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Article abstract

This paper explores the ways in which women contributed to the complex web of negotiations and accommodations out of which the early modern urban community was formed. Drawing on the archives of seventeenth-century Aberdeen and other Scottish cities, it focuses on female philanthropists and unwed wet nurses, women at the top and bottom, the centre and margins of urban society. Rich women founded hospitals for old women and schools for young girls, but these feminist initiatives did not extend to the female guestworkers in their midst: migrant female domestics made pregnant in town had to fend for themselves, and many ended up wet-nursing the children of the rich. Yet in indirect ways they, too, left their mark on urban society. These stories, then, shed fresh light on the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which early modern women pursued their collective and individual interests under conditions of profound gender inequality.

City Limits: Female Philanthropists and Wet Nurses in Seventeenth-Century Scottish Towns

GORDON DESBRISAY

WOMEN OUTNUMBERED MEN BY A SUBSTANTIAL MARGIN IN NEARLY EVERY early modern European town.¹ Scottish towns were no exception. Women outnumbered men in all the larger burghs except under conditions of armed occupation, as in the garrison towns of Cromwellian Scotland.² Poll tax records for the 1690s offer the first clear glimpse of population structure, and they suggest that in the compact royal burgh of Aberdeen (population circa 7,500) there were just 71 men to every 100 women.³ In the Scottish capital of Edinburgh (population circa 45,000) the sex ratio was nearly as lop-sided at 76:100.⁴ Farther from urban centres, the disparity became less pronounced, and in more distant rural parishes men were sometimes in the majority.⁵ Given the incomplete

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- 1 Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization: 1500-1800* (London, 1984), 178.
- 2 M.W. Flinn, *Scottish Population History, From the Seventeenth Century to the 1930's* (Cambridge, 1977), 191-2, 251; Gordon DesBrisay, "'Menacing Their Persons and Exacting on Their Purses': The Aberdeen Justice Court, 1657-1700," in *From Lairds to Louns: Country and Burgh Life in Aberdeen, 1600-1800*. David Stevenson, ed. (Aberdeen, 1986), 72-3.
- 3 John Stuart, ed., *List of Pollable Persons Within the Shire of Aberdeen, 1696*. Vol. I (Aberdeen, 1844), 595-632; R. E. Tyson, "The Population of Aberdeenshire, 1695-1755 - A New Approach," *Northern Scotland* 6 (1985): 124-25. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Aberdeen refer exclusively to the royal burgh of New Aberdeen.
- 4 Helen M. Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh: A Demographic Study* (Aldershot, 1994), 13-21, 28. The sex ratio in 40 London parishes in 1695 was 77:100, but male servants outnumbered female in London and the sex ratio favoured men earlier in the century. Roger Finlay, *Population and Metropolis: The Demography of London 1580-1650* (Cambridge, 1981), 140-42; Jeremy Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: A London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987), 130. For other English towns, see David Souden, "Migrants and the Population Structure of Later Seventeenth-Century Provincial Cities and Market Towns," in *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns 1600-1800*. Peter Clark, ed. (London, 1984), 149-61.
- 5 Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 28; Tyson, "Population of Aberdeenshire," 116, Tables 1 and 2; Flinn, *Scottish Population History*, 283.

nature of the evidence, the exact figures might be open to dispute, but the general picture is not. Nor is the main explanation, which is that large towns drew disproportionate numbers of women in from the countryside to work as domestic servants.⁶

These numbers should give pause to those of us trying to understand what it was like to live in an early modern town, especially in light of recent discussions of community as a heterogeneous, contested social space in which all members, not just elite men, participated, however unequally and oppositionally. Community, in this view, emerges from an array of confrontations, negotiations and accommodations among shifting constituencies and competing constellations of interests.⁷ This perspective offers a useful corrective to a somewhat myopic vision of urban life that has tended to fixate on town councils, church assemblies, guilds and the like as if these well-documented institutions constituted the entire arena of civic affairs and the men that staffed them the entire community.⁸ That vision, which early modern elites themselves were at pains to promote, rendered most men and all women mere passengers on the civic journey. But anyone who has ever been behind the wheel of a crowded vehicle knows that the driver's autonomy is seldom absolute and that those in the back seat have ways of making their presence and their needs felt. A properly holistic analysis of the early modern urban community in Scotland, one that gives drivers and passengers alike their due, must await a larger study, but here we can at least begin to bring women, the urban majority, into the picture.

How, then, did women contribute to the unending process of constructing and maintaining community? How did they resist? How did they collude? How did they cope? These are big questions. To begin to answer them I have turned to Aberdeen's rich seventeenth-century archives, augmented by evidence from Edinburgh and elsewhere. In particular, I have focussed on two groups of women, female philanthropists and unmarried wet nurses, whose stories,

6 I. D. and K.A. Whyte, "The Geographical Mobility of Women in Early Modern Scotland," in *Perspectives in Social History: Essays in Honour of Rosalind Mitchison*. Leah Leneman, ed. (Aberdeen, 1988), 83-106; Flinn, *Scottish Population History*, 192, 283; Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 28-9; Souden, "Migrants and the Population Structure," 150-60. See also, Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe Since 1650* (Bloomington, 1992), 54-7, 97-9, 140-41.

7 Adapted from Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (Cambridge, 1995), 4. See also Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession 91: The Modern Language Association of America* (1991): 33-40; and James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).

8 Myopia can be over-corrected. Rab Houston's *Social Change in the Age of Enlightenment: Edinburgh, 1660-1760* (Oxford, 1994), a model of the new urban history in many ways, takes insufficient account of civic and church government.

largely untold, offer especially instructive examples of the contrasting ways in which women at the top and bottom of urban society, at the centre and on the margins, saw to their individual and collective interests in a social, economic and ideological world cast in the image of the male minority. These are stories of women in very particular local circumstances, but I hope that they can shed more general light on both the extent of female agency and the limits of female solidarity in the early modern era.

To the question "How did they cope?" part of any answer, of course, is that it depends. Women were as diverse as men. To be sure, all women lived under a formal subordination to men: on the basis of their sex they were politically disenfranchised, barred from public office, denied full membership in guilds and professions, locked out of secondary schools and universities, restricted in their legal and property rights, paid lower wages than almost any man of comparable station, and, if they had never been married, prohibited from living on their own.⁹ Just as obviously, the ways in which these constraints were administered, understood and responded to varied enormously according not only to time and place, individual temperament and experience, but also wealth, class, age, religion, occupation, marital status, reproductive history and – of particular concern in this essay – place of origin.

In recent years, many historians have highlighted the wide range of occupations undertaken by early modern townswomen who managed to work within, around and in defiance of gender restrictions.¹⁰ Evidence of women's active engagement in what were for so long considered the masculine domains of public life and paid labour turns up wherever historians look beyond the ideologically charged records of guild and craft, whose handy lists and enumerations deliberately obscured the role of women and other "unfree" participants in the urban economy.¹¹ In Aberdeen, the records of the bakers' trade depict a resolutely female-free industry, but court records show that when bakers were prosecuted for baking and selling underweight loaves, women were invariably

9 See for example R.A. Houston, "Women in the Economy and Society of Scotland, 1500-1800," in *Scottish Society 1500-1800*. Houston and I. D. Whyte, eds. (Cambridge, 1989), 118-47. It has recently been shown that women were formally enrolled in Edinburgh's Merchant Company in the early eighteenth century, but their privileges were commercial only, and did not extend to holding office or other rights associated with full citizenship. Elizabeth C. Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh* (Basingstoke, 1996), 7-16.

10 For Scotland, see Sanderson, *Women and Work in Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh*; Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*; and Houston, "Women in the Economy and Society."

