions both about the importance of understanding eighteenth-century mercantile activity as familial enterprises (rather than sole proprietorships) and the importance of adjusting the methodologies traditionally used to write business histories. Our analysis finds personal connections just as influential as business associations for the ways in which eighteenth-century commerce was conducted.

By privileging surviving personal correspondence and using it in conjunction with business correspondence to compare the experiences of these three families, we not only challenge the appearance of mercantile activity as a solo pursuit, confirm the important contributions made to early-modern economies by women, and support the argument that eighteenth-century mercantile firms are best understood as familial enterprises; we also demonstrate the value of the methodological approach that underpins our analysis. Finally, by undertaking

7. There is a wealth of literature on early-modern trading networks. See, for example: Hancock, *Citizens of the World*; Haggerty, “*Merely for Money*”; Muldrew, *Economy of Obligation*; O’Neill, *Opened Letter*.

this analysis in synergy with important scholarly debates from within the fields of social history, cultural history, the history of emotions, and the history of family, we draw these approaches into the field of business history, where they have rarely featured. This article is divided into three sections. The first explores the historiographical fields in which we situate our work; the second focuses on women; and the third on extended family. Throughout, we comment on the value of the methodology we adopt, the impact of the activities of these families on emotional relationships, and the importance of considering comparative experiences in drawing conclusions about how eighteenth-century mercantile networks operated.

Historiography

In 1919, Alice Clark posited that during the seventeenth century women became increasingly excluded from what she termed the “capitalistic” industry, instead being forced into “family” and “domestic” industry (including carework, housework, and the production of goods that were solely for consumption by the household).⁸ While Clark acknowledged that wives of tradesmen were “sufficiently capable in business,” and that just because goods were produced solely for domestic consumption did not make the process of production any less significant, it is the first part of her argument that has endured.⁹ The mercantile Atlantic continues to be presented as a male-dominated space in recent literature,¹⁰ despite Sara Damiano’s convincing 2015 criticism of the persistently incorrect portrayal of Atlantic trading networks as “homosocial and masculine.”¹¹

In contrast to outmoded works, there is a burgeoning scholarship acknowledging the gendering of capitalism, highlighting the importance of women’s domestic labor to the economy, and noting the vital commercial roles conducted by women both inside and out of the home. This includes studies by Deborah Simonton and Sheryllyne Haggerty, who each emphasize the crucial economic roles performed by women in eighteenth-century urban towns.¹² The women considered within this article, then, were not atypical or unusual. The commonalities between them are suggestive of a shared experience, and situating their economic behavior within existing studies of North America and the Caribbean emphasizes this even further. The works of Alexandra Finley, Ellen Hartigan-O’Connor, Kit Candlin, and Cassandra Pybus all stress the important economic contributions made by women, both Black and White, free and unfree.¹³ Meanwhile, Catherine Cox’s and Helen Dingwall’s studies of

8. Clark, *Working Life of Women*, 3–11; Whittle, “Critique of Approaches to ‘Domestic Work,’” 40.

9. Clark, *Working Life of Women*, 291–293; Ben-Amos, “Women Apprentices,” 227.

10. Christian Koot is a recent example. His evocative scenes of bustling Atlantic ports makes no mention of the presence of women, highlighting only the merchants who “cluster in taverns and counting houses.” Koot, *Empire at the Periphery*, 2; Koot, *Biography of a Map*.

11. Damiano, “Agents at Home,” 810; Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace makes a similar claim that eighteenth-century business is written as a male concern and a masculine process, quoted in Simonton, “Claiming Their Place,” 115.

12. Simonton, “Claiming Their Place”; Haggerty, “‘Miss Fan can turn her han!’”; Haggerty, *British-Atlantic Trading Community*.

13. Finley, “Cash to Corinna”; Hartigan-O’Connor, *Ties That Buy*; Candlin and Pybus, *Enterprising Women*.

working women in Dublin and Edinburgh, respectively, are indicative of a broader experience shared by women in the Anglophone world.¹⁴ Thus, as Hartigan-O'Connor explains, commercial women were not exceptions in exclusively male-dominated markets but were “quintessential market participants” in commercial urban life.¹⁵

Taking into account studies of early-modern female apprenticeships, including the works of Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos and Jessica Collins, we consider the opportunities for professional training that were available to the women studied here.¹⁶ The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw specific crafts and occupations become increasingly gendered, with specific trades—including textiles, agriculture, domestic service, and shopkeeping—largely considered as feminine.¹⁷ Although Collins and Cox both agree that female apprentices were few in number, when girls did obtain apprenticeships they were completed largely within the textile trades.¹⁸ Furthermore, as women were forbidden by guilds from training male apprentices, Pat Hudson and W. R. Lee argue that this compounded the practice of young girls being apprenticed to specific “feminine” industries.¹⁹ Within this context, Mrs. Hall’s—and indeed Lydia Coleman’s—involvement in the textile trade is significant.

Crucially, in revealing how women like Lydia Coleman, Mrs. Hall, and their contemporaries undertook vital commercial activities, we see that they—and women like them—did not merely participate in commerce but were key drivers of economic activity, possessing agency with which they have rarely been credited. Their endeavors were simultaneously independent—such as Lydia Coleman acting as a local agent for the Halls—and conducted in genuine partnership with male relatives. Margaret Black, who we will introduce later, singlehandedly managed the commercial correspondence with her brother-in-law Robert. In doing so, she went beyond Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s definition of the “deputy husband,” acting as a business partner rather than a subordinate.²⁰ While Andrew Popp suggests that such activity was publicly acknowledged among contemporaries, women’s work was often completed without any formal recognition or acknowledgment.²¹ As Helen Doe and as Hudson and Lee have alluded to, this may have contributed to the “invisibility” of these activities in formal business records,²² but they can be found in personal correspondence, as demonstrated throughout this article.

Thinking more broadly about the extended families of which Coleman, Hall, and Black were part, this study contributes to recent scholarship that reintegrates the role of families within business histories. Such works are important. With the exception of Leonore Davidoff

14. Cox, “Women and Business”; Dingwall, “Power Behind the Merchant?”

15. Hartigan-O'Connor, *Ties That Buy*, 2.

16. Ben-Amos, “Women Apprentices”; Collins, “Jane Holt.”

17. Ben-Amos, “Women Apprentices,” 234; Whelan, “Preface,” 10; Collins, “Jane Holt,” 75, 87; Simonton, “Claiming Their Place,” 112–113; Cleary, ““She Will Be in the Shop,”” 182. Local exceptions did exist, however, for instance in Liverpool and Dublin, where women were not employed in textile manufacturing. See Haggerty, “Miss Fan can turn her han!,” 29; Cox, “Women and Business,” 37. Cox notes that Irish linen manufacturing was traditionally viewed as being a masculine activity.

18. Collins, “Jane Holt,” 75; Cox, “Women and Business,” 35.

19. Hudson and Lee, “Women’s Work and the Family Economy,” 11.

20. Ulrich, quoted in Damiano, “Agents at Home.”

21. Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families*, 87–89.

22. Doe, “Gender and Business”; Hudson and Lee, “Women’s Work and the Family Economy.”

and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* in 1987, the scholarship largely neglected the roles performed by merchants' families, including sons and daughters, until the mid-1990s.²³ While works by Jean Agnew, Jacob Price, and Constance Jones Mathers represent an important first step toward considering mercantile activity as a family pursuit, they are not without their limitations: they are largely biographical, or focused primarily on the strategic and commercial operations of the firm.²⁴ Adopting an earlier chronological lens and geographic approach to Hannah Barker's and Popp's respective studies, this article echoes their conclusions that families were central to the organization of firms, both small and large, during the eighteenth century. It shows that the experiences we uncover here were the product of family business dynamics that endured over time and which were found in multiple locations.²⁵ We build upon Margaret Hunt's pioneering study *The Middling Sort*, which by Hunt's own account "lays heavy emphasis on the experiences of women and families" in business.²⁶ When viewed against work that has explored these patterns across Europe and North America, including Marta Vicente's work on Spanish families and the calico trade, as well as Anne Hyde's study of the fur trade in the North American West,²⁷ this article confirms that such conclusions are broadly applicable in a variety of contexts and time periods, strengthening our understanding of women and families in business in a broad sense.

This is not to say, importantly, that doing business with family members necessarily led to positive outcomes, as Robert Symson's experience (explored below) exemplifies. And there is a wealth of recent literature that problematizes the role of families in early-modern business.²⁸ That family networks were an inherent part of early-modern business is well known, but the ways in which family members were utilized, and the emotional as well as financial consequences of this, are less well understood. Through analyzing the experiences of the Black and Symson families, in particular, we both draw on and contribute to important scholarship concerning the history of emotions.

