The Economic Contributions and Ironic Demise of Elizabeth Strutt and Other Middle Class Women in Family Enterprise of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

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The eagerness that appeared on [London inhabitants’] countenances, was getting of money. Thou knowest not how solicitous I am while life, & youth, & opportunity lasts to acquire something that you and I, should we live so long, may not have the two great calamities of Human Life, poverty and Old Age, come upon us together to leave a fair patrimony to our children and to spend a life of diligence, honesty, sobriety, & virtue; to have been the Author of anything good whereby mankind are made wiser or better; in the main, to have acted agreeable to truth & ones own best reason, & in a firm belief & trust in the existence of god & his providence is truly to be religious.

— Jedediah Strutt to Elizabeth, London (1765)

Jedediah Strutt, inventor of the Derby Rib machine in 1757 and British entrepreneur of the late eighteenth century, had dreamlike visions of the nascent world of industrialized business. Nevertheless, without the active help of his middle-class wife, Elizabeth Woollat, whom he married in 1755, he could not have attained the sort of financial and commercial success he imagined in his letter and eventually achieved. Most historians agree that Elizabeth established “an informal partnership” with her husband in the Strutt family enterprise, as many European middle-class wives of budding entrepreneurs did during the early years of the Industrial Revolution, powerful partnerships that lacked formal recognition during the time period. Historians R. S. Fitton and A. P. Wadsworth of The Strutts and the Arkwrights 1759-1830: A Study of the Early Factory System go so far as to assert that “Elizabeth Strutt was obviously a very capable woman and perhaps supplied the drive that her introspective, self-centered husband had hitherto lacked.”

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Many economic entrepreneurs depended on their wives to contribute to the economic wellbeing of the family enterprise, as well as the familial and social life of the family. However, historians often disagree as to why these middle-class women influenced the late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century economy of family enterprise so significantly, when only a few decades later, women were barred from all economic activity in Europe. Indeed, Elizabeth shared an unusually intimate marriage with her husband and earned the trusted role of an economic contributor to the Strutt enterprise, unlike the subordinate roles of most wives during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, aside from her unconventional marital partnership with Strutt, Elizabeth accurately represented the role of many eighteenth-century middle-class wives as the hidden assets of family industries before the late years of the Industrial Revolution. And yet, ironically, the economic contributions of women during the late eighteenth century eventually phased them out of all economic activity during the nineteenth, as European corporations industrialized and grew and as “the separate spheres” of the sexes consequently emerged.

The Firm of the Wife: Economic Partnership Bred from Love

If the stock of our bliss is in strangers’ hands rested
The fund ill secured oft in bankruptcy ends,
But the heart is given bills which are never protested
When drawn on the firm of Wife Children and Friends.5
— A Wolverhampton salesman to a courted lover, eighteenth century

During the nineteenth century, many middle-class men and women viewed marriage as a social obligation to produce a practical living in society and to create a reputable family. The act of marriage often served as the communion of two sexes, each partner granted the designated role as husband or wife, master or servant, leader or companion. As the Industrial Revolution progressed, the domesticity of women in middle-class European families became increasingly apparent, for women’s economic status declined with the advent of industry and factory work, while their domestic importance rose. And marriage became an increasingly convenient meld between the “separate spheres”
of men and women. However, among the exceptions lay the passionate union between Jedediah Strutt and Elizabeth Woollat of the late eighteenth century. As the romantic poem by the Wolverhampton salesman to his courted lover described, a man’s and his family’s fiscal or social successes mean little without the love of his wife, children, and family. Historian Catherine Hall emphasizes in *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* that marriage was a partnership, “the basis of most successful family enterprises.” She explains that the support and love of a wife, children and friends made the economic ventures of businessmen worthwhile.6 The external expectations of a family and its social purpose not only deprived many courtships and marriages of healthy, romantic relationships, but also perpetuated the internal hierarchy between spouses. Elizabeth was economically prevalent and successful in her husband’s business because she earned partnership as a cunning businesswoman. Additionally, though, she enjoyed an atypical marital partnership with a man she loved and had grown up with who in turn loved and trusted her as a wife, as a woman, and as a business partner.