11 Heather Swanson, "The Illusion of Economic Structure: Craft Guilds in Late Medieval English Towns," *Past and Present* 121 (1988): 29-48.

among those charged.¹² In the latter half of the seventeenth century no women were enrolled in Aberdeen's all-powerful merchant guild, but customs records show several women importing and exporting on a commercial scale.¹³ In seventeenth-century Edinburgh, daughters of guild burgesses occasionally petitioned the town council for the right to open a shop, and less well-connected townswomen might also be granted a licence if the authorities feared they could otherwise end up on the poor rolls.¹⁴ As retail trade expanded in the early eighteenth century, dozens of women – single, married and widowed – opened licensed shops in the Scottish capital, and some took on female apprentices.¹⁵ Brewing and innkeeping were traditional by-employments for urban women and, from the mid-seventeenth century, teaching school was another way for women to earn at least a supplementary income.¹⁶ Some schoolmistresses tutored privately in elite households, but most ran one-room elementary schools wherever space and a few fee-paying students could be found. There they offered girls and boys basic instruction in religion, reading, sewing and sometimes writing and arithmetic.¹⁷ From the 1650s, half of the licensed elementary teachers in Scotland's largest cities, and a great majority of the unlicensed, were

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- 12 Ebenezer Bain, ed., *Merchant and Craft Guilds: A History of the Aberdeen Incorporated Trades* (Aberdeen, 1887), 210-35; Aberdeen City Archives (ACA), Register of Convictions of Delinquents for Forestalling, Regrating etc., 22 January 1668; ACA, Aberdeen Council Register, Vol. 57, 27 March 1695.
 - 13 In 1691, Rachel Johnston, listed as a merchant, imported French barley, while Issobel Spink exported 400 ells (about 800 yards) of linen cloth. Scottish Records Office (SRO) E72/1/20.
 - 14 Marguerite Wood, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1655-1665* (Edinburgh, 1940), 130, 204, 345.
 - 15 Sanderson, *Women and Work*, Chapter 1; Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 205; and Houston, *Social Change in the Age of Enlightenment*, 367-71.
 - 16 R. A. Houston, *Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England, 1600-1800* (Cambridge, 1985), 235; and Houston, "Women in the Economy and Society," 122, 134-6. See also, Christopher R. Friedrichs, "Whose House of Learning? Some Thoughts on German Schools in Post-Reformation Germany," *History of Education Quarterly* 22 (1982): 373. In Catholic Europe, most schoolmistresses were nuns. Peter Petschauer, *The Education of Women in Eighteenth-Century Germany: New Directions from the German Female Perspective. Bending the Ivy* (Lewiston, 1989), 108, 142-67. One of Aberdeen's earliest known schoolmistresses was almost certainly Catholic: Janet Gordon was ordered to attend church more faithfully during an anti-Catholic crackdown in 1622. John Stuart, ed., *Selections From the Records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery, and Synod of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1846), 103.
 - 17 Houston, *Scottish Literacy*, 100, 114-15. In Peebles in 1656, women "who keepes scoole for female bairnes" were forbidden to teach boys, though the rule was evidently being broken and seems not to have applied elsewhere. R. Renwick, ed., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Peebles, 1652-1714* (Glasgow, 1910), 36.

women.¹⁸ In Glasgow, nine of seventeen elementary teachers licensed in 1663 were women.¹⁹ In Edinburgh, officials in 1659 tried to restrict the teaching of reading and writing to ten women and ten men, but women not favoured with a licence to teach literacy skills were encouraged to continue to offer training in domestic and industrial arts, for which the authorities set "no stinted number."²⁰ As in so many other areas of the urban economy, regulation failed to prevent unlicensed teachers, mainly women, from operating wherever there was a demand. Thomas Forbes, licensed to run Aberdeen's official "English school" where "young ons" (possibly girls as well as boys) were taught reading, writing and arithmetic, complained in 1677 that he had "but a verie small number of schollars in my schooll there being so many utheris schooll kept." Forbes named 15 unlicensed competitors in his complaint, five men and ten women.²¹

Examples of women's active role in the urban economy could be multiplied many times over. Yet for all the resourcefulness and ingenuity shown by those who managed to earn an independent living, women were still, then as now, much more likely than men to fall on hard times. In the wholly typical case of Aberdeen, women ordinarily accounted for 60 per cent of the recipients of public relief, rising to 80 per cent in times of crisis.²² To draw public relief from the town council or kirk session, a woman had to have been born in the city or been resident for seven years or more. To claim more substantial corporate relief from a guild, craft or profession, she had to have been born or married into the family of a male member of the corporation. And to qualify for any charity at all she also had to count among the widows, orphans, elderly and

18 Compared to other European countries, Scottish women may have comprised an unusually high proportion of licensed elementary teachers. Merry E. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1986), 179-83; R.A. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe: Culture and Education, 1500-1800* (New York, 1988), 73-5.

19 J.D. Marwick and R. Renwick, eds., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, A.D. 1663-1690* (Edinburgh, 1905), 23.

20 PRO, CH2/131/3 (7 March, 9 May and 1 August 1659). In Aberdeen in 1636, Marjorie Straquhan, her daughter and one other woman were told to stop teaching reading in their schools, and to obtain a licence if they wished to continue to offer sewing and lacemaking. John Stuart, ed., *Extracts From the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen: 1625-1642* (Edinburgh, 1871), 98.

21 ACA, Justice Court Book, Vol. I (1), undated, 1677. See also, Louise B. Taylor, ed., *Aberdeen Council Letters*, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1942-1961), 5:314 (8 April, 1674). The council allowed three women and two men on the outskirts of Aberdeen to stay open so as to spare young children a cold winter walk to town. ACA, Aberdeen Council Register, Vol. 55, 22 April, 1674. From Forbes' subsequent complaint, it seems the other schools re-opened after a decent interval. ACA, Justice Court Book, *ibid*.

22 Gordon DesBrisay, "Authority and Discipline in Aberdeen: 1650-1700," Ph.D. thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1989, 315-17.

infirm who constituted the “deserving poor” of the town.²³ Managing poor relief – deciding who got what, how much they got, when they got it, in what form and under what circumstances – was one of the key ways in which the great masculine institutions of the early modern city strove to shape and define urban society. But it was a game that women could also play.

City women were the main beneficiaries of charity, but they were also major benefactors. In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, a handful of wealthy Aberdonian women, mainly widows, established generous trust funds or “mortification.”²⁴ Like rich women all across early modern Europe prohibited by their sex from participating fully in public life, they turned to religion and philanthropy as powerful forms of self-expression and social engineering.²⁵ And like most major male benefactors, they targeted their funds to particular uses and constituencies. The bulk of their money went to support women and women’s causes.

The first such fund recorded in Aberdeen was established by Marian Douglas, Lady Drum, daughter of the Earl of Buchan and widow of the Laird of Drum. In 1630, she had encouraged her dying husband to leave the huge sum of £10,000 Scots to support boys from distressed or modest backgrounds at Marischal College and the Aberdeen grammar school, but when that project languished she set out to endow a charitable venture of her own while she was still alive to see her wishes carried through.²⁶ In 1633, she gave the town council £2,000 “of moneyes from my self” to help establish a women’s hospital (really a retirement and nursing home) for poor widows and spinsters of good repute whose husbands or fathers had belonged to the merchant guild. “It is not much,” she wrote, “bot ane widowes myte given with ane chearful and hearty goodwill.”²⁷ The hospital fund was augmented a year later by the widow Jean

23 Ibid., 161-78.

24 These drew on family fortunes from the first half of the century, when cloth exports fuelled Aberdeen’s pre-industrial peak of prosperity. See Duncan MacNiven, “Merchants and Traders in Early Seventeenth Century Aberdeen,” in *Lairds to Louns*, 57-69. In all, 126 mortifications were made over to the town between 1600 and 1650, as compared to just 51 over the rest of the century. *Mortifications Under the Charge of the Provost, Magistrates, and Town Council of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1849).