Despite a recent surge in interest in the history of emotions by historians and literary scholars, the study of historical emotions remains complex. As Peter and Carol Stearns highlighted in 1985, there remains a lack of consensus among scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists as to what "emotions" actually are; more recent studies have highlighted that there is still a way to go.²⁹ However, scholars now generally agree that emotions are fluid, learned, and shaped by contextual environments.³⁰ We take Stearns and Stearns's early, but enduring, work on "emotionology"—the standards that a society maintains toward basic

23. Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 6.

24. Agnew, *Belfast Merchant Families*; Price, *Perry of London*; Jones Mathers, "Family Partnerships and International Trade."

25. Barker, *Family and Business*, 11; Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families*.

26. Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 6.

27. Vicente, *Clothing the Spanish Empire*; Hyde, *Empires, Nations and Families*.

28. Haggerty, "'You Promise Well and Perform as Badly'"; Haggerty, "Merely for Money," 52, 138; Hamilton, "Local Connections, Global Ambitions"; Hamilton, "Commerce around the Edges"; Morgan, "Scottish Mercantile Networks"; Hancock, "Trouble with Networks"; Forestier, "Risk, Kinship, and Personal Relationships."

29. Stearns and Stearns, "Emotionology," 813; Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, x–xi; Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, 1–3.

30. Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, xi; Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, 1–3.

emotions and their appropriate expression—as a starting point, while also incorporating more recent frameworks.³¹ These include William Reddy’s work on “emotives,” or emotional expressions;³² and Barbara Rosenwein’s idea of the “emotional community,” which she defines as groups that determine their own values, modes of feelings, and ways of expressing those feelings.³³ Despite their continued differences, scholars stress that historical emotions are products of their own time and, as such, they warn against uncritically interpreting historical expressions of emotion through a modern lens. Nevertheless, by highlighting the emotional responses of separated family members expressed within personal letters, we are rewarded with a glimpse into the societal norms of the families considered.

A final comment must be made about the nature and arrangement of the archival material that underpins this article. A cursory glance at surviving source material does little to challenge the appearance of the eighteenth-century Atlantic as a male-dominated space in which “sole traders” thrived. Eighteenth-century trade directories, for instance, record males as sole proprietors, with few rare exceptions.³⁴ Meanwhile, the structure and organization of archival collections further distorts the importance and presence of female and junior family members while disproportionately emphasizing the activities of individual males. Reflecting a patriarchal society in which the spaces of “doing” commerce—including exchanges, counting houses, and coffee houses—were intrinsically masculine, records of trading firms and partnerships are invariably named for the patriarch. Thus, not only are such records catalogued in ways that do not accurately reflect their contemporary use, but use of these records encourages an approach in which a sole male trader (or partnership) is placed at the center of business. This obscures the important and often “invisible” work performed by the members of a merchant’s familial network, including his wife, sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, and aunts and uncles.³⁵ However, close reading of these records reveals that many of these networks did not and could not function in this way. By prioritizing personal family papers in conjunction with business records, we reveal a hidden layer of what, we argue, should be classed as “business” activity, though this activity is absent from the types of sources that commonly form the basis of business histories. The letters exchanged between Lydia Coleman and her son-in-law, cited at the outset of this article, provide an insight into the range of economic activities that were undertaken by members of a merchant’s extended family. This is only one example. When considered alongside similar personal and business correspondence from the early eighteenth century, such documentation sheds light on the largely unrecorded and often unnoticed work that was undertaken by countless numbers of family members who acted—often in autonomous ways—to expand and maintain a “sole” merchant’s network.³⁶

31. Stearns and Stearns, “Emotionology,” 813; Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*; Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*.

32. Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 63–111.

33. Stearns and Stearns, “Emotionology,” 813.

34. Haggerty, “Women, Work and the Consumer Revolution,” 106; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 132.

35. Women’s work is often described as being “invisible.” See, for instance, Baudine, Carré, and Révauger, “Introduction,” 6; Cox, “Women and Business in Eighteenth-Century Dublin,” 43. While the experiences of the women and children discussed here differ significantly from those of the enslaved women considered by Fuentes, her study provides a useful framework for considering what she terms the inherent and structural “machinations of archival power.” Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 1.

36. Natalie Davis, quoted in Simonton, “Claiming Their Place,” 102.

Women

The letters exchanged between Lydia Coleman and her family in the Caribbean reveal several overlapping layers of economic activity undertaken by female members of this familial network. First, we learn that Coleman received goods that were produced or obtained in Barbados and she distributed them in Boston, Massachusetts. As pointed out earlier, in April 1719 such goods included an assortment of textiles, such as scarves, hoods, and nightdresses, and also what Coleman refers to as “Hungen ends” (presumably textiles that had been made in or imported from the Hessian region of Hungen).³⁷ This was not simply a one-off. In the following month, Coleman received a delivery of cocoa from Barbados, which was to be delivered to Mr. Williams, the schoolmaster. At the time, Hall’s son Richard was living with Coleman—as had Hugh Hall Junior—while he completed his education. Coleman, Richard and Hall Junior’s grandmother, happily reported to Hall that she had delivered the cocoa to Williams and used the opportunity to negotiate the cost of Richard’s school fees. She wrote:

I delivered Richard’s Master Mr Williams . . . Cocoa: I spoke with Mr Williams a little afore I asked him what he expected for Richard’s schooling: he told me 40 shillings a year I was just a going to pay him when I received your sons letter. . . . I asked whether he would have his 40 shillings and the Cocoa or the money and Cocoa to stand to your generosity in that matter: and he told me he would have the Cocoa.³⁸

Letters from the same period indicate that such activity—namely, the local distribution of goods by female family members—was commonplace during the mid-eighteenth century. Consider, by comparison, the letters of New York City merchant Evert Bancker Junior, a member of one of New York City’s leading Dutch families.³⁹ Throughout the 1760s and 1770s, Bancker received a steady stream of letters from his extended Dutch family in Albany, New York, and Bergen County, New Jersey, including from his mother, Maria de Peyster. Like those letters exchanged between Lydia Coleman and her family in Barbados, the content of the Bancker family’s correspondence reveals a similar mixture of topics: accounts of family news and neighborhood gossip were interspersed with requests for the purchase of items, both for use by the individual and orders placed on behalf of other local residents. Susanah Shaw Romney highlights this “intermingling of family and trade” as being typical of letters exchanged within the intimate networks of Dutch New Netherland.⁴⁰ A letter dated August 1771 from Mary Bancker (who identified herself as Evert’s “sister”), for instance, was a mixture of business and pleasure, as she included payment from an uncle to cover the cost of tea that had been imported and delivered by Bancker.⁴¹ His mother, meanwhile, wrote to

37. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

38. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, May 30, 1719, Box 1 Folder 1.

39. Evert Bancker Junior (1734–unknown) was the brother of New York State treasurer Gerard Bancker (1740–1799) and the younger cousin of Evert Bancker (1721–1803), who was speaker of New York Assembly.

40. Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections*, 112.

41. While Evert is addressed as Mary’s “Dear Brother,” May King Van Rensselaer’s genealogical research suggests that Evert did not have a sister named Mary. She was potentially Evert’s sister-in-law. Van Rensselaer, *Goede Vrouw*, xix.

Bancker in May 1773 to follow up about an order she had not yet received. She also took the opportunity to chastise him for being “so much taken up with the world as to forgit he has a mother.”⁴² The implication is that female members of Bancker’s extended family acted as intermediaries and points of contact within the merchant’s communication network, helping to disseminate information regarding his wares within their local communities.⁴³ The fact that this activity was conducted informally has contributed to its exclusion from commercial histories, especially because business papers have been privileged. In this case, these letters are filed under “family papers,” despite recording economic activity.

