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## A 'master-mistress': revisiting the history of eighteenth-century wives

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### ABSTRACT

There is a dilemma at the heart of the history of eighteenth-century married women. Their 'story' is so closely bound up with considerations of gendered authority that, until recently, this has been the primary, sometimes the only, frame for analysis. It is true that patriarchy constricts and uses women to enable some men to reach their full potential and privileges. In so doing, it simultaneously makes married women integral to the functioning of society, economy, and polity, *and* writes them out of this story. There are other ways to tell the history of wives, however. This review article revisits the recent history of eighteenth-century wives to encourage all scholars to place wives at the heart of their accounts, including histories that do not define themselves predominantly as women's or gender history. By summarising recent scholarship and new directions in history that forefront and feature wives, it shows their centrality to the functioning of society, economics, culture, and politics and proposes that it is time for 'mainstream' histories to incorporate, even centre, these findings in order to produce fuller understandings of Britain and its place in a trans-global context.

### Introduction

In the *Lady's Magazine*, in 1790, Mr Matrix discussed married life and family affairs in his regular feature titled 'The Index'. Despite his subject matter, he noted in the February edition that he had passed on a reader's correspondence to Mrs Matrix to consider, because 'family matters, as I have often observed', were 'her peculiar province'. Indeed, the aim of this particular Index was to determine spouses' 'respective provinces' and 'what privileges belong to the husband which are in common to the wife, and what rights, immunities, and privileges belong to each, independent of the other'. Ostensibly, Mr Matrix sought to extend his household authority, plaintively asking, 'although we husbands are not allowed to intermeddle with, yet we surely may be permitted to speak of family affairs? Actually, what concerned him most was his proposition that 'the ladies have of late years very much enlarged their privileges; and if they go on in the same progress, the husbands will be mere locomotive animals'.<sup>1</sup>

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As with many discussions of gendered authority at the time, there followed a wry to-and-fro between Mr and Mrs Matrix, with both jostling for pole position. At once declaring himself indolent and possessing no inclination to interfere in the house, Mr Matrix nevertheless sought to define the limits of married women's authority: 'It is a question with me which is master of the house; for although *master* has been supposed a word in the masculine gender only, it appears from modern manners to belong also to the feminine, making that composition called a MASTER-MISTRESS'. In the midst of proffering evidence of such a wife, Mrs Matrix interjected, instigating a short exchange in which both asserted the right to speak over the other. Calling him a 'monster', she finally conceded and he continued, observing that families were the only acceptable arena 'in which the ladies have obtained the supreme command'. He concluded by inviting readers to communicate their thoughts on the subject of 'the respective provinces of husband and wife', setting out the key propositions for them to discuss:

That many disputes do happen between husbands and wives, relative to matters of domestic oeconomy [*sic*]. That these disputes happen from the provinces of husband and wife respectively not being clearly defined and laid down. That the provinces of husband and wife are distinct, separate, and independent. That it becomes necessary exactly to ascertain what the separate rights, privileges, duties, immunities, &c of the parties are, that in future all clashing of interests, and raising of tumults against the peace of families, and of our sovereign lord the king, may be avoided.<sup>2</sup>

Albeit humorously, Mr Matrix invoked the longstanding trope of the battle of the sexes, deploying a militarised, territorial language to tackle the 'mixed and confounded' state of family affairs. According to his martial model, a 'congress' of men and women should deliberate on the boundaries of each gender's 'province' and set them on a map, whereby infringing into 'the neighbouring territory' would be a felony.<sup>3</sup>

This article in the *Lady's Magazine* neatly captures the complexities of married women's position in the long eighteenth century. As we see, Mr Matrix afforded wives some rights, privileges, and authority within the family and household, but sought to constrain them beyond that domain. Yet, it is no coincidence that in his attempts to delimit wives' power to the domestic, he used a vocabulary that was entirely public and worldly; one of war, politics, and statecraft. In many ways, the 'master-mistress' of Mr Matrix's account also encapsulates the dilemma at the heart of the history of wives in the eighteenth century. Their 'story' is so closely bound up with considerations of gendered authority that, until very recently, this has been the primary, sometimes only, frame for analysis. Yet, there is a more extensive historical account that we can tell of wives. This article summarises recent scholarship and new directions in history, which forefront and feature married women, to show wives' centrality to the functioning of society, economics, culture, and politics. It argues that it is time for 'mainstream' histories to incorporate, even centre, these findings in order to produce fuller understandings of Britain and its place in a trans-global context.

## Married women in historiography

Of course, patriarchal power is central to any study of married women, just as it shaped their experiences at the time. Women's lives as wives were undoubtedly constrained

within a triptych of virtue, viciousness, and victimhood. Society and culture in all their institutional and print manifestations told girls and women how to be virtuous, oft detailing its components of modesty, chastity, and restraint. They instructed women on how to retain virtue before, during, and after marriage; detailing the dire consequences of failing, they warned married women to protect themselves from accusations of viciousness, virtue's antithesis.<sup>4</sup> The lived experience of this is evident in various court records that reveal how wives avoided behaviour that provoked gossip and scandal and damaged their or their husbands' reputation.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while virtue and viciousness, patriarchy's twin handmaidens, controlled women's sexuality, they also constrained women's autonomy. Individuals and institutions, for example, monitored wives' conduct towards their husbands for signs of insubordination or untoward authority. As such, wives were frequently patriarchy's victims at both individual and structural levels. This is laid bare in marital breakdown. If women separated from their husbands, their capacity to direct the outcome of conflictual marriages was curtailed and they were frequently the target of societal disapproval and economic disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> For some wives, the institution of marriage and its household spaces were sites of both violence and fear. In the increasingly global context of eighteenth-century Britain, intersectionality meant that women of colour under Britain's colonial control suffered far worse conditions. Enslaved women in the Caribbean, for example, were coerced into sexual relationships with white men or unions with enslaved men and subjected to pro-natalist policies.<sup>7</sup> Henrice Altink shows that Jamaican and metropolitan pro-slavery writers co-opted discourses around marriage to represent enslaved women as either virtuous or vicious 'to deflect blame for problems that threatened their personal safety and political strength'.<sup>8</sup>