25 Christopher R. Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City, 1450-1750* (New York, 1995), 211; Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, 1990), 153-76.

26 The new laird (her son) and the town council could not agree to the terms of her late husband’s mortification. Taylor, ed., *Aberdeen Council Letters*, 1:312, 315-26, 328-32, 377-82. Unless otherwise noted, all sums £ Scots (£12 Scots = £1 Sterling).

27 Ibid., 379; *Mortifications*, 101-2. Hospitals were all the rage in Aberdeen at this time. The medieval hospital was refurbished by (and restricted to) the merchant guild about 1630, and in 1633 William Guild (Jean’s brother) gave the former Trinity monastery to the incorporated trades as a hospital for their distressed men. In 1654, the listers [dyers] craft founded a hospital of its own that seemed to cater for men and women. Stuart, ed., *Extracts From the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen: 1625-1642*, 33-5, 52; Alexander Skene, *A Succinct Survey of the Famous City of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1685), 220-1.

Guild's initial donation of £300.²⁸ Lady Drum's initiative helped to fill an important void in female society, which had lacked a separate institutional focus since the closing of the convents after the Reformation. Her guild women's hospital was a beacon of Christian charity, lay piety, corporate identity and female solidarity. Like the guild brethren's hospital, the guild women's was meant to house six residents. Little more is known about Lady Drum's hospital, but if it was at all like its masculine counterpart it was probably run on a quasi-monastic basis: in the guild brethren's hospital, residents were expected to surrender their worldly goods, shun the opposite sex, dine communally, wear distinctive gowns to church, spend hours a day praying (though not by rote, in pointed deference to the Reformed faith, and not for the dead), and generally give themselves over to "Godlivership."²⁹

Most of Aberdeen's other female philanthropists invested in girls' education. The proliferation of unlicensed teachers and ad hoc elementary schools from the middle of the seventeenth century suggests that going to school and (presumably) learning to read was becoming a normal part of growing up in a Scottish town, for girls as well as boys.³⁰ Schooling for girls generally ended at the elementary level (young women might well continue their education, but not in the classroom), with the result that far fewer women than men could write as well as read, since writing was a skill usually perfected only in the secondary schools and colleges from which women were excluded.³¹ Nevertheless, elementary schooling was deemed so vital to the religious and practical training of young girls that, in Aberdeen, wealthy women established charitable trusts to support female education and extend its benefits to local girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.

28 *Mortifications*, 106-8. The money needed to be increased by investment before it could provide a permanent home for the women's hospital, and the civil wars, revolution, conquest and occupation of the 1640s and 1650s caused further delay. It was not until 1664 that renovations began on a property on the Castlegate given by Jean Guild for the purpose. ACA, Aberdeen Council Register, Vol. 54, 17 February 1664. As early as 1641, however, Lady Drum directed part of the interest to six widows of distinguished burghesses "whom I know to stand in need." Taylor, ed., *Aberdeen Council Letters*, 2:278.

29 Stuart, ed., *Extracts From the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen: 1625-1642*, 33-5 (9 March 1631); ACA, Aberdeen Council Register Vol. 54, 21 December 1659; Bain, *Merchant and Craft Guilds*, 158-9.

30 Linking the provision of schooling to literacy is fraught with difficulties. We do not know how many students attended a school, how regularly or for how long, nor do we really know what went on in an average classroom. See R.A. Houston, "Literacy, Education and the Culture of Print in Enlightenment Edinburgh," *History* 78 (1993): 374-80, and his *Scottish Literacy*, Ch. 4. See also, W. B. Stephens, "Literacy in England, Scotland, and Wales, 1500-1900," *History of Education Quarterly* 30 (1990): 549-52.

31 Since most measures of literacy are based, of necessity, on written evidence, female literacy is bound to be underestimated.

In 1649, the bountiful Jean Guild bequeathed another £3,000 to maintain and educate ten poor orphans a year, male and female. "How soon through aige they sall be fund capable," she directed, they were to be "educat and trayned up in the knowledge of the ground of Christian religione, and also in reading, wreiting, schewing [sewing], and all such as may fitt them for anie vertuous calling or trade of lyf, according to their sex."³² Ten years later, her sister-in-law Katharine Rolland established a fund to teach poor burgesses' daughters to "sewe and read," in that order.³³ The first educational bequest for girls, however, and the most significant in the long run, was that of Katherine Forbes, the widowed Lady Rothiemay. In 1642, moved by "the love I beare to vertue in woemen" and by her regard for the burgh "wherin I was educat and bred," she established Aberdeen's first endowed school for girls with a £1,000 donation to the town council. Interest earned on the money was to cover the rent on a suitable building and the salary of a rigorously chaste widow or spinster "of honest report, grave, and modest carriage and behaviour" able to teach "young woemen and lasses to reid, wreitt, and sow, and anie other airt, or Science, wherof they can be capable."³⁴ One of the first schoolmistresses hired was the well-connected Barbara Molleson, daughter of a former town clerk and sister of a town council stalwart: appointed by her brother and his colleagues in 1654, she was replaced in 1659 when she married, and reappointed in 1662 when widowed.³⁵ She and her successors collected a salary of £40 per year, plus £20 to rent a building to live and teach in.³⁶ The salary was one of the highest paid to a woman in Aberdeen, but still less than one-third that of the male undermasters at the grammar school.³⁷ No mention was made of supporting poor

32 *Mortifications*, 128-30.

33 *Mortifications*, 135-40. It was unusual not to stress religious instruction, but perhaps not surprising given her late brother William Guild's fall from ecclesiastical grace at the hands of the Covenanters, and the uncertain political atmosphere of the late 1650s. See Bain, *Merchant and Craft Guilds*, 143-8. Some German parents may have sent their children to private schools precisely to avoid the heavy religious emphasis of public institutions. Friedrichs, "Whose House of Learning?" 375.

34 *Mortifications*, 117-19.

35 CA, Aberdeen Council Register, Vol. 53, 15 September 1654; Vol. 54, 12 October 1659; J. Stuart, ed., *Extracts From the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen: 1643-1747* (Edinburgh, 1872), 201 (19 March 1662). Later in life, Molleson was also favoured with a pension from Jean Guild's fund for the widows of merchant burgesses. ACA, *Mortification Accounts*, Vol. 2, 1673.

36 ACA, *Mortifications Accounts*, Vol. 2, 1684-85. When the stock of the mortification ran down later in the century, the wage was reduced by one-third. ACA, Aberdeen Council Register, Vol. 57, 27 January 1692. For comparison to other female wages, see below.