In an 1840 letter to her friend Ellen Nussey, Charlotte Brontë warns the female sex against the dangers of love before marriage. She says that a young lady ought not to “love before marriage” lest she be seen as a “passionate fool,” but instead should simply “tolerate the man.” In fact, Brontë claims that “la grande passion” is “une grande folie.”7 Many men and women believed that the purpose of marriage was to fulfill a social norm and that a woman’s choice to marry should not be driven by passion but by feminine obligation. Despite Brontë’s hope that eventually a wife could learn to love her husband, some women, such as nineteenth-century middle-class wife Jane Welsh Carlyle, refuted the existence of love in any marriage. She described the act of marriage in a 1859 letter as “the occasion of two human beings binding themselves to one another,” and later elaborated, “If ever one is to pray—if ever one is to feel grave and anxious—if ever one is to shrink from vain show and vain babble surely it is on this senseless and impious occasion.”8 Carlyle suffered from an unhappy marriage to an author who subjected his wife to a subordinate and isolated life.

Rarely did the women of patriarchic family units penetrate the domestic bubble within which they were bound during the early nineteenth cen-
tury, primarily because they lacked the respect or perceived adequacy from their husbands to do so. However, the letters between Strutt and Elizabeth during their seven-year courtship and after their marriage reflected their sincere love for one another and certainly contributed to Elizabeth’s important role as Strutt’s informal partner in the family enterprise in later years. In his February 1755 proposal of marriage, Jedediah wrote, “You look’d on me with an Eye of tenderness, nay one is so apt to speak as they wish, I had like to have said Love; and if so, that one generous instance of truth and constancy has made a greater and more lasting impression on my mind, than all the united charms of Beauty, Wit and fortune of your sex.”

Even after their marriage, Strutt continued to write to his wife in the same passionate fashion. In a 1757 letter to Elizabeth, he wrote, “I never wished to please you so much nor ever lov’d you so well as now. I am thy ever faithful loving Husband.” Although Elizabeth often reserved emotion in her letters to Strutt and teased him with passive femininity and sexuality during their courtship, she returned the sentiment (and sentimentality) in a 1748 letter: “I trouble you with my Letters out of interest, if not kindness: since mine to you will procure yours to me: but I am yours, as a true plain dealer &c.”

Fitton and Wadsworth observe that the couple “shows deep affection on both sides” in their correspondence, and go on to suggest that their marital bond strengthened their business one. “We may surmise,” the historians write, “that [Jedediah] owed much of his success to her energy and counsel.”

Admittedly, the marriage of Strutt and Elizabeth, despite evident love between husband and wife, did not eliminate all sexist hierarchy or completely meld the gender roles within the Strutt family. However, the fact that Strutt appreciated and trusted his wife as a marital partner not only made his economic successes worthwhile, but it also prompted him to trust Elizabeth with greater responsibilities of the family enterprise as a business partner.

**Family Enterprise and Women: the “Hidden Investment”**

At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Britain and many other European countries transformed their economies from a form of industry based on
the agrarian putting-out system to one based on the factory system of mass production. The Strutt family built their hosiery and textile empire during the continent’s economic transition. Because the pre-industrial system of labor performed within individual households depended heavily on female participation, and because family enterprises predated the corporate-based industries of the mid- and late-nineteenth-century economy, women of middle-class entrepreneurial families wielded greater economic influence in the early eighteenth century than their counterparts of a later date. Although their economic influence diminished with the popularization of large-scale companies, women like Elizabeth contributed before the corporate change as they did during the period of the putting-out system, before the social pressures of female domesticity developed and before the intimacy of the home-based family enterprise became obsolete. In fact, wives in family enterprises contributed capital, skills, contacts and children to businessmen, thus earning them the title “the hidden investment” from historians Richard Scase and Robert Goffee in *The Real World of the Small Business Owner*.13