Although acknowledging patriarchy's manifold inequities remains essential, focusing on the limitations placed upon married women can mean that their significance as agents and actors in broader social, cultural, economic, and political forces is marginalised or exceptionalised. This is despite a longstanding, specialised scholarship, which shows that wives' worlds, experiences, and impact were wide and widespread. Indeed, by the first decade or so of the twenty-first century, several ground-breaking classics had appeared, including Amanda Vickery's article questioning the framework of separate spheres, Elaine Chalus' accounts of elite wives' contribution to political activities and discourse, Hannah Barker, Nicola Phillips, and Andrew Popp's work on married women in business, and Amy Erickson and Maxine Berg's detailed studies of working women.<sup>9</sup> Patriarchy itself was revisited too. Joanne Bailey shows how English husbands' lives were shaped by their wives' activities and Katie Barclay demonstrates how Scottish married women navigated patriarchy to exercise power within the household.<sup>10</sup> Frustratingly, such findings often remain at the margins of scholarship outside the histories of gender, marriage, and family, less likely to feature in mainstream histories. Even specialist work on wives frequently adopts an explanatory framework of patriarchal constraints. Thus, before it can demonstrate the intellectual value of investigating wives and their actions, it must rehearse the limitations that patriarchy imposed on married women and explain the weaknesses of earlier histories that ignored them. Since the subjects of these studies are often wives who do not fall neatly into the tropes of virtuous, vicious, or victimised, there is a risk that they are seen as anomalies resisting the patriarchal flow.<sup>11</sup>

However, recent efforts to diversify and decolonise scholarship are producing a body of work in which wives' contributions to society, culture, economy, polity, and empire are neither marginal nor exceptional. Attuned to the intersections of gender, sex, race, and class, work on the 'intimate relations' of empire places the role of women, relationships, and families front and foremost in accounts of trans-global phenomena.<sup>12</sup> Studies of interracial intermarriage in Colonial North America and India, for example, demonstrate that white European men's relationships with native women facilitated trade relationships, secured men's position in the areas they settled and colonised, and resulted in the acculturation of the colonisers and colonised. As Ann McGrath observes, in the 1780s, British and Euro-American traders married Cherokee women, who were frequently their 'active partners' and whose 'contributions were crucial to wealth creation'.<sup>13</sup> Such works are also often driven by a genealogical methodology. Katie Donington's work on the intimate genealogies of the Hibbert family, for example, enables her to show that women's reproductive labour was central to the expansion of commercial networks and the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>14</sup> Collectively, including married women into accounts of imperial relations offers a more complete account of colonial racial attitudes, as well as the ways interracial relationships and families shaped ideas of racial difference.<sup>15</sup> Such work can offer an exemplar for including married women in order to provide a fuller understanding of a range of historical phenomena.

Focusing on Britain and its expanding colonies and empire, this article surveys three such areas that demonstrate why wives matter historically and historiographically: married women as economic actors; as agents of knowledge; and as material beings, embodied makers of place and space. Each section demonstrates that including wives provides richer, more complex historical understandings of economic, intellectual, and material change.

First, some caveats are necessary. What is advocated here follows oft-trodden ground, reiterating feminist historians' more general demands that scholars integrate women into broader historical accounts, rather than treating them as an addendum to the main analysis. That this has not yet been fully realised where wives are concerned may be due as much to the REF agenda, which directs historians away from writing general histories or textbooks, than to an insidious anti-feminist agenda. Still, it does no harm to keep making these calls. The focus on wives' distinctive significance also needs explanation. After all, women who never married, as well as those who had been married at some point, contributed to all the areas addressed here. Yet, in the period surveyed, married women's history can be differentiated from women's history more generally, since marriage did afford some particular qualities to female experience. Although entering matrimony conferred legal and civil disadvantages and, potentially, reproductive demands, it also offered women access to privileges. Marriage signified female maturity and responsibility, provided opportunities to exercise bounded authority over children and other dependents, manage a household and its economy, and undertake roles in business and estate management; admittedly this might be through the role of helpmeet and was dependent upon education and abilities, and constrained by life-course.<sup>16</sup>

