

**“Texts and Textiles: Material Economies in the Early Atlantic”**

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A paper presented at

“Economic History’s Many Muses”

Fourteenth Annual Conference of the

Program in Early American Economy and Society

October 24-25, 2014

Library Company of Philadelphia  
1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia PA

In November 1766, a Rhode Island shopkeeper named Molly Maylem advertised an assortment of imported goods and textiles for sale at her shop on Thames Street, just a block away from the Newport harbor. She lists Irish linens, cotton checks, silk sprig camblets, calicoes, fur muffs and tippets, lawns and cambricks, silk gloves, fashionable ribbons and hair flowers, hats ready made, shoes and silk clogs, Barcelona handkerchiefs, white and colored thread, and cotton laces. To this unweildy list of imported goods, she adds, “good stays, ready finished, and a sett of Pamela, in 4 volumes.”<sup>1</sup> With a wink and a nod to subscribers of *The Newport Mercury* who may have already read Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*, Molly Maylem’s advertisement playfully hides the novel within the women’s corsets she offers for sale. That is, the shopkeeper recreates an important moment in Richardson’s novel: namely, the scene in which Pamela sews her letters into her stays in order to hide them from that curious reader, Mr. B.<sup>2</sup>

In this scene, Pamela is quite literally clothed in the texts that testify to her unsullied character and to her intact virtue that will, as promised by the novel’s title, be rewarded in the end. However, the concept of letters-as-clothes or clothes-as-letters reminds readers—then and now—of the symbiotic relationship between cloth and paper in this period: novels, pamphlets, newspapers and other print media were, of course, printed on paper made from locally sourced linen and cotton rags. In North America, while the rags entering local paper mills might reflect local use, the cloth itself was most likely funneled through British and European ports and shipped across the Atlantic before being advertised and offered for sale by shopkeepers such as Molly Maylem. Thus, in a cycle not unlike a snake eating its own tail, paper sells cloth that is remade into paper that sells cloth that is remade into paper and so on.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, we might say that the international manufacture and commercial circulation of textiles keeps the production and transatlantic trade in texts alive and well. Or, to put it another way, book

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<sup>1</sup> *The Newport Mercury*. Newport, RI: November 3-10, 1766; Issue 427, pg. 3.

<sup>2</sup> For my twenty-first century readers who may not have read Richardson’s *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (London 1740), the epistolary novel tells the tale of a 15-year old maidservant, Pamela Andrews, whose employer, Mr. B, abducts her, locks her up in one of his estates, and attempts to seduce and rape her. Pamela documents her captivity in a series of unsent letters that she keeps safely sewn into her stays. Upon discovering that Pamela has been allowed to “pass so much time in writing.” Mr. B insists upon reading these illicit papers commenting: “it is my opinion they are about you; and I never undressed a girl in my life: but I will now begin to strip my pretty Pamela and I hope I shall not go far before I find them.” Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, Letter XII and Letter XXXII.

<sup>3</sup> Of course not all cloth was made into paper and not all cloth that *was* made into paper was made into paper used in printing.

history—broadly construed—and textile history were at one point interwoven material economies.<sup>4</sup>

I begin with Maylem’s advertisement because its literariness provides an opportunity to think about how a non-historian might begin to approach the texts, evidence, and subjects that traditionally belong to the study of economic history. Approaching her ad—and the world of eighteenth-century Atlantic culture and commerce more broadly—from a literary scholar’s perspective, I am interested in how text and textile are spun together in such a way that what we might call a commercial poetics emerges in and through the world of Atlantic commodity circulation and exchange.<sup>5</sup> Reading eighteenth-century Atlantic media with an eye to the material conditions of production, circulation, and consumption provides new ways of understanding how the circulation of goods—in this case, texts and textiles—fosters new forms of expression as well as new kinds of subjects. The goals of this essay are two-fold. Firstly, I would like to consider the relationship between two parallel material economies: the transatlantic manufacture and trade in linen cloth and developments in the papermaking industry in North America. Secondly, while we know that linen is integral to making paper, I would like to explore how writing about these processes is also invested in *making subjects*. For this reason, the second half of this essay will revisit ground well-trodden by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and others relating to the role women played in linen production in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War but with an eye to the literariness of the advertisements, editorials, poems, and promotional materials that document the “Age of Homespun.” In this writing, cloth and paper are interwoven in the articulation of women’s private and public, and social and economic lives. In fact, this writing could be said to generate a third material economy centered on the production and circulation of white femininity itself.