Returning to the letters exchanged between Coleman and Hall, Coleman’s discussions of both the cocoa and the textiles indicate that she exercised a certain amount of economic power. In the case of the cocoa, she used it to barter the cost of her grandson’s education, and she played a role in establishing the retail price of the textiles. We have already seen how Coleman asked Mrs. Hall to “write to me the lowest [price] that I shall sell them at” before having to return the unsold goods to Barbados.⁴⁴ Whether Coleman ever received such instruction is unclear; however, writing to her grandson Hugh Hall Junior (also in Barbados) the following month, she expressed her concern that the textiles would not sell. Coleman wrote, “I am much troubled to think that I can’t sell them nor the night dresses: neither without much loss,” and she again requested confirmation if she should return the items to Barbados.⁴⁵

In a similar vein, Coleman was responsible for receiving money owed to Hall by Boston residents, including one Mr. Bening. This in itself was not unusual. Damiano illustrates that within the trading world of the Atlantic, women were often entrusted with calling in debts and personally accepting payment in their husbands’—or, in Coleman’s case, her son-in-law’s—absence.⁴⁶ However, when more forceful negotiations appeared to be necessary, the matter was referred back to male patriarchs. For instance, Coleman notes, “I have had no money of Mr Bening since you went but for Richards [*sic*] board 5 pound a quarter.” Although Coleman seems to have been more than competent in managing other financial matters, when reflecting on Bening’s failure to pay, she drew on her feminine vulnerability to spur Hall into pursuing the matter further: “I blush to think on [it] considering the many obligations that I am under.”⁴⁷ As Damiano explains, such action was a typical contemporaneous practice. In her study of New England port cities, merchants’ wives were simultaneously depicted by their own husbands as being both confident and capable but also distressed and needing assistance. This second scenario was most often employed when chasing debtors for payment, as merchants cited their wives’ suffering in attempts to shame correspondents into paying.⁴⁸ Furthermore, comparison with similar contemporary sources indicates that this was an experience unique to women. Although younger sons could draw on their patriarchal fathers’ influence when managing a difficult negotiation, this was not achieved by undermining their own competence. Joseph Symson (introduced below), for instance, intervened when Thomas Bayly failed

42. MssCol 192, Box 1, Bancker Family Papers, New York Public Library (NYPL).

43. Hartigan-O’Connor, *Ties That Buy*, 2–3.

44. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1 Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

45. Coleman to Hugh Hall Junior, May 7, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1.

46. Damiano, “Agents at Home,” 822–824.

47. Coleman to Hugh Hall Junior, May 7, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

48. Damiano, “Agents at Home,” 827.

to pay a bill promptly. This was despite Joseph's son Robert being solely responsible for managing their correspondence. At no point, however, did Joseph blame his intervention on Robert's weakness.⁴⁹ In this way, far from showing inherent weakness, women used all methods available to them to play the system to their own ends, emphasizing their inimitable usefulness to the family business.

Considering more closely the items that Coleman was tasked with selling in Boston, it is notable that they were dispatched by Mrs. Hall rather than her son-in-law, suggesting that she too enjoyed economic and mercantile independence. Again, note that when considering the items' resale in Boston, Coleman wrote, "I desire my daughter [Mrs. Hall] to write to me the lowest that I shall sell them at."⁵⁰ While her son-in-law was charged with passing the request on to his wife, the women bypassed him entirely when it came to making a decision regarding the items' price. Furthermore, once it became apparent that Coleman was potentially unable to sell the goods, she was not able to return them to Barbados without Mrs. Hall's prior approval. Coleman might well have expressed to both Hugh Senior and Hugh Junior her desire to return the goods, but ultimately neither had the authority to approve her request.

The fact that Mrs. Hall traded in textiles should not go unnoticed, as evidence of women being formally employed within the commercial economy invariably finds them associated with textiles.⁵¹ As Ben-Amos explains, however, while textiles were largely considered to be a feminine trade, this was notably confined to the manufacturing and retailing of textiles; the ownership of such businesses remained predominantly male. Thus, when Ben-Amos cites the example of Eleanor Morgan, who was apprenticed to mercer Robert Jeffreys in sixteenth-century Bristol, she stresses that Eleanor was to learn his trade and not that of his wife, Johanna, who was a shepster.⁵² Meanwhile, Collins, in her study of London-based early-modern apprenticeship records, found that up to 86 percent of female apprentices were engaged within the textile industry, receiving training as milliners, glovers, clothworkers, and coat sellers.⁵³

Little is known of Mrs. Hall or how she learned her skills in trade. It is possible that she acquired her skills as an apprentice, but it is also likely that she gained her experience from close proximity to male relatives who were either merchants or involved in trade in another capacity. As Simonton argues, "most women found access to business through husbands or fathers."⁵⁴ She notes that partnerships between husbands and wives were commonplace during the eighteenth century, and Hunt and Patricia Cleary each similarly note that many

49. Joseph Symson to Thomas Bayly, December 1, 1711, January 1710–March 1720, HM 50670, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, Huntington Library (HL).

50. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

51. Dingwall, "Power Behind the Merchant?," 156; Clark, *Working Life of Women*, 292; Hudson and Lee, "Women's Work and the Family Economy," 16. For more on the "commercial" economy compared with housework and home production (also described as the "family" economy), see Whittle, "Critique of Approaches to 'Domestic Work,'" 35–70.

52. Ben-Amos, "Women Apprentices," 230. A shepster was a woman employed in cutting out material as part of the dress-making process. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "shepster," accessed April 22, 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/177983.

53. Collins, "Jane Holt," 75.

54. Simonton, "Claiming Their Place," 105.

women worked in their husbands' shops.⁵⁵ Indeed, in his *Complete English Tradesman* (1726), Daniel Defoe recommended that it was good practice for tradesmen to acquaint their wives with their trade so they "might be able to carry it on if she pleased, in case of his death."⁵⁶ Thus, Mrs. Hall may have learned her skills as a consequence of her marriage to merchant Hugh Hall, or perhaps during her childhood as the daughter of a merchant. Such occurrences were commonplace. Popp highlights the example of Elizabeth Shaw, who played an active and important role in the daily operation of her husband's hardware business in Wolverhampton. Popp explains that as a child, Elizabeth had assisted both her parents and her brothers in their respective retail businesses.⁵⁷ Indeed, the commercial activities performed by Lydia Coleman suggest a similar experience shared by two women within the same family. Coleman was the widow of Boston merchant Benjamin Gibbs, and from both the responsibilities entrusted to her by her son-in-law and by her own apparent commercial acumen, it is highly likely that she had performed similar activities for her husband and may even have acted as his business partner.

Coleman was not simply a passive recipient of Caribbean goods but also an active participant in a network of exchange. Despite her advanced age, in addition to distributing Barbadian goods in Massachusetts, she was also responsible for obtaining locally produced goods from New England and arranging for their transportation to Barbados. Writing to her grandson, Hugh Junior, in May 1719, Coleman noted: "I have sent by Captain Brunton a box of nuts and 2 gallons of oysters in two casks: a gallon in each of them and 2 cask of the same Bigness by Captain King: 2 to your father."⁵⁸ Of course, some of these items may have been for personal use, as was a portion of the cargo they sent to her. As Lindsay O'Neill explains, the strategic inclusion of gifts such as these with letters enforced traditional methods of social obligation to strengthen ties between the two branches of the family.⁵⁹ However, in this case, Coleman's final remark on the oysters indicates that they were to be sold, as she instructs Hugh Junior to "write to me whether they come good."⁶⁰ This consolidates Coleman's position as an active rather than a passive participant in this activity—she is both supplying the oysters for selling and requesting information to enable her to make decisions about future speculations.

Coleman was a crucial member of Hall's mercantile network in terms of the import and export of goods as well as a valuable source of information regarding the economic situation in Boston. For instance, she updated Hall with information concerning the local market value of Caribbean-produced goods. In April 1719, she wrote only "rum : 4 : shilling sugar : 9 shillings : a pound."⁶¹ The brevity of the exchange indicates that no context was needed. This formed a regular feature of Coleman's letters, often wedged between shipping conditions and news of Hall's children. In the following month, she wrote to Hugh Senior that "sugar is extremely

55. Simonton, "Claiming Their Place," 105; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 129; Cleary, "'She Will Be in the Shop,'" 186.

56. Defoe, *Complete English Tradesman*, 353.

57. Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families*, 87–89.

58. Coleman to Hugh Hall Junior, May 7, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

59. O'Neill, *Opened Letter*, 113.

60. Coleman to Hugh Hall Junior, May 7, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

61. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1.

dear: 10 pence a pound: good brown sugar.”⁶² She updated both Hugh Senior and Junior on the scarcity of goods, writing to Hugh Junior in May 1719 that “sugar is very scarce” and to Hugh Senior in April 1719 that “there is no fish to be had.”⁶³ Coleman was especially interested in the scarcity of fish, with repeated updates regarding its availability. Such references are notable, as salted fish was an important commodity in eighteenth-century New England.⁶⁴ Coleman’s exportation of New England oysters suggests that if fish had been available, she would also have dispatched some to Barbados. These interjections are significant not only because of their content but also because they are included in what is nominally personal rather than business correspondence.

Finally, Coleman provided updates to both Hugh Senior and Junior on the purchasing capabilities of Boston’s residents. As we noted above, her main concern with Mrs. Hall’s textiles was that their price was too high for Boston’s gentlewomen. The reason for this, as she explained to Hugh Junior, was that although “they are very good and gentle dresses . . . our ladies have but little money and are very careful how they lay it out.”⁶⁵ Indeed, the lack of ready money may potentially have been a consequence of the unavailability of fish. As Daniel Vickers explains, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the fishing industry in Massachusetts was dependent on credit, which was extended by merchants to local fishermen, who in turn were responsible for obtaining and salting the fish. The merchants then shipped the finished product in exchange for money.⁶⁶ If there was no fish available, then New England’s gentlewomen—likely to have been drawn from the merchant classes—would have little available money to spend.