A further caveat is that in setting out the many, complex, and important roles that married women performed, it is vital not to infer that patriarchy is a benign force or was toothless enough to be ignored. It is undoubtedly a structure built on violence, inequality, and oppression that makes women more likely to be restricted, exploited,

and abused. The framework of intersectionality shows that race, class, and sex exacerbate its effects for many, including men. Nonetheless, the most successful, by which I mean enduring, forms of patriarchal societies are those that incorporate flexibility into their operation. As such, it is helpful to avoid a historical narrative wherein married women fall into one of two camps: subordinate or subversive. Institutions that upheld patriarchy, especially marriage and the family, the church, and the law, were structured to afford wives a degree of autonomy and power and the capacity to negotiate both at certain times and in certain sites.<sup>17</sup> Thus, what is outlined below is rooted in the position that what we see was largely what patriarchy permitted, and no more. This alternative history of wives is not, therefore, a history of exceptionalism, where some women were progressive forces battling systemic and personal restraints, subverting, or breaking free of a restrictive framework. Many wives upheld patriarchy, or simply operated routinely within its bounds, and oppressed and exploited others over whom they had authority.<sup>18</sup>

### **Wives as economic actors**

We think of the long eighteenth century as the age of economic transformation, wrought by industrial, commercial, consumer, and financial 'revolutions' rooted in and reliant on colonial markets and enslaved labour. Without placing married women at the heart of such developments, our understanding of these phenomena is impoverished. Comprehensive work now shows that wives across all social ranks worked. This varied according to rank but contributed to the household or family economy and was stopped or started according to child-care and other domestic responsibilities. Labouring married women fitted paid employment and unpaid labour that contributed to the domestic income around bearing and rearing offspring. Middling-sort wives carried out an array of roles such as keeping shop, training apprentices and servants, managing financial accounts, or collecting debts. Amy Erickson's work, for example, offers copious data to evidence this. Her article on married women's occupation in eighteenth-century London, rooted in evidence from criminal court cases, charity school apprenticeship, and guild company records, shows that the 'overwhelming majority of married women also engaged in production for the market'. This was not confined to the supposedly 'female' sectors of employment. As she notes, it is likely that a range of households hired domestic servants to free up wives for productive work.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, she concludes that 'the eighteenth-century economy clearly depended on the production for the market of both women and men'.<sup>20</sup> Married women's labour was just as important beyond the metropole, even if influenced by variations in law and custom in provincial and colonial locations.<sup>21</sup> Ann McGrath's work on Cherokee wives of white fur traders, for example, shows that their contributions to the trade and farming skills were essential to business.<sup>22</sup> It was similarly significant outside of urban areas. Nicola Verdon's work, for instance, on farmer's wives in the long eighteenth century demonstrates that, while unpaid and often unrecorded, and shaped by changing agricultural practices, their labour was diverse, extensive, and economically valuable.<sup>23</sup>

Married women (and those who had been married) also carried out a range of broadly financial activities fundamental to the domestic, local, national, and global economies.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, they were embedded in, and integral to, the circulation of credit and the

expansion of the commercial economy. Where the doctrine of coverture applied in England and parts of America, the law of necessities made wives their husbands' agents and able to enter into contracts on that basis.<sup>25</sup> Lindsay Moore's study of women's use of the law in the Anglo-American world, for example, concludes that married women's property rights were more favourable in England and the southern states of colonial America, since these locations possessed multi-jurisdictional legal systems. They ameliorated the common law's impact by providing a range of opportunities including equity, ecclesiastical, manorial, and customary law for married women to obtain and defend their legal status.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, wives' engagement in economic activities was so routine that, as studies now show, their operations cannot be considered anomalous, a function of either the law and its personnel disregarding wives' involvement or wives acting out of ignorance of coverture's rules. Nor was the law of agency a legal loophole or device that only brave wives exploited. As Tim Stretton and Krista Kesselring observe, in their collection on married women and the law, coverture was 'a reserve force' that was brought into play to serve specific benefits or exert restrictions.<sup>27</sup> For example, the law of agency was a necessary adjunct to coverture, which subsumed married women within their husbands' legal identity, but operated in a society that required economic engagement at times.<sup>28</sup> It was a legal mechanism that was established specifically to facilitate wives' purchasing goods or entering contracts when male masters of households were spread thinly, working elsewhere, or absent for long periods.<sup>29</sup> Of course, men could withdraw from their wives such agency and refuse to pay their wives' debts with relative ease. Society thus favoured women's husbands and left wives subject to their spouse's good nature and whims. As Rebecca Mason has commented, married women got access to various legal jurisdictions and their legal actions were legitimised *because* their actions benefited the household unit, not the wives' autonomy.<sup>30</sup> Even so, as Moore has demonstrated, it is crucial to acknowledge coverture's flexibility, which in some locations also enabled wives to operate as *feme sole* traders, making contracts, borrowing, and lending money in their own name.<sup>31</sup> This, as Stretton and Kesselring argue, was the reason for coverture's endurance: extending the range of economic actors in the domestic economy.<sup>32</sup> As, such, wives' economic status is fundamental to explaining Britain's economic and commercial development in the eighteenth century.

Wives were also managers and organisers of their household space and thus they purchased the proliferating consumer goods of the period, although they had to do so in their husbands' name. They, therefore, were the target-market for many retailers of fashion, novelties, and furniture. When husbands bought large items, wives often selected them and were responsible for their maintenance, care, and upkeep once in situ, as household advice reveals.<sup>33</sup> A rather charming version of this is seen in a letter that John Shaw, a commercial traveller in the English midlands, sent to his wife in 1819:

I quite forgot ere I left home to take the dimentions [sic] of our Parlour can you give it me in one of your letters and also what is the projection of the fireplace and width I have a great notion of getting a new carpet at Kidderminster if you have no objection for our present one appears to you very shabby and tell me also what ground you think will do best—of course you will say not too light that our little folks may not make it darker.<sup>34</sup>