## Part I

### “Of These Rags Our Paper is Made”

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes has observed, “etymologically the text is a cloth.” Text and textile share the Latin roots *texere* meaning “to construct or to weave,” and *textus* meaning “that which is woven.” In this sense, spinners of textiles can, with the same word, also spin texts. Qtd. In Katheryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Susquehanna University Press 2002), 29.

<sup>5</sup> I use the word “poetics” to suggest an intimate relationship between the medium and the message, the form and the content. That is, a reading of commercially minded writing that works beyond the surface level and that is less interested in garnering facts in order to think about how the formal elements of the writing reflect and comment on manufacturing processes and commercial exchanges.

As early as 1692, the North American writer Richard Frame articulated the material and symbolic connections between the production of cloth and the production of texts in his poem, “A Short Description of Pennsylvania.” Prior to the 1690’s, most quality writing and printing paper used in both England and North America was imported from Holland; however, the Anglo-Dutch wars meant that access to good, white paper was a consistent challenge. In response to this challenge, papermaking mills began to spring-up on both sides of the Atlantic, in the early 1690’s, that used Dutch papermaking technologies and even sometimes actual Dutch molds, complete with the watermarks of Dutch papermakers.<sup>6</sup> Describing a Germantown paper mill, Frame’s poem itself is printed on some of the first American-made paper and functions as both an advertisement for the paper it is printed on and as an economic essay outlining commercial and symbolic relationships between the cloth and papermaking industries. He writes:

A Paper Mill near German-Town doth stand,  
 So that the Flax, which first springs from the Land,  
 First Flax, then Yarn, and then they must begin,  
 To weave the same, which they took pains to spin.  
 Also, when on our backs it is well [worn],  
 Some of the same remains Ragged and Torn;  
 Then of those Rags our Paper it is made,  
 Which in process of time doth waste and fade:  
 So what comes from the Earth, appeareth plain,  
 The same in Time returns to Earth again.<sup>7</sup>

Frame’s delineation of the paper trade’s dependency on linen producing industries suggests that early papermaking mills—and, by proxy, early North American printers—are reliant upon men

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, in C. William Miller’s *Benjamin Franklin’s Philadelphia Printing: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1974) the author suggests that Franklin’s edition of *Pamela* is printed on American paper most likely made at a paper mill outside of Philadelphia that all the same bears a Dutch watermark (a crown fleur de lis LVG | IV—the LVG stands for Lubertus van Gerrevinck). Papermakers would on occasion coopt Dutch watermarks in order to try to pass their wares off as the more desirable Dutch paper. Special thanks to James Green at the Library Company for this information.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Frame, “A Short Description of Pennsylvania” (Philadelphia: printed and sold by William Bradford, 1692), 164. Available here: <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/permanence/text4/FramePennsylvania.pdf>

and women who work in flax fields, spin flax into yarn, weave it into cloth, wash it in homes, and wear it on their backs until “it is well worn.”

That Frame chooses to express these relationships through the medium of poetry rather than prose is also perhaps important. While cloth producers weave fibers, Frame weaves words. In fact, technologies related to the manufacture of cloth are embedded in the formal structure of the poem and the poems I will discuss below. Cloth is woven on a loom which is a device that threads together two distinct sets of yarn or thread—the warp and the weft. The loom keeps the warp in place while filling threads—or weft—are woven through them. Poetry borrows from the logic of the loom in that a poem’s meter is a structural device that gives it shape and, in the case of Frame’s poem, the rhyming couplets moving vertically down the page function much like the warp through which the words moving from right to left are continually threaded. In this sense, what is gestured to but not named in this poem is an intimate relationship between commerce, print, and domestic economy—an emerging commercial poetics that weaves these worlds together.

On the ground, early Americans might have been less interested in Frame’s poetic view of rags and more interested in generating extra income as rags were becoming an increasingly important commodity in Colonial North America. In the first half of the eighteenth century the number of rag paper mills in both England and North America expanded dramatically. In the late seventeenth century, British paper accounted for the generation of roughly £28,000 annually, but by 1730 generated roughly £780,000 annually.<sup>8</sup> North America witnessed a similar expansion of the number of mills and reams produced annually, and by 1818, the value of rags collected in the United States was estimated to be \$900,000 per year.<sup>9</sup>

Printers and writers seem to be in a prime position to recognize the relationship between cloth and paper and seem equally aware of the source of the paper they are writing and printing on. North American printers, such as Franklin, who had their hands in both ends of the business—who were rag buyers and sellers as well as commercial printers—were inevitably (if tangentially) invested in both the cloth production industries and the text producing industries.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, they served as intermediaries, structuring circuits of production and exchange

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<sup>8</sup> Munsell, *Origin and Progress*, 33-36.