The case of Lydia Coleman raises important questions regarding the typicality of her experience or whether she was simply a curious anomaly within the trading networks of the early-modern Atlantic. Similar experiences by contemporaneous women would suggest not. Consider, for instance, Margaret, the daughter of Robert Gordon, a Scottish wine merchant who resided in and traded from Bordeaux. In 1716 she married John Black, a Belfast-born wine merchant, who was also living in Bordeaux.⁶⁷ This was typical for the daughters of merchants in expatriate trading communities. As David Hancock explains, newcomers often married the daughters of fellow Anglophone merchants to forge economic and social ties.⁶⁸ Contained within the Black Family Papers, held at the Huntington Library, Margaret’s letters demonstrate a deep understanding of the family’s trade and mercantile affairs. Although few in number, one can infer from her letters that she enjoyed a great deal of responsibility regarding the daily operations of the business and acted as John’s business partner.

Margaret’s letters to Robert Black, her brother-in-law, are illustrative of this. They suggest that Margaret, in Bordeaux, was responsible for updating Robert, in Cadiz, with business information concerning crops, shipments, and any political circumstances that might impact

62. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, May 30, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1.

63. Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1.

64. Vickers, *Farmers and Fishermen*.

65. Coleman to Hugh Hall Junior, May 7, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

66. Vickers, *Farmers and Fishermen*, 100–108.

67. “Black Family Papers: Finding Aid,” HL (reproduced at http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/huntington/mss/black_family.pdf, accessed April 16, 2021).

68. Hancock, “Trouble with Networks,” 474–475.

the continuation of their trade. For instance, in October 1738, referring to the conclusion of the Polish War of Succession (1733–1738)⁶⁹—in which France and Spain were both involved—Margaret wrote to Robert to advise that “we are here [in Bordeaux] still assured of peace,” which would permit the safe transportation of wine between the members of the Black family who were resident in Bordeaux and Cadiz. In anticipation of the recommencement of trade unhindered by the dangers of war, Margaret informed Robert that “[we] are in hope now of a good vintage to begin in a few days if the weather continues favourable.”⁷⁰

Notably, all of this information was provided by Margaret, not John. This is not a false impression caused by an anomaly in the nature of the surviving records; other letters from 1738 taken from the collection indicate that John was in regular correspondence with Robert; however, the content of their letters did not concern the wine trade.⁷¹ We also learn from Margaret and Robert’s correspondence that he lodged his orders with Margaret directly, bypassing John from the ordering process entirely. In November 1738, for instance, Margaret wrote to Robert to confirm shipment of a “very pleasing commission.” Margaret confirmed that she had received Robert’s “favour,” in which he requested “five hogsheads good claret four of which to be bottled in quarts and one in pint bottles.” She advised that the order “shall be carefully executed and dispatched as your order the first good occasion,” noting that “I am glad the last proved so good and will endeavour all I can that what shall be sent be no worse.”⁷² In a postscript to the letter, Margaret also provided a brief update on her negotiations for the sale of the wine crop, writing that “the bargain for the two first growths in meadow is blown up and no price yet made for the seconds I have got about fifty tons of the last secured by friends [*sic*] order.”⁷³

Margaret’s letters indicate a thorough understanding of the mechanics of the wine trade, a sophisticated level of technical knowledge, and a level of expertise and confidence with the quotidian operation of the family business. Indeed, Margaret’s letters—were it not for her name printed at the bottom of the page—appear to share more similarities with business letters written by her male merchant contemporaries than they do with those letters written by Lydia Coleman or the female members of the Bancker family. While Margaret does, like many of her male counterparts, provide brief updates of family news, her letters are typically concise and of a business-like nature, being “letters of trade, wrote with judgement” that most merchants prized.⁷⁴ Unlike the letters of Lydia Coleman, they are not peppered with what Simonton describes as “feminine” discourse, such as religious references, including expressions of thanks to God that their family enjoys continued prosperity and safety.⁷⁵ Nor do Margaret’s

69. Peace was negotiated in 1735 but not ratified until the Treaty of Vienna in November 1738.

70. Margaret Black to Robert Black, October 4, 1738, Box 1, Folder 4, Black Family Papers, HL. For work discussing the impact of war on commerce in this period, see Talbott, *Conflict and Commerce*; Truxes, *Defying Empire*; Marzagalli, “Establishing Transatlantic Trade Networks.”

71. John Black to Robert Black, July 11, 1738, Box 1, Folder 1, Black Family Papers, HL.

72. Margaret Black to Robert Black, November 15, 1738, Box 1, Folder 5.

73. Margaret Black to Robert Black, November 15, 1738.

74. Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, 103; Haggerty, “Link in the Chain,” 162.

75. Simonton, “Claiming Their Place,” 109. See, for example, Coleman’s note: “I often take notice of the providence of God that whatever you sent your son: or my self that it all was came safe to our hands.” Coleman to Hugh Hall Esquire, April 27, 1719, Box 1, Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS. Such religious sentiment was a

letters contain overt expressions of sentiment toward her family.⁷⁶ This may have been due to a difference in personality; perhaps Margaret was simply less affectionate than some of her female contemporaries. However, this seems unlikely; continued reading of the Black family's correspondence indicates that the family enjoyed strong emotional ties, despite being separated by large distances.⁷⁷ More likely, Margaret's letters simply reflected a level of professionalism as she conducted her business. Margaret was one of many female traders who, by avoiding "feminine" discourse in commercial correspondence, established their credibility as autonomous, competent, and reliable businesswomen.⁷⁸

Margaret's letters raise fascinating questions regarding where she learned her trade and how she became so confident in taking a key role in the family business of wine production and exportation. Not only do her letters reflect a high level of professionalism and business acumen but also they indicate that Margaret was highly literate. She writes in a clear, neat hand, with few errors in spelling, at least no more than is typical of similar letters from the period. These factors combined suggest that Margaret received some level of education, whether formal or informal. This was somewhat unusual. Although research suggests that lowland Scots like Margaret enjoyed comparatively high literacy rates, Hunt argues that it was primarily boys who received an education.⁷⁹ According to Hunt, girls were only educated when it would have provided a practical advantage for men.⁸⁰ The likelihood is that Margaret developed her skills during childhood, learning details of the wine trade from her merchant father. As Barker has argued, families were central to the organization and operation of firms during the eighteenth century. While the male head of the household was listed as the sole proprietor of the business, in practice he was often dependent on all members of the household—or, as Barker terms them, the "household family"—for the successful daily operation of the business.⁸¹

Within this context, it was common practice for female members of the household to perform important duties to ensure the successful continuation of the business. As Hudson and Lee explain, such work was viewed by contemporaneous sources as the obligations of wives and daughters rather than as an "occupation."⁸² Simonton, meanwhile, outlines how female economic activity was often subsumed by the idea of the family economy, thus obscuring it from historical record.⁸³ Such an experience was especially true of the female

feature shared by some male merchants' letters of the same period. See, for instance, copy letters from John Newton to Rev. Dr. Jennings (1750–1760), 920 MD 409, Liverpool Record Office.

76. For instance, in May 1719, Coleman wrote to her grandson: "I receive 3 letters from you since you went to Barbados . . . with a great many demonstrations of your great love and care of me which I return you 10000." Coleman to Hugh Hall Junior, May 7, 1719, Box 1 Folder 1, Hugh Hall Papers, AAS.

77. See, for instance, John's letter to Robert in which he informs Robert that Margaret has died. John Black to Robert Black, July 4, 1747, Box 1, Folder 12, Black Family Papers, HL.

78. Simonton, "Claiming Their Place," 109.

79. For more on Scottish literacy, see Houston, *Scottish Literacy*; Smout, "Born Again at Cambulsang"; Stephens, "Literacy in England, Scotland, and Wales."

80. Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 81–85.

81. Barker, *Family and Business*, 11–13.

82. Hudson and Lee, "Women's Work and the Family Economy," 3. See the example of Elizabeth Shaw, who despite being openly acknowledged as playing an important role in the running of her husband's hardware business, had no formal role in either its management or ownership. Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families*, 88–89.

83. Simonton, "Claiming Their Place," 107.

members of fur trader and merchant John Askin's family, who provided essential—and unpaid—labor as his seamstresses.⁸⁴ It was also in stark contrast to the experience of sons who, as we will show in the case of the Symson family, might go on to become partners and executors of the family business or use their experience to gain employment in similar establishments. Within the context of the family business, then, young women like Margaret gained specific and highly desirable skills, comparable with those that might be learned by undertaking a formal apprenticeship.⁸⁵ Collins suggests that women who had developed such skills were more attractive candidates for marriage, especially in instances where her family could offer no dowry, as they promised to be useful additions to the economic family unit.⁸⁶ According to Hancock, Scottish expatriate wine merchants like Robert Gordon were often opportunistic younger sons from low- or moderate-income families. Thus, the lack of a dowry may have been a real concern for Margaret.⁸⁷ With Collins's conclusions in mind, it is possible that Margaret's experience of the wine trade made her an attractive prospect for John Black.