37 Undermasters at the grammar school were paid £133 a year, the master £400. Stuart, ed., *Extracts From the Council Register of the Burgh of Aberdeen: 1643-1747* (20 March 1667), 242. The council paid Daniel Newhouse, a Frenchman, £120 a year to teach navigation. ACA, Aberdeen Council Register, Vol. 57, 4 December 1695.

students at the school, but it would have been understood that the schoolmistress's salary, like that of Thomas Forbes and other male teachers on the public payroll, was intended in part to cover "all the poor children who ar recomendit to me, and receaved their Learning gratis."³⁸

Lady Rothiemay's was by no means the first or only school in Aberdeen to accept girls, but it was the first all-girl school established there on a permanent basis, distinct from a particular teacher, and the first to be managed and maintained in the public trust. In a university town proud to consider itself a centre of educational excellence, her school raised the profile of female education and, with the other bequests, helped to make it normative for native-born townswomen. Henceforth, civic boosters could claim, as Baillie Alexander Skene did in 1685, that "there wants no opportunities in this city for youth, both male and female, to learn any manner of good and commendable skill or knowledge in such things as may best qualifie them."³⁹ This was a somewhat hopeful assessment, but it was certainly the case that by the third quarter of the seventeenth century Aberdeen's often thread-bare safety net for the resident poor was being stretched to cover elementary schooling for girls. Indeed, officials could insist that a daughter be sent to school: in 1675 the kirk session, which doled out relief to the poorest residents of the town, reduced Janet Ross's meagre pension and warned her that she would be cut off entirely "if she doe not putt hir daughter to the school."⁴⁰

The founding of the hospital and the school, the setting up of charitable trusts for the comfort of old women and the education of young girls were major initiatives undertaken by women, on behalf of women. But female solidarity extended only so far: the benefits of these good works were strictly limited. This was especially clear with regard to educational initiatives, but it was true of philanthropic interventions in general. When Baillie Skene wrote of such education "as may best qualifie them," his words echoed Lady Rothiemay's "wherof they may be capable" and Jean Guild's "according to their sex," reminding us that, like most of their modern counterparts, early modern elites saw education primarily as a means of reinforcing the existing social order, preparing the next generation for their assigned roles in the community.⁴¹ It is certainly possible that the reassuringly staid and conservative language of the

38 ACA, Justice Court Book, Vol. I(1), undated, 1677.

39 Skene, *Succinct Survey*, 220.

40 SRO, CH2/448/14, 13 July 1675. In Edinburgh, couples taking in orphaned girls were required to teach them to read as well as manage domestic chores. Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 119. As the capital struggled to cope with hundreds of famine refugees in January 1699, the kirk worried that "some cair be taken to teach the younger sort [of the poor] to read and all of them the grounds of Religion." SRO, CH2/131/3.

41 See Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*, 16-22.

mortifications masked somewhat more progressive intentions on the part of Aberdeen's female philanthropists: teaching girls to read, after all, had the potential to connect them to a world well beyond the patriarchal household. But it is clear that naturalised distinctions of class and gender, though they might be tested and stretched by these interventions, were not meant to be overturned. Nor were the boundaries of class and gender the only ones to be upheld.

Not all distressed women in Aberdeen were eligible to retire to the women's hospital in old age, collect poor relief when they could not make ends meet, or have their daughters' schooling paid for. For one thing, there was a moral qualification for anyone, male or female, hoping to be counted among the "deserving" poor. To be eligible for the women's hospital, for example, widows must have remained "frie of publict [i.e. sexual] scandal" both before and after their husband's demise, while unmarried women were to remain virgins "to ther lyves ende."⁴² Orphans funded by Jean Guild risked being cut off if they proved "neglective" of their studies.⁴³ But it was not enough to live right – it was best to be born right. Lady Drum and Jean Guild both specified that the women's hospital be reserved for "borne bairnes in Aberdeine"; Katherine Rolland's educational support for "gild douchters" excluded all girls born outside the charmed circle of the merchant guild (let alone outside the town); and Jean Guild's fund for orphans was likewise reserved for native Aberdonians – unless, in the exception that proved the rule, they happened to be kin of her late husband, who were to be preferred "whither they be gottin within or without the burgh."⁴⁴

These restrictions are understandable, given the limited resources available to combat poverty in any early modern community, and the deep and not altogether unwarranted suspicion with which entrenched residents everywhere regarded outsiders. Elite women in Aberdeen, like people everywhere, were jealous of their rights and privileges. Every community has ways of defining itself against outsiders – without whom, after all, there can be no insiders. After gender, the most fundamental division in urban society was between the native-born and established residents who were of the town, and the mainly transient newcomers who were merely *in* it.⁴⁵ Aberdeen's great female benefactors all

⁴² *Mortifications*, 102, 107.

⁴³ *Mortifications*, 129.

⁴⁴ *Mortifications*, 102, 107, 140, 128. It seems that in these cases established residents of seven years or more would not be eligible, as they would be for other forms of relief.

⁴⁵ This distinction was prior to that between guild and craft, or between all such "free" families and the "unfree" majority. For a classic discussion of this issue, see Mack Walker, *German Home Towns: Community, State and General Estate, 1648-1871* (Ithaca, 1971). See also, Allan Sharlin, "Natural Decrease in Early Modern Cities: A Reconsideration," *Past and Present* 79 (1978): 126-38.

adhered strictly to this division, directing their philanthropic initiatives exclusively to women securely rooted in the town.

Even in a city the size of Aberdeen, there were always hundreds of women who were in the town but not of it. Most were female domestics from the countryside who comprised the majority of urban guestworkers: among the immigrants who flocked to every early modern town, female servants usually outnumbered male apprentices, servants and students by a considerable margin.⁴⁶ In the 1690s, just over half the households in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, many of them modest indeed, employed one or more female domestics, about half of whom had moved into town from elsewhere.⁴⁷ Many probably intended only a short stay, perhaps a single six-month contract. Others were in it for the medium haul, trying to save money for a dowry or to support family back home. All of them were vulnerable, because low pay and precarious employment meant that they were easily tipped into destitution. And when they were, they could make no claim on the city's poor relief rolls. As women and as outsiders, then, these migrant workers were on the wrong side of urban society's deepest fault lines.

This is not to suggest that they all came to a bad end. Servants who stayed out of court left few traces in the records, but enough of their stories have come down to us to suggest that upward mobility was at least possible, even for those who did not marry. When Elizabeth Hird died in 1665, her former employer, John Row, recalled her as "a good woman." He had known her for over 25 years, and after she moved away he kept in touch one way or another. She worked in his household in Perth in the 1630s, and accompanied his family to Aberdeen when he was appointed minister there in 1641. At some point she left his employ and made at least one more move, to Kirkcaldy. She seems never to have married, and in her latter days she used her dowry savings, perhaps an inheritance, and her good name to start her own business – in his journal, Row described her as a merchant.⁴⁸ As Elizabeth Hird's story reminds us, the point of most migration was to pursue opportunity, and women who were hardworking, healthy, strong, trustworthy and fortunate could hope to get by well

46 Whyte and Whyte, "Geographical Mobility of Women," 97. In 1695, Aberdeen accounted for about 6 percent of the total population of Aberdeenshire, but employed 17 percent (767) of the female servants polled. Based on figures in Tyson, "Population of Aberdeenshire," Tables 1, 2 and 4, and Stuart, ed., *List of Pollable Persons*.

47 Whyte and Whyte, *ibid.* In Aberdeen, 52 percent of households kept at least one female servant, as compared to 51 percent in greater Edinburgh and 58 percent in London. Stuart, ed., *List of Pollable Persons*; Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 46.