<sup>9</sup> Munsell, *Origin and Progress*, 33-36.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1730’s Franklin had begun the challenge the Rittenhouse Mill’s near monopoly over papermaking in the Philadelphia region by supplying non-Rittenhouse mills with rags. By 1788, as he tells Brissot de Warville, he had his hand in establishing up to eighteen different mills. Thanks to Jim Green for this information.

filtered through the home: running advertisements in newspapers and on the last pages of their books offering to buy rags, they give these domestic products—or even domestic “waste”—value in the marketplace.<sup>11</sup> For instance, in 1756 Benjamin Franklin’s *Pennsylvania Gazette* offered “READY MONEY for clean LINNEN RAGS at the New-Printing-Office, in Market-street, Philadelphia.” In turn, some printers dabbled in both ends of the business, such as Franklin’s sister-in-law, Ann Smith Franklin, who ran her husband’s printing business from 1734 to 1763 and, in addition to printing *The Boston Gazette*, seems to have printed on cloth intended for clothes and furnishing. She advertises “Linens, Calicoes, Silks, &c., in good Figures, very lively and durable colours, and without the offensive smell which commonly attends the Linens printed here.”<sup>12</sup> Mary Katherine Goddard, the printer of the first copy of the Declaration of Independence to include the names of the signers, also ran a dry-goods store out of her printing shop and advertised cash for linen and cotton rags.<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting back on the eighteenth century, nineteenth-century American author Joel Munsell comments, “we behold with satisfaction and amazement, what has been brought about by the aid of a commodity so insignificant in the eyes of the world as linen and cotton rags.”<sup>14</sup> He continues: “[Paper mills] consume the cast-off habiliments of the population of the whole world.”<sup>15</sup> While in the poem above Frame imagines an internal circuit of production in which North American linen becomes North American paper, Munsell recognizes that cloth traveling wider circuits of exchange—such as Irish linen and Indian cotton—may also find its way to local paper mills. Irish immigrants *were* bringing flax production techniques to North America as early as the 1720’s and 1730’s and by the mid eighteenth-century centers of Irish immigration such as Londonderry, NH were known for their linen textiles.<sup>16</sup> While this suggests that some of the rags used in papermaking in this region may have been made from North American linen, farmers in regions such as Philadelphia, as Adrienne Hood has noted, were in fact exporting large amounts

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<sup>11</sup> See Joel Munsell, *Chronology of the Origin and Progress of Paper and Paper-making* (Albany: Printed by J. Munsell, 1876), 71. Accessed through Archive.org

<sup>12</sup> See Leona M. Hudak, *Early American Women Printers and Publishers 1639-1820* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 36.

<sup>13</sup> See Leona M. Hudak, *Early American Women Printers and Publishers 1639-1820* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 321.

<sup>14</sup> Munsell, *Chronology of the Origin and Progress of Paper and Paper-making* (Albany: Printed by J. Munsell, 1876), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Munsell, *Origin and Progress*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> See James Patrick Byrne, Philip Coleman, and Jason Francis King in *Ireland and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History :Volume 2* (ABC-CLIO 2008), 460.

of flaxseed to places like Ireland, making the production and consumption of linen an international affair.<sup>17</sup> Because the flax plants used in linen manufacture were harvested before the plants could produce seed, flax seed production and the production of flax for linen were separate (but of course related) industries, leading Benjamin Franklin to remark in 1774, “All the wisdom and wealth of England and Ireland united, cannot sow Ireland with flax without the American seed, 34,000 hogsheads of which is annually exported to Ireland from the provinces of New-York and Philadelphia only.”<sup>18</sup> However, despite Franklin’s assertion—and despite the circulation of non-importation and non-consumption agreements in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War—between 1769 and 1772 British North America imported 6,454,860 yards of English and Irish linen, representing roughly 50% of the linen produced in Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of where the flax seed was harvested or sewn or where the linen was spun and woven, much of it would, no doubt, find its way to local North American paper mills. In the 1750s, five new paper mills were established in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and, in the 1770s, 25 new mills were established in the American colonies.<sup>20</sup> Booksellers and printers invested in early paper mills with the hope that local paper production would supplement an unreliable import trade and for this reason paper mills tended to be established where the printing trade could provide an strong market for locally produced paper.<sup>21</sup> But, printers obviously needed papermakers as much as papermakers needed printers. Printers bought the middling grade paper used to print newspapers, broadsides, and other inexpensive print materials—paper, that is, that North American papermakers new to the industry could produce and at prices that would make them competitive with similar grade Dutch, French, and Italian paper filtered through English ports.<sup>22</sup> And printers in cities such as Philadelphia needed a lot of paper. As Bidwell notes, “In the course of a year a reasonably busy printer bought a quantity of paper worth more than the

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<sup>17</sup> Adrienne Hood, *The Weaver’s Craft: Cloth, Commerce, and Industry in Early Pennsylvania* (Upenn 2003).