Margaret's Scottish heritage may also have impacted her experiences. Unlike their counterparts in England, whose wealth and property became subsumed by their husbands upon marriage under *couverture*, Scottish women retained greater control over their property, thus helping them to remain economically active.⁸⁸ According to Dingwall, Scottish women remained crucial to the local economy: they enjoyed guild membership, financial autonomy as importers of various commodities, and literacy.⁸⁹ Furthermore, beyond her business knowledge, Margaret's Scottish heritage may also have made her an attractive match for John Black. While Black was Belfast-born, like many Belfast merchants of the period, he was also of Scottish descent.⁹⁰ While it would be unfair to ignore the possibility of romantic love as being behind their union—and indeed John expressed great sorrow to Robert when Margaret took ill and eventually died—the prospect of a literate and likeminded marriage partner with business experience from within the Scottish expatriate community must have held some appeal.⁹¹

Combined, the experiences of Lydia Coleman, Margaret Black, women in the Bancker family, and countless other women like them whose activities have not been preserved—or remain hidden—within archives indicate that female members of a merchant's family played important roles in ensuring the continued operation and prosperity of the business. Women, whether through formal partnerships or via informal local distribution, formed a key component of mercantile networks, thus supporting the conclusions of Simonton and others.⁹² The family unit, of course, also included children, both male and female, and we turn now to consider their roles in promoting the family business.

84. Cook, "Your Little Madam Snip."

85. Ben-Amos, "Women Apprentices"; Collins, "Jane Holt"; Simonton, "Claiming Their Place," 105.

86. Collins, "Jane Holt," 80.

87. Hancock, "Trouble with Networks," 474.

88. Doe, "Gender and Business," 348; Dingwall, "Power Behind the Merchant?," 152–162.

89. Dingwall, "Power Behind the Merchant?," 152–156.

90. In Agnew's study of thirty-two "Belfast" merchant families, at least twenty-two were of Scottish origin. See Agnew, *Belfast Merchant Families*, xvii, 1–3.

91. Barker, *Family and Business*, 134–152; Agnew, *Belfast Merchant Families*, 28; John Black to Robert Black, July 4, 1747, Box 1, Folder 12, Black Family Papers, HL.

92. Cox, "Women and Business in Eighteenth-Century Dublin"; Hudson and Lee, "Women's Work and the Family."

Children

The experiences of Margaret and John Black's children provide an insight into the ways in which merchants drew on their commercial and familial networks to ensure the continued prosperity of their family. Margaret and John had at least thirteen children: John, James, Robert, George, Joseph (known as Jos), Alexander, Samuel, Esther, Thomas, and Katherine (known as Kitty or Kate).⁹³ There were three more daughters whose names remain unknown.⁹⁴ Although many of their sons became merchants, not all entered the wine trade—Joseph, for instance, was a professor of physics and chemistry at the University of Glasgow.⁹⁵ The family provides an example of what Price terms an “expatriate subculture”: a network of families whose younger members were prepared to consider careers that would take them out of the home country in return for a dignified, comfortable return in later life.⁹⁶ Although separated over vast geographical distances, the continued correspondence of the different strands of the Black family demonstrates how the priorities of family and business were closely intertwined. They also reveal the emotional impact that such separation had on individual family members.

Turning first to consider the connections between family and business, the letters reveal how John Black used his wealth and influence to ensure that his children were properly trained for employment. Like many of his eighteenth-century contemporaries, John used his network of family and friends to provide support, training, and education for his sons.⁹⁷ For instance, in September 1748 he wrote to his sixth son, Alexander, encouraging him to enter the world of commerce. John wrote that “it’s now time you should be thinking yourself of employing well your talent as opportunities may offer.”⁹⁸ Barker highlights the role that parents played in providing financial support or advice to their children; in this case, John provided the former.⁹⁹ He informed Alexander, “I am willing to let you have a small stock to try your ingenuity & industry.”¹⁰⁰ However, as John was living in Bordeaux and Alexander was in Dublin, John was unable to offer the practical support and advice that his son needed. In his father’s absence, Alexander relied instead on the expertise of a Mr. Simon, who is identified in later letters between the Black children as a longstanding family friend.¹⁰¹ John’s gift of capital

93. Robert Anderson, in his biography of Joseph Black, claims that there were only twelve children. Anderson, “Joseph Black (1728–1799).” However, an autobiographical letter from Joseph states: “[My father] and my mother . . . educated thirteen of their children, eight sons and five daughters, who all grew up to be men and women.” Joseph’s phrasing suggests that others may have died before reaching adulthood. See Ramsey, *Life and Letters of Joseph Black*, 5.

94. Genealogical research from Ancestry.com suggests that their names may have been Isabella, Jean, and Pricilla.

95. John wrote of Joseph: “My son Jos is become Eminent at Glasgow College Professor of Physick & chemistry.” Meanwhile, Thomas and Samuel were in the linen trade. See John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759, Box 1, Folder 21, and Isaac Simon to Alexander Black, October 5, 1761, Box 1, Folder 33, both in Black Family Papers, HL.

96. Price, *Perry of London*, 1; Jones Mathers, “Family Partnerships,” 372.

97. Barker, *Family and Business*, 118; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 47–63.

98. John Black to Alexander Black, September 21, 1748, Box 1, Folder 13, Black Family Papers, HL.

99. Barker, *Family and Business*, 125–126; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 22–23.

100. John Black to Alexander Black, September 21, 1748, Box 1, Folder 13, Black Family Papers, HL.

101. Kitty Black to Alexander Black, September 30, 1759, Box 1, Folder 22, and Esther Black to Alexander Black, October 14, 1759, Box 1, Folder 23, both in Black Family Papers, HL.

was dependent on Alexander “consulting always Mr Simon & having his approbation in all you undertake,” promising that “he [Simon] will always advise you for the best.”¹⁰² After initially establishing himself in Dublin under the care of Mr. Simon, by 1750 Alexander had joined his Uncle Robert in Cadiz.¹⁰³ While the letters do not provide an insight into the motivation behind the move, they indicate that Alexander and Robert enjoyed a close relationship. For instance, on hearing of Uncle Robert’s death in 1761, Alexander’s brother Robert (then living in the Isle of Man) claimed that the news “gave me greatest concern not only for the loss we have suffered in a person of my poor uncles [*sic*] valuable character but likewise for what you must have suffered by being a witness of his pain and sickness.”¹⁰⁴ John retained a close interest in his children’s lives; consequently his correspondence with Alexander (whom he urged to continue to write to his “poor old Dada”) forms a large portion of the collection.¹⁰⁵

Despite John’s best intentions, when the time came in 1759, he was unable to provide the same financial support to his youngest son, Thomas. In a letter to his brother Robert, John noted that Thomas was attempting to secure a partnership in the Isle of Man.¹⁰⁶ As John explained, the partnership was dependent on Thomas investing sufficient capital. However, John lacked the financial resources to fund it. Now retired, John lamented that “the stock required being too high for poor old me to furnish in these so difficult times.”¹⁰⁷ Instead, Thomas would eventually join his elder brother Samuel in the linen trade.¹⁰⁸ In an earlier letter from John to Alexander, we learn that Samuel enjoyed a considerable degree of commercial acumen. John wrote that “your brother Sam its said is very diligent in laying out his little money that returns to him with interest.”¹⁰⁹ Although John was unable to provide the capital on this occasion, he ensured that Thomas’s future was secured by placing him with his elder, and more successful, brother, thus providing him with alternative support and advice in lieu of financial contributions.

One particular letter reveals the pride that John took in supporting his children’s education and their economic success. In September 1759, John reviewed his children’s professional accomplishments in a letter to his brother Robert.¹¹⁰ The account reveals the geographical scope and size of the familial network. John Junior and his family were in Bordeaux, where they continued in the wine trade.¹¹¹ James was living in Aberdeen, with his wife, Belle, and their twelve children. Robert was in the Isle of Man, where he was described by John as being “very fortunate in trade now.”¹¹² George was in Belfast, working as a partner of merchant

102. John Black to Alexander Black, September 21, 1748, Box 1, Folder 13.

103. John Black to Alexander Black, November 7, 1750, Box 1, Folder 15.

104. Robert Black to Alexander Black, February 2, 1761, Box 1, Folder 26.

105. This term was used by John Black to describe himself. John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759, Box 1, Folder 21.