48 A.M. Munro, ed., "Diary of John Row, Principal of King's College," *Scottish Notes and Queries* (1893-1894): 84. It was not uncommon for English townswomen to migrate after the age of 50, especially if widowed. Souden, "Migrants in the Population Structure," 142-3.

enough, perhaps even prosper, especially if they built up a network of contacts among decent employers and managed not to get pregnant out of wedlock.⁴⁹

Like guestworkers in modern societies, migrant female domestics in early modern Scotland were denied access to social services but attracted more than their share of attention from the forces of law and order.⁵⁰ Paradoxically, these most vulnerable of workers, vital though they were to the maintenance of home and hearth, were feared by city fathers. Young men running on alcohol and testosterone caused most of the trouble in any community, but young women, especially those from out of town, were regarded as carriers of illicit sexuality, a corrosive social disease against which Scotland's urban patriarchs mounted the great Calvinist crusade for "godly discipline."⁵¹ Their very presence in town was thought to incite men to sin. As in many European towns, only widows and mature spinsters (and their female servants) were entitled to live independently of a man: young single women who tried it were automatically suspected of sexual adventurism.⁵² Women who arrived without work met with particular suspicion. In Aberdeen, they had just a few days to find a job or move on.⁵³

The vast majority of servants were unmarried, and they lived under a regime of mandatory chastity.⁵⁴ This was one reason why nearly all servants, male and female, were required to live in. Space, heat and privacy might be in short supply (servants routinely shared beds), but surveillance, supervision and

49 Around 1700, some of Edinburgh's female domestics facing the "melancholy prospect of our future fortune" appear to have organised a poor relief fund for themselves. Such schemes were not uncommon among various groups of urban workers, including the carters of Edinburgh and the "pynors" or longshoremen of Aberdeen. Whether migrant workers could enroll in any of these programmes, however, is unclear. Houston, *Social Change*, 89; DesBrisay, "Authority and Discipline," 202.

50 In Seville, however, outsiders were entitled to civic charity. Perry, *Gender and Disorder*, 176.

51 For young men behaving badly, see Lyndal Roper, "Blood and Codpieces: Masculinity in the Early Modern German Town," in her *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1994); and Colin A. McLaren, "Affrightment and Riot: Student Violence in Aberdeen, 1659-1669," *Northern Scotland* 10 (1990). On godly discipline, see, for example, Michael Graham, "The Civil Sword and the Scottish Kirk, 1560-1600," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*. W. Fred Graham, ed., *Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies* 22 (Kirkville, MI, 1994); Rosalind Mitchison and Leah Leneman, *Sexuality and Social Control: Scotland 1660-1780* (Oxford, 1989); and Geoffrey Parker, "The 'Kirk By Law Established' and the Origins of 'The Taming of Scotland'," in *Perspectives in Scottish Social History*.

52 See, for example, J. D. Marwick and Robert Renwick, eds., *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, A.D. 1663-1690* (Edinburgh, 1905), 126-7. See also, Houston, "Women in the Economy and Society," 132-3.

53 ACA, Justice Court Book, Vol. I(1), 9 July 1660.

54 Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1985), Ch. 8.

mature guidance were meant to be plentiful.⁵⁵ Such was not always the case, of course, and when it was the case it was not always enough to prevent illicit couplings, usually between fellow servants (not always from the same household), but sometimes between a female domestic and her employer or his son.⁵⁶ Whether the sex tended to be consensual or coerced is a matter for conjecture: cases of rape rarely came before the courts.⁵⁷

Whatever the precise circumstances, court records across the country confirm that female domestics were at considerable risk of becoming pregnant out of wedlock.⁵⁸ In Aberdeen, between 1657 and 1687, the secular authorities convicted 629 women (107 of them more than once) of fornication or adultery on the basis of an unsanctioned pregnancy.⁵⁹ Upwards of 90 per cent of these women were servants, and it is probable that a majority of them were migrants from the especially bastard-prone communities of the surrounding northeast region – as suggested by the fact that only about one-third of these cases yielded a baptism in the carefully kept civic register.⁶⁰ Miscarriages, neonatal mortality and evasion of registration could account for some of the discrepancy, but kirk session records across the country confirm that a great many of the

55 Mitchison and Leneman, *Sexuality and Social Control*, 180-8.

56 It is conceivable that some of the sons accused of fornication were taking the rap for their fathers, saving the family the much greater shame and expense of an adultery charge, and perhaps boosting their cut of the inheritance in the bargain.

57 Mitchison and Leneman, *Sexuality and Social Control*, 194-6.

58 Leah Leneman and Rosalind Mitchison, "Girls in Trouble: The Social and Geographical Setting of Illegitimacy in Early Modern Scotland," *Journal of Social History* 21 (1988): 483-97. See also Cissie Fairchild, "Female Sexual Attitudes and the Rise of Illegitimacy: A Case Study," in *Marriage and Fertility: Studies in Interdisciplinary History*. R.I. Rotberg and T.K. Rabb, eds. (Princeton, 1980), 163-204.

59 ACA, Justice Court Book, Vol. I(1). Most of these women were prosecuted by the church courts as well, and nearly all the fathers were also convicted. DesBrisay, "Authority and Discipline," 277, 310-13, 377-86. Steven J. Davies' exhaustive study found that pregnancy featured in 98 percent of all prosecutions for fornication and adultery. "The Courts and the Scottish Legal System, 1600-1747: The Case of Stirlingshire," in *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500*. V. A. C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman and Geoffrey Parker, eds. (London, 1980), 125.

60 Based on analysis of 94 prosecutions for fornication and adultery over a six-year period, 1659-1665. ACA, Justice Court Book, Vol. I(1) and New Register House OPR 183/3. Migration patterns of male apprentices suggest that most incomers came from English-speaking lowland parishes within a 30-40 km radius of the town, though women are thought to have made shorter and more frequent moves. I.D. Whyte and K.A. Whyte, "Patterns of Migration of Apprentices into Aberdeen and Inverness During the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 102 (1986): 81-92. On illegitimacy in the northeast, see Andrew Blaikie, *Illegitimacy, Sex and Society: Northeast Scotland, 1750-1900* (Oxford, 1993), and Leah Leneman and Rosalind Mitchison, "Scottish Illegitimacy Ratios in the Early Modern Period," *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser. 40 (1987): 41-63.

women convicted of fornication in the cities fled, or more likely returned, to the country to give birth. In Perth, for example, kirk elders in the 1690s simply assumed that unwed mothers who conceived in the town gave birth elsewhere and demanded to know where.⁶¹

Pregnant servants could expect to be dismissed by all but the most benevolent employers, and dismissal must have been a factor in the flight of many migrant women, who, once released from service, had no choice but to leave town. Since most runaways were headed for their home parish, they were easily traced and made to undergo church penance and civil punishment in the parish where the sin was committed.⁶² For those bearing their first illegitimate child, penance consisted of three successive Sunday appearances in the kirk seated facing the congregation on a stool of repentance, a shaming ritual in which the penitent was gawked at, preached over and prayed for.⁶³ Because it aimed at reconciliation and reincorporation into the body of the faithful, church discipline depended on the acquiescence of the accused: a seemingly heartfelt confession and a convincing display of remorse were absolutely essential to the process.⁶⁴ Secular punishment, on the other hand, had no such redemptive or bi-lateral aspect: for first offenders it normally consisted of a statutory fine of up to £10 Scots, payable in full by the end of the week, with a public whipping for those who could not or would not pay.⁶⁵ Aberdeen's accounts reveal that, given this negative incentive, most women and men paid on time.⁶⁶

Penance was an ordeal for some, merely tedious for others, but it was the £10 fine that impinged most heavily on a pregnant woman's immediate future. Ten pounds was all the cash, less tips, that senior female domestics in Aberdeen

61 SRO, CH2/122/9.

62 Leslie M. Smith, "Sackcloth for the Sinner or Punishment for the Crime? Church and State in Cromwellian Scotland," in *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland*. John Dwyer, Roger Mason and Alexander Murdoch, eds. (Edinburgh, 1982), 116-32.