<sup>18</sup> “The Question Discussed, November 19, 1774.” Reprinted from Verner W. Crane, *Benjamin Franklin’s Letters to the Press, 1758-1775* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1950), pp. 270-6.

<sup>19</sup> See N.B. Harte, “The British Linen Trade with the United States in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.” *Textiles in Trade: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium*, September 14–16, 1990, Washington, DC.

<sup>20</sup> See Konstanien Dierks, “Letter Writing, Stationery Supplies, and Consumer Modernity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World.” *Early American Literature*; Volume 41, Fall 2006, pp. 473-494

<sup>21</sup> John Bidwell, “Printers Supplies and Capitalization.” *The History of the Book in America, Vol. 1*. Ed. Hugh Amory and David Hall (Cambridge UP 1999), 176.

<sup>22</sup> Bidwell, “Printers Supplies,” 176.

total value of the equipment in his shop...[and for this reason] the colonial printer...was always seeking a reasonable price for this staple commodity.”<sup>23</sup>

Returning to Richard Frame’s poem with the (very) brief delineation of the international scale on which the linen, paper, and printing industries were working in mind, his fantasy of economic autarky seems naïve at best. He is either a rather bad economic historian or he may be trying to tell us something else besides how to sew flax, weave linen fibers, and make paper. Instead, we might take his poem as trying to articulate a particular relationship between print culture and consumer culture<sup>24</sup> that would become increasingly important to evolving understandings of colonial and American identity. The relationships between text and textile made visible in Frame’s poem and developed in more detail in colonial American newspapers in the second half of the eighteenth century—in the form of advertisements for clean, white linen rags and, in the years leading up to the Revolution, the call for women to produce and clothe their families in homespun linen—were more than simply an immediate feature of the economic and political landscape; rather, this attention to material economies could be read as an index of a developing preoccupation with gendered whiteness that would become essential to social reproduction in the new republic. As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have argued, spinning was not just about the production of cloth: it was about the production of a particular gendered identity.<sup>25</sup> In turn, building off the work of Jonathan Senchyne, we might say that paper mills and printers were participating in the production of whiteness as an indicator of refinement and as a social category. As Senchyne writes, “Despite actual differences in the color of finished product, the paper industry adopted white and brown as signifiers of quality loosely related to appearance. The idea of white as pure, unmarked, and beautiful lent itself well to the purposes of an industry in search of an unobtrusive background that contrasted with black ink.”<sup>26</sup> In this

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, Bidwell writes, “A typical printing office of this time would have required three or four reams a week to sustain a weekly newspaper with job printing, a modest amount of government work, and an occasional pamphlet on the side. A larger concern in a major city might have used an average of six reams a week or three hundred reams a year,” 174.

<sup>24</sup> By print culture and consumer culture I do not mean simply the consumption of texts and commodities but rather the nexus of economic and material practices that inform the production, circulation, and consumption of these materials.

<sup>25</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Senchyne, “Bottles of Ink and Reams of Paper: *Clotel*, Racialization, and the Material Culture of Print.” *Material Texts: Early African American Print Culture*, Ed. Lara Cohen and Jordan Stein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012).



sense, cloth and paper are seem to have been linked in the articulation of republican womanhood in the second half of the eighteenth-century.

## Part II

### The Gender of Paper in the Age of Homespun

As suggested above, women's roles in mediating the commercial and material interdependencies between cloth and paper were not lost on eighteenth-century American readers and writers.<sup>27</sup> In both homes and early dame schools, young women's education often emphasized reading, sewing, and spinning rather than reading, writing, and arithmetic. Non-elite women spun thread in order to generate additional income. Conduct literature, in turn, encouraged elite women to spin in order to generate the image of virtuous industriousness. As Jones and Stallybrass have remarked, whether the fiber was linen, wool, cotton, or silk, "all of it, until the industrial revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, passed through the fingers of [women] spinners."<sup>28</sup> In turn, North Americans who had access to print materials in the form of newspapers, pamphlets, novels, natural histories, almanacs, etc. regularly encountered printers' and papermakers' advertisements for the rags—a byproduct of domestic economy—that were a valuable commodity as the production of paper-based media continued to grow over the course of the eighteenth century. Labor in papermaking mills was, in turn, divided by gender: women sorted incoming rags and men fermented rags and molded rag pulp into rag paper sheets.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, women were located at an important pivot where the making and unmaking of one material—cloth—leads to the manufacture of the other—printed text.