It is by now well known, though it seems to have to be repeated regularly, that in this consumer activity married women were essential to the supply side of industrialisation. And, of course, consumption gave some wives the power to make themselves heard politically. Married women and suppliers of household provisions, for example, abstained from and boycotted slave-produced sugar in the abolitionist campaigns of the 1790s and 1820s. As Clair Midgley shows, while often portrayed as supportive and inspirational wives to campaigner husbands, these wives were activists in their own right. A tradition of family-based collective politics and a governing role in provisioning households provided married women with the justification for such global activism and makes them constitutive to histories of political engagement.<sup>35</sup>

Married women were central to the economy in numerous other ways. They facilitated familial and male property accumulation and business creation and ownership and not merely as male-directed pawns. Women brought to marriage knowledge of local trade and networks, the saved income from labour, or rental income from property, an inheritance, or a portion, which enabled their husbands to obtain or pay off mortgages, purchase property and land, enter business, and, in time, help fund the apprenticeships of their own sons.<sup>36</sup> Married women made loans, invested in business, owned property that they let for an income, rented out rooms to lodgers, and, despite being unable to write their own will without their husbands' permission, transmitted real and moveable estate through bequests.<sup>37</sup> At the micro-level, Alexandra Shepard's study of two married women pawnbrokers in London in the early eighteenth century leads her to conclude that the 'moneylending and asset management activities' of such women placed them 'at the heart of the early modern economy'.<sup>38</sup>

Evidence of the macro-scale of such activity comes from Amy Froide's exhaustive study of women as public investors. She shows that as a result of their marginalisation in the longer-standing sectors of the economy, women were able to take advantage of newly emerging financial markets of stocks and shares, opened up by the establishment of the Bank of England, the national debt, and the secondary market in securities. Froide is interested in women more broadly; after all, spinsters and widows were *feme sole*, and thus had direct authority over their assets. Even so, she shows that wives were also valuable public investors; their marital status simply influenced the type of and reasons for investment.<sup>39</sup> It is little surprise, therefore, that married women also acted as key agents of colonialism and chattel slavery in the Atlantic world. Recent research by Hannah Young and Christine Walker shows that their ownership of the enslaved was facilitated by and through marriage.<sup>40</sup>

Elite married women had more leisure time and less need to work for an income, but, of course, we now recognise that their socialising was part of forging, developing, and maintaining connections critical to patronage. Rooted in kinship and family, elite wives' activities are vital to understanding a system through which major institutions of the period operated, selecting and placing men in professions as diverse as the army, navy, medicine, law, and the church. It is not only that married women's political and social connections enabled men to access politics and authority. Margot Finn's study of the imperial family demonstrates this in ways that represent the ground-breaking methods and approaches of work on imperial intimacies. In one study, she analyses the lives of two married women and one unmarried woman, interlinked by blood and marriage, and by kin participation in transnational and colonial merchant capitalism. It is through their activities in childbearing, sociability, and the circulation of children,



gifts, and goods, that she shows how white wealthy married women's activities were fundamental to the 'extension of merchant capitalism and war capitalism alike', and integral to the East India Company becoming a 'dominant, global territorial power'.<sup>41</sup> Such married women's input included enhancing the social, economic, and cultural capital of husbands, the production of offspring, the socialisation of female children for advantageous marriage, and of male children and youths for employment via the transnational patronage system.<sup>42</sup>

The scholarship outlined so far shows that wives' efforts enabled and contributed to the domestic economy, to developing national commercial economies, and to global colonial commerce.<sup>43</sup> As Froide concludes, without women's money, 'Britain's trade, wars, and empire would not have been possible or successful'.<sup>44</sup> Yet, in many cases, these historians had to revisit much older literature to defend their position and findings. Wives' economic activities continue to be defined unhelpfully as familial, written off as domestic in scope or merely the underpinnings of male success. What also makes Finn's article and the intimate histories of empire worth emulating, therefore, is that they eschew justifying their assertions by revisiting earlier historical neglect or incorrect assumptions about women's insignificance beyond the family and domestic. They simply state and evidence their arguments that women, and, importantly in this context, wives, operated consciously and instrumentally in ways that connected them to economic and political power.<sup>45</sup> Yes, married women emotionally, psychologically, physically, and financially invested in familial or household success. However, so too did men, who although having far more opportunities than women, were still encouraged to work towards the same collective ends.

Analysis of wives' possessions has asked what their importance as economic and financial agents meant for their sense of authority. One can extend this to ask what it contributed to their self-identity and subjectivity, since scholars recognise that economic agency was significant for male reputation and identity.<sup>46</sup> Such questions have not yet been fully answered. The complicating factor, of course, is that marriage defined women's relationship with real and moveable property. The law made married women vectors of property. Unless set aside as separate settlement, coverture transferred their property to their husbands during marriage, before returning what was left to them on their husband's death. One factor that is not acknowledged often enough is that women retained a notion of property ownership across their marital lifecycle.<sup>47</sup> We need to know more about the ways in which periods of being wed deconstructed or reconstructed women's public sense of self. Only by analysing wives' self-awareness of their importance to national economic development and, in turn, how that contributed to their sense of self or self-fashioning, will we establish as full a picture as possible of the eighteenth-century economy.