63 DesBrisay, "Authority and Discipline," 321-5.

64 "The reproduction of hegemonic appearances, even under duress, is for this reason vital to the exercise of domination. Institutions for which doctrine is central to identity are thus often less concerned with the genuineness of confessions of heresy and recantations than with the public show of unanimity they afford. Personal doubts and inward cynicism are one thing; public doubts and outward repudiations of the institution and what it stands for are something else." Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 204-5. See also, Heinz Schilling, "'History of Crime' or 'History of Sin'? Some Reflections on the Social History of Early Modern Church Discipline," in *Politics and Society in Reformation Europe: Essays for Sir Geoffrey Elton on his 65th Birthday*. E. I. Kouri and Tom Scott, eds. (Basingstoke, 1987), 295-303.

65 For a "relapse," the statutory fine was £20, for a "trelapse" £30, and so forth. The fine for adultery (invariably an unmarried servant and married man) was £40. DesBrisay, "Menacing Their Persons," 85-8.

66 ACA, Accounts of the Justice Court, 1657-1744.

earned in a year, and many women earned less.⁶⁷ In Edinburgh, wealthy or generous employers might pay two or three times as much, but Aberdonian householders (so lax with regard to so many other civic by-laws) were scrupulous about abiding by the town council's wage ceilings.⁶⁸ At the same time, unwed mothers in Aberdeen were more likely than many of their sisters elsewhere to be made to pay the maximum penalty for fornication. In Glasgow, most couples convicted of fornication were fined 10 merks (£6.13s.4d) between them.⁶⁹ Men and women in the same predicament in Aberdeen would be fortunate to be asked to pay as much each: more often than not, both parties were fined the full £10.⁷⁰ Some women could call on family or draw upon their dowry for the fine, and some had goods they could pawn: in the cold winter of 1691 the Perth kirk session agreed "to take Janet Ord's plaid in pledge for her penalty."⁷¹ Others had to borrow from relatives, friends, lovers, employers, fellow servants or, if all else failed, money-lending merchants.⁷²

It must have been galling for single mothers to know that their fines were paid back out as charity for the "deserving" poor. In Aberdeen, the fines provided weekly and monthly pensions for needy citizens.⁷³ In Glasgow, the money was redistributed the same day. When, in June 1677, Margaret Robinson, pregnant with or recently delivered of an illegitimate child, paid her reduced fine of £2 for fornication ("she being poore"), the money was immediately turned over to Jean Hamilton "for keeping of ane child which wanted father and mother."⁷⁴ Not only, then, was a pregnant servant (most likely a migrant) facing single motherhood, unemployment, loss of earnings, public shaming and

67 Among female domestics in Aberdeen (not including wet nurses) the average wage in 1695 was £8.14s., exclusive of room and board. Stuart, ed., *List of Pollable Persons*. This was far less cash than almost any adult men earned, though they paid the same fines.

68 For the wages of Edinburgh servants and wet nurses, see Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 119-20, and Rosalind K. Marshall, "Wet-Nursing in Scotland, 1500-1800," *Review of Scottish Culture* 1 (1984): 48-9. In Aberdeen, only 5 of 593 female domestics polled, not counting nurses, were paid more than 16 merks (£10.13s.4d). Stuart, ed., *List of Pollable Persons*. On poll book wage evidence, see A. J. S. Gibson and T. C. Smout, *Prices, Food and Wages in Scotland, 1550-1780* (Cambridge, 1995), 271-3.

69 SRO, CH2/173/1.

70 ACA, Accounts of the Justice Court, 1657-1744.

71 SRO, CH2/521/10, 7 March 1691.

72 See Lorna Ewen, "Debtors, Imprisonment and The Privilege of Girth," in Leneman, ed., *Perspectives in Scottish Social History*, 53-68. Asked to testify as to the whereabouts of a servant he had once pledged security for, the merchant and landowner (and Quaker) Baillie Alexander Skene snapped that "she is gone South or may be dead for ought I know." ACA, Justice Court Book, Vol. 2, undated, bound with January 1673.

73 ACA, Accounts of the Justice Court, 1657-1744.

74 SRO, CH2/173/1, 3 June 1677.

indebtedness, but the wages of her sin went to sustain social services that benefited townswomen and their children, for which neither she nor her child was ever likely to qualify.⁷⁵

What was a poor servant to do? There were some options, but marriage seems not to have been one, at least not in the short term, and almost certainly not to the child's father. Unlike their counterparts in England and many European societies, unwed mothers-to-be in Scotland almost never invoked a failed courtship as a mitigating circumstance, nor did the authorities push offenders into matrimony.⁷⁶ The kirk would not offer any direct assistance to women from outside the parish, but it probably helped broker child support agreements. Given the generally low status of the fathers, however, this was unlikely to be a very substantial or reliable source of income, even if it was paid.⁷⁷ Women returning to the country might find work as farm servants: cash wages for women in parishes distant from Aberdeen were half those of the town, but in the immediate vicinity they could be as high or higher.⁷⁸ If they returned home to a farmstead they could help with chores, and tens of thousands of women throughout the northeast earned a supplementary income knitting stockings or spinning yarn, something a child could help with from a very young age.⁷⁹ For a surprising number of newly delivered unwed mothers, however, the best option was to move back into town as a wet nurse.

Poor women bearing illegitimate children were drawn by their fines deeper into the cash, credit and debt nexus. For domestics in Aberdeen faced with repaying the equivalent of a year's wages, the climb back was especially steep, even without the interruption in employment and the new mouth to feed. It just so happened, however, that the city fathers who fixed the wages and imposed the fines also decreed that wet nurses be paid £20 per year, double the top wage

75 In Seville, most of the "deserving poor" listed in 1667 were precisely unwed mothers and their children. Perry, *Gender and Disorder*, 173.

76 Leah Leneman and Rosalind Mitchison, "Clandestine Marriage in the Scottish Cities, 1660-1780," *Journal of Social History* 26 (1993): 846.

77 Evidence for child-support payments is scant before the eighteenth century, but Mitchison and Leneman concluded that Scottish fathers must have been made to pay something. *Sexuality and Social Control*, 152-3. In Aberdeen, child support payments in one instance amounted to £10 a year, but this was a rare case of a failed courtship, and may not be typical. ACA, Justice Court Book, Vol. 3, 17 August 1695. Barbara Stevinson, a former ale-seller in Edinburgh, said she received a single payment of £6 Sterling (£72 Scots) from the father of her child shortly after giving birth. SRO, CH2/718/12, 6 February 1696.

78 Gibson and Smout, *Prices, Food and Wages*, 293-4.

79 R.E. Tyson, "The Rise and Fall of Rural Manufacturing in Aberdeenshire," *Fernfolk & Fisherfolk: Rural Life in Northern Scotland in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. in J. S. Smith and David Stevenson, eds. (Aberdeen, 1989), 63-82. I am grateful to Sybil Jack and Kris Inwood for discussions on this point.

most single mothers could have earned before their pregnancy, with the prospect of handsome tips if the client's child survived to be weaned.⁸⁰

Well-to-do women in Scotland, like their counterparts across early modern Europe, tended not to nurse their own children. Because lactation impedes conception, and perhaps too because of taboos against having sex during the nursing period, widespread wet-nursing shows up in the demographic record. Aberdeen's baptismal registers reveal that women in the upper third of society in the 1690s bore significantly more children at shorter intervals than their poorer, breastfeeding (and possibly abstaining) neighbours.⁸¹ On the continent and in England, most wet nurses are said to have been married women in villages close to towns: urban children were sent out to nurse, and only the very rich hired live-in nurses.⁸² In Scottish towns, however, a much higher proportion of wet nurses lived in, and a much higher proportion were unwed mothers. Especially, it seems, in Aberdeen, where the combination of low wages and high fines encouraged single mothers to accept the best-paid work they could find even if it meant separation from their own children.