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<sup>27</sup> Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor has argued, "international commerce, in the form of goods and people, left its stamp on every kind of work that women did" and, significantly, that "women's work lives linked local transactions to international transformations" (39). See Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties that Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 89.

<sup>29</sup> See James Green, *The Rittenhouse Mill and the Beginnings of Papermaking in America* (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1990), 15. He writes: the "papermaking process began with the rag dealers, who collected worn out linen and cotton clothes and carted them to the mill on crude forest roads." Once at the mill "the rags were weighed, sorted into various qualities, hacked up and torn apart—the buttons and hooks having first been removed and dumped into a pile and moistened with water to begin fermentation." From there, the rags were hammered down into a "pulp," and eventually transferred to a chest or vat where the "vatman," lowering his mould into the vat, extracted pulp in the shape of large sheets of paper. Other workers removed these proto-paper sheets and placed them in bundles or reams to be stamped and eventually dried.

While the spinning woman was certainly not a new phenomenon, this figure gained increased legibility, as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has noted, in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War as British policies were causing increased tensions between colony and metropole. One of the key points of contention between England and the colonies was, of course, the passing of the 1765 Stamp Act which required that many print materials—such as newspapers, magazines, legal documents—be printed on London-milled paper that carried the embossed “revenue stamp.” While the Stamp Act certainly represented a form of “taxation without representation,” it also proved a threat to two burgeoning North American industries: printing and papermaking. Being forced to print on imported paper would raise a printer’s overhead and, in turn, take business away from local paper mills.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, when colonials responded to the Stamp Act in early 1766 by circulating non-importation and non-consumption agreements in major North American cities, men and women agreed to forgo purchasing commodities imported on British ships, they had to find new ways of securing another commodity: cloth. As suggested above, because cloth and paper are parallel media, a shortage in cloth meant that existing paper mills would have a difficult time securing the rags they needed to make paper—paper for bills of exchange, contracts, bills of lading, broadsides, and newspapers.<sup>31</sup>

Colonial newspapers record two reactions to Stamp Act and, consequently, the non-importation and non-consumption agreements. Firstly, they record a new valuation of spinning and women’s production of homespun linen cloth.<sup>32</sup> As women were called upon to produce their own “homespun” cloth in lieu of consuming imported textiles and clothing, newspapers published accounts of roughly sixty spinning bees between 1768 and 1770, in addition to numerous articles and letters praising the industry of young women whose labor at the spinning

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<sup>30</sup> See Bidwell, “Printers Supplies.”

<sup>31</sup> The non-consumption and non-importation agreements meant that there was a shortage of paper itself in the period, leading people with the capital to do so to establish a rash of new paper mills in this period. See Munsell, *Origins and Progress*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> As scholars have noted, in this context, the outward, public appearance of women and their management of the interior spaces of their homes became important indexes of a family’s political and financial commitment to Republicanism. Advertisements for textiles and women’s clothing shared space in newspapers with a rising number of condemnations of the “woman of fashion” and the female consumer. For work on clothing and gender in Early America see Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); and Linzy A. Brekke, “The ‘Scourge of Fashion’: Political Economy and the Politics of Consumption in the Early Republic.” *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*; Volume 3, Number 1, Spring 2005.

wheel was assuring colonists their “rights, property, and privileges.”<sup>33</sup> And secondly, they bear witness to a new valuation of linen rags themselves—the “ragged and torn,” worn-out linen that figures as the end result of the very cloth that papers called upon women to spin.<sup>34</sup> As Ulrich writes, “boycotting English goods gave household production a new significance.”<sup>35</sup> I would add, however, that this increased attention to the chaste industriousness of women at their wheels was centered on a particular type of woman. Or, we might say, these discourses were the making of that woman.

In the spring of 1766, newspapers in Newport and Providence documented this new fad for spinning matches. As mentioned above, working class women, women servants, and enslaved women had regularly engaged in spinning flax and wool for employers and slaveholders and as a means of generating extra income;<sup>36</sup> however, the spinning matches of 1766 suggest a new phenomenon: young, unmarried women from well-to-do families sitting down at the spinning wheel.<sup>37</sup> For instance, in March 1766, *The Newport Mercury* reports:

We hear that 20 young Ladies of the best Families in Providence, had a Spinning Match at a Gentleman’s House last Tuesday, where the Performance was surprising, and made a brilliant Appearance, and had a Dance in the Evening: There is several more of the same Kind to be performed there—A laudable Example for all Ladies in Newport and elsewhere, who purpose to promote Industry, and retrieve from Ruin a sinking Country.<sup>38</sup>

A similar report, from *The Providence Gazette*, makes sure to note that the “Eighteen Daughters of Liberty,” who “hath discovered a laudable Zeal for introducing Home Manufactures,” “were

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Laurel Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Object and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 180.