### **Wives as agents of knowledge**

The second way that we can demonstrate why it is crucial to centre married women in the wider accounts of major developments in the long eighteenth century is to consider their role in the production and dissemination of knowledge. Wives were able to contribute to the creation of knowledge, despite access to several forms of education being denied to women and men of certain social classes and religious denominations. This was due in

part to the patchy landscape of learning. Knowledge, its production, its circulation, and its reception were decentralised and fragmented in a society that was still in the process of developing disciplinary categories and boundaries, creating specialisations, and one in which the study of 'science' had yet to be professionalised.<sup>48</sup> Thus, as the 2019 special issue, 'The Sexes and the Sciences' in the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, shows, wives contributed to knowledge creation both independently and through co-production with husbands and family members. Until relatively recently, we knew more about key male figures, who used the single and married women of their families as assistants, co-creators, and as sounding boards for ideas. Scholars today, however, increasingly show that enlightenment philosophers conceived of the family as a location for social and scientific experiments and of its members as subjects and supports to their work.<sup>49</sup> For example, Meghan Roberts demonstrates that 'sentimental savants' in France not only 'trained their spouses and offspring to act as their assistants', their idealised wives were those who excelled at both family duty and intellectual work.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, wives boosted the masculinity of scientific men whose studies could otherwise be perceived to emasculate them.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, this does not translate into female autonomy in knowledge production, since society saw wives' role as *enablers* of knowledge, and, along with other female family members, as working 'in relation to a male family member'.<sup>52</sup> This raises further questions, therefore, about married women's self-identity. Katie Barclay and Rosi Carr observe that Enlightenment Scotland positioned such women predominantly as helpmeets. In their view, women in Scotland were 'able to read, converse, and occasionally write, but [were] restricted within an imagining of themselves as domestic beings'.<sup>53</sup> Yet, perhaps, realising or, even, accepting one's social and gender subordination does not always equate with feeling intellectually inferior or dependent.<sup>54</sup> Since expertise and authority was based 'on personal experience and natural virtue', expertise was distributed more widely, if not equalised.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, since, as Roberts argues, intellectual activity was seen as part of a collective spousal endeavour, then such women were propelled 'into the threshold between home and academic institutions'.<sup>56</sup> What is clear is that experimental natural philosophy relied on Enlightenment wives. Married women discussed scientific findings and new theoretical interpretations with their husbands, their intellectual circles, and a wider public, they collected data and specimens, transcribed, illustrated, and translated texts, and published accessible accounts for wider audiences.<sup>57</sup> It is therefore possible to apply across Britain, Robert's conclusion that marriage was central 'to the making of knowledge' in the Enlightenment.<sup>58</sup>

This is further demonstrated through eighteenth-century wives' authorship and involvement in print culture. Many penned novels for a living, supporting families through their literary endeavours and, as scholars now recognise, actively shaping literary trends and genres.<sup>59</sup> Novels and stories were not their only outputs, since women used their expertise and skill-sets as wives and mothers to justify and promote their publications, offering advice on family life, moral guidance, and educational treatises. Others were busy in broader print culture, working in family print houses, publishing, and selling print and visual culture to an expanding market.<sup>60</sup> Being married was often an entry point into this work; it provided stability and public reputation, and it was a motivating force for wives required to maintain or advance a family and its interests. One woman who spanned several of these sectors was Anne Fisher, later Anne Slack,

who lived and worked in the north-east of England. Barbara Crosbie writes about her to explore generational change, but in doing so also reveals much about wives' importance as agents of knowledge. As a single woman, Fisher published *A New Grammar*, in 1745, contributing to an expanding market for pedagogy. Her *Grammar* was innovative in that she broke ranks with male grammarians by rejecting the Latinate tradition, designing it for practical use in the classroom. She also ran a school in Newcastle until she married the printer Thomas Slack in 1751. As well as having nine daughters, she and her husband ran a printing shop, which also served as a 'literary club', and they established the *Newcastle Chronicle* in 1764. Even so, editions of her successful *Grammar* published after her marriage continued to conceal her gender. Still, her contribution to the expansion of print culture was public; for example, Anne Slack cultivated contacts with literati, such as Elizabeth Montague, who said of her after her death in 1778 that 'the literary Republic has lost one its highest female ornaments' whose 'distinguished Character will be viewed and held sacred by all the Sons and Daughters of Science'.<sup>61</sup>

Fisher established her reputation through pedagogy, and, of course, married women not only gained legitimate access to educational provision, they directed its development, since schooling took place across a variety of locations, from dame schools and private schools, to nurseries and homes. As wives, women also taught their own offspring using books and guides, in some cases written by other married women, transmitting both educational and pious knowledge.<sup>62</sup> They even advised their teenage offspring in matters such as business acumen. One example of this is John Shaw's mother, Elizabeth Shaw, who wrote advice to him at the turn of the eighteenth century when, as a teenager, he was learning how to be a commercial traveller.<sup>63</sup> She described herself as his 'monitor' and often tried to steel him when he felt vulnerable:

You much hurt me to find your reluctance to travelling still continues; for goodness sake what are you made of; you are no Edwards; remember upon this your first journey in a 'new way to you', you will stamp your charikter for a trade's man; I wish I was at your elbow, would endeavour to rouse your spirits if you really possess anny.<sup>64</sup>

She told her 'much lov'd child'<sup>65</sup> in another letter:

My advice is be warm in the pursuit of Business, if you meet with repulses follow up and with a chearful countenance and most resolution you will carry the point—you will say I know nothing about it, but this much I know, that if nature had form'd me of the other sex I would have made a handsome competency ere now.<sup>66</sup>