In Aberdeen, as many as one-quarter of all households with a newborn, by no means all of them rich, employed a live-in nurse.⁸³ The oft-repeated (and therefore oft-flouted) rule was that no rural women be hired to nurse in the city until "they have satisfieit [the kirk] for thair harlatric and fornicationes."⁸⁴ It

80 Aberdeen's statutory wages and prices were set each fall by the town council. There was little movement in the second half of the seventeenth century and servant's wages did not vary at all. DesBrisay, "Authority and Discipline," Appendix II, p.436. That these were the wages actually paid seems confirmed by the 1695 *List of Pollable Persons*. Of tips there is little direct evidence, but the household accounts of one member of the gentry routinely record such payments. See A. W. Cornelius Hallen, ed., *The Account Book of Sir John Foulis of Ravelston, 1671-1707* (Edinburgh, 1894), passim.

81 Tyson, "Population of Aberdeenshire," 122, 125.

82 Linda Campbell, "Wet-Nurses in Early Modern England," *Medical History* 33 (1989): 364-5; Valerie A. Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford, 1988), Ch. 6. Even in fifteenth-century Florence, only the richest couples maintained a nurse in the house. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Women Servants in Florence during the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*. Barbara Hanawalt, ed. (Bloomington, 1986), 61; Valerie A. Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies: A History of Infant Feeding* (Edinburgh, 1986), 158.

83 The poll book of 1696 includes 80 couples who baptized children over the previous 12 months. Tyson, "Population of Aberdeenshire," 125. It also lists 12 confirmed and 9 likely live-in nurses, so between one in seven and one in four families with infants employed an on-site nurse. Stuart, ed., *List of Pollable Persons*. Confirmed nurses are those described as such in the poll book or the kirk session records for the previous year. Likely nurses were those earning £20, the statutory wage for nurses and no other employees. On identifying nurses by their wages, see Marshall, "Wet-Nursing in Scotland," 48-9.

84 Stuart, ed., *Selections From the Records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery, and Synod of Aberdeen*, 69. This injunction was repeated at the end of the century. SRO, CH2/448/23, 4 November 1695.

was simply taken for granted that wet nurses were country women who had borne children out of wedlock, often as the result of liaisons conducted during a previous spell of employment in the town.⁸⁵ In 1694, as English and French parents reported increasing difficulty finding suitable wet nurses, the Edinburgh physician James McMath declared, "Nor are good Nurses hard to be got."⁸⁶ He did not need to elaborate. Historians have been slow to pick up on this, but early modern Scots knew that prospective nurses were as close as the nearest stool of repentance. In the seemingly typical month of March 1685, eight of 31 women on the Aberdeen kirk session books for fornication were currently employed as wet nurses.⁸⁷

Employing a live-in wet nurse had obvious attractions. The birth mother, who quite often had a shop or other business to attend to, was relieved of most or all of the burdens of child-care while still having the baby and the nurse under her roof and her supervision.⁸⁸ Her husband did not have to worry about the taboo against having sex with his nursing wife (assuming he ever worried about that), and without lactation to impede conception he could look forward to her bearing more heirs.⁸⁹ As for the nurse, it has recently been suggested that live-in wet nurses were treated "little better than cows" by early modern employers, being forced to tolerate blows and grant sexual favours.⁹⁰

85 Similar assumptions pertained in other towns. See D. Hay Fleming, ed., *Register of the Minister Elders and Deacons of the Christian Congregation of St. Andrews, 1559-1600*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1890), 1:391 (5 May 1574). In Edinburgh, where at least 41 polled households employed live-in nurses in 1694, the kirk asked the magistrates to reinstate the old custom "that whoever take a nurse guiltie of fornication not [yet] censured, consign [£13.6s.4d] to be forfeited to the poor unless the woman submit to answer [to the kirk] before she leave their service." SRO, CH2/131/3, 10 February 1696. Dingwall found "around 60" wet nurses polled in the capital, and suggests many more were actually employed. *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 42, 207. See also, R.M. Strathdee, S. Mitchell and E. A. Nicoll, eds., *The Tron Parish Poll Tax Returns 1694* (Edinburgh, 1993); and (for the Tolbooth and Old Kirk parishes) Marguerite Wood, ed., *Edinburgh Poll Tax Returns for 1694* (Edinburgh, 1951).

86 Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies*, 156-7; James McMath, *The Expert Mid-wife: A Treatise of the Diseases of Women with Child, and in Childbed* (Edinburgh, 1694), 388-9.

87 SRO, CH2/448/19. Some of the remaining women had yet to give birth, and others had just finished wet-nursing. There must have been many other unwed wet nurses who went unrecorded in Aberdeen because they completed their penance before being hired, or were convicted in other parishes.

88 McMath echoed medical opinion across Europe when he warned parents that "hired Nurses please themselves too much, and are kind only as they are set by and rewarded." *Expert Mid-wife*, 387-8.

89 On this taboo, see Fildes, *Wet Nursing*, 57, 62, 104, 107, 162; Audrey Eccles, *Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England* (Kent, OH, 1982), 97-100; and Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1992), 56, 69-70. For a dissenting view, see David Harley, "From Providence to Nature: The Moral Theology and Godly Practice of Maternal Breast-Feeding in Stuart England," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 69 (1995): 204-5.

90 Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York, 1997), 160.

Evidence as to what actually went on in any non-aristocratic household is hard to come by, of course, but the Scottish records offer grounds for a somewhat more hopeful assessment of the live-in wet nurse's lot. The job paid well by the dismal standards of women's work, and might last two years or more. In Aberdeen, the average surviving wet-nursed child was weaned at about twenty months, by which time there might well be another newborn to nurse.⁹¹ The close attentions of the birth mother might cause friction, but because physical and emotional agitation were believed to taint the milk and even induce epileptic fits in the child, it was in the employer's interest to see that the nurse ate well, rested and avoided heavy exertions; indeed, one hazard of the job was that fellow servants became dangerously jealous.⁹² And since the nurse was to be spared as much upset as possible, Aberdonian employers routinely interceded with the kirk to have disciplinary proceedings against her suspended until after the client child was safely weaned (a courtesy almost never extended to unwed mothers nursing their own children).⁹³ By the time a retired wet nurse finally made it back to the stool of repentance, the sting of the original scandal had probably abated. As for the master's sexual advances, assuming that the taboo against sex with a nursing mother (not to mention adultery) and the general injunction not to upset the nurse and her milk failed to stay his hand, if he was up on the medical advice of the day and understood the fungibility of fluids he would not have wanted to risk impregnating her. Milk was thought to be menstrual blood purified and filtered in the breasts, and it was believed that a new (illegitimate) fetus would, aided by gravity, siphon

91 Since the church could suspend disciplinary proceedings against wet nurses, some kirk session records can be used to gauge the duration of a nurse's employment. See, for example, SRO, CH2/448/19. Most wet-nursed children elsewhere were weaned at between one and two years: see Leah L. Otis, "Municipal Wet Nurses in Fifteenth-Century Montpellier," in Hanawalt, ed., *Women and Work*, 87-8; Chris Wilson, "The Proximate Determinants of Marital Fertility in England 1600-1799," in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*. Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson, eds. (Oxford, 1986), 224; and Paula A. Treckel, "Breastfeeding and Maternal Sexuality in Colonial America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 20 (1989): 35-9.

92 McMath, *Expert Mid-wife*, 389; Klapisch-Zuber, "Women Servants in Florence," 72; Simon Richter, "Wet-Nursing, Onanism, and the Breast in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1996): 18.