<sup>34</sup> The relationship between homespun linen and American made paper in this period is perhaps as symbolic as it is material. Of course, imported cloth was still entering the market and a large percentage of cloth rags sold to paper mills was most likely manufactured elsewhere.

<sup>35</sup> See Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun*, 176-7.

<sup>36</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Vintage, 1991) provides a series of case studies of the lives of both elite and non-elite women in the pre-Revolutionary period

<sup>37</sup> Married women, such as Benjamin Franklin’s wife, also took up spinning in order to clothe themselves and members of their household. Franklin writes to his wife: “As the Stamp Act is at length repeal’d, I am willing you should have a new Gown, which you may suppose I did not send sooner, as I knew you would not like to be finer than your neighbours, unless in a Gown of your own spinning. Had the trade between the two Countries totally ceas’d, it was a Comfort to me to recollect, that I had once been cloth’d from Head to Foot in Woolen and Linnen of my Wife’s Manufacture, that I never was prouder of any Dress in my Life, and that she and her Daughter might do it again if it was necessary.” Quoted in Carl Holliday, *Woman’s Life in Colonial Days* (Boston: Cornhill Publishing, 1922), 155. However, young, unmarried women—such as Franklin’s daughter—were the focus of most of the newspaper accounts.

<sup>38</sup> *The Newport Mercury*. Newport, RI: March 10, 1766; Issue 392, page 3.

young Ladies of good Reputation.”<sup>39</sup> Articles such as these reconceptualize spinning as genteel work practiced by “Ladies” of good repute with newly conceptualized ties to political discourse. While still a form of domestic labor and domestic oeconomy, it is not practiced as a means of generating income; rather, spinning becomes a way for young, unmarried women from well-to-do families to generate character. For instance, *The Boston Post* reports that participants at another spinning bee had “resolved to Marry as soon as a good Opportunity presented, but to have no Person but what was willing to risque his Life in Defence of...their Country’s Liberty.”<sup>40</sup> These reports recast spinning as the pursuit of unmarried genteel North American women (rather than that of women from varied economic and racial backgrounds) and make spinning—and by proxy, the wearing of homespun—a desirable and marketable characteristic of the marriageable woman.

While for laboring women spinning continued to be a means through which they could insert themselves into a nexus of commercial relations,<sup>41</sup> the spinning given public attention in newspapers in this period was more about the production of a certain kind of woman than it was about cloth for domestic use or Atlantic circulation. That, of course, does not mean that these discourses are devoid of their own kind of commercial poetics. Nowhere is this more visible than in an account printed in *The Newport Mercury* in May 1766 (Figure 1). Addressing his account to the printer of *The Newport Mercury*, this numerical narrative translates actions and events into data. That is, it attributes economic and numerical value to emergent understandings of feminine virtue that are tied directly to these industrious “ladies” of “good reputation.” Roughly reproducing the lines from Proverbs 31:13, the author writes: “This is the Character of a virtuous Woman:—She seeketh Wool and Flax, &t.—she layeth her Hands to Spindle, and her Hands hold the Distaff.—Her Price is far above Rubies.”<sup>42</sup> More so than in the narrative accounts above, this is a public print that advertises these women’s value by recreating the lines, page divisions, and particular relationships between letters (names, goods, etc.) and numbers that

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<sup>39</sup> *The Providence Gazette*. Providence, RI: March 12, 1766; supplement 2

<sup>40</sup> *The Boston Post-Boy*. Boston, MA: April 21, 1766; Issue 453, page 3.

<sup>41</sup> In an era when bills of credit and specie were a rare means of exchange, women of laboring classes, in particular, often exchanged flax and wool thread for items available in dry goods shops.

<sup>42</sup> *The Newport Mercury*. Newport, RI: May 5-12, 1766; Issue 401, page 3. Proverbs 31.13, from the King James Bible, states: “She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.” Young women regularly included this line in their samplers as well.

characterize home account books or the account books of dry goods merchants.<sup>43</sup> What is being exchanged here, however, is something different: thread is being bartered for the public, discursive articulation of character. That is, the “account” calculates character. Just as account books document the transferal of commodities from one hand to another and the transformation of commodity into specie or credit, this editorial account transforms ladies of fashion into Republican women.