Married women were also the keepers of other knowledge repositories whose significance is vital to understanding socio-medical practices in the period. As studies of receipt books demonstrate, they collected recipes that were culinary and medicinal, compiling medical knowledge and advice, which they practised on their household members and livestock.<sup>67</sup> Although Elaine Leong's work shows that men as well as women collected recipes, their location and use in the household meant that wives were their primary conduits.<sup>68</sup> Recipe collections' apparent household dimension is illusory, however, since they were artefacts that brought together diverse bodies of knowledge. Through these recipes, wives were vectors of knowledge, including how to cook regional and global cuisines, to brew and distil, and to make pharmaceutical and beauty treatments, and they passed on practices of domestic religiosity, and kitchen and dining technologies. Knowledge was further

embodied too. In bearing children, and as professional midwives, married women were repositories of reproductive knowledge. Medical men were professionalising and masculinising this sphere into what would become the fields of obstetrics, gynaecology and paediatrics; yet wives remained central to reproductive practices.<sup>69</sup> Women shared knowledge of pregnancy and child-loss with their mothers and daughters.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the occasions when they did not know enough about their bodies display the difficulties when this circulation of knowledge was curtailed. In the 1760s, when Catherine Ettrick sued her husband for separation on the grounds of cruelty, she listed his abuse during her first pregnancy. She noted that she was 'Totally Ignorant how to Manage herself when she was with Child' because he would not let her mother, sister, or midwife spend time with her.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps most obviously, married women were central to population growth, stagnation, or decline, since, in the period covered here, illegitimacy was constrained, and most births were within marriage. Wives' roles thus extended into the instrumental control of their reproduction. There is fragmentary evidence for the earlier period. Lady Sarah Cowper (1644–1720), for example, proudly recorded in her life-writings that she abstained from sexual intimacy with her husband from the age of 26, once she had born him a second son, thereby guaranteeing a male heir.<sup>72</sup> From the later eighteenth century, there is demographic evidence of a broader pattern wherein cohorts of married women practised family limitation, restricting child-bearing opportunities.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, as work on intimate relations in the empire has shown, elite wives' management of their childbearing and rearing was central to colonisers' 'success'. The East India Company families that Finn analyses, for example, succeeded, in part, because they reproduced successfully in climates and conditions that challenged white, western colonisers. To borrow Finn's term, married women presided over 'the birthscapes of empire'.<sup>74</sup> Indigenous wives unions' with white British colonisers and the 'hybrid' families that resulted are also central to understanding how and why ideas about race changed over time and shaped gendered and racial hierarchies.<sup>75</sup>

### **Wives as material beings, makers of stuff, place, and space**

The last decade has seen another scholarly account of eighteenth-century Britain and its empire emerge, informed by the material turn, wherein places, spaces, objects, and bodies are analysed to understand experience. In order to comprehend the significance of a materiality that was simultaneously domestic and global, it is essential to recognise how central wives were to its creation, collection, and performance. Through the material, wives influenced such normatively masculine spheres as political culture, circulated ideologies, and constructed identities from the sexual to the national. For example, Elaine Chalus shows how women politicised space through fashion, such as coloured ribbons, topical fans, and handkerchiefs, thereby inserting themselves into, and shaping, the extra-parliamentary nation; many of them were married, no doubt finding a greater degree of legitimacy through their marital status.<sup>76</sup> Wives obtained increased access to travel as companions of their husbands. Not only did such women carry out their wifely tasks while mobile, they were also vectors of global knowledge and commercial exchange, as well as agents in the circulation of colonial goods and racialized, imperial ideas.<sup>77</sup> This is particularly evident in military spheres. As Jennine Hurl-

Eamon demonstrates, lower-ranking women accompanied husbands who went to war as regular soldiers.<sup>78</sup> Like elite wives who went to sea with naval officer husbands, such women were part of the development of notions of patriotism. Hurl-Eamon argues, for instance, that the army gave wives of armed personnel, including those who stayed at home, ‘a sense of belonging and pride similar to that enjoyed by the men in uniform’.<sup>79</sup> As with political engagement, it was often wives who expressed this patriotism through objects purchased to decorate the home, yet another example of the merging of domestic and public.<sup>80</sup>

Other wives travelled with husbands for entertainment and tourism, thereby becoming significant in conveying goods as gifts and in the collection and display of global objects.<sup>81</sup> New research, for instance, on married women tourists, both on the continent, and in the British Isles, during periods of war and revolution, shows that they collected souvenirs, both natural specimens and artistic artefacts. Such collectors self-consciously positioned themselves as knowledge producers, displaying objects in their homes. Emma Gleadhill has analysed Lady Elizabeth Holland’s Grand Tour collecting, which she undertook from 1791 with her husband Sir Godfrey Webster. During their tour, she began an extra-marital relationship with Henry Fox, Lord Holland. She returned home, divorced Webster and married Holland. To combat the social exclusion resulting from the scandal, she used her collection of Grand Tour artefacts, displayed in Holland House, to reclaim her social and cultural capital.<sup>82</sup> When wives travelled with spouses employed by the EIC or those who owned plantations in the West Indies, they directly engaged in global merchant capitalism. Thanks to the riches produced by those activities, wives were fundamental to the embedding of global and imperial commodities and taste into British culture, through the purchasing, furnishing and refurbishing wealthy residences, as Margot Finn’s and Kate Smith’s work shows.<sup>83</sup> Even those who did not personally travel, acquired global goods and knowledge through collaboration with others who travelled, because they had wealth and cultural capital, as Maddy Pelling shows in her study of the Duchess of Portland.<sup>84</sup> She argues that the bluestockings who gathered around Portland ‘employed the multi-disciplinary practices of collecting, crafting and writing to cultivate a self-fashioned group identity deeply rooted in ideas of geographical and philosophical location’.<sup>85</sup> Such activities did important cultural and identity work more broadly, forging personal and familial identities that tapped into notions of nationhood and empire.