106. John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759.

107. John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759.

108. Isaac Simon to Alexander Black, October 5, 1761, Box 1, Folder 33.

109. John Black to Alexander Black, September 21, 1748, Box 1, Folder 13.

110. John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759, Box 1, Folder 21.

111. John wrote only of John Junior that he was with his family “sur les rives de La Garonne” [on the lively River Garonne] while later letters place John at Bordeaux. See John Black to Alexander Black, January 21, 1761, Box 1, Folder 25.

112. John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759, Box 1, Folder 21.

Daniel Mussenden.¹¹³ Joseph was in Glasgow, where he had “become Eminent at Glasgow College Professor of Physick & chemistry.” Meanwhile, Kitty and Esther were with the Simon family in Dublin.¹¹⁴ John, then approaching eighty years of age, contentedly reflected, “I will think myself happy in my Patriarchal dignity,” having secured employment for his family.

However, the letter also reveals the ways in which family members utilized each other to provide education and training for the next generation, as John outlined his grandchildren’s future prospects. John’s son James and his family provide an illustrative example. James and Belle had twelve children, eight being sons. Those who were old enough were already either completing formal education or apprenticeships: Johnny was “well settled” as an apprentice in Edinburgh; “Jamey” was with Robert, his uncle, on the Isle of Man; and a third unnamed son was to be educated by Joseph, also an uncle, in Glasgow. With regard to the younger boys, John noted that “the others in due time are to be provided for.”¹¹⁵ Thus, just as the brothers had been placed under the guardianship of trustworthy uncles and merchants within the various ports of Britain, Ireland, and Europe, now their sons were to follow a similar path. Such dependency on members of the extended family was common. As Hunt explains, eighteenth-century family firms like that of the Blacks were underpinned by “kin-based systems of moral enforcement.” Within these kinship groups, it was the duty of all involved to provide emotional support and, where able, capital; those who refused incurred guilt and shame from their community.¹¹⁶ In addition, just as the Black children had seen their mother, Margaret, take an active role in the family business, her sons followed suit. In a letter exchanged between John Junior and his brother Alexander, John noted, “[A]lthough I continue the firm of J. B. & Co, my partners are only my good woman & little ones.”¹¹⁷

While this separation of the family led to the economic and professional success that John celebrated so proudly, the letters also indicate that the decision to split up the family had a large emotional cost, especially for those left behind. The letters exchanged between Kitty and Esther with their brother Alexander (who appears to have been the social center of the family) are especially indicative of this. Kitty, for instance, expressed her delight at receiving her brother’s “wished for, kind and entertaining letters.” Although she sorrowfully admitted of having “very little to tell you of this time,” Kitty was pleased to update Alexander with news of their friends and family in Dublin. She reported that their old friend “Stucky” Simon was happily married “and is grown as fat as a fryer.” Kitty was also in contact with her father, John, on a regular basis, reporting to Alexander that “he and I, constantly write at least once a fortnight” and that “often I can’t help shedding tears at their so very affectual and kind” content.¹¹⁸

113. “Introduction to the Mussenden Papers,” Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/introduction-mussenden-papers> (accessed September 16, 2019).

114. John wrote: “Isaac Simon [of the Simon family of Dublin] his dear Jane their Jacky & Marianne with my Esther & Kate [Katherine/Kitty] are well at Dublin.” John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759, Box 1, Folder 21, Black Family Papers, HL.

115. John Black to Robert Black, September 22, 1759.

116. Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 23-24.

117. John Black to Alexander Black, January 21, 1761, Box 1, Folder 25, Black Family Papers, HL.

118. Kitty Black to Alexander Black, September 30, 1759, Box 1, Folder 22.

Kitty clearly missed her absent family yet got joy from their correspondence, but Esther's experience was somewhat different. By her own account, she grew up knowing few of her siblings in person. She began her correspondence with Alexander in October 1759, explaining, "I have long wished for an opportunity of beginning a correspondence with you, as I see very little likelihood of our meeting to converse, face to face, & as I long much to be better acquainted with you." Esther expressed her hopes that "when you [Alexander] are tired with casting up large sums & settling accompts you would sit down & scribble over a piece of paper which would be a most agreeable present to me."¹¹⁹ In seeking to develop a regular correspondence with their brother, Kitty's and Esther's behavior was typical of early-modern families who found themselves separated by long distances. As social, economic, and geographic changes rendered face-to-face contact less frequent, letter writing was crucial for sustaining and maintaining social and familial networks.¹²⁰

Esther was several years older than Kitty, and her correspondence with her brother does not share the same youthful optimism expressed by her younger sister. It does, however, demonstrate that Esther was aware of her social obligations as a letter writer, even if she was not always able to fulfill them. For instance, Esther was aware that as much as she hoped to entertain her brother with "all the news of the town," she was unable to. As she explained to Alexander, "I'm afraid I can't give you much of that as I was not here in your time, therefore am not acquainted with many of your comrades."¹²¹ While some studies openly acknowledge that separation was common among merchant families during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and other studies have explored the strong emotional bonds that existed between children and their parents, few have considered in much detail what it meant for those left behind. Unlike Kitty, Esther's letter hints at genuine sorrow that she has grown up without the physical presence of her elder siblings, writing, "I make people stare sometimes when I tell them I have brothers & a sister that I really don't know, otherwise than as we converse by letter which is really true, too true."¹²²

The expressions of sentiment visible in Kitty's and Esther's letters—described by Reddy as "emotives"—provide an important glimpse into the societal and emotional norms of their community.¹²³ Both letters contain expressions of gratitude for the receipt of Alexander's correspondence and the joy of hearing of his well-being. They also both express sorrow for having little relevant news of their own to share (something which was likely compounded by the lack of prior social interaction on which to base their letters). However, interpretation of these emotional expressions should be treated with care. To use Rosenwein's terminology, the sentiments expressed within Kitty's and Esther's letters provide an insight into the Black sisters' own "emotional community," which may not necessarily equate to that of our own. Whether or not Kitty genuinely shed tears at the content of her father's letters or whether this was simply performative, we will never know. Either way, its mere inclusion is suggestive of an expectation—at least among her own "emotional community"—that Kitty should be seen to

119. Esther Black to Alexander Black, October 14, 1759, Box 1, Folder 23.

120. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families*; O'Neill, *Opened Letter*, 2.

121. Esther Black to Alexander Black, October 14, 1759, Box 1, Folder 23, Black Family Papers, HL.

122. Esther Black to Alexander Black, October 14, 1759.

123. Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 63–111.

be a loving and devoted daughter, despite spending very little time with her father in person.¹²⁴

We now turn, finally, to consider the Symson family. The experiences of Joseph Symson and his four sons provide an indication of the ways in which children could be used to effectively extend a merchant's network. Symson, from an Anglican clerical family, was a mercer and shopkeeper in Kendal during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. His letter-book, also held at the Huntington Library, contains copies of all outward correspondence between Symson and his business associates.¹²⁵ The letters we have considered thus far comprise a mixture of business information and family news. The letters of Joseph Symson are, by comparison, primarily concerned with commercial and financial transactions. For instance, they provide an exceptional depth of information on contemporaneous woolen manufacturing, including the machinery, the workforce, and the impact of both on the quality of the finished product. However, the interest of the letters for the purposes of this article lies in what they reveal about the activities of Symson's sons, who helped to extend his commercial network. Upon Symson's death in 1731, this network extended from Kendal to Whitehaven, Newcastle, Preston, Leeds, Wakefield, Halifax, Manchester, Liverpool, and London.

The letter-book commences in 1710 when Symson was approximately sixty years of age. He had four sons: Robert, John, William, and Benjamin. Symson was already a widower by 1710, so there are no references to his wife, Hannah, within the correspondence.¹²⁶ Whether she would have played an active role in the family business, like the women discussed above, we will never know for sure; however, as the daughter of a prosperous Preston attorney, she may have been in a position to offer valuable legal advice.¹²⁷ As Barker explains, it was acknowledged as being the duty of parents and family members to ensure that their children were properly trained for employment.¹²⁸ Symson was no exception to this; as his biographer, Simon Smith, notes, the letter-book reveals how Joseph "concentrated his mind on his responsibilities as *pater familias*."¹²⁹ All four of his sons were initially apprenticed with Symson himself for one year, before being placed within businesses in the northwest of England.¹³⁰ John was sent to the merchant Henry Chorley, in Liverpool, while Benjamin was apprenticed to Edmund Neild, in Manchester. Robert, for the first years of the letter-book, remained in Kendal as his father's business partner and designated successor, although his younger brother, William, would eventually assume this role. Joseph explained his reasons for separating the brothers in a letter to Robert in 1717: Kendal was simply not large enough to enable two Symsons to excel in the same trade,¹³¹ and thus physical—and perhaps emotional—closeness was sacrificed for

124. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, 3–10.

125. An edited version of the letter-book was published in 2002. See Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*.

126. Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, xcvi.