If the production of homespun linen figured as a way to critique British sovereignty in the late 1760’s, the household production of worn linen rags is imagined as equally important to ensuring the survival of North American papermaking mills and printing presses that were threatened by the Stamp Act.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, just as editorials documenting spinning bees were beginning to sketch out the confines of white femininity, a growing number of advertisements for linen rags participate in this project by meditating on the connections between gendered bodies, the “things” they produce, and the “things” that produce gendered bodies. Take for instance, the following article published in the *Boston New Letter* in 1769. Announcing that “the bellcart will go through Boston before the end of the next month, to collect rags for the paper mill at Milton, when all people that will encourage the paper manufactory may dispose of them,” the address continues with the following poem:

Rags are as beauties, which concealed lie,  
 But when in paper how it charms the eye’  
 Pray save your rags, new beauties to discover,  
 For paper, truly, everyone’s a lover:  
 By the pen and press such knowledge is displayed,  
 As wouldn’t exist if paper was not made.  
 Wisdom of things, mysterious, divine,  
 Illustriously doth on paper shine.<sup>45</sup>

Because rags were a product of domestic oeconomy, this poem recognizes women’s valuable contribution to the production of “knowledge” which could not “exist if paper was not made.” However, the fetishization of paper as object of romantic desire (“For paper, truly, everyone’s a

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<sup>43</sup> See Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008)

<sup>44</sup> See Bidwell, “Printers Supplies.”

<sup>45</sup> Munsell, *Origins and Progress*, 42.

lover”) also conflates rags and rag paper with the bodies of the women who help to produce these commodities. In fact, it is difficult to discern “bodies” from “things” in this poem, suggesting how things may act on bodies and enable people to form and transform themselves. In this sense, this poem rewrites the clothes-as-letters and letters-as-clothes scene from Richardson’s *Pamela* once again but with a twist: rather than cloth/ paper signifying virtue, the poem locates women as intermediaries in a process in which cloth becomes paper while simultaneously intimating that the same process that makes cloth into paper also makes subjects.

Exploring how the page serves as an analogue for different social and racial types, Benjamin Franklin’s “Paper: A Poem,” makes these connections explicit. He writes, “Various the paper various wants produce—;/ The wants of fashion, elegance, and use./ Men are as various; and, if right I scan, / Each sort of paper represents some man .”<sup>46</sup> He goes on to compare fops to gilt-paper, laborers to copy paper, wretches and cheats to coarse brown paper, misers to sinking-paper, politicians to foolscap, quick tempered gentlemen to touch-paper, and poets to wastepaper. Finally, he explicitly compares the virtuous woman to white paper:

Observe the maiden, innocently sweet!  
 She’s fair, *white paper*, an unsullied sheet;  
 On which the happy man whom fate ordains  
 May write his name, and take her for his pains.<sup>47</sup>

While it doesn’t seem surprising that innocence would be aligned with the “unsullied” page, Franklin is also inadvertently aligning feminine virtue with whiteness as a discursive category. After all, the “whiteness” of the page depended on the kinds of rags that went into making it and some “white paper” was lighter or darker than other “white paper.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the poem suggests that white femininity in this poem is essential to social reproduction—the fair, unsullied body on which the “happy man...may write his name” is also the body through which white, republican subjectivity can be reproduced.

Despite the “homespun moment” in the years leading up to the revolution, international commerce continued to shape the appearance and economic possibilities of women in North America. While examples of women shopkeepers point to how commerce may offer women new opportunities for independence, they do so in the face of discourses reimagining the role of

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<sup>46</sup> Benjamin Franklin, “Paper: A Poem.” *The Works of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. 3.* (London 1806), 522.

<sup>47</sup> Franklin, “Paper: A Poem.”

<sup>48</sup> See Senchyne, “Bottles of Ink.”

women, and re-inventing the home as a site fundamental to the reproduction of cultural values. The image of the spinning woman at the center of the home producing cloth for local, private consumption may have become a poignant metaphor for colonials trying to imagine themselves as a self-sustaining nation-state rather than a colonial outpost entirely reliant on an import trade. An attention to textiles provides a wider lens through which to examine the lives of colonial women in this period, and significantly challenges the idea that women and their households were disconnected from public discourse. The American bourgeois woman dressed in the products of a local economy becomes the body through which a homogenous understanding of group identity can be reproduced, and the coding of domestic labor and the home itself as the territory of this woman, polices who and who cannot produce domestic spaces and recognized publics. In other words, a study of the production and consumption of textiles and their various afterlives brings into relief how fantasies of racially homogenous and self-sustaining home and nation are produced in North American newspapers.