National cultural production often has personal and familial dimensions, especially when we attend to its rootedness in objects. As such, wives’ contribution to this process can be explored productively in depth. Susan Stabile has shown that it was women, often wives and mothers, who constructed and transmitted genealogies.<sup>86</sup> They also preserved objects and memories, rooted in stories of ancestors or houses associated with them, thereby keeping and passing on family stories, myths, and significance through emotional objects to future generations. What is crucial to emphasise here is that wives were not only agents, creators, and disseminators of generational and familial memory and knowledge; their collecting and preserving of domestic, familial, local, and national papers, objects, and stories contributed to regional and national identities and national memory building.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, indigenous wives were central to acculturation across colonising lines, through their cultural practices as well as their symbolic status and access to local economic networks.<sup>88</sup>

Scholars taking a material culture approach have also brought to attention the extent to which wives were central to the manufacture of household textiles, both a productive and emotional labour. Of course, it was not solely married women who worked on domestic textiles; other female household members sewed too. But wives had lives that lent themselves to this kind of material craft. Many textiles were portable and accompanied women as they visited friends and family or sat by sick beds. They were relatively easy for wives and mothers to pick up, work on, and put down as other tasks took priority.<sup>89</sup> In more modest households, wives made and repaired basic items of clothing and linen; in other elite homes they focused on decorative textile making. In all cases, wives' needlework contributed to a home's practical needs and decorative soft furnishings. Serena Dyer's study of four genteel women's material lives shows that such creative acts were 'powerful acts of agency which were used to mediate the sophisticated world of goods'.<sup>90</sup>

Wives' textile-making had further significance in materialising emotions and memories.<sup>91</sup> As Sally Holloway has shown, married women sewed pincushions and quilts to mark childbirth.<sup>92</sup> Some memorialised deaths, stitching dates of a loved one's passing, thereby building haptic knowledge of lives lost and absent family members to be passed on to descendants. Dyer shows how Ann Frankland Lewis, about whom the historical record is relatively silent, conveyed her feelings about the loss of her husband and children in her thirty-two watercolour 'dress of the year' series, as well as revealing the social rhythms of her life.<sup>93</sup> This material activity marked public events too, stitching onto patchwork and intarsia quilts notable battles and royal coronations, or making manifest instructive scriptural and biblical scenes, all to inform as well as please those who saw, touched, and lay under the coverlets. These objects not only preserve elusive aspects of married women's lives, they should also be recognised as artistic endeavours that display their imaginative and creative lives.

Last, but by no means least, married women had bodies and their history is central to the new embodied accounts of the eighteenth century. Wives' reproductive, nursing, leaking, or sick bodies, as well as their caring bodies, which dispensed physical succour, are fundamental to histories of medicine, healthcare, gender, and parenting. Wives' bodies also communicated cultural messages. Historians of visual culture, for example, show how artists deployed such corporeality to various ends. For example, they depicted married women's pregnant bodies to mock or satirise notable men; portraits of elite women, however, tended to disguise wives' pregnancies beneath draperies, perhaps because it was raising rather than bearing offspring that was central to maternal identities.<sup>94</sup> Scholars also show how wives' disruptive bodies, typically engaged in illicit sexuality, were central to changing discourses of sexuality. There are, however, fewer attempts to explore women's own perceptions of their material bodies and physical sense of being.<sup>95</sup> Karen Harvey's new research project exploring embodiment in British correspondence addresses this gap, illustrating that it is possible to collect evidence of how wives experienced their own bodies. Harvey demonstrates, for example, that wives' sense of their physical self was closely tied to their emotional state. She uses the correspondence in 1726 between Rebecca and John Smith, a newly married, young couple, which detailed their state of health and bodies, to propose that they developed a shared lexicon of embodied discomfort to navigate their period of separation.<sup>96</sup> The middle-aged, probably menopausal wife, Dorothy Wright, writing in the 1740s, experienced her body as incomprehensible.<sup>97</sup>



Incorporating wives' emotional and physical selves in these ways will surely be central to the new histories of experience under development.<sup>98</sup> Parts of their experience remain relatively underexplored, such as wives' desires for sexual intimacy and for love, and the ways in which the experience and institution of marriage shaped them. Most evidence about married women's sexual lives stems from evidence relating to their infidelity, shaped by popular and satirical visual culture. Yet evidence exists for wives' feelings. In 1816, shortly after their marriage and during one of their lengthy separations, Elizabeth Shaw, John's wife, wrote to him that she lay in bed wishing she could hold him to her bosom. Her letter is full of longing; she says:

I feel as if I never should be satisfied with kissing & embracing you so you must prepare yourself for it. Nay I even talk of eating you—but at this rate I shall frighten you so I had better hold my tongue till I have you safe here.<sup>99</sup>

Natalie Hanley-Smith's work on controversial intimacies also provides insights into married women's physical and emotional desires and recognises that this shaped broader social and personal relationships.<sup>100</sup> This nascent embodied turn is vital because it enables us to position married women's subjectivity and experience at the centre of broader histories of the body.