The putting-out system dominated the economy of western Europe during the eighteenth century as Enlightenment ideas from Adam Smith and other capitalist economists of private industry and property popularized.14 In contrast to later nineteenth-century corporatized industries, the putting-out system allowed families to “maintain a certain degree of isolation as a productive unit,” according to historian Pamela Odih in *Gender and Work in Capitalist Economies*, a system that encouraged the participation of women as textile weavers under the supervision of their husbands.15 The later-eighteenth-century industries restricted women from work because of the growing separation of the workplace and the home, which elicited a decreasing presence of male supervision and a growing importance of child-rearing and domestic life. However, the small family enterprise, which Catherine Hall termed “the heart of economic organization”16 of the early Industrial Age, sustained the intimate family style of business and thus did not completely restrict the economic presence of the wife. In fact, Elizabeth contributed greatly to the Strutt firm because she provided her husband with business partners, investors and talents that indirectly, and often directly, contributed to its success.
When a businessman married a woman, the family enterprise benefited from the wife’s contributed “capital,” whether that included money or property inherited from the woman’s relatives, as Hall and Leonore Davidoff argue in *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850.* For example, although Elizabeth came from a modest background as a maid for a wealthy Nonconformist, Dr. Benson, she later convinced her former employer and members of her own extended family to invest capital in the Derby Rib machine, making it possible for her husband to patent his invention in 1759. Moreover, Elizabeth travelled alone to London to secure the necessary money, an undertaking she recounted in letters to Strutt. On May 3, 1757, she assured her husband that Dr. Benson “thinks [our scheme] may do very well & he will do all he can for us, & would willingly supply us with the money.” As Hall points out in *White, Male and Middle-Class,* marriage partnership served as a primary way to expand businesses in the early nineteenth century, for “a partner meant two sources of capital, two sets of hands, two lots of skills, two sets of relatives and friends.” Indeed, Elizabeth introduced Strutt to her brother, William Woollat, who became Strutt’s partner in the invention, patenting, and distribution of the Derby Rib machine, a new method of the mechanized production of hosiery and textiles.

Furthermore, Hall refers to Elizabeth as “a partner in herself”; not only did she visit London often to canvass among relatives and friends for the Strutt firm, but she also “checked out possible sources of supply” and “was active and well informed as to the business,” such as the “details of the ins and outs of ribbed stockings” and “the relative values of different kinds of thread.” Elizabeth possessed business cunning and used her networking skills to recruit many of her Nonconformist acquaintances as financial investors in the Strutt enterprise.

Not only might the wife provide her husband with contacts and skills of the kind Elizabeth provided Strutt and his firm, but many women were also responsible for training apprentices of the business and raising children to eventually manage the family enterprise. Before she bore children, Elizabeth oversaw the business management in Derbyshire and Blackwell while Strutt travelled to London in search of a patent. Eventually, the eldest Strutt daughter, Elizabeth, and eldest son, Wil-
liam, entered the production and management business at the age of 14, and the other sons, George Benson and Joseph, entered after completing school. In fact, William became a famous industrialist and the inventor of fireproof equipment for his inherited textile mills. Fitton and Wadsworth describe the Strutt business as replete with “family character.” Elizabeth maintained this family character by remaining “active—a partner in herself.” In addition to her economic presence in the family enterprise, the wife took care of the household, which Elizabeth ran with “frugality, obedience, and moral and intellectual discipline” with particular emphasis, from Strutt too, on “self-reliance, improvement and industry.”

The father of Strutt’s business associate and friend, Samuel Courtauld, who owned a silk mill in Braintree, told his son, “If a good wife fell in your way I would take her as an assistant even though she may not be right in the World’s wealth,” which Strutt certainly did with Elizabeth. Recent historians have given Elizabeth more and more credit for her husband’s success in the textile industry during the late eighteenth century because she, originating with modest means, contributed a wealth of capital, networks of family and friends, and children to the Strutt family enterprise.

The Shift from Family Enterprise to Corporations: An Irony of Women’s Economic Decline

As western European industry began to transform in the mid nineteenth century, and as companies with limited liability began to replace traditional single-person and family enterprises and partnerships like that of the Strutt family, the influence and importance of wives lessened in the economic sphere. Elizabeth remained influential until her death in 1774, which preceded the growth of corporate industry in the mid nineteenth century. But the boom of European corporations threatened and eventually restricted the success of other female entrepreneurs of the later nineteenth century. Scientific studies of the time period eventually claimed that women lacked the “good mental ability” and “the judgment and adaptability in the use and application of a number of tools,” according to Ohio State University historian Helen Cherington in her thesis, *The Adaptability of Women to Industry*, a de-
velopment she cites as a primary reason for the eventual demise of female entrepreneurship in Britain.\textsuperscript{28} A. P. Wadsworth and J. Mann assert in \textit{The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire, 1600-1780}, that the increasing demand for cotton textiles in British and international markets “gave strong inducement for the small capitalist to add spinning jennies, twisting and warping mills…in which horse and water power [were] used” to their family enterprises.\textsuperscript{29} Odih, in \textit{Gender and Work in Capitalist Economies}, concludes that the transition to mechanical production during the nineteenth century increased the productive output of the industry and elevated Britain as a competitive producer in the international textile market.\textsuperscript{30} Henceforth, as family enterprises became more regionally, nationally, and internationally prevalent, companies began to mass-produce products for specialized agents and middlemen to better serve the growing demand and market of consumers, according to Davidoff and Hall in \textit{Family Fortunes}.\textsuperscript{31} “The general trend to supersede craft training and experience was particularly disadvantageous for women,” they write, a trend further “compounded by their exclusion from a more scientific culture.” Davidoff and Hall go on to argue that although women continued to contribute to the domestic family economy, they ceded their external relations and economic activity to their husbands, as male clients and business employers began to distrust female economic independence.\textsuperscript{32}