Looking forward into the nineteenth-century, the material economies of texts and textiles, the mysterious, alchemical processes through which cloth becomes paper, the human-like quality of things, and the thingliness of humans, all seem to be old news for women writers such as Lydia Sigourney. By way of a conclusion, I would like to briefly consider her 1849 poem, “To a Shred of Linen” in which the author seems to take up the project begun by authors above in tracing the formalistic relationship between cloth, paper, and poem. She begins her poem with the following lines:

WOULD they swept cleaner!—  
 Here's a littering shred  
 Of linen left behind—a vile reproach  
 To all good housewifery. Right glad am I,  
 That no neat lady, train'd in ancient times  
 Of pudding-making, and of sampler-work,  
 And speckless sanctity of household care,  
 Hath happened here, to spy thee. She, no doubt,  
 Keen looking through her spectacles, would say,  
 "This comes of reading books:"—or some spruce beau  
 Essenc'd and lily-handed, had he chanc'd

To scan thy slight superficies, 'twould be  
 "This comes of writing poetry."—Well—well—  
 Come forth—offender!—hast thou aught to say?<sup>49</sup>

Sigourney's poem opens by inviting the shred of linen to speak. Poking fun at conduct literature that suggests, to invoke Anne Bradstreet's words from a much earlier period, that women's hands are better fitted to the needle than the pen, Sigourney suggests that poetry and cloth share the capacity to alchemize one form into another. Fibers become threads that are woven into cloth just as thoughts and memories become the basic elements that are woven into the stanzas that comprise poems. As Sigourney's poem goes on to trace the history of linen production, envisioning the long heritage of New England men and women growing, harvesting, and spinning flax in New England, she teases out the relationship between locally produced linen and locally printed poetry.

However, in all likelihood Sigourney's scrap of linen was more of an interloper than she lets on. After the American Revolution, merchants again began importing linen fabrics which North American consumers eagerly purchased. Britain periodically flooded the American market with inexpensive goods making it impossible for domestic manufacturers of linen to compete. Moreover, with the 1793 invention of the cotton gin and developments in factory spinning and weaving machinery, the manufacture of cotton goods far overshadowed the making of linen in North America and cotton became so cheap it was impractical and unprofitable to grow flax for linen cloth. By the mid-19th century handmade linen had almost disappeared with only a few manufacturers, such as those in Londonderry, NH, producing primarily inexpensive tow or osnaburg linen for Southern markets. In this sense, Sigourney's shred of linen was most likely manufactured from flax grown in Ireland or Scotland and spun into thread and fabric in the mills and factories of an expanding British industrial complex. The nostalgia she expresses for the place the spinning wheel once held in North American sitting rooms is also commentary on how global capitalist markets were restructuring social, economic, and (perhaps) literary relations at home. In the end, perhaps rejecting the nostalgic image of the spinning woman that she has called up from historical memory, she throws the shred of linen into the rag bag among other

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<sup>49</sup> Lydia Sigourney, "To a Shred of Linen." Accessed through the American Verse Archive, University of Michigan.



scraps destined for the paper mill, hoping it will emerge “Stainless and smooth” as a “fair page”<sup>50</sup>—the unsullied sheet—that will serve as the backdrop to penned and printed discourse.

At the outset of this essay, I suggested that we attend to the textile trade alongside early American printing and paper making practices in order to understand how these two related media were fundamental to the social fabrication of early American subjects and discourses. The evidence I’ve chosen to discuss in this paper certainly reflects a disciplinary preoccupation with language and literariness, but I sought to show how literariness and commerce—discourse and economy—collide to produce new forms of expression that, in turn, foster consuming publics of both words and goods. That is, I’ve sought to show how the history of texts and the history of textiles foster a commercial poetics that invites us to look at these materials while straddling disciplinary divides. As this essay has argued, textiles were central to the rise of eighteenth-century print culture and public prints have more to tell us than the words inked on the page: printed on rag paper and stitched together with a variety of different threads, texts bear the mark of men and women laboring in flax fields and as spinners, weavers, seamstresses, and laundresses and as rag pickers and papermakers. In this sense, cloth industries not only establish a discourse shared by laborers, manufacturers, and consumers; rather, we might say that textiles also, in fact, inhabit and colonize these print materials, thereby revealing the many ways in which men and women from diverse backgrounds may have “woven” their way into public discourses.

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<sup>50</sup> Sigourney, “To a Shred of Linen.”