Studies that use a queer lens to explore more fruitfully non-heteronormative unions are also crucial in producing new understandings of wives in the eighteenth century and vice versa. They show, for instance, that we can queer the category of wife, since some women entered a variety of relationships that were akin to marriage but did not conform to social or legal conventions. Unmarried women might claim the position of wife and thereby demand some of the privileges of its status.<sup>101</sup> Some women married other women, such as Anne Lister's participation in a quasi-marriage ceremony, thereby revealing the 'plasticity' of marriage.<sup>102</sup> Increasingly, scholars are carefully investigating romantic friendships of women who set up homes together and lived lives as a couple, such as Anna Gurney and Sarah Buxton, and work by Freya Gowrley on the ladies of Llangollen.<sup>103</sup> And we are also beginning to explore transgender individuals and their relationships. Jen Manion devotes a chapter to the wives of transmen, such as Abigail Naylor, who was married to James Allen from 1807 till his death in 1829, when the inquest established that Allen was assigned female at birth.<sup>104</sup> Such work shows that they were not the 'duped' women they are sometimes presented as, but willingly and knowingly entered the relationships and kept their physical knowledge of their husbands to themselves.<sup>105</sup>

## Conclusion: or why wives matter

In offering an overview of scholarship on married women, this article demonstrates that their activities are central to explanations of how provincial, metropolitan, colonial, and global societies functioned. Contemporaries certainly, if cynically, realised that wives were crucial to men's personal success. In the inside cover a York Chancery Court Act Book, spanning the late 1660s, for example, a clerk of court doodled: 'Marriage frees a man from cares, for when he's wed his wife takes all upon her'.<sup>106</sup> This article's synthesis of some of the activities that wives carried out demonstrates the veracity of this statement. It has shown that patriarchy conscripts and uses women to enable some men to



reach their full potential and privileges. In so doing, however, it simultaneously makes married women central to the functioning of society, economy, and polity, *and* writes them out of this story. This overview is written in the hope that scholars are closer to writing wives back in; centring them in histories that do not define themselves predominantly as women's or gender history. Research on empire that places 'sex, blood, and lineage' at the heart of its conceptual and methodological practice leads the way in showing that wives (in both formal and informal unions) are vital to a better understanding of the past.<sup>107</sup> Foregrounding wives' actions, activities, and contributions in our scholarly investigations of broader cultural, economic, political and social accounts of Britain and its colonies enables more nuanced, fuller accounts of historical change. Doing such history remains a powerful politicised and inclusive act.

## Notes

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3. *Ibid.*, 59.
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5. Tim Meldrum, 'A Women's Court in London: Defamation at the Bishop of London's Consistory Court, 1700–1745', *The London Journal* 19, no. 1 (1994): 1–20; Joanne Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660–1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149–61.
6. Bailey, *Unquiet Lives*, chapters 6 and 8; Elizabeth Foyster, *Marital Violence: An English Family History, 1660–1857* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
7. Randy M. Browne, Lisa A. Lindsay, and John Wood Sweet, 'Rebecca's Ordeal, from Africa to the Caribbean: Sexual Exploitation, Freedom Struggles, and Black Atlantic Biography', *Slavery & Abolition* (2021); Katie Donington, *The Bonds of Family: Slavery, Commerce and Culture in the British Atlantic World* (Manchester University Press, 2020), 159–81.
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9. Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760–1830* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Maxine Berg, 'Women's Property and the Industrial Revolution', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 24, no. 2 (1993): 233–50; Elaine Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life, c.1754–1790* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Amy Erickson, 'Married Women's Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London', *Continuity & Change* 23, no. 2 (2008): 267–307; Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700–1850* (Boydell and Brewer, 2006); Andrew Popp, *Entrepreneurial Families: Business, Marriage, and Life in the Early Nineteenth-Century* (Pickering & Chatto, 2012); Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383–414.
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14. Donington, *Bonds of Family*.
15. Livesay, 'Emerging from the Shadows', 122, 128; Perry, *Colonial Relations*, 32.
16. Works include Bailey, *Unquiet Lives*; Katie Barclay, *Love, Intimacy*; Leanne Calvert, 'Do Not Forget Your Bit Wife': Love, Marriage and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in Irish Presbyterian Marriages, c. 1780–1850', *Women's History Review* 26, no. 3 (2017): 433–54; Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (University of California Press, 1996).
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22. McGrath, *Illicit Love*, 170–1. Also see Perry, *Colonial Relations*, 28.
23. Verdon, 'Subjects Deserving'.
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26. Moore, *Before the Court*.
27. Stretton and Kesselring, *Married Women*, 10.
28. See contributing chapters in Stretton and Kesselring, *Married Women*; Joanne Bailey, 'Favoured or Oppressed? Married Women, Property and 'Coverture' in England, 1660–1800' *Continuity and Change* 17, no. 3 (2002): 351–72; Amy Louise Erickson, 'Coverture and Capitalism', *History Workshop Journal* 59, no. 1 (2005): 1–16; Margot Finn 'Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c.1760–1860', *Historical Journal* 39, no. 3 (1996): 703–22; Alexandra Shepard, 'Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy', *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (2015): 1–24.
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39. Amy Froide, *Silent Partners: Women as Public Investors During Britain's Financial Revolution, 1690–1750* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2, 3, 8.
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47. Stretton and Kesselring, *Married Women*, 5–6, 9.
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