93 This was a rather stark example of the ancient distinction, still with us, between (unpaid) family labour and (paid) household "work." The Aberdeen custom of noting in the kirk session minutes that a woman's penance for fornication or adultery was postponed until, for example, "the relic of John Reid Skippar her chyld be weaned," makes it possible to identify unwed wet nurses. SRO, CH2/448/19, 2 March 1685. Unfortunately, not every kirk session recorded these arrangements.

that blood down and away from the breasts, thereby imperilling the milk supply for his (legitimate) child.⁹⁴

What of the wet nurses' own children? Ferocious levels of infant mortality must have claimed many of them, and poverty, shame, anger and fear drove a small, if ultimately unknowable, proportion of single mothers to abandon or kill their newborns.⁹⁵ But what became of those who survived? A sixteenth-century Scottish minister warned that some women turned to wet nursing "not regarding quhat sal become of ther awin."⁹⁶ Many wet nurses, however, went to considerable lengths to provide for their children. It has been suggested that live-in nurses kept their own children with them in Scotland, but though the evidence is sparse I am inclined to think that this was not often the case.⁹⁷ In the poll books of the 1690s, Edinburgh and Aberdeen householders who kept a wet nurse almost never declared the presence of an infant other than their own.⁹⁸ Most employers seem to have expected exclusive service from their nurses, who had to arrange to leave their infants in the care of others.⁹⁹ Family members were presumably preferred.¹⁰⁰ Arrangements must have been complicated, however, by employers' evident preference for hiring a woman about one

94 Angus McLaren, *Reproductive Rituals: The Perception of Fertility in England from the Sixteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1984), 69; Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 35-43; Richter, "Wet-Nursing, Onanism, and the Breast," 14-15; and Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 53-5. McMath gave conflicting advice. Nurses inclined to "venery" (sexual indulgence) were to be avoided for fear that their depraved character would taint the milk, but married nurses might sleep with their husbands without fear of "spilling the Milk: Though it is best that she keep free, or forbear after from giving Suck." *The Expert Mid-Wife*, 390.

95 See Deborah A. Symonds, *Weep Not for Me: Women, Ballads, and Infanticide in Early Modern Scotland* (University Park, PA, 1997); and "Reconstructing Rural Infanticide in Eighteenth-Century Scotland," *Journal of Women's History* 10 (1998). I would like to thank Dr. Symonds for providing an advance copy of her article.

96 Anstruther Wester Kirk Session Register, New Register House, OPR 403/1, 35v. I would like to thank Michael Graham for this reference.

97 Dingwall, *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 27-8.

98 See, for example, Strathdee et al., eds., *Tron Parish Poll Tax*, 2, 4, 6, 8, 28, 40, 60.

99 For comparisons, see Janet Golden, *A Social History of Wet Nursing in America: From Breast to Bottle* (Cambridge, 1996), 120-7; Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 68; and Otis, "Municipal Wet Nurses in Fifteenth-Century Montpellier," 86.

100 In the nineteenth century, most unmarried mothers-to-be in the northeast moved back home with their parents until the child was weaned, leaving it with them when they returned to work as farm or domestic servants. Lower illegitimacy levels in previous centuries may have been tied in part to the relative scarcity of grandparents prior to the decline of mortality rates. See Andrew Blaikie, "A Kind of Loving: Illegitimacy, Grandparents and the Rural Economy of North East Scotland, 1750-1900," *Scottish Economic and Social History* 14 (1994): 54-5. At least one unwed wet nurse in Aberdeen, Janet Gordon, left her child with its father, Andrew Dempster. ACA Justice Court Book, Vol. I(1), undated, bound with 1675.

month after she had given birth, the ideal time according to the experts of the day, since by then her breasts were cleared of colostrum, the antibody-rich first milk then regarded, fatally for untold thousands of children, as unsuitable for newborns.¹⁰¹

When there was no other nursing mother in the family, a wet nurse had to pay a cheaper rural or otherwise down-market nurse to breastfeed and care for her own child. Few such arrangements were recorded but, in the poll book of 1694, Edinburgh employers occasionally declared that their nurse was paying someone else to suckle her own child, since those payments could be deducted from the wage on which the nurse's poll tax was calculated. Thus Robert Bennerman, a minister who had lost his benefice under the new Presbyterian regime, paid his (unnamed) nurse the relatively handsome sum of £66.13s.4d a year, but only £30 of her wage was taxed because "she hes her own child to nurse off that."¹⁰² This suggests that 55 per cent of her income went to child-care expenses; other live-in nurses paid out as much as two-thirds of their salary to a second-tier wet nurse.¹⁰³

These stories of female philanthropists and unwed wet nurses confirm that women at either end of the social spectrum acted to shape their own individual and collective fate under the constraints of profound gender inequality. Most obviously, women at the top of the social scale in seventeenth-century Aberdeen turned their wealth into a form of social, religious and political authority by endowing a hospital, a school, bursaries and pensions specifically for women. The founding of the girls' school was of particular importance for the women of Aberdeen, for it had not only the charitable effect of teaching some poor girls to read and write, but also the political effect of helping to establish primary education as an essential part of a young townsgirl's upbringing, as was demonstrated when city fathers subsequently compelled women of the resident poor to send their daughters to school.

But the smooth incorporation of feminist initiatives into the fabric of urban society depended on their remaining strictly within "city limits" that were as much political and ideological as they were geographic. These good works were carefully calibrated so as to pose (or perhaps in the case of education, to appear to pose) no overt challenge to existing relations of gender, class and citizenship. Thus, even as they brought comfort and aid to distressed townswomen,

101 Fildes, *Breasts, Bottles and Babies*, 81. "Foul, Turbid, Curdy" was the way McMath described colostrum. *The Expert Mid-Wife*, 324.

102 Strathdee, et al., eds., *Tron Parish Poll Tax*, 2.

103 When Mary Buchanan paid £9.10s (68 percent) of her £14 nursing salary "for her own chyld," the money was almost certainly going outside the household to another nurse or child minder, and not, as Dingwall suggests, to the employer for the child's board. *Late 17th-Century Edinburgh*, 27. See also, Wood, ed., *Edinburgh Poll Tax Returns for 1694*, 10.

Aberdeen's female philanthropists, by withholding their charity from the small army of female guestworkers in their midst, also accentuated and reinforced the already stark division in urban society between insiders and outsiders – a division that plainly overrode any incipient sense of gender solidarity.

Closer to the bottom of the social scale, unwed mothers from outside the town lacked the means to effect deliberate change in an urban milieu to which they were only semi-attached. Rich women might address issues of poverty and gender restrictions directly and on behalf of "women," but poor migrant women, as ever, had to manoeuvre within those restrictions to take care of themselves. Thus, many unwed mothers in early modern Scotland, marginalised by poverty and pregnancy as well as place of origin, took the best deal urban society offered and returned to town to nurse the children of women in more settled and prosperous circumstances.

Yet in fending for themselves, wet nurses, too, had a wider effect on the lives of the women who comprised the urban majority. Unintended though they were, the consequences of their actions rippled all along the intricate web of civic society. Their work freed better-off mothers to run their shops, conduct their businesses, and, not least importantly, bear more children; the relatively high wages paid live-in wet nurses enabled some with children of their own to employ other, presumably poorer, nurses; and before they could suckle the rich, prospective unwed wet nurses were made to help feed the "deserving" urban poor through their fines for fornication and adultery. The stories of female philanthropists and unwed wet nurses, then, come together to illustrate some of the ways in which early modern women, rich and poor alike, even those deemed to be in the town but not truly of it, managed to leave their mark on that society and to play a part in forming and re-forming the urban community.