127. Hannah was the daughter of Richard King and Mary Atherton of Ribbleton Hall, in Preston. Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, xcvi.

128. Barker, *Family and Business*, 118; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 22–24.

129. Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, xcvi.

130. Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, xcvi.

131. Joseph wrote that "upon mature, deliberate thoughts, agreeing with the advice of good friends here, it is thought that 2 brothers in this town of the same business will not do in our way to support 2 families, if they should live to marry." Joseph Symson to Robert Symson, November 7, 1717, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, HL.

financial reward. However, it was important to Joseph that his sons engage in markets that dovetailed with each other; namely, Liverpool's cotton market and Manchester's woolen market, which complemented Kendal's cotton and linsey trades.

From his advantageous position in the growing port of Liverpool, John was able to provide his father with the most current information on different markets, including the Caribbean sugar trade, the Chesapeake tobacco trade,¹³² and the Liverpool market for Kendal's cotton and linsey manufactures, as local merchants sought textiles as cargo for the colonial trade.¹³³ Owing to Liverpool's proximity to Chester, John also received goods that were dispatched to the port there.¹³⁴ Just as Hugh Hall sent luxury Caribbean items to his mother-in-law in New England during 1719, less than a decade earlier John had dispatched sugar, oranges, and lemons to his father in Kendal. In July 1711, Joseph thanked John for sending such items, but expressed his concern that John might have wasted his money on the costly goods that he would be unable to sell. Joseph wrote, "I hope you have not laid out much for the lemons and oranges for they'll not be of much use to us only to oblige some friends."¹³⁵ Joseph did, however, appreciate his son's newfound connections to the wine trade, writing that "as for wine we can do well enough without it till some that's rare good can be met with very cheap we must save what we can."¹³⁶

Like Joseph Black and Hugh Hall, Symson drew on his extended family network to provide training and lodging to support his children's education. Henry Chorley, referred to in the letters as "Cousin Chorley," was the brother of John Chorley, of Preston, who was married either to Joseph's sister or sister-in-law.¹³⁷ The letters indicate that although Henry Chorley remained closely acquainted with the Symson family's economic pursuits in Liverpool until his death in 1717, John's time with him was only meant to be temporary. In a letter exchanged between Joseph and his brother John in September 1711, Joseph revealed that John intended to set up his own shop. He wrote that "my son John will be out of his time at Liverpool & god will[ing] I design him to set up there next Christmas if I can get up money."¹³⁸ As John's father, it was Joseph's responsibility to provide financial support that would enable his son to establish his own business.¹³⁹ We have already seen in the case of John Black that such action was costly, and not always possible to fulfill entirely. Thus, Joseph Symson began to call in the debts owed to him by his brothers William and John. Joseph justified his actions to his brothers, explaining, "I thank god he [John] has good encouragement to have a tolerable trade, I must rake up all I can for him."¹⁴⁰ As a member of Symson's extended family, however, Henry

132. Although Liverpool's revolutionary wet dock was not completed until 1715, its construction had been authorized in 1708. This would transform shipping operations at the port and eventually help Liverpool attain world-leading status in maritime trade. See Ascott, Lewis, and Power, *Liverpool 1660–1750*, 141, 153–154, 156; Farrer and Brownbill, "Liverpool: The Docks."

133. Becket, review of Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, 227.

134. Joseph Symson to John Symson, September 3, 1711, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, HL.

135. Joseph Symson to John Symson, July 26, 1711.

136. Joseph Symson to John Symson, July 26, 1711.

137. See the bibliographical note on the Chorley family in Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, 707–708; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 22–24.

138. Joseph Symson to John Symson, September 8, 1711, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, HL.

139. Barker, *Family and Business*, 118; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 22–24.

140. Joseph Symson to John Symson, September 8, 1711, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, HL.

Chorley continued to provide John with support and professional advice, including guidance regarding the premises that John should secure for his own shop. Writing to Chorley in December 1711, Joseph thanked him and “Cousin Shaw” (Joseph Shaw) for “assisting my son John with your advice, what kindness is by any one done to him I shall always to my power gratefully acknowledge.”¹⁴¹ Indeed, the combined efforts of Joseph and his extended family to raise sufficient capital evidently paid off, as indeed John was set up in Liverpool by Christmas. In a letter exchanged between brothers Robert and John in December 1711, Robert wrote, “I heartily wish the step you have made as to your shop &c. and every [thing] that you do or shall make in order to your entering upon trade may be successful and satisfactory.”¹⁴²

Robert was the only one of Joseph’s sons not to receive training or educational instruction outside of the immediate family unit. Instead, Robert, as the eldest son, learned his trade as Joseph’s business partner and deputy, being primed to inherit the family business.¹⁴³ Symson’s letter-book reveals that Robert was solely responsible for managing correspondence and negotiations with certain clients, in particular one Mr. Thomas Bayly. Surviving correspondence between Bayly and the Symson family is illustrative of Robert’s training and role within the family textile trade. Bayly, who is described only as a “Merchant of London,” first encountered Joseph Symson in April 1711. Owing to the nature of the letter-book as a record of the letters of Joseph Symson (and occasionally Robert, acting on Joseph’s behalf), we only have access to one half of the conversation, and it is unclear how the relationship between the Symsons and Bayly began. However, the suggestion from Joseph’s initial response is that Bayly approached Symson, mentioning their mutual acquaintances of John Robinson and London merchant Michael Bovell.¹⁴⁴ This was typical of business letters of the period. In their study of first-contact letters sent between merchant banking houses in early-modern France, Arnoud Bartolemi and colleagues found that the majority of such letters were effectively “cold call” letters. Those banking houses that were successful in establishing a regular correspondence made reference to mutual acquaintances, even if they did not include a formal recommendation from such persons.¹⁴⁵ In an early letter from Robert Symson to Thomas Bayly, Robert wrote that Bayly “may depend upon our utmost care to serve you to content as you are Mr Bovell’s friend.”¹⁴⁶ The ongoing correspondence with Bayly follows a unique pattern compared with those of Joseph’s other correspondents. While Joseph, as the patriarch of the family, responded to Bayly’s initial contact, it was Robert who assumed responsibility for managing the relationship. Except for the initial response from Joseph, almost all subsequent letters to Bayly—including those negotiating terms and calling for payment—were written by

141. Joseph Symson to Henry Chorley and Joseph Shaw, December 15, 1711. See the bibliographical note for Joseph Shaw, of another prominent Preston family, in Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, 730.

142. Robert Symson to John Symson, December 3, 1711.

143. According to Smith, Joseph’s experiences with Robert made him cautious, and William was never made a partner on the same terms as Robert. However, it was William, not Robert, who inherited Joseph’s estate, and it was William’s son Joseph who later inherited the family business. Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, cx.

144. See the bibliographical note for Michael Bovell, in Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, 702–703. There is no record for John Robinson.

145. Bartolemi et al., “Becoming a Correspondent.”

146. Robert Symson to Thomas Bayly, April 28, 1711, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, HL.

Robert.¹⁴⁷ It would seem that as Joseph's successor-in-waiting, Robert was being trained in managing relationships with clients, a skill that would be essential when he inherited the business.

Despite Joseph's best intentions to secure a prosperous and successful future for his sons, financial support could not always guarantee protection against the difficulties of eighteenth-century life. For example, John died in 1715, at the age of twenty-six, leaving Joseph with a dilemma: John's Liverpool connections were advantageous, and Joseph needed to choose whether to abandon John's business entirely or set up another of his sons in John's place. His decision was to send Robert to Liverpool—much to Robert's delight—to assume control of John's premises.¹⁴⁸ William, age seventeen, was then appointed to be Joseph's successor in Kendal. Robert's experience in Liverpool was not a successful one, and serves as a reminder that although dependency on family networks was a strategy commonly used by Atlantic merchants to minimize risk, it did not necessarily ensure commercial success.¹⁴⁹ As Albane Forestier highlights in her study of West Indian trade networks, "family members could represent as much of a liability as an asset."¹⁵⁰ It quickly became apparent that Robert was not the same promising merchant that his brother had been, as he was lacking John's skill and commercial aptitude, as well as the training and support from the Chorleys and Shaws. Disinterested in commerce, Robert preferred instead to spend his newfound independence styling himself as a philanthropic gentleman among Liverpool's (and, much later, Chester's) emerging elite.¹⁵¹ His experiments with altering his appearance—including growing a beard, much to Joseph's indignation—caused his father so much concern that he asked mutual acquaintance David Pool to observe Robert's activities in Liverpool and report back.¹⁵² As Smith explains, the financial difficulties of withdrawing from his late son John's business necessitated that Robert remain in place in Liverpool. Consequently, the remainder of their letters document the increasingly strained relationship between Robert and Joseph, and serve as a reminder of the emotional cost of splitting the family in the hopes of financial success.