The crux, then, lay in the economic transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many middle-class women expanded family enterprises with their assets and “hidden investments” during the late eighteenth century and consequently those same industries grew in the nineteenth. However, with the massive industrial expansion that included the mergers of firms that many women were responsible for generating, large corporations and eventually monopolies became dominant during the mid and late nineteenth century. Paradoxically, the contributions of women to the family firm led to their eventual phasing out of economic activity because the growth of the firm and the popularization of the corporation further divided the “separate spheres” of the sexes. Although Elizabeth died before the effects of the Strutt enterprise’s expansion took permanent form, the family firm indeed expanded to become one of the most wealthy textile corporations of the nineteenth century. A family friend and business associate
of Strutt, Richard Arkwright, who invented the spinning frame, partnered with Strutt in 1769 to form the resulting corporation, Richard Arkwright and Co. Although the partnership eventually dissolved, the lasting firms of Arkwright and Strutt continued to dominate the textile industry throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{33}

Although Elizabeth did not directly introduce Arkwright as a business contact to the Strutt family enterprise, she certainly entertained the social friendship between the Strutt and Arkwright families for many years prior to the corporate merger. According to a 1960 \textit{Business History Review} article, the Strutt, Arkwright, and Evans families remained not only commercial but also social friends, the wives often inviting each of the families to “dances and dinners” at their respective estates.\textsuperscript{34} Had she lived longer, perhaps her services as the wife of a businessman would have become more obsolete as most economic services of wives did during the systematic shift of the nineteenth-century economy.

**Elizabeth Strutt of the Twentieth Century: Female Strides Towards Independence**

The economic role of women dramatically changed during the eighteenth century as commerce became increasingly privatized and industrial. The economic role of women again changed during the nineteenth century as corporations overtook the rapidly expanding industries of Europe. However, over the course of this long transformation from the agrarian putting-out system to the industrialized but small family enterprise to finally the larger corporations and monopolies, wives of the middle-class entrepreneurs left a permanent mark on economic activity in Europe. Elizabeth, although unusual in the respect of her romantic marriage, participated in the kind of “informal partnership” between husband and wife to which many women contributed through capital, contacts, and the social upbringing of the family unit. In fact, once women again penetrated “the sphere of domesticity” at the turn of the twentieth century during the war years, they contributed to the economy in invaluable ways.

During the First World War, when large numbers of working men left home and work to fight, many women assumed industrial and political
positions traditionally and even formally reserved for male occupancy only. Their economic contributions to the total war effort of the early twentieth century eventually prompted governmental legislation dedicated to equalizing men’s and women’s rights in Europe, including the right to equal pay and suffrage. During the 1920s women gained more social independence, and during the Second World War they contributed to the economic efforts of European countries in the same way as they did during the war years before. Although the 1950s elicited a conservative reaction against women’s rights and the resurgence of sexism in many countries (the United States of America particularly), the decade’s peaceful prosperity, like that of the nineteenth century, allowed women to continue their pursuit of a co-equal economic role.

Finally, in the past 30 years, many European and American women have skillfully found the balance between the work life and the family life, as Elizabeth Strutt managed to do many years before. Interestingly, since the 1980s, women have fruitfully used their femininity to achieve commercial success, like Elizabeth, who used a passionate marriage and her social and professional contacts to further her economic efforts. And furthermore, these women continue to penetrate the political, economic, and social realms of the modern day.

Notes


2. Catherine Hall, White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), 179.

3. Ibid., 176.


5. Shaw Letters, Birmingham University Library, letter no. 4.


12. Fitton and Wadsworth, 110.


20. Ibid., 180.


23. Ibid., 111.

24. Ibid., 109.


32. Ibid., 274.


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