Joseph's youngest son, Benjamin, was apprenticed to Edmund Neild, in Manchester. While John had been placed within the security of the Symson's wider familial network, Joseph lacked family connections in Manchester. As such, Benjamin's apprenticeship was initially less successful than that of John's. Aged seventeen, Benjamin experienced extreme homesickness and repeatedly expressed his desire to return to Kendal. There were also concerns regarding Neild's suitability as a master. In a letter to Benjamin dated April 1718, Joseph

147. As noted earlier, an exception occurred in December 1711, when Joseph intervened to reprimand Bayley for failing to pay a bill promptly. Joseph Symson to Thomas Bayley, December 1, 1711.

148. While the letters do not explicitly discuss Symson's reasoning for doing so, Smith suggests that tensions had emerged between Joseph and Robert, and that the latter was keen to leave Kendal. See Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, c.

149. Haggerty, "'You Promise Well and Perform as Badly'"; Hamilton, "Local Connections, Global Ambitions"; Hamilton, "Commerce around the Edges"; Morgan, "Scottish Mercantile Networks"; Hancock, "Trouble with Networks."

150. Forestier, "Risk, Kinship and Personal Relationships," 918.

151. Robert became a close friend of Bryan Blundell, a Liverpool-based slave trader, philanthropist, and founder of the Blue Coat charity school. By 1733 Robert was describing himself as "Robert Symson of Chester, Gentleman." Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, cx.

152. Smith, *Exact and Industrious Tradesman*, c–cvi.

expressed his concern over Neild's reputation for "drinking & keeping late hours in going home," which were at odds with Joseph's vision of a Christian household. In so doing, Neild would be unable to lead his family in prayer, which Joseph envisaged as an essential quality for a good Christian master.¹⁵³ Although Joseph initially scolded Benjamin for not alerting him to such information sooner, writing that "I wish you wrote your mind more plainly to me before I had sent [Neild] my money," he took the allegation seriously and charged Manchester merchant and mutual acquaintance Roger Sedgwick with investigating the claim. Should Sedgwick find that Neild did indeed indulge in excessive drinking and provide a "bad example" for Benjamin, Joseph would be obliged to "think of some other place for I would have myself & you [Benjamin] more easy."¹⁵⁴

The allegations against Neild were ultimately found to be untrue and Benjamin was to remain in Manchester. As his brother Robert explained to him in May 1718, "he [Joseph] as well as all his friends are entirely of opinion that it will be best for you to stay where you are."¹⁵⁵ However, Benjamin continued to express two concerns regarding the nature of his apprenticeship. The first was that a preexisting weakness in one eye was being worsened by Benjamin being tasked with warping.¹⁵⁶ The second was that, as the most junior of Neild's three apprentices, Benjamin perceived that his access to commercial training and the warehouse would be limited.¹⁵⁷ Joseph maintained a regular correspondence with Neild, and by the summer of 1718 Benjamin's concerns appear to have been resolved. From a letter to Neild dated August 1718, we learn that an outbreak of sickness in Manchester had led to Benjamin briefly returning to Kendal. Expressing his desire for Neild's own son's speedy recovery, Joseph wrote, "I assure you very much both to mine & his satisfaction he [Benjamin] tells what tender care both good Mrs Neild & you showed in his last illness and of getting him a bed at your friend's house." Not only are the Neilds described as being a "tender" master and mistress but Benjamin was reported to be "very cheerfully willing to return [to Manchester] when ever you order & think it proper & safe."¹⁵⁸ While Benjamin's view of his position altered over time, the fact that he was initially compelled to stay in Manchester, despite his proclaimed unhappiness, emphasizes that he was seen by his father and elder brother, in part at least, as an asset to be utilized in the family network.

Conclusion

Through three case studies—the Hall family of Barbados and Boston, the Black family of Bordeaux, and the Symson family of Kendal—we have explored the ways in which women

153. Joseph was concerned by the poor example being set for Benjamin, writing that "you have not been used to such." Joseph Symson to Benjamin Symson, April 24, 1718, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, HL; Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families*, 4; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 54.

154. Joseph Symson to Benjamin Symson, April 24, 1718.

155. Robert Symson to Benjamin Symson, May 8, 1718.

156. The action of preparing a warp for weaving. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "warping, n.1," accessed April 22, 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/225827.

157. Joseph Symson to Benjamin Symson, April 24, 1718, Joseph Symson Commercial Letter-book, HL.

158. Joseph Symson to Edmund Neild, August 28, 1718.

and children ensured the economic success of an “individual” merchant’s business. We have shown that members of a merchant’s extended family, both male and female, young and old, performed a range of important and skilled tasks that were essential to the daily operation of the firm.

Female members of mercantile families undertook important tasks, such as obtaining and distributing business intelligence. This included gathering and communicating information related to local markets, pricing, and the availability of goods and raw materials, as well as providing updates on crop growth and sales. Such information needed to be accurate and timely, as decision making based on incorrect or outdated business intelligence proved costly. Closely linked as they were to the acquisition and dissemination of business information, women upheld and even extended merchants’ communication networks. As seen in the case of the Bancker family, Evert’s female family members acted as intermediary agents. They provided face-to-face information to their peers regarding Evert’s stock, and customers approached these women when their orders were late or had gone astray. Women performed practical and logistical roles, such as processing orders and distributing goods within the chain of consumption. Crucially, these women acted not as pseudo-employees of the firm but independently and with agency, and they were recognized both by their business associates and the patriarch as decision makers.

Children performed slightly different, although complementary, functions. As Hunt and others have articulated, in the early eighteenth century, it was the duty of responsible fathers to ensure that their children (albeit primarily their sons) were sufficiently educated and prepared for employment.¹⁵⁹ Through the case studies considered here, we have detailed how merchant fathers drew on their extended family and business connections to ensure adequate training for their descendants. By placing sons with family and friends in different cities—and in the case of the Black family in different countries—children served to extend a merchant’s commercial network. Joseph Symson, for instance, gained access to both Liverpool’s local markets and the colonial market by establishing his son John there. Children were utilized within family business networks in explicitly intentional rather than incidental ways, as they formed a crucial part of the commercial process. Meanwhile, a continued interest in the well-being of absent children strengthened preexisting ties of kinship and friendship. The letters between brothers John and Robert Black display strong emotional ties through their regular exchange of updates regarding Alexander’s progress. Meanwhile, the ties between Joseph Symson and Edmund Neild, in Manchester, which were only nascent with the commencement of Benjamin’s apprenticeship, became visibly stronger through their ongoing correspondence and mutual concern for Benjamin’s well-being. Finally, children helped to ensure the continued future prosperity of the family after the patriarch’s death. Joseph’s son William (and later his grandson, also named Joseph) continued the Symson’s mercer firm in Kendal, while John Black’s son John Junior continued the wine firm of “J. B. & Co” after John’s retirement.¹⁶⁰ Although splitting up the family occasioned significant economic and commercial advantages, such action was not without negative emotional consequences. As the letters exchanged between Alexander Black and his sisters Esther and Kitty and the experiences of Benjamin

159. Barker, *Family and Business*, 118; Hunt, *Middling Sort*, 22–24.

160. John Black to Alexander Black, January 21, 1761, Box 1, Folder 25, Black Family Papers, HL.

Symson attest, the children of merchants experienced feelings of isolation, abandonment, and severe homesickness.

Eighteenth-century merchant firms were comprised of much more than a sole male trader, but most of the people included in this article have previously remained hidden behind the patriarch for whom the archival collections are named, such as the Hugh Hall Papers and the Joseph Symson Letter-book. In fact, these men were in many cases reliant on the supporting work undertaken by family members, including women and children, and this work that was frequently unrecorded in the formal business records of these individuals. It would be, of course, bold to claim that the experiences of the Hall, Black, and Symson dynasties were typical of all merchant families, though similarities between these families, which were operating in different arenas, as well as echoes with conclusions drawn in previous literature as explored above, suggest that broader conclusions may be drawn. Examples of women and children who were active in merchant communities remain limited, both because the nature of modern archival cataloguing has in some cases inadvertently obscured them,¹⁶¹ and because so often these activities have been seen as “family” affairs rather than business affairs. Further, such activity seems to have been perceived by contemporaries as so commonplace that it was simply not recorded with the diligence of nonfamilial interactions.¹⁶² Ultimately, this article proposes that more “merchant families” existed within the early-modern Atlantic than have been hitherto examined, and that a move beyond the patriarch and their professional correspondence in methodological approaches to these issues uncovers a wealth of information regarding how business was executed in the early-modern Atlantic world.

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161. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 1; Hudson and Lee, “Women’s Work and the Family Economy,” 2; Doe, “Gender and Business,” 348.

162. Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families*, 87–89; Hancock, “Combining Success and Failure”, 17.

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